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Why Sri Lankan Female Migrant workers are a Vulnerable Group?

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Summary

The Sri Lankan female migrant workers (SLFMW) are vulnerable to human trafficking, health problems (STIs, and psychological) and other. As a majority of these migrants come from the middle or the low social strata with a low education level it is understood that these factors make them vulnerable in the process of migration. Besides, the national policies of receiving countries as well as the ineffective migrant policies in the sending country worsen these women's situation.

There is a necessity to work along with the world labour migration movements and to empower SLFMWs and to develop sustainable knowledge base in the community to reduce vulnerability related to migration through capacity building programmes done by returnee migrant workers as peer leaders.

The government policies and the government's commitment to upgrade the facilities of the SLFMWs in the receiving country should be in favour of the workers whereas Sri Lanka should be an active participant in the current global migrant rights trend.

It is worth noting that gender issues and migration are inextricably linked due to several reasons. The female migrants are subjected to vulnerability in the sending country as well as in the receiving. In the receiving country they are victimized due to less bargaining power, inability to communicate created by language barriers whereas in their communities they are subjected to exploitation in the first half of the migration process and at the same time as 'returnee migrants' they are subjected to social stigma. Singhanetra-Renard reveals specifying on the health issues and vulnerability "[s]ince women migrants almost invariably possess lesser bargaining power and legal rights than locals and particularly local men, the role of migration in the victimization of women, and thus, the spread of HIV infection, cannot be ignored." Apart from these situations, in general, especially South Asian and South East Asian females are trafficked in the guise of migration later forcing them into sex work. Their vulnerability to trafficking is high as most of these women are very young and coming from economically depressed countries or communities.

“Trafficking is the illegal moving and selling of human beings across and within countries and continents in exchange for monetary and/or other compensation.”

Internationally, trafficking has become an economic, health, gender and a legal problem today. The second largest number of internationally trafficked persons in the world is recorded from South Asia. Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are identified as main centers of origin, whereas India and Pakistan are reported to be the destination or transit countries. Though ‘males’ are subjected to trafficking majority of victims are identified to be ‘young girls and women from poor and illiterate families.’ This victimization leads to grave violation of human rights such as right to live with dignity, right to free mobility and self-determination and right to justice.

Migration is known to be occurred with ‘choice’ whereas trafficking is characterized by ‘coercion, deception or force.’ Though migration and trafficking are distinct processes “[t]he pressing need for work and life opportunities has turned migration into a common livelihood strategy in South Asia, creating a fertile field for traffickers and unscrupulous employment agents.” The research findings of *“Human Trafficking and HIV”* show that at present labour migration and trafficking have become two overlapping phenomena since ‘voluntary migration for legitimate work’ is manipulated to the extent of ‘exploitation’ in the due process of migration. However people always give their consent to migrate expecting a better job with a substantial salary only to find out later that they are forced to work in plantations, households or brothels.

There are three main potential vulnerable factors that make women more vulnerable to trafficking than men. First is ‘the willingness to migrate’ due to poverty and lack of employment opportunities, second ‘unprotected migratory process’ through which women travel unaccompanied or with an unknown person and the last is the ‘non-secured migratory destination’ , a non-confirmed place of arrival.

Despite being trained by the SLBFE, the Sri Lankan female migrants remain a vulnerable group at the receiving country, since their language skill is at a lower level. Inability to communicate with the relevant authorities regarding the relevant matter leaves these workers’ problems unsolved and amounting. Though they do migrate through the agents registered under SLBFE after migrating their problems are almost forgotten or not dealt with.
Most of the FDWs are faced with difficulties since labour laws in most of the receiving countries have excluded domestic workers in their labour laws. Besides, the rights of these workers are denied for cultural and structural reasons; for example in the Middle East the religion and the different system of governance deprive the universal rights these workers have.
With regard to this, there is a need for intervention of the Sri Lankan government to change the situation first at the policy making level in the receiving country. Though in the past the

government took measures to intervene with the investigations on cases of female migrants' harassments in the Middle East, up to today these workers are subjected to various harassments and proper intervention was not achieved yet.

The main reasons that these Sri Lankan female migrant workers (SLFMW) become a more vulnerable to trafficking in the form of migration, infections (as in health problems-HIV infection and other Sexually transmitted diseases) and deprivation of fundamental rights are:

1. Though educated lack of employment opportunities in the country which makes the women willing to migrate.
2. Lack of awareness and information on the phenomenon of trafficking, about the receiving country, safe migration process, etc. as well as the lower education levels.
3. Introvert personalities which prevent them from revealing harassments they undergo/underwent due to social stigma.

Recommendations :

However much the government try to bring protection to them through changed policies there is a need to form a proper mechanism within Sri Lanka to give a proper knowledge about migration (labour categories, receiving countries laws on each category, maintaining their health, etc.), potential misuse of their willingness to migrate and survival tactics in the receiving countries to those 'willing to migrate' people. For most of the grass root level programmes the 'returnee female migrants' can be employed as peer leaders who would be able to relate their experiences and make the females who are willing to migrate a less vulnerable group for all evils throughout the migration process and till their return.

The awareness programmes should be composed to give these migrants the knowledge about international trends on migrants' rights, specially the rights of the FDWs and informal workers, enhanced by the 'Trade Union Movement'. The information as such would help them to join trade unions operate internationally which will be useful at desperate times in the receiving country. In addition the Sri Lanka government can initiate joint programmes with the institutions like IOM where there will be opportunities to integrate with the current global migration activities and migrant welfare enhancing policies. The national policies can be formed in harmony with the true needs of the migrants of Sri Lanka.