
Female labour migration to Middle East through a gender lens: A thematic case study on the factors effecting urban poor migration and the socio - economic impact

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Introduction

Middle East is the main destination for labor migration in Sri Lanka with over 93 percent of the country's labor flowing into the Middle Eastern region (SLBFE, 2015). The challengeable lives experienced by the Sri Lankan women migrants in Middle East countries are seen and heard through media. Therefore, using a gender approach and the thematic case study method it was attempted to examine the factors influencing the decision to migrate and the impact it causes within the household and to the individual. This study is unique, because it links factors and consequences of migration to gender roles and gendered power relations that perpetuate inequities in migrant outcomes.

Methodology

This study follows Braun and Clerk's (2006) method for thematic analysis. Thematic case analysis is suited for small projects/case studies using 6-10 participants (Fugard & Potts, 2015). This approach recognizes six steps to conduct research and analysis; familiarization, generating initial codes, discovering, reviewing, defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary data were gathered through fifteen (15) in-depth interviews from low-income male and female respondents, who are returned migrants from Kadaweediya North Grama Niladhari division in Panadura. The quantitative and qualitative data collected through the semi structured questionnaire were analyzed with the thematic analysis data coding techniques.

Results and discussion

The results of the study revealed that the major push factors for urban poor women's migration are linked to their productive and reproductive roles. Respondents recognized insufficient income (to meet day to day expenses) and the general sense of vulnerability and impoverishment felt in relation to deprivation of assets (such as housing and education) as reasons for migration. These reasons are directly linked with the women's' productive role. The other important cause for female migration is the change to gender roles or added

responsibilities in their gender roles. Factors such as demise of partner, desertion, sickness or alcoholism of male-partner, old age care, indebtedness changed subsidiary roles women performed in the reproductive sphere to prominent roles in both reproduction (caregiving) and production (breadwinner) spheres.

In addition, socio-psychological aspects such as mental stress, induced by home environments and the triple burden (Moser, 1993) were grounds for female migration. The major migration push factors for the urban poor male were insufficient income, unemployment and asset deprivation. Thus, male migration is a result of the males' prominent role in productive sphere. Partnered/married urban males migrated without any change to their gender roles in contrast to female migrants. Table 1 depicts the association between gender roles and the socio-economic factors influencing migration.

Table 1 Gender roles and causes of migration

Gender role	Factors influencing migration	Female (%)	Male (%)
Productive sphere	Insufficient Income, Poverty- Feeling poor/ self assessment of impoverishment, To uplift the family condition, To construct house for dwelling, Indebtedness, Lack of job opportunities.	56.5	93
Change in roles/added responsibilities/ (productive and reproductive)	Partner's alcoholism, Partner's unemployment, Dissertation, Partner's illness, To take care of parents, To finance caring responsibilities	30.5	0
Reproductive responsibilities	To educate children	9	7
Other	Stress	4	0
	Total	100	100

It was also found that the education levels and skill categories of migrants have a gendered dimension. In contrast to the female migrants, the male migrants chose work in semi-skilled job categories and have had attained on average a higher level of formal education or have gathered other marketable skills (as vehicle servicing skills, heavy vehicle operating skills etc.) than their female counterparts. Female migrants were limited to seek unskilled jobs as they possessed low levels of formal education and were unskilled. Most of the jobs the females are limited to involve paid care responsibilities and paid reproductive work (domestic work, nursing etc). These deficiencies between male and female human capital capabilities, eventually lead to different migrate experiences and differentiated access to resources.

In comparison to pre-migration status, the economic impact of migration on both the male and female urban poor and on their households were positive in terms of increases in monthly income and progresses in household access to assets (in land, houses, gold, children's education attainments etc). However, there is a clear gender wage gap in the migrant employment income which disfavours the migrant female over the migrant male. Female migrant returnees also reported increases in economic decision making powers and skill improvements, symbolizing empowerment and augmentations to their gender power relations. Urban poor returned migrant females reported negative workplace experiences due to verbal, physical and sexual harassments, over work and irregular payments of salary. However, the grievances of urban-poor male migrants were by far limited to over working than other types of labor exploitations. These experiences are a direct result of the human capital variation between males and female migrants which enables the males to enter more formalized and regularized employment options.

Considering the impact on the children due to the mother's migration, it is clearly negative. When mothers migrate seeking employment, children were restricted to the care of grandparents or fathers. School going age children of female migrants reported absenteeism, school dropouts, irregular attendance and low academic performance. Similar finding have been cited by Ukwatta (2010) and Perera and Rathnayake (2013). In contrast, the father's migration did not have such visible impacts on children or their education attainment. Migration of the mother who lacks assistance in child care and other necessary long term care needs impact the welfare of other household members, especially that of children. Thus, the urban poor female migrant is forced to choose between her reproductive and productive roles in the case of her migration.

In the post migration stage, urban-poor women migrants found it difficult to enter local labor markets and 90 percent of the returned migrant females were left unemployed. This induces future migration as unemployment is a push factor to urban poor female migration. In contrast, 80 percent of the male migrants were absorbed into local semi and skilled work categories as their Middle Eastern work experiences presented added advantage in the domestic markets for labor.

Conclusion

This study shows that factors driving urban poor migration have a gendered dimension. During and post migration impact on females and their households are specific and unique. Thus, labour migration policy should take into consideration the gendered characteristics of the urban-poor push factors and the gendered nature of impacts. The state should also pay attention to human capital deficiencies in female migrants and enhance alternative employment

opportunities (local and domestic) for females. In addition, provisioning and financially assisting in long-term child care needs in female-migrant households will improve household well-being.

Keywords: *thematic analysis, urban poor migration, women's migration,*

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