

1. Young women and girls left behind: Causes and consequences

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Introduction

Young women and girls are broadly defined to be those aged 10 to 24 years by the United Nations.¹ Despite their age, many of them – particularly those in South-East Asia and the Pacific – may have already experienced migration either as migrants themselves or through personal encounters with migrant relatives and/or friends given the high migration rates in these geographical regions. Bearing in mind that migration is relational whereby migration processes and migrants' lives are closely intertwined with other familial, social and structural factors, migration affects – to varying degrees – those who do and do not move. Non-migrants are also affected by migration whether directly through the absence of close migrant relatives or indirectly via vicarious experiences of migration. This paper thus focuses specifically on exploring the causes and impacts of migration on young women and girls who have remained in their home country in South-East Asia and the Pacific. The paper first highlights some key characteristics of these young women and girls and considers the diverse sociocultural contexts in which they reside alongside the possible causes for their situation. Thereafter, the paper turns directly to the often-neglected voices and emotions of young females who have been “left behind” by migrants. It explores the different circumstances and issues young women and girls face as daughters, sisters and/or wives of migrants,² reasons for their (im)mobility, and the everyday challenges they encounter as they navigate their transition into adulthood within communities where a culture of migration predominates. Finally, the paper concludes by offering some suggestions for interventions and areas for further investigation.

Contextual background: Issues girls and young women face

Countries within the South-East Asian and the Pacific regions are very diverse politically, economically, socially and/or culturally. Such diversities also exist within each country itself. Nonetheless, migration in contemporary times may provide some common threads across and within the countries in these regions even though their histories and cultures of migration may differ. While this paper is unable to delve into the comprehensive details of each South-East Asian and the Pacific country due to the

1 As there is no universal definition of adolescence and youth, this paper will examine research pertaining to girls and young women within this age range without prejudice to the definitions adopted by various organizations, countries and context under study (see www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/One%20pager%20on%20youth%20demographics%20GF.pdf). Also, given the varied definitions available, it is often difficult to obtain uniform statistics or data conforming to this age group alone.

2 In light of existing research and analysis, the paper mainly focuses on daughters.

uneven data available – particularly those relating to young women – and space constraints, this brief section is important in highlighting selected key contextual factors affecting young women and girls alongside the migration trends within these regions to facilitate a fuller understanding of the issues some young women and girls are facing within the environment they dwell. Knowing that youth is a relational and social construct that comprises a diverse and liminal group, the findings presented in this section are not intended to make generalizations about young women and girls in these regions. Instead, one must continually remember to consider the specific sociocultural and political contexts that partially contribute to each outcome. It is also important to stress from the outset that this paper focuses mainly on research from low to middle-income countries within these regions given their greater resource limitations, as compared to the upper-middle and advanced economies such as Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore.

An overview of young women and girls in terms of total and migrant population as well as school enrolment, literacy and labour force participation rates in each region is presented in Annex 1. In general, the proportion of young women and girls among the total and migrant population is higher in South-East Asia where there is also an observably higher rate of feminized migration. Many developing countries within these regions, particularly in the Pacific, are also experiencing a “youth bulge” due to a higher demographic proportion of youths versus other age groups in the population. For some, this has resulted in local issues such as high unemployment and underemployment rates among the youths and/or greater dependency on their families.³ While the school enrolment and literacy figures for young women and girls have generally improved for both regions, one must consider that the overall high percentage is often propped up by certain better performing countries. For instance, the gender parity index (GPI) for primary to tertiary gross enrolment ratio is 0.95 in Lao People’s Democratic Republic while youth literacy rate for female population aged 15–24 years in Myanmar is around 84.4 per cent in 2016 (compared to Indonesia’s purported 100% for the same age group).⁴ Most countries in South-East Asia and the Pacific have still not attained the targeted full school enrolment rate for their population even though access to education has generally improved with compulsory education ranging from five to 15 years in these regions.⁵ More importantly, many governments in both regions are also grappling with improving access to quality as well as relevant education.⁶ With higher qualifications and extended years of schooling for young women and girls, many are still experiencing poor employment prospects due to limited opportunities, skills mismatch and the “pushdown’ effects of expanding access to education” as evidenced in countries such as Indonesia.⁷ Regardless of education levels and despite education replacing agrarian activities for youths, Indonesian girls’ involvement in craft, domestic and/or waged-agricultural work, for example, was still considerably higher than boys’ throughout the years.⁸

With limited local prospects, migration appears to provide many South-East Asians and the Pacific Islanders with an alternative avenue of livelihood and pathway to economic success.⁹ At the same time, there are other factors encouraging people in these regions to migrate including the keen efforts of many governments in promoting international migration as an economic solution to addressing the country’s developmental and poverty issues. Natural disasters as well as climate change¹⁰ in recent years

3 Curtin, 2011; Duncan, 2008; Harper, 2017; Hugo, 2013; LYU and UNFPA, 2014.

4 Discovery DCode, n.d.; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016.

5 Discovery DCode, n.d.; Woo and Corea, 2009.

6 Levine, 2013; United Nations, 2018; Woo and Corea, 2009.

7 Beazley, 2015; Khoo and Yeoh, 2017; White, 2012:94.

8 Geertz, 1961; White, 2012.

9 Bylander, 2015; Hugo, 2013; Kelly, 2011; LYU and UNFPA, 2014; OECD, 2015; UNESCAP, 2017; Ware, 2005.

10 The impacts of climate change on the lives and livelihoods of left-behind young women and girls is an important topic which cannot be adequately addressed within the scope of this paper. More targeted research on this aspect is also needed.

have also compelled migration in these regions due to a loss of livelihoods and homes.¹¹ The growing feminization of labour migration can also be attributed to a general global preference and demand for hiring women in numerous factory, care and domestic work.¹² Over time, people grow increasingly accustomed to the idea of a family member, including daughters/wives/mothers, leaving their families to work in foreign lands in order to improve the family's overall well-being.¹³ Living in environments with a dominant feminized migration culture may also exert additional unseen pressures on young women and girls who stay. Interestingly, while governments and policymakers have been diligent in capturing emigration data, there is still no accurate data describing the size and characteristics of the population being left behind in South-East Asia and the Pacific. Estimates can also be wide-ranging; for instance, various scholars have suggested anywhere from two to nine million children in the Philippines to be left behind by migrant parents.¹⁴ The lack of disaggregated data for this critical segment of the population makes it difficult to fully understand the extent of the situation and impacts on both left-behind young women and girl, as well as boys.¹⁵

Finally, while matrilineal societies exist within some countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Marshall Islands, many of the communities in these regions are patriarchal. Many young women and girls often have to submit to the male authority, such as fathers or husbands, in their households, having limited mobility and freedom to make independent decisions even after reaching the age of majority which ranges from 15 to 21 years.¹⁶ Many girls are also encouraged by their families to marry early, thus keeping them constantly under a man's watch. Despite the rising age at first marriage in these regions, a notable percentage of girls in countries such as the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Solomon Islands, Thailand and Vanuatu are already married by 18.¹⁷ Based on the mean age at first marriage, many also generally marry before turning 25.¹⁸ Early marriages, often followed by young pregnancies, have critical implications on young women and girls' health, education, aspirations and mobility.¹⁹ On one hand, early marriages and the persistence of traditional gender roles may limit their movements by entrenching them in caregiving roles within the domestic sphere, but they may also kickstart their motivation to migrate in order to fulfil familial obligations, provide economic care for the family and escape patriarchy.

Broad impacts of migration on left-behind girls and young women

The previous section hints at some contextual issues and dilemmas confronting many young women and girls in their home countries even before adding the migration of a close relative into the mix. Naturally, they also have to contend with other ever-changing social, familial and gendered expectations, inequality, material needs and wants, urban and global influences as well as new challenges brought about by greater access to new media and technologies.²⁰ Given that the impacts of migration should be considered alongside intersections of age, class and gender amongst others, the numerous issues young women and girls face are to be also kept in mind as we turn now to exploring the impacts of

11 Duncan, 2008; IOM, 2017; Oakes et al., 2017; Prakash, 2018.

12 See for example Khoo et al., 2014; Lam and Yeoh, 2019; Sijapati, 2015; Small and Dixon, 2004; Tisdell, 2014.

13 Butt, 2018.

14 Cortés, 2007; IOM et al., 2008; Lam and Yeoh, 2018.

15 Martin and Herzberg, 2014.

16 Reid, 2014; Woo and Corea, 2009.

17 Jones, 2010; LYU and UNFPA, 2014; Rumble et al., 2018; UN DESA, 2012; UNICEF, 2018.

18 Woo and Corea, 2009.

19 United Nations, 2018.

20 Notably, boys and young men are also often subjected to similar conditions as girls. However, this paper focuses mainly on the experiences of young women and girls.

international migration of family members on left-behind young women and girls. While the terms, “stay-behind” and “left-behind” have seemingly been used interchangeably thus far, one should note that the former carries an underlying tone of choice while left-behind tends to indicate a lack of choice given the temporary labour migration regime that forbids family reunification in host countries, an absence of consultation or involvement in familial/parental migration decisions, as well as the lack of resources to pursue any migration aspirations.²¹ Admittedly, the sense of choice is sometimes unclear but more importantly, this paper does not imply any negative connotations when using “left-behind”. Besides, the state of staying or being left is unlikely to be permanent given that the movements of young women and girls and their families are often in a constant flux.

As mentioned earlier, research on left-behind children is still relatively limited despite a surge of studies (mainly situated in North America and East and South Asia) in the past decade. Studies eliciting the voices of youths – especially females – are even scarcer in both scope and numbers. Existing research focusing largely on various well-being outcomes such as economic, educational, emotional, psychological, physical/developmental as well as gender roles and familial relations are disproportionately situated in selected South-East Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam, and much less work on the Pacific can be found.²² Much of the existing research also does not present gendered-differentiated outcomes, though research highlighting the voices and emotions of left-behind young women and girls in Indonesia, revealing their aspirations and rationale for choosing to stay or migrate, have emerged recently.²³ Apart from those who chose to stay, left-behind young women and girls are a very diverse group and would have rather varied experiences and reasons for being “left” at home. For example, some are forced to stay; some are failed migrants who have either never left or have now returned; some are migrants-in-waiting; some are “virtual” travellers who may be partaking in another country’s events/programmes through digital means; others may be children of cross-national marriages (for example, Japanese-Filipino children) or overseas-born natives from the Pacific who are purposively sent to their home country for different reasons including (a) complicated family and citizenship situations; (b) getting in touch with their cultural roots; and/or (c) as a form of disciplinary measure.²⁴ On the other hand, the frequent coming-and-goings of islanders in the Pacific, for example Tongans, could create a perspective that no one is ever really leaving or being left behind.²⁵ To investigate further, we now turn to three broad – and often interrelated – aspects on the impacts of migration on young women and girls.

Economic and education outcomes

Existing quantitative and qualitative research on the different well-being outcomes of left-behind children in South-East Asia has produced an array of mixed – both positive and negative – findings. A complex combination of various factors such as gender and age of migrants, substitute caregivers and children, type of surrogate carers, sociocultural and circumstantial contexts, destinations, distance and length of parental migration as well as the presence of a migration culture in the community impinge on the outcomes.²⁶ Thus far, where gender is taken into consideration, not many studies in South-East Asia or the Pacific have highlighted young women and girls as being more negatively affected than boys when one or both parents migrate internationally. In addition, studies from both regions in the recent years –

21 Lam et al., 2018; Lam and Yeoh, 2018.

22 See reviews by Lam et al., 2018; Lam, Yeoh and Hoang, 2013.

23 See for example Chan, 2017; Khoo and Yeoh, 2017; Khoo and Yeoh, 2018; Somaiah, Yeoh and Arlini, 2019.

24 Cave and Koloto, 2015; Chan, 2018; Jensen and Miller, 2017; Lam et al., 2018; Robertson, Cheng and Yeoh, 2018; Seiger, 2017; Suzuki, 2010.

25 Cave and Koloto, 2015.

26 Beazley, 2015; Graham and Jordan, 2011; Lam et al., 2018.

albeit mainly from the Philippines – have shown that left-behind children are also not necessarily worse off than children living with both parents.²⁷ Overall, most studies would agree that children – both boys and girls – typically gain materially and economically from their parent's migration.²⁸ Remittances have also generally led to higher investments in education for girls, granting them improved access to (better) education, the completion of more years of schooling and obtaining higher qualifications, particularly for those from Fiji, parts of Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.²⁹ For the Tongans, remittances were especially important in the past as they provided subsistence for teenage girls.³⁰ The increased allocation of remittances to girls' education is also aided by compulsory education laws that helped ensure most young girls achieve a basic education.

Occasionally, different persons within the same community may give conflicting views on the outcomes of migration for left-behind children as evidenced in interviews conducted in Lombok, Indonesia.³¹ Local government officials stressed the necessity of remittances (read positive) for the survival of left-behind children while teachers described “psychological symptoms” and emotional trauma amongst those left-behind. They reported that left-behind children “were more likely to drop out of school” with left-behind girls leaving school before turning 11 (end of primary school) to look after younger siblings.³² Left-behind children themselves revealed positive experiences of remittances when received regularly. Indonesian girls, in particular, demonstrated an awareness that their parent(s) migrated to support their education and improve their lives. Thus, they expressed happiness in attending school and would study hard and recite the Quran out of their deep sense of “obligation and duty” toward their migrant parents.³³

Findings on academic performance of left-behind young women and girls have also been rather mixed. A study by Asis and Ruiz-Marave found that left-behind Filipino children performed better than those from non-migrant households at school and that girls performed better than boys.³⁴ In their survey of 487 children, left-behind girls aged 9 to 11 appeared to perform academically better than boys and have better school progression/pacing though these results are not significant. Other studies, however, revealed Filipino children from mother-migrant families to be doing more poorly than other children academically.³⁵ One study however reported left-behind boys with migrant mothers as “significantly more negatively affected than girls, even though there is wide evidence that education expenditures on girls are more sensitive to income changes.”³⁶ The long-term migration of Thai mothers was also found to affect school enrolment adversely while fathers' absence had no similar adverse impact.³⁷ Such mixed findings drive home the need to have more targeted studies in each country in order to facilitate the design of appropriate measures to help left-behind girls.

27 Asis, 2006; Asis and Ruiz-Marave, 2013; Jampaklay, 2006.

28 Lam et al., 2018.

29 Asis and Ruiz-Marave, 2013; ECMI/AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004; Gounder, 2016; Jampaklay, 2006; Khoo and Yeoh, 2018; Yang, 2008.

30 Connell and Brown, 2005.

31 Beazley, Butt and Ball, 2018.

32 Ibid., 597.

33 Ibid.; Khoo and Yeoh, 2017.

34 Asis and Ruiz-Marave, 2013.

35 Battistella and Conaco, 1998; Cortes, 2015; ECMI/AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004.

36 Cortes, 2015:76.

37 Jampaklay, 2006.

Well-being and social outcomes

As earlier indicated, the gender and type of surrogate carer – grandmother/father, left-behind father/mother, other relatives and/or non-relatives – for left-behind children is one factor affecting their well-being. Existing studies revealed that the presence and support of good surrogate carers are critical in mitigating the negative impacts caused by the migrant parent's absence.³⁸ Left-behind young women and girls are also enlisted to become carers either for themselves or their families. For instance, the eldest daughter in the Philippines, regardless of age, may be tasked to assume heavier care burdens, make household decisions, take on additional responsibilities and chores as well as care for younger siblings in their mother's absence.³⁹ Overall, earlier studies portrayed left-behind Filipino daughters – especially the eldest – as more disadvantageously affected by parental migration. Similarly, Vietnamese girls also have to pick up the household chores formerly performed by their older sisters who have now married internationally.⁴⁰ Reports of girls spending more time on household chores are possibly unsurprising given the prevailing gendered division of labour within both regions to accord domestic work to women.⁴¹ However, later research comparing three study countries, the Philippines, Nigeria and Mexico, revealed that Filipino children of engaged migrant mothers who communicate and remit regularly actually spent less time doing household chores. Some possible explanations of this reversal include the greater availability of resources in the household due to migration, transmission of social remittances as well as a greater emphasis on schoolwork instead.⁴²

Returning to the earlier studies reported in the Philippines, left-behind daughters also appear to cope with the added household and caring responsibilities “by leaving school earlier and forming their own families through early marriages and unplanned pregnancies in order to fulfil their own lives”.⁴³ Daughters from poorer families experience a more significant drop in their quality of life and falling grades upon their mothers' migration. However, they do become more independent and learn new skills in the process. The negative outlook presented raises causes for concern over the possible cumulative negative impacts of migration and poverty. It also highlights the need for a longitudinal approach toward understanding the impacts of migration and change in care and familial relations on left-behind children over the years. By contrast, the social and economic status of left-behind young Vietnamese women are actually elevated when there is an international (marriage) migrant in the household, thus raising their marriage prospects as well as bargaining power.⁴⁴ The option of marrying internationally for women has transformed the local marriage market quite significantly in favour of females.

Left-behind daughters also react differently to their situation; from qualitative interviews conducted with subsamples of larger studies, some are resentful while others are more reflective and accepting of their situation, and adjust their lifestyles accordingly to accommodate the change in reciprocation of their migrant mothers' actions.⁴⁵ Vietnamese girls aged 12 to 15 demonstrated their thoughtfulness over their transnational family formation and are more likely to understand and sympathize with the split-family arrangement.⁴⁶ As migration becomes increasingly normalized in many of the societies within the region, negative effects may also gradually become less pronounced.⁴⁷

38 For selected examples of studies discussing the various surrogate carer-types and well-being outcomes, see ECMI/AOS-Manila, SMC and OWWA, 2004; Hoang, Yeoh and Wattie, 2012; Lam and Yeoh, 2019.

39 Parreñas, 2005.

40 Belanger and Tran, 2011.

41 Jordan et al., 2018.

42 Ibid.

43 Hoang et al., 2015:265.

44 Belanger and Tran, 2011.

45 Hoang et al., 2015.

46 Hoang and Yeoh, 2015.

47 Lam, Yeoh and Hoang, 2013; Yeoh, Hoang and Lam, 2010.

A handful of other quantitative studies also presented some well-being indicators relating to left-behind girls that are informative. A study of 496 Thai children aged 9 to 11 first reported, through the perspectives of children from both international migrant and non-migrant households, that left-behind children and girls are more resilient⁴⁸ in coping with adversities than their respective counterparts.⁴⁹ Further investigations into the same sample ($n=1,030$), but now encompassing carers of children aged 3 to 5 and 9 to 11, later revealed negative impacts on the mental health of left-behind children, especially girls, if their mothers have ever migrated after their birth.⁵⁰ In another quantitative study, the impacts of migration on the physical development of left-behind girls are mixed. On one hand, Filipino left-behind girls (and boys) aged 9 to 11 are taller than their peers from non-migrant households, possibly due to having better nutrition brought about by their parents' migration. On the other hand, Vietnamese left-behind girls are significantly more likely to be stunted than left-behind boys and girls from non-migrant families. This stunting is likely attributed to cultural preferences of feeding boys over girls.⁵¹ Moving away from well-being indicators, the absence of Indonesian migrant fathers has also created difficulties for left-behind mothers to register their children's births which may lead to future problems for the children themselves.⁵²

Overall, traditional gendered norms continue to persist in both South-East Asian and the Pacific countries but gendered ideologies have been strategically altered to factor in international migration, sometimes in positive and other times in regressive ways. Many left-behind girls in South-East Asia appeared to have grown better than earlier cohorts at weathering the separation from their migrant parents/relatives and not all end up becoming materialistic or in dire situations as popular media often portray. The improvements can be partly explained by the increasing access to new communications channels/tools over the years facilitating frequent communication and reducing feelings of isolation and abandonment. A better understanding of migrants' decisions and lives overseas also helped left-behind young women and girls cope better with their absence and motivated them to live more productively in improving themselves. While information on the economic and educational benefits for the left-behind in the Pacific can often be derived through country reports, less is unfortunately known about the social adjustments and outcomes for left-behind children there. This is perhaps due to the smaller and more scattered proportion of left-behind populations from the Pacific region, making it difficult to conduct thorough research. What is known, however, is that many migrants from the Pacific, such as the Tongans, can frequently conduct short-term visits home which help greatly in conserving their economic, social and cultural ties.⁵³ This freedom is perhaps aided by the availability of dual citizenship programmes to some Pacific States as well as a more fluid migration regime unlike those confronting low-waged South-East Asian international migrants who are often labour-bound to their employers for a contractual two years before being able to return home.

Individual choices: “Rights” and obligations

Adolescent and young females remaining in their home countries are affected by the migration of their immediate family members as well as other non-related persons in their communities. Material and social remittances from relatives may affect the well-being of left-behind young women and girls personally, but they are equally affected by the culture of migration and the overt manifestations of

48 Resilience in this study is captured through children's subjective well-being as demonstrated by their answers as “always enjoying school” and being “very happy”.

49 Jampaklay and Vapattanawong, 2013.

50 Adhikari et al., 2014.

51 Graham and Jordan, 2013.

52 Ball, Butt and Beazley, 2017.

53 Cave and Koloto, 2015; Duncan, 2008.

material and economic effects of migration through the appearance of newer and bigger houses and vehicles, modern appliances and clothing, within their community. Numerous studies have emphasized that communities with a dominant and long-standing history of migration may “influence and shift value systems in dramatic ways, becoming a ‘referential behaviour repertoire,’ orienting value systems and motivating new perspectives and choices”.⁵⁴ Left-behind young females – especially those with migrant parents – are reportedly more susceptible toward migration and likelier to develop migration aspirations in replication of their predecessors’ footsteps.⁵⁵ While this may hold true for some, we must not forget that left-behind young women and girls do have agency and capacity to make their own migration choices. Even though many Vietnamese girls may want to marry internationally like their sisters, they retain the choice of marrying for love or a local suitor they deem as a good match.⁵⁶

Indeed, recent studies reveal that left-behind young women and girls make conscious decisions that may run counter to parental, partner and/or societal expectations whether in staying or leaving.⁵⁷ Through their own voices, we learnt that just as there are young women and girls who decided to migrate to fulfil their dreams, there are now more who are becoming increasingly vocal about their decision to stay.⁵⁸ In cases where societal or parental pressures attempt to deny them their freedom in deciding to stay or leave, left-behind young women and girls strategically subscribe to gender-appropriate scripts to help validate their decisions in their negotiations for the desired (non)migration outcome; for instance, reasoning that migrating or staying as necessary for providing care for the family.⁵⁹ Some Indonesian young women put their marriage plans on hold or break off their relationships in order to fulfil their life aspirations through migration while others first consider their positions as wives, and defer to their husband’s wishes over their personal aspirations.⁶⁰

In most cases of successful migration, migrant parents are able to offer their left-behind children greater educational opportunities and choices.⁶¹ Indonesian left-behind girls recount their options in pursuing higher degrees and greater liberty in selecting a desired course of study.⁶² Even as migration afforded left-behind young women and girls more aspirational capacities and the freedom to dream a little bigger, daughters were mindful of the sacrifices their parents made and moderated their career choices to reputable gendered occupations such as teaching, nursing or working as a pharmacist. They are aware that courses guiding their career paths toward becoming doctors or civil servants are either too costly or take a longer time. Left-behind young women and girls carefully balanced religious piety, their responsibilities as dutiful daughters with their aspirations when making choices that will avoid further burdening their parents financially, and make good of their parents’ remittances whilst simultaneously securing their own future prospects and steady income upon graduation.⁶³ We are thus reminded that “[a]spirations are not open sets of individualised desires and possibilities – roles as wives, mothers and homemakers remain cosmologically ‘pre-destined’ and women’s immobility is still largely culturally valorised”.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the decisions young women and girls eventually make.

54 Bylander, 2015:1125.

55 Somaiah, Yeoh and Arlini, 2019.

56 Belanger and Tran, 2011.

57 Chan, 2017, 2018; Khoo and Yeoh, 2018.

58 Somaiah, Yeoh and Arlini, 2019.

59 Bylander, 2015; Chan, 2017.

60 Khoo and Yeoh, 2018.

61 Likewise, adverse changes in the family’s migration situation may also derail the plans of left-behind young women and girls.

62 Khoo and Yeoh, 2017; Somaiah, Yeoh and Arlini, 2019.

63 Ibid.

64 Robertson, Cheng and Yeoh, 2018:620.

Potential for practical interventions/assistance

A salient point that emerged from the review is that stay/left-behind young women and girls need not be more disadvantaged than males or their peers from non-migrant households. External agencies can capitalize on existing positive outcomes in respective countries to better the lives and prospects of these young women and girls. The following are three suggestions for interventions.

(a) Enhancing existing education programmes

Knowing that many left-behind young women and girls have improved access to (higher) education, various programmes aimed at harnessing the “youth bulge” can be launched through schools to enhance their employment prospects upon graduation. Career advisors can guide girls on potential career choices in their country and scholarships or internship programmes with various industry players (both locally and internationally) for them to gain first-hand experience and make informed occupational choices. Availability of stipends and/or scholarships for furthering their education would be helpful in enabling young women and girls choose their truly desired course of study. Regularly reviewing the curriculum can ensure that the education provided is relevant for the job market, and the quality of education taught should be on a par with the standards of advanced economies in order to facilitate the transfer of qualifications.⁶⁵ Making school interesting and relevant for girls will also help lower incidences of early marriages and dropout rates.

(b) Youth-engagement programmes

More formal and informal programmes engaging directly with girls from migrant families would be useful to better understand their circumstances and needs. Concrete measures could include counselling and life-skills training sessions such as those helping them to manage their stress and make decisions. Group exercise programmes are a simple and low-cost way of gathering left-behind young women and girls together socially.

(c) Better recognition of their agency

It would be useful to prepare and disseminate visually attractive and concise information packages through social media recognizing the agency of young women and girls and affirming their rights to make migration or life choices for themselves. Such packages could be designed to guide them in the process of decision-making, empower them to make their own life decisions and provide support for those who chose to stay. A platform can also act as a consultation channel to obtain information about young women and girls’ views as well as a feedback channel for them to pose questions and obtain answers. However, such platforms should be carefully moderated to avoid abuse.

Recommended areas for further examination

Given that research to date has not fully explored the impacts of migration on left-behind young women and girls or given them enough space to voice their views, struggles and aspirations, there is a need for future research to focus on mending these gaps to come up with more relational, intersectional, longitudinal and comprehensive studies on left-behind girls spanning the different ages from 10 through 24. At the same time, studies should not neglect their male counterparts as the inclusion of males’

65 See for example, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ED-02-ASEAN-Qualifications-Reference-Framework-January-2016.pdf>.

views and experiences could provide a more gendered understanding of the different outcomes and experiences of migration whilst also addressing males' needs and wishes. The scope of the study should also be widened both thematically and geographically to cover more topics as well as countries with currently little-known information on left-behind young women and girls.

Conclusion

Various factors ranging from environment to migration often work together to affect the well-being of left-behind young females who come from very diverse social, economic and educational backgrounds. In some cases, the local circumstances are what propelled young women and girls' family members to migrate in the first place, thus placing them in the situation of being left behind. The impacts of migration on left-behind young women and girls are also very heterogenous and complex, having both positive and negative impacts on their economic, education and well-being outcomes. While regular remittances may often improve the economic situation and education prospects for left-behind young women and girls, migration can also affect – in unexpected ways – their life options and freedom to make informed personal choices. Given their fluid movements within societies that are constantly in a flux of change, young females may not remain in the (im)mobile state permanently and they are continually negotiating between familial obligations, social expectations and personal aspirations to achieve their ideal state of being. It is thus important to explore more carefully the impacts of migration together with the needs and aspirations of young women and girls.

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Annex 1: Overview of Key Data Relating to Girls and Young Women Aged 10 to 24 in South-East Asia and the Pacific*

Year	% of total population aged 10–24	% of total population who are females aged 10–24	% of population aged 10–24 who are females	% of total migrant population aged 10–24	% of total migrant population who are females aged 10–24	% of migrant population aged 10–24 who are females	Gross enrolment ratio, primary to tertiary (Gender Parity Index)	2016		2013	
								Female youth literacy rate (%)	Female labour force participation rate (%)	Female youth literacy rate (%)	Female labour force participation rate (%)
South-East Asia	25.6	12.5	48.8	17.0	8.8	51.9	1.02	97.1	59		
Pacific	22.0	10.7	48.6	13.8	6.7	48.8	1.02	Not Available	61		
Source				⁶⁶			⁶⁷				⁶⁸

* The data pertains to the total population of the respective regions only.

⁶⁶ UN DESA, 2017.

⁶⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016.

⁶⁸ Asian Development Bank, 2015.