

Does Recruitment through an Agent Minimize Vulnerability of Sri Lankan Female Domestic Workers?

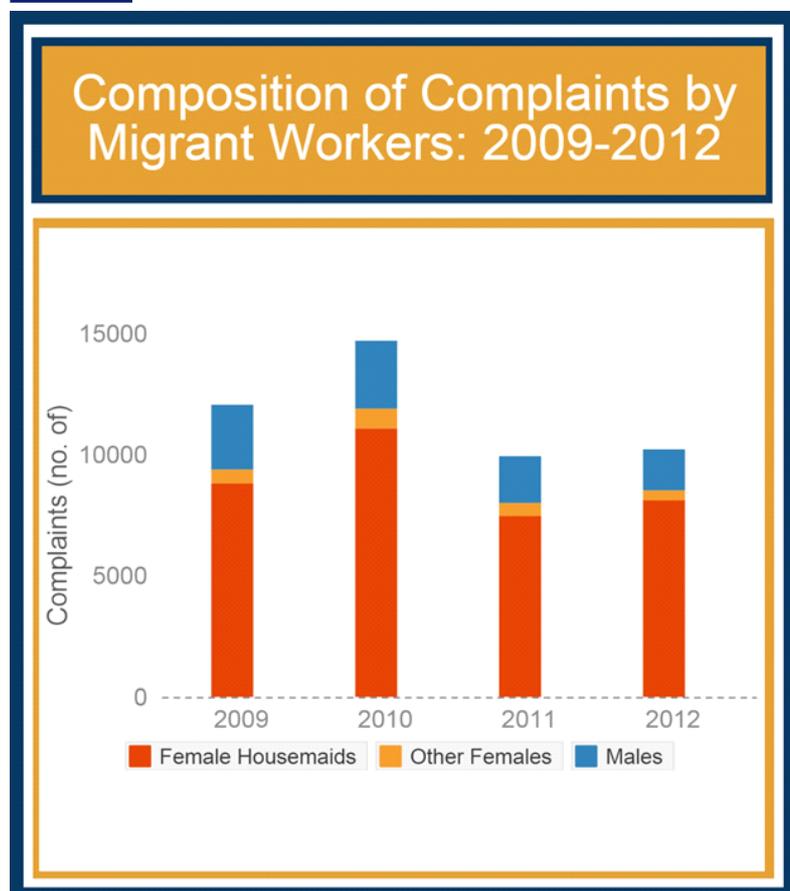
INTRODUCTION

In the Middle East almost one in every three female workers is a domestic worker and a majority are migrants. In 2013, out of the 293,105 departures from Sri Lanka for foreign employment, 33 per cent were female domestic workers and almost all of them headed to the Middle East.

Among all female migrant workers, domestic workers are disproportionately vulnerable to adverse conditions in destination countries (ILO, 2013b). Such vulnerability is mainly due to the near 'absence of any party with any interest in these women' (Cox, 1997). This is often exacerbated when the employee's living and working premises overlap and limit her opportunities to seek protection from a third party. In many cases, the third party is the individual or the institution that mediated between the employer and employee. As such, it is often hypothesized that unfavourable outcomes experienced by female domestic workers at destination are correlated with the recruitment channel.

In Sri Lanka, the main channel of recruitment is through licensed recruitment agents. In 2013, 62 per cent were employed through licensed agents. Employment through a formal recruitment agency normally involves a written agreement - specifying terms and conditions of employment and living conditions. Employment through other channels such as direct contacts and informal agents, etc., often do not involve such clear specifications.

FIGURE 1



Source: SLBFE, 2014.

According to SLBFE (2014), majority of complains by migrant workers are reported by female domestic workers (see Figure 1). The most common complaints (by all female workers) were non-payment of agreed wages; sickness; physical and/or sexual harassment; breach of employment contract; and lack of communication with home and peers. In terms of the destinations of where the complained issues were

experienced, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan accounted for the top three countries.

This policy brief is based on a recent study by IPS researcher, Bilesha Weeraratne, to discern if recruitment through an agent correlates to minimizing the vulnerability of female domestic workers at destination.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The study uses secondary data from the survey conducted by Social Policy Analysis Research Center (SPARC) and the International Labour Office (ILO) in 2012. Of the 2000 respondents, the analysis is based on 1409 respondents who were female domestic workers in their last trip abroad.

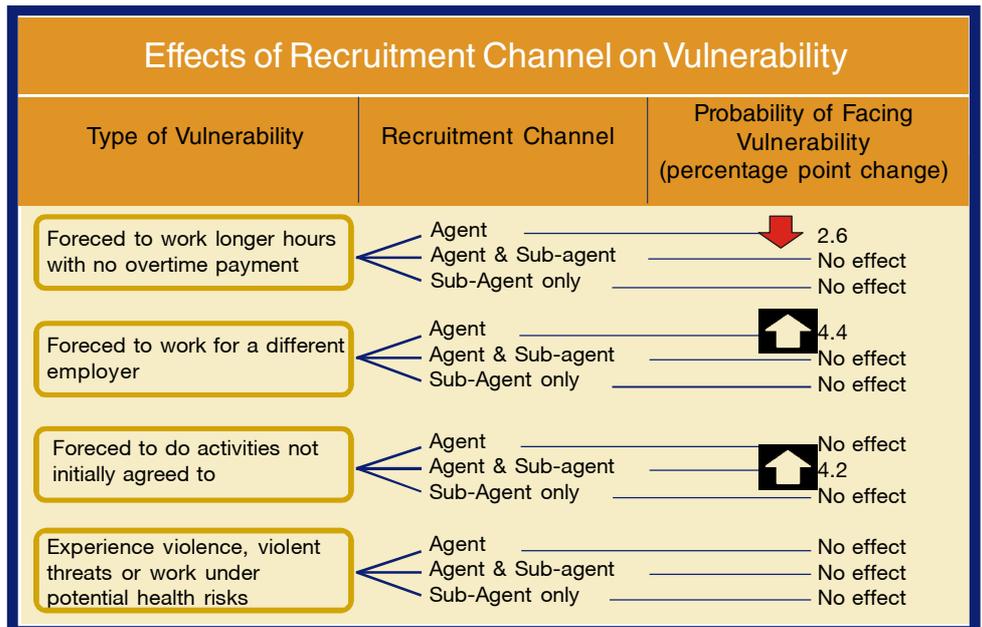
The study adopts a discrete choice methodology to estimate the correlation between probability to experience vulnerability at destination as a function recruitment channel and other control variables. The study focuses on four types of vulnerabilities (being forced to - work longer hours with no overtime payment; work for a different employer; do activities not initially agreed to; and had experienced violence, violent threats or work under potential health risks) and four recruitment channels - on own; agent only; combination of an agent and a sub-agent; and sub-agent only.

The findings of probit modeling are validated with qualitative information gathered in KIIs (Key Informant Interviews) with establishments assisting potential, current and returned female domestic workers and with employment agents.

FINDINGS

The study finds inconclusive evidence about the correlation between vulnerability and recruitment channels, and instead finds that the effect of recruitment channel is specific to the type of vulnerability faced (see Figure 2). The study also finds that, the low level of understanding about the migration process by migrants and the asymmetric recruitment structure (an employer is provided a replacement in the case of a runaway maid, but a maid finds it difficult to find an alternative to an abusive employer), are also contributors towards vulnerability at destination.

FIGURE 2



Note: all effects are relative to finding employment on own.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Vulnerability is multifaceted, involving various types of issues. **Different aspects of vulnerability can be minimized through different recruitment channels and no recruitment channel will protect a migrant from all types of vulnerabilities.** As such, potential migrants should be well informed (through an awareness campaign) about the various types of vulnerabilities associated with domestic employment and how to strike a balance with their varied implications, through the choice of recruitment channel.

Sources:

ILO-Geneva. 2013. Strengthening Grievance and Compliant Handling Mechanisms to Address Migrant Worker Grievances in Sri Lanka. A Review and Analysis of Mechanisms. International Labour Office -Geneva.

Cox, David. 1997. The vulnerability of Asian women migrant workers to a lack of protection and to violence. Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, 6(1), 59-75.

SLBFE. 2014. Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment 2012. Online Data Tables, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment.



This policy brief is based on the findings from a study carried out by IPS researcher Bilesha Weeraratne on 'Female Domestic Workers in the Middle East: Does Recruitment through an Agent Minimize Vulnerability?', with funding from the Think Tank Initiative.

For more information
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