

WHY SHOULD I DO EVERYTHING MYSELF: MIGRATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN SRI LANKA

Dr. M. Pinnawala¹

Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is a complex process that ranges from realisations of lack of power to challenging the existing order or taking control of the situation. Both situations lead to transformation of the structures, institutions and ideologies that perpetuate gender inequalities in society. Therefore, it needs to be recognised that the relationship between power and empowerment is a complex one. To understand this complex relationship we need to situate empowerment in the three-dimensional model of power (Lukes 2005), and examine how power works not only as control but as manipulation and latent power. Women's empowerment is often viewed as a process whereby women, individually and collectively, become aware of how power structures, processes and relationships operate in their lives and gain the self confidence and strength to challenge the resulting gender inequalities (Hannan 2003). In this sense empowerment is elimination of the feeling of powerlessness in women. As powerlessness creates dependency and makes people have decisions taken for them by others, empowerment can be seen as a process leading to the liberation of women from situations of dependency. According to this the empowerment of women means women taking control of themselves and of the situations they are in. The question of empowerment and the migration for women then boils down to one crucial issue. The issue is the capability of individual women to translate their labour market experience and their exposure to different cultural contexts into (a) increased self worth as persons with better economic value, (b) access to more material resources (c) the ability to change the ideologies and practices that are constraining them (Menjívar 2003) and (d) the ability to use their newly gained power. Labour force participation studies demonstrate that there are enough examples of the enhanced value of women as a result of becoming income earners, and studies among migrants amply show that there are many situations where women migrants have become more and more involved in decision-making and where families have redefined gender roles. Women may attempt to get their husbands to help them more in the house as a result but the context and extent to which the men comply is again a question. If women are not able to make men comply then there is no empowerment.

One important area where women migrants have shown empowerment is their active role as change agents. This is seen in relation to both regular socioeconomic activities and in the development process in their home country. By deciding to migrate they break one traditional barrier women face in many social setups, i.e. being independent and managing their own affairs. There is risk-taking and investment spirit that goes with this pioneering mentality. However migration can be both a cause and consequence of female empowerment (Hugo 2000), especially the changing trends in international migration whereas female share has been more than half. Therefore there is no argument migration not only makes changes in micro and macro level but also themselves.

This paper examines the way males empower the Sri Lankan migrant women who have returned from the Middle East after working as housemaids. Empowered women with migration cannot be understood in isolation since it is an outcome of the whole migration process which consists of three stages, namely pre migration, during migration and post migration. The objective of the paper is twofold.

¹ Phone: 07181818147, email: mallikap@pdn.ac.lk

The first is to understand the flow of empowerment through the above three stages. The second is to understand how she shows her empowered position in household after she returns from the Middle East. The study reviewed that women empowerment is a result of whole migration process and not something which occurs suddenly. It also showed that women empowerment can be seen in several ways i.e. through their attitudes and the behaviour, division of household task and responsibilities with the male members of the household, involvement of decision making process and through the changes of gender relations.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in a migrant source community in the District of Kandy in the central region of Sri Lanka. This community is considered a labour colony since almost all the household income earned through selling labour though the area shows both rural and urban characteristics. The field data was collected during a three months period using intensive anthropological data collection methods (in-depth interviews, group discussions, narratives and observations) and sociological data collection methods (questionnaire and time use diary). The number of main respondents of the study is 30 and out of them 15 are returnees who had worked in Middle-East countries as housemaids. Free flowing interviews with both husband and wife together allowing them to contradict and confront each other was one strategy employed to assess the empowerment of women in domestic situation. All of respondents are married and husbands of the women are the rest of the respondents of the study. Further, informal discussions were held with neighbours and relations of these families. The study examined power position of these women in relation to three stages of migration, namely, post-migration, during-migration and pre-migration, with a particular focus on the empowered nature of returned migrants in the post migration household.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Power position of women in pre-migration stage:

Changes of power position that lead to empowered women in post migration stage cannot be understood in isolation since it is an outcome of the entire migration process which consist of three stages, namely, pre-migration, during-migration and post-migration.

In the pre-migration household, the organisation of gender relations and the power structure associated with it places the woman, even if she is economically active, in the position of housewife because that is considered her primary role in the household. Her access to resources is limited, both in terms of ownership and control. This theoretically means reduced power because few resources mean little bargaining power. But the study found that lack of access to and control of resources for women does not necessarily mean that they are powerless. There are several other variables like age, special skills like education and personality that intervene and provide women with power in the household. More importantly, the view of power as ability to control, which is based on the traditional one-dimensional explanation of power, was found to be inadequate to understand the complex manifestations of power in pre-migration households. Even in situations where women did not own resources, they take part in decisions and play an important role in the management of the household. They cannot, however, impose their will or get it accepted. Therefore in this stage she has only covert or latent power and sometimes manipulatory power.

Power position of women in during migration stage

Migration changes the household to a during-migration household, in which the woman is the principal provider. That gives her more ability to control and impose her will, though she still has to operate within constraints imposed by traditions, practices, values and beliefs and most importantly constraints imposed by spatial distance, i.e. she is physically away from home. The power she has acquired in this situation, as she is now the principal provider, brings her closer to control power domain. The newly acquired status gives her ability to control but is

not a direct transformation of her old position of power. It is not a change from being powerless (lack of power) to being powerful. She has acquired power in a different plane. The power she has in the during-migration household is not a quantitative increase of power but a qualitative change.

Post migration household and empowered women

In the post-migration household too the change in the woman's power position is complex. On return, the woman becomes a housewife again and often becomes economically inactive. In the traditional conceptualisation of power this means she loses the power she enjoyed in the during-migration household. But the study showed that this does not result in the woman reverting to the same woman she was in the pre-migration household, where she had only manipulatory power. Instead she retains some traits of her new power she had exercised in the during-migration household. The returned migrants on the whole are more assertive in their ways and are ready to question tradition. This is indicative of a situation of empowerment often described as power within (Oxaal and Baden 1977) and is qualitatively different from the two previous forms of empowerment. The new situation of power of returned migrant women (empowerment) in post-migration stage can be seen in several spheres of activity in the household and public life, that includes changed attitudes and behaviour, involvement in decision making that was denied to her in pre migration stage, in task and responsibilities. Overall these are indicative of changing gender relations in the household..

CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment of women with migration is a complex process. In the contemporary discourse of power and empowerment of women the focus is on a quantitative increase in power. There is also the view that power and empowerment can be explained through a causal relationship where resources (sometimes qualified by ideological factors) lead to power. In this view the relationship is linear. These explanations look at only on the improved/enhanced ability of the woman to get things done, her increased ability to impose her will. But this study has shown that the change in power is more than that and that there is a qualitative element to changes in the power position of women migrants. It has also shown that there is dynamic order-building and a definition of power behaviour/structures in household power relations. Therefore empowerment is not a question of *how much?* but also *in what way?* It is the interactive relationship between these two dimensions of power that is important to understand changing power relations in the migrant household

REFERENCES

- Hannan, C. (2003). 'Transforming Empowerment and Gender Mainstreaming', International Symposium on A new Vision for Gender Policy: Equality, Development and Peace, Organised by the Korean Women's Development Institute, Seoul, Korea.
- Hugo, G. (2000) *Migration and Women's Empowerment* in H.B. Pressar and G. Sen (eds). *Women's empowerment and Demographic Process: Moving Beyond*
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view*, 2nd edition, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Menjívar, C. (2003). 'The Intersection of Work and Gender: Central American Immigrant Women and Employment in California', in P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, (ed.), *Gender and US Immigration: Contemporary Trends*, pp. 81-100, Berkeley: University of California.
- Oxaal, Z. And S. Baden (1997). 'Gender and Empowerment: Definitions, Approaches and Implications for Policy', Report no. 40, BRIDGE (development-Gender), Institute of Development, University of Sussex, pp. 34.