

Immigration: The other face of globalization

The other face of globalization: Who regulates a world marketplace that exploits workers?



Globalization -- this complex process of unequal relationships has many faces. One of the most visible is labor migrating across international borders in search of satisfactory employment.

Unlike tourists, who also travel globally, migrant workers are not rich and carefree. They huddle self-consciously in our airports, or stow away on ships and freight containers, poor, ill-clad and desperate. Frequently they are impounded and sent back.

Colonialism started it.

It is colonialism that began mass economic migration and nurtured it. For it was colonialism that fostered the "plantation economy" that required large masses of workers and so encouraged the slave trade and indentured labor. While global migration from Europe to the Americas had a trans-Atlantic locus, simultaneously large groups of Indians and Chinese were also crossing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific to work in East and Southern Africa, in the Polynesian archipelago and the western American mainland.

Today, however, the movement to and fro is just about everywhere. In this age, cheap air travel and technology have made possible what was earlier just a dream. Cell phones and webcams keep the migrant worker in constant touch with their families back home.

The United Nations estimates that there are 214 million migrants across the globe, an increase of 31 percent since the 1990s. The most famous European "source countries" of the late 19th and early 20th century were Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain. Today they have become migrant destinations.

Why are migrants disliked?

In spite of abundant proof that migrants contribute to the local economy and build it up, the attitude of native peoples to migrant labor is mostly hostile. Why is this? Is it only because of recession, and the fear that migrant workers will take jobs? Probably. Countries experiencing boom time are usually eager -- not reluctant -- to import outsiders to do their menial work. But when lean times come, this

attitude changes drastically.

There is more to these objections than just economics.

There is also the atavistic resentment, subliminal and not often articulated, to people who look different, who "speak a funny language, eat strange foods", and who will one day "want to marry our daughters". Racial stereotyping goes deep, and frequently manifests itself in irrational ways.

Most countries still haven't learned how to deal with multiculturalism. Migration seeks to address two objectives: economic well-being and social integration. If it succeeds in the first, it usually takes much longer in the second.

Traditionally most countries have a hegemonistic majority whose norms and values the minorities have to follow. But when the diversity in society increases, arguments about the common good bring disagreement, and support for it also weakens. Many countries in Europe are discomfited with the growing demands by migrant Muslims for their own Islamic code, dress and eating habits. The tensions over the women's veil is just one symptom of this.

There is another factor in economic migration today: feminization. Almost half the world's migrants today are women, and usually they are at the very bottom of the labor market -- as domestic servants, or sex workers -- work that exposes them to every kind of hazard at the hands of brutal employers and careless government officials. But wives and mothers who work abroad also contribute to family dysfunction in their home countries, where men are resentful of their economic independence. Not enough attention has been given to this issue.

People commonly expect governments to control migration. In fact, most governments just do not have the capacity. The greater the physical barriers they build, the greater the visa controls, the more devious the illegal migrant networks become. Because the demand for work is two-sided: a growing labor force that demands work, often any work; and an industry that finds cheap labor a profitable resource, and one to which it is hardly accountable.

Maybe we should revise our definition of countries, considering them not as nations but as markets. The nation state is hegemonistic and controlling. But the marketplace generally adjusts to all sorts of workers, for even slogging in a foreign "sweat shop" pays more than what one gets at home. The question is: But who will regulate the market?

The world is flat only on a map. In real life, there are ups and downs, knolls and fissures, barriers and detours. The only constant seems to be the seepage of migrant workers across increasingly porous borders.

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