



**Does Migration for Domestic Work  
Reduce Poverty?  
A Review of the Literature and an Agenda  
for Research**

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## Abstract

This review of the published academic literature on internal and regional migration for domestic work in Africa and Asia shows a dearth of studies on internal migration for domestic work in South Asia, and both internal and regional migration for domestic work in East Africa and West Africa. The existing literature is heavily dominated by papers on the transnational migration of domestic workers from South East and East Asia which examine in detail the shortcomings of the legal framework for regulating working conditions and recruitment practices resulting in little protection for migrant workers against exploitation. The paper highlights the serious lack of attention paid to the impacts of migration for domestic work on poverty levels within families in source areas. This is a significant gap in the literature given that migration is usually a household decision in which one member migrates to access more remunerative employment and remit money home. The paper offers a number of suggestions for improving the evidence base on this important migration stream.

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## Introduction

This review was undertaken to locate and synthesise the available literature on migration for domestic work in Africa and Asia and its relationship to poverty through a systematic search of academic journals in the social sciences. In line with the remit of the Migrating out of Poverty Consortium, the review is limited to internal migration (within national boundaries) and regional migration (migration to other countries within one region, such as East Africa or South East Asia). While there is no universally accepted definition for regional migration, the Consortium defines this as migration to countries within established regions of economic cooperation, such as SAARC for South Asia and SADC for southern Africa. However, one exception has been made due to its significance for migration and poverty, which is migration to the Middle East from both Africa and Asia. Both internal and regional migration are often of short duration and circular, where migrants undertake repeat journeys between origin and destination, and generally take place for work. The purpose of the review is to provide a balanced assessment of the evidence on this hotly debated issue, identify gaps and inform future research agendas.

## Scope and Design of the Review

Domestic work has been chosen as the focus for this review for three reasons. Firstly, because it is an important occupation for migrants from poor households across the world. Secondly, because it has recently become an important topic in international discussions on human rights and decent work. And finally, because the literature on the drivers and impacts of such migration on poverty appears to be scarce. While there are no reliable official statistics for domestic workers in a global context, current estimates from the ILO put the number at around 53 million domestic workers worldwide, of whom 83 per cent are women, predominantly but not exclusively from poorer sections of society (ILO 2013). These figures do not include child domestic workers. It is anticipated that with economic growth and a growing middle class the number of domestic workers is likely to increase in both developed and developing countries.

The ILO defines 'domestic work' as work performed in or for a household, or households, and a 'domestic worker' as any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship (International Convention on Domestic Workers, 2011, No. 189). The term 'domestic work' covers a wide range of tasks and services that vary from country to country and that can be different depending on the age, gender, ethnic background and migration status of the workers concerned, as well as the cultural and economic context in which they work. This ILO definition is broad enough to include more skilled types of domestic work. This review is limited to migration for unskilled domestic work, i.e. lower end tasks such as cleaning, housekeeping and care work, as these jobs are more relevant for a discussion on migration and poverty.

Geographical regions for the literature search were limited to Africa and Asia because these are the focus regions for the Consortium and also because there is a sizeable literature on the subject. The review includes only empirical evidence generated through peer reviewed academic research and not grey literature and literature generated by NGOs.

## The International Discourse on Migration for Domestic Work

There are divergent perspectives on low-skilled labour migration undertaken by the poor, which are rooted in different theoretical discourses. On the one hand are neoliberal approaches, which view migration as an integral part of development, and an inevitable process of levelling out inequalities in economic opportunity. Although family based models under the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) School have now replaced early theories which viewed migration as an individual decision, they continue to take a positive view about the impacts of migration on poverty. Here migration is seen as a family strategy to overcome imperfections in both insurance and credit markets in credit-constrained rural households (Stark 1991; Stark and Levhari 1982), as well as a strategy for managing household risk (Lucas and Stark 1985; Taylor *et al.* 2003). On the other hand are views based on structuralist traditions, which view migration as a symptom of development failure. Influential among these are dependency theorists who view migration as an extension of the global capitalist system and structural inequalities arising from that. Migration is seen to be symptomatic of the uneven development arising from centre-periphery inequalities and dominance structures. A core argument of dependency theorists is that underdevelopment occurs because of the exploitation of peripheral economies by the core (Hette 1990). Migration is perceived as a process that widens disparities between urban and rural areas rather than equalising them. Although these theories have not been tested empirically, they continue to influence thinking within developing country policy-making circles and this may in part explain the continued negative stance towards rural urban-migration. According to the 2013 World Population Policies Report, 85 per cent of the governments in Africa and 84 per cent of the governments in Asia have policies designed to reduce the flow of rural-urban migration (UNDESA 2013). For example, Nigeria has tried to stem rural-urban migration, which is thought to disrupt social cohesion in villages and cause urban crises (de Haas 2010).

Although we do not expect there ever to be complete agreement between these positions on migration, we do feel that both offer useful insights that should be reflected in academic research on the topic (for an overview of different approaches see de Haas 2010; Deshingkar 2005). Indeed, recent research on migration has combined some of these approaches to view migration more holistically, examining both the social and economic impacts of migration and also the counterfactual, i.e. what would have happened in the absence of migration. For example, Kabeer's (2000) research on poor female migrants in Bangladesh's garment industry highlights the significance of the agency, however limited, that women coming from highly restrictive social backgrounds were able to exercise. She argues that this work, albeit difficult and demeaning, gives these women greater control over their lives and improved their chances of breaking out of poverty and patriarchal systems prevalent in their areas of origin. Rogaly (2009) views the very act of migration as an expression of agency that reflects conscious choices made by low-skilled workers to transform their life chances by changing location. Others, such as Clemens and Ogden (2013), regard migration as an investment in human capital but recognise the many costs imposed by unsupportive policies and difficult working conditions. It is such approaches that inform our assessment of the evidence reviewed in this paper, as they take a more nuanced approach and alert us to the complexity of migration drivers and outcomes.

Within the broad category of low-skilled labour migration, migration for domestic work has attracted considerable attention in international discussions on workers' rights, especially

women's rights. The discourse focuses on power relations between workers and employers, as well as on the absence of protective legislation for such workers who are not covered by labour laws, systematically neglected by the state, and exploited by recruitment agents and employers. On the whole, such migration is viewed negatively, as a process that involves vulnerable people, mainly women, who have been forced into work that is degrading, dangerous and difficult, and offers few chances for poverty reduction and development.

In a paper for the ILO, Budlender (2011) summarises the reasons for domestic workers' vulnerability: the similarity between paid domestic work and the unpaid care work; domestic workers are usually women and often child labourers; they often belong to historically disadvantaged communities, such as minority ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, low-caste, low-income groups, or are migrants. These attributes make them particularly vulnerable to discrimination in respect of conditions of employment and work. The ILO identifies domestic workers as 'among the most vulnerable groups of workers', and has recently operationalised the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) which aims to introduce decent work standards to address 'deplorable working conditions, labour exploitation, and abuses of human rights'. The ILO estimates that globally, 29.9 per cent of domestic workers are excluded from national labour legislation, 45 per cent have no entitlement to weekly rest periods and paid annual leave, and more than a third of female domestic workers have no maternity protection.

It is on account of these negative dimensions of domestic work that public and policy perceptions have turned against it. However, there is insufficient explanation of the continued and even increasing migration for such work, or indeed any understanding of how the workers themselves view the pros and cons. By reviewing the available empirical evidence on this topic, this review hopes to shed light on whether or not such negative perceptions related to migration for domestic work are justified.

## Methodology

In order to keep the selection of sources as broad and balanced as possible, a systematic search of two databases was conducted:<sup>1</sup> SCOPUS, which is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature in the sciences, social sciences, technology, medicine, arts and humanities; and the British Library for Development Studies (BLDS), which houses a large collection of developing country journals articles that may not be available through other sources. The search did not identify every paper that was ever written on the subject of domestic workers but provides a fairly robust assessment of the state of the literature on the subject. A few additional papers on the topic were included based on recommendations by members of the Consortium.

A number of search terms were identified, based on the researchers' own knowledge, covering geographical regions and sub-topics relevant to the objectives of the Consortium. These included terms such as 'domestic work', 'migration', 'recruitment', as well as names of specific countries and regions.

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<sup>1</sup> This search was conducted by Bridget Holtom from DFID.

## Existing Evidence and Gaps

The search in SCOPUS yielded a list of 244 references from more than 40 origin and destination countries across sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Asia.<sup>2</sup> The BLDS search yielded an additional 20 references, but 13 had to be eliminated because they were in another language, covered north-south migration, or were from 'grey' literature. Of the 251 references from SCOPUS and BLDS, 106 references were eliminated after a reading of the abstracts, as they were found to be irrelevant to the review because: they covered migration to developed countries outside the RPC regions; used the term 'domestic work' to refer to national labour markets and not work in another person's home; covered skilled workers or child labour; or covered work within a person's own household. Therefore, the total number of references after the first round was 145.

The remaining references were listed in an excel sheet and classified according to countries covered, topic, methodology (qualitative or quantitative), and whether or not they had a sole focus on domestic workers. Papers were downloaded where possible and a further round of elimination was undertaken at this stage: books and book chapters, papers not based on empirical research,<sup>3</sup> papers that did not discuss poverty or development issues, and articles that could not be found or could not be downloaded free of charge from the University of Sussex website, were not included. This brought the total down to 58 references, which are listed at the end of this paper. Almost all of the literature was drawn from research specifically about domestic work, attesting to the global interest in the topic, with only nine papers discussing domestic work together with other low skilled occupations.

There has clearly been an increase in interest in the topic post-2000, as 51 of the 58 references are after that year. There are peaks in 2007- 2008, and again in 2010-2012; these appear to coincide roughly with the period immediately before and after the International Convention on Domestic Work, 2011 was introduced, but we cannot be certain that this was influential on the academic literature.

A conspicuous feature of the literature is that it is very heavily biased towards regional migration,<sup>4</sup> with only five papers on internal migration for domestic work. Three of these papers (Bhorat and Goga 2013; Dinat and Peberdy 2007; Dinkleman and Rachhod 2012) were based on quantitative analysis of nationally representative household data from South Africa and only two, Basu and Sundar (1988) on India and Bartolomei (2010) on India and the Congo, used qualitative methods. None of the studies employed mixed methods. This allows us to highlight gaps in the literature straightaway, namely that **there is clearly a need for more empirical research on internal migration for domestic work in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and for mixed methods research on migration for domestic work.**

According to ILO figures, the Asia Pacific region has the largest number of domestic workers (21.5 million), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (19.6 million), and Africa (5.2

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<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh, Botswana, Burma, China, Cyprus, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guyana, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Lesotho, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritius, Namibia, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Taiwan, Thailand, Togo, UAE, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

<sup>3</sup> The exceptions were papers on policy analysis in Southeast Asia by Elias (2008, 2010a, 2010b), Piper (2005), Lyons (2009), Chin (2003) and Teo and Piper (2009), and South Africa by Woolman and Bishop (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Definition provided on page 2.



million). Data from some Asian countries certainly corroborate these figures: emigration statistics from Sri Lanka indicate that more than three quarters of migrants are unskilled women and nearly all (99 per cent) are migrating for work as domestic maids (Eelens and Speckmann 1990). In the Asia Pacific region, 7.8 per cent of all women with a waged job in 2010 were domestic workers. Although Sub-Saharan Africa appears to have fewer domestic workers compared to other regions, the occupation is very important in some countries in the region. For example, national statistics indicate that domestic work is the second largest sector of employment for black women in South Africa, employing roughly 755,000 women, and is also a significant area of employment for internal and cross-border female migrant workers (Dinat and Perberdy 2007). An estimated 60,000 women migrate from Ethiopia every year, mainly for domestic work to the Gulf (Fernandez 2010).

The literature on domestic work is dominated by research from Southeast Asia, with 29 papers (or precisely half of our sample) from countries in the region. Research from Singapore (Asis *et al.* 2004; Huang and Yeoh 1996, 1998, 2007, 2012; Iyer *et al.* 2004; Lyons 2009; Teo and Piper 2009; Tyner 1999; Yeoh and Huang 2000, 2010), Indonesia (Kloppenburg and Peters 2012; Nurchayati 2011; Silvey 2004, 2006; Ueno 2009; Williams 2008) and the Philippines (Arnado 2010; Asis *et al.* 2004; Liebelt 2008; McKay 2005; Paul 2011; Rosewarne 2012) dominate this literature. It can be speculated that this is because the migration of Filipina and Indonesians dominates domestic work migration flows in the region and also because of strong research capacity on this issue in Singapore (in fact, one of the Consortium partners, Professor Brenda Yeoh, is an internationally recognised authority on the topic).

Next in importance is South Asia with 14 papers, also probably because of established migration streams from the region to the Middle East. Eight of these papers are on Sri Lanka, probably because this is one of the countries that sends large numbers of domestic workers to the Gulf countries. There are surprisingly few papers from other countries in South Asia, despite the fact that domestic work is an important occupation. India is particularly poorly represented in the literature, even though it has an estimated 4.2 million domestic workers (according to the 61st Round of the National Sample Survey), many of whom are internal migrants (Deshingkar and Akter 2009). Although there are two papers on Bangladesh, one on migration to the Gulf and the other on cross border migration to India, there are none on internal migration for domestic work within the country. It is likely that other countries in the region with marked regional inequalities, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, also have significant internal and regional migration flows for domestic work and **there is a need for further research on internal migration for domestic work in South Asia.**

The third region in order of importance is Southern Africa with six papers, all of which are about internal migration within South Africa or migration from other countries in the region into South Africa. South Africa is increasingly becoming the major migrant destination in Sub-Saharan Africa after the collapse of the Ivory Coast economy. Only four papers discussed the migration of domestic workers from East Africa and West Africa was completely absent from the list, which suggests that **there is a need for research to understand migration for domestic work in both East and West Africa.**

Methodologically, there appears to be a strong bias towards qualitative research, with 50 papers based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic research with domestic workers as

well as recruitment agents and employers in some cases. While qualitative methods have obvious advantages in researching scattered individuals who are living and working in insecure and secluded conditions, it suffers from being limited in its ability to generalise findings. **A strong case can be made for more mixed methods research on domestic workers, where quantitative research would indicate whether certain relationships and characteristics are representative of a wider population whilst in-depth qualitative research would yield a better understanding of those factors that cannot be measured quantitatively, such as the migration experience and impacts on the sending household. This type of research will also help to compare migration for domestic work with other employment sectors and with non-migrant households, to allow for a more contextual understanding.** With the exception of one study, most papers dealt with issues concerning female migrant domestic workers, probably because 83 per cent of domestic workers are female. Bartolomei's (2010) multi-sited ethnography examines the impacts of migration upon male domestic workers, from rural to urban areas in India and the Congo and regionally between Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast. **Clearly there are men in this occupation but they seem to be largely invisible in the research agenda. Therefore, future research on the subject should include men.**

**To conclude the discussion on the geographical spread of research on migrant domestic workers: there are major gaps in the literature on both Asia and Africa, which should be addressed through future research.**

## Vulnerability and Exploitation in Migration for Domestic Work: Worsening Poverty?

A significant theme in the literature over the last six years is that of exploitation, in terms of recruitment practices and the precarious nature of employment in domestic work, as well as the structural factors that perpetuate exploitation.

### ***Recruitment and Precarious Employment***

A majority of migrant domestic workers are not formally employed with written contracts, labour protection, or social protection. Working hours are long and arbitrary, wages are almost always below the legal minimum, and physical or verbal abuse and sexual exploitation have been widely documented. Franz (2013), Huang and Yeoh (2007), Jureidini and Mourkarbel (2006), Mahadavi (2013), Mkandawire-Valhmu (2009), Tyner (1999), and Yamada (2012) all discuss various dimensions of exploitation of domestic workers.

The role of recruitment agents as the perpetrators of exploitation is much discussed in the literature. As Lindquist (2010) notes, with the growing regulation of immigration, a large industry of brokers or agents has emerged in Southeast Asia. Domestic workers are often recruited through informal agents, who, although regulated by law in some countries, are unregulated in practice. The highly unequal relationship between recruitment agents and employers of domestic workers can lead to varying degrees of control and exploitation. Many countries do not regard domestic workers as employees, or houses as work places, placing them effectively outside labour laws. In this context, several authors make reference to the role of recruitment agents in exploitation. In Ethiopia, Fernandez (2010) describes

how nearly half of all female migrants, roughly 30,000 per year, leave the country through unofficial channels, which is enabled by illegal brokers who may be individual operators or legally-registered companies that illegally provide employment brokerage services to migrants.

In the Gulf countries, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Lebanon, recruitment of migrant workers is typically under the notorious *khafala* system of short-term, contract migrant labour. The *kafeel*, or sponsor/employer, assumes full legal and financial responsibility for the worker and must repatriate her at the end of the contract period. Migrants are prohibited from changing employers without the sponsor's permission and this is usually enforced by confiscating their passports (Fernandez 2010; Franz 2008). Furthermore, the employer can threaten them with deportation at any time, which heightens their control and power over the worker and effectively prevents the formation of a competitive labour force (Franz 2008).

The *khafala* system has spawned a large and multi-tiered network of private recruitment agents at destination and origin, who source workers for employers in the Gulf. Fernandez (2010) describes the agents in Ethiopia as 'brutally exploitative', stripping prospective migrants of all their money and often abandoning them in the desert before they even reach the coast of Somalia to board the boats that will take them to Yemen. Others abandoned at destination may not be able to return because of prohibitive exit fines payable to the Yemeni authorities. Eelens and Speckmann's (1990) research among Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in the Middle East suggests that a similarly complex system of informal recruitment agents exists in the country, in spite of the 1980 Foreign Employment Agency Act. More recent research by Dias and Jayasundere (2004) shows that agents are involved in a number of illegal and unscrupulous practices, such as non-adherence to advertised benefits, including overtime payments, free medical services and free return tickets. They are also associated with a wide range of other illegal practices, including faking documents and the false substitution of Muslim names for Sinhala or Tamil women to gain permits for Gulf destinations. In 2006, recruiters in the Galle area of south-western Sri Lanka were charging women LKR30,000 (roughly USD 288) to find them work as domestic workers in the Middle East, the equivalent of two and a half month's wages at destination. Such costs were financed through informal borrowing or selling of assets (Deshingkar and Aheeyar 2006).

Yet it is evident that such migration through agents continues and the literature does not provide a strong enough explanation for its continuation, an issue that we return to later in the review. For example, Sri Lankan domestic workers clearly remit significant amounts of money, despite the difficulties of such employment, and this is a resource that flows directly to their source families, who are often at the lower end of the wealth spectrum. Latest figures from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE 2012) show that a majority of the 138,547 female migrants who left to work in the Middle East, worked as housemaids and that the remittances from this region were in the order of LKR 438,525 million (3347 million USD), a significant sum for a poor country with a GDP of 59.42 billion USD (5.6 per cent of GDP), and more significant as the funds flow directly to poorer families.

### ***Policy and Structures***

A number of papers discuss the inadequacy of existing policies in protecting vulnerable international migrant domestic workers and also the complicity of the political system in perpetuating exploitation.

Franz (2013) for example, accuses governments in the Gulf countries of deliberately keeping the *Khafala* system outside the scope of regulation as a way to trap migrant domestic workers in bonded-labour like conditions and prevent unionisation and bargaining. She analyses the migration of Sri Lankan domestic workers as a system of bonded labour facilitated both by the Sri Lankan government, with its policies and institutions to encourage the migration of unskilled women, and the governments of Jordan and other countries in the Middle East, who benefit from cheap foreign labour. Jureidini and Moukarbel (2006) have coined the term 'contract slavery' to describe the situation of Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in the Middle East, which they compare to trafficking in human labour. They view both the Sri Lankan government and the Lebanese government as two sides of the system: the Sri Lankan government facilitates the 'export' of domestic labour to earn foreign revenue for the country while Lebanese policies allow workers to be employed in exploitative conditions.

In the case of Singapore, Huang and Yeoh (1996) believe that state policies on labour migration in Singapore have played a crucial role in influencing the uneven employer-employee relationships affecting migrant female domestic workers. The Singapore government regulates the numbers of foreign domestic workers that can enter the country but does not clearly define or impose protective legislation for them. Instead, it maintains that domestic workers are not under the Employment Act because their employment is a private contract between maid and employer. By leaving the employment of DWs to free market forces in this way, and given the unequal power relationship between employers/recruiters and DWs, exploitation is widespread. Iyer *et al.* (2004) add that the only aspect of migrant domestic workers' welfare the Singaporean state appears to be concerned about is their health. They argue this is to ensure that the costs of such immigration to the economy are kept at a minimum. Chin (2003) shows that flexible labour policies in Malaysia are biased towards capital and against the working classes, with restrictions on worker rights and benefits and curbs on collective action, which has created a climate where foreign workers are employed in exploitative ways. This, coupled with negative media portrayals of migrant domestic workers as women with loose morals, has the effect of posing migrant domestic workers as a threat to society while undervaluing their contribution. Somewhat similar is the situation of Burmese domestic workers in Thailand, who are invisible as employees and unable to access healthcare (Toyota 2006). It is not clear whether the Thai government recognises domestic workers as workers and whether they distinguish between migrants from other countries and their own people in the provision of welfare.

A different dimension of the vulnerability of migrant domestic workers caused by the failure of policies to protect them is highlighted by Griffin (2011), who documents how Basotho migrant domestic workers working illegally in South Africa are unable to access labour unions and labour institutions despite the introduction of measures to provide basic protection in respect of working hours, days off and contract termination in 2008 under the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. In reality, deportable migrant

domestic workers are too afraid to approach unions and labour institutions out of fear of being discovered.

The literature is silent on policies for internal migrant domestic workers, possibly because there are so few papers on internal migration and also because there are few examples of policies or legislation aimed at domestic workers. The exception is South Africa, where protective legislation for domestic workers has been introduced and appears to have worked. Legislation to guarantee a minimum wage for domestic workers was introduced in 2002. While one early paper found that this has not led to an improvement in incomes (Dinat and Peberdy 2007), later research by Dinkleman and Ranchhod (2012) and Borat and Goga (2013) finds a positive impact. Borat and Goga's analysis of data from the September round of the 2007 Labour Force Survey, covering all Africans between the ages of 15 and 65, shows a significant impact on the wages of female domestic workers at the 20th quintile of the wage distribution, which they attribute to the new legislation.

Although there are a small number of papers on policy, most of these are in Southeast Asia or South Africa. **There is a significant gap in the literature on policy analysis related to both internal and regional migration of domestic workers in East and West Africa as well as South Asia. There is also a lack of focus on positive/beneficial aspects of different government policies that assist migrants to exit poverty or improve their economic conditions.**

### Can Migration for Domestic Work Lead to a Reduction in Poverty?

Curiously, the literature reviewed is very thin on the impacts of migration for domestic work on poverty levels within families at source. Assuming that migration for domestic work is mainly for economic reasons, and/or that it is a family decision wherein one person is 'sent' away to access more remunerative employment and remit money home (for example see Stark and Levahari 1982), this seems like a huge gap in the analysis.

#### ***Economic Impacts and Counterfactuals***

Several papers make some reference to such impacts, but these are not analysed in depth to arrive at conclusions on the impacts of such migration on poverty at the household level. For example Fernandez (2010) observes that a majority of the interviewees in her Ethiopia case study said that they send all, or nearly all, of their salary home, to support their ageing parents, siblings, and other family members, but does not explore the issue in much detail. Another example is a case study of a migrant sending community in West Java by Silvey (2006), which documents how the landscape has been transformed with new houses, satellite dishes and consumer goods, yet without discussing the impacts on poverty fully.

Although a few papers mention higher earnings at destination for migrant domestic workers, none adequately discuss the factors that could explain the continued and increasing migration for domestic work, or provide any sense of the counterfactual, i.e. what these people would have done in the absence of the opportunity to migrate. There is an underlying assumption running through many papers that domestic workers have been forced into this occupation rather than it being their own choice. In other words, there is little recognition of the agency exercised by migrants in accepting work in what would be

widely regarded as exploitative and degrading conditions, a topic that we discuss again below. This assumption of forced migration is likely due to the fact that the research is dominated by structuralist thinking, which highlights power relations and the disadvantaged position of domestic workers vis-a-vis recruitment agents and employers. The emphasis has been on comparing migrants' working and living conditions at destination to decent work standards. However, this does not provide a complete assessment of the real choices available to women who take up this type of work, why they have chosen it and how it compares to the other options available.

However, not all studies report positive economic impacts. Shaw (2010) collates the evidence on the impacts of Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers on source families and observes that while households with a female migrant were more likely to have working-age men at home than those with male migrants, this did not always mean that remittances were used productively. Among the families of housemaids in the Middle East it was common for men to reduce their working hours, creating a culture of dependence. Here too, the way in which migration is conceptualised influences the conclusion. This analysis assumes that the 'dependency' on remittances is a bad thing, whereas economists such as Clemens and Ogden (2013) would argue that this is a sign that migration has succeeded, as the income from one member has allowed others to withdraw from labour (which may have been low return or degrading).

**While it is not possible to conclusively establish that migration for domestic work will result either in exits from poverty or in further downwards slides into poverty, it should be possible to identify the circumstances and the factors which contribute to migration leading to a route out of poverty.**

An associated question is whether the availability of domestic work waxes and wanes with the state of the economy of receiving areas. The evidence is sparse and inconclusive. For example, De Regt's (2008a, 2008b) research in Yemen, a poorer country in the Middle East, shows that the demand for foreign domestic workers, especially from the Horn of Africa, appeared to increase at a time when the economic situation was deteriorating. While Somali and Ethiopian migrant men are having difficulties finding paid work because of the high unemployment rate among Yemen's male population, Somali and Ethiopian women are often employed as domestic workers for middle and upper-middle-class families in urban areas. De Regt explains this as a social phenomenon where employing foreign domestic workers has become a status symbol. Evidently, employing foreign domestic workers is also a status symbol in Southeast Asia, an issue that has been well-researched (see for example Lan 2003; Tyner 2004). However, evidence on how domestic work responds to fluctuations in host country/region economies is thin and deserves more attention, because it raises questions as to whether the fortunes of the overall economy and those of the people who employ domestic workers are strongly correlated, as well as whether the situation of employers and employment available through domestic workers is correlated. If domestic work is resilient to economic fluctuations it could offer a more sustainable option compared to other occupations, such as construction work, which have been noted to fluctuate rapidly with the economy.

## Agency

We review the available literature with the understanding that labourers are engaged in a variety of spatial and social actions through which they reshape the structure within which they function (Herod 2001); that the agency exercised by individuals, however transient and small, can lead to transformative changes in the migration experience (Rogaly 2009); and that agency is shaped by the social relations and the wider economy within which workers' everyday lives are embedded (Carswell and De Neve 2013).

Drawing Rogaly's (2009) work with low-skilled workers in India, we regard the act of migration itself as a manifestation of agency. The literature reviewed here is highly lacking in this regard and offers little explanation of why people are choosing to migrate into working conditions that are widely considered degrading, dangerous and exploitative. There are clearly choices being made and trade-offs being considered between working conditions and financial and social benefits, in the quest for a better life in the longer term, but the literature does not address these adequately. Only one paper by O'Neill (2007), based on interviews with Nepali migrant domestic workers in the Gulf, appears to follow this line of reasoning. By gaining a deeper understanding of the migration decision made by these women, O'Neill completely rejects the notion that migrant domestic workers are victims of trafficking and instead shows how they are trying to take control of their destinies through migration. He feels that legislation to protect them against such migration is actually harming them and their families by keeping them out of Nepal's increasingly important remittance economy.

What the literature does cover is smaller individual actions that have enabled workers to bargain with employers and carve out a slightly more dignified or easier existence for themselves. Two papers from South Asia are illustrative of this genre. Bélanger and Rahman (2013), in their research based on 23 in-depth interviews collected in 2009 in Bangladesh with migrant domestic workers who had returned from the Gulf, argue that women actively negotiate patriarchal barriers prior to going abroad and also on return. While many women reported that relations with their spouses had not changed for the better, some women felt empowered personally due to their greater independence and improved economic status. Rao's (2011) research in the Chhatisgarh state of India shows that even though the experience of domestic work is not always positive for young women, it does represent a successful attempt to exercise agency in a context of constraint determined by traditional power relations at work and at home.

Nurchayati (2011) and Ueno (2009) also offer a nuanced analysis by showing how migrant Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers were able to exercise agency in negotiating small improvements to their working and living conditions through negotiations with their employers. One paper examines the role of supportive social networks: Piper (2005) discusses the collaboration and transnational networks involving trade unions and NGOs that have helped to put domestic workers' concerns on policy agendas in Asia and Europe. The literature on this type of migrant agency in Sub-Saharan Africa was conspicuous by its absence. Although research from other regions offers important insights as to how migrant domestic workers, in spite of the negative aspects of such migration, are able to expand their agency in bettering their own and their families' lives, there is a need to better understand the nature of agency in African cultural contexts.

In this context, several studies from Southeast Asia have documented the importance of electronic communication technologies and media such as mobile phones in helping migrants domestic workers alleviate problems of isolation and loneliness, exercise agency vis-a-vis employers (Chib *et al.* 2013; Lin and Sun 2010; Thomas and Lim 2010), as well as stay in touch with families (Arnado 2010; Chib *et al.* 2014). Ueno (2009) analyses interviews with Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore regarding their strategies of resistance by using mobile phones, in response to exploitation and coercion by employment agencies, employers, the Singaporean public, and kin and family members in their home countries. There is a need for more research on the role of ICTs in other parts of Africa and Asia, where family norms are different and also where the spread of technology is shaping up differently.

**In sum, there is a significant gap in the literature on migrant agency, as there is little discussion on why people are choosing to enter migrant occupations that are perceived to be exploitative and degrading. There is some research on how domestic workers are able to negotiate better working conditions for themselves but this is located mainly in Asia. More research is needed across Africa and Asia, explaining the migration decision in terms of agency and the structural constraints within which this is expressed, as well as the extent to which it shapes the migration experience and social and economic structures of day to day life.**

### ***Family Life, Gender Roles***

A number of papers are concerned with the impacts of migration for domestic work on families left behind and on the migrants themselves in managing reproductive roles in split households. Arnado's (2010) ethnographic research on Filipina domestic workers in Singapore shows the difficulties faced by domestic workers in balancing their roles as breadwinners in their source household and as confined domestic workers at destination. Through strategies to stay in touch with their families and children, these women have succeeded in long-distance mothering and management of their domestic duties. Less positive is the analysis by Asis *et al.* (2004) who, based on in-depth interviews with Filipina domestic workers in Singapore, claim that migration has challenged the very notion of family life. They argue that domestic workers face greater challenges than other migrants because they are separated from their own families and inserted into another family, where they often provide services that their own children are deprived of back at home. While their work releases their female employers from drudgery and childcare, it poses deep challenges on their source families in terms of roles and responsibilities. Hugo and Ukwatta (2010) and Ukwatta (2010) make similar observations about the challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in the Middle East in maintaining contact with their children and balancing familial obligations with work. Pinnawala's (2008) research with returned Sri Lankan domestic workers discusses the changes in family resource use and management arrangements arising from the spatial separation of women earners from their families. Migration has resulted in the creation of parallel power centres within the transnational family space, with the earner being one centre of power and the manager of the income back home being the other. The existing literature strongly demonstrates that the splitting of families poses specific challenges for female domestic migrants.

In contrast, Bartolomei's (2010) research in India, the Congo and the Ivory Coast finds that male domestic workers appear to juggle these responsibilities more easily, at least in terms



of managing to retain their patriarchal position in the household. She found that despite differences in the nature of the work and employment practices, male domestic workers in all locations continued to regard themselves as the head of the family, and although many of them perform 'female' tasks for their employers at destination, they do not transfer these skills back to their families or help their spouses. Traditional gender roles appear to have shifted very little.

Only two papers examined how migration for domestic work had transformed gender relations and impacted on gender norms in sending communities. In the Horn of Africa, interviews with Eritrean migrant domestic workers in the Middle East conducted by Kifleyesus (2012) at origin and destination show that migration has become a vehicle for social and economic mobility, even though the nature of the work is similar to the work that they would have done at home. By being paid for housework rather than having to work as unpaid workers within the home, these women have gained a sense of independence with their own incomes. Their improved personal wealth has also enabled them to liberate themselves from oppressive traditional norms and dependency on their spouses. Research in a northern Philippines community with established patterns of outmigration of women on contracts shows changes in women's social and economic status and how they have become the new local elite ('new kadangyans') (McKay 2005). The cultural capital accumulated by going abroad – their dressing style, makeup and way of speaking – are all a source of pride for the women themselves and for what this indicates about the abilities, resources and sophistication of the community. **Research on shifting patterns of gender relations in the households of domestic workers, and the relationship of such changes with poverty specifically in Africa, would be useful.**

Another important dimension of this discussion that is missing from the literature is the impacts of such migration on the age of marriage and child bearing, as these are seen to have implications for women's longer-term prospects for poverty reduction. One paper on India by Basu and Sundar (1988) shows that female domestic servants have fewer ever-born and living children than women working in other occupations and women who are unemployed. They speculate that this low fertility, which appeared to be voluntary, may have its roots in the incompatibility between reproductive and productive roles, as well as in the changing values generated by continued exposure to middle class values where women postponed childbearing for the sake of developing their careers. **This is a topic that would be interesting to probe further through empirical research.**

## Conclusions

An examination of the major themes covered by the papers indicate a mix of concerns: women's struggles to manage productive and reproductive roles as they leave their families behind; exploitative recruitment and employment practices; the failure of policies to protect workers' rights; and the lack of collective action and representation of workers' interests. On the whole, the discussion is focused on the dynamics at migrant destinations and focuses on their exclusion and their powerlessness against employers and the state. There is virtually no discussion of the economic impacts of such migration on the household, either in terms of poverty or in terms of the position of migrant women within their households of

origin. Migrants are important economic contributors to the households and nations that they leave behind, and their absence and remittances have a range of impacts on these places. Research on other migration flows has shown how migrants separate the place of earning from the place of spending remittances, how they have different statuses in the sending and destination areas, as well as the importance of their economic and social remittances to destinations.

The literature also does not adequately explore labourers' agency in deciding to migrate and how this agency is transforming their lives as well as the political, social and economic structures within which they function.

In other words, the review shows that the discourse on migrant domestic work and the polarised views on its drivers and impacts are not underpinned by empirical research that actually captures these dynamics. There is a need to provide evidence to inform such debates, so that they result in helpful outcomes for migrants, sending and receiving regions. Major gaps in the literature have been highlighted and a number of areas for future research have been identified.

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## About the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium

**Migrating out of Poverty** is a research programme consortium (RPC) funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions - and is located in five regions across Asia and Africa. The main goal of **Migrating out of Poverty** is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of impoverished migrants, their communities and countries, through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement. The RPC will also conduct analysis in order to understand the migration policy process in developing regions and will supplement the world renowned migration databases at the University of Sussex with data on internal migration.

The **Migrating out of Poverty** consortium is coordinated by the University of Sussex, and led by CEO Professor L. Alan Winters with Dr Priya Deshingkar as the Research Director. Core partners are: the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana; the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore; the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya.

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