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Sri Lankan Migration to the Gulf: Female Breadwinners - Domestic Workers

By **Michele Ruth Gamburd** | Professor of Anthropology - Portland State University | FEB 02, 2010



Several waves of Sri Lankan migration have taken place since the country gained independence in 1948. Beginning in the mid-1950s, wealthy, educated, English-speaking elites have migrated to Commonwealth countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom. In addition, since the upsurge in ethnic hostilities in the early 1980s, Tamil-speaking Hindu migrants have left the country, with many settling in Canada. In contrast with

these permanent migrants, since 1976 a growing number of Sri Lankans have become migrant workers. The leading destination for this migrant labor force — the majority of whom are women — has been the Gulf.

The Scale and Composition of Sri Lankan Labor Migrants

In 2003, the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), the main administrative body regulating labor migration, estimated that 1,003,600 Sri Lankans worked abroad.^[1] By 2008, this number had increased to 1,792,368, or 9% of the island's 20 million people. From the late 1980s until as recently as 2007, women made up the majority of these labor migrants. They accounted for 75% of the migrant flow in the mid-1990s, and by 2008 declined to a little under 50%. Of the migrant women, 88% went to work as housemaids.^[2] In much of the global North, such migrant transnational domestic workers meet the needs of the global "care deficit," reflecting a global trend in outsourcing domestic labor to women from less developed countries. In contrast, transnational domestic servants in the Middle East free their sponsors for leisure, supporting a socially significant lifestyle.

In recent years, Sri Lankan officials have actively encouraged male migration. The male guest workers fill more diverse roles, with skilled and unskilled laborers making up roughly equal percentages of the male migrants (42% and 41% respectively in 2008).

Main Destination Countries

Most Sri Lankan migrants (92%), both male and female, journey to the Gulf, with four

countries (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar) absorbing over 80% of Sri Lanka's workers. In the Gulf, Sri Lankan women share the market for migrant domestic workers with women from Indonesia, the Philippines, and several other countries. Racial, ethnic, religious, and national stereotypes predetermine wages. For example, in the UAE in 2004, housemaids from the Philippines were paid more than those from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh, in that order.[3]

Most Sri Lankan housemaids go abroad on two-year contracts and live in their employers' residences. Live-in housemaids have less autonomy and lower salaries than women with part-time or live-out arrangements. The isolation of the work situation can lead to abuse and exploitation.

[L]abor laws cover male laborers but do not protect household workers.

Domestic workers' legal protections vary from country to country. In many Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, labor laws cover male laborers but do not protect household workers. [4]Labor regulations do apply to foreign domestic servants working in other areas in Asia, the European Union, and the United States, but may not be enforced against middle- and upper-class employers.[5]

Sri Lankan Sojourners as Temporary Migrants in the Gulf

Guest workers form a crucial aspect of local economies in the Gulf. Overall, foreigners make up an estimated 37-43% of the population of the GCC countries and constitute 70% of the workforce, with workforce numbers rising significantly higher in the UAE (90%), Kuwait (82%), and Qatar (90%).[6]Most GCC countries have a de facto dual economy, with well paid, non-strenuous public-sector jobs created for "nationals" and poorly paid, difficult, low-status, private sector jobs performed by foreigners.

The high percentage of guest workers worries government officials. Accordingly, governments have legislated to minimize the perceived threat. Restrictions on length of stay, strict regulations about changing jobs, hurdles imposed by the sponsorship system, difficult-to-meet criteria for bringing in family members, the inability to own land and businesses, the near-impossibility of obtaining citizenship, and the absence of legal rights all work to keep guest workers' stays short, temporary, or informal.[7]Although Sri Lankans migrate to Australia, Canada, and the UK with plans to settle there, most sojourners in the Gulf do not hope to assimilate permanently into the host country.

Incentives for Sri Lankan Transnational Domestic Migrants

There are both national-level and family-level incentives for Sri Lankans to migrate. On the national level, migrant laborers' remittances contribute significantly to Sri Lanka's foreign exchange earnings. In 2008, total remittances stood at SLR 316,118 million, or roughly \$2.87 billion (converted at \$1 = SLR 110). Nearly 60% of this total, SLR 189,039 million or \$1.72 billion, came from the Gulf. In generating foreign earnings, private remittances (36%) come second after Sri Lanka's large garment industry (40%). Clearly the country has a great financial stake in the remittances generated by migrant laborers, particularly those working in the Gulf.

Migration alleviates unemployment among the poorer segments of Sri Lanka's population. Locally available jobs are mostly poorly paid and temporary, particularly for women. Although transnational domestic workers earn only an average of \$100 a month while abroad, this is between two and five times what women could earn working in Sri Lanka, and equals or exceeds the wages earned by most village men. Migrant women consistently assert that families cannot make ends meet on their husbands' salaries, and say that migration to the Middle East is their only available economic alternative. Family motives for migration usually include getting out of debt, buying land, and building a house. Women also state that they would like to support their family's daily consumption needs, educate their children, and provide dowries for themselves or their daughters. Participants in the decision-making process (undergone repeatedly for migrants who return several times to the Gulf) weigh financial necessity and household improvements against separation, incursion of loans, and alternate arrangements for childcare.

Migrant women often become the sole or most significant breadwinners for their families. Several studies suggest that each migrant woman supports four to five members of her family; figures for migrant men are likely similar.^[8] In 2003, the SLBFE estimated that migrant laborers made up 14% of the total number of employed Sri Lankans. By 2008, this figure had jumped to 25%. A significant and growing percentage of Sri Lankan families are thus directly dependent on Gulf remittances.

Conclusion

Labor migration to the Gulf has become a core feature of Sri Lankans' economic strategies at the family and national levels. Migration is likely to continue in the future. Trends will depend upon several factors: Sri Lanka's success in diversifying its migrants' destination countries; its economic growth and the local availability of desirable jobs; and its continued capacity to send care workers abroad while tending to an aging population at home.

- [1]. Statistical information in this article comes from the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment's Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment 2008, which can be found online at [http://slbfe.lk/downloads/Annual Statistical Report 2008 - SLBFE.pdf](http://slbfe.lk/downloads/Annual%20Statistical%20Report%202008%20-%20SLBFE.pdf).
- [2]. In Sri Lanka, domestic servants are often referred to as "housemaids" in both English and Sinhala. These migrant women's duties often exceed the narrow technical limits of the term.
- [3]. Michele Gamburd, "Advocating for Sri Lankan Migrant Workers: Obstacles and Challenges," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2009), p. 70.
- [4]. Regarding Saudi Arabia, see Graeme Hugo, "Indonesian International Domestic Workers: Contemporary Developments and Issues," in Shirlena Huang, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, and Noor Abdul Rahman, eds., *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005), p. 83; regarding the UAE, see Gamburd, "Advocating for Sri Lankan Migrant Workers," p. 66; regarding the UAE and Kuwait, see Karen Leonard, "South Asian Workers in the Gulf: Jockeying for Places," in Richard Warren Perry and Bill Maurer, eds., *Globalization under Construction: Governmentality, Law, and Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 134, 153.
- [5]. Pei-Chia Lan, "Surrogate Family, Disposable Labour and Stratified Others: Transnational Domestic Workers in Taiwan," in Shirlena Huang, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, and Noor Abdul Rahman, eds., *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005), p. 227; Vivienne Wee and Amy Sim, "Hong Kong as a Destination for Migrant Domestic Workers," in Shirlena Huang, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, and Noor Abdul Rahman, eds., *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2005), p. 193.
- [6]. Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Arab Versus Asian Migrant Workers in the GCC Countries." Paper presented at the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region, United Nations Secretariat, Beirut, Lebanon, May 15-17, 2006, p. 4; Sulayman Khalaf and Saad Alkobaisiet, "Migrants' Strategies of Coping and Patterns of Accommodation in the Oil-Rich Gulf Societies: Evidence from the UAE," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1999), p. 272; Leonard, "South Asian Workers in the Gulf," p. 133.
- [7]. Sulayman Khalaf, "Gulf Societies and the Image of Unlimited Good," *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 17 (1992), p. 72; Khalaf and Alkobaisi, "Migrants' Strategies of Coping," p. 294; Ahn Nga Longva, *Walls Build on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
- [8]. Swarna Jayaweera, Malsiri Dias, and Leelangi Wanasundera, *Returnee Migrant Women in Two Locations in Sri Lanka*: (Colombo, Sri Lanka: CENWOR, 2002), p. 1; Nedra Weerakoon, "Sri Lanka: A Caste Study of International Female Labour Migration," in S. Sta. M. Amparita, J.J. Balisnono, R. Plaetevoet, and R. Selwyn, eds., *Legal Protection for Asian Women Migrant Workers: Strategies for Action*, (Makati City, Philippines: Ateneo Human Rights Center, 1998), p. 109.