

# **The Feminization Of Migration, And The Increase In Trafficking In Migrants: A Look In The Asian And Pacific Situation**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Trends and patterns in international migration in recent decades have been influenced by several major economic, political and social developments, some of global significance and others confined to regions.

In the Asia-Pacific region, these developments have brought about new trends, among which the most striking are

- The feminization of migration,
- The increase in Trafficking in migrants
- The deterioration of health conditions
- And the consequences of the recent crisis in Asia

## **I - . THE FEMINIZATION OF MIGRATION**

On a global scale the number of female migrant are now almost equal to men. In 1990 48% of migrants were female, and between 1985 and 1990 the annual growth in female migration in most areas of the world has been larger than that of male, according to the UN Department for Economic and Policy Analysis. These changes in gender patterns in migration are due to structural changes in the sending countries, such as the shift from tradition to modernity, as well as changes in the workforce demands in the receiving countries or regions.

Looking specifically at the Asian region, according to ILO (1996), it is estimated that 1, 5 million women are working abroad whether legally or illegally. In the Asian countries of origin there is an aggregate outflow of 800,000 female migrants' workers per year, a number which is increasing steadily. In some countries in the region, women are highly represented in the flows of legal migration. This is true for the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, where women constitute between 60 and 80 percent of the legal migration. Unfortunately there are no reliable statistics on the gender distribution among irregular migrants. But based on the existing information, it can be assumed that the involvement of women in irregular migration is substantial.

In Thailand women account for only about 25% of the recorded workers leaving the country for overseas employment, but clandestine female emigration is increasing faster than that of men. (ILO 1996). In Taiwan between 1993 and 1997, more than half of overstaying foreigners from Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia were women. Similarly, in Japan between 1990 and 1998, women from the Philippines, Thailand and the Republic of Korea represented more than half of overstayers. Data for other indicators related to irregular migration, e.g. deportations, regularization's, are either

lacking, or not desegregated by gender.

### **Feminization of poverty**

The international labor markets reinforce the traditional gender divisions of labor, as countries capitalize on "the comparative advantage of women's disadvantages" in an increasingly globalized world: Girls get less education than boys and subsequently have fewer opportunities for skilled work. In general women have less access to the formal sectors and are therefore greatly dependent on work in the informal and unregulated labor sectors, such as domestic work, small trade, entertainment and sex industry.

Women are particularly vulnerable to increasing economic and social inequality, rural poverty, rising unemployment and the growing gap between rich and poor countries.

Poverty and social pressures drive large numbers of women in the region into low-status, low-paying occupations in domestic service or in the organized prostitution, frequently as migrants away from their homes, at times across international borders, exposing them to considerable risk of economic exploitation and sexual abuse.

### **Vulnerability of migrant women**

Migrant women experience double marginalization as well as vulnerability, - as women and as migrants. Already subject to a lower status in most societies, women face the conditions of labour market which often segregate them to the informal sector where there is little regulation on working conditions. Women working in the domestic sector are isolated and vulnerable to exploitation and violence by employers. Although this is a common phenomenon, there is no structure in embassies or consulates to assist women as an example the UN commission on human rights (1997) mentions that an average of 75 women per day seeks shelter in the Indonesian Embassy in Jeddah; that an estimated 2000 foreign domestic workers per year seek shelter in embassies in Kuwait. In April 1995, more than 200 domestic workers received shelter in the Embassy of the Philippines in Kuwait and 150 sought shelter in Sri Lankan Embassy in the same period.

Irregular migrant women experience even higher vulnerability. Once in the country of destination, they are mostly dependent on their employer, and can experience strong pressures to become involved in sex work. Although this phenomenon is widespread, there is no sufficient assistance from the authorities to help them avoid being trapped in the sex sector. Worse, women are often exploited by them.

## **II. TRAFFICKING**

Trafficking has been described as the "trade in human misery" as one of the worst human rights abuses and serious crimes of the 20th century. It is a big business internationally and is rapidly increasing in the Asia-Pacific region. However, there is little consistent and verifiable data of the magnitude and scope of trafficking.

Trafficking patterns in the region include:

**\* Trafficking into prostitution**

In most countries of the region the number of young women who are trafficked is increasing. The methods vary from abductions, deceit, false marriage etc. Of the trafficked women the majority remains in the sex work after they have been trafficked, either forced to because of family obligations and a huge debt incurred to the traffickers, or due to the lack of other income opportunities. The age of trafficked girls is frequently extremely low; for example, in Cambodia the age of trafficked girls is commonly below 13.

**\* Trafficking for other sexual Purposes**

Abductions for marriage are **common** in the rural areas of Vietnam and Myanmar bordering China.

**\* Trafficking into begging and soliciting business**

This pattern is relatively new. The prominent example in the region is the trafficking of children, disabled and elderly from Cambodia into the begging and soliciting business in Thailand. To a lesser extent, there is a number of Indian Muslim and Burmese trafficked by begging gangs in Bangkok. A number of beggars from Myanmar are also found to be trafficked by begging business in Dehong of western Yunnan province of China.

**\* Trafficking into other extreme forms of manual labor.**

These include the trafficking of mostly women and children into the domestic or construction sector, small factories or businesses, such as garment factories, condenser factories, steel factories, load carrying businesses, restaurants, etc. The conditions are usually abusive.

Trafficking has also changed pattern from two- to one-step trafficking and to bondage labour.

**\* From two- to one-step trafficking:**

Traffickers now target women and girls directly in their villages, rather than recruiting them after they have come to the city. Their strategy is more aggressive, and responds to increasing demand for young 'clean' women, following the fear among sex customers of contracting HIV. Additionally, it is easier to deceive and exploit the less experienced girls from the rural areas.

**\* Trafficking as Bonded Labour**

Debt bondage is widely used by traffickers to control trafficked women, particularly those trafficked for prostitution. Typically women are forcibly detained in apartments, factories, homes or brothels to foreclose escape prior to paying back their debts. Otherwise the traffickers exercise control over the women through the possibility of repercussions against the families of the women.

## **Reasons for the Increase in Trafficking: Big Money - Little Risk**

### **\* Trafficking is Lucrative**

The amount of money to be made compares with other kinds of crimes, such as weapons smuggling and drug trafficking. It is estimated that traffickers move as many as 4 million illegal migrants world-wide each year, earning up to 7 Billion \$.

### **\* Lack of Law Enforcement towards Traffickers and Accomplices;**

Trafficking entails little risk, mainly because of the large-scale involvement of state employees, whether police or immigration officials who receive bribes to facilitate border crossings, and offer "protection" services to brothels or other places of trafficked labor.

## **III. HEALTH**

A third change in the pattern of migration relates to health.

Population movements generally facilitate the transmission and spread of communicable diseases. Migrants have little or no access to health services in the receiving countries, and as a result suffer higher levels of communicable disease morbidity and mortality.

These conditions are aggravated for women migrants because of their inferior position in society, and because of the difficulty to meet reproductive health needs.

Consequently, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, is a major concern in the Asian region.

Spatial differentials in HIV and AIDS prevalence can often be attributed to population mobility. Women who live in locations with large numbers of migrants, such as border towns, urban and trade centers often experience higher HIV and AIDS prevalence rates than those in areas with smaller migratory populations.

Furthermore, the spread of HIV by heterosexual contact associated with sex workers in all countries of the Asia-Pacific region is ominous. Countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam increasingly become sources of sex workers to countries in other South-East and East Asian countries. Therefore the problem of disseminating information on health issues and on the risk of the HIV spread to these women who migrate into cultures different from their own, is magnified.

This situation is further exacerbated for women victims of trafficking, because they have no access to medical care and are often forced to participate in sexual activities without the opportunity to protect themselves.

#### **IV. THE IMPACT OF THE ASIAN CRISIS**

Against this background, the Asian Crisis is likely to strongly impact female migration patterns. Though it is still too early to see actual trends, the current realities points to:

1: An increase in unemployment levels for women. As many industries such as the garment and textile industries, which predominantly employ women, have closed down in the past 2 years, women will bear the brunt of crisis-induced unemployment. According to a recent report, (Bundit Thanachaisethavut - Labour Expert., quoted in the Bangkok Post 6/3 1999,) of the 50,489 workers laid off in Thailand in 1998, 58% (or 29,000) were women. The consequence may be that trafficking of young women and children may increase, as prospects for employment decline for new entrants in the domestic labor markets.

2: School dropout rates for girls are likely to increase disproportionately, as parents prioritize dwindling resources for education of boys. In Thailand alone the crisis has forced some 400,000 children to drop out of schools, a majority of whom are girls.

Both these two trends, - the increase in the unemployment rate of women and in the female school dropouts - are likely to reinforce a segregated labor market and the feminization of poverty. These may in turn encourage unskilled labor migration and trafficking.

3: Some Governments in the region have implemented for are planning large-scale deportation of migrant workers to preserve work for their own nationals. Migrant workers thus increasingly become dependent on employers and law enforcement officials, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuses without the mechanisms in place for monitoring or reporting abuses.

4: Other Governments are encouraging the emigration of their national labor force to reduce local unemployment and bring in remittances. They may be tempted not to press for enforcement of the protection of their citizens abroad.

5: Widespread devaluations have made migration and trafficking outside the Asia-Pacific region more lucrative which may reinforce the prevalence of both phenomena.

6: In the wake of the economic crisis, efforts to promote tourism are likely to turn a blind eye to abuses in the sex industry which involve women and children. Such abuses may increase even further.

Thus, the Asian crisis is likely to exacerbate the trends presented earlier and point to the need to focus on issues such as the protection of migrants and migrant rights.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Henceforth a number of recommendations relating to migration and trafficking for the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

They are in 7 main areas:

### *Prevention:*

- \* National information campaigns and community awareness-building to inform prospective migrant women and girls vulnerable to trafficking, whether international or internal, about the possibilities for legal migration and income-generating opportunities abroad, the hazards of irregular migration, and the abuse and exploitation mostly involved.

- \* Income-generating activities in the countries of origin, targeting vulnerable communities. Activities under these schemes would be micro-credit and savings groups, vocational training, and animal husbandry rising etc. and training to organize and run such groups.

### *Protection:*

- \* Build return and reintegration programmes for returning migrants and trafficked women and children, meeting their needs for building a livelihood.

- \* Such activities should target areas with high rates of migration and trafficking and consist of such activities as counseling, health education and assistance, education, income-generating activities as described above.

- \* Health programmes for migrants in the receiving countries, who have no access to the national health services.

### *Prosecution:*

- \* Law enforcement against traffickers and others profiting from the unlawful exploitation of irregular migrants and trafficked women.

### *Technical Cooperation and Capacity-Building:*

- \* Assist governments to implement activities within the various Administrations concerned on matters related to protection, prevention and law enforcement.

- \* Build capacity among national NGOs to work in the activities mentioned above.

### *Advocacy:*

- \* Urge governments to adopt existing international laws and human rights instruments concerning migrant and trafficked women into their legislation and practices.

- \* Urge governments of sending and receiving countries to establish bilateral agreements for minimum standards for worker protection, working conditions, standardized contracts, modes of conflict resolution and repatriation, and the problems of irregular migrant and trafficked women.

\* Urge governments of sending and receiving countries to increase the legal opportunities and regularize the procedure for legal migration, and enforce control with employment agents and employers to avoid exploitation.

\* Urge governments to establish a mechanism to facilitate legal assistance for migrant and trafficked women when contracts have been broken.

\* Review legislation on law enforcement against exploitation of irregular and trafficked migrant women, and the related protection of victims of exploitation.

\* Urge governments to promote national development policies which are gender-oriented. Such policies should promote equal access to productive assets and social services for migrants and natives of both sexes.

#### *Forums:*

\* Assist an ongoing process of consultations among governments and others concerned to establish and coordinate agreements concerning the protection of migrants and trafficked women, such as issues of nationality recognition, protection and access to basic national services, recognition of their rights according to international law and human rights instruments, both when seeking access to regularized sources of economic enumeration, and when expatriated.

#### Research:

In order to address the problems more effectively, updated and comprehensive information on irregular migration and trafficking is needed.

\* In that respect, there is a need for consistent and reliable data on irregular migration and trafficking in particularly women and children.

\* As well as for research in particular on the prevalence of violence against migrant women.

Marcela Ballara

[Marcela.ballara@gmail.com](mailto:Marcela.ballara@gmail.com)

1998