

Migration and family farms – session at the Women’s Economic Empowerment Global Learning Forum, Bangkok, May 23rd – 25th 2017

On the 23rd May, MEDA, IWMI and ILO representatives participated in a session at the Women’s Economic Empowerment forum on *Migration and Family Farms*. Migration has transformed rural economies in many Majority World Countries. In countries worldwide where off-farm economic activities include out migration for labour, the impact on women in family farms can be significant, ranging from social shifts toward female-headed households, labour shortages, and greater vulnerability for those who stay behind. Despite the challenges, migration can also bring opportunities. Women who remain in farming may gain greater control over resources, increased decision making, and remittances can lead to new investments. The trend of the feminization of agriculture has also been complicated by the fact that women are themselves increasingly migrating in many countries. This session sought to discuss solutions and generate a better understanding of how to address migration issues as part of the broader women’s economic empowerment agenda.

Migration has been driven by a range of factors. In the context of Myanmar, May Thu Ne Win, the Gender Coordinator at MEDA in Myanmar pointed to drivers such as weak infrastructure for agriculture, ethnic conflict and the rising wages in neighboring Thailand. Agriculture itself suffers low yields, and the levels of mechanization and overall productivity is far lower than other countries in the region. Fraser Sugden from the CGIAR program on Water Land and Ecosystems, citing examples from the Eastern Gangetic Plains, also pointed out drivers linked to climate stress, and its convergence with the pressures of a monetized market economy. Climate stress includes subtle changes in climate over change, which are affecting the agricultural yields in regions such as the Gangetic plains and the Myanmar Dry Zone. It also however includes extreme events. Myat Thet Thitsar, the CEO of Enlighten Myanmar Research Foundation notes how there was a significant increase in out-migration following cyclone Nargis, and the associated loss of farmland due to salinization.

The outcomes for family farm are multifold. The most notable is the increase in the work burden for women, the group who is more likely to stay behind, although Fraser Sugden notes that in the context of the Eastern Gangetic Plains, this is linked to one’s socio-economic status with richer households hiring in laborers to compensate. Although remittances are significant, at a time of rising living costs productive reinvestment is not always possible. Myat Thet Thitsar noted that a significant portion of the \$400-\$500 a month sent by migrants in Thailand is spent on food, with little reinvestment aside from the occasional micro-enterprise or small plot of land. There are also more complex outcomes, particularly for the women who stay behind – this includes an increase in family breakdown and divorce, as well as harassment as women carry out tasks formerly in the male domains. The latter is particularly important in the orthodox lowlands of the Ganges plains, whereby migration has upset many deeply entrenched norms of women’s behavior. Aside from gender changes, migration has brought about challenges for youth – who represent the new generation of farmers. As youth aspire to migrate, they are investing less time in farming, and many institutions such as youth groups are falling apart.

The increased tendency for women to migrate has created new challenges, both for the women themselves, as well as family members at home. Jaqueline Pollock, the Chief Technical Officer for Migration projects in Myanmar, emphasized that women in Myanmar are increasingly migrating independently from their spouses, yet increasingly take on the lowest wage employment. There is for

example, less labour protection in many of the sectors which are considered women's work. Agriculture and plantations for example employ many women as it is more easier for them to take young children with them. A significant policy challenges relates to the fact that media narratives of female migration outcomes are often polarized. At the one extreme is the migrant 'success' story, where they have earned significant wealth which is reinvested back into the rural economy. On the other hand are stories of destitution, whereby migrants may return to the village empty handed, having been cheated or exploited while abroad. However, Jaqueline Pollock noted importantly, that the vast majority of migrants fit into the middle ground – a group which is often neglected while devising policy. Extreme stories of violence against women migrants often lead to kneejerk reactions such as 'bans' on domestic worker migration. These do not address why people migrate or the daily issues facing rural women, and assume that women are safe from violence at home. This also diverts attention from broader structural inequities, such as the stringent restriction on female migrants reproductive rights, an issue with long term demographic implications.

A number of policy questions were discussed during this session, taking in insights from all participants. A first question related to how migration could be harnessed as an opportunity, with remittances being reinvested back into agriculture. Changing the modality for procuring inputs represents one potential way forward. Gender norms restrict women in some countries from freely going to the market to invest in agricultural inputs following the migration of their husbands, or they may face harassment, and this is a further disincentive for investment of remittances. Creating a safe space for the provision of inputs would also be a way forward, or developing schemes, whereby inputs can be provided directly at a farm level. One idea is to build upon savings schemes, whereby banks and cooperatives could be linked up with agri-input dealers, so inputs could be provided in a timely manner, paid directly out of the savings account without the need for a cash transaction. Similar models have been piloted to pay for healthcare. Another challenge relates to the incentive structures for women to invest remittances in the land. There needs to be a stronger business case promoted through agricultural development programmes, which can help women make informed decisions about how to use the cash they receive. While much money ends up being used on consumption, a clear indication of potential income from agricultural investment can help build the case that there will be more cash for consumption in the long term if money is used for agriculture itself.