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Left-behind and struggling: difficulties and strengths of children of migrant women

B C V Senaratna

Department of Community Medicine, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda.

The objectives of this qualitative, descriptive cross-sectional study were to describe difficulties encountered and strengths demonstrated by children left behind by Sri Lankan women migrant workers (employed overseas) and factors associated with such difficulties. Ten focus group discussions with school teachers in suburban schools attended by children of migrant women in the Colombo, Gampaha, and Kurunegala districts and 30 and 10 semi-structured interviews, respectively, given to principal care givers of children of migrant women and to religious leaders in the above districts were conducted to collect data, which were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Most children found it difficult to perform adequately in their academic work and extra-curricular activities. Other difficulties included coping with behavioural problems, inability to maintain health and hygiene, having to attend to household chores and caring for siblings, facing abuse or neglect (or both), lack of role models, and the inability to communicate adequately with substitute-carers. However, some children who recover early from initial reaction to mothers' departures, have the strength to withstand social and economical pressures, are more mature than their peers, survive in many situations without help from others, and have adequate access to human and physical resources.

Common factors perceived as associated with difficulties of left-behind children are poor emotional bonding between children and substitute-care givers, inadequacy of accessible financial and human resources, low educational level of and poor caring by substitute-care givers, changes in household composition, poverty and disadvantaged social conditions, abuse, neglect, and extra-marital affairs and subsequent abuse by adults in the family.

Although some children have the strength and resources to withstand adverse effects of the mothers' migration, such migrations force many of the left-behind children to live with numerous difficulties, which are also associated with complex interacting factors that arise from or have arisen as a result of the mothers' migration. Appropriate policy and other measures are required to ensure that migration of women does not have an adverse impact on the children left behind.

chamaravs@yahoo.com

Tel: 0112758591