

**“Women are Fond of Money Now”:  
Gendered Migration Patterns and Social Change in Rural Kyrgyzstan**

Kathleen Sexsmith, Guangqing Chi, Christian Scott, and Michaela Hoffelmeyer

### **Introduction**

The Republic of Kyrgyzstan is the fourth most labor migration-dependent economy in the world, with almost one-third of GDP derived from remittances. Young working age women form a significant share of this migration stream. However, international migration scholars know very little about the gender dynamics of Kyrgyz migration patterns, or how migration is related to changing gender norms in rural communities. This paper undertakes a gender analysis of migration decision-making and social change in rural Kyrgyzstan. In doing so it contributes empirical findings to the observed knowledge gap on current social and economic conditions in Kyrgyzstan (Ellis and Lee 2005), and to the literature on gender and international migration.

### **Background**

Currently, 50,000 labor migrants leave the Kyrgyz Republic every year (FIDH 2016). It is estimated that one third of the nation’s working age population has migrated (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008). Remittances provide an influx of cash to subsistence-based rural communities within Kyrgyzstan (Schoch et al. 2010). This massive transnational movement implies that migration and remittances play a critical role in human capital development and in shaping the future of the country (Vinokurov 2013). Despite the critical role of migration and remittances in sustaining livelihoods in rural Kyrgyzstan, as scholars we still know extremely little about the region’s migration dynamics and impacts.

The specific research gap that this paper seeks to fill relates to gendered patterns of migration. We look closely at (1) gender roles in household decision-making regarding migration and (2) the implications of migration for women’s empowerment and the transformation of patriarchal social norms in the Kyrgyz countryside. Regarding the first, migration decision-making, it is generally agreed that household gender composition and dynamics influence migration and remittance decisions (Lu 2012). For example, women tend to remit more than men, specifically for child education and health expenses (Portes et al. 2007; Yabiku, Agadjanian, and Sevoyan 2010). In this paper we examine intergenerational decision-making patterns between mothers, fathers, and their migrant children, and ask whether power in such choices is more decentralized and gender equal among family members as a consequence of young people’s migration.

Regarding women’s empowerment, the dominant view in the field of gender and migration studies has long been that international migration from rural areas in the developing world contributes to women’s empowerment and liberation from patriarchal gender norms. Some contrasting evidence has suggested that international migration can reinforce gender norms that subordinate women depending on the specific migration network and host country context

where they relocate. In this study we are interested in identifying specific attitudes within the sending community towards women's migration to understand whether migration is associated with more gender equitable social norms and independence for women.

### **Research questions**

This paper contributes to this body of literature on the interaction between local gender norms and international migration through a rigorous empirical analysis of gendered migration patterns in rural Kyrgyzstan. We make these important theoretical and empirical contributions through answering the following research questions:

1. What is the socio-demographic profile of rural Kyrgyz migrants? How do women and men compare?
2. What labor markets do Kyrgyz women and men enter when employed abroad?
3. To what extent and how do women participate in household migration decisions?
4. Is migration contributing to more favorable attitudes towards gender equality at the local community level?

### **Data and methods**

This study is conducted in Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked, mountainous, largely rural country with few natural resources. As a post-Soviet Central Asian country, Kyrgyzstan has experienced dramatic changes in political and market structures, massive economic reform, and rapid demographic changes in the past 25 years. As part of these institutional changes and resource scarcity, Kyrgyzstan is now the fourth most migrant-remittance-dependent country in the world (Remittances contributed ~30% to GDP in 2016).

The study areas are the At-Bashy Rayon (District) of Naryn Oblast (Province) and the Alay Rayon of Osh Oblast in Kyrgyzstan. The two Rayons, with elevations ranging from 1,252 to 7,000+ m amsl, are in the higher elevation areas of the country. The primary economy is herding and animal husbandry (sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and yaks). The two Rayons consist of a total of 108 villages with 122,470 people (as of 2015). Village populations range from about 600 to 12,000. The majority of the population are ethnic Kyrgyz.

We selected 26 villages based on a stratified random procedure with variation by village category, population size, elevation, and remoteness. We collected a total of 1,821 surveys and conducted 80 in-depth interviews. Interviews were transcribed and translated by Kyrgyz research assistants. Translations of respondent quotes have been slightly modified by the authors to achieve grammatic accuracy without changing the meaning of respondents' statements. Qualitative data were coded using a two-step process that entailed identifying and verifying key themes.

### **Preliminary findings**

**a. Socio-demographic profile of male and female migrants**

**Table 1: Gender breakdown of migrants (N=275)**

Migrants	Percent	Observations
Female	38.18%	105
Male	61.82%	170

We find that women are a significant share of migrants – 38% of all domestic and international migrants. Women and men are about equally likely to migrate internationally, with 64% of male and 70% of female migrants moving outside national borders. The primary destinations for international Kyrgyz migrants are Kazakhstan and Russia (95% of all migrants travel to one of these countries). Women are slightly more likely to travel to Kazakhstan (16% of international migrants) than are men (9% of international migrants). We are further exploring whether women show a slight preference for Kazakhstan as a migration destination due to specific labor market niches there.

We also find some small differences in the socio-demographic profiles of men and women migrants. Male migrants are more likely to be single (never married) than women, while women are more often divorced or widowed.

**Table 2: Marital status of male and female migrants (N=274)**

Marital Status ( $\chi^{2**}$ )	Male	Female
Married	49.70%	53.33%
Single (never married)	49.11%	38.10%
Divorced	1.18%	5.71%
Widowed	0%	2.86%

We also find that women migrants have slightly higher levels of education than men, on average.

**Table 3: Formal education levels of male and female migrants (N=273)**

Marital Status $\chi^{2*}$	Male	Female
Elementary	1.79%	0%
High School	59.52%	45.71%
Professional Primary	4.17%	1.90%
Professional Middle	9.52%	18.10%
University	25.00%	33.33%
Post-graduate or Higher	0%	0.95%

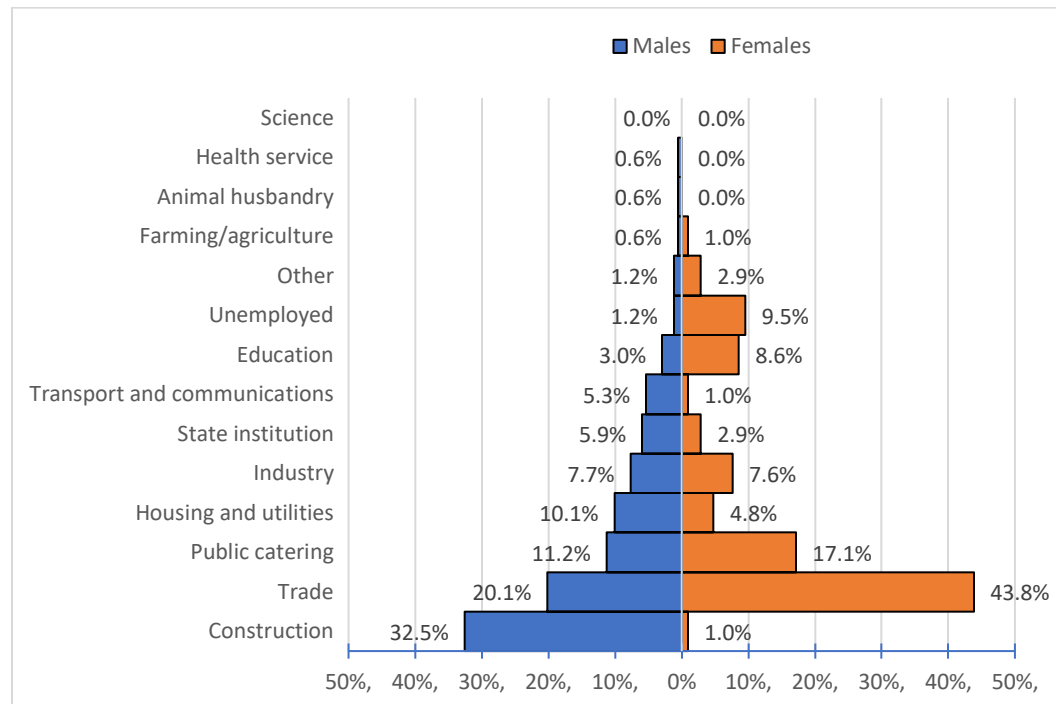
**b. Migration and the labor market**

We find that men's remittances are more than twice as high as women's.

**Table 4: Remittance levels by male and female migrants (N=272)**

Remittances $\neq^{***}$ ; $>^{***}$	Men	Women	Combined
Mean	39,373.87	18,291.92	31,313.13
Std. Error	4,425.3	3,463.485	3,095.848
Observations	168	104	272

An important finding of this paper is that migrant labor markets are extremely gendered. Figure 1 presents a job “pyramid” for jobs currently held by migrants abroad. We find that 44% of women migrants are employed as shopkeepers for small businesses usually at public markets (which we call “trade”), while construction is the most popular occupation for male migrants (33%).

**Figure 1: Gender comparison of migrants’ current jobs (% of migrants)**

We also find that men are more likely to be employed in seasonal work than women (39% of male migrants vs 27% of women). Presumably, this is because of the seasonal nature of construction work in the cold climate countries they are visiting.

Our qualitative research found that migration by women is viewed favorably at the local level because they are considered more “nimble” in finding work. One respondent suggested this has to do with women’s “soft skills”, saying: “In my opinion the girls are more flexible; they can easily find common language with official authorities, they are negotiable.” The mother of a

successful migrant describes her daughter as “very strong, with men’s solid resolute character” suggesting women who behave like men are successful. These answers suggest women migrants are seen as having less rigid identities than men, which positions them better in labor markets abroad.

### ***c. Migration decision-making***

In our qualitative interviews we asked respondents – the family members left behind -- about the decision-making process for migration and for remittance spending. When asked about who makes the decision to migrate, most respondents say it was a mutual decision either between themselves and their spouse or both parents of the migrant child. In a small handful of cases, women noted that only their husbands made the decision to migrate without consulting them.

Even though women migrants were relatively empowered in taking migration decisions, the left-behind family members we interviewed expressed concern about their daughters -- particularly unmarried daughters -- migrating abroad. One parent of a migrant said: "As a mother, I don't wish her (daughter) to be alone at a foreign country. If she is married and goes there with a husband I don't mind it." On the other hand, parents encouraged their unmarried sons to go abroad. For example: “The youngest son again will go to Russia soon. He wants to earn some money before marriage. I let him go to work, while he is unmarried.” For unmarried women migration appeared to be a safety risk, as for unmarried men migration was portrayed as an opportunity to establish themselves financially before getting married.

Regarding household finances, the majority of respondents reported having a "common budget" and making a mutual decision on spending with their spouses or children who were migrants. Only a small number of respondents were specific in noting men were the primary decision-makers regarding money. For example, when asked who decides how much money to send the family, the wife of a male migrant responded, “Of course, my husband. He tells us on what we should spend the money.” For some respondents, this mutual decision making indicated that social change was underway. For example, one female respondent says: “Nowadays families became smarter; they understood that decision made by all family members is more effective. The issues regarding money spend we do together with my husband, son, and daughter...for example, if our son is sending money, before spending it I advise with him.” She contrasted her own, self-described “modern” family with a more traditional family structure in which the men are in charge of spending. She said: “If the family is a traditional, conservative family the father will decide everything himself without considering others’ opinion.” Thus we cautiously conclude that migration is associated with progressive social change towards more inclusive decision-making with respect to household finances.

### ***d. Perceptions of Migration***

Our survey asked a series of questions soliciting perceptions of the impacts of migration on families and communities. Previous research has shown that a strong majority of rural Kyrgyz

people view migration extremely favorably (Sagynbekova 2016). We break down this analysis by gender and find that women consistently view migration more favorably than men. Amongst our survey respondents, women were more likely than men to give a positive response to the following statements ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

- To agree or strongly agree that migration benefits the children of the family.
- To agree or strongly agree that children left in care of others by migrant parents have a greater chance to receive an education and continue their studies.
- To agree or strongly agree that when a parent migrates it is not too much trouble to raise a child in their absence.
- To agree or strongly agree that migration has benefited the household.

Additionally, women were more likely to agree with the following statement ( $p \leq 0.05$ )

- That the social conditions of their households had improved or significantly improved since the migrant(s) left.

However, women were also more likely to agree that left behind children are more likely to experience behavioral problems ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

In qualitative interviews, we asked about the negative implications of migration. Several responses indicated that the community frowns upon migration because of its consequences for traditional family structures. One woman whose husband works abroad discussed how she is called an adulterer for living alone with only her children and not her husband. She said, "If my husband was here, nobody [would gossip]." When asked how migration affects demography, another, male respondent stated: "Women are fond of money now; they ceased to give birth." This statement highlights that gender ideologies are resistant to change by some community members even as women break out of their traditional roles. Women are seen to have materialistic interests which are critiqued for interfering for their traditional roles bearing children.

Qualitative interviews also elicited information on the relationship between migration and divorce. Divorce was also described as a common consequence of migration-related family separation. One male interviewee explained the problem as follows: "The risk of divorce is very high when living in Russia. The main cause of betrayal is a man's need a woman's care. For example, a woman cooks, washes their clothes, and meets their biological needs. Some men have a second family there and get divorced [from their first wives]." Although we did not seek to establish whether women or men are more likely to leave their families when living abroad, there does seem to be the perception among interviewees that if men migrate there is a higher chance of extramarital activity and divorce.

Respondents also described divorce as a push factor for migration. As it was explained by one informant: "For instance if the married couple decide to break up and they divorce, the children go to live with their mother. The point here is these divorced women with children are more

likely to migrate to make money, so they leave children with their parents." Another interviewee stated: "Basically, divorced women are more likely to migrate [than married women]. They leave their children with parents and go abroad." Thus there may be a cyclical relationship whereby migration by men begets divorce, which begets further migration by women. We will continue to analyze our data around migration and marriage patterns to understand these gendered trends.

These divorce trends signal new values in the Kyrgyz countryside with respect to women's freedoms in marital relationship. A soviet era custom commonly termed "kidnap marriages" (now illegal) saw women being taken by their family's homes by their grooms – sometimes against their will, and sometimes consensually to pay credence to the practice. Kidnap marriages in Kyrgyzstan and are associated with sexual violence (Handrahan 2004; Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007). Previously, women had little recourse when faced with domestic violence in their marriage. However, women are divorcing destitute husbands with increasing regularity. As one woman said: "In the past if your husband beat you, you have to have patience... [because of] money. Wives told their husbands to find money, but if the husband doesn't work, where is he (going to) find money? [Today] when the wife gets stressed and makes noise at home, if the husband beats her, then the wife would divorce." We cautiously conclude that migration is associated with better economic conditions and with women's economic independence, empowering them to leave violent or otherwise unsatisfying marriages.

## **Conclusions**

This paper analyzes gendered migration patterns in rural Kyrgyzstan and finds some preliminary evidence that it is positively associated with social progress towards greater gender equality, with some caveats. Women are critical actors in the migration economy although they send far less remittances than men, presumably due to their concentration in petty shopkeeping work. They are seen as "flexible" and agile in labor markets which encourages a positive attitude towards their labor migration amongst migrant-sending households. Women and young people seem to have a more active role in spending decisions within households thanks to their participation in migration and remittance sending. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, women are more likely to have a positive attitude towards migration than men. We also found evidence that gender discriminatory ideologies are changing -- albeit slowly and unevenly -- in the villages where the research was conducted. In our final paper we will further elaborate on these findings.

## **References**

- Ellis, J. and R. Lee. 2005. "Collapse of the Kazakhstan Livestock Sector." Pp. 52–76 in *Prospects for Pastoralism in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan: From State Farms to Private Flocks*, edited by C. Kerven. London, UK: Routledge Curzon.
- FIDH. 2016. *Women and Children from Kyrgyzstan Affected by Migration: An Exacerbated Vulnerability*. Retrieved (<http://birduino.kg/en/research/608-women-and-children-from-kyrgyzstan-affected-by-migration>).
- Lu, Yao. 2012. "Education of Children Left Behind in Rural China." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74(2):328–41.
- Portes, Alejandro, Cristina Escobar, and Alexandria Walton Radford. 2007. "Immigrant Transnational Organizations and Development: A Comparative Study." *International Migration Review* 41(1):242–81.
- Sagynbekova, Lira. 2016. *The Impact of International Migration: Process and Contemporary Trends in Kyrgyzstan*. Mountain Research Institute.
- Schoch, Nadia, Bernd Steimann, and Susan Thieme. 2010. "Migration and Animal Husbandry: Competing or Complementary Livelihood Strategies. Evidence from Kyrgyzstan." *Natural Resources Forum* 34(3):211–21.
- Schmidt, Matthias and Lira Sagynbekova. 2008. "Migration Past and Present: Changing Patterns in Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey* 27(2):111–27.
- Vinokurov, Evgeny. 2013. *The Art of Survival: Kyrgyz Migration, Human Capital, and Social Networks*.
- Yabiku, Scott T., Victor Agadjanian, and Arusyak Sevoyan. 2010. "Husbands' Labour Migration and Wives' Autonomy, Mozambique 2000-2006." *Population Studies* 64(3):293–306.