

## **GENDER AND MIGRATION IN THE PACIFIC REGION**

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I am very honoured to be invited to speak at this launch of the State of the World Population 2006 report. Having worked in migration research for over ten years, I am very pleased to see that this year's report has focused on the issue of gender and migration, in effect recognising the increasing participation of women in international migration and the specific issues relating to migrant women.

I have been asked to speak today on Gender and Migration in the Pacific region. My remarks are based on a recent paper that I wrote with two colleagues, Dr Elsie Ho of the University of Waikato, NZ, and Dr Carmen Voigt-Graf of the University of the South Pacific, Fiji. The paper was written for a book that is to be published early next year under the auspices of the UN Research Institute for Social Development.

In this paper we address the issue of gender in the contexts of changing international migration patterns and policies in the countries of the Pacific region and assess the outcomes for female migrants in relation to their economic participation and social welfare.

The countries of the Pacific region are both sources and destinations of international migrants. As we all know, Australia and New Zealand have had large-scale longstanding formal immigration programs. While settler migration remains an important component of their international migration systems, both countries have also experienced more diverse migration flows since the 1990s that have included an increase in the temporary entry of skilled workers and foreign students, irregular migration and increasing outmigration of their citizens.

In contrast to Australia and NZ, the Pacific Island countries are mainly sending countries of international migrants. Some of these small island states have more of their population living and working overseas than at home, and their economies are dependent on the remittances sent back by their migrants who are working in Pacific Rim countries such as Australia, NZ and the US.

Women now make up about half of all permanent and long-term migrants to Australia and New Zealand. They tend to predominate in some categories of migration such as family reunion or accompanying spouses while forming only a small minority of business and skilled migrants. However, more women are migrating independently as female education and labour force participation rates increase in countries that are the sources of migration.

Australia's permanent migration program has family reunion, skilled and humanitarian objectives. In the current year, the government has set migration planning levels at 46,000 visas for family reunion migration, 97,500 visas for skilled migration and 13,000 visas for the humanitarian program. The participation of women varies in the three types of migration. In recent years, more than 60 per cent of family reunion migrants are female, who are mainly spouses and fiancés of Australian residents. But among business and skilled migrants only 20-30 per cent of primary migrants are female, while women make up nearly 80 per cent of accompanying spouses of skilled migrants. Women are also in the minority in Humanitarian migration although Australia has a Women-at-Risk visa category for women in vulnerable situations, such as those whose male family members have died and they are left alone in refugee camps. Each year about 400-500 women migrate to Australia in this category. In recent years they have come mainly from Afghanistan, Sudan and other African countries.

In the last 10 years, temporary migration to Australia has increased. There is a clear gender dimension in temporary skilled migration in that three-quarters of temporary skilled migrants are male while two-thirds of their dependents are female. The skills needed tend to be in industry sectors that are male dominant, such as information technology, business and finance, and engineering. However, nurses are one of the largest groups of temporary skilled migrants and women are the majority among this group. Many Australian nurses and teachers are also migrating to work overseas on a temporary basis.

Out-migration is a significant migration issue in the Pacific Island countries and is a response to the low wages and lack of opportunities in the islands, particularly for skilled people, and the pull factors of high wages and better job opportunities in the more developed economies of the Pacific Rim countries. The presence of relatives overseas is also a factor, particularly in the choice of destination country. Since the early 1980s, many Pacific Islander women have been migrating on their own as well as to join their husbands in New Zealand, Australia and the US. Fijian women have also migrated to the US to work as domestic helpers and caregivers.

A small number of women migrants in the Pacific region have been victims of people trafficking. In a recent report of police cases in Australia involving people trafficking, all 22 victims were women. There have also been cases of Asian women entering some of the Pacific Island countries to work illegally in prostitution.

Since 2002, on the initiative of Australia, there have been a number of meetings and workshops involving countries in the Asia-Pacific region to combat irregular migration including people smuggling and trafficking. Known as the Bali Process, after the first ministerial meeting held in Bali in February 2002, these

activities have been attended by more than 30 countries and representatives from the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration. One of the outcomes of the Bali Process is that Australia has introduced new protocols to deal with illegal migrant workers in the sex industry who are found to be victims of people trafficking.

Previously, victims of people trafficking who were caught working illegally, many of whom were women, were treated as illegal migrants and simply deported. The new protocols include new visa arrangements to allow trafficking victims to stay in Australia to receive medical treatment and counselling and to assist police with their investigation. AusAid has also been working with the International Organisation for Migration to provide re-integration assistance to the women who return to their home countries.

These initiatives are only a beginning in addressing people smuggling and cross-border trafficking, particularly of women, in the region. There is recognition that more needs to be done, including more development assistance directed at countries of origin as well as the introduction of further legislation in countries of destination to criminalise all aspects of people trafficking.

Many female migrants, whether as primary migrants or accompanying spouses, seek to enter the labour market. Migrant women's experience in the labour market tends to be different depending on whether they are permanent migrants, temporary migrants or irregular migrants. For women migrating to settle permanently whether as primary migrants or accompanying spouses, labour force participation and employment are important indicators of their labour market integration and a significant aspect of the settlement process. For women on temporary work visas, their employment experience is an important aspect of their migration rather than their

settlement. And for those women working illegally in breach of visa conditions, their labour force participation may be an involuntary outcome of migration.

For permanent migrants, labour force participation and employment rates generally increase and unemployment rates decrease with duration of settlement. This is true of both women and men. The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia shows that about half of female migrants are in the labour force within 18 months of arrival in Australia, and Australian census data show that after 10 years of residence in Australia, overseas-born women have a labour force participation rate that is very similar to that of Australian-born women of the same age.

Studies also show that female and male migrants' labour force participation rates and employment outcomes vary considerably according to their migration category, English language proficiency and country of origin. Female migrants in the skills category have much higher labour force participation and employment rates than those in the family reunion and humanitarian categories. Data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia show that 86 percent of female migrants in the Independent skilled category were employed at 3-4 years after arrival in Australia compared with just 38 percent of those in the family reunion category and 31 percent in the humanitarian category. This is to be expected since migrants in the skilled category have been selected based on criteria that emphasised their employability while migrants in the family reunion and humanitarian categories are not assessed on their skills or English language proficiency. Women migrating in the family reunion and humanitarian categories are also more likely to work in unskilled jobs as factory workers and cleaners. The studies have also indicated the importance of English language proficiency in determining employment outcomes of both female and male immigrants in Australia. Migrants who speak English well have higher

employment rates than those who do not speak it well, even when other differences in human capital have been taken into account

As in Australia, studies in New Zealand also show that educational qualifications and the ability to speak English make a significant difference to the probability of recently arrived female and male migrants gaining employment. Employment rates also vary by duration of residence and country of origin. Recent female migrants from Northeast Asia and the Pacific Islands have the lowest employment and labour force participation rates, while those with more than ten years residence have employment and participation rates that are closer to the rates for New Zealand-born women.

Many migrant women with vocational or university qualifications are also not participating in the labour force if their qualifications are not directly transferable to the local labour market. Non-recognition of overseas qualifications and work experience and lack of local experience are significant barriers to employment faced by recent migrants – both female and male – from non-English-speaking countries.

As indicated earlier, women are a minority among skilled temporary migrants working in Australia. There are three times more men than women among primary migrants, and in some occupational groups such as managers and IT professionals, men outnumber women by five to one. Among nurses, however, women outnumber men by a similarly large margin of five to one.

In recent years, registered nurse is one of the most sought after occupations in Australia and the importance of meeting this demand by employers for nursing professionals is acknowledged by the Department of Immigration in giving priority to processing visa applications for nursing positions. More than 10 percent of women arriving as skilled temporary migrants are nurses. A large majority of the nurses are

from the UK and Ireland. Other major source countries are South Africa, US, Philippines and Sri Lanka. Many of the nurses are recruited for private hospitals, specialist hospitals and nursing homes. Women coming to work in Australia as skilled temporary migrants also include teachers and hairdressers, which have also been identified as one of the skills in demand in Australia.

Of the temporary female migrants in New Zealand who were granted work permits in 2003-04, nearly one in four were employed in professional occupations, many as nurses and secondary school teachers. The other major occupational group was sales and service workers where some of the occupations filled by women included travel attendants, tour guides and chefs.

Many young women from UK, Ireland and other European countries also come to Australia as working holiday makers. They work as relief nurses, teachers and clerical workers and fill casual job vacancies as waitresses in hotels, resorts and restaurants.

In Fiji, the employment situation of temporary migrant workers is different from that in Australia and New Zealand. In the late 1990s, there were some 2,000 Chinese temporary migrant workers employed in the garment industry as well as smaller numbers from the Philippines, Taiwan and Indonesia. Many are female. They usually have three-year work permits. The factories arrange and cover all their main expenses including food and accommodation, making them largely dependent on their employers or agents.

Fijian nurses and teachers have also migrated to other Pacific Island countries such as Kiribati and the Marshall Islands where the salary is higher. A recent study has found that during the 1990s, more than 800 nurses left Fiji. The women frequently took the decision to migrate autonomously, leaving their husbands and children

behind. In a study of a health centre on the Marshall Islands, 10 out of the 11 Fijian nurses were female. All were registered nurses with six to 20 years of work experience. The case of Fijian nurses in the Marshall Islands underlines the increasingly autonomous decision-making and migration of women for overseas employment. A growing shortage of skilled health workers in all Pacific Island countries has contributed to increased intra-Pacific migration with workers migrating to countries offering better work conditions and salaries.

Emigration rates of skilled persons have increased steadily in the Pacific Island countries, as skilled Pacific Islanders respond to overseas demand, particularly for health workers, teachers, accountants and other professionals. The migration of nurses and doctors from Pacific Island countries is a growing concern and is likely to affect the provision of health services in many Pacific Island countries.

The loss of skills from the Pacific Island countries is countered by the importance of remittances from emigrants to the economies of these countries. Despite lacking the capacity to send the same amount of money as men because they usually earn less than men, women have been shown in research to be more frequent remitters, probably because of their greater commitment to their families, especially their parents. In Samoa, women are considered the most reliable remitters and are therefore particularly encouraged by their families to migrate.

Unlike in countries in Asia and the Middle East where large numbers of migrant women are domestic service workers on temporary work contracts and may be vulnerable to exploitation by their employers, there is no such low skilled temporary labour migration program in the Pacific region.

Female migrants in the Pacific region who are likely to be in a vulnerable situation are those working illegally. In 2004, the Australian Department of

Immigration located 329 illegal migrant workers, of whom 42 per cent were female. The women were working mostly in the sex industry while men were more likely to be located working on construction sites, factories and farms.

## **Conclusion**

The Pacific region, like other regions in the world, is experiencing an increase in international population movements. There has been more migration between the countries in the region, a greater diversity of the origins of immigrants to Australia and New Zealand, and increasing outmigration from the region to North America, Europe and Asia. The pattern of international migration to Australia and New Zealand has also become more diverse, with a shift to more temporary movements, a greater focus on skilled migration, and increasing exposure to irregular or undocumented migration. Women are becoming increasingly important participants in all these migration flows, as part of family units and as autonomous labour migrants, highly skilled migrants and undocumented migrants. Most migration flows in the region have a fairly balanced gender composition, an indication that women are participating in migration at a similar level as men, at least on a numerical basis. Their labour force participation rates may be lower than male migrants', because many are accompanying spouses, but for those migrating autonomously for economic reasons they are also participating in the work force on par with male migrants. As for male migrants, the situation of female migrants in the Pacific region in terms of their labour market outcomes is largely dependent on their migration status and skill level. Migrants regardless of their gender also differ in terms of their entitlements according to their migration and residence status. While migrants with permanent residence status usually have the same entitlements in terms of access to government services as

the native-born and naturalised citizens, temporary migrants usually do not and are more dependent on their employers for any entitlements. Women migrants in low skilled employment or working illegally are most vulnerable to exploitation.

The main issues facing migrant women in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Island countries are therefore related to their migration status. For women who have migrated as settlers with permanent residence, their participation in the labour force according to their skills and qualifications is an important part of their settlement process. That some migrants face barriers in transferring their skills to their new country of residence is a loss in productivity for both migrants and the receiving country. For women who are temporary migrants, those who work in higher skilled occupations are likely to face fewer problems in relation to work place entitlements. However, for those who are in lower skilled employment such as Pacific Islander women working overseas as caregivers or Asian women working in garment factories in the Pacific region, there is scope for exploitation by employers if governments have no firm policies on the conditions of their migration and employment, or are unable to monitor or enforce existing policies. The situation of irregular migrants is understandably of most concern, particularly if the women have been trafficked. In relation to this issue, there is a need to focus on the situation of the women in both sending and receiving countries. There is therefore much scope for international action and regional cooperation to reduce the exposure of and the pressure on women to migrate and seek employment in such precarious conditions in foreign countries a long way from their home and family.