



Children's perceptions on their parent's migration for foreign employment

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Abstract

Migration of men and women in search of foreign employment is a popular economic activity in Sri Lanka. A large number of migrant mothers and fathers leave their children at home, transferring their care giving responsibilities to another person. Therefore, a group of children in the Sri Lankan society have been deprived of the vital role of one parent in the context of labour migration. This particular study attempted to identify the perceptions of some of those children regarding their parent's migration. Three Grama Niladhari Divisions, viz., Matotagama, Nakuttiya and Kadaweediya having high proportions of male and female migrants in Matara Divisional Secretariat Division in Matara District was selected as the field setting for this study. Primary data collection was done through an interviewer administered questionnaire, in-depth interviews and observation using 30 households. Main respondents were children between the ages of 12 and 18 while returnee migrant parent, spouse of the migrant and the primary caregiver were also taken as supportive respondents. The study revealed that, in all three areas, children felt the absence of their mother more than that of their father. The reason was that, in the absence of a majority of migrant fathers the children's mother was the primary caregiver. Findings also shows that although the migrant parent could easily fulfill the material needs of the children through money, the fulfillment of their emotional needs were not that easy.

Keywords: migration, children, perceptions

Introduction

Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment has identified that the foreign employment industry is the second largest earner of foreign exchange in Sri Lanka (SLBFE, 2006). Among the total number of migrants, women constitute the majority: The female participation for foreign employment was 59.32 of all departures in 2005. Current economic hardships and lack of employment opportunities in Sri Lanka have driven women overseas to earn money as live-in-domestic servants in the Middle East. (Gamburd, 2000).

The participation of women in international migration has raised both prospects and challenges. A large number of female migrants leave their children at home, transferring their care giving responsibilities to another person, often to her partner or a relative. Critics of migration feel that the migration of mothers has damaging effects on their children, leaving them malnourished, neglected, unruly and taunted in school (Gamburd, 2000). Ratnayake (1999) also observed that the absence of the mother would result in insecurity and long-term emotional repercussions in children. Although the lack of information and research is a barrier when identifying exact effects of father's

migration on the children, it is not incorrect to state that the separation of either mother or father has its own implications in a child's life.

Although the parent's role in a child's life is crucial, in the context of labour migration, many children in Sri Lankan society have been deprived of that vital role. Therefore this particular study will especially focus upon the children's perceptions on their parent's migration.

Research Questions

1. What are the children's perceptions on their parent's migration?
2. What is the nature of care giving received in the absence of one parent?
3. Is there a difference between the children's perceptions of separation from mother to father?

Materials and Methods

Three Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions having a high proportion of male and female migrants in Matara Divisional Secretariat Division in Matara District was selected as the field setting. Of the three GN divisions, 409D Matotagama is an urban low-income

settlement with Sinhalese predominating while 417A Kadaweediya is an urban low-income settlement with a majority Muslim population. 430B Nakuttiya is a rural, Sinhalese area. By design, the main respondents were children between the ages of 12 and 18. Hence, 30 households which had a male or female labour migrant with children from ages 12 to 18 were selected, out of all the migrant households within the selected three GN divisions. Primary data collection was done using an interviewer - administered questionnaire, in-depth interviews and observation. Questionnaire survey was conducted with the adult members of the household viz., the returnee migrant, spouse of the migrant and the primary care giver. In-depth interviews were conducted with children by taking one child from each family. Careful observation was also used to collect information on children's behaviour with parents and caregivers and, the household environment. The information collected by the in-depth interviews and the discussions were presented and analyzed qualitatively. Several quotations and a case study could also be derived as pertinent, from the in-depth interviews.

Results and Discussion

The 30 migrants studied had 76 children; 93.3% of the migrant mothers and 100% of the migrant fathers had less than 4 children in each family. Only one migrant mother had 6 children. At the time of the parent's departure, more than half (51.3%) of the children were less than five years of age; 22.4% of them were less than two years old. In the case of mother's departure, 43.9% of the children were below the age of five and 60% at the father's departure. Therefore, it can be understood that the most important formative years of the majority of children were spent in the absence of their mother or father, a critical factor for their physical and emotional development. According to Cardillo (1998), a child may develop a 'secure' personality style as a result of the mother's and father's sensitivity and responsiveness and children who develop 'secure' personality styles feel confident to cope with different situations. Also, the parent-child relationship is an important factor in determining how the child will learn to perceive his or her later relationships, abilities and skills (Backett, 2003; Bakshi, 2000).

Frequency of separation

In this study, it was identified that most of the parents had been traveling abroad for more than once leaving their family behind. Since mothers and fathers tend to migrate more than once, the children

have to live long periods without their parent. Children's perceptions revealed that not only had their mothers and fathers traveled abroad more than once, they had also stayed away from them for relatively long periods. "Our mother went abroad four times. Still she is there. We have been living nine years without her." a girl child of 15.

Migrant mothers had stayed away from their children for longer period than the fathers. Almost 80% of the migrant mothers had stayed away from their children longer than seven years, while the comparable figure was 46.7% in the case of fathers.

Children's perception on parent's migration

Almost all the children who had participated in this study objected to the migration of mothers. A majority of the girl children said it was unbearable to see their mother leaving them. "I cannot fully explain the feeling I had when I see my mother disappear out of my sight at the airport. I remember I cried all the way back home" A girl child of 15

"I think it was a feeling of emptiness" A girl child of 18

In the case of father's migration, 80% of the children said that their father had to leave due to their poverty and that there was no alternative. Almost all the children whose primary caregiver was their mother, had got used to the father's migration as they have their own mother with them. "Although I miss my father, I have my mother with me. Therefore I feel I am well protected and loved. It's different from having to live without mother" A girl child of 15

Children of Muslim families expressed that they have their male relatives (grandfather, uncle or elder brother) to look after them since there is a common practice of several families living together within Muslim households. However, a few children felt that they miss their father and that it was better if he was with them. "I feel safe when father was at home. Although we have mother's relatives all around us, its not the same." A girl child of 14

Nature of Caregiving received in absence of one parent

With regards to the primary caregiver, a remarkable difference can be seen in the cases of mother and father: in the case of father's migration 86.7% of children had their mother as the primary caregiver. When mother was the migrant, only two fathers were identified as primary caregivers. 73.3% of the children had their grand mother as their primary care giver. There was one household where only the four

children were left without an adult member in the house. In that household the thirteen year old elder sister took care of the younger siblings. There was one special instance where the Probation and Child Care had to take care of three children by placing them in two separate children's homes.

Only 24.1% of the primary caregivers were below the age of 40 while nearly 45% of them were 51 years or older. In three cases, children were looked after by grandmothers who were older than 71. As Save the Children (2006) pointed out, these age differences between the child and the caregiver could lead to communication problems. A majority of caregivers show a low level of educational attainment: two grandmothers had no formal education while 32% of them had only the primary education. The low level of educational attainment of the primary caregiver also could raise problems regarding the educational support for children.

Children's perception on mother's role as the primary caregiver in the absence of the father

It was identified in this study that in the majority of father migrated households (86.7%), mother was the primary caregiver and she had been responsible for the children's wellbeing. According to the children, when mother was the primary caregiver mother's extended family had an important role with regards to caring for them. Since some of the grandparents, uncles and aunts were residing in the same house with the migrant's children, and the close relationship with them was a good social influence in the absence of their father. In Kadaweediya, the normal household setting of Muslim communities provided a positive environment for the children of father migrated families. In the Muslim community, more than one family reside in one household. Since they live and eat together, the children of the father migrant households were not totally disturbed by the father's absence.

In almost all cases migrant father sends money to his spouse in Sri Lanka. Therefore there was no economic burden to the mother.

Children's perception on father's role as the primary caregiver in the absence of the mother

The investigation of children's perception of the father's role in the absence of the mother is shown in three main dimensions, in this study. The three dimensions were, undertaking domestic work, relationship with children and use of alcohol. In the absence of the mother, only two fathers identified

themselves as primary caregivers in this study. "They had done all the domestic work such as cooking, washing, cleaning, feeding and bathing children. The relationship between the father and the children were comfortable in both the households. The children of those two fathers expressed their gratitude to their fathers for not using alcohol and according to them it was one of the reasons why their fathers had been able to devote time to their needs.

In the remaining households, primary caregiver was someone other than father. Some of the fathers had bought material things for the children from the money sent by their mother. However, none of them had helped with the domestic work or children's educational activities. Alcohol consumption was higher among the fathers in Matotagama and it was a serious social problem among these migrant households. Since a majority of the fathers consume alcohol daily, the expenditure on liquor was higher in those households. Therefore most of the migrant wives were not sending money to their husbands as they had misused the money sent by the migrant, before.

There were two fathers who had started relationships with other women after the wife's migration. One of them was in custody due to the offense of dual marriages at the time of this study. *There was one special case in Matotagama where three children had to be kept in two separate children's homes due to the behaviour of their alcoholic father. The following quotation reveal the perceptions of the children and their vulnerability.* "My mother went abroad leaving us with our grandmother. Our father started to scold and beat us daily after consuming alcohol. My sister had to go to the police. We were kept in two children's homes" A boy child of 12

Children's Perception on the role of grandparents in absence of mother or father

Children who were left with the grandparents revealed that they were given enough food and cared well at times of sickness. However, the love and attention of the mother could not be replaced by any other caregiver according to the majority of children. "My grandmother takes care of me and my brother very well. But its not the same as when we had our mother. I miss her most of the time" A girl child of 13
All the grandmothers lived with the children all the time either in her place or in the migrant's household. They had done all the domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, washing and feeding small children. According to several older children some of the

grandmothers had even used to wash their cloths so as not to let them feel the absence of their mother. The burden of domestic work in the absence of the mother had not been a problem identified among the children in this study. Some of the older girls had said that they sometimes helped with household work but it was voluntary. However, under the grandmother's care some of the children thought that they were overprotected. Their close scrutiny had been a nuisance for some male children. Even though the grandmothers and male relatives attempted to set limits on their behaviour, boys were strong enough to act stubbornly. The majority of children indicated that they were not punished during the absence of parents. One older girl revealed that in most cases the necessary disciplinary action was ignored in order not to hurt the feelings of children in the absence of their parents. "My younger brother behaves differently after the mother's migration. Although he needs to be punished, grandmother ignores his bad behaviour. He is spoilt." A girl of 17

Therefore, attraction to peer groups, devoting more time for playing, displaying anger towards family members, inadequate attention to educational activities were identified as behaviours prevalent among teenage boys after parent's migration. However, researcher's observations during the interview revealed that a majority of the children showed close contact with their caregivers.

Conclusions

While this study confirms some of the findings of previous research which discuss negative impacts of the migration of mothers, some important insights have emerged regarding the perceptions of children regarding the migration of fathers and about the fathers' role as primary caregivers in the absence of mothers. In all three areas, children felt the absence of their mother more than that of their father. The reason was that in the absence of a majority of migrant fathers, the children's mother was the primary caregiver.

When mother is absent, the father's role has not been played effectively in majority of cases. Because of the patriarchal attitudes, the husband of the migrant didn't take over the child care responsibilities and therefore, the children were left vulnerable, at home. Since more focus has been given so far for the role of mother in caring for children in Sri Lanka, father's role as a caregiver is neglected within family.

Finally, it was revealed that, although the migrant parent could easily fulfill the material needs of the children through money, fulfillment of their emotional needs is not that easy. Especially, the children feel the absence of their mother even though they were looked after by the best available caregivers. Therefore a mother could not be replaced by any other person in the Sri Lankan setting - whether it is in an urban or a rural area.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledge the guidance given to her by Prof. Ramani Jayatilake, Department of Sociology, University of Colombo and the funds given under the Inter-University Research and Training Programme conducted by the SPARC, University of Colombo.

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