

## **Male dominance to female dominance and back to male dominance: the changing nature of international labour migration of Sri Lanka**

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When the international labour migration from Sri Lanka commenced in 1976, with the first major rise in oil prices in Middle-East region countries, males dominated in the migration stream. However, by 1988, the number of male and female international labour migrant workers became almost the same. During the period 1989-2007, female dominance in the migration stream became significant. Interestingly, the two decades of female dominance in labour migration has disappeared in the recent past. Thus the general objectives of this study are to examine the possible reasons for the disappearance of female dominance and future trends in international labour migration of Sri Lanka.

Data for the study is basically drawn from the data base of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). Complementary data sets from the Department of Census and Statistics and data sets developed by the author are also used.

One of the immediate reasons for the reversal of the two decade pattern is the increase of skilled male migrant workers under the bi-lateral agreement between South Korea and Sri Lanka. However, still the Middle-East region dominates and attracts about 90 percent of annual labour migrants from Sri Lanka. Comprehensive training activities, specifically for increasing the capacity of low-skilled workers to access skilled employment, are already underway. The SLBFE and many other state and private sector agencies have initiated a number of activities to promote skilled labour. Through that, more males than females receive advantage for migration to many destinations other than the Middle-East region.

For many years, the domain of Sri Lankan migrant workers has been dominated by females, particularly those who engaged in housemaid category. Studies by the author clearly demonstrated that 15 percent of married females who underwent induced abortion procedure in Sri Lanka, had the immediate departure for Middle-East as the main reason for the termination.

However, in 2007, State action resulted in closure of almost all abortion centers that had provided such services. Since then, women who were planning to go to Middle-East hardly have any avenue to get their unexpected/unwanted pregnancies terminate. Thus the majority of such women would have kept the pregnancy for full term and delivered the children. This environment affected potential female labour migrants in two ways: first, the pregnancy and second, by having a small child; both contributing to curtailing the attempt for migration.

Over 90 percent of the Sri Lankan female migrant worker population is low-skilled. Many of them face numerous problems, at destination and also after returned to Sri Lanka. The low-skilled female migrant labourers face more problems than the skilled female workers. It is this environment that has persuaded the government to initiate number of strategies to discourage the migration of low-skilled female workers, particularly the housemaid category. As a result of all these activities and changes in the environment (local and abroad), males once again dominate in the domain of international labour migration of Sri Lanka and the pattern is expected to continue in the immediate future.