

PROJECT PROFILE

Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration

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About the Project

This research seeks to advance a gender-sensitive understanding of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of labour migrations and the experiences of work and living in different cities: Erbil in Kurdistan-Iraq; Beirut in Lebanon; Islamabad in Pakistan; and Istanbul in Turkey. While migration remains a key issue globally, relatively little work has been done on gendered migrations in the Global South, and what has been done has largely focussed on domestic and care work.

The project addresses this gap by interviewing approximately 25 women and NGO workers in each city, designed to go beyond domestic work by looking at a range of labour sectors where women play active roles. In doing so, this research contributes to a better understanding of the global circulation of gendered labour that is occurring, the drivers of this movement, women's rights and agency, and how migrant women use urban spaces within these contexts.

Key Findings

- **Discriminatory practices in home countries inform migration.** In each of the four countries there are discriminatory practices and patriarchal norms that influence women's migration. This includes, but is not limited to, sexual violence, domestic violence, discriminatory employment practices because they are women, discrimination against their SOGIE identity, and no legal rights to divorce.
- **Gendered migrations in the Middle East and South Asia are diverse.** Migration is diverse in terms of educational level of the migrant, occupations, nationalities and rights and includes migrant women from both the Global South and North.
- **Women are treated differently based on their race, country of origin and social capital within a given context.** Women from diverse backgrounds face distinct forms of discrimination based on their intersectional identities. For example, in Turkey, cultural capital is important. Women from North America, particularly those who are educated with university degrees, are often able to find good work as teachers, journalists, or translators. In contrast, the women interviewed from the former Soviet Union, who are also educated, go through a process of de-skilling after migration and often end up working as cleaners or live-in carers. This happens, in-part, because they have less cultural capital in the Turkish context.
- **Education levels amongst the women are high, but the value placed on that education once in the country of migration is mixed.** Despite relatively high levels of education, many of the women still face significant hurdles in finding commensurate employment opportunities.
- **Women's agency can be both amplified and strained in migration contexts.** Most women show agency in their choice to migrate away from their home countries and in their efforts to improve their life conditions. However, women's agency in these contexts is strained by structural inequalities and violence that inhibit and mould their ability to participate in the labour market. For example, two of the Syrian women interviewed in Lebanon describe how they ended up in sex work, despite this not being their choice or aspiration.

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The agency comes from these women who are prepared to move, because it takes resources and it takes an ability to actually decide – I'm going to move. Now, I call that really using agency. "

PROFESSOR ELEONORE KOFMAN

- **Personal networks based on nationality play a key role in women's lives.** Interviews reveal that rather than relying on formal trade unions or collective forms of organising, many women use personal networks based on nationality to build community and advance their working conditions and livelihoods.
- **Recruitment agencies have a lot of control and power.** Recruitment agencies can control who migrates because they have bilateral agreements with agencies in the countries of origin. For example, they can influence and shape the flow of who and under what conditions migrants are allowed to enter the country. This is particularly the case in Lebanon where they have blocked changes to the kafala system.



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Recommendations

Academia

- **Close the research gap.** More research is needed that looks beyond domestic labour in the Global South to understand the diversity of reasons for migration. More research is also needed to examine migrants with different educational and skill levels and migrants from both the Global North and within the Global South. The migration of educated and skilled women needs to be recognised and studied.

Governments and International Organisations

- **Abolition of or improvement of the kafala system is urgently needed.** The rights of domestic workers must be improved and additional regulation is needed of the kafala and the recruitment agencies that hire into the system. Domestic workers should be protected by the standard labour laws. These laws should also be applied at a more granular level, beyond the national level. For example, in Kurdistan-Iraq, laws applied to the Kurdistan region rather than Iraq, and the specific factors relevant to Istanbul that may differ from the rest of Turkey.
- **Work with community groups.** Bottom-up rather than top-down approaches are needed in order to better understand the lived experiences and distinct needs of migrant women in these contexts, and therefore to create support systems and policies that are cognisant of their needs.
- **Prevent and stop gender-based violence and sexual harassment.** These forms of violence happen in the home and in public spaces, resulting in a severe restriction on migrant women's use of public spaces in the cities. More work must be done to educate against gender-based violence, to implement laws and policies and to operationalise those that exist to harassment and also to support victim-survivors of gender-based violence in achieving justice that is receptive to their needs.



To learn more about this research project and read its publications – including detailed Key Findings and recommendations for the project's work in Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey – visit: <https://thegenderhub.com/stories/gendered-dynamics-of-international-labour-migration/>

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This Project Profile was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to www.TheGenderHub.com to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



This research is part of the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub. The Hub is an interdisciplinary, transnational research network working with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organisations to advance the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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