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PAPER

I had to migrate: Reasons for Migration of Women as Housemaids to the Middle East

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Contract worker migration began as an outflow of male workers responding to new employment opportunities in construction and infrastructure development in the Middle East countries, mainly as a result of the oil price increase in 1973. Women began to migrate later and they dominate the flow of contract worker migrations today. Sri Lankan women mainly migrate for domestic work, which requires special gendered skills that women can provide. The proportion of housemaids in the total outmigration to the Middle East has remained close to 70 percent for the last three years.

This paper examines the reasons for migration of women as housemaids to the Middle East countries. The study was conducted in a migrant source community in the district of Kandy in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Fifty women returnees and ten husbands whose wives were abroad at the time were selected for the study.

There are several reasons for women migration and among them insufficient income of the family has become the most common. Unemployment or underemployment of the husband, lack of income earning opportunities for wives who wish to work to supplement inadequate household income and indebtedness are part of the cycle of migration. In addition to this, some migrated to have a better life. Building a new house, buying household items, giving a good education to children, buying land are their vision of a better life. In addition to these reasons, the study revealed that some women migrate to see the world, imitate their neighbors, run away from unhappy family life and similar non-economic reasons. This demonstrates that contrary to the popular belief that migration is primarily caused by economic factors there are many social and psychological reasons associated with women's decisions to migrate.