

HEALTH AND NUTRITIONAL PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY LEFT BEHIND CHILDREN OF SRI LANKAN MIGRANT MOTHERS

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Abstract: *Migration of mothers and their separation raises many challenges to their families, especially the children left behind, irrespective of the economic benefits they receive. Among them, the impact on health and nutrition of the children left behind by mothers play a crucial role as they affect the growth, education and behaviour of children. Although the consequences of mothers' migration on their children left behind have been studied immensely under different perspectives, health and nutritional problems encountered by the children are inadequately researched. Therefore, this paper discusses the health and nutritional problems of the children left behind by Sri Lankan migrant mothers based on a qualitative study done in 2014 that investigated the adverse effects of parental migration on health, nutrition, education, and behavior of left behind children. Four Focus Group Discussions and eleven Key Informant Interviews were conducted in Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy, and Kurunegala districts to collect information. The person who provide care, and the nature of care provision have a strong impact on health and nutritional conditions of children. Lack of knowledge and inadequate attention of caregivers, especially the grandmothers, on health and nutritional matters, poor hygiene of caregivers and improper food preparation habits have led to health and nutritional problems of the children. Low weight is prevalent among children less than 5 years of age. Children of school going age are vulnerable to nutritional and, physical and mental health problems depending on the nature of care provision and the environment they live in. Nonetheless, there is a lack of programmes addressing the health and nutritional problems encountered by the children left behind by migrant workers. Therefore, there is a need to initiate such programmes in the future to minimize these problems.*

Keywords: Left Behind Children, Nutrition, Health, Migrant Mothers

Introduction

There has been a transformation in the scale, complexity and diversity of international migration in Asia (Hugo & Young, 2008; International Migration Institute - IMI, 2006). Within this transformation, no change has been as striking as the increasing involvement of mothers leaving their children at home in the care of other family members (United Nations, 2016; Jayaweera & Dias, 2009). There are no accurate estimates of the children left behind by migrant mothers (Yeoh & Lam, 2007; Parrenas, 2005). Moreover, it is difficult to get accurate estimates due to the differences in age limits used to define the child by different countries and scholars (Yeoh & Lam, 2007). However, by examining the estimates of the children left behind in countries such as Bangladesh, China, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, Yeoh and Lam (2007) suggest that millions of children in the world live without seeing their mothers or fathers or both parents for many years. Perera and Ratnayaka (2013) reports that more than one million Sri Lankan children are left behind by their mothers who have migrated for overseas employment. Ukwatta (2012)

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