

Session Six: Migration Partnerships

Female Domestic Workers in Cairo Ray Juredini, American University of Cairo

Ray Juredini's presentation focused on a Migration DRC study of informal domestic workers in Cairo, many of whom are migrants from other African countries, The Philippines or South Asia. He noted that the existence of informal domestic workers is not an Egyptian phenomenon, but is rather a middle class phenomenon that is present throughout the Middle East, as well as the rest of the world. Such workers are technically invisible under Egyptian labour laws, which consider domestic work to be part of the private realm, and thus not regulated by the state. Additionally, Egypt has yet to ratify ILO conventions related to foreign labour migrants which would extend some social protection measures to these workers. Thus, these female domestic workers in Cairo have few rights, and the study Juredini supervised in which 781 female domestic workers were interviewed indicated that a significant number of these women are often exposed to verbal abuse (59 percent of respondents) and physical abuse (27 percent of respondents) by both the men and women who inhabit the households in which they are employed.

Juredini pointed out that a number of partnerships could help to ease this situation. Egypt's ratification and enforcement of the ILO Convention could extend rights to informal migrant workers. Bilateral agreements between sending and receiving countries represent another possibility to improve social protection measures for informal domestic workers, but these are often politically fragile and difficult to construct. For example, a formal agreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in which the former would have sent a set number of domestic workers to the latter to work at reduced rates of pay, fell apart after the details of the agreement were leaked to the Egyptian press, which criticized the Egyptian government's willingness to agree to such a plan. In addition to such measures, Juredini said that there is a potential role for civil society to play in helping secure better conditions for informal domestic workers. For example, a recent human rights campaign in Jordan by Human Rights Watch has sought to bring much-needed scrutiny to the frequent mistreatment of domestic workers by their employers. This could perhaps serve as a model for other civil society groups looking to raise awareness about the difficult conditions in which many informal domestic workers live.

Migration Partnerships: Means to Minimise Risks and Costs of Recruitment C.R. Abrar, RMMRU, University of Dhaka

C.R. Abrar highlighted a handful of potential partnerships on the inter-country level and also within sending countries which could help to make the process of international labour recruitment more transparent and less exploitative. Agreements are needed between sending and receiving countries to formalise migration processes, which could help make the extension of rights to labour migrants more viable. Here, creating a more positive public perception of migrants in receiving countries is vital. There is also an urgent need for more substantial agreements on labour migration between different migrant-sending countries. Competition between sending countries is highly counterproductive in terms of ensuring social protection and adequate wages for labour migrants, and regional agreements which establish minimum standards for 'labour exportation' should be considered.

At the intra-government level, sending countries must do more to make formalised migration a more efficient process. Providing pre-departure training for migrants and facilitating

transnational remittance flows are two important areas for government coordination across government agencies. Governments can also do more to integrate NGOs into social protection programmes for departing migrants. Broader partnerships with the private sector and other elements of civil society in facilitating various aspects of migration recruitment and return are also to be encouraged. However, the relative power of private recruiting agencies, which often serve as the *de facto* authority on out-migration, currently represents a significant limitation that must be overcome.

Migration Partnerships Internationally, and How They Can Be Exploited in the Interest of Pro-Poor Development

William Gois, Migrant Forum in Asia, The Philippines

William Gois noted that the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), which is an activist organisation, has tried to establish partnerships with groups whose interests are interconnected with migration processes, as opposed to focusing solely on migration *per se*. They have employed an 'inside-outside' approach, engaging with various government bureaucracies, on one hand, but also organising public events, including protests, on the other. They have sought to link up with other civil society groups which are interested in the areas of human rights, gender, trade and development – all of which are issues that interface with migration processes. They have also worked with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in an effort to add migrants' voices to migration policy debates.

Broadly speaking, MFA has sought to highlight the positive contributions made by migrant workers to economies, which is something that is not often measured – and thus is largely absent from policy discussions – in an attempt to introduce a counter-argument to discourses which vilify migrants. For instance, how much did the migrant workforce contribute the rise of the Asian Tiger economies, which all possessed large migrant workforces? Migrants participate actively in the economies of their host countries as consumers as well, not just as workers. The MFA has been trying to raise the profile of this critical contribution made by migrant labour to developing countries.

Gois noted that labour migrants increasingly face financial barriers to migration, as well as legal ones. Though much has been made of migrants' need for skills, skills alone are not enough to guarantee employment. Increasingly, labour migration requires a large initial investment that requires access to capital, which is a difficult hurdle for many migrants to overcome.

Discussant: Piyasiri Wickramasekara, International Labour Organisation, Geneva

Piyasiri Wickramasekara noted that global, regional, and bilateral partnerships were needed in order to reach humanitarian goals related to migration. Many countries have been reluctant to sign ILO conventions on international migrant labour, but the sentiment of countries is slowly changing. Even countries in the Gulf are becoming increasingly concerned with their human rights reputations and are more open to negotiation on social protection measures than in the past. However, many agreements that have been negotiated so far have been non-binding – which has been a necessary condition in order to secure any significant participation from countries in the north. Most significant, however, is the lack of state regulation over the private sector, which facilitates most labour migration, and thus determines to a large extent the relative vulnerability of many labour migrants.

General discussion

Questions overview: A participant from Egypt indicated that the Egyptian government had received no formal complaints about domestic workers in Cairo regarding maltreatment by employers, and suggested that the problem of domestic workers' rights was less significant in Egypt than in countries with larger numbers of domestic workers – such as the USA. Others echoed Gois' argument that the contribution of migrant labour needs to be documented, as indeed this has historically played a key role in the development of many countries, including the UK. There were also queries about what role international negotiations were having in discussions of migrant rights, including the questions: (1) is there a role for the Economic Community of West African States in facilitating the mobility of migrants? And (2) what is the current status of negotiations on migration between South Asian and Gulf countries? There was also a query about what issues should be raised at the Global Forum on Migration that will occur in Manila at the end of October 2008.

Gois reiterated that the discourse of human rights is often absent from debates on labour migration, and this is an area where civil society groups can contribute the push for migrant rights. Another problem to be addressed is competition between sending countries, including countries in ASEAN. Overall, there is a lack of formalised bilateral agreements on migration between Asian countries, and agreements which do exist are usually memorandums of understanding which cannot act as an instrument to protect workers' rights. Wickramasekara indicated that most bilateral agreements on migration are security-driven, lack transparency, and are designed to curb irregular migration. There is a real need for country partnerships which are based on equal terms, that include: a mutual recognition of migrants' positive impact on economies of both host and sending countries; and acknowledgement of migrant rights; shared ownership of the costs and risks of migration; and which are driven by common goals.

Abrar noted that academics have a vital role to play in better informing the media in order to dispel the negative attitudes which surround migration in the north. He also reiterated that there is a need for migration partnerships on a number of different levels, including regional agreements between states and bilateral agreements for more long-distance forms of migration (including south-north migration). Juredini added that one way to better facilitate migrants' rights would be to set up regulated placement agencies in receiving countries. However, imposing any sort of minimum standards is problematic, in the sense that this could potentially eliminate work contracts for those workers that do have them. Juredini added that his study was not meant to suggest that the plight of Egyptian migrant workers is particularly dire – again restating that informal domestic workers are present in virtually every country that possesses a significant middle-class population. He said that it was not surprising that the government had not received any formal complaints, as any undocumented worker who complains risks losing their job.

Session chair Md. Abdul Matin Chowdhury from the Bangladeshi Ministry of Expatriates Welfare closed the session by sharing his ministry's experience of migration partnerships. He emphasised that agreements between countries are important in facilitating migrant mobility, as are skills training programmes, both of which have increasingly been prioritised in Bangladesh. He said the government of Bangladesh had engaged in consular dialogues with the United Arab Emirates, South Korea and Qatar, and was hoping to continue such talks in the future with a view towards the countries working together with shared interests.