



# Rural Women and Migration

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration, and work towards effective respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants.



**D**ue to structural, cultural, social and economic barriers, rural women, who make up one fourth of the world's population, fare worse than rural men, urban men and urban women in virtually all of the Millennium Development Goals (Inter-Agency Task Force on Rural Women, 2012). It is increasingly acknowledged and understood that migration is a highly gendered phenomenon. Women, in general, face different challenges and opportunities in many areas than similarly situated men do. In addition, because rural women still often lack access to infrastructure and productive resources, represent the majority of the world's illiterate adults, are often excluded from waged employment and struggle to access health care, their experience of migration can significantly differ from urban women's experience. Women in rural areas, whether they decide to migrate or stay behind as family members of male migrants, are confronted with very specific hardships that both migration and development policy debates need to address in order to make migration work for rural women.

## Rural women on the move

Rural women are not a homogeneous group. Their circumstances, and in turn their capacity to migrate, plan and control their journey as well as its outcomes, vary according to their income, social networks, education, and local gender dynamics.

### Migration out of reach for many rural women

Migration requires resources and, as such, it is not available to everyone. Women who represent the

poorest of the poor in rural areas often lack the resources to migrate (e.g. information, land ownership, assets and social networks). Even in households where these resources exist, the larger family may control them, constraining women's migration opportunities (Bridge, 2005). Women can be more physically vulnerable and can be restrained in their movement by their caring and reproductive responsibilities. Cultural norms, which can be particularly stringent in rural areas, can also dictate that it is not acceptable for women to travel on their own. That type of restriction may mean that women have to travel shorter distances or stay put altogether (Bridge, 2005).

For those living in remote and isolated areas, other obstacles include the lack of proper identity documents and difficulties in accessing transport or information. Indeed, besides the fact that information sources on migration may be scarce in rural areas, rural women, who constitute the bulk of the world's illiterate people, face increased difficulties in accessing reliable information on legal and safe migration channels.

Rural women who do migrate can move to another rural area (rural-to-rural migration), relocate in cities (rural-to-urban migration) or cross international borders (rural-to-international migration). The latter pattern is more likely to occur when connections and support networks are readily available in rural areas through migrant workers or recruitment agencies (IOM, 2009). When these support structures are absent, rural women often first migrate to urban areas, to gain training and connections before migrating abroad (Bridge, 2005).

## Improving rural women's access to reliable migration information and travel documents

IOM provides information on procedures for legal migration, the costs and benefits of migration, as well as on rights, benefits and obligations of migrants. These information sessions can help reduce the risks and possible consequences of irregular migration, including trafficking and smuggling. As such, they contribute to increasing rural women's knowledge and understanding of migration channels and potentially improve their access to safe migration. For example, in Zambia, IOM supported individuals seeking information on the reality of jobs and educational opportunities with a Talk Line in operation 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. In Kenya, with IOM's support, the Ministry of Labour has included information on employment agencies on its website. Ensuring that aspiring migrants have access to valid and official travel documents is also an important step in encouraging legal migration. In Zimbabwe, IOM built the capacity of key government departments responsible for the provision of birth certificates, ID, passports, emergency travel documents and visas to ensure Zimbabweans, including women, have access to official travel documents. In addition, women and girls have received information on procedures to obtain these documents.



Information session in Indonesia  
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Rural women, like women in general, may also perceive migration as way to escape traditional gender roles, gender-specific discrimination or gender-based violence. These three push factors all have a very specific dimension in rural areas. For example, in the face of numerous difficulties in securing property titles in rural areas, some women may migrate to cities where prospects to acquire property are assumed to be better (UNFPA, 2007).

### Migration as a family survival strategy

For rural women, even more so than for women in general, the decision to migrate is often highly influenced by intra-household gender relations and hierarchies. Women may have a limited role in decision-making even when it results in their so-called "independent migration" for economic reasons (Bridge, 2005). The resolve to migrate is often caused by fundamental concerns about poverty and done in an attempt to ensure household survival by maximizing and diversifying the household income through remittances.

The migration of women can increasingly appear as the best option for the entire family, as the global demand for labour rises in highly gendered niches such as domestic work, health, child and elderly care, and also in the garment and entertainment industries. This demand acts as a powerful "pull factor" for women in depressed rural areas (Omelaniuk, 2005). For these women, who often did not finish primary education, engaging in these low-skilled jobs is often the only alternative.

### Rural women domestic and care workers

Despite being devalued in most societies, the domestic and care sector plays an important role in the social and economic development of every country. Many developed and middle-income countries are now facing a well-recognized care crisis due to the increased waged labour participation of women, unequal divisions of care responsibilities in households, changing demographic profiles, and the reluctance of nationals to take on low-paid, low-skilled and low-status domestic jobs (GFMD, 2010). The recruitment of migrant women workers helps to contain this care crisis. However, these domestic and care workers often work in jobs that are segregated at the margins of society, often outside of the realm of national labour laws, and often exposed to many human rights abuses.

### Brokers, smugglers and traffickers exploiting rural women

Human rights abuses often start at home. When women do not have the agency to manage their own journey as well as when legal channels of migration are scarce, the potential for exploitation by unscrupulous actors is high. There have been many documented cases of rural women who have been kidnapped or held captive, sold by their own families or trafficked after being lured by false promises. Recruitment agencies of all sorts are blooming in rural areas (UNFPA, 2006) and women who migrate from rural areas for work are particularly vulnerable to abusive contracts and work situations (World Bank, 2009). In 2005, a study by IOM in South Africa exposed the situation of women being trafficked from rural areas of Mozambique and sold to gold miners for "use as sex partners and domestic servants without remuneration" (UNFPA, 2006). Effectively fighting trafficking and smuggling in rural areas would benefit from adding fundamental legal reforms such as anti-discrimination measures, in addition to education and awareness-raising campaigns, community involvement, poverty reduction initiatives and the creation of livelihood opportunities (UNFPA, 2006).

### Addressing the specific challenges to victims' reintegration

Due to a lack of understanding of human trafficking or associated sense of shame and stigma, there is a mixed perception among family members and the wider community of victims of human trafficking. For example, in a study carried out by IOM in Viet Nam, many of the victims experienced suspicion, stigma and discrimination from their family, neighbours and community. Results of the study showed that the discrimination was stronger in rural areas than in urban areas. Some people expressed a 'blame the victim' attitude, based on the misperception that the trafficked person's circumstances were the consequence of an indulgent lifestyle and greed.

In Afghanistan, IOM has been working since 2006 in close cooperation with the government and other organisations towards the reintegration of about a hundred victims of trafficking, most of whom are women from rural areas. Victims have been provided with food, shelter, medical and legal assistance as well as family tracing and reunification assistance for younger beneficiaries. Through continuous dialogue with local law enforcement officials, IOM also ensured that these women were not detained or prosecuted for criminal charges. IOM's efforts have helped reduce the risks of stigmatisation or re-trafficking for these women. Further, IOM's information campaign reached out to the general public, particularly the members of border communities, through the use of radio spots and information tools such as posters.

## Empowering rural women engaged in transnational marriages

A recent study published by IOM highlighted data from the Ministry of Justice of Vietnam, accounting that 133,000 Vietnamese either married or registered for marriage with foreigners between 2005 and 2010. These were mostly women who married South Koreans or Taiwanese Chinese men. To facilitate the migration process and enhance their chances of success in their new environment, IOM has been offering a variety of migration services and assistance to young women prior to their departure. One of these services is Migrant Training, which teaches migrants life skills and attitudes which both prepare and empower them for their new life abroad. For example in Vietnam, IOM implemented a pre-departure orientation programme for women marrying Korean nationals, more than three quarters of whom came from poor, rural Mekong Delta communities. A day-long class provided basic information regarding Korean language, culture, societal norms, rights and citizenship. The project also includes the operation of a toll-free telephone hotline for direct advice in case of social, cultural or inter-personal difficulties.

### Marrying a stranger: Marriage migration in rural areas

Commercial marriages are also on the rise. In some Asian countries, the demand for migrant brides, many of whom are rural women and girls, stems from women's increased labour force participation leading to them delaying or forgoing marriage, traditional son preferences resulting in missing girls, and female rural-to-urban migration. Brides with a "traditional" profile are sought from rural areas to solve the deficit (UNFPA, 2006). These transnational marriages, organized by agencies and individual recruiters, generally attract poor rural women with little education. Some women manage to escape tight social controls and parental pressures as well as achieve economic security through these marriages. However, often they emerge as a source of distress and exploitation. Frequently, rural women leave their family with very little knowledge of their future husband. Integration into their new family and community can be difficult due to linguistic and cultural barriers, economic hardship, different gender norms and other unexpected experiences. Some men consider that buying a bride provides them with the authority to keep their wives in near-slavery situations, and confirmed cases of this type of abusive treatment are frequent. Without social networks, economic independence and knowledge of their rights, those women may find few escape routes.

### Forced migration of rural women

Whether they are displaced through conflicts or environment-related circumstances, there is no doubt that forced migrants are among the most vulnerable and marginalized migrants. In the case of armed conflicts, rural areas often bear the brunt of the violence, especially when fighting forces have a stronger presence and control in the countryside. In many cases, displacement is the only viable alternative; but for women, vulnerability to social and physical aggression, including gender-based violence, is increased. The same concerns also apply to sudden impact disasters such as floods, earthquakes, tropical storms, and landslides, which may lead to the unplanned, urgent flight of large groups of people in circumstances where women again face particular vulnerabilities. For example, if women do not have decision-making or bargaining powers, they may wait for their husband's to leave during a natural disaster, losing precious life-saving time. Other factors that may lead to an increase in women casualties during a natural disaster include gender-specific clothing, illiteracy, lack of information and family responsibilities.

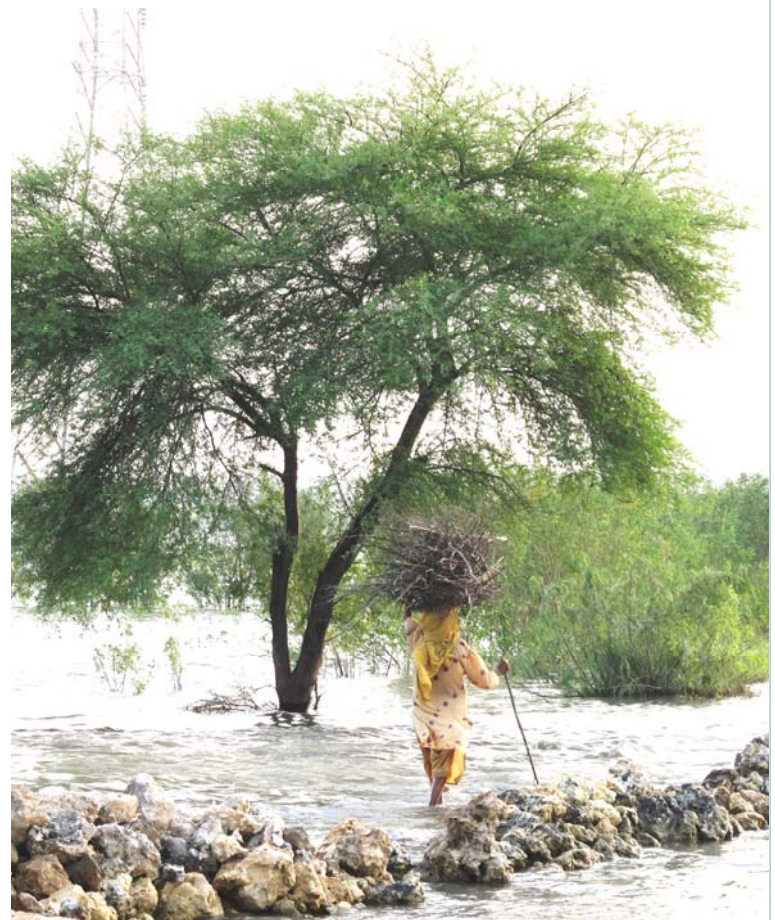
When it comes to climate-change or slow onset disaster-induced migration, the border between voluntary and forced migration is less clear. The decision to migrate is often taken when a "tipping point" – the point at which the situation becomes unbearable – has been reached (UNFPA, 2009). For example, protracted and severe droughts or other forms of environmental degradation can make natural resources insufficient to support livelihoods. Today, rural women and men from least developed countries constitute the majority of environmental migrants, seeking refuge mainly through internal or cross-border migration (UNFPA, 2009).

### Mixed impacts of rural women's migration

The specific risks that rural migrant women may face on their journeys, as well as the human rights abuses that those who work in poorly regulated sectors can face, have already been highlighted. For rural migrant women, the sources of vulnerability are threefold: vulnerabilities as women, as foreigners and as persons originating from rural areas.

### Remittances can help lift villages out of poverty

Rural women migrants, depending on the context of their migration, may gain more autonomy by improving their social and economic situation. Also, they can send remittances back home, which significantly contribute to the welfare of the families they left behind as well as to rural development. In rural areas, financial and social remittances, combined with transfers of goods from migrant relatives, can contribute to better health, education and nutritional outcomes in the countries of origin. The recipient households are generally less vulnerable to sudden shocks, and remittances increase their chances of moving out of poverty (UNFPA, 2007). In the Philippines, for instance, some women succeeded in moving from un-



Woman in the flooded landscape of Sindh, Pakistan  
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## Improving rural women's access to productive resources and financial assets

In Indonesia, IOM has been instrumental in the establishment of village-based women's cooperatives, known as Koperasi Wanita, or Kopwan. As of May 2007, 17 Kopwans had been established in 13 districts of the Aceh province. The Kopwan activities aim to increase and sustain women and low-income rural households' access to financial services. IOM facilitated the formation of loan cells which elected their own Board, trained and tasked with managing revolving funds. Loan cell members are provided access to credit for enterprise creation, development and expansion. This access to credit for women significantly strengthened their position within the family and their standing in the community as it gave them the opportunity to borrow money for their husband's business endeavours as well. Through the project, women were not only involved but most importantly at the centre of decision-making processes that affect their and their family's well-being. IOM has facilitated the delivery of a series of leadership and personal empowerment training activities to increase women's confidence and self-reliance. Literacy programmes such as teaching women how to read and operate the computers provided in the project were part of the available trainings. This initiative had a significant positive impact in Aceh Jaya, one of the areas worst hit by the December 2004 tsunami, where women entrepreneurs contributed to the material well-being of their family and helped to stimulate rural economic development.

paid subsistence agricultural work to running small businesses, thanks to remittances received from female relatives (IFAD and INSTRAW, 2007). However, the consequences of family fragmentation generated by parents' migration, especially in areas of high migration, should be better understood and addressed in order to fully reap the benefits of migration on households left behind. Furthermore, dependency upon remittances can discourage households members, including men, from being economically active.

### Rural migrant women face a difficult life in the cities

For women who move rural-to-urban, migration may mean an immediate improvement of their situation, but precariousness often continues to be part of their lives. Some of them have no other choice than to live in unhygienic, crowded and dangerous urban slums (UN-Habitat, 2004). Others, due to cash dependency, poverty and gender discrimination, may have to resort to transactional sex for survival, with little power to negotiate safe sex practices (UNFPA, 2007). In principle, these migrant women have access to better infrastructure and services in the city. Yet, poverty and the lack of social networks may limit their ability to benefit from them. For example, poor migrant women in Rajasthan have been known to return to their native villages to give birth because they cannot afford reproductive health care services in the city (UNFPA, 2008).

### Returning to the village: Challenges abound for migrant women

As with the decision to migrate, for many rural migrant women the decision to return home is a family rather than an individual decision.

Indeed, many women migrants return home at the request and to meet the expectations of family members (Zhang, 2010). Upon their return, they may face significant challenges. First, they are expected to slip back into rural women's subordinate status at the household and community levels. For many women, readapting to these social constraints generates much distress. The fact that some of them relinquish their income-generating status upon return is an additional obstacle to challenging gender hierarchies in the family. For those who wish to remain economically active, opportunities are unfortunately limited. Women who want to start a business commonly encounter difficulties in accessing productive assets. They also suffer from a lack of training and information. They often invest in beauty salons, small food stores, clothing shops or small communication centres that may not be sustainable in the long run.

The return and reintegration of former victims of trafficking to rural areas may also present serious problems, as anonymity is virtually non-existent. Additionally, many rural women fear stigma and rejection from their families and communities, due to the associations made with prostitution and HIV infection. The resulting isolation often means that survivors of human trafficking face limited access to psychosocial support and employment opportunities (USAID, 2007).

### Effects of male outmigration: Rural women left behind face many challenges

As indicated above, migration out of rural areas can be easier for men than it is for women. Men's outmigration has led to an increase in the number of women-headed households on virtually all continents. In some rural areas, entire villages are made up of women-headed households due to men's departure. In Brazil, women whose husbands have left as an environmental adaptation strategy are known as "widows of the drought" (World Bank, 2009). This evolution in the composition of rural households can challenge traditional roles and contribute to women's empowerment through increased autonomy and decision-making power. However, women's responsibilities also expand when men migrate. Women who are left in charge of households are expected to continue to perform their traditional roles and at the same time take on men's responsibilities. The daunting extra burden on rural women left behind can have far-reaching consequences, including on girls. In China, for example, the shortage of male farm workers due to migration has resulted in girls being pulled out of school in order to take care of younger siblings and to help with farm work (IOM, 2009: 270). The psychosocial consequences of male migration on their wives left-behind is still under addressed. Adequate access to tailored health and psychosocial services is cruelly lacking.

The struggle for women-headed households can be particularly trying when women are left to deal with increased workload and responsibilities, but without equal or direct access to financial, social, and technological resources (World Bank, 2009). For instance, rural women heads of household may confront de jure or de facto discrimination regarding land and property ownership and tenure, or access to credit. Legal reforms in these areas will go a long way towards bringing about food security for many communities (Economic Commission for Africa, 2004). Also, despite a clear trend towards the feminization of agriculture, farming equipment continues to be designed for men, forcing women to use tools that are inadequate in weight or size (World Bank, 2009).



Argentina: this woman received a loan to start her business  
© IOM 2006 - MAR0012  
(Photo: Cecilia Abregu)

Many women left behind rely on remittances for their survival. Affordable and secure remittance transfer services should be promoted to help reduce their vulnerability, and care should be taken to ensure that these services allow women to easily and securely collect money. Initiatives that promote women's direct receipt of and control over remittances will also help decrease women's reliance on family or in-laws for survival and decrease their vulnerability to abuse (IOM, 2010). Secure transfer methods are necessary, but

may not be a sufficient condition alone to promote the economic empowerment of women left behind. Thus, it is critical for remittances to be linked to local investment schemes, training and financial literacy programmes. For example, remittances should be used as a lever to move away from subsistence agriculture and increase food security for households headed by women.



A recipient of IOM livelihood support activities in Indonesia. © IOM/Edy Purnomo 2006 - MID0449

### IOM policy objectives

In the framework of its activities involving rural women, IOM strives to:

- Promote safe migration for women in rural areas, including the prevention of trafficking in human beings, as well as the facilitation of rural women's access to reliable legal migration information, identity and travel documents, as well as migration services;
- Promote a better regulation of the migration of domestic and care workers in the countries of origin as well as promote protection mechanisms and adequate conditions of employment in the countries of destination;
- Promote gender-sensitive pre-departure orientation programmes for future migrants, including those engaged in transnational marriage migration;
- Provide gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance to rural women in emergency settings, including natural disasters, and promote the full participation of women in community-based strategies to adapt to climate change and environmental degradation;
- Promote rural women's human rights and effective access to redress and justice in case of gender-based violence or exploitation, as well as provide assistance to victims of violence and abuse, including return and reintegration options;
- Promote migrant workers' access to affordable health and social services, including sexual and reproductive health services;
- Provide tailored support to women acting as heads of household as a result of migration and promote support services for the families left behind;
- Support the economic empowerment of women in rural areas, including through the promotion of schemes building on remittances;
- Research and collect data on the situation of rural women and girls and their migration behaviours;
- Foster inter-State dialogue and enhance bilateral, regional, interregional and international cooperation to better regulate and protect women migrant workers and promotion of gender-sensitive international migration policies.

### Supporting rural women left behind

Male out-migration combined with limited local economic opportunities can make women highly dependent on remittances. This can make them particularly vulnerable to poverty, especially when remittances are sent less regularly or cease altogether; as highlighted by an IOM report on Tajikistan. The report identified that around 1/3 of migrants' wives are faced with a situation of abandonment, without any information from their husband for several months and without any financial support. The loss of employment for labour migrants or their establishing a new family in the country of destination are two factors that can cause a decrease or an end to remittances. The absence of remittances can lead to dire economic and emotional consequences.

In Tajikistan, IOM's Information Resource Centre for Labour Migrants (IRCLM) holds mobile information and consultation sessions to overcome the physical isolation of rural communities. Its information session provides, among other things, information tailored to the needs of women left behind, revolving around remittances management and investment.

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In a Women Centre in Southern Sudan  
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