

Care drain, changes in gender roles within migrant families and care deficit in Sri Lanka

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The demand for care givers has increased internationally, especially in the developed countries, due to the increasing numbers of women entering the labour market, advancement in social status of women, economic development of families, and unwillingness of local women to engage in 3-D jobs and government policies that encourage immigration. Responding to this demand, the number of women migrating to countries in many parts of the world as care workers has increased dramatically over the past few decades and Sri Lanka has also become one of the major suppliers of caregivers among Asian countries. Women in Sri Lanka are perceived as primary care givers for their children, the aged and the sick persons in their households. With the increasing demand for care work from rich countries and due to the economic hardships, Sri Lankan women with low socio-economic conditions are compelled to leave their children, the aged and the sick in the care of the other family members and move internationally to care of the children of other mothers, and the aged and the sick people of other families for pay. Consequently, gender roles within migrant families left behind have changed. Spouses of migrant women, old parents and elderly children are overburdened with multiple activities. Moreover, deficiencies in care take place in families when care is needed. This care deficit involves a lack of paid care and a lack of informal family care. This paper reports on a field survey of 400 Sri Lankan transnational families where the women has gone to work in a foreign country as domestic workers as well as detailed qualitative work with key stakeholders in 2008 and 2014 in Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy and Kurunegala Districts. First, it examines the nature of work perform by migrant women at destination countries. Then, it explores how gender roles have changed within migrant families. Finally, the paper attempts to highlight the care deficit that might occur in Sri Lanka due to the care drain. It further emphasizes the need to conduct a survey to examine the care requirement of the families of employed women in the country and to develop and operationalize programmes in employing migrant care workers in Sri Lanka.

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