

Migrant Wife and Househusband: Transformation of Household Gender Roles with Female Migration

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Traditionally the woman's place of "work" has been confined to the so-called private sphere, namely, the household. In the household, she was expected to perform traditional womens' work such as looking after the children, washing, cooking, etc. The husband was the provider of the family and his tasks were almost exclusively in the public sphere. Many women today have become providers, sometimes even as sole income earners of the family. One modern context in which this traditional division of gender roles comes into question is when woman become independent migrants requiring husbands to takeover traditional household tasks. Research shows that this has often resulted in displacing the husband from the traditional role of the sole decision maker in migrant households. These changes are challenging the traditional pattern of male-dominated household organization and have resulted in emergence of a new phenomenon described as *migrant-wife or househusband*.

This paper examines how the changing of the traditional role of the wife affects the husband's traditional role in the households of Sri Lankan women who are working in the Middle East as housemaids. The study was conducted in a migrant source community in the district of Kurunagala in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka. Ten households with husbands whose wives were abroad at the time and ten others whose wives had been abroad were selected for the study.

Migration of a woman creates a functional vacuum in the household affecting its operations. The solution to this is often in the form of adjustment to the roles and status of the existing (functional) members of the household or through infusion of new members from the kinship network. When the husband takes the responsibilities of the wife it lowers the status/ social position of the husband in the eyes of the community because he is doing what is traditionally considered to be womens' work. The social position of the husband is particularly affected when he is substituting for his wife doing domestic chores and there is another person, proxy and female, managing the funds remitted by the wife. There are also some changes in the gender division of labour not only in "during migration household", but also in "post migration households". It was found that there was an increase in the number of husbands sharing work in the majority of households of returned migrants.

The study showed that while the wife is abroad many husbands take up household activities traditionally performed by the wife. Although this happens out of necessity, the majority of husbands were found to be happy with this arrangement as they felt that they should contribute to running of the family as the wife is now the provider. Yet at times, they also felt that their changing gender roles negatively affected their social position (and male ego). However, household relationships led to conflicts when there was a proxy coming from outside, for example, a relative, managing the finances of the wife, as husbands do not feel comfortable with another person having control over the family budget. The social position of the husband also becomes a major issue when the proxy manager is a woman.