

Original Article

Reintegration experiences of returnee migrant workers in the Kurunegala District: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: Over 1.5 million Sri Lankans are employed overseas, primarily in the Middle East under temporary, contract-based agreements. Return and Reintegration represent a critical yet often overlooked phase of the migration cycle, despite their significant implications for the social determinants of migrants' health and the overall well-being of migrant workers and their families.

Objectives: To understand social and economic dimensions of reintegration through exploring lived-through experiences of returnee Middle East migrant workers in Kurunegala District, Sri Lanka.

Methods: A qualitative phenomenology study was conducted using focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviews, among male and female returnee Middle East migrant workers employed under heterogeneous manpower levels and their family members residing in the Kurunegala District. A pre-tested semi-structured moderator/interviewer guide was used for data collection. Six FGDs involving 51 participants and 19 one-on-one interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The overarching theme of social reintegration emerged from sub-themes, including reintegration within family, community reintegration and support networks. Economic reintegration was formed by sub-themes: economic engagement, utilisation of the foreign earnings and use of accumulated savings. Reintegration was revealed as a time bound process which requires the commitment from returnees, family, and community. Those who carefully planned the migration process, considering reintegration as part of their migration cycle, were better positioned to acquire useful skills and leverage financial capital to become economically active upon return.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Social reintegration is deeply influenced by family dynamics, community ties and support networks. While economic needs pushed most to seek overseas employment, a successful reintegration demands proactive planning and strategic use of remittance and human capital. Further research across multiple districts with more diverse returnee groups is recommended to strengthen the generalisability of these findings and inform reintegration policy and practice.

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Introduction

International labour migration is a major global phenomenon, with an estimated 169 million migrant workers, constituting nearly 5% of the global labour force, living and working outside their country of origin [1–3]. In Sri Lanka, international labour migration constitutes a vital livelihood strategy, with approximately 1.5 million individuals, around 20% of the national workforce, employed abroad [4,5]. Most of these outbound migrant workers are engaged in temporary or contract-based employment in the Middle East, which offers economic opportunities to both skilled and low-skilled individuals [6,7].

Return and reintegration constitute the final phases of the temporary labour migration cycle that every Middle East migrant worker undergoes. Despite their significance, these phases remain comparatively neglected in both research and policy discourse [8]. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines reintegration as the process of “re-inclusion of a returned migrant worker into the society of his or her country of origin or habitual residence” [9]. It encompasses economic, social, and cultural reintegration as its primary dimensions.

The conditions surrounding the migration process often exacerbate health inequalities, increase migrants' exposure to health risks, and negatively impact their access to healthcare and overall health outcomes [10,11]. Emerging evidence suggests that the entire migration process, including return and reintegration, is considered a social determinant of the migrants' health [11]. Successful reintegration not only benefits migrants and their families but also plays a pivotal role in the development of their communities and home countries [12]. Conversely, unsuccessful reintegration can lead to adverse social and economic outcomes [11,13].

International and local migration policies increasingly acknowledge the importance of addressing the reintegration challenges faced by returnee migrants [10]. Such a proactive approach not only reduces disparities and promotes migrant rights but also empowers returning migrants to lead healthier lives and contribute meaningfully to their home societies. While Sri Lanka's National Labour Migration Policy and National Migration Health Policy recognise the need to prioritise reintegration research [14,15], a significant gap remains in understanding the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the reintegration experiences of Sri Lankan returnee migrant workers.

Most existing literature has overlooked the lived experiences of Sri Lankan returnees and how social and economic factors intersect to shape reintegration outcomes at the local level [7, 8]. There is also a scarcity of qualitative evidence on how return migration influences access to employment, health services, family relationships, and social support networks. Furthermore, scholars have called for deeper investigation into how social and economic factors, alongside other contextual influences, shape the health and social outcomes of returnees during reintegration [(6,7,11)].

This study aimed to address existing knowledge gaps by exploring the research question: How do Sri Lankan returnee migrant workers experience social and economic

reintegration after returning from Middle East employment?" The findings will be beneficial for researchers, policymakers, academics, government officials, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working with return migrants. A deeper understanding of the complexities of reintegration will support the development of tailored, context-specific interventions at the community level, promoting successful reintegration and overall well-being for returnees and their families. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study is to understand the social and economic dimensions of reintegration through exploring the lived-through experiences of returnee Middle East migrant workers in the Kurunegala District, Sri Lanka.

Methods

Study design and setting: A qualitative phenomenology study engaged returnee migrant workers and their families through face-to-face data collection types, including focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviews. FGDs encouraged group interaction and facilitated the exchange of collective perspectives, while one-on-one interviews provided in-depth insights into individual experiences [16]. The study was conducted in the Kurunegala Divisional Secretariat (DS) division of the Kurunegala District, Sri Lanka. Administratively, Sri Lanka is divided into provinces, districts, and DS divisions, with DS divisions serving as the third-level unit for government service delivery. Kurunegala DS division was selected based on practical considerations, including feasibility, time, and resource constraints. Kurunegala DS division also happens to have significant outbound labour migration to the Middle East, with SLBFE data indicating it accounts for nearly 50% of the district's migration over the past two decades [17,18].

Study population: The study population comprised male and female Sri Lankan migrant workers employed under heterogeneous manpower levels (skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled and housemaids) in the Middle East and their family members residing in the Kurunegala DS Division. Participants were purposively selected based on selection criteria; included returnees who had been back in Sri Lanka for at least 12 months at the time of the interview. This ensured that they had spent sufficient time beyond the initial reintegration phase [8,19]. Returnees, or family members with returnees who had returned more than five years prior were excluded to minimise recall biases.

Selection of the Study Sample: Identifying and reaching returnee migrants posed challenges due to the lack of a database/ registry to gather details of returnees [7,20,21]. In Sri Lanka, there are no precise and reliable registry/records of returnee Middle East migrant workers. Consequently, various purposive methods were employed to recruit study participants, including referrals from field officers (e.g., Public Health Midwives, Public Health Inspectors, Development Officers at DS Office, and Grama-Niladhari Officers) participant referrals, and direct recruitment by researchers.

Qualitative Session Preparation and Implementation: To achieve the study's objectives, researchers developed a pre-tested semi-structured interviewer guides (for FGDs and one-on-one interviews) with open-ended questions and probes. The guides were initially developed in English and then translated into local languages (Sinhala and Tamil), followed by backward translation to ensure translation and linguistic accuracy.

Six FGDs conducted, with 6-12 participants each, lasting 60-90 minutes. Participants were grouped based on gender and overseas job category to create homogenous groups for comfort and better engagement. However, diversity within focus groups was maintained by including participants with different experiences, including those from various Middle East countries and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Table:1).

Table 01: Distribution of study participants in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews

Type of the interviews	Type of the Informant and Middle East Employment	Age Range (Years)	Sex	No. of participants	Duration of Employment in the Middle East (Years)	Time Since Return (Years)
Characteristics of Returnee migrant workers						
FGD-01	Returnee migrant workers employed as housemaids	39-58	Female	10	03 - 21	01-05
FGD-02	Returnee migrant workers employed in other job categories (e.g.: caretakers, garment factory workers, etc.)	31- 52	Female	11	2.5 - 17	01-04
FGD-03	Returnee migrant workers employed in construction-related sectors	30-47	Male	08	04 - 12	01-05
FGD-04	Returnee migrant workers employed in other job categories (Auto-repair industry, heavy-vehicle driving, and hotel services)	29-48	Male	06	04 - 15	01-04
IDI	Returnee migrant workers	29-44	Female	07	04-11	01-03
IDI	Returnee migrant workers	30-41	Male	05	3.5 - 9	01-04
Characteristics of Family members and relatives of returnee migrant workers*						
FGD-05	Family members/ relatives of returnee migrant workers	29-52	Male	09	N/A	N/A
FGD-06	Family members/ relatives of returnee migrant workers	26-63	Female	07	N/A	N/A
IDI	Family members/ relatives of returnee migrant workers	28-57	Male	04	N/A	N/A
IDI	Family members/ relatives of returnee migrant workers	25-54	Female	03	N/A	N/A

**Family members of migrant workers were recruited independently and were not necessarily related to the specific migrant workers who participated in the study. N/A- Not Applicable*

Nineteen one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with returnee migrant workers and their family members. These interviews included 12 returnee Middle East migrant workers (7 female and 5 male), 3 spouses, and 4 other adult family members. Interviews typically lasted 45-60 minutes.

Data Collection: All interviews (FGDs and one-on-one) were conducted between April 2021 and November 2021 by the primary author, adhering to semi-structured interviewer guides. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, at which point researchers were confident that additional interviews would not yield new insights within the study's scope. The interactions among participants, including their verbal contributions and body language, were closely observed and documented in field notes. With participants' consent, interviews were also audio recorded. On the same day as the completion of the interviews, the initial transcripts were developed by listening to the audio records and cross-referencing with the field notes.

Data Analysis: Qualitative data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) [22], chosen due to its easy-to-follow systematic approach in handling bulk qualitative data and capturing diverse perspectives [23].

Thematic analysis was performed manually. Initially, transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to familiarise with the data, and codes were assigned (hand-coding) to capture key qualitative content. These codes enabled a summarised view of key points and recurring points. Using an inductive approach, patterns were identified, and related codes were grouped to develop initial categories and themes.

A rigorous iterative process was followed by revisiting transcripts to identify new themes or refine existing ones, ensuring a detailed understanding. During this back-and-forth evaluation, themes were revised, split, combined, or created as needed. In the final phase, themes were defined and named, providing clear representations of the data. To ensure the validity of the study, data source triangulation was employed by incorporating multiple perspectives from a diverse group of returnees and their families.

The study employed a qualitative research design as described by Creswell (2014) [24]. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) were used to ensure methodological rigor and quality appraisal of the study and interviews (25)

Study objectives, purpose, and ethical concerns were clearly communicated to all participants, with discussions tailored to minimise disruption to their routine work. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Kelaniya Ethics Review Committee (Ref.No:P/22/03/2021).

Results

This study delves into the lived experiences of returnee Middle East migrant workers to understand their reintegration into the home community. Thematic analysis yielded over 500 initial codes, refined to under 100 codes through iterative processes. These codes

were categorised into major themes: social, and economic reintegration. Interview quotes that support key findings are succinctly presented with the results.

A total of 70 participants took part in the study (51 in FGDs and 19 in IDIs), comprising 38 females and 32 males. Participants included returnee migrant workers and family members of migrant workers. Their socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2. Most participants were Sinhalese (n=41), followed by Sri Lankan Moors (n=21) and Tamils (n=8). Participants were aged between 25 and 63 years, with returnee migrant workers age ranging from 29-58 years (Table: 01). In terms of the highest educational attainment among migrant workers, 14.9% had only primary education, 51.1% had completed secondary education, and 34% passed the G.C.E O/L examination or achieved higher qualifications. Following their return, over, 75% of returnee migrant workers were engaged in income-generating activities, compared to 38.3% before migration. Regarding the relationship of family member to the migrant workers, nearly two-thirds were spouses (65.2%), while 17.4% were the migrant workers' parents (Table: 02).

Table 2: Distribution of socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants

Characteristics	Returnee Migrant workers (n=47)		Family Members of returnee Migrant workers* (n=23)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Sex				
Male	19	40.4	13	56.5
Female	28	59.6	10	43.5
Age (years)				
25 - 34	5	10.6	2	8.7
35 - 44	23	48.9	6	26.1
45 - 54	16	34.1	11	47.8
55 - 64	3	6.4	4	17.4
Ethnicity				
Sinhalese	28	59.6	13	56.5
Tamil	5	10.6	3	13.1
Muslim	14	29.8	7	30.4
Religion				
Buddhist	24	51.1	8	34.8
Christian/ Roman Catholic	4	8.5	5	21.7
Islam	14	29.8	7	30.4
Hindu	5	10.6	3	13.1
Marital status				
Married	28	59.6	14	60.9
Single	10	21.3	4	17.4
Divorced/Separated	5	10.6	0	0.0
Widowed	4	8.5	5	21.7
Highest Education				
Grade 1 to 5	7	14.9	1	4.4
Grade 6 to 11	24	51.1	8	34.8
O/L to Grade 12	8	17.0	9	39.1
Passed A/L	5	10.6	5	21.7
Vocational training/ Degree or above	3	6.4	0	0.0

Current Employment status					
Yes	Public sector employee	1	2.1	0	0.0
	Private sector employee	8	17.0	9	39.1
	Business owners (Who hires employees to do the task)	4	8.5	0	0.0
	Self-employed	19	40.4	2	8.7
	Contribute to the family business or income-generating activity without a salary	4	8.5	2	8.7
No		11	23.5	10	43.5
Employment status before migrant left for foreign employment					
Yes		18	38.3	16	69.6
No		29	61.7	7	30.4
Relationship with the migrant worker					
	Spouse of the migrant worker	N/A	N/A	15	65.2
	Parent of the migrant worker	N/A	N/A	4	17.4
	Parent-in-law of migrant worker	N/A	N/A	1	4.3
	Adult Child/ Offspring (>18years)	N/A	N/A	2	8.7
	Other (Aunt living in the same home)	N/A	N/A	1	4.3
*Family members of migrant workers were recruited independently and were not necessarily related to the migrant workers who participated in the study, N/A- Not Applicable					

Theme-1: Social Reintegration

The thematic analysis revealed social reintegration as a key theme, comprising three categories: reintegration within the immediate family, within the home community, and support networks.

Category-1.1: Reintegration within the immediate family: Re-uniting with the immediate family was critical for the reintegration of every returnee. Family members often played a pivotal role in the return of migrants to Sri Lanka. Further immediate family members were the primary companions of returnees.

"I returned home because of my family as my wife and kids need me here. I realised the value of living as a family under one roof only when I was away from them. I want to see my children growing up... I would have earned a 3-4 times higher salary in Qatar than what I earn today." FGD-3

For migrant workers, trust within the family is essential since they frequently depend on family members to manage their overseas earnings and protect their children and belongings while they are working in overseas (Table 03: 1.1a,1.1b).

Reintegration within the immediate family was an active process that required significant effort and lifestyle adjustments from both returnees and their families. (Table3: 1.1c). A spouse of a returnee migrant worker said that:

"My husband continued to smoke and drink at home in front of our kids even after he came back from Qatar. We had disputes yet I tried to help him to change. However, it took around three to four months, to change his bad behaviour." KII-17

The process of reintegration within the immediate family and regaining familial acceptance was time-bound and varied for each returnee. While some reconnected with their families within days or weeks, others took several months to reconcile. Many felt 9 to 12 months were adequate time for reintegration, yet some unresolved family issues still prevented full resolution (Table 03: 1.1d). Migrant workers who maintained transnational relationships with families in the home country by regular calls, social media interactions, letters, or sending remittances experienced smoother and quicker family reintegration processes (Table3: 1.1e).

Reintegration within the family was influenced by factors such as the duration of their employment abroad, gender, family support, and the age of their children. Conventionally, female returnees reintegrate with their families more easily than male returnees. For instance, one female employee came back and became her daughter's trusted guardian, whereas a male returnee felt alien to his children despite making years of sacrifices (Table 03: 1.1f,1.1g).

Category-1.2: Community reintegration beyond immediate family: The study explored social reintegration from a broader perspective, focusing on rebuilding and strengthening relationships with extended family members, neighbours, co-workers, and other community members. Returnees seriously considered the importance of restoring and strengthening these bonds. A customary practice was visiting them to share news of their return and offering gifts like chocolates, electronic devices, sweets, and foreign liquor based on the relationship's closeness. These gestures were viewed as a sign of respect and a way to strengthening relationships (Table 03: 1.2a,1.2b).

*"When my husband returned from Kuwait, he used to bring plenty of gifts like chocolate, liquor, and cigarettes. His friends and neighbours would visit upon hearing of his return, and they would continue to do so until all the gifts were given out."*KII-15

Returnee migrants frequently organised parties to reconnect with friends, relatives, and neighbours (Table 03:2c). They often participated in social events like birthday parties, weddings, funerals, religious and community gatherings to enhance their social standing and to re-establish connections with their extended family and community (Table3: 1.2d).

Category-1.3: Support Networks: Approximately 25% of respondents actively engaged in community-based organisations (CBOs) and neighbourhood groups, fostering valuable social interaction and community integration. According to the returnees, these groups and networks facilitated reintegration by offering financial assistance, advice, friendship, and support, enhancing their overall experience (Table 03: 1.3a,1.3b).

Beyond CBOs, returnees received support from various sources, including friends, family, co-workers, and community leaders, offering different forms of assistance.

"I had to return unexpectedly due to a worksite accident, injuring my right hand.

Unable to re-migrate, my wife and family looked after me, supported my recovery."

FGD-3

These social networks provided returnees a sense of security, support, and confidence, assuring them that there would be someone available to support during challenging times or when assistance was needed (Table 03: 1.3c).

Table 3: Direct Quotes from participants' Discourse in interviews

Theme: Social Reintegration

Sub-themes/ Categories	Quote extracts
1.1. Reintegration within the immediate family	(a) <i>"I left my children behind with a heavy heart to work abroad, trusting my husband and mother completely." KII-4</i> (b) <i>"Due to gossip from friends over my husband's extramarital relationship, I came home. Anger and mistrust resulted from his treachery and exploitation of my earnings. We separated and now I live with my children." FGD-2</i> (c) <i>"After working as a motor mechanic in the Middle East for around 7 to 8 years, I came home. Upon returning, my daily schedule, job, eating, and leisure habits significantly changed. At first, spending a full day at home was difficult and boring, which caused disagreements with my wife because she didn't fully understand my situation." FGD-3</i> (d) <i>"Upon my return I remained at home for a few weeks because I needed a break. But our relatives and neighbours misinterpreted as I was too proud to see them. However, we eventually reunited at family gatherings, and over time, their perspective shifted." FGD-2</i> (e) <i>"I kept in touch with my family by talking to them on the phone frequently while working as a housemaid. When I came back, this made it easier for me to adjust to being a housewife and mother to my two girls. KII-7</i> (f) <i>"I was a housemaid in Saudi Arabia, but my primary motivation for coming back was to ensure the safety of my kid. As she got older and required my protection, I returned, and I made the decision not to travel once more." KII-2</i> (g) <i>"When I left. My wife took care of the home while I financially supported for our immediate and extended families. My children are now grown-up and independent. Because of my overseas employment, our relationship has weakened. I hope they are aware of the sacrifice I have done to paid for a better life." FGD-4</i>
1.2 Reintegration within the community beyond immediate family	(a) <i>"I used to call my friends each time I come home. Most of my friends request to try foreign liquor and foreign chocolate. I used to make a list before my return and buy those gifts from duty-free...." FGD-3</i> (b) <i>"I returned from Middle East in 2018. I gifted my previous local employer a bottle of Gold-Label in an effort to secure a job immediately. This gesture helped to restore our relationship, and I was rehired as a motor mechanic with a higher income." KII-8</i> (c) <i>"Whenever I return to Sri Lanka, I organise dinner parties at my house and invite friends, family, and neighbours. These get-togethers provide a great opportunity to renew acquaintances and fortify bonds." FGD-3</i> (d) <i>"I routinely go to the temple on full moon Poya days and occasionally participate in religious events at the temple in our village. That gave me the chance to interact and build relationships with other locals." FGD-4</i>
1.3 Support Networks	(a) <i>"In our village alone, there are more than ten returnee migrants employed as housemaids in various Middle Eastern countries. A community welfare organisation and an NGO trained us in the production of pillowcases and bedsheets in exchange for their contributions of Rs. 15,000 towards our self-employment." FGD-1</i> (b) <i>I joined community-based human rights organisation. This membership connected me with migrant workers alike. We meet quarterly, sharing experiences and engaging in new activities. Last year, they organised free eye check-ups and provided glasses, saving me Rs 12,000." FGD-3</i> (c) <i>"Before my bypass surgery last year, my family faced financial and social challenges. The village youth club members supported us during that difficult time." KII-7</i>

Theme-2: Economic Reintegration

Economic reintegration emerged as a major theme in the analysis, encompassing categories such as economic engagement, foreign income utilisation, and utilisation of accumulated savings.

Category-2.1: Economic engagement: Overall, economic needs were the main push factors drive the labour force to seek Middle East employment, pulled by attractive salaries. In qualitative interviews over 80% of returnee migrant workers disclosed economic reasons as their primary motive (Table 04: 2.1a,2.1b). However, few respondents recalled unpleasant household environments and a desire for a different life experience as primary reasons for migration (Table 04: 2.1c).

Qualitative interview findings revealed two categories of returnee migrant workers in terms of human capital utilisation. The first group had clear plans to leverage their skills and savings to remain economically active upon their return. Twelve male returnees who had such earning plans claimed that they objectively acquired new skills and saved disposable income, which they invested in a business or self-employment ventures (Table 04: 2.1d). The second category includes returnees, especially former female housemaids, who lack specific economic plans to become economically active upon their return (Table 04: 2.1e).

Out of all returnees, 68.1% (n=32) engaged in income-generating activities. Among the economically active ones (n=23), two-thirds found jobs within six months, while nine secured employments within six to twelve months. However, limited local job opportunities led to unemployment or underemployment for some returnees.

More than 90% of economically active returnees worked in the informal sector, mainly in daily-wage labour positions (Table 04: 2.1f). Interestingly, none secured government jobs. Despite this, many engage in part-time seasonal agriculture to support families, neighbours, and relatives (Table 04: 2.1g).

Only 16 of returnees who started self-employment or secured local jobs utilised skills gained in overseas employment. These individuals had pre-planned their economic strategies during the pre-departure phase or while employed in the host country. Mostly males (n=11), previously in Construction(n=06), heavy vehicle driving(n=02), and the automobile industry(n=03). Among females, only five applied their foreign-acquired skills in local jobs.

"I worked as a motor mechanic in Kuwait for 8 years, gaining valuable experience.

Even now, I earn well using my skills after my return." FGD-4

"My husband worked in the Middle East as a heavy vehicle driver, and he can drive any vehicle. Nowadays he is working as a JCB backhoe operator at HiTec" KII-19

Category-2.2: Utilisation of the foreign earnings: All returnees and their families confirmed that they sent remittances, with about one in five migrant workers reported that they sent their entire monthly earnings back home. Around 80% remitted regularly through banks or informal channels. Feedback revealed that a substantial portion of

remittances was used for household expenses, including food, utilities, entertainment, and children's education (Table 04: 2.2a,2.2b).

Building a home was a top priority for most migrant workers seeking employment in the Middle East. Among 47 returnees, nearly 20% had completed their houses, while around 50% progressed to various stages of construction (Table 4 2.2c,2.2d). Notably, progress in home construction appeared to correlate with the length of overseas employment. Most of those who had completed their homes had worked in the Gulf region for over five years.

"Completing our house took nearly six years due to rising material costs. I returned after my initial foreign employment and went abroad again to send money for its completion. Originally budgeted at 1 million, it ended up costing over 2 million" FGD-2.

Sixty-six percent of participants, including both migrants and their family members, identified debt reduction as a priority. They utilised foreign income to repay loans and reclaim pawned valuables, like jewellery and land, within the first few years, emphasising the significance of loan settlement (Table 04: 2.2e).

Category-2.3: Utilisation of the accumulated savings: Most of the returnees stated they remitted most of their Middle East earnings, and the capital they brought back or set aside for savings (either with them or another trustee) was a small portion of their foreign income. After covering basic needs, surplus funds from some migrant workers were used for house renovations, land purchases, children's weddings, and electronic appliances like televisions, washing machines, radios, computers, and mobile phones.

Many respondents mentioned spending their disposable income on purchasing consumer goods, with some returnees stating that they used most of their savings on buying both white goods and brown goods (Table 04 2.3a).

"I urged my mother to buy us an imported washing machine and a two-door refrigerator when she returns. Despite her initial reluctance, she eventually agreed due to my persistent requests." FGD-5

Only 20% of returnees claimed that they managed to invest or save their extra cash or money brought home in productive/ income generating assets. A few female returnees had 'invest in gold' jewellery for themselves and their daughters. They considered purchasing gold as a method of investing their savings (Table 04 2.3b). Several returnees had invested their foreign earnings in local financial assets such as bank savings accounts, NRFC accounts, and term fixed deposits (Table 04 2.3c). One returning female claimed that she had sent all the earnings home before her return, but the recipient husband in Sri Lanka wasted the money by 'spending them on alcohol and gambling. (Table 04 2.3d).

Table 4: Direct Quotes on Economic Reintegration from Participant interviews

Theme 2: Economic Reintegration

Sub-themes/ Categories	Quote extracts
2.1 Economic Engagement	(a) <i>We were in the depths of poverty and the only option I had to overcome our financial hardships was to migrate</i>" FGD-2 (b) <i>"My husband had no stable job; he worked as a daily-wage labourer due to his wheezing condition, which made heavy manual work difficult. When he had wheezing episodes, he couldn't find labour jobs. I worked in a garment factory, but my income couldn't support our family."</i> FGD-2 (c) <i>"On top of the financial difficulties, the main reason for my decision to departure to the Middle East is the unpleasant set-up in my home. Those days my husband used to consume "Kassipu" every evening and make arguments with me... Some days he used to beat me"</i> FGD-1 (d) <i>"I'm a building contractor with over 8 housing and one commercial project completed. My passion for construction started in childhood, helping my father with cement work. In the Middle East, I gained diverse experience in plumbing, tiling, and Aluminium work. I saved a third of my salary for my business."</i> FGD-3 (e) <i>"I doubt there are job opportunities for returnee housemaids. Skills like cleaning and cooking from the Middle East have limited value here. The only options are local servant or babysitting jobs."</i> FGD-1 (f) <i>"I worked in a garment factory in Sri Lanka for 2-3 years, before my migration for Middle East as a Garment factory worker. Upon my return, I quickly re-joined the same factory. While job availability isn't an issue, the salaries are significantly lower compared to the Middle East."</i> KII-5 (g) <i>Personally, I couldn't find a satisfying job upon return, so I became a housewife. I assist my husband during harvest seasons."</i> FGD-2 (c) <i>"I'm a building contractor with experience in various fields like plumbing and Aluminium work. While working abroad, I planned to return and start my own business. With help from my brother-in-law who works at xxxxxx bank, I obtained a lease for my lorry."</i> FGD-3
2.2 Utilisation of the foreign earnings	(a) <i>"When I first moved abroad in 2014, I didn't send any money back. Eventually, I sent my parents 200–300 Qatari riyals every two months. I saved some money, but I used it to go out with friends. After getting married, I started contributing more towards the rising cost of living. It felt more meaningful to spend money on family needs."</i> FGD-3 (b) <i>"I mostly used banking networks to send my foreign earnings in Qatar home. I occasionally send my kids money and presents via my friends returning home. The money helped pay for food and other daily expenses, the schooling of the kids, and to settle my pawned chain and jewellery. Despite all our hardships, my husband wasted some amount of money on alcohol."</i> FGD-2 (c) <i>"I sought a Middle East job with the motivation to build a secure home for my family. We started building but couldn't progress beyond the foundation for nearly three years. I went abroad to send money for construction. Over 4-5 years, I sent most of my earnings home, and my husband supervised the work, allowing us to complete and move into our new house."</i> KII-2 (d) <i>"I sent my earnings to my mother and asked her to complete our partially constructed house. I didn't send money to my husband because I know he will waste them on alcohol... I was so disappointed and heartbroken as my mother too failed to invest my money in completing house construction work. My mother had spent my money on my siblings."</i> FGD-1 (e) <i>"Before leaving, our family faced immense pressure from loans, including property and pawned jewellery. Money lenders' threats loomed large. However, within the first two years abroad, we cleared most of our debts, achieving debt-free status by my return—a tremendous sense of liberation."</i> KII-4
2.3 Utilisation of accumulated savings	(a) <i>I spent my savings on a 55-inch LCD TV and an Apple mobile phone upon my return. Although these items were outdated compared to what was available in Qatar, they were the best in my village. Some neighbours and relatives were jealous, but I didn't mind their opinions."</i> KII-9 (b) <i>"I brought this chain I am wearing from UAE, and it is made up of the best quality gold. I also bought a chain and a pair of earrings for my daughter during her 'Kotahalu Mangallaya.' Buying gold is not only jewellery it is a worthwhile investment because you can sell them or pawn them and get money at any time"</i> FGD-1

(c) *"My husband was 50 years when he returns from Oman, and he was able to save some money in the bank as Fixed deposits and FD interest is monthly get deposited to his savings account. He uses this income as a pension."* FGD-6.

(d) *"All my earnings to the last Dinar I sent home and I did not have any savings with me when I came home. My husband had misused all my hard-earned money on alcohol, gambling, and other forms of missuses."* FGD-2

Discussion

The study employed six FGDs and series of one-on-one interviews to comprehensively explore the reintegration experiences of Sri Lankan returnee Middle East migrant workers and their family members.

Analysing socio-demographic profiles of participants is important for contextualising the findings and assessing their transferability to other settings or populations [7,26]. Of the 51 participants in the six FGDs, 35 were returnee's migrant workers, from the Middle East, and remaining 16 were family members or relatives of returnees. Additionally, 19 Key Informant Interviews were conducted, involving 12 returnees and 07 family members. The study sample was designed to include both male and female migrants across a spectrum of manpower levels. This approach aligns with the prevailing outbound migration pattern where around two-thirds of annual departures for employment in the Middle East are male migrant workers [8,18].

The IOM (2011), defines reintegration as a process of "re-inclusion of a returned migrant worker into the society of his or her country of origin or habitual residence" encompassing social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Another definition for reintegration proposed by Ruben, Houte, & Davids [22] describes reintegration as the process of individuals finding their position in society, fostering a sense of belonging and opportunities for societal participation. Both definitions emphasise social and economic reintegration as core dimensions. Social and economic reintegration, the main themes emerged in this study align with above reintegration definitions.

Theme social reintegration emerged from categories reintegration: within the immediate family, within the broader community, and through support networks. The findings, particularly the category 'reintegration within the family,' were consistent with a national-level survey on reintegration among Sri Lankan returnee migrant workers [8]. However, a notable limitation of the national survey was its omission of inputs from the families of returnees [(28)]. Present study addressed this gap by incorporating perspectives from both returnee migrants and their families in the qualitative discussions. Including family members offered diverse viewpoints and allowed researchers to triangulate data beyond the perspectives of returnee migrant workers alone.

Participants' accounts revealed that reintegration is a time-dependent, active process, requiring sustained effort and mutual adaptation. For instance, one returnee described taking 5-6 months to quit smoking and regain their family's trust, while another required 2-3 months to readjust to lifestyle in Sri Lanka. These lived experiences illustrate that reintegration involves ongoing behavioural and relational adjustments, reinforcing

Kuschminder's [26], perspectives that it extends beyond simply returning home to resume one's pre-departure life.

The thematic analysis highlighted 'reintegration within the community' as an important category. Many returnees had carefully planned how to reconnect with extended family, neighbours, friends, and former colleagues. Gift-giving emerged as a common and effective strategy for rebuilding relationships, with some returnees even maintaining lists of people to visit upon their return. These findings reiterate previous research highlighting the fundamental role of community reintegration in achieving a successful homecoming [29].

This study revealed economic needs as the predominant driving force (push factor) motivating over 80% of the labour force to pursue employment in Gulf countries. These findings are consistent with prior local and international research on international labour migration [8,30,31].

Only one-third of returnees reported using their foreign-acquired skills for local income generation, this finding aligns with the 2012 national survey on returnee Middle East migrant workers in Sri Lanka [8]. Those who successfully leveraged overseas-acquired skills for income generation had strategically planned this during both the pre-departure phase and their time abroad. These plans enabled them to upgrade their skill set and accumulate capital. In contrast, economically inactive returnees often lacked such post-return economic planning, limiting their reintegration prospects.

This study offers valuable insights into the social and economic reintegration of returning migrants, offering guidance for several key aspects supporting their well-being. This research carries public health relevance, providing evidence to guide policymakers and service providers in addressing the economic and social challenges faced by returnee migrant workers. This study has several limitations. Firstly, the findings derived from a single DS division limits geographic scope and may not capture the diverse experiences of returnee migrant workers across Sri Lanka. Additionally, by including only returnees and their families, the study excludes perspectives from employers, community leaders, and local authorities, which may constrain a comprehensive understanding of reintegration. Finally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce potential biases, including social desirability, recall errors, and reluctance to discuss sensitive topics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study underscores the significance of social and economic determinants for successful reintegration of Sri Lankan returnee Middle East migrant workers. Social reintegration is heavily linked with family dynamics, community ties and support networks. While economic needs triggered and act as a push factor for outbound labour migration, successful reintegration necessitates thorough planning and strategic use of remittance and human capital. Further, research is recommended involving larger and diverse groups of returnee migrants across multiple districts to validate and enhance transferability of these findings.

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