

ECOSOC Decision 2006/234

High-level panel discussion on the gender dimensions of international migration

At its 38th meeting, on 25 July 2006, the Economic and Social Council decided to transmit the summary submitted by the Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women to the General Assembly.

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1. At its 9th meeting, on 2 March 2006, the Commission on the Status of Women held a high-level panel discussion on the theme “The gender dimensions of international migration”. The panellists were Monica Boyd, Canada Research Chair in Sociology, University of Toronto; Manuel Orozco, Senior Associate, Inter-American Dialogue, United States of America; Ndioro Ndiaye, Deputy Director-General, International Organization for Migration, Geneva; Maruja Milagros B. Asis, Director of Research and Publications, Scalabrini Migration Centre, Philippines; and Irena Omelaniuk, Migration Adviser, World Bank. The panel was moderated by Carmen María Gallardo (El Salvador), Chairperson of the Commission.

2. The high-level panel discussion provided the opportunity for the Commission to examine the multidimensional aspects of international migration from a gender perspective and to provide input to the General Assembly at its High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, to be held in New York on 14 and 15 September 2006.

3. Women were active participants in migration within and between countries. Statistics indicated, for example, that the proportion of women among international migrants had reached 51 per cent in more developed regions. Women moved on their own as the principal wage earners or for family reunification purposes. Most women moved voluntarily, but women and girls were also forced to migrate owing to conflict and violence. There was increasing recognition that gender biases existed in the migration process, resulting in women’s experiences being different from those of men, including in relation to exit and entry and in countries of destination. Causes and outcomes of migration could be very different for women and for men.

4. The linkages between migration and development were identified as critical. A holistic and comprehensive approach was required to address the multidimensional aspects of international migration. Poverty and lack of access to economic resources were identified as main factors influencing the propensity of women to migrate. Increased socio-economic development, including through investments in the health sector, might lead to disincentives for migration. Increased gender equality within countries of origin might also reduce women’s need for and interest in migration, including for economic reasons. Perceptions about the roles of women and men, relationships within households and resource allocations determined the ability of women to make migration decisions autonomously, to

contribute to decision-making on migration within the household and to access resources for migration.

5. Insufficient information was available on the impact of migration of both women and men on the families remaining in the countries of origin. A closer examination of the structural conditions, including underdevelopment and poverty, that led people to migrate and leave their families behind was needed. The importance of national policies in ensuring the welfare of those left behind was noted, and it was recommended that the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development give attention to that issue.

6. The empowerment of women in the migration process required the increased participation of women in migration decisions. The empowerment of migrant women should be given specific attention in migration policies and legislation. The need for countries of origin and destination to examine their exit and entry policies to determine the impact on women was noted, as well as the need for greater collaboration between ministries to ensure increased attention to gender equality and the linkages between gender equality, migration and development.

7. It was recognized that the migration of women and men was linked to specific demand for different types of labour. In some countries, the demand for labour in traditionally male-dominated jobs, for example, in construction, led to high levels of male migration. In other countries, the demand for care workers led to increased labour migration of women. Participants noted, however, that the care sector was often a precarious and unprotected sector.

8. Agreements between countries of origin and countries of destination to encourage and facilitate migration were generally economically driven. Gender equality issues were often not given attention in such agreements, which could result in negative impacts on women. The issue of “brain drain” was raised, and it was pointed out that some developing countries had experienced a huge migration of professionals, including women, to developed countries to earn higher incomes.

9. The living and working conditions of both legal and undocumented migrant women workers should be examined further, including to identify their mistreatment and abuse. Violence against women migrants was cited as a critical issue. The issue of racial discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination were also raised by some participants. Gender-sensitive rights-based approaches to migration should include promotion and protection of the rights of migrant women workers, through, for example, the development of an enabling international environment, the ratification and implementation of international legal instruments, including the labour standards of the International Labour Organization and the harmonization of national legislation. Legal frameworks should meet the needs of both States and migrants. Partnerships with trade unions and training for police and border officials were recommended. The key role of non-governmental organizations in promoting the rights of migrant women was highlighted.

10. In some countries, evidence suggested that men migrants remitted more than women because their earnings were higher. In other cases, however, women tended to remit more because the ratio of migrant women to men was higher. Women tended to be the main receivers of remittances and generally invested in education and health care for their children. Both senders and recipients of remittances faced major constraints in having access to financial institutions. Banks and other financial institutions should improve their services. Further research on gender and remittances was needed.

11. Countries of origin and countries of destination both shared responsibility for the welfare of migrant women. The need for awareness-raising on the contributions of women migrants in destination countries was highlighted. The contributions, while significant, often remained invisible because of the concentration of female migrant workers in the private sphere. The importance of fostering greater sensitivity to the diversity of cultures among migrants was also raised.

12. Attention was drawn to the need to address the social challenges related to migration in countries of destination and the need to link the social and economic aspects of migration. Migrant women themselves could play a key role in addressing social challenges. The important contribution of diaspora communities in providing support to migrant women, including in relation to integration into destination countries, was highlighted. Migrant associations and migrant non-governmental organizations could play an important role in addressing the challenges of migration.

13. Trafficking was recognized as a development issue that cut across the Millennium Development Goals, particularly the goals on poverty eradication and gender equality and the empowerment of women. The majority of trafficked women came from low-income, socially deprived circumstances, mostly in developing countries and countries with economies in transition. In countries without comprehensive social security systems, women became vulnerable to trafficking and often ended up in unregulated labour sectors.

14. The forced absence of women through trafficking led to the breakdown of families, the neglect of children and the elderly, and negative impacts on health and education. Trafficking could force children into work, denying them education and reinforcing the illiteracy and poverty cycles that hindered development efforts. It could have a negative impact on public health services, including upon the return of victims of trafficking. It was noted that such impacts of trafficking had been researched inadequately and indicators to measure effectively the impacts on families were lacking.

15. It was recommended that organizations focusing on migration, including the International Organization for Migration, investigate the causes of trafficking and develop comprehensive indicators for cross-country analyses. Models for assessing trafficking flows, identifying early warning signals and assessing the impact of trafficking on countries of origin, including costs to public health systems, were needed. Evaluations of counter-trafficking programmes should include analyses of labour market factors and the role of

recruiters. The need for effective legal measures to address trafficking in women and girls, as well as for cross-border collaboration, including on monitoring and prosecution, was also highlighted.