

**Special Report: Migration and Gender in the African Context**

Ms. Bineta Diop, Executive Director, Femmes Africa Solidarite  
Ms. Julia D'Aloisio, Information and Communication, Femmes Africa Solidarite

**Introduction:**

Migration has increasingly become a topic of interest, concern and debate amongst the international community. There are currently estimated to be 200 million migrants worldwide, with 86 million of them being economically active (Ally, MRI, 2006). The sheer numbers alone suggest that migration will be one of the critical challenges this millennium (Experts Meeting, Algeria).

In terms of the context in Africa in particular, migration has, and will continue to shape the continent's social structure, economy and development objectives. Africa has a history of pull (better opportunities, from destination countries) and push (conflict, in national countries) factors which have influenced its migration patterns (Experts Meeting, Algeria). In terms of numbers, "of the 150 million migrants in the world, more than 50 million are estimated to be Africans. Furthermore, about 50 per cent of the internally displaced persons in the world and 28 per cent of the world's refugees are in Africa" (Experts Meeting, Algeria). While migration used to take place most often between countries with colonial links, this is no longer the typical model, with migration now occurring within Africa, and between African countries and those in Europe with no previous ties (Klein-Solomon, 2006).

Migrants bring energy, innovation and other contributions but the host society must allow them to be fully functioning and adequately protected. It used to be that migrants would accommodate to the host society and as they would plan to make the host country their permanent home. This model of migration is changing however, with people continuing to move in response to economic and social circumstances (Klein-Solomon, 2006). As such, there it is now increasingly recognized that migrants come with their own history and identities, thus making the integration process a two-way transition between the migrant and host society, rather than a one way process of assimilation (Klein-Solomon, 2006). Of course, this is still an idea situation, and there are ample examples where the migrant's transition does not meet this ideal. As such, there is really no one integration blueprint that fits the context of all societies.

The complex situations that spur a decision to migrate make human rights issues a primary concern. With migration being increasingly shaped by the global market, concern for the maintenance of human rights during migration has often been absent. Migrants often end up lacking basic social rights in both their host countries because of their status as non-nationals, or in some cases, undocumented workers, as well as in their home countries because where they are absent or in a state of limbo. Moreover, class, race and gender discrimination within work environments and society at large exacerbates the problem.

The purpose of this report is to examine the key issues effecting African migration today; explore the implications of migration for countries of origin and countries of destination;

review the actions that have been implemented in terms of migration up to this point; and propose some avenues through which to pave the way forward. Further, this report aims to take a gendered perspective in examining the ways in which women's migration is shaped by unequal power relations which carry particular implications and challenges.

### **Background: The African Context**

While there are number of push and pull factors at work which influence the migration patterns in and from Africa, most all of them have economic and social roots. At a very basic level, people migrate in search of better social and/or economic opportunities. This comes in the form of low wages, unemployment, rural underdevelopment and poverty (Experts Meeting, Algeria). Fuelled by the rapid population growth in relation to the lack of resources and opportunities in the country of origin, migrants set out in search of greener pastures.

Migration in and from Africa is also shaped by the complex social and political factors facing the continent. Among these are, "poor governance, patronage and corruption, human rights violations, political instability, conflict and civil strife, the real or perceived opportunity for a better life, high income, greater security, better quality of education and health care at the destinations" which all contribute to a decision to migrate (Experts Meeting, Algeria). The greater ease of mobility and decreased costs associated, along with the desire to reunite with family and friends, also amplifies these factors (Experts Meeting, Algeria).

There is a direct link between conflict and migration. Additionally, forced migration, such as that caused by the outbreak of violent conflicts, creates specific concerns for migrants. Not less than 50 million people are displaced by conflict (Ndiaye), with women and children being disproportionately affected. Rather than making a decision to move in search of better opportunities, migrants are uprooted from their place of origin without significant warning or preparation. As such, the needs of refugees and IDP people must also be considered in all migration strategies as their migration can be both a consequence of conflict as well a potential cause of future conflicts. (African Common Position on Migration and Development).

### **Globalization and Migration**

It is no surprise that migration has intensified accordingly with globalization. The development of information technology, communications systems, and transport infrastructure, for example, have all facilitated the migration process.

The African Union (AU) and New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) have also supported and facilitated the movement of people within Africa. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as the Economic Community of West African States, have already institutionalized the free movement of peoples. Further, NEPAD has included "programs to foster labour mobility within Africa and the sustained development of the region" (Adepoju, 2005).

### **Gender and Women's Migration**

Recent years have witnessed an overall ‘feminization’ in migration from Africa, but also on a global scale. As it stands now, nearly half -- 49% --of all migrant workers are women (Ally, MRI, 2006; Klein-Solomon, 2006; Experts Meeting, Algeria). While once considered an act by single, male laborers looking for work, migration has increasingly been featured in the lives of women. Moreover, women are now more than ever migrating as a means of meeting their own economic needs rather than migrating to join a husband and family (Adepoju, 2005).

The feminization of migration has also stemmed from the demand for services including that of domestic workers, nurses, teachers and other professions typically dominated by women (African Common Position on Migration and Development). It is also still the case however, that women often accept, or are forced to work in jobs that men will not do. In many cases, women become trapped in situations where they must work with families and children depending on their labour. These women also face the double burden of professional work, and the caring, unpaid work done in the home. This has been noted as one of the reasons why women migrants find it difficult to mobilize in depending their rights in the host country: activism would be another job to fulfill in an already overburdened set of responsibilities to be performed in ‘leisure time’ (Ally, MRI, 2006).

The precarious working conditions of many women in the domestic and sex trade can leave them vulnerable to exploitation, especially when connected through trafficking processes – a topic which is explored further as follows.

### **Trafficking**

In recent years, we have seen an increase in human trafficking within and out of Africa. Gender discrimination and unequal working conditions make women and children particularly vulnerable as they are often trafficked into sex work under the guise of becoming waitresses or domestic help (Adepoju, 2005). Once recruited, traffickers rely on migrants’ unfamiliarity with a new environment, their lack of a social support net, and their status as undocumented workers to exploit their labour for profit. Further, trafficked victims are often forced to pay debts to their traffickers to buy their release and have limited right to refuse clients, and no right to mobility and freedom.

Trafficking is difficult to track and extremely profitable to traffickers – global estimates suggest that it is a US 7 billion dollar business (Martens, Pieczkowski, and Vuuren-Smyth). As such, any discussion of trafficking must look at the demand side of the equation rather than simply the supply side factors putting women at risk.

There have also been many cases recently involving dangerous and risky passages to Europe, especially by boat. Most commonly for example, is the case of African migrants departing from Senegal to the transit point of the Canary Islands and on to Spain. Unfortunately many migrants die along the way in transit, become stranded in Morocco and Dakar for years, or are intercepted on their journey and deported.

### **Brain Drain**

Perhaps one of the most widely discussed areas of concern in relation to African migration is the concept of the “brain drain” which refers to the exodus of qualified professionals from the

continent. Over the course of a year, African countries lose 20 000 “skilled personnel” to developed countries according to the African Capacity Building Foundation (Sriskandarajah, 2005). This has been seen most acutely in the health care sector, where the migration of health care workers depletes the supply of workers available to address the health crises at home, and thus becomes another barrier in the delivery of health care in Africa. While nurses and doctors who migrate to Europe and North America certainly benefit at an individual level through higher salaries, the receiving countries win a disproportionate benefit through recruiting migrant’s labour at a decreased cost rather than repairing the gaps that have been created in their own systems. In turn, this leaves developing countries forced to hire foreign professionals at an increased cost to account for these losses (Ndiaye). Estimates are that the figure paid out to expatriate technical professionals is around \$US 4 billion ([www.afford-uk.org](http://www.afford-uk.org)).

While the concept of ‘brain drain’ is typically framed as solely a negative phenomenon for Africa, the reality is much more complex. Although many migrants remain permanently in their host countries, there are certainly others who do return to their countries of origin with enhanced skills and training to contribute (Sriskandarajah, 2005). In fact, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has established programs to facilitate this process, which will be discussed further in a following section.

Migrants also deliver an incredible amount of money earned abroad back to their home countries in the form of remittance payments to family and friends. These remittances should not be underestimated: their combined total exceeds humanitarian aid, forming the second most important source of revenue for African countries after that of foreign investments (Noll, 2005). As such, it would be foolish to overly limit the migration of African nationals, because in so doing, we would also limit the availability, scope and impact of these remittance payments.

In addition to the ‘brain drain’, there has also been increased attention to what has been referred to as ‘brain circulation’. In this trend, some “skilled professionals from Africa have been finding the countries of Gabon, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa to be good alternatives to the US and Europe for migration” (Adepoju, 2005). This is related to an overall shift where workers from these countries migrate, only to be replaced by migrants from other areas of Africa.

It is important to theorize the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon in social rather than individualistic means. For example, the problem is not the fault of individual migrants who leave in search of better opportunities. In fact, to limit their opportunities and freedom to migrate would in itself compromise their human rights. Thus rather than penalizing migrants for leaving, the challenge is to create and manage incentives which encourage them to stay or return to their countries of origin (Klein-Solomon, 2006).

In a similar vein, the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) argues that the brain drain can be addressed by the 3 Rs strategy: Retention, Return, Retrieval. This would be achieved by the building of incentives to keep migrants and their talents in their countries of origin; incentives to encourage them to return home permanently with further skills and training; and “tapping-in” to the resources of those in the diaspora for short term projects, training or long-term support. These initiatives are detailed further in their report entitled: *Harnessing the Passion and Skills of Young Africans in the Diaspora* ([afford-uk.org](http://afford-uk.org), 2006).

## **Migration for Development?**

Economic hardships are obvious factors which push migrants to work elsewhere. But is migration always necessarily positive for the development of countries of origin? The typical line of thinking is yes – that migration and enhanced development go hand and hand (see Rabat Declaration, 2006 for example). In fact, migration is often seen as a bona fide solution to local underdevelopment. However, explanations that equate development solely with economic results tend to gloss over the human rights considerations of migrants, which must be key in any understanding of development (Ally, MRI, 2006). In fact, a root cause of some of the violations and exploitation against migrants can be related to the underlying issue of migrant workers being considered as a solution to development. Migrant rights need to be considered first and foremost in policies about migration rather than the benefits that their labour yields economically (Ally, MRI, 2006).

## **Mobilizing the Diaspora**

The mobilization of the talents and resources of Africans living abroad is increasingly being touted as an important means of ensuring that migration is beneficial for the African continent. As mentioned earlier, the remittance payments returned from migrants in the diaspora are one of the most significant sources of revenue for the continent. In 1999, remittances from more developed to less developed countries totaled 60 billion (Noll, 2006).

In addition to providing financial resources, Africans in the diaspora contribute skills, training and resources to their countries of origin – practices which should be aided and facilitated as much as possible ([afford-uk.org](http://afford-uk.org)). However the significance behind the diaspora involves more than simply practical or economic ends. It has also been argued that the work of Africans by and for the development of their countries of origin is a powerful and empowering strategy, giving agency by drawing from the expertise of Africans rather than relying on the paternalistic hand of ‘foreign aid’ (Chikezie, 2005; African Common Position on Migration and Development).

## **International Responses**

Recent years have seen a surge in international focus towards migration. On December 9, 2003, the UN Secretary-General and a number of governments launched the ‘Global Commission on International Migration’ comprised of 19 Commissioners with a mandate to achieve a “coherent, comprehensive and global response to the issue of international migration” ([www.gcih.org](http://www.gcih.org)). In its October 2005 report, the Commission set forth six ‘principles of action’ and thirty three recommendations regarding the establishment of policies for migration at the international level.

This was followed by a number of ‘Expert Group Meetings on Migration and Development’ over the course of 2005-2006. In particular, the Expert Meeting held in New York July 6-8, 2005 allowed experts to present papers on issues such as: the impact of migration on developing countries; guest workers and recruiters; the relationship between migration and development; human trafficking; remittances; and the impact of globalization, within the context of a number of different countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. During the Experts

Meeting held in Algiers, April 3-5, 2006, participants adopted the 'African Common Position on Migration and Development' as a collective response to the issues concerning migration and Africa.

One of the most recent international responses to migration has been the creation of the Rabat Plan of Action, stemming from the Euro-African Expert Meeting on Migration and Development held last month in July 2006, Rabat, Morocco. One of the most significant aspects of the Plan of Action between African and European States encourages African countries agree to limit and manage migration, especially that which is illegal, in return for an agreement by European countries to bolster foreign development assistance to Africa (Rabat Plan of Action, 2006; Noll, 2006). While this was understood to be a win-win situation by some, it has also been argued that it would be nearly impossible for Europe to provide adequate assistance to match the financial contribution currently being made by remittance payments from migrants abroad. As a result, this would again facilitate a disproportionate benefit to Europe at the expense of Africa (Noll, 2006).

The cumulative effect of these Expert Meetings and their recommendations will be presented at the upcoming UN High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development to take place in New York on September, 2006.

### **IOM Programs and Initiatives**

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has established programs to address the pitfalls of migration for African countries. In Angola, they have facilitated the demobilization of child soldiers, wherein over 5000 were able to return home. In Rwanda, the IOM assisted in the reintegration of migrants who had been displaced in Italy during the conflict. Further, several programs were established to work in assisting women and children in Uganda who had been displaced by the Resistance Army in Sudan, and to provide them with protection and assistance against trafficking (Ndiaye).

In addition, the IOM has developed an initiative called the Migration for Development in Africa Program (MIDA) which is a capacity building program working for the return of qualified African nationals. The program funds migrants through a mobility-based approach, helping them to contribute their skills back to their countries of origin. As such, its overall object is "to assist in strengthening the institutional capacities of African governments to manage and realise their development goals through the transfer of relevant skills, financial and other resources of Africans in the diaspora for use in development programmes in Africa" ([www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)).

For its part, the Organization for the African Unity (OAU) endorsed the MIDA program at the 74th Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers and the 37th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU that took place from 5 to 7 July 2001 and from 9 to 11 July 2001 respectively, in Lusaka, Zambia ([www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)).

Thus far, MIDA has been established in the National Indicative Programs (NIP) of a number of African countries including: Benin, Cape Verde, DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda. Other countries which have taken formal steps towards enrollment are: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Liberia, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria. Moreover, some countries have expressed an interest in joining in the future including: Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-

Bissau, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Zambia (MIDA Great Lakes Report; [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)).

In particular, the implementation of MIDA in the Great Lakes Region has been considered quite successful. This program facilitates the professionals residing in Belgium in their return to their countries of origin to provide expertise and assistance in technical fields and to “facilitate a transfer of skills and pave the way for more permanent relations with national experts as well as with their homeland” (MIDA Great Lakes Report).

### **Paving the Way Forward**

It is clear that in moving forward we need to strike a balance between needs of sending countries, receiving countries, and the human rights of migrants themselves. There has been much discussion around the creation of incentives for migrants to return to their countries of origin. The recommendations from both the Brussels conference and the Rabat Plan of Action stress the need for partnerships between countries of origin, transit and destination (Rabat Plan of Action, 2006). What is crucial, however, is to ensure that the needs and interests of African countries are understood and accommodated in ways that work for the betterment of individual migrants and African society as a whole.

The continual mobilization of the African diaspora has readily been put forth as a suggestion. However, any policy and plan of action must work to marry the possibilities for economic development and empowerment, with the need for sustained social and development solutions within the country of origin. In other words, migration can not necessarily be considered a de facto solution for development – or the mechanism for bolstering the national economy.

Some theorists have argued for the cessation of taxes on remittance payments from abroad as a means of increasing economic flow to the continent. This suggestion certainly deserves further examination and debate.

The deskilling of migrants upon arrival in the host country is another problem in need of examination. Migrants’ skills need to be recognized and acknowledged within host countries in order for them to contribute fully to the society, and be integrated and accepted on equal footing. Failing to recognize foreign credentials does both the migrant and the host country a disservice.

In addition, compensation for skilled migration from South to North is a topic in need of further consideration. This might especially be implemented with regards to the creation of exchange programs and higher education. As of now, it tends to be the receiving and developed countries which retain the best trained professionals, again resulting in an unequal power dynamic (Andrew and Lukajo, 2005).

In any case, policies regarding migration must be institutionalized so that migrants can and will migrate with rights and are able to access these rights when they need them (Ally, MRI, 2006). There must be a serious attempt to address discriminatory practices and train and sensitize employers, who tend to have the broadest contact with migrants in the host country (Ally, MRI, 2006). It is crucial that migrant communities be involved in the creation of strategies and partnerships with host countries in a lateral rather than hierarchical approach (Andrew and Lukajo, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

While there is much debate about the benefits and pitfalls of migration, one fact remains clear: migration is here to stay. What has often been termed as the “migration bump” refers to the fact that migration will continue as long as there are large discrepancies between the income generated in the national and host countries (Noll, 2006). The challenge is to address these issues head-on and work towards policies and strategies that are equally beneficial for the future of host countries and Africa.