

Sri Lanka: Training Needs of Sri Lanka for Overseas Migration

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As a remedy for unemployment of youth Sri Lanka lifted restrictions on foreign travel in 1977. It enabled unskilled job seekers mainly women workers to leave the country for temporary employment in the Middle East.

Today Sri Lanka has an estimated stock of nearly 851,000 female migrant workers in the Middle East (see Table 1). Many migrated several times and now form a prominent network of Sri Lankans content with their employment. They are organised into cultural associations, commemorate national festivals and form cheer squads at sports festivals.

Table 1: Estimated Stock of Sri Lankan Overseas Contract Workers – 2002

Country	Male	Female	Total
KSA	130,000	195,000	325,000
UAE	40,000	98,000	138,000
Kuwait	24,000	141,000	165,000
Jordan	5,000	35,000	40,000
Lebanon	5,000	75,000	80,000
Oman	7,600	28,400	36,000
Bahrain	6,000	21,000	27,000
Qatar	33,000	7,000	40,000
Total			851,000

Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE)

The process of migration is governed by a law on foreign employment enacted in 1985, (Act No 21 of 1985). It was designed to regulate the business of recruitment of Sri Lankans for overseas employment by private sector undertakings and public corporations. Law also provides for promotion of overseas employment and welfare and protection of migrant domestic workers through a process of licensing. As a large number are working abroad recent developments in the employment of Sri Lankans highlight the need for better protection of migrant female domestic workers (MFDW) and recognition of their human rights.

While some receiving countries have a good track record of non-abusive employment several others face accusations of violation of basic human rights, abuse, removal of organs, harassment and exploitation. Reasons for this situation may lie among others in their socio political structures, cultural orientations, and unfamiliarity with core international human and labour standards.

Policy dilemmas are complicated by the presence of middlemen who thrive on ignorance of migrants both at home and in host country. It is estimated that for nearly 500 local licensed agencies, there are nearly 50 times that number of sub-agents and job brokers resulting in enormous costs of migration, which have to be repaid with least delay. This causes anxiety to domestic workers whenever wage payments are delayed or denied, while in employment abroad. There is "little or no" prior knowledge of rights, duties and expectations of employers or prevailing practices and social systems. It has been reported that some MFDW are unaware or not fully informed prior to migration of hostile working conditions, adverse climatic conditions, health hazards or government rules.

There is no institutional arrangements in countries of employment that recognizes the work and human rights of migrants. There is no conciliatory institution in place in any host country to receive, counsel and assure new entrants on benefits of early adjustment to new employments. At present interventions are possible over a dispute in police stations hardly the ideal place for peaceful conciliation. A rights awareness should be built at both ends of the migration process. This is best undertaken through inter-country accords or memoranda of understanding that terminate in effective bilateral agreements ensuring worker welfare as a joint responsibility of labour receiving countries and labour sending countries.

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A recent sample survey has shown that although 78.13% of the sample (1000) stated that they had no complaints about work conditions, of those who disagreed, the complaints were hard work (13.48%), lack of leisure time (12.35%), not enough pay (11.23%), pressure from own family members to return (12.35%), and sudden family events that forced them to return (13.48%).

Nearly a fourth of MFDW (23.1%) had suffered physical injuries in the course of being employed abroad, due to a variety of reasons including accidents at work and physical abuse by the employer or by another member of the household. 23.41% of those who had suffered injuries attributed them to physical abuse. Of these, 32.14% had no school education or had only a primary education (64.29%). Furthermore, 67.86% of them were from rural backgrounds.

It is noteworthy that 32.98% of those who had suffered injuries had not obtained any medical treatment from recognized physical or medical institution during the period of employment and had either ignored the injury or taken a home remedy. Although 40% of the victims of injury or abuse had not taken any action for relief or compensation, it is noteworthy that, of the remainder, 21.28% had complained to the relevant embassies or to the police in the host country (9.57%).

Current Health Status

A little over half of MFDW are currently taking medical treatment for ailments such as back pain, asthma, heart disease, and other complication which they attributed to harsh working conditions including tasks that had to be performed without sufficient rest periods.

Sexual Abuse and Unwanted Pregnancies

Of the total surveyed, 24 persons reported that they had been subjected to sexual abuse during their period of employment. Pregnancies occurred among 2 of them, and both women delivered the children who are living with their mothers although only one child has had its birth registered.

Knowledge of STD/HIV/AIDS

While 63.42% of the total sample stated that they were aware of STD, the corresponding proportion for HIV/AIDS was 52.35%.

Reported Grievances

It is noteworthy that 26.28% of the total sample reported grievances. Of these, the main complaints were not receiving full wages (54.41%), and the remainder was for not receiving compensation for disability, physical or sexual assault, rape and unwanted pregnancy.

Of entire sample, 26.28% stated that the employment experience had negative effects on their family lives. Of these, 27.1% stated that it led to divorce or separation from spouse or children developing health or social problems (15.89%). While the remainder mentioned addiction of husband to alcohol, death, sickness or disability of husband due to alcoholism and a few reported domestic strife, indebtedness, depression among family members if the MFDW had to abandon employment, and having to look after the welfare of siblings from money earned (45.79%)

Policy implications

Sri Lanka, as a sending country has to ensure that migrants are equipped with the required level of education, competence in the relevant language, and occupational and social skills required for a job abroad. The coverage given by training programmes needs to be expanded to cater to the requirements of prospective employers. Furthermore, the government has to adopt and enforce a recruitment policy for all agencies involved stating the minimum requirements for recruitment of migrants.

It appears that most returnees have not progressed in realizing their dreams, and macro economic planners should provide the above avenues at the start of the migration cycle rather than at its end.

Another task is the need for re-integration of returnees with their families and community without which the social costs of migration could outweigh its financial returns.

It is a public expectation that government should provide back stopping for children and other family members of migrants while they are away through the establishment of counseling and day care centres and community level organisations and extend full patronage to NGO's to extend their activities in the above fields.

Health agencies in Sri Lanka have to ensure that sufficient knowledge is transmitted to MFDW about STD and HIV/AIDS, risky sexual behaviour, and safe sex methods before they leave for overseas employment.

In view of the large number of complaints registered with the state agency handling overseas employment there is an urgent need for a strong conciliation service to resolve disputes or misunderstandings of workers. Repatriation should be facilitated for those unable to survive within first months of employment particularly whenever conciliation fails. The bulk of complaints relate to non-payment of wages, harassment and lack of communication (see Table 2).

Table 2: Total number of complaints by nature of complaint and sex for year 2001

Nature of Complaint	Male	Female	Total	Summary
1. Non payment of agreed wages	81	1042	1123	<i>Total of 1-5</i> 6829
2. Lack of Communication	100	1608	1708	
3. Harassment	29	1164	1193	
4. not sent back after contract	96	1265	1361	
5. Contract substitution	951	493	1444	
6. Death				<i>Total of Deaths</i> 211
a.) Suicide	1	10	11	
b.) Homicide	-	2	2	
c.) Accident	72	84	156	
d.) Natural	25	17	42	<i>Total of Sick</i> 373
7. Sick	37	336	373	
Total				7413

Source: SLBFE Information Technology Division.

Training

In order to uplift the category of MFDW and minimise problems due to non-preparedness, strengthen their skills, Bureau established 29 Island wide Training Centres; Training Period is 12 days for Middle East countries & 21 days for other destinations.

Table 3: Nos Trained in 2001

Year	no training
1998	45,432
1999	36,563
2000	41,191
2001	43,148
2002	44,267

Training is compulsory for females who are proceedings for employment for the first time in Domestic service. Recently training modules were upgraded and extended and practical training in use of household appliances, bank, travel formalities, care of elder or children and arrangements to look after them were included.

Further extra Training Programmes in language culture and customs is offered to all categories of Sri Lankans proceeding to countries where Sri Lanka has entered into MOU for recruitment of Sri Lankans recently like Malaysia, Korea and Singapore.

Training offered by Migrant Services Centre is inadequate, poor in content and coverage. Only 1/5 of migrant women are annually trained. Instances of public complaints have increased. This calls for re-examination of Domestic Service Training Programme.