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INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MIGRATION OF NEPALESE WOMEN: THE IMPACT OF THEIR REMITTANCES ON POVERTY REDUCTION

By

Chandra Bhadra^{}*

^{*} Associate Professor, Women's Studies Programme, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The views presented in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Tribhuvan University, ARTNeT members, partners and the United Nations. This study was conducted as part of the Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade (ARTNeT) initiative, aimed at building regional trade policy and facilitation research capacity in developing countries. This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the World Trade Organization. The technical support of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific is gratefully acknowledged. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the author. The author may be contacted at bhadrac@hotmail.com.

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Executive summary

The contribution of trade in services and associated remittances to the economies of developing countries is increasingly being recognized and the liberalization of the movement of natural persons (Mode 4 trade under GATS) is seen by many as an effective to ensure developing countries benefit from globalization. In that context, this study aimed at assessing the impact of remittances by women migrant workers on poverty reduction in Nepal. The specific objectives were to investigate the financial aspects, explore the human factors, and examine women migrant workers perceptions and preferences of national policy. The study was conducted in two remittance-based towns in eastern and western development regions of Nepal. The sample size was 421, comprising 247 returnee migrants and 174 household members. Data were collected through survey questionnaires, focus group discussions and case studies.

“Feminization of poverty” is a major factor for Nepalese women in seeking a global market for their labour-related services. Women’s remittances have had a significant impact on overall poverty reduction and on household capital formation leading to improvement in the quality of life. Women migrant workers also bring with them the so-called “social remittances”. Migration and remittances have increased women’s self-esteem by bringing about a positive change in their gender identity and gender roles, leading to a decrease in violence against women and an increase in love and respect among the family and community.

Certain trends have emerged in the migration and remittances by Nepalese women. Current migrants are better educated compared to the illiterate majority of the past. Poverty has led women to break the gender restriction imposed upon their mobility. Women from poorer families are migrating for work more than ever before, indicating that this is the only option for family survival. Current migrants are using institutional financial services to a much greater extent than relying on informal services that are costly and risky.

Tied to women’s migration and remittances are certain human costs such as gender discrimination at all levels of the migration process, imposed by various actors including the State. Violence against women and violation of their labour rights exist in the workplace; many times the perpetrators are women. A long absence of mothers has resulted in distancing in the mother-child relationship. The absence of mothers or older sisters has burdened daughters and younger sisters with household work and/or childcare, thus hampering their schooling.

To ensure recognition of the contribution provided by women’s remittances in achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 1 (and other MDGs, such as MDG2, MDG3, MDG4 and MDG5), and in order to do away with human or social costs, women’s migration must be included in national and international policy dialogue on trade, labour, migration and development. MDG8 on global development responsibilities needs to take on board the issue of women’s migration and its links to trade (specifically GATS) and development. The issue of access by poor migrant women to financial services needs to be made a part of public sector policy as well as corporate social responsibility of the private

sector. The international women's movement needs to begin working immediately towards the elimination of the "violation of women by women" together with its fight against "violation of women by men".

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Introduction

Globalization and the advent of new communications and transportation technologies have given new impetus to migration in the form of trading human services as exports, especially for bettering the livelihood for a massive number of people around the globe. Termed the “new era of mobility” (United Nations, 2006), this movement of natural persons (MNP) for trading human-services has a significant impact on and contributions to the social wellbeing and economic development of countries of destination as well as countries of origin (SAARC, 2006). In the light of the trade underlying the principle of demand and supply, and needing the movement of natural persons as exports and imports, migration for work is both a boon and a bane. If recognized as inevitable for economic growth or development and addressed accordingly, it becomes a boon. If overlooked, it becomes a bane to all concerned – the migrant workers and their families, the country of origin, the country of transit and the country of employment.

Although migration for work is a more recent phenomenon for women than for men, the trend of “feminization of migration” is already evident. Female migrants constitute more than half of all migrants worldwide and the trend of female migration outnumbers male migration, especially for work-related migration. In some countries of origin, female migrant workers outnumber male migrant workers (D’Cunha, 2005); in fact, in some destination countries, women comprise 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the migrant population (Mareno, 2005). The trend in the “feminization of poverty” is said to be the leading cause of the trend in feminization of migration for work. The brunt of poverty falls disproportionately upon women due to gender discrimination; therefore, women experience greater livelihood insecurity than men do, both for themselves as well as for their families. In the current era of globalization, women are found to grab global employment opportunities to ease poverty at home. Foreign women’s labour in the care economy is in high demand in developed countries due to the so-called demographic asymmetry, especially the declining fertility rate and the high life expectancy (ESCAP, 2005).

Similarly, women’s care services, especially in domestic care, are in greater supply from developing countries. Because domestic care skills require minimum economic investment, women from many developing countries have the “coercive advantage” in this vocation due to differential gender roles. Hence, women from developing countries migrate for work as a hedge against poverty. Nevertheless, in this kind of labour exchange, based on cross-border demand and supply and the export and import of services in person, women face greater risk and insecurity at all stages in the labour market due to gender discrimination (D’Cunha, 2005).

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. For many decades, Nepalese men have been moving temporarily to foreign countries for employment. In recent years, Nepalese women have also begun seeking opportunities for foreign employment, mainly to ease poverty at home. The majority of migrant Nepalese women seek employment in the so-called “care economy”. They have the above-mentioned “coercive advantage” in these vocations due to gender role. Nonetheless, due to gender discrimination, their migration and

the work is not smooth, safe and/or secure, from within their homes/families and their country, through the country/countries of transit to the country of employment.

A. Statement of the problem

The current movement of Nepalese female labour on a large scale to third countries other than India is relatively new. The trend emerged especially after the 1990s, principally due to the rapid process of globalization and the liberalized socio-economic and political contexts within the country. Nepalese women migrant workers are overwhelmingly engaged in a so-called “care economy”, where caring for humans is involved. Nepalese women and girls have a “coercive advantage” in those vocations as they are coerced from childhood into performing unpaid care within the household. The demand for care work in the global market has created an opportunity for Nepalese women to transform their unpaid reproductive work to paid productive work.

As caring for humans is labour-intensive and non-substitutable by mechanical devices, there is always a need for “natural persons” to perform such services. These care activities have been performed by women since time immemorial. In the context of the current global labour market, Nepalese female migrant workers are substituting for the labour-intensive care work previously performed by women in rich countries, both within the private sphere of households and in the public sphere of hospitals, hotels and hospices of the destination countries. With this substitution of care-labour, more and more women from the countries of employment are enabled to participate in high-paying market economies. This has transformed women’s work from unpaid reproductive work to paid productive work, both in Nepal and in the countries of employment, especially in newly industrializing countries and industrialized countries.

Furthermore, Nepalese migrant women are also releasing women in the petro-rich Gulf countries from labour-intensive care work and allowing them to enjoy leisure and prestige (D’Cunha, 2005). This substitution of the care services by importing foreign labour is conceptualized for analytical purpose as “global care chains”, where arguments hold that the provision of care involves a product and undergoes a process of production that can be bought and sold in the market for services (ESCAP, 2005). Furthermore, labour export or labour trade (especially of women) has considerable impacts on livelihoods and income, affecting the household capabilities particularly towards the fulfillment of MDGs; the migration of women also facilitates the empowerment of women (UNDP, 2005).

In the current context of a decade-old armed conflict in Nepal, remittances by migrant workers is said to be the only pillar that is holding the country’s economy together. According to the Nepal Living Standard Survey (2004/05), 11 per cent of the remittance donors are women; it is estimated that currently NRs 100 billion are contributed annually through remittances (Adhikari and others, 2006). It is an undisputed fact that when women have access to income and control over it, it has direct implications on poverty reduction; they spend their income on the family’s well-being (e.g., food/nutrition, clothing and children’s education) and are becoming especially favourable to girls’ education.

Despite the implications of migration by Nepalese women for work in direct poverty reduction, due to the patriarchal mind-set of state decision and policy makers, a protective approach exists in the policy related to migration of women for work. Many times this approach violates women's rights to employment, mobility and the choice of a profession (Adhikari and others, 2006; MoLTM/UNIFEM/SAMANATA, 2003), stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA).

Notwithstanding the positive impacts on livelihood and income at the household level, women's migration bears social and human costs comprising national and international magnitudes. The costs of women's migration for work can include brain drain and care drain, the social consequences of separation from family members, women becoming irregular migrants due to restrictions in immigration (both in the country of origin and/or the country of employment), and exploitation and abuse of female workers (ESCAP, 2005; Tullao and Cortez, 2006; UNDP, 2005). Nepalese women's migration for work is not exempted from these social and human costs.

In these contexts, the research problem is to document the positive aspects of women's international labour export, migration and remittances in terms of livelihood, income and women's empowerment while also documenting the social and the human costs involved in women's international migration for work. This is crucial to:

- (a) Convincing policy makers that women migrant workers are economic agents contributing to the Millennium Development Goal of poverty reduction and other subsequent MDGs at the household level; and
- (b) Generating national and international policy dialogue on trade in human services, labour export and development with a gender perspective for maximizing the benefit and minimizing the cost of global trade in human services.

With these points in mind, this study seeks answers regarding the extent and intent of the contribution by Nepalese women migrant workers at the household level, and the impact of this contribution on poverty reduction. It also attempts to identify migrant women's perception, choice and preferences, in view of State policy, about their migration for work.

B. Objective of the study

The general objective of the study is to assess the impact of remittances by women migrant workers on poverty reduction. The specific objectives are:

- (a) To investigate the financial aspect of the women migrant workers' migration process;
- (b) To explore the human factors related to women migrant workers' migration for work; and
- (c) To examine the perception and preferences of women migrant workers regarding the extent of women-friendliness of the State's policy on migration for work.

C. Rationale and justification of the study

Globally, there is a dearth of information, data and analysis on the linkages of gender, migration and poverty, and especially on the impact on poverty reduction, due to very little research having been done in this area (Omelaniuk, 2005). Despite the growing flow of women's remittances for the material well-being of family members in developing countries, very few studies analyse the relationship between gender and remittances; yet, this is a crucial step towards integrating gender perspective in international development policies and programmes (Mareno, 2005).

As part of the current tenth Five-Year Plan (2003-2008) of Nepal, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is especially designed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals; gender equality is spelled out in the Plan document as one of the keys to poverty analysis. To bridge the existing information gap concerning gender and remittances, this study aims to reveal the contribution of migrant women workers' remittances to poverty alleviation at the household level, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. It also documents the impact of current policy on migrant women workers from a culture-specific perspective, with regard to whether it is facilitating them or hindering them. The human factors of migration for work are also analysed from a gender perspective in an effort to help policy makers to realize the importance of gender mainstreaming in international labour migration policy and the legal framework.

D. Scope of the study

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (a) What is the proportion of female remittance in the total household income?
- (b) How are remittances used in the household economy in terms of basic needs (expenses on food/nutrition, clothing, education and medical care; socio-cultural expenses; and household capital formation and investment)?
- (c) Would the girls in the family be able to go to school if the remittance is not used for the household?

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