

## **Middle East migration, women's empowerment and changing gender roles in a peasant colonization scheme in Sri Lanka**

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**ABSTRACT.** Triggered by various socio-economic factors, married women in Mahaweli settlements in Sri Lanka are gradually moving out of their households in search of employment. Employment opportunities, especially in the Middle East, are changing traditional gender roles and relations at both household and community levels. The study uses information obtained through focus groups and in-depth interviews to understand women's empowerment due to their economic participation through changing gender roles and relations. The findings reveal that, as a consequence of migration to the Middle East for work, Mahaweli women could not make much transformation at the community level although women have been able to use their agency in many areas at the household level. It also reveals that the transformation they make at household level too is not sustainable.

**KEY WORDS.** agency, empowerment, gender relations, gender roles, Mahaweli, Middle East, migration

### **Introduction**

Sri Lankan women have participated in various economic activities for centuries (Jayaweera, 2002; Asian Development, Bank 2004). However, until a couple of decades ago this participation was mostly confined to within the country. Today, accelerated by the process of globalization, open economic policies, structural adjustment policies, poverty, unemployment, and a high demand for female labour, women's destinations in search of employment have extended beyond Sri Lanka. Middle Eastern and West Asian countries have provided opportunities for income-generating employment for many impoverished women. Remittances from migrant workers in Middle Eastern countries have become a major source of foreign exchange (SLBFE, 2005) and have provided significant support to help redress Sri Lanka's balance of payment problem. Sri Lanka has become one of the main countries exporting female unskilled labour to the Middle East (Weerakoon, 2000).

Although women's migration has provided a number of economic benefits to the country as a whole as well as to individual families, the social costs of this process are far reaching. In the case of Sri Lanka, most of the migrant workers are 25–44 years old (SLBEF, 2005) and the large majority are married women with children. The social impact of married women who migrate to Middle East or West Asian countries has been extensively researched in Sri Lanka (Gunatilleke, 1986; Bandarage, 1998; Hettige, 1989, 1991; Gamburd, 2000, 2003; Jayaweera, 2002; Kottegoda, 2006), as it has created a more complex picture with regard to traditional gender roles and relations in societies and households. The period of migration generally lasts between two and five years (Kottegoda, 2006), which puts pressure on the migrants' partners to take on completely different roles. However, in the majority of families where married women are absent for such a long time child care arrangements and responsibilities for other household chores are undertaken by other female family members rather than men (Gunatilleke, 1992; Gamburd, 2000).

Although the social impact of married women's migration to the Middle East or West Asian countries have been well researched in Sri Lanka, the impacts of the migration have not been researched much in peasant colonization schemes. Hence, the objective of the study was to understand a decisive component of women's empowerment, namely the 'transformative nature' of gendered agency of migrant women at both household and community levels. In order to understand this, I chose to focus on families where migrant women's husbands either did not have access or only had very little access to traditional support networks provided by female members of the extended families. In many families, when married women migrate it is usually the extended family that provides assistance by attending to the needs of the children remaining behind and carrying out other domestic activities. When no immediate family member is available, the assistance of a distant relative is sought. However, in the study settlements, as well in other parts of the country, such support systems are gradually decreasing. In the future reciprocal services may no longer be accessible for many families, when women are opt to work outside their place of origin for various reasons, irrespective of their age. This study was conducted in three settlements located in Thambuttegama local administrative division in System H of the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project (AMDP) of Sri Lanka.

## **Empowerment and agency**

Inspired by the work of Sen (1999), the term 'empowerment' has entered into the vocabulary of several disciplines. Kabeer (1999a; 2003) defines 'empowerment' with reference to making choices. She uses a three-dimensional conceptual

framework to analyse the choices people make, where she acknowledges the importance of resources (preconditions for empowerment), agency (an aspect of process) and achievements (the final outcome). Resources provide the conditions that enable a person to acquire the 'capability' to make choices. At the same time, employment is one of the means to create an enabling environment to acquire resources. By acquiring resources people gain material conditions. Thus, the material conditions achieved through employment should allow individuals the freedom to make choices, and this is termed 'agency' (Kabeer, 1999a). Accordingly, agency is considered as the central process of empowerment because it is exercised through the medium of resources. At the same time, Kabeer emphasizes that empowerment is not only about controlling resources (physical, human, natural, and financial) but also about control over ideologies (beliefs, desires, behaviour, patterns, values, attitudes, and traditions) which have created asymmetrical gender relations.

Kabeer (2003) differentiates between the 'effectiveness' of agency and the 'transformative nature' of agency. The 'effectiveness' of agency reflects women's ability to carry out given roles and responsibilities, while the 'transformative nature' of agency refers to women's ability to question or challenge various structures and constraints in their lives in a sustainable way (Kabeer, 1994; 1999a) and this is basically about power. This reflects that transformative nature of the agency varies with different contexts as structures differ spatially. Batliwala (1994) claims that in empowerment 'power' is an important aspect as it provides the ability to control material assets, intellectual assets and ideologies. She further states that empowerment should be seen as a process where oppressed men and women gain the ability to challenge the existing power relations and the sources of power. Batliwala also notes that empowerment is not a temporary phenomenon. It is both a process and a goal. These definitions are based on the understanding that 'power' is inherent in the social structure rather than belonging to an individual. Thus, 'power' can be dynamic. Generally, 'agency' does not exist independently of social structures which enable or constrain action (Giddens, 1986). Parpart et.al (2002:12) acknowledge that 'the tension between agency and structures and their interrelationships lies at the heart of the empowerment debate'. Structures may vary from being political to cultural. Thus, power exists in multiple domains (Malhotra & Mather, 1997), such as household, social and political domains. Within these domains men and women have to maintain their gender relations and negotiate or renegotiate their gender roles.

## **Gender and migration**

In the literature, focus on the gendered impacts of migration has provoked extensive discussions on women's empowerment, relative autonomy and status (Kabeer, 2001). Further, across a range of different cultural contexts, how women's employment affects gendered power relations within households has been debated for a long time (Chant, 1991; Redclift & Sinclear, 1991; Laurie, 1999). There are two theoretical approaches that focus on women's empowerment due to economic participation. While some studies have found that economic participation helps women to increase their status within their family and local community (Buvinic, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1988; World Bank, 1995), other have suggested that women's economic participation does not necessarily empower them (Malhotra & Mather, 1997). However, although the theoretical position on women's economic participation and empowerment comprises contradicting views, the fact remains that gender relations and roles are frequently transformed in the context women's economic participation. In this way, gender, understood as a social construct that organizes relations between males and females, can greatly affect the impact of migration on both men and women in different contexts. Gender roles and relations<sup>1</sup> are an area that intersects with empowerment. Empowerment provides a means for women to negotiate and renegotiate their gender roles and relations.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted in three settlements in the Thambuttegama local administration division in System H of the AMDP in Sri Lanka during March–June 2005. The three settlements are Solama (an ancient village incorporated into the project), Maliyadevapura (a settlement for evacuees who had lost their lands due to the project), and Kongwewa (a settlement which mainly consisted of settlers from other parts of the country as well as illegal settlers).

The data were collected through three focus group discussions with the settlers and 16 individual in-depth interviews both with the husbands of the migrant women and with returnee migrant women. The three focus groups were selected based on the settlement backgrounds, generational differences (first generation or the original settlers, second generation or the children of the first generation, third generation or the grandchildren of the first generation) and sex differences of the settlers. Each of the focus group discussions, which were held with 5–7 participants, lasted for approximately 2–2.5 hours. Recruitment of the participants was done using the snowball method. Cameron (2000) notes that focus group discussions are very useful for researchers conducting studies on the socially constructed nature of knowledge. With gender being a socially defined and culturally differing concept, I

found that focus group discussions provided very different and insightful facts about the topics introduced for discussion.

The in-depth interviews held with the husbands of women who had migrated to the Middle East to work and with women who had returned were tape recorded and later transcribed. Although unmarried women and men migrate to the Middle East, the study focused on men who were married to women who migrated for work and also returnee women migrants in order to understand the impacts of Middle East migration on their gender roles and relations. This was because in Sri Lankan society, as in many other Asian countries, marriage is an important institution where gender roles and relations for the most part are becoming increasingly complicated, complex and challenged.

The reason for choosing to conduct in-depth interviews with married men individually was to enable them to feel at ease in the environment in which they were to provide information on their changing gender roles. It was believed that speaking about a topic of this nature in a focus group would have placed them in an uncomfortable situation, and hence focus groups were not the place to hold interviews if I wanted their voices to be heard. Dunn (2000) claims that when interviewer and informants are at ease with each other the informants may become more communicative. He identifies interviews as an important method for collecting data on experiences and opinions. He also claims that interviews are useful for seeking out the opinions of rarely heard voices. In this study, interviews provided interesting information on the way men perceive their changing gender roles.

When I approached the men they were initially reluctant to talk about their experiences, saying they did not have time or offering other excuses. Although I knew that they could afford to spare a couple of hours to talk with me, it was clear that they did not wish to discuss their experiences. However, my constant presence in the settlements and the small size of the settlements (where the men could not avoid seeing me in one or other of the houses, the village shop or on the road) made it impossible for them to avoid me for long. Nevertheless, I did not wish to breach research ethics by pressuring them to be my informants. Fortunately, a middle-aged man whose wife had recently arrived back from the Middle East helped me to make contacts.

### **Responding to changes: What triggers women's migration to the Middle East?**

The Mahaweli Development Project, a multipurpose development project initiated by the Sri Lankan Government was an attempt to provide a solution to a number of socio-economic problems faced by the country (Puttaswamaiah,1990; Muller & Hettige,1995) by resettling several thousands of families from the late 1970s

onwards. The settlers included original settlers from the project area, impoverished people from various other parts of the country, and a further group who had lost their land due to the construction of dams under the AMDP. Among the different groups of settlers in the Mahaweli project, women had gained increasing attention. Some researchers have argued that since incorporation into the Mahaweli settlements women have been subordinated and exploited due to their workload, lack of access or no access to land under land distribution policies and inheritance practices, restricted mobility, and unremunerated work on the family farms (Lund, 1978; 1993; Schrijvers, 1985; 1988). By contrast, others have claimed that women are not economically marginalized (Jayaweera, 1987) and that they enjoy a greater share of power within the household (de Zoysa, 1995). Although there are conflicting views about the position of women in Mahaweli settlements it cannot be denied that Mahaweli women have been making extensive contributions to ensure their family's survival.

During the initial years of resettlement the women in Mahaweli contributed to their family's well-being through unremunerated work at home and on their family's land. Since their arrival in the settlements the women have experienced extensive workloads. They are responsible for household maintenance as well as agricultural production, and in some cases they are also responsible for the sale of agricultural products.<sup>2</sup> During the peak seasons, they work as both waged labourers and unpaid family workers, or they participate in reciprocal labour exchange. In terms of household tasks, their workload involves cooking, child care, drawing water, and collecting firewood. Many of them also engage in home gardening. Although few in number, some women are also engaged in non-farm income-earning activities in order to supplement their income from farming. Traditionally, men have not been expected to engage in housework as part of their culture-influenced gender roles. However, in some of the settler families who were not from the project area the men assisted women in certain household activities. This situation was observed by in the Mahaweli settlements during the late 1970s and early 1980s Lund (1993).

During the initial years of resettlement women's employment opportunities were limited to the settlement environment. However, during the last two decades women have been compelled to seek employment opportunities elsewhere for a number of reasons, primarily due to poverty (Wanigaratne, 1987; Scudder, 2005). When settlers' livelihood opportunities were affected by debt, droughts, market failures, and crop failures, along with declining profit margins for paddy,<sup>3</sup> the economic gains from paddy cultivation started to slip out of the hands of the settlers and they became helpless and desperate (Scudder, 2005). Income from agricultural activities fell far below expectations and many farmers started to rent out their paddy land on a share (*ande*)<sup>4</sup> or lease basis. By the late 1980s, with increasing

poverty, many settlers either leased their land<sup>7</sup> and/or worked for the elite members of the settlements (Schrijvers, 1988). By the early 1990s, under the second round of structural adjustment reforms, the withdrawal of fertilizer subsidies and the subsequent rise in the cost of production (Jayaweera, 2002), the situation had worsened for the Mahaweli cultivators. Many of the settlers, who were by that time small landholders and the weaker segment of the population in terms of capital, could not reap the benefits of expanding regional economies or wider markets. As the market-oriented growth strategy failed to trickle down, many Mahaweli settlers gradually started to change their livelihood strategies, looking beyond their settlements. Table 1 shows the settlers' major employment activities performed outside the settlements for two different time periods

**Table 1. Number of people employed in security services, garment industries and work abroad.**

Settlement	2000			2006		
	Security forces	Garment industry	Foreign employment	Security forces	Garment industry	Foreign employment
Kongwewa	30	12	23	41	20	37
Maliyadevapura	15	38	11	23	50	24
Solama	11	21	06	23	43	20
Total	56	71	40	87	113	81

Source: Annual Grama Niladari Division<sup>8</sup> data reports obtained from the Grama Niladris in the respective settlements

Finding livelihood opportunities outside the settlements was not without constraints. Among many factors, livelihood choices were determined by sex and age dimensions. While many young women were able to find employment opportunities in the garment industry, young men found employment opportunities in the security forces and the construction industry and there were also a few informal sector employment opportunities which did not demand high skills or educational qualifications. However, for middle-aged married women and men the employment opportunities were very much limited as the garment sector and security forces required mainly a young labour force.

Faced with poverty and few opportunities for paid work both within and outside the settlements, some married women have resorted to Middle Eastern migration as a conscious choice to break the vicious cycle of poverty.<sup>9</sup> Compared to other sources of locally earned income, this avenue provides an attractive source of income for women who are able to migrate. However, the perceived centrality of this specific economic activity in women's empowerment can be questioned.

## **Discussion: Views of the local society**

In this section I attempt to shed light on the 'transformative nature' of the agency of migrant women. Through the collected information, I will attempt to show how gender roles (housework and taking care of children) and relations (decision-making in some basic aspects such as raising children, investing in the future, building houses, making decisions on how to invest in the future) are located, negotiated and practised in households and also in wider societal contexts. The discussion is divided into three sections. First, I discuss the views of local society on the changing gender roles and relations between men and women. Second, I present the views of the husbands of migrant women on the causes and effects of migration on gender roles and relations at the household level. In the third section I discuss the views of returnee migrant women on their changing gender roles and relations.

### *Settlers' perspectives on 'change'*

During the previous decade, a gradual positive change has been observed by the settlers in terms of their economic well-being. During the reconnaissance study, especially the elderly settlers informed me that the incomes they earned from cultivating paddy or other crops and vegetables were gradually being replaced by remittances. Although they were happy that their settlements had TVs, radios, motorbikes, cement-floored houses, and houses with roof tiles, they were very worried about how some men in the settlements were becoming 'women', which is how they referred to the changing gender roles in the settlements due to women's migration to the Middle East for work. The following section reflects the views of the participants of focus group discussions on women's Middle East migration, and how the participants viewed the changing gender roles and relations created by this particular livelihood strategy.

### *'Their place is the kitchen'*

In many societies, traditionally assigned gender roles are being challenged due to local and global forces. Although the changes are visible and inevitable in Sri Lanka, how local society views such changes is worth considerable attention as such views are mixed. Although the roles of married women as wives and mothers are held in high respect (Bandarage, 1998), women cannot fulfil their obligations in this respect due to socio-economic pressures. For similar reasons, married men cannot



fulfil their role as providers. Across the settlements studied, women were therefore abandoning their traditional gendered responsibilities in order to earn sufficient to meet their various needs. One of the focus group members reflected:

I used to see a carving knife on Sumane's wife's shoulder. Now it has been replaced with a handbag – all because of Arab money. I feel sorry for Sumane. He had to do women's work at home. (Man aged 59, from Solama)

This statement reveals that although women's roles are changing and they are contributing to the well-being of their families, society's expectations of them in terms of assigned gender roles have not changed. Similar attitudes were revealed by another participant in the group:

Even if they go to moon, women are women. They should know how to cook and take care of the family. Men should earn the money. In our time women never even went to the town to work. I know a few women sold vegetables at the *pola*,<sup>10</sup> but before they left they did all their housework and they returned on the same day to take care of the housework. (Woman aged 63, from Maliyadevapura)

Generally, older participants emphasized the importance of maintaining traditional gender roles. In the settlements the constraints imposed by the ideology of gender roles with regard to home making and childcare means these are primarily the responsibility of women. Even if the migrant women workers contribute to the betterment of their households, the village social structure does not easily recognize this contribution in a positive way.

### ***'Why not men in the kitchen?'***

The views of participants on 'changing gender roles' were conflicting. One young woman justified the reason for women's migration to the Middle East as a matter of rational choice. She reflected a more positive view of women's economic participation and supported the changing gender roles:

Many young women in the village are working in the garment factories or in the Middle East as there are no jobs in the village. Unlike during our parents' time, today there are lots of opportunities for women to work. So what if their men take care of the work done by their wives, at least when they are absent? (Woman aged 24, from Kongwewa)

One young man and a young woman, from different settlements, also held the same view:

In our village many married women have gone to the Arab countries recently. Many of them have managed to build a good house. With the jobs available for men in this area, one cannot even imagine building a wall. So, unlike in the past, husbands and wives have to share their household responsibilities in a different way. So why can't men do housework in the absence of their wives? (Man aged 30, from Maliyadevapura)

Our men go to the kitchen only when their wives or other family members are sick, but they cannot continue like this any more. If they can send their wives to Arab countries, why can't they take care of the housework and the children? (Woman aged 22, from Solama)

The following view was expressed by a man. He often pointed out the problem of finding employment both within and outside the settlements. He himself had been unemployed or underemployed on several occasions. He also had a large family to feed, and none of the family members had permanent employment:

It doesn't matter where the money comes from if it is legal. This is not a time to debate about whether women should be in the kitchen and men should be in the *bazaar*.<sup>11</sup> When you feel hunger yourself you won't argue about whether men doing women's work is right or wrong. (Man aged 43, from Kongwewa)

Unlike older participants' views, young participants' attitudes towards women's Middle East migration and the changing gender roles of men and women were mostly supportive of women's choices. Many middle-aged women and men had a more positive view of women's economic participation outside the home, if not on their changing gender roles. Participants more frequently mentioned poverty and men's unemployment as the principle factors responsible for women's Middle East migration and the consequent changes in the gender roles. However, other factors are also responsible, such as denied property inheritance for women, increased opportunities, and increased access to information.

*'It is alright'*

Compared to the situation a couple of decades ago, women now participate more in household decision-making in the Mahaweli settlements. de Zoysa (1995) points out that previously even in wealthy families women did not have the power to make important decisions regarding agriculture even though they were knowledgeable on the subject. This situation has changed considerably now. In the context of Middle East migration utilization and control of remittances are evidently critical for understanding changes in gender relations. When I asked about the control and decision-making concerning the use of remittances one woman pointed out the following:

After migrating to a foreign country our women have become more experienced and more knowledgeable than men on what is right and what is wrong, because they have survived in a tough world and they know how to overcome such situations. I think it is alright for women to have the power to make important decision about the future of the family. (Woman aged 56, from Solama)

Another young woman voiced a similar attitude:

In our village, most of the [women] Middle East migrants are middle aged. Some of their husbands have not even gone to Colombo. They were very much limited to the village. Most of them can't make useful decisions, especially on what to invest their foreign money in. So it is alright if their wives can make such decisions, as they are exposed to the world. (Woman aged 25 years, from Maliyadevapura).

It can be inferred from these views that mobility outside the home and interaction with people outside the settlements, especially with other migrant women in the Middle East, has improved women's knowledge of investing in profitable economic activities. The views of the aforementioned participants thus acknowledge that women are capable of making important decisions as a consequence of their migration experiences.

*'It is not alright'*

One young man expressed a more negative view of women's economic participation as well as of men who are dependent upon their wives' remittances:

Isn't it disrespectful for men to eat on their wives' earnings? I am not against working women. I know women who work in this village. Many of them have a good family life. They cannot be equated with women who go to work in the Middle East. In families where women are working abroad men have lost their male powers. If women earn a higher income than men they try to control men. This cannot be accepted in a village. (Soldier aged 23, from Solama)

This young man's view was also supported by middle-aged and elderly men and women in the focus group. One elderly man added:

Women going to Dubai earn more money and they use more power at home. Even the children take the mother's side in many matters when it comes to whether something is right or wrong. Some women neglect their husbands and their children to follow the same path. I think power gained by money is not good for a peaceful family life. (Man aged 60, from Maliyadevapura)

Although it is not new for women to be involved in economic activities, the aforementioned participants indicated that women should not interfere with their husband's powers. They also pointed out that women who are working locally were maintaining a good family life (i.e. in the context of settlements, which literally means where the husband holds a superior position in the family) and they were respected in the local society compared to the migrant women. Indirectly, this shows that women who are gainfully employed (such as those who migrate for work) have more control over several matters relating to their family life at household level and that the increase in women's relative economic power in terms of employment has started to affect the social image of men in the settlements in a negative way. From the local society's perspective men's roles as husbands and fathers have been dramatically affected or they are in an inferior position due to the specific employment opportunities in the Middle East.

*'It is alright, but ...'*

One young man justified the changes that women's livelihood choices have wrought in men's traditional gender roles in the settlement by highlighting the broken promises of the Mahaweli project. He also emphasized the importance of making livelihood choices according to the situation one finds oneself in. However, he did

not approve of women taking the upper hand in important decision-making pertaining to the family's well-being:

Women who could not find employment have migrated to the Middle East. If the migrants' families are doing well, what is wrong with men helping in maintaining a family? But I don't think it is proper that such women decide everything in their family life. Some migrant women decide what their husbands should wear and not wear, and some take decisions on what they should invest their foreign money in. This goes beyond the [traditional] limits of women's control. (Man aged 24, from Kongwewa)

A middle-aged man from Solama added further support to this view:

Some of our men are depending on their wives for everything. In such cases it is alright for women to use more power at home as they earn money. However, they cannot influence the local society with such powers. This cannot be tolerated. Most of the migrant women try to force their attitudes and behaviour on our innocent women. (Man aged 47, from Solama)

Although migrant women were able to ensure a better economic status for their families, much of the time the Middle East money could not ensure a better social status for them in the community in which they lived.

### **Rarely heard discourse**

In this section, I present the stories of men who have been forced to change their traditional gender roles and in some cases also their gender relations due to their wives' migration for work. I asked the men about how they managed and accepted the new gender roles, how they shared power in important decision-making events at household level, and how they viewed the local society's reaction. The circumstances that prompted women's entry into the foreign labour market were diverse. However, their husbands frequently mentioned poverty, unemployment and the future of their children as the principle factors responsible.

#### *Men's new household responsibilities*

Unlike other economic activities that women are engaged in, Middle East migration requires long absences from home. This has caused husbands to take full responsibility for the tasks previously performed by their wives:

Until she left, I did not know how to cook, though I knew some simple cooking. I have three children. All of them are attending school. I cannot ask my children to do the housework. They are too young and they have lot of schoolwork. I know that I am not doing my work as well as my wife did, but I cannot do more than this. (Man aged 45, from Maliyadevapura)

It is difficult to manage housework along with taking care of three boys. Sometimes I get angry, but then I forget everything, thinking of the difficulties my wife is undergoing. She says that when she starts to work in the kitchen in morning the next thing she knows is that it is midnight. She tolerates everything for us, so why can't I? (Man aged 42, from Kongwewa)

My children are studying. They also help me with cooking, washing and cleaning the house. After my wife left, I have not been doing any job. I am taking care of the children. It is a hard job ... a man can't do it alone. (Man aged 37, from Solama)

Among the men interviewed, most could not cope with housework as they had young children to care for, some of whom were attending school. For some, the new gender role was a real challenge. However, they did not have any option other than accepting the situation and adjusting to it. Consequently, men who were engaged in paid work and taking care of housework revealed that they felt they were living a life full of pressure.

*'They look down on us'*

Middle East migration in the study settlements undoubtedly has drawn the attention of many settlers. Stories about migrant women, including their behaviour and that of their husbands, have become important items of gossip. The following views were expressed by the husbands of migrant women:

Society generally has a bad impression of Middle Eastern migrant women. This is strong, especially when such migrants are continuously migrating. The husbands of such women are also looked down upon, especially if the husbands do not have a job. In some families, if the wife is abroad, the husband does not do any work. I think that is not good. In our village such men come under heavy criticism. (Man aged 29 from Maliyadevapura)

I cannot do any work as I am not well. My wife has been in Lebanon for seven years. In the village shop people gossip about Middle East migrants

and their husbands. They do not know how many problems we face. I avoid going out much in public. (Man aged 36 from Solama)

When men cook in hotels and their wives cook at home, people do not think men are doing women's work, but when men cook at home and their wives cook in Arab people's kitchens, then people say men are doing women's work. I don't know what the logic behind this is. (Man aged 39 years. from Kongwewa)

Among the husbands interviewed, most of the young men had at least seasonal employment or did coolie work. In this way, they tried to support their families by contributing an income, albeit an irregular one. These men were generally regarded positively by society as most of them used the income their wives earned abroad carefully. At the same time, some men had withdrawn from making any economic contribution to the family after their wives had become the major providers. Local society did not hold such men in high regard; sometimes the men were humiliated by the villagers. This also shows how poverty leads to men's social position in village societies deteriorating when they become dependent on their wives' incomes. In such situations, gender roles and relations in the various contexts of the settlements have therefore become complex.

It is also pertinent to note that some men did not feel that women's economic participation had a negative impact on them as husbands. However, they felt socially marginalized due to the existing gender ideologies in the contexts in which they lived. For many, their lives had become double-edged swords, since they felt they could not oppose their wives' decision to migrate yet they also had to accept the new roles created by this strategy. A particularly relevant story on men's new gender roles was told by an army deserter:

People do not like to give coolie work or any other work to an army deserter in our society. My family is very poor. That is why my wife took the decision to go to Kuwait. Our son is three years old. So I am spending the whole day with him. Regarding society's views, it is really difficult for a man like me to face society as my wife is a housemaid. When I was in the army I was well respected in the village. Now I have to face two challenges: one as an army deserter, the other as a husband depending on my wife's income, even to pay for my haircut. Sometimes, I really hate my life and our society, but what to else can I do? I have a son. He should have a good future. (Man aged 29, from Maliyadevapura)

In Sri Lankan society army deserters are not well regarded because many of them have been found to have been involved in criminal activity after leaving the army. Hence, they cannot access employment opportunities easily if their backgrounds become known. The army deserter interviewed found it difficult to find employment either in his village or outside due to the position he found himself in. As he did not have any other options, his wife went abroad to work as a maid, but still he was very worried about his dependence on her.

*'She decides' versus 'we decide'*

In the following case, although the informant's wife was working abroad, the husband was also in employment, in a rice mill. In addition, he was taking care of their children and performing other household duties. His wife went abroad so that the family could save in order to build a house:

My wife wishes to send our sons to a town school. We have to build a house. We have a lot of future plans. We discussed them. All depends on my wife's salary. We make decisions together on many matters. (Man aged 42, from Kongwewa)

In the aforementioned case, the husband used his income for the survival of the family, while he was careful to save the remittances his wife sent towards building their house. This shows that among the families with wives and mothers who migrate to the Middle East for work and where husbands are also employed it is possible for the husbands to enjoy a certain amount of economic power, unlike their counterparts who do not have a job. In contrast, the following narrative reflects how men's gender relations are changing:

Now we have almost completed the house. I asked my wife to stop going again and to buy a three-wheeler for me so I can earn something. However, she is not listening to me. If I write a letter asking her to come home, she will stop sending the money. She did that once. Now I am not asking her to come or buy a three-wheeler for me. My responsibility is to bring up the children. I don't earn money. So my word isn't worth anything. So I have to tolerate everything my wife does. (Man aged 37, from Maliyadevapura)

When I first met the man at home with his children my initial impression was that he represented a success story of Middle East remittances. In terms of material well-being he was a successful husband who did not squander his wife's remittances. Yet in terms of non-material well-being he could not be labelled as a successful man



because he felt passive, helpless and inferior in his society. This feeling was also shared by another informant who was unemployed:

I have started to build this house with my wife's money. When she came home last year after working a two-year contract, it was she who decided on the planning of the house. (Man aged 44, from Solama)

Collectively, the narratives reveal that women are exercising more economic decision-making power at household level in cases where their husbands are not working. In the families where both the husband and wife work important decision-making is shared jointly.

*When they are not housemaids any more...*

As it was not possible to access migrant women who were currently abroad working as housemaids in the Middle East in order to understand what the women themselves thought of their impact on gender roles and relations within family and community level, I approached a few women in the settlements who had returned from the Middle East. Some of them had returned temporarily while others had decided not to migrate again.

*On gender roles and relations*

I asked the women who had returned from the Middle East how they had perceived the conventional gender roles, both at household and community levels, upon their return. Some responded as follows:

I think my husband listens to my opinions better now. Before I went to Lebanon he hardly helped me with household tasks. But these last two years have given him a good training. Now he knows the difficulties in doing household tasks alone and he helps me in many ways. We make decisions together. (Women aged, 27 from Kongwewa)

Upon my return from Dubai my husband supported me in the household activities and taking care of the children, but it was just for a short time. Now I am not earning. I have spent most of my earnings to build this house. My husband is working as a mason; He is not listening to me now like he did when I was abroad. Sometimes he is suspicious me if I tell him that I want to go abroad again. I am tolerating everything for my children. I have to depend on him for everything. (Women, 29 from Maliyadevapura)

My husband was happy only when I earned money. I have a kidney problem and I can't go abroad now. He expects me to do all the housework now. (Woman aged 36, Soalama)

It is because of the Middle East money that some unemployed people are employed now in the village. People build houses and it provides jobs for the villagers. For our villagers, Middle East money is good but not the migrant women. Many of the older people humiliate us. (Woman aged 22, Solama)

The narratives raise the question of whether women's economic participation results in sustainable changes in gender roles and relations or whether these changes are only temporary. According to the respondent from Solama, migration had provided her with previously denied benefits, though in some cases the benefits were temporary, as described by the woman from Maliyadevapura. The latter case shows that when migrant women stop migrating for work they also lose their agency and return to their previous positions. Generally, the material conditions attained through women's migration are targeted at the whole family and most of the time women do not gain any individual benefits. The migration period of married women in the settlements lasted from two to five years and in few cases it was for longer periods. The money earned by the migrant women in the settlements was invested mainly in one or a few of the following activities: improving their existing house, building a new house, repaying loans, saving for the future, or household consumption. Some of the women stop migrating once they had achieved their goals. When they ceased working most of them had hardly any savings left.

The situation is very complicated as some women 'choose' this option while others are forced to adapt. In the following case, the woman chose to remain passive:

I think we have to respect the village values. I worked as a housemaid to have our own house. My husband and I understood that we would not be able to build a house if we earned here. It is difficult and expensive for men to go abroad. So I went abroad and I am back now. He is making bricks. That is his job. I don't have a job. I think it is my duty to take of the children and housework. If a woman is at home it is not good for men to attend to the housework. (Women, 41 from Solama)

Thus, the women had adopted the appropriate gender roles in their families and they considered that household duties and child care should be attended to by women.

This shows that although the migrant women recognize the reality of their situation they did not consider it to be unfair, either because they did not have any other alternatives or because they valued the village traditions. During the focus group discussions some young women revealed that in families where women had stopped their employment contracts and where alternative options for earning an income in the future were worse, they were continuing with the traditionally assigned gender roles and maintaining the traditional gendered power relations at household and community levels. According to Kabeer (1999b), such 'choices' made by women may reinforce their subordinate status in society.

## **Conclusions**

Although women in the Mahaweli settlements were left out in the initial top-down planning when it came to accessing land – which is an important asset in an agricultural settlement context – many of them have actively responded to the changing situation today. They have exploited the opportunities available to them for ensuring a better future for their families by actively seeking alternative employment opportunities. The findings in this study reveal that many women in the Mahaweli settlements have brought economic advantages (building houses, buying tractors and three-wheelers, investing in their children's future education) to their families through their migration for work.. This shows how migration for work can provide the resource base for empowerment and can open up opportunities for challenging the conventional gender roles.

However, the stories of the returnee women differed among them selves. According to some women, their particular livelihood strategy may also lead to dependency, vulnerability and reinforce existing traditional gender ideologies, especially when women cannot invest their earnings in a sustainable way, while few of returnee migrants enjoyed a positive change. The former shows that access to income earning opportunities alone cannot provide the agency for women to make conscious choices. In this study women who had access to income earning opportunities primarily ensured the welfare of their families as a whole rather than their personal well-being. It did not provide them with the capacity to budget for the future. Thus, increasing women's access to employment is not an effective means for achieving their empowerment unless it is sustainable and transformative.

Women's migration for work has also changed their partners' traditional gender roles at household level, as their absences from home are comparatively longer than when undertaking other locally performed economic activities. In families where women continue with migration as a livelihood choice, the men are gradually withdrawing from their financial obligations towards the family. In such families, men have become dependent, powerless and voiceless, while women are

gradually taking control of many of what were traditionally 'men's responsibilities' and are becoming empowered in this domain. Now many of them are caught in a paradoxical, frustrating situation which they can neither avoid nor accept due to the gender ideologies about women's work in the settlements. According to some informants in the focus groups, migrant women's husbands' conventional gendered social values are gradually being eroded, their self-esteem is declining, their masculinity is under attack, and they are gradually becoming passive, disempowered and helpless.

In this respect, some villagers see women's empowerment in the household domain as occurring at the expense of men's disempowerment. In all focus groups, women's increasing economic power and men's declining economic power were given much attention. Even among the participants who did not view men's changing gender roles as a negative effect women's long-term absences or continuous migration were not viewed as a positive trend. According to some of the participants, in the long run this trend may lead to men losing their traditionally held power and force them to become dependent upon their wives for everything. However, 'gender equity' is important in a society and it should not be achieved at the expense of one gender's devaluation, disempowerment or subordination.

At the community level, social expectations based on gender roles and relations act as a powerful force in determining women's empowerment, especially in terms of the 'transformative' nature of their gained agency. In many societies, such as those of the settlements under study, the traditionally assigned gender roles and relations are being challenged due to local and global forces. Although these changes are apparent and inevitable, how the local societies view such changes needs a lot of attention in order to empower women further, as changes in societal attitudes are difficult to achieve. Some deeply entrenched attitudes regarding gender roles and relations can only be changed by the people concerned.

When selecting participants for the focus groups, I focused on settlement background, generation and gender in order to determine whether these variables had any influence on the participants' views on changing gender roles and relations due to women's role as providers following Middle East migration. In terms of settlement backgrounds, changes in the gender roles of men and women created by Middle East migration have received considerable attention and mixed reactions. Some focus group participants expressed a doubled standard. While the participants acknowledged that women should work in order to help their families they also emphasized that household duties should be attended to by women. Settlement background did not have any significant influence on the way settlers viewed the impacts of the livelihood choice in question on gender roles and relations.

A central finding of this study is that in terms of age and sex the views expressed regarding the changing gender roles and relations created by married

women's Middle East migration clearly differed. Women, especially young women, in all settlements held a more liberal view because they emphasized the importance of family well-being rather than changing gender roles. Young men also supported this view. On the other hand, despite the changes occurring at local and global levels in terms of social and economic aspects, many of the elderly villagers' expectations of the gender roles of married men and women remained unchanged. Although many of the focus group participants in all settlements agreed that both they and their offspring should have a good life and should find alternative ways to achieve this objective, some of them did not accept that this should happen at the expense of men changing their gender roles. Many elderly people would not accept any changes that would lead to deterioration in men's status in society. Elderly and middle-aged participants were more concerned about men's role as caregivers than women's roles as breadwinners. However, gender equity and empowerment cannot be achieved if either men or women lose their dignity and become subordinate, powerless, humiliated, or discriminated against.

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## Notes

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1. Gender roles explain differences between men's and women's lives in terms of socially constituted notions of what men should do and what women should do. Feminist geographers explain this concept as the contribution of men and women to society. Gender relations are about 'power relations' between men and women.
2. In rural Sri Lanka many women are involved in trading at small markets called *pola*.
3. Providing land for paddy cultivation and becoming self-sufficient in paddy was one of the objectives of the AMDP. The heads of each legal settler family were given 2.5 acres (1 hectare) of irrigated land. Under the
4. Under the *ande* system of cultivation the total production of the harvest is shared between the two partners.
5. Despite this being illegal.
6. Grama Niladari Division is a local administrative unit in Sri Lanka and the officer in charge is called Grama Sevaka or Grama Niladari.
7. This also exemplifies how the women use their main capability – labour – to ensure their family's well-being in bleak situations.
8. A type of rural market normally held on one or two days a week.
9. Although the direct meaning of this term is 'street', literally it means the public domain.

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