

Developing guidelines to support kin carers providing care and support to the Left behind Children (LbC) of the Sri Lankan female migrant workers to the Middle East

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Abstract: More than 1.7 million Sri Lankans now work abroad. Out of them a large majority are employed as female domestic workers. A significant number of them are women, having left their children with a caregiver. In addition to husbands, kin-carers; primarily female relatives of the migrant worker look after their left behind children. Literature state that the left behind children experience health, academic and psychosocial problems. This is mainly due to the absence of the mother and inadequate supervision they receive from their caregivers. Some children are reported to have experienced neglect and abuse from their caregivers. On the other hand, literature also convey that significant number of kin carers has stated that they too experienced health, financial and behavioural issues; due to looking after the left behind children.

Though there is a growing literature on the impact of female migration and its impact on their children, none of those studies have explored the specific role of the kin-carers in the lives of the left behind children. However, there is a need to acknowledge the significant contributions made by the kin carers pertaining to the care and wellbeing of the left behind children. Therefore, the paper aims to explore specific proactive, sustainable interventions to promote psychosocial wellbeing within the left behind children through providing recommendations to support kin carers, in the continuum of grass root to policy level implications

Key Words: Left behind children, Kin-carers, Sri Lanka, female migrant workers, Middle East.

INTRODUCTION:

Sri Lankan women have been employed as domestic workers in the Middle East for almost four decades. Majority of these are unskilled (Hettige, 1999) females recording low levels of education when compared with the national average (Save the Children, 2006; Ratnayake, 1999). A significant percentage of these female migrant workers are in an economically and sexually active age (21 to 40 years); and mothers of young children and adolescents (Save the Children, 2006; CARITAS, 2010). Moreover, the majority of these women had already overstayed their minimum stipulation period in the labor contract (i.e. two years); indicating that their children have experienced significant periods of their mothers' absence.

Records convey that migrant workers contribute significantly to the national economy (Ukwatta, 2010), the economy of their households and the improved living conditions of their families (Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010). However, females especially mothers' migration to the Middle East to be employed as domestic workers for a comparatively long period seems to have created immense psychosocial problems (Save the Children, 2006; Gamburd, 2005; Gamburd, 2008; Senaratna, 2011) for the LbC.

Absence or weak structures and specific mechanisms to oversee the wellbeing of the left behind children have also aggravated these multitudes of psychological, social, legal and anthropological issues (Perera & Rathnayaka, 2013; Tidball, 2011; Hugo et al, 2010; Save the Children, Sri Lanka, 2006). Thus, female migration pause increased dangers for very young children even though legal restrictions are in place to protect mothers from leaving them and seeking employment in the Middle East. Literature conveys that at the time of the mother's departure, the significant number of children is less than six years of age, with nearly one third of the children below three years (Save the Children, 2006). This is a critically formative stage of development in the lives of

young children when adequate physical and emotional nurturance is essential for the future growth of the child (Salawitz & Perry, 2010). In this age, children urgently require their mother's care and protection as they cannot comprehend, or cope with the absence of the mother (Salawitz et al., 2010).

However, precluding female migration to Middle East seems also to be a difficult option due to several reasons. First, it brings a significant income to the country; second, the majority of migrant women belong to disadvantaged communities where the traditional livelihoods are not viable. Third, the majority of the migrant workers have relatively low levels of education compared to the national average which may create difficulties for them to find the job with substantial salaries.

Thus, the most profound cause of female migration is poverty, creating difficulties to access regular and substantial income, in turn causing inability to meet the rising cost of living (Kankanamge, 2015; Perera et al., 2013). Therefore, financial issues (e.g. high indebtedness), as well as social issues (e.g. domestic violence, alcohol/drug addiction of the spouses), may be serving as push factors towards migration. Conversely, earning a steady/ comparatively significant income, independence of the worker (Pinnawala, 2009), upward mobility gained through migration, seeking freedom from spousal abuse/violence may serve as pull factors towards it. All factors mentioned above as well as future aspirations may influence Sri Lankan women to seek employment in the Middle East. Literature notes that married female migrant workers aspire to build houses, educate their children and collecting dowries for their unmarried daughters while unmarried female migrant workers mainly aspire to collect dowries for themselves (CARITAS, 2010) while supporting their families.

Hence, female migration to the Middle East has been the inevitable solution to the plethora of financial, social and psychological issues experienced by the disadvantaged communities as well as the country. However, its repercussions can be described as what could be equivalent to 'opening Pandora's Box'. For instance, the primary care and protection of the LbC have shifted from mothers to the fathers and or the kin carers creating a multitude of socio-anthropological issues. Moreover, the absence of the mother has created psychosocial as well as academic problems within the LbC.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING OF THE LBC:

Local (Perera et al, 2013; Hugo, 2010; CARITAS, 2010; Save the Children, 2006) as well as global (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Siddiqui, 2003) studies carried out on the impact of female migration point out its socio-emotional costs to the children.

Even though studies argue that psychosocial distress experienced by the LbC may be created due to poverty; literature (Senaratna, 2011) conveys that compared to a control group of children of similar background, left behind children experienced profound social-emotional problems. Further, the absence of the mother from the country was recognized as a singular factor causing two-fold increases in mental health problems within the left behind children (Senaratna, Perera & Fonseka, 2011). Hugo and Ukwaata (2010) find that the left behind children is reported to have experienced psychosocial problems of different types such as mood swings, temper tantrums, disobedience, preference to be isolated from other children, joining gangs, and use of alcohol. Studies also state that on the average, children in all ages reported having displayed increased temper tantrums after the departure of their mother with adolescents reported to have displayed considerably higher aggressive episodes such as joining gangs, or use of alcohol. Senaratne, (2012) also reports that the LbC displayed behavioral problems both in and outside the school. They were more prone to fight with peers, destroyed or forcibly took things belonging to others and reported to have displayed cruelty to animals in comparison to their peers. They were also reported as being unusually loud, hyperactive, and some using obscene language. Further, they were described as 'disobedient', 'timid', 'backward', 'ill-disciplined', and 'adamant' by both their teachers and the caregivers. Other problem behaviors included sulking, staring blankly, poor communication with teachers/peers while some children were often reported to have cried reflecting on the mothers' absence. However, literature also conveys that LbC had coped with stressors which have impacted due to the absence of their mothers, displaying maturity in their thinking and behavior (Senaratna, 2012). They also seemed to have survived varied situations on their own and were able to find adequate alternatives to fill the physical and psychological lacuna left by their mothers.

HEALTH ISSUES:

Female migration may also have endangered the physical health of the left behind children. However, when Ukwatta (2010) enquired impact of female migration on the children of the migrant workers, 30.5% of the respondents said that the children had suffered health problems while their mother was absent but less than one-fifth of the caregivers attributed them to the absence of the mother. On the other hand, based on the outcome of their study Hugo and Ukwata (2010) found that the left behind children experienced increased problems at school, health issues such as weight loss due to the absence of their mothers. Similarly, Save the Children (2006) reports that the LbC under that age of five experienced health issues such as loss of appetite and weight as well as speech impairment. Senaratna (2012) reports that due to poor physical hygiene some LbC have been rejected by their peers. Further, studies also report that hygiene of the children may have been affected by not having enough to eat or not eating nutritious food (Senaratna, 2012).

EDUCATION:

Mother migration to the Middle East has also been quoted as one of the primary factors which affect the academic performances of the LbC (Perera et al., 2013; Senaratna, 2012; Tidball, 2011; CARITAS, 2010; Senaratna, 2011; Hugo et al., 2010). When Save the Children (2006) explored the educational achievement of the LbC, comparing their achievements with a group of working and non-working mothers from the same socio-economic background, findings conveyed that majority of the LbC displayed poor school attendance and performance in their studies. In comparison, the control group of children with working mothers had twice the amount of 'good' or very good' scores on these measures. Senaratna (2012) reports that the school absenteeism was frequent due to lack of encouragement/guidance from primary caregiver/s, the performance of age inappropriate household chores (e.g. looking after younger siblings), as well as abuse experienced from the father or the caregiver. Senaratna (2012) also finds that LbC performed poorly in academic activities, lacked concentration, failed to improve despite additional help provided by the teachers and did not participate in extra-curricular activities due to poor moral support.

However, when Hugo et al (2010) inquired about the impact of the Sri Lankan mother's migration on the education of the LbC from their primary caregivers; two-thirds of the respondents reported that the effect was positive. This was mainly due to the enhanced ability to pay the educational costs of the children such as tuition fees and books. Less than one-fifth of the participants mentioned that there was a negative effect on children's education due to their mother's migration.

NATURE, TYPE, AND ROLE OF THE KIN-CARERS:

Kinship care reinforces the social status that comes from belonging to a family of one's own (Geen, 2003). It also creates a sense of identity and self-esteem that is inherent in knowing one's family history and culture. In Sri Lanka, extended family members have long played a role in caring for children when their parents were unavailable to do so, a practice commonly referred to as "kinship care." However, in the global context, kinship care has many forms (Geen, 2003), including persons beyond blood relatives taking care of children with the formal arrangement of the state. Hence, kinship care is described as any living arrangement in which children do not live with either of their parents and are instead cared for by a relative or someone with whom they have had a prior relationship (Geen, 2003).

However, in the Sri Lankan context majority of the care and protection seemed to be informal; provided by families, with no contact or support from the child welfare system. The growing research demonstrates that relatives are a valuable resource for providing temporary care and protection to the LbC (Ukwatta, 2010; Hugo, 2002; Hugo, 2005). Therefore, in the Sri Lankan milieu; informal kinship care refers to arrangements made by the parents and other family members for the LbC to be looked after by a kin-carer; without any involvement from the child welfare/ protection system or the judiciary. For instance, the female migrant worker who seeks employment in the Middle East may leave her children with the child's grandparent/s (Ukwatta, 2010) or an aunt during her employment. However, within this type of care arrangement, the legal custody of the children remains

with the parents, and the parents can legally take back the children at any time. In addition, the kin-carers in these circumstances may have difficulty enrolling the children in school, obtaining health benefits, authorizing medical care, or procuring other benefits, due to the fact that they do not have legal custody of the LbC. Hence, informal kinship care presents varied problems in the context of care/protection for both the kin-carer as well as the LbC.

Literature conveys that primarily fathers serve as the carers (Ukwatta, 2010; Hugo & Ukwatte, 2010; Save the Children, 2006) of the children left behind. In addition kin, carers, are mainly mothers (Ukwatta, 2010; Senaratna, 2012) or female relative of the migrant worker; living in the same house or close by to assist with the daily tasks and routine chores of child-rearing. Moreover, kin carers are usually assigned the sole responsibility of the child by the female migrant workers when she is divorced, separated or widowed or has issues with her husband's conduct (e.g. abusing alcohol/drugs or perceived of having or having extra-marital affairs) (Hugo et al, 2010).

Findings also convey that LbC experienced different forms of neglect and abuse from their relative and caregivers (Senaratna, 2012; Save the Children, 2006). Their healthcare was neglected by the caregiver/s, especially when they abused substance. Some children were abused physically and sexually by fathers and other male relatives (Save the Children, 2006) while others were forced to do age inappropriate household chores (Senaratna, 2012). On the hand, kin carers too reported that they experienced physical (back/neck/joint pain) and mental (stress) health issues due to looking after the LbC (Senaratna, 2011). Some reported that the duties of looking after LbC prevented them from attending to the needs of other family members (Senaratna, 2011).

However, studies have also come up with benefits of the female migration such as strengthening the role of the father as well as the kin carers (Save the Children, 2006). Similarly, Save the Children (2006) reports that a high level of positive interaction was evidenced between the primary caregivers and the LbC. A large majority of the LbC have also stated that they are close to their caregiver, though they found the separation from the mother to be irreplaceable; reporting feelings of loneliness due to her absence.

Thus, the literature conveys that there are multitudes of problems due to female migration to the Middle East. However, only a handful of studies have explored the specific proactive interventions which can be taken at the policy level to prevent the psychosocial damage caused by the female migration to the Middle East in Sri Lanka. Even fewer studies (Ukwatta, 2010) have explored the role of the kin-carer in the lives of left behind children. Therefore, the paper is of the opinion that the policy makers requires to identify and acknowledge the significance contribution made by the kin carers to in the lives of the LbC. Thus, the paper provides following recommendation to promote psychosocial well-being within left behind children through providing care and support to their kin carers.

Recommendation 01: Develop criteria to identify eligibility of the kin-carer:

At present the migrant workers seem to be making ad hoc arrangements without support, care and assistance from the Sri Lankan child welfare system. However, welfare system has offered its protection to the LbC by requesting the migrant worker to inform the NCPA to ensure the protection of the child. Thus, the paper recommends the NCPA to develop criteria to identify eligibility of the kin-carer, based on legal documents such as fit person ordinance, and Tsunami Act (Tsunami Special Arrangements Act, 2005). The paper also suggests that it would be important to conduct basic character checkups, obtain police reports, school records and or teacher/ school counselor recommendations when developing and evaluating the eligibility of the kin carer.

However, the paper suggests when identifying the eligibility of the kin-carer the importance and priority should be placed on the carer's ability to provide love and protection to the children above financial support. In addition, it recommends the NCPA to develop a risk assessment index to identify at-risk LbC (e.g. children living with alcoholic fathers; children with a record of frequent absenteeism, school drop-out); living with their kin carers who may neglect/abuse them or have the potential to do so.

The paper envisages that legal recognition of the kin carer to be eligible would provide several benefits to both parties. LbC would be cared by a carer who is bound by the child welfare and the law of the country to care and

protect them while the kin carer would be entitled to benefits/ provisions available to individuals looking after the LbC.

Moreover, the paper believes that the responsible government authorities should conduct quarterly, bimannual or annual monitoring, based on the risk level of the child to assess whether eligibility is maintained. When conducting the monitoring and assessment the paper recommends the officers in charge to be sensitive towards the kin carers in a manner non-offensive to him/her.

Recommendation 02: Develop guidelines to recognize the rights and responsibilities of the kin carers:

Formal recognition of kinship carer's physical/ legal rights and responsibilities to take care of the Sri Lankan children is a fairly novel concept. So far it has been limited to tsunami affected children (Tsunami Special Arrangements Act, 2005). Thus, the paper recognizes the urgency of the legally recognizing the rights and responsibility of the kinship carers by the government, in order to promote the welfare and protection of the LbC.

The paper further recommends that while exploring suitable culturally relevant and child-friendly measures for the care and protection of the LbC, policy makers should request and encourage the migrant mother to sign a voluntary placement agreement with the NCPA. In this they should be requested to provide details of the kin-carers. Even though this has not been practically feasible in the past, the paper believes that care and protection agencies in Sri Lanka require emphasizing the importance of it to the female migrant workers. The paper recommends awareness programs through popular media and local professionals such as family health workers and GS to promote this concept.

Recommendation 03: Develop guidelines to promote formal kinship care

The paper recommends the state welfare agencies to consider the provision of formal kinship care in which children are placed in the temporary legal custody of the State by a judge or the kin carers. If the legal custody is with the state, the child welfare agency, acting on behalf of the State, has legal custody and must answer to the court. The kin-carer will have physical custody. However, if the kin carers have both the legal and physical custody of the child's they will have rights and responsibilities and will be answerable to the state. The paper believes such a provision would create a safe, conducive and protective environment for the LbC, especially those who are at risk or potential to be at risk.

The paper also recommends when the child welfare takes decisions pertaining to the custody of the child, they should do so after considering the best interests of the LbC. This may include having to consider developmental trajectory of the child, special needs (i.e. disability), as well as after weighting protective vs. risk factors present in the environment of the kin-carer.

Recommendation 04: Develop guidelines to provided special provisions and benefits to the kin carers (who serve as the primary caregivers of the LbC):

Geen (2003) reported that kinship foster parents, who are primarily grandparents, tend to be in poor health. This may also be true in the Sri Lankan context. In fact, literature (Senaratna, 2011) conveys that kin carers reported of having financial and psychological concerns having to care for the one or several LbC in their old age. Further, female relatives belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged groups may also serve as kin carers to the LbC. Thus, having to care for the LbC may pause an additional burden to them impacting inadequate supervision, and neglect of the LbC even extending to abuse.

Thus, the paper recommends that the state welfare agencies to consider creative/ innovative ways of providing financial and psychosocial support to the kin-carer. For example, the paper recommends that the kin-carers should be provided with health insurance, low-interest loans to start micro business, provision of identification cards which would allow privileges when accessing health/ public transportation/ other community facilities and special recognition and priority granted if and when applying for or accessing formalized financial assistance and support from the state financial assistance programs and poverty alleviation programs such as 'Samurdhi'. The paper also

stresses the importance of developing, conducting and coordinating programs by the concerned authorities to cherish the services of the kin-carer.

Recommendation 05: Provide special support system for fathers if and when the father is the primary caregiver: Literature conveys that significant percentage of fathers serve as the primary caregivers of the LbC (Ukwatta, 2010; Save the Children, 2006). Literature also conveys that the positive behaviors of the father such as non-use of alcohol serve as protective factors (save the Children, 2006). Thus, the paper recommends identifying ways that government and non-governmental organizations could provide support to fathers/ kin carers. Some of the recommendation which the paper makes is forming and providing father support circles by the state welfare agencies. For example, NCPA could provide awareness on child abuse and protection (i.e. how to promote positive discipline at home) to fathers while Probation & Child Care could develop and initiate play groups for children and their fathers, as well as parenting information. Ministry of Education could explore the possibilities of granting special privileges to the fathers such as unlimited or frequent access to schools (e.g. given that fact that parents cannot enter school premises any time), meeting with the teachers and workplace leave. Foreign Employment Bureau could develop and implement income generation programs, financial counseling, and recognition (through the provision of monetary reinforcement scheme) based on the positive conduct of the father such as being teetotallers, or being a loving/ protective carer.

Recommendation 06: Develop awareness and training programs for kin-carers:

To understand the developmental trajectories and psychosocial issues of the LbC in their care and protection, the paper recommends in developing awareness and training programs for their kin carers. The paper is of the opinion that they should be of two types,

1. Psycho- social programs comprising of psycho-social first aid, parenting support programs, protection/intervention programs, counseling programs for parents and school teachers
2. Psycho-educational programs comprising of educational support programs, the special educational program for children with disabilities and learning problems).

Recommendation 07: Develop resources for children and their kin carers:

The paper recognizes the importance of developing resources for the LbC, and their kin carers. It further recommends wider circulation of the existing resources and awareness creation materials developed by varied government and non-governmental organizations to promote the wellbeing of the LbC. The paper further recommends the state and non-state agencies to identify mechanisms and strategies to circulate resource/ awareness creation materials.

Recommendation 08: Set up a 24/7 helpline to support kin-cares to ensure the care and protection of the LbC –As mentioned before, kin carers may have deal with multitude of problems in the Sri Lankan cultural milieu when having to care someone else’s child. They may also have issues which would require immediate answers. Thus, the paper also recommends in setting up a helpline to address the wellbeing issues related to LbC while providing support to the primary caregivers of the LbC.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, repercussion of female migration as well as inadequate supervision received by the LbC has been widely discussed at a great length by the media as well as varied government and non-governmental bodies. They include multitude of problems associated with education, physical health and psychosocial wellbeing of the LbC with a greater potential for neglect and abuse by the caregivers and others. Literature clearly conveys that the negative impact of the mother migration can be mitigated by the support provided by the extended families. Further, protection and care provided by the kin carers to the LbC, serve as crucial factors in their happiness (Ukwatta, 2010) and adjustment (Yeoh & Lam, 2007); mitigating the social costs of their mother’s absence (Hugo, 2005; Hugo, 2002). However, to provide continues support to the LbC, father/kin-carers also require sustainable

proactive assistance from the state welfare agencies. Hence, the paper explores the main issues on the female migration to the Middle East and provides guidelines to ensure wellbeing of the LbC.

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