

Gender, Remittances and Development



**The case of women migrants from Vicente Noble,
Dominican Republic**



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Executive Summary

The migratory experience is laden with contradictions and ambiguities. On the one hand, it offers migrants the opportunity to improve their living conditions and those of their families, which benefit from the arrival of remittances from abroad; and to expand their knowledge and broaden their horizons by discovering new cultural realities. On the other hand, however, migrants and their loved ones may face high human costs that include family separation, harsh living conditions in the destination country – which are often exacerbated by racism and xenophobia – exploitation and low wages, and the perennial nostalgia felt for their own culture. Nevertheless, international migration has become a permanent facet of the global landscape, and an essential poverty-reduction strategy for many families in the developing world.

Over the last years we have witnessed a growing interest in **remittances and their potential for development**. However, the majority of the studies conducted do not take gender perspectives into account. The sending and utilization of remittances are conditioned by economic, social and cultural elements in both the countries of origin and destination. These processes are inevitably cross-cut by gender. Not only is the migratory experience different for men and women, but the impact of migration on the household varies depending on whether a man or a woman migrates. Gender differences are thus observed in the way that households are restructured, the decisions that are made with respect to the utilization of remittances, and by whom, the type of investments that are prioritized, etc.

The integration of gender perspectives in the analysis of migratory processes, remittances and development contributes to making development policies and programmes more effective and sustainable, and facilitates the achievement of the **Millennium Development Goals**. For this reason,

INSTRAW initiated a series of **case studies** with the aim of understanding the gender dimensions of the migratory phenomenon, remittances, and their potential for development. The case of Dominican migration to Spain was chosen as an initial study because it is uniquely appropriate for an initial analysis of the links between migration, remittances and gender: it is a predominantly female migratory flow from rural areas, with women migrating as the main economic providers for their households. This case study departs from a theoretical framework that looks at the **feminization of migration** as part of a new international division of reproductive labour brought about by globalization. “Feminization” in this case refers less to an increase in numbers of women migrants, and more to the qualitative change in their role as providers.

The main objectives of the Dominican case study were: to analyze the gender dimensions of Dominican migration to Spain, the impact of gender in the sending, receipt and utilization of remittances, and the changes in gender roles brought about by the sending, receipt, utilization and management of remittances. An additional objective was to explore the sending and receipt of collective remittances and analyze the extent to which these support local development initiatives. This qualitative study permitted the collection of information through household interviews with households that receive remittances and the migrants who send them. Vicente Noble, a rural community in the South-West of the Dominican Republic was chosen because it gave rise to the first migratory flows to Spain, and female migration since then has been massive.

The economic crisis and the rise in male unemployment of the 1980s made women’s incorporation into the labour market necessary to ensuring the survival of their households. Given the difficulties that women face in accessing the formal labour market, these women were forced

to devise new strategies for guaranteeing the reproduction of their households. Beginning in the 1990s, women began employing the strategy of international migration, specifically to Spain. This strategy was fomented by religious leaders in the area that had contacts with middle- and upper-class Spanish families who required someone to carry out domestic chores and care for dependent persons.

The fact that Dominican migration to Spain was initiated by women contributed to the establishment of **female migratory networks**. Women’s participation in domestic service (where the working relationship is based on confidence, such that employers will rarely hire someone without references) allowed them to facilitate the migration of sisters, sisters-in-law and daughters to work in the homes of their employers’ friends. This also contributed to the selective reunification of mothers with their daughters, with the primary aim of avoiding early pregnancy, strengthening the household economy and ensuring a medium-term replacement migration that would allow women to return to their homes, leaving their daughters as substitutes. Finally, the Spanish government was a co-participant in the feminization of migration by offering an annual number of legal posts for foreigners specifically in the domestic service sector – in other words, for migrant women.

Dominican migrants to Spain demonstrate a high capacity for sending remittances in relation to the low salaries they receive. They send these remittances at considerable personal cost to themselves – barely saving enough money for personal expenses, leisure, training, etc. – so that they can invest the highest amount of money possible in their families’ well-being, sending significantly more money than the Dominican diaspora in the United States. This is also a reflection of the fact that migration to Spain is more recent than to the United

States, where it is more likely that Dominican migrants have reunited their families. For this reason, the **economic contribution** of migrant women to their country of origin is important.

When migratory flows first began, women remitted money to their husbands. However these men often did not use the money for what women wanted, choosing instead to spend it on personal expenses (drinking, gambling, sexual adventures, etc.) or on bad investments. Some husbands abandoned their productive work and lived entirely off remittances, and others continued to work but stopped contributing to the household. The main alternative chosen by women was to send the money directly to other women, mothers or sisters, who demonstrated an ability to comply with the wishes of migrants in the utilization of remittances, in addition to being scrupulous administrators of the funds.

Those women that stay in the country of origin receive and manage the money sent to them by migrant women, dedicating it primarily to the consumption of basic goods and investment in health and education, to a greater degree than remittance-receiving households in other countries. Thus remittances are supplementing the deficiencies of State social policies and covering periods of unemployment, retirement or illness for one or more household members. The purchase or improvement of the home is another important investment for remittances that is prioritized by all recipient households, being in many cases the only investment available.

Productive investment of remittances is rare and generally involves the purchase of a vehicle so that a household member can generate income by transporting passengers or cargo, or the establishment of a small business. These businesses are characterized by low levels of investment, local scope, high reliance on unremunerated family labour, limited capacity for income-generation and little medium-term viability. It must be noted that, in 54% of cases, the businesses started with remittances are female-

owned, that 100% of the women migrants who had returned to the community opened a small business, and that this is the only investment opportunity that their low level of education and training allows them. Women proprietors tend to invest in businesses such as beauty salons, small food stores, or clothing and accessory stores, and that these businesses are not sustainable. The lack of success of businesses started by women using remittances is due to the heavy burden of family labour borne by women heads of household in the country of origin, and the difficulties in accessing financial, education, training or other resources that would support newer, more sustainable entrepreneurial activities.

The community social perception of the impacts of migration and remittances is ambivalent. On the one hand community members highlight positive changes related to improved quality of life and increased purchasing power, the reduction of malnutrition and infant mortality, the structural improvement in dwellings, the increase in businesses and the overall improvement of the community's physical image. These positive perceptions do not include the changes that would be generated by more long-term economic, social and community development. On the other hand, informants also highlighted the increase in various social problems in relation to female migration, such as the disintegration of families and low educational achievement, school abandonment, early pregnancy and an increase in the use of drugs among children.

When men migrate, their departure is justified because they are fulfilling their paternal responsibility as family provider, and their absence is not perceived as traumatic for the children. In contrast, when women migrate for the same reasons, their absence is perceived as family abandonment that gives rise to the disintegration of the home and has nothing less than catastrophic effects on the children. No empirical data exist to support whether, and to what extent, the children of Dominican migrant women suffer these problems to a greater degree

than the rest of the youth population. What is beyond doubt is the **social blame** assigned to women migrants based on their "failure" to fulfill the expectations that traditional gender norms assign to the female role. Critiques along these lines come from various sources both within and outside the community of origin, including governmental and religious authorities that incessantly promote a discourse that blames all social ills on the disintegration of the family.

When men migrate, the sexual division of labour within the household does not alter significantly, as they can continue to fulfill their role as economic provider even from a distance. However when women migrate, it becomes necessary to reorganize the fulfillment of social reproduction. The findings of this study confirm that the husbands of migrant women from Vicente Noble do not alter their traditional roles by assuming some of the household and child-care responsibilities that were originally borne by women. Thus, a restructuring of the household becomes necessary and other women, often more than one, must assume responsibility for this work. The mothers of migrant women are those that most often assume responsibility for the household, and in cases where she or another woman cannot take charge, another woman – generally a Haitian migrant – is hired, thereby adding another link to the chain of gender and ethnic inequalities.

The predominance of **matrifocal households**, together with the fact that migration occurs in female chains and that women have become the main recipients of remittances have generated a family model in which men's contribution is less and less important, their role is increasingly secondary or marginal, and where all labour, both productive and reproductive, is carried out by women.

Women migrants that were not heads of the household before their departure have seen the most benefits in terms of a reduction in gender inequalities. The reality of becoming the main economic providers for their households supposes

a significant increase in their capacity for income-generation, has placed them in a position of **greater autonomy** with respect to their husbands, has provided them with **economic independence**, and has increased their household decision-making power. Moreover, these women have ceased to view their contribution as mere help, which was the case in the early years of migration, and are now aware of the symbolic meaning of being the main economic provider in terms of the definition of power relations within the household.

The reunification of husbands with their wives in Spain has been successful among those couples that conformed to a nuclear model of the family. Among these couples we observed some changes in gender roles. When both members of the couple worked outside the home, women feel justified in asking for a more **equitable distribution of household responsibilities**, and the distribution of men's income has been renegotiated, in contrast to the situation that existed in the Dominican Republic.

The potential of remittances for development will only be realized if a precise articulation between three elements is reached: **migrant associations**, whose objectives should include sending collective remittances to support local development projects in their communities of origin; the **government of the country of origin**, which should forge links with these associations and formulate policies to maximize the benefits of remittances; and the **government of the destination country**, which should ensure complementarity of its migration and

development cooperation policies, specifically by formulating co-development policies.

With regard to **collective remittances**, only a few examples were found. In spite of the fact that Spain hosts a large organization of Dominican women, until now this group has only carried out a few isolated local development projects in the South-west of the Dominican Republic, which have not continued over time.

Simultaneous intervention in several areas is necessary in the Dominican Republic, for example with respect to the cost of remittance transfers, the use of formal banking mechanisms, support to the entrepreneurial efforts of recipient households, and the design of local development plans for communities of origin. In addition, there is a need for mechanisms to mobilize the savings generated through remittances. Interventions in this respect must take into account the feminization of Dominican migration to Europe and the dynamics at play in the receipt of remittances which, as we have described, are strongly impacted by gender.

It is still necessary to give real meaning to the concept of co-development. Beyond the voluntary return initiatives promoted by many developed countries, it is essential that migrants play a leading role in the development of their communities of origin within the context of policies that promote co-development. A number of innovative projects are being carried out, with the participation of local and regional governments, with respect to training for migrants that also mainstream a gender perspective with

the aim of fomenting the mobility of women migrants to other sectors besides domestic service.

The Vicente Noble case study that is presented here attempts to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon, with the aim of promoting policies and programmes that improve the situation of women migrants.

Remittances constitute private money, and the responsibility for promoting their productive use cannot fall solely on the shoulders of migrants. This responsibility is not placed on other sectors of the population, who are not asked to justify the utilization of their income. Above all however, remittances must not be used as a substitute for State responsibility in terms of social needs and the creation of conditions that allow people to continue to reside in their country of origin. In addition, remittances cannot become a **substitute for financing for development**, which must receive sufficient resources from developed countries based on international commitments, such as those reached during the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey (2002). The euphoria that remittances have generated risks turning them into "disputed money" between governments and financial institutions, without taking into account the often gruelling work and living conditions of many migrants in developed countries, or the enormous sacrifices made by migrants in order to ensure the survival of their households. Migration must be seen in any case from the perspective of human rights, as its contribution to development can only be realized in a context of respect for these rights.
