



OPENING MINDS:
RESEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT

Effects of Parental Migration on Educational Developments and Mental Wellbeing of Left-Behind School Children in the Kurunegala District: A Case Study in the Mawathagama Educational Zone

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1 INTRODUCTION

Foreign employment, mainly the unskilled labour market, is the main source of income in South Asian countries and in Sri Lanka it is the largest income earning source in the last decade (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Various years). Middle East constituents remain the largest source of remittance to Sri Lanka, with 60 percent remittance (Kelegama, 2011). Approximately, 1.8 million people, which is equal to 24 percent of countries' labour force, are presently employed abroad (SLFEB, 2015). Female migrants represent nearly 52 percent of the total migrant workers (Senaratna, 2011), and 89 percent of female migrants work as housemaids (IPS, 2013).

Reports of the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau (2013-2015) reveal that 80 percent of the migrant women are married and 90 percent of them have children. The need to migrate is usually a function of the complex interaction of economic, social, familial and political factors. Its economic implications, especially on rural communities who are less advantageous are clearly identified (World Bank, 2006). There is a trend among the young mothers with small children to go abroad to overcome their

family economic problems (Ghosh, 2006). The magnitude of maternal migration appears to be increasing, and labour migration has become of age and sex selective (Perera and Rathnayake, 2013). The migration profiles developed by the Institute of Policy Studies suggested that around 30 percent of the woman migrants are not with their children for the period when they are 2-6 years which is considered as the critical developing period of the child's propounding personality, physical and educational developments (IPS, 2013). A limited numbers of surveys were conducted related to the impact on children left behind by migrant mothers because of methodological challenges. Most of them are quantitative investigations based on household surveys (UNICEF, 2011). Perera and Rathnayake (2013) reveal that children of migrant mothers show several deviations from their peers in schools especially when it comes to emotional outbursts. According to the BMC Psychiatry Report (2015), two in every five left-behind children were likely to have mental disorders (95%) and there is a significant connection between such disorders and the parents' absence.



However, Sanderathne (2011) indicated that Sri Lankan economy as a 'remittance-dependent economy' where its huge trade deficit of US 5.2 million was almost entirely offset by these remittances. Not only at the national level, household level income and easing liquidity capital constrain the investments significant for rural economies in Sri Lanka. As a nation, Sri Lanka faces these two dilemmas where remittance is a key economic dependency and the consequent social challenges the nation undergo as a result of sending childbearing mothers for overseas employments. The relative magnitude of the effect is confusing in literature especially in a situation where the remittances of household income is significant while the relationship between remittances and child educational and psychological effects are affected by such remittances. This is very important policy area for researchers.

The Kurunegala District in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka once recognized as the nation's agrarian stronghold as the largest paddy producing district. But presently, Kurunegala shows the highest female departures (Bulletin of International Migration Statistics of Sri Lanka 2010-2016) with average 13, 000 migrant workers annually leaving their families for economic gains. It is further revealed that 85 percent of the woman left children with either the farther or a grandparent; approximately over fifty thousand children in the district live without their mothers during their period of childhood. National Survey on Emerging Issues among Adolescents in Sri Lanka conducted by UNICEF Sri Lanka (2004) shows that, the deviant behavior of the adolescent school children, such as smoking, alcoholism, is the highest in Kurunegala. Mawathagama is the key electoral of the Kurunegala district and has the second highest number

of school children with deviant behavior. Further, educational data reveals that Kurunegala district records the third highest number of student population in Sri Lanka, with 336,609 in the year 2016, while Colombo and Gampaha districts record 379,840 and 361,008 numbers respectively. The Kurunegala district remains as the single district which has the highest number of schools with 890, while the Colombo district records 405 which is almost half in number. Therefore, it illustrates the need to conduct comprehensiveness research in the Kurunegala district.

This paper is based on a case study of left-behind children in families of parents, who have migrated for remittance earning purposes, in selected schools in the Mawathagama educational zone in the Kurunegala district. The purpose of this study is to analyze the comparative association between parental migration and educational status and mental wellbeing of mid-teenage school children by studying both children of migrants and non-migrant families. It heightened the risk of psychological effects for early childhood developments which is seemingly offset by the economic benefits of the labour migration at the rural level.

The problem of this study is the analysis of whether significant disparities exist in the educational performances and emotional characteristics among the children in migratory and non-migratory families where maternal migration, gender and age of the children would be considered as the key factors of the cognitive developments of children.

2 METHODOLOGY

A stratified random sample was used to survey 200 children as a cohort to represent two government schools for the



study which involved one national school and one rural school, with both having over 2000 students and consisting of the Advanced Level classes. Self-designed structured interviews were conducted with each individual child and cohort divided in four age groups; two gender classes and four types of parental migrant status i.e. both parent migrated, maternal migration, paternal migration and non-migrant family situations are included in the survey. Likert scales were used to obtain psychological characteristics while class teachers were consulted to obtain educational achievements of each child.

Associations were studied on descriptive analysis followed by chi-square tests in quantitative procedure. Analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18. Simple descriptive statistics were calculated to understand the prevalence and profile of each factor inducing the vulnerability of the children in the study. Same methodology was used previously to link children's education (MaKenzie and Rapoport, 2006; Kandel and Kao, 2001) and psychological behaviors (Parreñas, 2005; Yang, Li Ping, Jean and Congdon, 2010) and this mixed approach was used by (Kwaku, 2015) in Ghana and (Perera and Rathnayake, 2013) in Sri Lanka.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research profile is shown in Table 1. As per the data obtained in the survey, both the mother and father migrated abroad in 9.5 percent of students, while among 44.5 percent students, the mother migrated; among 6.5 percent of them, the father migrated and 39.5 percent children were selected from families of non-migrated parents. Father is the main caregiver for the children who live without their mothers and when considering the

family situation, 68.5 percentage of the children in the study lived without one or both the parents.

Results show that maternal migration negatively impact on the educational achievements as per the Figure 1. Where educational performances of children who live with their mothers have shown 43 percent higher than migrant family children and average marks are less than 25 for the for the all subjects, the study further shows that the educational targets of early age teenagers are significantly low in migrant families (Table 2) . However, paternal migration does not clearly affect educational achievements, while general educational performances of children in families who's both parents have migrated is significantly poor. The educational aspirations of the migrant family children are significantly lower than non-migrants.

Results show that children without their mothers have shown less educational outcomes than the children who live with their mothers (Figure 1). Whereas the educational performances of children who live with their mothers have shown 43 percent higher than children who do not, and the average marks are less than 25 for all subjects. The study further shows that the educational targets of early age teenagers are significantly low in migrant families (Table 2).

However, paternal migration does not clearly explained the educational achievements, while general educational performances of children in the absent parent families are significantly poor. The educational aspirations of the migrant family children are significantly lower than non-migrant family children and motivation for higher education is less in migrant families.



Table 1: Profile of students' survey

	Both Parents Migrated		Mother migrated		Farther migrated		Non-migration		Total
	Number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	
Gender									
Male	10	5.0	46	23	6	3	35	17.5	97
Female	9	4.5	43	21.5	7	3.5	44	22	103
Age of Students									
12 Years	3	1.5	20	10	4	2	4	2	31
13 Years	4	2.0	17	8.5	17	8.5	18	9	56
14 years	4	2.0	17	8.5	3	1.5	6	3	30
15 years	4	2.0	18	9	19	9.5	15	7.5	56
16 Years	4	2.0	17	8.5	0	0	11	5.5	32
Family situation									
Live without parent	19	9.5	19	9.5	0	0	5	2.5	43
Live with one parent	0	0.0	70	35	13	6.5	11	5.5	94
Live with both parents	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	63	31.5	63
Primary care giver									
Both mother and Farther	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	61	30.5	61
Mother	0	0.0	0	0	10	5	8	4	18
Farther	0	0.0	54	27	0	0	4	2	58
Grandmother/ G. Farther	8	4.0	24	12	2	1	3	1.5	37
Any other	11	5.5	11	5.5	1	0.5	3	1.5	26

Table 2: Educational target of children

Migratory pattern	Average number of days absent from school					Educational aspirations		
	Not absentees	Absent 1-3 days	Absent 4-6 days	Absent for more than 7 days	I have no idea	My aim is to pass O/L	My aim is to pass AL	I wish to go to University
Both parents' migrated	2	5	6	6	5	5	7	2
Mother migrated	11	35	18	25	25	32	15	17
Farther migrated	2	10	0	1	1	2	6	4
Non-migrant parent	13	55	4	7	1	13	40	25
Pearson Chi-Square	35.29a				46.63a			
Df	9				9			
P value	.000				.000			



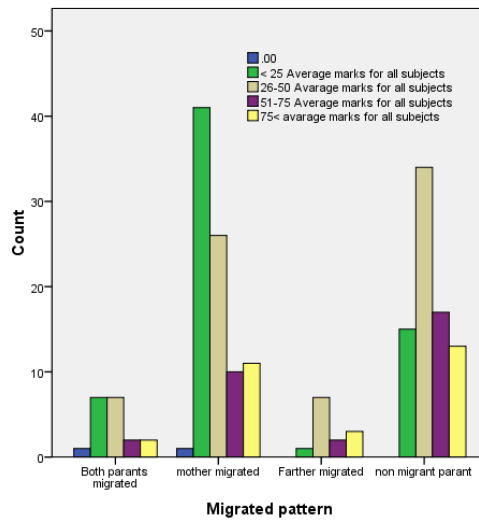


Figure 1: Comparative illustration on the educational performance of children with parents who have migrated

Table 3. Cross tabulation of parental migration situation with sensitivity analysis of children

	Feeling sad while studying		Difficulty in Concentration		Angry with friends		Quarreling with friends	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Migrate situation								
Both	18	1	15	4	13	6	9	10
Mother	71	18	82	7	46	44	59	30
Farther	11	2	13	0	1	12	5	8
None- migrants	30	46	36	43	19	60	18	61
Total responses	130	67	146	54	79	122	91	109
Significance test								
Chi- Square	37.4		51.8		24.6		32.241	
Df	3		3		3		3	
Significant value	.000		.000		.000		.000	

As shown in Table 3, vulnerability to negative cognitive factors associated with migratory patterns, such as sadness, difficulty in concentration, anxiety and deviant behaviors reveal that there is an association between these groups. Of the eighteen children out of nineteen surveyed whose both parents have migrated revealed that they have some kind of sadness; while 92 percent whose mothers have migrated for labor indicated that they suffered from bouts of sadness. Approximately 50 percent of the children

show anxiety in maternal migratory situation, while 25 percent in non-migratory parental situation. This mental health parameters are further justified by the analysis given in Table 4. It shows the problem solving behavior of different children and four groups. It reveals that the majority of children do not relying on their farther for their problem solving whether the mother has migrated or not. However, in general, the role of the parents on family matters is much higher in non-migratory situation.



Table 4: Tabulation of problem solving and relationship matrix

		Problem solving and relationships				Total
		I have a problem and need to discuss my personal matters with my mother	I have a problem/shy to discuss matters with my farther	I usually discuss my matters with someone else, not with parents	I usually discuss personal matters with my parents	
Migratory pattern	Both parents migrated	5	9	4	1	19
	mother migrated	17	28	39	5	89
	Farther migrated	1	9	0	3	13
	non migrant parent	12	24	8	35	79

Pearson Chi-Square -61.557a Df = 9 Significance .000

Table 5: Deviant behavior of Children with age categories

			Age of student					Total
			12	13	14	15	16	
Smoking and alcoholism								
I have smoked/ consumed alcohol more than once	Migratory pattern	Both parents' migrated	0	0	1	0	0	1
		mother migrated	4	1	2	1	5	13
		non migrant parent	2	0	1	2	0	5
	Total		6	1	4	3	5	19
I have smoked/ consumed alcohol only once	Migratory pattern	Both parents' migrated	3	0	1	1	1	6
		mother migrated	4	1	2	4	5	16
		farther migrated	0	0	0	2	0	2
		non migrant parent	0	3	2	2	0	7
Total			7	4	5	9	6	31
I do not consume alcohol or cigarettes	Migratory pattern	both parents migrated	0	4	2	3	3	12
		mother migrated	12	15	13	13	7	60
		farther migrated	0	4	3	4	0	11
		non migrant parent	16	13	16	11	11	67
	Total		28	36	34	31	21	150



I have smoked/ consumed alcohol more than once	Pearson Chi-Square	8.915 ^a	8	.003
I have smoked/ consumed alcohol only once	Pearson Chi-Square	18.456 ^b	12	.003
I do not consume alcohol or cigarettes	Pearson Chi-Square	12.566 ^c	12	.001

This study further revealed that children in the age group 15-16 show deviant behaviors such as use of alcohol, physical violence, including student-on-student fighting, are significant among the left-behind group (Table 5), further signaling that maternal migration could be linked to such cases even when the farther is their caretaker. However, there is no evidence to show the association of caretakers with both educational and cognitive functions of children.

The study also illustrated that the economic benefits linked to earning by woman migratory workers cannot be set off by the high social cost (Gamage, 2009); income problems (Karunaratne, 2008), life quality problems (Lasagabaster, Samuel and Hulugalle, 2005) and related health constrains (Senaratne, 2012) while gaps on educational achievements and psychological outcomes are very critical in child development.

4 CONCLUSION

This is a preliminary study to show the basic educational discrepancies of children of migratory and non-migratory families which further give emphasis to some psychological aspects such as anxiety and sensitivity of the teens. The study was conducted with 200 students who were in a tailored socio-economic situation due to relatively higher rate of female or maternal migration compared to other districts in Sri Lanka. However, the study shows that relatively higher level of negative cognitive aspects such as sadness, anxiety and tendency to quarrel with the friends among the maternal migrant children possibly resulted from negative wellbeing of the mental health of these adolescent children. The study further shows that the increasing possibility of children resorting to deviant behaviors are relatively at high risk level, where there is no

evidence to show the economic gains from the labour migration given the expected social benefit to the community in the Mawathagama region.

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