

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF
THE MIGRATION OF
SRI LANKAN TRANSNATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS
ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND**

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ABSTRACT

Some of the world's largest flows of temporary migrant workers originate in Asian countries. Almost all of these migration flows involve the separation of the migrant from their families whether extended or nuclear. Consequently, transnational families in which one or more members are out of the country for several years are increasingly common in the Asian region. Moreover, there are increasing numbers of migrant families with one or both parents being overseas for work for a significant part of the growing up of their children. In the Asian region, a large proportion of absent mothers are found in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. While the issue of the families and children left behind by migrant women has been intensively studied from a number of perspectives in the Asian Region, especially in the Philippines, it remains under-researched and indeed little understood in Sri Lanka, which is one of the major suppliers of overseas domestic workers.

Currently, the Sri Lankan government faces a dilemma. On one hand, remittances from overseas migrant workers overseas are the second largest source of foreign export earnings, and 60 per cent of this is from the migrants in Middle East countries where the majority of domestic workers are employed. On the other hand, there is a growing concern with the social effects of that movement on the children left behind by migrant women. Some countries in the region have banned the deployment of women migrant workers, but this has simply channelled them into undocumented flows. Although the government of Sri Lanka had several discussions to restrict the migration of females, it was found such a decision would be unworkable. A virtual vacuum of empirical evidence regarding the effects of the absence of mothers on their families and children left behind is recognised. Therefore, by examining how the families and children left behind are influenced by the migration of the "light of the home", this thesis provides valuable information that is urgently required by policy makers.

The thesis reports on a field survey of 400 Sri Lankan families where the mother has gone to work in a foreign country as a domestic worker and detailed discussions with key stakeholders in the study area. It examines the effects of the migration of domestic workers on the economic and social situation of their families and children. On one hand, the effects of increased money on the overall economic well-being of their families and the education of children are positive. On the other hand, there are several negative impacts on the behavioural

patterns and health of the children left behind and the family as a whole. This study also reports on the arrangements that are made by the migrant women for taking care of the children while they are away and how they maintain intimacy with their families from a distance. Differences in the impacts are investigated between urban, rural, and estate based households as well as according to the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the migrants. In addition, the thesis discusses the demographic and socio-economic context of Sri Lanka and the improvement in socio-economic levels and international migration patterns of females to provide a comprehensive picture of domestic worker migration. It also develops a theoretical framework of transnational domestic worker migration in Sri Lanka.

Finally, it explores some of the policy implications of the findings, and suggests some recommendations in maximising the positive effects and minimising the negative effects of women's migration on families and children. It further argues that there is a need to explore best practice models, which support the families of migrant workers but also facilitate regular intimate contact between migrant and family while gaining economic advantages of migration. There is every indication that migration of this type will continue and indeed increase as the drivers of it are intensifying, and banning the movement of women domestics has been attempted in several Asian contexts with negative results for the women involved.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or any other tertiary institution, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis being made available in the Discipline of Geographical and Environmental Studies/The University Library for loan and photocopying.

Swarnalatha Ukwatta

January 2010

DEDICATION

To my father who passed away during my PhD candidature, mother, husband, son, daughter-in-law, and daughter for their unconditional love and support

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ACRONYMS

CBSL	Central Bank of Sri Lanka
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DC&S	Department of Census and Statistics
DS	Divisional Secretariat
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council countries
GCE O/L	General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level
GCE A/L	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GN	Grama Niladhari
HDI	Human Development Index
ICMR	UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Family
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMI	International Migration Institute
IMPP	International Migration Policy Programme
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
NIEs	Newly Industrialised Economies
OCW	Overseas Contract Worker
SL Rs.	Sri Lanka Rupees
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
SPSS	Statistical Product and Service Solutions
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
WHO	World Health Organisation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	II
DECLARATION.....	IV
DEDICATION.....	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	VI
ACRONYMS.....	VIII
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	IX
LIST OF TABLES.....	XIV
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XVII
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Objectives of the study.....	6
1.3 Research questions.....	7
1.4 The demographic and economic context of Sri Lanka.....	7
1.5 International migration and remittances.....	12
1.6 Increasing scholarly attention towards the international mobility of women working overseas.....	16
1.6.1 International labour migration and the Asian region.....	17
1.6.2 Increasing female labour migration from Asia.....	22
1.6.3 Domestic workers in international migration.....	25
1.7 The study of the families and children left behind by Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers.....	27
1.8 Organisation of the thesis.....	30
CHAPTER 2 SRI LANKAN WOMEN, INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, AND THE TRANSNATIONAL FAMILY.....	33
2.1 Introduction.....	33
2.2 International migration flows.....	33

2.3	Changing role of women in Sri Lanka.....	35
2.4	Improvement in socio-economic status of women in Sri Lanka.....	37
2.5	Migration of domestic workers.....	41
2.6	International female labour migration and the family.....	47
2.6.1	The family in Sri Lanka.....	47
2.6.2	The family in transformation.....	49
2.6.3	The emergence of transnational families.....	50
2.7	Conclusion.....	51
 CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....		52
3.1	Introduction.....	52
3.2	Ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues.....	53
3.3	Mixed methodological approach: justification for the choice.....	55
3.3.1	Triangulation.....	58
3.3.2	Mixed methodological approaches in migration studies.....	58
3.4	Theoretical framework of the study	59
3.5	Data collection.....	61
3.5.1	Survey research.....	61
3.5.2	Selection of the study area.....	63
3.5.3	The context of the study area.....	69
3.5.4	Sample selection.....	72
3.5.5	Preparatory work for data collection.....	73
3.5.6	Field work	77
3.5.7	FGDs.....	78
3.6	Data analysis and presentation.....	80
3.6.1	Quantitative data analysis.....	80
3.6.2	Qualitative data analysis.....	81
3.7	Reflections of the research process.....	84
3.8	Conclusion.....	85

CHAPTER 4 TRANSNATIONAL THEORISING OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION.....	86
4.1 Introduction.....	86
4.2 The transformation of global migration system.....	86
4.3 Traditional theoretical approaches to labour migration.....	89
4.4 Bringing women in: an overview of current theory.....	95
4.5 From migrant to transmigrant: theorising transnational migration.....	99
4.6 Bridging gender, transnationalism, and domestic worker migration.....	102
4.7 Conclusion.....	106
CHAPTER 5 MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS: BEFORE DEPARTURE AND AT THE DESTINATION.....	107
5.1 Introduction.....	107
5.2 The institutional structure of labour migration in Sri Lanka.....	109
5.3 Female domestic workers before the departure.....	111
5.3.1 Recruitment procedure.....	113
5.3.2 Financing foreign employment.....	115
5.3.3 Training.....	118
5.3.4 Arrangements for childcare.....	120
5.4 Female domestic workers at the destination.....	122
5.4.1 Migrant destinations.....	123
5.4.2 Living and working conditions.....	124
5.4.3 Exploitation and abuse.....	126
5.5 Complaints from domestic workers	128
5.6 Conclusion.....	130
CHAPTER 6 THE DECISION TO MIGRATE AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANTS.....	131
6.1 Introduction.....	131

6.2	The decision making process.....	132
6.3	Characteristics of migrant domestic workers.....	139
6.3.1	Area of residence.....	139
6.3.2	Age.....	140
6.3.3	Ethnic groups.....	142
6.3.4	Marital status.....	143
6.3.5	Education.....	145
6.4	Conclusion.....	147
 CHAPTER 7 TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERING.....		148
7.1	Introduction.....	148
7.2	The children left behind by migrant mothers.....	150
7.3	Leaving their children to care for the children of other mothers.....	153
7.4	Consequences of distant mothering.....	159
7.4.1	Education of children.....	161
7.4.2	Emotional strains and behavioural changes in children.....	165
7.4.3	Health of children.....	169
7.4.4	Child abuse.....	169
7.5	Negotiating care work in the transnational family.....	171
7.5.1	Transnational communication.....	172
7.5.2	Reciprocal visits	175
7.6	Conclusion.....	176
 CHAPTER 8 ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF MIGRATION ON		
FAMILIES.....		178
8.1	Introduction.....	178
8.2	Economic impacts on families.....	181
8.2.1	Household income.....	182
8.2.2	Remitting behaviour.....	193
8.2.3	Living condition and household consumption.....	195

8.2.4 Investments and savings.....	200
8.3 Social impacts of migration.....	203
8.3.1 Changes in gender roles.....	204
8.3.2 Skills acquired.....	208
8.3.3 Marital stability.....	209
8.4 Respondents' views on female migration overseas.....	212
8.5 Conclusion.....	215
CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	217
9.1 Introduction.....	217
9.2 Findings related to the study's objectives.....	217
9.2.1 The demographic and socio-economic context and the trends and patterns of international female migration.....	219
9.2.2 Migrant domestic workers before their departure and in destination countries.....	221
9.2.3 Reasons for migration and the characteristics of migration.....	224
9.2.4 Theoretical framework in incorporating gender and transnational migration.....	226
9.2.5 Transnational mothering.....	226
9.2.6 Economic and social impacts of migration on families.....	231
9.3 Policy implications and recommendations.....	237
9.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research.....	246
9.5 Future prospects of female migration in Sri Lanka.....	247
9.6 Conclusion.....	248
REFERENCES.....	250
APPENDIX I.....	268
APPENDIX II.....	271
APPENDIX III.....	273
APPENDIX IV.....	306
APPENDIX V.....	336

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	Population, average annual rate of growth, proportion of females, and sex ratio, 1871-2010.....	8
Table 1.2	Changes in TFR in South Asian countries, 1970-1975 to 2005-2010.....	10
Table 1.3	Changes in life expectancy at birth in South Asian countries by sex, 1975-1980 to 2025-2030.....	10
Table 1.4	Migrant remittance inflows in US \$ billion, 2000-2008.....	15
Table 1.5	Percentage distribution of female migrants to the total international migrants by area, 1960 – 2005.....	19
Table 1.6	Proportion of female international migrants in selected Asian out-mmigration Countries.....	23
Table 2.1	Percentage distribution of educational attainment by sex, 1971 and 2006.....	39
Table 2.2	Percentage distribution of the total departures for foreign employment by manpower levels, 1994-2008.....	43
Table 2.3	Average household size by sector, 1963-2003/04.....	49
Table 3.1	Paradigms: nature of reality along three elements.....	54
Table 3.2	Registered departures for foreign employment by district, 2001-2006.....	64
Table 3.3	Percentage distribution of total departures by sex, 2001-2006.....	65
Table 3.4	Percentage distribution of the registered male and female departures for foreign employment and domestic workers by district, 2006.....	66
Table 3.5	Some key indices of population and socio-economic characteristics: Colombo and Kurunegala districts.....	70
Table 3.6	Thematic framework for analysis.....	84
Table 4.1	The validity of the observations of Massey <i>et al.</i> (1998) in the analysis of female labour migration.....	92
Table 5.1	Whether the migrant women had any problem in finding money to finance migration by sector and ethnicity.....	116
Table 5.2	Number and percentage distribution of women who sought money in securing work abroad by source.....	117
Table 5.3	Number and percentage distribution of women who agreed to repay loan by the period specified.....	118

Table 5.4	Number and percentage distribution of the persons who agreed to provide childcare support in the absence of mothers.....	122
Table 5.5	Number and percentage distribution of migrants in the study and total female departures in 2008 by the country.....	124
Table 5.6	Number and percentage distribution of migrant women by the nature of work overseas.....	125
Table 5.7	Number and percentage distribution of migrant women by the nature of abuse they faced.....	128
Table 5.8	Number and percentage distribution of the nature of complaints by sex, 2007...	129
Table 6.1	Number and percentage distribution of migrant women by the main reason for Migration.....	133
Table 6.2	Number and percentage distribution of migrant women by the reason for migration - multiple responses.....	135
Table 6.3	Percentage distribution of respondent households in the study and the population distribution of Colombo and Kurunegala districts and Sri Lanka by sector.....	139
Table 6.4	Percentage distribution of the total females in Sri Lanka in 2006 and the migrants in the study by marital status and age.....	144
Table 7.1	Number and percentage distribution of migrant women by two sample groups and number of children.....	151
Table 7.2	Number and percentage distribution of women by number children and sector..	152
Table 7.3	The nature of work of migrant women overseas.....	154
Table 7.4	Distribution of the type of migrant families by sector: at the time of migration and at the time of the survey.....	155
Table 7.5	Main person responsible for childcare in the absence of mother by sector.....	156
Table 7.6	Opinion of the respondents on children's happiness with caregivers.....	158
Table 7.7	Number and percentage of migrant families by the persons who supported children's education in the absence of their mothers.....	163
Table 7.8	Problems faced by the children in the absence of their mothers.....	166
Table 7.9	Changes in the behaviour of children in the absence of mother.....	167
Table 7.10	Whether the behaviour of children was affected by mother's migration.....	168
Table 7.11	Mode of communication with family members by sector.....	172

Table 7.12	Frequently contacted person by sector.....	174
Table 7.73	Problems mothers discussed with their children in letters or phone calls by sector - multiple responses.....	175
Table 8.1	Number and percentage distribution of migrants' husbands who were employed at the time of the survey by employment category and status.....	183
Table 8.2	Sufficiency of monthly household income before and after migration.....	185
Table 8.3	Number and percentage distribution of migrants' monthly salary abroad.....	188
Table 8.4	Main source of income to the monthly expenses of the households by those who reported their monthly income was sufficient and not sufficient.....	189
Table 8.5	Household opinion of whether the household income increased due to Migration.....	192
Table 8.6	Remittance transfers by sector, marital status, and ethnic group.....	194
Table 8.7	Number and percentage distribution of remittance recipients.....	194
Table 8.8	Reason for not sending money to the migrants' husbands.....	195
Table 8.9	Ownership of major items before and after migration.....	196
Table 8.10	Household opinion of the impact of migration on the household.....	197
Table 8.11	How family members spent money sent by the migrant - multiple responses....	199
Table 8.12	Investments by sector, marital status, and ethnic group.....	200
Table 8.13	Whether migrant families were able to save money by sector, marital status, and ethnic group.....	202
Table 8.14	Respondent opinion about the adequacy of their savings.....	202
Table 8.15	Negative impacts of migration on families-multiple responses.....	210
Table 8.16	Reasons for recommending women to work overseas.....	212
Table 8.17	Reasons for not recommending females to migrate.....	212
Table 8.18	Suggestions of respondents on female migration.....	213

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1	Population growth and change in the sex ratio, 1871-2010.....	9
Figure 1.2	Departures for foreign employment by sex, 1986-2008.....	13
Figure 1.3	The share of garments, private remittances and other earnings to the total export earnings, 1990-2008.....	15
Figure 1.4	Chapter outline of the thesis.....	31
Figure 2.1	Literacy rates by sex, 1881-2006.....	38
Figure 2.2	Employed persons by employment status and sex, 2006.....	40
Figure 2.3	Departures for foreign employment by different occupational categories and sex, 2008.....	43
Figure 2.4	Estimated stock of Sri Lankan OCWs by the country of destination and sex, 2007.....	44
Figure 2.5	Domestic worker departures by district, 2007.....	46
Figure 3.1	Methods and methodological approach used in the study.....	56
Figure 3.2	Theoretical framework of the study.....	60
Figure 3.3	Departures for foreign employment by district and sex, 2006.....	67
Figure 3.4	Sample selection procedure of the study.....	68
Figure 3.5	Analytical procedure of qualitative data.....	83
Figure 4.1	Inter-related arenas of global migration transition.....	87
Figure 4.2	Theoretical framework for the explanation of the migration process of Sri Lankan domestic workers overseas.....	104
Figure 5.1	Age distribution of the children of migrant women.....	121
Figure 6.1	The decision making process of Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers.....	132
Figure 6.2	Persons mainly responsible for making the decision to work overseas.....	138
Figure 6.3	Age distributions of the migrants in the sample and the total female population in Sri Lanka	140
Figure 6.4	Age distribution of the total female departures for foreign employment in 2008 and the migrants in the study.....	141
Figure 6.5	Age distribution of the departures for foreign employment by sex, 2008.....	142
Figure 6.6	Distribution of migrant women by ethnicity.....	143

Figure 6.7	Marital status of the migrants at the time of the survey by sector.....	144
Figure 6.8	Educational attainment of migrants in the study and the total female Population.....	145
Figure 7.1	Percentage distribution of migrant women by number of children and sector....	152
Figure 7.2	Percentage distribution of migrant families who reported the requirement for institutional childcare support by sector.....	157
Figure 7.3	Opinion of respondents on the happiness with caregivers.....	158
Figure 7.4	Impacts of mothers' earnings on children's education.....	162
Figure 7.5	Proportion of households reported a change in the behaviour in children.....	167
Figure 7.6	Number of migrant families who reported an illness of children and type of illness.....	170
Figure 8.1	The impacts of women's migration on families.....	179
Figure 8.2	Income of the migrants' husbands by sector and ethnic group.....	184
Figure 8.3	Sufficiency of monthly household income before and after migration by sector and ethnic group.....	186
Figure 8.4	Income distribution of the respondent households whose monthly income was sufficient to support their families as a result of migration.....	187
Figure 8.5	Sufficiency of monthly household income by the duration of work abroad.....	188
Figure 8.6	Main source of monthly income of the household by sector.....	190
Figure 8.7	Main source of the monthly income of the household by ethnic group.....	191
Figure 8.8	Household opinion of the increase in household income by ethnic group.....	192
Figure 8.9	Household opinion of the increase in household income by the duration of work abroad.....	193
Figure 8.10	Monthly income distribution of migrants while working overseas and their husbands at home.....	205
Figure 8.11	Changes in the decision making power of migrant women in financial matters and household activities as a result of migration.....	208
Figure 8.12	Marital status of migrant women - at the time of initial migration and at the time of the survey.....	209
Figure 9.1	Research questions and the objectives of the study.....	218