# Not Without Them: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals for Women Migrant Workers

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## Abstract

*Drawing on multiple data sources, including key informant interviews, participant observation and archival study, this paper provides an analysis of the civil society’s role in foregrounding the agenda of women migrants in migration and development (M&D) fora, and reflects on its role in realizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, the dominant narrative within the state-led Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) tends to be a gender-blind migration for development approach, which emphasizes national-level economic growth at the centre of migration processes, while negating the subjectivities of women migrants and neglecting their contributions to the global economy; this approach diverts attention to a narrow focus on macro-economic development through forms of financial remittances. Based on an examination of the GFMD as a site for gender-mainstreaming M&D, we reflect on lessons learned as we look forward to achieving the SDGs. We argue that while the SDGs include some significant provisions for women in migration, only critical civil society advocacy and activism networked within grassroots organizations can address the structural changes necessary (such as a re-articulation of the care economy to value economic contributions of women’s reproductive work) to transform and improve the lived realities of women in migration and realize the SDGs in a manner that fosters their empowerment.*

## Introduction

Women migrants engaged in global labour markets are subjected to the dictates of “neoliberal governmentality” that exploits women through the “feminization,” “flexibilization”, and “informalization” of work which underpins development (Peterson: 2012; Oksala, 2013; Yeates, 2012). In the highly-gendered labour markets which structure migration flows of women workers and migration governance, it is important to consider gender not only as a variable but also as an analytical lens (an argument further explored in this issues’ introduction paper: Holliday et al, this issue). Women Migrant Workers (WMWs) are differently situated within labour migration dynamics and gender can operate as a governing code. However, in migration and development policies at both national and international levels, gender is not often considered a separate analytical category. Moreover, migration policies are mostly gender-blind, ignore the power dynamics and implications of gender-segregated labour markets, and the socioeconomic/cultural structures in both origin and destination countries (Piper, 2006).

Migration is a gendered phenomenon, and men and women experience migration in very different ways. Before, during and returning from migration, women are likely to differ from men in terms of motivations, opportunities, settlement, adaptation, labour market insertion, cultural change and so forth (Meghani, 2016; Hennebry, et al., 2016a). WMWs are embedded in labour markets, labour relations and economies across borders including the care economy (World Economic Forum, 2017; Yeates, 2009), and as such they contribute to economies in both countries of origin and destination, while they bear the burden of gendered costs and risks associated with labour migration (Hennebry et.al, 2017). However, in “dominant migration for development” governance discourses, the prime focus is given to monetary gains measured through women migrants’ contributions in relation to national economies. This development paradigm ignores women migrants’ personal experiences and thus fails to pay ample attention to their rights, protections and unique subjectivities (Piper & Lee, 2016). For development agendas to adequately acknowledge the role of WMWs in the care economy requires recognizing the value of care labour, and the way in which cheap and flexible care labourers from the South effectively subsidize the care deficit in the North (Yeates, 2012).

In most migrant-sending countries, women migrants’ remittances make significant contributions to national economies. Yet, a governmental discourse that focuses on remittances serves to instrumentalize WMWs’ contributions. States generally refrain from formulating gender-sensitive migration policies that facilitate women’s cross-border labour mobility. Rather, some countries impose legal restrictions on women’s labour migration, often under the guise of protection (Anderson, 2012; Hennebry, 2017). As Piper (2015) contends, dominant government policy frameworks primarily focus on controlling migration through state cooperation and extracting economic benefits from foreign workers whilst “paying mere lip service to the human rights of migrants.” (p. 792). Moreover, labour laws in most host countries often poorly protect the rights of women migrants, who are subject to intersecting structural factors and discriminations based on gender, class, age, ethnicity and nationality, which make the challenges they confront further compounded (Hennebry, J. et al., 2016a). What results is that the women migrants concentrated in highly-gendered sectors (e.g. domestic care) cannot access the same labour rights and social protections as workers in other sectors. Structural inequalities, gender discrimination in labour markets in countries of origin, and restrictive immigration controls coalesce so that many women may have few pathways to migrate, and will be more likely to turn to recruiters and to migrate via lower skilled temporary worker schemes or undocumented channels – and as such are particularly politically disenfranchised (Piper, 2010; Hennebry, 2016b).

Such issues have sparked civil society and migrant rights groups to demand attention at global fora of the role of WMWs in development and to recognize the importance of gender equality in the global development agenda. Their voices have resonated globally, amplified by forming activist networks, through fora such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). Indeed, recognition of issues pertaining to WMWs have been directly integrated into the UN’s recent Sustainable Development Goals. For example, Goal 5 states the need to protect and empower WMWs, particularly through SDG 5.5 in which WMWs’ advocacy and empowerment will be vital.

To better understand this important role of civil society, with a view to realizing the SDGs, we examine the GFMD as a key global site for the negotiation and formulation of migration and development governance. Indeed, although state participation is voluntary, informal and non-binding, the GFMD is the largest multilateral global migration governance process that engages over 160 countries from all regions on migration related issues. The stated goal of the GFMD, since its inception in 2007, has been to facilitate a constructive dialogue among governments and advance understanding and cooperation on the mutually reinforcing relationship between migration and development, and to foster practical and action-oriented outcomes (Vanyoro & Wee, 2016). While the GFMD’s informal and non-binding nature has been criticised, Chikezie (2012) argues that the very non-binding nature of the GFMD has helped avoid conflicts among states over sensitive migration issues. The GFMD, and in particular the Civil Society Days (CSD), is also a valuable platform for shifting norms, addressing challenges and sharing best practices, all of which will be vital to realizing the SDGs. This paper looks at the GFMD through the lens of civil society’s role in foregrounding the agenda of women migrants.

This paper draws on data gathered from three main sources: key informant interviews, participant observation, and analysis of various policy documents, from the United Nations and the GFMD, pertaining to gender and migration governance. The authors carried out 10 semi-structured Skype, phone and in-person interviews from July 2016-January 2017, with representatives of various civil society organizations (CSOs)[[1]](#footnote-1) operating at local, national and global levels. Organizations included the Philippines-based Centre for Migrant Advocacy, Global Coalition on Migration, United Methodist Women, European Network of Migrant Women, Women in Migration Network, the Building and Woodworkers International Federation-BWI​, the International Labour Organization, [National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights](http://www.nnirr.org/), Institute for Women in Migration (Mexico), as well as three Nepal-based organizations Pourakhi Nepal, Maiti Nepal, and Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee.[[2]](#footnote-2) The authors also acted as participant observers during interactions with CSO representatives at different global migration fora and conferences such as the GFMD meetings (Third Thematic Meeting on September 8, 2015 in Geneva, the GFMD Civil Society Days, Government Days, and the Platform for Partnership in Istanbul in 2015, as well as numerous other global advocacy events during 2007-2017). Finally, a content analysis was conducted of various United Nations documents dealing with gender and migration, from the SDGs and agendas and reports from the GFMD. Themes and reports pertaining to gender and migration were identified and categorized in a timeline across both Civil Society[[3]](#footnote-3) and Government Days.[[4]](#footnote-4) Specific examples were drawn to demonstrate how civil society advocacy and networking has influenced global migration and development agendas. The paper begins with a reflection on the changing landscape of migration and development governance, emphasizing the impact of civil society actors. The case study of the GFMD is outlined as a backdrop/site for the articulation of the SDGs, and the role of CSOs in shaping the GFMD agenda is discussed. Then important lessons learned from this case are inferred in addition to identifying the remaining hurdles in achieving the SDGs most relevant to WMWs.

## That Was Then, This Is Now: Civil Society Changing the Migration Governance Landscape

There has been an important shift in terms of gender mainstreaming of migration governance and development. An array of CSOs have played a crucial role in shaping and transforming the governance of migration by functioning as transnational pressure groups to influence state behaviours and the policies of international agencies (Ruggie, 2004; Piper, 2015). For example, Taran (2003) observes that civil society activism with migrant workers’ NGOs and regional networks and global campaigns pressured for the ratification of the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families*,* leading to the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants in 1999. These developments prepared the backdrop for the official launching of International Migrants Day (December 18) by the UN in 2000.

CSOs activism can thus be credited for anchoring human rights as a “common and powerful” discourse (Jochnick, 1999). Their success can be attributed to their adoption of a networked approach to addressing the interlinked nature of the problems (See: Piper et al, 2017); their willingness and ability to operate through norms-making instead of resorting to coercion; their continued “agency” which they utilize to change structures (Finnemore, 2014); and their interconnected activism through “transnational advocacy networks” which are “bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (Keck & Sikkink (1998:2). Particularly when the channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, the “boomerang effect” allows domestic actors to bypass their state and directly reach out to their international allies to exert pressure on their state (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The “boomerang effect” refers to the act of local non-state actors linking with the international society to pressure states to make corrections (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The vertical hierarchy of non-state actors starting from local to subnational, national, regional and global has given way to multiple nodes of connection and communication; CSOs working locally in any part of the globe can directly and instantaneously communicate. Networking and coalition building are among the most powerful strategies they employ to connect with non-state actors such as trade unions and other global organizations. Through this form of cooperation, CSOs can break historical cycles, create alternative channels of communication, create space for multiple voices, and provide alternative visions, ideas, and information (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), as seen in the case of the emergence of Civil Society Days within the GFMD.

Some are more skeptical of CSOs’ abilities to negotiate with states on an equal footing, and rather emphasize the strengths of such groups to act as “norm entrepreneurs” (,Rother, 2010, 2009) engaged in what Burton & Pollack (2002) refer to as “strategic framing” through transnational activism, which has been particularly important to gender mainstreaming efforts (Lyle-Gonga, 2013). The networked approach of CSOs has been particularly important to their success in driving global agendas for which they advocate and novel approaches have emerged in terms of composition of networks and division of labour (Piper, 2013). Interestingly, in some global spaces it has been unions that have taken the lead (e.g. ILO processes), whereas in others, CSOs have been leaders in pushing rights agendas (e.g. OHCHR) (Ibid). Through networked connections, they gather the indispensable information that they later feed to policymakers; their actions are “political, dynamic and transformational” (Avant et al. 2010:3). Through this strategy, they tackle issues within state-territories and across borders, effectively transforming the character of global politics (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

CSOs working on issues pertaining to women migrants have gained in strength numerically, collectively and discursively: numerically, through the rising numbers of migrant rights organizations; collectively, through the networked nature of these organizations and; discursively, by pushing the agenda of a rights-based approach to migration (Piper & Rother, 2012). In both origin and destination countries, it is mainly such CSOs that have voiced and politicized migration issues. Some migrant organizations run by former migrants themselves engage in transnational politics (Piper, 2006 & 2010). In addition to actively participating in regional fora and weighing in on numerous issues, CSO networks have led to a wide range of local, regional, and transnational advocacy and development initiatives (Wise, Covarrubias & Puentes, 2013), as well as influenced government responses (Piper & Rother, 2012). However, the impacts of civil society’s networked activisms have been uneven. The extent to which the issues most relevant to WMWs have been brought to the fore of governance debates and discourse varies from region to region and country to country, with some lagging far behind while others have made significant strides ahead, particularly with respect to global migration and development governance.

### The Role of CSOs in Gender Mainstreaming the GFMD

Global migration governance is multi-layered, multi-leveled and fragmented. McAdam (2009) contends that global migration governance suffers from significant fragmentation both vertically—with actors at the international, regional and local levels—and horizontally—across policy domains (e.g. immigration, social and labour governance) and associated institutions. The governance of international migration is spread across three levels (global – which involves normative regulatory frameworks; regional – which involves co-operation between nation-states; and meso – which includes non-state actors such as civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and transnational networks and rights organizations) (Grugel & Piper, 2007). Yet, as Piper & Rother (2012) note, there are structures and practices which bridge these levels, involving several international commissions and various institutions for inter-state dialogue and cooperation that have been established at regional and global levels. It is within this space between levels that CSOs have been particularly influential. Since international mechanisms are both legal and normative frameworks which rely on states for implementation, the existence of actors in between is necessary to hold states accountable to their commitments. This has been an important space for CSOs who have worked to close the gap between these levels considerably in recent years, and they have played a particularly important role in gender-mainstreaming.

Examining the GFMD as a case study provides a glimpse into how CSOs are pushing for the gender mainstreaming of migration and development governance across these different levels. It is appropriate to look to this forum, in part since it was women migrants themselves, and the CSOs representing and advocating for WMWs’ rights, that were instrumental in the establishment of the GFMD, and bringing gender to the forefront of global migration and development debates (Piper, 2012). The progress made at the GFMD toward gender mainstreaming of migration and development has been slow, but what progress has been made has been driven by CSOs, as the “Civil Society Days” have pushed gender onto the agenda of the “Government Days.” This push has extended into international organizations such as the IOM, which has rearticulated their messaging and priorities around gender in recent years (IOM, 2016).

Women migrants’ organizations in particular have been proactive in vocalizing and pushing the gender mainstreaming agenda at international fora. CSOs at the global level network with their counterparts working at national and regional levels, prepare for the annual GFMD meetings and advocacy actions, and more importantly, emphasize on ensuring that migrants’ rights and human development are implemented on the ground. Piper (2015) emphasizes that such activisms and advocacies have been possible by mobilizing grassroots networks and connecting them with transnational and global networks and campaigns that address migrant’s rights. Ellene Sana, the Director of the Centre for Migrant Advocacy, notes this development to be crucial, adding that unlike the first few years of the GFMD when only the government sessions provided an interface between civil society and states, CSOs now officially take part in the GFMD meetings.[[5]](#footnote-5) The GFMD does not consist of either “top-down” or “bottom-up” global governance structure; instead, it has a hybrid structure in that it involves states´representatives effectively engaged in a process of informal networking and dialogue (Chikezie, 2012). However, most interviewees concurred that in its early years, government sessions were more exclusionary, and CSO representatives were made to feel they should be grateful for any of the space provided in the sidelines. These sentiments were echoed by representatives interviewed from the Women in Migration Network (WIMN), as well as the Building and Woodworkers International (global union) Federation (BWI​). Further, most CSO participants interviewed at the GFMD emphasized that the recognition of gender, and the importance of protecting WMWs’ labour and human rights, has not happened overnight.

The intensity of dialogue between non-state and state actors have evolved each year , and the number of CSO representatives and observers at the Civil Society Days has increased, from around 200 in Manila and Athens to more than 400 in Mexico (Rother, 2012; Chikezie, 2012; Wise, Covarrubias & Puentes, 2013). However, as Vanyoro & Wee (2016) observe that the “Common Space” within the GFMD provides a common forum for both civil society and the government representatives, but it has been strongly critiqued by CSOs for lacking the authority to implement change or enforce states to meet their obligations. The Common Space program and panels are shaped by the input of the international steering committee, and there is a balance between government and civil society delegates (ibid). However, CSOs offer minimal input during panels, and due to the formal and tightly controlled nature of plenaries, there is almost no room for debates from diverse perspectives (Vanyoro & Wee, 2016).

A comparison of themes and discussions at the Civil Society Days and the Government Days indicates that there is often a lag between the issues and concerns identified by CSOs and the ones being discussed in the state-led GFMDs, and yet the themes identified by CSOs tend to be taken up in subsequent years at the GFMD. In recent years, gender has become even more prominent in the Civil Society Days, and instead of treating all WMWs as a homogeneous group, the Civil Society Days have embraced an intersectional approach to looking at women *in* migration which (GFMD Civil Society Days, 2015). As witnessed at the 2015 Civil Society Days, CSOs have put pressures on states to hold them accountable by emphasizing the implementation of the agendas and agreements already adopted by states, such as CEDAW (GFMD Civil Society Days, 2015). A 2012 survey conducted by Social Impact Inc. indicated that CSOs have the ability to directly and indirectly influence agenda setting and discussions at the GMFD, but the Civil Society Days only marginally influence the state-led discussions within the same session (Blue, de García, & Johnston, 2012). Within a given year though, stark discrepancies exist between what the civil society has advocated for and the recommendations adopted by the states. Indeed, there has been a notable time lag, which is evident in terms of gender, where states tend not to address themes raised in Civil Society Days during the same year (See Table 1).

### Achieving the SDGs for WMWs − Lessons Learned from the GFMD

The SDGs have specifically recognized gender as an important factor in migration, particularly stated through SDG 5.5[[6]](#footnote-6), SDGs 5.6[[7]](#footnote-7), 8 and 10.4.[[8]](#footnote-8) The SDGs have normative value and it is through diverse actors and appropriate mechanisms that these goals can be achieved. Numerous interviewees claimed that both in terms of issues covered and the process in which the SDGs were developed, SDGs are considerably more participatory and inclusive than the preceding MDGs.[[9]](#footnote-9) Some also noted that CSOs, though not directly and all equally involved in framing the content of the SDGs, provided inputs through transnational civil society networks operating at the global level. Compared to the MDGs, the SDGs are more visible, and CSOs are seizing the opportunity to highlight these issues because now they will be in the vocabulary of government for the next 15 years. Yet, as noted by an interviewee from the European Network of Migrant Women (Interview, 2016), “… it is an overstatement to say that the agenda of women migrants is at the forefront of SDGs. But if we mean by this that migrant *women* are acknowledged as a specific category and target group within SDGs, then it is fair to say a fundamental role.” Indeed, if the SDGs pertaining to women migrant workers (e.g. 5.6 and 10.4) are to be realized on the ground, a number of challenges must be addressed, and we highlight seven of these below.

The *first* major challenge we wish to highlight is ensuring inclusive civil society involvement in formulation, implementation and monitoring of the SDG indicators. Given the scope and ambition of the SDGs, states alone cannot achieve the agenda. Since CSO act as transnational networks connecting to groups at the grassroots, they will be crucial partners to fill some of the gaps in the existing fragmented global migration governance system (Rose Taylor, 2016). The format of the GFMD continues to relegate CSOs to the sidelines, despite their influential presence, and the SDGs are embedded into the GFMD as well as a high-level forum which replicates this state-centric format. This neglects the important role of other major fora which have growing civil society participation, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, as key sites for achieving SDGs related to gender equality and migration.

Focusing on the national level and putting pressure on the national governments is critically important, but this becomes more effective when such an activism is done in collaboration with broader CSO networks operating at regional and global levels, as shown in studies on other global processes, specially the ILO process around the negotiations of its latest Convention NO. 189 (“Decent Work for All”) (Piper 2013; Yeoh, 2008). The networked and transnational CSO activism succeeds at the macro level by mounting pressure on national governments to implement gender-responsive governance, and at the micro level they empower individuals through providing various forms of assistance and services (Gleeson, 2009). Such networked members have brought local and national issues to the fore of the GFMD – and this local-global link is arguably even more vital in the context of the SDGs. As noted by Ellene Sana, the Director of the Centre for Migrant Advocacy in the Philippines, her organization places tremendous value in being part of broader transnational networks, adding that what binds them together is a shared advocacy to promote migrants’ rights and interests.[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed, CSO representatives interviewed continually emphasized the importance of participating at the national and local levels as CSOs, and connecting with counterparts working at regional and global levels. Mexican CSOs indicated that participating in the GFMD enabled them to better understand how their government managed its discourse around migrants from Central America, and how global geopolitics frame and influence national and regional level governance approaches along Mexico’s borders to the North and the South (IMUMI, 2017). This illuminated greater leverage points for their national advocacy strategies.

For WMWs specifically, whose transnational lives cross many jurisdictions, the challenges to claiming rights differ from others due to the international and multi-jurisdictional realities of their lives (Hennebry, et al., 2016a). CSOs which are already accustomed to working across borders, will be vital to holding governments accountable by “engaging them and constantly reminding them that they should do their job” and requires building networks within and across borders.[[11]](#footnote-11) They also play a role as norms entrepreneurs at the global level, and are therefore vital to the success of the SDGs. CSOs can easily engage and interact with local and vulnerable populations and advocate on their behalf across these levels (African Civil Society Circle, 2016). They are also particularly important for localization, to effectively translate the development agenda into results at the local level (ibid).

A *second* major challenge is empowering and strengthening CSOs at all levels, and particularly among grassroots organisations. Empowering civil society at the grassroots, especially the organizations run by women migrants themselves is imperative to shifting the global migration governance discourse and structures. Connecting such organizations with trade unions (including those where women represent the minority of the workforce) is particularly important to capacity-building and claims-making (BWI, 2016). To further strengthen these networks, locally based or sectoral labour unions can also connect to international labour unions and trade associations, as well as make use of the range of tools, normative frameworks and conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017). Engaging in global meetings provides an important space for capacity building, but its processes and structures can be taxing for smaller scale organizations. Making oppressed groups visible internationally is a goal of such transnational advocacy networks (Bob, 2002), but not all local non-state actors may be able to connect with their global counterparts for several reasons. Such groups often lack material resources, pre-existing linkages to international actors, skill at international public relations, and organizational cohesiveness (ibid). The other groups possessing such resources and connections can get their cases heard in the international human rights community while others cannot, resulting into a “loose but real competition among needy groups” (Bob, 2002). Kent, Armstrong, & Obrecht (2013) also observe that contemporary NGOs and IOs are deeply ingrained within the reward system of project undertaking through national donations while only a few retain the ability to assert their autonomy from government strings attached. Contemporary foreign development projects and practices of development associated with NGOs, “have been rediscovered as essentially civilian forms of counterinsurgency,” which includes “drawing in and orchestrating such NGO forms of non-state sovereign power with interventionary state-led assemblages of aid” (Duffield, 2008).

The unhealthy competition for securing funding from IOs, especially among CSOs at national and local levels creates rivalries and reduce their effectiveness. Cooley and Ron (2002) argue that an increase in the number of CSOs and the marketization of their activities has led them to be engaged in competitive behaviour to access funding that will ensure their survival. In some cases, in the context of neoliberal funding constraints and growing securitization (Basok and Piper, 2012), CSOs compete with others instead of collaborating, and in other cases become imbricated with the creation and execution of securitized social policies (Deacon, 2007). This lack of collaboration obstructs the formation of global civil society. Gobzina notes that civil society may have to, “rethink some fundamentals: such as its dependence on neoliberal funding mechanisms in which it largely implicated, or the identity politics which large sectors of civil society find very fashionable to play with. It would have to go back to class, race, sex analysis, self-organize, build broad coalitions and strike. Civil society should go back to grassroots movement building, political consciousness raising and solidarity.” [[12]](#footnote-12)

CSOs are not a homogeneous group: their political power, organizational capacities and level of activism differ from one another, with some organizations feeling marginalized and lacking sufficient knowledge or credentials to enable their participation. Further, civil society as conceived within the GFMD specifically, differs from the general way in which it is defined and understood, particularly among those who consider themselves part of it. Chikezie (2012) argues that civil society inclusiveness can be addressed through reframing the concept of civil society itself and choosing one that carries “less baggage.” In practice this would take a significant restructuring of the administrative procedures which function as gatekeepers, vetting the “legitimate” CSO participants through a formalized application process.

Moreover, as Banulescu-Bogdan (2011) suggests, advocacy engagement at such official UN fora demands of civil society actors’ different skills and strategies from their usual ones. Member states are more concerned with seeking practical solutions and effective policies (according to their own interests) than with norm setting, and this again presents challenges for conventional advocacy approaches (Chikezie, 2012). If CSOs are to be meaningfully embedded into the SDG processes at global and national levels, then international organizations or UN Agencies, such as the IOM and UN Women, must work to seek opportunities to include such actors in meetings and make steps to open dialogue and decision-making beyond member states. Where possible, such entities can also play a strategic role in capacity-building among CSOs to engage in fora like the GFMD and utilizing international mechanisms (such as the Human Rights Tribunal, Shadow Reporting or providing input to Treaty Bodies during Convention review protocols). Creating capacity building and training tools can also enhance advocacy efforts by CSOs, such as UN Women’s *Gender on the Move* manual (See: Petrozziello, 2013) and related training courses. For example, this manual and the related “training of trainer” courses offered by UN Women Training Centre have been particularly successful in capacity building among nearly 1000 representatives from civil society across Mexico (IMUMI, 2017)

*Fourth*, given the increasing role of various private sectors in migration governance, their meaningful inclusion would be a necessity. Rother (2012) observes that the private sector remains largely absent from global fora pertaining to migration and development, but having them included in migration and development fora could make a meaningful contribution *– though not necessarily on equal footing with CSOs*. In the context of growing privatization of governance, and an expanding “migration industry”, recognizing the expanding role of the private sector in migration and development (ranging from private labour recruiters, employers, housing inspectors, remittance service providers, private security contractors, private humanitarian aid actors, etc.,), the absence of the private sector is a huge missing link. Looking forward toward the realization of the SDGs, having private sector at the table can enable norms entrepreneurship and advocacy to reach this group. So, while the role of the private sector must be considered cautiously, refusing to engage will do nothing to shift norms and encourage accountability for those private entities that are playing an increasing role in both migration and development governance.

*Fifth*, there is a need to bring issues from diverse regions and countries to the table, to effectively rebalance the global arena to reflect perspectives beyond the Global North. Yet there is a tendency for each GFMD to pull participants from the region in which the meetings are held, and thus these voices tend to dominate in a given year. For example, the 2015 GFMD revolved around specific regions and this was reinforced by panelists predominantly from the Global North (Vanyoro & Wee, 2016). There were 36 participants from the Americas, 49 from Asia Pacific, 50 from Africa, 71 from Europe, and 19 Turkish civil society organizations represented. Further, limited funding available to the grassroots CSOs also limits attendance by small organizations from afar, and in some instances CSOs do not engage due to a perception that global policy forums have limited influence on sovereign, national migration policy processes (Vanyoro & Wee, 2016). That said, the GFMD is widely attended by larger CSOs who serve as umbrella organizations that have aimed to represent interests and voices from around the globe (e.g. Women in Migration Network or MFA).

*Sixth*, the dominant approach to contemporary labour migration governance remains largely gender-blind. Circular and temporary migration programs tend to re-entrench gender norms, prevent or restrict the movement of women migrant workers into gendered and devalued sectors, and in some cases can increase their risk of being put in abusive and irregular situations where they can be exploited by recruiters and employers. Bilateral agreements (BLAs) or memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that structure guest worker or temporary worker programs tend to specifically limit mobility rights and can embed gender discrimination in their operation. For example, Spain’s agricultural guest worker program with Morocco specifically recruits WMWs who are mothers, largely due to perceptions that such workers are compliant, docile workers with delicate hands suited for small fruit, and are likely to return to their countries of origin to care for their children at the end of their contracts; women must also secure their male spouses consent to participate in this program (Mannon, et al., 2012; Zeneidi, 2017).[[13]](#footnote-13) Despite states’ commitment in the SDGs to “Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment” (MADE, 2015), without a rethinking of these approaches to managing labour migration, the gender inequality experienced by women migrant workers will remain. CSOs have surfaced these tensions frequently in the civil society days at the GFMD.

Addressing underlying structural, financial and social factors that lead to gender inequalities, represents a *seventh,* and certainly more formidable challenge. Though daunting, there are some concrete changes that can be made that would significantly realign the system and make such structural changes possible over the long term. For example, to meaningfully address gender inequality would require the redistribution of care work in sending and destination countries, and such measures as bolstering state-funded childcare, strengthening parental leave, and challenging the devaluation of carework in both economic and social terms. While care work is addressed, and care drains and deficits acknowledged in the civil society days at the GFMD, care concerns are rarely referenced in the state dialogues or seen as being a key driver of migration or subsidy to global growth and economic wellbeing in destination countries. Further, while broader in scale, encouraging gender mainstreaming approaches across *all* national policy domains (not just those that are deemed to pertain to women specifically) can reshape norms and institutions that have the potential for reshaping international relations and policy at the global level, producing some integration of gender concerns in state foreign policies and opening global governance institutions to further pressure from women’s NGOs (True, 2003).

WMWs face not only particular challenges in terms of claiming rights due to both migration and occupational status, but also the deep-rooted gender norms, discrimination and inequality that obstruct their full and equal participation in all aspects of social, political and economic life. As echoed across numerous key informant interviews, women migrants are burdened with multiple layers of responsibilities, within families and in society. Most domestic workers, Colin Rajah in an interview notes, “take care of children at work, and when they go back home, they take care of their own children, and this makes them constant caregivers.”[[14]](#footnote-14) In order to achieve the gender equality goals, the global care chain must be broken, and carework must be valued across all of the migration journey. This is intrinsically linked to the gendered realities of the global labour markets, and specifically to the global care economy in which women migrants are disproportionately embedded. Reflecting on the way in which such large-scale structural factors (such as the care economy) remain relatively untouched within the GFMD, the way forward for the SDGs must not replicate this pattern if gender equality is to be realized.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the extent to which gender mainstreaming has occurred in the Global Forum on Migration and Development, and the efforts of migrant associations and other civil society organizations to bring women migrants’ key concerns and rights to the fore. Drawing on policy and document analysis and qualitative interviews with key informants, we argue that the roles played by CSOs, and their advocacy in bringing women migrants’ voices to the forefront of global migration discourses, have been of paramount importance in key UN fora accessible to women migrants.

Although some important achievements have been made toward gender mainstreaming the global governance apparatuses, much more has yet to be done in bringing gender fully into the migration and development discourse. It is within this new terrain that CSOs and women migrants themselves are negotiating materializing the provisions already enshrined through international and national legal and policy instruments. While this shifting landscape indicates more opportunities to be heard than ever before, there remains much work to be done to bring gender fully into the migration and development discourse. Further, global migration governance has lagged behind the pace at which international migration and labour flows are happening, mainly owing to international demands for flexible and affordable labour (Piper, 2015). Clearly, the lag has also been a normative one as well, with governments sorely lagging behind CSOs with respect to understanding and addressing the gender dimensions of migration and development.

CSOs have developed networks to demand accountability from governments and jurisdictions across borders, and these networks can be leveraged to challenge the limited framing of migration in the SDGs and its reliance on a development model that is sustainable only through the unpaid and underpaid work of women and girls. Civil society organizations working for, and run by women migrants have played a crucial role as “norms entrepreneurs” and have pushed for the protections of women migrants’ human and labour rights, and this transformation is reflected through different migration governance mechanisms and instruments not only at the global but also at regional and national levels. However, migration and development governance is implemented by states, and for states; and while the language of the migration and development discourse has made strides in bringing gender to the fore, policy gaps, and discrepancies between policy and practice remain.

At a time when the governance of global migration is multi-leveled and multi-layered, civil society is a necessary partner for states as they aim to achieve the SDGs. CSOs act as the voice of the poorest and most marginalised citizens, as agents of accountability, as service delivery agents, data collectors and researchers; they play a crucial role in reporting and monitoring. CSOs play a critical activist role at the national and grassroots level, and they can continue to play a critical role in advancing the SDGs by effectively articulating the needs and aspirations of the poor, fulfilling critical service-delivery gaps and promoting “good” governance practices. Also, in terms of migration governance mechanisms for labour migration in domestic work, CSOs can put networked pressures on national governments to sign bilateral agreements and make recruitment agencies abide by international and national frameworks designed to protect human and labour rights. Migration remains a sensitive issue for states, many of whom are reluctant to deal with this issue at global fora. Against this political reality, CSOs can play an important role at all levels in pushing the agenda of migrants in general and women migrants in particular.

Learning from the last decade of GFMD meetings, there must be a co-ordinated mechanism to involve CSOs and to monitor the implementation of the SDGs. One strategy is to integrate SDG indicators into the List of Issues Prior to Reporting utilized among Treaty Bodies when states come up for review under a given convention (e.g. CEDAW or CERD). These linkages are imperative, particularly if Goal 5[[15]](#footnote-15) and Goal 8[[16]](#footnote-16) are to be achieved since they require action among receiving states (the majority of whom have actually ratified these conventions) – where they must be incentivized to make changes to national legislation. Pushing states to ratify CEDAW and adhere to Recommendation No. 26, which directly outlines protections for the rights of WMWs which would make considerable strides toward Goal 8. Further, the SDGs must make links to existing international mechanism and entities, particularly for implementation and monitoring.

Overall, civil society provides a necessary social and political space that creates the potential to challenge the largely male-dominated character of state institutions and foster solidarity around norms of equality and rights (Chaney, 2016). Clearly, it is the globally connected and locally active networks of CSOs which have been pushing governments at all levels to revisit gender blind and gender-neutral approaches to governance – and without them, the SDGs will remain out of reach.

**Table 1: GFMD Government Days adoption of gender themes** [[17]](#footnote-17)



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1. Civil society is a contested concept. For the purpose of this paper, we build on the World Bank’s definition which refers to a “wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.” We broaden this definition to include non-state or non-market actors and those that are not products of the state, including social movements of various types, movements by women’s rights organizations, organizations by women migrants themselves, faith-based institutions, and trade unions. We understand CSOs as non-state actors that build new structures and rules to solve problems, change outcomes and transform international life (Avant et al, 2010; Boli & Thomas, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Interviews were meant to inform our analysis, rather than form the basis of it, so not all interviews are directly cited in the text. In addition, not all participants wished to be identified by name, or organization, and therefore only organization names are identified where applicable/permitted by the interviewees. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The GFMD Civil Society Days are the yearly occasion for the [MADE regional networks](http://madenetwork.org/regions) and [Working Groups](http://madenetwork.org/working-groups), in addition to a wide array of networks and civil society actors, to come together and discuss what they have been doing to advance the agenda for the protection of migrants’ rights and human development, and to formulate action plans and recommendations for governments to follow up on. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The government-led GFMD process follows directly after the Civil Society days. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In an interview with Ellen Sana, the Director of the Philippines-based the Centre for Migrant Advocacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. SDG 5.5. Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. SDG 5.6. Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the ICPD and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Adopt policies especially fiscal, wage, and social protection policies and progressively achieve greater equality. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Fukuda-Parr,2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Centre for Migrant Advocacy is part of an Asian regional network which actively operates in about 16 Asian countries, and it is also part of the global network, Global Coalition for Migrants and Migrants Rights International [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In an interview with Ellene Sana, the Director of the Philippines-based Centre for Migrant Advocacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Interview, European Network of Migrant Women, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See: Mannon, S. E., Petrzelka, P., Glass, C. M., & Radel, C. (2012). Keeping them in their place: migrant women workers in Spain’s strawberry industry. International Journal of the Sociology of Agriculture and Food, 19, 83.; Zeneidi, D. (2017). Gender, Temporary Work, and Migration Management: Global Food and Utilitarian Migration in Huelva, Spain. Springer [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Interview, Rajah Colin, Global Coalition on Migration, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Source: GFMDa, GFMDb [↑](#footnote-ref-17)