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Burden on the substitute-carers of left-behind children of migrant women

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Objective of this qualitative and descriptive cross-sectional study was to describe the perceived burden among substitute-carers of children of migrant women of Sri Lanka (employed overseas) resulting from childcare responsibility. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted among substitute-carers of children of migrant women, in Colombo, Gampaha, and Kurunegala districts. They included grandmothers, fathers, grandfathers, aunts, siblings, and other relatives who have taken over responsibility of childcare. Data analysis was done using qualitative content analysis.

Most female carers were unemployed and some male carers did not have regular employment. Current work of male carers but not of female carers was affected by childcare responsibility. However, some carers had given up their employment in order to care for children, and some others had forgone new employment opportunities. Education (school and higher) of elder children who looked after younger siblings as well as of young relatives in the same capacity has been adversely affected. Unmarried carers of left-behind children have forgone marriage opportunities due to responsibility of childcare, and love affairs of some unmarried carers have got adversely affected. Despite appreciation by others, most fathers did not receive any help from other relatives for childcare, compared to other carers. The strain of childcare affected many carers psychologically, due to their inability to help children in school and other work, fear that they may fail as mother substitutes, and fear that their work may get adversely affected. Physical health of some elderly carers was adversely affected, and some failed to seek health care due childcare responsibility. Disruption of interpersonal relationships with family members, relatives, and friends adversely affected substitute-carers. Most substitute-carers of left-behind children were adversely affected due to responsibility for childcare. Many health and social problems arising from such burdens could be prevented or addressed by providing suitable support services to families of migrant women.