

Impact of international labour migration of spouse on left behind wife's fertility

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Abstract

Migration of a population can be identified as one of components in demography of the country. Labour migration leads to significant changes in the place of origin. Since the late 1970's Sri Lanka's labour migration policy encourages migration as a method of high income employment provider. In national level, remittances from foreign employment are undeniably as it is one of the major sources that have been fueling economic development in Sri Lanka. During the latter part of 1980's female predominance could be seen in terms of labour migration in Sri Lanka. However in recent years once again the male dominance labour migration could be observed. Similarly, one major characteristic that could be identified is that the majority of the male migrants are married and they migrate leaving their wives and children at the origin (ILO, 2013). The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of international labour migration of married males on the fertility of wife left behind. The study was mainly based on the primary data collected from Kochchikade North Grama Niladhari Division in Colombo District Divisional Secretariat. This sample has been selected using a purposive sampling. A sample of the study has been 103 spouses, whose husbands have migrated to a foreign destination for employment. In the absence of the husband in the household, women has become the head of the family. The study revealed that 94.2 per cent of women have children. Of them, 44.3 per cent of women whose husband had migrated have a single child. It can be seen that there is a decrease in the number of children in the family due to husband's absence. According to the study majority of them desire two children for their family. Therefore, long time separation of husband has affected on their desired number of children.

Keywords: Labour migration, fertility, left behind families

Introduction

Migration can be identified as a very important demographic component which is influenced by economic development and social change. Migration of a person is timely and varies from country to country depending on the social and economic causes and consequences of the country. International migration is an important phenomenon in the global migration process. Among the international flows, labour migration is regarded as an emerging trend for both males and females. Migration of men and women create various issues to the families left behind. Most of the studies have examined the consequences of female labour migration. However, studies on male labour migration are relatively low in comparison to females labour migration.

Since 1970s, developed, industrial countries had high demand for labour than the least and less developed countries. Especially in the Gulf countries, huge labour shortage to be identified and in this context, there was a huge labour migration to Gulf area. The workers were taken under the temporary contract through the Gulf Cooperation Council. Especially, most of the men moved in terms of labour compared to females. The migration of labour from other countries caused the rise in profits in the Gulf countries and the construction boom in those countries. By 1980's, new industrial countries imported labourers from less developed countries. The labour demand of these countries, particularly for construction, agricultural sector and various elementary and 3 D occupations (Dirty, Dangerous, Demeaning). Global migrants have rapidly increased over the past 15 years. 173 million in 2000, 222 million in 2010 and it has increased to 244 million in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). According to

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International Labour Organization, out of these migrants more than 150 million people migrate in search of a job (ILO, 2013). Out of the total number of international labour migrants, 48 per cent of the migrants are women and 52 per cent of the migrants are males (ILO, 2013).

Increase in the price of oil coupled with the increase in demand for petroleum products from the developed industrial countries and elsewhere has made the Middle-East a rapidly growing economic region leading to higher incomes for local inhabitants and numerous industries which has led to infrastructure development. This has led to a steadily increasing demand for skilled and unskilled workers. Inadequate local labour supply has created the demand for foreign labour. This gap has been filled by workers from many countries including Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the introduction of an open economic policy in Sri Lanka in 1977 created a socioeconomic environment conducive for foreign employment. In the view of growing importance of inward remittances for the country and the positive impact of labour migration on unemployment at home, successive governments have taken measures to facilitate labour migration (CENWOR, 1997).

In 1970s, most of destinations for labour were Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, and now it can be identified countries such as South Korea and Singapore as destinations of migrants. According to the Sri Lankan Foreign Employment Bureau - (SLBFE, 2015) annual departures for foreign employment have increased significantly since mid – 1980s. In 1986, the number of men who have migrated to foreign destination were 11023 (76.25 per cent) and the number of women who have migrated to foreign destination were 3433 (23.75 per cent). By the end of 1988, the number of females have exceeded the number of males, and had reached its peak level in 1993. Accordingly, the number of women who have migrated to foreign destination have increased to 96,807 (75 per cent). The number of males have increased to 32,269 but proportion of males who have migrated to foreign destination have decreased to 25 per cent. According to the SLBFE, in 2012 Sri Lankan labour migration has become female dominant from 1993 to 2007. But after 2007, male labour has gradually increased and by 2015, international labor migration of males have risen. Accordingly, the number of male migrants were 172,630 (65.56 per cent) and the number of female were 90,677 (34.44 per cent) (SLBFE, 2015). Similarly, one major characteristic that could be identified is that the majority of the male migrants are married (ILO, 2013). Substantial insights can be gained if, in addition to the socioeconomic factors influencing fertility, the specific mechanisms through which these factors operate are identified (Bongaarts, 2003).

Childbearing can result a decrease in women's autonomy and independence (McDonald 1997; Steinberg 1996). Infants and young children require large amounts of care within the home. As a result of the gendered division of labour, this care is usually given by mothers, and thus their mobility is decreased and they become more tied to the home and house work (Sanchez and Thomson 1997). Labour migration of men, however, leads to a decrease in fertility because men's absence greatly reduces the frequency of sexual intercourse within a marriage which is a key proximate determinant of fertility (Bongaarts et. al., 1984). For an example, Lindstrom and Saucedo (2002) reported that Mexican men's temporary migration to USA has reduced fertility rates in a short term. Although in the long term couples have adjusted fertility upwards and had similar levels of completed fertility, this temporary reduction in fertility is potentially important: it is a window of time in which women's autonomy would be able to increase. In a setting such as rural Mozambique, where the total fertility rate is estimated to be about 6.1 births per woman (National Statistical Institute 2005: 53), even a slight decrease in childbearing could lead to significant changes in women's daily lives. Specifically, less childbearing and reduced responsibility for caring for young children may result an increase in women's independence and autonomy.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of the international labour migration of married males on the fertility of wives left behind.

Data and methods

This study is mainly based on both primary and secondary data. The study area was selected as Kochchikade North Grama Niladhari Division. A sample of the study was 103 spouses, whose husbands have migrated to a foreign destination for labour. These respondents were selected using the snowball sampling method. The mixed methodology has been used in collecting data where the structured questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data while informal interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. The secondary data were obtained from the Department of Census and Statistics, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS using univariate and bivariate analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis focusing on the main themes based on the objectives of the study.

Results and discussion

Respondents' characteristics reveal that mean age being 42.5 years. Among the respondents 36 per cent were currently in 40-44 age group, 4 per cent were in 50 years and above age group. It can be seen that majority of the respondents (96 per cent) were in the reproductive age span. Majority (54.1 per cent) has obtained up to secondary level education and 8.1 per cent had primary education.

Spousal separation due to migration has decreased the exposure to conception, leading to lower marital fertility, at least in the short term (Bongaarts et.al, 1984). The migration has negatively affected fertility (Myres and Morris, 1966). During the migration, the cost of child is increased where the fertility is decreased (Jensen and Anlburg, 2004). Fertility rates were much lower among women whose husbands had been away for at least a year than for all married women (Khanal et.al. 2013).

This study reveals that, male migration has an impact on the fertility of the wife who is left behind. Especially it has a significant impact on the starting behaviour, spacing behaviour, stopping behaviour and the desired number of fertility. Couples who want to limit their fertility can follow two strategies, known as birth spacing and stopping (Knodel, 1987; Okum, 1995). In this case, male are migrating to foreign destinations for a long time which has an impact on fertility. In this situation most of the couple's fertility decisions depend on this long distance relationships. In demography, fertility is defined as the number of live birth. Reproduction can be identified as a major function of any family. Accordingly, the fertility of family is mainly the decision of both husband and wife. Hence, the absence of husband influences fertility decision of the family.

It is important to understand the actual fertility of left behind families. It is indicated that 94.2 per cent of left behind families have children and 5.8 per cent haven't children and majority of the migrant families had children.

Table 1 indicates the number of children in migrant's families. The findings further reveals that the majority (44.3 per cent) have one child while about 32 per cent of the migrant families had two children.

Table 1: Number of children in migrant's families

Number of children	Number	%
One child	43	44.3
Two children	31	32.0
Three children	14	14.4
Four children or above	9	9.3

Source: Field survey, 2016

N = 97

Caldwell's theory of wealth flow explains fertility decline as a rational decision made by parents based on the direction of intergenerational transfers. In high-fertility contexts, this theory proposes that children produce more than they consume and therefore provide net wealth to parents. In contrast, in low-fertility contexts, parents invest more in children, resulting children being a net economic cost. A weaker prediction of the model, that when children are more expensive, parents desire fewer of them (Caldwell, 1987). This led to the rise of the family's children in the past and today, costs of a child is increasing. Especially men's international labour migration, reduces the number of children in the family. Labour migration of males, however, leads to a decrease in fertility because male absence greatly reduces the frequency of sexual intercourse within marriage, which is a key proximate determinant of fertility (Bongaarts, Frank, and Lesthaeghe et al., 1984). As suggested by proximate determinants framework, men's absence is likely to lead to lower fertility (Yabuki et.al.,2011). According to a study by Jensen and Anlborg in 2004, they showed that the cost of children have increased due to the migration.

Thus, the perception is that the migration of a male impacts women fertility. According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2016/17, the total fertility rate was 2.2 in Sri Lanka. Total fertility rate (TFR) is a constructed measure on the number of children a woman would have if she completed her reproductive years at the prevailing age-specific fertility rate. Although majority have one child women who are in the sample have not yet finished their reproductive age. Also economic factors and socio-economic characteristics of the migrant's family can be perceived fertility of those families through interdependent variables. In a setting such as rural Mozambique, where the total fertility rate is estimated to be about 6.1 births per woman (National Statistical Institute 2005: 53), even a slight decrease in childbearing could lead to significant changes in women's daily lives. Specifically, less childbearing and reduced responsibility for young child-centered activities and duties may result in increases in women's independence and autonomy (Yabiku, 2011).

Table 2 indicates the desired fertility of migrant's families. Desired fertility refers the average number of children that couples want or are planning to have in their reproductive age span. Difference can be identified between the actual and the desired fertility of the women due to the male labour migration.

Table 2: The desired fertility of families left behind by married male migration

Desired fertility	Number	%
One child	3	3.0
Two children	59	57.6
Three children	39	37.4
Four children or above	2	2.0

Source: Field survey, 2016

N = 103

The study explores that the majority of women expects two children. As a percentage of 57.6 per cent of the couples' desired fertility is two children. 37.4 per cent of the couples expects three children. According to Table 2 and Table 1, the actual fertility is lower than desired fertility. Social, economic, and demographic causes affect this situation and the couples who are at the end of the reproductive age span is unable to achieve their desired fertility. Especially, in migrant families less number of children has been observed due to the absence of husband.

It is also important to identify whether migrant families can achieve their desired fertility. According to the study, 45.4 per cent have reached their desired number of children. But most couples (54.6 percent) are unable to reach the desired number of children. It is important to find out that the international labour migration of husband has resulted for the couples to not to achieve their desired number of children.

It could be identified that there is no huge impact on spacing behavior of fertility. 47.4 per cent of respondents have responded that there is an impact of male migration on spacing behavior. However majority had an opinion that it doesn't impact on spacing behavior.

Table 3: The impact of male migration on spacing between children

The impact of male migration on spacing between children	Number	%
Increase space	28	62.2
Decrease space	17	37.8

Source: Field Survey, 2016

N = 45

It was found that 62.2 per cent respondents have reported that increased space among their children due to long time absence of their husband.

The following case study exhibit that case related to Mala. Mala is a 39-year-old , whose husband have migrated to United Arab Emirates for employment.

My husband went to foreign country for the first time in the year 1999. When he left the country, we had only one son. After 3 years' time he went another country for five years .We want to have more babies after his return. But my husband has not returned to Sri Lanka for 10 years. After he returned to Sri Lanka, we made a baby after 10 years. Now we have a daughter who is 13 years younger than her brother. – (Female, 39 year-old)

With the above situation, it can be noted that male migration increases the space between babies. In this study only four women have completed their reproductive age. Therefore, there aren't sufficient data to study on the stopping behaviour in fertility. Also nine women haven't had their first baby yet. 38 women are waiting to have their next baby.

Conclusion

Although it has been well established in the literature that men's labour migration is associated with the fertility of women. The main focus of this study is to examine the impact of the international labour migration of married males on fertility of the female left behind. This study has also gathered information on fertility behaviours of wives whose husband have migrated to foreign destination for labour. The majority of left behind families have one child and it is different from their desired number of children. Hence, this study evident that male migration has a significant impact on fertility.

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