Women's Labour Mobility in the Greater Mekong Subregion

This article reviews key issues of women's labour mobility in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), with particular emphasis on migration patterns, causes of migration, challenges and implications. Because there are limited regional capacities to collect socio-economic information on large-scale migration and because much of the migration is not registered, there is limited sex-disaggregated data available. Therefore, some of the discussions below are general to both female and male migration and some are gender specific. Nevertheless, the major issues emerging include fast-growing migration flows within and outside the subregion; irregularity of movement; labour exploitation and violation of rights with minimal legal support services; yet positive developmental outcomes for the families and countries involved.

Migration patterns

Two major patterns of labour migration are distinguishable in the region: intra-GMS—within the GMS; and extra-GMS—within and outside ASEAN.

Intra-GMS migration

Female and male migration in the GMS has become more dynamic and grown rapidly in volume (ADB 2013; Caouette et al. 2007; Jalilian 2012). The number of migrant workers in the subregion is estimated at 3 to 5 million, and the migrant stock is expected to increase by 28 percent by 2020 (Lewis et al. 2010). Intra-GMS migration mainly involves movement of unskilled workers from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (referred to as CLM) to Thailand. This migration is primarily irregular. Data from Thailand's Ministry of Interior (cited in IOM 2011) puts low-skilled CLM migrants at 2.46 million in 2009, of whom 1.4 million were unregistered. Among registered CLM migrant workers, 82 percent were from Myanmar. Beyond the movement of unskilled labour from CLM to Thailand, there is movement of higher skilled Vietnamese migrants into Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, though in smaller numbers, and of skilled Chinese workers from Yunnan and Guangxi provinces into Laos and Myanmar (World Bank 2006; Caouette et. al. 2007).

The proportion of registered female CLM migrants in Thailand increased from 29 percent in 1998 to 46 percent in 2009 (ILO n.d). Male migrants mostly find work in construction, agriculture or on fishing boats, while female migrants generally find employment as domestic workers or take up jobs in factories and food processing plants (IOM 2011).

Extra-GMS migration

The rise of migration within the GMS has been accompanied by rapid increases in outflows of migrants to countries outside the region, chiefly through labour export programmes. Extra-GMS migration mainly involves GMS countries, especially Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, sending workers under labour export agreements to richer countries within ASEAN, notably Malaysia and Singapore, or outside the ASEAN region. Thailand has a labour export programme sending Thai workers, largely semi- and low-skilled, to Taiwan, China, Japan, Israel, Malaysia, South Korea and some Middle East countries. Vietnam has implemented labour export programmes since the 1990s mainly directed to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Malaysia. Cambodia has sent migrant workers to Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore and Japan.

Causes of migration

Migration in the GMS is largely driven by significant demographic and economic disparities, complementary labour market structures among GMS countries, and improved connectivity and integration (ADB 2013; Caouette et al. 2007; Jalilian 2012).

- *Unequal social and economic development spurs migration.* Studies demonstrate striking divides and disparities in incomes, economic structures and other human development dimensions (e.g.

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demographic structure, educational attainment) within the GMS. Thailand is the most advanced country, with rapid urbanisation and a broad economic structure based on fast-growing, export-oriented and labour-intensive manufacturing, services and agriculture. Thailand's economic growth has generated significant employment. However, it has an aging population, illustrated by the negative growth rate of the working-age population. The consequent large labour shortages mean that Thailand needs to rely on migrants from neighbouring countries. CLM are young population countries with higher population growth and increasing youth and working-age cohorts. Yet their economic growth is relatively narrow-based, relying on agriculture and a few manufacturing and service sectors (e.g. garments, construction and tourism). This means that CLM economies cannot absorb their ever-increasing labour force, leading to labour surpluses. Such complementary economic and labour market structures stimulate cross-border mobility, where Thailand is a primary labour market destination and CLM are sources of labour supply.

- *Increased connectivity and integration stimulate migration.* GMS countries are involved in multi-level cooperation frameworks. The GMS cooperation programme, established by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992, links developing economies to more dynamic ones through extensive development of infrastructure systems. The ASEAN cooperation framework offers greater opportunities for trade and investment through its comprehensive economic cooperation initiatives. ASEAN also helps GMS countries link to the wider Asian region through its ASEAN Plus Agreements, i.e. ASEAN+1 and ASEAN+3. The multilevel configuration of subregional and regional systems coupled with improved connectivity increases intraregional trade and economic interactions and thus stimulates cross-border movement of people (Caouette et al. 2007; ADB 2013).
- *Geographical proximity further fuels migrant flows.* Thailand has long porous borders with CLM. With Cambodia, for example, it shares an 803 km land border that has many informal entry points. Laos shares a national border of 1835 km with Thailand. Cross-border mobility is also driven by the relocation of industries in Thai border towns to take advantage of abundant labour (ADB 2013).

Issues and challenges

As in many regions of the world, female and male migrants in the GMS face multifaceted issues and challenges at different stages. Some problems happen during the recruitment process, while the majority of issues arise in the workplace. The nature of issues and the degree of seriousness varies according to the migration journey, type of work and destination country.

- *Poorly regulated recruitment agencies.* Incidents of malpractice and negligence by recruitment agencies, even licensed ones, are common. Main pre-departure abuses include excessive recruitment and travel fees, confiscation of passports and insufficient, false or misleading information about work conditions (Hing and Ly 2014). In Cambodia, for example, there is evidence of prospective migrant workers being confined in overcrowded and unhygienic pre-departure training centres; workers have also reported physical abuse, long working hours, little rest time and no free weekends or annual leave, and a deep sense of loneliness and homesickness (Hing and Ly 2014).
- *Weak migration management.* Legal migration is a complex, lengthy and costly process. Majority of migrants therefore opt for informal routes. The problems confronting CLM governments are compounded by a lack of enforcement mechanisms to ensure effective migration management and a lack of adequate legal and support services for migrants, especially victims of trafficking and workplace abuse.
- *Vulnerability during transit.* Irregular migrants, whose journeys are often made outside the regulatory frameworks of both sending and receiving countries, are at the gravest risk of abuse and exploitation by employers and generally have no recourse to legal protection. In Myanmar, the law prohibits young women under the age of 25 from travelling abroad without a legal guardian. This discourages young women from migrating legally, and makes them more inclined to accept offers from job brokers who promise to arrange escorted travel and paid work (SERC n.d).

- *Problems at worksites.* There are significant gaps in promoting and protecting the rights of migrant workers especially in destination countries. There are high incidence rates of exploitation, especially deception about wages, type of work and legal status, withheld wages, retained passports or identity documents, physical confinement, substandard working conditions and threats of denunciation to the authorities. Gender discrimination and inequalities mean women are generally more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation than men. NGO reports indicate severe abuse of Cambodian domestic workers in Malaysia. For example, in 2012 alone, there were 90 cases of forced contract extensions, physical abuse and torture, disappeared or missing women, or women waiting for unpaid salaries in Malaysia (CLEC, LSCW and HRW n.d). And in 2010 and 2012, LICADHO assisted and/or repatriated some 250 Cambodian domestic workers from Malaysia. For migrant workers in Thailand, the main issues and problems are no recourse to legal protection (because of fear or lack of freedom), violence, dangerous and difficult working conditions. Naro's (2009) compilation of case studies on Cambodian migrants mistreated by their employers reveals how some had to work long hours for low wages, while others were physically harmed when they refused to follow instructions.
- *Weak or ineffective complaints mechanism.* There are few satisfactory or timely solutions to problems as they arise. Employers' exploitation of workers remains unchecked by national governments and legal systems fail to protect workers, particularly regarding wages, working conditions and employer abuse.
- *Restricted access to social security and health services.* The majority of migrant workers, both legal and irregular, face many difficulties in gaining access to social security because benefit entitlements are linked to economic activity or legal employment status. Other factors restricting migrants' access to social security include administrative processes, language and discrimination. Some countries restrict or refuse to grant migrant workers entitlement to certain welfare benefits.
- *Issues upon return.* Returning migrants encounter multifaceted problems in their home countries. The most common is the challenge of reintegrating into their home community. While most migrants do not psychologically prepare themselves for their return, the reception of their families and communities varies depending on whether they return with savings (Caouette et al. 2007). Another issue is a lack of reintegration programmes such as skills recognition, employment services and financial services. Countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and China even have legislation that fines or punishes citizens who leave the country without notifying the authorities (Caouette et al. 2007). Prejudice and negative stereotypes can also accentuate the difficulties facing returned migrants (Caouette et al. 2007). The degree of mental stress among migrants and their families is much higher for those who have been abused or who return home with serious health problems. The situation is even worse for female migrants because some communities discriminate against them based on the presumption that they have been directly or indirectly involved in sex work (Caouette et al. 2007).

Impacts of migration

In general, migration is perceived and found to have more positive than negative effects on development. Benefits include easing of the labour demand and supply imbalance; increased incomes from remittances; improved healthcare, education and nutrition; increased consumption; and improved access to finance (Ratha et al. 2011; Caouette et. al. 2007; Jalilian 2012).

For labour-scarce countries such as Thailand, availability and access to low-skilled and unskilled labour from CLM can guarantee a steady and reliable supply of workers, vital for sustaining competitiveness (World Bank 2006; IOM 2011). Labour-intensive manufacturing, fisheries and agriculture, sectors that have been critical to Thailand's economic growth, remain competitive due to the abundance of low-cost migrant labour (World Bank 2006; IOM 2011). For labour-abundant CLM, easier and freer cross-border movement of workers can ease unemployment pressures, especially in rural communities where lack of economic opportunities and chronic unemployment are widespread.

Remittance flows into GMS countries in 2013 ranged from USD5.69 billion in Thailand (1.5 percent of GDP), USD11 billion in Vietnam (6.4 percent of GDP) and USD59 million in Laos (0.5 percent of GDP) to USD176 million in Cambodia (1.2 percent of GDP). Cross-country experiences including those in the GMS suggest that remittances can help stabilise external accounts and thereby reduce economic volatility (Ahsan et al. 2014).

Migrant remittances are used for different purposes. In Cambodia, for example, about 87 percent of total remittances were spent on daily consumption (mostly food), debt repayment, medical treatment and durable household assets; the other 13 percent went on farm inputs, setting up a business, expanding an existing business, and other productive assets (CDRI 2009). A more recent study on Vietnam reveals that, after repaying pre-migration loans, remittances are mainly invested in physical assets and human capital: building houses (53.3 percent), children's education (24.2 percent) and business (17 percent) (Lee and Mont 2014). Most of the Vietnamese returned workers reported that they were able to amass significant savings from overseas work and to use those savings to invest in small businesses at home.

Migration has positive effects on livelihood generation. In the GMS, households with migrant workers generally have higher income and consumption than households without migrant workers (Jalilian 2012). In Laos, families with a member working abroad had more material possessions, such as televisions, mobile phones, radios, tractors, shops and cash, than families without a migrant member (SERC n.d). Migration also contributes to poverty reduction. In Cambodia, migration and remittances could reduce the poverty ratio by 3 percent (Roth et al. 2013). In Laos, remittances, especially from Thailand, help reduce rural poverty (Southichack 2013).

Yet not all impacts are positive: loss of productive labour for agricultural production, lack of supervision and care for children left-behind, and debt bondage can be harmful to migrants' families and their communities. One implicit cost of migration for migrants' families or sending communities is the reduced labour force available for family self-employed (farm and off-farm) activities and for communities at large (Roth et al. 2014). Too often, when migrants—especially women—go to work abroad, they leave children in the care of elderly parents or other relatives. Children left behind receive less supervision and care and sometimes engage in child labour. Recent evidence in Hing et al. (2014) indicates that compared to children in non-migrant households, children in migrant households have a 27 percent higher probability of participating in economic activities. Although migration has been found to have no significant impact on child vaccination rates, it does affect children's health as reflected in the increased number of injuries and higher incidence of illnesses and malnutrition. In Vietnam, migrants typically have to borrow money from relatives, friends or banks to pay the sending enterprise and brokers in order to leave. If they fail to get overseas work or have to return early, the economic consequences of these loans can be devastating (Lee and Mont 2014).

Summary

This brief review of the key literature on migration in the GMS provides several important insights. First, women have played, and continue to play, increasingly significant roles in migration dynamics and trends. Given existing demographic and economic conditions, those trends are expected to continue. The pitfall, though, is that there are often no specific migration policies or intervention programmes for women migrant workers, and few research studies focus on the specific issues affecting them. Second, the management and protection of migrant workers in both sending and receiving countries is ineffective. Migrant workers encounter problems at all stages of the migration process: pre-departure, worksite and return. The predominance of irregular migration could escalate the risks and vulnerability of migrant workers especially of women. Third, although migration has negative impacts such as lower labour supply in sending families and communities, separation from family and children, and recruiter/employer abuse, there are significant benefits. It has positive developmental effects. Fourth, the increase in migration flows, especially migration of low-skilled workers in the GMS, has been phenomenal. Yet this has occurred within a limited regional regulatory or institutional framework. Consequently, significant challenges and issues have accompanied the growth in migration.

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