5 GENDER EQUALITY

SKILLING WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS: INSIGHT FROM SRI LANKA

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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GOALS
GOVERNANCE OF
LABOUR MIGRATION IN
SOUTH & SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**

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Summary

This Brief provides insights from the Gender Assessment of Skills Development Opportunities for Women Migrant Workers from Sri Lanka conducted under the Governance of Labour Migration in South and South-East Asia (GOALS)[1] programme led by UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. The study focused on: mapping skills development programs for women migrant workers in Sri Lanka; assessing labour supply and demand trends along the Sri Lanka – Gulf Cooperation Council corridor and; better understanding why Sri Lankan women migrant workers continue to pursue jobs in the domestic work sector in Gulf Cooperation Council states.

Using a combination of desk review of available secondary sources and primary research, the study finds that few women participate in skills development programmes, unless such training is mandatory for securing employment overseas. Secondly, there is little, if any, data available on skills demand trends in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Resultingly, there is no systematic planning to prepare labour with the required skills to meet demand. Finally, domestic work remains a sector with readily available jobs which recruitment agents promote to aspiring women migrant workers even when they have other skills and experience. Importantly, the existence of the 'incentive scheme' for domestic work in Gulf Cooperation Council states is a significant motivator for a range of actors in the recruitment industry to drive aspiring women migrant workers to accept jobs in the domestic work sector. The insights in this Brief aim to contribute to an evidence-base for informing gender-responsive and inclusive labour migration policies and programmes leading to better economic and social outcomes for women migrant workers from Sri Lanka and the South Asian region.

Background

Country of Origin governments promote skilled work opportunities for migrant workers based on the idea that when workers possess skills, the likelihood of obtaining decent work and higher wages is greater, thereby reducing the incidence of abuse, forced labour and human trafficking particularly for women migrant workers.

While Sri Lanka has the highest number of women in the South Asian region working in Gulf Cooperation Council states, many women (approximately 75 per cent[2]) fall under the domestic worker or low skill categories. While Sri Lankan women migrant workers have secured employment in other occupational categories, by-and- large, they continue to pursue jobs in the domestic and other low skilled categories even when they have paper qualifications which are likely to secure higher skilled work. However, there is increased acknowledgement by the Government of Sri Lanka that women migrant workers in low skilled work are vulnerable to workplace harassment and abuse. This, coupled with the country's commitment to international migration frameworks such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, has contributed to a policy shift to encourage higher skilled migration for both women and men.

The skills training-skilled employment nexus is however complex, in that it is not a linear relationship but one that is hinged on a number of broader considerations including consistent policy directives, relevance of curriculum and coordination between different stakeholders in the skills industry; and availability and access to relevant and up-to-date data and information on labour demand trends. Building an evidence base of skills development opportunities and understanding labour supply and demand trends from both Countries of Origin and Countries of Destination is important to ensure that women migrant workers are able to fully benefit from their migration journey and able to contribute fully to development.

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[2]UN Women (2018). The rights of women migrant domestic workers: gender-responsive employment contracts. Policy Brief. Available at https://asiapacific. unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/06/the-rights-of-women-migrant-domestic-workers.

Methodology

The study used a combination of research tools, each complementing the other. They included a smaller quantitative component consisting of close ended-questions and a larger qualitative component of open-ended questions allowing elaboration of the quantitative questions. Insights were gleaned from both primary and secondary data sources with respondents including returned and aspirant women migrant workers; government officials at the national and sub national levels; officials from training institutes at the national and sub national level and; officials from donor organizations funding skills programs.

Some limitations in the study are to be noted. The sample consisted of few respondents engaged in skilled work, reflecting the skills and occupations that women migrant workers from Sri Lanka seek in Gulf Cooperation Council states. Accessing reliable and accurate data on labour supply from Sri Lanka was challenging in particular given the lack of adoption of common skills classification system by the agencies compiling data on labour migration. Similarly, accessing labour demand trends in Gulf Cooperation Council countries was difficult resulting in data accessed from an online source on Philippine women migrant workers as a proxy as there was no such data available for the case of Sri Lanka at the time of data collection.

Key Findings

Skills development opportunities for women migrant workers

- The technical and vocational training (TVET) sector in Sri Lanka is fragmented and lacks coordination, with many State and non-State actors implementing programmes

- Women's participation in TVET programmes is low, and when they do participate, they rarely complete the programmes mainly due to their family responsibilities

- Age and marital status are key factors for women to decide to participate in skills development programme and also in overseas employment

- Skills training programmes targeting women migrant workers are being conducted only by SLBFE, ILO and IOM

- Letters from employers in Sri Lanka certifying skills and experience are important for women to obtain jobs overseas in the same sector and at a similar skill level

- In-service on-the-job training in destination countries enables women to step up to higher-skilled jobs

- Awareness of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) mechanism among aspiring and returned women migrant workers is very low

- Lack of assessors with relevant competencies and delays in skills assessments are hurting the efficiency of the RPL system

Labour demand trends in Gulf Cooperation Council states

- The skills classification system used by SLBFE is not in line with international skills classification systems, so skills matching is difficult

- Employment opportunities exist overseas for women in semi- and higher-skilled jobs, particularly in the care, hospitality and retail sectors

- To access these jobs, women need strong communication and transversal skills in addition to job-specific skills

- Job orders received by Sri Lanka are not filled for all categories of skills

- There is no system to identify and analyze labour demand trends in GCC countries, so there is no mechanism to train migrant workers to meet future labour demand opportunities there

Labour supply from Sri Lanka

- Job orders indicate that opportunities exist for women as drivers, beauticians, hairdressers, waiting staff and receptionists. However, many of these opportunities are not filled

- Classification of skills adopted by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment is not in line with international skills classification systems. Resultingly, there is lack of clarity on skills of particular occupational categories such as domestic housekeeping assistants

- The lack of relevant and up-to-date information on labour demand trends in Gulf Cooperation Council states and the absence of a mechanism to train women migrant workers to meet future labor demand opportunities, makes skills matching difficult
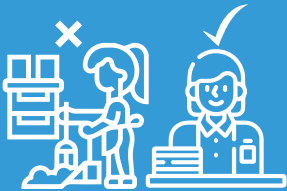
The lure of domestic work for women migrant workers

- Often women's decision to migrate is not planned but sudden, requiring immediate passage

- Women who take up jobs as domestic workers abroad are typically over 30 and married, and they migrate in order to meet household expenses

- The incentive scheme is very attractive for the poorest and most marginalized women to seek domestic work

- The ready availability of domestic work coupled with the financial benefits of the incentive scheme motivate recruitment agents to promote domestic work even when women have skills and experience in other sectors

- Women domestic workers value the 21-day SLBFE predeparture training programme but see no value in further skills training if they wish to remigrate for domestic work

- Returned domestic workers who do not intend to remigrate see no value in registering with the RPL mechanism

- The Family Background Report (FBR) regulation also has implications on women's decision and ability to migrate for work abroad.

Recommendations

How important is skill training in accessing higher skilled jobs for women? Whilst the response to this question is complex, insights from the study indicate that on-the job training coupled with employer certification of skills and experience support women's access to more and diverse skilled work opportunities abroad and upon their return. Policy recommendation summary with relevant offices are provided below.

	Policy Suggestion	Relevant offices/ Actors
Enhance coordination between key stakeholders in labour migration and TVET Actors in consultation with the ministry of foreign employment	• Review and strengthen labour migration policies to improve preparation for sending women migrant workers to meet labour market needs in targeted countries of destination	SLBFE
	• Strengthen and increase dialogue and partnerships with selected countries in GCC States on skills recognition and certification, migration, and skills development - This could be creating bilateral skills partnerships between Sri Lanka and selected countries in GCC States.	SLBFE TVEC
	• Establish an institutional framework on skills development for overseas employment in consultation with other stakeholders including public and private skills providers, CSOs and workers' organizations	SLBFE TVEC
	• Establish a labour migration information system to improve data and information sharing among training providers, SLBFE and other key stakeholders at national and sub-national levels	SLBFE TVEC
	• Provide resources to the Foreign Employment Development Officer (FEDO) in assisting women migrant workers to participate in necessary skills development programme prior to overseas employment	SLBFE

	Policy Suggestion	Relevant offices/ Actors
Improve women's access to and participation in TVET programmes	• Strengthen TVET training programmes to be more gender-sensitive by introducing, for example, weekend modules and programmes at the divisional level and providing child-care support for women with children to participate in the training programmes	VTA NAITA
	• Build capacities of skills providers/TVET trainers so they are more gender-sensitive including in their ability to support the retention of women in the programme	VTA NAITA
	• Introduce specialized accreditation and skills upgrading for returned women migrant domestic workers	SLMBFE TVEC
	• Increase access to programmes in domestic and care sectors by shifting SLBFE-conducted programmes to national training institutes	SLBFE TVEC NAITA VTA
	• Develop training of transversal skills such as digital literacy, conflict management skills, etc. for women	TVEC
	• Create awareness of available training programmes at the divisional level using migrant societies and civil society actors	SLBFE TVEC
ENHANCE ACCESS TO RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING FOR WOMEN	• Conduct community awareness of RPL, particularly on its value	TVEC
	• Establish a platform for information/data sharing among all stakeholders working on RPL	TVEC
	• Train assessors so they have required competencies, including to certify skills of domestic workers	TVEC
	• Build capacities of assessors to be gender-sensitive	TVEC
PROVIDE ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS TO DOMESTIC WORK FOR WOMEN	• Support government officials and non-government actors at local level to promote alternative employment opportunities abroad for women apart from domestic work	SLBFE
	• Assist aspiring women migrant workers to have their skills and experience assessed and certified through the RPL before migrating	SLBFE TVEC
	• Actively promote skills development as a pathway to decent work and safe and regular migration	SLBFE
	• Enhance the capacity of migrant societies at local level to instill the value of RPL and developing skills	SLBFE