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Putting gender into the migration-development nexus. A micro level case study of Sri Lanka

Be it an indigenously or exogenously driven process, gender roles play an important part in the mechanisms affecting changes in a society. It has been theorized that migration creates a real challenge to the persistent patriarchal structure and gender stereotypes within and outside the households of migrant workers in their country of origin. Otherwise using data from an empirically designed longitudinal ethnographic research, this paper argues that migration hardly brings out stable or enduring structural changes in the traditional gender roles in women's lives at the micro level. Instead, migration brings forth a set of simultaneous interplays into gender roles. Particularly, the change in migrant women's roles within households is not perceived to affect the overall micro level social structure. It is simply a partial and short-term outcome of an exogenous process. Migration-induced changes in gender roles arbitrarily shake, strain and disrupt the existing social, cultural and institutional foundations on the micro level. The study finds strong evidence that the long-term impact of arbitrary changes in gender roles causes a number of micro social issues. The consequences of these issues insidiously impair the long-term developmental capabilities of migrant households in the country of origin.

Key words: gender, migration and development

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a developing country, currently undergoing a transition to a middle-income status. It is the first nation that has introduced trade liberalization policies in South Asia in the late 1970s. The sudden introduction of the neo-liberal economic policy reforms enables Sri Lanka to win access to the international labour market. In fact, along with the economic policy reforms, the country's migration boom fully coincided with the worldwide demand for the oil production from the

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countries in the Persian Gulf in the 1970s. Having started the momentum in such a way as of 2013, Sri Lanka became a home country for nearly three and a half million workers (WB 2013). This number represents approximately twenty percent of the country's domestic labour force (CBSL 2012). The economic impact of the international migration and the resulting inflows of remittance are often viewed positively in Sri Lanka both at the macro and micro levels (IPS 2013). Migration workers' remittances are a great source of foreign exchange to the economy. Official figures state that the country received a high stream of remittances amounting to approximately ten percent of the country's GDP in 2012 (CBSL 2012). Over the last three decades of its engagement in the global labour supply chain, Sri Lanka has been widely seen as a proved case of the operational nexus between migration and development in the Global South (IPS 2013). Furthermore, Sri Lanka has been known to be successful in utilizing remittances to increase the per capita income, thereby reducing poverty and increasing access to the basic services such as health, education and livelihood development opportunities (Sanjeevanie 2012).

Aside from operational links of migration to economic growth and development, however, labour migration has turned out to be a full-blown social challenge to the Sri Lankan society. For the most part, the roots of this challenge lie in the village level social dynamics. In the last three and a half decades of Sri Lanka's migrant labour boom, female labour migration has largely outnumbered the male one (Gamburd 2000). It has been recorded that the majority of these outbound female migrants are married, with an average of two or three children of school age (Sanjeevanie 2012). Sri Lankan migrant workers' plight in the home country has reverberated with ripples of shock waves in the recent years, as compared to its original burgeoning in the 1980s, due to its heavy social cost on the families left behind. Migration induces big changes in spending patterns, family structures, gender relations and micro social relations, particularly in rural settings (Gallina 2007). The most commonplace stories about the migrant families' issues often relate to instances of family destruction, spousal abandonment, school dropouts, alcoholism and drug addiction, paternal incest, and physical, sexual and psychological abuses mostly against girls left behind. Concerning all these issues, gender remains a fundamental cause in understanding the extent of development outcomes and the problems of migrant families.

Putting gender into development; theoretical context

Gender roles play an important part in the mechanisms affecting changes in a society. The sociology of modernization and development explores the influence of gender roles in development in two distinct ways. Firstly, the case is that the established patterns of gender roles in the family organization can create substantive stimulation for social formation to bring about desired changes. Secondly, being open to the opportunities of development can bring about a progressive change

in the traditional gender roles (Hulme, Turner 1990). Talcott Parsons from the structural-functionalist perspective extends his discussion on family to explain the differentiation of gender roles within a family. Partners of a family are somehow assigned to perform different and sometimes complementary functions. Men are mostly involved in fulfilling an instrumental role, while women perform a complementary role of an expressive nature. However, Parson analyses women's central role within a family, particularly in the matter of their bonding with children (Jacobsen *et al.* 2004). German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (1855–1936) describes human social life based on the relations between family members. His observations derived from empirical research repeatedly show that the strongest relationship in the family organization is between a mother and her children. The relationship between a father and children appears to be less instinctual than that between a mother and a child. Psychologist Edward John Mostyn Bowlby (1969) argues that a mother's emotional role in the childrearing leads her to become a child's psychic organizer. He further contends that the lack of the maternal love can have disastrous consequences for children's emotional health.

The connection between gender and development invokes a great deal of research in social anthropology. Yet, the conceptual and analytical grounding of the case of gender in development has not escaped the attention of feminist sociologists as well. Social anthropologists clearly explain that the role of women in the spheres of childrearing and domesticity is important in bringing stability to the family organization (Bowlby 1969). Even feminist scholars in their arguments countering gender stereotypes widely acknowledge the mothering role in the process of men's and women's personality development in a society (Chodorow 1978). Chodorow asserts that the emotional bond between a mother and a child naturally builds the influence of the mother's dominant role at the early stages of the child's life. Irrespective of this contention being a subject to the debate, however, nurturing social values is symbolically attached to women (Jacobsen *et al.* 2004). Feminist scholars acknowledge women's affinity with social values as an element which forms a basis for the desired social change.

Method of sampling and methodology

A case specific sample was drawn from a rural village called Polhena in the extreme south of Sri Lanka. Polhena has been known for a considerable number of remittance recipient families (Sanjeevanie 2012). Given the power of its socio-economic significance in relation to migrant families, the village offered a good cause for being the primary research site of the study. The initial sample was selected using the criterion-based method. The strongest reason for the selection of the sample frame was the anecdotal evidence of migration-induced changes in gender roles and their potential to trigger disruptive social consequences for a long-term development at the micro level. The sample consisted of a total of ten migrant

families who were financially dependent on the remittances sent home by their migrant relatives in the last five or more years. The first round of collecting the field based data for the study took place in June 2008. The second round of the research was conducted in August 2013. In July 2014, further observations of the same set of cases were undertaken.

A well-focused case study of selected migrant families was applied as the main research method. In-depth individual interviews and participatory approaches made up a huge data collection. On some occasions, narrative interviews were also conducted. In order to maintain the consistency of information revealed in the case studies, the researcher referred to a guide questionnaire during the field work. A number of problem centered interviews were also held with informed tacit sources. A semi-structured interview was also conducted with a government officer of the village. All cases subject to the study were covertly and overtly observed by the researcher during and after the field work. In some crucial and serious cases secondary observations were done later, through a locally based informant.

Eight out of the ten migrant families of the sample had female migrants. Of these, five women were still working abroad and three had returned. There were two families with male migrants. The Gulf countries exporting oil were a common host destination for all the migrant workers of the sample. Seven migrants had worked in their host destinations either as housemaids (all four women) and unskilled or semi-skilled laborers (the men). All these workers had repeated their migration to the same destination during the last twenty or more years. The researched migrant workers were all in the age group between forty-five and fifty-five years, were married and had no less than one to three children at the time of their migration.

Dimensions of the counter-developmental micro social consequences

Micro social consequences of the migration-induced changes in gender roles in development were analyzed using a multi-dimensional approach. The dimensions selected for the analysis included principal issues and concerns in relation to left-behind children, failed marriages, spousal abandonment and the problems of re-integration. As regards the underlying reasons for these dimensions, they were somehow closely interconnected with each other. The process of establishing dimensions was largely guided by the generalization of individual cases of the sample. Therefore, the set of the foregoing dimensions primarily referred to the respective social and cultural context in which the study had been undertaken. For the purpose of the analysis, the significance of the degree of intensity and the frequency of issues and concerns pertaining to the key dimensions were analyzed explanatively.

Putting Gender into the Migration-Development Nexus

In general, migration apparently created a real challenge to the functioning of the persistent patriarchal structure and gender stereotypes within and outside the households of migrant workers. The study found a suggestive evidence that migration accompanied a set of compelling reasons for changes in traditional gender roles and power relations within migrant households in the Sri Lankan rural society. The village women's participation in migration contributed in many ways to bridge the existing gender gaps, particularly in terms of rights, freedom, opportunities and privileges. The findings of the study also overlapped well with the developing country context of migration, as it has opened a window of opportunities for women's empowerment. Notably all the migrant women of the sample enjoyed their right to choose work and women's traditional role in childrearing was not considered a barrier for them to enjoy such a freedom of choice. The women's economic contribution to a family during their migration significantly surpassed that of their husbands. In terms of economic contributions, the changing context of gender roles within a household had gradually led to a transfer of the role of the main breadwinner to the female workers of the sample. The study also explored the overwhelming evidence of the changing patterns of property rights (especially rights to land) between husbands and wives, which is the fundamental basis of the patriarchal relations of power in the Sri Lankan context.

Despite all these notable positive changes in gender roles and power relations, however, migration also influenced gender interplays within households in other very complex ways. These interplays evidently created challenges in negating the migration-induced positive changes in power relations and gender roles within and outside migrant families in quite oppressive rural social settings. The explorative analysis of the case study revealed a set of complex and counter-productive changes in gender dynamics within households of both male and female migrant workers. Positive changes in gender roles, especially in terms of the improvement of women's role within households, were deemed to last only for a certain period of time. During the active periods of earning, especially abroad, women enjoyed more power in household affairs than as returned migrants. The long-term migration exposed family members who were left behind to new social and economic vulnerabilities. The long-term absence of mothers forced fathers to take up maternal roles for the left-behind children, while mothers played a single parent role in the absence of migrant husbands. Initially, internal adjustments of household roles were peacefully negotiated between husbands and wives, and based on the prospect of a family's future economic elevation. But such economic motives lost their value particularly in the eyes of the men who were left behind for a longer time. Doing housework and childrearing eventually damages their sense of pride and self-respect as men. The migration of their wives steadily and gradually caused a shrinking of the men's role as traditional breadwinners of families. Thus, in the context where so-

cially and culturally constructed gender roles are deeply ingrained, such sudden changes in the husband's role within a household diminished his masculinity. Changes in socially assigned gender roles within a family even drew the attention of neighbors and in general the village appeared to shun men who were financially dependent on their wives.

It was also a common practice among the villagers to suspect the migrant women of being involved in prostitution in their host countries. As a result, when families received money from abroad, the villagers often ridiculed husbands for selling their wives for money. Such a social blame would often reach the ears of adult children of families as well. On the other hand, those wives who had been left behind by their husbands were more exposed to oppressive treatment, mostly by their immediate relatives. The findings emerging from the cases of failed marriages of female migrant workers showed that the confrontations resulting from the issues of changing gender roles often resulted in growing fissures in family relationships in the long run. The frustration resulting from the undermining of their gender role in the family sometimes was strong enough to cause the men to become alcoholics. Alcoholism appeared to be an enduring issue affecting the whole family and was often the biggest obstacle for men to use their own skills productively. The tendency of chronic unemployment among the left-behind husbands was very high. Also the overall pattern of men's depression and alienation within a family sometimes led them to seek their own relief, mostly by re-marrying another woman who represented a female stereotype. Alcoholism and re-marrying were often the way for the men to regain their lost manhood in the village.

By setting the findings of the study in a general national context of female migrant workers, it was very rare that the husbands or the society treated the returned migrant women with respect, especially on grounds of their contribution to households' well-being, sacrifices and various kinds of hardships experienced while working abroad. Instead, the returned migrant women were suspected of having had extra-marital relationships with men while living abroad. The society is not ready to see migration as a route towards the empowerment of women, but instead, inflicts a long-term marginalization on them, upon their return.

The reasons affecting the family separation did not, however, emerge one-sidedly from the social consequences of the changing gender identities of men. There was sufficient evidence of the women's contribution to the problem as well. All the respondents representing the cases of households of female migrant workers revealed suggestive evidence that female migrant workers on their return home were reluctant to live with their husbands. They had experienced a modern lifestyle abroad for a long period of time, which was very different to living in the village society. Also their exposure to the world outside of their village and the country built their self-confidence. Being the main breadwinners, these women's power to make key decisions in a family was also increased and after being exposed to their rights and freedom, they were not prepared to live with the ste-

reotypical husbands anymore. They were also not willing to tolerate any sort of resistance resulting from strong masculine traits at home.

The real fact about these cases, however, is that the impact of migration on the changing traditional gender roles has worked in two different directions simultaneously. Migration has empowered migrant women while further strengthening the male stereotypes at home. The gendered changes resulting from migration have caused serious power imbalances between men and women in the families. Thus, migration has not been effective in catalyzing the systemic process of simultaneous changes in gender roles and power re-constructions between men and women at the micro level.

The pattern of re-migration among female migrants also soaked in more evidence of counter-productive impact of the changing gender roles on women. The re-migration of women was largely a means of maintaining the breadwinner role. Many cases of women's migration created a lifetime breadwinner role and similarly an enduring spinner of chaos in families and responsibilities for women. Because of the growing role of women who took up new functions in providing for a family, their husbands and adult children gradually became dependent on the remittances and such dependency reduced the incentive to find jobs for themselves. These consequences led to an even more pathetic state of family affairs when the men's undertaking of the women's duties of child caring and house-keeping was largely unfulfilled. The level of complexity of the issues with regard to the left-behind children mattered most in the re-integration process of female migrants and thus, burdening women with dual roles continued unchanged. The re-integration phase was seen as the last stage of the regressive cycle of the development achieved by migrant families.

Returnee female migrants notably failed in the re-adaptation to their previous life as caregivers and homebound mothers. In Asian culture, the common portrayal of a woman is quite exploitative. In such a scenario, if a woman is not a quintessential mother, wife or daughter-in-law, her husband and relatives are not very accepting of her. So the power gained by these women resulted not in creating a resource for a family, but rather a problem on their doorstep. Thus, the rural society devised no endogenous passage to sustain their empowerment. When women were not willing to be marginalized, there occurred disputes and disagreements with the rest of the family. Reintegration to the family and society as a changed person was an uphill task, especially for the women in the rural society. It was also apparent that social consequences made a re-migration inevitable for the returnees.

The evidence of changes in the gender roles and relations of migration was not only related to husbands and wives, but also to the left-behind children. The children of the respondent households had grown up in the long-term absence of one or both parents. They were living mostly with their grandmothers or immediate relatives. In all cases, the foster-caring grandmothers were not educated and some were obviously illiterate. The grandmothers' role as the key reference

individual for the children of both sexes throughout their early childhood and adolescence impacted gender issues on a wide range. Grandmothers are often actively involved in reproducing the gender stereotypes and patriarchal patterns within Asian families, and the left-behind children's close relationship with their grandmothers played a strong role in building their gender identity. In line with typical social attitudes, grandmothers favored their grandsons over granddaughters. In the case of paternal grandmothers, this emotional intensity between grandmothers and grandsons appeared to be very high and the grandmothers' care-giving role wielded a great influence on instilling a deep sense of masculinity and gender stereotypes in boys. In many cases, this sense of manhood and power led boys to violent behavior. Through observations of the cases and from the information revealed by tacit sources, there was a high incidence of domestic violence, where sisters frequently suffered at the hands of their elder brothers, within their homes.

Likewise, girls also tended to develop their gender stereotypes through reference to their grandmothers, believing that they should take up maternal roles for their male siblings and perform domestic chores because they were girls. Girls started experiencing the gender-based discrimination at a very young age of their lives at home and thus, gradually came to terms with their growing subordinate position at home. The grandmothers' role in the foster care often overtly influenced boys in developing the ego boundaries from their own sisters, which exacerbated a gender tension between brothers and sisters of the same respondent households. These repercussions were quite obvious, resulting in left-behind children being disposed towards long-term unchangeable gender stereotypes. As far as the individualization and socialization of those children were concerned, they were exposed to the same conservative social structure of gender stereotypes as their parents' generation. Thus, on a micro scale, the continued patterns of the status quo had directionally restrained qualitative enrichments of the positive changes in gender roles and their relations.

Such circumstances strongly suggest that migration brings out no stable or enduring structural changes into power relations and gender roles at the micro level. Instead, migration appears to bring forth a set of simultaneous interplays into gender roles. Especially the changes in the role of migrant women did not appear to have touched the overall social structure at a micro level. Also the change of the sort was not resulting in the response to the advancement of the overall quality of the social structure concerned. Simply, it was only a partial outcome of an exogenous process. Thus, the micro level social system and its subsystems embrace no overall seeds of change in gender dynamics. Furthermore, the adaptation becomes more painful when the changes in gender roles occur in an arbitrary manner. The long-term repercussions of painful changes jeopardized the stability and the status quo of a family well-being and its strength as an institution in the micro socioeconomic system as a whole.

Discussion and Conclusions

Migration is seen most in the light of its economic potential. The multiple homogenous references to the economic gains of migration have contributed most to the discourse of migration and the development nexus in the direction of a serious lack of evaluation of various features of development that characterize functioning and capabilities of lives of migrant workers and their families. Not surprisingly, the gender aspect of migration is the one that hardly becomes an input into the migration-development nexus. Nevertheless, prevalently in gender studies, it has been empirically theorized that migration can create a real challenge to the persistent patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes within and outside the households of migrant workers in their country of origin, particularly in the global South. But it is absolutely clear that migration is not a homogenous process that can pursue the enduring gender changes in every society, and above all, not every society is prepared to put its gender potentials into the migration-development nexus. Likewise, the gender dimensions of migration and development nexus can be centered in two different ways. Migration can induce social changes in minimizing the gender gaps in a given society. And at the same time, the gender elements of migration can hurt the links between migration and development, rather than help them. The impact of gender on the migration and development nexus sometimes poses anomalous effects to the very nature of the social structure and the organization of a given society.

In Sri Lanka, of course, gender has serious implications regarding the migration and development nexus. In effect, it can derail or destroy socioeconomic capabilities within and outside the migrant households. Migration can influence a range of short-term and long-term gender-related social consequences that go beyond the income-related capabilities it generates. The micro social consequences of the gender-related issues of the left-behind children, failed marriages, spousal abandonment and the problems of reintegration of migrant workers were, disturbingly, strong enough to cause a chain of socioeconomic consequences that could undermine the development capabilities of the migrant workers' households. Even though the income growth is crucial in achieving the economic progress, the ultimate sustainability of development is largely dependent on the social and economic dimensions that are fundamentally interrelated with the present capacities of the people's lives. Gender role changes, influenced by migration within families and its social repercussions, decisively affect the long-term families' well-being and the productivity of the human capital, and thereby, the households' capacity to participate in the ongoing social and economic processes. The utility of the remittances could considerably overshadow the actual prerequisites for a good life, and even emasculate the families' defense against the social chaos. The financial effect of migration, however, is not powerful enough to alleviate the overall adverse effects of micro social consequences on the long-term development. Instead, the micro social consequences clearly tend to undermine, in the long run, the financial effect, or simply the poverty reduction, as the advantages of the remittances.

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