

Their Children and My Life: Impact of Childcare on Young Mother-Substitutes of Migrant Women's Children

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Labour migration is Sri Lanka's primary source of foreign exchange. Two thirds of around 2 million Sri Lankans working overseas are females. Children of married migrant women are left behind with substitute-carers, who are, in many occasions, unmarried young aunts or elder siblings of these children. The objective of this study was to describe socio-economic and psychological impact of child-care on young-adult mother-substitutes of left-behind children and their methods of coping.

This cross-sectional study was conducted in Colombo, Gampaha, and Kurunegala districts. Young-adult carers (aged 18-24 years) were identified using data from a field survey. Thirty five of them were randomly selected, and interviewed using an interviewer-administered semi-structured questionnaire. Ten semi-structured interviews were also conducted with key informants in their respective communities. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Many young-adult carers of left-behind children were their aunts, while others were elder siblings. Most have never had any experience in such extensive childcare, and had been least prepared to undertake it. Many have been reluctant to undertake childcare but forced to accept due to social obligations and unavoidable circumstances. Transition of childcare responsibility from mother to mother-substitutes has been rapid. Most claim the childcare responsibility to be stressful and also to have adversely affected their ambitions by (1) disrupting educational and employment opportunities and (2) negatively impacting on their social networking. All young-adult mother-substitutes perceive themselves to have moderate to severe psychological stress resulting from unfamiliar task of childcare and show symptoms of stress reactions, fail to uptake positive coping methods, and demonstrate maladaptive behaviours. Unexpected childcare responsibility adversely impact on social, economic, and health domains of unskilled young-adult carers of left-behind children. This, in turn, would have negative repercussions on children themselves and warrants policy level interventions.

Key words: *Migrant, Children, Carer, Psychological, Coping*