

# Feminized Migration in East and Southeast Asia: Policies, Actions and Empowerment

by Keiko Yamanaka  
and Nicola Piper





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# acronyms

AMC	Asian Migrant Centre
APMRN	Asia Pacific Migration Research Network
CARAM-Asia	Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility - Asia
CATW	Coalition Against Trafficking in Women
CBO	community-based organization
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
E/SE	East and Southeast (Asia)
EU	European Union
FDW	foreign domestic worker
GAATW	Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMAGE	International Migration and Gender Study Group
INSTRAW	United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JANNI	Japan NGO Network on Indonesia
MFA	Migration Forum in Asia
NGO	non-governmental organization
NIE	newly industrialized country and economy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SAR	Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong)
TAN	transnational advocacy network
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNIFIL	United Filipinos in Hong Kong
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

# summary résumé resumen

## SUMMARY

Since the 1980s, labour migration has been increasingly feminized in East and Southeast (hereafter E/SE) Asia. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, more than two million women were estimated to be working in the region, accounting for one third of its migrant population. Most female migrants are in reproductive occupations such as domestic work and sex services, in private households and informal commercial sectors. Despite the great need to protect their welfare and human rights, governments of their destination countries view migrants as merely a workforce to meet labour shortages, and ignore protective measures and gender-sensitive policies. Under pressure to increase foreign revenues, labour-source countries encourage their women to migrate and remit their earnings from abroad, but in the face of global competition, governments of source countries have shown little interest in their migrant women's welfare. In the context of the E/SE Asian countries' bleak records of human rights practices, non-state actors have assumed increasing importance in advocating migrants' rights, which they have done through local and transnational networks.

Feminized, and therefore gendered, migration in E/SE Asia has its roots in the region's rapid but uneven economic development, which is characterized by the inequality and conflict that differences of gender, class and nationality produce. The transfer of foreign women within the region from the low-income economies (the Philippines, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Pakistan, Bangladesh among others) to the high-income ones (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Taiwan Province of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan) intensifies existing gender inequality, economic injustice and ethnic discrimination. International migration is, however, a contradictory process that, while providing migrant women with opportunities for social mobility, also subjects them to abuses and exploitation. The majority of Asia's migrant women are independent contract workers seeking employment abroad in order to augment family incomes and personal savings. Empowerment results from their everyday resistance to existing power structures, and from the opportunity to accumulate individual and collective resources.

An analysis of Asia's immigration policies and women's migration patterns reveals six widely recognized and designated categories and characteristics of the women involved:

- domestic workers
- entertainers (sex workers)
- unauthorized workers
- immigrant wives
- skilled workers
- workers who share an ethnic heritage with that of the host population (such as Japanese-Brazilians in Japan and Korean-Chinese in the Republic of Korea).

These six categories of migrant women differ from one another in the conditions of their border crossing, employment and legal protection, and they therefore differ in the ways in which they resist the unequal and discriminatory practices they encounter at their destinations. Consequently, concerned citizens and non-governmental organizations choose different civil actions and counteractive measures to enhance migrant women's rights. The governments of labour-importing states in E/SE Asia vary in their political tolerance of civil-society activities. There are thus significant differences in the capacities and resources that their civil societies have for collective action.

The existing literature indicates three levels of effectiveness of civil actions and women's resistance in Asia. The first is found in Singapore and Malaysia, where strict immigration policies, rigid labour contract systems and low degrees of state tolerance for civil activism severely curtail pro-migrant actions. The second level characterizes Japan and the Republic of Korea, where tight border controls and large numbers of undocumented workers, combined with relatively high degrees of tolerance for collective action, allow many groups and organizations to challenge state authority and provide legal and cultural assistance to migrants. The third level is manifest in Hong Kong SAR, where despite a strict immigration policy and rigid labour contract system, the British colonial legacy permits migrants to openly pursue economic rights and collective action. The frequency of demonstrations by migrants, especially Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong SAR, highlights the importance of transnational networking that links migrants in sending and receiving countries. The growing presence of a transnational advocacy movement throughout Asia facilitates the efforts of civil organizations to enhance migrants' rights and welfare.

In conclusion, feminized migration has increased inequality and injustice based on gender, class and nationality

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