MIGRATION IN THE 2030 AGENDA

International Organization for Migration

The UN Migration Agency

65 YEARS

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ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH MIGRATION GOVERNANCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND SOLUTIONS IN SUPPORT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

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Abstract

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims at achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. This goal is critical to achieve migration governance as defined by the International Organization for Migration's Migration Governance Framework, by fulfilling the rights and maximizing the socioeconomic well-being of all migrants and society. It requires assessing the specific challenges that affect women and girls, with particular emphasis on discriminatory practices influencing decision-making and the ability to migrate. It also requires determining how to empower women and girls through migration. To tackle these challenges, SDG5 indicators are critical to build evidence-based systems and gender-sensitive policies.

Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly resolution, adopted on 25 September 2015 (A/Res/70/1), sets a clear time frame to achieve gender equality through its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: all forms of discrimination against women and girls must be eliminated by 2030. This goal recognizes that gender equality is a fundamental human right. But it is also a response to the fact that gender inequality remains a global challenge, considering that women and girls still suffer disproportionately from discriminatory practices and violence worldwide. Finally, the scope of SDG5 is not limited to a static vision of gender equality; it also includes the more forward-looking notion of women and girls' empowerment.

SDG5 outlines clear targets pertaining to specific gender-related challenges (5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.A, 5.B and 5.C) that translate the general goal into a series of actionable objectives. For example, target 5.4 aims to promote and value unpaid domestic work through policies related to infrastructure, social protection and public services while promoting shared responsibility within households. In all cases, the targets are complemented by a set of indicators allowing for progress to be monitored. Indicator 5.1.1, for instance, measures whether legal frameworks exist that promote and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, while indicator 5.4.1 measures the proportion of time spent carrying out unpaid domestic work disaggregated by sex, age and location.

Beyond SDG5, the challenges of gender equality are referred to in various parts of the resolution document. The targets set by SDG4 with regards to inclusive access to education and learning opportunities aim at eliminating gender disparities that affect access to education.

In the field of migration policy, SDG5 reminds policymakers and practitioners how important gender-sensitive approaches are to achieving migration governance. The International Organization for Migration's Migration Governance Framework (IOM MiGOF), for instance, calls for the systematic mainstreaming of gender considerations into public policy, in order to ensure that policies appropriately address the needs and experiences of all migrants, including women and girls.

The global context of gender dynamics in migration requires that we look beyond mere differences in male and female migration flows. Features such as the type of migration or the likelihood of mobility are important, but it is also important to consider the inequalities that are typically hidden by those trends. For instance, while nearly half of migrants worldwide are women, a figure that might suggest an acceptable gender balance in terms of global flows, it does not provide adequate insight into the underlying social constraints nor of the significant qualitative differences that characterize the migration of women.[1] Being a woman or a man may well trigger very distinctive migration pathways as a result of gender-related disparities and discrimination. It is therefore crucial to assess the full picture of gendered realities to shape policies accordingly.

It is necessary to contextualize the relationship between gender and migration in the current trends of migration and recognize current attitudes and awareness of gender itself. In academia, gender as a research area

for migration studies emerged in the 1980s. Within the UN community, it is often considered that the 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing set a landmark, calling, inter alia, for disaggregated data by sex. Significant progress was made in the early twenty-first century in putting forward a number of mandatory regulations, such as special measures to protect beneficiary populations from sexual exploitation and abuse by UN and other aid workers,[2] and other tools seeking to address gender-related issues. This growing awareness driving the migration governance agenda has accompanied the rise of globalized migration. Recently, the notion of the feminization of migration has emerged as we witness an increase in the number and percentage of women migrating independently, as opposed to within the context of other migrating family members. Current policy dialogue, such as the negotiations of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, offer new fora to discuss these structural trends and facilitate the achievement of the SDGs, including SDG5.

Addressing the challenges of gender inequality in the context of migration demands an acknowledgement of the degree of violence that migrant women and girls endure. Gender-based violence affecting women and girls, such as domestic violence and forced marriage, may drive migration from the country of origin. Sexual violence may also impact migrant women and young girls along migration routes. Current data indicate that women and girls are also disproportionately exposed to trafficking and discriminatory practices against domestic workers.

Migrant women are also more frequently affected by socioeconomic challenges, such as unemployment, underemployment and deskilling. They often face a higher burden of reproductive labour and in many cases productive labour responsibilities[3] due to traditional gender roles.[4] Finally, their significant participation in unpaid domestic work and market labour is not always fully taken into account, for instance due to gender-based expectations that women mostly migrate for family reunification and/or as the dependants of male migrants.

Achieving SDG5 within the context of migration governance requires twofold action. First, assessing inequalities and, in particular, gender-based discrimination and vulnerabilities is needed to inform policymaking. Second, promoting the opportunities offered by migration for women and girls – such as their education and economic independence – is essential to support their own empowerment. Transforming these actions into sustainable opportunities requires robust monitoring systems and data solutions.

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Assessing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities within migration

All migrants seek better life opportunities, and in so doing are confronted by challenges, but migrant men and women do not have access to the same opportunities, nor are they confronted by the same challenges. Women are, for instance, particularly exposed to gender-based violence during the migration process, and are affected disproportionately by migrant trafficking. They are also significantly at risk of being recruited for forced labour in the sex trade or as domestic workers or caregivers.

The study of women as a vulnerable group has been the subject of various research initiatives. Migration must take into account the complementarity of "family roles" and "market roles". Migrant women should not be defined solely in terms of their relations to men (such as relative or dependant) but first and foremost on the basis of their independently defined socioeconomic role and characteristics (such as employment status, qualification or work experience).

Two potential scenarios on gender-related discrimination in relation to migration can be envisaged. First, gender-related discriminatory practices may push women to migrate as they pursue liberties they are deprived of. For instance, early marriage, domestic violence or female genital mutilation may

drive women to leave their country of origin. Second, discrimination may undermine their ability to freely and independently determine whether they want to migrate or not. This could stem, for instance, from legal regulations that impose constraints on women, whether to ensure they respect the wishes of male relatives or to "protect them from harm". Another limiting factor is access to education: if young girls are unable to complete their education, they may become dependent on male relatives or acquaintances and forced to turn to them for important life choices. Conversely, research indicates that discriminatory social institutions have limited effects on male migration.

The scope of these effects cannot be underestimated if SDG5 is to be achieved: the traditional perception of female migration as a by-product of male migration is fundamentally incompatible with the idea of gender equality. This approach puts the identification of women's rights violations at risk by suggesting that migrant women are dependants, passively following their male counterparts. Likewise, it undermines the awareness of how gender-specific discriminations can directly trigger pull and push factors.

Academic research suggests that discriminatory social norms and institutions shape female migration. Specifically, it has a particular impact on South–South migration decisions and destinations. Strong social expectations regarding gender roles influence decisions to migrate and migratory behaviour, both because of the attempts to avoid discrimination and the limitations that hamper women's abilities to migrate.

Violence against women and girls does not only affect those migrating. As a traditional phenomenon rooted in relations of unequal power, domestic violence is a common form of discriminatory violence at the household level. Armed conflict is frequently accompanied by specific forms of sexual violence affecting women and girls. However, refugees and internally displaced persons caught up in situations of conflict or residing in camps often continue to follow established gender roles, with women continuing to exercise domestic responsibilities for their families and men taking on distinct productive roles. These differentiated gender roles and norms may further contribute to female migration and displacement patterns.

Gender inequalities also account for unbalanced labour economics, a situation reflected in labour migration statistics. Women in informal employment are over-represented in the domestic sphere. This includes both situations where women work for an employer or carry out unpaid domestic work at home. Migrant women are particularly at risk of poverty within these professions. The broader labour market has also showed persisting gender pay gaps, with

the glass ceiling phenomenon affecting female workers worldwide. These socioeconomic realities reflect gender inequality and the restrictions that tend to be imposed on women. At the other end of the professional spectrum, women entrepreneurs remain a minority, and corporate leadership roles remain overwhelmingly male-dominated.

These elements of discrimination affecting women show that migration patterns are not gender neutral. Both North–South and South–South migration can be assessed in terms of gender equality. Gender plays a direct role in the costs and opportunities of migration, and discriminatory social institutions can impact those. Specifically, gender inequalities play a complementary role to the variable of wealth disparities across countries.

Some have referred to the Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) outcomes as "unfinished business" regarding gender equality. The new Sustainable Development Agenda encourages taking bold action by achieving SDG5. In that respect, migration policy can play a significant role in protecting women's rights and addressing discriminatory practices.

Harnessing the potential for migrant women's empowerment

There are many ways in which migration can contribute to the empowerment of women.

First, migration can offer women access to education and careers that might not be available in their countries of origin. If and when such migrants return home through the so-called circular migration process, they can take back and disseminate norms of behaviour and practices that improve the position of women in their society of origin. Female refugees and asylum seekers may derive special benefits from the protection they receive in their host county and take advantage of this to acquire new professional qualifications or develop new skills.

Second, migrant women may earn better incomes, enjoy greater degrees of autonomy and freedom, and exercise new leadership roles. Their social status can thus be enhanced, as can their ability to influence decision-making within their social circle. Increasing participation in society can be another example of that process. Structural changes in labour dynamics can also reflect empowerment trends, with women traditionally dominating international migration for care services as opposed to corporate leadership roles.

Third, many migrant women provide steady flows of remittances to their countries of origin. The very act of sending money to family back home can be a role – and even life – redefining activity whereby women who have been in situations of dependency prior to departure can become a financial mainstay for their family, thus acquiring a new capital of influence and authority. Less tangible remittances transmitted, for example, in the form social skills, expert knowledge or technical know-how, are also of significant value.

These various transfers are obviously not an unmixed blessing: family expectations of assistance and support may weigh heavily on the migrant women, and there are enduring concerns about the impact of the brain drain on the country of origin in the case of highly qualified migrant women. All things considered, however, the balance sheet for women can be positive, provided migration policies in both countries of origin and destination are formulated, with due regard for the particular needs and experiences of migrant women and girls.

Based on gender analysis of labour migration dynamics, it is possible to adjust policies to take into account gender-specific trends, for instance by organizing programmes for admission of foreign workers specialized in particular fields. Au pair programmes or initiatives to give work permits to executives' spouses have demonstrated that it is possible to tailor migration policies in ways that are gender-sensitive, the ultimate test being whether these policies do, in fact, encourage and enable women to accede to areas (such as corporate leadership) that are currently difficult for them to reach.

Recent research has confirmed that levels of discrimination in destination countries play an important role in shaping female migration flows, as migrant women are often attracted to countries where more gender-equitable norms and practices offer them greater freedom and rights.

The key difference between the 2015 agenda compared to the MDGs' targets for gender equality might lie in a shift from the objective of social development to the broader goal of women's participation in the socioeconomic sphere. A rather narrow focus on women and girls' health and education has given way to a broader recognition of the often overlooked social and economic contributions of women. The consideration of the time spent on unpaid domestic and care work disaggregated by sex illustrates that approach.

Women face constraints to access quality jobs globally, as well as equality in pay, and significant progress is needed to achieve gender equality. Empowerment strategies ultimately drive development by positively affecting poverty, inequalities and school attendance. Migration policies and migrants themselves can play an active role to support their achievement.

Monitoring gender and migration to achieve SDG5

The MDGs' monitoring requirements created a significant incentive for statistical communities to come up with new data at the country level, which has led States to collect quality, comparable data across the world. Building on these efforts, the new development agenda seeks to monitor progress made against the SDGs.

Monitoring gender equality requires, in the first place, accurate assessments of gender-based forms of violence and discriminatory practices. It also demands looking into all forms of women's empowerment, such as economic power, political participation and leadership. It also facilitates the prioritization of gender in the policy agenda by significantly raising its visibility. As such, monitoring systems fulfil a strategic function by creating clear stimuli for public action, beginning with identification of funding priorities.

In the context of migration, the systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data is required both at the level of migrants and social institutions. The current knowledge of international migration is still limited by data gaps, lack of reliability and the irregularity of data collection. These are all obstacles to the establishment of strong monitoring systems. Addressing those challenges and improving the availability of data are essential for evidence-based policymaking, a principle required to achieve gender-sensitive migration governance under the IOM MiGOF. Once established, data-collecting systems will deliver material that can be analysed to identify gender-related trends and challenges.

Some existing tools already allow the monitoring of key indicators to assess the state of gender equality. For example, the Social Institutions and Gender Index, developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development offers policymakers a standard to measure gender inequalities across countries. The United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index and the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index are among other useful instruments. Index-based tools combining quantitative and qualitative data are particularly appropriate to capture the

complex spectrum of gender data. Combined with migration data, they allow policymakers to develop tailored solutions that support the achievement of SDG5.

Data collection efforts must learn from the lessons of past successes and limitations that have characterized monitoring of MDGs. They should avoid data discrepancies between an international statistical system and the national systems by developing harmonized methodologies and data-collecting instruments and thus improving both the validity and reliability of the data collected.

Ultimately, the analysis of gender and migration to achieve equality and empowerment must benefit from what has been recently called the "data revolution". This term reminds policymakers and researchers that technological capacities to collect and process data have reached unprecedented levels of power, putting innovative solutions within the reach of practitioners.

The way forward: Orderly and dignified migration for all

SDG5 and the entire Sustainable Development Agenda framework, along with the IOM MiGOF, are congruent: evidence-based policy, rights-based approaches and partnerships are equally necessary to deliver quality results. Specifically, migration governance can contribute to achieve gender equality and women and girls' empowerment through the systematic incorporation of gender data to measure vulnerabilities and support empowerment strategies. This requires accurate monitoring of the indicators defined by the Sustainable Development Agenda, in line with the possibilities offered by the data revolution and the objective to develop gender-sensitive policies. Ultimately, this will also facilitate orderly and dignified migration pathways for all.[5]

Endnotes

1. As a social construct, gender roles and norms are shaped by the social and cultural contexts to which individuals belong. Social perceptions may be conducive to discriminatory practices that, in turn, influence migration processes.
2. See, for example, General Assembly resolution 57/306 of 15 April 2003 and Secretary-General's Bulletin ST/SGB/2003/13 of 9 October 2003.
3. "Reproductive labour" refers to work performed in the domestic or private sphere to help sustain a household, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for children; "productive labour" refers to paid work that is generally performed in the public sphere and is enabled through reproductive labour.
4. This is true both for migrant women and girls who have left their communities and for those who have not.
5. This article is written by Ludvik Girard, Regional Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, OIG, IOM, Dakar.

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