MISSING FROM TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER PROGRAMS: GENDER-SENSITIVE APPROACHES

ABSTRACT

Research has underlined the increasing feminization of migration, and how women in temporary foreign worker (TFW) programs are concentrated in lower-skilled and more vulnerable jobs traditionally considered "women's work": caregiving, domestic service, hospitality. Many developing countries look to TFW schemes as an answer to high unemployment levels. A recent report by The North-South Institute and the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of West Indies, Jamaica, looks at the linkages between Jamaica and Canada in temporary labour migration from a gender perspective.

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In an overview of gender and migration prepared for the Global Commission on International Migration, Nicola Piper draws attention to how changes in global and regional economies and labour markets have resulted in increased economic activity by women, including their participation in migration – a phenomenon referred to as the "feminization of migration" (Piper 2005). This includes a reduction in demand for male labour in some sectors, as well as a shift in emphasis to employment in the service sector both in countries of origin and destination. With increasing levels of unemployment among women as well as men, many labour-sending governments are seeking opportunities for women in temporary foreign worker programs. In most labour-receiving countries, women temporary foreign workers (TFWs) are over-represented in low-paying, vulnerable sectors such as caregiving, domestic and hotel work, and entertainment. Women are under-represented in other, non-traditional sectors such as construction, grounds maintenance, public transport, etc., as a result of gender stereotyping, negative perceptions of some jobs, lack of skills and other barriers. Yet these non-traditional sectors often offer better wages, opportunities for skills development and working conditions than do the sectors where women migrants tend to dominate.

Women comprise about 40% of all TFWs in Canada. Citizenship and Immigration Canada(CIC) figures for the 2005-2008 period show that the number of TFWs in Canada increased from 141,030 to 251,229, with placements for women increasing at a rate slightly higher than for men. While some women find employment as nurses, immigration statistics for the period 2005-2007 show that gains for women TFWs were largely in the National Occupation Category (NOC) level C (intermediate and clerical). Male TFWs were more widely distributed among skill levels A (professional), B (skilled and technical) and C. For men, a large proportion of category C jobs were in agriculture; for women, in domestic work, as caregivers (CIC 2007). The latter work typically takes place in private homes, outside the realm of most provincial labour codes. Studies have shown how these private arrangements can place live-in caregivers at risk of poor and sometimes abusive working conditions.[1] CIC data also suggest that increasingly, lower-skilled workers are coming from a more diverse range of countries: the number of female workers from Mexico, and particularly the Philippines, has risen in recent years, perhaps a reflection of new memoranda of understanding between Canada and these countries.

While research suggests that TFWs often contribute to improvements in living standards for their families, particularly through their remittances, there are questions about the broader development impacts of migration for labour-sending countries. These questions include the economic cost of a father's or mother's prolonged absence on those left behind and particularly on children; the social and economic implications of inadequate enforcement of TFW rights in the host country; and the potential for skill loss rather than gains while working in the host country. The North-South Institute (NSI) has been engaged in research and outreach activities on Canada's temporary foreign workers programs (TFWPs) for several years, beginning with its landmark evaluation of Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) in 2002-2003 (NSI 2003). While identifying many now internationally recognized "good practice" elements in the SAWP, the research raised a number of concerns related to

workers' housing, enforcement of migrant workers' rights, health and safety, and community relations. In 2006, NSI facilitated discussion of these issues, and possible community responses, at multi-stakeholder workshops in three Ontario rural municipalities that receive large numbers of SAWP workers (NSI 2003). In 2007, in collaboration with the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies, University of West Indies, NSI held workshops in Barbados and Jamaica to discuss its research findings and consider ways of adding value to TFWPs for both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. These workshops engaged Caribbean government officials, Canadian and Caribbean researchers, trade unions and some migrant workers who shared their experiences living and working in Canada. Some of the issues that were considered were: how to enhancing workers' understanding of their rights in Canada; challenges that increasing numbers of TFWs pose to local host governments in meeting workers' needs – for example, local transportation, health and social services, housing. In Ontario, for example, some researchers have pointed out that greater attention must be paid to the specific needs of women migrants, who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and sexual harassment. One strategy that has been put forward is the increased support for community organizations that are in contact with women workers and information provided to them about local health and other services. These organizations also organize social activities that help build greater social inclusiveness in communities where racial and other stereotypes about migrant workers present barriers. Caribbean officials also drew attention to the impact that temporary labour migration can have on families, and noted the need for community supports for those "left behind" – too often, government agencies only become involved when a situation reaches a crisis; however, there is scope for more proactive interventions (Piper 2005).

The increasing numbers of women participating in TFWPs in Canada and the persisting gender stereotypes that are evident in sectors and skill levels in which they are employed point to the need for strategies that are more inclusive of women's experiences and needs. NSI and the University of West Indies, Jamaica, are planning research that will link researchers in Jamaica and Canada to identify key gender concerns in TFWPs and explore policy responses for both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. Among issues to be considered are the following: gender-related barriers to recruitment processes in the labour-sending country; gender-related access issues for women TFWs to better jobs (better pay, occupational health and safety standards, and opportunities for skills development) in labour-receiving countries; access to skills training in both sending and destination country; and the undervaluing of traditional female occupations. The research will emphasize participatory research strategies that will engage women migrant workers, those considering TFWPs, and other stakeholders to identify key components of gender-sensitive TFWPs. If funding is available, the project could be expanded to include other countries in the Caribbean. The Philippines is a recognized leader in initiatives aimed at supporting and protecting their overseas workers, so the research might be extended to include analysis of Filipino workers' experiences in Canada and gender-sensitive strategies by the Philippine Office for Overseas Workers. Based on the results of the preliminary scoping, the research would focus on potential opportunities for Jamaican female TFWs in non-traditional sectors. This phase will also assess likely implications for TFWs – in particular, women – of the current recession in Canada. While it is expected that employment opportunities for TFWs may contract in the short term, the emphasis on investment in infrastructure projects may maintain demand for foreign workers to fill labour shortages in this sector. In addition, both sending and receiving countries need to consider medium and longer-term labour force needs, and the place of TFWs in labour markets.

References

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Note

[1] A large proportion of both male and female TFWs are in the category "skill level not stated."