

The role of discriminatory social institutions in female South-South migration

OECD Development Centre, April 2014



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Key messages

- Discriminatory social norms in both origin and destination countries are additional factors influencing female migration.
- Higher levels of discrimination in origin countries parallel higher levels of female migration but only up to a certain threshold where very high discrimination appears to curtail women's abilities to migrate.
- Women tend to migrate to countries with similar or lower levels of discrimination.

Migration patterns, choices and outcomes are not gender neutral. There are important gender differences in the drivers and patterns of migration which merit further analysis. Today, women account for close to half of migrants (UNDESA 2013). For the most part, policy attention has focused on female South-North migration. This seems justified by the large numbers of women migrating to the North: in 2013, women represented 52% of all migrants in the North. Their motives for migrating to the North can be explained by a search for better economic opportunities and social conditions related to gender discrimination. For example, sex-based discrimination in the labour market has been identified as an important factor in driving female North-North migration (Baudassé and Bazillier, 2013). However, given that South-South migration represents over 50% of the total migrant stock and women accounted for 43% of all migrants in the South (UNDESA, 2013), expanding analysis to understand the gender dynamics of this type of migration is of increasing importance for migration policies and research.

Female migration has traditionally been understood as a by-product of male migration: women follow their husbands, brothers or fathers for family reunification reasons. More recently, with the increase of independent female labour migrants (Jolly and Reeves, 2005), economic and employment factors have started to dominate the literature on female migration. However, little attention has been paid to how discrimination and violations of women's rights and freedoms may also influence their migration decisions. Women's unequal status in familial, societal and cultural structures, restrictions on their access to paid employment or public life, *inter alia*, should be considered as barriers or incentives to migrate, as well as influencing their choice of destination country.

Findings from the OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) suggest that discriminatory social norms and institutions play a role in shaping female South-South migration decisions and destinations. Social institutions are defined as the formal and informal laws, social norms and practices, which play an important role in shaping or restricting the decisions, choices and behaviours of groups, communities and individuals (Jütting et al., 2008). They set the parameters of what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable, and are thus central in defining gender roles and shaping individual development pathways and decisions. As such, discriminatory social institutions and norms also influence migration choices: on the one hand, migration may be a way for women to escape discrimination; on the other hand, discrimination may curtail their abilities to migrate.



This paper first provides an overview of trends and drivers of female migration. The second section examines the potential impact of levels of gender inequality in origin countries on women's destination choices. The next section explores the role of discriminatory social institutions in origin countries on female South-South migration, while the final section focuses on the role of discrimination in destination countries. The conclusion presents the policy implications of this new analysis of female migration.

An overview of female migration trends and drivers

Studies of female migration tend to analyse the trends and drivers through the lens of "independent" or "dependent" migration: women are defined by their relation to men (e.g. as a wife or daughter) and their "family role" rather than by their "market role". Recent advances in research and policy making on female migration have been supported by the increasing availability of sex-disaggregated migration data. Data from 2013 indicates that not only are more women migrating, but more are doing so as "independents" (UNDESA, 2013). In 2004, 27% of women who received US employment-based visas were principal visa holders (Docquier et al., 2009). Women's greater access to education and job opportunities may explain this new trend, which is not restricted solely to the North. In India, for example, increased employment opportunities in export industries, electronic assembling and garment factories have sparked an increase in women migrating as "independents" (Shanthi, 2006).

Migration is the result of comparing conditions at home to possibly better opportunities abroad, weighing up the costs and advantages of such a move. Well-known economic drivers of migration include differences in opportunities between origin and destination countries in terms of, *inter alia*, income, unemployment rates, employment opportunities and cost of living. Other well-known factors include migration policies, geographical, cultural and linguistic proximity as well as the environment and climate (Péridy, 2010). The role of networks is also important since men and women from the same country of origin tend to migrate to the same destination country. A network can increase the likelihood of women migrating since it may link potential female migrants with demands for female labour in destination countries. Word-of-mouth communication also helps spread information about destination countries: the larger the network (i.e. more peers who have migrated to the country of destination), the smaller the psychological and integration cost of migration (Munshi, 2003).

The costs and opportunities of migration are not gender neutral (ILO, 2013). Looking at the non-economic determinants of female migration, previous studies to date have focused on three broad categories (Boyd and Grieco, 2003): (1) individual factors (e.g. age, urban/rural origin, marital status, role and position in the family, educational status and employment experience); (2) family factors (e.g. size, stage at life-cycle, structure, status); and (3) societal factors (e.g. the norms and values that determine whether a woman can migrate or not, and if she can, how and with whom she can do it). For example, while being married with children reduces the probability that women will migrate, this is the opposite for men (Kanaiaupuni, 2000). Levels of education also have surprising gender differences: men with higher levels of education are found to be less likely to migrate which is not the case for educated women for whom the probability increases (Kanaiaupuni 2000). Better access to education in origin countries and higher employment opportunities in destination countries helps explain the increase in the number of female labour migrants; this is also related to the growing demand for female-specific employment, especially in the service and care sectors (Martin, 2004).



Box 1: What is the SIGI?

The SIGI is the first attempt to measure discriminatory social institutions in non-OECD countries. It is made up of 14 variables grouped into five sub-indices:

- *Discriminatory Family Code* captures social institutions that restrict women’s decision power within the family;
- *Restricted Physical Integrity* refers to restriction on women’s control over their bodies;
- *Son Bias* measures intra-household biases towards sons and the devaluation of daughters;
- *Restricted Resources and Entitlements* includes restriction on access to, control of and entitlement over resources;
- *Restricted Civil Liberties* captures social institutions that restrict women’s access to public space and political voice.

The SIGI provides data for non-OECD countries. The scale of the SIGI is from 0, representing low discrimination, to 1, which represents a high level of discriminatory social institutions. Find out more: www.genderindex.org

The double role of discriminatory social institutions in origin countries

Economic opportunities and geographical disparities in prosperity are not the only drivers of migration: other factors are also involved in choices over well-being. How discriminatory social institutions shape migration has so far been largely neglected. Sen and others have already shown how desire for individual freedoms and rights to be respected and expanded also govern individual decision-making (Sen, 1999). When applied to female migration, Sen’s “capabilities” approach points to important means by which women’s freedom (or lack of freedom) to “achieve outcomes that they value” may influence their decision to migrate and their choice of destination.

There are two possible scenarios for how discriminatory social institutions in origin countries influence female migration. On the one hand, women’s desire to escape gender-specific discrimination within their community or family structures could be considered as an additional determinant for their migration. Women may prefer to migrate to avoid early marriage, female genital mutilation or fear (or even experiences) of gender-based violence. There is evidence from south-east Asia of women migrating in order to avoid involuntary marriages (Lam and Hoang, 2010).

On the other hand, this scenario depends on women’s ability and opportunity to make and carry out that decision. In contexts where discrimination against women restricts their ability to act and their basic rights and freedoms, their capacity to migrate is also severely curtailed. For instance, early marriage is known to reduce a girl’s chance of completing her secondary education, and is linked with limited economic independence and decision-making autonomy within the household (Cerise et al., 2013). In such contexts, the socio-economic dependence of women on their husbands for key decision-making choices, as well as their low-skills and restricted access to resources thus also limits the opportunity for them to migrate.



This relationship between female migration and discriminatory social institutions in origin countries was examined using a standard migration model. A standard gravitational framework assesses the impact of the SIGI on female migration controlling for GDP per capita, income differential, distance, contiguity, language differential, population size and unemployment rates for origin and destination country, civil liberties, conflict, network (proxied by migrant stocks in 1990) and male migration flows (See Ferrant and Tuccio, 2014 for more details).

Box 2: Data

Sex-disaggregated migration data from the United Nations contains bilateral migration for the years 1990, 2000 and 2010. To better capture gender dynamics in international migration, the change in migrant stocks observed between 2000 and 2010 is used as a proxy for net migration flows. Although the proxy is affected by the deaths and return of migrants, it is a reasonable approximation. The 2012 SIGI data provides a useful proxy for the level of discriminatory social institutions between 2008 and 2011 for non-OECD countries.

Main determinants of migration included in the standard gravitational model of migration are included as control variables. Data on GDP per capita, government expenditure and population in both origin and destination country are taken from the Penn World Table. Female unemployment rates and for women's average years of education are taken from the World Development Indicators of the World Bank. The conflict variable from Uppsala Conflict Data Program and Freedom House's civil liberties measure are used. Finally, the CEPII's Gravity Dataset provides data on contiguity, language and distance.

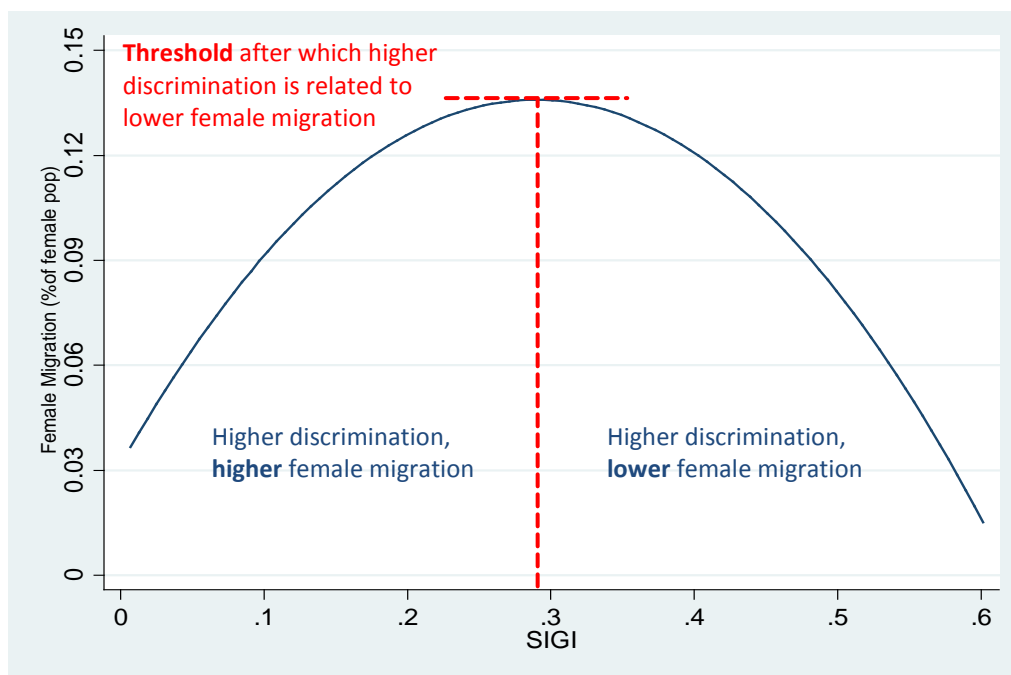
For more details on the methodology applied, please refer to Ferrant and Tuccio (2014).

Figure 1 shows that discriminatory social institutions in the country of origin can be an additional incentive for women to migrate but only up to a certain threshold, where it becomes an obstacle for female migration. When levels of discrimination increase from low ($SIGI < 0.13$) to moderate ($0.13 < SIGI < 0.3$), female emigration flows increase. This suggests that emigration may be a way for women to escape higher discriminatory social institutions. However, when levels of discrimination increase from moderate ($0.13 < SIGI < 0.3$) to high ($SIGI > 0.3$), female emigration flows decrease. High levels of discrimination against women reduce their ability to migrate. For example, discriminatory customary laws or the poor enforcement of formal legislation on inheritance deprive women of the resources necessary for cross-border migration. Conversely, for the same level of economic opportunities in the two groups of countries, countries with the lowest level of discrimination have a lower level of female migration than countries with higher levels of discrimination. This suggests that in these countries women's migration is less affected by the level of discrimination.



Figure 1: Discriminatory social institutions in origin countries are both an incentive for and a constraint on female migration.

Female migration flows (estimated share of female migrants in female population controlling for standard determinants of migration) by SIGI: higher discrimination is correlated with higher female migration flows up to a certain SIGI threshold after which higher discrimination is correlated with lower female migration flows.



Source: 2012 OECD Gender Institutions and Development Database, United Nations Global Migration Database.

Note: The chart shows the relationship between the SIGI 2012 in origin countries and the predicted value of female migration flows. The SIGI scores from 0 meaning no or very low discrimination to 1 indicating high inequality. Additional controls are GDP per capita, income differential, distance, contiguity, language differential, population size and unemployment rates for origin and destination country, civil liberties, conflict, network and male migration flows. For the sake of simplicity regressions tables are not presented here. However, regression results are available upon request from the authors. All coefficients are significant at the 5% level with the expected sign.

Therefore, discriminatory social institutions in the origin country appear to be an additional factor explaining female migration alongside traditional determinants such as common language and borders, distance between countries, and economic and employment opportunities. Interestingly, using the same model and data, discriminatory social institutions do not have significant effect on male migration. There are two possible reasons for this gender difference. Firstly, male migration decisions are not sensitive to the level of gender inequality in their home communities: men are freer to make migration decisions independently, without the same constraints that shape women's choices. Alternatively, since the SIGI measures social institutions that discriminate against women, it may not be able to capture discrimination against men.



Box 3: The key role of discrimination within the family

When looking at the individual SIGI sub-indices, four out of the five sub-indices have significant statistical results. The discriminatory family code and restricted resources and entitlements can function as either an additional incentive or an obstacle for women to migrate depending on the country's level of discrimination, while restricted physical integrity and civil liberties clearly hinder female migration. Some examples provide insights into this phenomenon: women in Iran need their husband's approval to apply for a passport or to travel abroad, which restricts their autonomy and mobility. Similarly, women's freedom of movement in Burkina Faso and Mali is limited by their national civil codes, which obliges wives to submit to the authority of the husband for decisions over where to live. In Moldova, women report having less opportunities to migrate because of lack of resources (money, network, language) which are generally more available to men (IOM, 2005).

Discriminatory family practices appear to be the main drivers of female migration, while other forms of discriminatory social institutions play a secondary role. Within this sub-index, the early marriage variable appears to be a particularly important determinant of female migration, confirming research and case studies of girls' migrating to flee early marriage. For example in Ethiopia, 23% of migrant adolescent girls reported that they migrated to escape early marriage (Erulkar et al., 2006). Fleeing early marriage is only possible if there is scope to migrate: very high prevalence levels of early marriage are correlated with lower female migration flows due to limited female decision-making abilities.

The pull power of social institutions in destination countries

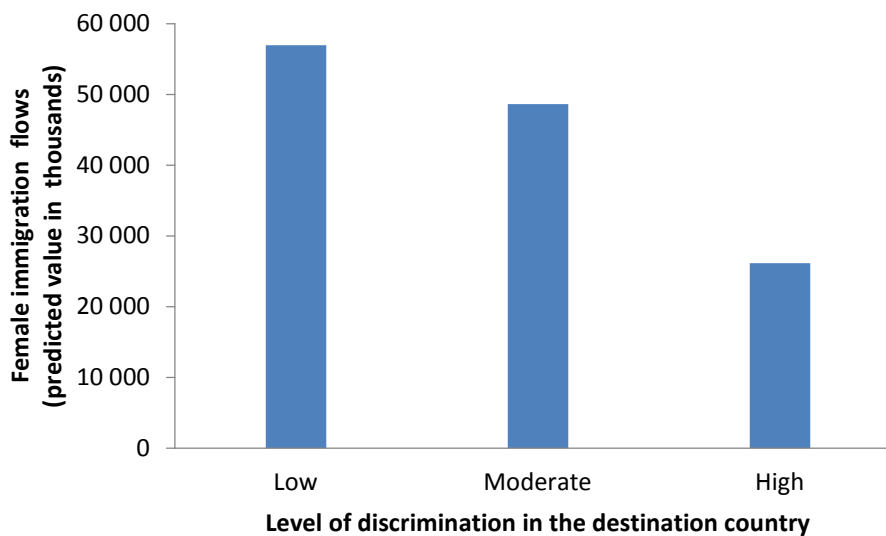
Levels of discrimination in destination countries also appear to be an important pull factor, with results indicating that female immigration flows are negatively correlated with discriminatory social institutions of the destination country (Fig.2): women are more likely to migrate to a country where they could enjoy greater freedoms and rights. Across all of the SIGI sub-indices, low levels of discrimination in a country appear to be attractive for women migrants. They tend to migrate to countries where there are low levels of discrimination within the family, such as inheritance rights, where there are stronger legislative regimes protecting women's freedom from violence and where their reproductive rights and secure access to asset ownership are protected.

Importantly, these countries also provide a wider range of employment opportunities for women, and have lower levels of sex-based discrimination in the workplace. For some women, migration may mean an increase in social mobility, economic independence and relative autonomy. This is especially true if it is accompanied by increased participation in the labour market. New economic and social responsibilities may change the distribution of power within the family, leading to greater authority and participation in household decision making and control over the family's resources. In this respect, immigration laws and regulations can also influence women's migration opportunities and outcomes.



Figure 2: Higher discrimination in destination countries, lower female immigration flows.

Female migration flows are negatively correlated with discrimination against women in the social institutions of the destination country.



Source: 2012 OECD Gender Institutions and Development Database, United Nations Global Migration Database.

Note: The chart shows the relationship between the SIGI 2012 in destination countries and the predicted value of female immigration flows. Levels of discrimination are defined by SIGI terciles (low levels of discrimination means $SIGI < 0.13$; moderate: $0.13 < SIGI < 0.3$; high: $SIGI > 0.3$). Additional controls are GDP per capita, income differential, distance, contiguity, language differential, population size and unemployment rates for origin and destination country, civil liberties, conflict, network and male migration flows. For the sake of simplicity, regressions tables are not presented here. However, regression results are available upon request from the authors. All coefficients are significant at the 5% level with the expected sign.

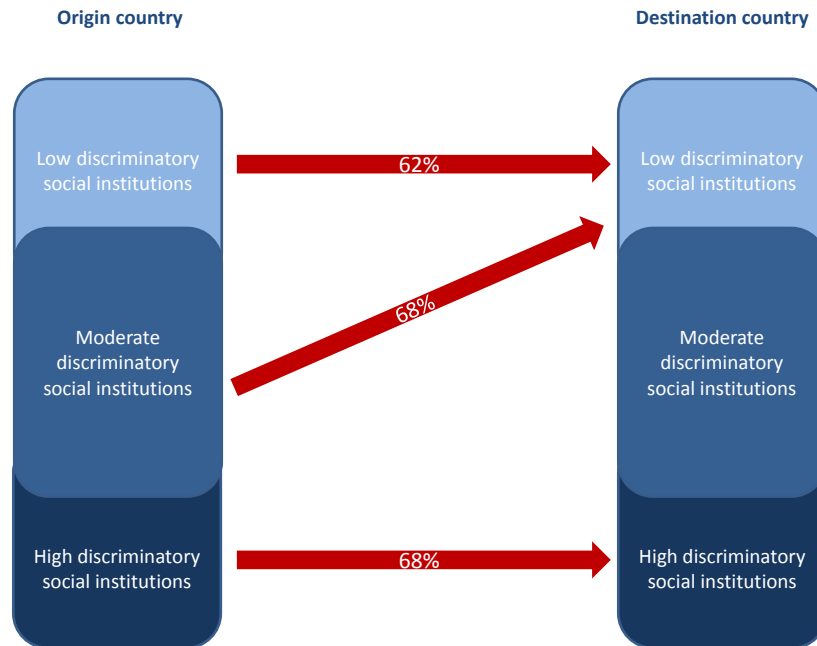
Levels of discrimination in origin countries and the destination decisions of female migrants

Figure 3 shows how discriminatory social institutions in origin and destination countries interact in female migration patterns. Female migration flows are disaggregated by the level of discrimination in the country of origin and the main country of destination. There are three main observations based on the results, which indicate the underlying influence of social norms and institutions. Firstly, women from countries with the lowest levels of discrimination are more likely to migrate to other low discriminatory countries: 62% of the main destination countries for women from low discriminatory countries also have a low level of discrimination. This seems to reflect a preference for gender equality, by migrating to a country with similar social institutions and norms, as well as other factors, such as geographical or linguistic proximity, as well as economic and employment opportunities.



Figure 3: Women from moderate discriminatory countries tend to move to countries with low levels of discrimination.

Main destination countries by level of SIGI: female migration flows from countries with moderate levels of discrimination mainly go to low discriminatory destinations (68%) and moderate discriminatory destinations (26%), while the remaining flows go to high discriminatory destinations (6%).



Source: 2012 OECD Gender Institutions and Development Database, United Nations Global Migration Database.

Note: Levels of discrimination are defined by SIGI terciles. The first terciles refers to low discriminatory countries ($SIGI < 0.13$); the second terciles refers to moderate levels of discrimination ($0.13 < SIGI < 0.3$); the third terciles refers to high discriminatory countries ($SIGI > 0.3$).

Secondly, women from countries with the highest levels of discrimination are more likely to migrate to countries with similarly high levels of discrimination. In addition to the geographical and cultural proximity, in these contexts women tend to have less decision-making power within the household and therefore have less say in the choice of their destination country.

Finally, a particularly interesting migration pattern that suggests women's preference to live in countries with lower levels of discrimination relates to women from countries with moderate levels of discrimination. In these countries, women tend to migrate to countries where discrimination is lower, thus putting the spotlight on social institutions as an additional point of attraction in the choice of destination in combination with the other economic and employment factors.



Policy recommendations

Improve sex-disaggregated data on migration and social institutions

One of the main reasons why female migration has not yet been extensively studied is the absence of comprehensive, regularly collected and reliable sex-disaggregated data on international migration. Data gaps remain, for example, in terms of information on irregular and forced migration, or seasonal and return migrants. At the micro level, there are data gaps on immigrants in destination countries and return migrants in origin countries. Addressing these gaps and improving the availability and reliability of data are essential for evidence-based policy making. Expanding data collection and empirical analysis to factor in the role of social institutions and norms can further strengthen policy effectiveness while deepening the understanding of the gender dynamics of migration on individuals, families and communities.

Recognise and tackle discriminatory social institutions in origin and destination countries

Governments should systematically target discriminatory social institutions as a factor impinging on women's rights and capacities to achieve their migration choices as well as providing an incentive to emigrate. Promoting gender equality in the workplace or in public life should be accompanied by a strong legislative framework, accompanied by awareness-raising programmes and interventions, which address the structural causes of inequality. Discriminatory social institutions severely handicap a country's capacity to tap into the socio-economic potential of half its population, and open the door for women to seek better conditions where their contributions and rights are valued.

This implies removing barriers to women's empowerment, in particular tackling all infringements of their physical integrity and human rights. The migration of women should represent a choice to improve their opportunities and overall well-being rather than an escape from discrimination or violence. A first policy step is to ensure that women are able to migrate independently. In Jordan, a new law passed in 2003 granted women the permission to obtain or renew a passport without the permission of their male guardian (or husbands) (De Bel-Air, 2011).

To take full advantage of the human capital and economic potential of female migrants, destination countries should invest in an enabling environment that facilitates their reception and integration. Community outreach activities by publicly accredited female migrant networks and associations should be encouraged as a complement to integration policies as a means of ensuring that new female migrants have access to information on their rights, public services and other basic information. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have set international standards protecting the rights of migrant women workers and should form a critical point of reference for migration policy.



Conclusion

Discriminatory social institutions in both origin and destination countries affect female migration. While this field of research is new, the preliminary results from the SIGI analysis suggest that, in addition to the standard determinants, discriminatory social institutions should also be considered as factors explaining female South-South migration. The results show that female migration should not be explained only by wealth differences between countries: it also depends on a number of other variables including gender inequalities. The picture that emerges from this analysis suggests that greater public investments are required in both origin and destination countries to address discriminatory social institutions in order to maximise the positive rewards of female migration for communities, families and women themselves. These efforts should go hand in hand with the overall commitment to reduce (or eliminate) high levels of discrimination against women in order to ensure that their fundamental rights and freedoms are respected irrespective of whether they decide or are able to emigrate.

Box 4: A global conversation on the impact of social norms on female migration

From 2-15 September 2013, Wikigender and partners* organised an online discussion gathering 35 contributions on the linkages between norms that discriminate against women and girls and migration processes. Among the strategies proposed to better analyse migration patterns, improve migrant women and girls' well-being and increase the positive impacts from female migration, five points emerged as essential:

- Social norms and practices influence women's decision to migrate and their choice of destination.
- The ability to send remittances to families in origin countries strengthens women's position in the household and contributes to increasing the welfare and well-being of families back home.
- More comprehensive data are needed on female migrants and their experiences in destination countries.
- Policies need to take into account the leading role female migrants can play in both countries of origin and destination in improving social and economic outcomes.
- A mix of policies and interventions are needed to reduce gender-based discriminations in the family, the labour market and for younger migrants.

For more information and to read the full report, please visit www.wikigender.org/index.php/Online_Discussions

*Partners in this discussion included the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Scalabrini Migration Center (SMC), Wikiprogress and Wikichild.



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