



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women



Concept Note

Gender and Migration: Care Workers at the Interface of Migration and Development
Wednesday, 11 May at 1:15pm – 2:45pm

**A special event by United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
(UN Women) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) at the
Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC-IV)
Istanbul, Turkey**

Background

Care workers provide care for people in private homes or in public and private institutions, such as hospitals and nursing homes. Care workers also provide less direct person-care services, such as cooking, cleaning the house, washing the laundry and other housekeeping activities, which are necessary for the welfare and comfort of members of a household. They may be unpaid household members and non-household members or paid non-household members. The latter may be paid domestic workers and health care professionals. Care work in private homes and in public and private institutions is largely done by women and migrant workers.

Domestic workers, who are employed by private households to carry out housework and care of children, and elderly or sick family members, make up an increasing number of care workers. Estimates of the number of paid domestic workers are currently being updated by the ILO, but available figures put the share of domestic workers at 4 to 10 per cent of the workforce in developing countries and about 2 per cent of the workforce in developed countries¹. It is estimated that as of 2010, women make up 49 per cent of world's international migrant population (214 million), and their share rises to 52 per cent in North America and Europe, which together account for more than half (120 million) of international migrants. Following the traditional gendered occupational segregation in their countries of origin and of destination, women migrants work mainly as nannies, housekeepers, housemaids, live-in caregivers, nurses and midwives.

Although care work makes an important contribution to economic and social development, it remains peripheral to the development agenda. It is undervalued and underpaid compared to other occupations which involve similar competencies and responsibilities over people or property. Because it is women's traditional task, it is often perceived as not requiring "real skills" but rather

¹ ILO LABORSTA database 2005, 2007, 2008, noted in ITUC's (International Trade Union Confederation) *Decent Work, Decent Life for Domestic Workers: An Action Guide*, 2011. Accessed via: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ITUC_dwd_AnglaisWEB.pdf

something that comes naturally to women. Care work reproduces gender-based pay gaps. In the case of domestic work, part of the reason why it is undervalued is that it takes place in the home – private and socially invisible; it involves, to a large extent, tasks that women have traditionally carried out without pay; and it is not aimed at producing economic added value. Moreover, as domestic workers often belong to historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities, or are migrants, they are vulnerable to another layer of discrimination in respect of employment conditions and to abuse. To make matters worse, domestic workers are often excluded, de jure or de facto, from labour and social protection, or fall into cracks between immigration, employment and social security laws. The recruitment and employment conditions of health professionals in the formal sector may be better regulated but these also suffer gaps, such as on matters of working hours, remuneration, occupational health and safety and social security.

Gendered development processes, including global demographic and labor market developments have created demands in care services both within and across national boundaries and has driven increasing flows of care workers, largely women, from poorer labour surplus regions to more prosperous, developed regions. These include:

- (1) The inability of regions/countries of origin to provide enough and decent employment which makes internal and trans-national border-crossing an attractive, acceptable or – in desperate circumstances – the only viable option². Factors include *inter alia* increasing poverty, insecurity of livelihoods, growing work burdens, family pressures, desire for better living standards, gender inequality and discrimination which often have a disproportionate effect on women; and
- (2) The “care crisis” in the more developed countries which has led to an increasing demand for women in domestic positions and for migrants to perform household responsibilities and caregiving. Factors include *inter alia* women’s increasing public employment in more developed countries because of increasing education or to plug labour shortages in richer countries; a changing demographic profile weighted in favour of the elderly in more prosperous labour short countries; and reduction in state provision of care services and shifts towards market-based approaches³.
- (3) Cultural factors, including the prestige consciousness of the middle class and affluent.

These gender-based causes of feminized migration, in the context of domestic care work, construct women within a “global care chain” where they are connected trans-nationally through a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. For these women, the care-giving back home in their respective countries of origin is taken over by other members of the family or by paid lower-class domestic workers, in both cases mostly women. As

² UN Women (2005) *Claim & Celebrate Women Migrants' Human Rights through CEDAW*, p 29.

³ Ibid

⁴ Hochschild, A.R.(2000) 'Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value', in Hutton, W. and Giddens, A. (Eds) *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*. London: Jonathan Cape

⁵UN Women (2008) *Global Care Chains: Towards a rights-based global care regime*. Accessed via: www.un-instraw.org/data/media/.../2-marco_conceptual_cdc-en_web.pdf

such, women become integrated into a gendered, occupationally segmented global care chain involving a hierarchy of women in countries of origin and employment⁴.

Nonetheless, there is growing recognition, internationally and nationally, of the economic and social contribution of care workers to sustainable human and economic development, and the importance of protecting them. Despite this domestic care workers contribute by sustaining and revitalizing employer households, freeing up time for women employers to engage in “productive” activity or “leisure”, subsidizing costs of government expenditure on child care and other services; remitting money that benefits the country, their families and communities. Towards this end, several countries have introduced policies, legislation and programs that advance the social, economic and legal rights of domestic workers.

Against this background this special event focuses on domestic care workers and seeks to:

- To enhance an understanding of the links between domestic care work, migration and development in LDCs and globally
- To raise awareness on the significance and benefits of protecting the labour, economic and social rights of domestic care workers
- To share and discuss good practices and advocate strategies and measures that expand protection of care workers and improves their working conditions.