



SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF SRI LANKAN MIGRATION TO ITALY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to explore the social consequences of Sri Lankan migration to Italy. The study is based on a primary survey conducted in a district where most of the Sri Lankan migrants to Italy are observed. The reference period of migration for the study was from 1985 to 2014. The total number of migrants observed from 150 households during this period were 320 persons. This study showed that the migrants and their families have improved their economic status because of the emigration to Italy but the social consequences have been very undesirable. The study found that a significant proportion of Sri Lankans had emigrated through illegal means. The family bond between the migrants and their immediate families has been very weak. Although migration may assist in achieving financial stability, this study showed that the absence of a parent can be detrimental to a child's social and psychological development. This study also found that migration of their adult children, especially who are married and leave their immediate families behind has a significant impact on the elderly parents, especially in relation to their physical and mental well-being.

Keywords: Migration, Italy, Sri Lanka, Social consequences

INTRODUCTION

It is quite important to note that migration has been explicitly incorporated into the SDGs with the adoption of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals³. Migration provides a driving force for sustainable development through the effects of globalization. It decreases unemployment and enrich human capital. International migration has come to play a central role in the social, economic, and demographic dynamics of both immigrant-sending and immigrant-receiving countries. With the increasing migration trends, governments, non-governmental sector and private sector increasingly appreciate the relevance of migration to all aspects of sustainable development. Migration is normally recognized as a process which provides benefits to both sending and receiving areas. At the same time, it can also provide trade-offs and costs to migrants themselves, their families and societies. Furthermore, it also can create inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly when access to regular migration opportunities is not open to everyone and when migration is forced to transpire in disastrous situations. In this context, it is

³<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/populationfacts/docs/MigrationPopFacts20155.pdf>

particularly essential to protect, respect migrants' human rights because migrants, especially women who are low-skilled and those who are recognized as forced migrants are missed out from most of the national development policies.

Sri Lanka can be regarded as one of the significant emigration nations of the world today (Hugo, 2013; Hugo and Dissanayake, 2014). According to the United Nations recent data, there were 0.8 million Sri Lanka-born persons living outside of their country of birth in 2000 but increased to 1.3 million by 2013 (United Nations, 2013). This was a 51 percent increase during the 13 year time period and the increase was substantial for the more developed regions as it was 158.3 percent whereas the less developed regions recorded only a 2.7 percentage change. This suggests that the emigration was dominant towards more developed regions during the last two decades.

Sri Lanka is one of the contemporary world's major emigration nations. The United Nations (2013) has shown that there were 1.25 million Sri Lanka-born persons living outside of their country of birth, equivalent to 5.9 percent of the current Sri Lankan resident population. Jayasuriya and McAuliffe (2013, 6-7) showed that migration outflows of Sri Lankans can be categorized into five groups such as Temporary workers (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled), Skilled settlers, Student migration, Asylum seekers and Tourists, including pilgrimages to Nepal and India. Since several of these flows are temporary or circular, not all are captured in the United Nations' estimates of the numbers of Sri Lanka-born persons resident outside of Sri Lanka. Contract labour migration of low skilled workers, especially female domestic workers to the Middle East, and a lesser extent, Southeast and East Asia, has increased over the years (Hugo and Dissanayake, 2014).

Although there is an active discussion of Sri Lankan migration to the above mentioned destinations and different from of migration patterns, the present paper attempts to investigate a neglect destination of Sri Lankan emigration, which is emigration to Italy and its socio-impact on the Sri Lankan society.

EMIGRATION TO ITALY

Sri Lankans began to migrate to Italy during the second half of the seventies as an attractive place of destination and they were mainly Catholic women who were employed in 'elderly' homes. Subsequently, Italy was seen and recognized as a temporary destination, but a significant number sought Italy as a permanent place of residence (Henayaka-Lochbihler and Lambusta, 2004)⁴. Gradually Italy became a popular destination for some Sri Lankans because of the employment opportunities available for Sri Lankans as there were relaxed entrance possibilities available compared to other European countries. However, it is also important to note that some have tried other countries such as Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland or France as their place of destination but their application for residence status had been rejected and thereafter they had entered Italy as their second choice.

During the period 1986 to 1990 a series of Admission Acts attracted many Sri Lankans. In 1996 the Dini Decree⁵ reduced the bureaucratic procedures for the family reunifications which enabled a few thousand of Sri Lankans to join their relatives. Moreover, another pull factor was the

⁴<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.564.2219&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

⁵ At that time Lamberto Dini was the Italian Foreign Minister

system of legal immigration which enabled a formal entry requested by an Italian employer who must guarantee a formal employment for foreign workers (Cologna, 2003: 25). Different data sources show different statistics on Sri Lankan migration to Italy. For example, the Sri Lankan Embassy in Rome declared there were 80,000 Sri Lankans in 2003 (Henayaka-Lochbihler and Lambusta, 2004) while the Italian Institute for Statistics, estimated that the Sri Lankan population present was 26,474 in 2001. In addition, the Caritas/Migrantes statistics on immigration claimed that the Sri Lankans living in Italy were 35,845 in 2001. However, it is also important to note that irregular migration had been high to Italy from Sri Lanka and hence the number of Sri Lanka migrants present can be more than what the official sources have indicated. It appears that the illegal traffic of immigrants was often camouflage through travel agencies or import-export enterprises. (Morlicchio, 1992). It has been claimed by Hugo and Dissanayake in their work on irregular migration to Australia (Hugo and Dissanayake, 2014) that:

The general understanding of the population is that overseas migration can bring prosperity to the family because international migration has uplifted the socio-economic status at family level. This suggests that the idea that ‘international migration brings prosperity’ has become a norm, especially among the Sri Lankans who are at the lowest socio-economic category. Most importantly, the international labour migration and the boat migration to Italy have made a substantial impact on irregular maritime migration to Australia because of the benefits drawn from unskilled labour. Although some argue that motive of these migrants are political but Hugo and Dissanayake’s study (2014) clearly finds the major reason for irregular migration is economic.

Available statistics reveal that about 65% of the Sri Lankans had migrated to Italy for employment and among them about 59 percent were employees while a little more than 3% established their own enterprises. Only 0.1% have immigrated for educational purposes and 0.7% for religious reasons. A substantial proportion of 31.4% migrated for family reunifications (Caritas, Dossier Statistico, 2003: 117). However, a significant number Sri Lankan migrants chose Italy as a permanent working and living destination. This has led to the creation of a large and consolidated community over the last three decades of which no comprehensive social scientific research has been carried out. In this context, Sri Lankan emigration to Italy can be regarded very important to study its social consequences in Sri Lanka as the place of origin when compared to emigration to other Western destinations chosen by Sri Lankan migrants, such as Canada, Great Britain, Switzerland, and Germany. However, from the point of view of the Sri Lankans, Sri Lankan emigration to Italy has been usually seen as an economic motive and this has led to create some modernized living environment in some parts of Sri Lanka. These areas have been named as “Little Italy” and “Millano Dream”.

DATA AND METHODS

The study is based on a primary survey conducted in a Divisional Secretariat⁶ (DS) in the Northwestern province of Sri Lanka where most of the migrants to Italy can be found. Five Grama Niladari⁷ divisions were selected from this DS Division. Quantitative data was collected from 150 respondents. Among them, 33 were return migrants and 117 were household members of migrant families. In addition to the data collected through a structured questionnaire,

⁶ For ethical reason, the name of the DS division is not exposed.

⁷ This is the smallest government’s administrative unit and consists of several villages.

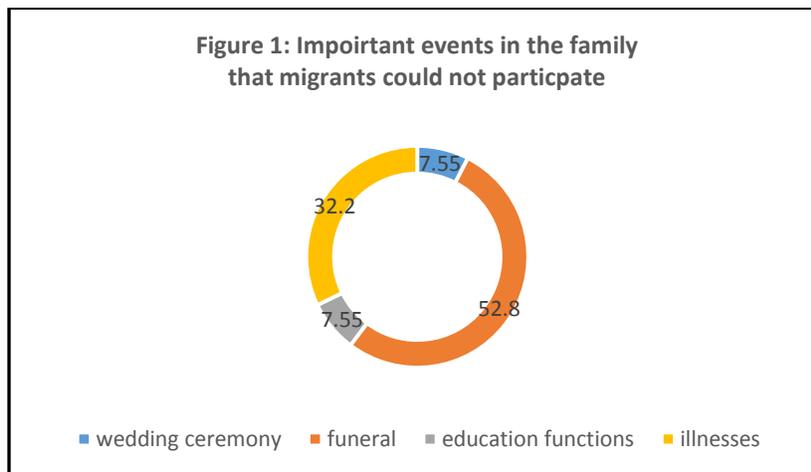
qualitative data was collected from case studies and in-depth interviews. Furthermore, whenever necessary, secondary data sources such as reports published by the Department of Census and Statistics, Central Bank Reports (2013), and the Annual Statistics Handbook of Foreign Employment were also utilized. The reference period of migration for the study was from 1985 to 2014. The total number of migrants observed from 150 households during this period were 320 persons.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the migrants and their families have improved their economic status because of the emigration to Italy but the social consequences have been very undesirable. The study examined three groups of people related to migrants: parents of the migrants, spouses of the migrants and children of the migrants. The study also found that 53.3 migrant had emigrated to Italy legally but 46.7 emigrated through illegal means.

Impact on Migrants

Emigration to Italy made the migrant to be absent from their families for a long period of time and hence they have been not able to take responsibilities of the family affairs. It was revealed that 81 percent communicated daily with their family while 32.8 percent weekly, 15.6 monthly and 3.3 percent occasionally. However, 35 percent of the migrants had not been able to participate in most of the important events in the family as shown in Figure 1.



Source: Primary Survey

It was observed that a substantial proportion of migrants those who are parents could not participate at their children's funeral while children were unable to attend their parents' funeral. This has reduced the family bond between the migrants and their immediate families. Majority of these migrants were illegal migrants and they did not have proper income source to attend to those family events. It is clear from the study that irregular migration to Italy has created many social issues. They were unable to support the families financially because of their unstable situation at the place of destination. It is also quite important note that a significant proportion of people who intended to migrate to Italy could not proceed to Italy because 23 percent of them had been arrested at the Sri Lankan border while 8 percent at the Italian border. Although migrants wanted to improve their economic as well as social status by migrating to Italy, they

were not even able to do so but their social integrity in their respective communities was severely affected. This is clearly reflected in the following case study;

Case study 1: I am 32 years old and my family lived in the society with high respect as my husband was a school teacher. Once he found someone who transport (or smuggle) people to Italy by boat. My husband wanted to emigrate to Italy to uplift our socio-economic status in the family, so he also joined this trip. However, unfortunately they were captured by the Sri Lankan navy and kept him in the prison for 3 months. The whole family was upset, and we could not bear this incident until he was released and my children's schooling also was affected as I had to visit my husband daily to see him in the prison. In addition, my children were reluctant to go to their School because of the insult of the peers. We still cannot bear how our society treats us because of my husband's involvement in the migration racket.

A higher proportion of the sample (67%) revealed that they were already married when they migrated. However, it was observed that marriage has been unstable among some migrant families because 7.3 and 3.3 percent of families revealed that extra-marital affairs and suicide incidences, respectively while the migrant spouses were in Italy. When the reasons for such actions were investigated, it was found that loss of protection to the family and the freedom gained after the spouse left for Italy were the main reasons why marriage became unstable. It was reported that 27 percent of spouses indicated that family protection was lost after their spouses migrated to Italy and this has led to create extra-marital relationships of the spouses left behind. A mother of a migrant's testifies this circumstance:

Case study 2: My son migrated to Italy by a boat in 2003 by selling his house and land to find money for the travel. First three years from his migration, we spent all his income received from Italy to buy a land and build a house. It was quite a difficult period. At present, my son earns a better income and hence my daughter-in-law is not very much concerned about family matters. She does not do any work but enjoys with her friends and now we have found she has developed an affair with another man. My son has got to know this situation and he has decided not to return to Sri Lanka again.

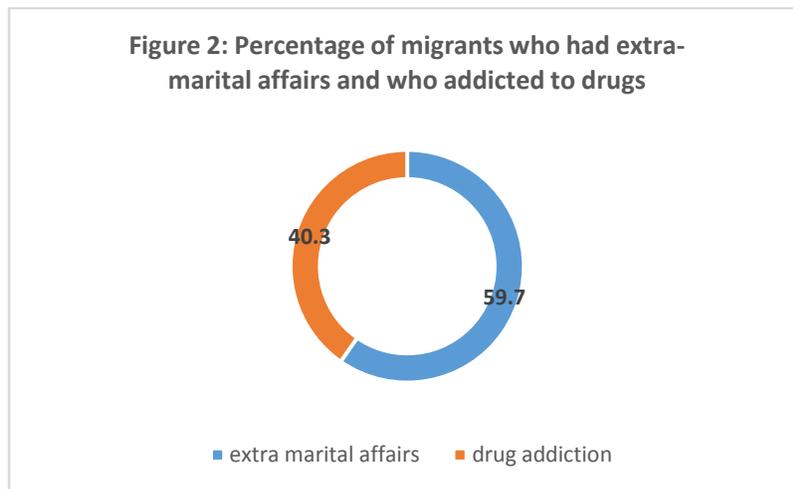
The process of migration is a transnational phenomenon that has profound effects on the lives of migrants' family members remaining at home as in the case of emigration to Italy by Sri Lankans. It is evident that members of transnational families remain linked to one another and experience the process of migration on both sides. Labor migration is usually regarded as economically helping the family members who are left behind through remittances. Nevertheless, splitting up families in this way may also have multiple adverse effects on education, health, labor supply response, and social status for family members who do not migrate (Démurger, 2015)⁸.

Impact on Spouses of Migrants

In this study, it was observed that migrants separated from their spouses experience greater levels of depression and frustration because of the changed behaviour of their spouses after migration. It was revealed that a substantial proportion of spouses left behind at the place of

⁸<https://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/144/pdfs/migration-and-families-left-behind.pdf>

destination suffered because of the extra marital affairs as well as addiction to drugs of their spouses who migrated to Italy. The study showed that 51.3 percent of the migrants in the sample had extra-marital affairs and addiction to drugs and their distribution is shown in Figure 2.



Source: Primary Survey

Addiction to drugs was mainly seen among those who migrated to Italy through illegal means and it appears that their unemployment for a considerable time period at the place of destination has led to habituation of drugs because of the frustration. When people immigrate to Italy through illegal means, it seems they find very difficult to settle down because of the lack of money as well as protection issues. According to some of the cases studies, it appears that they cannot find proper accommodation and hence, they tend to stay in packed shelter where there are many migrants (both men and women) stay together under one roof with very limited facilities. Such situation has led to develop extra-marital affairs because of the close association developed due to the congestion of the living environment. A female migrant who is still 38 years of old mentioned the following:

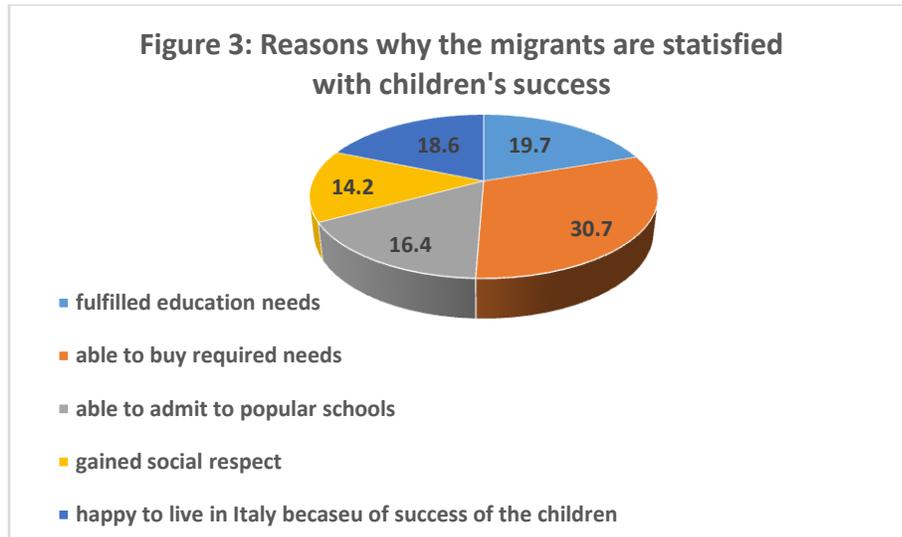
Case Study 3: We migrated to Italy by boat and could not find proper accommodation because of the high cost. Therefore, we rented a room to accommodate 8 people although it was not sufficient for 8 people. There were both men and women so we separated spaces by using cardboards. Close association among each other as well as physical and mental separation from their spouses at destination led to create many extra-marital affairs in this accommodation.

Reconstruction of sexual relationships after migration can have significant implications for disruption of family life. This can lead to infidelity, union dissolution, and even formation of dual families on both sides of the border often mar the migration experience, affecting the overall functioning of migrant families (Parrado and Flippen, 2010).

Impact on Migrants' Children

Migration is becoming more and more a significant topic of discussion in the area of child protection. Most often migrant households are more likely to praise the overall impact of migration as 'positive'. When the migrants were asked about their perception on migration, 93

percent of fathers who migrated to Italy, said that they are positive and their responses about the impact of migration on their children are shown in Figure 3.

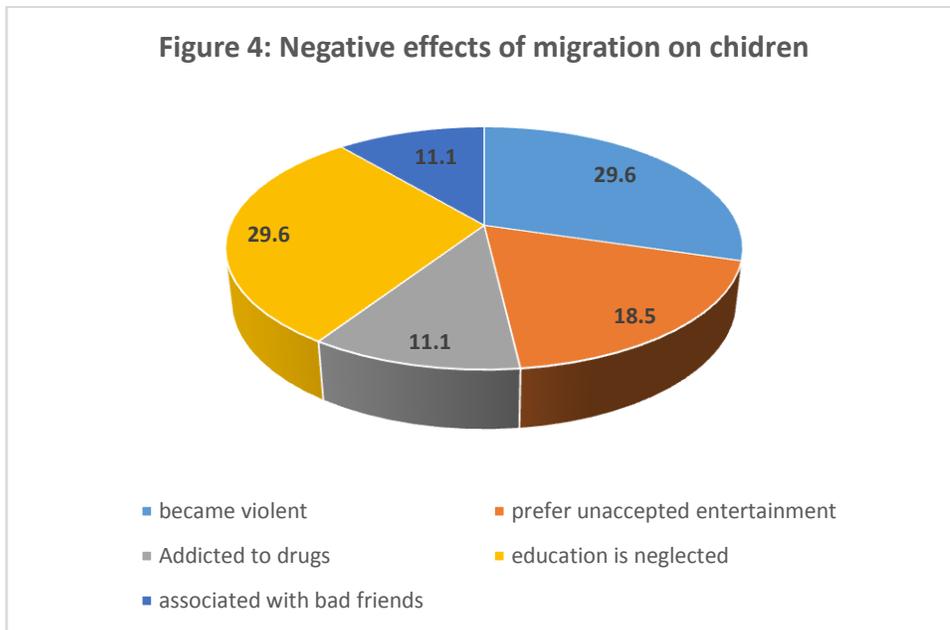


Source: Primary Survey

Most of the migrants in the sample were low-educated people and hence, they expected to educate their children to obtain the required social respect for their families. This is one of the reasons why they migrated to Italy because they perceived that they can earn enough money to educate their children. This is clearly evident from the following case study, who is a 48 years of aged male migrant:

Case Study 4: When I was young my parents didn't have money to educate me so I schooled only up to grade 4. Before migrating to Italy I was labourer and my daily wage was just Rs.200. I couldn't marry because of economic hardship so I migrated to Italy by boat in 2002. In four years' time, I could earn enough money and returned to Sri Lanka I got married and returned back to Italy. We had a boy and I could send him to a popular school and my family now has very good life. I could not have done this to my family if I did not migrate to Italy.

Despite the benefit of additional money the migrants received through migration, a significant number of migrant households seemed to be doomed about the choice they were obligatory to make in order to sustain their families. This negative perception of the overall impact of migration was also shared by a significant number of households (23 percent). The category that was most likely to stress the negative impacts of migration was abandoned households. The study revealed that the extra source of income received with migration, was considered the largest advantage of migration, as it helps pay for health and education, better nutrition, and better housing. However, abandoned households were negative and the most important negative effects identified were lack of parental guidance and impacts on children's aggressiveness and depression (Figure 4). All households approved that, though positive effects may exist, children are often affected negatively by the absence of a parent, with a certain impact on their psycho-social well-being.



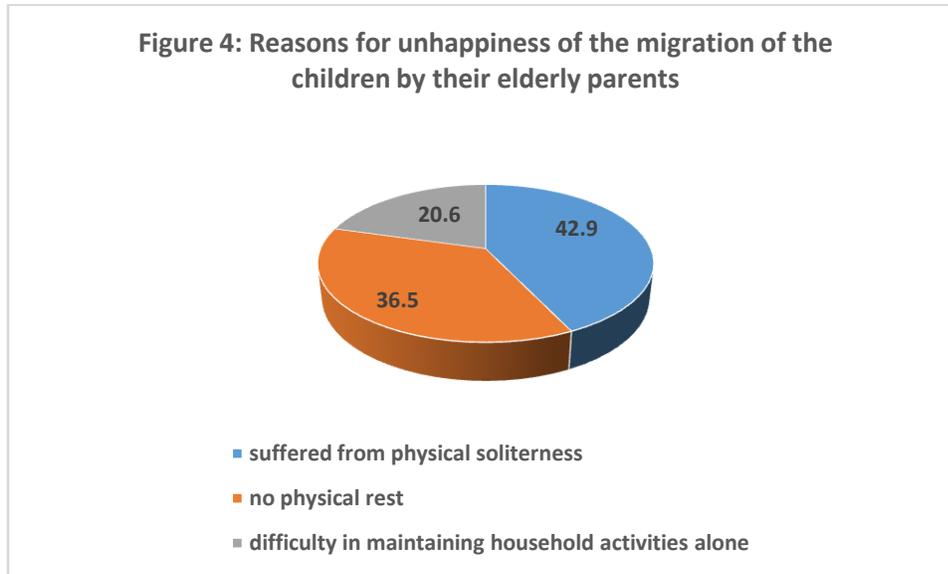
Source: Primary Survey

The study suggests that when Sri Lankans migrate to Italy to find employment, they often seek to improve the well-being of their family and provide better opportunities for their children. Although migration may assist in achieving financial stability, this study shows that the absence of a parent can be detrimental to a child’s social and psychological development. Similar situation has been observed in other setting as well (Yanovich, 2015).

Impact on Migrants’ Elderly Parents

Although many migration studies concentrate on consequences of migration on the spouses and children of the migrants, impact on their elderly parents are being left out on the discussions. This study finds that migration of their adult children, especially who are married and leave their immediate families behind has a significant impact on the elderly parents too. In this study, more than 80 percent of the migrants’ parents are above the age 60 years of age. Majority of migrants have left their families with their parents (i.e. children’s grandparents).

When these parents are interviewed, majority of them feel that they cannot cope up with the household activities of the migrants’ family because of their old age. It is important to note that 26 percent of the sampled households consist of elderly parents. Majority of them are looking after the property of the households while others look after their grandchildren. Although they receive money for their living from their migrant children, they are very unhappy because they think that they cannot enjoy their retirement. Figure 5 reveals their unhappiness in relation to children’s migration by leaving undesired household work on their shoulders:



Source: Primary Survey

It appears that leaving elderly parents behind either with the migrants' families which have young children and economically inactive spouses or the land and property to take care of, can make elderly parents more vulnerable in relation to their physical and mental well-being. Therefore, this study suggests that migration of the children has adversely affected the health of elderly parents left behind.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that the migrants and their families have improved their economic status because of the emigration to Italy but the social consequences have been very undesirable. The study found that a significant proportion of Sri Lankans had emigrated through illegal means. Emigration to Italy made the migrant to be absent from their families for a long period of time and hence they have been not able to take responsibilities of the family affairs. This has reduced the family bond between the migrants and their immediate families. It was observed that marriage has been unstable among some migrant families because of extra-marital affairs and suicide incidences. It was found that loss of protection to the family and the freedom gained after the spouse left for Italy were the main reasons why marriage became unstable. Similarly, a substantial proportion of spouses left behind at the place of destination suffered because of the extra marital affairs as well as addiction to drugs of their spouses who migrated to Italy. Most of the migrants were low-educated people and hence, they expected to educate their children to obtain the required social respect for their families. This is one of the reasons why they migrated to Italy because they perceived that they can earn enough money to educate their children. Although migration may assist in achieving financial stability, this study shows that the absence of a parent can be detrimental to a child's social and psychological development. This study also found that migration of their adult children, especially who are married and leave their immediate families behind has a significant impact on the elderly parents, especially in relation to their physical and mental well-being.

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