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Gender and Migration: An Integrative Approach

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Abstract. This paper is a synopsis of Oishi's forthcoming book *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies, and Labor Migration in Asia* (Stanford University Press), which analyzes the mechanisms involved in international female migration in Asia. Acknowledging the shortcomings of previous studies that focus too much on migrant-receiving countries and/or a single country case, this work examines female migration from a comparative and integrative perspective. The analysis proceeds at multiple levels of analysis: (1) the state (macro); (2) individuals (micro); and (3) society (meso) in both migrant-sending and receiving countries. How have foreign direct investment and state policies affected women's labor force participation? How has society legitimized or illegitimized women's labor migration within and across national borders? How do individual women make their decisions to emigrate? Based on fieldwork in 10 countries, the study demonstrates the complex causation of international female migration in Asia.

1. Why Does International Female Migration Matter?

Feminization of international labor migration is a global trend. The percentage of women in the migrant population (both permanent immigrants and temporary migrants) has been increasing in the postwar period, and now women comprise the majority of international migrants. According to Zlotnik (1998), the number of female migrants across the world increased by 63% — from 35 million to 57 million — between 1965 and 1990, an increase 8% higher than that of male migrants. In the United States, 53.5% of newly admitted immigrants were women in 1998.

Women are no longer just following their fathers or husbands. They migrate in their own capacities as workers. However, as the number of migrant women increased, the number of abuse and exploitation has also risen. Since most migrant women work at the bottom rung of the occupational hierarchy, they are extremely vulnerable. The vast majority of them work as housemaids, entertainers, nurses, and factory workers. Housemaids are especially vulnerable

because they work in private homes where the authority can conduct very little inspection. The problems include sexual harassment, rape, non-payment or underpayment of wages, verbal/physical abuse, and so on.

Because of these growing problems, many international organizations started addressing the issue of female migration. For instance, the UN Population Conference in Cairo, UN Women's Conference in Beijing, General Assembly, and other international conferences and meetings have been addressing the problems that migrant women are facing. The UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution on Violence Against Migrant Women Workers in 1994. And the Resolution was also adopted by the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Human Rights, both of which have started taking initiatives in encouraging member States to adopt and implement effective measures to protect migrant women. However, despite these growing attention and problems, there has not been any systematic research to explain the mechanism and the patterns of international female migration. Most studies simply compile descriptive country cases without systematic comparisons, or present theoretical assumptions without providing empirical evidence. Very little research has been done to analyze the cross-national patterns of women's international migration. This research aims to fill this gap.

The Scope of Research

This paper will examine temporary labor migration of women. This is because temporary migration comprises a significant component of global migration flows due to the "closed-door" policy in many industrialized countries. I will also focus on the migration of "unskilled women" because the majority of migrant women fall under this category. They are not necessarily

uneducated: for instance, one third of Filipino migrants in Hong Kong and Singapore are said to have some college education. However, many of them are working as unskilled workers such as housemaids and care workers.

My research also centers on intra-regional migration in Asia. The migration flows within Asia is much larger than the flows of Asian immigrants to the US, Canada, and Europe. For instance, while the US received 266,000 Asian immigrants in 1997, the number of intra-regional migrants in Asia was over 1.5 million in the same year. In 1999, the Philippines sent only 31,000 permanent immigrants to the US, while it sent 640,000 temporary migrants to other countries, mostly in West and Southeast Asia.

The scope of this research is also limited to legal (regular) migration since there is not sufficient data available for illegal (irregular, undocumented) migration. I will also mainly examine the mechanism of the “sending side” or “emigration side” in this paper because a relatively small number of research has been done from developing countries’ perspectives.¹

2. Research Questions

My research question is concerning the patterns and mechanisms of women’s migration in Asia. When I coauthored the ILO Report in 1996 (Lim & Oishi, 1996), I found out that men migrate from almost all developing countries in Asia. However, when it comes to female migration, the majority of the flows originate from three major sending countries (Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia). Why is there such a pattern? What factors drive women in these countries to emigrate?

¹ This does not mean that I ignore the perspective of receiving countries. On the contrary, my overall research the analyses of the demand-side factors, immigration policies, and the selectivity of employers. For more detail, please refer to my forthcoming book.

In the past two decades, many case studies have been conducted on female migration in developing countries. However, most of them simply attribute international female migration to poverty, and thus do not go beyond it to explain why many low-income women in some poor countries do not emigrate abroad. It is necessary to go beyond the poverty-driven explanation and examine the causal mechanism of female migration in greater depth.

3. Existing Migration Theories

Generally speaking, migration theories have not addressed the gender aspects of international migration partly because of the assumption that most migrant workers were men and women are their dependents. Even though this problem has been alleviated over the past two decades, not very many scholars have made sufficient attempts to theorize international female migration in a comprehensive manner. In this section, I will present a brief overview of existing migration theories and explain why they cannot explain the patterns of international female migration effectively.

Neo-Classical Economic Theory

Neo-classical economic theory, for instance, attributes the patterns of international migration to the economic factors such as labor demand and supply, wage differentials, etc. However, as Table 1 shows, GDP and unemployment rates do not explain the patterns of international female migration. All the major “sending countries” of migrant women (Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia) have higher GDP per capita than “non-sending countries” (Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan). This does not make sense if we assume that poverty is the only cause of emigration. The effect of unemployment is also puzzling. In Sri Lanka, men’s

unemployment rate is higher than women's, but women still comprise 79% of total out-migrants. On the other hand, in Pakistan, women's unemployment is much higher than men's, and yet, women account for only 1% of the out-migrants. Economic indicators apparently do not provide sufficient explanations for international migration of Asian women.

Table 1: Temporary Labor Migration from Selected Asian Countries² in 1996

Country	GDP per capita (US\$)	Unemployment (%)		Women's Share in Labor Force (%)	Women's Share in Migration Outflows (%)	Total Annual Migration Outflows	Total Stock of Migrants Abroad (Millions)
		Male	Female				
Philippines	3,600	7.0	8.2	37	58	250,000	6.5
Sri Lanka	2,600	8.0	7.6	36	79	163,000	1.2
Indonesia	2,800	3.3	5.1	40	68	121,000	1.9
Bangladesh	1,470	2.7	2.3	42	0.5	210,000	2.0
India	1,800	n.a.	n.a.	31	10	415,000	1.4
Pakistan	2,000	4.1	13.7	26	1	130,000	3.1

n.a. = Not Available. Source: Asian Migrant Centre (1999); ILO (2000). Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (1998); and ILO estimates. The data on the Philippines refers to only newly hired migrants.

Structurist Theory

The structural theory views international migration as a form of exploitation of the peripheral nations by the "core" nations in the international system. Workers in developing countries are structurally pulled into the secondary labor markets in industrialized countries which are characterized by low wages, less preferable working conditions and lack of job security. One of the proponents, Sassen (1988) points to the role of multinational corporations (MNCs) in developing countries whose preferential recruitment of female workers triggered the migration of young single women from rural (periphery) to urban (core) areas. She argues that

² The data on the number and percentage of migrant women are available in only seven Asian countries. The data on female migration are very scarce since most governments do not compile gender-specific

the MNCs fire such workers easily depending on their performance and economic downturns, and such redundant female workers become potential international female migrants. However, she has not provided the data which support such a direct link between the EPZs and the increase in international female migration. In fact, available case studies and my study also showed that the majority of migrant women from Sri Lanka and Indonesia emigrate directly from rural areas and were not engaged in wage employment prior to emigration. My data also show that the direct impact of EPZ on female labor force is not as significant as the literature has suggested.

Household Strategy Theory

Household strategy theorists contend that migration decisions are not made by individuals but by households. According to the proponents of this approach, people act collectively not only to maximize expected income but also to minimize risks for the members of the kinship unit. Households control risks to their economic well-being by diversifying the allocation of household resources such as family labor (Lieby & Stark, 1988).

This theory has been gaining much attention, but surprisingly, very few proponents of this theory has conducted fieldwork to interview people about their own decision making to test their hypothesis. Their arguments are actually the assumptions they drew from the census data which show that poorer households send more migrants. In fact, my data showed that the vast majority of migrant women made their decision on their own. Another problem of this approach is that it does not explain why some countries send more migrant women than others. If women emigrate based on their household strategy, it means that households in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (“non-senders” of migrant women) do not have a strategy, which is difficult to believe.

statistics on international migration. Myanmar is excluded from this table due to its extremely low level of legal migration.

Network Theory

Network theory attributes migration process to personal, cultural, and/or other social ties. In migrant-sending countries, information about jobs and living standards abroad is most efficiently transmitted through personal networks such as friends and neighbors who emigrated. In receiving countries, immigrant communities often help their fellow men and women to immigrate, find a job, and adjust to a new environment. These networks reduce the costs of migration for newcomers, further inducing potential migrants to leave their countries.

Network theory is indeed applicable to the case of female migration in Asia. Women tend to rely on their personal networks more than men do. The literature and my own field research also suggest that many migrant women found jobs through their friends and relatives. The density and geographical extent of personal and institutional networks between migrant-receiving countries and sending countries would certainly help explain how migration has expanded.

However, social networks cannot explain why and how such networks were developed between one country and another to start with. The web of network does not seem to be evenly spread across countries and regions. The migration system theorists argue that the development of such networks is dependent on historical, geographical, and political ties which existed before large-scale migration started (Kritz et al, 1992). However, there is no convincing evidence indicating the preexistence of such close ties between major migrant-sending and receiving countries in Asia; e.g., the Philippines and Saudi Arabia, or Sri Lanka and Kuwait. Social networks alone cannot explain the patterns of international female (and male) migration either.

4. Gender and Migration: The Integrative Approach

Given the limitations of existing theories, I would like to propose a method which I call “the integrative approach” to international female migration. The integrative approach adopts three levels of analyses: (1) macro-level (the state), (2) micro-level (individuals), and (3) meso-level (society).

I would argue that the state plays a major role in determining the patterns of international female migration. As my colleague and I discussed elsewhere (Lim & Oishi, 1996), emigration policies treat men and women differently. Some countries do not restrict male migration but do restrict and or even ban female migration. These countries tend to be “non-sending countries” of migrant women. On the other hand, major “sending countries” of migrant women seemed to have relatively open emigration policies for women. My first hypothesis is that these emigration policies would explain the basic patterns of female migration.

I also decided to look at the factors at the agent level – the autonomy of migrant women themselves – to explain the patterns of female migration. I hypothesized that for a large-scale female migration to take place, women in the particular country have to have more autonomy and decision-making power within the household.

At the meso-level, I also assumed that there must be a social environment accommodating for international female migration. If society ostracizes women who go abroad and return home, a large-scale female migration is not likely to take place. Women must feel comfortable with leaving their community, and the community also has to provide an environment which does not penalize women who came back from abroad. But for this to happen, I hypothesized that the country would have to be integrated into the global economy and induces women’s internal mobility (e.g. from rural areas to cities) first. When people get used to

the reality that women leave their community on their own and work in cities, international female migration also becomes more easily acceptable.

This study adopts comparative case study approach. I will compare “sending countries” and “non-sending countries” of migrant women at the multiple of levels of analyses: the state, individuals, and society. The research is based on my fieldwork conducted in 1999 mainly in Philippines, Sri Lanka (major sending countries of women) and Bangladesh (non-sending country). The data include interviews with 111 key informants such as policy-makers and NGO staff, and 132 migrant women.

5. Research Findings: An Integrative Approach to International Female Migration

Immigration policies and labor demand/supply do affect the overall volumes and patterns of international female migration. The general assumption is that if there is a large demand for migrant women and if the immigration policy is more open for unskilled female labor, the more migrant women will enter the particular country. Also, there is a process of selectivity among employers. For example, many employers in Southeast Asia and Europe prefer to hire Filipinas as domestic helpers because of their high education level, language (English) ability, and friendliness. In fact, the wage level of Filipinas is higher than that of any other nationalities.

However, the demand level and selectivity on the employers’ side cannot entirely explain the patterns of female migration. For instance, Arab households are said to prefer to hire Muslim maids because Christian maids (most Filipino maids are Christian) teach wrong values to children. And yet, not many Muslim women from Bangladesh emigrate to work in the Arab region. Why do they not respond to the labor demand despite their poverty? That is why examining the “emigration side” becomes necessary.

Value-Driven vs. Economically-Driven Emigration Policies

I argue that emigration policies of developing countries play a crucial role. Emigration policies for women are generally more restrictive than that for men. Many countries place the restrictions based on age, destinations, and occupations for women. There are a few destination restrictions for men as well when the receiving countries are involved in war. However, otherwise, they do not have equivalent restrictions. Because the remittances are so important to the economy, many developing countries in Asia tend to promote male migration.

In the 1970s, the governments were not concerned with the protection issue or the value aspect of emigration policies. Although male workers, who comprised the majority of migrant populations at that time, experienced problems such as non-payment or underpayment of wages, breach of the contract, poor working conditions, and even sexual harassment at times, these incidents received little attention from the public and government officials.

However, as the number of female migrants increased and the media started reporting the cases of rape, sexual harassment, and maltreatment of these women, public concerns grew rapidly and governments had to make efforts to protect migrant workers overseas. The Philippine government initially opted for a ban on female migration, but later shifted back to a more open policy partly because of the public pressure and also because a large number of women left through irregular channels and became even more vulnerable.

The Bangladeshi government, on the other hand, has been adopting a highly restrictive policy on female migration. While it lifted a ban in 1991, the government reimposed a ban on unskilled women's migration in 1998, believing that it is the best approach to protection. Sri Lanka has not imposed a ban but attempted to expand its official protection capacities at the diplomatic missions abroad following the Philippine government's initiatives.

Contrary to what migration scholars have argued, emigration policies of developing countries are not just the simple products of economic concerns. Developing countries certainly do promote labor migration of unskilled workers in order to ease high unemployment rates and improve the balance of payment situation. However, my case studies show that policy-makers as well as the general public perceive female migration differently from male migration. Economic concerns are more important for male migration, but not for female migration. The emigration policies for women are “value-driven” compared with those for men which are economically-driven.

However, emigration policies cannot explain the entire phenomenon of international female migration. Emigration policies set the overall framework of international female migration, but it does not mean that the policies are implemented in a perfect manner. For instance, the Philippines’ ban on female migration to Kuwait turned out to be rather ineffective because many women chose illegal/irregular channels to work there. Also, in Bangladesh, very few women emigrated abroad even before the government placed a ban on female migration. Why didn’t women choose to emigrate? To answer this question, we have to turn to the micro-level factors.

Micro-Level: Women’s Autonomy and Decision-Making power

I argue that for a large-scale international female migration to take place, there must be strong conducive factors at the agent level, such as willingness and motivation of individual women. The reasons for emigration vary. Young single women are motivated to work overseas primarily to support their families. In the Philippines, extended kinship relations are still prevalent and thus young women are willing to support not only their parents and younger

siblings but also their nephews, nieces, and grandparents. However, young Filipinas also emigrate partly to earn money for their own future and seek some adventure, more so than married women. In Sri Lanka, young single women emigrate to help their family members but their incentives include dowry concerns. They feel guilty that saving for their dowry is putting a large financial burden on their whole family. Therefore, they wish to migrate and work overseas to earn a large sum of money on their own to increase their marriageability.

On the other hand, married women are motivated more by the desire to work for their children's future. But the keys to their actual emigration decisions are their autonomy and decision-making power within the household, particularly pertaining to financial matters. In the Philippines, it is mostly the wife who manages the household finances. Sri Lankan women also assume a major role in household finances, though to a lesser degree than their Filipino counterparts. In both countries, women make both short-term and long-term financial plans for their children and other family members. They are the ones who feel the financial needs of family members most acutely, and thus are motivated to earn money by going overseas.

In contrast, many Bangladeshi women tend to have little control over household finances. In Bangladesh, most men take financial responsibilities, plans for household expenditures, and do daily shopping. Many women do not even know exactly how much money their family has. While many low-income women are engaged in some kind of wage employment, they are less motivated to take the financial responsibility by going abroad.

Autonomy and Decision-Making

Contrary to the arguments of household strategy theorists, the majority of migrant women from these countries make migration decisions by themselves. My survey showed that the

majority of Filipinas and Sri Lankans made their own decisions to emigrate. About one third of Sri Lankans and one-sixth of Filipinas never consulted their family members about their decision to migrate. Many of these women kept their decision secret until a week or sometimes a day before their departure. Moreover, about a third of Filipinas and one-sixth of Sri Lankans left their country despite the objections from their husbands or parents. Women are much more autonomous than the migration literature has suggested. They are the major decision-makers for migration.

Micro-Macro Link: Social Legitimacy

Then, how are the macro factors (policies) and micro factors (individuals) related to each other? To better understand these linkages, I would like to propose the concept of “social legitimacy” as a useful heuristic tool. I define social legitimacy as the embodiment of norms in a given society which endorses particular behavioral patterns. Social legitimacy for international female migration means the set of norms that are conducive to women’s international migration. Social legitimacy for women’s international migration are deeply rooted in many socioeconomic factors such as (1) historical legacy of women’s wage employment, (2) the country’s integration into global economy, which results in the feminization of the labor force, (3) women’s rural-urban mobility; and (4) gender equality, particularly in education.

Historical Legacy of Women’s Employment

The historical legacy of women’s gainful employment refers to the tradition in which women were engaged in economic activities outside their home, whether in formal or informal sectors. In the Philippines, women had been engaged in commerce and services even before the

colonial period. Similarly, Sri Lankan women have been the primary workforce in tea estates since the country was under British rule, and also comprised the majority of handloom workers after the country gained independence. In both countries, women's wage employment and geographical mobility were not alien to the society. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, the tradition of female seclusion has discouraged women from openly taking part in wage employment. Women have long been "invisible human resources" (Wallace et al, 1987).

Impact of Global Economy and Women's Rural-Urban Mobility

A country's integration into the global economy and success in export-oriented industrialization also help develop social acceptance toward female migration. Both in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, export-oriented industrialization led to a rapid increase in the female labor force and accelerated rural-urban migration of women. Bangladeshi women have also started entering the labor force in manufacturing sectors, but to more limited extent than Filipinas and Sri Lankans. The vast majority of them still remain in the agricultural sector in rural areas. Rural-urban migration is still dominated by men. Women's geographical mobility within the country is still limited in Bangladesh.

Women's Education

Women's education level also affects the level of international female migration, albeit in indirect ways. First, the high education level among female population in developing countries attracts the investment of multinational corporations. Foreign investors normally prefer to hire skilled female workers who are also cheap and docile. The export-led manufacturing sectors thus facilitate women's internal mobility because they increase their employment prospects in

various urban sectors. Having education also increases women's expectations for better life, and family tends to expect returns from daughter's education as well. While the public shows concerns for internal/international migration of illiterate women, it tends to accept the migration of women with some education, believing that they should be able to make wise decisions and can protect themselves in an unfamiliar environment.

Social legitimacy is further enhanced by political backing. In the Philippines, President Marcos's aggressive promotion of overseas employment helped increase the number of migrant workers, and this created an accommodating environment for international migrants, whether men or women. While succeeding administrations have not officially promoted labor migration, they have recognized its economic importance and almost all presidents have praised migrants in public speeches as national heroes or heroines for helping their family and country. The Philippine president even greets returning migrants at the airport in every December. Such recognition that the government has attached to migrant workers certainly helped increase the social acceptability of international migration, whether for men or women. In the Philippines, very little stigma is attached to international female migration.

In Bangladesh, by contrast, social legitimacy for female migration even within the country is generally low, let alone for their migration to foreign countries. Social stigma against women migrating abroad is still strong. And this is reflected in the lack of political backing to female migration as well. The policy makers and intellectuals argue that potential migrant women tend to be illiterate, helpless, and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in a foreign land. They believe that the state needs to protect these women by banning their emigration. The lack of such legitimacy or the existence of stigma against female migration within their own country

also discourages women from leaving the country. Women are afraid of being ostracized, labeled as promiscuous, and risking their marriageability or tarnishing family reputations.

6. Conclusions

The patterns of international female migration can be explained by three levels of analyses from the “sending side”: (1) the state; (2) individuals; and (3) society. At the state level, emigration policies treat men and women differently. Because women are not a value-neutral workforce but the symbols of national dignity and pride, the government tends to have protective and restrictive emigration policies for women. Emigration policies for women tend to be value-driven rather than those for men which are economically driven.

At the individual level, women’s autonomy and decision-making power are crucial determinants. Women in so called “major sending countries” (e.g. Philippines and Sri Lanka) have higher autonomy and decision making power within their households than those in “non-sending countries.”

However, these are not the only determinants, either. Many low-income Bangladeshi women have higher autonomy and yet are not interested in migration. In the Bangladeshi society, there has not been a social environment that is conducive to large-scale female migration. Women’s emigration, if not accompanied by male family members, still carries strong social stigma. Of course, some extremely poor women cannot afford to care about such stigma and thus try to find a job overseas through irregular channels. But the number of such irregular migrants is still lower than those from other countries, indicating that the social stigma is strong enough to discourage the vast majority of lower-middle and middle-class women from

leaving the country. Therefore, it is important to look at this meso-level factor, “social legitimacy.”

Social legitimacy, which derives from historical legacy of women’s employment, a country’s integration into global economy, women’s rural-urban mobility, and their education level, is a prerequisite for the large-scale international female migration. A country’s export-oriented strategy increases foreign investment that leads to the rise in women’s labor force participation and their rural-urban mobility. Even in the major “sending countries” such as Philippines and Sri Lanka, it was not socially desirable for women to leave their community on their own to work in cities before export-oriented industrialization started. However, as the country became integrated into the global economy, and as the demand for female labor increased in urban areas, many low-income women responded to the demand by leaving their communities, moving from rural to urban areas. As a result, social norms were gradually transformed. The increase of women’s rural-urban mobility eventually resulted in social acceptability of women leaving their community on their own, whether for cities or foreign countries.

The link between globalization and international migration is not as direct as the conventional migration literature suggested. I found the impact of globalization is rather indirect, but is still an important factor. The globalization process and the resultant export-oriented industrialization do not necessarily produce international migrants directly. However, they seem to help bring about changes in social perceptions towards women’s employment and their independent departure from their own community. The sudden increase in the demand for female labor gradually transforms traditional norms which used to restrict women’s geographical mobility within the traditional community.

The mechanism of international female migration is extremely complex and thus requires an “integrative approach” with the multiple levels of analyses. Similar studies are needed in other regions such as Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa to compare the main causal factors. Does the state act in the same manner in all regions? Are there any regional differences in the ways in which globalization processes affect women’s migration? Further comparative research will lead us to a better understanding of international female migration.

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