Migrant Domestic Workers as ‘Agents’ of Development in Asia: an institutional analysis of temporality

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**Abstract**

The issue of temporary contract migration represents the predominant form of legal migration policy in Asia. Since its rationale is centred upon the filling of jobs and provision of income generating opportunities, it is linked to the migration-development nexus debate, both in scholarly as well as policy terms. The focus of this paper, therefore, is the impact of temporality migrants’ agency as development actors, constructed and played out within a transnational sphere. The mainstream migration-development nexus debate and policy prescriptions imagine diaspora groups to serve as the ideal conduit for grassroots driven development initiatives. While ‘diaspora group-led’ initiatives tend to assume long-term, if not permanent, migration, temporary migration creates a dynamic that is fundamentally distinct. Temporality of migration, as mandated by bilateral agreements and promoted by global institutions in Asia, shapes migrant agency and migrants’ development aspirations in essentially different ways. Despite the differences, temporary contract migrants are nevertheless constructed as the ‘agents of development’ at the macro level of politics and policies, while receiving limited attention in research conducted on the meaning of their agency beyond their economic contributions. This paper provides an opening to the analysis of the relationship between temporality, migrant agency and the migration-development nexus debate in relation to a specific group of migrants, female domestic workers who epitomise the feminisation of migration and constitute the largest number of newly hired migrants in many key source countries in Southeast Asia. The case of migrant domestic workers leads to the introduction of a gender dimension to our discussion of temporary migration in its link to migrants’ developmental agency.

Keywords: temporary migration, migrant domestic workers, migration-development nexus, intra-Asian migration, agency

# Introduction

This paper uses the notion of temporality as a starting point to contribute another form of critique to the migration-development nexus debate. It does so because the possible development outcomes of migration have been strongly dominated by the mainly political or policy-driven debates without taking into account the diversity of migrants nor the different migration patterns as they occur in different world regions. Temporary migration is one of those omitted types of migration. In much of Asia, however, the dominant form of legal migration occurs on the basis of temporary (typically employer-tied) contracts, offering few if any chances for greater socio-economic freedom of mobility or legal security, such as permanency let alone citizenship.

In our discussion of the relationship between migration and development, we place the focus upon the impact of temporality on migrants’ agency as development actors. We do so in relation to the current phase of the migration-development nexus debate and concomitant policy prescriptions which exaggerate the benefits of temporary migration and uses a discursive frame which encourages migrant-led development models, typically in relation to remittances, skills development and migrant entrepreneurship. Such models, however, fail to incorporate the challenges that temporary migration arrangements pose, as we show in this paper on the basis of the example of foreign domestic workers who constitute a significant and, in some cases, the dominant migrant workforce. We argue that the temporary nature of migration affects how migrants form collectives to exercise their agency and development aspirations. The unique challenges posed by temporary migration models in relation to harnessing or leveraging migrant agency are ignored by the mainstream economic discourse on migration.

Our analysis deals primarily with the meso-institutional level since key vectors for development are typically collective institutionalised forms, as for example so-called hometown associations, or political diaspora organisations, business persons’ networks, and other less formalised community actions (Faist, 2008; Hazán, 2013 ; Goldring, 2002; Marabello, 2013; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2011; Bakewell , 2009, Chikanda, Crush and Walton-Roberts, 2016). However, existing studies on migrant collectives assume the existence of diaspora groups with immigrants who are settled permanently or semi-permanently in the destination countries and thus are mostly derived from the destination country perspective. This assumption leaves aside other forms of (formally regulated) migration, such as employer-tied temporary contract migration. Rather, conceptualisation of migrant-driven development typically involves imagining a migrant who lives in affluent, democratic countries in North America, Oceania and other parts of the so-called ‘West’. Overlooked in such discourses are the many migrants who move within the Global South, or intra-regionally, a migratory flow which parallels South-North migration in numeric significance (Hujo and Piper, 2010; Castles and Delgado Wise, 2008; Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera, 2016), such as intra-Asian migration.

In this paper, we advance the argument that the migration and development literature has paid insufficient attention to the implications of temporary labour migration schemes on development in Asia. Instead, the dominant development discourse operationalises migrants as ‘agents’ for development despite the contradictory mismatch between the economic benefits (such as migrant remittances) at the macro level versus social and political changes that are prompted at the micro level. This mismatch is reflected in the fact that the global governance discourse on migration and development which focuses on the economic benefits of remittances is readily embraced by migrant sending states (Piper and Rother 2014).

By contrast, on the ground, migrants’ desire for development is embedded in a complex socio-political reality that is shaped by the process of migration. Yet, popularisation of ‘migrant-led’ development models and mainstream imaginations of migrant agency in development fall short in incorporating the lived reality of temporary migration (Dannecker 2009). In this paper, we pay a particular attention to the aspect of ‘return’ as the guiding principle of temporary migration. Xiang Biao’s (2013b) expression of ‘compulsory return’ signals the fact that migrants’ returning to their countries of origin is not only a reality but also a normative rule. While the mandated return process causes serious social, economic and political limitations, the implications of such limitations have not received due attention from the researchers and policy-makers.

Our objective, therefore, is to critique the dominant discourse on the migration-development-nexus through the lens of temporary migration models that affect migrants’ ability to be agents of development as per mainstream imaginings. Given the current regulatory framework, migrants’ ability to enhance their developmental agency, we argue, hinges upon their ability to act collectively. To underpin our argument we treat a specific group of migrants; female migrant domestic workers, as our reference point. Foreign domestic workers epitomise what has been termed ‘the feminisation of migration’ (Oishi 2005) as evident in the case of key source countries in Southeast Asia where they constitute the largest number of newly hired migrants (Piper and Lee, 2013 ). This focus allows us to introduce a distinct gender perspective into our discussion of the paradox involved in foregrounding temporality in what has structurally become a permanent feature in economic development: the reliance on migrant labour in low-wage sectors. Furthermore, by departing from the specific experience of foreign domestic workers, we probe into the question of how temporality affects the process of meso-level collective organising, set within a transnational sphere, as a counterforce to governmental and global politics.

This paper provides a concept-driven discussion using concrete examples to illustrate possibilities of the formation of temporary migrants’ collectives in Asia. It consists of three parts. In the first section, we present an overview of inter-regional migration in Asia and the significance of domestic worker migration as representative of broader temporary migration in the region. In the second section, we review the limitations of migrant agency in the context of temporary migration, and in the last section, we explore possibilities of collective organising of temporary migrants by looking at different forms of political and community organising in countries of both destination and origin. By placing temporary migrants at the centre of our discussion, we question the power geometry involved in international migration and in doing so, challenge the idea of migrant agency as portrayed in the global development discourse.

# Managing Intra-Asian Labour Migration: Temporary Migration of Foreign Domestic Workers

Mobility within Asia is diverse and includes migration from the ‘Global South' to the ‘Global North', as well as between countries of the Global South. Reflecting economic disparities, existing networks and regulatory frameworks, migrants move not only to the affluent countries in the Asian region such as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, but also to middle-income countries, e.g. Thailand, Malaysia, India, and China. A report by the United Nations (Huguet and Martin, 2015) confirms that the most prominent type of flow in the region is temporary labour migration. It further states that in 2013 among the estimated 231.5 million migrants in the world, over 95 million came from countries in Asia and the Pacific which constitutes an almost 50% increase compared to 1990.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Cross-border migration has been an important dimension of economic development throughout Asia, alongside increased demand for low-wage labour needed to sustain global and regional re/productive chains. As a result, many Asians remain within the region when migrating and their migration is proactively shaped by states. Most governments in South, Southeast and West Asia have come to actively promote outflows or inflows of migrant workers as a key economic strategy, and they have primarily done so on the basis of strictly temporary visa policies. This is so because origin countries typically seek remittance inflows and skill transfers, while destination countries use temporary migrant labour as ‘disposable’ inputs for jobs shunned by the local workforce. National, regional and global policy-makers have reached a ‘consensus’ on mutually-beneficial economic outcomes of temporary labour migration. This understanding has resulted in the subordination of migrants’ legal and working rights as lesser considerations to the economic ‘management’ paradigm of migration flows.

Intra-regional migration in the form of temporary visa arrangements has become a distinct pattern in Asia since the mid-twentieth century, a period during which temporary labour migration had also risen to its prominence in the ‘West’. In Asia, this type of migration was boosted by neoliberal economic globalisation (Gills and Piper 2002) with its specifically gendered forms of labour supply and demand, The highly feminised migration of domestic workers is one distinct feature of such trend. Given the numerical significance of intra-regional migration in Asia, this paper’s discussion is set within the context of the dominance of temporary migration and the prominence of domestic work based on the key migration corridors between East, Southeast, South and West Asia.

Migrant domestic workers in Asi***a***

Many temporary migrants take up domestic work in countries of destination. At least 53.6 million women and men above the age of 15 are reported to be in domestic work as their main job, with some source suggesting a figure as high as 100 million (ILO 2010).[[3]](#footnote-3) Domestic worker employment constitutes at least 2.5 percent of total employment in post-industrialised countries and between 4 and 10 percent of total employment in developing countries. In gender terms, women are the overwhelming majority of the domestic workforce (at 83 percent), which represents 7.5 percent of women’s employment worldwide (ILO 2010).

In Asia, a significant number of independent women who migrate can be observed in the case of the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and more recently in Vietnam also. According to the statistics provided by the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) for instance, Filipino foreign domestic workers (FDWs) made up 36.1 percent of land-based overseas Filipino workers (122,808 out of 340,279), of which 95.5 percent were female in 2010.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the case of Indonesia, the flow of migrant workers is predominantly female: on average, there were only 36 male for every 100 female migrant workers. The ratio is even more skewed for those bound for the Gulf States, at about 12 male for every 100 female migrant workers between 1995 and 2005, and most of the female migrants were domestic workers (Roharto et al., 2013).

Temporality as key feature of migration management in Asia

The economic situation in many origin countries is characterised by high rates of un- or under-employment against the backdrop of a dearth of decent job opportunities, especially in rural areas. This explains states’ institutional support for overseas migration to generate quick cash flows. This is best exemplified by the institutionalised out-migration push in the Philippines (Chi, 2008; Bautista, 2015) which it has practised for several decades. Other countries in Southeast Asia have begun to emulate the Philippine model and set fixed quotas to achieve the desired volume of outmigration (such as Vietnam, see Huguet and Martin 2015).

Major migrant-sending countries (such as Indonesia and the Philippines) are heavily relying on remittances which make up a substantial proportion of their GDP (Asia-Pacific RCM Thematic Working Group on International Migration Including Human Trafficking, 2015). Temporary migration labour programs are usually ’managed’ in the form of bilateral agreements; Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) being the dominant form. MoUs, however, often lack the inclusion of clauses referring to the protection of migrant workers’ rights (Wickramasekara, 2011).

Migration management (Chi, 2008) takes a highly restrictive form in Asia. This practice includes safeguard measures against what Stephen Castles (2004) called ‘failed migration policies’ when describing guest worker programs in Europe that eventually led to the ‘unplanned process of settlement and community formation’ (p. 23) contrary to their original intentions. In contrast, temporary labour migration programs in Asia impose a strict immigration control that puts restrictions on the ability to claim membership in destination states. Temporary contract migration schemes mean that legal migration takes almost exclusively place on the basis of strictly fixed term contracts. Such contracts typically tie the worker to one specific employer, example being the notorious Kafala system as practiced in the Gulf countries. Breaking the contract to seek employment elsewhere – for instance in the case of abuse or contract violation on the part of the employer – can turn a migrant into an ‘illegal’ worker and resident. In this sense, there is no free access to the ‘labour market’. Because of the strictly temporary nature of migration, the nature of employer-tied contracts and the frequent occurrences of undocumented migration as the result of absconding or overstaying, return migration can be a natural consequence of this arrangement.

The practice of restrictive policies in the form of strictly temporary migration are particularly evident in the case of migrant domestic workers who are sometimes violently prohibited from any measure that can be seen as developing intimate ties to the destination countries. Migrant domestic workers are prohibited from marrying locals and restricted from marrying migrant workers (marriage has to take place after departure) in Singapore. Female migrant domestic workers (who make up the majority) have to undergo regular pregnancy tests by the authorities, and pregnant domestic workers face being deported (Xiang 2013b, Constable, 2014). Since the employers are *de facto* penalised when their domestic worker becomes pregnant, employers take on the role of surveillance to impose curfew or interfere with the workers’ day-off , often in the name of gendered morality and ‘protection’ (Yeoh and Huang, 2010 ; Constable 2014). In Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers are excluded from eligibility to apply for permanent residency, which is available for expatriates after seven years of residence (Constable, 2014).

Managing migrant's timely return before the expiry of their visa is a required process, and extends beyond the concerted efforts of the authorities (Xiang 2013a; 2013b). Border management is often ‘outsourced' to migrant employers and brokers (Xiang 2013b; Yeoh and Chee, 2015) by placing responsibility onto the shoulders of the (sponsoring) employer when the migrant employees overstay their visa. Xiang (2013b) approaches temporary labour migration by viewing it as a process of ‘compulsory return’ bound by the temporary contractual labour relationship and the consequence of cutting migrants from the surrounding social milieu at the local level.[[5]](#footnote-5) Equating the two processes of the temporal and the spatial, attention to the mandated process of return allows us to view migration as a complex phenomenon that involves a myriad of social, economic, political changes and anxieties invoked in the societies that migrants move and return to (see also Lindquist, 2009). Temporality shapes one’s wholesome experience of migration from pre-departure to after-return, frames the migration industry/market including the middlemen/broker practices, and establishes the foundation of governmental (of both destination and origin) policies and transnational governance structures. In relation to intra-Asian migration, the discussion of migrant agency, their subjectivity and ‘freedom’ should, therefore, be premised on temporality and its socio-political consequences.

# Migrant ‘Agency’ at the Intersection of Temporality and Transnationality[[6]](#footnote-6)

The framing of migrants as agents of development has come at a historical juncture where the renewed interest by policymakers in the migration-development nexus is paralleled by the deepening and spreading of economic neoliberalism. The positive spin taken on the relationship between migration and development (reflected e.g. in ‘brain drain’ being reframed as ‘brain gain’) has, therefore, to be seen in relation to the neoliberal emphasis on expanding individual responsibilities and increasing market reliance for accessing ‘public’ services. It is for this reason that the sense of optimism in migration’s ability to advance development, as captured by the ‘triple win’ mantra which is premised on the idea that receiving and sending states as well as migrants themselves benefit from migration, has to be qualified.[[7]](#footnote-7) Valuing the role of migrants in development could be viewed as a welcomed shift in thinking in the recasting of the debate beyond the ‘victim’ frame. However, the neoliberal understanding of agency in the sense of self-reliance and individual responsibility takes a different spin.

The mainstream economistic approach to migrants’ developmental role, thus manifests itself through a focus on migrants as remittance senders, creating cash flows to their families for use within their communities of origin. Migration scholars from other disciplines, notably proponents of transnationalism, have highlighted the significance of social and political remittances also (Levitt 1998; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2013; Piper 2009a). Central to the economic, social and political remittances are migrant collectives; groups of individuals who identify themselves in their relationship to the experience and history of cross-border mobility, along aspirations for development of their origin countries and themselves.

The formation of hometown associations of immigrants from Latin America, such as Mexicans in the USA, are particularly well-documented exemplifications of migrants' active participation in the implementation of development projects in their countries of origin (Goldring, 2002; Smith, 2007; Hazán, 2013). In Europe, this is reflected in growing interest in the concept of ‘co-development’, referring to the destination countries' proactive interest in the development of origin countries, with migrant groups acting as a bridge between the two (Hazán, 2013; Marabello, 2013; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2011; van Houte and Davids, 2008). Far less is known about collective institutional organising from other regions. This has the effect of making one form of migration hyper-visible while rendering others invisible (Raghuram 2009). Omelaniuk (2016) observes in her study of the treatment of diaspora groups in the context of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), a multi-stakeholder, non-binding, global initiative led by the UN, that tapping into 'diaspora wealth', transfer of skills and knowledge and fostering of transnational business connection are viewed as important contributions. This process is often encouraged by politically charged nationalism, special legal status, and the promise of economic benefits (Upadhya, 2013). Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera (2016) use Zimbabwean migration to South Africa, to make the point that Zimbabwean migration to South Africa is no less in number than to the UK, while only those living in the UK are assumed and included in the global discussion of diaspora groups and development.

The mainstream diaspora-led development models are premised on a selective approach based on the example of migration from the Global South directed to the Global North (See also, Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera 2016). In addition, the models of diaspora-led development also exclude earlier waves of migration in late 19th and early 20th century Asia. Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, for instance, has been subject to one of the many recorded histories of Asia migration within the region (Nonini and Ong, 1997; Xiang, 2013a; see also other contributors to an edited volume by Ong and Nonini, 1997). Yet, Chinese diaspora in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia are never on the global migration and development agenda, posing the fundamental question of who is treated as ‘diaspora’ within development discourse and practice and why they are seen as relevant to development and not others (see also, Bakewell, 2009). Our objective, however, is not to dwell on the historicity and conceptualisation of identity and social impact of diasporas, as it has already been done elsewhere (Ong and Nonini, 1997; Xiang, 2013a).

The temporary nature of migration as the key feature of intra-Asian migration has been absent from such studies. The case of intra-Asian migration, however, requires us to note that any development ‘agency’ is hampered by ever more restrictive and selective migration policy frameworks. Restrictions are driven by barricaded access to labour markets, types of work, and length of stay; and the ‘selectiveness’ of workers based on their gender and/or country of origin. A migrant’s agency for development is, therefore, not only restrained by the restrictive and selective nature of prevalent migration policies, but also due to gendered norms, flexible labour markets, high competition for jobs and the fraudulent practices of intermediaries (resulting in economic precarity) as well as socio-political non-commitment to newcomers and politically disenfranchised migrant-(non)citizens. It has been shown that it is countries of destination which tend to have the upper hand in determining the substance of bilateral negotiations (Wickramasekara 2011). However, in recent years some countries of origin such as the Philippines have also become more selective, albeit often in the form of instituting bans on female migrants only, rather than blanket bans on everyone’s migration to a specific country of destination where conditions are particularly unfavourable if not exploitative.

Migrant domestic workers are, thus, made precarious by multiple structural, and intersecting, vulnerabilities which discourage or prevent migrants from expressing their agency and form organised collectives to translate their collective demands into rights claims (Grugel and Piper 2011). As seen in the previous section, immigration measures can be explicitly more restrictive for migrant domestic workers, in addition to the weak labour protection measures in the sector of domestic work (Piper and Lee, 2013, Esim, 2011; ILO, 2010). Given the average migrant is female and a low-wage worker from the Global South, the question is raised about the impact of multiple axes of discrimination on their ability to be ‘agents of development’. Also, it has been shown that domestic work migration is related to unequal development within their own country, and the fact that many development projects are focused on metropolitan areas and not on the rural areas from where many domestic workers originate (Withers, 2016). Such migrants are, therefore, doubly neglected: by their own state as well as by the destination state.

## Developmental agency along the spatial-temporal axis

Conceptualising migration involves not only territorial space but also has a temporal dimension. The concept of development carries with it an implicit sense of time, as conveyed by the idea of progress from a ‘backward' status to a more advanced level. The imagination of linear progression over time casts expectations that the ‘backward' countries will eventually and almost automatically, catch-up with modernity, economic prosperity, democracy and other political, social and economic achievements. The linearity of temporal progression has also influenced the thinking and arguments by the dominant voices among the proponents of the migration-development nexus who project a positive and causal relationship between human mobility and economic development. Therefore, migration is not simply about crossing the border between two physical spaces, but also refers to movement between two temporal registers, be it in the sense of industrial organisation of time (Levitt and Rajaram, 2013), about expectations of the future and the transformation of the past (Upadhya, 2013) or between temporalised differences and relative deprivation (Raghuram, 2009).

However, what this paper pays attention to is not the ‘time’ but the ‘temporality’, or more specifically temporariness as a disciplining practice for migrant subjectivity (Robertson 2014). Lee and Chien (2016), for example, identify ‘five years’ as temporally significant in South Korea’s visa policies on co-ethnic migrants. The co-ethnic immigration policies distinguish one visa, identified as ‘unskilled’ from another, identified as ‘skilled’, and places temporal limitations on the ‘unskilled’ visa category only. This is significant because under South Korea’s Nationality Act, those who have maintained legal residence for five years are eligible for South Korean citizenship. Sharma (2007) argues that racialised temporary border practices, which are practices of accepting permanent immigrants first as ‘temporary, migrant workers and illegalized persons’ (p. 78),explicitly denies their citizenship potentials. Prevalence of temporary migration is explicitly linked to segmentation and globalisation of supply chain and the global production system (Ryder, 2015). Countries of origin tend to use the temporary nature of migration to ensure the consistent flow of remittances since evidence has it that prolonged absence from the ‘home country’ results in the lowering, if not eventual petering out, of monetary transfers (World Bank 2006).

Migrants’ expectations, planning and understanding of temporality attached to space, shapes their behaviour and membership practices in destination countries, most notably their participation in the labour market. Piore’s study (1979, as quoted in Levitt and Rajaram, 2013) found migrants more willing to accept lower wages and comparatively worse employment conditions when they expect their stay to be temporary. The temporary nature of migration shapes or rather reflects the kind of institutional understanding that destination and origin states have of migration. Migrants are not perceived as members, or potential citizens, but rather as flexible low-wage labour that supplies manpower in areas where the destination country is experiencing short- and (usually) long-term shortage, whilst providing much needed monetary flows to sustain their own families. Martin (2006) explains this process by using an aphorism that ‘there is nothing more permanent than temporary migration’ (p.4). Despite permanent labour shortages, temporary migration provides labour at the expense of human rights such as the right to family life, mobility, social protection, and other basic rights to one’s life and wellbeing (Sharma, 2007; Castles, 2004), affecting migrants’ ability to function as agents of their own, their families’ or communities’ and national development.

What possibilities, then, exist for the articulation of agency for temporary migrants? Leading up to our discussion of the existing collectives of temporary migrants in the next section, we intend to raise what we consider key issues that emerge from the current dominant understanding of the migrant-led development models as they relate to migrant collective agency.

# Temporary Migration and Collective Agency: Possibilities

In an ideal scenario of migration-led development, migrants send remittances home, acquire skills and return to their origin communities to put remittances, skills and knowledge to ‘productive' use. However, as we have argued in the previous sections, the temporary nature of migration programs as prevalent in Asia often functions as a hindrance to the development efforts of migrants. Migrants may not accumulate the level of income they are entitled to, due to weak labour protection mechanisms and undervaluation of their labour in the sectors they work in, resulting in low-wage income and frequent instances of labour rights violations such as wage arrears or non-payment, in addition to the charging of excessive recruitment fees. Limited provision for family formation or reunification, transnational separation of families, inevitability of return and unchanging gender and labour conditions ‘at home’ can affect the lack of ‘success’ of this type of migration in terms of sustainability.

## Migrants as economic entrepreneurs

The focus in the migration-development nexus debate tends to be on economic aspects, i.e. the idea that migrants from ‘less-developed’ countries who move to and work in more ‘developed’ countries and their remittances will reduce poverty within, and the income gap between, countries. Such thinking has evolved from the so-called ‘three-Rs’ shaping migration, referring to recruitment, remittances and return (Nyberg-Sorensen, Van Hear & Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). Proactive ‘recruitment’ is the outcome of undesirable economic conditions of origin countries which push migrants to take up opportunities overseas and others (including return migrants) to take up recruitment as a source of income (Nu Nguyet 2017). ‘Return’ ideally constitutes the end of the cycle of migration, with migrants successfully resettling into their origin communities using the remittances and the skills acquired during their overseas stint. Given the salience of ‘remittances’, migrants end up being reduced to their economic role and the value of their labour power (Nyberg-Sorensen et al., 2002; see also Dannecker 2009; Faist, 2008; Raghuram, 2009). Policy research on development aspirations of migrants after return has been scant and post-return programs have focused on training migrants’ ‘financial skills’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ to make the most of their overseas income.

The shortcomings of entrepreneurial programs were identified as early as the early 1990s in the Philippines. A project was implemented by the ILO, the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), and the Commission of the European Communities, seeking to enable Filipino migrant workers and their families to generate entrepreneurship and self-employment from remittances (ILO, 2003). The project evaluation revealed a number of limitations within entrepreneurship education, including the limit of individual entrepreneurship without the structural changes in the economy, among other things. The evaluation revealed that returning migrants are not necessarily more entrepreneurial than other people. To the contrary, they have been away from their origin communities during their work overseas, and may be out of touch with the needs and demands of their origin communities. Social networks, relationships and social dynamics may have shifted as a result of the migration. Even if the return migrants have good ideas and are ‘entrepreneur-minded', successful small business is only possible under a favourable economic, political and social climate created by appropriate macro-level policy instrument and social infrastructure. Being an entrepreneur also does not mean offering decent job opportunities in their communities, unless training on fair wages, anti-discrimination, inclusivity and equity training is also offered. Otherwise, return migrant entrepreneurs can be discriminatory, gender-insensitive, and nepotistic (Anwar and Chan, 2016).

It has been suggested that business initiatives should be complemented by other professional skills, contacts, access to adequate financing and financial training (see also Randolph and Agarwal 2017). Initiatives such as Migrant Return Saving Programmes and Migrant Credit Unions have been tried with foreign domestic workers based in Hong Kong. Although such programs offer potential models for mobilising migrant savings and turning them into viable projects, so far actual success has been questionable, with excessive focus on setting up small *sari-sari* shops in small communities without any macro-economic strategy to expand markets and employment chances beyond small-scale ventures (Weekley 2006; Piper and Lee 2013).

It is far from certain whether the modules of entrepreneurship education practiced so far have advanced from their shortcomings. A Working Paper from the UN agency states that "as long as the structural context remains unchanged, remittance-based individual entrepreneurship will have little possibility of success, as investors face constraints that cannot be overcome simply by individual efforts. [UN] INSTRAW's (and other) case studies show that in those circumstances, the development impact of remittance-based investments tend to be nil, and that overcoming such limitations requires public interventions" (UN INSTRAW, 2007: p.7). Kathleen Weekley (2006) comments on the reintegration programs such as entrepreneurship training that they foster complicity in neoliberal capitalism, by spreading false hope despite the implausibility of entrepreneurial success.

Government monitoring and ethnographic studies on the effect of the training programs remain scarce, except for a notable few. Anwar and Chan (2016) compare two rural villages in central Java, Indonesia, and explore the consequences of return migrant entrepreneurship in migrant-origin villages. In one village, return migrant enterprises based on personal, familial network relationships fostered a fierce competition and resulted in social distrust, socio-economic inequality, and network exclusivity. On the other hand, the other village took necessary steps to ensure inclusive development and guard against business monopolies and political elitism, through the system of participatory decision-making in the village governance structure and implementing a fair distribution system. The authors suggest that return migrant entrepreneurship does not necessarily foster a greater socio-economic equality/inequality, but social and political mechanisms of participatory village governance and fair client distribution system can lead villagers to feel that cooperation can result in the benefit of themselves, their family and community. As Anwar and Chan (2016) point out, migrants face an individualised responsibility to put their migratory experience to a productive outcome, when the kind of ‘success' depends on social relationships and networks that exist in the communities where they belong (see also, Lee and Anwar, 2012). The authors quote BNP2TKI (Indonesia’s national government agency that oversees migration) treatment of participants as 'empowered return migrants' who will presumably go back to 'empower' the members of their communities, yet the community dynamics— gender politics, local elitism, familialism, etc. may be beyond the power of a few return migrants and their families. It is nonetheless worth noting that one village fostered more inclusive forms of development through utilising the village governance structure and forming collective groups that is equipped with communitarian goals of village development.

Although one of the villages in Anwar and Chan's (2016) study can be considered a ‘good example', this village, too, depended on low-wage and lowly valued labour of women to partake in 'domestic' and 'feminine' tasks, including emotional and social labour that is required for looking after, creating, and maintaining family and community bonds the businesses depended on. In both villages, women were underrepresented in leadership positions, where men dominated, as well as undertaking jobs that are better paid, organisational, administrative and other work considered ‘skilled'. This gendered dimension is reinforced by the state programs that target women in certain 'feminised' industries such as cooking, sewing, and hairdressing, rather than taking into consideration the participants' own interest, specificities of village economy and geographical features of the community. Paradoxically, however, women are seemingly responsible for negotiating their domestic chores, and childcare arrangements while they participate in income generation activities.

## Temporary migrants as social and political collectives

The limits of labour organisation for temporary migrants have been explored elsewhere from the point of view of conventional routes for labour organisation via trade unions as well as the broader labour movement including NGOs (Ford, 2004; 2006; Piper , 2009b). Despite the limits of organised labour, migrants’ social movements have particularly embraced the limits, restrictions and challenges imposed by temporary migration models. Migrant workers have responded to the lacking outreach by formal trade union to them by diversifying forms of organisation in pursuit of justice (Milkman, 2011; Piper et al. 2017).

The importance of migrant participation in collective organising has been amply demonstrated, especially in regard to the transnational character of such organising. The example of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong SAR has been particularly well studied where most nationalities have created their own unions and are part of an umbrella union together with local domestic workers led by the Hong Kong Federations of Trade Unions (HKFTU). The forming of organisations by and for domestic workers in Hong Kong has had considerable effect on political empowerment; as freedom of expression is protected and practised in Hong Kong, many migrant domestic workers through their migratory experience gain an opportunity to communicate their ideas in public (Piper and Lee, 2013). Experiences of political participation often continue upon their return. There is a discernible trend towards increasing numbers of civil society organisations established by returning migrants, including domestic workers, for the purpose of lobbying, rights advocacy and livelihood projects.

Among the numerous examples of organisations of returning migrants that are politically active in the countries of origin is SUMAPI (The Samahan at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawang Pantahanan sa Pilipinas), a community organisation in the Philippines, which was formed by domestic workers who had returned from Hong Kong SAR.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, Indonesian migrant domestic workers who participated in NGO and trade union activities in Hong Kong SAR have also started up their own NGOs upon returning to Jakarta (Piper and Lee 2013). Other examples are POURAKHI in Nepal and BOMSA in Bangladesh, NGOs set up by female migrant workers who returned home. Greater economic resources, in general, elevate their social position within their families and societies against traditional social practices that look down upon women. The enhanced economic and social capability enables them more power to partake in decision-making processes concerning themselves, their families and their communities. The extent to which exposure to new knowledge and social practices are translated into sustainable social reform, however, is debatable.

Collective organisations can also assist migrant domestic workers to fight against negative stereotyping and a paternalistic approach towards their protection as expressed in this letter from a returnee woman in a Nepalese newspaper who shares her perspective:

Women working in the Gulf countries are looked down upon by the society, but those women working in Japan, Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, UK and USA are very much respected even though it is [a] fact that they also have to stay away from the family for a long time. So it is the society that recognizes money as an important factor for social status... because of the societal practice to look down upon women working in the Gulf, their psychological and moral will power is eroding. If they are also given some social respect... it would boost their morale and [they would be] able to contribute to family and society.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Against such negative and discriminatory stereotyping, organisations of return female migrants such as POURAKHI can formulate a collective response (Piper and Lee, 2013). Organised collectives of return migrants pay heed to complex gender expectations and dynamics, including ideals of motherhood, daughterhood, and other visions of gendered roles and morality. The structural difficulties and compounding dimensions of discrimination may have resulted in the organisation of collectives to be uneven and sporadic (Silvey, 2003) but where they emerged, the vigour and strength of their collective voice has demanded attention in a novel and noteworthy manner.

# Conclusion

Temporary labour migration schemes create complex social situations that complicate migration’s relationship to development and hamper their ability to be ‘agents of development’. The notion of ‘temporality’ is therefore related to the following elements: (1) *compulsory return and remittance-driven development models* which over-emphasise migrants’ economic contribution to the country of origin without plans for sustainable development;(2) *continued (transnational) surveillance* *by their employers or brokers* *and restrictions on family* practices which create an environment where temporary migrants are treated as if they existed in a social vacuum during their stay in the destination countries; and (3) *migrants’* *limited ability to acquire sufficient resources* that would lead to sustainable alternatives to break the vicious cycle of migration and reduce the need to (re-)migrate. While migrants can gain (some) economic resources, skills and knowledge as a result of their migration, the acquired resources may not be easily turned into viable and sustainable alternatives upon expiry of their temporary contract. Upon (inevitable and often involuntary) return, they are typically treated as individual agents of development, in the absence of structural changes in the macro-economic set-up, prevailing social perception and political governance marred in policy inertia and lacking political will to address the drivers of migration.

While migration is not a panacea for development, underdevelopment in the origin countries can motivate migrants to cross borders to work in destination countries with their governments using their mobility as a tool for development. Migrants are portrayed heroically for their sacrifice for their family and ultimately the nation (Bautista, 2015), yet their role has been defined mainly by governments and many international agencies in relation to their remittance sending capacity and the impact of such monetary flows on the local and national economic development. Their own development vision is typically unheard (Dannecker 2009) and thus not harnessed.

Temporality also affects the policies and attitudes of the origin state, and its sense of responsibility towards protecting the rights and wellbeing of its citizens because of the limitations set by territorial forms of jurisdiction and the power inequality imposed by the global economic hierarchy. Even if the origin states have the political will to provide support for its citizens overseas, they depend on the goodwill of the destination states, while being cognizant of the destination states' ability to dictate terms of bilateral agreements, including the quota of migrant intake. The temporality of migration programs is an important indicator that sets a stage for the political relationship that migrants build with the countries of origin and destination.

By paying specific attention to the gendered dimensions of meso-level aspects of temporary labour migration through the lens of migrant domestic workers’ experience, we have brought to the fore the limitations of the dominant development envisioning of migration-led development models which typically draw on permanent migration and presence of established diaspora groups and connections. Instead, we presented possibilities of ‘new’ forms of collectives that temporary migrants form, despite the structural limits posed by gender, low-wage status, precarious legal status, and uneven geography of development. Whether it is the labour union formed by Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, or a community women’s group of return domestic workers from the Gulf States in a rural Indonesian village, it would be an overstatement to say they effectively shape the discourse and policy directions of development policies. However, they teach us valuable lessons on the possibilities of *migrant*-led (as opposed to *migration*-led) development models despite the limitations and challenges posed by temporality, and those lessons are immensely valuable for academics and policymakers.

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2. The report includes countries in the Pacific, including the Pacific islands, New Zealand and Australia. For the purpose of this paper, we exclude the Pacific and only consider Southeast, East, South and West Asia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ILO document *Decent work for domestic workers*, IV Report to the ILC, 99th session, 2010, at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\_104700.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This figure was obtained by adding the numbers of ‘household service workers’, ‘care workers, cleaners and related workers’, ‘caregivers and caretakers’ and ‘housekeeping and related service workers’ on the data from Overseas Employment Statistics, 2010, POEA, as quoted in de Dios et al. (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In a forthcoming article, Piper and Withers integrate the notion of ‘compulsory return’ into the concept of “forced transnationalism”, an argument made against the backdrop of temporary employer-tied contract migration as it prevails in Asia. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We use the notion of “transnationality” rather than transnationalism to highlight specific conditions created by a regulatory framework based on strictly temporary contracts (with the average length of 2 to 4 years), rather than the processual or relational aspects of transnationalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Critiques on migration-development nexus in general are beyond the scope of this paper as it has been done elsewhere, from the point of view of critical development studies, the Global South, and gender. See Nicola Piper (2009a) ‘Editorial Introduction: The Complex Interconnections of the Migration-Development Nexus - a social perspective’. *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 15(2): 93-102; Hein de Hass (2005), International migration, remittances and development: myths and facts. *Third World Quarterly,* 26(8): 1269–1284; Castles, Stephen, and Raul Delgado Wise (eds). *Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South*. Geneva: IOM, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://sumapi.weebly.com/> (accessed on 10 April 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Published in *Drishti Vernacular Weekly*, 3 June 2003 as quoted in Adhikari, Jagannath. ‘Poverty, Globalisation and Gendered Labour Migration in Nepal’, in *Poverty, Gender and Migration*, Sadhna Arya and Anupama Roy, eds, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006, 87- 106.  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)