



International
Labour
Organization

Impacts of international cruise ship employment for i-Kiribati women

Sophia Kagan
Labour Migration Technical Officer, ILO
11 February 2015



Decent Work for All



Overview

- Research into the experience of i-Kiribati female migrants in the international cruiseliner sector.
- Were the migrant women 'empowered' by their migration experience?
- What does empowerment even mean?
- And what should be the policy considerations in relation to facilitating (or not) women's migration in future?



About Kiribati

- One of the most remote countries in the Pacific Island region
- Prevailing issues of poverty, and lack of access to employment opportunities → In 2010, the unemployment rate was 31% of the labour force but higher amongst females: **34.1%** (Kiribati National Statistics Organization 2012).
- Youth unemployment was particularly high, with **54%** of the 15-24 year old persons being unemployed, with at least half of the school leavers left without training opportunities or jobs.

About Kiribati

- Permanent migration is not an available option, except for the highly skilled or those selected through the Pacific Access Category
- Temporary migration has been a long-standing employment opportunity but mainly for men (eg. mining and export of phosphate in Nauru, seafaring and fisheries)
- More recent opportunities in seasonal work
- Women's (low skilled) migration often seen with trepidation by policy makers









Research

- In a unique set of circumstances, around 100 i-Kiribati women with almost no migration experience were employed on cruiseships during 2004 to 2012 under an agreement between the Government of Kiribati & Norwegian Cruise Liner company.
- After 2012 the agreement was abruptly brought to a halt with no further contracts issued to i-Kiribati women
- Was the experience a positive one? Did it lead to the women becoming more 'empowered'?





Research questions

- Gender empowerment is a broad concept; may be conceptualized as a process involving *'conscientization, agency, ownership of and control over resources, ability to make choice and to participate in decisions that affect one's life'* (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003).
- Important to distinguish between short-term outcomes for the migrant women, and the longer-term broader impact on gender relations within households, a community or a country from which the women come.
- General consensus that *'immigrant women achieve some limited, albeit uneven, benefits from migration and settlement.. But there is little evidence that migration profoundly changes gender ideologies or that power within households is radically redistributed'* (Levitt, 2001).



Research questions

- Qualitative research with 20 female migrants from NCL, and 12 other interviews with key stakeholders
- Core question was the degree to which women were ‘empowered’, as a result of their cruiseship employment.
- Three variables:
 - (1) Control over their earnings (proxied by remittance decisions) relative to their control over their earnings before cruiseship employment;
 - (2) Subjective sense of change in family dynamics as a result of their migration
 - (3) Subjective sense of confidence and independence, and to what extent this influenced future plans and ambitions.



About the cruise ship sector

- The cruise ship industry employs hundreds of thousands of workers globally – more than 70,000 come from the Philippines alone
- Women are largely concentrated in the low-skill end of the hotel division of ships, though this is often correlated with
- Majority of i-Kiribati NCL workers had contracts of around 10 months with two months of vacation time in Tarawa.
- Most of the women interviewed worked in housekeeping with a small number in hotel reception – sectors which both employed mostly women.



Norwegian Cruiseline Company

Summary of sample

Age when commenced NCL	Single	Married/ widowed	Total
20-24	9	1	10
25-29	4	2	6
30-34	0	4	4
Total	13	7	20

?



Summary of key observations – social norms

Majority of the single women interviewed commented on the strict i-Kiribati cultural norms that they were obliged to follow by their families.

‘I was not allowed to go out at night or socialize with others too much, except for church activities. My curfew was 10pm and I was not allowed to drink alcohol.’

On the ships they suddenly had freedom, but also privacy to engage in conduct they wanted to engage in.

‘It was like another world where you had the freedom to do anything that you wanted’.



Summary of key observations – remittances

- Depending on the contract and position they had, women earned between AU\$600 – 800 a month (US\$430-580), which was up to eight times the average salary for the women prior to leaving.
- The money that was saved by the women interviewed was generally brought back in cash. Many of the women had saved around AU\$2000 (US\$1450) after a 10 month contract
- Control over remittances was quite limited except in relation to care for, and schooling of, the women's children.



Summary of key observations – remittances

Remittances and savings commonly used to respond to *bubuti* requests and long term investment (eg. Start up business) was rare.

‘When I returned home, most of the money would be used for my brothers. If they wanted something I would buy it. They said that they were bored of eating fish, so some of the money went to chicken, meat. I felt happy making them happy. Other things that money was spent on were tools (brothers were carpenters), house extensions, fishing gears, some purchases like a TV and fridge... In the end there was not much left for me, but I felt that I had treated myself on the ship already [through little purchases made on clothes and drinks]’



Summary of key observations – family dynamics

- More than 60% of the sample had a planned or unplanned pregnancy with a fellow crew member.
- Some of these were planned pregnancies as a result of relationships formed on the ship, though several were unplanned and resulted from unprotected sexual intercourse (though distinction sometimes unclear)
- Most of the women noted that there was some, but not dramatic, impact on how much autonomy they had within existing relationship, such as with parents and husbands. While some additional autonomy was permitted for single women (being allowed to go to nightclubs or socialize with friends), most of the married women did not see much impact of the experience on their relationships with their husbands



Summary of key observations – family dynamics

More dramatic was the impact on the women's relationships formed after NCL.

'Sometimes [my husband] is upset with me because I want everything to be fair. If he goes out with his friends, I go out with my friends. And he now considers me an equal, not like before. If he sees that I'm tired, he will cook. I tell other men that they should do the same... but his family is not very happy with me'

'I will not stop working when I get married. It may be hard to find a guy who will accept that. I may be very old when I get married.'



Summary of key observations – independence

Particularly dramatic were the changes in the women's own views of their independence, their skills and their views gender relations in the community.

'After working on ships it helped me to realize two important it was to be independent and not rely on someone else.

Whatever I plan it is for the benefit of me and my kids – not my husband. I don't plan on giving up my job.'

'Most of our clients were from New York and they were very demanding,' said one woman, 'It helped us to grow professionally and there was lots of guidance and training provided on the ship.'



Discussion and policy implications

1. Management of remittances: little evidence of women interviewed being able to control how remittances were spent, except where there was previous negotiation with the family and a reason for why money could be saved rather than diverted to *bubuti* requests.
2. Family dynamics: in existing relationships, migration showed little change but experiences on the ship did influence some of the women's decision regarding future partners.
3. Subjective change in independence, and influence of migration on future plans and ambitions: all reported that they felt a degree of change in themselves – either increased confidence in their work, or increased independence in their lives.



Discussion and policy implications

- Women migrants' perspectives is something that could be more fully considered in policy responses → Even though the proportion of women who fell pregnant on the ship shocked some policymakers, it should not eclipse the empirical evidence that the women migrants' highly valued their migration experiences and felt that migration channels should be more accessible to i-Kiribati women
- Scope for more robust pre-departure training and reintegration support, particularly in the context of sexual and reproductive health, and financial literacy and business development training.



International
Labour
Organization

Thank you

Sophia Kagan

sophiakagan@gmail.com

