

Left-behind children of migrant women: Difficulties encountered and strengths demonstrated

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Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2012; **41**(2): 71-75

Abstract

Introduction: Labour export is the main source of foreign exchange earning for Sri Lanka. Women form 52% of this and when they migrate, many of them leave behind their children who face abuse and neglect as a result.

Objectives: To describe the difficulties encountered by these children and strengths demonstrated by them and to describe factors associated with the difficulties they encounter.

Method: A qualitative, descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out in administrative districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Kurunegala. Data was collected through focus group discussions with school teachers and semi-structured interviews with primary carers of migrants' children and religious leaders.

Results: Qualitative content analysis of data showed emergence of several themes. These children performed poorly in academic activities, lacked concentrating abilities and failed to improve despite additional help. They did not participate in extra-curricular activities due to poor moral support and had a wide range of behavioural problems such as aggression, cruelty, stealing, hyperactivity, disruptive behaviour etc. They found it difficult to establish new relationships and sustain existing ones, including relationships with parents. Many children were physically, psychologically, emotionally and sexually abused and most were neglected by their carers. They also lacked acceptable role models. However, some children had strengths to cope with stressors resulting from mothers' absence, were mature in thinking and behaviour, survived in many situations without help and found access to adequate human and physical resources. Mothers' migration, poor emotional bonding with substitute carers, inadequacy in physical, financial, and human resources,

disadvantaged social conditions and behaviours of adults in families increased their difficulties.

Conclusions: Migrant women's children have many difficulties resulting from mothers' absence. Their strengths to face life's challenges, comparatively, seem minimal.

(Key words: Migrant women; children; behaviour; difficulties; strengths; Sri Lanka)

Introduction

Mass scale Sri Lankan labour export starting in late 1970s¹ has become the main source of foreign exchange earning². With over 250,000 persons migrating annually³ and the total estimated labour migrants from Sri Lanka being 1.8 million⁴, labour migrants will continue to be an economically vital sector. Women migrants' proportion which peaked to 64% in 2003⁵ and regressed to 52% by 2009⁶, continues to be a vital group economically and socially as most women migrants have left children behind⁷. In the absence of mother, the father, grandmother or close family relative becomes the substitute carer⁷, resulting in children being moved out of the family home or the substitute carer/s moving in, thus altering family composition^{7,8}.

Left-behind children bear the brunt of subsequent alterations in family functioning, sometimes facing abuse and neglect^{1,8,9}. In addition to neglect, emotional and physical abuse, sexual abuse by fathers or male relatives has been reported⁹. This is worsened by inadequate quality time spent by fathers with these children, which would otherwise have dampened effects of the mother's absence. Studies show that children left behind by migrating mothers have poorer mental health status compared to those whose mothers are employed in Sri Lanka^{7,10}.

Objectives

To describe difficulties encountered by these children and strengths demonstrated by them and the factors associated with the difficulties.

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(Received on 15 July 2011: Accepted after revision on 11 August 2011)

Method

A qualitative, descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out in administrative districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Kurunegala, which annually send the highest number of migrant workers for overseas employment⁶. Participants included: teachers (of schools largely attended by children of migrant women), primary carers of children of migrant women and religious leaders in areas inhabited by families of migrant women.

A preliminary survey was conducted to identify schools largely attended by children of migrant workers. Teachers who have served in these schools for over two years were invited to participate in focus group discussions (FGDs). FGDs were conducted until no new information was forthcoming. Pre-prepared moderator's question guide was used to moderate FGDs.

Thirty primary carers were selected from a list prepared through a community survey conducted for a parallel study. This list categorised primary carers based on their relationship to left-behind children and primary carers from each category were randomly selected for the study. These categories included grandmothers, fathers, aunts, grandfathers and elder siblings. Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted with selected primary carers. A pre-prepared, interviewer-administered, semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection.

Ten religious leaders in areas inhabited by large numbers of migrant women's families (identified through above mentioned community survey) were selected to represent different religions. They included Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Muslim clergy. A pre-prepared, interviewer-administered, semi-structured questionnaire was used to conduct SSIs with these religious leaders.

FGDs and SSIs were tape recorded with participants' consent and notes taken. Tapes were transcribed immediately after each FGD and SSI. Qualitative content analysis of data was carried out.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Ethical approval was obtained from Ethical Review Committee of the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

Results

Analysis of data showed numerous difficulties encountered by children of migrant women.

- ***Difficulties in academic activities***

Teachers, primary carers and religious leaders indicated that most children of migrant women, regardless of age, found it difficult to perform adequately in academic activities compared to other children. Lack of parental guidance and encouragement negatively influenced their performance. They failed to maximally utilise additional help offered by teachers and lacked ability to concentrate on learning tasks. School absenteeism was common due to lack of encouragement from primary carers or other commitments such as looking after younger siblings. Abusive fathers also prevented children attending school.

- ***Difficulties in extra-curricular activities***

Disinterest and poor performance extended to extracurricular activities due to lack of encouragement and moral support received from mother-less homes.

- ***Difficulties due to behavioural problems***

Many left-behind children had behavioural problems, both at school and elsewhere. Aggression was prominent. They were more prone to quarrel with and hurt others. The poor tolerance towards others led to frequent fights and poor acceptance of them as friends. Cruelty towards animals was comparatively more among these children. They forcibly took others' belongings, even stole from teachers, were jealous of others, spoilt others' work, and did not like teachers and carers praising other children. Some were hyperactive and could not be controlled by teachers and primary carers while others were unusually loud and some used obscene language. Disruptive behaviour was commonly seen. They destroyed belongings of other children and of the class. Both teachers and primary carers found these children ill-disciplined, disobedient and adamant. They were also backward, timid and did not participate in most school and social events, putting them at a disadvantage compared to other children. Other behaviour problems included sulking, staring blankly and poor communication with teachers and peers. Some children often cried reflecting on the mothers' absence. Many children were at a disadvantage not being able to differentiate between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

- ***Difficulties in relationships***

These children had difficulties in sustaining relationships and making new relationships. Social acceptance of some children was poor, mainly due to poor physical hygiene, hyperactivity, aggression, cruelty and other behavioural problems. They seemed lonely and indulged in their own thoughts, neglecting

others. Some children found it difficult to maintain a healthy relationship with the father after the mother migrated. At times, childcare had to be changed from the father to an aunt or grandmother because children were very irritable and anxious while with father. Many children had their relationships with mothers also affected. Some missed their mothers while others hated their mothers for leaving them and refused to communicate with them. Yet others sought motherly care and affection from teachers.

- ***Difficulties due to abuse and neglect***

Many children were compelled to do household chores that were not age-appropriate. Some had to look after younger siblings, cook for them, wash and bathe them. Even very young children washed clothes and did household chores an adult normally does. Nutrition of children was adversely affected due to either not having enough to eat or not eating nutritious food. Essential healthcare of some children was grossly neglected, especially when carers abused drugs or alcohol. Some children were abused physically and sexually by fathers and other male relatives.

- ***Lack of good role models***

Lack of role models, especially for boys, was identified as a difficulty faced in steering their lives in an appropriate direction. Fathers and male relatives abused narcotic drugs or alcohol, gambled, had extra-marital affairs and lacked regular employment.

Strengths of children in facing adversities

Despite numerous difficulties the left-behind children encountered, some have demonstrated strengths to withstand these difficulties successfully, utilising social and other resources available. However, it was the universal opinion that the number of children having tangible strengths was minimal.

This minority with demonstrable strengths were skilful in recovering early from the initial psychological reaction following their mothers' departure. They were also competent in coping with the economical and social stressors resulting from their mothers' absence. They were adept in sustaining existing relationships with family, friends, teachers and neighbours as well as in establishing new relationships with others. Drawing from such relationships, they minimised their financial requirements by obtaining materialistic and human support and maximised purchase when spending money. They showed admirable skills in accessing human and physical resources. Their ability to

withstand social pressures was based mostly on their strong social networks.

Such resilient children showed a significant maturity in their thinking and behaviour when compared with their peers. Their abilities to plan and execute tasks as well as to foresee obstacles and take remedial measures were more advanced than those of other children. They could not only draw support from others but cope with and survive in many situations without help from others. This skill they derived mainly from their ability to withstand mental and physical stressors.

Another critical strength some children demonstrated was their ability to relate to and communicate freely about their problems with teachers and other adults and seek help when required. This enabled them to relieve themselves from unnecessary mental and physical stressors, thereby maximising their ability to survive healthily and thrive.

Factors associated with difficulties of children

- It was universally felt that the most important factor was the absence of mother.
- Poor emotional bonding children had with substitute carers was considered a significant factor.
- Lack of the tools or equipment required was considered a factor hindering both academic and extracurricular activities of children.
- Inadequacy of financial and human resources available to these children was considered a significant factor.
- Low educational level and poor caring by substitute carers was considered a significant factor.
- Other factors were changes in household composition, poverty and disadvantaged social conditions, abuse and neglect, and extra-marital affairs and substance abuse by adults in families.

Discussion

There appears to be universal agreement among teachers, primary carers and religious leaders on difficulties and strengths of children of migrant women and factors associated with their difficulties. Poor academic performances of these children have

been demonstrated in earlier studies⁷. School performance is related to attitudes of children towards learning¹¹ and it is possible that poor family moral support resulting from the mothers' absence may be negatively influencing such attitudes. Empowering primary carers to offer moral support to children would have favourable effects in encouraging children to perform better. Lack of sufficient tools for academic and extra-curricular activities was a significant contributory factor. The poor economic status of families of women migrants could have pre-existed prior to their migration, and not remedied, or was a consequence of their migration and subsequent breakdown of family functioning. Inadequate or lack of payment of salaries to women migrants as widely reported could also result in this. Although the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment and some non-governmental organisations provide scholarships to needy children⁶, the recipients are only a fraction of the needy. Expansion of such services will see needy children benefiting immensely. However, the need for such assistance to families of migrant women itself questions the usefulness of women's migration as a mode of increasing family income.

Some children found difficulties in attending school due to carers' neglect and abuse. Previous studies have also reported that, at times, children were not sent to school by their carers¹², drop out of school^{12,13}, and attend school irregularly^{9,13}, which may also explain their poor performances. Strict implementation of existing legislation regarding schooling, child abuse and neglect by relevant authorities could be one remedial measure for this social problem.

Existence of numerous behaviour problems among children of migrant women has been repeatedly confirmed. Many studies done in Sri Lanka^{8,12,14,15} and other Asian countries¹⁶ have also consistently shown that children of women migrants display a wide range of behavioural problems. Most abnormal behaviours observed are symptoms of mental health abnormalities in children¹⁷. Studies have shown that mental health problems as measured using validated instruments could be twice as high among the children of migrant women as among other children⁷.

Such behaviour problems also affect their relationships. Many children fail to make friends or maintain existing relationships. Their relationships with parents (including migrant mothers) are adversely affected. Such inadequate relationships invariably diminish their social resources and aggravate social and behavioural problems further.

The belief that some children of migrant women are abused and neglected is confirmed by findings of this study. In addition to mental suffering due to mothers' absence, these children are physically and sexually abused and their healthcare and other welfare are neglected by carers. Such physical and sexual abuses by some fathers and male relatives of children of migrant women have also been reported earlier^{7,9}.

Behaviour problems, abuse and neglect, all of which compound each other, need to be detected early and remedied, if they were not to become more complex health and social problems. Both teachers and the preventive health care teams attached to Medical Officer of Health offices could be, if adequately trained, excellent resources to screen children for presence of these problems and refer to appropriate services. Existing support services such as mental health programmes in peripheral hospitals and legal/protective services also need to be strengthened if these are to accommodate such referrals.

Compared to difficulties children of migrant women face, their strengths are minimal and present in a few. Although some children are strong enough to overcome mental and physical stressors of mothers' absence and build and manipulate social resources to their advantage, the majority do not possess such skilful strengths.

Factors considered as responsible for difficulties faced by children are seen usually as inherent in the social environment most live in. Most migrant women are from disadvantaged social environments and typically have low educational achievements⁷. It has been shown that many migrant women have disrupted families even prior to their migration, and many others face the same afterwards⁷. Such disadvantaged social environments probably have a spiralling effect due to the interrelationship of various environmental and social factors influencing children's problems. The complex web of environmental, socioeconomic, family, and personal factors compound difficulties faced by children of migrant women. Remedying such complex situations would need programmes involving multiple stakeholders and which are multipronged, long-term, and sustainable.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Left-behind children of women migrant workers in Sri Lanka have many difficulties resulting from the mothers' absence.

- Their strengths to face life's challenges, comparatively, seem minimal.
- As migration of Sri Lankan women for overseas employment continues to thrive, appropriate and tangible policy is required to ensure that migration of women does not impact adversely on their left-behind children.

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