

## On the Agenda: Migrant Women in Search of Decent Jobs

**The issue:** Globalization has fostered the flow of movable workers—migrants who travel from countries with large workforces and higher unemployment rates to fill gaps in nations with a stagnant or dwindling labour supply. This can benefit both the destination and source countries. The former can fill jobs that their own citizens generally decline to take. In the latter, remittances from overseas workers can make a hefty contribution to gross domestic product, and an enormous difference to individual families and the communities in which they live.

Increasingly, migration has a female face—women constitute 50 per cent or more of migrant workers in Asia and Latin America, and in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, they significantly outstrip men. While some women reap benefits from access to new employment opportunities, the vast majority end up at the lower end of the job market as domestic and service workers, and as entertainers, typically a euphemism for sex workers. Often with no legal protection or access to information about what provisions may be available, they face exploitation and violation of the most basic human rights, from the right to a living wage to the right to protection from physical harm. The worst abuses force women into sexual slavery.

With migration now a fixed feature of many economic and political policies, steps must be taken to make sure that source and destination countries work together to protect women's human rights. This process can maximize the development benefits for both sets of countries and ensure that women can go in search of decent work. These and related issues will be taken up at the 2006 UN General Assembly high-level dialogue on international migration and development. The discussion will build on several existing international agreements that protect the rights of migrant workers.

**UNIFEM takes action:** UNIFEM's work with women migrants encompasses source and destination countries. Projects focus on establishing laws and practices that protect women migrants'

human rights, drawing connections to national poverty reduction strategies, strengthening women migrants' organizations, and brokering exchanges between source and destination countries to advance labour rights.

**In Jordan:** UNIFEM-assisted work in Jordan, a destination country, has worked with the Government on developing a mandatory minimum standard contract for the recruitment of domestic workers from significant source countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The contract spells out basic rights, including those related to time off, minimum wages, medical insurance and paid return to home countries. It prohibits the withholding of passports or salaries by employers or recruiting agencies. A second new law tightens regulation of these agencies, and specifies fines or the revocation of Government-issued licenses for those that do not meet basic standards.

**In Nepal:** UNIFEM has helped the Ministry of Labour and Transport to draft a Foreign Employment Act with rights-based provisions. Nepali women traveling to work abroad now receive information about the contractual obligations of employers and about migrant centres that provide assistance in destination countries, including Nepal's embassies in countries with large numbers of Nepali immigrants. A Migrant Worker Welfare fund has been created, and the ministry is considering ways to more effectively regulate the recruiting agencies that convince women to take foreign jobs. A massive media campaign has highlighted women migrants' concerns and their substantial contributions to Nepal's economy.

**In the Philippines and Indonesia:** UNIFEM and a migrant workers association, Unlad Kabayan, have piloted a savings and investment scheme for women that helps them build a foundation for their future from their work abroad. In the province of Bohol, the government has used a UNIFEM-supported study mapping the stages of migration to draft an ordinance to protect women in different phases. The study is now being used in the city of Blitar, Indonesia to reform local migration laws.

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**In Latin America:** With women making up a growing percentage of migrants in Latin America, UNIFEM is backing research to assess current patterns that can eventually support the crafting of more responsive policies. One study analyses Ecuador and Peru as source countries and Chile and Argentina as recipient countries; another examines the different migratory experiences of women and men from Ecuador; and a third assesses the vulnerabilities of the large number of women displaced to Ecuador by the ongoing conflict in neighbouring Colombia.

**In Asia:** UNIFEM has published a comprehensive briefing kit, entitled “Empowering Women Migrant Workers in Asia” ([www.unifem-eseasia.org](http://www.unifem-eseasia.org)). It features a wealth of information, including basic facts, personal stories, examples of good practices in assisting women migrants, and tools for gender and rights-based development programmes.