

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	7
Introduction.....	9
Literature and Debates on Women's International Labour Migration.....	11
Methodology.....	20
Country Study 1: Philippines.....	23
Country Study 2: Indonesia.....	94
Country Study 3: Yunnan, China.....	135
Country Study 4: Thailand.....	171
Synthesis Report.....	224
Conclusion, Discussion and Policy Recommendations.....	253
Bibliography.....	267
Index.....	282



## Executive Summary

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This study focused on female labour migration from four countries in South-east Asia; namely Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan-China. The research covered a sample of 387 female returnees from the afore-mentioned countries who had migrated internationally for employment. The major findings for each of the countries' case studies are summarised as follows. They were engaged mainly in the services sector, i.e., engaged as domestic helpers, caregivers, entertainers and sex workers. Some were hired in the manufacturing sector and a few to do agricultural work.

All migrants from Yunnan were undocumented while those from the other three countries were both documented and undocumented. Thus, cases of trafficking could be found mostly in Yunnan but also to a lesser extent in the Philippines and Thailand.

Many returnees were married with children when they migrated, generally between the ages of 20-35 years. In most cases, the husband would help with household work when the wives were away. All female workers earned some income during their time abroad and many remitted money to their parents or family at home. While they were working overseas, some women experienced physical violence and/or sexual harassment.

Once they returned to their places of origin, female migrants faced differing situations. Most Indonesian women went back to their agricultural work, while many Filipinos attempted to migrate again rather than look for work in the Philippines. Thai females often engaged in local service work or became self-employed although many wanted to emigrate again. Yunnanese women generally returned to their housework and farm and few started their own businesses. There were few economic reintegration programmes to absorb returned women in their own country or community, making them vulnerable for re-migration. A "General Health Questionnaire" (GHQ) indicated that two Thai women out of 98 respondents had health problems. The results of this test were not clear for Indonesia and Philippines. The GHQ was not done with the Yunnanese sample group. Thai, Filipino and Chinese women generally reported that they had higher self-confidence and more independence after their return.

In all, labour migration of women from the four countries indicated that there were cases of both legal migration and human smuggling (where women were voluntarily smuggled.) Migrant women were empowered economically when they worked abroad because they had a higher income and they could send remittances home. On the other hand, they were socially vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and sexual harassment. When women returned home, the situation was reversed: they were economically vulnerable because of a general lack of income but socially empowered due to their higher social status and self-confidence, which they had developed. However, family disruptions such as divorce, infidelity and estrangement from children did occur and rendered some women socially vulnerable. Many returned female workers did not succeed in reintegrating themselves into the old social, cultural and economic contexts of their former lives.

#### Policy Recommendations

The following measures are proposed for the improvement of conditions for female labour migrants.

1. A better protection regime and more efficient social safety nets should be developed to assist vulnerable female migrants. Concrete actions that could be taken are, for example:
  - a). the provision of dormitories for commuting domestic helpers to prevent harassment at home by male employers;
  - b). the establishment of easy access hotlines and shelter homes for female workers who have difficulties with employers;
  - c). the provision of legal advisors to assist migrant women with work contracts and legal status problems;
  - d). the encouragement of family reunion schemes to partly subsidize annual or bi-annual travel costs of female migrants to their family in the country of origin;
  - e). the provision of reproductive health and mental health care services to migrant women in the countries of destination, including contraceptive services and HIV/AIDS and STD intervention programmes; and,
  - f). rehabilitation programmes to be set up for the migrant's families while they are abroad, for example in remittance management or care-giving.

2. A gender-sensitive reintegration programme should be established to absorb returned women into the economic and social life in countries of origin with:

- a). skill development training programmes to assist women to work in accordance with their acquired skills, individual interests and local labour market viability;
- b). the provision of small loans for female returnees who want to start a business;
- c). family rehabilitation programmes for returned women, their husbands, children and other members of their family;
- d). availability of social workers or counsellors to assist returnees who have social and psychological troubles; and
- e). public recruitment services for those who want to re-migrate to prevent undocumented migration.

3 A public awareness campaign should be conducted, highlighting the possible vulnerability of female international labour migrants as well as the types of work which the sending government wishes to encourage its migrating nationals to be employed in. Such an information campaign would aim to prevent grassroots level irregular migration. The use of electronic communication could benefit prospective female migrants as well as those who are abroad, the former for information-sharing and the latter for communicating with their families in the country of origin.

4. A database of returned migrants should be developed, which includes their basic characteristics and monitors their development after return.

5. Research studies should be conducted to elucidate such issues as: the mental health of returnees (or other social costs of migration); the causes of migrant women's reintegration success and failure in various occupations; the sustainability and viability of such work; and the efficacy of existing reintegration programmes.

6. Women's networking through information sharing and self-help interest groups should be encouraged, to raise public awareness with regard to the economic imperatives which force women to move abroad for work so frequently.