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Irregular Migration and Transnational Family Insecurities

A Case Study of a Coastal Community in Negombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This thesis explores how men's irregular migration from the coastal community of Munnakkara in Negombo, Sri Lanka, to Europe reshapes the everyday lives of families left behind. The study is situated within the social and economic context of post-2022 Sri Lanka. It focuses on household insecurities among families where men initially migrated legally to Eastern European countries but later moved through irregular routes to Western and Southern Europe due to changing conditions. The study is guided by interdisciplinary perspectives drawn from Global Studies, Migration Studies, Sociology, and Gender Studies. Using a qualitative research design based on nine semi-structured in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion, and ethnographic observation, the research explores how irregular migration affects migrant-sending households. Through reflexive thematic analysis, the findings reveal a central paradox of irregular migration. Although migration is pursued as a strategy for economic stability, it often reproduces and intensifies financial insecurity, emotional distress, and gendered burdens within transnational households during the initial years. Women assume increased caregiving and financial responsibilities, while children experience the effects of prolonged paternal absence in different ways. By focusing on the lived experiences of migrant-sending households, the study highlights the hidden social and emotional costs of irregular migration beyond dominant economic narratives. The study underlines the importance of policy interventions that strengthen psychosocial support, social protection, and institutional assistance for migrant-sending households in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, irregular migration, transnational families, gendered labour, left-behind children, emotional distress, debt.

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Popular Scientific Summary

Many families viewed migration as a pathway to a better life. In Sri Lanka, especially after the economic crisis of 2022 and the COVID-19 pandemic, migration became one of the few available options to overcome financial hardship and achieve a better future. This thesis examines how irregular migration to Europe affects the families left behind. The study focuses on the coastal community of Munnakkara in Negombo, where men first migrated legally to Eastern European countries, but later moved through irregular routes to Western and Southern Europe due to changing political, legal, and economic conditions. Migration is often discussed mainly in terms of economic benefits and remittances. This research examines the hidden social and emotional outcomes of irregular migration experienced by migrant-sending households. The experiences of left-behind families, their uncertainty, emotional struggle, and family separation are rarely discussed in migration research in Sri Lanka.

The research is based on qualitative fieldwork using semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and ethnographic observation. The findings reveal a central contradiction of irregular migration: although migration is considered a strategy for economic stability, it often creates new forms of insecurity during the initial years of migration. Women frequently carry a huge burden in the absence of men. They take on childcare, household management, financial pressures, and emotional support within the family. Children also experience the prolonged absence of fathers in different ways, including emotional, psychological, and educational challenges. At the same time, families continue to maintain hope that migration will eventually lead to a better future.

The study argues that irregular migration should not only be understood as an economic process. It creates social and emotional insecurities that affect family relationships, care responsibilities, and the everyday life of the migrant households. By discussing the lived experiences and realities of migrant-sending households, this thesis highlights the hidden human costs of migration that are not discussed widely in public and policy discussions in Sri Lanka. The findings also underline the importance of stronger psychosocial support, social protection, and institutional assistance for families affected by migration.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IOM	International Organization for Migration
PHM	Public Health Midwife
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment

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1. Introduction

Migration is widely recognized as a central component of globalization, shaping economic, social, and political processes across borders and societies (Castles et al., 2020, pp. 1-4; Sassen, 2007, p. 69). It plays a significant role in shaping development and social change and has been incorporated into the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Within this broader context of global mobility, irregular migration has become increasingly visible, particularly in the Global South (IOM, 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; Rosina, 2024). According to the International Organization for Migration, irregular migration is defined as “movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving country” (IOM, 2011). In simple terms, irregular migration involves crossing borders or residing in a country without legal authorization. In Sri Lanka, this phenomenon has intensified after the Easter Sunday attacks, the 2022 economic crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Senadhi, 2023, p. 153). Together, these events have severely disrupted livelihoods, increased unemployment, and deepened financial insecurity across households. While migration is often framed as a pathway to economic improvement, lived experiences reveal its complexity and vulnerability, particularly due to its irregular nature. These experiences also show how global structural inequalities intersect with the realities of local households.

This research examines how men’s irregular migration from the coastal community of Munnakkara in Negombo, Sri Lanka, to Europe reshapes the lives and produces new insecurities within migrant-sending households. Munnakkara and Negombo have a long history and offer a significant setting for exploring the dynamics of regular and irregular migration (Brown, 2012 & 2018). The community is characterized by strong kinship ties with Europe, religious engagement, and economic dependence on fishing, migration, and tourism. Interview participant shared, “my husband left to give us a better life. Now we live without him, debt and loneliness” (interviewee 1). This reflects the lived tensions between aspiration and insecurity that relate to irregular migration. Approximately one-third of the household population in this area is engaged in migration, reflecting its integration into transnational labour systems (Village officer, FGD). Migration decisions are often collective and shaped by household strategies, social and future expectations, and long-standing migration networks, as identified in the interviews.

In this study, men initially migrated through legal channels by obtaining work visas to Eastern European countries such as Romania and Serbia. However, due to unstable employment

conditions, they did not receive the initially agreed salary. Due to the increasing burden of debt at households, they moved through irregular routes to Western and Southern European countries, particularly Italy and France, in search of better economic opportunities (Senadhi, 2023, p. 152). This shift toward irregular migration is often unplanned. It emerges as a response to the constraints encountered after arrival. As one interviewee explained, “Initially, my husband did not plan to go to Italy. Due to salary issues in Romania, he decided to move” (interviewee 8). This highlights how migration pathways can shift in response to changing conditions. These irregular journeys are uncertain, but they are widely perceived as necessary for achieving economic stability and fulfilling household aspirations. The study critically explores the multidimensional consequences of this form of irregular migration on migrant-sending households in Sri Lanka.

Existing migration literature in Sri Lanka has mainly focused on labour migration, remittances, and women migrant domestic workers and their children. This research examines the underexplored insecurities of migrant-sending households affected by irregular migration. At the same time, it provides a context for understanding how global conditions and economic disruptions connect with local vulnerabilities and lead to migration and irregular migration. By focusing on this, the study addresses an important gap in Sri Lankan and South Asian migration research.

Situated within the coastal migration belt, the study draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic observation.

The primary research question of the research is as follows:

- How does the irregular migration of men to Europe affect the economic, social, and emotional security of women within migrant-sending households?

To address this main question, the study further explores two secondary questions:

- How does prolonged paternal absence influence children’s psychosocial well-being and sense of stability?
- What coping mechanisms and informal support systems do transnational families develop to manage these insecurities?

The findings of this research reveal a central paradox. Migration is often considered a solution to financial hardships and a pathway to a stable future. But, due to its irregular nature, it often reproduces and intensifies more insecurities for a period or permanently. As an interviewee shared,

“...we thought this would solve our problems, but now we are struggling even more than before in all ways” (interviewee 2). These men work without legal documentation and unstable employment, which creates financial precarity in their households. Remittances, as the primary benefit of migration, are irregular, delayed, and insufficient during the initial years. This captures the tension between hope and upward mobility, and the uncertainty families continue to experience over time.

Further, the study finds that women experience an intensified triple burden: productive, reproductive, and community labour. Some women gain decision-making power within households, but it is often linked with stress, exhaustion, and limited support. Families rely on their family networks and religious institutions such as the church, which plays a central role in providing emotional and social support.

The research reveals that paternal absence has profound emotional, social, and educational consequences for children. The prolonged separation creates an emotional gap between migrant fathers and children that cannot be fully covered through digital communication and material conditions.

This thesis is organized into several key chapters. The literature review examines existing research on migration, labour migration, left-behind children and transnational families, and irregular migration, while identifying the research gap this study addresses. The theoretical framework outlines the interdisciplinary perspectives drawing from Global Studies, Migration Studies, Sociology, and Gender Studies. The analysis is guided by perspectives on the global-local continuum, gender, the care economy, and feminist critiques of globalization. The methodology chapter explains the qualitative research design and discusses the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion, and ethnographic observation conducted in Munnakkara, Negombo. The analysis chapter presents the empirical findings through key thematic discussions on household insecurities, emotional distress, gendered responsibilities, and the experiences of children in migrant-sending households. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, discusses their broader implications, and offers policy recommendations.

By foregrounding women's voices, this study moves beyond economic-centred narratives of migration and highlights the hidden social and emotional consequences of irregular migration. By connecting micro-level experiences with macro-level structures, it contributes to broader academic and policy debates on migration, gender, and development.

2. Literature Review

Migration has become a defining feature of globalization and contemporary social transformation (de Haas, 2020, p. 17). While migration creates opportunities for economic and social mobility, it can also produce emotional insecurity, debt burden, and caregiving responsibilities within migrant-sending households. This chapter critically reviews the related literature in Sri Lankan migration scholarship and research gaps in the field, particularly irregular male migration to Europe and its consequences for women and children in coastal migrant-sending communities.

2.1 Migration, Globalization, and Development

International migration is widely recognized as a central dimension of globalization and is closely linked to uneven development, labour mobility, and increasing global interconnectedness (Castles et al., 2020, pp. 1-4; Czaika & de Haas, 2014, p. 283). Migration has intensified through global transformations, labour demands, and economic inequalities between regions. Migration must therefore be understood within broader global processes that connect local household experiences with international economic systems, labour markets, and development structures.

de Haas (2020, p. 17) argues that migration should be understood as part of broader development and global inequality rather than simply as movement between places. His perspective challenges the simple idea that migration is driven only by poverty. Similarly, Sassen (2007, p. 69) highlights how global economic restructuring creates both labour opportunities and inequalities that shape migration flows. While both scholars connect migration to global capitalism and uneven development, de Haas emphasizes mobility aspirations and development transitions, whereas Sassen focuses more directly on labour demands and structural inequalities within the global economic conditions. Together, these perspectives help explain why migration emerges not only from economic hardships and global disparities but also from aspirations for social mobility and transnational opportunities.

Migration decisions are shaped not only by individual choices but also by structural and humanitarian conditions. Conflicts, economic crises, unemployment, labour markets, and political instability directly affect household survival strategies and migration opportunities. Therefore, migration must be understood as part of a global-local continuum where global economic and political changes directly affect local household experiences and livelihood strategies positively and negatively (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017, p. 12).

2.2 Labour migration in Sri Lanka

Since the liberalization of the Sri Lankan economy in 1977, labour migration has become a major source of foreign exchange and household income through the Middle East (Sriskandarajah, 2002, p. 289). Existing Sri Lankan literature has mainly focused on remittances, women migrant domestic workers, and the contribution of migration to household survival and national economic development.

A significant migration research examines the experiences of women migrant domestic workers and the transformation of family life within transnational households. Michele Ruth Gamburd's work is particularly relevant in understanding migration, kinship, and caregiving practices in Sri Lanka. Gamburd (2000) demonstrates that migration reshapes family structures, social obligations, and emotional relationships across borders. Her work highlights the emotional and social dimensions of migration beyond dominant economic narratives.

Gamburd (2000) further examines how migration challenged traditional patriarchal expectations on women's domestic roles in Sri Lankan society. The expansion of female labour migration to the Middle East challenged these expectations. Many women became the primary income earners within their households while working abroad as domestic workers (Gamburd, 2000, pp. 36-40; Jayaweera & Dias, 2009, p. 47). However, caregiving responsibilities often remained feminized. When women migrated, childcare responsibilities were handed over to grandmothers, sisters, or female relatives rather than fathers or male household members (Gamburd, 2008, pp. 15-22).

Although migrant women frequently become the primary breadwinners of the household, men often continue to maintain authority as the 'head and decision-maker' within the family (Gamburd, 2000, p. 202). In contrast, when men migrate, women are generally required to assume full responsibility for childcare, household management, emotional care, and financial survival, thereby intensifying their everyday burdens (Jayaweera & Dias, 2009, p. 92). These shifting caregiving arrangements demonstrate how migration restructures family responsibilities and emotional care within households.

Another major theme within Sri Lankan migration literature concerns remittances and economic development. Migrant workers' remittances contribute significantly to household consumption, education, and the national economy (Sriskandarajah, 2002, p. 296). However, previous studies also demonstrate that migration frequently begins with debt-financed journeys (Jayaweera & Dias,

2009, p. 89). As a result, the initial years of migration are often dedicated to repaying these debts rather than achieving immediate economic stability.

2.3 Left-behind children and transnational families

One of the most-researched areas in Sri Lankan migration literature is the migration of mothers to the Middle East and its impact on the children left behind. Existing literature has examined how mothers' migration restructures caregiving responsibilities and affects children's psychological, social, and educational well-being.

Gamburd (2008, pp. 25-29) argues that prolonged maternal absence creates complex psychological consequences for children in transnational families. In Sri Lanka, mothers are associated with emotional care and everyday caregiving, while fathers usually maintain a comparatively distant relationship with children. As a result, maternal migration often creates emotional insecurity, loneliness, and disruptions to children's daily routines. Gamburd (ibid, pp. 25-29) further mentions that migration transforms family relationships beyond economic improvement. It produces marital tensions, shifting expectations of intergenerational care, emotional struggles, and loneliness within transnational families. However, while Gamburd primarily focuses on maternal migration to the Middle East, comparatively less attention is given to how paternal irregular migration reshapes emotional relationships and caregiving structures within households. This gap becomes increasingly important in the contemporary Sri Lankan context, where male migration has expanded significantly regularly and irregularly.

Similarly, Jayaweera and Dias (2009, p. 90) found that although migration may improve the financial stability, children in migrant households may experience emotional insecurity, behavioral difficulties, weakened supervision, and educational challenges. Studies further suggest that many children experience difficulties in their education, emotional isolation, and reduced participation in extracurricular activities due to the absence of their mothers and the lack of adequate emotional support within households (Dunusinghe, 2021, p. 73; Manel, 2020, p. 129). These findings suggest that substitute caregivers do not provide adequate attention to children's emotional well-being, higher educational needs, and everyday developmental needs. Children are more vulnerable depending on their age, gender, caregiving arrangement, and the duration of maternal absence. However, while Gamburd focuses more closely on emotional relationships and kinship structures, Jayaweera and Dias emphasize child welfare, behavioural issues, and caregiving arrangements.

Together, these studies demonstrate that migration produces economic opportunities as well as social vulnerabilities within households.

These studies also identified significant child protection concerns within migrant households. Jayasuriya and Opeskin (2015, pp. 579-587) argue that maternal migration creates significant challenges for the rights and well-being, risks of child neglect, child labour, and abuses within some migrant households. Younger children are particularly vulnerable because they depend heavily on close emotional attachment and parental care. Previous studies have documented cases of sexual abuse and exploitation involving children living in the absence of migrant mothers (Hettige, 1999; Jayaweera & Dias, 2009, p. 90). Similarly, some adolescent girls may become substitute caregivers within maternal migrant households and be vulnerable and victims of rape, sexual abuse, and incest by the fathers and male relatives (Perera & Rathnayaka, 2013, p. 12). These studies discuss some of the hidden and long-term social consequences of maternal migration beyond its economic benefits.

International organizations have raised concerns regarding the psychosocial well-being of children in maternal migrant households. Save the Children reports that many children experience emotional insecurity, educational neglect, loneliness, and reduced psychosocial support due to separation (Pinto-Jayawardene et al, 2006, pp. 14-30). The report further argues that institutional support mechanisms for migrant families are weak and insufficient, despite the significant contribution of migrant workers to the national economy.

Beyond Sri Lanka, international migration literature on transnational families provides important theoretical perspectives. Parreñas (2005, p. 37) argues that migration creates ‘transnational families’ where emotional relationships and caregiving responsibilities must be maintained across national borders. Although remittances may improve economic conditions, financial support cannot fully replace parental care, emotional guidance, and physical presence (ibid, p. 67). Her work demonstrates that migration simultaneously creates economic opportunities and emotional costs within family life.

2.4 Irregular migration and migrant vulnerabilities

While legal migration has remained relatively stable, irregular migration toward Western countries has grown significantly in recent years (de Haas, 2023, p. 43). The Global South has become increasingly central to the discussions on irregular migration. Restrictive migration policies and

limited legal pathways often push migrants toward irregular routes, particularly when economic pressures, labour demands, and aspirations for mobility continue to increase.

Global scholarship on irregular migration has focused on asylum systems, border governance, undocumented labour, human smuggling, detention, deportation, and migrant vulnerabilities within destination countries. Recent studies examine migration legal status, labour exploitation, work-life relationships, living conditions, and migrants' rights and realities within host societies (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, pp. 191-206).

Within the Sri Lankan context, irregular migration has received increasing academic and policy attention, particularly regarding migration to Australia, Canada, and Europe. Existing literature suggests that irregular migration from Sri Lanka intensified during and after the civil war, and later expanded following economic instability, unemployment, and livelihood insecurity (Jayawardena, 2020, 103-104; Senadhi, 2023, p. 153-154; Sriskandarajah, 2002, p. 288-290).

Research conducted under the Australian Department of Immigration's Irregular Migration Research Programme identifies economic insecurity, aspirations for social mobility, migration networks, and labour opportunities abroad as major drivers of irregular migration from Sri Lanka (Jayasuriya & McAuliffe, 2013, p. 22). Studies further show that migration decisions are shaped not only by poverty but also by access to financial resources, migration networks, and mobility opportunities, while migration networks and previous migration success stories strongly influence aspirations to migrate irregularly (de Haas, 2011; Jayasuriya, 2014, p. 7; Karunaratne, 2013).

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the role of transnational social networks and migration culture in shaping irregular migration in Sri Lanka. Recent research on Sri Lankan migration to Italy demonstrates how social links, diaspora connections, and earlier generations of migrants contribute to new generations of irregular migrants (Senadhi, 2023, p. 154-171). Migration, therefore, becomes normalized, and established migrant communities provide information, financial assistance, emotional support, and practical guidance that reduce the risks of irregular migration.

Similarly, research on Sri Lankan migration to Italy suggests that migration has improved the economic conditions of many households. Simultaneously, it creates significant social consequences, including weakened family relationships, emotional distance between parents and children, and psychosocial effects on left-behind family members (Senadhi & Dissanayake, 2018,

pp. 10–11). The literature further highlights that visible symbols of success with upward mobility, improved housing, and social status often shape migration aspirations. At the same time, family tensions, emotional disconnection, marital instability, and weakened household relationships among some transnational families also emerged. This highlights the complex social consequences of migration beyond economic benefits (ibid, p. 7; Pathirage, 2025).

These scholars demonstrate that irregular migration is not an isolated individual decision and is socially organized through family expectations, community networks, and transnational connections. Moreover, these studies explain why people migrate irregularly and how they improve economic conditions in households. But it has been given less attention to how these migration processes reshape emotional life, caregiving responsibilities, uncertainties, and gender relations within migrant-sending households.

2.5 Global-Local dynamics and research gap in Sri Lankan Migration Literature

Recent migration in Sri Lanka must also be understood within the broader context of recent economic and political crises. The Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic crisis in 2022 severely disrupted tourism, fishing, informal labour, and household income security. These crises intensified financial insecurity and increased migration decisions among vulnerable communities.

At the same time, labour shortages and migration opportunities in Europe created migration aspirations among economically vulnerable households. Therefore, migration decisions cannot be separated from global labour demands, structural inequalities, and humanitarian conditions that shape local livelihoods and economy.

Existing studies on irregular migration mainly examine networks, migration routes, border governance, migrant smuggling, asylum systems, and labour exploitation within destination countries. Although these studies provide important insights into migrant vulnerabilities, comparatively less attention has been given to irregular male migration to Europe, and the consequences of this migration for women and children in migrant-sending coastal communities.

In particular, the emotional consequences of prolonged paternal absence, women's increased caregiving and financial responsibilities, household debt burdens, and the psychosocial experiences of children remain underexplored. This gap is especially significant in coastal

communities where irregular migration has become increasingly normalized through migration networks and transnational connections.

Recent migration patterns from Sri Lanka to Europe also reveal an important shift in migration trajectory. Many migrants now travel legally to Eastern European countries before moving irregularly to Western and Southern Europe. These irregular migration pathways are shaped by changing conditions. Unstable employment, low salaries, exploitative working conditions in the initial destination, and increasing household debt pressures often encourage irregular movements. In many cases, migrants initially do not intend to migrate irregularly. However, this evolving pattern of irregular migration through Eastern Europe remains insufficiently examined within Sri Lankan migration research. The effects of this migration pattern on the household insecurities experienced by women and children have also received limited attention.

This study addresses these gaps by examining irregular migration through a qualitative and household-centered perspective in Munnakkara, Negombo. This coastal migrant-sending region has long-standing patterns and connections of both regular and irregular migration. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of women and children, the research contributes to broader debates on migration, globalization, gender, and transnational family life.

The study argues that irregular migration should not be understood only as an economic survival strategy or a labour mobility process. It is also a deeply emotional and gendered social process that redistributes insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, debt burdens, and emotional distress across transnational households. In doing so, this research highlights the hidden social and emotional costs of irregular migration beyond dominant economic narratives in Sri Lanka.

3. Theoretical Underpinning

This study examines the lived experiences of women and children in migrant-sending households in Munnakkara, Negombo, affected by men's irregular migration to European countries. Irregular migration is not only an economic process but is also connected with social, emotional, and gendered experiences. The study draws on interdisciplinary perspectives from Global Studies, Migration Studies, Sociology, and Gender Studies. These theoretical perspectives explain how global economic inequalities, migration opportunities, gendered care responsibilities, and transnational family relationships shape the lived experiences of households left behind.

Migration is recognized as a central dimension of globalization and is closely linked to uneven development and global connectedness (de Haas, 2020, p. 17). A key perspective guiding this research is the concept of the **global-local continuum** by Darian-Smith & McCarty (2017, p.12). Scholars such as de Haas (2020) and Sassen (2007) argue that migration is closely connected to globalization, labour demands, and uneven global development. These perspectives elaborate on why migration from Sri Lanka cannot be understood simply as an individual decision driven by poverty. Rather, migration decisions are shaped by broader global and local conditions, including labour shortages in Europe, restrictive migration policies, economic crises in Sri Lanka, and transnational migration networks.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the Sri Lankan context after the Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 economic crisis, which created severe financial insecurity and livelihood instability. Within coastal communities such as Munnakkara, migration increasingly became a survival strategy and a pathway to social mobility. The concept of the global-local continuum helped in analysing how global labour demands, the pandemic, and local economic crises interacted to shape migration aspirations and irregular migration, affecting households both positively and negatively (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017, p. 12).

The study also engages with feminist perspectives on the **gendered care economy**, which forms the central theoretical framework of this research. Feminist scholars argue that migration processes cannot be understood only through remittances, labour mobility, or economic outcomes. Instead, migration must also be examined through the invisible labour, unpaid care work, psychological burdens, and gendered inequalities (Fraser, 2016; Parreñas, 2005; Runyan, 2019). These feminist perspectives were useful for analysing how migration restructures family life in gendered ways, redistributing care responsibilities unevenly within transnational households in Munnakkara.

Parreñas' concept of 'care deficits' was important in understanding how paternal absence increased women's (mothers') caregiving and emotional responsibilities and transformed them into 'intensive mothers' in these households (Parreñas, 2005, pp. 67-79). Although migration was expected to improve household finances, women often became responsible for childcare, debt management, emotional support, and household survival simultaneously. Similarly, Runyan (2019, pp. 112-124) argues that globalization and migration intensify women's invisible labour. Women frequently absorb the social and emotional costs created by labour migration, creating 'gaps in caregiving' (ibid, pp. 112-124). This particular gap is reflected in the analysis through women's experiences of intensified burdens, which place significant pressure on them and negatively affect children's well-being. Fraser (2016) further explains that neoliberal economic systems depend heavily on 'unpaid reproductive labour' while undervaluing care work within households, which is reflected in the analysis.

These feminist perspectives analyse how irregular migration redistributes caregiving responsibilities and emotional labour within transnational households. In this study, women were not simply 'left behind'. They became central actors responsible for maintaining household stability under conditions of uncertainty and debt. The concept of the **triple burden** (Moser, 1993) was also useful in interpreting women's experiences. Many women simultaneously engaged in productive labour, reproductive labour, and community responsibilities while managing emotional stress caused by prolonged separation and financial insecurity (Moser, 1993, pp. 31-35). Further, this resonates with Enloe's (2014) analysis on how global economic systems rely heavily on women's 'invisible and undervalued labour' within households and communities. Through these concepts, the study identified how irregular migration intensifies gendered inequalities and invisible care labour within migrant households. Their labour is unrecognized, even though they carried much of the responsibility for holding families together.

Families are commonly understood as social units shaped by close relationships, caregiving responsibilities, and shared living arrangements (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011, p. 1). The research engages with **transnational family perspectives** to understand the impact of paternal absence on children's well-being. The transnational family perspective explains how family relationships are maintained across borders through remittances, digital communication, relational ties, and caregiving practices despite physical separation (ibid, p. 187- 190). Life within transnational families can bring both opportunities and emotional difficulties for children. The digital communication helps children maintain contact with their fathers, but the physical absence creates

a ‘gap’ in emotional distance and social well-being (Parreñas, 2005, pp. 67-79). This perspective was important in analysing how technology helped maintain contact between migrant fathers and their children while addressing emotional distance and feelings of absence within households.

The study adopts **Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory** (1994) to understand how parental absence directly influences the emotional security and educational well-being of children. Bronfenbrenner explains that children’s development is shaped through interactions within multiple social environments, especially close family relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, pp. 37-41). The concept of the **microsystem**, which includes parents, siblings, and immediate caregivers, was particularly relevant to this study (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, pp. 39-40). The findings show that disruptions in these relationships, particularly when positive interactions with fathers are weakened or absent, can negatively affect a child’s well-being, education, and cognitive development. Emotional presence, caregiving, and parental relationships remain central to children’s psychosocial stability and overall well-being.

Although these theories come from different disciplinary traditions, they complement one another within this study. Globalization perspectives explain the broader structural conditions shaping migration. Feminist care economy perspectives reveal how migration redistributes unpaid labour and emotional responsibilities. Transnational family perspectives help understand the emotional consequences of family separation. These frameworks together helped to analyse irregular migration as a complex process that creates insecurities, affects household relationships, emotional well-being, and gendered everyday life.

The theoretical perspectives also guided the research design and analysis, including the research questions, interview themes, and interpretation of the findings. The analysis employed reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s framework (2006). The coding process emerged inductively from participants’ lived experiences. At the same time, the theoretical framework helped interpret recurring themes and contextualize the findings on how irregular migration reshapes family life within transnational households.

4. Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction to the field site

Munnakkara is a coastal fishing community in Negombo, located in Western Province, Sri Lanka, with an estimated population of around 5000 residents (Village Officer, Focus Group Discussion). It is located near the village of Mankuliya and the suburb of Negombo town. This area is 99% Roman Catholic, with strong kinship ties and livelihoods based on fishing, lagoon-based activities, and tourism.

The community consisted of 99.5% Sinhalese, while the remaining 0.5% included Tamil and Muslim families (Village Officer, FGD). People in this community are fluent in both Sinhala and Tamil, which is quite distinctive in the Sri Lankan context. The typical age of marriage is around 21. Most young women complete their Grade 11 Ordinary Level exams, and a few complete Advanced Level studies. Overall, women are more educated than men in the community and put a strong effort into ensuring their children's education.

Most men in the community, aside from those who migrate, are doing tourism, fishing, or related work such as fish drying, ice production, and boat fiber work. Only a few are employed outside this sector. Most women are housewives; some work in garment factories, run small food stalls, or engage in self-employment.

Most people in the area have average incomes and limited financial literacy, which leads to poor money management and unnecessary spending. Many carry heavy debt and are trapped in debt cycles, frequently falling into the hands of moneylenders. Despite this, when opportunities arise to migrate, they still manage to secure high-interest loans. Migration decisions are strongly influenced by family migration networks and aspirations for economic mobility in European countries such as Italy and France (Senadhi, 2023, p. 152).

The area is highly congested, with narrow 4-6 foot pathways to their houses. Their privacy is limited, and they live as extended families. Despite these conditions, the community is closely connected and supportive, especially in caring for children. Many children above the age of 16 usually help with hauling the fishing nets after school and earn their pocket money. Fishing is also associated with a community perception of economic survival, reflected in the belief that the sea continually provides a harvest.

Religion plays a major role in the everyday life of this community. The majority of the community is Roman Catholic. People maintain strong ties with the church, clergy, and religious activities, making the church a key social and cultural institution. These social, economic, and cultural conditions make Munnakkara a significant setting for examining how irregular migration reshapes household life, gender roles, and experiences of insecurity within transnational families.

4.2 Research sample

Negombo and the suburbs are well-known for transnational regular and irregular migration from 1990 onwards (Brown, 2012). Negombo coastal line is described as Little Rome (Punchi Italiya) due to its strong connections with families and friends who live in Italy through migration (ibid). The Western Province, particularly coastal areas such as Negombo, has consistently recorded high levels of labour migration over the past several decades (SLBFE, 2024, p. 29; Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka, 2024, p. 80). The study focused on Munnakkara 56 and 156B East Munnakkara Grama Niladhari Divisions (Grama Niladhari Division is the smallest administrative unit in Sri Lanka). These areas are known for high migration rates in Negombo, and around 1,500 out of 5,000 residents in Munnakkara are migrants (Village Officer, FGD).

This sample was selected from the above Grama Niladhari Divisions, and all women were Roman Catholics. Purposive snowball sampling was used to identify participants. In qualitative research, sampling plays a key role in identifying participants who can provide meaningful insight into the research problem or ‘intellectual puzzle’ (Mason, 2018, p. 53). The first interviewee and the Focus Group members were introduced by the gatekeeper, who is a school medical practitioner in one of the schools near the field site. As Andoh-Arthur (2019, p. 1) notes, gatekeepers are essential mediators for accessing study settings and participants due to their knowledge and connections within research populations. Through the trust built with the first interviewee, other interviewees were identified through referrals, and subsequent interviewees also assisted in identifying further interviewees and focus group members. The study included interviews with nine women (seven Sinhalese and two Tamil participants). Among the interviewees, three were in their 30s, five were in their 40s, and one was in her early 50s.

All interviewees had children aged between 3 and 20 years (5 girls and 11 boys). There were two households with a single child. Seven of these women completed their Grade 11 examination, two of them passed their Grade 13 examination, and one of them acquired a Diploma in Accountancy. Two women were formally employed, two had small self-employed businesses, and the remaining

five were housewives. All participants belonged to households in which husbands experienced job loss or severe income instability following the Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 economic crisis. During this period, their husbands experienced unstable and irregular incomes. Their husbands migrated during 2021 (five men) and 2022 (four men) to Eastern European countries such as Romania (8) and Serbia (1) with valid work visas and later moved irregularly through one or more channels to Italy (7), France (1), and Poland (1) for better economic opportunities. Although household income levels have generally increased, most households continue to allocate a significant amount of their income toward debt repayment.

4.3 Research design

This research utilized a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of women and children in migrant-sending households affected by men's irregular migration to Europe. Further, qualitative research enabled an in-depth understanding and contextualized analysis of the economic, social, and emotional insecurities experienced within transnational families. As Rubin (2021, p. 30) argues, the strength of qualitative methods lies in their ability to capture detailed descriptions of lived experiences, their complexities, and the depth of everyday life in these households.

4.4 Data collection methods

A semi-structured interview questionnaire guide was used with 17 background and household profile questions, and under 8 themes (including migration decisions, debt, women's responsibilities, children's well-being, emotional separation, elderly parents, social support, and gaps - the questionnaire is attached in the appendix).

In this research, interviews allowed interviewees to discuss deeply personal and sensitive experiences related to irregular migration, debt, family separation, emotional distress, and everyday insecurities that would have been difficult to capture through quantitative methods or observation alone. As Gerson and Damaske (2020, p. 6) argue, qualitative interviews can uncover social and psychological processes that are often not directly observable. These interviews were particularly valuable for exploring hidden emotions, everyday struggles, and the complex relationships between social structures and individual experiences. Furthermore, in-depth interviewing allowed the identification of dynamic processes, lived realities, and relationships between structure and individual experience. The semi-structured format questions were

simplified and provided with examples for each question. Due to that, all participants engaged more openly and independently.

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted to complement the individual interviews by gaining broader community-level perspectives on irregular migration and its impact on families in Munnakkara. The discussion included key community figures who regularly interact with migrant households in different professional and social capacities. The Assistant Parish Priest, a nun from the Good Shepherd Convent living within the community, the Village Officer, a school teacher, a Public Health Midwife, and a church member were included in the FGD. These participants were selected because of their close engagement with migrant families through religious activities, education, public administration, healthcare services, and church committee work. Their experiences provided valuable insights into the lives, health, education, and community dynamics of women and children in Munnakkara. Drawing on their professional and community expertise, they shared broader perspectives on children's school attendance, emotional well-being, women's caregiving responsibilities, community involvement, family relationships, health, and wider changes within the community.

The FGD was held in the Holy Cross Church area in Munnakkara and was led by the Assistant Parish Priest. The discussion lasted nearly two hours and followed a semi-structured guide organized under nine thematic areas (FGD question guide attached in the appendix). Ground rules relating to confidentiality, respect for differing views, and voluntary participation were explained at the beginning. Follow-up questions and examples were used where necessary to encourage discussion and clarify responses. The FGD not only confirmed many of the findings from the individual interviews but also helped identify shared community experiences, social norms, and underlying dynamics surrounding irregular migration and transnational family life.

Further, a five-week ethnographic observation was conducted to better understand the everyday realities of migrant-sending households and the social environment of Munnakkara. The observation complemented the interviews and FGD by providing contextual insights into daily routines, religious life, caregiving practices, work-related hardships, and community interactions. Participation in community activities, including church events, the Season of Lent, and school sports meets, created opportunities for informal conversations and observation of social relationships within the community.

Observations also provided insights into women's everyday responsibilities, children's behaviour, community attitudes toward migration, and the emotional dimensions of prolonged family separation. Although many observations were not directly included in the analysis, they contributed to contextual understanding and helped validate recurring themes and interview findings.

Using interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation enabled data triangulation, compared experiences across different sources, and provided an understanding of everyday life within migrant households. These qualitative methods aligned with the study's interpretive and reflexive thematic approach. It seeks to understand how global structural processes such as migration are experienced and negotiated within everyday household life.

4.5 Interview setting – venue, duration, and language

I conducted all the interviews in person in interviewees' own households, and interviews lasted between two and four and a half hours. One interviewee required additional time due to the recent loss of her husband following an irregular migration. I obtained verbal consent, and only one interviewee agreed to an audio recording. For the rest of the interviewees, I took detailed notes. I carefully documented all relevant information shared during the conversations. They allowed time for note-taking, and several interviews were paused when interviewees became emotional, particularly when discussing debt, family separation, and children's well-being. I understood their hesitancy as interviewees for the audio recording. They were uncomfortable with that due to the sensitive nature of irregular migration, their personal experiences, and legal vulnerabilities.

I conducted the interviews in the local language, Sinhala, which enabled more natural conversations and allowed interviewees to express emotional and personal experiences more comfortably during the past 6-10 years.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed of anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation, their right to withdraw at any stage, and their right to ask me any questions. Before each interview, interviewees were informed that they did not have to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with. Also, they could

request that shared information not be included in the research. These steps were important because of the sensitive nature of irregular migration and participants' concerns about privacy and possible consequences.

Given the sensitivity of irregular migration, personal data, sensitive data, and interview notes were securely stored (Ethics forms attached in the appendix). I ensured that the study would not contribute to discrimination, disadvantage, or harm toward interviewees. They were also requested to write their recommendations and suggestions wherever possible, and these have been incorporated into the conclusion and policy recommendation sections in this thesis.

During the study, I came across an exceptional case. One interviewee shared the sudden death of her husband (47 years old) due to a sudden heart attack. Due to his irregular migration path, all the officials in both countries are not responsive to this family. This interview was taken for more than 4 hours, with continuous crying and emotional outbursts from the interviewee. Due to the emotional sensitivity of the interview, additional care was taken during and after the discussion, including referral to free professional counselling support. Also, I encouraged her daughter to continue her education, regardless of any difficult situation in her life. After completing the report, I contacted her again and shared the sections written about her experiences anonymously, while also explaining my findings. Since her experiences were emotionally sensitive, I reconfirmed her consent to include them in the study and encouraged her to seek additional support services that are available in Sri Lanka.

4.7 Positionality

Social power, academic authority, and knowledge production are important considerations in research (Kvale, 2007, p.88). The power dimension, authority, and relationship between the interviewee and me are different as a student from a European University interviewing a local woman in a household. But as a Sri Lankan who is experienced in development sector work with children and women, I was able to balance the power dynamics through the discussion. I was able to build trust with the interviewees before starting the interviews during the initial discussion.

Throughout the interviews, I remained attentive to how interviewees presented themselves and narrated their experiences. Maintaining transparency about the research objectives and recognizing and minimizing biases when interviewing them made sense of their responses. Many of them

shared deeply personal experiences and emotions. Many interviewees expressed appreciation for not being judged, being empathetic, and being carefully listened to. Being Sri Lankan also enabled me to better understand the community's subculture and its relationship to broader Sri Lankan social realities. As I have access to these data as a researcher, they appreciate the effort to reveal these narratives related to their lives.

At the same time, being Sri Lankan and familiar with the local social and cultural context may have influenced how I understood certain experiences shared by interviewees. Some issues related to gender roles, family responsibilities, and migration aspirations felt familiar to me because of these shared cultural understandings. To address this, I remained reflexive throughout the research process and encouraged interviewees to explain their experiences in their own words rather than relying on my own assumptions or interpretations.

4.8 Research analysis

My notes were lengthy, as interviews lasted between two and four half hours. The recorded interview was transcribed and translated into English with other written interview notes. An index of the interviews was created, and only the most relevant sections were translated due to the length of the interviews; the FGD was fully translated. Ethnographic observation notes are also incorporated where needed.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework (2006, p. 79-93). A primarily inductive, bottom-up coding technique was used, allowing themes to emerge from interviewees' lived experiences and narratives. Data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic observations were analysed using NVivo software. After familiarization with the translated transcripts, initial open coding was conducted to identify recurring ideas, emotions, and experiences emerging from participants' narratives (codebook is attached in the appendix). These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories through an analytical process. During the coding process, memos were written to record emerging interpretations, relationships between codes, and reflections on participants' lived experiences. A research note diary was useful throughout the data analysis process. While themes emerged from interviewees' narratives, findings were later interpreted using relevant perspectives from Migration Studies, Gender Studies, Sociology, and Global Studies. The findings are presented through a balance of participants' quotations and analytical interpretation to capture the complexity of lived experiences.

4.9 Limitations and delimitations

Even though I am a Sri Lankan, interviewees initially maintained some distance at the beginning, but after the initial discussion before the interview, they were more open and shared their experiences. One Muslim woman who had initially agreed to participate in the interview withdrew later due to personal concerns and fears within her family regarding possible legal consequences related to the discussion.

Due to ethical considerations, children were not directly interviewed. The findings relating to children's experiences are collected through mothers' narratives. There may be some biases stemming from mothers that I cannot avoid. I interacted with children informally in the presence of their mothers or teachers during field visits and during their school sports meet. These interactions provided additional contextual understanding of children's aspirations, behaviours, and everyday experiences within migrant households.

During the fieldwork, I stayed in rented accommodation located a few kilometres away from the research site and travelled daily to the community. The research was conducted during the season of Lent, which required the rescheduling of interviews due to religious pilgrimages and prayer meetings.

While many examples that emerged across themes, only important and selected cases are presented in this thesis due to the word limitations. This study is delimited to the insecurities and consequences experienced by migrant-sending households in Munnakkara, Negombo, where men migrated to Europe through irregular pathways. It does not examine the lived experiences of irregular migrants themselves.

5. Analysis

This chapter examines how the men's irregular migration to Europe affects the everyday family life of the left behind families. Beyond the family's economic conditions, it explores women's social and emotional security and children's holistic well-being. The analysis is divided into four sections. The first identifies financial insecurity in migrant-sending households, their hardships, and their hopes. The second addresses the children's well-being, and the third analyzes the gendered burdens and the restructuring of women's roles. The fourth discusses the informal support systems and coping mechanisms. Drawing on qualitative data, ethnographic details, and combining theoretical frameworks, the analysis shows how irregular migration operates and produces ongoing insecurities over uncertain periods. It also highlights how migration shapes future aspirations while revealing the contradiction that is incorporated within the entire process.

5.1 Between hardship and hope: financial insecurity in migrant-sending households

From the late 1990s onward, young men in Sri Lanka from across the country considered migration to Europe as a solution to the challenges they faced at home, including the civil war in the North, political violence against youth in the South, and high unemployment (Brown, 2012). However, transnational migration to Europe, particularly to Italy, is driven by family ties and is monopolized by Catholic youth from Chilaw, Wennappuwa, Negombo, and the Western coastal seaboard (ibid). While migration is perceived as a path to economic and social advancement, it has produced significant insecurity. These challenges affect families, especially women and children left behind, as well as the migration process and migrant men in host countries.

The findings reveal how irregular migration both responds to and reproduces financial insecurity within these households. Since the migration occurred through irregular paths, as well as the current financial issues and realities, it has not provided immediate financial stability. Further, migration generated new economic vulnerabilities, more debts for several years, and pressure on women who manage their households in the absence of their husbands. This section discusses financial insecurity through interrelated dimensions: economic pressure as a driver of migration, the debt cycle and the financial trap, and irregular remittances. These dynamics show how the migration process operates in an uncertain economic environment, led by the structural differences in the country and global conditions.

5.1.1 Economic pressure and migration decision

Sri Lanka experienced the most acute economic crisis in 2022 after its independence, marked by the country's first-ever sovereign default, loss of foreign reserves, inflation, and shortages of food, medicine, fuel, and 15 hours of power cuts every day (Ministry of Finance, 2023). The crisis stemmed from multiple factors, including declining foreign reserves, the collapse of tourism due to the Easter Sunday Attack and the COVID-19 pandemic, ill-advised tax cuts, and disastrous organic farming policy. China's lending practices played a crucial role in the debt and economic crisis as well.

- Economic pressures on households

The central finding across the data highlighted that the majority of the migration journey of these people started from 2021 onwards. The code economic pressure is described as the structural financial hardship that drives the decision to migrate. The interviewees highlighted that the economic condition of the country, which affected the household level, driven to make the decision rather than an aspiration. They further described that financial hardship, job loss, and the rising cost of living are the key factors that influence the decision. These pressures intensified in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attack and the COVID-19 pandemic. These causes disrupted their livelihood related to fishing and its industry, as well as the tourism industry that they depend on, resulting in reduced or lost income.

Due to the above-mentioned situations, families find it difficult to meet their basic needs. One interviewee mentioned that her husband "came home and cried" because he could no longer manage household expenses after losing his job during COVID-19 (interviewee 2). Similarly, another highlighted that "my husband was not someone who originally wanted to go abroad. Due to COVID-19, the boat-repairing work stopped, and he lost his job. Although he did small repair jobs, he did not have a stable job or stable income" (interviewee 5), highlighting how migration emerged as a solution rather than a planned decision.

There was only one interviewee who mentioned that her husband willingly migrated during that time. Interviewee 9 mentioned that her husband had "always been interested in going abroad for work". Even though she didn't support the decision, she felt they had "no solution" to the difficulties they faced. Her husband lost his job as a tour guide after the Easter Sunday attack, and then the situation was intensified by the economic crisis in the country. But he was interested to

go abroad with his personal aspiration as well as a solution to his financial issues. Including him, two interviewees' husbands had migrated before to the Middle-East countries, before their marriages. Due to a lack of salaries, they returned to Sri Lanka.

These scenarios can be further analysed within the global-local continuum on how global forces and changes affect local households both positively and negatively (Darian-Smith & McCarthy, 2017, pp. 12). The country's economic crisis, Chinese loans, regional political interference, and the COVID-19 pandemic intersect with local households, creating hardships for them. This shows that the impacts of the national economic crises were experienced directly by the community in Munnakara through job loss, debt, and household insecurity. This emphasizes how migration-related crises affect both national structures and everyday household realities in different ways. Migration System theory further suggests that migration is shaped by inequalities and global demands rather than individual choices (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020, p. 43). In the Sri Lankan context, local economic instability intersects with global opportunities that create conditions in which migration becomes a necessity.

- Migration decision and transnational networks

This area and the community have a history of migration and close ties with relatives in European countries. In this study, men initially migrate through legal channels, obtaining work visas to Eastern European countries. Among these interviewees' husbands, 8 traveled to Romania, and 1 to Serbia. However, due to unstable employment and changing conditions, they did not receive the initially agreed or expected salary. That increased burden of debt, and then they moved through irregular routes to Western and Southern European countries, particularly 7 moved to Italy, 1 to France, and 1 to Poland, in search of better opportunities. This shift toward irregular migration is often not pre-planned. It emerges as a response to the constraints encountered after arrival. As one interviewee explained, "Initially, my husband did not plan to go to Italy. Due to salary issues in Romania, he decided to move (interviewee 8). This pattern was reflected across seven cases in the study of nine interviews, highlighting how irregular migration evolves in response to changing conditions. Most migrants initially planned to return to Sri Lanka after completing their initial two-year contracts and later migrate again. However, the other two migrants had already intended to move to Italy after spending several years in Romania when they began their migration journey from Sri Lanka. Despite these different plans, changing conditions eventually pushed them to migrate irregularly.

Departures from Sri Lanka to foreign employment - 2022

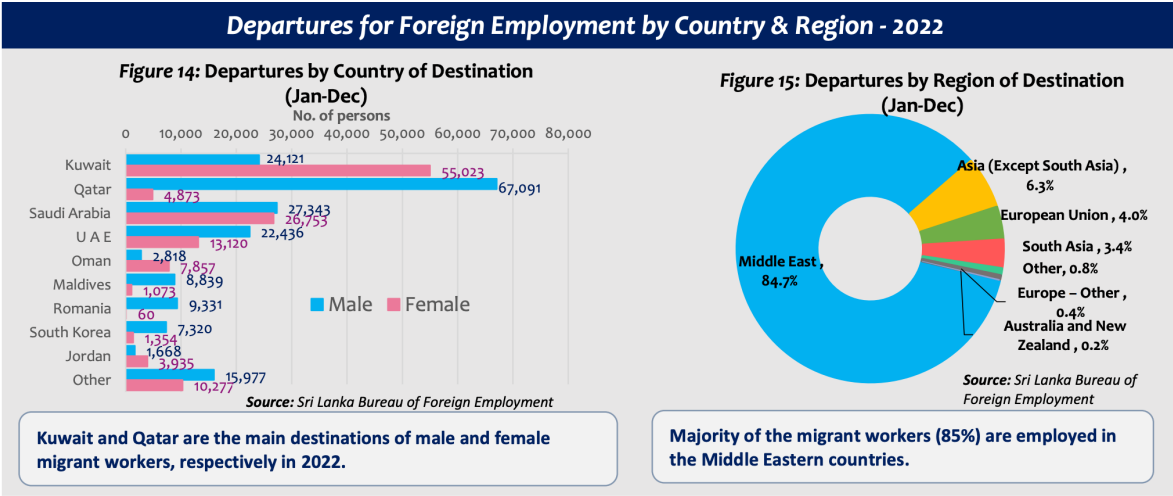


Figure 1: Source: Quarterly bulletin of workers’ remittance and labour migration (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022).

The graph shows the number of Sri Lankan workers who left for foreign employment in 2022. Romania recorded the highest number of departures among European countries with 9,391 in total (9,331 men and 60 women). This trend continued from 2022 through the fourth quarter of 2025, with Romania remaining the leading destination in Europe (Quarterly bulletin of workers’ remittance and labour migration, 2025). This suggests that Romania has become a relatively accessible entry point for obtaining work visas and potentially moving on to other European destinations.

All of them took irregular routes to reach their current destination and live there without a valid visa, but applied for asylum and refugee status in the country while doing part-time jobs. The nun participating in the focus group discussion explained that migration had become “a necessity” and “a trend” within the area (Nun, FGD). Similarly, interviewee 9 mentioned that “he decided to move to Italy on his own. Some of his family members who are abroad influenced him.” It can be understood that their financial issues, family connections abroad, as well as some of their personal desires, led them to migrate irregularly, even with a significant risk. In many cases, the migration decision is shaped by economic necessity and social expectations. The normalization of migration within the community created a context in which going abroad was seen as a feasible, expected solution to financial difficulties. As a result, the migration has been embedded as one of the possible strategies to overcome the hardships in households.

Importantly, the decision to migrate was taken as a collective family decision in most households rather than an individual decision. Most of the interviewees and their husbands discussed the migration decision together. Also, a family member or a friend of theirs involved later who had migrated and settled in a European country. Interviewee 3 mentioned that “both of us together decided his migration” and “his friends abroad shared a lot of information about the process”. However, the economic pressure limited the planning and created different uncertainties in their lives. “The agency had promised that he would receive a salary of 3,300 Romanian Lei along with free food and accommodation. Later, nothing was received free. It was winter, and he had many expenses for food, accommodation, and winter clothing. Because of this, he could not even send fifty thousand rupees (Sri Lankan currency) home per month,” said interviewee 4 during the conversation. It revealed that her husband was not able to send at least 150 United States Dollar during those months.

This created severe financial pressure in the household and expedited the process of irregular migration for better salaries and opportunities. Further, she mentioned that her husband had said he would “escape to Italy even by bus” because he stayed in Romania for seven months, “with many difficulties” (interviewee 4). Once he moved irregularly to Italy, family members supported him by paying for the journey and providing accommodation until he found a job. Later, she sent money to the relatives who had financed the journey by taking another loan through an informal channel. This highlights the importance and connection of transnational family ties and support networks in the migration process.

- Educational aspirations and financial pressures

Further, their economic pressure went beyond the day-to-day household expenses when children started their education in Grade 1. All the interviewees highlighted that they want to provide a quality education for their children and enable them to achieve their dreams. For this purpose, they required a considerable financial investment for school admission, which created financial stress. “...we admitted our son to school by paying about five hundred and fifty thousand rupees, and for that, we had to take loans (interviewee 1). This amount is nearly 2000 United States Dollar and equal to 6 months’ salary of her husband at that time in Sri Lanka. This highlights the additional financial pressure on households as they attempt to meet daily needs, while investing in long-term educational aspirations. Also, in the Sri Lankan context, once the father or a parent is abroad,

without knowing the real circumstances, schools charge an extra amount from those children. One interviewee shared that, “at my daughter’s school admission, both parents were required to attend the interview. I felt very helpless. When I said my husband is abroad, they asked for extra money. But my husband was unemployed at that time. He did small part-time jobs. I took another loan of Rs. 200,000 from my office to pay for the admission” (interviewee 9). This illustrates the immediate financial stress on these families in educational aspirations.

From the analytical point of view, these findings show that migration in this community can be understood as a response to the structural economic conditions that created vulnerabilities in households. In this discussion, migration is reflected as a strategy of survival within a context of economic vulnerability rather than representing social upward mobility.

5.1.2 Debt cycle and financial trap

While economic pressure initiates migration, the process of migration and the existing conditions in the households are closely connected with debts. The debt cycle is a common feature in all households. It is identified as ongoing and interconnected borrowing before and after migration, creating a long-term financial trap. All participants mentioned that they had to take loans, pawn jewellery, borrowing from relatives to finance migration. Furthermore, the persistence of debt cycles challenges the narratives of migration as a development strategy. While remittances are often promoted as a ‘key driver of economic growth’, this research finds that they can be insufficient to offset the costs of migration for some time, particularly in cases of irregular mobility (Sriskandarajah, 2002, p. 291).

- Financing migration through debts

The cost of migration was a considerable amount for these families and required them to find it through multiple financial resources, as mentioned above. Interviewee 1 mentioned that they obtained the money by taking a “five-hundred-thousand-rupee loan”. They also pawned her gold jewellery to find money, and “those items are still not redeemed”. Taking loans for migration in this context is “very common, as they do not have any other option,” said PHM during FGD. And also, debt is not a one-time process, and it is a continuous process. Interviewee 5 explained that her family remained “always in debt” because they continuously borrowed money to repay previous loans. Many interviewees described that they had to borrow another loan to repay existing

loans, creating a cycle of debt and a financial trap. Across eight households, irregular migration was also financed through loans, with wives later contributing financially by sending money to support the migration process. Many households become trapped in ongoing debt that continues long after migration. This further intensified women's economic burden within the household.

High interest rates further intensify this, due to informal lending arrangements. "We do not have assets to get loans, which is why we had to take high-interest loans," said interviewee 5 during the discussion. All of these families do not have any assets, and they do not meet the basic requirements for a loan from the government or private banks in Sri Lanka. So, they had to depend on informal arrangements. All interviewees reported that they are paying a significant amount of the remittances to pay the interest and loan taken out. Interviewee 9 noted that remittances were mainly used to "repay loans and interest" rather than improve household living conditions. And it was intensified once their husbands moved to another country through irregular routes, until they found a proper job there. "My husband was unemployed for 3-4 months in Italy after traveling from Romania. I managed all household work and financial things on my own. We have not paid the loan for some time since we do not have money," interviewee 9 shared further. At the same time, once they took loans for the migration, they took an extra amount for 2-3 months for the household expenses, as they do not know when the husband sends money to fulfil the monthly requirements.

Further, it can be identified that these migrant families have been cheated by some agents during the migration journey. There were mediators from the same community between them and the agent, and with that trust, most of them had given a considerable amount to go to European countries with a valid visa. "In 2017, my husband tried to go to Austria. We pawned our jewellery and borrowed about 1.2 million rupees. My husband went to India for visa processing. Later, we found out that it was a fraud. (interviewee 1). Interviewee 6 mentioned that "the legal case we filed was rejected as the given receipts to us were fake". These situations also intensified their financial pressure and debt at that time, and they felt no other solution than to migrate to a European country.

- The social and emotional burden of debt

Debt also has important social and emotional dimensions. The pressure to repay loans creates ongoing stress among these women and affects their mental well-being. Interviewee 6 mentioned that "even thinking about repaying debts gives me headaches," which depicts the nature of

financial stress. Further, interviewee 5 shared that “the money my husband sends home is not enough. We still have many debts. I think about my life, and I feel anger, sadness, and frustration. I often ask myself, “Why is this happening to me?” with tears in her eyes. Drawing from the theoretical perspectives, the burden of debt also has significant gendered implications, as women are primarily responsible for managing household finances. This reflects the feminist argument on how gendered inequalities and global labour mobility disproportionately affect women, who bear the hidden costs of economic restructuring in households (Runyan, 2019, pp. 112-114).

In addition, the debt relationship often extended beyond the formal financial institutions. It includes family, close relatives, and informal networks. Borrowing from relatives and extended family members puts additional pressure on these women, as it may introduce another expectations. “During the months when I do not have money, my sisters lent me about one hundred thousand rupees each time,” shared (interviewee 6). “...My relatives help me during the hard times. If they need help, I have to do it as it is my chance to pay back,” said the interviewee 5. This highlights the nature of obligation as a part of this process. All these women are in charge of the household finances. They are responsible for navigating these complex situations and, further intensifying their insecurities, burden, and relationships.

From theoretical perspective, this debt cycle and the financial trap highlight the limitations of migration as a strategy for economic improvement. Rather than minimizing the financial insecurity in these households, irregular migration continues to create financial issues for years, putting them into debt and dependency. As Bhambra (2021, p. 309- 311) argues, postcolonial economic structures continue to shape patterns of labour mobility. In countries like Sri Lanka, positioned within unequal global systems, migration becomes a household strategy. Then the risks and financial burdens are largely borne by families rather than the institutions.

5.1.3 Irregular remittances and transnational financial precarity

Another dimension of financial insecurity is connected with the instability of remittances. Irregular remittances are described as unstable, insufficient, or unpredictable financial support from migrant workers. They are often unpredictable and insufficient to meet the household needs and the payment of monthly installments of debt. Basically, remittances are identified as the main benefit of labour migration. The findings of this research revealed that remittances are highly variable, sent to households at different timelines due to the context of irregular migration.

Workers' remittance inflows by country to Sri Lanka - 2025

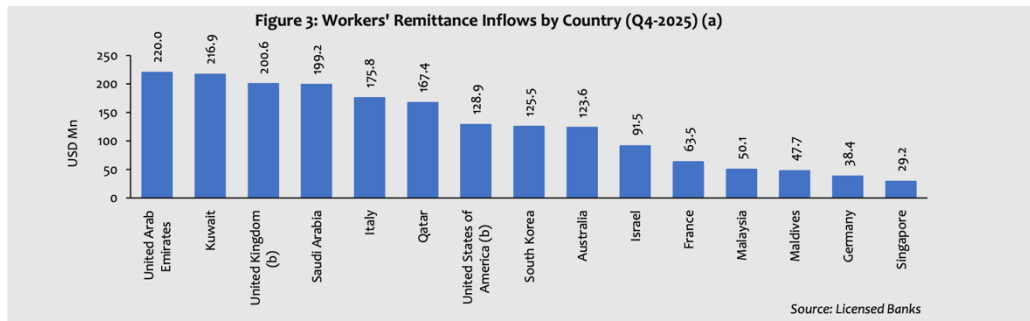


Figure 2: Source: Quarterly bulletin of workers' remittance and labour migration (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2025)

The graph depicts the remittances inflow to Sri Lanka, and notes that Italy led the highest remittances inflow from 2020 to 2025 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2025). The interviewees mentioned that their husbands in Italy send remittances via formal bank channels, and also through informal channels such as Undial.¹

- Labour conditions in the destination countries

All interviewees reported that their migrant men work in poor conditions in Italy, Poland, and France, often doing 2-3 part-time jobs due to the lack of legal documentation. Most of them work in restaurants, cleaning, plumbing, as kitchen helpers, and doing seasonal jobs.

Due to the lack of legal work rights, most of them are paid less. This reflects the broader dynamics of the global labour market, where migrant workers often work informal, insecure, and low-paid jobs (Sassen, 1999 & 2007, p. 69). In this context, irregular migrants lack job security, no legal protection, no proper working rights, earn less salary for the job, and have no power to demand certain rights. This makes their earnings highly unpredictable. As a result, the unstable economic situation of migrant workers abroad directly affects their families back home. This situation is confirmed by interviewee 9 by saying “.....later, he started daily wage work, which is not stable. He sends money through informal channels (undial) every three months”. Primarily, the women in

¹ Special note from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL): Here, remittances from the United Kingdom mainly include remittances diverted from other source countries due to cross-border forex transactions arrangements and other remittances, such as those received following Cyclone Ditwa¹h in Sri Lanka at the end of November and early December. (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2025).

the migrant household, especially as the person of reproductive labour, have to manage everything, including household expenses, debts, and the education expenses of children.

Further, this highlights how global rules, politics, and economic processes create localized forms of precarities. As Darian-Smith and McCarthy argue (2017, pp.12 & 89), this depicts how ‘macro-level economic transformations are experienced by micro-level households’ in deep personal ways in Negombo, Sri Lanka. Global migration policies restrict these migrants’ economic opportunities, creating situations where labour is similar but wages differ due to unequal rights to work. These structural inequalities shape income flows and influence everyday financial decisions within local households.

- Uncertainty and the irregularity of remittances

The unpredictability of remittances creates significant challenges for these households’ financial management. As the primary responsible person in the household, women must plan for everything without knowing when the remittance arrives. This creates a high uncertainty in their daily lives and increases the debt cycle. “My four sisters and a brother helped me a lot during this difficult time. During the months when my husband could not send money, my siblings supported our household expenses,” said the interviewee 6, highlighting how she borrowed a small amount from her siblings when remittance did not arrive. This shows how irregular income reproduces dependency on informal support networks.

Moreover, the gap between the expectations and reality of migration is particularly striking in irregular migration. However, all interviewees reported that actual earnings were lower than promised due to job insecurity, wage deductions, and exploitative working conditions. Interviewee 6 described that after deductions for food and accommodation, her husband had “very little money” to send home. This situation not only delays debt repayment but also deepens the financial instability in the household, reinforcing the cycle of economic insecurity. Further, the timing of remittances intensified these challenges. Delays in sending money create immediate difficulties for households, forcing women to adopt short-term coping strategies to meet urgent needs. “When there are emergencies, medical expenses, I borrow small amounts from others,” said interviewee 1. This highlights the dimension of financial insecurity, where uncertainty is not only about the amount of income but also its timing.

Importantly, the unpredictable nature of remittances has broader implications for household well-being. It limits the ability of families to invest in long-term improvements as they expected from the migration. Instead of buying land and housing, investing in education, or savings, they focus on short-term survival, such as paying debts on time, getting rid of the debt cycle, and covering daily expenses. In this sense, migration does not necessarily facilitate upward mobility but rather sustains and provides temporary support for ongoing economic conditions in the household.

The findings can also be understood through the concept of ontological security, which emphasizes the importance of stability and predictability in everyday life and individuals' sense of well-being (Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 240). The uncertainty created by irregular remittance disrupts the plans for the future, also creating anxiety and fear in the lives of women due to their current living conditions. The insecurity extends beyond the material conditions, affecting their emotional and psychological well-being and sense of stability. This reveals how migration, rather than providing economic stability, often produces transnational financial precarity. The uncertainty is distributed across borders and experienced most intensely at the household level.

Due to a lack of knowledge and a tendency, these communities tend to take loans when it is needed, and they do not have saving habits. "...Many women are used to borrowing daily, with very high interest rates. They are financially unstable, and debt causes significant mental stress," said the Nun during the FGD. Further, she highlighted that conduct programs such as savings initiatives with the support of Caritas (one of the NGOs in Sri Lanka) and government banks in the area to raise awareness and encourage them to save.

This section has highlighted that financial insecurity is both a driver and a consequence of men's irregular migration. Rather than providing a path to get out of poverty, migration creates a complex uncertainty and economic insecurity in these households for some years, and they have to adapt to the changing circumstances. By examining these lived experiences of women in migrant households, this study identifies the broader conditions that shape migration decisions and outcomes.

5.2 Children's well-being in transnational households

Men's irregular migration significantly affected children's emotional well-being, family relationships, and educational experiences within migrant-sending households. This is a significant area to look into, as irregular migration differs from regular migration. This section examines children's well-being in two key dimensions: emotional distress and educational impact. The analysis highlights that paternal absence creates different conditions in these children's lives beyond the material and financial deprivation.

5.2.1 Emotional distress and psychosocial insecurity

- Children's holistic well-being

Most of the interviewees highlight the intensity of emotional attachment of children to their fathers and the difficult situation of adjusting to absence. Several mothers (interviewees) reported crying, anxiety, emotional withdrawal, sleep disturbances, and school refusal among their children. Interviewee 1 shared with tears that her son hid his father's clothes before departure because he did not want him to leave, and later "cried in his sleep, asking for his father."

Similarly, interviewee 5 described that her daughter cried for an extended period and refused to eat and go to school. "There is a very strong bond between my daughter and her father. When he left, she stood near the gate and cried for hours without even coming inside". These situations are still continuing in two families with single girl children. Apart from two participants of this interview, all the other 7 participants talked about this experience with tears, and their children are aged 3 – 16 (12 children). In the other two cases, in one family, two children are very close to their mother and not to their father. In the other family, both children are aged 16 and 20, and their mother mentioned that they love their father but were not that emotional during his departure or afterwards. These examples show the profound emotional impact of separation, particularly among younger and teenagers who rely on paternal presence for love, guidance, and security at their age.

- Psychosocial well-being and paternal absence

The long-term absence of the father due to irregular migration disrupts children's emotional stability and development, which are essential to their well-being. Children often struggle to understand the reasons for their father's absence, leading to confusion and emotional distress. Disruptions in the relationships and positive interactions are weakened or absent between father and children can negatively affect a child's well-being (Guy-Evans, 2024, p. 1). As interviewee 1 explained, "the children are growing up without their father during the most important years of their lives".

Further, this disruption of family structures due to migration creates severe insecurity among children, as mothers report. "Children often ask their fathers to come back. They are frequently sick and mentally weak," said the Catholic Nun during the FGD, while Interviewee 9 mentioned that after her husband left, her 9-year-old daughter "started wetting the bed every night," and it continues. Most of these mothers sought professional medical help, which is available in Government hospitals for free, and also from private hospitals. "My younger son started crying frequently and even developed a speech difficulty during that period. I took him to a doctor, and we are continuing treatment," shared interviewee 4 during the discussion. The PHM stated that children under 10 in these families received advice after identifying these issues.

- Emotional gap within transnational families

These findings reflect Parreñas' (2005, p. 67 -79) concept of "care deficits" and "gap" within transnational families. The financial support cannot fully replace emotional presence and everyday caregiving. Although digital communication helped maintain contact through video calls and voice messages, interviewees consistently emphasized that emotional closeness could not fully compensate for physical absence. The emotional impact of separation was especially severe because irregular migration involved prolonged uncertainty. Unlike temporary labour migration with predictable return periods, women and children often did not know when husbands or fathers would return or obtain legal documentation. This uncertainty intensified children's emotional insecurity and weakened their sense of stability. During the discussion, the researcher observed that mothers attempt to fill these gaps, but the absence of a father remains a significant void in these children's lives, as most families are nuclear.

Children's emotional distress is also shaped and intensified by the emotional state of their mothers. All women experience stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and social stress due to increased responsibilities, reproductive household duties, and financial insecurities. These emotions directly and indirectly affect children. In Sri Lankan society, physical punishments are very common in most households. Most of the participants reported that they are becoming more irritable and less patient with their children quite often, which influenced children's behavioural and emotional feelings. "When I get angry, scold them or hit them, they say that if their father were here, he would not allow me to hit them," shared interviewee 3 during the discussion. Interviewee 1 mentioned that she cried before sleeping when she remembered the daily incidents, especially if she had inflicted physical punishment on her children during the day, even if there was no point in later repenting. But the pressure always passed over the children. Further, she said, "...sometimes I get to know about their feelings from my husband. Children do not share with me when we have arguments...", (interviewee 1). This highlights the interconnected nature of the family situation at the moment in these households, where different experiences and issues are closely linked.

Moreover, children really missed their father regularly as well as important days. Especially when they enter school in Grade 1, they really miss their father's presence. "When my daughter entered Grade 1, my daughter and I went to school, and one child asked my daughter whether you dad had died? and I cried from the inside, and my heart was heavy," said interviewee 9 very emotionally. "Our children feel the absence of their father deeply. Especially during church feasts and Christmas, they talk about how their father is not here," said interviewee 1. "..... she marks days on the calendar, trying to guess when he will return," said interviewee 5, even though she does not know when her father will get a proper visa to come back home. "While little children face psychological challenges, young adults are motivated by their fathers' sacrifices and do well in their education," said the teacher during the focus group discussion. Also, young adults can understand the situation in the family, and they try to convince their younger siblings as well. Interviewee 8 shared that when something happened at home, her elder son would say not to tell anything to his father because "he has many issues there and he is alone."

This was voiced by interviewee 2, after her husband's tragic death in Italy. "My son seems to suffer from anxiety. He talks very little. My daughter is the one who tries to stay emotionally strong for all of us." They haven't seen their father in person for 4 years, and they never will again. The children feel their father's absence deeply. This stands out as one of the most tragic consequences

of irregular migration. There is no one accountable, and the loss is left entirely with the family. This emotional cost is higher than everything else.

Children often develop coping mechanisms on their own that reflect their attempts to deal with their father's absence. Some of the children aged 15 and above can understand the situation, while the younger ones show their increased attachments. They have identified some objects that relate to their father and keep them with them. "My son still sleeps, keeping a T-shirt of his father's near to his pillow," shared interviewee 1 during the conversation. "When my husband left, my younger son used to cry while looking at his father's photographs," said interviewee 4, and her little son kept a photograph next to his bed. These children's behaviours indicate their attempt to maintain a sense of connection with their father. These experiences can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory, particularly the concept of the microsystem, which emphasizes the importance of close family relationships in children's emotional and cognitive development. The prolonged absence of fathers affected everyday emotional interaction, guidance, and supervision within children's social environment.

Overall, these findings resonate with theoretical perspectives that children in migrant households experience a form of psychosocial insecurity. This emotional distance can lead to feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and social difficulties in children's lives, and that gap can sometimes be 'irreparable' (Parreñas, 2005, pp. 67-79). Their emotional well-being is shaped by uncertainty, the absence of their father, and disrupted family dynamics. This challenges the common perspective of economic benefits and highlights the broader social and emotional burden that children carry during childhood.

5.2.2 Educational impact and future aspirations

In addition to the emotional distress created by the paternal absence, there are several positive and negative implications for children's education. Educational impact on children is described as the negative effects of migration on children's schooling, concentration, or academic performance. Interviewees shared their children's educational challenges, irregular attendance, and less concentration after the father's migration. Also, a few of them are doing well academically and are engaged in extra activities.

An interviewee mentioned that her child's performance in school had declined after his father's migration, and he was struggling to focus on his studies. Interviewee 1 explained that her son, previously considered a student who focused on education, began struggling academically and "walking around during lessons" after his father left. Another participant shared that her child refused to go to school soon after the father's departure, which reflects that emotional distress can disrupt education and their academics. "...she did not go to school. This situation continued for about two months. Eventually, after teachers visited and supported her emotionally, she returned to school," (interviewee 5). Further, interviewee shared that her husband also felt this deeply and even asked if he should return to Sri Lanka if she discontinued her schooling. These findings highlight the connection between emotional well-being directly affect their education. When children experience anxiety, sadness, and loneliness, it leads to poor academic performance. Also, this depicts that even though there is financial support for education, their minds are tied to deeply psychosocial aspects. Bourdieu (1986) discussed that children's educational outcomes are shaped through parental support and the resources provided by them. In the context of migration, when the paternal absence disrupts this support, it limits the educational achievements of children.

Furthermore, in these households, while mothers take all responsibilities, they have limited time to support their children's studies. "I am extremely tired and stressed, usually in the middle of the week. Helping for daughters's homework is also an extra work, sometimes feeling like a burden. My mother helps her a lot", shared interviewee 9, and she said she feels guilty about that. Since most of these women are working at different levels, they are not able to provide the guidance and encouragement needed for their children to perform well in school. These dynamics also reflect the nature of transnational family arrangements. As Runyan (2019, p. 121-124) argues, globalization and migration often increase women's labour and responsibilities while simultaneously creating gaps in caregiving. In these households, women's increased workload limited their ability to provide educational support, which affects children's education.

In addition, depending on the remittances and the debts, these educational challenges vary for the households. Some households that are struggling with more debts and financial insecurities try hard to send their children to private or semi-government schools. They have to pay a considerable amount for admission, fees, and other requirements, but they hold it for some time due to instability of remittances. Migration decision has been considered in these families to support children's education, but irregular remittances and debt limit their ability for a certain period. The long-term implications of these educational disruptions are significant if the children lose future

opportunities. And it may continue the cycle of inequality. “My daughter wants to be a pilot. My husband always said that he would sponsor and send her to a European university. He worked hard for that. But I do not know what to do now,” said interviewee 2 with tears, whose husband died in Italy.

Despite these structural conditions, these mothers make a strong effort to educate their children, send them to local universities, and explore opportunities overseas. “We always encourage the children to study well, succeed, and go to university,” said interviewee 1, and she said that her children should step into a world that was never open to her. The migrant fathers who are stable to some extent, send continuous remittances, and children in those families engaging in extra curricular activities in school too. “He also supports their sports activities and says he does not want them to go through the struggles he faced during his childhood,” shared interviewee 8 during the discussion. Her elder son is doing athletics in a prominent Boys’ school in the area, and the family allocates a considerable amount of money for his sports journey.

The focus group discussion revealed their existing experiences while working with the community. The teacher and the nun confirmed that some mothers are very committed to educating their children, and those children perform well in academic and other activities. The Assistant Priest and the Sunday Catechism understand that the education levels are very low in the community. “Parents, especially for boys, do not put much effort into education because fishing guarantees employment regardless of education,” said the Assistant Priest, and they conduct special programs for grades 8–10 with support from the University Catholic Student Movement in Sri Lanka to raise their awareness and educate them about the world beyond this lagoon. Further, the Assistant Priest said that “we teach about the value of education, productivity, time management, and disaster management,” which are really essential for these children’s lives.

In general, most of the teenagers and young adults want to go abroad and work as they have seen this kind of tendency. The Assistant Parish Priest mentioned that “despite having experienced the absence of their fathers and close family members, many children are inspired to migrate.” During informal conversations conducted as part of the ethnographic observation, children expressed their willingness to migrate abroad for employment, especially to countries where they had close family connections. This reflects how migration has become normalized within the community. But young mothers who know the value of education and the possibility of doing other jobs encourage their children to study well.

Another exceptional case was found during the interviews. One participant, her 55-year-old husband, migrated irregularly to Poland and works as a dishwasher. According to her, his age, unstable work conditions, and the harsh climate have put him in a very difficult situation. The family has two children aged 16 and 20. The son was selected for University admission, but dropped the opportunity due to financial hardship. With his father unable to send money and having debt for the migration process, the son has taken on the role of primary breadwinner. He works to support the household while ensuring his younger sister can continue her education. Interviewee 7 shared with tears that her son's future and aspirations have been deeply affected by the consequences of his father's irregular migration.

This section has highlighted that men's irregular migration has implications for children's well-being, affecting both emotional and educational dimensions. Some of the younger children experience significant emotional distress due to paternal absence, while educational outcomes are shaped by both psychosocial factors and household constraints. They keep the connection and receive advice from the father through digital platforms such as video calls and voice messages daily or once a week. Some children do their studies and extra activities well, knowing the dedication made by their fathers. Their mothers are also giving their support, but have some limitations due to their over responsibilities. Children bear hidden social, emotional, and mental costs in this context, and these experiences reflect relationships across borders of transnational family life.

5.3 Gendered burdens and the restructuring of women's roles

Migration is deeply connected with the lives of these communities. As it is framed as an economic upliftment strategy, it produces gendered redistribution of labour and responsibility, placing women at the centre of households. This section examines how women's roles are restructured through interrelated dimensions: female headship, triple burden, and emotional distress. Drawing on qualitative data, observations, and theoretical perspectives, this analysis demonstrates how irregular migration shapes women's experiences in these households through structural inequalities.

5.3.1. Female headship and household restructuring

- Women as household managers

Women became the central managers of household after their husbands' migration including in extended families. Female Headship is defined as women assuming primary responsibility for household management in the absence of the husband. Women hold all primary responsibilities in financial management, caregiving, and some decision-making in the absence of their husbands. All the participants consistently described how their roles are expanded and add more responsibilities and burden after their husbands' migration.

Interviewee 1 described how she balanced her job, childcare, cooking, elderly care, and household responsibilities from "early morning until late at night" after her husband migrated. Similar experiences were reported across nearly all households, particularly among women living in nuclear families without consistent support from extended relatives.

In many households, women are managing the debts they have taken for their husbands' migration. Some families have also been scammed during the migration process, and their debt levels have increased as a result. "We are very poor and innocent people. Sometimes we trusted others and deposited large amounts of money in banks for migration arrangements, only to discover later that those people were fraudsters," said interviewee 4 in a painful voice. Because some do not receive remittances on time, they have to manage debt and household expenses very carefully. They borrow money from individuals and use informal channels, and those lenders come and shout in front of their houses if they are not able to pay at least the interest on the particular day. As the head of the household, they have to manage all these circumstances.

Further, all these women need to run the family. Most of these women are doing a job or are self-employed. They want to earn and keep the household stability, knowing that remittances would not be enough after paying debts and interest on loans. "From my cake business, I try to manage household needs," said interviewee 5, and interviewee 9 mentioned that "I am extremely tired and stressed with my responsibilities at work and home. He (husband) asks me to quit my job, but because of our debts and responsibilities, I cannot." This shows that as a woman and the head of household, these women bear a lot of responsibilities after their husband's migration. Further, they highlighted that they do not know when these responsibilities will be taken from them, as the separation is prolonged.

Focus group discussions further confirmed these findings. Participants, including the teacher, the nun, and the community member, emphasized that women in these migrant households are the family's main pillar and strength. They manage economic and social responsibilities and provide emotional support to the family. Due to that, all these women are living with stress and pressure from that burden. "Through the 'Sethsarana' program supported by SHE LEADS (Korean initiative), we have empowered 20 women. We have helped reduce their tendency to take loans by building leadership and empowerment," said the nun during the FGD to highlight the initiatives that they have taken to empower these women in migrant households.

- Gender hierarchies within transnational households

Even though the headship and responsibilities are over their heads, some hierarchical conditionals are still exist in some families. Although women are involved in decision-making, it is constrained to the day-to-day life and education of children. Some participants living with the extended families reported that they communicate with their husbands (while keeping the usual communication) before making major decisions. This indicates that traditional hierarchies are exist unconditionally, even though the practical responsibilities shift to them. Interviewee 5 noted that "most major decisions" were still made by her husband and his parents, even though she carried responsibility for household management. This reflects feminist arguments that women's responsibilities are increased under globalization, but it is without the redistribution of power (Runyan, 2019, pp. 30-36).

Women lives in nuclear families usually make the decisions together after discussing with each other, but the responsibility is on their heads. "...husband has told me to make those decisions carefully (child education). He agrees with all the decisions I make. Although I have the freedom to make decisions, I also carry the responsibility for them, which increases the pressure on me....," said interviewee 3. Interviewee 1 mentioned that most family decisions are made jointly by her and her husband through phone calls. However, sometimes when immediate decisions are needed, she "make them herself and later explain them to him." This shows the difference in hierarchical conditions among extended and nuclear families. This aligns with De Alwis (2022, pp. 680-682) argument, which highlights the changing roles of women in Sri Lankan society due to structural changes. Further, she mentioned how women increasingly take on economic and social responsibilities when the husband is not in the family (ibid, pp. 680-682).

The female headship in migrant households represents the emergence of women as practical authority for the household. She is responsible for the entire household in social, economic, physical, and mental well-being, even though there are some traditional constraints. Their responsibilities are really high with children, their emotional distress, education, and caring for their elderly parents.

5.3.2 The Triple Burden: productive, reproductive, and community labour

Beyond the duties of household headship, women in migrant households experience a significant portion of labour, conceptualized as a 'triple burden'. According to feminist scholars, it is a simultaneous responsibility of paid work, unpaid care work, and emotional labour carried by women (Moser, 1993; Bakker, 2007). This reflects the broader process of social reproduction. Women's labour is essential to maintaining family life in the household and sustaining the transnational family relationships.

Interviewees described their daily routines, which show their household burden, which is intensified after the husband's migration. "I wake up at 4 a.m., cook, leave home at 6:30 with my daughter, drop her at school, finish work by 5 p.m., buy groceries, return home, cook dinner, help her with homework, and go to bed around 11:30 p.m. This is an exhausting routine," shared interviewee 9. "I have to pay the electricity bill, children's school fees, tuition fees, take care of elderly parents, buy their medicines, and manage household tasks. All of these responsibilities fall on me, " shared interviewee 6. Similarly, others' experiences are the same, and they mentioned how they are responsible for household work, expenses, childcare, and caring for elderly parents in both families. Since the mother is the primary carer in the household, she needs to put extra effort into children's safety and security. Interviewee 1 shared that when she worked late, she "take the children to the workplace." Further, she added "balancing my job and responsibilities is very difficult." Moser (1993, p. 31-35) argues that women generate income within the households and manage all finances and debt, while engaging in childcare and community responsibilities. These sharings highlight how women become the primary organisers of everyday life in their households, in paid work, care work, and everything.

Interviewee 5 mentioned that since she managed her small business and caregiving responsibilities, including her husband's elderly parents, she has only a little time to rest. Most of the participants highlighted that they struggle with work and are tired of everything, including their lives. These experiences highlight the overburdened responsibilities of these women, which

resulted in pressure and exhaustion. Two women among this group have long-term migraine and eczema. During the days when they have it, they cannot work or do any household chores. Their income is losing those days, and even children do not go to school sometimes. These situations also create insecurity in their lives, as there is no one to take care of them.

All these women contribute a considerable amount to their family income. There is nothing left for the household once they pay debt and interest from remittances. Interviewee 5 mentioned that since her husband does not have a visa, he works part-time and she “manage household needs” from what she earns from her small business. The interviewee who faced a tragic situation after her husband’s death mentioned that she “now every month I struggle financially. It is very difficult for me to pay for school expenses and tuition fees. But, I’m trying my best,” shared interviewee 2. This highlights that women are financially dependent on their migrant husbands to some extent, but not passively or as ‘parasites’ (Parreñas, 2005, p. 69). In transnational households, through the lens of social production, it highlights their central role in managing daily life, managing care work, and sustaining the household stability in the absence of men. Focus group discussion also emphasised that mothers in migrant households are overwhelmed by different responsibilities. This includes their financial struggle, children’s education, and emotional needs, as well as their job responsibilities. The nun mentioned that usually these women come and “share their stories to get emotional support.” The teacher noted that children “rely on their mothers”, and this stretched their role further.

Most participants reported receiving some support from their own parents, whereas in-laws rarely gave them any help. This is common in extended households in Sri Lanka, where relationships are not strong, and support for the daughter-in-law is limited in most families. Yet they expect her to do most of the work herself in the household. “Women frequently come to share their problems, including conflicts in extended families such as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law issues,” shared the nun, confirming that this situation exists in these households. Fraser’s (2016, p. 99-102) analysis of the ‘crisis of care’ highlights that capitalist systems rely on unpaid reproductive labour while undermining the conditions that sustain it. Similarly, Federici (2004, p. 7-9) highlights how women’s labour is central to the reproduction of social and economic dimensions in the capitalist global world but remains undervalued, unwaged, and invisible due to patriarchy.

Moreover, women’s labour extended beyond their normal work of economic and physical tasks, including emotional and relational work. Almost all women in these households manage family relationships, maintaining communication with husbands, engaging children in that conversation,

and keeping the love and bond between them: father and children. Further, she supports the children's well-being, checks with medical practitioners their emotional health, and cares for the adult parents. "I feel that life has become very heavy," shared interviewee 8 during the discussion. Hochschild (2012, p. 6-7) reflects this as 'emotional labour', which describes how others do not recognize it and do not appreciate it at any level. It was identified that women keep this emotional burden with themselves and do not even share it with their husbands, as they also struggle alone in another country.

This section illustrates how migration intensified women's roles in the households, positioning them as the pillar of the family and as a key person in sustaining transnational family systems. Since the husband is not at home, she is the representation of the family to school, church, and community work, while she is carrying a silent burden in her life.

5.3.3 Emotional distress and hidden insecurities

In addition to the increased responsibilities, these women experience significant emotional distress that represents their insecurities in the migration households. Emotional distress contains psychological and emotional strain experienced by women due to migration-related separation and responsibilities. This dimension is usually neglected by everyone, and there are multiple sources identified. Emotional strain emerges from irregularity of the migration, financial pressure, issues related to children, prolonged separation, and the heavy burden and demands of managing household work independently.

- The emotional burden of irregular migration

All these women have intensified insecurity about their household and their futures due to the irregularity of their husbands' migration. Initially, all of them registered in SLBFE before leaving the country for a job, and most of them did not plan to take the irregular routes. This legal requirement safeguards migrant workers by ensuring contract verification, access to insurance coverage, and the availability of support services in destination countries (SLBFE, Act No 4 of 1994). But due to the unexpected circumstances in the workplace, they had to make that decision as the last option, knowing that this separation would be prolonged. "At the beginning, we did not feel this level of sadness because we expected him to return after his two-year contract in Romania," said the interviewee 8. Most of the men did not share the danger of the journey with

their wives from Romania and Serbia to their final destinations, as the journey included illegal paths.

All women shared that their husbands did not share the harsh truth of the journey, and later known from him or through videos shared about those types of migration journeys. “My husband’s journey was extremely difficult. He was cheated first, and again, we paid a huge amount to them for the journey from Romania to Italy. Later, he went to Italy through multiple countries in multiple ways,” shared interviewee 6. She was so emotional while she talked about the journey, as well as how people scammed them continuously. “Even now, it is very painful for me to remember this.” Further, she talked about that with tears, and this shows their emotional burden about that journey. Almost all of the participants shared about this with tears and heavy voices. It was hard for them during that time, and still, they felt a huge insecurity about their husbands’ lives. Further, they revealed that this journey has intensified their debts as they have to pay again for the irregular migration, and worried about the illegal process of it, which increased their emotional distress. After the husband’s death, interviewee 2 faced the most terrible periods of her life, leaving her in a deep emotional and financial crisis. “For me, it feels like a bad dream. I tried to find out what happened by contacting many places, but we received nothing.” Such experiences reveal the hidden emotional costs of irregular migration that remain largely invisible within dominant economic narratives.

- Prolonged separation and emotional disconnection

Even though digital communication allows them to talk to each other and share everything, the geographical distance creates a separation in family life. Interviewee 1 reflected that “earlier we had less money, but we were happy together; now we have money, but not our family together”. She further mentioned that children miss him during Christmas, Easter Sunday, church feasts to celebrate them as a family, and their everyday life. Similarly, Baldassar (2008, p. 252) emphasizes the emotional challenge of maintaining ‘co-presence’ in transnational families, where physical absence cannot be covered by communication technologies. Interviewee 6 mentioned that despite improved finances, “as a family, we are incomplete”. Interviewee 9 feels that she and her husband have done her daughter an “injustice.” She feels her daughter’s bond with her father is “gradually weakening.” All participants mentioned that they feel the absence of being together as a family very strongly, even though technology plays a connection between their lives. These experiences support Parreñas (2005, p. 67) argument that transnational families experience emotional

disconnection due to prolonged separation, ‘variegated feelings of insecurity’, leading to strained relationships and unmet expectations.

All participants shared that they are really tired and feeling loneliness, sadness, frustrations, disappointment, uncertainty about their lives, after their husband’s migration. Interviewee 5 stated, “when my husband was at home, I felt emotionally strong. After he left, I felt very lonely.” “I have somewhat adjusted to this life, although it is still very tiring, ” explained interviewee 6 as her experience. Further, they mentioned that they experienced anger, tension, and apathy due to the pressure of separation.

All these participants are really worried about their husbands’ meals, health conditions, and living conditions. Interviewee 3 mentioned that “...we feel very sad that he does not always have proper food there. Whenever we eat or drink something, we remember him.” Coastal areas, especially Negombo, Munnakkara, and the suburbs, are well known for fresh seafood, and all these people eat a protein-rich diet. Meals are often prepared with a variety of seafood dishes in different ways, such as curries, fried, and salads. In contrast, after migrating, their diets change to carbohydrates with less access to fresh protein. Also, culturally, Sundays hold special significance in coastal Sri Lanka. I observed that after Sunday mass, families gather to prepare multiple seafood dishes, share drinks, and spend time together. These family gatherings often include singing, dancing, and celebrating as a community. These moments are common and joyful, but these families experience the absence of husbands and fathers during that time. One boy shared that when his father was in Sri Lanka, they would sing and dance with neighbours on Sundays.

- Emotional suppression and suffering

One of the main reasons for their distress is the suppression of emotions. Many women reported that they avoided sharing their difficulties with their husbands, as they are also living alone. Since they struggle with a proper visa, job, weather conditions, and prolonged separation from family, most of the women do not share their struggles with their husbands. Interviewee 1 shared that her daughter and son contracted dengue and were hospitalized for two weeks. At that time, she strongly felt the absence of her husband. But she did not tell him many details because she did not want to “worry him”. She informed her husband that the children were admitted due to a normal fever. She avoided telling him everything, not to give him additional pressure and stress.

When talking about their shared emotions, most of them used to cry alone at night. Some of them share with their own sisters and with their teenage daughters. All of them mentioned that they go to the church, praying for guidance. “Whenever I feel sad or troubled, I share my feelings with my second sister. I also go to church regularly and pray to Jesus about my struggles,” shared interviewee 4, while interviewee 5 mentioned that “when I feel sad, I share my feelings with my daughter and pray at church.” Religion plays a very supportive and guiding role in this community, and people are always supported by related parish institutions.

- Financial insecurity and emotional strain

Women’s emotional distress is closely linked with financial insecurity, particularly the burden of debt and the irregularity of remittances. Several participants stated that the delay in receiving remittances forced them to borrow from others, which created more debt, additional pressure, and anxiety. Interviewee 1 shared that her main goals are to repay all our debts and have “peace of mind,” highlighting the pressure in her mind. “After he moved to Italy, he did not have a stable job, so he worked several part-time jobs to send money home. During that time, it was very difficult for us to manage expenses,” shared interviewee 4. This uncertainty not only affects household finances but also contributes to her emotional strain, as women struggle to manage responsibilities without stable support. This is further emphasized by Runyan (2019, p. 113), highlighting how globalization and the broader global inequalities produce gendered forms of insecurity related to the economic restructuring of households with few economic resources.

- Children’s well-being and maternal distress

Further, these women’s emotional distress has been intensified by children’s education-related matters, health issues, and psychological differences due to paternal absence. “My daughter deeply feels her father’s absence. She has become very stubborn and constantly compares herself with others and does not perform well in school,” said interviewee 9. Even though she helps in all possible ways, meeting doctors, but no improvement. Moreover, after the father’s separation, the mental condition of a few children was changed, and all these mothers consulted with the medical practitioners after identifying themselves or being informed by the school. “Mothers struggle to control boys, and children often do not listen sometimes,” shared the teacher with her experiences. Since some children fulfil their requirements more easily than others, they are “stubborn and do not obey their mothers” said the teacher. But this group did not share similar concerns regarding

their children. All these examples illustrate their concern for the children, which creates a greater emotional burden on their minds.

The emotional distress of women and children's educational matters was clearly visible in the interviewee 2 discussion. Due to the sudden death of the father, "going to the exam is emotionally difficult for her," shared interviewee 2. I also observed that her daughter was sitting alone, studying and crying, when I had the conversation with her mother. Looking at her, interviewee 2 also started crying, and we stopped the conversation for a while. Even her son seems to suffer from anxiety. He talks very little with everyone at home after his father's death, she shared further. She couldn't sleep properly after her husband's death. "My responsibilities feel overwhelming. I constantly feel afraid..." Further, she shared that she can understand the uncertainty of life, and the emotional pressure is difficult to bear.

- Workplace stigma and suspicion

Their emotional distress is further increased by the other people, specially neighbours and colleagues in workplaces. Once they knew about the irregular migration and their prolonged separation, most other men brought proposals for casual relationships. Interviewees 1 and 5 talked about how well-known men of their husbands, as well as the family, brought them a proposal to start a new relationship apart from the marriage. "Some men have made inappropriate proposals to me, saying they could help repay our loans. But I am not that kind of woman. My husband trusts me completely, and we have a strong understanding between us," said interviewee 1. "At work, people make comments jokingly. Some people assume my husband has another relationship abroad. I keep many things to myself and often cry alone at night," shared interviewee 9, and cried in between our discussion. One of her senior colleagues introduced her to someone as a single mother looking for a partner, mentioning that her husband has another family in Italy. Some even asked her daughter whether her father would ever return. Due to the long-term separation and these types of incidents intensified their emotional distress further, also affecting children and their mental stability, and the relationship with the father.

Some migrant men suspect their wives due to this long-term separation. "I do everything alone. Sometimes when my husband asks questions, I feel hurt; he says it's love, but I feel he suspects me," shared the interviewee 9, and further she mentioned that she does not go out at night or attend parties in the office because she does not want to make him suspect her and make arguments. Further, interviewee 3 mentioned that her husband would randomly asked her to "switch on the

video” while she was out alone. These things are also disturbing their mental stability and creating emotional imbalance and behavioral issues. The focus group discussion also further highlighted this. Assistant Priest, and the nun mentioned that more women experience emotional stress due to their “husbands’ unnecessary suspicion” and “relying on religious prayers and the free counseling” service offered by the church.

Even though these women face emotional distress due to separation, some are not willing to migrate and stay with their husbands in Europe. Excluding the participant whose husband had passed away, the remaining 8 participants have different views. 3 interviewees had no intention to move and stay overseas, while the other 5 interviewees are ‘likely to migrate’ if possible. “I do not want to settle abroad. My mother has been my biggest support. I do not want to leave her,” shared interviewee 9. The other two are living in a nuclear household but are not willing to migrate. They like to travel if opportunities arise, and also send the children for higher education. All the other participants like to migrate as a family and educate the children in European schools and universities.

This section has demonstrated that men’s irregular migration leads to a profound restructuring of women’s roles within migrant-sending households. Women manage responsibilities as the head of household, experience an intensified triple burden of labour, and significant emotional distress. These live reflections from the interviewees also show their empowerment in the transnational households. Furthermore, from the theoretical perspectives, these dynamics show how global inequalities and labour systems shape people’s lives. The risks of migration are disproportionately borne by migrant workers and their families (Parreñas, 2005, p. 12-15). While global labour markets benefit from flexible and low-cost migrant labour, the associated insecurities are externalized to households in the Global South. As Runyan (2019) argues, such processes are deeply gendered, with women absorbing the economic and emotional consequences of migration as household managers and caregivers. By integrating empirical findings, this analysis highlights that irregular migration is shaped by broader global structure. Its impacts are deeply gendered and experienced in everyday life within migrant households.

5.4 Informal support system and community network

In the absence of stable institutional support, participants depend on informal support systems, including family members, neighbours, and the church. These networks played a crucial role in helping households manage financial, emotional, and practical challenges with migration.

Many women reported receiving support from their own parents, particularly in childcare and emotional assistance. However, support from in-laws was often limited, reflecting gendered dynamics within extended families. As one pattern across interviews suggests, women living with their own families experienced relatively more support compared to those living with their in-laws.

5.4.1 Future aspirations and expectations

Despite significant financial and emotional challenges, participants consistently expressed their future aspirations. These aspirations included building a new house, funding their children's education, and living together as a family. During these discussions, they highlighted that migration is not only a survival strategy after stabilization but also an investment in a better future, achieved through a difficult journey. "At the beginning, both my husband and I felt that we had made a terrible mistake by deciding to migrate. Now that he sends some money through part-time work, that feeling of uncertainty has reduced slightly," shared interviewee 4. Further, the interviewee 5, who is doing her business, mentioned that she has a dream of starting her own dream cake shop. "He says he will start a fish business in Sri Lanka," said interviewee 3 while sharing their plans.

Many participants emphasized their desire to improve their current living conditions, reflecting long-term goals associated with stability and mobility. "These mothers have aspirations such as buying land, building a house, and sending their children to international or the best school in the area, and then to universities," shared the Assistant Priest as well as the teacher, confirming these migrants' aspirations. Apart from paying all debts and constructing a new house, education emerged as a central aspiration. All parents prioritize higher education in Sri Lanka or abroad, supporting their extracurricular activities, such as sports. They have identified education as a pathway to upward mobility. This is highly admired during the FGD since most of the mothers do not pay any attention to their children's education, and that mindset is changing in this community. "Some children are highly motivated, and their mothers want their child to reach where she could not," shared the school teacher, and this was confirmed by the priest and the nun. This aspiration

highlights how migration connects with intergenerational strategies, and the present commitments of parents are tied to anticipated future aspirations.

However, these hopes coexist with uncertainty and hardship. Until they secure a valid visa, there is a gap between expectations and reality, particularly due to irregular remittance and debts. This reflects the ‘precarity and cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 1-22), where these individuals have aspirations but find it difficult to achieve for some time due to the structural constraints. Hopefully, all migrants will be able to get a valid visa and fulfil their aspirations, and live together with their families.

5.4.2 Church as a social support institution

As a faith-based institution, Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church in Munnakkara is identified as a significant pillar for everyday life, emotional and social support for migrant households. All participants described how the religious space is becoming not only a source of spiritual well-being but also of emotional and social well-being and community connection.

Church and its mission during migration, transnationalism, and globalization in the Global South play a pivotal role. Brown and Yeoh (2018) highlighted how the Catholic Church supports ‘identity formation and reconnection to the homeland’ for migrants and how it connects the left-behind in migrant families with religious practices (2018, p. 11-32).

The church plays a central role in the life of the community. All are well-connected with the church, and one of the main support systems. The nun noted that many women regularly visit the church “to pray, share their struggles, and seek emotional relief.” Most of the interview participants also mentioned that when they feel stressed, helpless, and struggle with emotions, they usually go and pray at the church. This indicates that the church functions as a counselling space for these families. This highlights the role of religious institutions in providing a sense of stability and strengthening mental well-being in the context of insecurity.

All migrants went to the church and received blessings from the Priest before they left the country. Once he landed there safely, the family here offered a Thanksgiving mass for that intention. “They pray for success before leaving and give thanks after receiving their first salary,” shared the nun

during the discussion. People offer a “holy mass or offer an offering from the first salary as a tradition” in Munnakkara; further, the nun shared.

The Sunday Catechism and the other programs offered by the church to the children and the community are adding value to their lives. Beyond the religious lesson, they conduct different programs, and they have seen “positive changes” among children and households, shared the Assistant Priest. They have conducted financial literacy programs for mothers and children separately, motivational programs, the importance of education, and environmental sustainability programs for the children, with the support of University students and other resource persons. The Priest further said that one of the Government Officers mentioned that “Munnakkara is hell on earth,” and we (the church) and the community have to work to change that idea, since this is our “home”. These initiatives are also changing the thinking pattern of the children and women, opening them to a new world beyond the “island mentality” as the Priest mentioned.

The Village Officer shared that when they want to conduct any program, they usually contact the church, pass the message through it, and gather there. “We have conducted awareness programs on irregular migration and its risks with Civil Defense committees, the Navy, and the police, with the support of IOM, ” said the Officer, and the church is the central place to connect to everyone. This shows how the religious institution plays a role in community social work.

The connection and support system of the church reflects the absence of formal welfare structures that these families should have. Also, the church functions as an everyday coping mechanism that mitigates insecurity in these households. While it does not reduce the structural inequalities, priests, nuns, and the support system around them play a crucial role in this community in sustaining emotional resilience and support for the upward mobility of their lives.

The central finding of the research is a profound paradox. Households often perceive migration as a strategy for overcoming financial hardship and achieving long-term stability. But, due to its irregular pathways, it often reproduces and intensifies more vulnerabilities for some period or permanently, as identified in one case. On one hand, it was revealed that migration provides access to income that may not be available locally, enabling households to meet their expenses, live an average lifestyle, and pursue long-term goals. On the other hand, the costs, risks, and uncertainties associated with irregular migration create ongoing financial challenges. As a result, the benefits are uneven and have hidden costs during the journey. Despite the burden of debt, some households

experienced certain benefits from migration. While several families continued to struggle economically and emotionally, migration also created hopes and aspirations, particularly regarding long-term opportunities and a better future for their children.

Beyond economic outcomes, the findings highlight the intense social and emotional consequences of irregular migration. The absence of fathers has a deep emotional and social impact on children, also leading to distress that affects academic progress. Meanwhile, women who remain at home take on significantly expanded responsibilities. They often face greater pressure, exhaustion, and emotional strain. Their insecurity is generally high about life and the household. This uncertainty continues until their husbands become stable and find how to navigate the future. The Roman Catholic Church in the area plays a central role, supports the emotional resilience and social upward while other institutional support is less for these irregular migrant households.

Overall, the findings illustrate that irregular migration is not simply an economic process but a deeply social and gendered phenomenon shaped by global inequalities and local realities. Its impacts extend across financial, emotional, and relational dimensions, affecting not only migrants but entire families. The experience sharing and insights highlight the importance of looking beyond the economic narrative in migration. It needs to be understood within a broader framework that considers its hidden costs and uneven consequences, particularly for women and children in migrant-sending contexts.

6. Conclusion

This research examines how irregular migration from the coastal community of Munnakkara in Negombo reshapes the everyday lives of migrant-sending households. This study expands Sri Lankan migration literature by examining the lived experiences of women and children within migrant-sending households affected by irregular migration. Overall, the findings reveal that irregular migration functions not only as an economic survival strategy but also as a deeply gendered, emotional, and social process that redistributes insecurity within transnational families.

Importantly, this research is situated within a broader global-local framework. The 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka, job loss and income instability, the impact of COVID-19, and labour demands in Europe directly shape the everyday lives of these families. Hence, the relevance of the ‘global-local continuum’ is revealed in migration as an interconnected process (Darian-Smith & McCarthy, 2017, p. 12). This study draws on the gender and care economy framework (Fraser, 2016; Parreñas, 2005; Runyan, 2019). These theoretical perspectives explained how global economic inequalities, migration aspirations, gendered care responsibilities, and transnational family relationships shape the lived experiences of households left behind.

Financial insecurity and the debt cycles emerged as key features of migrant households. Due to low financial literacy and limited access to formal financial institutions, families relied on informal lending for migration journeys, resulting in a huge debt burden. Many migrant men worked without legal documentation, and unstable employment created financial precarity in their households. Remittances, as the primary benefit of migration, were irregular, delayed, and insufficient during the initial years. Rather than the upward mobility, migration functioned as a survival mechanism with long-term uncertainty.

Beyond the economic dimension, the research highlights the emotional, social, and educational consequences experienced by children. The absence of the fathers created emotional distress, psychological and behavioural changes that impacted their education. Younger children were particularly affected, often showing declining academic performance and emotional distress. Some young adults identified their fathers’ sacrifices and motivated to study well and pursue future opportunities. The findings suggest that children’s overall well-being cannot be understood through material concepts. It must be viewed through love, care, guidance, emotional stability, and family support. Hence, paternal absence constrains children’s future opportunities during the initial

years beyond immediate economic concerns. The gap between the migrant father and the household cannot be covered fully through digital communication, and also the remittances.

The key finding of the research lies in gendered transformation and the insecurities in the migrant household. It shows that women experience an intensified triple burden: productive, reproductive, and community labour. While they become the central pillar of the household, there are several constraints, as well as stress, exhaustion, and limited support. Their labour and emotional distress remain invisible, but it reproducing gendered inequalities. At the same time, some women also develop much confidence and decision-making capacity within transnational family life. With the support of the supportive network and the church, they are aiming for a better future for the whole family after the initial years.

6.1 Policy recommendations

The findings highlight several areas for contextual policy intervention at the country level. The Sri Lankan government should strengthen regulations of migration agents and prevent fraud and financial exploitation. Several women described their experiences with individuals and financial losses due to a scam, which intensified their debt burden. Establishing transparent recruitment processes, monitoring systems, and agencies, and accessible legal support is essential for migrants and their families. The Divisional Secretariat can use mobile services to share information more widely in areas like Munnakkara.

Expanding access to formal, low-interest credit is essential to break the cycle of debt in these households. Government banks and financial institutions in Sri Lanka can introduce targeted loans for migrant households. Further, they can develop financial literacy and promote savings while ensuring responsible borrowing and spending. As many households do not meet the requirements for formal loans, these interventions will improve household financial stability. At the same time, governments and NGOs could develop community-level credit schemes that provide low-interest loans to these households, especially those without property or other assets. Further, they will not rely on informal systems, which intensified their debt cycle.

There is a need to improve labour protection for Sri Lankan migrants abroad through bilateral agreements with destination countries. According to the government's Quarterly Bulletin on Workers' Remittances and Labour Migration, Romania has emerged as a potential destination for labour migration (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022-2025). Most men who migrated to Romania

had no initial plan to use irregular routes to reach their current destination, as reported by their wives. Workplace changes, low pay, and shifts in job schedules have increased debt and pushed them toward irregular migration. Expanding safe and legal migration pathways, securing proper work agreements, and ensuring fair salaries would reduce the risks of irregular migration and improve income stability for migrant workers. The Sri Lankan government should strengthen its intervention under its mandate (SLBFE) to protect migrant labourers, their well-being, and the welfare of their families.

The psychological support services for women and children should be strengthened in these households at the community level. Schools, Public Health Midwives, and religious institutions are already placed in these communities. These institutions can play a key role in identifying and supporting these vulnerable families. Most of the participants have highlighted the need for counselling for themselves and also for their children. Structured programs through the Divisional Secretariat level, school counselling programs would help address the emotional consequences identified in this research. NGOs working in the area can intervene through their Social Protection Programs and support for these families.

Community-based organizations, particularly churches, should be supported more in their existing efforts to provide social and emotional support for women and children. Further, they can organize programs related to empowerment, mental health, financial literacy, and children's education while strengthening the resilience within migrant households.

This study reveals a complex reality on irregular migration through the experiences and insecurities of the families left behind. It highlights that irregular migration is a complex process with global structural inequalities, emotional struggles, and everyday survival. The experiences shared by women and children reveal the hidden social and emotional costs of migration beyond the economic narratives contributing important insights to migration literature in Sri Lanka. This research highlights a more holistic and contextual approach to migration policies, which interconnects all dimensions of migration. Addressing these complexities is essential for creating and promoting decent work and economic growth for migrants as well as their households for a productive and sustainable outcome (Sustainable Development Goal 8, Agenda 2030).

6.2 Directions for future research

An important area for future research is the long-term impact of fathers' absence due to irregular migration. Many of the migrants are unable to return to Sri Lanka for several years because of visa and legal restrictions. As a result, their children often spend a significant part of their childhood and adolescence without regular physical contact with their fathers. While migration may improve the economic situation of the household, its longer-term social and emotional consequences are high. In particular, there is limited understanding of how prolonged separation may affect children's emotional bonds with their fathers, family relationships, sense of identity, and connections with extended family members. Future longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how these family dynamics change over time and whether the financial benefits gained through migration are sufficient to balance the emotional challenges associated with long-term parental absence. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of transnational family life when separation becomes an enduring feature of everyday family experiences.

7. Reference

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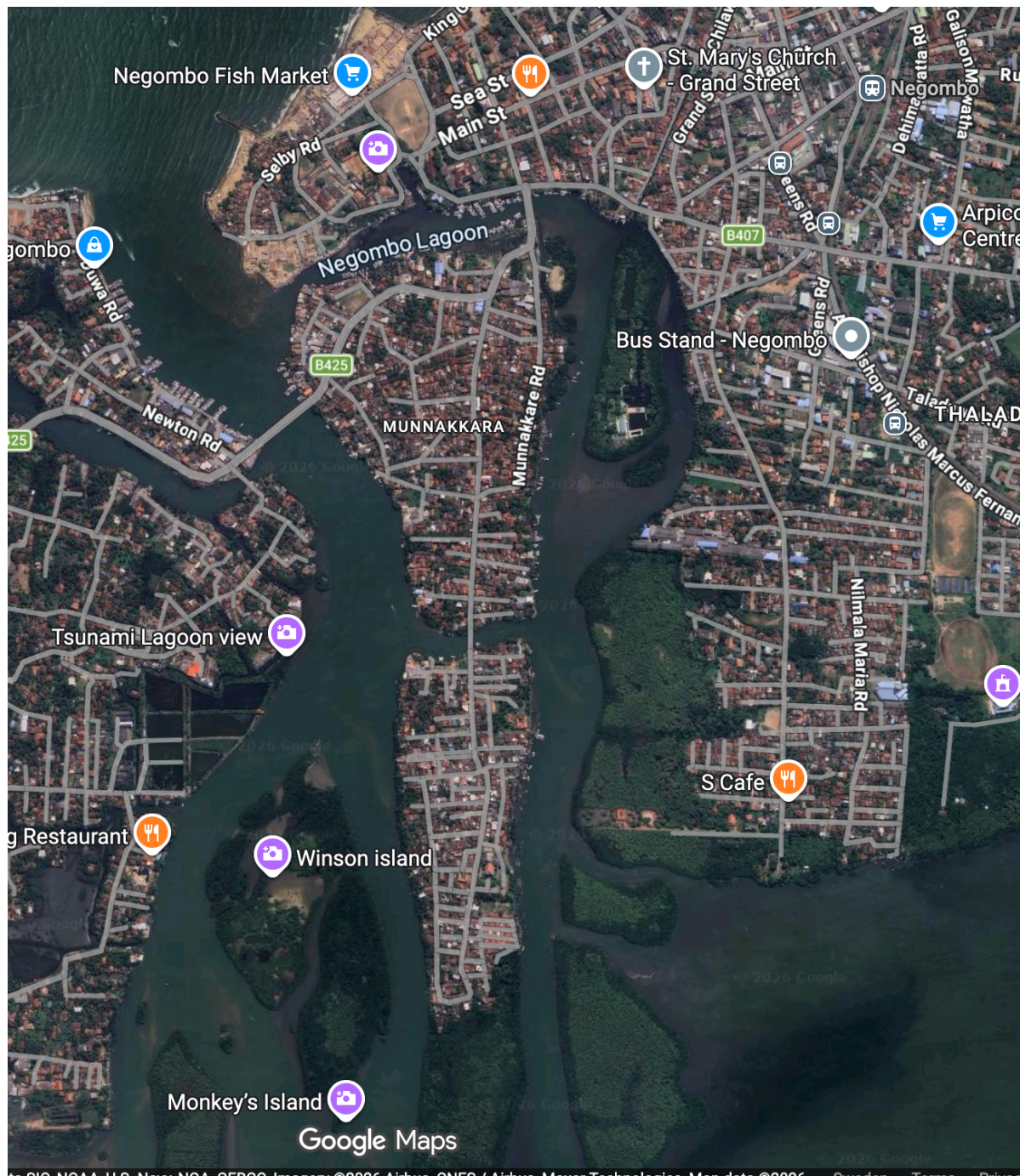
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8. Appendices

Figure 3: Map of the study area - Munnakkara



(Source: Google Maps, 2026)

Figure 4: Word Cloud

NVivo analysis showed that “husband (222),” “children,” and “money” were among the most frequently mentioned words in the translated interview sections.



Ethical Notes for the interviewer

- 65

Background and household profile (will ask conversationally)

1. Town/ village of origin:
2. Current city/place of residence:
3. Age:
4. Ethnicity:
5. Religion:
6. Education level:
7. Marital status and years of marriage:
8. Living situation: Nuclear family / Extended family
9. Number of children:
10. Age(s) and gender of children:
11. Are there elderly parents living with you or nearby?
12. Who currently lives in the household, and how has this changed over time?
13. Your current occupation (paid/unpaid):
14. Husband's age :
15. Husband's education level :
16. Husband's occupation before migration:
17. Husband's occupation after migration:

Theme 1: How and why migration happened

- When did your husband go abroad?
- How long has it been since your husband left the country?
- Example: was it before or after (child started school / COVID pandemic/ economic crisis in Sri Lanka, 2022)

- Can you tell me a little about your family life before he migrated?
- What was everyday life like for your family before he went abroad?
- Example: work, income, children's schooling, daily routines

- What made your family think that going abroad was necessary?
- What were the main reasons behind his decision to migrate?
- Example: as it relates to money problems, debts, lack of work, children's education, housing, or something else?

- How was the decision made in your family?
- Who was involved when the decision to migrate was discussed?
- Was it discussed together as a family, mainly between you and your husband, or decided by him alone?

- At that time, did it feel like a choice, a necessity, or something you had no option but to do?
- Did someone join this discussion from abroad?
- How did you personally feel about the decision when it was made?
- Did it feel hopeful, risky, stressful, or unavoidable?

- How did your family prepare for his departure?
- Before he left, what kinds of preparations did you make?

- Example: financial preparations/emotional preparation for you or the children/were you worried, confused, or uncertain about what might happen?
- Which country did your husband go to first?
- Where did he migrate initially?
- How did your husband travel abroad? regular/irregular/mixed (You can answer only if you feel comfortable.)
- Did he migrate through multiple countries? (If comfortable to share)
- Follow-up - which country is he living in now?
- Was the migration arranged through an agent, an agency, or another way?
- Example: Some people go through regular routes, some irregular, and some mixed - whatever you feel okay sharing.
- At the time, how did you understand the journey he was taking?
- What was your experience or awareness of his travel route?
- Were you informed about where he was going, or was it unclear?
- How did your family manage to find the money for the migration?
- Paying for migration can be difficult- how did you arrange it?
- Examples: Savings, pawning jewellery, borrowing from relatives, loans, selling land, or help from others.

Theme 2: Money, daily expenses, and debt

- Since your husband left, how has managing money at home been for you?
- Compared to before, do you find managing household money easier or harder now?
- In what ways has it changed?
- Are there some months when money is enough and other months when it is not?
- How does your family manage financially from month to month?
- Are there particular times of the year that are more difficult? (eg: school begins, Christmas, church feast)
- How regularly does money arrive from abroad?
- Is the income sent from abroad predictable, or does it vary? For example, monthly, sometimes late, or only when possible.
- Do you currently manage any loans or debts?
- Has your family needed to borrow money since your husband migrated?
- Example: From banks, money lenders, relatives, or other sources.
- What kinds of expenses worry you most these days?
- Examples: Food, children's school fees, rent, medical expenses, and loan repayments.
- Which household costs are hardest to manage?
- What do you usually do during periods when money from abroad does not arrive?
- How does your family manage when remittances are delayed or stopped?
- Example: Support from relatives, short-term loans, savings, pawning items, and reducing expenses.

Theme 3: Women's responsibilities and daily life

- Since your husband migrated, how have your daily life and responsibilities changed?
- What does a typical day look like for you now, compared to before?
- Example- morning routines, work, childcare, household tasks, support for parents
- What kind of care work do you mainly manage now?
- Who do you usually take care of in your household these days?
- Examples- Children, elderly parents, household work, and emotional support for family members.
- How do you manage paid work and household responsibilities together?
- Is it easy or difficult to balance income, work, care work, and home duties?
- Example- Time pressure, tiredness, support or not from others, and difficult choices.
- Who usually makes decisions in the household now?
- Has decision-making in the family changed since your husband left? In what ways?
- Example: Money, children's education, healthcare, and daily expenses.
- Do you feel your role in the family has changed since your husband migrated?
- How do you see yourself in the family now, compared to before?
- Example- More responsibility, more independence, more pressure, or mixed feelings.

Theme 4: Living with separation

- What has it been like for you to live without your husband at home for a long time?
- How do you experience everyday life with your husband living abroad?
- Example: In daily routines, family life, or emotionally.
- Does his absence feel temporary, or does it feel long-term to you?
- When you think about his absence, how do you understand it now?
- Has this feeling changed over time?
- How do you manage thoughts about his return, safety, or future plans?
- What helps you cope with uncertainty about the future?
- Example: Talking with a family or friend, praying, working, or avoiding thinking about it.
- Are there feelings about this situation that you usually keep to yourself?
- Are there thoughts or worries you don't often share with others?
- Concrete examples -worries about return date, safety abroad, children growing up, or growing older alone.
- When you think about the future, what concerns come to mind?
- What are your main worries or hopes for the years ahead?
- Example -Family unity, finances, health, children's futures, or migration plans.
- How do your children seem to feel about their father being away?

Theme 5: Children's well-being and paternal absence

- From what you observe, how do your children react to their father living abroad?
- Example: Do they talk about him often, or avoid the topic?
- What do your children usually do when they miss their father?
- How do they express missing him?
- Examples - Crying, asking questions, calling him, looking at photos, becoming quiet, angry
- Have you noticed any changes in your children since their father migrated?
- Compared to before, do you see differences in their behaviour or emotions?
- Examples: Becoming quieter, angrier, or distracted, changes in school performance, changes in sleep patterns, or play.
- How often does your husband communicate with the children?
- How regularly do the children hear from or see their father?
- How do your children usually communicate with their father?
- Examples: Video calls, audio calls, messages.
- How do they respond? Do they seem happy, shy, quiet, emotional, or uncomfortable during calls?
- What worries you most about your children's well-being?
- As a mother, what concerns do you have about your children in this situation?
- Example: Emotional health, education, behaviour, and future
- In everyday family life, how emotionally present do you feel your husband is?
- Even from a distance, how involved does your husband feel in the children's lives?
- Example - Helping with school decisions, discipline, encouragement, and emotional support.

Theme 6: elderly parents and care

- How do your husband's parents feel about him working and living abroad?
- From what you observe, how do elderly family members feel about his absence?
- Example: Do they talk about it often, or keep their feelings to themselves?
- Do they usually express their feelings openly?
- Do they show worry, sadness, or loneliness, or not?
- Example: Through words, silence, health complaints, or changes in behaviour.
- Has caring for elderly family members increased your responsibilities?
- What kinds of support do you provide for elders now?
- Examples - Health care visits, medication, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and companionship.
- How do elderly family members cope with long-term separation?
- What helps them manage everyday life while their son is away?
- Example: religious activities, routines, neighbours, extended family, community groups, social work
- How often do they communicate with their son?
- Do they talk with him more or less often?

- How do they communicate - Example: Phone calls, video calls, messages, or through others or you.

Theme 7: Social life, community, silence

- How does the community talk about families with irregular migrant members?
- What kinds of things do people in the community say about migrant families?
- Example - Positive, negative, mixed, or mostly silent?
- Have you ever felt judged or talked about because of your husband's migration?
- Are there things people say openly or quietly that affect you?
- Example - Comments, gossip, advice, or expectations.
- Are there topics related to your husband's migration that you avoid discussing?
- Are there things you prefer not to talk about with neighbours or relatives?
- Example - Money, children, return plans, legal status, safety.
- Do you feel women experience more pressure or judgment in these situations?
- How does being a woman shape your experience in the community?
- Example: Blame, advice-giving, moral expectations, control over behaviour.
- Who do you usually rely on for emotional or practical support?
- When you need help, who do you turn to?
- Examples: Family members, neighbours, friends, religious groups, community organisations.
- Are there moments when you feel especially vulnerable or unsupported?
- When do you feel the most alone in dealing with this situation?
- Example - During illness, financial stress, children's issues, or community events.

Theme 8: Help, support, and gaps

- When something goes wrong in your family, who do you usually turn to first?
- If you face a problem at home, where do you go for help?
- Examples - Relatives, neighbours, religious places, friends, NGOs, or government offices.
- Are there any community, religious, or institutional supports you currently use?
- What kinds of support are available to you in your area?
- Example- Temples/churches, women's groups, welfare offices, NGOs
- Have there been times when you expected help but did not receive it?
- Were there moments when support was needed but not available?
- Example- During illness, financial difficulty, family crisis, or emergencies.
- Have you ever had difficulty accessing welfare or benefits?
- Has your husband's migration affected your access to any government support?
- Example: Delays, rejection, confusion, or being told you were not eligible.
- What kinds of support do you think families like yours really need?

- If better support were available, what would make the biggest difference for you?
- Examples: Emotional support, childcare, financial advice, debt relief, legal help, community care.

Reflection

- Looking back, how has migration changed your life and family?
- What do you want others to understand about women living with long-term absence?
- What do you hope for your family's future?
- What should government support/ subsidies/ policymakers, or organisations understand about women in migrant households?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide

Participants: Mothers, grandparents, teachers, parish priests, local officials

Duration: 90 - 120 minutes

Group size: 6 participants

Opening (Ground Rules)

- Confidentiality
- Respect for different views
- No obligation to speak

Opening (entry point: shared experience and general question)

- Many families in this area have someone working abroad. Would you say this has become normal here?
- Is it through a regular or irregular channel?
- When people talk about migration in this community, what do they usually talk about first?

Theme 1: Migration as a community-level crisis strategy

- Why do families decide that someone must go abroad?
- What kinds of problems push families to make that decision?
- Can you think of a typical story of how a man decides to migrate?

(Follow-up if needed)

- Is this decision usually planned calmly, or taken during difficult times?

Theme 2: money, daily expenses, and debt

- After a man migrates, does family life become easier or harder financially?
- What kinds of expenses worry families the most?
- What happens when money from abroad is delayed or does not arrive each month?

For example, for school fees, food, or medical needs..... what do families do?

Theme 3: Women's responsibilities and daily life

- When a man migrates, how does a woman's daily life change?
- What extra work does she take on at home or outside?
- Who helps her when things become difficult?

For example, who takes children to school, meets teachers, goes grocery shopping, or goes to government offices?

Theme 4: Living with long-term separation

- When someone has been away for many years, how do families talk about their absence?
- Do people still say "he will come back soon," or do they stop talking about his return?
- What kinds of worries stay with families for a long time? (socially, emotionally, and security)

Theme 5: Children and young people

- How do children usually react when their father is away for a long time?
- What changes do teachers or elders notice in children? (emotional or behavioural changes?)
- Are there times when children ask difficult questions or become quiet?
- Does this affect school attendance or concentration?
- How do schools and teachers respond to these changes?
- Are there gendered differences in how boys and girls are affected?

Theme 6: Elderly parents

- How do parents of migrant men feel about their sons being away?
- Who takes care of elderly parents when the son is not around?
- Do older people talk openly about their worries, or keep them inside?

Theme 7: Community discussions, silence, and judgment

- How do people in the community talk about families with migrants?
- Are there things families prefer not to talk about openly?
- Do women face more pressure or judgment than men?

For example, gossip, advice, or blame - what forms does it take?

Theme 8: Help, support, and gaps

- What formal support systems exist for migrant families?
- When families face serious problems, where do they usually go for help? (GS-Government servant in the village, Priest, Clergy, Maulavi)
- Are there supports that families expect but do not receive? (government welfare, benefits, and scholarships for children)
- Are migrant families treated differently by offices or programmes?

Theme 9: Recommendation

- What kinds of interventions would help families most?
- What should the government, policymakers, institutions, or NGOs understand better?

Closing

- What do you think outsiders do not understand about families living with long-term irregular migration?
- If one thing could change to help these families, what should it be?
- Is there anything important we haven't discussed?

Figure:5 Codebook

Code	Definition	Example Quote	Operationalization
Economic pressure	Structural financial hardship that drives the decision to migrate	“Salary was not enough... we had no other option..” (Interview 1) We (he) did not have a stable job or stable income” (Interview 5)	Participants describe job loss, low income, or inability to meet household needs leading to migration
Debt cycle	Ongoing and interconnected borrowing before and after migration, creating long-term financial trap	“We became trapped in debt” (Interview 5) That loan was repaid by borrowing from another person” Interview 7)	Use when loans, pawning assets, or borrowing to repay debts are mentioned as continuous processes
Irregular remittances	Unstable, insufficient, or unpredictable financial support from migrant workers	“Money is not enough... depends on his work” (Interview 1) “He mostly does part-time work... income varies” (Interview 3)	Apply when income from abroad is described as inconsistent, delayed, or inadequate
Female Headship	Women assuming primary responsibility for household management in the absence of the male partner	“I manage everything alone” (Interview 1) “I have to manage household work, shopping, and children” (Interview 2)	Use when women describe taking over decision-making, finances, and daily household management

Triple Burden (women's labour)	The simultaneous responsibility of paid work, unpaid care work, and emotional labour carried by women	"I work, take care of children, and manage everything" (Interview 2) "I manage everything... including elders and children" (Interview 4)	Women describe multiple overlapping roles and responsibilities
Emotional distress of women	Psychological and emotional strain experienced by women due to migration-related separation and responsibilities	"Life feels very lonely and exhausting... I feel very sad" (Interview 9) "I feel anger, sadness, and frustration" (Interview 3)	Use when women express sadness, loneliness, anger, anxiety, or emotional fatigue
Children's emotional distress	Emotional and psychological impact of paternal absence on children	"He wakes up crying for his father" (Interview 6) "She cried for hours and refused to eat" (Interview 8)	Children's sadness, fear, attachment, or emotional dependency is described
Educational impact on children	Negative effects of migration on children's schooling, concentration, or academic performance	"He dropped in class grades" (Interview 7) "She did not go to school for weeks" (Interview 5)	References to declining performance, lack of focus, or school-related issues
Coping Strategies (support systems)	Practical and emotional strategies used by families to manage migration-related insecurities	"My siblings supported us during difficult times" (Interview 4) "When I feel sad, I share my feelings with my daughter and pray at church." (Interview 5)	Use when participants describe support from family, religion, community, or personal strategies

Preliminary themes identified through data

1. Migration as an economic survival strategy
2. Debt and financial insecurity
3. Gendered burdens and women's roles
4. Emotional and social consequences of separation
5. Children's well-being, development, and transnational adaptation
6. Coping strategies and support systems

Financial Insecurity

- Economic Pressure
- Debt Cycle
- Irregular Remittances

Gendered Roles

- Female Headship
- Triple Burden
- Emotional Distress (Women)

Children's Well-being

- Emotional Distress (Children)
- Educational Impact

Consent to participate in a Master's Thesis at the Faculty of Social Sciences

I agree to participate in the thesis- Irregular Migration and Family Insecurities: A Case Study of the Negombo Coastal Belt, Sri Lanka

This is a student research project conducted as part of a Master's degree at Lund University, Sweden. The purpose of the study is to understand how labour migration affects families, especially women and children, in coastal areas of Sri Lanka.

As part of this research, some personal information will be collected, such as background details about the household, migration decisions and experiences, family economic conditions, and everyday challenges faced by families. This information is needed to understand participants' situations accurately and to analyse how migration shapes family life and well-being.

Information on the processing of personal data

The following personal data will be processed:

City of Origin, Current city, Age, No. of children, Age/s of children, Living situation (Nuclear or Extended family), Current occupation, Husband's occupation, The country Husband migrated first? In which country is your husband currently living and the what migration channel? How long he has been migrated?, Irregular migration route? Income condition and expenses in the family? The way he sends money home, how long has he been calling home? (video, audio), How do children feel about their father's absence? How do wives feel about their husbands' separation? How do the elderly parents feel about their son? Irregular migration route? Social/emotional vulnerabilities.

The following sensitive personal data will be processed: Ethnicity and Religious nature

Personal data will be processed in the following ways:

Data will be collected through an audio recorder (voice recorder) that is not connected to the internet or any cloud-based system to ensure that no personal data is exposed to external networks with permission. Notes will also be taken manually during interviews, a focus group discussion, and two online interviews. All recordings will be transcribed into written or typed documents, which will be stored either in a physical notebook or on a personal computer using encrypted, password-protected files. Audio files will remain securely stored on the original recording device until transcription is complete. Voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections will be ensured. Anonymity will be ensured through the use of pseudonyms and by removing any identifying information from transcripts, field notes, and eventual publications. Participants will retain the right to withdraw at any stage, and any data linked to them will be deleted immediately upon request. Data confidentiality will be maintained by limiting access to the researcher and storing all materials securely. Ethical approval for data collection and handling will be obtained from Lund University's Research Ethics Committee before fieldwork. Personal data won't be shared through media or social media platforms at any stage. I do not share your personal data with third parties.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, with organisation number 202100-3211 is the controller. You can find Lund University's privacy policy at www.lu.se/integritet

You have the right to receive information about the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have inaccurate personal data about you corrected. If you have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer at dataskyddsbud@lu.se. You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority (the Data Protection Authority, IMY) if you believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

I agree to participate in the thesis- Irregular Migration and Family Insecurities: A Case Study of the Negombo Coastal Belt, Sri Lanka

Location	Signature
Date	Name clarification

Research ethics form, degree projects at Graduate School

Name: Hesha Perera (J.K.H.S.L.Perera)

Course: Master's in Global Studies

1. Briefly describe your research question and purpose.

Irregular migration from Sri Lanka to Europe has increased since the 2022 economic crisis, especially in coastal hubs like Negombo. As men depart through irregular channels, women become the heads of households, managing debts, caregiving burdens, and community stigma, while children face psychosocial stress and disrupted schooling. Although digital communication maintains contact, prolonged separation often weakens emotional stability. These family experiences reflect broader global inequalities and neoliberal labour regimes rather than individual choices. This study examines the lived realities of affected families in Negombo, their coping strategies, and the service and policy gaps that shape their vulnerabilities.

Primary Research Question:

- How does men's irregular migration to Europe affect the economic, social, and emotional security of women within migrant-sending households?

Secondary Research Questions:

- How does prolonged paternal absence influence children's psychosocial well-being and sense of stability?
- What coping mechanisms and informal support systems do transnational families develop to manage these insecurities?

2. Briefly describe your planned research population.

The research will be conducted in 3–8 coastal Grama Niladhari divisions (GN) in Negombo, a region that represents a historically significant hub of both legal and irregular migration.

Semi-Structured Interviews - 10–12 interviews with women aged 25–50 heading migrant households.

Focus Group Discussions - 1 Focus group discussion with mothers, grandparents, teachers, parish priests, and local officials.

Case studies - Two online discussions with migrant men in Europe to capture transnational perspectives on family life and uncertainty.

The study will employ purposive and snowball sampling, facilitated by a trusted local gatekeeper (a school medical practitioner/ counsellor in Negombo with long-term community engagement). This strategy is essential for accessing households affected by irregular migration, a topic that is both sensitive and stigmatized. Data collection will continue until saturation is reached, ensuring analytical depth.

3. Will you gather personal data?

☒ Yes

☐ No

4. If you answered yes to question #3, describe the kind of personal data you will collect.

City of Origin, Current city, Age, No. of children, Age/s of children, Living situation (Nuclear or Extended family), Current occupation, Husband's occupation, The country Husband migrated first? In which country is your husband currently living and the what migration channel? How long he has been migrated?, Irregular migration route? Income condition and expenses in the family? The way he sends money home, how long has he been calling home? (video, audio), How do children feel about their father's absence? How do wives feel about their husbands' separation? How do the elderly parents feel about their son? Irregular migration route? Social/emotional vulnerabilities

5. How will collect your research data?

☒ Interviews

☒ Observations

☒ Text analysis

☐ Internet fora and social media

If yes describe what kind:

☐ Surveys

☒ Existing statistical data

☒ Other

If other, describe the material briefly: two online discussions

6. Describe how you will process (e.g. collect and store, etc.) the data as you work with your thesis.

Data will be collected through an audio recorder (voice recorder) that is not connected to the internet or any cloud-based system to ensure that no personal data is exposed to external networks

with permission. Notes will also be taken manually during interviews, a focus group discussion, and two online interviews. All recordings will be transcribed into written or typed documents, which will be stored either in a physical notebook or on a personal computer using encrypted, password-protected files. Audio files will remain securely stored on the original recording device until transcription is complete.

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, who will be fully briefed on the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections. Anonymity will be ensured through the use of pseudonyms and by removing any identifying information from transcripts, field notes, and eventual publications. Participants will retain the right to withdraw at any stage, and any data linked to them will be deleted immediately upon request.

Data confidentiality will be maintained by limiting access to the researcher and storing all materials securely. Ethical approval for data collection and handling will be obtained from Lund University's Research Ethics Committee before fieldwork. Personal data won't be shared through media or social media platforms at any stage.

7. Describe how and when you will erase the personal data.

All personal data will be erased in accordance with GDPR principles and Lund University's ethical guidelines. Immediately after each interview or focus group, all names, locations, and identifiable details will be anonymised in the transcripts through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of unique identifiers. Audio recordings will be stored only until transcription and verification are complete, after which the files will be permanently deleted from the recording device and any computer storage.

Personal data contained in notes or transcripts will be retained only for the duration of the thesis process. Once the thesis is examined and approved, all identifiable data will be securely erased. Participants also retain the right to request the deletion of their data at any point, and in such cases, the relevant files will be removed immediately. All data handling and deletion procedures will be carried out under the guidance of the supervisor.

8. Are you familiar with the template for obtaining consent from participants in a master's degree project (available on Canvas)?

☒ Yes

☐ No

9. Will you be gathering sensitive personal data? If so, what kind?

☒ Race/Ethnicity

☐ Sexual Orientation

☐ Health

☐ Political orientation

☐ Sexuality

☐ Information about legal offences

[X]Of Religious and/or philosophical nature?

10. If you plan to gather sensitive data, explain why the data is important to your project.

Yes, the study will gather sensitive data such as ethnicity and religious background. This information is important because migration patterns in Negombo are closely shaped by ethnic and religious community networks, historical ties to migration destinations, and differing social norms around caregiving, family roles, and mobility. Understanding these aspects helps contextualize how families experience irregular migration, cope with prolonged separation, and access support systems. Collecting this data allows the analysis to capture how insecurities and social pressures are influenced by community identities, which is essential for accurately interpreting participants' lived experiences.

Figure 6: Entrance bridge to Munnakkara and local boatyard.



Figure 7: Holy Cross Church, Munnakkara



Figure 8: Munnakara boatyard and fish market



Photo courtesy of the author.