

DON'T WORRY, I AM HERE FOR YOU: FEMALE MIGRATION AND EMERGENCE OF PROXY MANAGERS IN THE HOUSEHOLDS OF MIGRANT HOUSEMAIDS

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Introduction

Social networks play an indispensable role in all stages of migration providing various support services (Boyd 1989) especially during the period when migrant women are not physically present in the household. One important contribution of the social networks of the households of migrant women is the support they extend to the household to manage the disruption in the affairs of the family organization caused by the removal of a wife/mother.

This paper examines the emergence of a new actor who plays an important role in the network support system of the households of Sri Lankan women who are working in the Middle East as Housemaids. This new actor is a member of the kinship network who is introduced into the household to represent the interest of the migrant woman and work on her behalf. The examination focuses on the kinship network from which this person often comes. The objective of this paper is twofold. The first is to explain the management of the household by the migrant women with the assistance of the proxy. Here my concern is to understand the strategies that migrants employ to enable them to participate in household activities, especially managing the household budget from transnational space. The main focus here is to examine the role of the migrant woman/wife in controlling the

funds she sends home. It was found she employs several controlling/management strategies through proxy in managing the household budget from a long distance, i.e., transnational space. The second is to understand how the management of the household through a proxy has affected gender relations in households of women migrants. The impact of this new actor (proxy) on the household organization including its power relations, during the period the woman migrant is away is discussed as part of this. Role substitution and downgrading of the husband's social status are the two main focuses in this area

The study: location, sample and technique

This study was conducted in three migrant source communities in the District of Kandy in the central region (hill country) of Sri Lanka. The three communities included a traditional village (TV), a Labour Colony (LC) which shows both rural and urban characteristics and an urban low income settlement (ULIS) in the municipal limits of Kandy. The field data was collected mainly using anthropological data collection methods with emphasis on gathering qualitative data. The principal data gathering techniques employed were in depth discussions/ narratives and formal field interviews using a

questionnaire. For collection of qualitative data 5 returned workers used from each location and for quantitative data 15 used from each.

Sri Lankan women contract workers in the Middle East

Sri Lanka became a major labour exporting country of the South Asian region only in the 1970s with the economic development in the Middle Eastern region that accompanied the oil price increase. The outflow of migrants in the initial stages was mainly male workers but today it is predominantly female. The domination of female workers came later in the 1990s. By the turn of the century of the total Sri Lankan contract work force overseas over 70% were women. This figure is even higher for some countries in the Middle East and the Gulf except for Saudi Arabia and Oman. Females constitute over 85% of the Sri Lankan labour force in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirate and Lebanon (SLBFE 2006). Of these a very high proportion are housemaids. The proportion of housemaids from Sri Lanka in the Gulf region has remained close to 70% of the total migrants to these countries for the last several years.

The transnational involvement of the migrant in the affairs in the household and the emergence of proxy managers Trans-national links between migrants and the households/communities they left behind are a feature of contemporary migration. Among Sri Lankan domestic workers, transnational connections are almost exclusively in the form of individual links with the household back home. The links extend to community

through the kin group and the neighbourhood residential group. Migrant domestic workers maintain regular communication with their homes mainly out of necessity because they are the providers of the household and that requires them to maintain regular links in the transnational space. This requires them to take part in household decision making in addition to links they maintain with home for emotional reasons, i.e., support they need to compensate for the social isolation in the host country.

This study found that though many husbands take the responsibility of running the household when the migrant wife is away they are not the managers of the remittance and often handle the affairs of the household under supervision/instructions of another person. This "other person" can be described as a proxy manager who represents the interests of the migrant woman. He or she comes from outside the household but is a member of the kinship network of the family, often a female of the female line of the kinship group. The preference for "female line" makes gender an important factor in the selection of the proxy representing the migrant. These proxy managers are involved not only in remittance management but also conjugal family related matters.

Conclusion

While being employed abroad migrant women are involved in household activities and control the management of household affairs, especially the management of remittances. They also actively take part in personal and social matters connected with the household. Since she is physically not there she appoints a mediator who

serves as her proxy to manage her affairs in transnational space.

Being proxy manager not only involves a wide range of duties and heavy responsibilities but also carries considerable power. The proxy, having the trust of the migrant, can act without consulting her first, a power that can be misused but the researcher did not come across such situations in her study. It is very common for this person to receive special treatment from the migrant in the form of gifts, etc.

References

Boyd, M. (1989). Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas, *International Migration Review*, 111 (3): 638-670.

SLBFE (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2006) Statistical Hand book on Migration. Colombo, Sri Lanka.