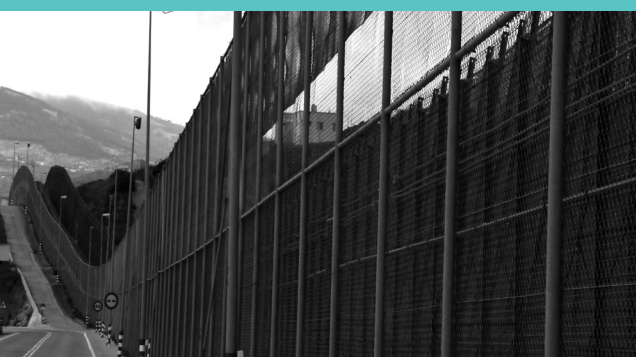# THE IMPORTANCE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES FOR MODERN MIGRANTS

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MIGRATION & CRISES

UNU-GCM

Policy Report 04/06

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At a time of unprecedented mass displacements across the world, migrants and refugees have come to occupy a central place on the international agenda, as well as in the media and public sphere. This research programme focuses on the relationship between migration and crises, both in terms of conflict and disaster-induced displacements that are occurring in the short and long-term; as well as the crises that have been newly introduced by particular migration, border and integration policies that have fallen short in terms of protecting the human rights and dignity of those on the move. The project focuses on displacement in different geographical regions across the world, with an understanding that these contemporary crises have not emerged out of a vacuum, but are located within particular historical, geopolitical, environmental and cultural contexts. The programme examines the human costs of these crises, as well as the new forms of solidarity that have developed.

The Importance of New Technologies for Modern Migrants

Jonathan Egeland Harouny

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Summary

This policy brief examines how new technologies improve the lives of modern migrants. By facilitating affordable and easy communication, new technologies enable migrants to stay connected to the societies they emigrated from while also establishing themselves in their new societies of residence. In particular, the policy brief will focus on smartphones and how they help migrant mothers from Southeast Asia stay in touch with the families they have left behind. It makes use of research underlining the important role that new technologies – like smartphones – play in the daily lives of modern migrants. As a result, the policy brief will demonstrate the importance of access to such technologies and provide policymakers with specific recommendations.

"Our phones and power banks are more important for our journey than anything, even more than food" – Wael, Syrian refugee (AFP)[1]

Migration Today

Today's world is experiencing an unprecedented level of population movement. The United Nations General Assembly recently reported in their *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* that the number of migrants in 2015 surpassed 244 million, roughly 65 million of which were forcibly displaced. These migrants often face unique dangers and difficulties, both in relation to the process of geographical relocation and in relation to their settlement in their new societies of residence.[2] When it comes to settlement, migrants often experience difficulties having to do with feelings of being pulled in different directions. For example, it is common for migrants to experience what Abdelmalek Sayad (2004) has called "dual absence"– the feeling of belonging "neither here nor there".

Photo: "Migrant worker, Thailand", Maryann Bylander/CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO – Thailand, 2012

In order to combat such difficulties, successful migrant integration is very important. Integration is a core issue for both migrants and host societies. For migrants, successful integration means acceptance into their new societies of residence, but without having to forego their bonds to the societies they emigrated from. For host societies, successful integration means social cohesion and peaceful and prosperous intercultural relations. Successful integration is therefore a goal shared by both migrants and host societies alike. However, what is less clear is how we ought to go about aiding and facilitating better integration.

There are several factors that determine how well migrants are able to integrate. One important factor has to do with the facilitation of affordable and easy communication, both between the migrants and other members of their new societies, and between the migrants and people from the societies they left. Not only is it necessary that migrants have the resources required to establish new connections and relationships in their new societies, but also that they have the ability to remain connected to and in touch with their families, cultures, and traditions. This way, migrants may develop new relationships and identities – for example by establishing new connections through social media – but without having to abandon their old ones. Affordable and easy communication is therefore of central importance when it comes to the successful integration of migrants into their new societies of residence.

Lately, there has been a lot of research on how new technologies and new media can aid migrant integration (Licoppe, 2004; Diminiescu, 2008; Chib et al., 2014; Diminiescu & Loveluck, 2014; and Bello, 2014, 2017). One technological device that seems to be of special importance, and which this policy brief will focus on, is smartphones.[3] By providing a better understanding of the central role that smartphones play in the lives of today's migrants, this policy brief will offer policy-makers interested in better integrating migrants an interesting and useful perspective.

3. A smartphone is a handheld personal computer which allows for voice, SMS, and Internet data communication. It also supports applications that facilitate social networking – like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – among other things.

4. For example, studies on intercultural dialogue between immigrants and host societies have shown that the relationships between immigrants and host societies are of central importance when it comes to identifying and dealing with root causes of terrorism and other sources of negative international relations. See, e.g., Parekh (2002) and Bello (2013).

5. However, despite its positive effects, recent research has also identified conditions under which the development of mobile identities also can have negative and discomforting effects. See Simon et al. (2013).

6. In general, the increased availability of new technologies has increased both the possibilities and the desires people have to move (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2014).

7. For this and other reasons, the United Nations Human Rights Council released a non-binding resolution in 2016 condemning intentional disruption of Internet access by governments. In the resolution, it was declared that "the same rights people have offline must also be protected online".

Smartphones and the Importance of Connectivity

When migrants experience the negative feelings associated with dual absence, especially in isolation and over long periods of time, it can have negative repercussions not only for relationships between immigrants and members of established residents but also for relationships between states.[4] It is therefore of great importance that migrants be allowed and encouraged to create and maintain important connections and lines of communication so that they get to experience what I would call "dual presence" – the feeling of belonging "both here and there". Such experiences of dual presence enable them to have identities that are "mobile", which in turn increases their chances of successful integration – both professionally and psychologically (Portes et al., 1999; and Nowicka, 2007).[5]

As several recent studies, reports and news articles have pointed out, new technologies and new media – like smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – provide migrants with the necessary tools for creating such mobile identities. More specifically, they do this by enabling them to stay connected with their families, cultures and traditions on the one hand, and their new societies of residence on the other – thus affirming their dual presence in both settings (Licoppe, 2004; Diminiescu, 2008; Diminiescu & Loveluck, 2014; Mikal & Woodfield, 2015).[6] Smartphones, for example, are of great psychological and practical importance to modern migrants insofar as they enable them to keep in contact with both their loved ones back where they emigrated from and the people and culture of their new societies of residence – while also providing them with apps and services that supply them with vital information about people to contact and their location.

Social media, chatting and texting services, location services and entertainment services are just some of the things migrants can enjoy, provided that they have a smartphone with Internet access.[7] Smartphones are therefore useful tools for migrants who want to experience a sense of presence or belonging "both here and there". By aiding migrants in this way, smartphones help them to better integrate into their new host societies and, as a result, free them from a lot of discomfort and stress related to their new life situations (Portes et al., 1999; Nowicka, 2007; Butcher, 2009; Shi et al., 2017).

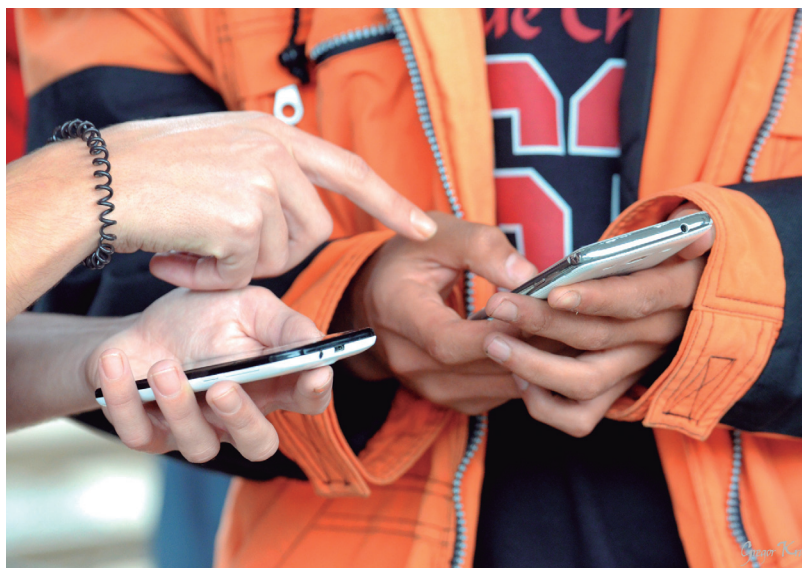# Case Study: Connecting Migrant Mothers from Southeast Asia

Photo: "Translate – Train of Hope Linz", G. Kraftschik/CC-BY - Austria, 2015

Southeast Asian countries have some of the most migrant populations. For example, the Philippines has one of the world's largest migration rates, leading to more than 10% of the population working abroad. The majority of migrants from this region are women employed as domestic workers, according to a report by the International Labour Organization (2013). Many of these women are also mothers with children left behind in their home countries. These women often work under difficult conditions, struggling to balance their working hours with their mothering duties (Amrith, 2015). This section will examine three studies investigating how smartphones help these women in their attempts to fulfill their mothering duties while also settling into their new societies of residence.

In the research article *Mobile Phone Parenting* (2011), Madianou and Miller used comparative research on UK-based Filipina migrants, most of whom were employed as nurses or domestic workers with left-behind children in the Philippines, to determine the importance of smartphones in their parenting relationships. The article establishes that smartphones play a central role in improving

the migratory experiences of the Filipina mothers and aiding them in their long distance parenting. Clearly, having access to smartphones that enable them to keep in contact with their children allows them to deal with their new life situations in a positive manner. The authors (2011, 467) conclude by saying that "the mothers use the phone to become involved in everyday parenting and micromanaging of their children's meals, homework and disciplinary issues. They view this performance of mothering as empowering and as evidence of the phone's ability to reconstitute their role as effective parents".

In another research article, Malik and Kadir (2011) interviewed 11 Filipina and 11 Indonesian migrants employed as domestic workers in Singapore. In their interviews they discovered, much like the previous study, that smartphones and Internet access were essential tools for the female migrant workers in their transnational mothering. Despite the distance, these technologies "enabled them to be closely involved in their children's routines, get updates about their studies, and even set rules and ensure that they are observed. [The technologies] were able to partly alleviate their worries about their children, build and maintain intimacies through jokes and frequent communication" (Malik & Kadir, 2011). Interestingly, the research paper also shows how online services such as Facebook and video chat, rather than replacing smartphones as the primary tool for communicating with their children, played useful complementary roles. As a result of their research, Malik and Kadir therefore suggest that governments should provide migrant domestic workers with greater access to such technologies and ensure their rights to regularly keep in contact with their families.

In a third study, Chib et al. (2014) surveyed 42 Filipina and Indonesian migrants employed as domestic workers in Singapore. In their study, they found that the migrant mothers not only used smartphones to manage their long distance parenting, but that they also used them to negotiate and redefine their own identities and relationships. For example, they note that "the mobile phone, with the added feature of mediation as a safety-catch, provided an outlet to satisfy emotional, romantic, and sexual desires" (Chib et al., 2014, 87). This is important because it shows that smartphones play a central role for migrant mothers both when it comes to keeping in contact with the people they have left behind and also when it comes to establishing themselves, sometimes with new identities and relationships, in their new societies of residence. (Migrant mothers are more than just mothers. They have other identities too). More specifically, they do this by enabling the migrant mothers to develop mobile identities which allow them to satisfy emotional needs and sexual desires as equal members of the social fabric. Smartphones are therefore es-

sential when it comes to the integration of migrant mothers, both in the sense that it enables them to keep connected to their families and traditions, and also in the sense that it allows them to take part in their new societies by redefining and managing their identities.

What these studies show is that new technologies – and smartphones in particular – are of great importance to mothers from Southeast Asia. More specifically, their importance is experienced by the migrants on two different fronts. On the one hand, they enable them to stay connected to their cultures, traditions and families back home by facilitating affordable and easy communication.[8] And, on the other hand, they provide the migrants with useful tools for settling in their new societies of residence. For example, by helping them to develop mobile identities, smartphones can enable the creation of new social connections, facilitate their inclusion into their new societies, and promote a favorable picture of the migrants as equal members of their new societies.[9] Moreover, by aiding the integration of migrant mothers on both these fronts, smartphones also appear to strengthen their experience of dual presence – allowing them to feel a sense of belonging "both here and there".

Conclusions and Recommendations

New technologies help migrants integrate into their new societies of residence. More specifically, by allowing for affordable and easy communication, these technologies play an enabling role for migrants who want to take part in their new societies, but without having to forego their ties to the societies they emigrated from. Smartphones, as studies on migrant mothers from the Southeast Asian region have demonstrated, are a vital tool for keeping in contact with loved ones left behind and also for settling in one's new society. In light of these data, policymakers should consider the importance of the following:

- Migrants' access to new technologies, like smartphones: Smartphones and New Media are of central importance to modern migrants, and governments should therefore consider ways of bettering their access to these technologies.

8. Considering that migrant mothers often suffer from the stigma of "abandoning" their families (UN-INSTRAW, 2010; Neyts, 2015), new technologies, like modern cell phones, might ease the burden of separation by lessening its social impact.

9. McKay shows how Facebook facilitates communication and friendships between migrants and members of their new societies' in-groups: "Facebook contributed to migrants' orientation toward their host society. This occurred in terms of an explicit expression of care and cultural contribution, where Facebook was used primarily for social, personal purposes" (McKay, 2016, 82).

- Migrants' access to the Internet: In accordance with the United Nations Human Rights Council's 2016 resolution, governments should not disrupt the Internet access of their people, but rather should facilitate and improve it.

- Migrants' rights to contact their families: Being able to communicate with one's family is a universal human need, and governments should consider the importance of satisfying it for all its citizens.

- More research is needed on factors that play central roles in the integration of migrants into their new societies of residence, especially when it comes to new telecommunication technologies and new media.

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