

# **Harnessing knowledge on the migration of highly skilled women**



International Organization for Migration (IOM)



OECD dev  
DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

# ***An Overview of Key Findings***

*This document provides an overview of the forthcoming publication “Harnessing knowledge on the migration of highly skilled women” by the IOM and OECD Development Centre, following the Expert Group Meeting on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women held in Geneva on April 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> 2014.*

## ***1. The migration of highly skilled women in the international context***

The migration of women, either independently or to follow a family member, is a phenomenon of great significance in most destination countries. Almost half of all international migrants are women<sup>1</sup>, including those that are tertiary educated according to OECD data<sup>2</sup>.

The OECD further highlighted that highly skilled women are migrating in greater proportions than highly skilled men and women at lower educational levels. Women with tertiary degrees are at least 40% more likely than men to migrate to OECD countries<sup>3</sup>, according to the UNDP’s Human Development Report. Such trends are found in several OECD countries. In Switzerland, for example, the level of education is higher among migrant women than local women: 26.7% of foreign women have a tertiary education compared to only 19.5% of Swiss women above 15 years of age<sup>4</sup>.

In addition, evidence suggests that flows of migrants between developing countries are at least as large as those from developing countries to OECD countries<sup>5</sup>. Such flows come with a different set of challenges due to high levels of informal employment and the inherent nature of porous borders. However, despite certain public perception, skilled migration is significant within those flows. If women’s participation in South-South migration flows seems less significant than in migration flows to developed

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2011). Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by Age and Sex (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2011).

<sup>2</sup> Dumont, J-C., Martin, J.P. and Spielvogel, G., “Women on the Move: The Neglected Gender Dimension of the Brain Drain” (July 2007). IZA Discussion Paper No. 2920.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP Human Development Report 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Enquête Suisse sur la Population Active: <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index/themen/03/02/blank/data/03.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ratha, D. and W.Shaw, 2007: “South-South Migration and Remittances.” World Bank WP no.102.

countries<sup>6</sup> little is known however on the role of skilled women in such flows. More information on the determinants of qualified women's migration between developing countries would help governments address brain drain in a more comprehensive way.

Despite their high social and human capital, skilled migrant women remain under-represented among migrants admitted for work reasons. This is in part because some of the biases of admission schemes designed to attract or regulate skilled and highly skilled migrants. Admission systems lead to very different outcomes for men and women, and sometimes explicitly exclude skilled women<sup>7</sup>.

Research reveals that admission systems tend to prioritize professions linked to production sectors rather than professions linked to welfare such as health, education and public services<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, business management, information technology, engineering and finance professionals, sectors that tend to hire men, are favoured over migrant doctors, nurses, teachers and social workers, professional groups that hire relatively more women.

As a consequence, the act of migrating itself often results in reduced labour market participation for skilled women<sup>9</sup> for reasons linked to migration status<sup>10</sup>, work permits, issues with degree recognition and professional experience obtained abroad, lack of demand for specific skills and gender and ethnic discrimination<sup>11</sup>. Lower labour market participation and the loss of support networks results in an increase in household and childcare responsibilities for women, which can reduce their employability.

Despite the large existing body of work in the field of international migration in recent years, policy makers and scholars still lack a greater socio-economic understanding of migration outcomes regarding the migration of highly skilled women. In order to contribute towards narrowing the knowledge gap and ensuring greater visibility of the potential impacts upon highly skilled migrant women and host and home countries' development, the IOM and OECD Development Centre held an expert meeting focused

---

<sup>6</sup> Migration and development within the South: New evidence from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (ACP Observatory on Migration), Migration Research Series n°36, IOM, September 2013

<sup>7</sup> OSCE (2009). Guide on Gender-sensitive Labour Migration Policies. Vienna.

<sup>8</sup> Kofman, E. (2000). "The invisibility of skilled female migrants and gender relations in studies of skilled migration in Europe" *International Journal of Population Geography* 6(1): 45-59 and Kofman, E. (2007). "The Knowledge Economy, Gender and Stratified Migrations." *Studies in Social Justice* 1(2).

<sup>9</sup> In the EU, the employment rate of female third-country nationals of working age (25-54) in 2010 was almost 20 percentage points lower than the average employment rate of all women in that age group. Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey, quarterly data on employment rates by sex, age groups and nationality – comparison of employment rates for nationals and citizens of countries outside the EU-27.

<sup>10</sup> Admission on other grounds than employment has often been observed to lead to lower employment rates and higher risks of de-skilling for migrants and is explained by the general pre-conception by employers and institutions that such migrants' qualifications do not necessarily meet the demands of the local job market.

<sup>11</sup> Ho, C. (2006). "Migration as Feminization? Chinese's Women's Experiences of Work and Family in Australia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(3): 497-514.

Ho, C. and C. Alcorso (2004). "Migrants and Employment: Challenging the success story." *Journal of Sociology* 40(3): 237-259.

Liversage, A. (2009). "Vital junctures, shifting horizons: high-skilled female immigrants looking for work." *Work, employment and society* 23(1): 120-141.

Man, G. (2004). "Gender, work and migration: Deskillling Chinese immigrant women in Canada." *Women's Studies International Forum* 27: 135-148.

Meares, C. (2010). "A fine balance: Women, work and skilled migration." *Women's Studies International Forum* 33: 473-481. [ENREF 13](#)

on the issue on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2014.

The two-day meeting brought together 24 experts from international organizations and academia in order to address the following objectives:

- Review evidence on the nature, scope and impact of the migration of highly skilled women on countries of origin and destination;
- Share good practices in terms of major conceptual frameworks, practical tools and resources to increase the quality and coverage of programmes to maximize the potential of highly skilled migrant women;
- Examine policy monitoring, evaluation and implementation approaches to ensuring successful social and economic integration;
- Highlight challenges and barriers to the implementation and scale-up of promising/successful approaches to prevent brain waste and deskilling of migrant women;
- Identify practical solutions, entry points, catalysts and pathways to overcome identified challenge and barriers.

## **2. Key findings from the Expert Group Meeting**

### **Discussions:**

In the course of the two-day meeting, experts discussed a broad range of issues. These included, but were not limited to discussions on data, equality, admission policies, deskilling, psychological costs and the governance of labour migration. The broad range of issues constituted an important ingredient in starting a mapping exercise in order to identify key priorities for the future by the different stakeholders involved in the process of migration. Below are some of the highlights from the presentations and discussions.

### **Scope and determinants of the migration of highly skilled women:**

- Between 2000 and 2011, the number of migrant women with tertiary education in OECD countries has increased by 80% which is twice the growth in the number of tertiary educated native-born women<sup>12</sup>;
- Over the same period, the number of migrant men with tertiary education has raised by 60%.
- Emigration rates are 4 percentage points higher for women with tertiary education than for men (13.9% compared to 9.7% for men)<sup>13</sup>;
- At a regional level the difference in average emigration rates for tertiary educated individuals is much higher for women in Africa (27.7% women and 17.1% for men) and Latin America (21.1% women and 17.9% men);
- One third of the tertiary educated migrants in OECD countries are from Asia (34%)<sup>14</sup>
- The main countries of origin of tertiary educated women residing in OECD countries are the Philippines, China, and India;
- In relative terms, the leading destination countries for tertiary educated migrant women are Canada, Israel, USA, UK, New Zealand and Ireland.
- Analysis based on the OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) suggests that discriminatory social norms and institutions play a key role in shaping women's South-South migration decisions. Levels of

---

<sup>12</sup> Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (DIOC, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (DIOC), 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Database on Immigrants in OECD countries (DIOC 2005/06)

gender-based discrimination in countries of origin are found to be an additional incentive for women to migrate, but only up to a certain point, after which it becomes an obstacle<sup>15</sup>. Other research has found a similar hump-shaped relationship between women's rights and the brain drain<sup>16</sup>;

- Levels of discrimination in destination countries are also an important pull factor, as women tend to migrate to countries where they can enjoy greater freedoms and rights<sup>17</sup>.
- There are marked differences in the subjects that women and men study in post-secondary institutions. Women tend to select humanities and social sciences disciplines and are under-represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects, particularly in computing and engineering<sup>18</sup>.
- A new indicator (GenderImmi)<sup>19</sup> suggests that there are important differences across countries with respect to the high skilled migration of women. Canada, for instance, has the highest level of gender-sensitivity in its approach of skilled immigration policy through gender auditing and by accounting for differences in life-courses between men and women and allowing for a more gender sensitive definition of "skill" in immigration selection policies.

### **Highly skilled migrant women in countries of destination:**

- Migrant women residing in OECD countries are more likely to have tertiary education than native-born women (27.78% compared to 22.9%)<sup>20</sup>;
- In OECD countries, the share of immigrant women holding tertiary degrees is only three percentage points below that of men;
- Highly skilled migrant women face higher unemployment rates than their native-born counterparts;

---

<sup>15</sup> "The role of Discriminatory Social Institutions on Women South South Migration", Ferrant & Tuccio, in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> "Institutionalized inequality and female brain drain", Maryam Naghsh Nejad, in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> "The role of Discriminatory Social Institutions on Women South South Migration", Ferrant & Tuccio, in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> OECD 2012. Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship; final report to the MCM 2012C/MIN/20125.

<sup>19</sup> This indicator provides detailed information on 37 migrant visas in 12 OECD immigrant-receiving countries. More information can be found at "Gendering skilled immigration policies across the OECD: The GenderImmi Dataset", Boucher, in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming

<sup>20</sup> Database on Immigrants in OECD countries (DIOC 2005/06)

- The poor labour market integration of highly skilled migrant women is linked to issues of foreign degree recognition, emphasis on host country work experience and a preference for local accents in relation to language skills. The latter is shown to disadvantage women particularly considering their concentration in relational work such as support, service, and caring labour, in contrast to male-dominated technical occupations<sup>21</sup>.
- The estimated value of economic losses due to under-utilized immigrant skills in Canada is nearly twice as large for women as for men: 7.44 billion compared to 3.94 billion in constant dollars<sup>22</sup>.

### **Highly skilled migrant women and the country of origin:**

- Highly skilled migrant women are less likely to return to Turkey than men <sup>23</sup>;
- Indian migrant women are less likely than men to plan a return to their home country as they perceive better career opportunities in host countries<sup>24</sup>;
- Indian women returnees expressed higher dissatisfaction upon return than men did, due to difficulties readjusting to local gender relations, work culture and administration.
- Health professions such as nursing and medicine tend to be respectively dominated by women and showing an increase in the proportion of female staff. These categories of highly skilled women show specific determinants and patterns of migration including the recourse to temporary migration opportunities and geographically close destinations.

---

<sup>21</sup> "Addressing the skills paradox: Deskillling migrant women in Canada", Creese, in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> Reitz, Jeffrey, Josh Curtis and Jennifer Elrick, 2014. "Immigrant skill utilization: Trends and policy issues", *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 15 (1): 1-26. in "Addressing the skills paradox: Deskillling migrant women in Canada", Creese, in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> "The return intentions of Turkish highly skilled migrants", Gungör in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> "Impact of skilled return migration on India's development", Hercog, in in "Harnessing Knowledge on the Migration of Highly Skilled Women", IOM-OECD Development Centre, forthcoming.

### **3. Recommendations to policy-makers:**

On the basis of the discussions from the two-day meeting, recommendations were also discussed by experts, aiming at using the current body of knowledge to remedy some of the obstacles faced by this migrant group. Recommendations centred around core principles of gender equality and gender-specific actions related to migration management, while continuing to strive for a general maximization of the benefits of migration and development for both individual migrants and societies in countries of origin and destination. Recommendations focused on reducing the impact of inequality on women's migration opportunities, fostering positive migration outcomes for highly skilled migrant women at destination and maximizing the development impact in countries of origin.

#### **Reducing the impact of inequality on women's migration opportunities**

- Reducing gender segregation in education and training with the aim of also doing so in labour markets;
- Removing discriminatory regulations and taking proactive steps to reduce discriminatory practices against women in the labour market and in society in general, through a better translation of the dispositions found in the Convention on the Elimination of all Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) into national legislations;
- Increasing the economic, social and financial conditions of work for professions where women predominate (including health and education professions) as a way to improve the share of men opting for those professions;
- Promoting working conditions that allow for balance between work and family responsibilities for all workers and taking proactive steps to grant paternity leave benefits and ensure take up;
- Increasing access to up-to-date and reliable information on migration opportunities as well as on the recognition of degrees and skills.

## **Fostering positive migration outcomes for highly skilled migrant women at destination**

- Ensuring integration services for permanent and temporary migration, irrespective of route of entry;
- Facilitating labour market integration through better systems of accreditation for international qualifications and in-country work experiences;
- Fostering employer sensibility training programmes that are specific to issues facing migrant and non-migrant women;
- Making temporary workers programmes based on the model of “adult single workers” more accessible to women.

## **Maximizing the development impact for countries of origin**

- Harnessing the organization of highly skilled migrants in academic and private sector institutions in both countries of origin and destination, to collaborate;
- Improving knowledge on women’s likelihood to return including the analysis of women’s perceived obstacles to utilising their skills upon return.
- Supporting access to entrepreneurship for returning skilled migrants by facilitating their access to information, credit and productive assets;
- Fostering highly skilled migrant women’s social and economic contributions to their country of origin through virtual return programmes and strengthening of women-led diaspora associations.

## **ANNEX:**

### **List of participants:**

Ms. Mariya Aleksynska, Economist, Conditions of Work and Equality Department, ILO

Ms. Cansin Arslan, Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, OECD

Ms. Anna Boucher, University of Sydney

Ms. Gillian Creese, University of British Columbia

Ms. Mercedes Fernandez, Centre for Migration Studies, University of Madrid

Ms. Gaelle Ferrant, Economist, Gender Team, OECD Development Centre

Mr. Jason Gagnon, Economist, Migration and Skills Unit, OECD Development Centre

Ms. Nil Demet Gungor, Atilim Universitesi

Ms. Metka Hercog, Cooperation and Development Center, Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

Ms. Jennifer Irish, Minister-Counsellor, Head, Humanitarian Affairs and Migration Section, Permanent Mission of Canada

Mr. David Khoudour, Head, Migration and Skills Unit, OECD Development Centre

Ms. Eleonore Kofman, Middlesex University

Mr. Frank Laczko, Head of the Migration Research Division, IOM

Ms. Sylvia Lopez-Ekra, Head of Gender Coordination Unit, IOM

Ms. Blandine Mollard, Gender and Migration Officer, IOM

Mr. Frederick Muia, Senior Adviser, International Organization of Employers

Ms. Maryam Naghsh Nejad, Institute for Study of Labour (IZA)

Ms. Parvati Raghuram, The Open University

Ms. Yvonne Riaño, Bern University

Ms. Natalia Ribas Mateos, Barcelona University

Ms. Barbara Rijks, Migration Health Programme Coordinator, IOM

Ms. Sonia Santos de Melo, Adviser, Migration and Skills Unit, OECD Development Centre

Ms. Christine Verschuur, Gender and Development Programme, Graduate Institute of International Development Studies

Ms. Lara White, Senior Labour Migration Specialist, IOM