# Migration-Development Nexus through a Gender Lens

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*Understanding the agency role is central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act, and can choose to act one way rather than another. And thus we – women and men – must take responsibility for doing things or not doing them. It makes a difference, and we have to take note of that difference. This elementary acknowledgement, though simple enough in principle, can be exacting in its implications, both for social analysis and political reason and action.*

“Women’s Agency and Social Change” in

“Development as Freedom” Amartya Sen (1999)

It has been 25 years since Sen’s seminal book “Development as Freedom” was published. A lot has changed since then, also in terms of how we tend to perceive the relationship between migration and development.

For one, and to paraphrase Sen, migrants have begun to be perceived as "*responsible persons" who "chose to act one way rather than other*". To migrate, or to stay. This reasoning is reflected in the recent work of, among others, Hein de Haas (2021) and Kerilyn Schewel (2020), who perceive migration – or lack thereof – as a result of people's aspirations both in terms of their right to move (de Haas) and to stay (Schewel). Importantly, as argued by the latter, a systematic neglect of the causes and consequences of immobility – i.e. of people's staying preferences – obscures any efforts to understand why, when, and how people migrate.

By developing the aspirations-capabilities frameworks to explore the determinants of (im)mobility, de Haas and Schewel have contributed a great deal to altering the status quo in migration research, which has often focused on the more easily quantifiable, economic factors underlying migration decision-making.

Importantly, unlike most mainstream theories of migration, the aspirations-capabilities framework becomes even more relevant when acknowledging the highly gendered nature of migration.

**Women in migration – where do we stand?**

Judging by the numbers, international migration turns out to be strikingly gender-balanced: According to 2020 data on international migrant stocks, women account for 48.1% of migrants, and this proportion goes up to 51.6% in the so-called developed regions. However, it would be wrong to assume that women and men's aspirations are the same. Indeed, as found by Schewel (2020), both migration and immobility are "deeply gendered".

To begin with, migrant women contribute more in remittances than men. Already back in 1999 – the year in which Sen's "*Development as Freedom*" came out – 62% of remittances to Sri Lanka were sent by women, accounting for over 50% of the country's trade balance. Similar tendencies were observed in South Africa, where employed female migrants were 25% more likely than men to send remittances. Compared to men, migrant women are also more likely to be motivated by collective family needs, such as food, children's education, or healthcare. Perhaps the most robust evidence in this respect comes from a natural experiment study by Stillman et al. (2009 and 2015):

Tongan women were more likely to migrate to New Zealand to access better public services, including health care and education for their children. Tongan Men, on the other hand, were rather driven by their desire to accumulate capital to start a small business upon return. And yet, migrant women still tend to be largely regarded as passive followers, as victims who are pushed and pulled around by global macro-forces, or as those who "*have no choice but to migrate in order to survive*" (de Haas, 2021). Rooted in mainstream historical-structural migration theories, this reasoning tends to be directed disproportionately towards South-North migrant women, who are often concentrated in typically precarious jobs in the care sector, including in domestic work (Anderson, 2013) and in 'global care chains' more broadly (Sabio et al., 2022).

Admittedly, in many respects, migration can be a double-edged sword for women. Discrimination on the grounds of migrant status as well as gender and/or highly segregated labour markets can force some female migrants to accept dead-end, low-paid and low-skilled jobs.

At the same time, however, migration can and does provide many women with the opportunity to access a paid job and become a breadwinner, which – unlike for men – would be unattainable without the experience of international migration. And which in itself, as noted by Sen, can be a hugely empowering experience, boosting women's bargaining power within family and increasing their sense of autonomy (see also Barber, 2002; Katseli et al., 2006; Nowak, 2009; Wright, 2012).

Despite this evidence, we tend to perceive female migration through the lens of exploitation, rather than that of aspirations and capabilities. While not entirely inaccurate, this one-sided perception tends to deprive many South-North migrant women of their agency in migration decision-making. In the words of Sen himself, it fails to recognize women as responsible persons who "*can choose to act one way rather than another*."

At the same time, this perception is not particularly surprising. The migration-development discourse still tends to focus on purely economic factors, be it at an individual or at a macro level, disregarding the role played by non-economic ones, such as aspirations. The key question remains:

## Why do (some) women migrate?

Whether someone migrates has been traditionally regarded through a fairly pragmatic lens, namely that of factors pulling people away from their countries of origin and pushing them towards new destinations (Lee, 1966). Known as push-pull, this neoclassical theory has proven popular until these days, perhaps due to its fairly universal assumptions. It regards human mobility decision as resultant of characteristics of the origin and of the destination, but also of the characteristics of those making the decision.

As a result of these characteristics, economists refer to 281 million migrants living across the world (IOM, 2024) as a self-selected group of population that differs from their non-migrant counterparts in terms of, for example, education, skills or financial resources prior to migration (Borjas, 1987; Chiswick, 1978; Dustmann et al., 2011; Grogger & Hanson, 2011). In simple words, those who migrate are not randomly selected from the population.

The picture is more nuanced if we account for the fact that migration is a highly gendered phenomenon: Migrant women from countries characterised by higher levels of gender inequality in terms of, for example, access to education or work may come across as particularly self-selected – and remarkably self-driven – compared to both non-migrant women and migrant men.

Globally, South-North migration is shown to attract the most able who are in the position to afford its relatively high costs (Chiquiar and Hanson, 2005; Docquier et al., 2007; Flahaux et al., 2014; Gonzalez-Ferrer et al. 2013). This initial investment could indeed make women less likely to migrate than men - if only because of their often limited socio-economic independence.

In reality, however, roughly a half of international migrants are female – and this pattern has been relatively stable over the past sixty years. Further, women are the ones who drive migrants' higher labour force participation rates compared to natives (ILO, 2018), which questions the passive and dependent role that is typically attributed to them.

As a result, there seems to be a disconnect between how we perceive women in migration and their de facto aspirations to migrate. And although women empowerment tends to move in the same direction as economic development (

Duflo, 2012), attributing migration of women to economic development alone is a prime example of missing the crucial role of aspirations.

**How could development affect women's aspirations?**

One of the key arguments behind de Haas's aspirations-capabilities framework is that economic growth, and the resulting gains in education, coupled with greater media exposure, initially lead to more emigration as they simultaneously increase people's capabilities as well as their migration aspirations (de Haas, 2021). Yet, when a country reaches a certain level of economic development – specifically, when it advances into a higher-income status – it is easier for more people to fulfil their life aspirations by staying at home; thus, their aspirations to move decrease (de Haas, 2023, p.90).

This assumption is in line with the migration transition curve (Zelinsky, 1971) – or migration hump – whereby migration increases gradually only up to a certain point of economic development, after which it goes down again. The existence of the inverted U-shaped relationship between migration and development has been proven empirically: According to Dao et al. (2018) for example, migration goes up until a country's income per capita reaches $6'000 (at purchasing power parity, PPP). According to Clemens (2006), on the other hand, this 'cutoff' point ranges between $7,000-$8,000 per capita (also in PPP terms). Advancing from the lower- to the higher-income status seems to be the key.

In line with the logic of the 'modernisation theory' of gender discrimination – whereby also gender discrimination fades as countries develop economically – women's migration levels should also drop as development increases only up to a certain point, beyond which women should be able to freely realize their potential in their country of origin, on par with men.

The problem arises as country income levels alone cannot explain all variation in gender discrimination. In many lower-middle and upper-middle income countries, for example, gender discrimination remains at the same level, persisting despite increasing economic development.

Against this backdrop, and to recognise women in migration as active agents, the migration-development discourse might helpfully revisit people's staying preferences and aspirations, which will be perhaps more useful to understand "

*the same phenomena that rational-choice frameworks struggle most to explain – behaviours related to family, religion, or gender*" (Schewel, 2020).

In the end, only 16% of adult people worldwide – nearly 900 million people – wanted to migrate permanently, according to 2021 Gallup survey data. It would be irrational to claim that the remaining 84% of the population with no interest in migration, lacked any capabilities or aspirations. But that is what we seem to assume – implicitly or otherwise – about women in migration today.

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