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Sri Lankan female domestic workers overseas: mothering their children from a distance

Swarna Ukwatta

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Abstract Sri Lanka is one of three countries in Asia, along with the Philippines and Indonesia, where women migrants constitute between 60 and 70% of legal migrants; these female migrants are mainly employed overseas as domestic workers. Since the 1980s, the out-migration of Sri Lankan females for employment abroad surpassed that of males and the major destination has been countries in the Middle East. The majority of these women are married and have at least one child; they leave their children in the care of other family members in their absence. While they usually make arrangements to accommodate the spatial separation forced by migration, their migration poses many challenges to themselves and their children left behind. Recently, the issue of children left behind by migrant mothers has attracted growing attention from policy makers in Sri Lanka. Since the social and emotional ramifications of mothering from a distance and how these mothers cope with them are inadequately investigated, this article uses data collected from a 2008 survey of 400 Sri Lankan female migrant families to examine the effects of mothers' migration on how they are mothering their children from a distance, and how they perceive the effects on their children. The article concludes with some suggested policy recommendations.

Keywords Sri Lanka · Domestic workers · Children left behind · Mothering from a distance · Transnational families

Introduction

Increasing numbers of Sri Lankan women are mothering their children from a distance, owing to the global increase in demand for domestic labour and care

S. Ukwatta (✉)
Department of Demography, University of Colombo, Colombo, Sri Lanka
e-mail: sukwatta@gmail.com

workers, a major dimension of the feminization of migration (Ukwatta and Hugo 2009). Consequently, the shift of reproductive work from the household to the market has intensified in recent decades (Yeoh et al. 2005). This phenomenon has led to the emergence of transnational families[1] with mothers who are absent for a significant part of the time when their children are growing up (Agrawal 2006; Asis et al. 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Hugo 2005a; ILO 2007; Parreñas 2001a, 2005a; Tyner 2002; Zlotnik 1995). Consequently, the plight of children left behind by migrant mothers has attracted the growing attention of scholars in recent years (Yeoh and Lam 2007). On one hand, the migration of these women to work overseas can usually be understood as a way to improve the livelihoods of migrant women themselves and their families (Gamburd 2000; Shaw 2008a; Sumulong and Zhai 2008; Yeoh and Lam 2007) and to take advantage of the greater labour market opportunities in other countries within and outside Asia (Parreñas 2001a; Wickramasekera 2002). On the other hand, mothering from a distance, or 'transnational motherhood' as Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997, p. 548) have called it, has social and emotional ramifications for both mothers who leave, and for their children left-behind (Parreñas 2001a; Yeoh and Lam 2007) despite the economic bonus that migration provides (Save the Children 2006). Although mothers usually make arrangements to accommodate the spatial and temporal separation forced by migration, their migration poses challenges (Battistella and Conaco 1996; Parreñas 2001a; Yeoh and Lam 2007). Family separation is not new; in the past, migration has kept families apart. What is new about transnational families is the measure with which migrants maintain contacts with the families left behind (Asis 2004). New ways of being family and new meanings to motherhood have developed as better and cheaper communication facilities become available (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Despite the separation, women justify their decision to leave their children behind with other family members by highlighting the material gains for their children and the family.

While the effects of female migration have been intensively studied from a number of perspectives in Asian countries, particularly the Philippines (e.g. Asis et al. 2004; Battistella and Conaco 1996, 1998; Parreñas 2001a, b, 2003, 2005a, b, 2003; Yeoh and Lam 2007), the effects of the migration of Sri Lankan mothers on families and children left behind remains under-researched and little understood. Although some aspects of this issue have been investigated by several authors (e.g. Eelens 1995; Fernando 1989; Gamburd 2000, 2005; Hettige 1999; Ratnayake 1999; Save the Children 2006), these studies do not provide a detailed account of transnational mothering. However, migrants' remittances have become the second highest source of foreign earnings in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, migrant women with children, especially the domestic workers, bring both benefits and costs to their children. The social costs they bring to their families and children have recently become one of the major concerns of policy makers and the public in Sri Lanka.

[1] Families whose core members are located in at least two nation-states are considered as transnational families. Members in these families belong to two households, two cultures and two economies simultaneously. These take many forms and are marked by changing heads of household—including grandmothers and youth who take charge of children while the parents are away (UNFPA 2006, p. 15).

There is a need for further investigation into the migration of women and the children left behind and therefore, this article examines the economic, social and emotional consequences of the migration of Sri Lankan female domestic workers. The article begins with a brief description of the increasing trend of female migration in the Asian region. Then it discusses the data used and some characteristics of those interviewed. Next, the effect of the migration of these women on their children left behind and how these women maintain contact with their families are discussed in detail; finally, policy implications which arise out of the study are examined.

Increasing female labour migration: the Asian region

In the Asian region, the 1970s were a watershed period heralding many changes, including the beginning of truly global migration (Massey et al. 1993). With the 1973 oil price increase and the associated massive demand for workers in the Middle East, migration flows entered a new era in scale and complexity (Hugo 2005b; Skeldon 2003; Wickramasekera 2002). One of the unexpected outcomes of this oil crisis of the 1970s was the involvement of Asian workers in the infrastructure development in the Middle East countries which continues to this day. With the dramatic rise in their oil revenues, these countries began to modernize their economies at a scale and pace that could not have been done without the involvement of foreign labour (Lim and Abella 1994). With the initiation of massive infrastructure and development projects, the Gulf countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—drew workers from Asia. Initially, these countries imported workers from South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), and quickly expanded into East Asia, particularly South Korea, and Southeast Asia: Thailand and the Philippines. It is interesting that Sri Lanka and Indonesia joined the ranks of source countries of workers a little later, and 'when they did, they carved a niche in the deployment of domestic workers' (Asis 2004, p. 19).

With the rapid economic growth and the emergence of Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs) in East and Southeast Asia during the last decade, the destinations of Asian migrant workers have become diversified (Asis 2004, 2005; Hugo 2005a; Skeldon 2003). In the 1980s, NICs have opened up the market for labour importation to sustain their economic growth. As their economies soared, the NICs experienced labour shortages in sectors which the local population eschewed: construction, manufacturing and plantation/agriculture. As local women entered the paid labour market, the families of employed women experienced a shortage of care workers. As a result, the labour shortage in the '3-D' (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) sectors and in the households was solved by importing female migrant workers from other countries, especially from the Asian region.

This rapid growth of contract labour migration of low-skilled workers has been one of the major elements in the increased level of international population mobility in Asia and this has been directed from the low-income countries to high-income countries within the region and to Middle Eastern countries (Hugo 2005a).

Table 1 Proportion of international female labour migrants: selected Asian out-migration countries

Country of origin	Year	Number of workers sent	Percentage of women	Source
Philippines	2007	1,077,623	47.8[a]	Philippine overseas employment
Sri Lanka	2007	217,306	52.7	Sri Lanka foreign employment bureau 2008
Thailand	2007	161,917	14.8	Kachonpadungkitti 2008
Indonesia	2005	474,310	68.5	Ananta and Arifin 2008:22
Bangladesh	2007	832,609	4.0	Miah 2008
Vietnam	2000	30,000	15.0	Dang et al. 2003:28

Source: Ukwatta and Hugo (2009: 6)

[a] New hires

According to the available statistics, as shown in Table 1, the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka are prominent among the suppliers of female workers in the Asian region.

However, labour-importing countries hire migrants on a contract basis and require them to return to their home countries at the end of their contract; family members are not allowed to join the workers, except in the case of the highly skilled and professionals. Therefore, almost all of these temporary contract labour migration flows[2] involve the separation of the migrants from their families. As a result, large numbers of families in the Asian region, especially in Sri Lanka have become transnational with absent mothers.

Sri Lankan domestic workers overseas

Sri Lanka has seen a steady increase in the number of overseas contract workers over the last three decades (Fig. 1). In the mid-1980s, according to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2008, p. 1), the numbers leaving Sri Lanka officially fell as low as 16,656 but they grew tenfold over the next decade and in 2007, little less than a quarter of a million were deployed. While in the earlier years more males than females went overseas as contract workers, for most of the last two decades two-thirds or more have been women.

According to the data of 2007, these women work overwhelmingly as domestic workers: over 52% of total departures were employed as domestic workers. The majority of them have at least one child and leave them behind in the care of other family members at home (Save the Children 2006).

The major destinations for Sri Lankan labour migrants are the Middle Eastern countries. However, since the 1990s Singapore, Italy, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Mauritius have also become important destinations, but the stock of workers in

[2] Contract migrants, otherwise termed 'guest workers', are defined as those who cross international boundaries in securing employment with no initial intention of permanently settling in the country of employment (Bohning 1984, p. 50).

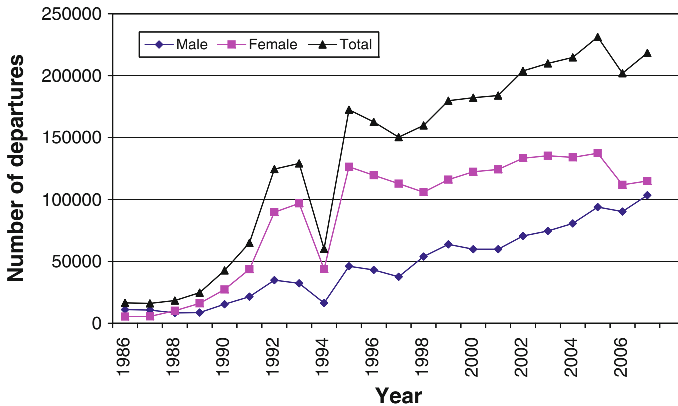

Fig. 1 Departures for foreign employment by sex, 1986–2007. *Source*: SLBFE 2008, Table 1:1

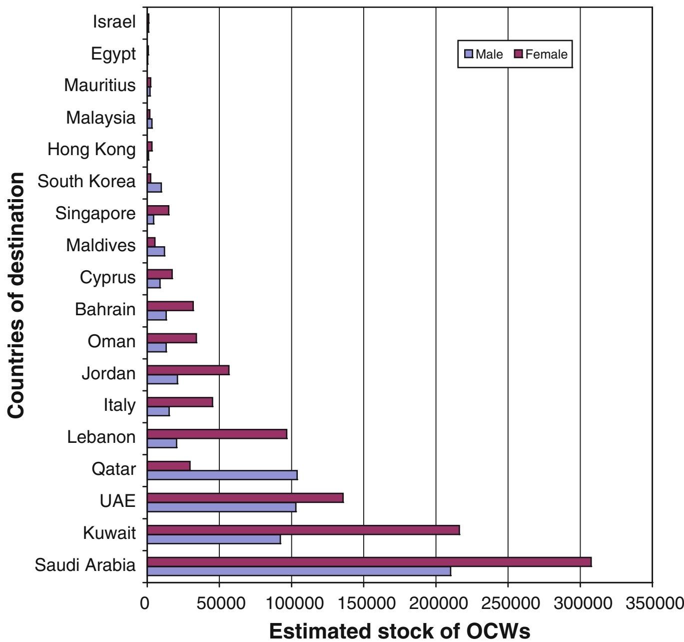

Fig. 2 Estimated stock of Sri Lankan overseas contract workers by country of destination and sex, 2007. *Source*: SLBFE 2008, Table 62:65

these countries is insignificant compared to that of the Middle East countries (Fig. 2).

As in the case of the Philippines, it is impossible to ignore the importance of the migration of women to work overseas since the remittances from the foreign employment industry have become the second highest among the foreign earnings in the Sri Lankan economy (SLBFE 2008). As shown in Table 2, the share of

Table 2 Percentage distribution of private remittances and other foreign earnings as a percentage of total earnings, 1990 and 2007

Year	Private remittances	Foreign earnings					Total
		Tea	Rubber	Coconut	Garment	Other	
1990	20.2	24.9	3.9	3.5	31.7	15.8	1100.0
2007	35.8	13.2	1.4	1.0	43.2	5.4	1100.0

Source: SLBFE 2008, Table 83:121

foreign earnings from agricultural products has decreased while the share from the garment industry and private remittances dramatically increased during 1990–2007. Remittances earned by foreign employment as a percentage of the total foreign earnings increased from 20.2% in 1990 to 35.8% in 2007.

Despite the economic benefits that migration seems to provide to the country and to the families of migrants, the social costs are large and can have both positive and negative effects on families, especially on children (Fernando 1989; Gamburd 2000; Save the Children 2006). According to UNFPA (2006), monetary remittances are often invested in meeting daily needs and improving family nutrition, education, and health, especially when women determine how they will be spent. In other words, wages earned by women migrants most often 'go to fill hungry bellies, clothe and educate children, provide health care, and generally improve living standards for loved ones left behind' (UNFPA 2006, p. 1). However, women are the major physical and emotional supporters for their family members, especially for their children.

Method

This investigation into how female migrants mother from a distance is based on a survey conducted in 2008. The sample was selected from two districts which recorded the highest number of female migrant departures, and specifically, the highest number of domestic workers. As this is a difficult population to identify, a snowball sampling method was used in the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame. Official migration statistics have been used as a benchmark with which to compare the characteristics of the selected sample.

In 2006, the largest number of female migrant departures were from the districts of Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy and Kurunegala (Fig. 3). Out of these four districts, Colombo (10.6%) and Kurunegala (16.5%) districts reported the highest percentages of the departures as domestic workers, a total of 27.1%. Hence, these two districts were selected for field investigations. From these two districts, four Divisional Secretariat (DS) Divisions (the next lower administrative division) with high levels of outmigration of housemaids were selected; one urban and one rural in each district. Finally, 20 Grama Niladhari (GN) Divisions (the next level of the administrative hierarchy) with the largest numbers of housemaid migrants were identified. From each DS Division, 50 families in which there was a returned

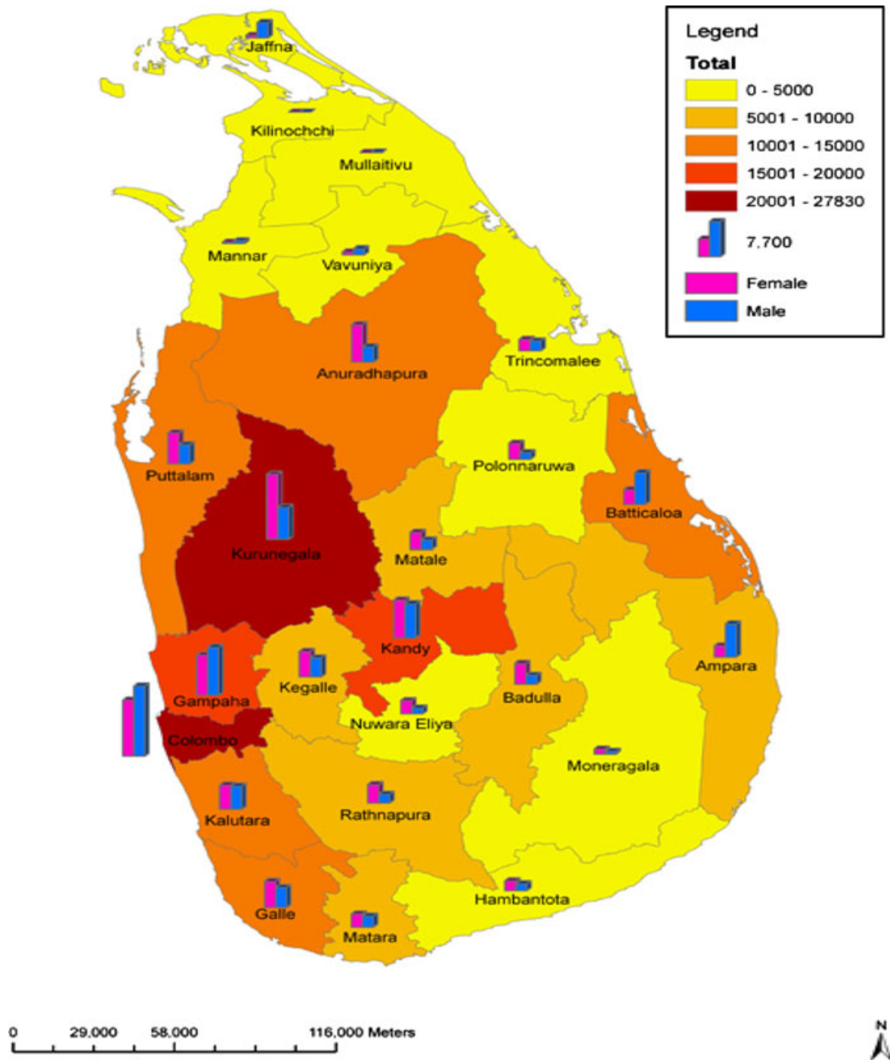

Fig. 3 Departures for foreign employment by district and sex, 2006

migrant worker[3] and 50 families in which a housemaid worker was still away at the time of the survey were selected using a snowball sampling technique. This gave a sample of 400 female migrant households with different socio-economic characteristics.

Of the 400 respondents interviewed, 217 were returned migrants and 183 were members of families which had housemaid migrants still overseas. Out of 183 family members who responded to the questionnaire, 39% are migrants' husbands, 36% are parents of the migrant or her husband, 15% are relatives and 10% are the

[3] Returning at some time within the last decade.

eldest child. Fifty-nine per cent of the total respondents lived in rural areas, 31% in urban centres and 10% on plantations. At the beginning of the female migration to work overseas, more women migrated from urban areas (Dias and Jayasundere 2004). But, with the growing demand for female labour, the situation has changed and at present, the majority of women working abroad are from rural areas in Sri Lanka. This is reflected in the sample of this study as more women from rural areas were interviewed.

Two questionnaires were provided: one for returned migrants and one for family members. It is acknowledged that the migrant and other family members could answer the questions differently owing to different perceptions of migration. Family members (mainly fathers, grandparents and other relatives) were interviewed when the migrant was still overseas at the time of the survey. The major difference in these two questionnaires is the way in which the questions were asked. In addition, some additional questions also have been included in both questionnaires. Both questionnaires have a household schedule and an individual schedule and consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. In the individual questionnaire, information on the background of migrant families, pre-departure conditions of migration, nature of work abroad, the social and economic effects of the migration on families and children were gathered and some open-ended questions were included to obtain the views of migrants and family members on the discussions of the government on banning female migration. However, children were not interviewed because of ethical considerations and the sensitive nature of the issue. Instead, information regarding the children was collected when interviewing returned migrants (mothers of children), and in the interview of family members. Therefore the noted effects of the migration of mothers on children is not the children's point of view, but instead the perception of those who are responsible for the care of the children. In addition to the survey which was conducted, a number of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with village heads, doctors, nurses, teachers, Samurdhi Niladhanies, and Child Probation Officers. Findings from the FGDs are used in this article to support and explain some survey findings.

Sample characteristics as compared to the Sri Lankan population

Total departures for foreign employment in 2007 indicate that female migrant workers leaving Sri Lanka are somewhat older than their male counterparts (Fig. 4). The sample population is slightly older than the outflow of female migrants from Sri Lanka in 2007 (Table 3). This is partly due to the survey design: more than half of the sample are migrant workers who have returned to Sri Lanka within 10 years of the interview date. The median age of female migrants departing in 2007 was 34.7 years: around 4 years younger than that of the sample (38.4 years). It is important to note that 65% of all migrants leaving Sri Lanka for the first time were aged 30 years and over and therefore the majority of women going overseas to work as domestics are women who are, or have been, married, and have children (Fig. 5).

Of all migrants of the survey, 54% were Sinhalese and the remainder divided evenly between Tamils and Sri Lankan Moors. Although the typical Muslim groups of Moors and Malays constitute only 8% of the national population in the 2001

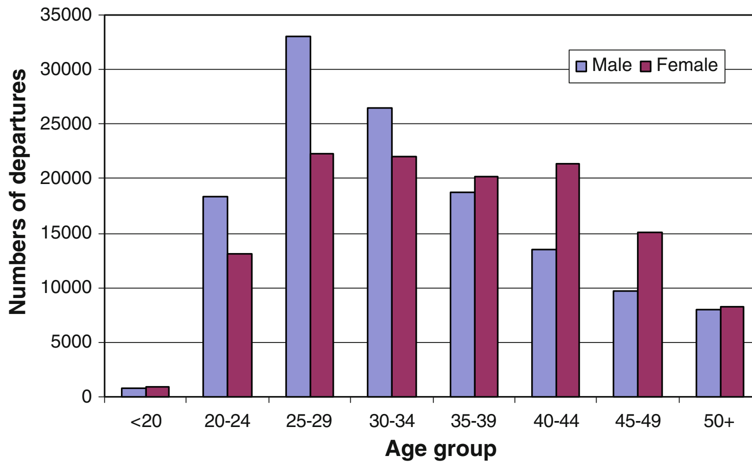

Fig. 4 Age distribution of total departure for foreign employment by sex, 2007. *Source*: SLBFE 2008, Table 54:59 and SLMDWS 2008

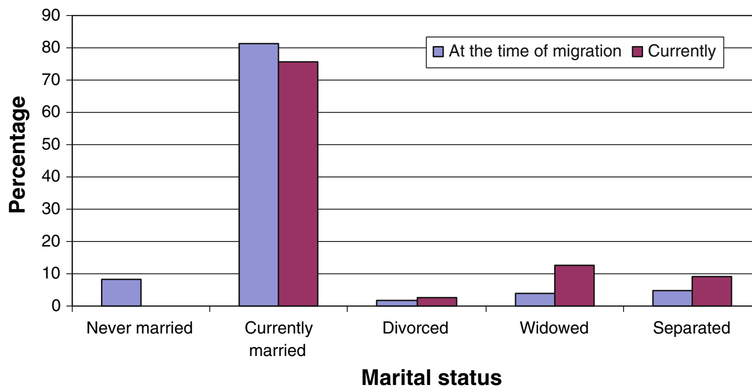

Fig. 5 The changes in marital status of migrant with migration. *Source*: SLMDWS 2008

census (DC&S 2001), they represent almost 23% in the present sample of migrant domestic workers. The reason for this is that most employers at the destination countries prefer to have Muslim domestic workers (Eelens 1995; Gamburd 2000).

Compared to the educational level of Sri Lankan women, migrant domestic workers have lower levels of education (Ratnayake 1999; Save the Children 2006). Of the women in the sample, a little less than 50% had primary education (passed grades 1–5) as shown in Table 4. While 37% had secondary education (passed grades 6–11) another 7% had tertiary education (passed General Certificate of Education examination (GCE) Ordinary Level (O/L) or Advanced Level (A/L)). Another 8% reported that they had no schooling although it is a requirement for them to have some education to work overseas.

Table 3 Age structure of female departures in 2007 and females in the sample 2008

Age group	Female departures for the first time in 2007		Females in the 2008 sample	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Less than 20	2,516	2.2	2	0.5
20–24	15,616	13.6	10	2.5
25–29	21,604	18.8	46	11.5
30–34	18,455	16.1	71	17.8
35–39	20,021	17.5	105	26.3
40–44	18,435	16.1	80	20.0
45–59	10,272	9.0	49	12.3
50 and over	7,723	6.7	37	9.3
Not identified	35	0	–	–
Total	114,677	100.0	400	100.0

Source: SLBFE 2008, Table 54:59 and Sri Lankan Migrant Domestic Workers Survey 2008 (SLMDWS 2008)

Migration reflects people's responses to many different factors such as social and economic inequalities, social and cultural conditions and constraints, and other infrastructure and accessibility aspects at places of origin and destination (Chandra 2002). However, studies have indicated that migration occurs mainly for economic reasons such as poverty and lack of employment in Sri Lanka (Athukorala 1990; Gamburd 2000; Kottegoda 2006; Perera 1993; Ratnayake 1999; Save the Children 2006; Shaw 2008b). Almost all women interviewed in the studies of Shaw (2008a), Save the Children (2006) and Gamburd (2000) had the desire to improve the economic status of their families with special concentration on building a house, educating their children and paying their debts. Desire for the improvement in economic conditions is reflected in the economic levels of the migrants and their families before the migration. As the migrant families in the sample indicated, only 28% of these migrant women were employed before the migration and received low wages. Of the 217 returned migrants, only 22% have been employed after the return.

Out of 348 families who reported the activity status (employed or not) of the migrants' husbands, 93 per cent were reported as being employed (Table 4). Among those who were unemployed (25), nearly half were drug or alcohol addicts, five did not like to work and another two were imprisoned. Prevalence of male unemployment is high among migrant families compared to the national rate which is 3.6 (DC&S 2008). However, migrants' husbands support their families financially although the majority of them work as labourers with lower monthly income.

Of the employed men, only 22.5% have been employed in government, semi-government or private sector, but another 7.4% have been employed abroad. However, half of these migrants' monthly income was below Rs. 8,000 (US$ 80). This fact that the migrant women tended to come from poorer families is also reflected in the response to a question about the sufficiency of the household's income to meet their needs before the migration of the housemaids. In only 7.5% of

Table 4 Socio-economic characteristics of migrant families

Educational attainment and the type of activity	Number	Percentage
Educational attainment of the migrant	400	100.0
No schooling	31	7.8
Primary	192	48.0
Secondary	149	37.3
Tertiary	28	7.0
Type of activity of the migrant before migration	400	100.0
Employed	111	27.7
Unemployed	289	72.3
Type of activity of the husbands of migrants	348	100
Employed	323	92.8
Unemployed	25	7.2
Employment status of husband	323	100.0
Government	26	8.0
Semi-government	2	0.6
Private	45	13.9
Other	226	70.0
Works abroad	24	7.4
Occupation of husband	323	100.0
Labourer	189	58.5
Self employment	53	16.4
Driver	21	6.5
Clerical and related work	10	3.1
Works abroad	24	7.1
No permanent job	3	0.9
Other	23	7.5
Husband's income (Rs.)	263	100.0
Less than 5,000	37	14.1
5,000–9,999	127	48.3
10,000–14,999	51	19.4
15,000–19,999	25	9.5
20,000–24,999	11	4.2
25,000–29,999	7	2.7
30,000–34,999	2	0.8
35,000–40,000	3	1.1

Source: SLMDWS 2008

cases was it reported that the family's income before migration was sufficient. In families who did not report the economic status of the migrants' husbands, this was because the migrants of those families were not married at the time of the survey.

The majority of the sample (98%) worked in the Middle East: 41% in Kuwait, 28.5% in Saudi Arabia and 10% in Dubai. However, 81.8% of these migrants live in

a house owned by them or their relatives. All this information indicates that these female migrant families have a lower level of socio-economic conditions.

Results

Migrant families are influenced economically and socially through both monetary and social remittances (Ghosh 2009; Hugo 2002; Ukwatta and Hugo 2009; Silvey 2006; Wahyuni 2005). Monetary remittances increase the household income of migrant families, their savings, and investments. They improve the living conditions of migrant families as well by enhancing the ability to purchase family housing, land, and household consumer durables. Social remittances, the transfer of ideas, information, knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviour patterns, identities, and cultures (Clawen 2002; Hugo 1995; Levitt and Nyberg-Sorensen 2004), change the life styles of migrants and their families. Moreover, their migration has both positive and negative effects on their children left behind.

Effects of mothers' migration on children

Care of children

Undoubtedly, the main purpose of women's migration is to provide economic and social benefits for their families. Several studies in Asia illustrate both positive and negative effects of mothers' migration on children left behind (Asis et al. 2004; Battistella and Conaco 1998; Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2003; Save the Children 2006; Yeoh and Lam 2007). Some studies have shown that the mother's absence need not have negative consequences and migrant families are on the whole able to cope with the challenges of family separation (Hugo 2002; Asis 2001). This is especially the case where there are strong extended family systems in the origin areas (Hugo 2005b). This 2008 study reports that the percentage of extended families of migrants is higher than that of nuclear families (Table 5) and it has increased from 50 to 54% with the migration of women. This reflects the fact that in some cases an extended family member has moved in at the time of migration to help in the care of children while the mother is away overseas. In contrast to the overall picture of the distribution of family types in Sri Lanka, in the migrant families, the highest percentage of nuclear families is found in rural areas with a slight decrease with the migration of women. This is probably for two reasons: first, in many cases, the availability of extended family members living nearby to assist with the daily tasks of bringing up children, and secondly, the assistance given by the neighbours for childcare and other household activities. However, there is a significant increase in the percentage of extended families in urban areas in which the migrant families required the support of extended family members for household activities and childcare. This indicates that whether the extended family members live in the migrant's household or not, they often provide tremendous support to transnational families.

According to Parreñas (2001a), it is mostly other relatives and not fathers who care for the children left behind in the Philippines. In contrast, in this study in Sri

Table 5 Type of family by sector and the change: current and before migration

Type of family	Sector (percentage)						Total sample	
	Urban		Rural		Estate		At the time of migration	At the time of the survey
	At the time of migration	At the time of the survey	At the time of migration	At the time of the survey	At the time of migration	At the time of the survey		
Nuclear family	45.6	35.2	52.5	51.7	46.2	48.7	49.8	46.2
Extended family	54.4	648	47.5	48.3	53.8	51.3	50.2	53.8
Total number and percentage	31.3 ($N = 125$)		59.0 ($N = 236$)		9.8 ($N = 39$)		100 ($N = 400$)	

Source: SLMDWS 2008

Table 6 Person mainly responsible for child care in the absence of mother and requirement of institutional support for child care by sector

Childcare responsibility and institutional support	Sector (percentage)			Total
	Urban	Rural	Estate	Percentage
Person responsible for child care				
Husband	79.2	79.2	92.3	80.5
Parents	10.4	13.1	7.7	11.8
Other relatives	5.6	5.9	–	5.3
Other children	4.0	1.7	–	2.3
Institution	0.8	–	–	0.3
Requirement of institutional support				
Yes	46.5	33.7	19.8	26.0
No	26.8	67.2	5.9	74.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: SLMDWS 2008

Lanka, the main person charged by the mother with the care of her children while she is overseas is her husband, although these migrant families receive tremendous support from extended family members. As shown in Table 6, in more than four out of every five families the husband was the person mainly responsible for child care. This situation is highly significant among estate families.

However, among the families interviewed little more than one-fourth (Table 6) mentioned the requirement of institutional care for their children, especially with educational facilities, although such a system is still not prevalent in Sri Lanka; the requirement was higher in urban families.

In many cases, there are extended family members in the household living close by to assist with the daily tasks of bringing up children. Among those who did not leave the husband in charge of child care, 61% did not because they were divorced,

Table 7 Respondents' opinion on the changes in the behaviour of children in the absence of mother

Behavioural change	Number	Percentage
Increased problems at school	106	42.9
Health related behaviour	16	6.5
Moodiness—temper tantrums	34	13.8
Disobedience	60	24.3
Isolation from the other	3	1.2
Joining gangs	16	6.5
Use of alcohol and drugs	12	4.8
Total	247	100.0

Source: SLMDWS 2008

separated or widowed, 12% said that they had concerns about their husbands' behaviour especially in relation to drugs and alcohol, in 10.5% the husband also was absent overseas and a similar proportion said their husbands' work prevented them from caring for the children. Small numbers preferred to leave their children with their mother; some husbands had disappeared and one was imprisoned.

Emotional and behavioural changes in children

However, even with the presence of other relatives, problems still arise among the children left behind (Ukwatta and Hugo 2009). According to the views of the participants of FGDs, children recognize the efforts of their mothers to provide emotional and material care from afar. They know that their mothers call regularly and remit funds every month and they acknowledge that the sacrifices of their mothers are not just for their personal interests but also for the collective interest of the family. Despite the efforts of mothers to communicate with and visit their children regularly, children still want their mothers to return.

When the respondents were asked their opinion about the problems children faced due to the absence of their mothers, only 60 out of the 400 households reported that the children remaining at home suffered significant problems. Of these, mental and physical health problems were most often mentioned along with the strains associated with loneliness. When these respondents were further asked about the behavioural changes[4] among children left behind, almost two-thirds of survey households (62%) said that they identified changes in the behaviour of children while their mothers were away. Table 7 shows the major changes in behaviour reported by the respondents; this shows only the main change in behaviour as several respondents reported multiple behavioural changes. Problems of disobedience and moodiness and a negative effect on behaviour at school are the major issues. This suggests that there are widespread influences of mothers' absences on children's behaviour, an issue which needs to be investigated in greater depth in comparison with non-migrant families of similar socio-economic levels as a control

[4] Behavioural changes of children in the absence of mothers were assessed through subjective responses to specific question asked, and did not involve rating scales.

group. However, with the transformation of the family types in Sri Lanka from extended to nuclear (De Silva 2005), these migrant families will confront intergenerational problems.

Mothers' absence can become problematic in situations where children have problems with friends, classmates, relations and siblings, and other personal problems. In Sri Lanka, as in the Philippines, extended family members substitute for parents in these situations, but perhaps the consultation they give may not be adequate. Battistella and Conaco (1996) found that the absence of mothers does not have a decisive impact on the spiritual and moral attitudes of children; some of the parents continue to remain the children's guides even from abroad; and the substitutes, particularly the extended family members, exercise a positive role in this regard. Similar attitudes were reported by the Sri Lankan families, especially when the members of the families were interviewed in the absence of mothers.

While Battistella and Conaco (1998) learned that Filipino children with absent mothers showed poorer social adjustment and psychological development, the 2003 Philippines Study (SMC et al. 2004), in contrast, showed that the children in the survey had generally adjusted well socially, had strong social support and got along well with other family members. In Sri Lanka, the study of Save the Children (2006) also reported that children left behind have positive relationships with their caregivers. Nonetheless, FGD participants in this Sri Lanka study also reaffirmed the findings of Jampaklay (2006) in Thailand that a mother's love is often irreplaceable, even by the best caregivers. In Sri Lanka, 30.5% of respondents said that the children had suffered health problems while their mother was absent but less than a fifth attributed that illness to the absence of the mother. On the other hand when asked in an open question of the impact of mother's work overseas on children's development 19% responded that there was some impeding of development and 14.5% said children needed their mother's attention to develop fully.

The literature indicates that in some cases the absence of parents can have an adverse effect on the behaviour of children (Hugo 1992, p. 193). In the Sri Lanka study almost two-thirds of respondents considered that it did have an effect. The literature suggests that children can become more unruly when their parents migrate and this appears to be the case in Sri Lanka as well. There are clearly emotional issues for children when their mother is absent for an extended period and while these can be compensated to some extent by fathers, older children and other relations, the nurturing role of the mother is missed by children and this has consequences for their behaviour.

Effects of remittance on children

However, the absence of mothers can have both positive and negative effects on the education of their children depending on the mothers' education and the support given by the family members. While some studies in Asia highlight the positive effects (Battistella and Conaco 1996; SMC et al. 2004), others illustrate negative effects (Battistella and Conaco 1998). Studies of the impact of migration on the education of children left behind in Bangladesh have also shown mixed results.

Several of these studies show that a large proportion of the migrants' remittances was used for children's education (Kuhn 2006). This is also evident in the studies of Jampaklay (2006) in Thailand and Hugo (2002) in Indonesia. While a parent's migration sometimes provides Bangladesh children with better educational prospects, Siddiqui (2003) argued that the absence of mothers causes children's education to suffer. Jampaklay (2006) reported that the absence of parents has had negative effects on the school enrolment of children left behind in Thailand. This complexity is also apparent in the findings of the Sri Lankan study.

When asked about the effects of mother's earnings on children's education, a little more than three-quarters of the households of female migrants reported positive effects while only 5% reported negative effects. This was mainly due to the enhanced ability to buy books and other necessary items for schooling, and to pay tuition fees and for transport associated with education. Another 19% said that the mother's absence had no effect on education at all. Hence the overwhelming proportion of respondents (76%) identified a significant positive effect of the migration on the education of the children left behind. Responses where the effect was negative considered that without the mother's strong influence the children did not pay as much attention in school and some children even left school while their mother was away. It is evident that mothers and other family members believe that remittances had allowed children to continue their education despite the quality of education.

While there is a general belief among the absent mothers that the provisions they have made for looking after their children are adequate, some concerns remain with them and clearly affect them when they are away. It is interesting that more than a quarter indicated that there was a need for institutional support to be provided to families where the mother is overseas in order to supplement the support given by husbands and families. Child Care support is the greatest need which is expressed. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that almost half of the mothers would not advise other Sri Lankan women to work overseas. Some of the major reasons they gave for this were: the social costs outweigh the economic benefits, children need their mothers, the family disruption is a big cost and so is the suffering experienced abroad because of separation from children.

How women are mothering their children from a distance

Mothering is generally understood as a practice that involves the preservation, nurturance, and training of children for adult life (Ruddick 1989). Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) define transnational mothering as the organizational reconstitution and rearrangement of motherhood to accommodate the temporal and spatial separations forced by migration. They also found that this arrangement creates new meanings of motherhood and especially expands mothering to encompass breadwinning. Migrant mothers do not abandon their children (Parreñas 2005b) even though the critics urge that mothers should stay at home with their children (Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2003). Migrant mothers always attempt to maintain the responsibility of nurturing their children while abroad (Parreñas 2003, 2005b) and maintain intimacy across borders (Parreñas 2005b). This indicates that

many migrant mothers remain responsible for ensuring both the economic and emotional security of their children (Parreñas 2005a).

Emotional strain is common among female domestic workers. As much as absent mothers suffer, their children suffer more (Parreñas 2003). Confronted with geographical distance, transnational mothers face the challenge of providing emotional care to their children. As is the case in the Philippines (Parreñas 2001a, p. 363), commodifying love is a common way among Sri Lankan mothers of making up for their absence and coping with the emotional tensions of mothering from a distance. When mothers are not in a position to care for their children's daily needs in person, they try to give material benefits to their children. About 72% of mothers sent materials for their children and almost all children were happy with the material they received. They struggle with and do have regrets over separation, but are able to withstand these hardships because of the financial and other material benefits provided from a distance. Sri Lankan mothers believe the financial benefits they provide can be used by their children for daily meals of meat and rice, to attend school, and to have secure housing.

One of the strategies adopted by Sri Lankan women is transnational communication to maintain familiar contacts across borders by telephone and letter writing to repress their emotional feelings. Although migrant mothers hand over the responsibility of daily child care to their husbands or other family members, they generally retain a strong feeling of responsibility for children while away. This makes it important to examine the patterns of interaction that these women maintain with their families of origin. Table 8 shows the modes used in communicating with their family at home. Only a very small number (7 of the 400 individuals) failed to communicate with home while they were away. Land phones are the most popular means of communication (65%); in urban areas the proportion was higher (77%) while it was less in rural areas (59%). In rural areas, however post was used more (71%) than for urban areas (66%). It is noticeable that mobile phones were used by little more than a fifth in both urban and rural areas but slightly more in urban areas. The dominance of the telephone is interesting although post still plays an important role. It is apparent, however, that there is still not a very great use of modern means of communication in Sri Lanka.

In the Philippines the rapid advance in communication technology has allowed migrant mothers to be involved in day-to-day decisions in the form of telephone calls, letter writing and text messages (Asis 2006; Parreñas 2005a; SMC et al. 2004; Yeoh and Lam 2007). The Philippines has the greatest rate of text messaging of any country of the world because of the large numbers of family members who are overseas at any time. However, through various factors such as social inequalities, residence (urban or rural) and income, such transnational communication is not uniformly available throughout the Philippines. In Sri Lanka, the access for housemaids abroad to modern forms of electronic communication is limited, especially access to the internet.

Nearly two-thirds of these migrants contacted their families once a month and another 31% weekly. Table 8 shows the most frequently contacted person was the husband (61%). Children are frequently contacted by 49%, and other family by

Table 8 Mode of communication with family members and persons frequently contacted by sector

	Sector (percentage)			Total percentage
	Urban	Rural	Estate	
Mode of communication				
Air mail	8.8	21.6	10.3	16.5
Land phone	21.6	21.2	12.8	20.5
Air mail and land phone	43.2	33.1	51.3	38
Mobile phone	2.4	5.5	–	4.0
Air mail and mobile phone	9.6	12.3	23.1	12.5
Land phone and mobile phone	7.2	0.8	–	2.8
Air mail, land and mobile phone	4.8	4.2	–	4.0
No contact at all	2.4	1.3	2.6	1.8
Persons frequently contacted				
Husband	44.3	31.3	42.1	36.4
Children	9.0	11.2	7.9	10.2
Husband and children	18.0	30.5	13.2	24.9
Children and other family members	11.5	14.6	13.2	13.5
Other family members	17.2	12.4	23.7	15.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0‘	100.0

Source: SLMDWS 2008

28%. While the ‘husband and children’ combination was most popular among urban and rural families, the ‘other family option’ is most popular among estate families.

As mentioned already, the emotional pain of separation of mother and child is evident in the fact that loneliness was discussed by 35% of respondents in talking to their children while they were away (Table 9). Also issues associated with child care and the people looking after them at home were significant, being mentioned by 13% of respondents. Education is another matter discussed frequently.

It is apparent that contract labour migration generally has a beneficial effect on the economy of the households the children grow up in. Migration has an overall beneficial effect on their physical environment. A key question, however, is whether the social costs associated with the migration more than counterbalance these positive effects. Of basic significance here is the length of absence of the mother. The usual contract signed is of 2 years duration and 91% of respondents were, or intended to be, absent for this period. Another 5% went for 3 years and the remainder for longer. Only 51 of the respondents had visited Sri Lanka during their contracts. The main reasons for the visits were the illness or death of a family member and the poor health of the migrant worker. However, 10 came back because of problems being experienced by their children. The point is, however, that most women are parted from their children for at least two continuous years and several women have more than a single sojourn overseas. Hence they are not present for significant proportions of the childhood of their children. It is apparent that the mother retained some of the nurturing role even though she was absent for an extended time. Three-quarters of

Table 9 Problems mothers discussed with children in letters or phone calls by sector

Problems discussed	Sector (percentage)			Total percentage
	Urban	Rural	Estate	
No discussions held	31.2	20.8	25.6	24.5
Educational matters	4.0	11.9	2.6	8.5
Health problems	4.0	3.4	15.4	4.8
Loneliness	16.8	8.1	20.5	12.0
Education and health	7.2	14.5	5.1	11.3
Education and loneliness	3.2	8.5	5.1	6.5
Problems of caretaking	0.8	6.4	–	4.0
Financial problems	0.8	2.5	5.1	2.3
Education/health/loneliness	19.2	15.7	17.9	16.5
Education/health/child care	12.8	8.8	2.6	9.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: SLMDWS 2008

respondents said that the mothers discussed the problems of children over the phone or by letters with their husbands or other carers and the children themselves. Moreover, almost all felt that this discussion assisted in reducing the effect of the children's problems. It needs to be stressed that most of the respondents reported that their children managed their lives adequately while their mother was away, while only a tenth thought the children were really happy during the absence and another tenth moderately happy. Less than 5% thought the children were unhappy. It is clear that the assistance provided by other family members during the mother's absence is very important; nevertheless some 15% said that their children had a problem with their mother's absence. These included loneliness, and health and mental problems. However, in 95% of the cases the mothers considered that the child care arrangements they put in place before going overseas were adequate.

While there is a general belief among the absent mothers that the provisions they have made for looking after their children are adequate, some concerns remain with them and clearly worry them when they are away. It is interesting that more than a quarter stated that there was a need for institutional support to be provided to families where the mother is overseas in order to supplement the support given by husbands and families. Child Care support is the greatest need which is expressed. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that almost half of the mothers would not recommend that other Sri Lankan women work overseas. Some of the major reasons they gave for this were: the social costs outweigh the economic benefits, children need their mothers, the family disruption is a big cost, and the mothers suffer while abroad because of separation from children. Migrant mothers do not abandon their children but instead adapt their mothering role after migration. They continue to bear most of the responsibility for childcare even after leaving their countries (Asis 2006; Parreñas 2003, 2005b). This is true among other migrant communities where the role of care-giving continues to fall on women's shoulders even after migration.

Policy implications and conclusion

The Sri Lankan government does not impose any restrictions on women's migration for employment abroad (Shaw 2008a; Soysa 1992) as their remittances have been a major component of household income and foreign earnings in Sri Lanka (Athukorala 1990; Kageyama 2008; Lasagabaster et al. 2005; Shaw 2008a). According to Lasagabaster et al. (2005), the Sri Lankan government has recognized the importance of migrants' contribution to their households and the country's economy, and has implemented a number of programs to facilitate foreign employment.

However, the recognition of the economic significance of the emigration of women is being offset to some extent by the growing concern at the social costs involved in the movement. Their migration has become an issue of public debate with the recognition of the harmful consequences of the long-term separation from mothers for children left behind (*Daily News* 2007; *Human Rights Watch* 2007). The media repeatedly denounce the living and working conditions of women abroad, women who have been duped by bogus recruitment agents and left stranded at the destination countries or harassed by their employers; they also stress the harmful consequences of the long-term separation of women for the well-being of families, despite the economic and social benefits received by the families of the migrants (Eelens 1995; Fernando 1989; Rodrigo 1999; Save the Children 2006). Also, the complaints received by the SLBFE from female overseas workers have become the concern of policy makers. Out of the total complaints from migrants received in 2007, 85% were from females; however, this is less than one per cent of the total female migrant stock in 2007 (*Asian Migration News* 1–31 August 2008; SLBFE 2008:65, 69).

Currently, the Sri Lankan government faces a dilemma: there is a need to promote migration for overseas employment as it is the second highest source of foreign earnings in Sri Lanka (SLBFE 2008:121); and there is a growing concern about the problems faced by the children left behind by migrant mothers (*Daily News* 15 March 2007a, b, c; *Human Rights Watch* 2007). The latter led to a proposal for new legislation to prohibit women with children under 5 years old being involved in the migration, and to allow women with children above 5 years of age to migrate only if they have made appropriate childcare arrangements (*Asian Migration News* 1–15 March 2007a; *Daily News* 15 March 2007). It is obvious that all the mothers who migrate overseas for employment make some kind of arrangement for childcare, but it is important to investigate how these arrangements work. If these women believe migration is beneficial for them and the economic benefits of their migration outweigh the social costs, there is a need for suitable arrangements for childcare at family or institutional level depending on the type of family, whether it is nuclear or extended. If these women are not allowed to migrate, they may find alternatives, often undocumented ways to migrate or to earn money (Pham and Harrod 2008; Ukwatta and Hugo 2009). Gamburd (2005) in her study of Sri Lankan transnational domestic workers has emphasized the jeopardy of banning female migration:

> Female migration from Sri Lanka has always been legal and is likely to remain so in the future for three reasons. First, laws restricting women's migration would be challenged in the courts as violations of women's fundamental

> rights. Second, the sheer volume of female migration and the government's dependence on the money these migrants remit make such an impractical. Third, policy makers recognise that such a ban would funnel these women into undocumented and illegal migration, creating even greater problems of the same type. The result of Nepal's recent ban on female migration, with an increase of illegal networks that place women at greater risks illustrates this point (Gamburd 2005, p. 100).

Furthermore, the evidence from Indonesia is that 'where the migration of women to work as domestic workers is banned it merely forces the migration underground so that women move as undocumented migrants and are even more vulnerable to exploitation' (Hugo 1992, p. 182). Moreover, banning women's migration with young children will further violate their rights to freedom of mobility, development and employment while it will lead to disorderly migration and the trafficking of women (*Asian Migration News* 1–15 April 2007b; *Human Rights Watch* 2007). In addition, it will affect the Sri Lankan economy: on one hand, migrants' remittances are the second highest source of foreign income; on the other hand, migration of women to work overseas is a temporary solution for the country's unemployment problem.

However, the discussions held by the government were later reconsidered as it was felt such a decision would be unworkable owing to the disapproval of the critics, who pointed out that the 'blanket ban' is not the solution to the problem although they admitted the possibility of social problems arising when mothers leave their children left behind (*Asian Migration News* 1–30 May 2007c). They argued that the government attempted to make such decisions without careful consideration of proper planning (*Asian Migration News* 1–15 March 2007a); they urged the government to establish support services to improve the conditions of migrant families instead of banning migration (*Asian Migration News* 1–31 August 2008). They pointed out that these discussions were largely influenced by the available statistics which indicated that many children left behind by migrant mothers have become vulnerable to abuses and suffer from malnutrition and lack of proper healthcare, without considering the advantages of their migration (*Asian Migration News* 1–15 March 2007a).

However, in 2008, the Sri Lankan Foreign Employment and Welfare Ministry prepared a draft new National Policy on Labour Migration to be presented to government in relation to three areas: regulations on good governance, protection and welfare of migrants and development aspects of labour migration (*Asian Migration News* 1–31 August 2008), after recognition of the social costs of female migration. Any idea to deal with the problems of the absence of Sri Lankan OCWs by banning their migration is likely only to worsen the situation. It will dry up one of the few sources of income available to Sri Lankan women or it will result in them joining the significant number of workers who move as undocumented migrants and expose them to the risk of greater exploitation. An approach which is likely to yield better results for the women and their families is one which accepts that the movement will occur but works at establishing best practice in the governance of that migration and in the conditions of migration at the origin and destination. The

findings of this research suggest that the following interventions need to be considered: (1) provide better support systems in origin areas to help husbands and other family members in caring for children; (2) provide institutional support with educational facilities when the support provided by the family members is inadequate; (3) appoint government officials to monitor the progress of migrant families; (4) encourage teachers and other staff to discuss the problems the children of migrant mothers have with their guardians and to inform the relevant authorities for necessary action; (5) improve the conditions of the migrant women at the destination since there continue to be many complaints; (6) conduct a national sample survey to examine the causes and consequences of the migration of female domestic workers in detail; (7) develop communication facilities in both origin and destination areas to facilitate women maintaining the nurturing role with their children as none of the respondents kept in touch with home by email.

In this age of migration, family membership for many in Sri Lanka has become transnational with members dispersed in space. Migration has rendered it impossible for the family to live together all the time. Separation of migrant worker mothers from their children, irrespective of the duration of time, raises important challenges for both mother and children. The Sri Lankan government has used methods to supervise, count and regulate the migrant worker population, but little attention has been paid to the social impacts of the migration, especially on mothers and on their children.

Children are well aware of the reasons why their parents have left: for financial improvement and to provide them with a better education. Nevertheless, parental absence is often experienced with a sense of loneliness and abandonment. Migration is appreciated particularly for the material benefits deriving from it, such as the gifts that parents bring home. But it is lamented because of the rupture of family unity, and insufficient communication between children and their parents. Children often feel that the nurturing provided by mothers from afar is not enough. While most adult family members manage in the absence of the 'light of the home', the separation of the mother from the family is especially difficult for children. It is difficult for other members in the family to reorganize and reconstitute motherhood to accommodate spatial and temporal separation forced by migration. Hence, more attention should be directed towards female migrant workers and their children.

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