

Did International Migration Change Women's Lives? Examining the Empowerment Status of Sri Lankan Women Migrants

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Abstract

This study examines the empowerment gained by Sri Lankan women migrants who worked in the Middle East and settled in their communities after considerable periods of employment. It provides novel insights into their empowerment status across economic, social, and political components. The diverse sample of 53 women in the Badulla District of Sri Lanka, obtained using a judgment sampling method that represents various economic sectors, religions, and age groups, contributes valuable findings to the existing literature. In terms of economic empowerment, the findings highlight achievements in acquiring assets and reaching short-term goals. However, concerns arise about the sustainability of their economic status since a significant majority are currently not engaged in any economic activities, and there is little indication of investment in entrepreneurial initiatives. As for social empowerment, noteworthy progress is observed, particularly in their adeptness at handling social incidents, decision-making within the family, and their independence in various aspects of daily life and social relationships. Additionally, the study sheds light on their political empowerment, evident through their positive outlook on independent vote-casting. The findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of empowerment experienced by women migrants, calling for continuous support and nurturing of their growth in various domains of life through progressive policy formulations.

Keywords: international migration, women's empowerment, women migrants, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Poverty encompasses not only the lack of resources but also limited opportunities, denied rights, and silenced voices, resulting in the deprivation of a person's capabilities (Sen, 1999). The relationship between poverty and vulnerability leads to women being the most affected among the disadvantaged (Zoynul & Fahmida, 2013). In this context, the term “women's empowerment” becomes a crucial subject, as it aims to enhance women's capabilities to lead self-reliant and dignified lives, making independent decisions with respect and humanity. In simpler terms, empowerment signifies the cessation of reliance on others and the achievement of a state of independence (Sharma, 2008). Women's empowerment is the process through which women who previously lacked the power to make important life decisions gain the capacity and opportunity to do so (Kabeer, 2011).

Sri Lanka stands out as the sole South Asian country that sends more female labor than male labor to the Gulf region, primarily as contract domestic workers (Ismail, 1999). This observation is reinforced by Handapangoda (2014), who highlights that the female-to-male employment ratio for Sri Lankans in the Gulf region is 79:21, constituting nearly three-quarters of the total workforce.

The migration of Sri Lankan women to the Middle East is driven by various factors. According to Gamburd (2008), poverty is the primary motivation. Additionally, after economic liberalization in 1977, employment opportunities declined in Sri Lankan villages—where the majority of people reside—making it difficult for families to sustain themselves solely on income earned by male breadwinners engaged in farming and fishing. Consequently, women have been compelled to seek alternative economic opportunities outside the village (Eelens & Speckmann, 1990). Additionally, women from these households often possess only basic or secondary-level education and lack the skills to secure well-paid jobs in Sri Lanka (Kottegoda, 2006). Conversely, in response to the substantial

demand for unskilled domestic workers in the Gulf region, the Sri Lankan government actively encouraged impoverished women to migrate (Ismail, 1999; Jayasuriya & Opeskin, 2015). Given this context, poor Sri Lankan women had little alternative but to seek employment as domestic workers in the Middle East.

Furthermore, according to Oishi (2002), married women often choose to become migrant workers to secure a better future for their children. Similarly, Hewage, Kumara, and Rigg (2010) revealed that Sri Lankan married women's migration is motivated by the desire to earn money for their children's education, house construction, and dowries for daughters, all contributing to the well-being of children left behind.

While many Sri Lankan women from disadvantaged backgrounds migrate to the Middle East, limited research investigates whether their migration positively impacts their home communities. Two significant studies (Handapangoda, 2012, 2014) on women migrants' empowerment are based on small, specific samples. The first study examines married women in a single Divisional Secretariat Division, and the second includes only five Sinhala, Buddhist, married women. These studies mainly address economic and social empowerment, particularly focusing on decision-making and household recognition. However, to effectively study women's empowerment in contexts involving migration, research must employ a theoretically grounded, multi-dimensional framework. Such an approach is necessary to comprehensively capture: access to economic, social, and human resources; individual agency and decision-making capacity; the impact of structural and cultural constraints; and resulting achievements or changes in well-being.

Therefore, the current study makes a valuable addition to the existing literature by utilizing a diverse sample of 53 migrants that encompasses various economic sectors, religious affiliations, and age groups obtained from 18 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions of four Divisional Secretariat (DS)

divisions.¹ By employing a quantitative analysis method, this study provides novel insights into the empowerment status of women migrants. It explores broader aspects of social empowerment beyond the family sphere, including the ability to confront challenges within society and to maintain social relationships. Additionally, it sheds light on their political empowerment.

The findings indicate economic achievements in asset acquisition and short-term goals for women's empowerment. However, concerns arise about sustainability due to limited economic engagement and entrepreneurial investment. Social empowerment shows progress in handling incidents, decision-making, and daily independence. Political empowerment is evident in positive attitudes toward voting, reflecting active democratic involvement. The study emphasizes diverse empowerment facets among migrant women, underscoring the need for ongoing support and progressive policies.

2. Literature Review

According to academia, women's empowerment is understood as a multidimensional and dynamic process through which women gain the ability to make meaningful choices and exercise agency across social, economic, political, and interpersonal spheres. Kabeer (2011) defines the term as access to resources (material, human, social), the capacity to use them (agency), and the realization of desired outcomes (well-being, autonomy, social status) that expand women's capacity for making strategic life choices in an environment where it was denied to them previously. According to Bordat et al. (2011), women's empowerment enhances women's abilities in dealing with power, autonomy, agency, and livelihoods.

¹ The GN division is the fundamental administrative unit, covering multiple villages, responsible for local governance at the grassroots level. A DS division comprises several GN divisions.

Meghna Jain (2023) argues that empowerment must encompass all facets of life, recognizing that social, economic, cultural and political dimensions are interlinked and require simultaneous advancement. Women's empowerment should be viewed as a multi-dimensional concept that spans interpersonal relations, sociocultural norms, economic conditions, and political or legal rights. This perspective underscores that empowerment is not simply about one dimension (e.g., economic improvement) but requires progress across multiple domains to achieve meaningful and sustainable change (Silva, 2022; Ganesh & Chitra, 2025).

In the context of Sri Lanka, previous studies highlight that contract labor migration has brought about changes in gender roles. For example, labor migration has led migrant women to engage in three main activities (Ghosh, 2009). Firstly, these women become the primary breadwinners of their families by making significant contributions to the family income. Secondly, they take on caregiving and household duties as wage earners for their employers. Thirdly, they manage the care of their children from afar, making arrangements for others to care for them back home.

Ghosh's (2009) argument is further supported by research that has been undertaken in Sri Lanka concerning women's Middle Eastern contract labor migration. Gamburd (2008) has argued that the Middle Eastern migration has changed the gender roles and gender identities of Sri Lankan men and women, resulting in husbands entering the field of "women's work" or "household/care work" and wives becoming breadwinners. Further, Handapangoda (2014) notes that Sri Lankan migrant women's status changes when they are in the Gulf region in comparison with the pre-migration. According to the author, women who perceived themselves as subordinates and dependents in the pre-migratory situation have become more autonomous, freer, and self-reliant due to becoming the major providers of their family income when they were working as migrant domestic maids. In addition to that, Kottegoda (2006) mentions in her study that female Middle Eastern migrants from Sri Lanka challenge the gender roles and kinship of the traditional family by traveling abroad, leaving the

family members behind, and engaging in paid work. Apart from the changing of the breadwinner role in the family, Sri Lankan migrant women's previous main role, which is the role of a caregiver, is shifted to the husband or other extended family members with their departure to the Middle East (Pinto-Jayawardena, 2006).

Handapangoda (2012) focuses on the economic empowerment of Sri Lankan women during labor migration, covering their financial contribution, earnings control, decision-making, and household status. The study suggests that labor migration induces notable life changes for women migrants without being a direct empowerment intervention. Conversely, Handapangoda (2014) explores post-return empowerment within households. This qualitative study's sample comprises only five Sinhala, Buddhist, and married women, potentially introducing selection bias and restricting the findings' countrywide applicability.

Recent research increasingly shows that migration whether internal or international can influence women's empowerment by altering household labor dynamics, economic opportunities, and decision-making roles. For example, a longitudinal study from rural China finds that internal migration significantly improves rural women's labor-market outcomes, autonomy over marital and fertility decisions, and political participation especially among younger women and those from low- to middle-income households (Lu et al., 2025). Similarly, a study from Bangladesh reports that when household members migrate, women sometimes take on additional work and responsibilities, which can expand their agency, though gains may be limited or uneven in the short term (de Brauw et al., 2021). Recently, a cross-country micro-level analysis of African countries shows that remittances from international migration are associated with increases in women's empowerment indicators across multiple dimensions — suggesting that international migration, by way of remittances or changed family roles, can be a transformative mechanism for empowerment (Onyina et al., 2025).

In light of such evidence, women's empowerment can be understood not simply as a static status but as a dynamic, context-sensitive process one that may be catalyzed by mobility, migration, and transnational economic ties, alongside more conventional factors such as education, resources, and social support.

Theoretically, empowerment is often framed through a multi-dimensional lens involving interrelated components such as resources, agency, and well-being or achievements (Silva, 2022). A commonly referenced typology argues that empowerment may concern individuals or collectives; may involve removal of internal psychological barriers or external structural / interpersonal barriers; may be defined by individuals themselves or by external actors; and may focus on expanding the number of options available or on motivations behind choices (Gram et al., 2019). Another conceptual framework identifies different approaches to women's empowerment: for example, focusing on economic empowerment (control over material resources), raising critical consciousness (awareness of social constraints and rights), and collective development (organization, social support, political/legal reforms) (Sreenivasa Murthy, 2022). These theoretical perspectives highlight that empowerment is not solely about improving economic status; it must integrate social, political, psychological, and structural dimensions to create genuine, sustainable change.

Thus, when studying women's empowerment, especially in contexts involving migration, it is important to adopt a theoretically grounded, multi-dimensional framework that captures: access to resources (economic, social, human), capacity for agency and decision-making, structural and cultural constraints, and actual achievements or changes in well-being.

Adhering to recent trends in women's empowerment related to migration, this study offers a comprehensive and inclusive analysis of empowerment among women migrant returnees. It utilizes a diverse sample spanning multiple sectors, religions, and age groups to provide a strong understanding of this critical issue.

3. Research Methodology and Data

3.1 Research Design

This research study adopts a quantitative method focusing on a group consisting of Sri Lankan women migrants who represent the three main economic sectors of the country. Badulla District in Uva Province is selected as the study site, as it encompasses communities from all three sectors. A judgment sampling technique was used to select the potential respondents. 53 women included in the sample, obtained from 18 GN Divisions in four DS Divisions, namely Bandarawela, Haliela, Badulla, and Soranathota. Data collection was carried out through a survey questionnaire from the returnees who have engaged in overseas labor migration as housemaids, primarily in the Middle East, and have subsequently returned home after a satisfactory period of employment. These divisions were chosen to ensure representation from different parts of the district and to capture a diverse range of perspectives such as different economic sectors and different religions.

In surveys of this nature, there is typically a tendency for respondents to be hesitant to provide their exact views, especially when addressing sensitive questions. Particularly, Sri Lankan women may be reluctant to openly express their opinions on their husbands' behavior and characteristics during such discussions. To address potential respondent hesitation in providing honest views, especially on sensitive questions, we used a simple list experiment design in addition to the general survey analysis. The sample was randomly divided into two groups: the control group (direct response group) and the treatment group (veiled response group). The control group received a list of neutral and non-sensitive items (length = n), while the treatment group received an identical list with an additional sensitive item (length = $n+1$) and were asked to indicate how many items in the list they agreed with.

3.2 Data

Within each Divisional Secretariat area, the data collection process involved survey questionnaires that were distributed among 18 *GN* divisions. This field survey was carried out in June 2023 with the support of *GN* division-level administrative officers. With the assistance of the research support team, a total of 53 women who have migrated and currently reside in the 18 selected *GN* divisions were identified. With their consent, they were included as the study sample to share their experiences and the challenges they faced. The primary objective of the questionnaire is to gather the perspectives of the respondents regarding the extent of empowerment they have attained through their migration experiences. This approach allowed for the inclusion of women from various localities within the selected areas, providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by women across different economic sectors.

The survey questionnaire included questions to get the general demographic information of respondents and families, their economic status, and migration-related details. Furthermore, taking into consideration the relevant literature, specific questions were incorporated into the survey questionnaire to assess the empowerment status of these women after their migration. As mentioned above these questions aimed to gather data and insights regarding the extent to which their migration experience has contributed to their empowerment in various aspects of their lives. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample.

3.3 Data Description

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Age category (years)				
30 to 40	0.057	0.233	0	1
40 to 50	0.283	0.455	0	1
Over 50	0.660	0.478	0	1
Number of family members	4.302	1.170	1	6
Number of kids*	2.320	0.713	1	3
Migrated times	2.019	1.366	1	10
Total period of migration	4.660	3.186	1	22
Migrated as				
Cleaner	0.057	0.233	0	1
Housemaid	0.868	0.342	0	1
Sales assistant	0.019	0.137	0	1
Sewing machine operator	0.07	0.233	0	1
Economic sector				
Estate	0.226	0.423	0	1
Rural	0.321	0.471	0	1
Urban	0.453	0.503	0	1
Religion				
Buddhist	0.660	0.478	0	1
Hindu	0.151	0.361	0	1
Islam	0.170	0.379	0	1
Christian	0.019	0.137	0	1
Marital status before migration				
Married	0.717	0.455	0	1
Unmarried	0.283	0.455	0	1
Marital status after migration				
Married	0.887	0.320	0	1
Unmarried	0.057	0.233	0	1
Widowed	0.057	0.233	0	1

Education level				
Less than 11 years of school	0.585	0.497	0	1
11 years of school	0.415	0.497	0	1
Having vocational education				
No	0.830	0.379	0	1
Yes	0.170	0.379	0	1

*Note: Number of observations 53. The migrated countries are Bahrain, Dubai, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. * There were three women without kids.*

Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the women included in the sample. The majority of women fall into the middle-age category, with approximately 66 per cent of them being over 50 years old, while around 28 per cent are between the ages of 40 and 50. The average family size is 4.3, a bit above the national average.² Out of the 53 women surveyed, 50 of them have children, and the average number of children per woman is 2.32. Additionally, most women in the sample have migrated twice (18 - one time, 25 – twice, 7- three times, 2- four times, 1 – 10 times) and the average duration of their migration period is 4.66 years with a minimum 1 year and maximum of 22 years. All the women in the sample have migrated to lower-level jobs where about 87 per cent of them have served as housemaids.

The sample represents the three main economic sectors, with 22 per cent returnees from the estate sector, 32 from rural areas, and 45 from urban areas. The composition of the sample aligns with national-level statistics concerning religion.³ A noteworthy shift in marital status among returnees is evident. Before migration, around 28 per cent migrated before marriage, decreasing to 5.7 per cent after migration, with 72 per cent married before migration rising to nearly 89 per cent post-migration. This points to a trend of increased post-migration marriages among women in the sample.

² 3.8 as at 2016 according to the Socio Economic Data (2020), Central Bank of Sri Lanka

³ 70.1, 12.6, 9.7 and 7.6 per cents respectively according to Socio Economic Data (2020), Central Bank of Sri Lanka

Notably, none in the sample completed high school (13 years). About 59 per cent have not finished secondary school (11 years), suggesting lower education leads to occupations like housemaids. Limited job prospects due to lower qualifications seem key in their migration decision, reflecting challenges in local employment opportunities. Only 17 per cent of women in the sample have pursued vocational education after completing their schooling. This statistic further supports the notion that limited qualifications contribute to their decision to migrate. With few credentials to secure employment in the domestic labor market, these women are more inclined to seek opportunities abroad.

The data illuminate migrating women's traits and motivations. Their lower education and minimal vocational training underscore local employment hurdles, prompting migration for improved prospects. This highlights the need to comprehend migrant women's distinct circumstances to address their needs. Our research, using a more inclusive dataset, enhances internal and external validity.

3.4 Balance Check for Two Groups

To ensure a reliable estimation in a list experiment, it is essential to achieve a balance between the control and treatment groups in terms of the distribution of covariates. In order to assess this balance, t-tests were conducted for continuous and dummy variables, while chi-square tests were employed for categorical variables. The results of the t-tests and chi-square tests, which were conducted to assess the balance between the control and treatment groups in terms of covariate distribution, are presented in Tables 2(a) and 2(b).

Table 2(a)

Balance Check for Continuous and Dummy Variables

Variable	Control group		Treatment group		Mean difference	P-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Family size	4.400	1.155	4.214	1.197	0.186	0.569
Number of kids	2.458	0.658	2.192	0.749	0.266	0.190
Migrated times	1.920	0.759	2.107	1.750	-0.187	0.623
Migrated period (years)	4.520	1.806	4.786	4.077	-0.266	0.765
Vocational education (dummy)	0.161	0.374	0.179	0.390	-0.019	0.861

Table 2(b)

Balance Check for Categorical Variables

Variable	Control group	Treatment group	Pearson Chi-sq	P-value
Age group (years)				
30-40	2	1	1.865	0.394
40-50	5	10		
Over 50	18	17		
Religion				
Buddhist	13	22	5.941	0.115
Hindu	4	4		
Islam	7	2		
Catholic	1	0		
Schooling years				
Less than 11 years	15	16	0.044	0.833
Completed 11 years	10	12		

Tables 2(a) and 2(b) show balanced results among variables in both groups. Randomization seems to have successfully created comparable control and

treatment groups, as evident from the lack of noteworthy distinctions. This minimizes confounding effects on treatment estimation, enhancing analysis validity and reliable conclusions.

4. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents and discusses data analysis results. Empowerment status for migrant women is categorized into economic, social, and political aspects, enabling a systematic and detailed exploration. This approach offers structured insights into the multifaceted nature of their empowerment and allows nuanced analysis of contributing factors.

4.1 Review of the Family Support during the Migration Period

We commenced our analysis by conducting a review of family support in financial decision-making, sending remittances, and caring for their children during the migration period, as those are crucial for migrants to successfully achieve their goals.

Table 3

Financial Decision-Making of the Family during the Migration Period

Decisions made by	Number	(%)
Married		
Both my spouse and me	18	0.47
Spouse	16	0.42
Another family member	4	0.11
Unmarried		
Myself	15	1

According to the findings presented in Table 3, a significant majority of women migrants had the opportunity to make financial decisions both independently and in collaboration with their spouses during the migration period. This indicates a relatively equal opportunity for them to participate in family decisions related to finance. Additionally, it is observed that approximately 30 per cent of spouses made decisions specifically regarding remittance. Interestingly, unmarried women made decisions independently.

Overall, these figures support the notion that women migrants had substantial opportunities to participate in decision-making processes regarding their earned income during the migration period.

Table 4 illustrates how the women migrants received support during the migration period concerning two key aspects: sending remittances and caring for their children, specifically in cases where they are married and have children.

Table 4

Sending Remittances and Looking after Kids during the Migration Period

Sending remittance	Number	(%)	Looking after kids	Number	(%)
Spouse	33	0.62	Spouse	27	0.68
Mother	13	0.25	Mother	10	0.25
Elder child	1	0.02	Elder child	1	0.03
Another family member	6	0.11	Another family member	2	0.04

As per the data presented in Table 4, a significant number of women received support from their spouses in managing remittances and taking care of their children during the migration period. Additionally, approximately 25 per cent of women received support from their mothers in these matters. This indicates that migrants benefited from substantial family support, which played a crucial role in helping them achieve their goals throughout the migration period.

4.2 Review of the Negative Effects of Migration

Before proceeding to examine the empowerment gained by women migrants, we also looked into any negative effects they experienced due to migration. Accordingly, out of 53 respondents, 24 women indicated experiencing negative effects, and specific issues were brought to light as the failure of married life (3), spouse addiction to drinking and drugs (9), failure of children's education (4), and nutrition issues of kids (8). Yet, despite being aware of the opportunity costs associated with the decision to

migrate, only 14 women expressed feeling disappointed about their choice to migrate.

Then we inquired about potential factors that negatively affected achieving their expected goals from migration. Among the respondents, 25 women provided reasons, such as poor support from spouse and family (6), poor guidance from the travel agency (3), and the majority of the respondents (16 women) attributed their inability to achieve their migration goals to poor financial management practices. Interestingly, despite some facing negative effects and falling short of their goals, 14 out of the 53 respondents expressed their willingness to migrate abroad again if given the opportunity.

In the next step, we proceed to assess the level of economic, social, and political empowerment of returnees resulting from migration, which is the primary objective of the study.

4.3 Economic Empowerment

4.3.1 *Assets Gained during the Migration Period*

As the first step of assessing the economic empowerment of migrated women, we analyzed the assets acquired by them following their migration experiences. Table 5 shows these results.

Table 5

Assets Gained

Reason	Yes	(%)
Completing home constructions	42	0.79
Jewelry	40	0.75
Vehicle	5	0.09
Buying a land	3	0.06
Other	3	0.06

The analysis reveals that a majority of women were able to successfully acquire some form of assets following their migration experiences. As anticipated, a significant number of returnees were able to complete the construction of their homes, fulfilling their goal of establishing a permanent

residence. Additionally, many women reported acquiring jewelry, indicating an increase in personal assets. Of the 9 returnees aiming to buy a vehicle, around 5 succeeded, indicating a significant achievement rate. Additionally, 3 women purchased land, showcasing investment in valuable assets. Notably, 3 more acquired items like furniture and appliances, reflecting diverse outcomes from their migration.

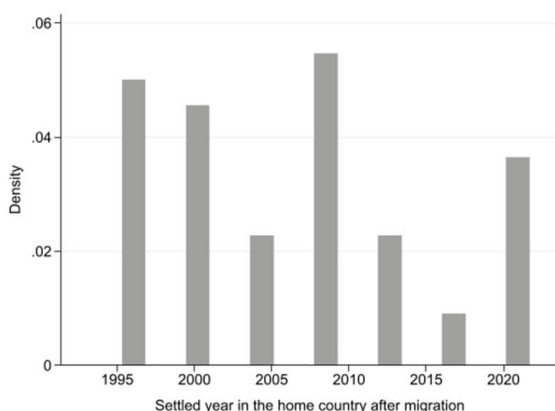
These findings underscore the economic empowerment experienced by a significant proportion of the returnees. The ability to acquire assets, such as completed homes, jewelry, vehicles, and land, demonstrates the positive impact of migration on their financial well-being and asset accumulation. It reflects the tangible outcomes and successes achieved by these women as a result of their migration efforts, highlighting the transformative potential of migration for economic empowerment.

4.3.2 Current Economic Status of the Family and its Sustainability

Nevertheless, the majority of these resources have been acquired by migrants during their migration period, and for many of them, it has been over ten years since their return as shown in Figure 1. Hence, it is worthwhile to examine their current economic situation years after their settlement.

Figure 1

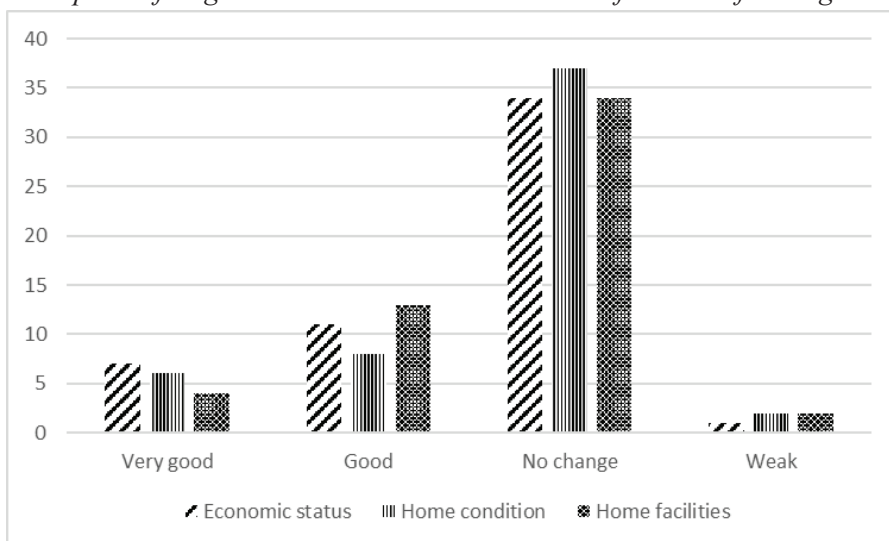
Settled Year in the Home Country after Migration



Therefore, as the next step, we examined the perspectives of migrants regarding their economic welfare during the period after migration in contrast to their circumstances prior to migration. Three key aspects that were given consideration included the financial situation of the family, the state of their residence, and the amenities available within their home.

Figure 2

Perception of Migrants on their Economic Status before and after Migration



According to Figure 2, it is evident that although many migrants were able to acquire assets during their time of migration, a significant portion of them could not maintain the same level of prosperity consistently after their return. After approximately a decade, only around 11 per cent of migrants report that their economic situation is very good, while approximately 20 per cent consider it to be good compared to their pre-migration status. The majority of migrants (64 per cent) now perceive that migration has not brought significant changes to their family's financial situation, the condition of their residence (70 per cent), or the amenities available in their homes (64 per cent). Unfortunately, about 3 per cent of migrants now find themselves in weaker economic conditions compared to the period before

migration. These findings imply that the majority of them could not sustainably use their gained assets.

To further examine the sustainability of the economic achievement made by the returnees we evaluated how many women have been able to progress to the next level by utilizing their acquired assets and initiating sustainable economic activities. Accordingly, we had a look to identify women who took steps towards investing a portion of their savings or assets into income-generating ventures, such as starting a business or engaging in self-employment. Table 6 presents this information.

Table 5
Post-Migration Entrepreneurship Initiatives

Entrepreneurship initiative	Number	(%)
No	38	71.7
Grocery	5	9.43
Planting flowers	1	1.89
Hotel service	3	5.66
Nursery	1	1.89
Planting mushroom	1	1.89
Selling compost	1	1.89
Selling three-wheeler parts	1	1.89
Sewing	2	3.77

According to the findings presented in Table 6, it is evident that only 15 women, which accounts for approximately 28 per cent of the returnees, expressed an intention to initiate a small business or engage in some form of income-generating activity after their arrival, indicating a commitment to sustained economic involvement. This result is consistent with Handapangoda's (2012) findings; however, the percentage of returnees with investments in business ventures is notably higher in our study compared to the previous research, where only 16 per cent of returnees reported such investments. Nonetheless, a considerable majority of approximately 72 per cent did not show such initiatives, while out of the 15 startups initiated, seven are currently not operational.

Currently, out of the returnees, six individuals are employed in small private sector jobs, while eight are involved in farming activities. This means that only around 40 per cent of returnees are making some economic contribution to their families after returning. However, this percentage is significantly higher compared to Hadapangoda's (2012) study, where the figure was only 10 per cent. This suggests that in recent times, returnees have been consistently making efforts to participate in various economic activities to support their families.

However, still, the majority of women may have been content with the gains they achieved during the migration period and may not have a clear and sustainable plan for managing their future livelihoods. This lack of clear plans for economic engagement is a critical factor affecting the sustainability of their economic empowerment.

4.4 Social Empowerment

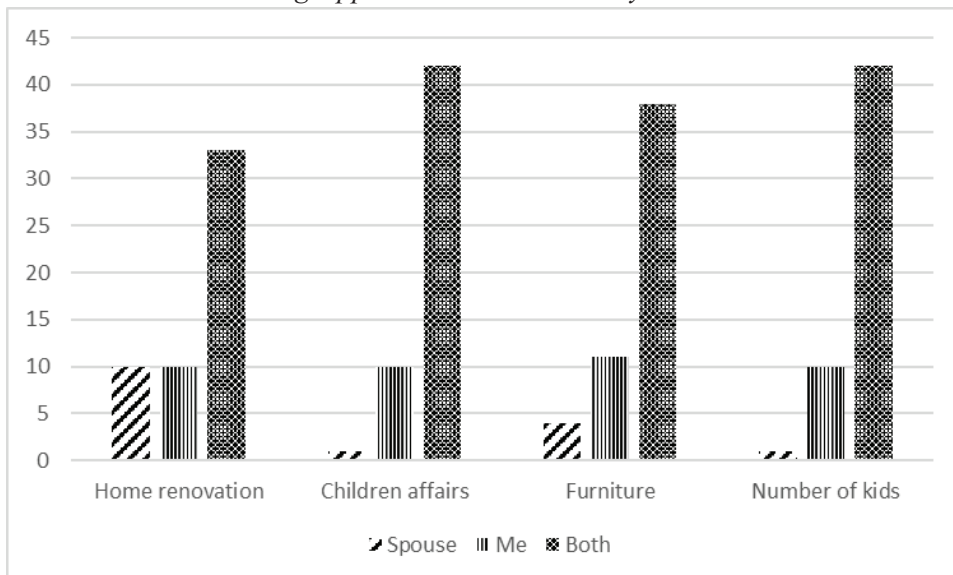
To assess whether migration has resulted in social empowerment for women migrants who find themselves in families where their spouse is the primary breadwinner, we examined various aspects of their social lives after their migration. These aspects included decision-making, social relationships, confidence in dealing with different institutions, and their ability to engage in public speaking. By analyzing these factors, we aimed to gain insights into the extent of social empowerment experienced by these women migrants.

4.4.1 Decision-Making Opportunities within the Family

Figure 3 visually presents the extent to which married women migrants have gained decision-making opportunities concerning family-related matters at present.

Figure 3

Current Decision-Making Opportunities in the Family



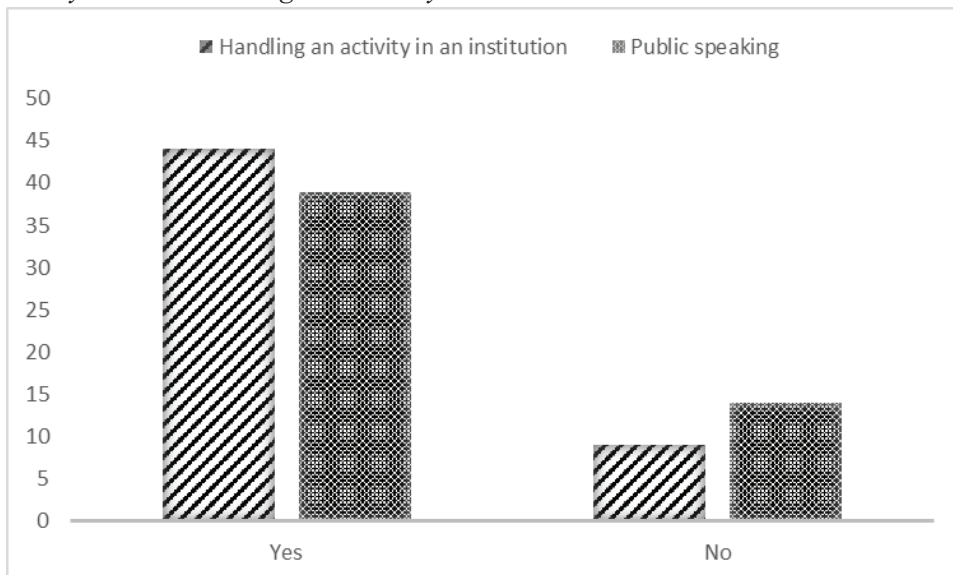
The figure indicates that both husbands and wives are making decisions together in all four aspects of family-related matters. This suggests that these women migrants have equal opportunities and involvement in the decision-making process, including gained resources during the migration period. This result indicates a positive response toward increased empowerment within the household, which stands in contrast to the findings of Hadapangoda (2014). The earlier study revealed that despite having increased access to household resources, including income, there was no proportional increase in control over those resources.

4.4.2 Ability to Face Challenges in the Society

As part of the subsequent analysis, we explored the returnees' perspectives on their ability to confront challenges within society. Specifically, we examined two factors: their competence in managing activities within institutions and their aptitude for public speaking. These aspects were taken into account to gain insights into their confidence levels and skills in navigating societal challenges.

Figure 4

Ability to Face Challenges in Society



According to the data presented in Figure 4, approximately 83 per cent of women migrants expressed confidence in their ability to handle activities within an institution, while about 74 per cent were confident in their public speaking skills. These statistics provide evidence that migrant women, as a result of facing challenges in diverse social and cultural environments, have developed the confidence necessary to navigate various situations in their daily lives. This highlights their ability to adapt and grow in the face of different societal challenges.

4.4.3 Perspectives on Personality Development

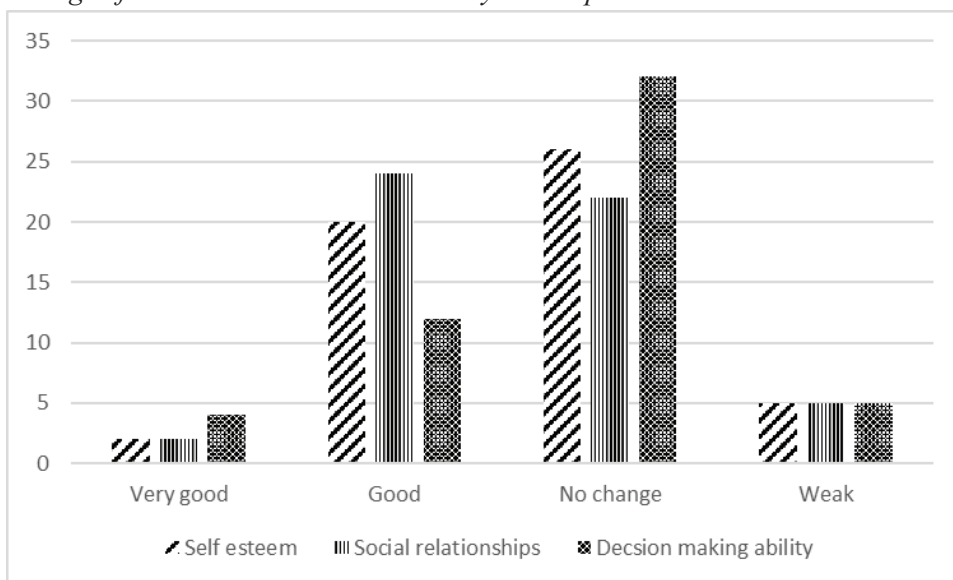
As part of the analysis of social empowerment, we then examined the perspectives shared by the migrated women regarding the self-development they gained from their migration experiences. In this context, they were asked to provide their views on the changes in three key factors related to personality development: self-esteem, social relationships, and decision-making ability. These factors were selected to assess the personal growth and development experienced by the women before and after their

migration journeys. Figure 5 illustrates their views on these three factors.

Fig 5: Change of factors related to personality development.

Figure 5

Change of Factors Related to Personality Development



Despite migrant women gaining confidence in facing social challenges, their views on personality development appear to be in average condition. Only a few of them expressed having very good self-esteem, social relationships, and decision-making abilities compared to the pre-migration period. Approximately 38 per cent and 45 per cent of the women reported having better self-esteem and improved social relationships after migration, respectively, while 49 per cent and 42 per cent mentioned no change in these factors. Regarding decision-making ability, around 22 per cent believed they had improved, while about 60 per cent stated no change. Additionally, five women reported experiencing worse conditions in these three areas after migration. Overall, it appears that migrant women are not significantly satisfied with the personality development gains obtained through their migration experiences.

Based on the analysis conducted above, it becomes evident that women migrants have been socially empowered through their exposure to challenging experiences and the valuable lessons learned while living in diverse social and cultural environments. This empowerment is particularly notable in their ability to navigate and handle social incidents effectively, as well as in their increased participation in decision making processes regarding family matters. However, when it comes to personality development, the findings indicate a more limited impact of migration experiences. The majority of women migrants tend to express that those factors related to personality, such as self-esteem, social relationships, and decision-making ability, have not undergone significant changes as a result of their migration experiences.

4.5 List Experiment Results

Now we present our simple list of experiment results that would be used as validation of their responses to sensitive questions related to social empowerment. Within the list, we included a set to obtain their views on independent vote casting as a measure of their political empowerment.

4.5.1 Examination of Social Empowerment

In this component, the respondents were requested to indicate the number of statements they agreed with for three sets of statements. Each set comprised three non-sensitive statements and one sensitive statement. The questions were centered around three key themes: opportunities for decision-making within the family, independence in decision-making in daily life, and independence in maintaining social relationships. By using this approach, the aim was to gather insights into the returnees' perspectives on these sensitive topics while maintaining their privacy and confidentiality. Table 7 shows the responses for each set by the two groups.

Table 07*Responses on Social Empowerment*

Number of statements agreed	I have opportunities for collective decision making		I have independence in decision-making in daily life		I have independence in having social relationships	
	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	2	2	0	1	0
2	5	2	4	2	4	3
3	20	7	19	5	20	7
4	0	17	0	21	0	18

As our effort is to get validation for our previous findings, we did not use complex estimation methods in this exercise. Thus, we estimated these responses by linear estimation and came up with the following results as shown in Table 8.

Table 08*Estimation Results of Responses on Social Empowerment*

Parameters	I have opportunities for collective decision making	I have independence in decision-making in daily life	I have independence in having social relationships
Coefficient	0.593	0.874	0.999
Robust SE	0.188	0.113	0.167
Z	3.150	7.770	5.970
P> z	0.002	0.000	0.000
Constant	2.800	1.840	2.680

Regarding all three aspects, women migrants exhibit positive views. Roughly 59 per cent reported collective decision-making opportunities, about 87 per cent claimed daily life decision autonomy, and almost all noted unimpeded social relationship independence. These results reinforce prior findings on their social empowerment.

4.5.2 Examination of Political Empowerment

In the final component, we explored the perspectives of migrant women on their political empowerment, specifically focusing on their views regarding independent vote casting. The gathered responses are outlined and presented in Table 9.

Table 09

Responses on Political Empowerment

Number of statements agreed	I have independence in vote casting	
	Control	Treatment
0	0	0
1	0	0
2	1	1
3	24	3
4	0	24

Table 10

Estimation Results of Responses on Political Empowerment

Parameters	I have independence in vote casting
Coefficient	0.776
Robust SE	0.164
Z	4.720
P> z	0.000
Constant	2.760

Similar to the previous findings on social empowerment factors, women migrants hold a positive and highly significant view regarding their independence in vote casting (about 78 per cent). This supports the notion that they are politically empowered and capable of expressing their perspectives on suitable parties and candidates during elections. The results highlight their active engagement in the political process, indicating that

they have the agency to make informed decisions and have their voices heard in the democratic process.

Our thorough analysis of women migrants' empowerment, derived from their experiences in diverse social and cultural contexts, yields valuable insights. Findings highlight economic empowerment through asset acquisition and short-term goals. However, sustainability is uncertain due to limited economic engagement and entrepreneurial investment. Social empowerment progress is seen in managing incidents, family decision-making, and daily life independence. Political empowerment is evident in positive attitudes toward independent voting and democratic engagement. In the following section, we discuss policy implications in conclusion.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive and novel assessment of the empowerment status of Sri Lankan women who migrated as laborers to the Middle East and have since returned to their home communities. Employing a theoretically grounded, multi-dimensional framework, the research evaluates empowerment across economic, social, and political domains. The methodology utilized a diverse sample of 53 returnees drawn from 18 GN divisions, ensuring representation across the country's three major economic sectors, various ethnic and religious groups, and different age cohorts, thereby addressing limitations in previous, narrowly-focused literature.

The findings indicate a multifaceted empowerment experience. Economically, returnees achieved short-term goals, particularly asset acquisition; however, concerns arise over sustainability, as a majority are currently economically inactive with limited entrepreneurial investment. Socially, noteworthy progress is evident in family decision-making, independence, and adeptness at handling social incidents. Politically, their positive outlook on independent vote casting demonstrates active civic involvement. Despite these gains, the analysis uncovered several challenges hindering anticipated outcomes, including poor family support, inadequate

financial management, and adverse social impacts such as marriage breakdowns and failures in children's education and nutrition resulting from their absence.

Given the increasing importance of foreign remittance, the results collectively emphasize the urgent need for policy interventions. These include establishing robust support systems that guide women toward suitable, higher-paying jobs through vocational qualifications, offering financial literacy training for sustainable remittance management, and providing crucial counseling and care for family members to protect children's well-being. Future research should consider incorporating observational data to mitigate potential respondent bias and conduct comparative analyses across economic sectors using larger sample sizes.

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