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THE MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN
THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

KEY FINDINGS

- The international experience is of substantial differences between the sexes in out migration from remote Indigenous communities with females being more likely to seek opportunities in larger towns and cities.
- This phenomenon of 'female flight' is driven by the aspirations of women to improve their education and career opportunities and to apply these in a new setting, as well as the tendency for local industries in remote areas to primarily employ males.
- Female flight is characterised by a growth in the sex ratio in communities left behind, and by a range of negative social impacts which may threaten the viability and social cohesion of communities.
- There is some evidence that female flight is occurring from some parts of the NT.
- More work is required to understand whether the NT will follow similar patterns to those experienced internationally.

RESEARCH AIM

To examine the potential impacts of the migration intentions of Indigenous women.

This research brief discusses the phenomenon known as 'female flight' which has been observed in many remote parts of countries overseas and has impacted on the viability and cohesion of Indigenous communities in particular. Some exploratory data drawn from the Census of Population and Housing provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, is presented to postulate whether and how female flight might impact on settlement patterns and demographic change in the Territory.

The research has been conducted by **Andrew Taylor (Research Fellow)** and **Associate Professor Dean Carson**

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Background

International migration literature has documented historical imbalances between the sexes in residential out-migration from rural and remote communities to larger urban centres in countries across Northern Europe, in Russia and in the Americas. Moves by women from more to less remote settlements have been shown to be both more prominent and more likely to be permanent when compared to men. This phenomenon of 'female flight' (a term coined by Hamilton and Seyfrit, 1994) has been shown to have major demographic impacts on the communities left behind by women through raising the sex ratio and diminishing the opportunity for natural increase. In the long run the viability and prosperity of the communities themselves is threatened by declining populations and declining social cohesiveness.

The 'footprint' of female flight is thought to be particularly evident in Indigenous communities in remote and sparsely settled regions in the countries mentioned above. The strong similarities between these and the settlement and demographic characteristics of remote parts of the Northern Territory lead us to anticipate that a long term process of relatively high levels of female residential out migration from Northern Territory Indigenous communities will occur. The potential impacts of female flight in the Northern Territory will be far reaching and will need to be carefully managed. In this research brief we briefly discuss whether and what type of pre-cursors to female flight already exist in the Territory. We postulate on some of the possible impacts and what this might mean for planning and population change as well as for managing the potential social outcomes that have been documented in communities where female flight has occurred overseas.

What causes female flight?

Female flight has been attributed to a complex mix of aspirational (pull) factors and structural changes (push factors). In remote regions of industrialised nations Indigenous men and women fare poorly even when there is strong economic growth in remote areas because new jobs are usually taken up by imported and skilled labour. Men in particular have been shown to adapt poorly to structural change with resultant increases in anti-social behaviour. Those jobs which are offered to local residents tend to be taken up by Indigenous men rather than women. Often these operate in boom and bust cycles (for example mining) and depend on government support. The nature of employment is consequently short term and unstable and this discourages the (locally) male dominated workforce in such industries from undertaking career planning and skills diversification.

Females, on the other hand, have been shown to be more open to the diversification of their skills away from those required to fulfil traditional roles (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006). Consequently, they adapt to structural change by educating themselves in new skills. They may then want to take up the challenge and the promise of 'something new' by applying for employment or further education in larger urban centres. Education appears to be a major driver of female flight, especially amongst young people. Often females develop generic business skills which they can apply across a range of industries, while males tend to concentrate on a specific trade or skill. Surveys of the migration aspirations of young women also indicate females, more so than males, are accepting of the idea that they are likely to permanently move away from their community to take up educational and career opportunities.

Generally in the countries where female flight has been observed, 'stepwise' migration has involved moves from remote settlements, to larger settlements including rural towns,

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regional towns or cities, capital cities, and then to external regions. The resultant demographic effect through the permanent departure from the remote community is to raise the sex ratio there and diminish the opportunity for population growth via natural increase.

The stickiness of cities for women

The growth of towns and cities with large service sectors and manufacturing industries has attracted females from rural regions on a worldwide basis. Once in the cities, females have been thought to be more likely than males to hold on to new jobs and then progress their urban based careers. Advances in telecommunication technologies have assisted females to maintain social and familial ties to the communities they have left behind, as have improved transport networks. And with the pool for partner selection being far greater in the larger population centres, cities become ‘sticky’ for those who have arrived from more remote parts in both an employment and social sense. Meanwhile, men who have migrated from small communities in remote areas are noted to be less adaptable to the changes that accompany residential moves to larger towns and cities. They are more prone to struggle to hold down employment and to finish studies or training courses with the result being return migration to the home community or disengagement from the mainstream economy and society.

Could it happen in the NT?

Settlement patterns in the Northern Territory outside of Darwin (population 73,000) and the Alice Springs (population of around 26,000), are best described as sparse and dispersed. They are dominated by consistently small (under 1,000) communities with high proportions of Indigenous people. Nearly three quarters of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory live outside of Darwin and Alice Springs, with many living in discrete Indigenous communities (see Figure 1). The impacts of departures of just a few female residents from these very small communities may be significant in terms of raising the sex ratio resultant social issues for those who remain.

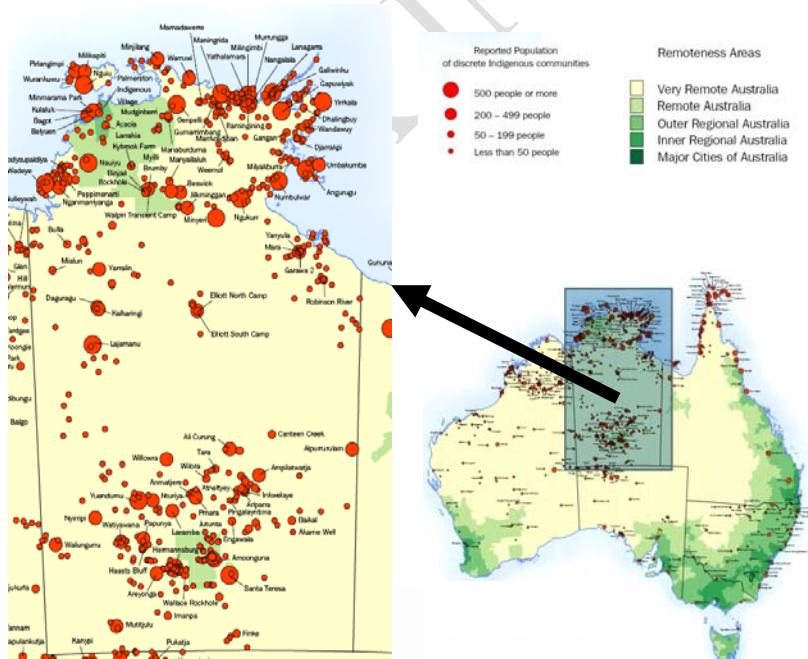


Figure 1- Indigenous settlements in the NT
 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009

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The seeds of female flight may already be evident in range of Northern Territory data. Taylor and Carson (2009) have already found that long term trends show the Indigenous population of the Northern Territory is urbanizing and that females are overrepresented in the cohort which has moved from remote to urban areas. Census data from 1976 to 2006 also shows a progressive increase in the balance of mobility towards female residential mobility (Figure 2).

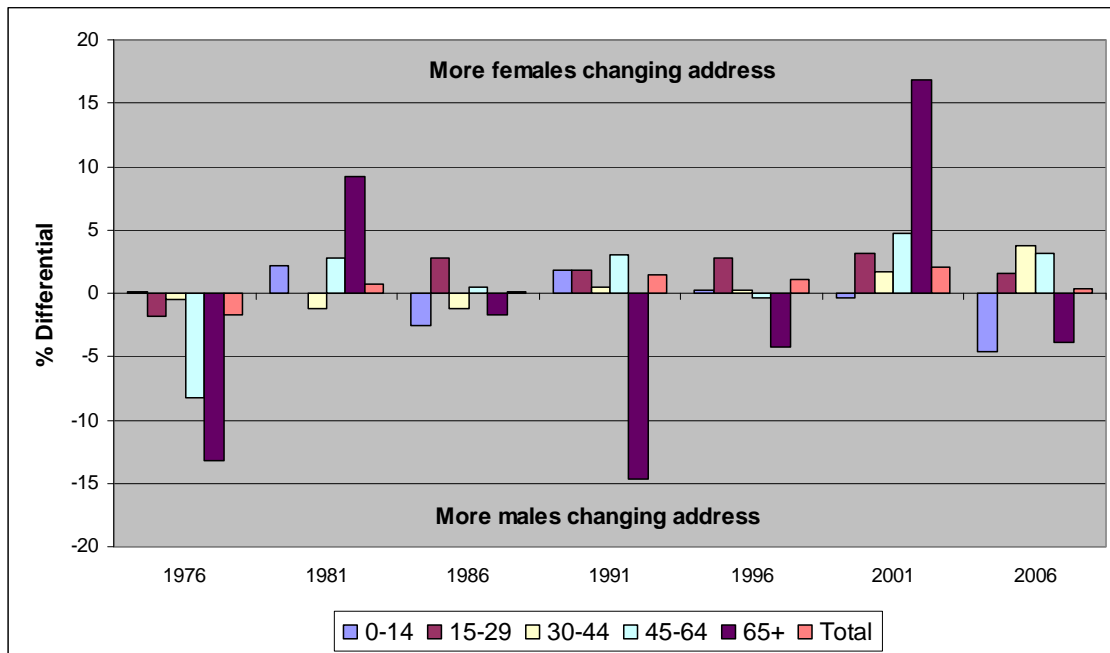


Figure 2 – Percentage difference in female and male residential mobility, 1976 to 2006
 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census custom data run

In the Northern Territory education and labour force data may be pre-cursive indicators of female flight. Census data shows Indigenous females are far more likely to hold post-school qualifications or to have completed the final two years of high school (comprising 70 percent and 60 percent respectively). The potential for females to apply their qualifications exists largely outside of the small discrete communities which have poorly formed labour markets (if any) and offer limited career possibilities. For example, male participation rates in the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) are much higher than female across all age groups and are most substantially different for those aged 20 to 29 years. Much of the criticism directed at the CDEP scheme has been about the nature of work undertaken by workers as being low skilled, repetitive, and with little opportunities for progression. It would not be surprising given international experience to find that women more so than men react to these limited opportunities by moving away.

Potential impacts for the Territory

Three broad types of impacts are likely as a result of female flight occurring in the Northern Territory – demographic, social and settlement impacts. First, rising sex ratios will be the most immediate and obvious demographic impact. But because the phenomenon may occur over generations, long term data is required and the trend may go unnoticed. Arguably, female flight may have already occurred in some communities in the NT, such as Nguiu on the Tiwi Islands (Figure 3). With its close proximity to Darwin’s educational facilities and job market female residents of Nguiu may have been amongst

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the first to take up opportunities and the pattern of change in sex ratios observed over the past 30 years might be a forewarning of a more widespread future trend.

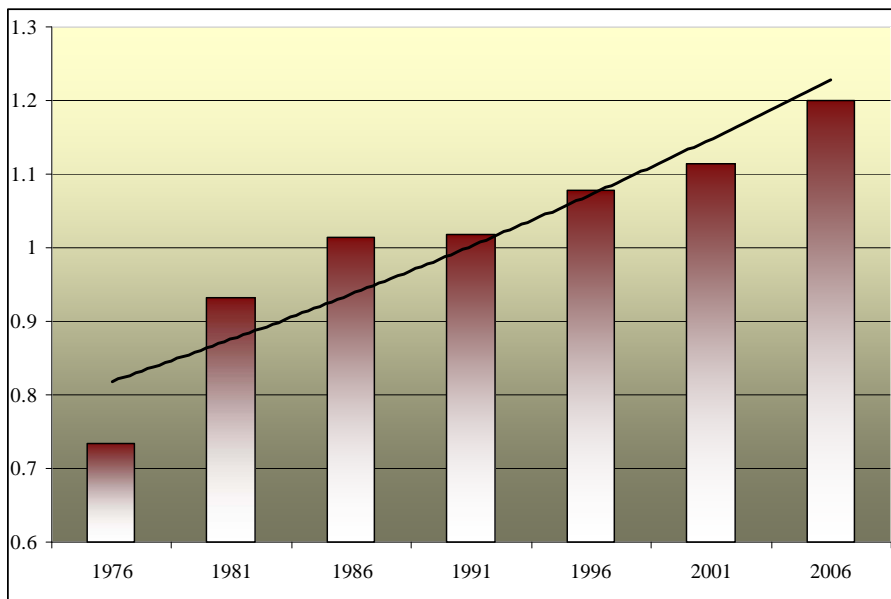


Figure 3: Footprints of Female Flight? The changing Indigenous sex ratio for Nguiu community (Tiwi Islands), 1976 to 2006

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census custom data run

With more females than males moving to towns like Darwin there is likely to be an increase over time in mixed partnering there and associated declines in the number of births in the smaller communities left behind. Research to date on mixed partnering demonstrates there is a strong correlation between greatly improved socio-economic status for the Indigenous partner in the mixed partner relationship (whether de facto or marriage). With improved income, health, and wellbeing comes the increased likelihood of out migration from the Territory.

The range of social outcomes from female flight in the Territory will no doubt vary greatly between communities because local circumstances are so diverse. Nevertheless, we can expect males to not cope very well with a female deficit. There may, for example, be resentment towards departed females who have founded a career elsewhere. We might also expect that policies seeking to improve educational and employment opportunities in communities will increase the rate of female flight. Other more subtle indicators might be observed at the local level including growing rates of mobile phone ownership and subscriptions to chat (and similar) forums. Such technology transfers are indicative of societies which are engaging with the global economy and, as all migration literature suggests, the consequence is likely to be a growth in residential (out) migration.

Ultimately, widespread female flight in the Territory has the capacity to significantly change Indigenous settlement patterns in the longer term. The viability of diminishing settlements (population size and social conditions) may be threatened and in the end residents may exercise their choice to move elsewhere. Under this scenario we can expect the larger Indigenous communities in the Territory to become smaller and the smallest existing communities to lose all or most of their residents.

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What should we do?

In spite of our knowledge of female flight being widespread in regions similar to the Territory, questions around the past and future migration patterns of Indigenous women in the remote parts of the Northern Territory have not been asked. In particular there has been no documentation of the possible relationships between female out-migration and social outcomes in the communities left behind. This is indicative of the focus of Indigenous migration research to date on short term and seasonal patterns rather than residential migration per se. Where residential migration is concerned, the research has paid little attention to the demographic characteristics of those who move or to the effects on the places left behind. Much of the public discussion on Indigenous mobility has been about negative aspects associated with the short term movements of young males in particular (known as 'urban drift').

Consequently research is needed on the residential mobility choices of Indigenous people, and particularly Indigenous women, in the Territory. While Census data has some limitations for accurate recording of the places where Indigenous people consider they usually live, other indicators are available and need to be monitored. These include observing changes in the population structures of remote communities using a range of datasets and administrative sources. Historical demographic techniques may also help to demonstrate demographic transitions at the local level over time. Of particular interest is data which can tell us whether gendered differentials in levels of engagement in the education system and labour force are occurring.

The question of whether female flight has or will impact on the settlement characteristics of the Northern Territory is sufficiently important to warrant consideration by academics and policy makers because the weight of evidence from the experiences overseas demands attention. Not least, female flight presents a difficult paradox for those who advocate improvements to educational and employment outcomes for residents of remote Indigenous communities. This is because the manifestations of such improvements may be a new set of problems in communities where, on the whole, it is females that (initially at least) grasp the opportunities presented by programs and policies whose intention was to facilitate whole-of-community development.

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