

Behavioural problems among the pre-school children of migrant mothers in Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

Objectives :

To assess the prevalence and types of behavioural problems and the distribution of some associated factors of behavioural problems among three defined groups of pre-school children, from a low socio-economic background in relation to the maternal employment status. Special emphasis was given to the children of mothers employed overseas.

Methodology :

Three groups of pre-school children between the ages of 13-59 months were included in the study in three MOH areas were selected for the study.

Group 1 - children whose mothers were employed as domestic helps overseas for more than 6 months duration.

Group 2 - For each child in group 1, a child matched for age and sex having a mother employed in Sri Lanka for the same duration as mentioned above was identified from the same neighbourhood.

Group 3 - Similarly a child matched for age and sex whose mother was not formally employed was identified from the same neighbourhood.

An interviewer administered questionnaire was used to collect information on socio-economic status of the children, child care arrangements and psychosocial environment. "Home risk factors" used in the Child Health Development Record for pre-school children was one way of studying the their psychosocial environment. A checklist developed by Richman and Graham, which had been adopted and modified for Sri Lanka, was used to study the behaviour of children.

Results :

Some of the variables which were differently distributed in the three groups were educational level of the father, indulgence in alcohol and drugs among the fathers and marital disharmony in the families.

The highest proportion of behavioural problems were seen in the group 1 (8.8%) with bed wetting, night waking, clinging to the caretaker, temper tantrums and bad relationship with the siblings, compared to groups 2 (2.2%) and group 3 (2.9%).

Conclusions :

Women of low income groups seek employment overseas, to improve their economic standards. The pre-school children of these mothers seem to be an important group for which special child welfare activities should be aimed at.

Introduction

In many traditional societies, care of young children was shared by of all the members in the extended family. In the past few decades, the family structure in Sri Lanka has transgressed from this, resulting in more nuclear families with young parents caring for their children on their own. With increasing female literacy and economic needs, more and more females continue to join the work force. When mothers of nuclear families are employed away from home, it results in a new set of problems regarding the care of young children. There is no organised system by the state to provide care for the children of the working mothers who are in need of such a system.

In recent years, mothers in the lower socio-economic groups have gone a step further, seeking employment overseas in a domestic capacity, leaving young children with relatively inadequate child care arrangements. In 1995 out of all migrants to middle eastern countries 73% were females seeking employment as domestic helpers. Out of them 79% were married and no data is available on the children they would have left behind (1).

Factors shown to influence the behaviour of pre-school children are manifold. Child's immediate environment is the nuclear family and if the intra-familial dynamics are disturbed the child may respond to stress with disordered behaviour (2). marital discord (3), social disadvantage (4) in the family, maternal deprivation (5) and single parent families (6) are factors which negatively influence intra familial dynamics.

In a low socio- economic background, social disadvantage and lack of resources are naturally inherited by the young children. It could be hypothesised that children from such a background, whose mothers are employed overseas may be more

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vulnerable to develop behavioural problems by virtue of the fact that they are exposed to multiple risk factors mentioned above.

This study was carried out to assess the prevalence and types of behavioural problems and distribution of some associated factors of behavioural problems among three defined groups of pre-school children from a low socio-economic background in relation to the maternal employment status with special emphasis on migrant mothers.

Methodology

Study set-up

This study was carried out in the Colombo district. Available data at the Foreign Employment Bureau (1) indicate that this district has the highest number of women migrated overseas as unskilled workers. Three out of ten Health Unit areas within the Colombo district were randomly selected.

The study population included three defined groups of children:

Group 1- All children aged 13-59 months of age, resident in the study area whose mother was working as a domestic helper overseas for more than 6 months were chosen.

To study the possible effects of the total absence of the mother, two comparison groups were studied.

Group 2 - For each child in group 1, a child of same sex and matched for age (+/- 3 months), having a mother employed in Sri Lanka for more than six months, living in the same neighbourhood was chosen.

Group 3- Similarly, a child matched for age and sex, whose mother was not formally employed was identified from the same neighbourhood.

Only children whose parents were employed in skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled occupations were included in the study, in order to minimise variations in social classes.

Study instruments

1. An interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to obtain data on some socio-demographic characteristics of the child and parents, provision of child care and psychosocial environment.

Information on the quantity and quality of care given to the child was assessed, using responses to a few specific questions. They included:

- the time spent with the child by the father and the caretaker,
- extent to which the caretaker participates in play activities and in "story telling"(traditionally done by telling the folk tales),
- measures taken by the caretaker to stop any "undesirable" activities of the child,

2. The Pre-school child behaviour checklist (PBCL), developed by Richman and Graham modified and adopted for Sri Lanka was used to assess the behaviour of the subjects (7).

There were 17 items where different childhood behaviours were considered. A graded score was used considering 3 levels with regard to each of the 17 behaviours.

behaviour not a problem	- 0,
somewhat a problem	- 1,
definitely a problem	- 2.

A composite score for each child was developed based on this scoring system. A child with a score of 10 or above was identified as a child with "abnormal behaviour" (7).

3. Observations were made in the households to identify the 'risk factors' in the home environment, which would influence the child's psycho-social environment, through a check list used in the National Child Mental Health Programme in Sri Lanka (table 3).

Results

Characteristics of the children

Each group included 137 pre-school children in the defined age group. There were 56 males (40.8%) and 81 females (59.2%) in each group. The age distribution shows that the highest proportion of children were in the age group 37 - 48 months (38%), with the proportions in the other age groups, 13 - 24 months, 25 - 36 months and 49 - 60 months being approximately 20%.

The proportion of children with a low birth weight i.e. below 2500 grams, was significantly high in group 1 (37.2%), compared to group 2 (21.9%) and group 3 (35.8%). The differences between the groups 1 and 2 and 1 and 3 were statistically significant (S.N.D.=2.8 in both comparisons).

The three groups were not significantly different in respect of birth order of the child, number of living children in the family, age gap between the index child and the sibling immediately elder to him/her and the sibling younger to him/her.

Characteristics of the parents-

In general, ethnic distribution among parents was similar, with more than 80% Sinhalese, 9% Tamils and 6% Moors, the others comprised Dutch Burghers and Malays. This was compatible with the ethnic distribution of the Western Province of Sri Lanka within which, this study was conducted. Similarly, over 80% of the parents were Buddhists and all other religious groups had a share of 5-6% of the population under study.

Selected socio demographic characteristics of the parents of the three groups are given in Table 1. It shows that the proportions of mothers with an educational level more than grade 9 level were higher in groups 1 (50.8%) and 2 (56.9%), compared to non-working women in group 3 (43.8%). Among the fathers, this pattern was different with a higher percentage in groups 2 (56.3%) and 3 (58.6%), than in group 1 (29.4%).

Table 1 Socio-demographic information of the family

	Group1 (n = 137) %	group2 (n = 137) %	group 3 (n = 137) %
Level of education			
> grade 9			
Mother	50.8	56.8	43.8 ($X^2=4.91$, df=2, p=.08)
Father	29.4	56.3	58.8 ($X^2=36.39$, df= 2, p=.000)
Marital status of parents			
Married	86.1	88.3	97.1
Separated	1.5	0.7	0.7
Abandoned	7.3	8.1	0.7
Illegitimate	2.9	-	-
Widowed	2.2	2.9	1.5
Ownership of house			
Living at a relation's house	45.2	73.7	73.7 ($X^2=32.22$, df=2, p=.000)

** Absolute numbers were taken and Chi square (X^2) test was performed.

Childcare practices

The mother or any other person who had the primary responsibility in looking after and being with the child was identified as the principal caretaker.

In group 3, the principal caretaker was the non-working mother of the child. In the other groups, a majority of children were looked after by the grandparents, 61.2% for group 1 and 73.6% for group 2. The other children were looked after by a mixed group of caretakers which included father, domestic helps, siblings, relations and neighbours (table 2).

Time spent with the child

The mean time spent by the mother, father and principal caretaker were compared between the 3 groups. The highest mean time spent by the mother with the child in groups 1,2 and 3 was 0.00, 3.55 and 11.9 hrs respectively. The mean time spent by the father with the child was approximately 2 hours in all 3 groups. The Principal caretaker in groups 1 and 2 spent approximately 10 hours with the child (table 2).

Attitudes of the principal caretaker

The percentage of primary caretakers who never played with the child was highest in group 1, 46.3% compared to 32.1% and 32.8 respectively in the groups 2 and 3 (table 2). The same pattern was seen with regard to the practice of telling stories, the respective percentages in groups 1,2 and 3 was 56.6%, 35.5% and 42.3%).

There were several measures adopted by the principal caretakers, to stop activities done by the child which were identified as "undesirable" by the caretakers/mothers. In groups 2 and 3, respectively 42.3% and 43.1% mothers tried to persuade the child to stop the particular activity, without reprimanding him/her, while the percentage for group 1 was 32.1%. The highest percentage of caretakers who resorted to punitive action was seen in group 1 (61.3%). The respective proportion for groups 2 and 3 was 54%.

In group 1, where the mother was employed overseas, the age of the child at which the mother left the country and the frequency of contact the mother had with the family was studied. Seventy seven percent of the mothers had left when their children were more than 12 months of age (77.2%).

The frequency of letters from the mothers overseas was taken as an indicator of the contact the mother had with the family. Most of the mothers sent letters home at least once in two months (85.5%). There were 9.6% of mothers who had not written home in

the year before (50% of these mothers, had been away for more than 24 months). The rest of the mothers sent letters home at least once in six months.

Table 2. Quantity and quality of care given to the child

	group 1 (n=137) %	group 2 (n=137) %	group 3 (n=137) %	level of significance
principal caretaker				
mother	0	0	100	
grand parent	61.2	73.6	0	
mean time spent with the child by the (hrs)				
mother	0	3.55	11.9	
father	2	2	2	
attitude of the caretaker playing with the child				
frequently	39.7	47.4	58.4	$X = 16.18$, $df = 4$, $p = .002$
sometimes	14.0	20.4	8.8	
never	46.3	32.1	32.8	
telling stories				
frequently	31.6	41.6	51.1	$X = 28.16$, $df = 4$, $p = .00001$
sometimes	11.8	23.4	6.6	
never	56.6	35.0	42.3	
measures taken to stop activities identified as undesirable by the distracting attention	PCT 32.1	42.3	43.1	
direct punitive action	61.3	54.0	54.0	

Psycho-social environment

The psycho-social environment of the child is considered to influence the behaviour of the child. Home risk factors used in the National Child Mental Health Programme were used to get an idea on the psychosocial environment in this study. The first two risk situations : mother below 17 years of age and the presence of more than 2 children below 2 years of age were not found in any of the groups. Findings are presented in table 4.

Behaviour

As the pre-school behaviour check-list has been developed for children above 24 months of age and above, only 109 children in each group were eligible to be included in the study

Table 3. Distribution of the 'Home risk factors' among the three groups (g-Group)

	g-1	g-2	g-3	level of significance
low level of knowledge in basic health, in the PCT	-	1 (0.7)	4 (2.9)	
principal caretaker with mental illness/depression	2 (1.5)	1 (0.7)	-	
principal caretaker not interested in the child	6 (4.4)	1 (0.7)	2 (1.5)	
disorganised house	68 (49.6)	56 (40.9)	62 (45.3)	
father delinquent, alcoholic, mentally	23 (16.8)	6 (4.4)	3 (2.2)	$x = 23.65$, $df = 2$, $p = .00001$
retarded, drug addict				
family with severe marital discord	17 (12.4)	15 (10.9)	5 (3.6)	$x = 7.36$, $df = 2$, $p = .025$
abject poverty	11 (8.0)	3 (2.2)	7 (5.1)	
children affected by armed conflict	1 (0.7)	-	2 (1.5)	

Number of children with behaviour problems

	group 1	group 2	group 3
behaviour normal	97 (91.2)	106 (97.8)	105 (97.1)
behaviour abnormal	12 (8.8)	3 (2.2)	4 (2.9)

$$X = 7.378, df = 2, p < .05$$

It had been shown that by considering the total score, isolated behaviour problems in relation to a particular item could be masked (8). In addition to the overall score related to behaviour, presence or absence of behavioural problems under the 15 situations was studied. The findings of this analysis are summarised in Table 4. Only 41.2% in all 3 groups had siblings. Among them 13.6% of children in group 1 had a "bad relationship" with their siblings which was explained

Table 4. Children with "abnormal behaviour" in relation to the 15 items in Pre-school Behaviour Check List - (g-Group)

	g-1 (n = 109)	g-2 (n = 109)	g-3 (n = 109)	Level of significance
always poor appetite	27 (24.8)	32 (29.3)	22 (20.2)	
not dry by day	6 (5.5)	4 (3.7)	5 (4.6)	
bed wetting	29 (26.6)	17 (15.6)	17 (15.6)	X = 5.66, df = 2, p = .05
encopresis	6 (5.5)	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	
difficult to settle to sleep	3 (2.7)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.9)	
night waking	10 (9.2)	3 (2.7)		
lethargic	11 (10.1)	14 (12.8)	8 (7.3)	
lack of concentration	11 (10.1)	6 (5.5)	11 (10.1)	
dependency	9 (8.2)	7 (6.4)	8 (7.3)	
seeks a lot of attention	23 (21.1)	11 (10.1)	9 (8.2)	X = 9.21, df = 2, p = .01
easy to manage	18 (16.5)	10 (9.2)	11 (10.1)	
temper tantrums	19 (17.4)	7 (6.4)	19 (17.4)	X = 7.42, df = 2, .p = .02
often moody	3 (2.7)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.9)	
has a lot of fears	2 (1.8)	2 (1.8)	1 (0.9)	

as being jealous and rough towards their siblings (the comparable percentages in groups 2 and 3 being 0 and 1.4%). There was a statistically significant difference between the proportions in groups 1 and 2 and 1 and 3.

With regard to 5 out of 15 items, statistically significant differences were observed between each of the three groups. They were bed wetting, night waking, clinging on to the caretaker, temper tantrums and bad relationship with the siblings.

The risk of developing behavioural problems in children in relation to the availability of the mother was examined by calculating the odds ratio as follows.

Group 3 – mother not employed and is at home,
Group 2 - mother employed in Sri Lanka,
Group 1 – mother migrated.

Situation A

Each group was compared with group 3 which was thought to have no risk with regard to the availability of the mother at home.

Odds ratio	lower class interval	upper class interval
Group 2		
0.6	0.1081	4.033
Group 1		
3.969	1.075	14.65
statistically significant		

The risk of developing behavioural problems in the children of migrant mothers was 3 fold.

Then the risk of developing behavioural problems in the children due to the presence of a few specific variables was examined next. They were :

1. father delinquent/alcoholic/drug addict (Z7),
2. frequency of the fathers visits after the mother left (pavisit),
3. how the caretaker reacted if the child was engaged in an action undesirable to the principal caretaker :

two levels were considered against kindly telling and distracting the child,

Scolding – scold

Hitting straight away to punish - punish

Odds ratio	upper class interval	lower class interval
Variable		
Z7		
1.5	.1909	11.78
Pavisit		
2.171	.6681	7.053
Scold		
.3673	.0929	1.452
Punish		
2.143	.6849	6.705

None of the odds ratios were statistically significant and this may have been due to the small sample size. As we cannot alter the situation where the mothers went away from children, for employment overseas, we examined how each one of the 'risk' factors mentioned above, modified the risk of the mothers' absence resulting in behavioural problems.

Situation B

Odds ratio	lower class interval	upper class interval
Variable		
Group 2		
4.084	0.6685	.1094
Group 1		
16.8	4.496	1.203
Z7		
22.81	2.8	.3457

The risk of developing behavioural problems was increased in the children of migrant mothers (than in situation A) with the presence of a father who was an alcoholic/drug addict /delinquent.

Situation C

Odds ratio	lower class interval	upper class interval
Variable		
Group 2		
.63	.1035	.3.9
Group 1		
3.664	.9605	13.82
Pavisit		
1.548	.4555	5.258

The risk of developing behavioural problems was decreased in the children of migrant mothers (than in situation A) with the father not paying them frequent visits.

Situation D

Odds ratio	lower class interval	upper class interval
Variable		
Group 2		
.96	.1535	6.603
Group 1		
5.178	1.365	19.65
Scold		
.3194	.0791	1.289
Punish		
2.088	.6407	6.906

Risk of developing behavioural problems was increased in the children of migrant mothers (than in situation A) when there were bad practices to discipline the children like hitting the child straight away.

Discussion -

This study was carried out to assess the prevalence and distribution of some factors associated with behaviour problems of three defined groups of pre-school children of low socio-economic groups in relation to maternal employment status with special emphasis on mothers employed overseas.

Findings indicate that generally all the parents in the study population have had a middle level education. Fathers in group 1 were less educated than their counterparts in the other groups and their wives. With employment opportunities available for female domestic helpers in the middle eastern countries, the mothers in group 1 were in a better position to seek employment in those countries.

Children in group 1 seemed to have faced more unfavourable circumstances than their counterparts in the other three groups. Marital discord was seen mostly in group 1 and 13.9% children in this group were living only with the mother before she left (table 1). Hence, at the time of the study, these children had neither of their parents with them. More than half of the families in group 1 (54.7% compared to 26.3% in both groups 2 and 3) did not own a house and were staying at a relative's house.

Aggravating the unfavourable circumstances, group 1 had the highest proportion of fathers who were smokers, who consumed alcohol and who were drug addicts. It is possible that the number of persons who indulged in these activities would have been much more as people tend to give negative answers concealing socially undesirable behaviours (10).

A pre-school child depends on the care taker not only for the fulfilment of basic physical needs but also for the psychological needs. A mother employed overseas, will have to be away from home for a continuous period of time, often more than a year. Out of the mothers who migrated overseas, 22.8% left their children while they were infants. This was not satisfactory at all, considering the intimate bond the child would have developed with the mother, during this period. Fathers of children in group 1 did not try to compensate for the mother's absence at home, by spending more time with the child.

The highest number of children with behavioural problems were seen among children of mothers employed overseas while the lowest was in group 2. The highest proportion of principal caretakers who straightaway physically punished children, in the

event of engaging in an activity undesirable to the caretaker was also in group 1. All the above factors could influence behaviour, directly or indirectly, as shown in studies both in developed and developing countries (111,120,117).

Since the Middle-eastern countries started recruiting females as domestic helpers, many women from developing countries have accepted such employment. The Sri Lankan government has accepted on principle and encourages the foreign exchange earned by the women employed overseas but has not embarked on a regular programme to provide proper child care arrangements for the needy children. These children could be at a disadvantage even before the mothers left them as shown in this study.

Recommendations

A system should be developed where "at risk" children are identified and registered by the Public Health Midwife who provides the maternal and child care services at domiciliary level. A multidisciplinary approach could be initiated to help these vulnerable children. With the help of a team of officers who are under the Divisional Secretary e.g. Child Rights Promotion Officers, Samurdhi Officers, Social Services Officers, Women's affairs Officers etc, an integrated programme should be initiated to support these children.

Domiciliary care with empowerment of caring adults : giving assistance to promote parenting skills and monitored financial assistance should be arranged than institutionalised care for these children. Development of creches with trained staff is another felt need which would benefit all categories of children.

Financial assistance could be given by the Foreign Employment Bureau. A small proportion of the monies paid by the migrant mothers as registration fees at the Bureau could be used for this purpose. It is our duty to provide a safe environment for these children while admiring the hard earned and much wanted foreign currency earned by their mothers.

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