

25 Labour Migration

Definition: Migration motivated mainly by the prospect of employment in another country.

The concept of labour migration is reasonably straightforward (at least in comparison to some other migration concepts): many people probably have a default understanding of international migration in which most migrants are motivated by the prospect of improving their economic situation by working in another country (often a wealthier one). If anything, there is a need for appreciation of the significant extent to which migration consists of *other* modes (e.g. family reunification, refugees, retiree/lifestyle migration). Even so, labour migration (a related term is economic migration) is a key type, and there is a great deal of complexity in the migration streams that can be described using this concept.

In conventional terms, labour migration consists of movement of workers from poorer countries to wealthier countries, mainly to do low-skilled, low-wage jobs that natives in wealthy countries do not want. Guestworker programmes are a specific instance of this type, but labour migration can also be permanent (i.e., envisioned as such at the outset, by the migrants and by employers and/or the state in the destination country); it might also be temporary but without the restrictions that characterize guestworker programmes (thus the migrants return by choice, whatever their original intentions). Labour migrants might arrive in the destination country with a work-related visa but can also enter in an undocumented (illegal) mode (Marfleet and Blustein 2011).

Michael Piore's (1979) analysis of migrant labour captures key dynamics of this form of migration. One essential consideration is status: citizens are reluctant to accept jobs at the bottom of the occupational status hierarchy, even at relatively favourable wages. Particularly in the secondary labour market, marked by unstable demand rooted in the business cycle, workers are difficult to find in the local population also because of their strong preference for employment stability. On both counts, migrant workers appeared (indeed, continue to appear, at least for policy-makers unfamiliar with history) to be an ideal solution. Being foreign, they are less concerned about their place in a local status hierarchy and are willing to accept jobs they would have considered inappropriate in their home countries, particularly at wages high in comparison to what was available to them there. Similarly, the lack of employment security does not matter as much to them given that their intention is typically to accumulate some savings and return 'home'. On the other hand, these perceptions and preferences can change over time (many migrant workers accumulate savings less quickly than they predicted), and they

can become similar to native workers in ways that make them less suitable for the jobs they initially held.

In a conventional understanding, the jobs held by labour migrants are jobs typically held by men (e.g. factories and agriculture), while women would migrate primarily in a family reunification mode after their husbands had established themselves economically in the destination. That image was always inaccurate to an extent (see the separate chapter on gendered migration), and it has become increasingly outmoded in recent decades as labour migration streams have shifted and become more diverse. Women are quite often primary migrants, working in a wide range of economic sectors – but there has also been significant growth in employment of migrant women as domestic workers (e.g. cleaning house, caring for children and elderly people). Prominent examples of these migration flows include the employment of Filipina and Indonesian women as maids in Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia, and Filipina and Mexican women in a wider range of jobs in the USA (Constable 2007; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Parreñas 2001). One might consider migration of sex workers as a form of labour migration, even if this involves an unconventional notion of work. Workers are also increasingly migrating among relatively poor countries, not just from poor to wealthy ones (Ratha and Shaw 2007). Another divergence from the usual depiction of labour migration emerges in the increasing use of highly skilled migrant workers for technical and professional work (Espenshade 2001).

Policy-makers in destination countries have in recent years been trying to manage labour migration flows in ways designed to reduce the low-skilled component, in the face of rising unemployment (and welfare dependency) particularly among natives with limited education and skills. Labour migration policies in many countries have recently been focused on bringing highly skilled workers – not just in a general way but instead targeted at specific occupational needs, with emphasis on altering policy (e.g. quotas) rapidly in response to changes in needs (Martin et al. 2006; Menz and Caviedes 2010). Even so, some countries struggle to manage labour migration in these ways, particularly when it involves undocumented workers, and many labour migration streams continue to comprise considerable proportions of low-skilled workers (especially in the USA).

That point raises a question that arises quite frequently in migration studies: what sort of data is it possible to have on labour migration? Answering that question is difficult not only in relation to undocumented migrants but for the concept of labour migration quite generally (Salt et al. 2005). Some migrants fit into more than one type. The (rapidly increasing) flows of students, for example, consist to a certain extent of labour migration: many students are employed part-time (their residence permits often permit this). In addition, some people use student visas purely as a cover to gain entry for employment that would otherwise be prohibited to them; the institutions in which they are registered might be bogus or of dubious quality, and the 'students' spend most of their time working (Liu-Farrer 2011). Other categories can have similar ambiguities: people who enter for the purpose of family reunification often end up employed, as do many refugees and asylum seekers (though in the case of asylum seekers work is often prohibited and thus illegal when actually

attained). All of these points would bear consideration when using data constructed on the basis of official statuses (e.g. as evident in visa types).

The understanding some people have of labour/economic migration is rooted in a common-sense economic perspective that has certain shortcomings (even if it is reinforced by the conventional neoclassical assumptions routinely employed by many economists). Migration is usually seen as a choice made by an individual whose main goal is to raise their income (or maximize their utility). An important corrective emerges in the 'new economics of labour migration' (Stark and Bloom 1985, Stark 1991). In this more realistic view, migration is typically a strategy considered by households, not individuals acting alone, and their goals include diversification of risk, not just greater income. In many poorer countries, certain markets are underdeveloped or even entirely missing: in particular, it can be difficult or impossible for people to get credit and insurance. The risks that arise for people's well-being and even survival can be mitigated if a household member leaves to work in another country: in the event of drought and crop failure, for example, remittances from someone employed in another country can function as an essential substitute for crop insurance. Remittances can also substitute for bank loans, i.e., when there are no banks to make loans. Again, in this perspective labour migration is often not a matter of individuals' desire for the higher wages available in wealthier countries: many people engage in labour migration not out of aspiration or avarice but out of necessity (whether real or perceived).

There are other respects in which a corrective to individualistic assumptions about labour migration is required. The choices of individuals and/or households are embedded in structures operating at a number of levels (e.g. regional, national, global). It is obvious enough that people cannot just choose to engage in labour migration: restrictionist government policies might simply thwart that option. But structures can also facilitate or even compel migration – perhaps more for certain types of people than for others. In a world-systems perspective (e.g. Sassen 1988), the incorporation of peripheral areas into the global economic system sometimes disrupts people's survival strategies, while also creating 'bridges' to particular destination countries. In addition, differently situated migrants find themselves in a wide variety of positions in the destination: while some people (such as daily cross-border commuters, e.g. living in France but commuting each day into Geneva or Basel) enjoy situations not terribly different from native workers, others encounter conditions that seem antiquated or even antithetical to pervasive understandings of capitalist societies. Robin Cohen (1987) argues that analysis of labour migration reveals a picture of capitalist economies fundamentally at variance with a classic Marxist understanding: instead of being characterized by 'free' labour, capitalism (particularly as practised in the most 'advanced' countries) requires significant quantities of unfree labour, supplied mainly by migrants, many of whom are constrained in ways that are not easily reconciled with standard market theory. Again, labour migration is sometimes not purely a matter of choice, and it often does not have the consequences that the migrants themselves anticipate.

As with other issues relating to migration, many people are interested mainly in what labour migration means for destination countries (e.g. Castles 2010). It is

clear, however, that labour migration can have very significant consequences for countries of origin. One particular concern, arising mainly for the emigration of skilled workers, is the brain drain. For sectors such as health care, for example, some countries find that educational investment in their own citizens does not produce a good return: the beneficiaries are (in addition to the migrants themselves) mainly the wealthy countries that succeed in attracting workers by paying wages the origin countries cannot match. Martin et al. (2006) suggest compensating origin countries for their losses, in part by enabling origin-country taxation of emigrants' earnings in destination countries. On the other hand, labour migration (whether of skilled or unskilled workers) might enhance development prospects for origin countries via emigrants' remittances and return migration, though there can be substantial regional variation in this regard (Verduzco and Unger 1998). In addition, it is no longer possible to make a clear distinction between destination countries and sending countries, as many countries now fall into both categories (e.g. Thailand, on which Martin et al. 2006).

See also: *Guestworkers; Brain drain/gain/circulation*

KEY READINGS

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26 Migrant Networks

Definition: Social networks are sets of relationships that are open in principle and are composed of different kinds of social ties. Migrant networks involve social ties that take shape via the distinctive experiences of migration; these networks usually persist across international boundaries.