THE IMPACT OF MOTHER-

MIGRATION ON CHILDREN AND

FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA

CONTENTS

Editor's Note ... ...

The August Issue of the Review has an extremely vital issue as its focus; namely the impact of mother-migration on children and families in Sri Lanka.

Article 64 (2) of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (to which Sri Lanka acceded to in 1996) stipulates that the State should pay due regard not only to labour needs and resources, but also to the social, economic, cultural and other needs of migrant workers and members of their families involved, as well as to the consequences of such migration for the communities concerned.

These obligations are buttressed by the provisions of other international treaties to which Sri Lanka is a signatory, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Has Sri Lanka's social and legal framework taken such obligations sufficiently into account? Or, on the contrary, have the children and families of women migrant workers, (responsible for, according to Central Bank statistics in 2002, 61% of total remittances and 22% of total foreign exchange earned during that year), been pushed to the background of national legal and policy initiatives?

The first essay written on invitation to the Review by *Sajeewa Samaranayake* analyses the manner in which migrants' children have negotiated the absence of their mothers, (and consequently the breaking up of the family unit for long periods of time). He uses the findings of three research studies carried out respectively in 1989, 1999 and 2001 for his analysis which is conducted from the standpoint of the *attachment theory* (based on the premise that relationships are key to connecting children's personal and social worlds).

The author underscores some commonly accepted findings emerging from these studies regarding the high-risk category that migrants' families and children fall into. He makes the pertinent observation that "the data available highlights the fact that there are no shortcuts available, whether in conducting research or in making an assessment with a view to intervention, to paying attention to *individual children in individual families.* " Thus, what is imperative is "co-ordinated and competent social work which *relates* to the families in order to help them."

Providing some new research findings to these discussions, the Review is also pleased to publish excerpts of the Summary Report *Left Behind, Left Out: The Impact*

on Children and Families of Mothers Migrating for Work Abroad by Save the Children in Sri Lanka (August 2006).

In its Preface, Richard Mawer, Country Programme Director, Save the Children in Sri Lanka notes that the study investigates the phenomenon of large-scale female migration and its implications for children's right to a secure family environment, to a quality education, to sound development and right to contact with mothers. The study makes the point that children and families left behind by migrant women are "left out" by an entire system that has yet to adequately and fully recognize and appreciate the considerable contribution to national income made by these women.

Structures and mechanisms to oversee the emotional, psychological, and social impact on children and families of the long-term absence of the maternal figure are not in place, and when they are present, they are extremely weak, as amply brought out in the research findings. Of particular note here is the clear negative impact that migration of women has on the education of children and the greater potential for neglect.

Particularly, the findings reiterate women's right to choice of employment. Thus, in no way is childrearing seen as the sole responsibility of these women. In fact, the research focuses on fathers and other family members as caregivers, and investigates issues around it.

It is however emphasized that more proactive interventions need to be made on behalf of children, as well as fathers and the large number of female caregivers - mostly senior citizens - who are all dealing with the absence of a critical figure in the household, and providing care and support to children. The increased potential for the abuse of children in environments with lack of adequate or strong protective caregivers also needs to be addressed.

Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena

MIGRANTS' CHILDREN: MAKING SENSE OF THEIR DEVELOPMENT AND WELFARE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 'ATTACHMENT THEORY'[*]

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 1977 marked a watershed for the relationship between the state and the family unit in Sri Lanka. The state relinquished its hold on the economy to embrace capitalism. But in doing so it failed to develop a corresponding vision of social security and social development. There was no balanced perception of capitalism which was seen as wholly good. Within a free market, the public health and education services, (which were available to all as a matter of right since the early 1940s), not only failed to develop but were also undermined by the private sector. Quality services were increasingly available to the select few and at a price. There was no commitment to uniformity *and* universality in the provision of health care and education for children. This burden was shifted to the family, effectively separating the privileged children from the disadvantaged.

Forces of materialism and consumerism carried those who were able to exploit them to new heights leaving the unskilled and deprived rural and urban poor with no option but to join the rat race as best as they could. Both rural and urban classes characterised by illiteracy, low educational attainments, low incomes, unemployment and poor living conditions, were the hardest hit by this new economic order. (Samarasinghe 1989, Hettige 1999, Amarasinghe 2002).

Against this background decisions made by housewives of these classes to leave their families and migrate to the Middle East to work as housemaids could be understood as an attempt to break out of the cycle of poverty and create their own safety nets. This pattern commenced in the early 1980s and is well established now notwithstanding widespread concern about increased developmental risks to the children left behind, both within and outside the family home. The Second Country Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1998 estimates their numbers at 6-800 000 and they have become a principal source of foreign exchange to the country.

Whilst this essay will focus on how migration affects the development of children left behind, declining socio-economic conditions in Sri Lanka in the last two decades of the 20th century serve to broaden the relevance of this inquiry. Other families were also affected by hard economic choices made during the period under review. Skilled workers and professionals across the class spectrum ventured abroad leaving their families and continue to do so, perhaps more so today.

Again, employment in both the public and private sectors within Sri Lanka takes little account of the family life of the individual and can lead to lengthy periods of separation from the spouse and children. Increasingly fewer families conform to the traditional breadwinner (father) and caregiver-homemaker (mother) model where the home symbolised a constant and caring parental presence (First and Second Country Reports). As Morrow (1988) points out, today,

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A motif of absence plays in the lives of many children. It may be an absence of authority and limits or an absence of emotional commitment.

How do migrants' children negotiate these absences and what effect does it have on their development? What implications do these absences pose for their equal right to optimal development together with other children in the country and how does abuse and neglect affect this right? We seek the answers to these questions within the framework of the *attachment theory* (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1979,1980) which holds that 'relationships provide the key experience that connects children's personal and social worlds' (Howe *et al* 1999:9).

This perspective, which naturally includes both relationships and other factors, (genetic and environmental), that affect those relationships will inform our approach to migrants' families. We begin with the facts ascertained by three research studies, which focused on the lives of these children and their families.

2. THE STUDIES AND THEIR RELEVANCE

In 1989, Samarasinghe carried out a survey of 75 families both within and in the outskirts of Colombo. Ten years later Hettige studied a much larger sample of 1386 families drawn from three administrative divisions where migration levels were high. They were, Colombo (urban sector, n=500), Mawathagama (rural peasant sector, n=546) and Weligama (coastal fishing sector, n=340). In 2001, Amarasinghe who carried out an assessment of 120 child sex workers reported that 17% (n=21) of them were from migrants' families. There is no disaggregated data on this group but some common findings will be referred to.

2.1 Observations on Methodology and Focus

Child development needs to be viewed in a continuum. However all three studies are cross-sectional and therefore omit vital information about family history and onward progress. Another drawback is that the studies focused the group as a whole and not individual families. Consequently the findings are separate and disconnected. For example, Hettige records the following figures for Mawathagama.

1. Daughters assuming maternal role - 46.7%,
2. Paternal alcoholism   - 50%,
3. Paternal incest   - 27.6%
4. Paternal physical abuse   - 5.7%

This pattern is fairly representative of the other two divisions as well. However we do not know in how many families factors (1) and (2) led to (3) and in how many families (2) led to (4). Again, the breadth of the studies did not enable a full coverage of individual children in multiple settings - home, school and peer group activities; and to this extent we do not have a complete picture of these children. The relevance of relationships outside the home is brought out in Amarasinghe's study which revealed humiliation of poverty stricken students in school and peer initiation into premature sex as significant influences in pushing children into the sex trade. Finally, whilst both the specific studies indicated that the *majority* of the families remained functional and that approximately a

quarter of them succeeded in making capital investments in house or property, the protective factors which operated in their favour were not probed.

2.2 Common and Evolving Patterns

On a comparison of the specific studies by Samarasinghe and Hettige which stand ten years apart, the most dramatic change is in regard to foster-care. This had worked reasonably well in Samarasinghe's study and the foster-carers were mostly adults and close relatives (88%) who had known the children since birth. In fact, 35 of them asserted that the children loved them *more* than they loved their mother. Only 4 daughters were pressed into service as foster-carers in this study.

By contrast, Hettige reveals a heavy reliance on daughters as foster-carers; 59% in Colombo, 46.7% in Mawathagama and 61% in Weligama. This reflected a national shift towards the nuclear family and even the more truncated single parent model. Urbanisation and the high cost of maintaining extended families are two explanations cited (Second Country Report 1998:34). No grandparents figured as caregivers except for 22 grandmothers. Continuity was seen in the apparent imbalance in parental commitment to the family unit, repeat migrations, paternal alcoholism and in the fact that roughly a third of the families presented multiple risk indicators.

2.3 Hettige's Findings on Child Impact

Hettige demonstrates that the principal risks were those associated with fathers. 30% of them in all three divisions paid less attention to the family than earlier and there were also complaints of incest and physical abuse. Alcoholism and other vices affected care-giving and also depleted family coffers. These risks were contained within the 30% limit and it will be assumed that they were *concentrated* within the same group of families rather than being spread across the sample. Since daughters assumed a maternal role in a much larger percentage of families, it is clear that this did not necessarily signal family dysfunction in the way that paternal alcoholism did.

Whilst some fathers incurred loss of employment in their effort to shoulder household duties, those children whose fathers were absent assumed additional responsibilities which were premature. 10% of all children aged 6-10 had household chores which included cooking and baby sitting for some. This figure increased to 20% for the children aged 11-14. These children found a lack of support both in their house work and school work due to maternal absence. More children dropped out of school as they grew older. The pressures on these children can be appreciated against a marked pattern of paternal absence and alcoholism in both Colombo and Mawathagama.

However paternal addiction to liquor (n=6), and psychological problems (n=12) were significantly less in Weligama, the fishing community where boys habitually joined their father in fishing. As with the younger children roughly 50% of those between 15-18 and nearing adulthood confirmed loneliness and the lack of a confidante. This increased their insecurity and vulnerability to people they turned to. The children recorded as victims of sexual abuse and assaults fall within this age group. Self development and a livelihood being the defining issues of this period in life more than 3 out of 5 children sought financial assistance to engage in self-employment and an equal number expressed willingness to undergo counseling.

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In those families affected by negative paternal behaviour, the education of children suffered. The children in urban Colombo fared better due to the better facilities available. In general however a system of 'free education' that neither imparted life skills nor trained students for employment, (in view of a chronic mismatch between the system of education and the job market) turned out to be an institutional lie. The school environment has also failed the children who needed its support most. Hettige refers to victims of sexual abuse being condemned and ill-treated by teachers and class mates and Amarasinghe to the adversity faced by poor students.

Together with the older adolescents, children under 5 appeared to be a high-risk category. There were 272 in all and the health and nutrition of 102 children were found unsatisfactory. Again, children in Colombo fared the best and those in rural Mawathagama were the worst affected. Maternal separation was found to have a direct impact on growth in some cases including the loss of weight and speech impairment within the first month of departure. The deprivation of maternal love, affection, care and security was compounded in certain cases through the neglect or lack of awareness of the father or foster-carer. Less than half the children in this group benefited from a pre-school education.

2.4 Principal Issues of Concern

Based on the foregoing, a human relational perspective of these families reveals the following connected issues of concern for the application of the attachment theory.

1. Family history and marital relationship between migrant mothers and their husbands.
2. Form and size of the family.
3. Quality of child-care before separation.
4. Communication of the decision to leave to the child.
5. Foster-carer's role and relationship with the child.
6. Full spectrum of relationships within the post-separation family.
7. Paternal behaviour and what influences it, including the presence or lack of social support within or outside the family.
8. Home and finance management skills.
9. Additional responsibilities of children.
10. Relevance of gender for children.
11. Educational support for children at school and home.
12. Peer group activities of children.
13. Health and well-being.
14. The experiences of the migrant mother abroad and her communications with the family.
15. Family reunions and beyond.

3. ATTACHMENT THEORY

The Attachment theory is a theory of personality development in the context of close relationships (Howe 2001:194) and it has helped researchers piece together a powerful connection between the nature of parent-child relationships and the different psycho-social pathways children take as they grow up. Infants begin their social life very early. Starting off with an indiscriminate social responsiveness they recognise their parents by 2 or 3 months and begin to respond preferentially to

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them (Bowlby, 1969). *Attachment* refers to the *general* pattern of parent-child interaction which ensues when the baby communicates a physical or emotional need to the caregiver.

3.1 Secure Patterns

The caregiver who relates to and understands the behaviour from the baby's perspective establishes a sequence that may be enacted thousands of times during infancy. The baby thus acquires a sense of security, trust in his caregiver and a secure attachment whilst the caregiver acquires a sense of competence and security in his/her role.

3.2 Insecure Patterns

A second category of babies find that their attachment behaviour consistently produces the opposite desired. Their parents intrude to either control or deny their feelings and reject their behaviour. However they seem to respond best when the baby is quiet and undemanding. These babies de-activate their attachment system. They learn to regulate emotion by suppressing it as the optimum strategy for achieving proximity to the caregiver without being rejected. Not being able to make sense of what they *feel*, they rely on what they *know* - that people are available when they are undemanding and self-sufficient. (Howe *et al* 1999:61). They are classified as avoidant. A third category of babies experience their caregiver as unreliable and inconsistently responsive. The child is not rejected but not all of his behaviours are accepted, and as in the case of avoidant babies the carer's own psychological needs tend to govern her involvement.

As Howe *et al* point out (1999:89)

> 'There is love for the child but as far as the infant is concerned, it is hard to win and in scarce supply.'

Inconsistent mothers are sometimes comforting, sometimes angry and sometimes ineffective. Unlike the avoidant child, this infant cannot *mentally* predict and establish a connection between what he does and the maternal response and he falls back on emotion. This they do by raising the level of attachment behaviour in order to break through parental inattention and insensitivity. Thus, yelling screaming and temper tantrums are eventually rewarded with attention and relative security is achieved (Howe *et al* 1999:89, 90). They are classified as ambivalent as they develop a deep sense of uncertainty about self-worth and the availability of others.

Avoidant and ambivalent infants retain their anxiety and insecurity in relation to the parent (thus carrying a psycho-social risk) but they share, together with the securely attached, an *organised* system which effectively enables them to achieve proximity and maintain contact with the parent. Consequently they will be able to maintain functional relationships with others despite their distinctive styles of interaction (George 1996). But infants within certain dysfunctional care-giving relationships are unable to devise a coherent defence.

Such infants remain in a state of heightened and unregulated distress and arousal precisely for the reason that its cause originates from the caregiver. This takes place where the parent is either abusive

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or emotionally withdrawn (due, either to a psychiatric condition or heavy drug or alcohol abuse). According to Howe *et al* (1999:122) this classification may also be superimposed on one of the three secure attachments, whichever 'best fits', the <u>disorganised</u> style coming into play at times of stress and emotional low points.

Attachment behaviour is 'proximity seeking' in that it is designed to ensure caregiver availability either for protection from danger, provision of food or emotional warmth and social interaction (Howe *et al* 1999:15). Paradoxically a secure attachment has a liberating effect, providing a 'secure base' for the child to explore, learn and adapt to his psycho-social environment. Conversely a child whose attachment behaviour is not generally responded to with sensitivity and acceptance develops a state of *insecurity* which inhibits exploration, play and social learning.

Attachment relationships provide the child with a set of *general* assumptions about his self worth and the availability of others to provide him with care and protection, and they become his mental property, an internal working model, which in turn affects   relationship style and social competence. This model constitutes his 'personality.' The model may be modified or even disconfirmed if others begin to react (positively or negatively) in ways that it fails to anticipate. Nevertheless, with time it becomes resistant to change even though change is always possible in the context of *close* relationships (Howe *et al* 1999:21, 41).

3.3 Child Abuse and Neglect

Issues of abuse and neglect are now understood to be synonymous with psycho-social developmental risk and the attachment theory provides a holistic focus to family functioning. First, it is now recognised that 'the essential element in child abuse is not the intention to destroy a child but rather the inability of a parent to nurture his offspring' (Newberger, 1973). Secondly, despite the early attention to observable physical effects, it is the *psychological consequences* that are the unifying factor in all types of maltreatment (Garbarino & Vondra 1987). An allied point is that forms of maltreatment generally overlap so that a child may have experienced more than one (Aber & Cicchetti 1984).

Thirdly, several researchers (Giaretto 1976, Herman & Hirschmann 1977) have noted that the occurrence of sexual abuse suggests *general family dysfunction* and they contend that it is this dysfunction rather than the abuse *per se* that accounts for psychological outcomes for the child. According to Erickson *et al* (1989) this could be said in regard to other types of maltreatment as well. They point out that 'maltreatment is not an isolated event within an otherwise normally functioning family' but that it 'represents a pervasive, persistent pattern of interaction within a home environment that in many ways fail to foster the child's healthy development.'

4. ATTACHMENT THEORY APPLIED

4.1 The Context of Its Application

In applying the attachment theory to migrants' families, characteristic patterns of interpersonal relations before and after maternal separation provide the all important context that shapes the psycho-social environment of the child (Wolkind & Rutter, 1985).

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It should also be recognised that *multiple* losses which precede or come in the wake of separation will have a greater cumulative effect than any one factor standing alone (Rutter 1999). Thus, marital discord, family breakdown due to death, divorce or separation, paternal alcoholism, environmental discontinuity signified by a change of residence, a drop in living standards and additional responsibilities can have a debilitating effect on children if they combine.

These principles however cannot be applied in deterministic fashion in view of the unique personal element that every child brings into the equation by way of their attributes of temperament and intelligence (Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Rutter 1999:121). Thus, even though development is a 'co-operative mission between genes and experience' (Howe *et al* 1999: 35) there may be an important question of degree involved, indicating the dominance of one over the other. Consequently it is well accepted that children's long term responses to psycho-social adversity can reveal enormous variation. This quality of relative resistance is attributed to *resilience*. Conversely some children may be more susceptible to psycho-social risk than others due to their *vulnerability*. These two are necessarily broad phenomena. They may influence and be influenced by interpersonal relationships both within and outside the family. It has also been pointed out that positive experiences have no intrinsic protective value unless they directly counter, neutralize or compensate for some risk factor (Rutter 1999: 133).

4.2 Marital Relationship and Parental Childhood History

24% of the migrant mothers in Hettige's study were divorced, separated or widowed. There is no further information as to the lapse of time since these events, the alternative care-giving arrangements made and the role the divorced/separated fathers played during maternal absence. It could be speculated, perhaps that this group was not affected by paternal alcoholism. These facts are vital in view of Rutter's (1971) identification of parental conflict, family discord and their effects on parenting as the most potent risk factors in circumstances involving maternal separation. Indeed children may be harmed by such risks in the absence of any separation.

On the other hand, a good marital relationship between the migrant mother and her husband, (signifying mutual trust and commitment), is a strong protective factor which maintains self esteem and notions of parental availability for children. It is therefore established that 'the context and circumstances of the separation are more important than the mere fact that the parent and child are not together' (Wolkind & Rutter 1985).Marital relations are in turn shaped by the interaction of the distinctive attachment styles of the spouses. As Wolkind & Rutter (1985:38) put it, 'interpersonal behaviour is likely to reflect both current social circumstances and previous social experiences.'

Parenting is affected likewise and George (1996:417) states that the internal working model 'predicts continuity and the inter-generational transmission of relationships.' This can place certain children at an early disadvantage as there is a greater likelihood that parents who provide increased genetic risks for their children may also provide sub-optimal environments and rearing conditions (Rutter 1999: 121). Childhoods of abusing and neglecting parents appear to be full of anger, conflict, violence and chaos. By contrast, neglecting but non-abusing parents are more likely to have received insensitive and incompetent parenting characterised by social isolation.

The data on migrants' families throws up three strands of cases with those of 'pure' neglect of the emotional, physical and educational needs of children appearing to be the highest, sexual abuse the second and physical abuse the third. As noted above however, forms of maltreatment may reveal a complex interaction and the 2nd and 3rd strands probably indicate secondary concerns of neglect and emotional abuse as well. Depending upon the distinctive styles of parent-child interaction, these cases could fall within any of the three insecure patterns.

4.3 The Form and Size of the Family

According to Rutter (1999:120/121) certain conditions and events do not represent a risk process as such but 'predispose to other experiences that actually mediate the risk.' Thus, family poverty may make parenting difficult, but 'the proximal risk processes mainly involve impaired family functioning ... and relationships rather than economic privation as such' (Cf. Brody *et al.*, 1994; Conger and Elder, 1994). This would be true of both nuclear and single parent families as well. Amarasinghe who investigated the backgrounds of child sex workers found that family units with more than five members without extended support was a high-risk factor. Where a family is already poor, every new child increases its socio-economic disadvantage and dilutes the available parental attention (Rutter 1971). In migrants' families, this also served to impose additional burdens on older children.

4.4 Quality of Early Child Care and Communication of the Decision to Leave

The departure of the migrant mother may be a time of change and instability for all family members. Adults however have a continuing duty to mediate the changes in a way that makes sense and provides security to the children. In good times as well as bad, the essence of the attachment theory is the human need of the child to be connected to another human being who provides basic trust and assurance that he/she is loved and will be protected. It also emphasises that this connection is all about clear open and honest communication between caregiver and child.

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) said that three optimum conditions are necessary for children to resolve losses and move on - a secure attachment with the person leaving; timely, accurate provision of information; and continuing access to a trusted parent or adult. We focus initially on pre-separation adult behaviour and the modes in which children process information.

According to Jewett (1994: 7-11) the first stage of processing and understanding observations is formed at about 18 months and lasts till around 7 years and is called *magical thinking*. These children generally personalize everything and tend to believe that their own thoughts, wishes and actions are responsible for everything that happens to them and others. They also lack the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy and appear to believe in fairy tale endings. Adult wishful thinking for negative external situations to simply go away is a residue of this mode of response. Around 6 years, children shift to *concrete thinking*, which is a black and white form of thinking in terms of absolutes like good/bad, always/never. They have little ability to deal with the shades of grey. This mode lasts till about 11-12 years when children start perceiving both individuals and events in a balanced and even philosophical way. Adults may often regress to this mode in times of stress and in relation to difficult moral issues. Similarly children may regress to magical thinking in times of crisis.

These cognitive modes are inextricably linked with their characteristic modes of regulating affect ingrained within the internal working models. Secure infants and toddlers up to about 4 years rely on the physical proximity of the caregiver and maternal separation can be highly stressful to them. As they grow older however they are less likely to show emotional upset if they accept and understand the reasons for leaving. Due to their increasing cognitive capacity, they can conceptualise the attachment figure as psychologically available, though not physically present and can sustain relationships over lengthy periods of separation (Wolkind & Rutter 1985: 35). Ambivalent children (irrespective of age) are the *most* prone to separation anxiety and they may experience heightened levels of stress (Howe *et al* 90/1). Conversely, avoidant children (irrespective of age) are unlikely to register separation protest. They do experience feelings of distress physiologically (Spangler & Grossmann 1993) but they are not accessed or expressed (Howe *et al* 1999:63/4) within an internal model which assumes that others are not available but the self is 'strong, in control and not easily upset or affected' (Howe *et al* 1999:67). Disorganised children may exhibit a typically confused response or none at all.

The Attachment theory teaches us that the underlying question posed through these diverse behaviours remains the same: 'am I loved and will you care for and protect me?' During the pre-separation stage, parents who see the child merely as an object of protection rather than a psycho-social being may busy themselves with the practical arrangements and fail to recognise the sense of vulnerability felt by the child. Hence this period represents a threat to all working models however attached. But like all threats this too could be converted into an *opportunity*, to re-confirm secure models and to modify the insecure ones.

Children told about the mother leaving the country for employment may employ a range of defensive strategies including disbelief, self-blame, denial and avoidance. In such cases emphasising the positive or acting normal does not help the child to begin a normal process of integrating the truth. Circumstances may differ, but as Jewett (6, 39) points out;

> 'The more directly the knowledge of loss is conveyed, the less chance children have to become confused, to deny the truth or to blame themselves for what is happening ... children are less likely to be scarred by what they are told than by fantasies – often frightening, self-blaming or damaging – they concoct to figure out what has happened when they are not given accurate information.'

Both parents breaking the news together and asserting that they remain as a family regardless of the change is important. So is ascertaining the wishes of the child regarding alternative arrangements and providing assurance that the child bears *no* responsibility for the situation or the decision. Finally, the provision of parental or adult permission regarding three matters may be crucial for the child's long term psycho-social well-being. They are that the child may;

1. both know and think about the separation,
2. have his/her *own* feelings about the matter, and
3. take as much time as is needed to figure things out. (Jewett 1994:1-10)

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Such an approach recognises and respects the individuality of the child. It also enables them to integrate the information and say a thought-out good bye, which as Jewett (1994:12, 25) points out can be a most healing experience.

Post-separation, keeping channels of communication free and open between migrant mothers and their families and foster-carers can help foster family unity by a mutual sharing of pleasures and pains on both sides of the divide. For both avoidant and ambivalent children and their mothers, the written word can also confer a power of detached expression not available before.

4.5 The Foster-Carer's Role

Maternal loss to these children however is undeniable. The resultant activation of their attachment behaviour may not receive the old familiar response and they may not be easy to help. The attachment theory holds that the more love the child has been given, the easier he/she finds to both give and receive love. But a removal of the 'secure base' *may* impair this ability and children under 5 years appear most vulnerable in view of their reliance on <u>physical</u> proximity. Hettige's study makes a reference to children under 5 sustaining weight loss and speech impairment within the 1st month after separation. It helps in these circumstances to focus on the protective factors around the child in order to strengthen them (Rutter 1999). They include the foster-carer, father, siblings, teachers and other friends.

In Samarasinghe's study the majority of foster-carers (88%) had a prior relationship with the child and 35 of them claimed they were more loved than the mother. In Hettige's study, the numbers of adult foster-carers reduced but remained significant and the development of a 'greater attachment' was noted in some cases. Jewett (1994: 54, 61) notes however that 'The success of the new relationship does not depend on the fading of the memory of the earlier one; rather the more distinct the two relationships are kept, the more the new one is likely to prosper.' Here again the child must be expressly permitted to develop a relationship with the new carer if he or she is minded to do so and told that he/she need not feel a conflict of loyalty. Adults must be especially sensitive on this point and there may be long term concerns indicated by the claims of foster carers in both studies. It would be true to say that children have the inherent capacity to develop any number of selective attachments but that the number actually made is determined by their care-giving environment.

4.6 Paternal Behaviour

In a patriarchal society where gender roles have been stereotyped, fathers in migrant families are forced to face a clear reversal of roles as well as a prolonged period of spousal deprivation. In colloquial terms, this is a 'double whammy' and there can be no doubt that this is a period of great stress for fathers who come within the insecure categories. Matters are compounded by a lack of practical skills in home management with attendant implications for the nutrition, health and well-being of the children, as well as saddling them with premature responsibilities. The absence of social support from within or outside the family appears to have a direct bearing on the parenting capacity of the father.

Avoidant/dismissing adults minimise the importance of relationships and the need for others. Thus 'at times when greater intimacy is expected such as marriage or parenthood they may experience increased unease and discomfort or increase their detachment' (Howe *et al* 1999:61). Hence they are not experienced *as* very supportive by partners in times of distress. This appears to explain the behaviour of some of the fathers in withdrawing from families at the time they were needed most. Their self-esteem is likely to be the most affected by their displacement as the primary earner. Likewise alcohol addiction is explicable in the case of dismissing fathers as an escape from feelings and social anxieties (Howe *et al* 1999:79).

Ambivalent-pre-occupied fathers on the other hand are likely to feel a greater sense of loss and abandonment. Moreover the raised demands of ambivalent children are readily experienced by them as criticism of their care-giving abilities leading to an activation of their own attachment needs. The motive for alcohol abuse in his case is likely to be a desire to be socially involved and accepted (Howe *et al* 1999:79,101). Alcohol and drug abuse have serious implications for attachment relationships and can have a disorganising effect on the internal working models of all children.

4.6 Sexual Abuse within the Family

This is characterized by the twin syndromes of secrecy and addiction (Porter, 1984). Migrants' families do provide a clear risk indicator, for as Porter points out,

> When a mother withdraws from her family, her children and husband may turn to one another for support, practical assistance, or comfort and the foundations of an incestuous relationship are laid. In other cases a man deprived of his conjugal rights may turn to the nearest available source of gratification – a dependent child.

Sexual abuse violates the dependent child's expectations of parental care, leading to confusion of roles and boundaries for the child, the family and the next generation (Furniss 1983). Here again the negative consequences of sexual abuse interact in complex ways with other types of maltreatment.

According to Kendall-Tackett *et al* (2001:48) intra-family abuse normally takes place over a lengthy period and involves serious sexual activity such as oral, anal or vaginal penetration; these factors as well as the use of force, lack of maternal support at the time of disclosure and the victim's negative outlook and coping style also led to increased symptoms. Crittenden (1996) states that in rigid and avoidant families, interpersonal relationships can be frustrating and troubling and that 'sexual abuse might reflect a desperate attempt at a relationship ... while nevertheless, allowing the participants to remain psychologically distant and unavailable." In ambivalent and enmeshed families where generational and emotional boundaries are blurred sexual activity reflects a never satiated desire for affection and involvement.

The disorganised parent can appear extremely unresponsive, insensitive, harsh, punitive and highly agitated. 'Coercion and victimisation are prominent interpersonal strategies with anger being the predominant affect' (Crittenden, 1996). If (as will often be the case with children in this category) unresolved trauma is mixed up with sexual abuse children become even more confused about the nature and expression of intimacy, leading to sexualised behaviours including the sexual abuse of other children (Howe *et al* 1999:151).

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4.7 Additional Responsibilities of Children

The studies (Hettige more than Samarasinghe) are replete with findings of unsupported children from 6-18 years shouldering household responsibilities at the expense of their development. Their very status as children is jeopardised with the distortion of family roles and structures. Insecure parents whose own unmet attachment needs prevent them from relating fully to the needs of their children are the most likely to place inappropriate responsibilities on them. Avoidant children entrusted with premature responsibilities in the house 'are likely to refuse help and make it clear that they are able to handle things independently and would rather do things themselves, their way.' However they become lonely over time, unaware of their own emotional needs. As children and adults, they may believe they are loved for what they do rather than for who they authentically are (Jewett 1994:185/6).

Ambivalent children who tend to externalise all their frustrations are unlikely to be so compliant and their behaviour could turn the home into a scene of eternal conflict. On the other hand, secure-autonomous parents are generally able to achieve an age-appropriate balance over issues of this nature that cause developmental tensions (Howe *et al* 1999:54-59). Elder (1974) found that older children who took on increased family responsibilities during the great depression were able to cope and were thereby strengthened. By contrast, younger children given comparable responsibilities coped less well and were often damaged by the experience. The distinction to be observed is between *work* which promotes development and *labour* which may retard it.

The treatment of these children requires some reference to the concept of emotional abuse (Glaser 1995). In its 'pure' form emotional abuse is distinct from the psychological aspects of physical abuse and neglect and sexual abuse. This is the only subtype of maltreatment exclusive to the caregiver and it builds upon and refines attachment theory in regard to insecure parents. Whenever there is a discrepancy between attachment behaviour and parental response, the child tends to resolve the issue with an egocentric self-blaming explanation, so that emotional abuse impacts directly on the child's sense of self esteem.

Qualitatively, the premature imposition of physical and psychological responsibility and emotional unavailability are recognised forms of emotional abuse. Quantitatively, it must be sufficiently pervasive to be considered characteristic of parent-child interaction. Findings in the study indicate the existence of these qualitative ingredients within one-third of the families which have shown multiple negative indicators with a reasonable suspicion that they are found in combination and that they pervade the parent-child relationship. Child victims of this form of abuse are left feeling abandoned, sad or worthless. They may become withdrawn or vulnerable to others to whom the child turns in seeking a response (Glaser 1995:79).

4.8 Relevance of Gender for Children

It is significant that only daughters and no sons were entrusted with the task of foster-care. Likewise, there may have been a gender bias in favour of sons in the allocation of household chores including cooking and baby-sitting. Within Sri Lankan society, these are roles traditionally assumed by the female. It is also not known if the rapport between fathers and sons in Weligama, (the fishing village surveyed) excluded daughters. Conversely, it is a general rule that girls, especially after puberty are

subject to greater protection than boys and virginity is readily associated with the dignity of young girls (De Silva 2000). Attitudes to homosexuality among boys however are less clear cut and this has contributed to their becoming the main victims of international sex tourism (Amarasinghe 2002). Within limits however, conformity with the traditional roles assigned to the sexes can operate as a protective factor by enhancing self-esteem whilst non-conformity can heighten vulnerability.

4.8 Disorganised, Controlling and Unresolved Category

Hettige does not identify those fathers with psychiatric conditions, severe alcohol addictions or those carrying unresolved trauma from their own childhoods. It is Amarasinghe's study of child sex workers that throws up most of the issues that characterize this category. His 120 subjects included children from war affected areas, coastal areas affected by sex tourism and also street children, many of whom were affected by multiple losses including the loss of and continued deprivation of a family environment. The death or absence of caregivers, unsupervised leisure, peer corruption and personal humiliation in school are mentioned as significant influences which directed their pathways into the sex trade. 'Many children mentioned that they are miserable, feel bad about their society, and are frustrated. The children as observed, were not responsive to the interviewers, inconsistent with what they said, and often did not like to discuss the past' (Amarasinghe 2002:64).

4.9 School Environment

There is a clear need for teachers to empathise with understand and support these troubled children. As Jewett points out 'when a child who has lost a parent ... returns to school, the community that the child re-enters is not grieving, and the child faces what can be a difficult transition alone.' This applies to victims of sexual offences and other children who may feel ashamed of a family tragedy or incident. Everyone knows about it but no one knows what to say and this can deal an additional blow to children 'at a time when they most need and deserve reassurance that they are worthwhile acceptable people' Jewett (1994:18).

4.10 Coping Strategies and Alternative Pathways

Rutter (1999:130-32) notes that individuals who seek an escape from their troubles through drugs, alcohol, dropping out of school, ill-considered love affairs and marriages are likely to be trapped within a vicious circle. This rings true for both alcoholic fathers and child sex workers who figured in the studies. Such strategies are clearly maladaptive and a resilient outcome is enhanced by avoiding these pathways, either alone or with the support and guidance of others.

On the other hand positive chain reactions are generated by the social support received from school and peer group experiences which enhance self-esteem and trust in others. They increase the likelihood of young adults assuming the responsibility for their own future, rather than seeing themselves as victims of circumstances. This leads to the use of foresight and planning in relation to key life decisions like career and marriage, both of which can provide stable frameworks for long term psycho-social recovery.

4.11 Impact on the Internal Working Model and Implications

As a general proposition, the stability of the internal working model of migrants' children would bear a direct relation to the stability of their psycho-social environment. The principal issue remains one of controlling their lives and avoidant children take too much weight onto themselves whilst ambivalent children place too much weight on others.

As Jewett (1994:191) points out these children need to be helped to achieve a more moderate response to ensure their psycho-social well being. Disorganized children on the other hand, need a change of environment for the *better* if this can be provided, with subsequent reunification to take place solely in their best interests. The research indicates a need to re-affirm the primary duty of parents to their children. But where parents fall short, both state and civil society have a clear interest in providing an organized response for the prevention of predictable long term consequences of abuse and neglect for the child, family and wider society.

5. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Howe *et al* (1999:46) state that the majority of children and adults in all cultures show secure patterns, normally estimated at 55-66%. This category is 'invisible' in the studies reviewed. However, if the assumption about risk factors being concentrated within approximately one-third of the families studied by both Samarasinghe and Hettige is correct, the modal - secure pattern would appear to persist amongst the majority of migrants' families. It should be stressed however that this is a qualified proposition, advanced with great caution and one that can only be confirmed by further research.

Nonetheless this issue has implications for the separation of migrants' families from other families sharing the same socio-economic disadvantages and their treatment as a high risk category. Children in all these families face the obstacles posed by current deficits in the education services in particular and these ensure that they remain socially depressed as a class. Full psycho-social development is not promoted merely by preventing abuse and neglect but also by providing equal life chances to all children and eradicating second class social citizenship. Child care and development is shaped by three variables,

1. family history;
2. parent's life skills, including emotional resources;
3. support and resources (McGaw and Sturmey 1994)

Support and resources refer on the one hand to equal and universal access to quality services in the fields of education and health. On the other hand, it refers to professional assistance for families and children in need to appropriate forms of social support. There is a clear need for therapeutic intervention in cases which reveal child abuse and neglect in order to protect children and support families as indicated by the needs of these children and their families.

But both cases where abuse and neglect were obvious as well as those which indicated 'pure' neglect revealed the need for *practical help and guidance* in organising the home and finances for ensuring security and continuity for all family members. Within such a model of social support, treatment and

practical help go hand in hand in order to promote psycho-social well-being within a supportive framework.

However as the attachment theory and resilience concepts show, family dysfunction (or the need for other forms of intervention) is not the exclusive preserve of poor families. Families across the class spectrum have been affected by the adjustment of family life demanded by the capitalist work ethic and thus affected by the many forms of *absences* referred to by Morrow. Ideally therefore, whilst equalisation of education and health services ought to target children within lower income families, child and family services ought to be available to all families (rich or poor) without any stigma attached to it. This may constitute one of society's last defences against the seemingly inevitable moral degeneration which has accompanied unregulated capitalism in Sri Lanka.

The question whether the 'export' of mothers should stop in the wider interests of a generation of children is one that does not admit of a ready answer in view of the current state of our knowledge. There remains the fundamental question whether migration is a cause or merely a symptom of a pattern of dysfunction in family and community life. Another missing part of the picture is the reunion of mothers with their families and the effects of separation on the resumption of normal family life.

Therefore, whilst the field is somewhat illumined by the attachment theory, the data available highlights the fact that there are no shortcuts available, whether in conducting research or in making an assessment with a view to intervention, to paying attention to *individual children in individual families.*

Whilst further research is required some families are also in need of immediate help. The latter course is only possible through co-ordinated and competent social work which *relates* to the families in order to help them. An invaluable lesson of the attachment theory here is that close relationships are the locus of both psycho-social destruction *and* their reconstruction (Howe 2001). The variety of outcomes and multiplicity of factors involved (some of them yet un-researched), do not lend themselves to any other approach at present.

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LEFT BEHIND, LEFT OUT

The Impact on Children and Families of Mothers Migrating for Work Abroad
Save the Children in Sri Lanka[*]

1. THE STUDY

1.1 Justification for Research

Migration can be understood as women's, (and men's) solution to the plight of family poverty and unemployment. Often, women migrate in order to provide their children with a better future. However, despite the economic bonus that migration is seen to provide the psychosocial costs are large and could violate a child's right to development, survival and education. These children are also often "left out" of social policy planning.

Of 858,000 migrants for the year 2000, 590,420 (68.6%) were women.[1] Of these women, around 75% are married[2], with around 90% of married women having children[3]. Save the Children's motivation for the research rested on the potentially significant number of children that could be affected by this phenomenon (up to one million on a rough estimate), and the negative impacts of migration on children suggested by previous research on the subject.

Anecdotal evidence and empirical research indicate that children left behind have less supervision at home, experience emotional problems, may be more likely to drop out of school and may be more subject to abuse[4]. The longer the migrant mother stays away from home, the more difficult the situation becomes for the children and the greater the rates of child neglect and delinquency[5]. Gamburd[6] explains that Sri Lankan migrants musts redefine how they love their children. Instead of emotional support, they provide material support with hopes that family members will pick up the emotional sustenance. They offer nurturing to Middle Eastern children (for pay) while providing material benefits to their own offspring (for love).

Past research had indicated that overseas remittances brought in by migrant workers were squandered. An SLBFE study of two districts found that 40% of the migrant's remittances were spent on alcohol and tobacco.[7] Households with a migrant mother had a higher proportion of fathers who smoked or drank or who were drug addicts.[8]

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[*] Extracts from the Summary Report compiled by Save the Children in Sri Lanka and Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena. Study conducted by *Integrated Development Consultants* for Save the Children in Sri Lanka. First published August 2006.
[1] Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2000.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Eelens, Mook and Schampers, 1992
[4] Hettige, 1999; Athauda et al, 2000; Ratnayake, 1999; Fernando, 1989; Samarasinghe, 1989.
[5] Dias and Weerakon-Goonewardene, 1991.
[6] Gamburd, 2000.
[7] Randeniya, 2003.
[8] Athauda et al, 2001.

The present study confirms many of these findings, yet explores new areas on the impact of mothers' migration on children that had virtually been ignored in previous research. These include the lack of attention given to the nature and role of caregivers, the time and attention that they give to children, the impact of their age, gender and occupation on the health and emotional wellbeing of children and challenges faced by the husbands of women who have migrated. The differential impact of caregivers' occupation, age, education and ethnicity on children is analysed. The study also sought to overcome some of the methodological limitations in past studies such as small sample size, non-random selection of participants, absence of comparison and control groups, and reliance only on descriptive statistics.

1.2   Objectives

The general objectives of the present study included the promotion and protection of the rights of children of migrating mothers, sensitizing citizens, the government, non-governmental organizations and others about the risks and problems faced by migrant families and encouraging best practices. The outcome of the research is expected to lead to advocacy for policy and practice changes. Its specific objectives included developing a profile of migrant mothers and their families, establishing the effects on the children and husbands of women who migrate abroad to work as housemaids and examining the extent to which the effects are problematic.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

The framework for the study was based on previous research and factors that were considered important in ensuring a child's right to development, survival and education. These included academic progress of the child (school attendance and achievement), health, and emotional and social adjustment. Demographic factors such as the age of the child when the mother leaves, education of mother, geographical area, ethnicity and years the mother is away, which impact on child outcome were considered.

Characteristics of the father, caregiver, and other protective factors were examined as secondary factors affecting a child's development and survival. Money management and family communication were also considered key factors for good outcomes for the child.

1.4 Methodology

The study was conducted using a random sample of 1,200 households of mothers who had migrated overseas for employment and had been absent from their families for over six months at the time of study in the two districts with the highest incidences of female migration - Colombo and Kurunegala. The representative study sample comprised 1.5% of the total number of female labour migrants with children in the two districts.

Two Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions[9] having high proportions of migrants were selected purposively from each district, one each representing the rural sector and the urban sector. (ie: the DS

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[9] Divisional Secretariat Divisions are the administrative units coming below the districts. Under the Transfer of Powers (Divisional Secretaries) Act No.58 of 1992, the Divisional Secretaries perform duties and functions assigned to them by the Central Government.

Divisions of Hanwella (rural) and Colombo (urban) from the Colombo district and Ridigama (rural) and Kurunegala (urban) from the Kurunegala District). Although the DS Divisions of Hanwella and Ridigama did not have the second highest proportions of migrants for the respective districts, they were selected to represent ethnic diversity due to the Indian Tamil ethnic minority that lived in a plantation setting in both divisions and Muslim communities in the Ridigama division. Both divisions claimed high rates of migration of women. This sample enabled the research to identify certain ethnicity-related characteristics of migration.

Selection of households was based on a simple probability sampling method after obtaining lists of households eligible for the research from Grama Niladhari (GN)[10] divisions in each DS division selected for the study. In addition to the household sample, the study included a sample survey of 200 children from each of the two districts (total of 400 children) representing the three main age groups (below 5 years, 6-14 years and 15-17 years). The study also included control groups of families from the same socio-economic background as that of the families with migrant mothers where the mother was working in Sri Lanka (100 families) and where the mother was in Sri Lanka but not working (100 families).

The study had both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The former included data from structured questionnaires addressed to primary caregivers, children, and mothers employed and not employed in Sri Lanka. Data collection was based on visits to selected households by a team of 14 research assistants recruited and trained in research techniques, participatory and child-friendly research methodologies and child rights. The qualitative dimension included data from focus group discussions[11] with samples of caregivers, children and fathers and interviews with key informants (ie; school teachers, religious leaders and government field staff etc.). In addition, research assistants participated in different social events such as community meetings, religious functions, *Sramadana* (community-related) events, child-related seminars, discussions, village festivals and ceremonies and occasions such as village funerals to observe different dimensions of the lives of families left behind by migrants. Data from children under five years were obtained through informal discussions and child-friendly activities (playing, dancing, singing and drawing) conducted by child researchers.

A national level Research Advisory Group (consisting of representatives from childcare departments and state agencies as well as NGOs) met once every two months to give academic and operational input to the study. At community level, frequent local advisory groups comprising of government officials, community leaders, the research team and children met to support the development of the study.

1.5 Action and Community Mobilization

The research assistants addressed issues of child abuse reported during the research by referring them to relevant divisional-level authorities. They also provided information to children about how they could protect themselves from abuse by communicating with the relevant authorities through reporting abuse, rather than being silent about abuse.

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[10]Grama Niladhari Divisions are the administrative divisions coming immediately below the Divisional Secretariat Divisions.
[11] Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in each DS Division selected for the study and were conducted with children and adults separately.

1.6   Children's Participation in the Research Process:

Children's participation was directly ensured by having a team of 10 child researchers (aged 10–16) trained on child rights and child-friendly research methodologies, who worked alongside the research assistants. Many of the child researchers were themselves from families where the mother had migrated, which resulted in a special rapport between the child researchers and child respondents. Child researchers also participated in the research advisory group meetings and contributed their perspectives on the problems they faced in the field as well as the positive and negative aspects of the study.

2. THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2002), remittances from Middle East employment comprised a total of 75,579 million rupees in 2002 making up 61% of total remittances and 22% of total foreign exchange earned during that year, displacing traditional income sources such as tea, rubber and coconut cultivation.

The Sri Lankan state has a legal and moral obligation to ensure the welfare of children and families of migrants who bring in much-wanted foreign exchange to the country. However, despite being subject to a number of international treaty-based conventions that impose proactive obligations in ensuring the welfare of children of migrants, the study found specific gaps in the implementation..

2.1   The Legal Framework

2.1.1   International Conventions and the Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991. The CRC affirms acting upon the best interest of the child (Article 3), the duty of the state to provide assistance to parents (Articles 18, 27 and 23), the duty of the state to prevent maltreatment and abuse (Article 19), and the securing of benefits in regard to social insurance and social security taking into account the resources and circumstances of the child (Article 26). It also affirms a child's right to education (Article 28), rights of children with disability (Article 23), and a child's right to be free from sexual exploitation and abuse (Article 34).

The country's Children's Charter (developed in 1992) substantively reflects the CRC. The National Plan of Action gives domestic effect to the CRC and the Children's Charter. Objectives of the National Plan of Action for 2004-2008 include ensuring adequate care as well as a safe and healthy environment for Sri Lankan children of migrant mothers consistent with their evolving capacities. It identifies compulsory registration at the district-level SLBFE centers for all migrant mothers as a strategy.[12]

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[12] National Plan of Action for the Children of Sri Lanka, 2004 – 2008, page 55.

Considering the noticed trends of families with migrants who institutionalize children,[13] it is noteworthy that Government policy stipulates institutionalization of children as the last resort.[14] Even so, institutionalization should be only for a maximum period of three years.

Apart from the CRC, Sri Lanka has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW -1981) and has acceded to the International Convention on Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1996)[15]. Article 64 of this Convention requires the State to pay due regard not only to labour needs and resources, but also to the social, economic, cultural and other needs of migrant workers and members of their families involved, as well as to the consequences of such migration for the communities concerned.

Notwithstanding this seemingly impressive record of compliance with international treaty- based obligations, monitoring bodies have questioned Sri Lanka's conformity to the treaties that the State is subject to. Particularly, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child functioning under the CRC has expressed continuous dissatisfaction regarding the general lack of coordination on the part of state agencies entrusted with childcare.[16] More specifically, the Committee has pointed out that families of migrant workers "receive little or no assistance with their child rearing responsibilities while working abroad." It has also recommended that Sri Lanka develop a comprehensive policy to support the families and caregivers of such children and has stated that the institutionalization of such children should be as a last resort.[17]

2.1.2 Domestic Legal Context

2.1.2.1 The Constitutional Framework

Generally, the fundamental rights and language rights detailed in Chapters III and IV of Sri Lanka's 1978 Constitution safeguard children as well as adults. These encompass the common liberty rights (though not the right to life) as well as rights to expression, association and assembly, the violation of which, by executive or administrative action, can be brought directly before court. Article 12(4) of the Constitution allows special measures to be taken "by way of law, subordinate legislation or executive action for the advancement of women, children or disabled persons."

The non-justiciable Directive Principles of State Policy declare that the State should promote the interests of children and youth and protect them from "exploitation and discrimination." (Article 27(13)). These Principles are "non-justiciable" as they cannot be brought directly before court for their violation. Nevertheless, they are supposed to guide the legislature and the executive in the formulation of laws and have been utilised in this context by courts when interpreting statutory and constitutional provisions.

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[13] Interview with North Western Province commissioner for Probation and Childcare.

[14] See Circular No. 12/76 of 1976.

[15] The Convention entered into force in July 2003. States who participate in the negotiations to the signing of a treaty may signify further consent to be bound by the act of ratification. Those states who wish to later become parties to a treaty may do so by acceding to it. The legal effect of both accession and ratification is the same in international law.

[16] See CRC/C/SR.889, Concluding Observations of the Committee, adopted on 6 June 2003.

[17] *Ibid*, see Concluding Observation No (5)

However, a specifically justiciable constitutional provision protecting the special interests of children is necessary. Recognising this long-standing concern, the 2000 Draft Constitution provided a lengthy draft Article stipulating, among others, that "Every child has the right to family care, parental care or appropriate alternative care and to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services (draft Article 22(2)(a) & (b)). The State was enjoined to "progressively realise" these rights. It was also expressly provided that the best interests of the child shall be paramount in all matters concerning children, including public and private social welfare. This draft Article would have provided a more rigorous constitutional framework for the protection of the rights of the children of migrant mothers. However, it is yet to be enacted.[18]

2.1.2.2   The Statutory Framework

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) established under Act No.21 of 1985, (hereafter the SLBFE Act) prescribes compulsory registration for all prospective migrants. It stipulates several conditions for migration such as obtaining an insurance policy prior to migration and undergoing a seven-day training programme (in the case of migrants going abroad as housemaids for the first time).[19]

A serious problem in the SLBFE Act is its emphasis on the promotion of migration as a means of income generation for the State and for Sri Lankans themselves. While the SLBFE Act recognises, in principle, the need to look after the welfare of the families of Sri Lankans employed outside the country,[20] the responsibility in that regard is not specifically vested in the State. Consequently, this responsibility is not adequately reflected in government practices and policies. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of the Philippines is exemplary in acknowledging the rights of migrant workers' welfare and could provide useful guidance in reformulating the mandate of the SLBFE and other state agencies.[21]

2.2   The Policy Framework

In Sri Lanka, which is predominantly rural and agricultural, prospective migrants see job opportunities overseas as a means of overcoming poverty. Diminished social safety nets through structural adjustment programmes combined with an open economy that encouraged foreign

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[18] Enactment of the 2000 draft Constitution has been prevented by the lack of political consensus in regard to other parts of the draft concerning the nature of the State, the extent of devolution and the continuation of the executive presidency.

[19] The length of the training could vary depending on specific factors such as the destination of the migrant. Due to some agencies bypassing these requirements, if a female migrant's contract is canceled or if she has to return unexpectedly before expiry of the contract period, she is not entitled to compensation. This has a negative impact on an already weak family economy and on the caring and nurturing of dependents including children.

[20] Section 15(q)-objectives of the SLBFE include " to receive donations and contributions from Sri Lankans employed outside Sri Lanka and use such donations and contributions for the rehabilitation, guidance and counseling of, and the provision of information and assistance to the families of such Sri Lankans." Such a provision shifts the responsibility of looking after the welfare of the families of migrant workers from the State to private individuals.

[21] A good contrast to Sri Lanka's SLBFE Act is provided by the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 which specifically states its goal to establish higher standards of protection and promotion of the welfare of Filipino workers and their families. Interestingly, while recognising the significant contribution of migrant workers to the national economy, it declares that the State does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and achieve national development. Relevantly, the SLBFE Act is now being redrafted.

employment as a means of alleviating poverty resulted in an increase in the departures of migrant women. Policy responses to the needs of children and families arising from the migration of mothers have been patchy and inconsistent even though some gaps are being addressed at various levels of the state structures.

Aspects of childcare and protection were devolved to the provinces by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. However, a most serious policy gap arises from the fact that overall operational coordinating and monitoring responsibilities is not vested with a single state agency but instead many responsibilities are shared between a number of such agencies, all of which lack co-ordination with each other. Insufficient outreach of social services to remote areas of the country is also a critical problem.

2.2.1 The Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment (MCDWE)

Childcare issues come under the new Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment (MCDWE) since November 2005, subsequent to the presidential elections and new ministry structures. The Department of Probation and Childcare and the National Child Protection Authority both fall under the Ministry. In the context of families left behind by migrating mothers, it is noteworthy that one Ministry now has the mandate of looking at issues of women *and* children, with the potential for policy linkages between women's and children's rights that this implies.

2.2.2 The Department of Probation and Childcare

The Department of Probation and Childcare (DPCC), formerly under the Ministry of Social Services and Women's Empowerment, now comes under the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment (MCDWE).

The national DPCC, under the central government undertakes training, research, and foreign adoption, policy development and recruitment of child rights promotion officers (CRPOs) line-managed by the national commissioner. CRPOs conduct duties relevant to the implementation of the CRC, including providing support to children in difficult circumstances, and implementing children's sponsorship schemes.[22] Provincial DPCC commissioners are responsible for the implementation of the judicial process and other aspects of childcare and institutional care at the provincial level. Probation officers (POs), line-managed by provincial commissioners, work closely with the Magistrate's Courts and are ideally situated to examine the relationship between migration and child abuse, and migration and children in contact with the law.

2.2.3 The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA)

The National Child Protection Authority (established in 1998 under Act No. 50 of 1958) functions with a board appointed by the President of Sri Lanka with representation from the key childcare/social service/labour departments as well as ministries. Subsequent to the November 2005 elections, the

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[22] There are around 253 CRPOs and 51 more were to be recruited according to information obtained at the end of 2005 from the Dept of Probation and Childcare. CRPOs are line managed by the Central Department of Probation and Childcare.

NCPA was brought under the MCDWE, taking away its formerly independent status under the Presidential Secretariat. The NCPA is mandated, among other tasks, to formulate policy on child abuse and exploitation and to coordinate the different agencies involved in the prevention of child abuse and protection of victims.

The new structure of the District Child Development Committee bringing together the District Child Rights Monitoring Committee, District Child Protection Committee (NCPA's district branches)), and District Early Childhood Development and Care Committee are a hopeful sign for better coordination of childcare work, with the Committee comprising many childcare related officers from various government agencies.[23]

2.2.4   The Divisional Secretariats

Divisional Secretariats (DSs) are critical in having outreach to families in need due to its operational structure. DSs house the CRPOs, counsellors of the Social Welfare Ministry, as well as field officers of the SLFEB and NCPA. However, there is little contact between these officials who have a potentially critical role in networking on child protection work in the division, and initiating innovative means of creating community-specific support mechanisms for families of migrant workers.

2.2.5   Women's and Children's Bureau of the Police Desk

The Department of Police has its own Women's and Children's Bureau, which has desks in 33 main police stations which, through female officers, provides advice to aggrieved parties, counseling, and looks at the possibilities of litigation.

2.2.6   The Ministry of Health

The State has an obligation to provide free medical care including free services to mothers and children through government health units. The health policies implemented by the national and provincial health authorities have a direct bearing on the health and wellbeing of the mother and the child. Family health workers and public health inspectors have been deployed for the purpose as guided by a preventive, promotional and curative medical and nursing staff. Health officials who visit families with children under five on a regular basis are well placed to coordinate around issues of families of migrant mothers considering the fact that around half the children left behind by migrating mothers are under six years of age according to the report.

2.2.7   Role of Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations, including international NGOs, national NGOs and village- level community based organizations, play an important role in dealing with social problems of children of migrant mothers.   For example, the Women's Development Foundation (WDF) Kurunegala, a regional NGO, deals with children of migrant families in Kurunegala and several other locations of

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[23] Cabinet circular MSS/3/4/161 of 14th June 2006.

the country. These programs are implemented with the coordination of CRPOs and the Department of Probation and Childcare.

3. PROFILES OF MIGRANTS, CHILDREN, CAREGIVERS AND HOUSEHOLDS

Many migrant women in the study sample were socially disadvantaged and came from backgrounds of relative poverty and low education. A significant number of their children left behind were between 6 months and 5 ½ years. The primary caregivers (PCGs) were fathers or close relatives (nearly three-fourths were female) and their educational standards were even lower than that of migrants

The migration of mothers strengthened the roles of extended families. However, there was strain on extended family relationships due to added pressures and burdens put on caregivers as a result of the children being left in their care.

Household patterns of expenditure were dysfunctional in that financial benefits were received from the migrant mother but the money was not put to best use for the family.

3.1   Profile of Migrant Women

Out of the sample of 1,200 households, 82.8% were in the economically and sexually active age group of 21-40 years indicating the likelihood of very young children being left behind. Most migrants (81.4%) were legally married while 12.8% were widowed with the remainder consisting of those who were separated (0.8%), not legally married but having a regular partner (1.5%) and single parents (3.6%).

Nearly all were housemaids (96.3%) with the remainder consisting of skilled workers (2.5%) and professional and unskilled workers (1%).

Migrant mothers had slightly lower levels of education compared to national standards, even though it was higher than that of caregivers. Around 7.5% had no education, almost a fourth (22.2%) had a primary education, and over a third (42.4%) had a secondary education without proceeding to GCE Ordinary Level. In around half the sampled households, women migrants had already stayed longer than the minimum period stipulated in the labour contract (i.e. two years) indicating the long-term nature of the mothers' absence in many cases. Around 70% of migrants had made more than one visit abroad and the rest were on their first visit, with the high likelihood of a second visit.

3.2   Profile of Children

Of the children surveyed between six months and five and a half years, the majority (89%) was between 3 and 5 years. About 58% of these children were not attending pre-school, the majority of these being female (67.7%).

The mean age of the children between six and seven year is around 12. Most children (73.5%) were below 14, the compulsory age of schooling, with 26.5% between the ages of 15-17; 58% of children

between 16-17 were female, 42% were male. As many as 7% among them were not attending school (93% attending).

At the time of the mother's departure, nearly half (48.8%) were less than six years of age. Nearly a third of children in this age group (30.5%) were less than three years of age. This is a critically formative stage of development when adequate physical and emotional nurturance is essential for the future growth of the child. Furthermore, this is also an age when most would not have been able to comprehend what was happening, and if they did, were probably unable to cope with the event.

3.3 Profile of Primary Caregivers (PCGs):

Of the main respondents, nearly all were primary caregivers. However, 3.9% were other relatives who were present in the household and were able to respond to the questions asked as the PCGs were not at home during the time of the interview.

Only 25.9% of primary caregivers were fathers. Most PCGs were close relatives of the children with nearly three fourths being female, the majority of them grandmothers. This reflects the culturally defined division of labour between the two sexes. This also raises several implications considering that, in South Asia, women are socially and culturally disadvantaged to begin with and more so if they are rural and belong to economically marginalized groups, all of which are characteristics of the sampled female caregivers.

In around 17% of cases, children were being looked after by caregivers older than 60. The research indicated that these age differences between the child and caregiver could lead to communication problems, and problems in education support, as many of them may not even be literate. About 2.5% also had caregivers less than 20 years of age; these were older siblings (most often girls) who looked after their younger siblings often at the cost of their own wellbeing and education.

The sample had slightly lower proportions of Sinhalese and Tamils (69.5% and 15.6% respectively compared to 73.9% and 18.2% respectively in the country) and a somewhat higher proportion of Muslims (14.8% in the sample compared to 7.1% in the country) due perhaps to the specific targeting of Muslim populations by employment agencies with links in the Islamic Middle-East. In terms of religion, the survey sample showed disparities with the national pattern with 66.8% Buddhists (compared to the national percentage of 70.4%), 11% of Hindus (compared to 8.8% nationally) and 14.7% of Muslims (compared to 10.6% nationally).

Most caregivers showed relatively low levels of education with 39.8% having a secondary education without O/levels and 30.9% having a primary education; 7.9% did not have any education at all while 17% had passed the GCE O/level and 3.9%, the GCE A/level. The educational levels of PCGs were lower than the migrant mothers of whom more than 70% had gone beyond primary school and more, while only around 61% of caregivers had attained a similar level of education.

An overwhelming number of PCGs (89.7%) lived with the children all the time. Over half of the PCGs who did not live with the children all the time stayed in close proximity (about 100 meters) with a third living farther away. Over two-thirds of PCGs had relatives living nearby who assisted during family emergencies, brought food and looked after children. About half the PCGs (56.8%) had

no other jobs or responsibilities. Slightly less than half of the PCGs felt that the mothers of children in their care appreciated the work they did and the mothers either wrote to them about it (40.8%) or mentioned this over the phone. This suggests also that a fair amount of mothers had personal contact with the caregiver, and were interested in the welfare of their children.

The migration of mothers strengthened the roles of extended families with many grandmothers and aunts taking on caring roles. The study noted 75.3% of extended families among migrant households, and new members moving into the family to take care of children in 17% of the cases, indicating the social capital that could be made available to reduce the negative impacts of the mother's absence.

However, over half of the PCGs stated that they had difficulties in relation to their tasks such as dealing with health issues of children, financial problems and problems with difficult children, caregivers' own health problems and heavy workload. Most respondents (70.2%) felt that their primary duty was to educate the children followed by feeding and caring (emotional care) as secondary priorities. The importance given to education could be due to the general perception that education is the main gateway to social mobility. While 3.6% of respondents had no response to the question about children's rights, of those who did, an overwhelming majority (92.5%) mentioned the right to education as a child right.

3.4   Profile of Households of Migrants

About half the families lived in semi permanent or temporary houses with one or two rooms which demonstrates the background of relative poverty that migrants come from.

3.5   Household Income and Expenditure Patterns

The average monthly income of a household was Rs 17,376 with 59.3% earning between Rs 10,000 and 20,000. Expenditure exceeded earnings on average by Rs 9000. Plans to use the remittances for various priorities (such as constructing a house, purchasing land, paying loans, educating children) were only realized by 15% of the respondents.

Though 72.4% stated that they were sent regular remittances, many were trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty that included debt cycles, unplanned events or emergencies. Expenditure patterns emerged in the categories of house construction, purchase of land, health care, clothing, travel for pleasure, religious or other ceremonies, liquor and cigarettes, special occasion, food, education savings, and betel. Other than for the high expenditure elements of house construction and purchase of land, in daily expenditure trends, expenditure was highest for food and then, in descending order, for savings, education and liquor and cigarettes. General observations of researchers indicate that expenditure on liquor and cigarettes maybe underreported. This is a critical factor to be examined in future work. However it is a positive sign that families claim relatively high expenditure on education.

3.6   Relations with Neighbours

Relations with the immediate community were positive with neighbours helping 77.7% of the migrant households.

4. WELLBEING OF CHILD

> *"Children from homes where the mother has migrated usually suffer from mental and physical ailments such as ear infections, skin sores, and bedwetting. There was one child who urinates (in his pants) every time the song is sung to end school and return home." (A preschool teacher from Kurunegala district)*

> *"Absence of our mother makes me sad, lonely. But she went abroad to earn money for our wellbeing" (16 year old boy)*

According to Vijitha Fernando[24] "migration involves a domestic upheaval which most husbands and children cannot cope with. The phenomenon of the mother going out of the home and the country for as long as two, three and sometimes four years is a strage phenomenon, and one that can drastically change the lives of the family ... the impact is greatest on young children and on the home and has all pervasive repercussions – economic, social, psychological and physical on the children, whatever their age". Emotionally and behaviorally, the absence of the mother on foreign employment is then bound to have an effect on children.

The study found however that the migration of mothers strengthened the roles of extended families and increased the role flexibility of fathers in adjusting to what are considered "women's roles" though most fathers saw the new roles as temporary changes which would conteract to a certain extent some of the negative implications of the absence of the mother. The standard of care observed by the PCGs was high while the love and attention showed by them towards the child left in their care was considerable. However, the findings indicated that though this was much appreciated, the vacuum left by the mothers' departure was simply not filled by caregivers. Specific emotional needs and behavioural problems of the children (particularly younger children) were evident with the departure of the mother.

4.1 Emotional and Behavioural Changes in Children

Caregivers observed certain negative behaviour in children[25] after the departure of the mother although not in a majority; 22.1% of children under the age of five showed loss of appetite and 5% in the same age group showed weight loss. On average, around 20% of children in all ages showed increased temper tantrums after the departure of the mother. Temper tantrums were higher in the adolescent age groups, a naturally "rebellious" phase where stubbornness and disobedience is already a feature. Around 10% of older children (15-18 years) showed lower concentration levels.

Overall, researcher observations of children below six years revealed that most children (71.5%) showed a positive mood (smiling, playing etc.) while the caregiver was interviewed and did not cry (90%). Researcher observations of children below six years and caregiver relationships during the interview revealed that most children showed close contact with their caregiver (85%), while a

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[24] Vijitha Fernando, 1989.
[25] Behaviour changes were assessed through subjective responses to specific questions, and did not involve rating scales.

minority showed no special attention or showed indifference towards their caregiver (14%). Researchers observed that most caregivers responded lovingly to the child's needs (71%).

4.2 Mothers' Contact with Families

The absent mother's contact with the family would have significant bearing on the wellbeing of the child. Nearly half of migrant mothers (49.9%) maintained contact through home visits while 21.4% returned in less than half a year and another 21.4% returned in less than a year. Furthermore, nearly half of those who returned also stayed up to three months in Sri Lanka before leaving again, while the remainder stayed for much longer periods. The exact reasons for return were not investigated in this study, but it is possible that this was due to dissatisfaction with the workplace and not for reasons specifically associated with children. Other ways that contact was maintained by the migrant mother was through telephone (82.7%) better enabled by the rapid expansion of the telecommunications network in Sri Lanka.

4.3 Patterns of Caregiving

> *"Auntie looks after us very well, like our mother did. Hence, we do not feel that much loneliness"* (6 year old girl).

> *"Our stepmother is very harsh. She loves only her children. She hits me, scolds me. Her children are also like that."* (5 years old boy)

These two quotations illustrate the extremes of the situations faced by children of migrant mothers. The mean amount of time that the children (6–17 years) received from their caregiver was about seven hours per day; 40% of the children stated that there was no difference between the times spent on activities such as play, talking, reading, school work and religion before and after the mother's departure; 37% indicated less time, and 23% indicated more time on activities presently.

A high level of positive interaction was evidenced between the PCGs and the children resulting in considerable emotional support extended towards the latter; 96% of the children (6 -17 years) said that they are close to their caregiver and 95% indicated that they exchange ideas and emotions with their caregiver. Similarly 95% of the children indicated that the care that they received was adequate and most (89.5%) indicated that they do not have problems with their caregiver. Of the total sample of 400 children, 96.5% of the children indicated that they received rewards from the caregiver for good behaviour comprising mainly verbal appreciation (with/without the presence of others) followed by informing mother of the behaviour, and gifts.

However, the study findings indicate that the love, attention and proximity of the mother were not replaced by even the best caregivers in the estimation of the children with 77% of the children indicating that they felt lonely due to the absence of the mother. A majority of children in the older (6-17 years) age group indicated that they felt lonely or sad despite acknowledging a close and appreciative relationship with the caregiver. More children felt that mothers appreciated their good behaviour (86.5%) more than did their relatives (78%) or fathers (74%), or community (59%). In

response to how they felt about their mother returning, nearly all the children (94%) indicated that they would be happy if their mother came back.

The level of caregiver scrutiny of the children in their custody was high. Most children (94%) indicated that their caregivers take some form of disciplinary action(s) when they disobey, while 6% indicated that they do not receive any form of disciplinary action(s). The more frequent disciplinary action(s) included warning, blame and accuse. Caregivers who resorted to blame combined with physical punishment and pure physical punishment were 13% and 7% respectively. 87% of the children indicated that caregivers set limits on their behaviour. In addition, a majority of children indicated that the caregivers monitored their school homework (87%), time they return after school (91%) and child's whereabouts (90%).

The immediate emotional environment of the children interviewed emerged as fairly stable with nearly all of the children (96.5%) indicating that they have an honest person within or outside the family that they could confide in and get emotional support, this being primarily their caregiver (i.e. the father or grandmother in most cases) and/or other family members and relatives; 75.5% also stated that members of the community maintain contact with the caregiver and would let the latter know if the child was doing something wrong (84%). Comparing general support received between community, school and peers, children felt that they receive help from their peers (93.5) and community (91%) more than from school (86.5%).

4.4 Role of Fathers

"Father began to drink more with my mother's departure. He comes drunk and starts quarrelling with us when there is nothing to eat."(A 16 year old girl)

"Father doesn't allow us to feel the absence of our mother. He tries to attend to our chores as much as he can. But when we remember our mother, we feel very sad." (A 15 year old boy)

Husbands are often the key to a successful migrant experience[26]. Children's wellbeing cannot be investigated without studying the response of husbands to migration.[27] When the men are employed and comfortable with the role reversal of wives being the major breadwinner and themselves playing caregiver roles for their children, the goals for overseas work can be achieved without huge social costs to children.

The assessment of fathers' roles in childcare in the present study had several dimensions such as time spent with children, undertaking domestic roles, comfort levels with domestic roles, and alcohol and drug use, all of which was compared with fathers in the control group. Only around 50% of fathers indicated being able to devote time to children's needs, and only 25% of these identified themselves as primary caregivers. 86.2% of these fathers had other jobs or responsibilities indicating that most fathers spent substantial time away from home. This indicates that children may often feel bereft of parental care even in the presence of a designated caregiver. These fathers also had higher stress levels than fathers in control groups.

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[26] Herath, 2003.
[27] Yapa, 2003

However, comfort levels of fathers in roles usually designated to women such as cooking and cleaning, and actual engagement in such activities, were higher where the mother had migrated. Children also reported more positive rather than negative changes in fathers.

The educational levels of fathers were generally lower than that of the migrating mothers with 39.7% having secondary school without O/levels (compared to 42.2% of mothers), 18% having O/levels (compared to 23.6% of mothers), with A- level achievement being the same in both groups.

While 52.1% of fathers spent ½ hour to 3½ hours on education related activities, 42.4% of fathers spent no time at all on education. This suggests that fathers could be relying on other members of the family including their older children, for education support. 74.6% said they got help from neighbours. Priorities in that regard were: help during an emergency (61.2%), food (8.2%), support to look after children (21.6%), normal assistance (6.3), education (0.4%) and financial assistance (0.8%).

Comparing the time spent by fathers in the main sample and those in the control groups, fathers in the main sample spend less time or none at all with the children with regard to educational activities, reading, and talking with children although more fathers spend more time playing with them. One critical reason for this difference could be that fathers in the main sample spend more time doing other household and child rearing activities than fathers in the two control groups. The low education levels of fathers compared with the lower levels of time spent with children on education-related activities indicates that the absence of the mother has a significant effect on the child's education.

An important finding of the research was that fathers in the main sample had assumed new roles involving childcare activities and had higher comfort levels with these roles. It can be inferred from these responses that female migration has led to greater flexibility in the role of the father and that ingrained notions of gendered responsibilities in the household may be seeing certain kinds of transformations in the context of the migration of females with families. Most fathers in the main sample stated they would undertake these roles for no more than five years suggesting that they see the new role change as temporary.

Children's views of role changes in fathers were generally positive though dislike was expressed in relation to fathers washing pots or dishes (31%) and clothes (27%), indicating children's own discomfort with some new paternal roles. This is probably because such roles are seen as traditionally belonging to women.

Fathers in families of migrant mothers clearly felt more stress in their lives than fathers in other groups. A higher percentage of husbands of migrant mothers admitted to drinking than fathers from the two control groups. Daily and weekly alcohol intake was clearly higher for fathers in families of migrant mothers. Similarly, the highest proportions of fathers using drugs was in the main sample.

Consequent potential for violence against children is a clear inference though incidences of corporal punishment, for example, were found to be no higher than in households with mothers in Sri Lanka.

4.5   Child Protection Issues

4.5.1   Child Abuse

Child abuse in Sri Lanka is acknowledged to be an increasingly serious problem.[28] With mothers absent from the family, children are seen to be more exposed to abuse without the traditional domestic roles played by the female parent. In the study, while children were asked open-ended questions to allow them to voluntarily speak out on violence against them, this was not a specific subject of in-depth inquiry due to the sensitivity of the issue. While rates of child abuse were not high, some reported cases emerged out of the sampled households. One instance of abuse of a girl child by a close relative (father's brother) and two instances where girl children complained that they were in imminent threat of being raped or sexually abused either by a father or other relative were reported.

The study sample did not indicate high levels of violence by fathers against children, dislodging the negative perception of fathers as fundamentally abusive in the absence of the mother. Levels of corporal punishment were similar in migrant and non-migrant households. However, it is worth noting that two cases of early marriages of children due to breakdown of their family lives, five cases of sexual abuse of children (perpetrator unknown), one case of resultant attempted suicide and three cases of potential suicides due to sexual abuse were reported to research assistants from migrant mothers' families outside the study sample due to the researchers' close interaction with communities.

A strong call for a child protection service at the community level has emerged from this study, one specific focus of which could be sexually abused children.

4.5.2 Protection of Children with Mental and Physical Disabilities:

Children with disability who may already face marginalization in society and in families, are likely to be further affected and marginalized in the absence of a parent. On one hand, disability could be a reason why mothers migrate to meet high expenditure due to the disability of the child, or even escape stigma. On the other hand, the absence can make the condition worse, or lead to the children being institutionalized due to further neglect. The further neglect of these children was also mentioned by a community doctor in focus group discussions. The research sample included five children with mental or physical disabilities. In one particularly poignant example, in the Hanwella DS Division (Lahirugama), a mother had migrated leaving all three disabled children in the hands of the father. Children with disability were often neglected, demonstrated low hygene levels and many did not attend school.

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[28]The Women and Children's Bureau of the Police Department records 2,242 cases of grave offences reported against children and 1, 026 minor incidents during 2004. This signifies an increase from 1,579 such reported cases in 2002. Newspaper reports from the NCPA reveal that child abuse rose from 333 incidents in 2993 to 867 incidents in 2004. Gender-disaggregated data for 2003 indicate a higher proportion of female victims of abuse (277 cases) compared to males (126 cases): 'Rights of the Child", Law and Society Trust, Sri Lanka: State of Human Rights; 2005. These incidents include child labour, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, kidnapping and neglect and comprise only a fraction of the actual occurrences, most of which are not reported.

4.6 Other Factors Affecting Families of Migrant Mothers

4.6.1 Gender

Caregivers often felt obliged to be more protective of girl children during the absence of the mother. More numbers of female children as a whole indicated that they were disciplined (91.4%) as opposed to the number of male children (82.1%). More PCGs monitored the behaviour of female children than male children, particularly in regard to the speedy return of the child after school (93.2% of females as compared to 68% of the males). Such monitoring could be due to cultural values regarding the "protection" of female children. However, girl children felt more lonely than male children when friends talk about their mothers, and when they have sensitive problems to discuss. Case studies clearly indicated the manner in which housework had been made the responsibility of girl children.

4.6.2 Ethnicity

Children of minority ethnic groups experienced less emotional and behavioural problems stemming from mothers' migration due probably to stronger extended family system among them observed in the study. However, most families of migrants in urban areas and in Tamil communities came from the plantation and urban slum communities and were of lower educational and economic levels.

4.6.3 Rural/Urban divide

Data on protective factors and field observations show that children in urban areas were more "independent" of caregivers than children from rural areas. More rural children said they were "sad" and "lonely" and suffered from behavioural problems. They showed a sense of dependency and closeness to the PGC. On the other hand, less urban children did well in school due to specific socio-economic contexts such as conditions of life in slums and shanty areas.

4.6.4 Characteristics of Caregivers

More children living with older caregivers experienced emotional needs and inability to communicate with them. Children felt sad or unable to communicate with PCGs who were over 60 years of age.

To a certain extent, behavioural problems such as temper tantrums and bedwetting were found in higher proportions among children between 6-14 and 15-18 years of age who had older caregivers (i.e those over 50 years of age). Absence of physical punishment at home had a positive impact on children. Fewer of these children had emotional or behavioural problems such as loss of appetite, temper tantrums and bouts of anxiety if they lived with PCGs who did not use physical punishment.

Non-use or infrequent use of liquor by the father had a positive impact on children as fewer of these children experienced feelings such as sadness or loneliness and more the children in this group were able to perform better at school examinations.

5. EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF CHILDREN

"The children remain isolated in the classroom. Most of the time, they look helpless. They do not come forward and are shy. They do not bring lunch to school and some fall unconscious during the morning assembly. Their clothes are untidy or dirty whereas the children who have mothers at home wear clean clothes." (School teacher)

"Both our mother and eldest sister are abroad. I have to take care of my eldest sister's child as well. I cannot attend school properly. Father is also not interested. If my mother were at home I would be able to go to school everyday. We take meals from the boutique. When mother was there she cooked at home." (a nine-year old boy).

Providing their children with a better future is a key reason why some women migrate for work abroad. Yet, education and future social and economic mobility of children are critically affected in the absence of an adequate caring and educationally supportive home environment for children.

The analysis of primary data in the earlier chapters showed that the average educational level of the migrating mother was somewhat higher than that of caregivers as a whole, and that of fathers. In addition the fact that mothers were seen by children as highly supportive of education could mean that educational outcomes would be significantly affected by the absence of the mother.

The results of the study clearly show the need for additional support in the education of children of migrant mothers. Pre-school and primary school teachers' observations on medical and behavioural problems of very young children with mothers abroad suggest further investigation and indicate the way in which teachers can be part of a protective mechanism for children whose mothers have migrated, and the way in which schools provide a protective space for children who feel neglected in the home.

5.1 Educational Performance of Children

A comparative analysis was conducted of school attendance and performance of 50 children each (150 in all) from three groups comprising children of migrant mothers, children with mothers working in Sri Lanka, and children of non-working mothers, all from the same socio-economic background. This sample was considered adequate for purposes of controlled comparison. Educational performance was assessed through an assessment of subject scores at end of last semester examinations in the three subjects regarded as critically important for purposes of measuring achievement: First Language, Mathematics and English. School attendance was assessed through school registers for the last semester

Educational performance of children left behind by migrating mothers was clearly lower than that of the two control groups; As the charts show, the highest proportion of children obtaining the lowerst scores in all three subjects were children of migrant mothers and the highest proportion of children obtaining the highest bracket of scores (over 75) were children of working mothers. A clear pattern was seen for subject scores with the "middling" scores being obtained by children of non-working mothers.

While the absence of the mother was not the only reason for poor attendance and performance, this clearly had an impact on education when compared to the other two groups of children who were also from the same socio-economic background of poverty. The phenonmenon of children of working mothers performing the best could be due to higher literacy levels in the family, and higher motivation for studies, a factor worth further investigation.

Girls performed significantly better than boys in all three subjects. Whereas 13.6% of males scored over 50 marks for mother tongue, the respective proportion among females is 83.3%. In the case of marks for Maths, the respective proportions among males and females obtaining over 50 marks are 16.7% versus 70.8% while for English it was 8.4% and 60% respectively. The higher success rates of girls could be attributed to the reported higher levels of attention, supervision and protection that girls felt that they received over boys and the tendency for girls to spend longer hours in the household.

The highest percentage of attendance at schools was by children of working mothers, followed closely by those of non-working mothers and then those of migrants. Of those children who have attended between 26 and 50 days, 100% are children of working mothers followed closely by those of non-working mothers (94.9%) and those of migrants (88%). It is clear that the absence of the mother has had a decidedly negative impact on children's performance, and somewhat of an impact on school attendance.

5.2   Teachers

> "Children in Grades One and Two usually cling to the female class teacher's sari and try to wrap themselves around her body and get affection" (female school teacher).

Teachers are often seen as "surrogate mothers" by children of migrant mothers. Pre-school and primary school teachers' observations on medical and behaviour problems of very young children with mothers abroad not only needs further investigation, but indicates the way in which teachers can be part of a protective mechanism for these children. These mechanisms could be established through creating links with teachers and families and through extra educational support in the classroom to children at risk.

5.3   Fathers' Participation in Children's Education

A higher proportion of fathers in families of migrant mothers (71%) participated in PTA meetings compared to those from families of working mothers and non-working mothers (57.1% and 56.4% respectively). Interestingly, this is despite the fact that 42.4% and 42.5% of fathers spent no time at all respectively on education and on homework with their children. This indicates that fathers perhaps were more ready to undertake supportive roles outside the household domain where education was concerned.

Study findings suggest that the Parent-Teacher Associations could be one of several organizations at the community level that could be more effectively utilised to assist families of migrant mothers in coping with the problems that they are faced with. A similar role could be played by preschools and Sunday schools.

6. PERCEPTIONS ON SERVICE PROVIDERS & BEST PRACTICES

The study revealed that state obligations towards families left behind through migration were not being met adequately according to community perceptions.

High rates of migration occur from areas of considerable poverty, which are often remote and difficult to access. Social service mechanisms have consistently failed to address this longstanding issue of access to remote areas. This segment of the study shows the failure of the state to provide innovative, locally relevant child support systems to which communities in need have easy access. It also refers to best practices on the part of some of the state agencies.

6.1 Coordination among Government Agencies

Poor coordination among government agencies at community, regional and national level was a primary finding of the study as indicated in the following case study.

Problems of Coordination Among State Agencies

One of the Divisional Secretariats in the study area is the focal point for development interventions. Several development activities are underway successfully with the inputs of 36 officers working in the development field and with 68 Grama Niladharis permanently stationed at cluster and village level. The child rights promotion officer (CRPO) and Probation Officer (PO) attached to this office are expected to report incidences of child right violations, abuse and protection issues to these regular committees as a part of their primary duties. At one of the many meetings that the researchers had with them, the CRPO and PO maintained that during the last one year or so, no such cases have been reported.

However, the Samurdhi development officer whose primary responsibility is poverty eradication in low-income families, tabled 13 cases of child abuse. She then stated that she is unable to take further action in the context of lack of coordination and support from the staff members who posses formal authority for this purpose.

6.2 Respondents' Perceptions of Service Providers

An overwhelming majority of respondents (97.3%) stated that they had not received any assistance from any agency. When asked as to why external agencies were not helpful, nearly half (49.6%) attributed this to their socially marginalized positions. Other reasons given included the weakness of government agencies and the poor outreach of social welfare agencies, particularly to highly disadvantaged, remote areas such as those in the sample, where high rates of migration are present.

Equally, only 7.3% of respondents asserted that they knew of any organization in the village that could help them to take care of children; most said "no" (53.7%) or "did not know" of such an organization (39%). Similar findings emerged in relation to the question as to whether there were organizations close to the village that could help. Out of those who stated "yes", over half mentioned societies associated with the temple or mosque (55.2%) followed by the PTA (25.2%) and the

remainder distributed among 10 other agencies including youth societies, womens' organizations, funeral societies, pre-schools and Samurdhi societies.

From one perspective, this could mean that many PCGs are trapped in the role of caregivers to the extent that they are physically and/or socially isolated from the rest of the community. It also indicates that outreach programmes for child welfare are weak, and not responsive to the needs of disadvantaged communities. The study suggests stronger support to caregivers with a special focus on a child protection service at the community level.

6.3 Best Practices

Government agencies engaging in pro-active programmes and research on social problems and issues were rare. However, the research highlights initiatives taken by the North-Western province Department of Probation and Childcare where the commissioner has established village-level committees to address needs arising from migration and attempted to bring in all stakeholders to expand this experience in the province. The provincial investigations revealed cases of illegal migration and identified children at risk. The programme recognizes that the issue of mother migration cannot be isolated from broader development issues.

Best practices of governmental agencies includes some initiatives taken by the SLBFE including a training programme for women going abroad to work as housemaids for the first time and who are registered with them. The SLBFE has a cadre of welfare officers (called Human Resource Development Assistants) who visit schools to identify and find solutions for problems of children of migrant mothers. It is important to ensure that these activities reach all children of migrant mothers and that there is adequate follow-up.

NGOs also provide examples of best practices. The Women's Development Foundation (WDF) of Kurunegala is a regional NGO which has been active with women and children related development issues in Kurunegala, Monaragala and Hambantota during the last 24 years. One of the programmes implemented by the WDF in the Kurunegala district deals with problems created by mother migration for employment abroad and appreciates the role played by the father in child-rearing in the absence of the mother on employment abroad.

Other best practices are provided by community organisations such as temple or mosque societies and funeral aid societies. From an intimately personal perspective, extended kin relationships, positive behaviour patterns on the part of fathers in families where the mother has migrated and the ready assistance received from neighbours are all positive aspects of family and community life that could be strengthened through familial and social mobilization programmes.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm to some extent earlier research that migration of mothers has a negative impact on children and fathers. Yet, the positive impacts of mother migration were also undeniable, including financial benefits to the family and emotional adjustment of many of the children to the absence of the mother.

- One of the most critical findings of the study was the possibility that the absence of the mother on work abroad may have a negative impact on education performance and attendance of children and the lower performance rates of boys in relation to girls. The fact that the education levels of migrant mothers was higher than that of caregivers, including fathers, is a clear indicator that the support from home for school work may have reduced with the departure of the mother.

- Children also demonstrated considerable emotional and behaviour changes after the departure of the mother, notably loss of appetite in under-fives, and temper tantrums in all age groups, specifically adolescent age groups. There were clear links between having older caregivers and negative behaviour in children, and less negative behaviour was apparent where there was no corporal punishment on children, and where fathers did not use alcohol regularly. However, the overwhelming majority of children had positive sentiments about their caregivers.

- Of particular interest is the adaptation by some fathers to a new role as caregiver and the consequent challenging of stereotyped gender roles within the family. Fathers of families of migrant mothers showed higher comfort levels with caring and household roles and performed household roles significantly more than fathers in families with mothers in Sri Lanka. However, fathers had taken on primary caring responsibilities in only a quarter the households and demonstrated higher stress levels than fathers in families with mothers in Sri Lanka and higher numbers of these fathers used frequent alcohol compared to fathers in the other groups.

- The perceived high levels of abuse of children by drunken fathers was not reflected in the interviews of the sample group, with the reporting of abuse by only a fraction of the child respondents. However the increased vulnerability of children in the absence of the mother and the need for child protection mechanisms were noted from anecdotes and outcomes of focus group discussions.

- In the majority of households, primary care-giving responsibilities were taken up by female relatives such as grandmothers, mother's sister and father's sister who often had their own children to care for, or were senior citizens and had their own medical and social problems. This indicates that more focus has to be paid to these groups who are already marginalized as women living in relative poverty.

- The migration of mothers had strengthened the roles of extended families with new care givers moving into the family with the departure of the mother. However, informal arrangements that had been resorted to in the absence of the mother were under considerable stress.

- Of children left behind, nearly half were less than six years of age at the time of the departure of the mother indicating the vulnerability of children, particularly in the very formative years of their lives.

- An overwhelming majority of children said that they are close to their caregiver and appreciated what caregivers offered them. However, the love, attention and proximity of the mother were often not replaced by even the best caregivers in the estimate of the children. Despite communications and maintaining contact between migrant mothers and their children being satisfactory, the absence of the mother was acutely felt by the children.

- While families of migrant women had relatively better incomes compared to households of a similar socio-economic background, families overspent considerably. Goals of migration were rarely met due to poor financial management and high cost of living, and about half the households lived in semi-permanent or temporary houses. However, these families clearly had higher material possessions than non-migrant families.

- Gendered needs of children due to migration need to be looked at more closely. Girl children felt they got more attention from caregivers than did male children and performed noticeably better in school. However, girl children felt more lonely than male children in relation specific contexts. Case studies also indicated the manner in which housework has been made the responsibility of girl children.

- An overwhelming majority of families said that they did not get any support from public services an almost equal number were not even aware of any available public services. Many PCGs attributed this lack of interest to the fact that they were poor and marginalized. This indicates a dangerous pattern of isolation and low self worth aggravated by the fact that most PCGs were quite unaware of organisations from which they could obtain services either within or outside the community.

- While the research identified the Divisional Secretariats as having considerable potential for coordinating outreach programmes for families with migrant mothers and other families at risk, there was little coordination among the many governmental agencies and remotely located households were rarely reached by these authorities. Communities had more faith in community level organizations such as PTAs and religious societies for support which could also be strengthened to be more responsive to community childcare needs.

- Some best practices redressing the needs of children left behind by migrating mothers are found among governmental agencies, NGOs, communities, families and husbands of migrants.

- The Study outlines changes to the existing statutory and constitutional framework and suggests a comprehensively new policy emphasis on migrant mothers and their families, focussing most particularly on children.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policy proposals should foster an empowering and supportive environment for families of migrant mothers and address the needs and concerns of their children. It is strongly recommended that the following policy changes are given serious consideration:

a) The Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau (SLBFE)'s committees within divisional secretariats should ensure that families are supported with programmes *prior to* the decision to migrate so they have a clear understanding of childcare support that needs to be in place. If the decision is made to migrate, the SLBFE and the Department of Probation and Childcare (DPCC) authorities should ensure childcare plans are in place at the point of registration. There should be periodic follow-up on these plans.

b) Since many families do not register in the first instance, the SLBFE should continue to encourage registration via awareness and incentives as well as reach out to the families of those mothers who have left but not registered.

c) The DPCC should initiate programmes that support primary caregivers to address the emotional, intellectual and other needs of children left under their care as well as to ensure the caregivers' own wellbeing. Given that women formed a majority of caregivers, and given the social and cultural disadvantages of women in South Asia which are increased if they are rural and if they belong to economically marginalized groups (all characteristics of the sampled female caregivers), this category deserves special attention. The important role that fathers play in the absence of the mother should also be acknowledged and supported.

d) The SLBFE should also support families of migrant workers in the effective management of overseas remittances with a particular focus on addressing needs of children.

e) The Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment (MCDWE) should develop an action plan to increase effective coordination between relevant national and provincial level agencies in working on issues of children with migrant parents, and other children at risk.

f) The Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment should have sufficient financial resources to implement its strategies.

2. The Provincial Departments of Probation and Childcare, with the support of divisional secretariat offices and the District Child Development Committees, should take the lead in initiating locally relevant childcare support mechanisms such as drop-in/daycare centres and ensuring better use of existing community-level networks. Special support schemes on early childhood development should be set up for children under six years of age.

3. The Ministry of Justice, along with the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment should take the lead in developing constitutional provisions leading to legislative reforms on children's rights which would facilitate legal action on violation of child rights.

4. The SLBFE Act, No.21 of 1985 should be amended to specifically vest the duty of the protection and promotion of the welfare of migrant workers and their families in the state and state agencies.[29]

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[29] Article 64 (2) pf the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and members of their Families (to which Sri Lanka acceded to in 1996) enjoins the State to pay due regard not only to labour needs and resources, but also to the social, economic, cultural and other needs of migrant workers and members of their families involved, we well as to the consequences of such migration for the communities concerned.

5. The Ministry of Education should take the lead in ensuring that schools, principals and teachers set, observe and monitor standards on educational performance and behaviour issues of children of migrant mothers and other children at risk, and provide extra instruction time where necessary. Children's peer groups should also be supported in schools.

6. Institutionalisation of children, including those left behind by migrant mothers, should only be as a last resort. Probation officers, child rights promotion officers other responsible parties should be strongly encouraged to investigate a full range of alternatives prior to institutionalization, and should be held accountable for the decisions made thereafter.

7. Future research on migration should specifically focus on the most vulnerable children of migrant mothers; namely children at risk of abuse, children with disability and children of minority/urban slum communities. The circumstances of the girl child should receive special attention. Further research could also benefit from inquiry into the impact of fathers' migration on children.

8. Good practices of the SLBFE, Provincial Departments of Probation and Childcare, non-governmental organizations and others should be documented and replicated throughout the country.

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