The features and implications of cross-border mobility differ by gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Women migrate for many reasons and in many ways, depending on whether they are labor migrants, refugees, or reuniting with their family; whether they are traveling alone, with children, or with their entire family; and whether they have skills in demand at their destination. Risks associated with fragility, conflict, and violence, coupled with legal frameworks that criminalize same-sex conduct, are steadily driving forced displacement for sexual and gender minorities. Because data and empirical evidence on sexual and gender minorities are scarce, this spotlight focuses primarily on the migration of women.

Patterns of male and female migration vary widely across countries. The feminization of migration flows has been increasing since well before the 1960s. This shift reflects a combination of factors, including the feasibility of travel by women and the nature of the demand for migrant labor (construction versus domestic work, for example). The percentage of female migrants is particularly high in certain migration corridors, such as from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand to Hong Kong SAR, China, and from Sri Lanka to Jordan.

Women and girls are overrepresented among some groups of migrants. For example, in 2022, 86 percent of adult Ukrainian refugees arriving in Europe were women, as were 62 percent of Ethiopian adult refugees present in South Sudan. Many of these women came with children, while the men stayed behind. Women also constitute a large part of those who migrate for family reunification. Typically, a wife and children move to join a migrant male family member who has already settled at the destination. This is the main long-term immigration flow in many member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), including the United States.

Climate change brings new dynamics to affected communities, and women face specific challenges. In many low- and lower-middle-income countries, women are often engaged in agriculture, frequently at the small, independent production level. These activities can be disproportionately affected by slow-onset climate change. Yet when they do not have other skills that are in demand in the labor market or when they are constrained by family obligations, women may not be able to move, and they are trapped in a situation of “maladaptation.” Still, patterns vary across countries and contexts. For example, in Bangladesh women are more likely to migrate than men in cases of crop failure and flooding because of insecurity in land tenure. By contrast, in Mali and Nigeria males are more likely to migrate in the event of climate shocks.

Overall, women and girls make up a relatively large share of emigrants from some regions and countries, such as Latin America, the Russian Federation and Central Asia, Central and Northern Europe, and the Philippines and Thailand (map S4.1). In other regions, such as South Asia, the Middle East, and large parts of Africa, men and boys predominate.

Similarly, some regions and countries receive relatively larger shares of female immigrants, such as Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Argentina and, to a lesser degree, the United States, Australia, and some Western European countries (map S4.2). Others receive a larger share of male immigrants, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Germany, and most of Scandinavia.
Map S4.1  Some countries send more female migrants; others send more male migrants
Share of females among emigrants from origin countries where migrants constitute at least 2 percent of the total population


Map S4.2  Some countries receive more female migrants; others receive more male migrants
Share of females among immigrants in destination countries where migrants constitute at least 2 percent of the total population

Migration and gender norms

Gender norms affect cross-border mobility at all stages, from the decision to migrate to the decision to settle or return. Gender norms often determine the options available to women and girls in the country of origin, including in terms of education and jobs. In some countries, women also face higher barriers to accessing the labor market. Even when legal norms are not as restrictive, such as in Brazil, Guatemala, India, and Lebanon, laws do not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value. These factors affect women’s choices to migrate and seek better opportunities. Restrictive gender norms are also driving women, especially high-skilled women, to emigrate. Many highly skilled women are choosing to migrate on their own to work, and they tend to favor destinations with lower gender gaps and less discrimination, such as OECD countries.

Between 2000 and 2020, the rate of migration from low- and middle-income countries to high-income countries increased 163 percent among tertiary-educated women (figure S4.1). This rate is faster than the increase in tertiary-educated male migrants (138 percent), as well as the increase in lower-skilled female migrants (39 percent). The rate of single women with a college education migrating to the United States has been growing steadily, particularly for women from South Asia and certain countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Restrictive gender norms can be an incentive for migration, but they can also be an obstacle. For example, in Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, and the Syrian Arab Republic women cannot travel outside of their countries under the same conditions as men. In other countries, social expectations place higher burdens on women—for example, when it comes to fulfilling family duties or making decisions independently. These burdens may limit women’s options for migration.

Access to the labor market at the destination

Many migrant women face challenges in accessing the labor market in the destination country. Some immigrant women have few labor market opportunities outside the informal and service sectors, and so they often work as domestic or care workers in precarious conditions. For example, in Colombia, Venezuelan women are more likely than men to work in the informal sector; recent women migrants are more than twice as likely as men with similar education levels to be unemployed; and even when migrant women have higher levels of education, they earn less than migrant men. Targeted policies are needed to leverage women’s economic potential and tackle issues of gender and labor discrimination.

Figure S4.1 The rate of migration of tertiary-educated female migrants is increasing faster than that of tertiary-educated male migrants and lower-skilled female migrants

Increase in the rate of migration from low- and middle-income countries to high-income countries, 2000–2020

Many of the women who move for family reunification—about one-third of migrant women in Europe—need support to access labor markets. This support includes childcare, skills matching, language courses, and vocational training. Several municipalities in Germany have implemented the Mama lernt Deutsch (Mom is learning German) initiative, which provides German-language courses for migrant women and childcare while mothers attend class. Torino, Italy, has offered courses in language, mathematics, civic education, and migration rights to less-educated Arab-speaking women from North Africa, who often live in isolation because they lack jobs and social networks. Indeed, for women and girls, being able to work helps reduce social isolation and improve the prospects of social integration.

Women refugees often face additional challenges. In situations of forced displacement, families are often torn apart, frequently leaving women with the full responsibility for their children. When they do not have support networks or childcare, women face extreme difficulties in accessing the labor force. They also may face discrimination as they look for full-time employment. Some Syrian refugee women, for example, have to juggle jobs, childcare, and household duties in fulfilling their role as the main or sole breadwinner.

Policies and support programs can help address gender differences in labor market access for migrant women. Civil society organizations and local governments have developed a range of initiatives, and additional efforts are under way at the national level. For example, Portugal implemented an initiative at the municipal level to provide women who had immigrated from Brazil and Cabo Verde with skills and job training. In Jordan, recent changes in work regulations allow home-based businesses to be registered. This new policy is expected to benefit both Syrian refugee women and Jordanian women whose ability to work outside their home is limited because of childcare responsibilities. In parallel, origin countries such as the Philippines have established a set of requirements to protect the rights of migrant domestic workers—mostly female—at their destination. But such protective measures must be balanced with other economic considerations so that migrants are not denied jobs or opportunities.

Education at their destination can help women access careers that were not available in their origin countries. It is even more important for girls. Migrant girls in OECD countries perform better than boys at all education levels, suggesting there are high returns on investments in their education. One crucial component of scaling up education and access to the labor market is the availability of language courses.

Gender-based violence

Some women and girls, both refugees and nonrefugees, migrate to escape sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) in their origin country. Women and girls are especially affected by GBV in contexts of armed conflict. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo women and girls have been raped on an alarming scale. Between 2003 and 2006, the International Rescue Committee registered 40,000 cases of GBV in the country. In fact, between 2005 and 2007 more than 32,000 cases of conflict-related sexual violence were registered in the province of South Kivu alone, and the actual numbers are believed to be even higher. Other forms of GBV are also common in situations of conflict, forced displacement, and humanitarian crises, including early marriage.

Women are often subject to intimate partner violence in both conflict-affected and safer settings, even though such violence often goes unreported because of trauma, fear of retaliation, and lack of laws addressing the issue. Several countries affected by fragility, conflict, or violence, such as Afghanistan, Guinea, Haiti, Libya, Sudan, and Syria, do not have specific legislation addressing domestic violence.

Women and girls encounter great risks of GBV at all stages of migration, as do sexual and gender minorities. Migrants in general—but especially women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities—face a very high risk of sexual and gender-based violence along migration routes. Forced migrants and those...
who are smuggled are particularly affected. The risks are exacerbated when victims have a limited ability to report crime to local authorities—such as if they are undocumented. Women are about three times more likely than men to be subjected to sexual violence along the western and central Mediterranean routes. Unaccompanied women and girls are 71 percent more likely to be victims of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse than those who are accompanied.

Gender-based violence urgently requires dedicated, holistic policies. Origin and destination countries have begun to tackle this issue. For example, Slovenia has placed specialized staff in asylum facilities to mitigate GBV risks. In Sweden, staff at reception centers are trained to identify possible GBV victims at all stages of processing applications for asylum. Since 2019, the Vietnamese government has been regularly informing embassy and consular officials about GBV, labor migration, and trafficking, and it instructed them to respond to GBV through direct service provision and referrals. More needs to be done, however, including increasing funding and investment in women’s groups, widening access to sustained services for survivors, investing in efforts to prevent GBV in situations of forced displacement, and improving understanding of local settings through better data.

A path toward empowerment

People leave their countries in a quest for a better life. This is a particularly important option for women and girls and sexual and gender minorities when local gender norms may hamper their mobility, access to justice, safety, and fair access to the labor market. Migration can lead to empowerment, financial independence, better opportunities for education, safety, family reunification, and employment. However, migration brings additional challenges, which can add to existing vulnerabilities. To maximize the benefits of migration for women and their families, discrimination should be addressed by increasing the access of women and children to educational opportunities, fighting against labor market discrimination, preventing and tackling GBV, and working toward social integration. To better inform policy making, more—and disaggregated—data on gender and migration are needed.

Notes

2. Ferrant et al. (2014).
17. Woldemikael et al. (2022).
18. OECD (2020).
20. EIGE (2019).
21. Ibesh et al. (2021); UNHCR (2014).
23. UNHCR and Blumont (2019); World Bank (2019).
24. Testaverde et al. (2017). These requirements include a minimum age (23) for migration, regulation of recruitment, mandatory training before departure, and a
minimum wage that migrant domestic workers should receive at their destination.

27. Banwell (2020).

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Woldemikael, Olivia, Stephanie López Villamil, María Alejandra Uribe, and Julio Daly. 2022. “Overcoming Barriers to Venezuelan Women’s Inclusion and Participation in Colombia.” CGD Policy Paper, Center for Global Development, Washington, DC.
