

# **MIDDLE-EAST MIGRATION OF SRI LANKAN WOMEN WORKERS AND RURAL POVERTY IN SRI LANKA: A CASE STUDY OF THIRAPPANE DS DIVISION**

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Labor export makes a positive influence on the economic development of a country. Private remittances from Sri Lankans working abroad directly relates to the development prospects of a country. By 1997, labor exports accounted for 20% of the total exports income. By mid 1980's, its contribution increased to one fifth of total export income and thus became the major source of foreign exchange for the country. Until 1960, migration was limited for those with educational and professional skills<sup>1</sup> but by the beginning of the 70's there was a revolution in the labor migration field in Sri Lanka. Women considered migration as the most convenient and profitable ways to get out of poverty. First, it was urban low-income women who started migration and then rural women joined the process<sup>2</sup>. Poverty in Sri Lanka is mostly a rural phenomenon. Four fifths of the rural population lives in poverty. The distribution of the poor by the reference poverty line (Rs. 471.20) for rural, urban and estate sectors are respectively 79%, 17%, and 4%. Seventy two percent of Sri Lanka's population lives in rural areas. By 1995, unemployment in rural areas was 12.3% while it was 14.2% for urban areas. In 1990, the employment ratio in agriculture was 55.5% and it fell to 44.1% in 1995 indicating a gradual reduction<sup>3</sup>. At present, there is a tendency among the youth to seek jobs in other sectors of which foreign employment and the garment industry are priority areas.

This research was carried out in Thirappane Divisional Secretariat Division, Anuradhapura District. The main objective of this study is to understand the factors driving women for foreign employment and the effectiveness of foreign employment in alleviating poverty. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected for this study. Apart from the literature review, 10 case studies and unstructured interviews were used in data collection. In addition, regional administrative officer were interviewed and used their official records to gather data.

It was evident from the result that most important reason to migrate for women is economic difficulties at home. They plan to conduct several activities from the money earned abroad. The competition among the villagers also pushes women for foreign employment and imitation too is a reason for women to go abroad. Especially the unmarried young women are interested in modern household electrical appliances and they work as catalysts for women to be abroad. The concept of coming out of poverty in the village is usually building a nice house or buying household equipment. The purpose of foreign employment is to acquire them. But this has not taken them out of poverty. Temporary and permanent solutions can be utilized to explain this situation.

Foreign employment can generate temporary solutions for some of the problems that villagers face. Women are able to work on their houses and to buy a few household items to the house. But not having a permanent income, they may have to sell or mortgage what they have bought. And at the end, they end up with a completed or half built house only. This pushes them back to foreign employment and this act like a circle. This does not help them to get out of poverty. Permanent solutions are needed to move away from poverty. This requires a permanent income. And to get that kind of income they need to invest the money. But very few of those who go abroad for employment does this.

The study shows that their perspective on poverty, which is based on the short-run need to change. Their concern on the present day cannot get them out of poverty. They need to be driven for investment and self-employment with the resources they collect from abroad. These people require direction and mobilization in that line of thinking. There is need for attitudinal change in them. Further, state agencies must have supervision before and after migration on these people to help them minimize their problems in abroad and at home. This may help those who travel abroad and make foreign employment an effective way to address rural poverty.

**Key words:** Women, rural poverty, foreign employment

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