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Women's Labour Migration from Asia and the Pacific: Opportunities and Challenges

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Executive Summary

In an era of unprecedented human mobility, migration from and within the Asia-Pacific region has assumed gendered dimensions, with implications for migration flows, trends and patterns. Gender roles, inequalities and relations affect who migrates, why and how, and migration also has significant implications for women migrant workers (WMWs) themselves. Migration can provide opportunities to improve their lives and that of their families, help them escape from social and economic vulnerabilities, and offer avenues for greater autonomy and empowerment. Migration also, however, exposes these women to different types of vulnerabilities, discrimination and risk, both in their origin and destination countries, particularly where such migration carries stigma and patriarchal norms are deep-seated.

For the broader society, the consequential effects of women's increased mobility have been significant. Sending countries have benefitted from higher inflows of remittances and changes in societal and family relations, particularly as they relate to gender roles and relations. For receiving countries, the welfare gains have been considerable as well, in the form of increased labour supply, opportunities for native women to enter the workforce and child- and elder-care possibilities, especially in contexts where such services are limited.

While countries in the region have adopted various measures to address the concerns of women migrants nationally, bilaterally and regionally, the ability to highlight issues concerning women migrant workers in the Beijing+20 discussions and in the formulation of the post-2015 development agenda provides opportunities for greater impact on gender equality and women's empowerment. A few key areas for consideration include: greater protection for women migrant workers; measures to maximize the potential of remittances for the workers, their families and beyond; conducive policy environments, especially in destination countries; and improvements in information, evidence and knowledge base.

I. Trends and Patterns of Women’s Migration in the Asia-Pacific Region

Any discussion of migration trends in the Asia-Pacific¹ does not lend to easy generalizations because of the region’s vast size and social, economic and cultural differences as well as complexities. A few key features and notable trends can be discerned, however.

- **Divergent trends and patterns, as women’s migration rises in some places, declines in others.** In line with

global trends, women migrants comprise nearly half (48 per cent) of overall migrants to the Asia-Pacific region and 44 per cent of emigrants from the region (UN DESA, 2013a). While this figure is slightly less than in other parts of the world,² the number of women migrants has been increasing in most countries (including China, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Bangladesh and Nepal), absolutely and proportionately.³ There are notable variations, such as the decline in the traditionally higher share of women migrants in countries such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Female Migrant Stock in Select Countries with High Migration Rates

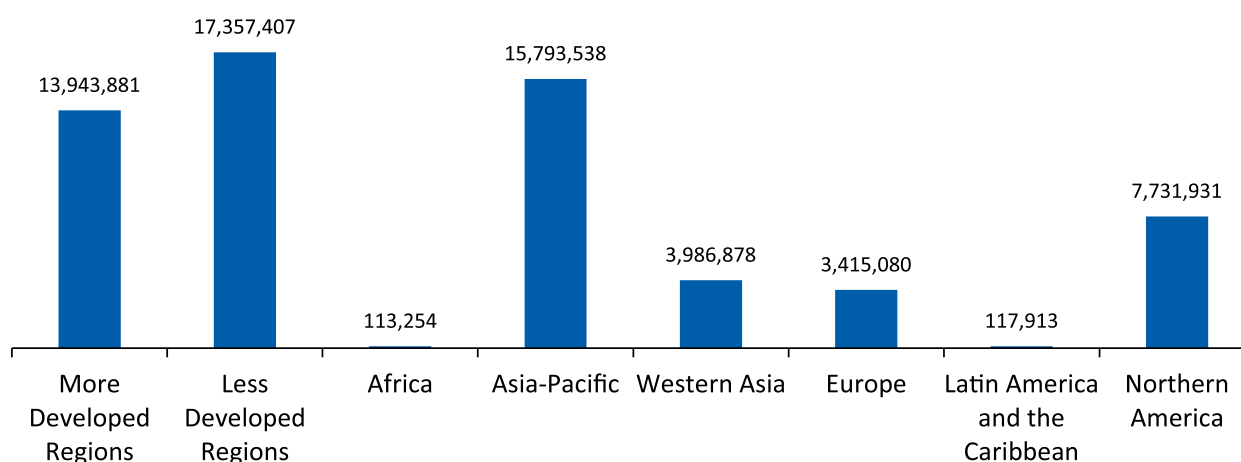
Country	1990	2000	2010	2013	Percentage Change (1990 to 2013)
Bangladesh	122,165	136,912	181,091	186,586	53%
China	184,407	253,952	367,572	408,029	121%
India	3,578,808	3,107,712	2,648,186	2,602,233	-27%
Indonesia	235,727	138,992	109,157	112,431	-52%
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	1,834,901	1,141,541	1,041,630	1,037,482	-43%
Malaysia	453,265	736,885	994,869	1,020,010	125%
Nepal	308,439	503,061	621,819	663,325	115%
Pakistan	2,951,730	1,908,514	1,883,087	1,773,602	-40%
Singapore	381,420	750,020	1,207,938	1,297,081	240%
Sri Lanka	228,345	196,529	169,151	161,696	-29%
Thailand	245,207	610,093	1,590,524	1,844,344	652%

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2013 Revision,” United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev. 2013, www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/index.shtml.

While the reasons for these shifts have yet to be examined comprehensively, policy changes in both countries of origin and destination seem instrumental. For instance, the enforcement of the Household Service Workers Reform Package in the Philippines in 2006 appears to have led to a decline in the deployment of domestic workers in the subsequent two years (Battistella and Asis, 2011), while the withdrawal in 2003 of the Bangladeshi ban on migration of women to lower levels of occupation and the enactment of the Overseas Employment Policy of 2006⁴ seem to have precipitated women’s migration (MFA, n.d.). Likewise, destination countries (for example, Australia) have also revised their immigration policies in a way that has favored women (Inglis, 2003).

In line with global trends, women migrants comprise nearly half of overall migrants to the Asia-Pacific region and 44 per cent of emigrants from the region.

Figure 1: Destinations for Women Migrants from the Asia-Pacific Region, 2013



Source: Author's calculations based on data from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by Destination and Origin," 2013 revision, www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesorigin.shtml.

- **Destinations for WMWs are heterogeneous and intra-regional migration is significant.** The oil-rich Gulf countries and the rapidly expanding economies of East and Southeast Asia are the major destinations for women from the region. More women are also migrating to developed countries, especially to meet the demands of the

health-care industry (see Figure 1, also Shutes, 2011). Other notable patterns: (1) more women migrants head to less-developed parts of the world; (2) intra-regional migration of women is as large as migration beyond the region;⁵ and (3) women migrants is significant in the top migration corridors (see Table 2).⁶

Table 2: Women Migrants in the Top Migration Corridors in the Asia-Pacific by Decade, 1960-2000⁷

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
China-Hong Kong, China	48%	45%	48%	49%	51%
India-United Arab Emirates	17%	19%	27%	36%	31%
China-United States	38%	20%	50%	50%	53%
Philippines-United States	28%	49%	54%	56%	57%
Afghanistan-Iran (Islamic Republic of)	50%	47%	45%	42%	41%
India-United States	37%	49%	45%	45%	46%
India-Saudi Arabia	23%	21%	19%	17%	20%
Indonesia-Malaysia	41%	41%	38%	36%	45%
Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia	25%	22%	20%	19%	21%
Bangladesh-United Arab Emirates	10%	12%	17%	24%	20%
Cambodia-Thailand	48%	47%	51%	52%	52%
China-Republic of Korea	45%	48%	47%	47%	47%
Malaysia-Singapore	48%	52%	53%	55%	57%
Myanmar-Thailand	48%	36%	46%	48%	48%

Source: Author's calculations based on data from World Bank, "Global Bilateral Migration Database," last updated July 1, 2011, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/global-bilateral-migration-database>.

- **Many women migrants migrate through irregular channels and/or are in irregular status.** Official statistics

on women's migration from most countries in the region are considered to be major underestimations because of the large numbers who migrate through informal channels and/or are working in irregular status.⁸ It is estimated

that in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such migrants make up at least 15 per cent of the workforce (Shah, 2014).⁹

- **WMWs mainly work in female-dominated occupations.** The gendered perception of



WMWs as a “young, needy, pliable, portable and disposable labor force” has meant that their demand is primarily in the domestic, hospitality, health and care, garment and entertainment sectors (UN Women, 2013a). In 2012, 86 per cent of Sri Lankan WMWs were in domestic work (SBFE, 2012), and 51 per cent of all WMWs from the Philippines were labourers and low-skilled workers (PSA, 2014). In destinations such as Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia, WMWs work in the informal manufacturing industry¹⁰ (Harima, 2012).

WMWs from the region also figure among the ranks of skilled workers, engaged in “welfare and social professions” (for example, education, health and social work). However, even as skilled professionals, women from the region take up sub-standard employment due to skills mismatch and non-recognition of academic qualifications and training (Jolly and Reeves, 2005). For instance, Nepali nurses in the United Kingdom are relegated to lower-level jobs as care givers in private nursing homes and care homes where job satisfaction is low and their technical capacities and knowledge remain unacknowledged (Adhikari, 2012).

II. Factors that Influence Women’s Labour Migration

Earlier, it was thought that out-migration of women takes place mostly in the context of associational migration, including marriage. However, with the rising share of WMWs migrating on their own, there has been increased attention on the determinants of women’s migration (Agrawal, 2006). Broadly speaking, several economic, social and political factors have been identified. Among them:

- Lack of job opportunities, aspirations for a better life and significant disparities in wage rates between origin and destination countries have induced women to migrate to countries where earnings are higher. Contrary to the general presumption that only the poorest and most vulnerable women migrate, the high cost of migration has meant that mobility of women permeates across different economic quintiles (UNFPA-IOM, 2006).
- The “culture of migration,” and women’s position in the sending community and overarching gender norms influence women’s access to opportunities for migration and their ability to take autonomous decisions relating to it (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). This is particularly true for

South Asia, where cultural norms accord a lower status to women, girls are widely viewed as a burden, female educational attainment is low and employment opportunities are limited, and gender-based violence is pervasive (UN Women, 2013a).

- National policies in countries of origin also influence the mobility of women. Conditions enacted to protect women from exploitation often prevent women’s participation in migration (Boyd and Grieco, 2003), or compel them to migrate using informal channels (UN Women, 2013a).
- Effects of “cumulative causation” are strong in determining WMW mobility patterns—Filipino women who migrated to Hong Kong, China or China generally hail from areas with a history of women’s migration, while women migrants from Thailand begin work in Bangkok or a tourist resort before being pushed into the global sex industry (Oishi, 2002).

But “push” factors alone do not explain the actual migration of women. Instead, many contextual factors in labour-receiving countries also create enabling conditions for women to migrate, including:

- The growth of export-oriented sectors where women are perceived to have a comparative advantage over men, resulting in increased migration of women in both the formal and informal sectors (Ahsan et al., 2014). Examples include export-processing zones in Jordan leading to increased employment of women migrants, particularly from Sri Lanka (HRW, 2007). Similarly, for-export-only garment and textile factories set up in the Mae Sot area of Thailand employ only migrant workers from Myanmar, most of whom are female (Kusakabe and Pearson, 2014).
- Increased demand for domestic workers in East and Southeast Asia as women enter the labour market. This leaves their “second-shift” (that is, domestic responsibilities) to be taken care of by migrant workers. In Singapore, it is estimated that one fifth of all households employ domestic workers. In contrast, in the GCC countries, the demand is led by changes in the structure of families and lifestyles, and for the “maintenance of newly acquired social status” (Irianto and Truong, 2014; Sabban, 2010).
- The increased demand in the health and care industry around the world, especially in the

ageing global north, has led women from the Asia-Pacific region to fulfil that need (UNFPA-IOM, 2006). The outflow of skilled migrant workers is even having a circuitous impact on migration patterns: the movement of nurses from Fiji to countries in the Pacific Rim and the Middle East has caused shortages, which, in turn, has precipitated the in-migration of Filipino nurses to Fiji (Rallu, 2008). The complex web of social networks has resulted in circular and cumulative impacts—women’s migration is higher in places where there already are earlier migrants (Massey et al., 2005).

III. Impact of Women’s Labour Migration

While gender-disaggregated data that considers the effects of women’s migration—and in particular labour migration—are hard to come by, existing literature does point to important contributions made by women migrants both to countries of origin and destination. The mechanisms and the extent to which they are able to contribute depend on many factors.

I. Financial Impact

In many labour-sending countries, women’s remittances are among the largest sources of cash revenue. Even though some women understandably send smaller amounts than men because they usually get paid less, women remit a higher proportion of their earnings, and do so more frequently (IOM and UN-INSTRAW, 2010; Omelanuik, 2005; FIDH, 2007). For instance, a Bangladeshi woman working in the Middle East sends 77 per cent of her income on an average (Kabbeer, 2007) while in Lao People’s Democratic Republic, women migrants remit one sixth more than their male counterparts (UN Women, 2013a).¹² The combined effects of these remittances can be significant; contrary to men’s remittances, which are spent overwhelmingly on “productive assets,” women’s remittances tend to be used for education, health, food, clothing and housing (UN Women, 2013a). According to one estimate, each Sri Lankan migrant woman on average supports a family of five, which totals 4 million people, or 20 per cent of the country’s population (Gamburd, 2010).

2. Social Impact

Besides financial remittances, the social remittances of women migrants in terms of ideas, skills, attitudes and knowledge can also contribute to socio-economic development, human rights and gender equality in

countries of origin. While a complete transformation in gender hierarchy and relations is not evident, migration of women does contribute towards reformulating gender roles and cultural norms (Lopez-Ekra et al., 2011). By sending back remittances, women emerge as breadwinners, a role often attributed to males (UNFPA, 2006); goods brought from abroad serve as “signs of prestige” (Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012); and acquisition of property by migrant women, for instance, where female land ownership is very low, enhances their status (Adhikari, 2006). There are indications, however, that in societies where patriarchy is deeply rooted foreign employment is a “transitory experience,” and upon return many women are once again relegated to traditional roles of subservience (Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012; Dias and Jayasundera, 2002; Gamburd, 2010).

The social costs of women’s migration are also significant. In the absence of family reunification policies, WMWs become “absentee mothers,” “surrogate mothers,” “transnational mothers,” and their homes, “transnationally split households” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012). The impact of this is borne by children, “mobility orphans” who are growing up without the tangible presence and influence of their primary caregivers (Nguyen and Purnamasari, 2011; Graham and Jordan, 2011). The socio-physiological impact on children might not be unequivocally negative though; one study in Thailand found that children with migrant parents are “more likely to give a positive assessment of their own [subjective] well-being” compared to children without migrant parents (Jampaklay and Vapattanawong, 2013). When women migrate for work, responsibilities of the elderly in the household also increase. Research indicates that in instances where the mothers have left home for employment, the responsibility of raising children falls onto grandmothers (a phenomenon called “grandmothering”) (Tigno and Francisco, 2002; Yeoh and Lam, 2006).

Besides the effects of women’s migration on countries of origin, there is evidence to suggest that the welfare gains of immigration are substantial in the destination countries. Migration increases labour supply, with positive impact on employment, production and the country’s gross domestic product (Ratha et al., 2011). This trend can be extrapolated particularly in sectors with concentrations of WMWs. Further, instead of replacing native workers, immigrants, especially WMWs, often take up jobs that native workers are unwilling to do, such as elder care, which is becoming



more important in countries with ageing populations. Benefits such as low-cost child care enable native women to enter the workforce. For instance, in Hong Kong, China, migrant domestic workers: (1) make it possible for Hong Kong women to go out and work; (2) help fill the existing void in child-care services; and (3) if English-speaking, serve a dual role as helper and English language assistant. Without domestic help, a family member, often the woman, would have to stay at home, resulting in lower household income (Nagy, 2010).

IV. The Legal and Policy Context

The legal and policy context of countries of origin and destination largely determines the gendered nature of migration flows in and from the Asia-Pacific region.

1. Policy Context in Countries of Origin

Most of the countries in the region (with the exception of the Philippines and Sri Lanka) have an overarching migration policy or law that is considered to be “gender-neutral.” While such non-discriminatory clauses are important, they also fail to address the specific needs and concerns of WMWs (Sijapati and Nair, 2014).

a. “Obstructive Policies” to Protect WMWs

Several countries have time and again introduced policies that include age bans or proscriptions on certain countries or sectors; these restrict the mobility of women and force many to migrate through informal channels, increasing their risks of exploitation and trafficking¹³ (UN Women, 2013a; Sijapati and Nair, 2014). The case of the Philippines is notable in that these bans are in place only temporarily, and are revoked when favorable conditions are in place¹⁴ (UN Women, 2013b).

b. Privatization of Labour Migration Governance Makes WMWs Particularly Vulnerable

Across the region, it is typically the private sector—recruitment agencies and brokers—that administer overseas employment programmes and work permits. This has created a protection gap for women, especially in the absence of effective state oversight and monitoring. Women suffer disproportionately because middlemen often take advantage of their low levels of knowledge and awareness by charging them excessive fees, causing them significant financial hardship and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking (UN Women, 2013b; U.S. State Department 2012).

2. Legal and Policy Contexts in Destination Countries

The policies of destination countries also have a significant bearing on the experiences of WMWs.

a. Nationalization of Workforce

In response to rising immigration and economic downturns, many countries in the Gulf and other parts of Asia have adopted policies to control in-migration with strategies such as employment restrictions in certain sectors, including employment quotas and job reservations/priority for nationals; stricter enforcement of immigration rules; and an increase to employers in the cost of hiring foreign workers (Thimothy and Sasikumar, 2012). The implications of these policies on WMWs are not known, since most women migrants from the region are employed in low-skilled jobs that are rejected by the natives.

b. Preference for Temporary Migration over Permanent Settlement

Labour-receiving countries such as Japan and the Republic of Korea view women workers (and to some extent men as well) as “temporary” or “circular” migrants, and do not provision for their long-term legal immigration. In other countries, temporary migration schemes that target legal and official recruitment of temporary workers are mainly aimed at construction and farm labourers, and thus predominantly involve men (ILO, 2008). Further, most destination countries employ women as domestic workers on fixed contracts with no possibility for spouses and/or children to join them. In such cases, the social costs of migration are particularly high as children lose their mothers and primary caregivers (UN Women, 2013b).

c. Non-Recognition of Domestic Work

In almost all the labour-receiving countries of the Gulf and East Asia, labour laws do not cover domestic workers. Non-recognition of domestic work means that employers enjoy a significant degree of control over the workers while the kafala system in the Gulf restricts employees from changing employers and thus makes them completely dependent on their sponsor—often resulting in abuses and exploitation by employers (UN Women, 2013b).

d. Specific Measures to Protect Migrant Workers

With their increased dependence on migrant workers, the governments of labour-receiving countries have put in place several policies to protect migrant workers, including women. For example, the Government of Kuwait has issued various ministerial decisions to protect women domestic workers,

including prohibiting employers from withholding workers' travel documents and allowing migrant workers to transfer to another employer under certain circumstances (International Human Rights Clinic, 2013). Similarly, in Hong Kong, China the employment ordinance regulating conditions of employment applies to all workers. It is unclear to what extent these policies are enforced, but they represent a first step toward providing meaningful protection to migrant domestic workers.

3. Bilateral, Regional and International Mechanisms

In addition to national policies, countries in the Asia-Pacific have also undertaken a number of other measures, bilaterally and regionally, to protect the rights of WMWs.

a. Gender Concerns in Bilateral Agreements

Bilateral agreements are important mechanisms for facilitating and regulating migration of workers but there are very few that specifically focus on WMWs. Some of the notable ones that do include: the India-Saudi Arabia agreement on domestic service workers; Indonesia-Malaysia memorandum of understanding (MoU) guaranteeing domestic workers certain rights

and privileges; Bangladesh-Jordan MoU providing Bangladeshi domestic workers with protection and rights under the labour law of Jordan; and agreements between the Philippines and Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom on the employment of health professionals (Sijapati and Nair, 2014; UN Women, 2013a; Scalibrini Migration Centre, 2013).

b. Reference to WMWs in International Instruments

Countries of origin and destination in the region are signatories to international instruments that seek to protect the rights of all migrant worker; references to WMWs, while limited, are meaningful. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990)¹⁵ is recognized as the most comprehensive, while the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979, particularly General Recommendation No. 26 on Women Migrant Workers, is also important. Others include the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions that set out basic principles and rights and serve as important instruments to protect the interests of women migrants, including ILO Conventions 189, 143 and 97.

Table 3: Provisions in International Instruments Affecting WMWs

International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Without specifying separate rights for women migrants, the convention outlines the right of all migrant workers to have the same working conditions as nationals. - Prohibits inhuman living conditions, physical and sexual abuses, degrading treatment and forced labour; safeguards right of migrants to freedom of thought, expression, religion and access to courts.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prohibits discrimination against women and ensures protection of the rights of women, including right to employment, decent work conditions and social security. - General Recommendation No. 26 addresses the concerns of WMWs, including in formulating gender-sensitive and rights-based policies, removal of restrictive and discriminatory policies, and WMWs' access to health services, redressal mechanisms and reintegration with family and society.
ILO Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (ILO C189) (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mandates that migrant domestic workers receive an enforceable written contract prior to departure. - Requires adoption of guidelines and enforcement mechanisms for agencies that recruit domestic workers. - Provides for legal mechanisms to safeguard the rights and interests of migrant domestic workers.
ILO Convention on Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) (ILO C143) (1975)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires states to identify migrant workers illegally employed, verify if such migrants transit, reside or are employed in circumstances that contravene multilateral or bilateral instruments/agreements and national laws, and take appropriate preventative measures.
ILO Migration for Employment Convention (Revised) (ILO C97) (1949)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mandates legal provisions on remuneration, trade union membership and legal proceedings be applied equally to migrants—without discrimination on grounds of gender.

While few of these instruments refer directly to WMWs, the rights contained therein are applicable to them as well. Having said that, there are important caveats: (1) the application of international human rights law does not necessarily apply equally to citizens and migrants; (2) most ILO conventions apply to migrant workers in exploitative situations

or belonging to the specific groups the conventions are meant for; (3) most conventions have not been ratified by the labour-receiving or sending countries in the region; and (4) the effectiveness of these instruments ultimately depends on whether domestic legislation privileges international commitments over national laws (International Council on Human Rights

Policy, 2010; International Human Rights Clinic, 2013; Sijapati and Nair, 2014).

c. Inter-Regional Fora and Regional Consultative Mechanisms for Discussing and Collaborating on Issues Concerning WMWs

In recent years, a number of regional and multilateral processes have emerged as important fora for deliberating on issues confronting WMWs, among others, through a participative process that has enhanced dialogue and cooperation among states, donor agencies, policymakers, non-governmental organizations and researchers (see Table 4).

Table 4: Select Consultative Fora and Issues Relating to WMWs

	Gender-Related Discussions/Measures Adopted during Key Proceedings
Colombo Process	- Discussions have included domestic workers, trafficking and sex workers. - Decisions to promote and protect rights of migrants and their families; improve their welfare, dignity and well-being; and address specific needs of vulnerable migrant workers, especially women, domestic workers and low-skilled and low-wage workers.
Abu Dhabi Dialogue	- Framework of Regional Collaboration 2012 includes measures impacting women directly such as enhancing the employability and skill of workers; improving the recruitment process; facilitating worker adaptation to foreign employment; responding effectively to migrant workers' problems.
Asia-EU Dialogue	- Discussion of relevant themes such as challenges of irregular migration; regulatory frameworks for recruitment and good practices; highly skilled migration; skills certification and recognition mechanisms; monitoring migration; and ethical recruitment and role of private sector.
UN High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development	- Deliberation on measures to protect human rights of all migrants; prevent and combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons; and address vulnerabilities, rights and empowerment of women and children. - Declaration aimed at promoting a more systematic and responsible action in countries of origin, destination and transit, and a safer and more transparent framework for international migration and mobility adopted by the General Assembly.
Global Forum for Migration and Development	- Human rights and gender examined horizontally and recommendations made to help governments better integrate these into future policy-making. - Recommendations and proposed actions included promoting legislation, policies and practices for gender-based development; protecting migrants; improving gender-related data collection and analysis; and developing compendium of best practices on protecting migrants.

V. Challenges Relating to Migration of Women

Migrant workers experience various kinds of difficulties during the migration process but women in particular are considered more vulnerable due to their marginalized status and sectors of work.

1. Pre-Migration Stage

In most Asian countries where patriarchal and gender norms are strong, women often experience difficulties while trying to migrate, including lack of family support or even acquiescence. Due to these barriers and/or policy restrictions such as age bans, many are also trafficked or smuggled irregularly (UN Women, 2013a).

There are also significant information asymmetries between women and men in terms of policy provision and other procedures for seeking employment abroad. Hence, women tend to easily fall prey to

brokers and agencies who overcharge them on recruitment fees. Further, in Nepal it was also found that restrictions placed on women migrant workers have meant that WMWs often are forced to pay bribes, the “setting fee,” ranging from USD 100 to 600, to airport officials, further inflating the cost of migration (Amnesty International, 2011).

Women also face difficulties managing the finances to pay for their migration—since most lack the resources or necessary collateral to obtain loans from banks and other financial institutions, they borrow from money lenders at high interest rates (Caritas, 2010; Grieco and Boyd, 1998).

2. In Transit

Women, particularly those who migrate irregularly, are often stranded in transit countries due to lack of proper documentation. Since they rarely have local contacts, skills or local language knowledge, they are exposed to exploitation and hostility in transit (Van Hear et al., 2009).

3. At Destination

At destination, reports about WMWs experiencing problems of poor living and working conditions and even sexual and physical abuse are aplenty. Many find out upon arrival that their work is different from what was agreed upon, as are the salary and other conditions. Reports of not being allowed to leave the house of employment, excessively long working hours, prohibition on the use of phones, lack of any leave days, humiliation and lack of respect are commonplace (ILO, 2013; Amnesty International, 2011). A good many run away from their employers and end up in an irregular status, leaving them vulnerable to further abuse, including sexual exploitation (ILO, 2013).

4. Return and Reintegration

Returning WMWs are not always welcomed back, notwithstanding their contributions to their families, communities and even national economies. Women migrants are looked at with suspicion and suspected of misconduct while abroad by family members and society at large. Many return home to disintegrated families and separation from husbands. Studies have shown that women returnees, especially those subjected to sexual abuse and/or exploitation, face violence at the hands of their husbands and in-laws (ILO, 2013). Some women migrants return with severe physical and psychological problems, disability and illness, making reintegration even more difficult (HRW, 2007). Returned women migrants also face the challenge of reintegrating into the labour market since they can rarely make use of the skills and experience earned abroad. Their inability to manage their earnings at destination or upon return also means that they have limited funds for investments or for exploring self-employment opportunities (Stella, 2012).

VI. Conclusion and Way Forward: Learning from Good Practices

The migration of women has always been an important feature of international migration in the Asia-Pacific region. Beyond increases in the migration of women, the patterns and forms have also shifted. The fact that women migrant workers are making fairly autonomous decisions to migrate to provide for themselves and their families suggests that substantial efforts should be undertaken to improve the benefits of migration while ensuring their rights and welfare. These issues gain particular salience, especially in the context of the Beijing+20 discussions and the post-2015 development agenda as both fora provide new

opportunities to regenerate commitments towards gender equality, women's empowerment and more equitable and sustainable development. To accomplish these goals, some key areas for action include:

1. Strategic Plans to Protect Women Migrants

Sending countries in the region, particularly those with high or increasing rates of women migrants, need to develop and implement strategic plans to benefit from current trends and patterns. Elements in the plan could include measures such as:

Revising national laws to make them more gender-sensitive. Since most of the national legislation and policies governing labour migration are gender-neutral, there is a need to amend them to include gender-sensitive provisions. Within the region, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act is considered a pioneering piece of legislation that has provisions that could serve as guideposts for other countries, including such as requiring host countries to guarantee protection through certification, penalise illegal recruitment, free access to skills and livelihood programmes and compulsory medical and life insurance for agency-hired workers.

Amend bilateral agreements to ensure the rights of migrant workers. Since bilateral agreements are increasingly being used to regulate and protect migrant workers, these could be re-negotiated to make them more gender-sensitive by including provisions such as an anti-discrimination clause (e.g., Spain-Mauritania); equality between men and women (Canada-Colombia, Honduras-Mauritius); certain rights and privileges for spouses, children and parents (Argentina-Bolivia, Italy-Albania); and special protection for vulnerable categories of workers, including domestic workers (Bahrain-Sri Lanka).

Raising awareness on issues of women's migration and their contributions. Despite the contributions of women migrants, deep-seated patriarchal norms mean that there continues to be significant stigma attached to the migration of women, particularly when confounded with sex trafficking. Governments and others stakeholders should consider conducting awareness-raising and sensitization campaigns so that the dignity of women's work is upheld and their reintegration becomes easier. At present, most such campaigns have been limited to educating women about their rights and about trafficking.

Improving capacity and coordination between different stakeholders. Some countries in the region that are in incipient stages of developing migration governance systems are confronted with the manifold



challenges of managing significant migration outflows, a good proportion of which includes irregular movements, including trafficking. These initiatives and measures have yet to lead to transformative impacts due to duplication of efforts and limited coordination amongst stakeholders. A partial resolution could result from the formation of a task force comprising government representatives, civil society members, researchers and others to chart out institutional mechanisms for coordination and cooperation various government agencies as well as civil society and development organizations.

2. Better Preparation of Migrant Workers

Pre-departure orientation trainings have been adopted across the region, with varying levels of success, as a way to better prepare migrant workers for employment abroad. Countries in the region could consider strengthening these programs further by:

Implementing orientation trainings specific to WMWs. Some countries provide courses tailored to WMWs, such as the 21-day orientation course for domestic workers in Nepal. These need to be expanded to include destination- as well as sector-specific occupations beyond domestic labour.

Promoting skills acquisition. Since most WMWs leave in search of livelihood opportunities, the benefits from migration could be further harnessed by promoting skills acquisition prior to departure. Some countries have already made notable efforts in this regard—the Perspective Plan for Bangladesh, 2010-2020 includes provisions for skills development training both at home and abroad. Experience also suggests that collaboration between countries of origin and destination could be mutually beneficial as in the case between Sri Lanka and Italy: Skills-upgrading Programme for Sri Lankan Care-givers of Children and the Elderly.

Improving financial literacy. The fact that women remit more than men in some countries also means that they save less. Improving the financial skills of women migrants through financial literacy programmes would enable them to better manage their earnings and potentially smoothen reintegration upon return. In the Philippines, for example, workers going overseas are provided orientation seminars that include topics on remittance, including opening a bank account before departure.

3. Improving Policy Environment in Labour-Receiving Countries

The fact that the contributions of migrant workers percolate not only to their countries of origin but to

labour-receiving countries as well means that there is a greater need for countries of origin and countries of destination to coordinate efforts. Some of the areas requiring attention are:

Ensuring adequate legal protection for WMWs.

Incorporation of migrant workers within the framework of labour laws in destination countries is an important initiative underway in many countries such as Hong Kong, China and Jordan. The Employment Ordinance (Chapter 57) of Hong Kong, China applies to all workers, including migrant workers, domestic workers and those employed in the informal economy.

Providing support services and access to redress mechanisms. Provision of support services for migrant workers, especially those in distress is crucial. Some measures currently in place include hotlines to obtain information, receive calls and provide support to migrant domestic workers in distress (in Jordan; Hong Kong, China; and Singapore); establishment of shelters for victims of trafficking and abuse that also provide medical, psychological, legal and vocational assistance to female victims of trafficking (the United Arab Emirates); and mandatory health insurance for low-skilled workers (some parts of the United Arab Emirates). These efforts need to be enhanced in order to ensure that WMWs have decent work conditions.

Mandating standard contracts of employment.

Many countries of origin (such as the Philippines) and countries of destinations (such as Hong Kong, China and Jordan) have in place provisions for a standard employment contract, especially for domestic workers. In order to ensure their effective implementation, the experience of Hong Kong, China suggests that besides laying out the roles and responsibilities of the workers and employers, there is also a need to clearly spell out standards for regulation, inspection and enforcement by government authorities—for instance, the standard contract for domestic workers is the only contract acceptable for immigration purposes and in labour courts.

4. Increased Cooperation at Regional and Intra-Regional Levels

Effective management of migration as well as the potential for harnessing its benefits requires global, regional and bilateral cooperation. Over the years, inter-governmental dialogue on migration-related issues such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, Asia-EU Dialogue and Global Forum for Migration and Development has intensified, and most of these have focused on the need to ensure the safe migration of WMWs and protection of their rights. Reflecting the

discussions and decisions at these consultative fora, South Asian governments included protection of migrant workers as an agenda for regional cooperation in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Declaration of 2014. With the Eighth Meeting of the Global Forum for Migration and Development in October 2015 scheduled to focus specifically on the contributions and specific needs of WMWs, there are increased opportunities for concerted action.

5. Improving Information, Knowledge and Evidence Base

Improve data collection and management on migrant stock and flows. There is a significant paucity of information about the migration of women and its complex facets. Measuring women's migration is especially problematic given the widespread irregular migration. Stock migration data are usually obtained from censuses but only a few countries include a full range of basic questions relevant to migration, including women's migration, and temporary patterns are rarely detected. The situation is similar for data on migration flows—most countries do not maintain a comprehensive data management system that captures information on arrival and departure, and often do not differentiate between different types of movements. There have been ongoing efforts to bring together data on Asian international migration as carried out for developed countries in SOPEMI (Système d'Observation Permanente sur les Migrations) but greater efforts are required on this front.

Support research initiatives to understand impact of women's migration. Research to help develop the knowledge base to identify and address issues concerning WMWs is equally important. New data are required to identify the ways in which migration experiences can benefit women and their families. In countries dependent on the inflow of remittances, there is also a strong need to systematically examine the consumption and investment patterns of female remitters and recipients so that policies and programs can be guided accordingly. Likewise, more evidence is also required to understand the impacts of irregular migration, particularly trafficking and forced labour, on development interventions. A host of policies and programmes are being implemented to support WMWs but in the absence of rigorous impact analyses, there is very little evidence for what works and what does not.

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Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this brief, the Asia-Pacific region refers only to countries, territories and regions in East Asia, South Asia and the Pacific: Afghanistan; Australia; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; China; Cook Islands; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Fiji; French Polynesia; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Iran; Japan; Kiribati; Lao People's Democratic Republic; Macao, China; Malaysia; Maldives; Marshall Islands; Federated States of Micronesia; Mongolia; Myanmar; Nauru; Nepal; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Niue; Northern Mariana Islands; Pakistan; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Republic of Korea; Samoa; Singapore; Solomon Islands; Sri Lanka; Taiwan Province of China; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu; and Viet Nam.
2. In regions such as Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America, females comprise over 50 per cent of the migrants.
3. Comparative international data on women migrant workers (WMW) are not available, as the stock and flow numbers are not disaggregated by migration type. As a result, the population estimates used in this brief are for all women migrants, not just labour migrants. It can be assumed, however, that a significant number of women migrating from and within the Asia-Pacific region are doing so for work purposes.

4. The Overseas Employment Policy of 2006 in Bangladesh recognized the equal right of men and women to migrate for employment. The policy now has been replaced by the 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act.
5. For instance, in 1990, 60 per cent of the migrants from the ASEAN region moved beyond the region whereas in 2013, 70 per cent migrated within (Sugiyarto and Agunias, 2014).
6. In the corridors that generally lead to permanent migration (e.g., China-United States or India-United States), the proportion of female migrants is almost the same as that of males, which is equally true for corridors that have traditionally been driven by female-dominated occupations such as domestic work, the entertainment sector, factory work, nursing and care-giving (for example Myanmar-Thailand and Cambodia-Thailand). The proportion of females is increasing even in non-traditional destination countries for women such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.
7. The list of these top migration corridors are derived primarily from three sources: (1) UN DESA 2013, p. 6; (2) IOM 2013, p. 62; and (3) World Bank 2011, pp. 5-6. These corridors are presented in descending order, i.e., from the largest to the smallest in absolute terms. Notably, the Nepal-India and India-Nepal corridors are not listed here because owing to the open border between the two countries, there is no record of the movement of people back and forth (Sharma and Thapa, 2013).
8. According to IOM's estimates, a significant share of the migratory flows of both males and females in the Asia and Pacific region is irregular, and the region itself has the highest numbers of irregular migrants in the world. <http://iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/asia-and-the-pacific.html>.
9. Irregular migration is known to result from: (1) movements channelled through irregular routes, trafficked or smuggled; (2) over-staying valid work permits/visas; (3) visa-trading; and (4) abscondment from employers (Shah, 2009).
10. These include garment workshops, craft industries, shoe factories and electronic assembling factories.
11. See Techwah Tan, "Singapore's Maids: No Respite?" *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/singapores-maids-no-respite>.
12. On average, women remit USD 348 per year compared with USD 297 by men.
13. Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia and the Philippines are among these countries.
14. For example, in July 2012, the Philippines announced a ban on the deployment of overseas workers to 15 countries that failed to meet the safety requirements under the amended Filipino law; the ban was lifted once protections were put in place.
15. It should be noted that this convention came into force only in 2003.

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