

The Impact of mother migration on children and families

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About 10% of working age Sri Lankan women currently work abroad, the majority as housemaids in the Middle East. Around 75% of these women are married and on average leave two to three children behind in Sri Lanka. The remittances the women send home represent the country's largest source of net foreign exchange. Although housemaids appear to be Sri Lanka's most lucrative export, existing research and anecdotal information suggest large psychosocial costs to the children and husbands of female migrant workers and inadequate response by governments and other stakeholders to migrant family problems. Children of migrants tend to have less supervision at home, are less likely to succeed in school, experience emotional and behavioural problems, and are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. Husbands of migrant workers have difficulties adjusting to the absence of their wife and the loss of their main breadwinner role. Some resort to alcohol or extramarital affairs or neglect/abuse their children; others waste the remittances sent from abroad.

Existing research suggests relationships between positive child outcomes and certain demographic variables and specific intervening variables. Demographic variables such as geographical area, years mother is abroad, ages of children, and socio-economic status seem to predict child outcome. Certain intervening variables which appear to serve as "protective factors" or predictors of child positive outcome include father variables (e.g. role flexibility, parenting skills, lifestyle choices), family variables (e.g. marital relationship, mother communication with children, money management) and primary caregiver (e.g. relationship with father of children, time with children). The objectives of this research are to identify how mother migration affects children and husbands and to understand what protective factors facilitate positive child outcome. One thousand families of migrant mothers, from each of two districts, Karunegala and Colombo, will be randomly selected. Through interviews, questionnaires and focus groups, variables measuring demographics, child outcome and intervening variables will be collected. To counteract the risks of mother migration to children and families, there is a need for greater understanding of the protective factors that facilitate positive child outcome. In addition, appropriate interventions by the government and other stakeholders must be expanded to support families of migrant workers.

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