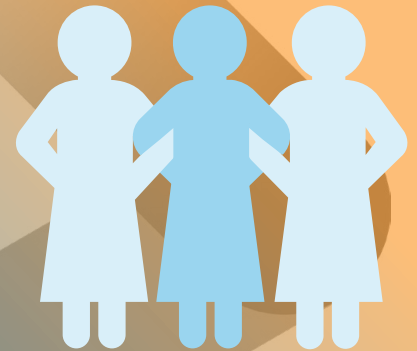


CENTRAL ASIA: Undercounted women's migration, remittance dependence and gendered constraints on mobility



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Emigration from Central Asia is large-scale, labour-driven and gradually declining, with subregional variation in gender balance. International migrants originating from Central Asia declined moderately over the past decade.¹ Nonetheless, the scale of outward mobility remains substantial and structurally embedded in regional labour markets. Women consistently constitute a slight majority of emigrants (51.8 per cent in 2024).

Central Asia's migration model is fundamentally shaped by labour mobility and strong remittance dependence, particularly on the Russian Federation as the primary destination. Uzbekistan received the largest absolute volume of remittances in 2024 (USD 14.8 billion, approximately 77 per cent from Russia²), while Tajikistan remains among the most remittance-dependent economies globally, with transfers reaching around 49 per cent of GDP in 2024.³ These flows underscore the structural role of migration in sustaining household consumption and national economies. Gender norms shape women's labour migration sharply. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan,

labour migration remains heavily male-dominated, with women estimated at **around 16 per cent and 18 per cent** of labour migrants,⁴ reflecting constraints on independent female mobility and male concentration in construction/manual sectors of receiving countries. In Tajikistan, this gendered pattern is embedded in a broader structural dependence on labour migration, as the country ranks among the world's top recipients of remittances as a share of GDP, underscoring the centrality of male labour migration to household livelihoods and the national economy.⁵ For example, according to data from the IOM's *Baseline Mobility Assessment*, in 2025,

¹ UNDESA. 2024. [International Migrant Stock 2024 by sex and by region, country or area of origin](#)

² The Central Bank of Uzbekistan. 2025. [Central Bank's Brief Review on Currency Transactions of Individuals](#).

³ World Bank. 2025. [Macro Poverty Outlook 2025, Tajikistan](#).

⁴ UNDESA. 2024. [International Migrant Stock 2024: Origin and Destination](#); for national records, data sets available from national statistics offices.

⁵ World Bank. 2024. [The Journey Ahead: Supporting Successful Migration in Europe and Central Asia](#).

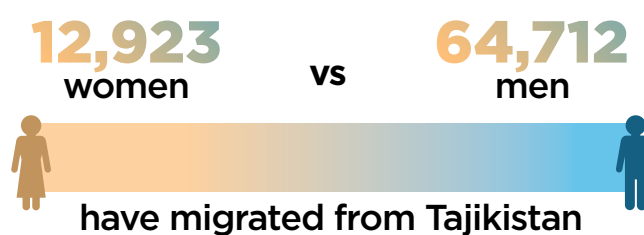
51.8%
of emigrants
in Central Asia
are women



Uzbekistan received
\$14.8B
in remittances
(2024)

Remittances equal
49%
of GDP in
Tajikistan

Only
16-18%
of labour migrants
are women



12,923 women from Tajikistan emigrated to the Russian Federation, compared to 64,712 men.⁶ Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, shows a more balanced profile, supported by networks and family-linked mobility.⁷ Across the sub-region, women are pulled into feminized service work – domestic work, caregiving, cleaning, hospitality, petty trade and seasonal agriculture – often informal and weakly protected.⁸ A notable post-2022 nuance is that in some contexts women’s labour migration increased as a household adaptation when men curtailed or deferred migration to Russia due to insecurity and mobilization fears, with women stepping into breadwinner roles.⁹ Women entering migration pathways traditionally dominated by men often face weaker pre-departure support and recruitment oversight, resulting in heightened exposure to informal employment and exploitation. Yet official statistics and migration frameworks remain insufficiently equipped to respond to this emerging feminization of labour mobility.

Immigration to Central Asia remains modest in scale and predominantly regional, shaped by post-Soviet ties, proximity and ethnic-return dynamics. While data remain thin and fragmented, available evidence shows that Central Asia is increasingly relevant as a destination and transit space. Immigration into Central

Asia is mostly regional and shaped by former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) ties, proximity and ethnic-return programmes.¹⁰ Overall, most immigrants to Central Asia come from nearby countries or other former USSR republics, and many movements are circular or short-term.¹¹ Kazakhstan is the primary destination for immigrants in Central Asia,¹² drawing people from neighbouring countries and beyond.¹³ Elsewhere in Central Asia, the absolute numbers of immigrants are much smaller. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each host in the order of tens of thousands of foreign citizens. For example, Tajikistan had nearly 10,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly from Afghanistan, as of 2023,¹⁴ and a modest number of foreign workers (including some Chinese, Turkish and South Asian nationals).¹⁵ Kyrgyzstan’s immigrant population includes expatriates (development and business professionals), some ethnic Kyrgyz returnees and regional migrants. Women account for about 60 per cent of Kyrgyzstan’s immigrant stock and just over half in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan;¹⁶ however, recent in-flow subgroups (expatriate professionals, short-term workers) lack reliable sex-disaggregated data, so their composition may differ. Uzbekistan in 2024 recorded only 2,229 immigrants with residence permits.¹⁷

⁶ IOM calculations based on the IOM round 6 Tajikistan Baseline Mobility Assessment data.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific). 2025. [Women Migrant Workers from Central Asia to the Russian Federation: Trends, Challenges and Prospects](#).

⁹ Bossavie, L. L. Y., C. Ozden, B. Rude and L. Zhou. 2025. [Gendered Impacts of Military Conflicts on Labor Migration from Central Asia](#). World Bank.

¹⁰ UNDESA. 2024. [International Migrant Stock by Sex and Origin](#); for national records, data sets available from national statistics offices.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² As of 2020, Kazakhstan hosted approximately 3.73 million international immigrants, of whom about 50.4 per cent were female. Source: IOM. 2024. [Kazakhstan - migration data gap analysis](#).

¹³ ICMPD. 2024. [Migration Outlook: Eastern Europe and Central Asia](#); IOM. 2024. [Kazakhstan - migration data gap analysis](#).

¹⁴ UNHCR Tajikistan. 2024. [Country Factsheet](#).

¹⁵ UNHCR. 2024. [Annual Results Report 2024: Tajikistan](#).

¹⁶ IOM. 2024. [Migration Data Platform: Kyrgyzstan](#); IOM. 2024. [Migration Data Platform: Uzbekistan](#); IOM. 2024. [Migration Data Platform: Turkmenistan](#).

¹⁷ IOM. 2024. [MTM Migration Situation Report: Uzbekistan. October–December 2024](#).

Transit migration through Central Asia reflects mixed movements, with weak monitoring and significant gender-specific protection risks. Transit migration through Central Asia includes mixed movements of asylum-seekers and refugees, notably from Afghanistan, as well as individuals engaged in irregular labour migration.¹⁸ Many rely on informal or smuggling networks due to limited legal pathways for migration or to seek protection. Available data rely largely on interceptions, deportations and project-level reporting rather than systematic monitoring and sex-disaggregated statistics are rare. Women in transit face heightened protection risks linked to weak reception capacity, language barriers, limited access to legal pathways and scarce gender-sensitive services. Recent reports of deportations of Afghans from Tajikistan, including women and children, highlight the fragility of protection safeguards and the limited availability of gender-sensitive screening, referral and support mechanisms along transit routes.¹⁹

International protection systems in Central Asia remain restrictive and insufficiently gender responsive. While some countries host small numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, recognition rates are low and asylum procedures are narrow in scope, with limited grounds for protection, restrictive interpretation of eligibility criteria and constrained access to appeal or complementary forms of protection. Gender-sensitive asylum

procedures, such as individual assessment of women's protection claims, access to female interpreters and trauma-informed interviewing are not systematically available. As a result, women with complex protection needs, including survivors of gender-based violence, face significant barriers to accessing international protection and durable solutions.²⁰

Environmental stress is intensifying mobility pressures in Central Asia, with gendered impacts that remain largely invisible in policy and data systems. Environmental stress is an increasingly important driver of mobility, interacting with rural poverty, agricultural dependence and existing gender inequalities. Climate-related hazards, including droughts, floods, landslides and water scarcity are intensifying across the subregion, particularly in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.²¹ Women are disproportionately affected by increased workloads when men migrate, reduced access to land, credit and irrigation, and heightened risks of exploitation and violence during displacement.²² Official data on environmental and disaster-related mobility remain largely absent, with Tajikistan a partial exception in recognizing environmental relocation in policy terms.²³ As a result, women's exposure to 'trapped' immobility in degraded rural areas, as well as their role in household and community adaptation, remains largely invisible in migration and climate governance frameworks.

¹⁸ Winrock International and Freedom Collaborative. 2023. [Regional Mapping of Trafficking and Vulnerable Migrants' Routes in Central Asia](#); FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights). 2016. [Migrant Workers in Kazakhstan: No Status, No Rights](#).

¹⁹ OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2025. [Afghanistan: Returns of Afghans creating multi-layered human rights crisis](#).

²⁰ UNHCR. 2022. [Annual Results Report 2022. Kazakhstan Multi-Country Office](#); UNHCR. 2024. [Annual Results Report 2024. Kazakhstan Multi-Country Office](#); UNHCR. 2019. UNHCR Submission for the Universal Periodic Review – Kyrgyzstan – UPR 35th Session (2019). [Universal Periodic Review: 3rd Cycle, 35th Session](#).

²¹ CabarAsia. 2024. [Environmental Migration Will Increase in Central Asian Countries](#).

²² Khitarishvili, T. 2016. [Gender Inequalities in Labour Markets in Central Asia](#). Paper prepared for the UNDP/ILO Conference on Employment, Trade and Human Development in Central Asia.

²³ IOM. 2012. [Environmental Degradation, Migration, Internal Displacement, and Rural Vulnerabilities in Tajikistan](#).

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