

The Negative Impact of Women’s Foreign Employment on their Children: An Empirical Study at Addalaichenai, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a major exporter of women workers all over the world especially in Middle East countries as well. The Sri Lankan government encourages labour migration of both men and women since their trade liberalization, 1977. In fact, part of the function of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment established in 1985, has been training and recruiting women workers as domestic helpers for overseas employment. 65 percent of workers migrated from Sri Lanka in 1990 were women (Anuja Agrewal, 2006). The departure to foreign employment has increased by 7.36 percent from 2011. As the Sri Lankan economy depends heavily on the remittance of migrant workers, government promotes female migration. Sri Lanka got more foreign exchange as 600 million in 2012 (Rauff zain, 2014). At the same time, women’s foreign employment has deleterious effects on the well – being of children in Sri Lanka. According to this, the objective of this study is to evaluate the negative impacts of women’s foreign employment on their children in Addalaichenai divisional secretariat area. Survey conducted between the year 2012 and May 2014. The study takes the form of qualitative, quantitative research and depends on focus group discussions and key informant interviews which are both primary and secondary. The results indicate that although the women’s foreign employment has positive economic impact of remittances, on the other hand the female migration effects on the well – being of children in different dimensions such as education, health, psychology, physically. Further it is also observed that women’s foreign employment cause to early marriage and sexual abuse in the research, at Addalaichenai divisional secretariat at area. Moreover, this research draw up few recommendations such as implement existing strictures and policies, providing support services to children left behind, care givers and mothers and providing public awareness and capacity building programs on serving the children.

Key words: Women’s Foreign Employment, Migration, Negative Impact, Children Left Behind.

Introduction

Foreign employment is considered as a part of anti – poverty strategy and development issue with positive economic effects and growth. According to this it is observed, that the Sri Lankan government promoted women’s migration for employment in the past. Today, Sri Lanka is one of the largest labour exporting countries in south Asia. The supply of Sri Lankan workers to other countries is estimated over 1.9 million in 2010.

According to the estimation of Sri Lanka Bureau for Foreign Employment (SLBFE), the female migrant work force was 1,020,155 at the end of year 2007. The percentage of

female migrant has grown from 24% to 75% between the year 1986 and 1997 (Nirasha perera, 2013).

According to the estimation of Sri Lanka Bureau for Foreign Employment, about 1,500,000 Sri Lankan migrant have been working abroad. 85% of migrant are housemaids. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Lebanon and Jordan are the top five countries to which Sri Lankan females migrate for employment. The most common occupation for female migrant for foreign employment in 2011 was housemaid (Nirasha perera, 2013). The Sri Lankan economy depends heavily on the remittance of foreign employees;

especially we can observe that the large part is women. Furthermore, foreign employment is the second largest economic source of foreign exchange earnings and it represents 30% of national savings. According to the statistical data, the amount of female migrant for employment has been increasing in the last five years. Nearly 633 female migrate abroad as housemaid per day (Rauffzain, 2014). In Eastern province, most of the women have been facing difficulties in economy. So, migrant mothers believe the migration for work is their best chance to provide their children with a better future. It cannot be denied that foreign employment has brought many positive implications. Migrating abroad for work has lifted many families out of poverty through the dollar remittances. It can be observed that increasing domestic consumption and improve access to basic goods. However, women's foreign employment has negative impacts on demographic outcomes on children.

The effects of foreign employment could have a profound impact on the child's development and future opportunities. Some recent conferences have recognized the positive economic effects of migration, but also draw attention to the ways in which migration affects the poor and the most vulnerable children. Female parent's departure has multiple impacts on children's material conditions and on their emotional development, social relations and school performance. Children's feeling after their parents' departure include guilt, sadness, isolation, fear of abandonment and some even develop aggressive behavior.

Research Problem

Women play crucial role in the economic development of their families and communities with certain obstacles such as poverty, unemployment, low house hold income and social discriminations. Most of the women migrate abroad for employment, as they have to maintain their children and family. Women's foreign employment leads

to alleviate economic poverty at the household level, improved family living conditions (e.g. Better housing, nice clothes and facilitative children's access to social services). At the same time, the issues, facing children of migrant mother have been increasing nowadays. These issues incited me to do this research.

Research Questions

This study aims to find out the answer for the following questions.

1. What are the reasons for women migrate abroad for employment?
2. What are the negative impacts of women's foreign employment on their children?

Research Objectives

Women's foreign employment is a problem in Sri Lankan society because it has various negative impacts on their families. The effects of women's foreign employment could have a profound impact on their children's development and future opportunities. According to this, the study is aimed,

1. To identify the reasons for women's foreign employment.
2. To identify the negative impacts on their children and to draw up few recommendations on saving the children.

Research Area of the Study

Addalaichenai divisional secretariat is located in the coastal belt of Ampara district in the South Eastern Region of Sri Lanka. It includes four main villages such as Addalaichenai, Palamunai, Oluvil, and Deegavappiya including 32 Grama Niladhari divisions. Addalaichenai includes Aalankulm, katchenai, and Konawatta as small villages. Palamunai include sinnappalamunai and Thiraikkeny (Tamil village) and Oluvil includes Ashraff Nagar as small village neighbouring the village Deegavapiya. Tamil people are living in Thiraikeny area and Sinhalese are living in Deegavapiya village. The frontiers of this

divisional secretariat are Kaliyodai River in North, Akkaraipattu in South, the Bay of Bengal is in East and Irakkamam divisional secretariat division is in West.

Literature Review

In the previous studies, the author, Nirasha Perera and Madhubhashini R. Rathnayake (2013) have explained that, maternal migration is an attractive short term solution and potential economic boon for an impoverished family. However, for all its economic benefits it has serious deleterious effects on the well-being of children in Sri Lanka. Children are at a disadvantage at all levels and all aspects of their existence.

Further, as recent surveys show, in Moldova and other labour sending countries, remittances have represented a way out of poverty for migrant households. However, parental migration can also put children at risk of social exclusion. In addition, the studies show that the evaluation of the school performance of children left behind is far from objective. Moreover, the studies suggest that the health and behavioral risks are more abundant among children living in migrant households (Mohamed Azzedine Salah, 2008)

In another previous study related to the migration, the authors, Gassmann, et. al. (2013) have explained that if children are left in the care of someone other than the parent or grandparent, we see negative outcomes on education and nutrition. In general children living in return migrant households are better off when all dimensions are aggregated into an index of well – being than children in either current or non-migrant households.

In another research, the evidence shows that children affected by migration face several challenges in terms of education and health care as well as various psychosocial problems. Many children left behind suffer from depressions, low self – esteem which can lead to behavioral problems and at increased risk of poor academic performance as well as

interruption of schooling. Additionally migrant children and children left behind are at a higher risk and more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse as well as child labour and trafficking (Bakker, et. al, 2009).

Research Methodology

The study takes the form of qualitative and quantitative analysis. In this research primary and secondary data were collected which depends on focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The total sample of this study is 100 and it included Children, Youth, Government Protection Officer, Probation Officer, Foreign Employment Promotion Officer, Counselor, Grama Niladharies, Women Development Officer, Teachers, Parents, Caregivers, Health Workers, Villagers, Returned Migrants, women who decided to go abroad for work and Members of Child Protection Working Groups. The study areas for the primary data collection are Oluvil, Palamunai and Addalaichenai. Sample is randomly selected.

Analysis and Findings of the Study

Reasons for Women’s Foreign Employment

According to the research, the data reveals several reasons for women’s foreign employment. Most of the women are compelled to migrate abroad for work such push factors. That is lack of access to regular and substantial income and the inability to bear the rising cost of living. Because, most of the women take a role of maintaining their family and children due to the loss of their life partners cause of natural disaster such as tsunami who were their bread winners of the family. In this situation, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, poor education and lack of livelihood support influence to take decision to migrate abroad for work. Moreover, in some families, husband’s bad activities such as alcoholism, domestic violence, extra material affairs, irresponsiveness and unemployment are the main reasons for women’s foreign

employment. In addition to this, some of the major aspirations of the migrant women such as to build houses, collect dowry for their girl children and to educate their children force women to migrate.

Furthermore, in these rural areas, agriculture is a main employment economic sector. Introduction of new technologies in agriculture field reduced the demand for human resources. So, as the facilities cannot survive with their main livelihood method of agriculture, women tend to migrate.

Among the specific problems it is noted that, women can migrate abroad for employment with low cost than the man. Therefore, in poor families women are also compelled to migrate by their husbands. Further, better employment opportunities in overseas, advertisement of recruitment agents, motivation by friends and relatives who have migrated for work abroad and feeling freedom intend to migrate women. However, in the primary data collection, it was found that the underlying reasons for migration is to earn an income to escape poverty and to reach a broader goal such as family betterment such as purchasing land, building house, paying off debt and pre – departure loans by agents. Besides, another main reason for continue migration of women is observed that majority of the women feel difficult to re – adjust to family life on their return abroad.

Impact of Education

It can be identified through the study of 50 children of migrant mothers that nearly 40% of students are drop outs from schools. Moreover, most of the students did not regularly attend school. According to the study findings, the main reason for irregular attendance of these children was that the older children had to care for younger siblings in family. In some cases, the female children are compelled to marry for a protection purpose by the women parent due to migrate abroad for work.

In looking at the impact of women’s foreign employment and remittances on educational attainment, the underlying hypothesis is that the remittances relax the household’s budget constraint which previously limited educational investment thereby enabling households to invest in the human capital of children. Remittances can reduce the dropout rate of individuals.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis was conducted of school attendance and performance of children of migrant mothers and children with mothers. Findings show that educational performance of children left behind was clearly lower than the children with mothers. It can be specially noted that a student, who was the batch top in studies and extracurricular activities at school suddenly became to lower rank in study and have lack of interest to attend school just after his mother’s departure to abroad.

Moreover, according to the focus group discussion, it was revealed that some children of migrant mothers needed help for class work from teachers and other children in the neighbors. Most of the children are careless in study, fail to do homework and have a habit of loitering in the classroom when teachers are teaching. Further, some children get burdened with family responsibilities including cooking, taking care of young siblings and taking care father or grandparents which make them late to school and leads to dropping out of school. The majority of teachers think that children left behind receive money from abroad, show less interest in their studies, and are not prepared for classes and care more likely to be cheeky and untidy.

Almost all children care-givers, teachers and local authorities agree the performances of the children of migrants are significantly lower than those of children living with their parents. The qualitative study believed that the lack of parental support and control, psychological suffering and an increase in family duties negatively impact children’s

education. The study had found sufficient evidence to conclude, the women’s foreign employment has had a decidedly negative impact on their children’s performance and an impact on school attendance.

Impact of Children’s Health

Evidence from the international literature shows that migration can affect the health of those left behind both positively and negatively. With additional money coming from remittances, people have easier access to health services, can be needed expensive drugs and eat more nutritional food. However, several surveys also show that the absence of mother may negatively affect children’s health. Mother’s love is very essential for children. It is one of the fundamental psychological needs of all children. In psychology, it is called attachments. Further, children lose their opportunities for get love and caring to be from mothers, due to the mother migration. This leads the children to effect physically and mentally.

Moreover, some studies indicate that, there is a higher incidence of moderate and severe malnutrition among children of migrant mothers as compared with other admissions. Further, they point out, one of the main causes of morbidity and malnutrition was caused by sudden termination of breast feeding. Some young children had lost considerable weight within the first month of the mother’s departure (N. Perera and M R. Rathnayake ,2013).

Most people believe that the absence of mother affects children’s physical and psychological health during the focus group discussion and key informant interviews. They pointed out that children who live with parents (especially mothers) are physically healthier compared with the children of migrant mothers. One reason might be their nutritional status since; children do not eat regularly, which has a negative impact on their health. Another reason could be that in the absence of their parents, children usual

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hesitate to tell out and hide certain health problems to the care givers and post pone visits to the doctor for various reasons such as poor supervision. Further, the teachers pointed out that, most of the children of migrant mothers eat fast foods comparing with other children. Therefore, it should be pointed out that the children of migrant mothers benefits with the remittance, sent by their mothers in purchasing goods. However, children don’t receive needed care and drugs in a timely fashion and the food they have access to be of bad quality due to the care giver’s less supervision in ability and lack of knowledge.

Impact on Psychology

Children left behind suffer from a wide range of psychological problems related to emotional detachment. The most common psychological problems are feelings of abandonment, sadness, despondency and despair, lack of trust, low self-esteem and inability to concentrate at school.

In Trinidad and Tobago researchers found that one third of children had serious levels of depression or interpersonal difficulties affecting schooling and leading in some cases to suicide ideation. The research furthermore indicated that children separated from parents because of migration were more than twice as likely as other children to have emotional problems although their economic status was improved (C. Bakker, Martina E and Michele Reis, 2009). Further, other studies find negative impacts of parental transnational migration on left behind children’s mental health. For example, research has found a higher incidence of mental disorders and impeded social and psychological development among the children left behind.

In this study the psychological impacts are considered in the basis of physical complains thoughts, behavior and emotions. According to the study, the qualitative data revealed that most of the children of migrant mothers were affected behaviorally such as isolation, poor relationship with other siblings, bet wetting

and lack of interest in schooling. Further, it was identified that some children made physical complaints such as headache and body pain. Some children stated that they feel loneliness and lack of protection.

Moreover, according to the findings of this study, care givers and teachers revealed that they observed certain negative behavior in children after the departure of the mother. Children of migrants exhibited aggressive behavior, quarrelling with others, feel angry, sad, afraid, unloved and worried compared with other children of non-migrants. In the key informant interviews, a counselor stated that most of the children shy to say about their migrant mother and a girl (16 years old) attempted to suicide due to the effect of mother's foreign employment.

It should be noted that Battistella and Conaco have suggested that migration doesn't have negative impact for the children left behind if it is not the mother who migrates (R. Addikari, and A. Jampackky, 2013).

Sexual Abuse

The girl children of the migrant mothers are subjected to sexual abuse, rape and incest in the hands of male relatives. The absence of mothers is often identified as a main cause for sexual abuse and incest. After women migrated abroad for work, most of their husbands have extra marital relationships or sexual partners. At the same time, some of them turn to their daughters to satisfy their sexual needs. In a 2002 study of 22 reported incest cases, in 11 cases (50% of all cases) the mother was away in the middle east, pointing to the significance of mother migration as a contributory factor to trends in incest in Sri Lanka (Nirasha Perera, M R Rathnayake, 2013)

In this study, the qualitative data collected showed that the unhealthy family background leads mothers to migrate. This may be aggravated by migration. The absence of mother leads to the child vulnerable to sexual

abuse from male relatives and neighbors. In this research the quantitative data collected showed that out of 8 cases of sexual abuse of children, 4 cases (50% of all sexual abuse cases) are the children of migrant mothers.

Furthermore, from the focus group discussions and the key informant interviews, it came to know that, in Ampara district Akkaraipattu Unit, which includes Addalaichenai, Aalayadivembu, Akkaraipattu, Irakkamam more influences in child abuse. In this Akkaraipattu Unit, Addalaichenai divisional secretariat area more influences. Further, key informants state that nowadays sexual abuse are increased and mostly it is held by family relatives such as father, second father, brother and other male relatives. Probation officers stated that they deal minimum 3 cases of all kind of child abuses per week.

Physical Violence

The study sample did not indicate high levels of physical violence by fathers against children. In some cases, it was held by the step mother and other care givers. The data collected from the divisional secretariat, Addalaichenai and the probation office, Akkaraipattu Unit revealed that about 50 percent of physical abuse cases are with the children of migrant mothers out of 10 physical abuse cases, they dealt for the last two years. Corporal punishment was 10 (school cases).

Table 1: The Details of Child Abuse Addalaichenai Divisional Secretariat Area.

Types of Abuse	Year					
	2012		2013		2014 (up to May)	
	Total children	Children of migrant mothers	Total children	Children of migrant mothers	Total children	Children of migrant mothers
Sexual Abuse	3	2	2	1	2	1
Physical Abuse	6	3	4	2	6	2
Child Abuse	2	1	-	-	-	-
Neglected	11	8	11	8	6	5
Other Abuse	15	10	12	8	5	-
Corporal Punishment	10	-	-	-	-	-

Probation Unit, Akkarapattu Office (2014)

Abandonment

N. Perera and M. Rathnayake (2013), states that sometimes migration was chosen by mothers as a method to abandon their children in the face of problems at home. Sometimes this is because she has a new lover. Sometimes it is just to escape from poverty's daily grind.

According to the focus group discussion and key informant interviews, it was found that, the care givers, grandparent and relatives accept the responsibility to look after the children when mother's foreign employment. But, when they find it difficult to honor the commitment, children are abandoned. According to the research, it was found that about 21 children of migrant mothers are neglected out of 28 neglected children in this research area. Therefore it should be noted that about 75 percent of children were neglected due to the mother's foreign employment.

Early Marriages

The general law of the country stipulates the age of marriage as 18 years. This is applicable for all citizens except for the Muslims. For Muslims, the law does not specify a minimum age limit for marriage. In the area where data

was collected, it was found that early marriage was a relatively common phenomenon for the respondents. It was identified that in some families the female parents too had been teenagers. Early marriage is one of the most prevalent forms of child abuse that exist in Sri Lanka. It is a root cause for migration, extra – marital affairs, child neglect, child abandonment, early pregnancies, institutionalization and even child abuse (Nirasha Perera, and M R Rathnayake ,2013)

The early marriages have a correlation with women's foreign employment. During the focus group discussion it was revealed that most of the girls from poorest family which consist large number of girls enters in to an early marriages. In this situation their life becomes fraught with many challenges and uncertainty. Because, soon after they entered into the life, they got minimum two or three children. It becomes difficult to them to maintain their family due to no experience in financial management and irresponsiveness of life partners.

In some families, women are given up by their spouse. At this juncture, they are tempted by prepaid wages and advanced money or pre departure loans from recruitment agents or brokers for foreign employment. Such as this

situation leads to take decision to migrate abroad for work. On the other hand, in some families women’s foreign employment is a root cause for early marriages.

Having thought that the marriage would provide the girl child the socioeconomic security as well as physical security, some women compel their teenage girl children to marry due to their decisions to migrate abroad for work.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion

Women’s foreign employment has positive implication in economically. It can alleviate poverty or reduce the risk of falling into poverty. Remittances sent by migrants increase domestic consumption and improves access to basic goods. However, women’s foreign employment has many negative impacts on the development of their children.

In general, the majority of Sri Lankan families especially in Eastern province, mothers take care of the family and perform tasks such as cooking, cleaning, taking children to health facilities, helping them with their homework and supervising them during leisure time. At the same time, the traditional role of the father is earning money, yet many roles are shared by fathers and mothers. When the father is the migrant parent, most of the mothers continue playing their traditional role of direct care givers. When mothers migrate, most of the fathers fail to take on the role of direct care giver and perform all the duties previously carried out by mothers. When mother leave the care that is provided to their children is subject to more frequent and more significant changes.

This paper has demonstrated the impacts on children across different dimension of education, health, psychology, violence, early marriage and abuse. According to the research findings, about 102 women migrated abroad for work in the first five months in 2014 while

it was 121 in the year 2013 in the research area.

Therefore, it can be assumed that in these coming years Sri Lanka is likely to experience a larger number of left behind children due to increasing number of women’s foreign employment. In this situation, the country needs effective policies that can maximize the positive effects of women’s foreign employment and minimize the negative effects on their children. Policy makers should pay more attention and give more priority to the children living without their parents.

Recommendations

Implement the existing strictures on maternal migration and monitoring mechanism

Enforce the existing strictures on migration such as the regulation against women who have children under three years old. Further, relevant authorities such as Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, Children’s Secretariat of Ministry of Child Development and Women’s Affairs and the National Child Protection Authority should take action to monitor the care plans of children of migrant mothers and coordinate efforts to support families of migrant mothers.

Revision of existing policies

The existing policies and regulation should be revised regarding better assistance of the children left behind. A specific effort should be made to identify and address this issue within national development frameworks such as the national development plan. This will help to improve nature, level and quality of services provided to children in difficulties.

Raising public awareness about women’s foreign employment and support to role of fathers

The authorities and other stake holders who play a role in migration should make the existing information about studies, which make it clear and accurate information on women’s foreign employment issues, policies

and services widely available. This will increase awareness and will help families make informed decisions that prioritize children’s welfare when preparing to migrate to work abroad.

Although the convention on the child right stresses the role of both mothers and fathers in child rearing, awareness projects should be developed to specifically educate fathers and to equip them with knowledge they need to constructively support their children left behind, specially their daughters. This will help to prevent school drop outs, early marriage and abuse. Aware the children, fathers and care givers on child abuse and how to report incidents of child abuse and the services available at community level for children.

Provide the knowledge of reproductive health

It should be implemented or improved the reproductive health teaching in schools. It would cover issues, faced by children of migrant women such as early marriage, incest and child abuse.

Building the capacities of care givers

A significant proportion of children left behind suffer from emotional problems due to lack of sensitivity, knowledge and capacity on the part of their care givers. Project should be developed to empower and support care givers, as they deal with their own specific problems. Specific attention should be paid to grandparents who have their own specific needs.

Providing support services for children

Provide material support for the children of migrant mothers who are vulnerable to school drop outs. Further, strengthen counseling services and monitoring the children of migrant mothers by the child protection committees, the development of probation. Moreover, it should be maintain day care centers where children can be in a healthy background which will help the children to

grow physically and psychologically. Besides, children should be involved with extracurricular activities after school or children’s clubs after school. It will lead the children to be in a protective environment. Because, the children left behind are mostly abused at home.

Furthermore, community level support groups should be encouraged by child rights promotion officers, probation officers and other social welfare officers should support children, fathers and care givers when facing problems resulting from women’s foreign employment.

Extend self-employment facilities for women

Provide support such as material, training for entrepreneurship, marketing and financial for women who lost their bread winner of the family to do self-employment. It would be helpful to decrease the children left behind.

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