

Keywords:

Women Migration Asia Labor
 Workers Poverty Economy
 Employment Empowerment China

Reverse migration:**The Impact of Returning Home**

Alison Albright, Deborah Naybor
 University of Buffalo
 Department of Global Gender Studies

Alison Albright: second year PhD student and instructor in SUNY Buffalo's Global Gender Studies Department. My research interests include: gender and global poverty, gender and family activism, and global youth feminist movements.

Deborah Naybor: Second year PhD student and instructor in SUNY Buffalo's Global Gender Studies Department. My research interest is women's land rights and time poverty's impact on poor women.

Introduction

Global labor migration is gendered. There is a common misperception that most migrant workers are male but large numbers of women migrate in order to find work abroad or to urban sectors within their own countries. Migrant labor is also divided along gendered lines by the types of work available and rates of pay. Women constitute about half of international migrants (95 million), and send millions of dollars in remittances home to educate their children and support their families (UNFPA, 2006). Since the 1960's, approximately half of migrant workers have been female but since 2000, there has been an increase in women migrating independently and as the main income earner, rather than just following male relatives (Jolly, 2005)

Migration for global labor creates a massive ebb and flow of workers following shifts in the economy but not all migration involves poor, single male laborers moving to Western nations as widely portrayed in the media. In fact in 2000, 56% of migrant workers were from More Developed Regions. Seven percent of migrants were refugees and 60% of migrants entering the US and Canada in the 1990s brought their families. Many migrants are well educated, with advanced skills. This conglomerate of migrating workers has been growing exponentially in recent decades. But the recent global economic crisis has slowed migration and even caused millions of workers to return home, a term known as "reverse migration."

The Positive Impact of Women's Return

When the global economic downturn reduced the need for a migrant labor force, many workers hesitated to return home. For some, it had been a hazardous and expensive trip to get to the cities or new countries where they had been making a living. Some felt that lower wages or fewer hours would still pay better than returning to their poor villages or negatively impacted home cities. Others just didn't have the money or the means to travel home (Ghosh, 2009). But for some women, returning home was welcomed relief from the long hours of difficult work, the unsafe working conditions of migrant labor or the dangerous life as a prostitute. Reduction of labor needs has reduced the demand for trafficking, exploitation and vulnerability of women to the abuse of employers. Many women who lost their jobs were released from sweatshop conditions, living and working in crowded, unsafe situations. Even legal migration may subject women to possible abuse, discrimination and employment abuse (UNFPA, 2006).

As the demand for labor decreases, the expensive and sometimes dangerous migration to another area of the world for work also decreases. Paine, a 22 year old woman from Indonesia, had signed up to work in an affluent Singapore neighborhood for \$148 a month, a small fortune to the poor rice farmer. But she was locked in a warehouse for four months, awaiting assignment and unable to pay the \$50 that would release her from her migrant labor contract (Newsweek, 1998).

In addition to reducing stress, health risks, dangerous conditions and exploitation, the return of women migrant workers has a number of positive impacts on the home they return to. Mothers are often reunited with their children, cared for by family members. In New York City, 57% of Chinese immigrant mothers were found to send their newborn children back to China to be cared for by relatives because they were unable to afford day care (Kwong, Chung, Sun, Chou, Taylor-Shih, 2009, p. 348). Women, who act as caretakers for children, the sick and elderly, are an invisible and undervalued source of domestic labor, and although the remittances sent from their jobs were much needed, so are their unpaid services to the family and community. Carla leaves her daughter in the Philippines to work as an entertainer in Japan. She has only been able to visit three times in the past ten years. "How I wish I was here to ease her difficulty and to listen" (Mendoza, 2009).

Another advantage to the return of migrant women to their traditional homes is the new knowledge they may bring with them. A "brain gain" (Batavola 2007) returns those women who have gained new skills and education while working in an urban or more viable rural area. Many women have gained knowledge on health, contraception, and work skills from other women or from programs available through their workplace. A study of over 3000 women in China found that women returning from urban employment were more likely to use family planning and have increased reproductive knowledge. (Chen, Liu, Xie, 2008). Women who have journeyed to the cities or abroad have a wider global view of human and legal rights, politics and democracy, and a better understanding of the world outside their village. Martin (2008) states the "diasporas can also help stimulate political reforms that improve conditions in home countries" (pg. 7).

Men Return: The Positive Impact on Women

When men migrate to urban areas or to foreign countries for higher paying employment, they also may be placed in dangerous or abusive situations or end up in forced labor, unable to afford to return to their families. Choucri and Mistree (2007) state that “the workers’ own countries do not wish to pay for their return home. As a result they are unemployed, without discretionary income, and unable to leave the region. This situation has given rise to a new label, signaling a new migration experience: the ‘stranded migrants’” (p. 176). The workers who emigrate may face extreme hardships and authorities do very little to provide for immigrants rights. Male migrants have been attacked and murdered, accused of stealing jobs from local workers, leaving women widowed or caring for injured men and devastating the family income (Saidazimova, 2007).

Families may save for years to afford the cost of passage, legal or illegal, for a male head of household to migrate in search of work overseas. When the economic downturn reduced labor force requirements, men may be able to find a way to return home. This means the main household producer returns. Their labor adds to the ability to increase production in self sufficient subsistence farming and adds to local food security as food availability increases and prices are lowered. Local labor force availability increases, decreasing local production costs.

The workers who emigrate may face extreme hardships and authorities do very little to provide for immigrants rights (Saidazimova 2007). They may be the victims of violence, as local workers grow angry at jobs lost to outsiders. Men involved in labor migration are often forced to focus on survival and have little time to think of family back home. The International Organization for Migration notes that “the new and different experiences they enjoy could lead to a redirection and redefinition of roles and relations between migrant men and women and impact on their family lives” (p. 17). Returning home strengthens the family bond and provides help in caring for children and elderly parents.

As with returning women, men who return from urban areas or international employment bring back new ideas and a better understanding of policy and rights, including potential exposure to a greater range of rights for women. The return of skilled and educated laborers provides a better workforce at home. They may have received subsidized education, as in Taiwan, where migrant laborers were provided with advanced educational and vocational training. (O’Neil 2003). Socioeconomic and political structures are transformed through the globalization that workers carry back home. They return with a wider range of goods, ideas and services and increased “economic interconnections” (Choucri, Mistree, p. 175).

Women’s Losses: The Negative Impact of Returning

Xiaoju, a young woman in China, migrated to the city to work in a factory. She lost her job making cheap jewelry, working long hours for little pay.

‘The foreigners have stopped ordering’ the supervisor suddenly informed two-thirds of the employees, “I don’t have work for you anymore”. Xiaoju returned to her home village to live with her grandparents on a tiny farm. She fatalistically states, “No one can be responsible for the crisis. It strikes everyone the same way”. Her a pink cell phone that that cost her 160 hours of overtime, about \$109, is her last connection to her friends in the city. Xiaoju knows that life will be more difficult without a paycheck despite her relief from long, difficult hours of work (Wagner, 2009). Xiaoju’s story and sentiments reflect the feelings of many female migrant workers in regards to losing their jobs and returning home.

There are three main disadvantages and negative aspects that women in Xiaoju’s situation can expect to have to deal with when they return home. First there is loss of essential remittances obtained from migrant work. Although it is quite often that these remittance may appear to be inconsequential; they have been proven to be essential contributions to the economy of the home village. (Judd, 2007). These remittances are often used for family education, health costs, and food. Along with losing the money itself, the second negative effect is that women lose a sense of responsibility from having to make important decisions as how to best manage the money they were making (Donnan, 1997). This new level of responsibility helped women to learn strategies for making effective decisions for their and their family’s future. This loss of responsibility can also lead to the third main disadvantage which is a loss of educational and skills opportunities. Many female migrants will return to restrictive education, social, and career opportunities (Donnan, 1997). The return home ends opportunities for women to work in other countries learning new cultural and social practices. Women may be returning to cultural practices that limit their exposure to education resulting in an end to a “brain gain” they have been privileged to be a part of in their migrant country.

The loss of money, responsibility, and educational, social, and occupational opportunities are the main negative effects of reverse migration on women returning home, but women who have remained in the home while the male head-of-household migrated for work also may experience negative effects when the male returns home.

The Men Are Back: Negative Impacts of Men’s Return

When the male head of household returns home there can be an extreme restricting of women’s freedom (Chen, Liu, and Xie, 2008). Women, who have been running the household and working the fields while the men were away, now often find their rights and land taken away from them. This has led to issues of domestic violence as women have tried to claim the land they had been working on in the men’s absence, and in many cases women lose all rights and decision-making responsibilities in regards to the land once the male head of household returns. While men may have been exposed to a more global view of women’s rights, some returning male migrants are reluctant to expose women and girls to Western values. They fear this would undermine cultural traditions and in fact some men become more socially and religiously conservative due to

their disgust with Western ways which they experienced during their emigration (Martin 2008, pg. 7). Women who try to challenge such conservative views may risk losing both their land and their children if they chose to attempt to divorce their restricting, oppressive, and possibly violent former migrant husbands (Judd).

The main disadvantage of reverse migration on these women is the loss of land. A woman's right to land is a key resource in agrarian societies (Agarwal, 1994). A woman's right to land is linked to her educational and social opportunities. Women given responsibility for taking care of land make decisions that affect the welfare of their whole family increasing female empowerment in all levels of the society. When the male head of household returns, this empowerment is taken away from women, and unfortunately is often replaced with a restrictive environment.

Overall the negative effect of reverse migration on women is limiting, restrictive oppression. Regardless whether the woman is returning home or she is the one who surrenders her role when the man returns home, women have to give up something as a result of reverse migration. The losses include remittances, responsibilities, educational, social and career opportunities, freedom, and land. Policies affecting reverse migration need to consider such effects on women and need to be re-written to empower women not restrict them.

Conclusion

Understanding the intricate relationship of women and men in reverse migration is complicated. UNFPA (2006) states that "for a long time, the issue of women migrants has been low on the international policy agenda." They further state that "the explicit recognition of the human rights of women and the need for gender equality is a basic prerequisite of any sound, equitable and effective policy framework that seeks to manage migration in an orderly and humane manner." Education and inclusion of men in these policies will be critical to safeguard women during the transition of reverse migration.

Improved communication and transportation allows women access to increased knowledge of their rights and their experience as an urban or international migrant has hopefully raised their awareness of these rights. Women may have been "compelled to migrate because of inequality, exclusion and limited alternatives in their home countries" (UNFPA) but returning home may give them opportunity to bring about change. But there has to be a new understanding of the problems reverse migration will create for women and development of new policies and programs to increase their economic stability and physical safety.

References

- Agarwal, B. (1994). *A field of one's own: Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, J. Liu, H., Zhenming, X. (2008) Effects of rural-urban return migration on women's family planning and reproductive health related attitude and behavior in rural China.
- Choucrist, N., Mistree, D. (2007) Globalization, Migration, and New Challenges to Governance. *Current History*. April 2009, Vol 108. No. 717.
- Donnan, H. (1997) Return Migration and Female-headed Households in rural Punjab. New Delhi. Hindustan Publishing Corp.
- Ghosh, J. (2009) Will the Crisis Reverse Global Migration? *Yale Global*. July 14, 2009. Retrieved September 2009 from www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/briefings/data.000122.
- International Organization for Migration (2009) Gender Issues and Migration Policy. Retrieved December 2009 from www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/developing-migration-policy.
- Jolly, S. (2005). Gender and Migration: Overview Report. Bridge Development-Gender , Institute of Development Studies(UK).
- Judd, E. (2007). No Change for Thirty Years.: The Renewed Question of Women's Land Rights in Rural China. *Development and Change*, 38 (4), 689-710.

- Kwong, K., Chung, H., Sun, L., Chou, J. & Taylor-Shih, A. (2009) Factors Associated with Reverse-Migration Separation Among a Cohort of Low Income Chinese Immigrant Families in New York City. *Social Work in Health Care*. 48:348-359.
- Martin, S. (2008) Transatlantic Perspectives on Migration Policy Brief 1. Institute for the Study of International Migration Newsletter. Retrieved October 2009 from <http://isim.georgetown.edu>.
- Mendoza, D. (2009) Development: Social Cost of Migration Hits Women, Families. *IPS News*. Retrieved November 2009 from <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews-44037>.
- Newsweek. (1998) The Market for Misery. *Newsweek*. August. Retrieved November 2009 from <http://www.newsweek.com/id/122475>.
- O'Neil, K. (2003) Brain Drain and Gain: The Case of Taiwan. *Migration Policy Institute*. September 2003. Retrieved November 2009 from www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=155.
- Saidazimova, G. (2007) Central Asia: Labor Migrants Face Abuse, Xenophobia. Retrieved November 2009 from www.rferl.org/content/article/1078995.html.
- UNFPA. (2006) A Mighty but Silent River: Women and Migration. Retrieved September 2009 from www.unfpa.org/swp.2006.english.Chapter_2/index.html.
- Wagner, W. (2009) As Orders Dry Up, Factory Workers Head Home. Spiegel ONLINE. January 8, 2009. Retrieved online September 2009 from www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,600188,00.html.
- World Bank (2009) China Quarterly Update, November 2009. Retrieved November 2009 from <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/CHINAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22102737~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:318950,00.html>