

*Making Gender and Generation Matter for Sustainable  
Development*

IIED

GENDER, POVERTY AND MIGRATION

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# **Exploring mobility and migration in the context of rural-urban linkages: why gender and generation matter**

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This paper draws on research on rural-urban linkages conducted in the past decade in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, with particular attention to work in northern Tanzania. The overall objective of the programme is to explore the different ways in which mobility and migration (mainly, but not only, internal) intersect with the changing relations between rural and urban areas, people and activities, and in the process transform livelihoods and power inequalities at both intra and inter-household levels.

Throughout the world, mobility and migration are increasingly complex and dynamic, and encompass a wide range of forms and types of movement, a growing number of destinations, and migrant flows with diverse sex, age and ethnic compositions. Such diversity reflects processes of socio-economic, demographic, cultural and political transformation, including changes in population distribution, with in many cases rapid rates of urbanisation, and changes in the economic base, with industry and services accounting for a growing proportion of GDPs and of the labour force. Gender and generational relations are key elements that both shape and are shaped by these transformative processes.

## **Mobility, income diversification and livelihoods**

Mobility can be broadly described as an adaptation to the unequal spatial distribution of resources, including natural resources, markets and employment opportunities. As such, mobility is increasingly recognised as a key element of livelihood strategies, in many cases overlapping with the diversification of income sources. Livelihoods strategies are largely based on access to assets, which is itself mediated by economic, socio-cultural and political normative systems which reflect evolving power relations between different groups. As a result, strategies may lead to the accumulation of assets and more secure livelihoods, or only ensure the survival of those who undertake them. In our research programme on rural-urban linkages, we set out to explore how different groups rely on rural and urban-based assets and resources to adapt their livelihoods to changing contexts, and how policies can best support these transformations while identifying and acting on negative impacts such as social marginalisation and environmental degradation.

Research on livelihood strategies usually takes the household as the unit of analysis. Attention to how gender and generation determine household members' access to and decision making power over the use of household resources and assets, brings in a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which livelihood strategies contribute to – or undermine - the wellbeing of

individuals within the household unit. At the same time, a gender perspective on mobility and migration does not focus exclusively on intra-household relations, but includes attention to place-specific gender relations and social relations, including inter-household inequalities such as class, caste and ethnicity. It also includes attention to the meso and macro-levels, or the ways in which the globalisation of production, consumption and trade, itself deeply gendered, is enacted in specific locations, and the many ways in which economic and non-economic dimensions overlap and intersect.

### **Gender and generation in the findings from the case studies**

The case studies were conducted in rural settlements closely linked to large and smaller urban centres. They included Mali (around Bamako and Mopti), Nigeria (around Aba, in the southeast of the country), Tanzania (around Lindi in the south and Himo in the north) and Vietnam (in the Red River and in the Mekong Deltas). In all these very diverse locations the numbers of young people migrating, especially young women moving independently, have increased substantially. Overall, this is due to the combination of increasing employment opportunities away from the home settlements (even when these are largely limited to waitressing and the sex industry in the case of young women), as well as economic and resource constraints within the settlements. Perhaps more important, however, are the socio-cultural transformations that underpin the changing aspirations of both young men and women, as described below.

One of the key assets of rural households in low and middle-income countries is land. Access to land is unequally distributed both between and within households, and where local economic activities are based on farming and provide limited opportunities for non-agricultural income-generation, landlessness is closely related to poverty. Poverty does not generally increase out-migration from rural settlements, although it does have an impact on destinations, with more rural-rural movement amongst lower-income than higher income groups. Access to land does, however, have an impact on intra-household gender-selective movement when women do not have the same inheritance rights to land as men. Communities fear losing land to women's husbands, hence the growing practice is to allow women user rights until they get married. In northern Tanzania, where daughters are expected to contribute unpaid labour to the family farm but do not traditionally inherit it, employment opportunities for women in tourist resorts and in urban centres have become increasingly attractive for young women, and one-third of the case study respondents reported that at least one young woman in their household had migrated. While this proportion is significantly lower than that of households with migrant sons (almost two-thirds of respondents), there are substantial gender-based differences in destinations. Young women tend to move further afield than young men, who in contrast are more likely to engage in seasonal and temporary movement since they have land to come back to during the farming season. Their seasonal mobility is largely to increase resources to support their farming (Diyamett et al, 2001).

In Vietnam's Mekong Delta, where access to land is restricted by a relative shortage of agricultural land rather than by inequalities in access, the proportion of mobile women and men is broadly similar. There are however significant differences in destinations and forms of mobility which to some extent reflect those in northern Tanzania. Men dominate short-distance and short-term migration, often moving within the same districts or to neighbouring ones, whereas women tend to move for longer periods of time to work in export-oriented factories in peri-urban areas, or as domestic workers in urban centres. Compared to women's, men's destinations and employment opportunities are more diverse (Hoang et al, 2008). Beyond intra-household relations, the gendered nature of labour markets is thus an important explanatory factor of the diversity of internal migration. This is not only related to 'emerging' sectors of employment in manufacturing and domestic service. In Mali, women, for whom access to farm land is traditionally limited, have long had a key role as highly mobile small and medium-scale traders in ensuring small-scale farmers' access to urban markets. Perhaps an unintended consequence of these deeply gendered labour markets is that in the region surrounding Bamako, Mali's rapidly expanding capital city, women appear to be better equipped to benefit from demographic and economic transformations than men. While men resent the loss of agricultural land to residential use, which is not compensated by increased employment opportunities in urban and peri-urban factories, women benefit from the ever-expanding urban demand for horticultural products. Indeed, this has allowed the most successful amongst them to start purchasing land for residential and commercial use (GRAD, 2001).

Economic change intersects with socio-cultural transformations in all the case study locations. In southeast Nigeria, young men's migration, often temporary, to urban centres is seen as a rite of passage. Those who do not move are often labelled as idle and shying away from hard labour, and may become the object of ridicule. At the same time, the demands for community work on those who stay are a major obstacle to gaining economic independence, and migration is therefore perceived as offering a socially acceptable way to escape from obligations to, and control from community elders. For young women, similar constraints operate, albeit at the level of the household rather than that of the community. In this case, too, migration is a way to negotiate or escape from power relations and increase personal independence while avoiding conflict over gender and generational norms. Significantly, the sending of remittances to the parental household has greatly contributed to making young women's migration socially acceptable (Okali et al, 2001). Having said this, while in all four countries remittances constitute a crucial, and in many cases the most important source of family cash, their worth is almost everywhere underestimated if not downright dismissed by parents. This probably reflects ongoing struggles over power and authority in contexts where rapid socio-economic transformations redesign intra-household and traditional community relations. At least in Tanzania, it could also reflect an unwillingness to reveal an important source of income when people are hoping the research will bring them greater resources. In Lotima, when we did wealth ranking, they all put themselves in the lowest wealth ranking

however much we pointed out that some had corrugated iron roofs, bicycles etc.

## **Methods and tools**

Exploring intra-household relations and power inequalities can be a sensitive issue. All the case studies had a simple, quantitative survey component – a very short questionnaire that was used to validate the discussions previously held in focus group discussions. The questions asked in the survey were developed from the understanding of the issues discussed using participatory tools, and served essentially to clarify some issues. For example, to the question ‘what is your occupation’, a common answer in a rural setting is farming. However, this was often very obviously not the case; besides this, we also wanted to understand whether different groups engaged in different types of occupations, and what were the implications for their livelihood security. Based on this, we asked respondents what were their first, second and third occupations. We then asked them what proportion of their time they would spend on average for each occupation over one year, and what proportion of their income was derived from each occupation. In many cases, the second and third occupation was the most important, but did not change individual’s ‘identity’, especially amongst older people. This highlights the complexity of processes of social, cultural and economic transformation.

The most interesting discussions on gender and generation and intra-household inequalities were stimulated by the use of participatory tools, and especially the intra-household matrix developed by the Tanzanian researchers. This is a simple instrument which helps visualise clearly the relationship between household division of labour, access to and ownership of decision making over household resources, and migration patterns. The most telling example of the usefulness of this tool is the discussion held by older men in the village of Lotima, in northern Tanzania, who started by blaming young women for wanting to ‘run away’ to town and across the border, to the international tourist resorts on the Kenyan coast, often returning with sexually transmitted diseases. However, once the intra-household matrix began to take shape, it became very obvious to them why their daughters were leaving – they were expected to work their parental land for free with no prospects of inheriting it, making them dependent first on their fathers, later on their husbands. Clearly, migrating was an extremely rational decision to gain some financial security. The discussions started off some wide-ranging debates within the community, and young women were finally given space to voice their concerns and needs, and negotiate better access to land and water.

In many cases, however, older women were more likely to defend the status quo, i.e. the highly skewed power relations within households where daughters are at the bottom of the heap, but their mothers do not fare much better either. Nevertheless, older men’s monopoly of decision-making was justified by them as ‘work’. Sons also had privileges, and it is telling that while daughters are blamed for moving, sons are ridiculed for staying put. Even if they do not migrate, however, young men are less and less likely to farm, preferring instead to engage in trade and other non-agricultural occupations –

in many cases involving some level of mobility. In part, this is related to inter-generational relations and to the fact that old men often seem very reluctant to hand over resources to younger ones, saying they will squander them. This also has important consequences at the household and community levels. In Lotima, where livestock keeping is an important part of family farming, it has resulted in an increase in the hiring of wage labourers. A similar pattern was found in the Mekong Delta, where young people migrate or move out of farming, and their parents hire workers, often from poorer areas, to help them on the family farm. We tend to think that migration is always out of rural areas, and that wage labourers work on commercial farms. The findings from the case studies debunk both assumptions.

### **What have we learned?**

When we set out to explore rural-urban linkages in the case study locations, we thought that gender and generation were important factors that we had to take into account. What perhaps we did not expect to find was that a gender and generation lens is not only crucial to understand individual experiences, but also to see households and communities in three rather than two dimensions, with a great diversity of desires and expectations among their members and related power struggles. These are important pointers to future trends. What we also did not expect, at least not to this extent, was finding so many striking similarities in mobility and migration patterns in very different contexts, with gender and generation the common denominator.

From a broader perspective, we also learned that it is important to understand the links between mobility and income diversification. Access to non-agricultural income sources and local non-farm employment opportunities, for example in small towns, can contribute to the reduction of poverty and vulnerability. However, they are unlikely to reduce mobility and migration precisely because of the importance of non-economic factors that underpin decisions to migrate. Negotiations around power inequalities both within and outside households are in a sense played out in a wider space which enables migrants to pursue individual aspirations while retaining household and community responsibilities, and most importantly social acceptability – although this may not always be achievable for young women.

Migration and mobility, often seen as a major problem by policy-makers and government officials, are slowly getting on the agenda as key livelihood strategies. In the context of climate change, after an initial wave of alarmist predictions of massive flows of refugees, the debate seems to have toned down and is now more focused on how to support migration as part of an 'adaptation portfolio'. The findings from our research suggest however that we should also not accept unquestioningly this change of perceptions of migration. Two issues seem particularly important. The first is that migration should not be the consequence of inequality within households and communities. In other words, it should be one amongst several options. In general, while young men have more chance to make a reasoned decision based on choice, this is not usually the case for young women: in Lotima, young women argued that if they were given secure access to land and water,

there would be no reason why they should go. The second is that while there is no doubt that remittances reduce vulnerability and increase resilience in sending households – which may be crucial in the context of climate change – if they come from exploitative, insecure work, as is often the case for young women working in bars, in sex work and even as domestic workers, this poses an important ethical question. It is worth mentioning here that almost universally women send home a higher proportion of their incomes than men, and this increases their vulnerability (for example, by living in cheap and often insecure accommodation and foregoing health checks and medical treatment). So while migration and migrants should certainly be supported, it is also important to address directly the underlying causes of some migrants' vulnerability. One does not certainly exclude the other.

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