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Illegal Sri Lankan Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Gulf Countries: An Analysis on Push and Pull Factors¹

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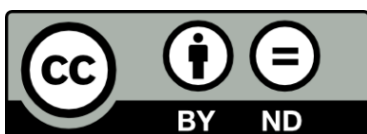
Abstract

The implementation of new restrictions by the Government of Sri Lanka to discourage unskilled female labour migration through the mandatory 'Family Background Report' has resulted in an increase in the number of female illegal migrations. This study efforts to uncover the reasons that motivate women to migrate as domestic workers disregarding the government's strong discouragement. I argue that gendered push factors coupled with financial motivations trigger illegal and circular migration among women. This explorative research utilizes primary data collected through structured interviews from a sample of sixty-five migrant women which is complemented by secondary data collected from statistics and reports published by the Government of Sri Lanka. The research concludes that government's inability to address strong push factors that motivates unskilled female labour migration, and its effort to use blanket solutions such as restricting movements through laws have forced women to migrate using illegal measures which makes their situation more vulnerable. It also suggests that affirmative action such as to create more occupational opportunities and the equal distribution of resources to rural areas to address this issue is needed.

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Keywords: Domestic workers, labour migration, female migrant workers, push and pull factors, illegal migration, government laws, poverty, gendered push factors



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INTRODUCTION

Individual movement within and outside their home country for economic purposes is simply defined as labour migration. However, the term 'labour migration' is often linked to the migration of an individual from his home country to a destination country seeking better employment opportunities (IOM, 2008). Although migration for economic purposes is not a new phenomenon, it is often discussed among scholars given the complexities connected to the process of labour migration at both home and destination countries. Thus, high demand emanating from developed countries for both skilled and unskilled labour has promoted labour migration.

Sri Lanka is a major labour sending country in the Asian region since late 1970s. Initially, the capital rich Gulf countries with massive labour shortages such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates were the targeted destinations for many Sri Lankan unskilled and low-skilled migrant workers. This labour market was soon dominated by female workers who migrated to Gulf countries as unskilled domestic workers. The perfect fit between high demand for domestic and care workers followed by prompt supply led to feminization of Sri Lanka – Gulf migration corridor (Weeraratne 2014; Asia-Pacific RCM Thematic Working Group on International Migration includign Human Traffcking 2011;

UNESACP n.d.). The Sri Lankan Government encouraged unskilled female labour migration considering its substantial contribution to the country's economy and its impact towards relieving the pressure of pervasive and chronic unemployment (Kelegama, 2004).

The Government, however, in 2008 adopted its first ever 'national policy on labour migration' which advocated the necessity of changing the orientation of migration from unskilled to skilled labour (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, 2008). In July 2013, the Government adopted another controversial policy to impose restrictions to discourage female migrant workers to Gulf countries by changing its open policy on migration to a closed policy. The new policy demanded a 'Family Background Report' (FBR) by all prospective female migrant workers along with the consent of their guardian to proceed. The implementation of the FBR was a hasty decision taken by the Government without identifying the real causes that motivate female labour migration and driven by casual observations. This measure was highly criticized by many entities including international organizations, human rights activists and scholars due to its gendered nature and direct discrimination against women and their right to work (Gamburd 2020; Jegathesan 2019; ILO 2018; Weeraratne 2016; Abeyasekera and Jayasundere 2015).



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Although the expected outcome of reducing the number of female migrant workers was achieved, Weeraratne (2018), uncovers an emerging trend of illegal migration to Gulf countries since the implementation of this law. Findings of her empirical study reveal that more women use illegal measures to migrate when they cannot use the legal channel provided by the Government as they cannot meet the requirements of the FBR. Thus, the conservative estimates of the Sri Lankan embassies in the Gulf countries also highlight an increased amount (5-10%) of illegal female migrant workers within the post 2013 period. This reveals that women are taking drastic measures by placing themselves in a risk to bypass government procedures. Yet, no previous studies have attempted to identify the reasons behind this strong motivation towards women's migration events by using illegal measures.

In this context, this study aims to uncover the strong push and pull factors that motivate Sri Lankan women to migrate into Gulf countries as domestic workers disregarding the Government's strong discouragement. Previous studies on the same issue have elaborated the bans on female labour migration resulted in distinct outcomes such as decreasing the number of female migrants, adverse impact on women and their families, and increasing illegal migration among women (Gamburd, 2020; ILO, 2018b; UN Women, 2015; Weeraratne, 2018).

Given the lacuna of literature to identify the increasing movement of women's illegal migration with the introduction of restrictions by the Government, this paper intends to fill this research gap by finding answers to the question why women intend to migrate even using illegal measures by disregarding the discouragement of the Government? with the intention of uncovering strong push and pull factors behind this motivation.

I argue that the Government's inability to identify and address the root causes such as chronic poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities coupled with gendered push factors such as family issues and domestic violence have forced women to migrate as they recognize migration as the only solution to overcome their issues. The study also reveals how gendered push factors contribute to and trigger illegal and circular migration among women. This study contributes to the existing literature by adding new knowledge on gendered push factors behind illegal migration among Sri Lankan female domestic migrant workers.

This paper consists of three major sections. The first section provides a background to the study by explaining why labour migration is an attractive option for females in Sri Lanka and how the Government intervened in this process. The 'findings section' discusses the main findings of the primary data, while the 'discussion section' evaluates and analyses these findings along with secondary data.



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This section examines the argument of the paper. This paper concludes by recommending durable solutions for the Government to address this issue effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Motivations: Push and Pull Factors for Female Migrant Workers

The number of female migrant workers in Asia increased up to 35 million in recent history with the increasing number of women migrating to countries in the Gulf region to provide their labor as domestic or care workers (ILO, 1996). Fragmented economic development in Asian countries with overwhelming poverty and limited access to employment led more women to migrate seeking an income to support their families and children (Parkins, 2010; Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018; Ranathunga, 2011; Siriwardhana et al., 2015).

As revealed in a number of studies, the primary push factor behind female unskilled labour migration is unarguably the poverty (De Haan, 2011; Shaw, 2007; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016). Although the general perception towards 'pull' factors for both men and women are identified as the expectation for better employment opportunities and upgraded living states (Weeraratne, 2018), in reality, female labour migrant workers conduct the same reproductive work under minimum facilities at the

destination country. Therefore, it can be assumed that the pull factors for unskilled labour migrant workers vary upon their gender; for women, the primary pull factor for migration, within this context, is financial income. However, receiving a better wage for the same reproductive work conducted at the home country is an incentive for women to migrate (Asis, 2004; Hettige, 2012).

The experience of migration differently affects men and women (Weeraratne, 2018). Women usually are disadvantaged and discriminated during the process of migration due to patriarchal norms in their home countries and due to the gendered nature of work available at the destination countries. While women in developed countries hire women from poor countries to conduct household and care work, women migrants pass the same duties to another woman in her home country (Gamburd, 2010, 2013; Parrenās, 2001) as financial push factors are more powerful. Although migration empowers women economically and changes their position from the 'housewife' to the 'breadwinner' of the family (Gamburd, 2010; Parrenās, 2001), this empowerment is unsatisfactory given its temporary nature (Piper, 2003).

Despite its economic gains, the negative impacts of the female labour migration was largely debated among scholars (Jayasuriya & Openskin, 2015; Piper, 2008; Shamim, 2006; Swarna Ukwatta, 2010; Swarnalatha Ukwatta,



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2010). While the feminist approach identifies the right to work and access to financial resources through economic empowerment as a woman's right, the impact towards left behind family members and the vulnerability of females at the destination country has led several countries like The Philippines, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to enforce restrictions to limit the number or to ban the female labour migrants to Gulf countries.

Although countries like Nepal and The Philippines implemented restrictions banning female migration to Gulf countries with unsatisfactory labor laws (Battistella, 1995; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016), the ban implemented by the Government of Sri Lanka is only applicable for the mothers with children under the age of 5. The rest of the workers are permitted to go as long as they have the approval from their guardian and the authorities are satisfied with the information provided at the FBR.

History: Feminization of Sri Lanka - Gulf Migration Corridor

The Sri Lanka-Gulf migrant workers corridor is considered as one of the prolific labour migration passages. With the open economic liberalization policies, Sri Lanka became a major labour sending country in South Asia since late 1970's (Cheng, 2003; Kelegama, 2000; Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018; Schuurman & Salib, 1990; Shamim, 2006). Consequently,

remittances have been the highest foreign revenue source of Sri Lanka where more than half of the total remittances were remitted by the migrant workers in GCC countries (Foreign Employment Bureau, 2020).

The overseas labour migration of Sri Lanka is dominated by unskilled and low skilled workers who are engaged in temporary work such as in construction, domestic, and care work, largely in Gulf countries (Abeysekera, 2010). Considering the high demand for domestic and care work in the Gulf region, the Government encouraged more females to migrate as domestic workers by relaxing local policies related to labour migration with two main purposes i.e., to reduce the pressure of unemployment, and to earn more remittances which is vital in the development process of the country (Jayawardhana & Jayathilaka, 2009; Kelegama, 2000). Hence, more women from rural areas of Sri Lanka migrated to Gulf countries seeking financial independence which consequently led to the feminization of labour migration which lasted almost a decade, starting from the early 1990s to early 2000s, where female migrant workers marked more than 65% from the total labor migrant departures to Gulf countries. (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2017).

This trend remains up to 2007, providing the country with one of the highest female migration per capita rates in the world (Jayasuriya & Openskin, 2015). This was an exception



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in the South Asian region, as all neighboring labour sending countries had male dominated migrant worker corridors (Gamburd, 2010; Siddiqui, 2008; Weeraratne, 2014). Departures of female migrant workers started to drop down from 2007 and marked 31% in 2018, particularly due to the direct and indirect measures taken by the Government to discourage unskilled female labour migration. **Appendix I** includes sex-disaggregated data to reveal how female labour migration increased and decreased over the years during the period 1986 to 2017. The significant decrease of the number of female labour migrants is seen after 2013 in response to the Government's intervention to discourage unskilled female labour migration.

Restrictions: State Intervention on Mother's Migration

The first ever national migration policy of Sri Lanka drafted in consultation with a variety of stakeholders such as government officials, representatives from migrant agencies, employers and workers, trade unions and respective international institutions such as IOM and ILO and enforced as a law since 2008 (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, 2008). The preamble of this report identifies the importance of migrant workers considering their significant contribution to the country's economy and guarantees the protection of the rights of the migrant workers aligned with international instruments. The

National Labour Migration Policy is identified as a comprehensive framework which identifies the issues and requirements of the migrant workers. Thus, the policy also considers the gendered aspects of the labour migration while identifying the special requirements of female migrant workers and therefore commits to enhance gender equality (Abeyasekera & Jayasundere, 2015).

The much controversial mandatory requirement of the 'Family Background Report' (FBR) introduced by the Foreign Employment Bureau by its circular 13/2013, is a part of the Government's national migration policy, with the purpose of discouraging unskilled female labour migration particularly to Gulf countries. In contrast to the commitment to enhance gender equality at the National Labour Migration Policy adopted in 2008, the FBR intentionally violates women's right to work (Gamburd, 2020; ILO, 2018a; Jegathesan, 2019; Weeraratne, 2016). Although the issues such as family breakdown, partner's addiction to alcohol, negligence of the health and education of children, child abuse inter alia have been cited as negative impacts of mother's migration (Siriwardhana et al., 2015; Weeraratne, 2016) which led the Government to implementing this restriction, in contrast to the National Labour Migration Policy, this was not an outcome of a proper consultation process with stakeholders or a



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parliament debate (Abeyasekera & Jayasundere, 2015).

Even though it is important to have national and international framework to protect migrant workers, identifying and addressing the gendered aspect related to migration was not properly identified by the Government (Shah, 2004; Shamim, 2006). The constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees an equal right to every citizen disregarding their race, ethnicity, or gender. Thus, Sri Lanka reiterates its commitment to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women by ratifying the UN Convention on the Elimination all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981.

The Family Background Report (FBR)

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment introduced a mandatory FBR for prospective female domestic migrants (housemaids) by its circular 13/2013 and expanded it to cover all female migrant workers in 2015. The FBR, while banning the migration of mothers with children under the age of 5 and mothers with disabled children, requires background information of the family including the consent of the guardian and the approval of the Head of the Village for mothers with children above age of 5. The 2015 extension of the FBR further requests estate sector workers to provide the approval of the superintendent of the estate in addition to the other requirements (Jegathesan, 2019).

Unarguably, this restriction closed the avenues for many prospect female labour migrants. Despite its intention to protect migrant women and their families considering them as a vulnerable community (ILO, 1996; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Shah, 2004; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016), this decision overruled the women's (mother's) decision making power over her right to work and handed it over to the guardian (husband) and to the government elites who have the final authority to accept or reject the application of unemployed women. The following section discusses why the introduction of the FBR as a blanket solution to discourage female migrant workers has failed to achieve its noble expectation of protecting women and their family institution, while leading them to go for the difficult and dangerous choice of illegal migration.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research utilized both primary and secondary data to examine the reasons that triggers illegal female migration to Gulf countries. Primary data was collected through a sample of 65 female migrant workers selected by using the convenience sampling method. The main intention of collecting primary data is to identify the push and/or pull factors that forced women to migrate using illegal measures when they are not permitted to use legal channels provided by the Foreign Employment Bureau of Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study used a



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convenience sampling method as it is required to identify the actual reasons behind their migration. The research sample consists of 65 female migrant workers selected from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the two prime destinations for Sri Lankan female domestic migrant workers. The sample comprises of 50 migrant workers from Riyadh and 15 from Kuwait City who were at the 'safe houses' that operates under Sri Lankan embassies at the two destinations during the period of May 2019 to January 2020. The inability to have similar number of participants from both destination countries due to the difficulties in approaching women is a limitation of this research.

The secondary data was used to back the arguments constructed through the evaluation of primary data. The information collected through reports and statistics of the Foreign Employment Bureau of Sri Lanka, the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, and other UN reports were used to supplement the analysis of primary data.

The focused group consists of illegal migrants who migrated for the first time as well as for the second or third time. With the purpose of securing privacy, personal information such as the name, age, hometown in Sri Lanka or any other personal information was not collected from the members of the sample. Structured interviews were conducted with the purpose of

identifying the primary reason/s that persuaded these women to migrate. The sample was requested to list down the reasons (if there were more than one reason) that motivated them to migrate based on the significance of each reason. Given that all of them provided two or three reasons, the first three reasons provided by each member were taken into consideration during the analysis. The reasons provided by the members are indicated in **Table I**. The 'findings' section provide a detailed interpretation on data and how it was evaluated.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section draws from the primary data collected from the interviews with the respondents and attempts to examine those with the intention of answering the research question 'what are the strong push factors that motivate women to migrate?'. It further efforts to distinguish *financial* and *gendered* push/ pull factors with the purpose of discovering real motivations behind their decision to migrate.

The reasons provided by the respondents revealing their motivation(s) for migration are categorized and portrayed in **Table I**. The 'decision to migrate' was an outcome of a more than one reason for most respondents: a majority of respondents had a primary motivation coupled with a secondary motivation(s) which explained that the



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decision to migrate is a combination of push and pull factors.

I categorized the reasons provided by the respondents under several groupings: initially, they were divided to two groups i.e., (1) who migrated solidly for financial purposes such as poverty and debt and (2) who were influenced by one or more other mooring factors along with financial issues. A predominant number of respondents in the first group were the women who migrated for the first time. The first group contained 36.9% where the second group represented 63% out of total respondents.

15.3% out of the second group stated that their decision to migration is motivated by lack of occupational

opportunities coupled with poverty and debt. 67.4% out of the second group claimed that family issues coupled with financial difficulties left them with no choice but to migrate as domestic workers to Gulf countries: interestingly, a majority of these women are not migrating for the first time but for the second or third time. The percentages of the respondents for each reason are indicated at the Table I. Given that the respondents were provided with the opportunity to provide multiple answers (up to three) the points starting from (3) to (10) this demonstrates the percentage of respondents who explained each point as a mooring factor for their migration.

Table I

Reason		Push / Pull Factor	Number of respondents	As a % of total sample	
		Push Factor	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	
Financial reasons	<i>Migrated solidly due to poverty and debt:</i>		16	8	36.9%
	(1) Poverty		10	3	20%
	(2) Debt		6	5	16.9%
	<i>Migrated due to financial and other reasons:</i>		34	7	63.0%
Family Issues	(3) Lack of job opportunities		4	6	15.3%
	(4) Issues with husband		7	3	15.3%
	(5) Children’s education and health issues		10	5	23.0%
	(6) Personal (unexplained family issues)		4	2	9.2%
	(7) Freedom		4	1	7.6%
	(8) Mistreatment by family members		5	3	12.3%
	(9) Peer influence (in receiving country)		2	0	3.0%
	(10) Strong discontent about the country or village		4	1	7.6%
	(11) Other		1	0	1.5%



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The findings of this study reveal that the primary motivation for the migration of women are financial motives. However, the importance of mooring factors cannot be disregarded as 63% out of the total respondents claimed that their decision was influenced by mooring factors, which are predominantly family related issues. Although financial difficulties have been included in almost all the answers, it is noteworthy that there were one or more other reasons that motivated women to migrate. Given that a majority of the *second group* consists illegal migrants, the role of the mooring factors is important as it has a significant impact on the increasing illegal migration.

When considering the individual reasons provided by the members of the 'second group' who claimed the impact of mooring factors in addition to the financial issues, 23% out of the 34 respondents explained that the necessity of money for their 'children's educational and health needs' motivated them to migrate given that they cannot support the children and family otherwise. Although this point is connected to the financial motivations, in contrast to the two major reasons provided by the 'first group', this reason demonstrates the expectation of a mother to build a better future for her children that she could not achieve due to financial difficulties or other family issues which is a gendered push factor.

This is ironic in two ways; first, Sri Lanka is a welfare State which provides universal free education and health for all citizens. This response uncovers an unattended issue (by the Government) faced by the citizens, particularly in the rural areas of the country. Even though education is free, the unequal distribution of resources within the country over the years have deprived more and more citizens (particularly in rural areas) from accessing proper education which consequently reduce the opportunities to access to a decent job. The inability to address this issue over the years has increased the urban-rural gap inside Sri Lanka. Rural poverty (excluding the estate sector) has been 4.3% in comparison to 1.8% of urban poverty in Sri Lanka in 2016 (Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs & Sri Lanka, 2016). While 81% out of the country's total population live in rural areas, females mark 52.3% of the total rural population of Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Even though poverty is common to both men and women, the high gender inequal norms still exist within Sri Lankan society coupled with a lack of access to proper education and training facilities, women are more prone to be disadvantaged and poorer than men. Female unemployment in rural areas remained 7.7% in 2019 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019). Rural poverty undoubtedly is a strong push factor that forces more women to migrate to the Gulf countries to support their families (Gamburd, 2013).

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Second, the Government's main objective of implementing FBR regulations is to discourage female labour migration to protect the family institution and children (ILO, 2018a). In contrast, a mother's intention to migrate (by leaving her children) is to earn money for the education and health requirements of children due to the lack of opportunities in the home country. It is puzzling to justify whose requirements are more appealing within the current context of Sri Lanka. (Weeraratne, 2015) has pointed out that the lack of livelihood and economic opportunities has led more young women to migrate both internally and outside of country. Research has also pointed out that the extended family system which is still in operation in rural Sri Lanka provides plenty of safe childcare opportunities for the children within their own family structure (Abeyasekera & Jayasundere, 2015; Gamburd, 2010), which helps to minimize the negative impact of mother's migration towards children.

Female unemployment is significantly high in Sri Lanka. The female labour force participation in 2020 was 32% in comparison to the 71.9% of male labour force participation (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020). Therefore, the lack of occupational opportunities, as indicated by 15.3% of women can be interpreted as a common issue faced by many Sri Lankan females, particularly in rural areas. This is also connected to the point 'strong discontent towards

country/village' claimed by 7.6% respondents. The lack of equal distribution of resources (including access to proper education which is a 'must requirement' to access a decent job) and opportunities within the country has deprived them from enjoying the benefits entertained by women in urban areas of the country. This situation leads them to select migration as the only available alternative to overcome existing financial issues and to support their families. 'Peer influence' is also significant in this process. Seeing their neighbours and relatives gain financial achievements through labour migration motivates many unemployed women in Sri Lanka to choose migration as their livelihood method. Gamburd (2010), has also emphasized the impact of peer influence to motivate female migration to Gulf countries within the Sri Lankan context.

The concerns such as 'issues with husband' (15.3%), 'mistreatment of family members' (12.3%), unexplained 'personal family issues' (9.2%) and 'freedom' (7.6%) could be categorized under issues related to domestic violence and abuse. To analyze this set of issues, it is important to understand the social, cultural, and economic factors that pursue domestic violence. A lack of access to occupation with a permanent monthly income has led both males and females in rural areas to engage in temporary jobs with daily wages which is not certainly enough to



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satisfy day today requirements. As explained in gendered power relations, the frustration and the dissatisfaction are generally focused on the woman as she is the less powerful and most vulnerable within a gender relationship. Given its high patriarchal nature of the relationships, poverty and domestic violence are highly inter-related within Sri Lankan society (Bandara, Knipe, Munasinghe, Rajapakse, & Page, 2021; Kottegoda, 2004; Tudawe, 2001). Therefore, migration benefits these women in two ways: first, to escape from unsatisfactory family settings and second, to earn a satisfactory income which they can support their family members in the home country.

Gendered Push Factors

The analysis of primary data reveals that the root cause behind female migration is directly or indirectly connected to financial difficulties they face within the home country. The high demand for domestic work in Gulf countries for women is another motivation for the wife's migration rather than the husband's migration. The available opportunities for male workers such as in the construction sector (in the Gulf countries) are dominated by the migrant workers from other South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2008), leaving minimum opportunities for Sri

Lankan male workers. However, some of the traditional labour sending countries including the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal and Kenya banned unskilled female labour migration to Gulf countries considering unsatisfactory labor laws exist in Gulf countries (Kader, 2015; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016). As a result of this, there is high demand for domestic and care work in Gulf countries providing more occupational opportunities for Sri Lankan women. Being able to earn a relatively better income for the same reproductive work carried out at the home country is an additional motivation for these women.

An interesting trend of circular migration can be identified when studying the background of the respondents. It is noticed that the women (particularly the respondents of the second group) who used illegal methods to bypass the FBR have at least been in the same destination country one time before. The mooring factors such as gendered push factors have motivated these women for circular migration. It can be assumed that women do not hesitate to use migration as an escaping tool to overcome unsatisfactory family and social settings once they are familiar with the context of the receiving country. Given the assistance provided by the sub agents² as a mediator to facilitate the process, migration using illegal

² In Sri Lanka, the role of sub-agents is crucial when considering the unskilled female migration to Gulf countries. They support (i.e., assist documentation, provide financial

support) these women throughout the process and coordinates with their counterparts at the destination country to find a working place as domestic workers.



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measures have increased with the introduction of the restrictions to discourage unskilled female migration to Gulf countries. Within this context, it can also be argued that gendered push factors such as domestic violence also triggers the motivation for illegal migration among females.

The analysis of primary data confirmed the findings of the previous research that reveal financial issues are the primary push factor that persuade female labour migration. In addition, the findings of this study also reveal an emerging trend of gendered push factors that encourages female labour migration even by using illegal means when they are not eligible to use the legal channel provided by the Government.

Even though female literacy rate increase to 90% in the country due to its much-appreciated universal free education policy, students in rural areas are unable to utilize the benefits of free education due to the lack of resources (such as schools and teachers) caused by the unequal distribution of resources. Even though Sri Lanka provides free education for all, the school dropout rate is high among girls in the estate and rural sector due to the socioeconomic background of the families rather than gendered reasons such as prioritizing son's education (Asian Development Bank, 1999). This situation has, on the other hand lead more women to be in poverty as they are not qualified enough to occupy a decent job

provided by the Government or private sector within the country. The available occupational opportunities in the informal sector are temporary and often less-paid, particularly for women. Given this situation, the economically inactive female population in the rural areas of Sri Lanka marked 74.2%, in 2019 (Department of Census and Statistics 2019). This reality has left women with no other option than migrating as domestic workers to Gulf countries which they are getting a relatively better wage for the same reproductive work without requiring any additional qualifications.

Chronic poverty, on the other hand, increased domestic violence and abuses within households. The findings of primary data reveal that domestic violence has indirectly lead to circular migration among women as they identify it as an opportunity to earn an income while escaping from the unsatisfactory family settings at the home country. In contrast to the common push factors explained in literature so far, findings of this study claim that gendered factors such freedom and escaping from an unsatisfactory family background are push factors for Sri Lankan women to migrate.

Ironically, the Government is trying to re-establish these gender norms and women's reproductive role within the society through laws, which women are trying to escape by using migration. Within this context, it is observable that the Government's effort to protect the

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family institution through implementing gendered laws such as FBR, without identifying the actual root causes behind the issue left these women with no other option but to use illegal measures to migrate which place them in a riskier situation such as human trafficking. Hence, the findings of this paper reveal that The Government's inability to identify and address the root causes behind female labour migration and the implementation of blanket measures such as the FBR has aggravated the situation and placed migrant women in a more vulnerable situation.

CONCLUSION

The fear of breaking down the family institution and social structure coupled with the impact of a mother's migration towards the left behind preceded the Government of Sri Lanka to implement restrictions on female labour migration since the early 2000s. Even though the anticipated outcome of reducing the number of females migrating through legal procedures dropped down, this policy indirectly promoted illegal migration among women which placed them in a precarious situation. This paper examined the persistent push factors that motivate illegal migration among women to Gulf countries as domestic workers. The findings of this study reveal that the inability to overcome financial issues within the home country due to the lack of economic opportunities have forced these women to migrate given it is the

only plausible opportunity available. Thus, the Government's inability to address these root causes and the use of blanket measures such as implementing laws to restrict the movement of women have placed them in a more vulnerable situation.

Thus, the mooring factors such as gendered push factors encourage illegal and circular migration as it helps women to escape from unsatisfactory family settings while providing a monthly income. They do not hesitate to migrate again once they are familiar with the context of the destination country as they are confident that they can find a job there. The role of sub agents in both sending and the destination country has made this process easier as they help women with documentation requirements.

This paper recommends durable solutions such as addressing the ground level issues i.e., enhancing equal distribution resources including educational and occupational opportunities, developing technical educational opportunities for both male and females particularly in rural areas that will enable them to apply for a skilled or semi-skilled jobs within the country, implementing laws to address domestic violence and related issues and initiating District or Divisional level scholarship and/or other supportive programs for children (whose parents have no proper income) particularly in rural areas of the country, to discourage unskilled female labour migration rather than



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implementing blanket solutions such as the Family Background Report which directs women into more vulnerable situations. Thus, the use of diplomatic measures such as signing bi-lateral agreements with labour receiving countries to guarantee the safety of migrant workers is also important considering the significant contribution of the remittances to the country's economy.

This research identifies the lacuna of literature on the response of prospective female migrant workers and their family members towards the Family Background Report, which is helpful in repealing this mandatory requirement in the future. In addition, a study on how the Government's effort to control the decision-making authority of females by reestablishing gender norms within the society would also be an interesting area for future research.

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Appendix I

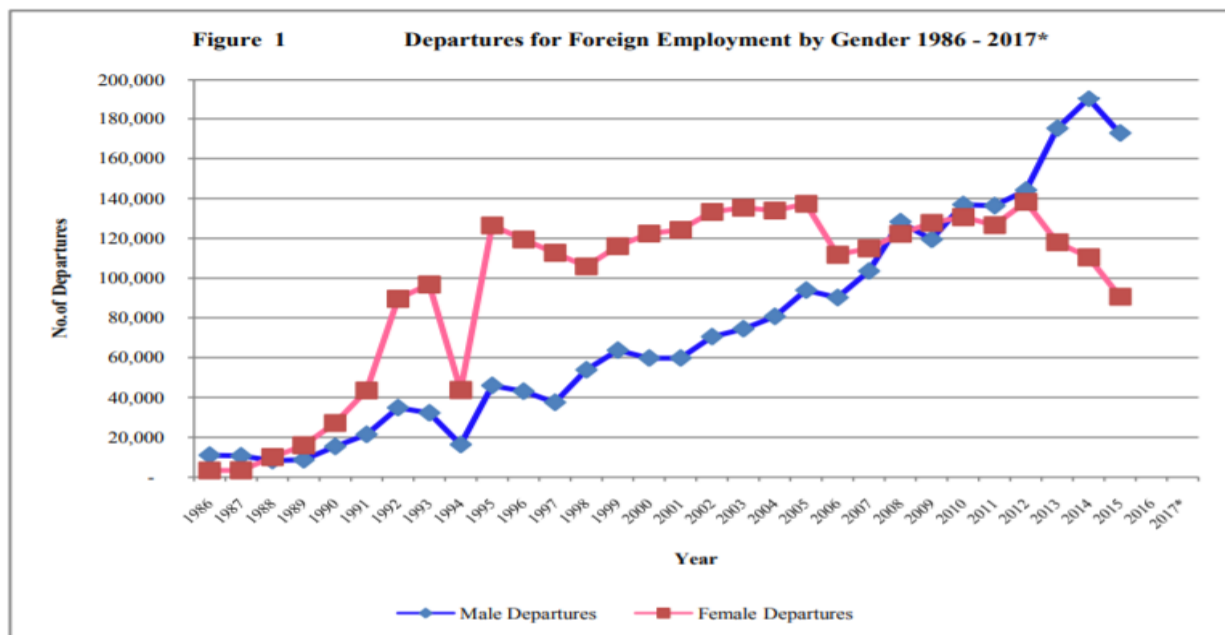
Departures for Foreign Employment by Gender 1986 - 2017

Year	Male		Female		Total
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
1986	11,023	76.25%	3,433	23.75%	14,456
1987	10,647	75.37%	3,480	24.63%	14,127
1988	8,309	35.11%	10,119	54.91%	18,428
1989	8,680	35.11%	16,044	64.89%	24,724
1990	15,377	36.08%	27,248	63.92%	42,625
1991	21,423	32.97%	43,560	67.03%	64,983
1992	34,858	28%	89,636	72%	124,494



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1993	32,269	25%	96,807	75%	129,076
1994	16,377	27.22%	43,791	72.78%	60,168
1995	46,021	26.68%	126,468	73.32%	172,489
1996	43,112	26.52%	119,464	73.48%	162,576
1997	37,552	24.99%	112,731	75.01%	150,283
1998	53,867	33.71%	105,949	66.29%	159,816
1999	63,720	35.45%	116,015	64.55%	179,735
2000	59,793	32.82%	122,395	67.18%	182,188
2001	59,807	32.50%	124,200	67.50%	184,007
2002	70,522	34.61%	133,251	65.39%	203,773
2003	74,508	35.51%	135,338	64.49%	209,846
2004	80,699	37.59%	134,010	62.41%	214,709
2005	93,896	40.60%	137,394	59.40%	231,290
2006	90,170	44.65%	111,778	55.35%	201,948
2007	103,476	47.37%	114,983	52.63%	218,459
2008	128,232	51.19%	122,267	48.81%	250,499
2009	119,381	48.31%	127,745	51.69%	247,126
2010	136,850	51.16%	130,657	48.84%	267,507
2011	136,307	51.84%	126,654	48.16%	262,961
2012	144,135	51.03%	138,312	48.97%	282,447
2013	175,185	59.75%	118,033	40.25%	293,218
2014	190,217	63.26%	110,486	36.74%	300,703
2015	172,788	65.59%	90,655	34.41%	263,443
2016	160,306	66.02%	82,510	33.98%	242,816
2017	139,271	65.64%	72,891	34.36%	212,162



*The figures on departures from 1986 to 1991 do not reflect the actual number of persons who migrated for economic purposes due to the absence of proper mechanism to collect accurate data.

Source: Foreign Employment Bureau of Sri Lanka
(<http://www.slbfe.lk/file.php?FID=489>)