

Migrant work and homecoming: Experiences of Timorese seasonal workers

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Abstract

Most of Timor-Leste's population is dependent on subsistence agriculture and young people flock to the capital in search of further education or work in the capital. With the lack of work opportunities in Timor-Leste, the government sought to send young Timorese overseas as temporary migrant workers. Two official programs for temporary workers were established in South Korea and Australia, but a greater number travel to the UK (United Kingdom) through informal migration channels. This paper focusses on the development outcomes of migration programs, seeking to understand how migrant work impacts the family economy and wellbeing. It draws on the case study of Timorese workers in Australia's Seasonal Workers Program, their experiences as migrant workers, their use of remittances and how migration contributes to their potential to support their family on return to Timor-Leste.

Keywords: Timor-Leste; labour mobility; work; remittances; family economy

Labour mobility is driven by social inequalities in the global marketplace, evident by the gap between the poor rural agricultural producers and the middle classes in the 'modernising' urban areas. The exploitation of migrant labour in low grade jobs making cheap goods for the consuming middle classes has become the face of stark global inequalities. Meanwhile in the locations of poverty, rural-urban migration has become a strategy to reduce poverty by families around the world, often as a first step leading to international migration. It provides vulnerable households a way to engage in asset accumulation that can provide families with exit routes from poverty (Ellis 2003).

Labour mobility is a relatively new phenomenon in Timor-Leste. There are thousands of Timorese working overseas as a means to support their families, in three major destinations: Australia, Korea and the UK. The conditions they face overseas are diverse, but the reasons they go are similar. This paper is focussed on understanding how migration opportunities are taken up by young Timorese, drawing on an in-depth study of the Australian Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) to

identify the short to medium-term impacts for workers participating in the SWP. It also situates this research in the broader context of Timorese migrant experiences in Korea and the UK. This research finds that these migrants see themselves as contributors to their families and communities through their financial contribution (see Chapter 14, this volume). At the same time, a broadening of their horizons has supported criticism of some traditional practices, resulting in their desire to challenge local customs that are inequitable.

Labour mobility in Timor-Leste

The movement of people from their place of origin is often influenced by diverse factors such as poverty, war or conflict. Labour migration is driven by expected improvements in the life of a migrant's family which might include higher wages, employment, health and education. International migration generally is beneficial for most of those involved, resulting in higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth for countries of destination and increased wages for migrants (ESCAP 2016, 10-11). Remittances sent by migrants have positive effects not only for their families, but also for communities and their country in general. Potentially, countries of origin can benefit when migrants return with new skills that are useful to the national economy.

The theory of New Economics of Labour Migration recognises that migration decisions (who goes, where to go, for how long, to do what etc.) are not individual decisions but joint decisions taken within the ambit of the household, and for different members of the household (King 2012). This is particularly the case in communitarian societies such as in Timor-Leste where the extended family plays a central role in decision making.

Economic inequalities between urban and rural Timor-Leste are increasingly evident, with the wealthier residing in urban areas, while the vulnerable poor are predominantly in the rural areas (McWilliam 2015). This wealth contrast is a driver of rural-urban migration. Internal migration to the urban centres also resulted from people fleeing the conflict in 1999. Since 2000, the economic opportunities from aid and development resources have been concentrated in the capital, leading to rapid population increases in Dili.

The mobility of young people to access education and work opportunities starts with school students moving to their district town (municipal centre) and then often onto the capital Dili to attend secondary school. Most of them do not return to the rural areas to live but remain in the urban areas seeking further education or work opportunities. During the Indonesian occupation, students were told that they should go to school so that they could get a job in the government. Now this is every student's aspiration. As Ego Lemos, Timor-Leste's premier permaculturalist stated, "Young

people were not interested in agriculture. Once they had some education they assume agriculture is not a good source of employment” (quoted in Wigglesworth 2016, 108).

In 2009, around 22% of the total working age population living in Dili were migrants and close to 39% of the working-age population moved to Dili for economic or educational reasons (ILO 2016, 11). Permanent jobs remain elusive for most young people. The number of available jobs has been small relative to the large size of the cohort of youth leaving formal education in search of work each year (UNDP 2018, 58).

McWilliam and Monteiro (2019, 48) observe that continued poor employment conditions and a persistent lack of work opportunities in the Timor-Leste economy, especially in rural areas, resulted in migration. Their research in Lautém district found that high school graduates who failed to secure places at a university or employment in town, and whose parents were not in a position to support further education, often elected to work in the UK as a way to build savings and gain experience prior to pursuing studies in later years.

A political crisis in 2006 saw youth gangs take to the streets in violent communal conflict, which triggered some concern about the disaffection and social marginalisation of youth as a result of lack of employment opportunities. Following this, the government of Timor-Leste sought to enhance work opportunities through labour migration, initially through the South Korea Temporary Workers Program pilot from 2006.

The second official labour migration program to be established was the Australian Seasonal Workers Program (SWP), which started in Timor-Leste in 2012. The SWP is an Australian government initiative which allows workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste to work for up to nine months (previously six months) to fill low-skill seasonal vacancies in Australia.¹ It is supported by the Labour Mobility Assistance Program (LMAP) which provides in-country support to the in-country labour supplier. In Timor-Leste this is the Department of Overseas Workers at the Secretariat of State for Vocational Training and Employment Policy (SEFOPE).

Timor-Leste was the fifteenth Asian country to join the South Korean Employment Permit System (EPS), which regulates labour migration. The EPS allows young Timorese to work in South Korea for three to five years. Potential migrants must learn Korean to be eligible. Of 8,638 participants in the Korean language course between 2009–2015, 40% passed and 60% failed the test (Wigglesworth and Fonseca 2016). Like the SWP, this program is run by SEFOPE. This small study of Timorese workers who had returned from South Korea was carried out by Ann Wigglesworth and Zulmira Fonseca in 2015.²

A much larger number of Timorese migrant workers travel as undocumented migrant workers to the UK. Since the first Timorese found work in Northern Ireland in 2000, thousands have travelled a well-trodden path to join family or friends working in the UK. This is possible because Timorese born before 2002 have

the right to a Portuguese passport which gives them access to European Union (EU) countries. There are now an estimated 16,000-19,000 Timorese resident in UK, on Portuguese passports and without official support, predominantly working in meat factories, warehouses and cleaning jobs. A small qualitative independent study of Timorese working in the UK was undertaken by Ann Wigglesworth and Lionel Boxer in 2016.³ In the research the workers had spent from one to fourteen years in the UK. New arrivals are assisted by family members or friends who are already there and these networks are disproportionately linked to the eastern districts of Timor (Wigglesworth and Boxer 2019). Migrants who had worked in the UK, South Korea and Australia all said that the lack of job opportunities at home was their reason for engaging in overseas work. The scale of this migration reflects a strong unmet demand for paid work in Timor-Leste. Andrew McWilliam, in the following chapter, provides more insight into the cultural and social impacts of UK migration in one of the eastern districts.

The numbers of Timorese migrants that have worked in the two official overseas work programs in Korea and Australia are relatively small, with less than 2,000 migrants having been placed in the EPS from 2009-2015 (when the research was undertaken) and 1,400 by the SWP from 2012-2017. The program was growing quickly with thousands waiting in the Work Ready Pool (with equal numbers of men and women) for a placement. COVID has had a profound impact with border restrictions curtailing movement over two years.

Remittances are now Timor-Leste's largest source of foreign revenue after oil and aid, overtaking coffee, the major export. An estimated US\$44 million was remitted in 2017, US\$27.1m from the UK, US\$9.6m from Korea and US\$5m from Australia (Curtain 2018).

This paper draws on the three research projects on Timorese migration as mentioned above. The Korea and UK surveys used a similar simple questionnaire to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Thirty returnees from Korea were interviewed. For the UK study some interviews were conducted with migrants in Northern Ireland or England and others with returnees from the UK in Dili. A total of 21 interviews were held, a cohort too small for quantitative analysis.

The SWP questionnaire was much more comprehensive, particularly about working conditions, the use of remittances and post-SWP activities on return home. As with the Korea study, all interviews were conducted with returnees in Timor-Leste. This comprehensive survey also reached fifty respondents in the first phase and 39 of these same workers in the second phase. The data interrogates the terms and conditions of the migration experience, the rationale for becoming a migrant, the purposes for which remittances were used and migrants' aspirations for their future.

While the experiences of working in different countries were different, it was found that the motivations, expenditure of remittances and future aspirations of the

migrant workers were similar across all three programs. Due to the more comprehensive data from the SWP research, this paper will use SWP data on the experiences of Timorese migrant workers, their motivations and aspirations for the future.

Timorese seasonal workers in Australia research

The Labour Mobility Assistance Program (LMAP) is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia's foreign aid program) with the specific purpose of supporting SWP partner countries to increase the number and quality of workers participating in the programme, and to support targeted activities that will increase the benefits (financial and other) for workers and their communities resulting from their participation.

A study of Timorese seasonal workers was commissioned by Cardno as part of the LMAP in 2016-2017.⁴ The research team for the SWP study was led by Dr Ann Wigglesworth with Mr Abel Boavida dos Santos and a team of three women and two men who were recruited and trained as data collectors. The first phase of research involved interviewing 50 returned workers shortly after their return. In the second phase these same workers were interviewed after five or six months at home and before they returned for another season of work.⁵

The SWP is a complex program with multiple stakeholders in Australia and has operated in Timor-Leste since 2012. After a slow start, the program recruitment has built up. At the time of the research in 2016 almost 600 workers had been sent since 2012. By late 2017 this had more than doubled to 1,400 workers and the annual participation is said to have continued to increase.

Table 12.1. Numbers of Timorese SWP workers per year up to 2017

Year	Male	Female	Hospitality	Horticulture	Total
2012	7	5	12	0	12
2013	25	10	21	14	35
2014	100	31	46	85	131
2015	115	46	41	120	161
2016	227	71	34	264	298
2017	556	225	42	739	781
Total	1,030	388	196	1,222	1,418
%	73%	27%	14%	86%	100%

Table developed from data from LMAP reintegration and tracer survey and updated on 2017 annual data via personal communication with LMAP.

In Australia the registration of SWP employers is managed by the Department of Jobs and Small Business. Its purpose is to meet seasonal labour shortages in Australia in the horticulture and accommodation sectors.

The LMAP support the in-country labour supplier, SEPFOPE, particularly in relation to pre-departure briefings and reintegration briefings. Seasonal workers brought into Australia by employers are subject to the same workplace relations and work health and safety safeguards as Australian workers.

Of the 50 workers interviewed, 10 were women and 40 were men, the majority between 26-35 years old with an average age of 30. Of workers interviewed, 70% had just secondary school education and 22% had a university degree. In this largely Catholic country, 98% were Catholic, 58% were married and 36% had never married including four of the ten women in the sample.

Gender disaggregated data indicates that 27% of Timorese SWP workers are women, a higher proportion than any Pacific country participating in the SWP. This compares with women making up only 5% of Timorese workers who go to South Korea and probably not more than 10% who go to the UK. This is in part due to the gender equality policy of DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) paying attention to the gender balance of participation. They also provide an orientation on gender equality and norms in Australia prior to departure.

When asked which district they are from, every district of the country was represented. However, 45 of the returned workers were recruited in Dili and continue to be resident in Dili. This is because large numbers of young people migrate to Dili for education, training or work opportunities which are greater in Dili, generally staying with extended family members. Typically, when asked what district they are from, Timorese will respond with the origin of their family, often also their place of birth, even if they are no longer living there.

Initially, the Korean EPS and the Australian SWP were both seen by the government as a way of resolving the issue of high youth unemployment in Dili in order to reduce youth on the streets, so recruitment from the urban areas was intended, even though most of the SWP work was in horticulture. The consequences of this will be discussed later.

Research findings

The work

The two types of work in the SWP are horticulture, the largest category, and hospitality in Northern Australia during the cooler winter tourism season. At the time of the research in 2016, most men work in horticulture (72%) while the women

interviewed were more evenly split between the two categories (60% horticulture and 40% hospitality). This imbalance is influenced by perceived gender roles in Timor-Leste where housekeeping is seen as women's work and hard labour as men's work.

The decision to send a family member to work overseas is often based on decision making within the extended family (see Chapter 6, this volume). Where the migrant is a woman, and often a wife and a mother and the major provider through food production, child care and other domestic tasks, women migrants make personal sacrifices in leaving their children for the benefit of her family. However, she can also make an increased economic contribution to her family and often gain an increased status within the family. Sometimes women also gain new perspectives on gender roles which enables her to challenge those local customs that lead to inequality.

A higher proportion of women in hospitality than horticulture is partly due to the fact that some Australian farmers are reported to consider size and strength as a factor in worker selection and thus prefer to recruit men, just as some labour recruiters choose to recruit Tonga men rather than the smaller Timorese. However, others have reported that Timorese workers are more reliable than some of the Pacific Islanders. On the other hand, employers tend to see women as more suitable to kitchen and housekeeping services in hotels in the hospitality sector and many women workers prefer this type of work.

When workers return to Australia for a second (or more) time, the workers are often invited to return to the same employer. In this research, all hospitality workers returned to the same workplace. However, there was a significant reduction in horticulture workers returning to the program. Horticultural work was found to be hard, and in Victoria and Tasmania workers suffered from very cold working conditions. A number of workers, particularly women, chose to change their workplace from horticulture to hospitality in the north of Australia as their preferred option.

Within the two broad sectors of work there is a considerable variety of tasks. Some workers named just a single task they were doing every day while others named a variety of tasks. Crop work made up 68% of horticultural work, the largest number in fruit picking and others in land clearing, preparation, planting, weeding, driving or a combination of these. In hospitality, housekeeping involved making up bedrooms and laundry work, while some simply said 'hotel work' implying more varied tasks within the hotel.

Most workers worked six days a week (68%) with some 12% of workers working only five days and 20% of workers working 7 days a week. The hours worked was more variable. Most hospitality workers averaged eight hours a day, while 85% of horticulture workers worked either eight or nine hour days. Some of the

horticulture workers were paid on a piece rate basis and could work longer hours to get more money. Of those interviewed, 36% received piece rates for some or all of their work, while the majority (64% of workers) were paid by regular wages.

There were a few workers who were unhappy about the hours they worked. This included workers who said the hours of work were insufficient, due to limited fruit available to pick, and others who did not like having to work into the night (i.e., asparagus pickers). Some workers had been sent too early in the year and incurred accommodation and living costs several weeks before the fruit was ready for picking and they could start earning. The majority, however, became accustomed to the working hours and the hard work, and appreciated the work they had, well paid by Timorese standards, that enabled them to adequately support their families at home.

Working conditions and life in Australia

A pre-departure briefing provided by LMAP is important for workers to have a thorough understanding of the work and living conditions that they will have, and the rights and responsibilities of themselves and their employers.

More than 80% understood what their working and living conditions, rights and responsibilities would be. Weaker understanding was evident for the questions on Australian Law about which less than half the respondents had a good understanding, and Australian culture and gender issues. The UK study illustrated the importance of migrant workers understanding the laws of the country, for instance in Northern Ireland several workers got into trouble for inadvertent illegal activities and unacceptable behaviour (Wigglesworth and Boxer 2019, 10.1).

In relation to accommodation, 42 workers (84%) rated the quality good or very good and 38 workers (76%) rated the value for money good or very good and also accepting the rules imposed at the accommodation. This was in spite of the fact that acceptable accommodation is a major area of complaint within the SWP in general.

Elsewhere, SWP workers have had excessive rent deducted from their salaries for a shared bedroom. For example, one employer charged A\$195 a week each from six workers who were living in a shipping container.⁶ Where such exploitation comes to the attention of organisations or trade unions, they can advocate on behalf of the workers, and by doing so assist SWP in weeding out unfair practices by employers.

In contrast, Northern Ireland workers are free to make their own arrangements, resulting in a considerable variation in their preferred accommodation arrangements. Some shared between many workers, for example a dozen people sharing a three or four bedroom house to reduce outgoing expenditure and maximise their remittances home. Others chose to rent a house alone or with a friend or partner at greater cost, wanting to better connect with the neighbours and local community.

Thus, workers may accept basic accommodation to save money, but this is very different from paying high rent for substandard accommodation as can occur in the SWP.

In many worksites, transport was made available for workers to go shopping (36%) and for recreation (24%) but it was charged to the worker as a deduction. Access to banks, medical services and religious centres was acceptable for the majority. Church attendance has been a major source of connection with the host community in rural towns. Those who attended a local Catholic Church had a greater opportunity to associate with local people outside of their workplace. In some cases, it has been an important source of support and advice for migrant workers as well as opening possibilities of engagement with the host community. For instance, some Timorese have joined the local church choir and others have been invited to participate in local community activities through church connections.

Access to the internet in Australia was available to only 30% of workers. Some workers were in such remote locations that they could not make calls home by either phone or internet except on weekend shopping trips to town. In Northern Ireland, where many workers do not return home for many years, workers often speak to their family on a daily basis through Skype, Facebook or other social media sites. This shows how important communication with the family back home is. Some SWP workers pointed out that where contact with their family is lacking there is a risk that doubts, jealousies and uncertainties can interfere with harmonious family life.

Worker's skill development and job satisfaction

The vast majority of workers felt that they had benefited significantly from the SWP experience, not only for the money they earned but also workers believed that they had gained useful skills which they could put to use when they return home. High on the list was English speaking, Occupational Health and Safety, working in groups, using household appliances and punctuality. Many also mentioned horticultural skills, however the second phase of research showed that skills gained in Australia that were used included hospitality skills, English skills and general work skills. None of them had used horticultural skills.

Across Timor-Leste, subsistence farming is associated with poverty, so returning to the land is considered a backward step, not only by youth but by their family. Skills to enhance agricultural practices to make them more productive and marketable are much needed which will require the young generation to be educated in a way that both changes their negative beliefs about agriculture and enables them to make improvements in local production, preservation and marketing of food.

Most of the returning workers do not own or have access to land because they are urban residents. An important recommendation by SWP workers was that youth from the rural areas, who were accustomed to agricultural work, should be

recruited in order that their skills development can contribute to development in Timor-Leste. Some workers criticised young urbanised team members citing that they did not pull their weight in horticultural work in Australia which impacted negatively on their team's work to meet productivity targets. As a result of the findings of this research, LMAP have trialled recruitment of SWP workers in rural areas.

When asked how satisfied they were with their recent SWP experience, 96% of workers said they were satisfied with 68% being 'very satisfied', which is an extraordinarily high satisfaction rate. It may have been influenced by their desire to return to Australia. However, wanting to return is also an indication of satisfaction with the overall experience.

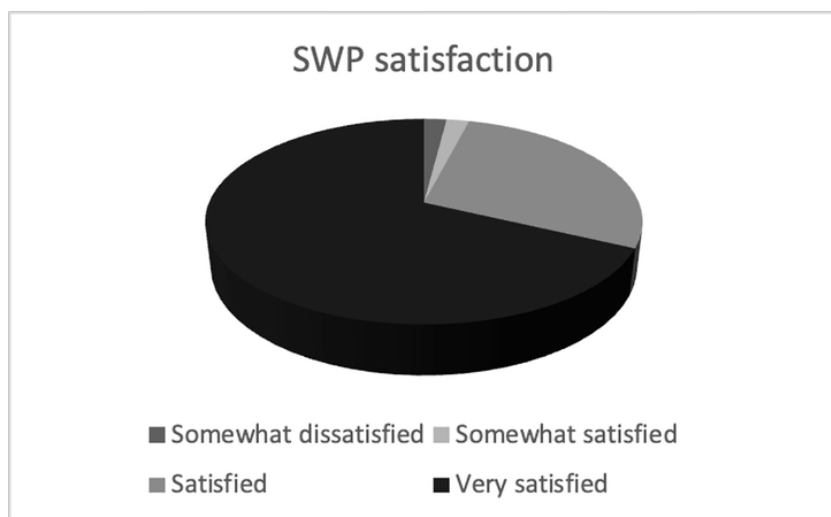


Figure 12.1: Satisfaction with SWP experience. Source: LMAP Data Base Q7 (this graph was prepared by LMAP).

For levels of satisfaction, the Australian SWP compares favourably with the Korean EPS. Of the returnees interviewed from Korea, 30% had not completed their contract and returned home early. Many struggled with the demands to work 'fast, strongly and diligently' for long hours. Some only received two Sundays off a month. Some lived on a boat at sea for extended periods, others were in isolated locations. Many tried to change their employment, in the process breaking their contract which resulted in them being deported. Two interviewees faced serious injury and were expected to return to work more quickly than they felt was reasonable.

The challenges faced by Timorese workers in Korea are considerably greater than those that SWP respondents presented in the course of this research. However,

the longer period of work contract (3 years, with possible extension to 5 years) gave workers greater levels of skill development than is available to SWP workers. Many also worked on small family farms and at fisheries in contrast to the large-scale farming in Australia, thus offering more suitable models of productivity to replicate at home. The placements were mostly family businesses, for instance 10 (33%) workers were in a company with four or less workers and another 10 (33%) in a company with 5-10 workers. While many male workers in the fishing industry did not complete their contracts, the most successful category of workers were female agriculture workers. They were most likely to complete their contracts in a single company and spoke positively of their experiences (Wigglesworth and Fonseca 2016).

Impacts and remittances

The benefits to the family of labour migration are substantial. SWP horticultural workers saved on average AUD 6,000-10,000, while hospitality workers had more varied (higher and lower) savings. Some workers have the opportunity to work overtime to increase their income if they wish.

In Korea, average earnings were USD1000-2000 per month, and more than half of the workers in Korea would send back more than USD 6,000 a year to their families (Wigglesworth and Fonseca 2016). In the UK, many workers were living on, or near to, the minimum wage (£950 per month), which is locally considered a hardship. However, Timorese workers worked overtime or sometimes two jobs to send money home. Unlike the Korea and SWP programs, workers can stay for the long term in UK and some settled down there. If a Timorese couple had children in the UK, then the bulk of their earnings would be spent on their family in the UK and remittances would be reduced. They would also receive UK government benefits for their children. A few of the interviewees sent £6,000 a year (USD8,000), others sent half that amount and some families with children at school in the UK sent little or nothing (Wigglesworth and Boxer 2019).

The average remittance sent by SWP workers during six months was AUD3,200. The most common use of remittances is for daily living expenses (78%), house renovations or building (54%), educational expenses (50%) and customary obligations (44%), followed by household purchases and health related expenses.

Customary obligations arise from the communitarian social structures in which the family takes priority over the individual. Further discussion on this is found in the following chapters by McWilliam and Rose.

Research with Fataluku migrants in Lautém district and Dili by McWilliam and Monteiro (2019) shows the remittances were spent principally on consumption, house building, education 22% and cultural gifts 28%. They note that construction of

houses amongst migrant households is a clear indicator of their improved circumstances. The comparatively high spending in obligatory gift exchange suggests that migrants remain closely engaged and connected to the daily rhythms and events of everyday family life in Timor-Leste (McWilliam and Monteiro 2019, 52). In this volume, McWilliam has shown how the flow of remittances to both Dili and Lospalos has been important to support both immediate household priorities but also cultural obligations and activities, thus investing in the ancestral traditions in Timor-Leste.

Many SWP workers referred to customary gifts as a part of their obligations. However, young people sometimes criticised the high level of expenditure in customary ceremonies, believing that it prejudices the health and education of family members by prioritising family expenditure in such ceremonies over sending the children to school and other basic needs. One worker lamented he had nothing to show for three years of work in Korea because all the money was spent on a funeral. Some SWP workers claimed to have set up a secret bank account to quietly save for a future business to protect the money from family demands.

An average of AUD 1,242 per worker was spent in Australia on goods to carry home, mostly mobile phones, computers, and clothes, shoes and educational materials. These items are visible signs of economic wellbeing.

Returning home

The second phase of the survey took place in November 2017. On returning to Timor-Leste, after six months at home, 75% of male workers lived off their savings, with 18% involved in house building or renovation activities. Of the 20% who had wanted to look for a new job only 13% actually did so and all but two failed to find one. Many young Timorese earn money through informal work such as selling goods on the street, driving taxis or running minibuses but it is not considered exactly 'employment', but as temporary, transitional work whilst awaiting a 'proper' job in an office (Wigglesworth 2016, 76). Some SWP workers decided not to look for a job because they wanted to return to Australia and would not want to give up a job they had recently acquired.

Of half the returned male workers who had wanted to start a business, less than half of these achieved this. Many reasons were given for the difference between the planned and actual activities. Some 20% said that they changed their plans because they had to spend their money on supporting relatives and paying school fees. One had to spend all the money on a funeral and another had to spend most for customary obligations for a wedding, so they did not have the start-up capital. Others who wanted to start a business failed to find a suitable premises, changed their ideas on the type of business to establish, built or renovated a house or spent the capital on other items instead.

Half of the women also wanted to start a business and one worker previously had a job in a restaurant and returned to that job. No women planned to live off their savings rather than work. All the women who wanted to start a business achieved this.

Of the 10 interviewed male and female workers who started a business, all involved other family members, mostly 2-4 other members. They established businesses using their own financial resources, including a guest house, a restaurant, three shops, sale of processed food and transport businesses. The majority either had no training or advice or they learnt skills from a family member (including a sister, a father and a husband). One mentioned they developed the required skills in Australia. Only one had formal training from the Institute of Business Support (IADE) in Dili to develop a business plan. This is one of a range of business support and market access programs in Timor-Leste that could offer support to returning workers on their return home, if appropriate linkages were made to better assist the workers on their return.

Workers were asked if they had difficulty adjusting to life when they returned to Timor. Their major concern was that it is difficult to come back to where there was no work, and the only possibility was to wait until they could go to Australia on SWP again. Some men expressed a sense of demoralisation or being 'in limbo' because there were few options to contribute to the family in Timor. This is another reason for maximising the opportunities of returning workers to use their new skills in the Timorese economy. However, many Australian employers are opposed to limiting the number of times that SWP workers can return, because they want to build a reliable workforce where trained and effective workers return year after year.

SWP's role in meeting livelihood needs of the family varies over time. Initially much money is spent on improving home infrastructure, buying material goods and paying education fees for family members. After these expenses have been met, workers start to consider longer term investments in their future, often looking to set up a business. Most married workers see SWP work as a means to an end, to earn enough money to meet their family's needs and to establish a better life for their family in Timor-Leste. For this to occur they need to look for ways to leverage their SWP skills and capital to establish a business or to find work in the Timorese economy. It is a sacrifice to be away from their families and while the children are young, they say this is not a problem, but many want to be at home while their children are growing up and at school. Married workers do not want to be a permanently absent parent. Some workers reported that their children were proud that their parent was working overseas, as it is a source of status.

Single workers said they sent remittances to support their parent, to purchase equipment for disabled members of their family and to support the education of their siblings.

The physical expression of improved circumstances is evident by the newly renovated or built houses which are springing up in communities that migrants come from. Workers spoke sometimes of building a house for themselves as well as for their parents in the village, or if they lived in Dili they might have to buy land first before they can build a house.

Cultural-gender impacts

When a family member is away overseas for a prolonged period there are domestic adjustments to be made. The family may call on older daughters, grandparents and nieces to help in the home. Women who had worked in Australia or the UK spoke of their husbands and other family members taking a bigger role in household activities and looking after the children while she was away. This was accepted within the context of the wellbeing of the extended family and indeed it is common for children to be sent to live with extended family members in Timor-Leste in a range of circumstances.

Disadvantages to migrant work that were highlighted included distrust between couples, particularly of female workers by their husband or boyfriend while they are overseas. Concern about how the money is spent was sometimes an issue, particularly by female workers who fear their husband might gamble the money away.

Before going to Australia, SWP workers received training in gender and cultural differences and how in Australia men and women should be treated equally. They also observed that in Australia they learnt that women can play many diverse roles in society, such as driving trucks and may also be a boss or supervisor. These new experiences opened their minds about the roles of women and had an influence on how they thought about gender issues.

Asked whether their views on gender had changed since returning from Australia, workers gave a surprising response. In the November survey, 62% of men and 60% of women said they had significantly changed their perspective about their own role in their family. By the second research phase, all the women and 82% of the men said their views had changed, indicating that the change in attitude had consolidated with time in Timor-Leste.

A number of male workers said that before going to Australia they had forbidden their wife, younger sister or daughter to continue her education. It is commonly believed that it is a waste to educate girls because they will be married into another family and only do domestic duties, which include the double burden of food production and marketing, as well as household duties. A number of workers explained that after they returned from Australia, they assisted female family members to enrol and pay to attend school. They realised that they had been wrong to limit the potential of women and girls in their household.

Women workers spoke of the experience of being treated as an equal in the workplace, not having to defer to men that they worked alongside. This gave them more confidence. They took this experience home and shared it with their families, sometimes finding voice in place of formerly subservient behaviour. One described how previously she had to obey her drunkard husband, but in Australia she learned that women and men are equal which gave her confidence to make decisions for herself. Other women workers expressed pride and confidence from making a greater contribution and economic responsibility for the household.

The rate of domestic violence in Timor-Leste is very high, as it is in Australia, and in both countries it is illegal. In Australia the principles of equality of women are more accepted (although still under-implemented) in many spheres of work. In contrast entrenched ideas of patriarchy in Timor-Leste result in male leadership and decision making still considered normal in Timor-Leste. Women are raised to keep their opinions to themselves and defer to their husband's decision making. Consequently, there is a very low representation of women in rural village councils.

In 2010 a Law against Domestic Violence was passed in Timor-Leste. The law refers to the term *Violência doméstica* (domestic violence), a phrase imported from Portuguese and entirely new to the Tetum vocabulary. Research into violence within the family revealed that this allowed it to be associated with new meanings. Rural leaders appeared to have re-interpreted the national law so that it is more consistent with customary law that considers intimate partner violence in the family as normal. They considered 'domestic violence' to be only when a woman suffered serious injury such as drawing blood or requiring hospital treatment, contrary to the broad definition in the Law against Domestic Violence (dos Santos and Wigglesworth 2016, 63).

This shows the importance of changing attitudes. New social values can be established through exposure to new ideas such as the workers were exposed to in SWP. Amongst the workers interviewed, the majority of men said that they had changed their attitudes toward the women in their families and are now more supportive of women getting an education and of helping with domestic duties than they were before. Women workers have strengthened their resolve to take greater control over their lives. These workers provide important insights into their experience of different cultural attitudes to male and female roles.

Analysis of the impacts of migrant work

Labour migration offers higher wages that are generally paid regularly and on time, typically earning more in a week than what they could earn in a month in Timor-Leste (if they could get a job). The three studies (Korea, UK and SWP) cannot

be directly compared because of different methodologies, however some common themes emerge.

Whether earning in Korea, the UK or Australia, most remittances were used to fund their family's daily living expenses, pay school and university fees for siblings or other family members and invest in home improvements. The pattern of expenditure changes over time. Firstly, workers meet immediate family needs for housing, equipment and transport. When workers come towards the end of their contract in Korea or have worked for a number of consecutive years with SWP they look at how they can use their work skills and cash to establish a livelihood in Timor-Leste. For many workers, the technical work they had been doing was a source of inspiration to establish a business back home, and they started to save money, looking to the future. For some workers, customary obligations may unexpectedly require large proportions of their earnings to be spent on family ceremonies such as funerals or weddings, which put on hold other plans. Many educated and aware young people disagree with excessive spending on traditional ceremonies which have no productive value. Also, the strong paternalistic nature of Timorese society makes the voices of educated young men and women undervalued, leading to a kind of covert protest by some of them. While all workers saw it as a duty to contribute to the extended family wellbeing, they did not agree when expenditures were perceived as jeopardising the family's ability to meet their basic needs of consumption, education and wellbeing.

Temporary workers in Korea had been away for 3-5 years but when they returned home, they received minimal support for their reintegration. A number of returnees from Korea had worked in small family agriculture or fisheries businesses and mentioned wanting to establish a horticultural or aquaculture business similar to the one in which they worked. Although they had a very useful experience for the Timorese context, they felt isolated on return from a long time overseas and did not know how to go about getting the support they needed, and were not assisted in any way by the sending agency, nor was there any debriefing process for returnees.

The UK workers have no support to assist departure or reintegration, yet most of the ten returnees interviewed in Dili had successfully established a business or got a job on the basis of their English skills. These migrants had not waited for support but had worked off their own initiative since going to the UK, and this continued when they returned home. Also they were in general more mature than the average SWP and Korea workers, because there was no age limit to go to the UK and many had stayed many years and had worked toward planned activities they would do on return.

The SWP holds re-integration briefings which includes sharing information about the various business support programs in Timor-Leste, but follow-up support

is needed to help workers access these services. SEPOPE needs to make suitable arrangements for support of returning workers in order to facilitate both the SWP and the Korean EPS returnees to find a livelihood at home, as workers from both programs express the same difficulties in economic integration at home.

Younger Timorese are often lacking confidence to approach government officials and others perceived as 'senior' to them. Thus, opening the door for them to feel welcome in such settings is important. Commentary from workers returning from both SWP and South Korea showed that they felt they needed such technical support to be able to establish themselves in the local economy, particularly given the government's notoriously difficult process to register a business.

Of particular note was that returned workers from all three destinations were proud of being able to improve the lifestyle and wellbeing of their families which was their main objective in going overseas for work. Visible improvements in the economic wellbeing of their families have a positive impact on people's perceptions of their family, increasing their social status in the community.

A highly significant and remarkable finding of the SWP research was the degree to which workers claimed to have changed their behaviour with respect to gender attitudes since working in Australia. The requirement to attend gender equality training in the LMAP program, followed by experiencing women working as equals in a range of traditional male work roles, opened their minds to new ways of thinking. Timorese society is a transitional society where the cultural context and old values still have a strong influence. But younger generation Timorese are also keen for change. With their new experiences and knowledge there has been greater recognition of the need for greater fairness and equality in relation to the right of all family members to adequate food, housing, education and health care.

As Jose Ramos Horta stated days after his inauguration as President in May 2022 regarding Timorese people going abroad to work: "They make much more money than we will ever be able to pay them and they send money home. They learn new skills and they come back changed. It's a bit like going to university but instead they go to work."⁷

Conclusions

Timorese workers are appreciative of the opportunity to support their families through migrant work. Overall, they contributed a large part of their time and money in Timor-Leste towards house improvements and daily living expenses. Labour migration has become the most important source of income for many families. The government of Timor-Leste sees these programs as reducing the numbers of unemployed youth and building work skills.

The experience and work skills that were acquired through migrant work motivated many workers to establish business activities at home. Long term development outcomes is a stated objective of the Timorese government in promoting labour migration, so more attention should be paid to supporting the reintegration of the returnees. Then the national development impact would be much greater.

In Timor-Leste the younger Timorese have a high degree of respect for their elders and cultural values, but there are also two areas of social change being called for. One is a women's lobby aiming to achieve equality for women, particularly the political participation of women in local and national government, and an end to the high rate of domestic violence that exists. The second is a concern about the monetisation and commodification of customary ceremonies which introduces a competitive status-seeking approach to spending large amounts of money, replacing the traditional practice of exchange of goods (dos Santos and Wigglesworth 2016, 62). Many young people see this as being to the detriment of family wellbeing.

Globally, migration has become a widespread strategy by poor families to gain the resources they need to improve the wellbeing of their family. In Timor-Leste, it is an opportunity to lift families in the subsistence economy out of poverty. As well as the benefits that remittances bring, the impact of migration on social change in Timor can also arise from new perspectives on how to respond to immediate economic needs of families. New international experiences can accelerate the process of social change which has been taking place in the country since independence. So far, migration appears to have brought benefits to poor rural communities that have seen little in the way of economic opportunities since independence.

Notes

- ¹ The SWP is led by the Department of Jobs and Small Business (formerly department of Employment), supported by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Operating since 2009 in the Pacific, SWP is available to nine Pacific countries: Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu as well as Timor-Leste.
- ² Wigglesworth and Fonseca, "Experiences of young Timorese as migrant workers in Korea" presented at the Australasian Aid Conference 2016, Development Policy Centre (DPC). The research was commissioned by the 'Labour Mobility in the Pacific Project' at the DPC at the Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University (ANU).
- ³ Wigglesworth and Boxer, 2017, "Transitional livelihoods: Timorese migrant workers in the UK." Presented at the Australasian Aid Conference 2017. The original research involved 19 participants, ten in Northern Ireland and nine interviewed after returning to Dili. A second visit included revisiting some earlier participants about the implications of Brexit and interviewing two new migrants in UK, bringing the participant number to 21. A revised and updated version of the paper was published as Wigglesworth and Boxer 2019, "Positioning for their future: Timorese migrant workers in the UK."

- ⁴ A change of management of the SWP since the research resulted in Palladium taking over from Cardno as the managing contractor, referred to by Rose in chapter 14 of this volume.
- ⁵ Wigglesworth and dos Santos, 2018, "Timorese migrant workers in the Seasonal Workers Program." Presented at the Australasian Aid Conference 2018, Development Policy Centre (DPC).
- ⁶ Conversation with a Colombian priest and member of Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH) in Victoria. As a member of the Seasonal Worker's Program Advisory Group, ACRATH plays an active role in bringing issues of exploitation or unfairness to the attention of the SWP team (Interview, Peter O'Neil, Melbourne, 11/11/2019).
- ⁷ Allegra Mendelson interview with Jose Ramos Horta, "East Timor's president to focus on economy, political stability", *Al Jazeera*, 24 May 2022.

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