



GSPS | GENDER IN SOCIETY
PERCEPTION STUDY

WOMEN AND LABOUR MIGRATION

Kyrgyz Republic



OCTOBER 2018

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RESEARCH REPORT:
**WOMEN AND
LABOUR MIGRATION**

Kyrgyz Republic



Bishkek, October 2018



GENDER IN SOCIETY PERCEPTIONS

STUDY (GSPS) OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

This pillar research report is part of the Gender in Society Perceptions Study (GSPS) funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, a joint undertaking of UN Women, UNFPA and IOM in the Kyrgyz Republic and in partnership with the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic. The GSPS is also supported by stakeholders from leading local universities, research institutions, non-governmental organisations and government ministries, including the Office of the President; National Academy of Sciences; National Defence Council; Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth; Department for Security, Law Enforcement and Defence, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The overall objective of the GSPS is to establish household, community and public level data and information on key risk factors for gender inequality and threats for violence affecting women and girls in the Kyrgyz Republic (what is known, believed and practised). Specific objectives of the GSPS are to understand:

- Pressing interpersonal and structural issues leading to gender discrimination, violence and exploitation;
- Community-level trends and shifting societal perceptions of gender stereotypes and relations;
- The relationship between gender inequality, insecurity and potential conflict triggers.

To reach these goals, quantitative and qualitative research was carried out on five topics of key interest to understand gender practices and perceptions in Kyrgyzstan today: women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, violence against women and girls in the form of bride kidnapping and child marriages, women's religious beliefs and practices, and women's involvement in labour migration. The GSPS National

Survey Results, collected by UNFPA and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, were published in Fall 2016. The GSPS pillar reports, each address one of the five topics of interest, and incorporate the findings of the qualitative and quantitative research. The pillar reports and survey are published in English, Russian and Kyrgyz. A general introduction, published separately, provides the full context analysis and methodology for the collection of GSPS publications.

The GSPS was launched to redress the lack of comprehensive studies that focused squarely on sources of gender inequality – and particularly on the attitudes and perceptions that can feed gender inequality – in the Kyrgyz Republic, and to identify the factors relevant for promoting a gender-inclusive peace. The GSPS attempted to identify opportunities and strategies for equal participation of women and girls in community level processes, provide focussed recommendations to state and non-state authorities, and provide evidence for more gender-responsive policies in the Kyrgyz Republic. The results of the GSPS are being widely distributed within the UN system, to the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and among scholars and members of civil society and non-governmental organisations.

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Joint Steering Committee:

The Joint Steering Committee (JSC), co-chaired by the Office of the President and the UN Resident Coordinator with membership from state and civil society organisations and UN agencies, provided oversight over implementation of GSPS. We are grateful to JSC members for monitoring progress to ensure achievement of key results.

Joint Steering Committee Secretariat:

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Research Respondents:

The GSPS would not have been possible without the participation of more than 7,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan who devoted their time, energy, and insights to the study as respondents. It is thanks to them for us to be able to present the findings in this and other GSPS-related reports.

Recipient UN Organization Partners:

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Stakeholders Advisory Group:

The Stakeholder's Advisory Group (SAG) represented a wide range of state stakeholders, research institutions, experts and civil society actors. The SAG served as a platform for multiple state and non-state stakeholders to inform, advise and consult on the research methodology and instruments, and ultimately approving them. We are deeply grateful to those who gave their time to this endeavour and showed their ownership of our joint effort.

Research Team:

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GLOSSARY

<i>Ala kachuu</i>	Bride kidnapping
<i>Kainata</i>	Father-in-law for a woman
<i>Kainene</i>	Mother-in-law for a woman
<i>Kelin</i>	Literally translates as a 'daughter-in-law' or 'bride'. In Reeves (2004), kelin "can be used generically to refer to young women who are 'in' but not 'of' a given household."
<i>Kv-artalnie</i>	Head of local territorial units
<i>Novostroika</i>	A new settlement inside or outside a city
<i>Oblast</i>	Administrative territorial division
<i>WhatsApp</i>	Messaging application for mobile phone

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	Asian Development Bank
<i>BPFA</i>	Beijing Platform for Action
<i>FGD</i>	Focus Group Discussion
<i>FIHD</i>	International Federation for Human Rights
<i>FMS</i>	Federal Migration Service
<i>FRA</i>	EU Fundamental Rights Agency
<i>GSPS</i>	Gender in Society Perceptions Study
<i>IOM</i>	International Organization for Migration
<i>IDN</i>	State Inspectorate for Minors
<i>QCS</i>	Quality Control Supervisor
<i>PTSD</i>	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
<i>NSC</i>	National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic
<i>UNFPA</i>	United Nations Population Fund
<i>UN Women</i>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report of the Gender in Society Perceptions Study (GSPS) project considers how labour migration from Kyrgyzstan influences women's equality and empowerment, and affects their overall security. It finds that while labour migration can be an empowering experience for the more educated and economically secure women, for the majority of women studied it does little to increase their sense of empowerment, as they continue to feel limited by cultural norms and values while abroad. When they return to Kyrgyzstan, some women can benefit from 'post migration growth' due to the new skills, economic self-sufficiency and confidence they gained abroad. However, a greater number are likely to face 'post-migration stress', which further undermines their sense of security and self-worth. Few if any state policies are in place to provide information and support to women interested in migration, or to help ensure that returnees can quickly regain access to social services, pensions, and other rights.

Labour migration is most often described as a solution of last resort, a family-level coping mechanism, which women are forced to undertake out of economic and financial necessity, rather than an expression of their fully free and independent will. Labour migration rarely offers a way for women to renegotiate their position in their families and local communities, and women migrants are often under social pressure to conform to an ideal asexual stereotype, while continuing to fulfil their traditional gender roles and duties. Those who are mothers continue to carry out virtual 'emotional care work' for their children and other family members. Too often while abroad, women lose further access to their rights as they live in overcrowded and unsanitary accommodation, are exposed to exploitative working conditions, and have little or no access to health care. This study found only a few examples where remittances helped contribute to a migrant's development, or to that of her family or community.

Education, financial resources and support networks abroad can all contribute to ensuring more positive migration experiences, especially better employment prospects and new empowerment opportunities. Some women who face challenges in migration are also able to build new resilience and coping mechanisms which then translate into 'post-migration growth' upon return to Kyrgyzstan. But improved support and better conditions are needed to ensure that more women can turn their migration experience into empowerment.

Recommendations to ensure that increased religiosity can help generate greater gender equality and gender-equal peace include:

- The popularisation of vocational education and training among women and girls, to ensure they can access job opportunities in formal sectors abroad

as opposed to relying on menial jobs in households. This would enable girls and women to enjoy equal access to higher paid jobs in the formal labour market, where they will have better social protection than that associated with domestic jobs in private households.

- The provision of greater state support and advice to potential migrant workers and returnees to ensure that they know their rights and can access services including health care, social insurance, civil documentation (such as birth registration) and legal aid. This pre and post-orientation should consider women migrant workers' greater vulnerability to sexual abuse and trafficking but without unduly restricting women's migration experience to these aspects.
- The inclusion of gender concerns, and the need to increase protection and services for migrant women, in bilateral discussions on labour migration management between Kyrgyzstan and host countries such as Russia.
- The organisation of public information and awareness-raising campaigns on the feminisation of migration and the positive contributions that migration can make to the development-rights nexus to address popular negative perceptions of women working abroad.
- Support for mentoring schemes and networks between successful women migrants and women who are considering working abroad. Support for the organisation of migrant women's self-help groups, migrants' associations and other non-governmental organisations which can help women claim their rights and improve their access to empowerment opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the effects of labour migration on the wellbeing and security of Kyrgyz women migrants, their families and communities during the different stages of their migration experience. A particular focus of this report is on women's coping strategies for addressing gender-specific challenges. Our findings show that labour migration for women in Kyrgyzstan is a complex, dynamic and ambivalent phenomenon which produces gender-specific benefits and constraints.

International treaties and national laws make specific provisions for migrants in general but women "do not easily fit into these structures".¹ The Division of the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs noted in 2004 that approaches to documenting and understanding international migration tend to disregard the specific migration of women, while mainstream analytical frameworks either ignore the participation of women in migration or simply view the experiences of migrant men as reflecting those of all migrant individuals². But academics and professionals have begun to identify important and close linkages between gender, labour migration and development. UN Women and other inter-governmental organizations have called "upon States to ensure that the distinct needs of women and girls are addressed as part of the new global compacts on refugees and for safe, orderly and regular migration, and in all national and international policy responses, and that dedicated human and financial resources are made available to address these needs in practice."³ Increasingly, authors are shifting from focusing on gender inequality between migrant women and men to emphasising the potential benefits of migration for women, including increased independence, autonomy and changes in gender relations.⁴ Some highlight women's agency as important for the economic development of their countries of destination and of origin, and for political processes and social development in their communities⁵.

A steadily growing number of independent women migrant workers from the Kyrgyzstan Republic have

become wage earners and support their families at home. Available sources on this topic tend to focus on describing the challenges, difficulties and abuse female migrant workers face while abroad and when they return. These narratives serve to victimise Kyrgyz women migrants and depict them as being prey to a series of structural, economic and social inequalities which deprive them of any realistic opportunity to protect their rights. The ways in which Kyrgyz women migrants work to improve their own and their families' standards of living, seek opportunities for self-development and resist discrimination and exploitation remain largely unknown. Their potential post-migration empowerment has not been studied systematically. Our work responds to these gaps in knowledge and generates analysis of the actual experiences of Kyrgyz women migrants as they prepare for, live through, and return from migration. This study is guided by specific questions such as: what is involved in the decision making by women and their families to migrate, what are the women's experiences while they live and work as migrant workers, in what ways does migration benefit and disadvantage them, and what can be done to ensure increased opportunities for their empowerment?

To collect the qualitative data necessary to attain the goals of this study, 27 focus group discussions (FGD), 18 case studies and 35 individual in-depth interviews with female and male migrants, their families and their communities were conducted throughout the Kyrgyz Republic.

Key findings of the research indicate that women are increasingly becoming independent migrants and breadwinners. They are primarily motivated to improve the economic wellbeing of their households, but personal aspirations are also becoming more common. Unlike the first cohort of Kyrgyzstan's post-independence women migrants, today more educated, better-off urban female migrants are more open to migrating for personal reasons. This group of women seeks better job opportunities and a more satisfying social and cultural life. Migration can offer

1 Women in Migration Network, 2017, p. 1

2 http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/thirdcoord2004/P01_DAW.pdf

3 Joint Statement by the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 19 September 2016.

4 Women in Migration Network, 2017.

5 http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/thirdcoord2004/P01_DAW.pdf in Migration Network, 2017.

an escape from gendered risks and vulnerabilities at home, such as forced marriage, abusive husbands, violence from extended family members and the risk of being kidnapped as brides. Women's pre-migration professional experience, level of education and reliable social support systems were evident factors of their success. Those respondents who could migrate for explicitly personal reasons seemed to have been most likely to benefit from the experience and to gain longer-term liberation in their everyday lives post-migration.

As for Kyrgyz women migrants coming from less privileged social backgrounds, opportunities for personal development from migration were less straightforward. Women in this group reported being motivated by poverty and family needs and did not emphasise any hopes for personal growth. De-emphasizing expectations of liberation was framed by cultural assumptions about appropriate work and behaviour for women and men. For women, these assumptions were based on understanding that their migration was nothing more than a temporary solution to a family emergency for which Kyrgyz women were more suited because they could engage in care service work. Cultural assumptions about the appropriateness of female migrant workers' behaviour clearly led to stereotyping and stigmatisation. Negative images could prevent young women from marrying when they return or create destructive dynamics in their existing families. We found evidence of psychological, physical, financial and economic violence in some of the households where returnee migrants resided. This was especially true if female respondents were seen to have become 'too independent' and 'out-of-control'. This created a hostile environment for their re-integration. In other cases, the strength they gained through their migration experience, helped some women resist violence at home.

The women interviewed worked hard to reduce the likelihood that migration would have negative effects. For example, they invested in maintaining close ties with their family members. They extended notions of good motherhood to include breadwinning functions which required prolonged physical absences in distant places. They also carried out 'emotional care work' from a distance through phone calls, social media and the giving of gifts. Women stressed the suffering they experienced because of separation and the way in which they effectively organised care work at home by mobilising other family members, including husbands, grandparents and older children, especially daughters, to take care of younger children or other vulnerable family members. Women respondents also used a variety of methods to reduce the risk of a damaged reputation at home, such as distancing themselves from the aspects of migration that are seen as immoral, selfish or unfeminine. They used many strategies to 'desexualise' themselves to avoid any rumours, i.e., presenting themselves as asexual objects not thought capable of sexual activity. Some turned to Islam upon return. Others became engaged in social and political activism. These forms of resistance and empowerment had positive short-term effects. The concern in the longer run is that by emphasising their role as women in their families, and their migration as an act of familial loyalty and self-sacrifice, women migrants are not able to fully exercise their will for independence and autonomy, or to maximise the benefits of migration.

The report concludes with specific recommendations for policy development and practice to scale-up good lessons learnt and address specific areas of concern.



LITERATURE REVIEW

1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policy makers and academics are increasingly recognising the importance of understanding the gender dimension of international migration's causes and consequences (Moreno, 2006). The New York Declaration that was issued at the 2016 United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants makes numerous references to women with UN member states committing to “recognize and [will] take steps to address the particular vulnerabilities of women and children during the journey from country of origin to country of arrival. This includes their potential exposure to discrimination and exploitation, as well as to sexual, physical and psychological abuse, violence, human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery.” States also say that they “will ensure that our responses to large movements of refugees and migrants mainstream a gender perspective, promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and fully respect and protect the human rights of women and girls.”⁶

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), for example, has positioned gender as one of the core lenses through which international migration should be understood and addressed:

Gender is a cross-cutting migration issue and perhaps one of, if not the single most important factor shaping the migratory experience. Major steps have been taken in migration research resulting in a wealth of literature as well as field research, which clearly establishes gender as a crucial factor in our understanding of the causes and consequences of international and internal migration, and that gender is relevant to most, if not all, aspects of migration (IOM, 2009, p. 9).

Literature focusing on exploring linkages between gender and migration emphasises that women and men experience migration processes differently due to socially ascribed expectations related to their gender, and that gender shapes migration-related opportunities, vulnerabilities, and everyday practices (Waldo, 1995; Donato, 1992; Oishi, 2005; Gabaccia et al, 2006). Authors insist that gender differences are evident at all stages of migration; at both entry and exit, and throughout the process of working abroad (UN, 2006). In South-East Asia, for example, different labour demands were found to motivate men and women to participate in international labour migration. Male migration was a response to the demand for labour to take up jobs deemed undesirable by the local population in the destination country. Female migration reflected the tendency in the western hemisphere to transfer domestic care work from more affluent women to migrant women (Asis, 2006). Women in un-regulated “private” domestic and care work are particularly vulnerable to

abuse because of unequal power relations, limited access to information, limited autonomous mobility and because of the invisible nature of their workplace.

Research on migrant workers' remittances has shown that practices around them are also informed by gender (Gallardo, 2006).⁷ Women are expected to remit over US\$ 300 billion, half of the global remittances in 2016. But there are gender differences: men tend to send money to their spouses, while women send their earnings predominantly to their children and parents. On the basis of data from the Dominican Republic, Moreno (2006) showed that women were more likely to spend remittances on improvements in the household, the education of their children and on health. She also found that women could gain autonomy and increased negotiating power within the household as a result of both sending and receiving remittances. Development literature emphasises the role of education in ensuring women migrants' gains in employment, economic and political participation and other life opportunities (Boyd, 2006). The literature also notes the importance of an enabling environment for gender equality for the enhancement of women's rights (Asis, 2006).

Women are estimated by the UN to make up nearly half of the 244 million migrants worldwide. Growing numbers of women migrants are not automatically leading to greater equality among male and female migrants (Orozco, 2006). Researchers and professionals foresee that labour migration will continue to grow and poverty will continue to serve as a major push factor for women to migrate until

⁶ <http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration>

⁷ <http://ir.westernunion.com/News/Press-Releases/Press-Release-Details/2016/Western-Union-Pays-Tribute-to-Global-Women-Work-Force-as-World-Economic-Change-Agents-and-Calls-for-Greater-Recognition-and-Integration/default.aspx>

conditions in countries of origin improve (Boyd, 2006). For migrant women, their situations also depend on the level of gender equality in the destination countries (Moreno, 2006). Yet sending and receiving states rarely consider the distinct vulnerabilities and needs of women and girls when they develop policies and programs in response to migration.

The opportunities that migration offers for women's empowerment, family well-being and social and economic development hinge in part on the alignment of policies and institutional and public responses to women migrant workers with international human rights standards embodied in international human rights treaties, including International Labour Organization (ILO) instruments. Kyrgyzstan is a party to core international human rights treaties including: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Kyrgyzstan has ratified eight core conventions of the International Labour Organization, including the Migration for Employment Convention, but not the ILO Migration Workers Convention 1975, the ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention 1997 or the ILO Domestic Worker Convention 2011.

National level policy and legal frameworks allowing for effective regulation of migration and protection of the rights of migrants are still works in progress. In 2004, the Concept of State Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic was developed, and followed by the adoption of the State Programme on Regulating Migration Processes for 2007-2010. In 2006, a law "On external migration" was adopted and became the main national legal instrument for regulating such migration. The State Migration Service, under the supervision of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, is currently working on the State Migration Policy until 2030. In 2012, the Department of External Migration of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs developed a Strategy to Regulate External Labour Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic for the period until 2020. The strategy defines priority directions in key areas including: development of new labour markets; enhancing domestic employment; providing social, economic and legal protection of migrants, etc.

Attempts have been made to develop standards and administrative procedures for provision of information services to Kyrgyz migrant workers. These standardised services were aimed at ensuring the safety and employment of out-going migrant workers, "especially for youth and women" (Chudinovskih, et al, 2013, p. 6). Guidelines were developed to assist institutions such as employment agencies in their use of the standardised services. But these attempts have not been enforced (Chudinovskih, et al, 2013, p. 6).

Regulation of labour migration to the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) from Kyrgyzstan took place based on the legal frameworks contained in inter-state agreements between countries of the Commonwealth. These include the CIS Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (2008), and the agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Labour Migration and Social Protection of Migrant Workers (1994), among others. There are also bilateral agreements between the Kyrgyz Republic and Russia (e.g., on employment and social protection of migrant workers (1996). However, regulatory frameworks governing migration processes have been criticised for lacking enforceability due to their abstract formulation, obsolete features, and inconsistencies in the use of concepts and terminology in comparison with those which are internationally accepted (Chudinovskih, et al, 2013). Labour migration has not been appropriately reflected in the Kyrgyz Republic's country development strategy for the years 2013-2017, although strategic priorities of migration policy will be included in the National Strategy on Sustainable Development after 2017 (Innovative Solutions, 2014).

At the same time, a significant proportion of Kyrgyzstan's citizens have become increasingly involved in the global economy and are directly affected by developments in international labour markets. The first large-scale wave of labour migration occurred in the mid-90s, mostly in the form of the so-called 'shuttle-bus trade when mainly women travelled by bus principally to Turkey, Russia, Poland or China to purchase goods to be resold at home (Thieme, 2008). The second wave of labour migration started in the early 2000s and can be explained by growing poverty. Migrants would migrate for prolonged periods of time to be employed in their country of destination (Chudinovskih et al, 2013). The year 2006 is now recognised as a turning point because it is only since then that the majority of migrants have been ethnic Kyrgyz. Earlier migration flows involved predominantly non-Kyrgyz ethnicities (FIDH, 2016).

Today, out of a population of close to six million, between 650,000 and 700,000 Kyrgyz citizens live and work abroad as migrant workers, mainly in Russia and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan (State Migration Service under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2017). Approximately 50 000 Kyrgyz nationals leave the country every year to work abroad (State Migration Service under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2017). Studies have shown that the largest number of migrant workers come from the southern regions of the country where poverty rates are highest (Ministry of Migration, Labour and Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2014). Although economic hardship has been a predominant motivation (Mogilevsky, 2005), remittances have also been found to contribute to increased financial dependence among the economically inactive proportion of the population (ADB, 2014).

It has been estimated that about 75 percent of Kyrgyz migrants are under the age of 35 (Thieme, 2008). In 2013, the Kyrgyz National Institute of Strategic Studies found that more than 30 percent of migrants have higher education and more than 50 percent have completed secondary education. However, less than 13 percent worked in sectors which were connected with their educational or professional qualifications (in FIDH, 2016). Common areas of employment for men include construction, trade, industry and agriculture (FIDH, 2016). Women predominantly held jobs in the service sector, catering, the textile industry, and as domestic workers (FIDH, 2016). Most people (more than 80 percent) find jobs through the help of relatives, friends and acquaintances (FIDH, 2016). Only three percent of migrant workers are reported to have found employment through the State Employment Centre (under the auspices of the former Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth – now the State Migration Service).

In 2011, remittances sent to Kyrgyzstan accounted for 15 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank, 2011). In 2015, it ranked second among top remittance receiving countries, with remittances accounting to 30 percent of GDP (World Bank in FIDH, 2016). Migrants' earnings have contributed to a significant decrease in extreme poverty from 42.2 percent of population in 2000 to 2.9 percent in 2012.⁸ But about a third of the Kyrgyz population still live below the national poverty line (ILO, 2016). Political instability in Kyrgyzstan, which experienced popular revolutions in 2005 and 2010, leading to the overthrow of the ruling president in each instance, and was followed by ethnic violence in the second case, has also contributed to emigration flows.

It is important to remember that Kyrgyzstan is one of only fifty-one countries that have signed the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990). While the convention mainly addresses the responsibilities of migrants' host countries, it also reaffirms the rights of migrant women and men to non-discrimination, equal pay and working conditions, medical services, cultural identity and state protection from intimidation and violence. Inherently it suggests that migrant women who return cannot be discriminated against in Kyrgyzstan simply because they left their families and communities, including their previous employment and/or private enterprise. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 26 spells out even more clearly the vulnerabilities of migrant women and calls on their countries of origin, transit and destination to take these into account when designing policy. The General Recommendation indicates how in countries of origin like Kyrgyzstan women may, "lack reliable information on migration which leads to increased vulnerability in relation to employers," or may suffer stigma upon their return, and recommends more training for potential migrants and providers of legal services, as well as supervision of recruitment agencies.⁹ Such commitments on the part of the state are crucial, as numbers of Kyrgyz female migrants seeking labour abroad and leaving independently continue to rise steadily.

In 2015, it was estimated that 59.6 percent of migrants from Kyrgyzstan were women (UN, 2015). In Russia, nearly 40 percent of Kyrgyz migrants were women (FIDH, 2016). Of those, 48 percent were not accompanied by other family members. Among married women migrants, 82 percent were not accompanied by their husbands (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2016). The feminisation of migration in Kyrgyzstan has been linked to the feminisation of poverty in the country. It is also notable that in the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan it is more accepted for women to migrate independently than is the case in the south of the country, where women migrants are more likely to face social disapproval (FIDH, 2016).

⁸ living on less than US\$ 1.90 a day

⁹ Furthermore, Recommendation 201 of the International Labour Organization's Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (2011) recognises that countries of origin also play a key role in the guarantee of the rights of their citizens abroad, exhorting them to inform potential migrants of their rights, create legal assistance funds, ensure access to social services and provide specialised consular services.

A survey of the literature on Kyrgyz female migration reveals the propensity of academics and practitioners to focus on the topic in terms of structural, economic and social inequalities faced by women during their time abroad which deprive them of possibilities to protect their rights. Kyrgyz women migrants are described as having double vulnerabilities and as victims of various violations (FIDH, 2016). They were found particularly likely to face violations of their rights if they did not have proper documents (which applies to 60 percent of Kyrgyz migrants) (FIDH, 2016). When female migrants suffered violence, they were found to be unlikely to seek help from local authorities, some who did later complained of abuse from them. Some 55 percent of female migrant workers in Russia reported that they suffered the worst oppression from city police, while 28 percent said the same of the Federal Migration Service of Russia (Central Asia on the Move, 2015). Women in migration were exposed to gender inequalities and economic discrimination. By way of illustration, in 2008 female migrant workers' wages were 63 percent of those of male migrant workers, even though female migrant workers tend to be better educated than their male counterparts (Tyurukanova, 2011). Risks to women included psychological, physical and sexual violence, exploitative working conditions, inadequate living conditions, and lack of access to healthcare and justice (FIHD, 2016). Violence against Kyrgyz migrant women by Kyrgyz men has emerged as a worrying trend. For example, criminal acts of violence carried out by members of the radical "Patriot" group of Kyrgyz male migrants are specifically targeted at Kyrgyz women migrants, and labelled as 'disciplinary' measures (Beishenbek kyzy, 2012).

Within Kyrgyzstan, FIDH (2016) finds that massive out-migration of labour has contributed to an increased incidence of bride kidnap, polygamy, and unregistered marriages. Women who marry in such circumstances frequently lack social protection and financial means, and can face abuse in the house of their husband's parents. Divorce can put them in an even more precarious situation. The same report argues that the feminisation of migration has led to increased incidence of abandonment of children, who then became susceptible to limited health care, restricted access to education, ill-treatment and sexual violence. Other sources also suggest that migrants' children pay a particularly high price for their parents' absence. According to Damira Niyazaliva, Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs, some 6,700 children of internal migrants suffered

neglect due to their parents' absence (Akipress, 2015). Migrants' children were found to lack access to uninterrupted education and adequate medical care, and were deprived of decent living conditions (AUCA, 2013). Kroeger & Anderson's (2011) study of Kyrgyzstan showed that the academic achievement of 14 to 18 year old boys in the households of migrant workers was lower than the academic achievement of other groups of children. Girls in such households were more prone to malnutrition. Generally, the study showed that remittances did not contribute to the human capital of children left behind at home (Kroeger & Anderson, 2011).

In the light of the expectation that the feminisation of migration will continue (Moreno, 2006), more research and analysis is necessary to expand understanding of the linkages between gender, security and labour migration, and to consider them not only from the perspective of the vulnerability of female migrants, but also as a source of strength and of positive social and economic contributions. In general, research which explores migration in terms of its empowering capacity for women's development has been rare. For instance, political, economic, and social forms of violence that motivate women to migrate remain understudied (UN, 2006). This is unfortunate, as we can see from these rare studies in Kyrgyzstan, that migration can, for example, liberate women from control and monitoring by their families and home communities, and from pressures to conform to traditional marriage, career and childbirth choices (Innovative Solutions, 2014). In addition, we know from Ismailbekova (2014) how older women who remain behind can use men's absence to increase their own status and decision-making power within their households.

This study continues this line of research and presents an analysis of women's active resistance to hardship, of the solutions they devise to combat systemic risks, and of opportunities for life-changing decisions and development which are then reflected in the improved wellbeing of their households and societies at large. The general goal of this study is to identify, systematise and describe such experiences with the aim of allowing people's voices to be heard. Our findings show that labour migration in Kyrgyzstan is gendered and affects patterns of femininity and masculinity, expressions of patriarchy, and the space available for women to resist, accommodate and negotiate.

The image features a solid blue background in the upper half and a solid green background in the lower half. A large, stylized number '4' is rendered in a light blue color, spanning across the boundary between the two colors. The number '4' is composed of a thick top bar, a curved middle section, and a thick bottom bar. The text 'METHODOLOGIES AND THEORY' is centered horizontally in the blue section, underlined with a thin white line.

METHODOLOGIES AND THEORY

METHODOLOGIES AND THEORY

Two major methods of data collection were used in this study: focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews. A case study approach was also used to capture social dynamics in migrants' families. A focus-group discussion (FGD) is a form of a group interview in which participants with similar backgrounds are asked questions about their perception, attitudes, behaviours and assessment in relation to a specific phenomenon in a systematic manner. The data pool is comprised of a total of 27 FGDs, eight of which included female participants with migrant experience and nineteen which were mainly made up of residents of different research locales. Each focus group had four to twelve participants. Some groups were exclusively male or female, while others were mixed-gender.

Thirty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with women migrants, their families and members of their communities. Through in-depth interviews, researchers obtained data about respondents' subjective experiences, attitudes, thinking, motivations, aspirations, etc., in the specific contexts in which they found themselves.

The case study approach utilised in this research allowed for an in-depth investigation of 18 families with members who have been or are migrant workers. The 18 case studies encompassed a total of 88 interviews.

Geographically, all of the country's seven oblasts and two major cities (Bishkek and Osh) are represented in the study, with two case studies, two in-depth interviews and three focus groups being conducted in each of these nine areas. The fieldwork took place in December 2015 and was conducted by a group of eight field researchers. Each field researcher received relevant training and worked in one of two fourperson teams. The fieldwork was monitored daily by a Quality Control Supervisor (QCS) via telephone and through two monitoring visits to the field. The specific locales where the data collection took place were¹⁰:

City of Bishkek and neighbourhoods of Tynchtyk, Kudaibergen, Kok-Jar, Ala-Too;
Batken oblast: Batken city, Uch-Korgon village, Kara-Bak village;
Chui oblast: Tokmok city, Kara-Dobo village, Aidarken village;
Issyk-Kul oblast: Karakol city, Yrdyk village, Tyup village;
Jalal-Abad oblast: Jalal-Abad city, Masy village, Bazar-Korgon village, Suzak village;
Naryn oblast: Naryn city and Kochkor village;
Osh oblast: Uzgen city, Nookat village; Osh city and neighbourhood of Ak-Tilek;
Talas oblast: Talas city, Kyzyl-Oktyabr village.

¹⁰ Due to sensitive information obtained in the course of the research and disclosure of the names of the villages and neighbourhoods, respondents in this report will not be identified by their place of residence, in the interests of protecting their anonymity.

All of the interviews and debriefing notes were transcribed for subsequent qualitative data analysis. The transcripts were uploaded into a software program called MaxQDA which enables program-assisted thematic analysis. This was undertaken by two teams comprised of two to three coders and one national analyst. Specifically, they identified, examined and recorded emergent and recurrent patterns, topics and themes. The themes were later consolidated into larger chunks for analysis and synthesis. The approach was data driven and analytic products evolved from the bottom up. All transcripts were anonymised to protect the identity of participants.

Before the presentation of our findings it is important to note that our analysis is based on empirical and nuanced qualitative field material. We do not wish to imply that the women interviewed in this study represent all women migrant workers in Kyrgyzstan, and we would be cautious of far-reaching quantitative generalisations based on our fieldwork. But we believe that each experience is unique and, collectively, the stories we have gathered give a powerful voice to Kyrgyzstan's female labour migrants. We believe the women migrants' varied experiences reflect the tendency to keep silent about their lives as migrants and of the need to be better understood. These usually silent voices are important because when heard they reveal what inclusion and exclusion means for these women. Importantly, our analysis was committed to finding a middle ground between positioning female labour migration as either a space for women's liberation or as a solely disempowering experience. In addition, this study has been informed by a considerable quantitative study (national survey) conducted by the National Statistics Committee in the Kyrgyz Republic in cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund in Kyrgyzstan in 2015.¹¹

¹¹ This data are referenced as UNFPA & NSC (2016) in this report



From top:

GSPS respondent, an internal migrant, is 17 and expecting her second child. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

While GSPS respondent's sister is working on her home assignments, her first child, who was born when his Mom was 15, is trying to crawl. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov



From top:

GSPS respondent, a labor migrant, is standing in front of her house in Iskra village (Chui). "It is better to drink tea at home with my children and husband than to eat meat abroad," she reflects on her recent experience in Russia.

© UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

It's time to bath her youngest boy! GSPS respondent feels very happy to be a Mom for four, despite the family's difficult financial circumstances. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

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ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

According to the State Migration Service of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic (2017), the increasing number of female migrants is explained by ‘family migration’, whereby women’s movement across Kyrgyzstan’s border is portrayed as intrinsically linked to their husbands’ mobility and places of temporary residence¹². Such an explanation of female migration is based on a mainstream gender paradigm which views men’s independent migration as a social norm, while women’s mobility is dependent on their husbands’ relocation. By contrast, our findings demonstrate that patterns of women’s international economic mobility are much more diverse and increasingly less determined by their male partner’s physical presence or absence. Respondents tended to explain their divergent behaviour as being a result of exceptional life circumstances. Older former women migrants who left home in the early 1990s, following the initial collapse of the Soviet Union, emphasised extreme poverty as an overwhelming motivating push factor that left them no choice:

We really... basically, even for bread... we had no money for bread, to be honest... Flour was unaffordable. I can't remember now how much it cost back then but in my mind I just remember that it was unaffordable. Many people were leaving. And I wanted to too. I said, "I must go, I must take us out of this atrocity." Our situation was such that I went away without even thinking. For me, I was happy that we had that chance. This was like a straw for a drowning man. (A woman migrant)

Frequently there were days when we would eat one lepyoshka [flat bread] a day. So, we decided that I should go to work. So, I went. This was only because of finances, only because of money. Nobody would go for the sake of a good life... only for the money. (A woman migrant)

Clearly, for this group of women migrants, i.e., the first post-independence cohort, the lack of financial means to support even basic livelihoods was sufficiently extreme that following ‘ideal’ gendered conventions would have meant consciously aggravating the poverty their families were experiencing.

Our data illustrate that today’s motives for labour migration are more varied, although poverty-driven female migration was still widespread among our respondents. There was a general belief nationwide (by 84 percent of men and women) that labour migration would, “improve the financial welfare of the family.” (NSC & UNFPA, 2016) Our data additionally demonstrated that extreme poverty can in fact predispose women migrants to greater vulnerability during migration.

Migration to reach empowerment and seek security

At the same time, we identified a younger, more economically and socially advantaged group of women amongst the newer category of migrants in our sample. This cohort shared core demographic characteristics including being of 28-45 years of age, urban residents, university graduates and of higher economic status. For them, independent labour migration could be a conscious decision in pursuit of their own aspirations, dreams and interests. For some women in this category, labour migration provided a feasible means of avoiding local constraints which were frustrating their goals. For example, a young unmarried urban professional woman of Russian ethnicity¹³ migrated to satisfy her aspirations for a better job, personal, professional and social life:

I can't say that my decision [to migrate] was about earning money. I was getting good money here [in Kyrgyzstan]. I made this decision on an impulse. I was tired of working here with difficult children [in a local NGO]. I went away to avoid professional burnout. I needed to change the setting. It was no longer interesting for me. I had stopped growing professionally. I wanted something different. I thought why don't I go to Russia? I had some support there. I have a brother and a sister there. So, I just left but not like a migrant worker. I wanted to find a job where I could work five days a week, where I could have a lunch break, where I could work until six pm and be free after that. I wanted to have days off on Saturday and Sunday, have vacations, go to see the sea. That

¹² “Overview of migration situation in the Kyrgyz Republic”, available at <http://www.mz.gov.kg/reports/view/2>

¹³ We indicate this respondent’s ethnicity to underline her knowledge of the language spoken in the country of destination.

was my goal. And I found that kind of job, where I worked five days a week, I had fun, travelled, went to museums and theatres...

There is no question that migrants' pre-migration strengths and weaknesses had considerable bearing on their ability to use labour migration to enrich their lives through opportunities not available in the home country. University education, knowledge of languages, professional experience and skills, social support, financial stability and internal motivation for personal success were among these vital characteristics. Although the experience of the respondent whose story is presented above was not common in our data, we were nevertheless able to establish that women with pre-migration strengths were able to use labour migration to ostensibly escape from gendered risks and vulnerabilities at home and be physically removed from pressures and domestic problems such as forced marriage, abusive husbands, violence from extended family members and the risk of being kidnapped as brides. To substantiate this finding, we provide specific examples from our pool of real women's voices in the section below.

We begin with one respondent, a young female migrant whose decision to migrate for labour was motivated by unwillingness to be married:

I received my university degree in accounting. On the day of my graduation I was told I would be married off. My two older sisters were kidnapped for marriage and I was being prepared for the same destiny. Several families tried to marry me to their sons, but I refused. I talked to my aunt (who was abroad at that time) and asked if there was a job available for me. It turned out that they had a job for me and I left quickly.

Another woman decided to migrate to avoid a precarious marriage arrangement involving polygamy:

I was offered the possibility to become a second wife. You know [such things are done], right? I had gotten divorced but I could not just become a second wife because I had two little boys. I thought about how I could bring them to a stranger's house. Who will be happy? Today people can't even feed their own children. They [the family of the suitor] came to me, they proposed to me and promised me 'mountains of gold'. I decided not to become a second wife. I was an experienced woman by that time. I had seen many things and was not a silly woman anymore. I knew what it could turn into. So, I decided to do everything myself.

For this respondent, her relocation and that of her children, helped avoid incessant pressures from the local community to enter into a marriage which she knew would be harmful to her and her children.

In another interesting case a woman migrant forced her own daughter to migrate out of fear that she might otherwise be bride kidnapped. Physically removing her daughter from the risky location was perceived to be a much more efficient solution than the mother's staying in Kyrgyzstan to guard her:

I never wanted to take my daughter with me [to Russia]. I did not want to expose her to Russia. I did not want to expose her to Russia in such a way. When I returned home, she was already graduating from school. We came to see her senior prom. Among our Kyrgyz people there is a weird custom called 'ala kachuu' [bride kidnapping]. I had heard by this time that it had happened here and there. They [kidnappers and their families] would wait for the girls while they are at the prom and kidnap them right afterwards. We decided I should go back to Russia and take her away with me. (A woman migrant)

In this case, security concerns were clearly the motivation for labour migration. Seeking a more physically and psychologically secure life was evident as a motivating factor in many interviews. Women's concerns about unsatisfactory family situations at home prompted their decision to undertake migration. Their dissatisfaction ranged from blatant cases of domestic violence to psychological abuse by extended family members or the stress of post-divorce situations. For a few women willing to share with us, migration was clearly a means to escape abusive husbands, partners and family members. Below are some excerpts from these interviews. This woman is talking about her husband's abuse as one of the factors that pushed her to go abroad:

This just makes sense. A person who drinks [her ex-husband] cannot be safe. He becomes aggressive. We experienced it. Assault. In the presence of the kids... I, of course, did not like it. I had to... I had to in the end... divorce him. After that he started calling me, kept writing text messages to me... So, at home, my family decided to block him from me. They told me, "He will not leave you in peace," and sent me off to Moscow. So, as the result of a joint family council they sent me to Moscow. (A woman migrant)

We learnt that this woman's decision to move away was further bolstered by the knowledge that her ex-husband would not be able to follow her because

of his restricted mobility due to his lack of proper documents. A somewhat different family situation is presented below. Here the respondent's husband was absent but the central figure of concern was the interviewee's mother-in-law, whose demands for devoted domestic labour were intolerable to the young woman. She felt unappreciated as a family member at home and that her labour contribution was unrecognised by her powerful in-law. It is evident that she sought substantive change in her life circumstances through moving away from what was for her an oppressive home regime. Once she became a migrant worker, away from the physical premises of her husband's family, she could regain her sense of self-esteem as a person and as a worker:

...In [name of city in Kyrgyzstan], I always had to remember that I was only a daughter-in-law. Even when I tried to forget and live freely, I was constantly reminded about 'my place'. In Russia, instead, I feel free, my ears can relax from the showers of complaints by my mother-in-law about me because I don't do everything the way she wants me to. And the work I do here is much, much easier! My first day at work in Moscow was a surprise for my employer. He thought I would take one entire day to do the cleaning, but I managed to finish everything within just the first two hours...

For the following respondent, migration was both a consequence of her divorce and a practical means of dealing with post-divorce stress. Being left with no sources to support her and her children, she accepted an invitation from her younger sister to come and work with her in Moscow. Now successfully employed there, she was back in Kyrgyzstan for a short vacation at the time of the interview:

I divorced him [her husband] three years ago. My kids at that time were still little. My daughter was seven and my son was five years old. Naturally, after the divorce nobody would help me, he did not help me. He did not pay any alimony, he gave no material support. I won't even talk about his participation in the kids' lives. Naturally, it was very very hard for me. I did find a job but the salary was too small. My younger sister worked in Moscow at that time and suggested that I go there and find a job that would suit my profession. I went and got a job as a hairdresser. I was lucky; I got a job in a good firm. It was a chain of hairdresser's salons, a very big beauty salon, one of the chains throughout Moscow. I got an official job, got an official work permit, access to work, everything was done officially. I have worked for two years and now came to have my vacation here. (A woman migrant)

It is apparent that this respondent's professional qualities and pre-existing and reliable social support network in the country of destination contributed to her successful migration. For women migrants who reported satisfaction with their experiences of working abroad, their professional capacity and effective social support system was evidently factors of their success. In addition, those respondents who could be particularly open about their own personal development being a major motive for migration seem to have been especially able to benefit from this experience and even gain longer-term liberation in their everyday lives post-migration. One case study of a woman whom we call Dinara¹⁴ was particularly compelling.

Dinara was thirty-three at the time of the interview. She was unquestionably happy about her life as a migrant worker, which for her was a dream fulfilled. Central to her pre-migration story was suffering the early death of her father, who was blind and partially paralysed as the result of encephalitis, when she was sixteen years old. This changed her world outlook from one of a predominant preoccupation with material wellbeing towards a longing for interesting experiences because, "Life is too short and we need to really LIVE and not just survive." This personal philosophy motivated her to finish university despite being married at the age of eighteen and living in a large family together with her parents in-law, her husband's three brothers and their families, all under one roof. Being the youngest adult family member, with an age difference between her and the next youngest of twenty-three years, she found herself surrounded by eight older people all demanding compliance, submission and hard domestic work. Psychological trauma caused by the death of her two children compounded her suffering. She found these conditions unbearable and dreamt of moving away. Migration for labour granted her this opportunity:

I did not 'fit' into their family. I still don't. I have this problem. YES, I have education, YES, I speak Russian. YES, I have my own opinion. That is why I don't fit into their family. So, I had this idée fixe that I must break out and leave. I felt I was missing something. I had to develop, materially and morally. I could not just stay in the village and have no progress, only regress. Plus I had psychological [stress]... you know... two of my kids died...

¹⁴ All names used in this report have been changed and are used simply to enhance narration.

Eventually, Dinara went abroad and worked as a cook. She was able to send sufficient remittances home to make her immediate and extended family more approving of her increased independence. For example, a few months after she returned home she could take her mother on vacation to Turkey without hindrance from her husband's family. Dinara's husband supported her throughout her travels.

The importance of a supportive home environment has already been mentioned as a fundamental for women's success as migrant workers, as this further quote from our research illustrates:

It was my wish to go abroad, even if as a migrant worker, and to explore a new labour market, make money, change my life, and I did that. My husband supported me and took care of the children while I was working as an accountant in Russia.

Migration as the choice of 'last resort'

However, most women in our data pool came from less privileged demographic backgrounds. For them, the opportunities for personal development were less straightforward, and these women were less eager to focus on these aspects of their experience. Positive developments were nevertheless still present and identifiable in their stories. In explaining their motivation to move away from home, women in this group emphasised poverty and the needs of their children:

It is much better [to migrate] than live with them [children] together at home and not be able to buy them [children] what they ask you for. It is better to be far away from them and send them money. I can't look into their eyes and not be able to afford to buy them what they want. It is better to work abroad than not have a job at home]. (A woman migrant)

If I hadn't gone to Moscow, I would still live in the old house. We [her children, husband and parents in-law] could not have repaired our roof. (A woman migrant)

No, I didn't see any solutions here, you see? I tried everything. But the pennies I was offered here... I would not be able to do anything for my children with them. (A woman migrant)

It was evident that these respondents, and others like them, viewed their migration as behaviour required of dutiful daughters, caring mothers, supportive wives, daughters-in-law and siblings.

It was important for them to define their migration as a selfless sacrifice involving emotional suffering for the good of their families, and to emphasise the hardship they experienced as migrant workers. They spoke emotionally about their departures such as, "When I was boarding the plane, when I was sitting by myself, I kept crying, my heart was aching" (a woman migrant). Or they complained that they wished their families at home could see "How difficult it is to work and earn money" (a woman migrant). In one case study, we learnt that a very young woman migrated right after high school to take her mother's place. Her decision was motivated by a desire for her younger sibling to have a 'normal' childhood with a real mother around – something she had not had herself because her mother was away: "I am going away so that our mum can be with you. Only because of this I am going away. At least you will live with your mum," she said. All these respondents, in packaging their migration aspirations as familial duties and forced choices, de-accentuated any hopes for personal gain, liberation and individual development.

Women's labour migration as a 'morally ambivalent' space

We argue that such lowering of expectations for personal liberation is caused by cultural assumptions about what work and behaviour is appropriate for women and men while abroad. Sollund and Leonard (2012) claim that such assumptions preclude any liberal treatment of women in labour migration. Common assumptions about appropriate behaviour by women migrants are summarised in this quotation from one respondent:

When I think of a woman migrant, I think of a woman who is divorced, who has little children, whom she must take care of. Or her husband cannot provide for her and she has to go [migrate for labour]. She is forced, out of despair. Her spirits are low. They cannot possibly be any lower. (Participant of all-male FGD)

This quote encapsulates a set of socially permissible attributes and behaviours for women migrants whose 'spirits are low'. Indeed, public perception of labour migration continues to be viewed as an 'extreme measure undertaken in despair' (as reported by 87 percent of women and 89 percent of men in the NSC & UNFPA (2016) study). This sense of despair and exceptionality was important for understanding the permissibility and the liberal treatment of women's migration because

they, by virtue of their gender, were disrupting the discursive order in which independent mobility was naturally assumed to be the territory of men. Women and men internalised these gendered conventions and grappled with intra-familial and intra-personal conflicts during all stages of women's labour migration. Many of the men and women interviewed, framed the departing of a mother and wife as an outrageous and extreme measure, representing a decision that was not at all easy. One woman said, *"When I was leaving, it felt as if I was going to war. Everybody cried. My sons, my daughters cried"* (a woman migrant). They reported the almost unbearable uncertainty of parting with loved ones and the need for considerable personal strength. They felt that the emotional costs of migration - guilt, anxiety, hopelessness - were overwhelming them.

As for the men, some of them seem to have been confused and ambivalent about being left at home. Female participants shared how difficult it was for their husbands to accept that they were boarding planes and leaving. In some of their stories men would be torn between the 'heart and mind', helping their wives to leave while obviously not wanting them to go:

My husband bought me a ticket for 500 dollars. When I was going to the airport, my husband panicked and told me to come home. He started yelling and cursing. I told him that 500 dollars was a lot of money and that I would work and send him money. And in the end, he agreed. (A woman migrant)

Among interviewed men, anxiety, doubts, fears and a sense of hopelessness were reported. Statements such as, "A man should hide his pride if he cannot provide for his family and has to send his wife to migration," or, "We (men) ourselves are giving women reason to go there," and, "If, as a man, you cannot provide for your family, well, maybe, you are not a man," were recurrent in all focus group discussions with men.

When women's migration is framed as an emergency arising from family circumstances it does not leave much space for renegotiation of gender roles and women's liberation because it is seen as an extension of women's traditional roles and duties. In such situations, linkages between women's labour migration and personal gain are not permissible. It was also evident that some of our female respondents had internalised these ideals and propagated such narratives of familial duty and self-sacrifice.

The real and perceived demands of the labour market abroad, often linked to global care chains, fed into these social assumptions and help frame today's women's labour migration. Women are increasingly seen as a better 'fit' to the job requirements abroad. The feminisation of low-skilled, domestic and care service jobs (Oishi, 2005), which resemble the kind of unpaid work women do at home, resulted in women being viewed as more suitable for labour migration. Stereotypical views held by both women and men also consider women to be more flexible, adaptable and undemanding (Oishi, 2005). As one female participant, a former migrant worker herself, confirmed, "No man will go and work as a dish washer or sweep backyards. Women, on the other hand, always find jobs. In any situation, they will. She will wash floors or wash dishes. She will do whatever." Some men, we found, would even encourage their wives to undertake labour migration because they themselves would be too embarrassed at the prospect of having to perform non-prestigious 'womanly' service jobs. Among our male respondents one was especially quick to retort, "If not her [his wife], who should go to Russia to work? Is it me? I will never go to clean up after any Russians! I will never be a servant to them!" This "work" would be detrimental to a man's sense of masculinity, personal dignity and, possibly, post-colonial national identity.

This did not mean, however, that women entirely submitted to this imposed role. Our findings, on the contrary, illustrate that even under such limiting conditions they sought and found opportunities for positive development and growth, and we describe these experiences in detail later in this report. We will first discuss the risks and predicaments our respondents faced during and after migration, and analyse how they learnt to address them and with what degree of success.

Risks and vulnerabilities for migrant women

In the development literature women migrants have been recognised as having particular and dual vulnerability as both women and as individuals involved in migration. For example, the Beijing Platform of Action (1995) distinguishes this by stating

¹⁵ Care work is the name given to all the daily activities that sustain our lives and health, such as domestic work (food preparation, cleaning, laundry) and personal care (of children, the elderly, people who are sick or have a disability). In the northern hemisphere where increasingly fewer women are keen to take on personal household duties, and men have little interest either, families who can afford it hire domestic workers, often women from less wealthy states like Kyrgyzstan.

that, "Massive movements of people have profound consequences for family structures and well-being and have unequal consequences for women and men, including in many cases the sexual exploitation of women," (BPFA, pp. 13-14) and that, "Migration and consequent changes in family structures have placed additional burdens on women, especially those who provide for several dependents" (BPFA, p. 18). Academic literature identifies the concept of 'migration trauma' and this has become an important focus in interdisciplinary studies of migration. For example, in discussing migration trauma, Carswell et al. (2009) showed how the number of traumatic incidences, increased trauma and increased adaptation difficulties among migrants. As described by Porter & Haslam (2005), migration stressors can become chronic and may lead to decreased quality of life and poorer health outcomes overall. Post-migration problems, such as emotional distress suffered by one family member, were found to have an impact on the entire family (Carswell et al., 2009).

Unsurprisingly, our data demonstrates that our respondents, to varying degrees, were exposed to multiple and simultaneous pressures such as institutional abuse, stigma and humiliation, social isolation and alienation, home-sickness, guilt and shame, anxiety and remorse, poverty, uncertainty, etc., during their lives as migrant workers. These were recurrent themes in interviews, even among those respondents whom we have already rated as successful. Women migrants spoke of such experiences reluctantly but firmly.

Women migrant workers were often forced to engage in physically demanding, insecure and unprotected jobs due to the need to make money quickly. The story of one woman was particularly gloomy:

I was looking for a job for one and a half months. I did not even have money to pay for the bus. Then I worked for four months and was not paid. I could not even send anything home. I didn't have money for food. I worked in the kitchen and ate there. I begged my employer to give me at least 1000 som, so that I could at least send that to my son. I remember this now and it was hard (crying).

Ultimately, this respondent could find ways out of poverty and came back home with her goals realised. She, like other women migrants, used many strategies to deal with her precarious job situation. These women would address the problem of jobs

being temporary and on-demand, insecure and poorly paid by holding two positions simultaneously. They would either have two employers or hold two positions in one office. For example, "I worked in a café during the day in an office and cleaned the same office at night and also cleaned another office," one woman shared. "I worked as a dishwasher in two restaurants and also as a cleaner. You go to work at 7 am and come back at midnight." The workload was sometimes overwhelming, but these women could self-motivate, like the respondent who said, "I tried it twice, it was very difficult. It was unreal. The job was difficult and you work 24 hours and then have one day off. But when you needed money you just did it." Such physical demands had effects on both the physical and psychological health of some respondents however.

According to NSC & UNFPA (2016), about 30 percent of women and men returning home from labour migration see deteriorations in their health. Some of the health consequences were relatively minor, such as hands covered with "rashes and sores" from washing detergents. Others would eventually interfere with their productivity and lead to their forced return home. For example, one woman worked very successfully for a few years as a cook in a restaurant until, "...[my] legs became unfit for being a good cook. My legs simply stopped working because of all those years I had been standing up." It was especially tragic for her because she had just received a significant salary increase. Another woman had a similar story: "In the morning the alarm would go off and I would wake up, stand up and fall down. I would fall down because I had stopped feeling my legs." Unfortunately, standard medical service, including sexual and reproductive health care, in the country of destination was often not affordable or accessible. Cheaper semi-legal and illegal medical services offered by so-called 'black doctors' were known for their questionable quality, and they were still expensive.

Respondents also reported psychological and emotional problems such as psychological harassment at the workplace. For example, they frequently were subjected to so-called 'honesty tests' which they found humiliating:

...They test us at the beginning very seriously. My boss once left her wallet on my table, supposedly by accident. Of course, I panicked, hoping I wouldn't be blamed for anything I hadn't done... I heard many terrible stories which happened to other women like me... I called her immediately and told her about her wallet... She came back and smiled at me, saying that I had passed her test.



From top:

GSPS respondent, a labor migrant, is standing in front of her house in Iskra village (Chui).

"It is better to drink tea at home with my children and husband than to eat meat abroad," she reflects on her recent experience in Russia. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

It's time to bath her youngest boy! GSPS respondent feels very happy to be a Mom for four, despite the family's difficult financial circumstances. © UN Women/ Elyor Nematov

Threats emanating from employers was one of the most frequently reported fears (by 51 percent of women and 52 percent of men) in the UNFPA & NSC (2016) study. Psychological abuse from the women's landlords was also frequent. The following example vividly illustrates this:

Once they [the landlords] called the police to our apartment in the middle of the night. The police came and broke into our apartment. They [the landlords] extorted money from us and we did not want to give it to them. So they called the police and told them that we chased her [the landlady] with a knife. The police came and checked us for drugs... they checked our legs and arms... (A woman migrant)

Another form of ill-treatment came from law-enforcement representatives in the country of destination. In this report we will present only one of the many stories of harassment we encountered. This relates to the experience of an older respondent who worked as a cook in a small restaurant in Russia. When she received her first salary in cash and was on her way home she was detained by the local police:

They caught me and put me into their car and started pressuring me saying, "You will give us ten thousand [rubles] now," as if they knew I had that money. I told them that I did not have any money. I showed them my registration documents but they were fake and they told me where to stick them ... So I rode with them in their car, crying. I told them I did not have money with me but at home. We negotiated and agreed to three thousand. I was so cowardly. They took me home, they knew where we lived. When they brought me to the entrance my jaw dropped. They knew where we lived! So, I went inside and took out three thousand. My passport was with them, so I took out the money and gave it to them. They opened the window of their car and I gave them the money and they returned my passport and told me not to get into their eyesight anymore. They told me I was too quick. Then, I mean, three thousand was big money, when you have worked with no days off, as a cook, all day long on your feet! Crying crocodile tears I went home. I felt pain because of the money, but more because of humiliation. Later they would catch me again in the metro many times.

Inside the metro, they have a room. They take you to that room, take your passport and sit there. They have nothing else to do. It is night already. Their shift lasts until morning. The metro closes at 1 am and they amuse themselves with you. Every time you give them money. If you don't they will not let you go. A car will come for you and you will be taken away. This process is when they take you out of the

metro, as if you are incarcerated, as if you are a murderer. This is psychologically very... it is better to give them the money. Otherwise you just lose money. If you stick to your principles they will deport you.

Few women were willing to share experiences like this one. The suppression of traumatic events may be yet another sign of serious psychological trauma. Everyday exposure to routine humiliation was a source of stress to women who suffered anxiety and depression. They told us that they, "...felt humiliated and kind of dirty there..." or, as one respondent explained:

This was psychologically stressful for me, the humiliation. They tell you, "Why the heck don't you live in your damn Bishkek? Why don't you grow your damn cotton there? Why did you come here?" They would use really bad words; this was such a humiliation and was so stressful for me.

As a result, these women's lives were often full of tension and fear. Respondents would share memories such as, "I am telling you, really, you feel as if you are caught in a cage. You are as tense as a rod."

Feelings of isolation and despair were also frequently reported. Migrants felt as if they were experiencing, "...another imprisonment situation, even more so than at home... You don't even talk to anyone most of the time and just survive each day." Living conditions characterised by small, shared spaces, living out of suitcases, and having little privacy exacerbate the sense of isolation, increase stress and affect self-esteem. This participant shared her story of the residential arrangement she had to endure while abroad:

I arrived at this house and I opened the door to the apartment and thought, "Why am I here?!" This was a threeroom apartment; in every room there were ten people. The kitchen was tiny and only one stove with four rings. People took turns to cook. And there were always too many people. There was one very disgusting thing; that was the toilet and shared bathroom. I did not even understand right away where I was and where we would sleep. People would cook dinner and eat it and everybody would come and go in turn. I regretted it so much and I wanted to cry and I blamed myself for coming. (A woman migrant)

An additional source of anxiety and uncertainty was the so-called 're-entry ban'. The re-entry ban is operated based on a register compiled by the Russian Federal Migration Service of the people who are to be denied entry (for three to ten years) to Russia for

violations of administrative, criminal and immigration laws. In 2016, 119 000 Kyrgyz migrants were registered under the re-entry ban (<http://ssm.gov.kg/>). Awareness of the re-entry ban was relatively high among the NSC & UNFPA (2016) survey participants, with a total of 64 percent of women and 68 percent of men knowing that there was such a list. It was notable that, according to our data, respondents were often unaware of the alleged crimes they had committed. Finding themselves listed under the re-entry ban came as a surprise to them when they were deported or refused entry at the border. The women interviewed expressed despair and confusion about how they had been put on the re-entry ban register and about how to be removed from it. Nearly all of the women interviewed whose names were on the list keenly wanted to migrate, felt they had lost real opportunities to improve their financial status, fulfil plans for the future and strengthen social connections. Inclusion on the re-entry ban consequently resulted in poverty, frustration, uncertainty and risks associated with unregulated migration and trafficking.

Women's exposure to these various challenges and vulnerabilities was varied in terms of intensity, duration, frequency, etc., depending on individual circumstance. Our analysis has provided a collective image of the type of challenges these women might experience while they lived the lives of migrant workers. Women actively made efforts to resolve these problems using whatever resources and methods were available to them. One effective way to reduce high levels of stress, for example, was to obtain legal status as a migrant worker. Some respondents, especially those who were better educated and well-informed, would make sure they had received formal papers before engaging in any professional activity, even if it required significant expense and long wait periods. As one respondent emphasised, "As an honest creature, I just can't work with fake documents." Importantly, they encouraged and even insisted that their families and acquaintances also obtained legal documents if they migrated.

To counteract work-related migration challenges, women respondents also used their social intelligence skills to gain their employers' respect and trust. They would maintain these professional ties even after departing for home, and these served as links for new migrant workers. The practice of renaming themselves by adopting Russified versions of Kyrgyz names could also be viewed as a coping mechanism to help them integrate, although such practices can be

seen as detrimental to one's national identity and a violation of self-determination.

Some interlocutors used religion (predominantly Islam) to deal with stress. In one of the focus group discussions, women agreed that they would regularly turn to prayer and ask for God's help. One of these women said, "You sit there and think 'Oh, God, please, let everything be ok. Let me be safe and in one piece. Let me be ok'". A few women reported that they veiled themselves, or that others veiled themselves, in Russia. These data conform to the evidence of some professional literature which documents the use of religion and religious practices as coping mechanisms to deal with hardship and stress (e.g., Pargament, 1997).

Women building resilience and other positive developments

Living through these traumatic experiences ultimately allowed some migrants to build internal resilience and strength. These women reported enhanced personal development through adopting a renewed worldview, e.g., "I used to work like crazy here, there I learnt to feel like a human being"; developing more personal strength, e.g., "I got important life experience. I learnt to survive in difficult conditions"; having new possibilities for themselves, e.g., "I used to be very shy, now I am more open" or "I learnt to work, to communicate with people, work my way, be part of a team. I am now more confident. I now know that if a person wants something, it's possible to attain it"; and renewed appreciation of their families and relationships. Some migrant women for example believed that their absence contributed to the strengthening of their families and had a positive effect on their family dynamics. The quote below supports this claim:

My husband started valuing me and our relationship. It was exactly my trip to Moscow and my work there that helped me prove that I could earn more than him and do it more easily. He started valuing me more. There was more respect from him towards me because we could pay back 250, 000 rubles of our debt and buy cattle thanks to the money which I earned. (A woman migrant)

Importantly, we observed that migrants actively exploited opportunities to enhance the quality of their lives and their personal development. This observation is reflected in the responses of one of the youngest participants in this study, who said, "I went to Ankara and worked there for six months. I was deported and did not go there anymore. Now, I am just

a kelin ja daughter-in-law]." Her remark about being "just a kelin" led us to think that she perceived her status as less than the one she had when she lived as a labourer in Turkey. The NSC & UNFPA (2016) study demonstrated that nationwide people tend to believe that labour migration, "...gave people new knowledge, professional skills and social communication skills," (67 percent of women and 71 percent of men) and that, "This was a good opportunity to see the world" (68 percent of women and 73 percent of men). Our data supplemented the NSC & UNFPA study by identifying additional areas of positive development for women including: an increased sense of autonomy, new social and professional connections, economic independence, and internal psychological changes. We illustrate this through excerpts from two interviews with returning migrant women. In the first, the woman describes her improved self-confidence and an ability to stand up for herself:

I have become a person who is unfit for my in-laws and especially for people who have been raised differently, I mean for Soviet people. I returned from Russia as a freer person. I started telling people things to their face; I did not care if somebody liked what I say or not. They looked at me and thought "ofigela" ["she is nuts!"]!

The second quote below demonstrates an increased degree of independence and economic self-sufficiency:

There I was used to having my own money; I could spend it on myself. I worked in a beauty salon. You can imagine that I was used to working with makeup; I could attend spa salons and beauty master classes because it was free once a week. This became a habit for me.

Respondents who reported successful re-integration upon return could own their migration experience and be open about it. Economic achievement undoubtedly played a central role in enabling them to do this. Their sense of self-satisfaction, self-esteem and identity was evident:

Deep in my soul I was so happy that I earned money and it went towards building our house. This is a very positive side of my travels. And we were able to pay back our debts. This is also a positive side!

We sent our daughter to college and paid her tuition and sent her money. We called her and she told me, "Mum, I won an Olympiad." That made me so happy!

I came home and paid for my mother's medical

treatment. I took her to a resort. I paid for the renovation of our house.

These respondents were especially eager to share positives from their experiences abroad:

You go abroad, you see a new world, different nations and your worldview grows, even if you are 40 years old. You learn Russian. In your village you put on your robe and headscarf and that's it. While in Moscow we learnt to take care of our looks.

I learnt to get along with people. I have a closed personality. Today it is easier for me to work with people, because I had to talk to the clients as part of my job. You needed to talk to people. If you just do your job, the client won't like it. Basically, you must ask, "How are you?", "How is your doggy?" This is very helpful. Even now I am sitting and talking to you, this is already a big plus.

I learnt to be tolerant. When you see new places and new people, you grow up as a person. You don't lose yourself.

Positive internal personal changes following labour migration and its challenges would become instrumental for some of our respondents in their adjustment to their post-migration lives. We can call it post-migration growth (PMG). Below we present two success stories.

A returning migrant woman living in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan had a successful business in Russia and her new entrepreneurial skills allowed her to promote new forms of leadership and women-led economic activities. While abroad, this woman continued to run a small business back home, in which she involved her younger sister and later other young women. She helped to establish the first woman-run sales point in her village. Below is the story in her own words:

I helped my jobless little sister to open her own business in [name of the village]. She earned 300 dollars per month. This was very good money at that time. Plus, this was very prestigious, because renting a place would cost 500 dollars per month, you see. Her husband left her for Russia and she had two children and no money. Her youngest one was an infant. She hired a babysitter and started working. This was the first time a woman had a business in [name of the village] at that time.

Upon return this respondent could re-establish (after some difficulties) her own successful business with the money she earned in Russia and continued her business partnership with her Russian counterparts.

Another returning migrant from a rural area in the northern part of the country reported internal changes and positive growth so significant that she decided to become involved in the political leadership of her village. This is what she said:

This experience [labour migration] was the greatest of my life. I have become stronger as a person. Since I have come back, I just can't sit still. I always need to work. As soon as I got back from Moscow, I realised that I am not the kind of person who can just stay at home. I work all the time. I see myself as a deputy of the local council and even more, if I am given the opportunity. I have already been invited to become a member of a political party [name of the party]. I have been invited to lead the work with youth in [name of the aiy] okmotu]. The leader of this party has told me, "If my son was like you, I could die when I am thirty and my heart would be at peace."

Other outstanding women reported different kinds of post-migration leadership opportunities, such as providing legal advice and even personal facilitation of legal and secure employment for new departing migrants, both men and women. These women would use their good reputation, established connections and networks to ensure that both employers abroad and the new migrants were satisfied. We believe this data is particularly important when it comes to consideration of future policy initiatives, especially as two thirds of women and men prefer receiving information about labour migration (departure, accommodation and living, employment, etc.) directly from fellow community members, the internet and mass media, rather than from official sources (NSC & UNFPA, 2016). Precise figures reveal that only 32 percent of women and 36 percent of men reported that they would turn to specialised migration services for information if they needed it (NSC & UNFPA, 2016). Behaviours like those of the women mentioned here served to decrease the precariousness of new migrants' employment while abroad, and therefore reduced their vulnerability in general.

Post-migration mobilisation was also exhibited by a group of women motivated to change household conditions in their villages to improve the local quality of life:

We have seen life in different places. We have widened our horizons. We have been able to compare Kyrgyzstan with other countries, like Turkey. The difference is like between the land and the sky. You quickly get used to a good life, warm water, hot water, utilities and machines. You want to introduce all this here because it is convenient for yourself and for others. We want to introduce it all here as well.

These examples are illustrations of post-migration growth among women who took part in our study. Pre-migration advantages described previously, as well as the existence of a social network in the country of destination and availability of a social support system back at home, were important factors for facilitating positive change.

Post-migration stress and vulnerabilities

Post-migration growth {PMG} was not a universal phenomenon. It was more evident for those women whose level of migration stress and trauma was moderate rather than severe. Those who suffered greater stress during migration were more likely to experience signs of what we call post-migration stress {PMS}. One experienced woman migrant worker told us, "In some way, a person must feel human. There you don't feel like you are human." She had trouble recovering from migration trauma and clearly suffered its long-term effects. In her story we can recognise signs of post-traumatic stress disorder {PTSD}, including flashbacks:

I remember we were with the kids at my mother-in-law's house. It was winter and in the evening we came to see her and slept over there. My husband returned a little later with two men. And we were already in bed and they arrived with a car that had headlights on the roof. I jumped out. You know the police have projectors on their cars. I saw it and shouted "A-a-a! Police!" This was very emotional. This was such a stress for me. I pitied myself and burst out crying.

Post-migration stress {PMS} and post-migration growth {PMG} among Kyrgyzstan's returning migrants is understudied. Our data is insufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of this topic, but shows that it substantially affects reintegration, a process fraught with risks and threats of discrimination.

The NSC & UNFPA {2016} study, somewhat contradictorily, showed that only two percent of respondents in their survey reported experiencing some sort of negativity upon return. These tendencies, according to the NSC and UNFPA {2016}, did not depend on the participants' place of residence, education or other demographic characteristics. But our data clearly indicates the existence of subtle vulnerabilities among returning women migrants, the result of persistent negative stereotypes. The men and women we interviewed, for example, expressed intolerance towards women migrants who had returned. About 60 percent of all participants in the NSC & UNFPA {2016} study stated that "Women migrants returned home more independent and

self-confident and feeling equal to men." However, 38 percent of women and 45 percent of men in the same study believed that, "Women in migration begin to lead immoral lives." On this basis, according to the NSC & UNFPA (2016), 51% of women and 55% of men support the activities of nationalist organisations such as the "Patriot" groups, who try to monitor and 'protect' the moral image of women from the Kyrgyz Republic in Russia. At the same time, 22% of women and 26% of men do not consider it immoral for a migrant man to start a new family, if he continues to take care of the family that he left behind in his country of origin. Our data showed that men's concerns were related to the perceived independence, non-compliance, disobedience, etc. of returning women. They imagined that migrant women had adopted new life values, world outlooks and 'foreignness' which they disapproved of. As one respondent put it, *"I have a negative image of migrating women: they go, they get spoiled, they get divorced, they change their mind-set, and they change their world outlook"* {male FGD participant}.

Often men expressed fears that their "transformed" wives would now find their homes unsatisfactory. They worried that they could not afford the standards that their wives became used to aboard or to control them as they did before. As one male participant explained, *"They come back with crowns on their heads. She begins to think, 'Aha, I can earn money myself. I can live without a husband.' Families begin to break up."* Women migrants whose behaviours were seen as contradicting expectations associated with 'good female Kyrgyz migrant worker' narratives invoked various sorts of disapproval and punishment.

Through our interviews it became evident that young returning migrants face difficulties to get married when they return home. In focus group discussions men made statements that showed that they took it for granted that nobody would want to marry such women. One expressed a common opinion when he said, *"Who marries a migrant woman? If she chose that path, she is already a bad candidate for being a wife or mother..."* In the NSC & UNFPA (2016) survey, only 11 percent of returning women migrants reported experiencing a change in their marriage prospects. However, our research uncovered a pervasive view that women migrants are 'unmarriageable' due to their alleged transformation into 'rotten' women. One young unmarried male respondent said he would never marry a former migrant because, *"After that a girl becomes ... rubbish."* Women, including returning migrants, would themselves express such opinions as,

"After migration... oh, this girl is finished! Her destiny is...she is very unlikely to get married... even if she does, there will be all sorts of rumours. Many girls get spoiled," or, "... If you want to get married, you should avoid going to Russia. That's not how a girl builds her future." The concept of 'rotteness' revolved around women migrants perceived 'inappropriate' behaviours, which ranged from their disrespect for their parents to sexualised images of their lifestyles abroad where, *"They live with fifteen people in one room; they all sleep together. These women undress and go to bed with those men. We don't know what they REALLY do while in migration"* {participant of all-male FGD}.

In the NSC & UNFPA (2016) survey 68 percent of women and 70 percent of men agreed that, *"[Migration] worsens the relations in the family."* One case study included a divorced man who believed that his divorce was caused by his wife's going away as a migrant worker and becoming 'too Russian'. Considering the patrilocal and extended families of many local communities, negativity can often stem from the women's in-laws, who fear losing their desired control over their daughters-in-law:

...I do not appreciate the fact that my kelin [daughter-in-law] becomes so independent because she does not even ask me when she goes to the bazaar [for permission to go and what to purchase there]. Everyone has to know their own place and role in the family and fulfil that place ... (Participant of all-female FGD)

In an interview with a middle-aged woman who had returned we learnt that the fear of her family's disapproval became central to her everyday life post-migration:

Since I returned I am scared. No-one should fear people, fear being approved or disapproved. In Kyrgyzstan there is no psychological support, no specialists to speak out. I fear what my husband will say, or my mother-in-law, or my father-in-law or my mother. They say words I don't like. How do I tell them that I don't like what they say? I learned how to work, because if you work you can reach your goals. I did not do anything else [while in migration].

This suggests that some women migrants are returning to hostile home environments which are detrimental to their potential post-migration growth. Domestic violence, although not spoken about publicly, was often implied.

A few respondents reported feeling outcast and rejected by their families. Others implied that they had become a target for open scolding and bullying

by their families. They would be demoralised by humiliating phrases like, *"This is not Russia for you,"* and, *"You are in Kyrgyzstan now, so go and do your work our way,"* etc. One woman complained that her husband tried to demonise her in the eyes of their children; *"My husband told my daughters that if they did not clean the house I would yell Russian curses at them."* Data on intimate partner violence also demonstrates that women's labour migration can trigger male aggression. By way of illustration, a recently returned middle-aged female participant in a focus group discussion complained that her husband regularly accused her of inappropriate behaviour while abroad; *"Especially when he gets drunk, he tells me that that I have slept there with everybody toge- ther."* The bitterness of her words indicated that this systematic psychological pressure hurt her. For us, this implied the existence of an intra-familial conflict with a latent potential for escalation. Returning migrants who suffered family disapproval felt that the independence that they forged in migration, suddenly became not only unnecessary but also undesirable back home. They were forced to forget and renounce their migrant experience and return to 'normal.' When women were seen as having failed to do so, the likelihood of domestic violence increased.

At the same time, it was precisely the respondents' migration experience that could give them the strength to withstand such verbal and physical abuse. In a few cases we witnessed how a woman who had been economically successful as a migrant returned empowered and able to negotiate and resist harmful practices at home. The respondent mentioned above, could talk back to her husband, reminding him that, *"If I did not go, your house would never have been built."* But for how long would she resist the humiliation of being suspected of immoral behaviour? Will her husband's preoccupation with moral concerns continue to be overruled by the evident material benefits? In situations where women did not manage to bring back enough cash in their families' eyes, there was less they could do to protect themselves. Another former woman migrant seemed to have given up on changing her husband's abusive behaviour. Her choice was to accept the situation as it was; *"What can I do with him? I have kids... Plus, he is a man, so it's normal here to act like that. Even if he doesn't value me as a breadwinner, he is my husband and the father of these children."*

Investigating the incidence of domestic violence among returning migrants was not among this study's core goals. The information that we present

here emerged during our semi-structured inquiries and were not standardised through the data collection process. However, our data were sufficient to illustrate the ever-present risk of women being subjected to abuse as the result of stereotypes associated with female labour migration. To assess the quantitative prevalence of domestic violence among returning women migrants would require additional research and the use of a different methodology.

Nevertheless, our data demonstrates that some existing practices can be qualified as economic violence against women migrants. In several instances, women's personal lives and financial situation was under the strict control of their families who sought to ensure a steady supply of remittances. They were treated without violence on the condition that they focussed exclusively on their family's needs and sent their entire earnings home. Nearly all women migrants interviewed said that they conformed to these social expectations. They were strongly committed to providing their families with at least the money required to ensure their material wellbeing. This would typically include mandatory university tuition fees, wedding celebration costs, purchasing or building a new house and refurbishing it as required, and if funds remained, providing houses for children and other relatives. It would also include expenditures such as children's clothing and shoes, coal to heat houses and cash to attend traditional celebrations. Being able to deliver this "standard" package was a matter of life satisfaction, prestige and status for these women migrants.

At the same time, many women felt that if they failed to supply their families with a stable income they would be trapped, rid with a considerable sense of guilt and shame. A form of financial exploitation forced women to continue supplying their families with money for needs and essentials that appeared never ending. Asked what would happen if she could not meet her family's expectations, one respondent exclaimed, *"With what kind of face would I come home? I would feel ashamed! What would my people say? People would say, 'She did not work at all!'"* This pressure might prevent women from pursuing their own interests, motivations and goals, and force them to take on employment with excessive workloads that negatively affected their own wellbeing. Indeed, while we identified women's systematic and successful efforts to support their children and families with their remittances, we found little evidence of the money being reinvested to support the women's own personal development. On the contrary, there were visible risks for these women who, having spent years

labouring abroad in precarious conditions, come back home to find little that would benefit them. One such story is presented below. The respondent was a woman in her early twenties, who returned home after several years abroad with her husband. She and her husband had been sending their earnings to his family who used it to help their older son build a house. She says:

My husband's elder brother and his two younger brothers don't work. They don't even know the alphabet. Their wives don't know the alphabet either. They receive text messages and can't read them. So these brothers and my mother-in-law stayed at home and simply ate the money we sent. While in Moscow, my husband started missing our little daughter so badly, he just returned home. So did I. When we came back, my mother-in-law created a scandal because the house was not yet finished. They will not speak to us now, they are offended. We are being told that we are doing things wrongly. Now we don't have anywhere to live. We need to go back to work and build our own house this time.

Even when women migrants were their family's major income providers, they might have little say in how the money was spent. Often returning migrants regretted that they had sent all their earnings back home and had not saved money themselves. The words of one of our respondents vividly demonstrate this:

If my husband would let me go, I would go and work. I would NOT send money home anymore, but save it all there. When I worked there, I sent money every month. I kept enough money for food and the apartment and the rest I would send home. When I came back, there was no money for me...

In many cases, women complained that their remittances had not effectively been invested. For example, in Naryn oblast, families often used remittances to purchase animals for breeding. Our respondents claimed that this was not a strategic use of funds, did little to improve the family's well-being and did not justify the hardships they endured while abroad.

There were also smaller but still important areas of disagreement regarding how the remittances were spent. For example, one respondent, a woman migrant, laughed as she told us during a focus group discussion:

When my husband goes to the bank to withdraw the money I have sent, he takes all four of our kids with him. After he collects the cash, he takes them straight to a café to eat tasty food. I starve here and save every penny, but they go to cafés.

This respondent accepted what happened with huzmour, but there was a clear sense of disagreement over how the hard-earned money was spent and disappointment that her hard labour was not recognised.

Lack of appreciation of women migrants' earnings was also evident in cases where remittances were not seen as 'big enough' for serious purchases like houses, cars, etc. Never-ending demands for remittances from family members made women migrants feel like they were being taken for granted and under pressure. Migrants knew that if they did not live up to their family's expectations they would suffer from deep social disapproval. For example, an older woman interviewee shared her resentment of having her daughter-in-law abroad; *"All she earned, she spent for herself, her kids, not on us. There is nothing in this house that she purchased... So, I don't see any value in her travel to Russia."* This daughter-in-law is likely to suffer the consequences when she returns home, including emotional stress of living with dissatisfied family members, their spite and anger.

In addition to these family-related vulnerabilities, returning migrant women also faced other forms of economic disempowerment: lack of access to employment related services and de-professionalization. This is in large part due to the informal nature of labour migration. Participants in a focus group discussion shared their concern about the lack of government-sponsored social support and protection for the returning migrants:

Migration is a result of the government's ineffectiveness and the Kyrgyz mind-set. We worry that so many young people work illegally, as short-term hires... How will their pension be accrued and charged? (Participant of all-male FGD)

Migrant workers who were legally hired and fully complied with the host country's tax and labour market demands shared this concern. Beyond the corrupt and erratic nature of the informal labour market, what worried migrants is its invisibility in the state social protection system. Migrants' labour and contributions to the economy through remittances are not officially recognised by the government of the Kyrgyz Republic. Social benefits such as pension rights, for example, are accrued according to the number of years in formal work and the accompanying tax contributions. The number of years a person is officially employed is the most relevant factor for calculating the monthly benefit people will receive on reaching retirement age. These benefits are a crucial source of income for

many older people. The prospect of being deprived of them was frightening for migrants and a source of insecurity. In the passage below, we show a number of such examples:

When I returned, I don't know... I will tell you again that there we work for our boss; there are no labour agreements. We work as migrants. But our work is not counted towards the state pension (trudovoi stash). There is no such... This means, I will reach pension age, I am thinking how will I live then? I wish that we could bring evidence that we really worked and this work would be counted towards my pension... (A woman-migrant)

I did not have problems there with official work and legal status. But because I am approaching my pension age I am worried. My kids are too little yet to feed me. How do I get at least a minimum pension? It will be really hard for me. I have worked for so many years in Kazakhstan; naturally I have no pension arrangement. I have worked now in Russia, there I have no pension rights either, even though I work there and send money here. When I become a pensioner what kind of money will I receive? This really concerns me. (A woman-migrant)

Respondents worry that the state won't recognise their work abroad as valid and legitimate for receiving social benefits at home. It is unclear to them if the Kyrgyz Republic has agreements with Russian and Kazakhstan for example, to ensure that their years of work in those countries will count towards their pensions in Kyrgyzstan. Few women migrants interviewed understood these processes, and many worried that their considerable contribution to the economy of Kyrgyzstan through their remittances was not going to be officially unrecognised. They felt that their work abroad was being treated as insignificant or even invisible, unrecognised and unremunerated. This was a source of disappointment, frustration and despair which might push these women into more vulnerable life situations, insecure livelihoods and extreme poverty.

Migrants in our study typically performed low-skill work abroad which could lead to their de-professionalization and effect their professional development prospects back in Kyrgyzstan. Rather than formally advancing their professional qualifications, the low-status, informal and de-professionalising nature of women migrants' work, often jeopardised their employment chances upon return. A few vivid examples are given below.

For one of our respondents, time abroad interrupted her work path as an entrepreneur and put her into a

more precarious situation upon her return:

Before [I went away] my life was better. Because I worked here [in Kyrgyzstan] and I had a good salary. I could support myself. There [in Moscow] I had to work for somebody else and my life was much worse. I came back. I became jobless. I could not go back to my old job. For one year I was going here and there and could not find a job. I took out credit and started working in a bazaar and in a month I needed to start paying the loan back and I could not. It was more difficult because I had to pay back credit now.

Another respondent, a migrant from a village had worked as a teacher in a local school and found no job security when she returned:

When I returned they would not give me a full teaching load. I had to agree to teach half of the load and have to teach in a neighbouring village school as well. The head teacher said that the school principal wanted to give me less work because I had left two years ago. So, I agreed. What can I do? I work in two schools with no days off. But I can't walk that much, and I need days off...

Returning migrants often found that they lost access to professional networks and business opportunities while abroad. It was virtually impossible for them to sustain or return to successful businesses they left in Kyrgyzstan. For example one returning migrant from a rural area in the south of the country, explained how she had run a small convenience store before she migrated:

I could develop it, because I have many acquaintances, I am articulate, Somehow I could make it so that this store became recognised. See what I am saying? Everybody would come there, many people... everybody got used to it... (A woman-migrant)

When she came back, the owner of the building had used her absence to his benefit and raised the rent to a level that was unaffordable for her. Describing this situation, she said:

I knew I would not be able to pull it off. At that moment I ... (sigh), for half a year I barely managed. I had to stay at home for several months. But staying at home with two children, with not a single coin of money... not a single coin of support... This was a very hard time for me. Expenses... I wanted to work, but there was no job. I wanted to run my own business...

Stories like the above apparently contradict literature which presents female labour migration as

a bridge out of poverty. The above case studies demonstrate how labour migration, due to its de-professionalising and informal structure, may worsen women's employment prospects, result in loss of professional and social networks at home and increase returning migrants' debt burden.

In addition, women might face social shaming aimed at inducing regrets for the decision to migrate: "I was shown an index finger and ridiculed, 'You are a fool! Why did you go away at all? You just lost your job!'" one woman migrant told us. Another expressed fears that the low status of her job abroad could ruin her reputation back at home:

If somebody from my village saw me sweeping the dirty roads in Moscow... Well, I don't think they would think anything good about me and they will spread [bad] words [about me] across the entire neighbourhood.

Women were generally concerned about de-professionalization. A woman migrant, an engineer by education, who worked as a dishwasher in migration, sharing her worry:

My teachers who taught me, I felt really sorry for them. I learnt so much from them, they were my role models. Now they work as housekeepers, cleaners, baby sitters... It makes me sick because - how to say this - because our people are suffering.

A ruined professional reputation is a serious concern in a society where much depends upon networking.

There is a notion of 'immiserability' of migration (Parrado & Flippen, 2005) associated with deterioration in the quality of life among returning migrants. The NSC & UNFPA (2016) study showed that in the majority of responses, women and men returning from labour migration faced problems such as deteriorating health, difficulties with employment, alienation from children, and deteriorating relations with their spouses. Our data supported these findings and complemented them with more nuanced and gender-specific challenges and solutions. In terms of solutions, women actively sought effective ways to address and resolve the challenges presented by 'immiserability' upon return. However, it is clear that they also faced on-going gender-specific challenges which we argue arise from the gendered concept of the 'female migrant worker' which we discuss in the following section.

Social expectations and demands

In Kyrgyzstan, men, as fathers and husbands, as well as the wider male community, feel that their masculinity is threatened by female migrant workers who take on roles that have normally been regarded as a source of masculine honour and national pride. In grappling with these gendered threats, both men and women engaged in the process of socially constructing female labour migration to make it less threatening. Individual men and women, for example, would treat women's migration as temporary, after which things would return to "normal". Consequently, women and their migrant labour activities could be seen as being instrumentalised for a common social good. We argue that this process has resulted in the 'othering' of female migrants by which women's labour and contributions come to be seen as less than a job and they themselves as less than labourers. This has had damning effects on women, contributing to the physical and emotional burden of their work, and undermining their empowerment.

It is one of our central arguments that within the context of this process of 'othering' of Kyrgyz women migrants, women are first depicted as the overwhelmed victims of poverty at home; desperate, maternal, self-sacrificing, and forgiving. Such narratives of suffering were effective in providing gendered justifications for men to send their women off as migrant workers. When women's earnings are generated through work which is somehow considered as 'less than a job', their role as breadwinners is less threatening to the vulnerable sense of masculinity of the men who stay behind.

Women's perceived "natural" reliability and compulsion to take care of their families also served to justify female labour migration in ways which would not undermine men's perceived breadwinning functions. We noted that the image of a suffering migrant worker was elevated to a heightened and idealised narrative of purity, dignity and duty. This idealised romantic conceptualisation emphasised a relative advantage of women's migration compared to that of men, based on their assumed stronger ties to family and inherent diligence and reliability. Below are excerpts from relevant interviews:

Women are hardier. They only think about their families, they make more effort; they try harder to earn money for their families. (Participant of all-male FGD)

Women are more responsible; they know that they need to pay off the debts. (Participant of all-male FGD)

...Women are more resilient and hardworking than men. She is the one who often pushes him to go above and beyond to live better, or at least move from the one place in order to earn money for the family. (Non-migrant male)

The apparently positive depiction of women as naturally more responsible migrant is inherently malicious, because it imposes social expectations and rigid rules upon the “good female Kyrgyz migrant”. These pressures were powerful, yet could be easily violated and further women migrants’ stigmatisation and victimisation. Therefore female Kyrgyz migrants had to systematically supply evidence that their migrant experiences closely resembled the idealised image that had been imposed on them. We listened to people who told us:

Women? Well, women... they must remember that they are women and that when they come back to Kyrgyzstan, people here must maintain a good opinion about them. There should be no bad rumours about them. If she goes alone, anything can happen... (Participant of all-male FGD)

Women were continuously expected to watch their behaviour and not evoke any suspicions. No similar warnings were received in relation to men. However, it was apparent that women’s efforts to avoid suspicion were complicated from the start by a form of primordial doubt that sees them as incapable of resisting big city temptations. We heard descriptions such as, “*These women cannot control themselves...*”, “*Girls, unlike boys, begin to dress scantily. They come back and become more... as you say, ‘a goat who has tasted the city’*,” etc. The topic of sexual behaviour was both central and a source of harsh criticism in these and other interviews. We heard, for example, that:

There [in Russia] they have no understanding of shame, conscientiousness; they are not shy of each other. Women have no idea of shame {laughs}, no idea of morals. Men! And women, too {laughs}! They think nobody sees them and nobody knows how they act abroad. (A woman migrant)

The image of ‘immoral’ women migrants persisted even when they were clearly the victims of genderspecific migration risks. Their vulnerability was often attributed to their lack of protection, physical weakness, naivety, lack of experience, etc. We heard opinions such as, “*If a woman goes, she will be pressured. She will be spoken to derogatively,*” or, “*Women are being tricked there,*” or, “*They become sex slaves,*” and “*Our Kyrgyz girls become victims.*” Another respondent told us:

Women can be raped. They will have nowhere to turn, no one to tell. They will be too shy to tell anybody because they will be afraid of bad rumours about them. They are afraid to disgrace the honour of their families. (Participant of all-male FGD)

Narratives around both women’s sexual practices and their being potential victims of rape or other forms of gendered abuse had the same outcome: women could be socially rejected and stigmatised.

Marrying a man of non-Kyrgyz ethnicity or citizenship was also categorised as sexual promiscuity, and was a source of potential reputational damage not only to the woman’s family but also to her community and the nation as a whole:

Labour migration is a separate institution. The state benefits from it. But labour migration is also a threat to national security. If they [women] marry foreigners, they prepare enemies of the Kyrgyz people. They give birth to the nephews of our enemies. (Participant of all-male FGD)

Indeed, some participants believed that women’s labour migration should be considered within the context of national development and pride. As one respondent said, “[If women] go abroad, all the country will benefit from their remittances” (participant of all-male FGD). Here a former migrant worker, a woman in her thirties, internalises these views and gave advice to prospective women migrants:

I understand that we are all individuals and we all live our lives, but we have no right to disgrace our nation, our motherland. If you are a patriot, you should show that you are one. If you go to earn money, you earn money, and the state gives this opportunity to you. But it does not force you to sleep with everybody, drink and smoke, and so on. Live normal lives and earn money just the same. This will also bring you more respect.

Strong statements like, “*If a man leaves, he can take another wife. If a woman goes and marries another man, then the entire state collapses,*” were also common and revealing of the deep-seated hypocritical convictions around women’s gendered role in ensuring the stability of the nation and the state, as well as that of their own families.

We identified a consensus that, “*If a woman does something wrong, this will bring shame on her husband*” {participant of all-male FGD}, and by

extension on the community and nation. Therefore the purity and high morality of Kyrgyz women were viewed as intrinsically linked to the good reputation of the Kyrgyz nation. Women who were dishonoured could be subject to punishment, violence and social disapproval. Given this context, it is not surprising that the NSC & UNFPA (2016) study found that more than half of all respondents (51 percent of women and 55 percent of men) supported the work of Kyrgyz nationalist organisations in Russia, which attempt to uphold the moral image of women from the Kyrgyz Republic by seeking out those who engage in “bad” behaviour to strip, beat and video them, with photos and recordings then uploaded to the internet as a punishment. At the same time, only slightly less than 80% percent of participants approve of Kyrgyz migrant men who start new families abroad.

Control of women’s behaviour, especially sexual behaviour, has been of crucial importance because women “...as wives and daughters, are carriers of masculine honour” (Nagel, 1998, p. 256). The regulation of Kyrgyz women migrants’ sexuality has taken different forms and had varied effects on their mobility. A female participant in a FGD claimed that, “If girls go by themselves, this is very risky. They don’t even sleep at home. They get pregnant and go to ‘black’ doctors. This is why we in [name of the city] don’t send our girls off.” Family members might entirely prohibit a prospective migrant from leaving because of concerns about what migration might do to her sexuality and by extension to her contribution to the nation’s reputation. In a few cases, we observed families trying to re-instate their control by preventing women from a repeat migration once the acute financial problems of the household had been resolved. For example, one returning migrant who was the middle-aged daughter-in-law to an older lady, shared her exasperation with us:

I gave an education to all my children. We built ourselves a house. We moved in to our house. I wanted to go again because in the new house the walls were bare, but my mother-in-law did not let me go.

Viewed as a threat to their families, or morally suspect, Kyrgyz female migrants might be subjected to increased social surveillance by family members, especially by their fathers and husbands. In the guise of providing protection, family members used methods of distant control. This could mean ensuring that women who were leaving were accompanied or hosted by relatives or became part of a reliable existing social network. In all our interviews with

migrant women, they indicated access to some safety network in the country of destination. As one man, a migrant worker’s husband said, “How will you let her go to an unknown land? How will you let your woman go alone? You will not be able to... She [his wife] went with her sister. They went together. She went with her people.” For this respondent it was crucial that his wife had not been alone when she migrated. In another case, a husband of a migrant woman ensured that his wife would be properly protected and supervised by male relatives (his wife’s brother-in-law) while living abroad.

Modern communication technologies were also widely used to monitor family members. The husband of a returning migrant told us that he would call his wife two or three times a day using an ‘IP-telephone’ in order to, “...make sure she is at home, that she got home all right.” In speaking to us, his wife told us with laughter how she experienced this:

This was like five times a day. I was laughing; this was like five-times-a day namaz. Yes, people pray five times a day, while you call me five times a day. From Kyrgyzstan it was cheaper and he kept calling me. I would also call sometimes to talk. Five times a day with my husband, three times a day with my children.

For these men, these practices allowed them to project the image of a husband who continues to fulfil his protective and supervisory function in the family. For women, such intensive demands on their time interfered with their job requirements and undermined their professional motivation.

Another form of controlling women while abroad was to issue them with instructions regarding proper behaviour and the dress. Below we present the kind of advice home communities give migrant women:

See, you live in a village like a normal woman and then go to the city. In the big city you live in a room with other young women. And you look at these young people and begin to put on makeup! (Participant of all-male FGD)

When they go away to work, these girls can go to nightclubs and can rot. Work colleagues go to nightclubs and so they also have to go to nightclubs. They change for the worse, not for the better. (Participant of all-male FGD)

Standard behaviours such as putting on makeup or participating in corporate social activities are therefore seen as detrimental to a woman’s reputation. Quickly such activities are construed as

“indecent” and associated with immorality. Of concern was a clear contradiction between the demands for ‘decent’ behaviour and the requirements of women’s jobs. Kyrgyz women migrants told us how their employers demanded that they look presentable, well-groomed and neat:

We worked in a good restaurant, we had to look good. We could see different celebrities, like Pugacheva and Kirkorov. Every day we would wake up, wash and carefully do our hair, come to work looking so cute, and then – wash floors. (Two participants of FGD with women migrants)

When women did not meet their employer’s expectations they risked being perceived unable to embrace the corporate spirit, work in a team and grow professionally. This might have a harmful effect on their capacity to earn money, which was the purpose of their migration in the first place.

Migration’s effect on children and teachers

Even though as described above, many migrant women work abroad to raise money for their children, they often face public recrimination for “abandoning their families” and their decision to migrate is cast off as selfish and irresponsible. In focus groups participants for instance spoke of the negative impact an absent mother could have on her children’s welfare. Participants would say, “*I am against migration among girls. When girls aged 25-30 years leave, this is bad. Their kids will be left with no care. They will grow up unenlightened [temnie]*” {Participant of all-all male FGD}. Some women migrants themselves said, “*This is just a pity. Women don’t see their kids grow, what happens to them. We only aspire to make money and we waste our time far from home, our motherland,*” or, “*The only thing I want to say, whatever the situation, mothers should not leave their kids behind. This is what I want to say to mothers who go away to earn money.*” Some women reported being “punished” by their children: “*The kids stopped talking to me on the phone*”; “*My son has become indifferent to me. He became distant. He stopped confiding in me, he prematurely became an adult because he missed me so much.*” Relatives also at times added to the pressure. For example, the respondent below came home for a short vacation and experienced an incident which traumatised her:

She [my daughter] was about four years old. And when we arrived, my younger brother and his wife met me. It was very difficult to leave when your daughter is so small. So they taught my daughter that my sister-in-law was her mother. Then, once, they asked my daughter, “Where is

your mummy?” and she pointed at my sister-in-law. It hurt me so badly and I started crying.

Women migrants were also often blamed for abandoning their husbands, pushing them to depression or alcoholism following their departure. One such respondent told us, “My husband, without me, was becoming an alcoholic. I was told that I was sending too much money and had made him an alcoholic.” This woman’s mother-in-law insisted that she return and did not allow her to go back to Russia for work. In a different case, an independent woman migrant’s mother-in-law continuously threatened to find another wife for her son, urging her to take better care of him. This apportioning of blame represents yet another form of vulnerability for women, whose labour migration has not absolved them from their role of chief nurturer in the family.

Children of migrant workers also face stigma, especially in their schools. We interviewed six school teachers from different parts of the country, all of whom emphasized that their pupils required their parents’ presence, especially their mothers, to perform well at school. They claimed that there were differences in the behaviour and motivation, even in the physical appearance, of pupils whose mothers were not living at home. A primary school teacher gave a specific example:

When her mother came back I could see it right away. When she was back the little girl changed immediately. Some brightness appeared, she was shining, and she opened up. She became more alive... [...] She started studying better, she stopped missing classes.

Without exception, the school teachers considered mothers to be central to parenting, and consequently disapproved of women migrants who left their children behind. Children, especially girls, deprived of such motherly care were seen as particularly deviant. One teacher interviewed observed that, “When the father leaves for migration children are not that affected.” Other opinions expressed included the following:

Well, we live in a century of shortcomings. Mothers are very important for raising children. It is the mother who gives them a good upbringing. A father is not that close to children. It is better if fathers migrate for labour.

Husbands get drunk. I am telling you this from my experience. I always give those examples. I think it is better if fathers go away and the mothers stay to bring their children up, to be with their children. After a father gets drunk, what kind of upbringing will a child get? The child will not receive normal care.

A real or perceived lack of “normal care” for the children of migrant families led to these children’s stigmatisation. We learnt that they were perceived and treated differently in school:

We used to call dysfunctional families those where there was violence, alcoholism, drugs. Today, unfortunately, this list includes the children of migrants. It’s really unfortunate. I am telling you this as a pedagogue. I have in my class, for instance, three girls. One girl was left with her grandmother because her mother left the family. Another one has both her mother and father abroad. And the last one is a half-orphan, who father is alive but left her to earn money. (School teacher)

These children are in the at-risk group. We work with them separately because they have a different mind-set. They are very sensitive, susceptible. Any wrong word, wrong move can kill them, not just offend them. This can leave them in a very bad way... (School teacher)

For school teachers, the children of migrant workers caused them additional personal and professional work. All of the teachers interviewed reported that they “try to be substitute mothers.” Certainly, they repeatedly and unsuccessfully reached out to the children’s caregivers, but ultimately ended up expending their personal resources, such as time and money, to ensure their wellbeing:

Myself I tried to be her mother, I helped her. I also talked to her father.

When we study difficult subjects, we help them. Then, we have school events but they don’t have mothers, so I give my own money on their behalf. You pity them, you give something yourself. I tell their families. In the end you contribute for them. For example, the 8th of March [celebration of International Women’s Day], everybody greets each other and then if someone doesn’t greet [with a gift] and if she is not greeted [with a gift] she is said to be improper.

When a child does not receive sweets [a gift of a bag of sweets given to children for New Year], they cry. You must treat these children equally. You really must fulfil the roles of their mothers.

The work of ‘equalising’ often meant that teachers paid from their own pockets for the expenses that they saw as important for the children’s psychological wellbeing and to ensure their participation in school activities. Most of the teachers who were interviewed purchased stationery for the children of migrants at the beginning of the year

even though their own salaries are very low. Additionally, these teachers found themselves compelled to engage in emotional and therapeutic work for which they felt they were not trained:

Sometimes a teacher must also be an actor. We must learn everything and then act in a just and fair way. We also must work as psychologists. We must do what is good for them and not lose a single day.

School teachers took on this additional work with no expectation of extra remuneration or institutional recognition. On the contrary, school administrations would further burden the teachers instructing them to visit the homes of migrants’ children, to observe their living conditions and produce regular reports. This was counted as part of their regular workload. But such monitoring could also strengthen the children’s stigmatisation, compounding their vulnerability. Ultimately it would be the mothers who would be expected to address the harm of their children’s stigmatisation upon their return.

Dealing with social expectations and risks of stigma

Women migrants tried to address their sense of guilt by maintaining close ties to their family members. They conceptualised ‘emotional care work,’ or the demonstration of motherly love, as something that could be performed from a distance through phone calls, social media and the giving of gifts. However at the same time they emphasized that this was insufficient and that they suffered when away from their children. One respondent described how, “*The moment I was on my way to Bishkek to the airport, my daughter, a 9th-grader at that time, hugged my legs and cried and did not want to let me go. In Moscow I would imagine that scene again and my heart would bleed, I would cry.*”

In a few rare cases however, migrant women succeeded in organizing care work in their house in their absence by tasking other family members, including their husbands. Grandparents, older children, particularly daughters, and husbands would provide childcare and other kinds of assistance, such as cooking and housework. Some women reported having succeeded in challenging traditional gender roles at home and established important cooperation with their husbands to share childcare. This provided the women with a sense of empowerment and with the ability to differentiate themselves from the stereotypical migrant women who simply abandoned her family. Such women were few however and

stressed how unusual and fortunate they were to have such trustworthy and supportive husbands. These informants spoke about how their husbands, former migrant workers themselves, not only provided child care but also provide caring advice on how to behave while away:

You come home and some husbands scold their wives. Before my departure my husband told me to buy a long nightgown. Why? Because he told me that I would sleep with other people in one room. He understood. Others don't understand, they hear about it and have bad thoughts and [believe] rumours.

My husband told me to cut my hair short and dress like a woman from the city. He made me an urban girl! He told me to go freely so that the FMS (Federal Migration Service of Russia) would not bother me.

Their husbands confirmed their words:

When she was leaving I felt positive. She consulted with me and with the family. "If you want it, then go," I said. I did not scold her, I gave my permission.

Our children were still small and they had to be looked after. As their father I took care of them for two years and raised them well.

Because a man is the master in a house you take on the role of both the father and the mother. This is a double job. If you don't do it, this is wrong. If you don't take care of them, your kids will go hungry; if you don't dress them, they will be poorly dressed. You must educate and discipline them. This is what I did as a father.

In some cases, older children, in most cases daughters, would become caregivers. One young participant described the life of her elder sister when her mother was away:

It was difficult for her; everything fell on her shoulders; she did everything. Yes, she would go to school or college in the morning, come home and clean and did everything. She would do her homework at night and early in the morning and went to her classes. When mum was not there, my sister showed me lots of warmth; she would hug me and kiss me, and pamper me.

In other cases, women left their children with their mother-in-law. This was a choice typically dictated by patrilocal tradition and helped counter negative stereotypes about a woman's departure. Women profusely praised their mothers-in-law:

*My poor mother-in-law! Thank you so much! Until she died she took care of my kids. If she did not, how could I have gone? I will thank her for the rest of my life! She looked after my children as if they were her own.
(A woman migrant)*

*My daughter did not forget us thanks to my mother-in-law. She would tell her that she had a mum and a dad. She showed her our photos. She showed her our photos through the internet, WhatsApp, odnoklassniki [Russian social media site]. And she [the little girl] did not forget us. When we came back she recognised us right away.
(A woman migrant)*

At the same time, this could reinforce existing inequalities between the women and their mothers-in-law which are often already pronounced in households in Kyrgyzstan. Women would seek their mothers-in-law's authorization and blessing to go abroad, and then provide them with material support. Below is one of many examples:

Of course, she [the mother-in-law] did not like it, but she did not show it. Plus, I tried; I knew she was taking care of my children and that her workload was big. I tried to give her gifts every holiday and every time I came home I thanked her [with money]. (A woman migrant)

When women migrants could demonstrate to their communities that they remained emotionally and materially connected to their families, and had secured a strong family support network to take on their responsibilities at home, they could reduce stigma on themselves and their families. This allowed them to enjoy their increased financial and networking opportunities without compromising their reputations.

And you know what else, to be honest? I am telling you that women get spoilt there. I really don't like it. You know these were the women I knew, we interacted when we were here. Two or three women were my classmates in university and now they are behaving inappropriately with men. Once we decided to meet in McDonald's. I mean we were in Moscow, we had not seen each other for a while. I thought it was super and I took a day off. Although I worked thirty-one days a month because I came there to work... So, we met in McDonald's and my classmate came with a Russian boyfriend. I did not like it. I did not stay with them. I told her, "You know I only came for a couple of minutes. I must go home now." So I went home and slept in. I have a very trusting relationship with my husband. I did not even allow myself to speak to another man. For me this is already cheating, never mind sitting and interacting with them and drinking, as many of our women do. For me this was now a matter of principle.

It was important for her to recast herself as a devoted and faithful wife who would make every effort to dissociate herself, mentally and physically, from anyone indulging in what might be perceived of as socially unacceptable behaviour. Another respondent's interview is an example of more general distancing:

If you went there, you should work. Regardless of whether you are a man or a woman. I had a goal to earn money for the family, for good reasons. That is why people go there. And when I saw... especially when I lived in a shared apartment... I saw many stories. I saw a lot. Some women went rotten. Their destiny was spoiled. There were some young girls too. I went all by myself and I did not do those wrong things. You went there to work, right? So, you work. This is how my life was there.

These respondents clearly adhered to the social construct of 'proper' women-migrants as asexual. In fact, women used several strategies to 'desexualise' themselves to avoid any rumours. One young single woman told us that she introduced herself as a married woman with three children to avoid being seen as a potential target of romantic and sexual advances abroad. Another described how she once ran away from the apartment of an acquaintance because she did not want to be where extra-marital sexual relationships took place. Some presented themselves as asexual human beings, like the informant who spoke of her life in migration in the following terms:

I can live without it [sexual activity]. I realised that I don't care if I have a regular sex life or not; I did not even think about it... whether you need it or not at all....

Another returning migrant explained that she 'forgot' how to be intimate with her husband:

With my husband my first problem was very intimate. I got unused to ... (laughing). Can you imagine, three, four months without... I think I have become not so passionate... I am telling you honestly. I came home and could not get used to being touched. It turned out that in four months I got so unused to it. This was my first problem.

In an extreme form of self-desexualisation we repeatedly heard in one village the story of a woman who had a young child on a flight:

This woman migrant became pregnant whilst in Russia. She left her four-year old son in the luggage claim area at Manas Airport as soon as she saw some acquaintances

from her village. That boy was eventually found by airport workers, but after a careful search for a parent, nobody wanted to take him.

Returning home with a baby conceived while away was definitely evidence that the mother had had an active sex life. The woman chose to disassociate herself from this fact and avoid the related repercussions for her and her family, rather than to keep her son. The fear of stigmatisation was so powerful that it had forced her to choose a radical solution.

When discussing their migration experience, the women interviewed tended to frame it in gendered terms, emphasising their roles as mothers and wives, and their migration as an act of familial loyalty and self-sacrifice. As women migrants recast themselves in such narratives we discovered that they could not be independent and autonomous. When their presence was seen as necessary at home, they were expected to return immediately. One respondent, Gulzada, was working in Moscow in a printing house and earned enough to fund a house for her family and two big wedding celebrations for her children. After her husband had a stroke, her children called her back. She relates, *"They dictated the condition: 'Mum, enough is enough, we don't need your money, we need you! If something happens to dad, we will not forgive you!'"*

Zaryl, another respondent, was urged back by her daughter who was getting married and needed her mother by her side. Zaryl explained that, "I was too ashamed to think that my daughter would be married and there would be no parents around. I had no choice and came back home for her." Ageing in-laws and parents, having provided care services to the children of migrant women, often expect these women to return and provide care for them as they get older. For instance, Nargiza found a good job in Moscow, but soon after she left her mother died. She was not able to get back fast enough to see her mother alive. Her relatives told her not to go back. Nargiza's sister told her:

That's it. Stop. See, you did not get to see Mum alive. Now you have an old mother and father-in-law. Think about them. You are their only kelin [daughter-in-law]. If you go and something happens, all you find there will have no meaning here. Think!

Nargiza stayed in Kyrgyzstan to take care of her elderly family members, leaving her belongings and work instruments in Russia.

Religion as a means of coping

The social disapproval of independent female migration was especially evident when discussed in religious terms, mostly from the perspective of Islam. Women's autonomous migration was perceived to ostensibly contradict Muslim beliefs. The idea that, *"It is forbidden for a woman to go away alone. If she goes alone, God knows... this is wrong, according to Islam, this is something that it is forbidden to do,"* {participant of all-male FGD} arose repeatedly in many FGDs. Men voiced the undivided opinion that, *"Those who have a religious conscience have their wives at home. She can be hungry, she can be full, but she must be satisfied with what her husband brings home,"* or, *"Among us Muslims, we have a regulation that men cannot let their women go away,"* etc. In highly religious communities and families, migrant women were likely to face greater social isolation and exclusion.

In our research, we found that some women became more religious after returning home. The cause or motivation for this change was not clear. The daughter of a migrant woman and a returning migrant worker herself, for example said:

I liked Moscow. There were 120 Kyrgyz people working [in a hotel]. Registration and patent was not a problem. But my mum called me back home. When I came home, I covered myself immediately. One month later I started reading namaz (prayers).

This behaviour may be a way for women to safeguard against rumours and reputational risks, and a way to increase their marriage prospects especially in more religious communities. To give an example, in an interview with a young man, our researcher asked what his opinion would be of a woman who had been a migrant worker. The respondent's answer was clear: *"Well, I will see. If she reads prayers, if she is a believing girl, one can marry her. If not, I would say not to marry her."* For some young women, engaging with Islam could be an effective means of minimising any possible social harm from the stigma attached to women's independent mobility. The practice of

religion can thus become a way for women migrants to further their interests and achieve personal ends. This can be treated as the instrumentalisation of religion; it is intentional but yet forced upon them from outside because of the existing system of negative beliefs about female labour migration. Islam can become a space for women to practise their agency within religious frameworks that can increase their personal chances of successful reintegration. Employing religious attributes such as veils and hijabs can further their anticipated positive outcomes.

The NSC & UNFPA (2016) study revealed some data about links between religion and migration. The survey found data that contradicted conventions shared by expert communities that citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic tend to become more religious upon their return home. Essentially, the numbers proved the conventions to be wrong. While some data indicated an increase in religiosity after return, this was true mainly for migrants coming back from the United Arab Emirates {89 percent of respondents}. Increased religiosity of migrants after returning from the UAE was often particularly noted in rural areas {91 percent}, in contrast to urban residents {84 percent}. Among those urban residents returning from Turkey 11 percent of those from Bishkek and 21 percent of respondents from the country as a whole mentioned increased religiosity upon their return. Interestingly, labour migration to the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan had no significant effects on the religiosity of migrants: less than 2 percent of respondents reported increased religiosity after returning from these countries. The survey identified reasons for increased religiosity, such as active religious organisations in the host countries {47 percent}, and the belief that turning to religion helps migrants cope with the difficulties of life away from home {21 percent}. The main reasons for decreasing religiosity of migrants were lack of time for religion, decreased access to religious organisations, influence of other religions {24 percent}, and loss of contact with their traditional religion {19 percent}.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Female labour migration in Kyrgyzstan is characterised by complex and dynamic narratives, polarised attitudes, conflicting ideas and contradictory practices for those women and men who leave, who stay behind, and those who return. Dilemmas persist between economic pressures which encourage women to migrate and gender norms which assign them caregivers tasks at home. Individuals and communities deal with these complications and ambivalences through the continuous social construction of women's migrant labour as temporary, due to external financial pressures and women's lifestyles abroad as vulnerable.

Upon their return, women are expected to revert to their pre-migration roles, lifestyles and functions within their households. They are closely monitored by their families for any internal changes. Any signs of possible liberation and emancipation are countered through implicit and explicit forms of violence and on-going control. Female labour migration, thus, occupies what could be described as a 'gendered and ambivalent moral space', characterised by specific vulnerabilities and risks for the women migrants.

We show that women migrants actively use the opportunities they are given for their own personal benefit and empowerment. They maintain a sense of "normalcy" and stability by employing specific strategies which allow them to preserve their "proper" image, while simultaneously using their mobility as an opportunity for self-development and growth. However, such positive effects were less evident among women who migrated in order to support their working husbands and provided mainly childcare and domestic support in the host country. The permissibility of women's autonomous migration currently occurs largely through complex dynamics, discursive negotiations and the recasting of female migration as 'less' than a job, and women migrants as 'less than labourers'. But generally, the women migrants from Kyrgyzstan who manage to find opportunities to develop their independence and to pursue their own interests, do this while still conforming to normative beliefs about women being primarily household caretakers, and without openly challenging traditional gender norms. Migrant women efforts, we argue, have the potential to destabilise and transform divisive and hierarchical gender norms, but only gradually.

In this study we have identified migration-related vulnerabilities which were both general and specific to women. We have argued that pre-migration vulnerabilities and privileges might reduce or minimise risks for women whilst in migration and determine if they are likely to benefit from post-migration growth. We have discussed factors which could contribute to migration-generated positive development among women migrants and what post-migration threats might exist. Based on our analysis, we have formulated a number of policy recommendations which we hope can be used to multiply positive experiences and address newly identified areas of concern.

Recommendations:

Our findings and the existing literature inform the following **recommendations** for increasing the propensity of women's labour migration to support gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as their sense of security and ability to contribute to community level peace. They include commitments in at least three necessary areas of policy, and programmes towards the following:

1. Human-rights approach and global commitments to development.

Respecting human rights is a precondition for growth and prosperity in peace and security¹⁶. This in turn enhances migrants' capacity to contribute to their own wellbeing, that of their families and of society. To enforce respect for human rights of women migrants and ensure relevant practice, we propose the following recommendations:

¹⁶ Migration and Development: a Human rights approach <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cmw/docs/HLMigration/MigrationDevelopmentHC%27spaper.pdf>

- The Kyrgyz Republic must ensure adherence and enforcement of all the human rights treaties and instruments that promote and protect the rights of migrant workers, including women and girls, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women {CEDAW}, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families {ICRMW}, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights {ICESCR}, the Migration for Employment Convention, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, etc.

- The Global Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals are to be fulfilled to create an environment in which women can choose to migrate rather than be forced by economic necessity or security concerns. It is thus recommended that the Kyrgyz Government promotes realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals {especially, Goal 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16} which reduce constraints that push people to migrate such as unemployment, gender inequalities, etc.

- The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, with support from the international and local community, is to review national development programmes, e.g., the new Sustainable Development Strategy till 2040, the Programme to Assist Employment and Regulate Labour Migration till 2020, the law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On external labour migration", the agreement "On guarantees of the rights of citizens - participants of the CIS in the field of pensions {1992}", the agreement between the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan and between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on "Cooperation in the field of labour migration and social protection of migrant workers {1994}", the CIS Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families {2008}, etc., in order to identify discriminatory provisions and modify them as necessary.

- Policies, programmes, projects and community work is to be developed to enhance provision of greater state support and advice to potential migrant workers and returnees, to ensure that they know their rights and can access services including health care, social insurance, civil documentation {such as birth registration} and legal aid. This pre-and post-orientation should take into consideration women migrant workers' greater vulnerabilities to sexual abuse and trafficking, but without overly narrowing women's migration experience to these aspects.

- The Kyrgyz Government is to ensure that accessible legal literacy programmes {via a range of communication channels} are instituted to promote better understanding of the human rights of women migrants. This includes awareness-raising on migration issues, such as how to avoid becoming a victim of the re-entry ban of the Russian Federation.

2. Gender-sensitive approach in migration policy and programmes.

International migration must be regarded as a gendered phenomenon. Any analytical frameworks used to understand migration need to allow for investigation of how migration and its outcomes differ along gender lines. Women's increased participation in international labour migration provides them with the opportunity to join the labour market, make informed decisions and escape repressive environments at home. However, migration poses gender-specific risks to women due to discriminatory norms and cultural expectations which limit their potential and capacity. The following recommendations underline the need for gender-sensitive approaches in developing migration policies and strategies:

- The Kyrgyz Government is to include gender concerns and the need to increase protection and services for migrant women into bilateral discussions on labour migration management between Kyrgyzstan and host countries such as Russia.

- Given that women are more likely to encounter precarious working conditions, providing effective supervision of working conditions for migrant women by relevant authorities needs to be considered as a means to avoid violations of workers' rights and exploitation.

- In recognition of the fact that women may struggle to access them, national and international organisations, both state and non-governmental, are to make efforts to provide accessible, gender-responsive services, including mental health and social care, covering violence prevention and protection, and incorporating referral mechanisms.

- It is necessary to ensure sufficient support to mentorship schemes and networks between successful female migrants and women who are considering working abroad. Support needs to be given to migrant women's self-help groups, migrants' associations and other non-governmental organisations which help women to claim their rights and improve their access to empowerment

- Targeted attention to gender-specific vulnerabilities and strengths in migration policies and programmes would generate a more just situation for women migrants. Multiple forms of oppression in migration (e.g., as women, as foreigners, as a particular race, etc., by host nationals and by the home community) must be considered. It is essential to provide access to justice and due processes for women in all stages of migration.

- Stakeholders are to engage in the promotion of policies and programmes responsive to the needs of female migrants, including measures to be undertaken to foster sensitivity to returning migrant women's vulnerabilities at home, at work and in society at large.

- Negative views of women migrant workers mirror the pervasive gender-related myths in Kyrgyz society. These myths are further conceptualised in the minds of Kyrgyz people through their perceptions of women migrants. Therefore it is important to reduce the patriarchal/binary perception of gender roles in society through a systematic school education programme aimed at eliminating the root causes of gender-based stereotypical perceptions of the roles of women and girls, including women migrants.

- A longer-term approach to reducing women's exposure to precarious working conditions is to promote vocational education and training among girls and women, encouraging and empowering them to take up professions and develop skills not typically embraced by women in Kyrgyzstan. This will help to ensure more secure employment for women in the formal sectors of the economy, both in the domestic and foreign labour markets. Secure employment is instrumental to women receiving social benefits and to ensuring better protection from abuse, including human trafficking.

3. Conceptual focus on women's agency (as opposed to victimising women migrants).

Migration and development processes are closely intertwined. Women and men's opportunities to maximise development benefits from working abroad should become more central to the analysis of migration. We agree with the Women in Migration Network that, *"Migrant women workers should not be seen as a source of income to their country of origin through remittances, nor as a source of cheap labour in destination countries. Migrant women workers make significant contributions to development beyond remittances. This includes women's leadership, agency, knowledge and social contributions in countries of origin*

and destination" (2017, p.6)¹⁷ and recommend the following:

- A continued effort to conduct gender sensitive analysis, review and evaluation of all strategic development documents and programmes at all levels, with a view to integrating gender expertise that would highlight the important potential women migrants have for contributing to sustainable development and peace.

- The Kyrgyz Republic is to follow UN Women's Recommendations to, *"Develop gender-responsive, human rights-based migration policy without delay, which recognizes the agency of women in migration, promotes their empowerment and leadership and moves away from addressing migrant women primarily through a lens of victimhood,"*¹⁸ and, *"Acknowledge the important contributions made by women migrants to sustainable development and social change in countries of origin, transit and destination,"*¹⁹ in order to focus on protecting women's human rights and not on protecting women because the latter limits women's autonomy and independence.

- National and international partners are to engage in the organisation of public information and awareness-raising campaigns on the feminisation of migration and the positive contributions that migration can make to the development-rights nexus to reduce popular negative perceptions of women working abroad.

- Skills training should be provided for returning migrants to help them fit back into the Kyrgyz labour market and address the de-professionalization that can occur during labour migration. This can help to minimise post-migration stress.

Most of the above recommendations will require:

- Increased understanding of migrant women through empirical data which must be treated as effective evidence to form a basis for formulation of policies and programmes. Systematic and regular research and gender-sensitive data collection is

17 https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/women_in_migration_ts3.pdf

18 UN Women, Recommendations for addressing women's human rights in the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.

19 UN Women, Recommendations for addressing women's human rights in the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.

required to provide a basis for fair, gender sensitive, evidence-based migration policies and advocacy, with the goal of preventing discrimination and exploitation.

- Allocation of sufficient resources and manpower to policy makers and decision-making mechanisms to prompt a shift from gender-blind to gender-sensitive promotion and protection of women's rights.

These recommendations will help the government of Kyrgyzstan implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is grounded in

international human rights law and recognises that the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is crucial, especially to reach Goal 5. Ultimately, these will all contribute to enabling both male and female migrants to participate fully in both societies; that of the sending country and that of the receiving state, and will include, "*[utilizing] labour market integration, social inclusion and political participation in ways that are respectful of their identity and protective of their human rights, recognizing that the outcomes can include greater peace and prosperity for the community and country*" (UN Women, 2017, p. 10).

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