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Why Increasing Female Migration from Gender-Unequal Countries is a Win for Everyone

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Charles Kenny and Megan O'Donnell

Available evidence points to a superior payoff to female migration from gender-unequal countries to more gender-equal countries for the migrant—sending and recipient countries alike. This suggests that a policy by relatively gender-equal countries to provide entry preference to female economic migrants from gender-unequal countries would combine development impact and economic self-interest.[1]

Women as migrants have at least as much (if not more) of a development impact on home countries as male migrants.

For example, both men and women are a source of financial and social remittances, but there may be a marginally bigger flow of such remittances from female migration than male migration in some circumstances. Women remit a higher proportion of their incomes than do male migrants (although as they frequently earn less, the overall impact on remittance volumes may be muted), show more stability and frequency in sending home remittances, and are more likely to remit when unexpected shocks occur (Fleury, 2016).

There may also be larger social remittance impacts when women migrate.

Ferrant and Tuccio's (2015) study of South-South migration suggests that migration towards gender-equal countries promotes gender equality in the origin country, while migration towards high-discrimination countries has the reverse effect. Similarly, migration by both men and women to countries with high levels of female political empowerment leads to higher female parliamentary shares in sending countries (Lodigiani and Salomone, 2015). Because women migrants (unlike their male counterparts) show a preference for moving to gender-equal countries, the average female emigrant will likely have a bigger impact on home country equality than the average male migrant, if women are allowed to migrate freely to their destination countries of choice (Ferrant and Tuccio, 2015). Hadi (2001) also suggests households with female migrants are more concerned with the education of daughters.

However, though women want to migrate equally with men, especially from countries with high levels of gender inequality, actual rates of migration are lower for women from those same countries.

Ruyssen and Salomone (2015) look at cross-country Gallup surveys of perceived gender discrimination, intent to migrate, and preparation to migrate (visa application or plane ticket purchase). Amongst women, perceived discrimination in countries of origin is a strong incentive explaining the intent to migrate. However, actual preparation depends on factors including network effects and family obligations and is (weakly) negatively related with perceived gender discrimination. A number of other studies suggest that different measures of gender inequality are associated with lower female emigration:

- Ferrant and Tuccio's (2015) study of South-South migration suggests that gender inequality is a (negative) push factor for migrant women: gender discrimination at home reduces female emigration (though it has no effect on male migration).
- Using a global sample, Nejad (2014) finds that (very) low measures of women's rights in origin countries are associated with lower out-migration of skilled women.
- Baudassé and Bazillier (2014) suggest that all else equal, lower gender equality in schooling and the workplace is associated with lower rates of female emigration, especially amongst the high-skilled.[2]
- McKenzie (2005) reports on seventeen countries that place restrictions specifically on the international movement of women (requiring permission from a husband or father to leave the country, for example). His analysis suggests that countries with such restrictions see five to six percent less migrants per capita than countries with similar income, governance and population levels but which do not specifically legally restrict women's abilities to migrate.

Worldwide in 2010, the United Nations estimates that women made up 48 percent of emigrants. Using recent United Nations migration data, Table 1 suggests that amongst some of the countries that Mckenzie (2005) suggests have legal restrictions specifically on women's ability to emigrate, the proportion of women in emigrant stocks is usually lower (a country average of 42 percent).

This sending country constraint means that even though women prefer to emigrate to countries with stronger gender equality, they are often unable to do so at the levels men achieve.

Take the example of Egypt (Table 2). The country's emigrants are mostly male, especially to countries in the region with high levels of gender discrimination. But even to receiving countries with lower levels of gender discrimination, the gender breakdown of emigrants does not reach parity. More broadly, Docquier et al. (2009) find that while highly-skilled (defined as post-secondary educated) women account for 49 percent of all highly-skilled emigrants to OECD countries, the proportion of highly-skilled emigrants from Middle East and North African countries to OECD countries who are women is only 38 percent.[3]

Data from Li and Sweetman (2014) on immigrants to Canada suggests that women make up 45 percent of the immigrant stock from the average sending country. Amongst the seven countries in the database that McKenzie (2005) suggests put legal barriers specifically on female migrants, women account for 36 percent of the immigrant stock.

Favoring female migrants from gender-unequal countries has the potential to benefit gender-equal host countries.

These migrants have overcome more barriers to emigrate, suggesting greater capacity. This applies (even) to women and men with the same observable features in terms of education or experience, for example. Because women from gender-unequal countries will be less likely to have been given access to quality education, employment, or business opportunities, those who have nonetheless achieved similar levels of educational or professional success as their male counterparts are likely to have more capacity, all else equal. This suggests that women from gender-unequal countries (immigrating to gender-equal countries as primary visa-holders for economic purposes) would outperform their male counterparts from gender-unequal countries and those from both genders from gender-equal countries.

Unfortunately, current analysis usually lumps this group of female migrants in with those who migrate as family members and/or for non-economic purposes, which means cofounding factors including differing labor force participation rates may hide the effect of any such outperformance.[4]

Table 3 suggests that about 63 percent of men granted lawful permanent residence visas in 2013 in the US were occupied outside the home compared to 45 percent of women. In 2000 in the US, annual work hours averaged 983 for female immigrants and 1301 for female US born. That compared to 1855 and 2052 for male immigrants and US-born. Female immigrants worked outside the home for an average of 53 percent of the time that male immigrants did and 76 percent of the average that female US-born did.[5]

And overall employment rates can be lower even for the high-skilled: in Canada 34.4 percent of immigrant women with a university degree were employed in Canada compared to 43.5 percent of men (International Organization for Migration 2014).[6]

Looking at income, data from Li and Sweetman (2014) on immigrants to Canada suggests that women from a given country earn on average 64 percent of what men earn (this does not account for different labor force participation rates). Amongst the seven countries in the database that McKenzie (2005) suggests put legal barriers specifically on female migrants, this figure is 61 percent of the earnings

These broader gaps in workforce participation and earnings are likely reflective of structural barriers preventing female migrants from finding suitable employment.

Improving labor force participation quality and rates is likely to result in measureable economic gain: the losses to the Canadian economy due to deskilling—migrants working in jobs for which they are over-qualified—are an estimated $7.44 billion CAD for women (almost double that of men's: $3.94 billion CAD) (International Organization for Migration 2014). Methods to encourage female labor force participation that apply as much to migrants as the native born include equal pay for equal work legislation and childcare support. There is also a role for governments to support skill-portability measures (officially recognizing foreign qualifications where appropriate, for example).

These confounding factors apply less to women who come to countries specifically to (study or) work.

Amongst more directly comparable categories of men and women, the lower economic return appears to dissipate: Goyette and Xie (1999) study foreign- and native-born scientists and engineers in the United States and find that the earnings gap between foreign-born women and men is less than that between native-born women and men (foreign female scientists earning 74 percent of foreign male scientists as compared to 70 percent for native-born female scientists and native-born male scientists).[7]

Looking across all migrants, Li and Sweetman (2014) suggest that the returns to quality education in Canada are similar for female immigrants who do not have children as they are for men. In addition, as some confirmation of the capacity effect in Canada, looking only at individuals between 18 and 24 years of age employed full time, controlling for a range of factors including occupancy and industry clusters, birth country, quality of education, work experience, location in Canada and language knowledge, Coulombe et al. (2014) find that the country dummy coefficient for returns to schooling and education in Canada is higher for women than men born in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (though it is higher for men than women born in Egypt).

If there is a capacity advantage amongst female migrants from gender-unequal countries, it suggests the potential for a triple-win reform of immigration policy in gender-equal countries.

Because women moving from gender-unequal to gender-equal countries see a dramatic decline in the barriers they face to labor force participation, they are likely to receive a particularly large financial payoff to migration. Because sending countries are likely to see larger financial and social remittances from female emigrants who move to work abroad, they are likely to see a particularly large economic and social payoff to such emigration. And because recipient countries are likely to gain immigrants that are more capable for a given level of education or experience if they favor women from gender-unequal countries, they too will see a larger economic payoff.

This suggests policymakers in comparatively gender-equal countries including in Europe and North America should give points to women from gender-unequal countries if they use a points system as part of their immigration decision making processes.

Canada's immigration system, for example, works on a point system that considers six factors: language, education, experience, age, arranged employment, and adaptability (Government of Canada 2015). Close to 62 percent of new permanent residents in Canada are economic migrants assessed through the point system (International Organization for Migration 2014). Canada could add a seventh factor, awarding points to female migrants from gender-unequal countries.

Within countries that do not use a points system (e.g., the United States), policymakers should find other ways to give preference to these women—potentially introducing a visa quota category for female principal visa-holders from gender-unequal countries under employment-based visas.

Table 3 suggests that employment-based preferences account for only 161,000 out of 991,000 lawful permanent residence visas issued by the US in 2013, and this includes spouses and children of the principal visa holders.[8]

But amongst this relatively small group, the United States awards "first" through "fifth" preference to various categories of economic migrants seeking permanent residence.[9]

Under this system, "fourth preference" refers to "special immigrants," including those who are religious workers, broadcasters, Afghan and Iraqi translators, and certain types of physicians. This diverse, catch-all category could also be extended to include female migrants from gender-unequal countries. At present, very few (a total of 82 migrants for Fiscal Year 2015) came to the US as "special immigrants" from the gender-unequal countries listed in Table 5, and the total number of immigrants from these countries was 5 percent of the total migrant population in FY2015, suggesting reasonable potential for expansion.[10]

There are multiple options regarding the creation of home-country lists to classify potential women immigrants as deserving of special status.

Existing empirical research has used measures of overall women's rights, rights specifically related to work and travel, as well as measures of outcomes including female labor force participation and relative education levels. Table 4 uses the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law data to define 'gender-equal' and 'gender-unequal' countries, focusing on legal restrictions on women's freedom of movement and employment opportunities. A narrower list would include only those countries that specifically limit women's capacity to emigrate by putting restrictions on ability to leave the country or obtain a passport without a husband's or father's permission (Table 5). There are, of course, other structural and cultural barriers that affect women's equality, but these definitions are comparatively clear and objective.

The potential triple win from a policy favoring women migrants from gender unequal countries should unite advocates for global gender equality and development with advocates for more economically efficient immigration policies.

While the impact of such a policy on overall flows may be limited, the benefits of admitting even one additional Caroline Herschel, Zaha Hadid, Martina Navratilova, or Madeleine Albright, on the economy and society of the receiving country could be immense, as can the advantage to home countries of more female emigrants including Aung San Suu Kyi.

Table 1. Gender imbalance in migration flows

Source Country	Destination Country Percentage of Emigrants that are Women		
	World	Developed regions	Developing regions
World	48	52	43
Afghanistan	45	43	45
DR Congo	50	52	50
Egypt	32	40	31
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	46	46	49
Iraq	47	43	48
Pakistan	35	44	32
Saudi Arabia	41	46	36

Table 2. Egyptian immigration by gender

	Immigrants from Egypt '000	Percent Female
Yemen	11	49
Sudan	13	48
Iraq	14	18
State of Palestine	18	54
Libya	21	29
Israel	21	53
Oman	79	39
Bahrain	81	35
Lebanon	83	52
Jordan	139	19
Qatar	164	20
Kuwait	388	42
Saudi Arabia	729	32
United Arab Emirates	935	32
Average		33
Netherlands	13	31
Austria	15	37
Germany	23	29
Greece	28	45
France	31	37
United Kingdom	34	43
Australia	45	48
Canada	56	46
Italy	108	29
United States of America	160	48
Average		41

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015). Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by Destination and Origin (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2015). Limited to countries with >10,000 Egyptian immigrants

Table 3. US immigrants by occupation and gender

Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Residence in US: Fiscal Year 2013

		Sex		
Characteristic	Total	Male	Female	Unknown
Total occupied +non-occupied	990,553	434,284	513,736	42,533
No occupation outside home	471,041	162,159	283,733	25,149
Homemakers	130,162	4,735	114,407	11,020
Students or children	249,910	120,224	119,489	10,197
Retirees	9,330	3,980	5,277	73
Unemployed	81,639	33,220	44,560	3,859
Unknown	266,604	118,141	142,881	5,582

Characteristic	Total	Family-sponsored preferences	Employment-based preferences	Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens	Diversity	Refugees and asylees	Other
Sex							
Total	990,553	210,303	161,110	439,460	45,618	119,630	14,432
Male	434,284	92,857	81,638	167,980	23,099	61,693	7,017
Female	513,736	101,165	78,003	251,004	18,220	57,937	7,407
Unknown	42,533	16,281	1,469	20,476	4,299	-	8
Total	990,553	210,303	161,110	439,460	45,618	119,630	14,432

Source: https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2013-lawful-permanen...

Table 4: Legal Restrictions on Women's Mobility and Employment Opportunities

'Gender-Unequal' Country	Legal Restrictions on Women's Mobility/Work (of 19)[11]
Syrian Arab Republic	15
United Arab Emirates	13
Kuwait	13
Sudan	12
Saudi Arabia	12
Jordan	12
Egypt	12
Cameroon	12
Mali	11
Democratic Republic of Congo	11
Bahrain	11
Ukraine	10
Tajikistan	10
Niger	10
Moldova	10
Benin	10
Azerbaijan	10

Table 5: Legal Restrictions on Women's Mobility (Barriers to Exit)

'Gender-Unequal' Country	Legal Restrictions on Women's Mobility/Work (of 6) [12]
Saudi Arabia	6
Iraq	5
Sudan	5
Afghanistan	4
Iran	4
Jordan	4

Endnotes

[1] The existing literature cited in this paper provides multiple conceptualizations and measures of "gender-unequal countries" and "gender-equal" countries. We provide two potential country lists at the end of the paper but note the empirical evidence we cite is not based on those lists.

[2] Although note that between 1990 and 2010 the stock of high-skilled female immigrants in OECD countries increased by 152 percent, and by 2010 the stock of high-skilled female immigrants was larger than the stock of high-skilled male immigrants. Africa and Asia experienced the most rapid growth of high-skilled female emigration, and, as proposed above, the growth rate is strongly correlated with measures of home country gender inequality (Kerr et al., 2016).

[3] As reflected in Tables 4 and 5, many countries in the MENA region (including the top seven most discriminatory according to the first index) qualify as 'gender-unequal' based on their legal restrictions on women's mobility and employment opportunities.

There is a rich literature on the 'family investment hypothesis' which suggests one migrating spouse might work upon arrival while the other (usually the man) accrues human capital. The evidence for the hypothesis appears to be weak, exceptions included in the case of Australian migrants where the primary worker according to immigration status was male (see Basilio et al 2007).

[5] This lower participation rate appears to dissipate over time. Looking at US census data from 1980 to 2000, Blau et al. (2011) find that immigrant women from countries with high female labor force participation work more after arrival in the US than do those from low labor force participation countries (an average of 814 hours a year compared to 690 hours), but there is convergence both between migrant groups and between migrants and native-born US women, which is largely complete within six to ten years. They also note that men's labor supply is unaffected by female labor force participation in source countries, suggesting that the initial lower participation reflects home country norms and the convergence suggests adoption of host country norms over time. And the problem may be smaller elsewhere: A set of surveys carried out across European countries from 1994-2000 suggested that the proportion of all men who reported positive work earnings was 67 percent compared to 46 percent for women. Amongst foreign-born respondents the proportions were 70 percent for men and 48 percent for women. For both men and women, being foreign-born was associated with lower earnings (Adsera and Chiswick 2007).

[6] Migrant women across OECD countries are more likely to have tertiary education than native-born women (27.78 percent compared to 22.9 percent), however native-born women are more likely to be employed (a 5.1 percentage point gap in employment compared to 0.1 percentage point gap for men) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2014; European Institute for Gender Equality 2015).

[7] More research is needed on the presence of a 'capacity surplus' amongst female economic migrants from gender-unequal countries, as the available evidence is not conclusive. The data in Lin and Sweetman (2014) suggests it may be possible to conduct analysis on a Canadian sample comparing earnings of those in full time employment by gender and country of origin. It may be possible to compare the gap in US wages between full time employed men and women from particular countries (perhaps controlling for education and experience) and see if the gap is smaller or larger amongst populations from countries with particularly severe gender inequality.

[8] Only around 70,000 of new migrants to the US each year are admitted on the basis of "extraordinary ability," needed skills, educational status, or other measures of (needed) capacity. The rest are spouses or children of those migrants, diversity visa lottery winners or (by far the largest proportion) family members of US citizens. Source: https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2013-lawful-permanent-residents. Docquier et al. (2009) suggest that in 2004, just 27 percent of women who received US employment-based visas were the principle visa-holder compared to 65 percent of men. If these ratios still held in 2013, that would suggest around 21,000 women were admitted to the US as permanent residents as principal employment-based visa applicants along with 53,064 men.

[9] First preference refers to those with demonstrated "extraordinary ability, outstanding professors or researchers, or multinational executives or managers;" second preference applies to those with "advanced degrees or exceptional ability;" third preference covers skilled and professional workers with bachelor's degrees as well as unskilled workers; fourth preference refers to categories of "special immigrants," and fifth preference relates to entrepreneurs ("Permanent Workers," US Citizenship and Immigration Services, accessed December 1, 2016, https://www.uscis.gov/working-united-states/permanent-workers.)

[10] "Table III: Immigrant Visa Issued," US Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, accessed December 1, 2016, https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/AnnualReports/FY2015AnnualReport/FY15AnnualReport-TableIII.pdf.

[11] Indicators selected from Women, Business and the Law: (1) An unmarried woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as an unmarried man. (2) A married woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as a married man. (3) An unmarried woman cannot travel outside the country in the same way as an unmarried man. (4) A married woman cannot travel outside the country in the same way as a married man. (5) A married woman cannot travel outside her home in the same way as a married man. (6) A married woman cannot get a job in the same way as a married man. (7) A married woman cannot register a business in the same way as a married man. (8) A married woman cannot choose where to live in the same way as a married man. (9) A woman cannot work the same night hours as a man. (10) A woman cannot work in jobs deemed hazardous in the same way as a man. (11) A woman cannot work in jobs deemed morally or socially inappropriate in the same way as a man. (12) A woman cannot work in jobs deemed arduous in the same way as a man. (13) A woman cannot work in mining the same way as a man. (14) A woman cannot work in factories the same way as a man. (15) A woman cannot work in construction the same way as a man. (16) A woman cannot work in the same occupations as a man. (17) A woman cannot work in metalworking the same way as a man. (18) A woman cannot engage in jobs requiring lifting heavy weights above threshold in the same way as a man. (19) A woman cannot do the same job-related tasks as a man.

[12] Indicators selected from Women, Business and the Law: (1) An unmarried woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as an unmarried man. (2) A married woman cannot apply for a passport in the same way as a married man. (3) An unmarried woman cannot travel outside the country in the same way as an unmarried man. (4) A married woman cannot travel outside the country in the same way as a married man. (5) A married woman cannot travel outside her home in the same way as a married man. (6) A married woman cannot choose where to live in the same way as a married man.

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