

A New Social Phenomenon? The Migration of Professional Sri Lankan Women to New Zealand

Abstract

This paper discusses the preliminary findings from a doctoral study about the migration of young single women professionals from Sri Lanka to New Zealand. The migration of highly educated single women, such as the study's participants, from third world to first world countries, is a new global social phenomenon. While it is a response to the requirements of the global knowledge labour market, it affects both sending and receiving countries. The research study examines the effects on Sri Lanka and New Zealand and on the individual women themselves. It is intended that the study will contribute to the relatively small literature on independent middle class female migration from developing to developed countries in the contemporary period. The findings, which are discussed in the paper, suggest that the women are upwardly mobile and aspire to non-traditional occupations which enable them to become autonomous decision-makers. The findings also show that, interestingly, there is no evidence of any ambivalence towards these aspirations despite the women's early acculturation into traditional gendered roles. They are thoroughly modern women.

Key words: Migration, women professionals, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, global knowledge economy.

Introduction:

This paper is an overview of preliminary findings of a doctoral research study about the migration of young single women professionals from Sri Lanka to New Zealand. The research investigated the experiences of six young Sri Lankan women who are highly educated, independent professionals, and recent migrants to New Zealand. The increasingly feminised character of migration, particularly involving the movement of single independent young women from third world countries to universities and professional employment in first world countries, is a relatively under-researched feature of the phenomenon (Luke 2001). Yet it is a phenomenon with a range of implications. These may include social implications for families in the traditional societies left by these 'footloose' women. The main focus of the study was to examine how their experiences in the globalised knowledge labour market illustrates a particular female phenomenon in the early 21st century and the nature of these changes occurring to those young women.

Theoretical discussion

The expansion of the global market in higher education in the opening decades of the twenty-first century provides professional opportunities for women from the emergent middle-class of former Third World countries (Giddens 1995; Vidich 1995; Gunn 2002; Sorenson 2004). There are employment and social implications for the new host countries as young single professional women enter their labour forces. At the level of individual experiences, the women undergo change as they find a place for themselves and their completing university degrees in the globalised knowledge labour market. The changes occur as the women negotiate along a paradoxical path of opportunities and restraints. For the first time in history large number of single women from developing countries with relatively traditional societies, and travelling without their families are moving to developed countries to study and take up professional employment (Luke 2001; Harvey 2000; Hymowitz 2008). Although women have always played an important role in migratory movements (Campani 1995) the new phenomenon is characterised by features not seen in earlier migration movements, in particular, the migration of unaccompanied, well-educated young women moving to the life of a well-paid, independent professional in the middle class of a first world country. The phenomenon characterises the United States' patterns of migration and marriage with women who never married or previously married but are now single becoming a significant feature of migration patterns (Society 2006; Hymowitz 2008, Evans, 2009). It is a phenomenon also affecting New Zealand.

From the colonial era, third world elites have sent their daughters to European countries for higher education. In contrast, the women I study are not members of elites but come from the growing middle-class that characterises countries like Sri Lanka, India and China. The children of the new middle-class obtain degrees from local universities that have internationally recognized qualifications. Dale suggests this 'globally structured educational agenda' (Dale 2000, p. 427- 48) as common world education culture which reflects the impacts of globalised capitalism on education system. The participants in this research are from this group. They are professional, well-educated, middle class young women who have migrated to first world countries for their personal career development.

Reasons for migration

The colonial bridge between Sri Lanka and New Zealand is one of the attractions for these women to move to New Zealand. Having shared British colonisation, many Sri Lankans are familiar with the New Zealand education system with its similar curriculum, the use of English as the medium of instruction, and the qualification process. The recent leading role played by New Zealand in Sri Lanka's educational restructuring programs and provides another link between the two countries. In particular, The Colombo Plan- 1951 played a significant strategic role in changing foreign affairs policy and international/export education policy formation (Butcher 2009) which developed relationship with Asian and South Asian countries. However, among various reasons for leaving Sri Lanka, most share the desire to find exciting opportunities.

In ,addition, Sassen (2000) point outs that women too, may decide to move in order to further their careers, to acquire new skills and, while migration is not just about making money, money does give the financial freedom to be autonomous and independent. This suggests that it is not enough to understand female migration from the third world to first world as a question of survival. These women are motivated to move to realize aspirations which include professional satisfaction, career progression, and skill development and enhancement. The accounts of the participants in this research showed that their families are financially well off and do not require remittances. Two of the young women mentioned that they are sending gifts to encourage their younger siblings. The participants say that they have been influenced by the opportunity to further their education and be economically well-off with long-term visions of future success. Here are snapshots from the vignettes of these women.

Thirty-one year old Asanka has a managerial position in a construction company in New Zealand. At the age of 25 she graduated and moved to New Zealand as an engineer. This is what she says about leaving Sri Lanka, '...to improve my career experience and also to employ my skills... I wanted to enjoy my freedom...I mean...live...live a free life...you know. It's like without others' interventions'.

Thanuja completed her BSc at age 23 and migrated to pursue higher education. During the last seven years in New Zealand she has become well established in her profession as a designer. Thanuja says that 'I wanted to take any challenge. I know that I have to work hard here but it's a challenge to face the life. I decided to move from Sri Lanka for my post-grad studies...needed to get some overseas qualifications and experiences for the career development...yes... I am where I wanted to be...'

Nimmi completed her first degree in commerce at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka and migrated to New Zealand in her early twenties. In the last six years she has developed her career in a high profile role in a well known business in New Zealand. Her decision to move from Sri Lanka was 'to choose a better place to grow up as a professional...to search for a better life, better opportunities and further education. For me opportunities mean the new avenues... that would avoid so many restrictions in the education system, social structure and economic sector. Finding employment ...particularly for women there are so many barriers there...'

At twenty-five, Achini moved from a very traditional family background in order to live alone and enjoy freedom. She explains her situation this way. 'My aunties and uncles are very conservative. After my mother's death my dad is very strict...I decided to move from such place to enjoy my freedom'.

Twenty nine year old Hiranya has lived in New Zealand for more than six years. She was inspired by her friends living in foreign countries, either in higher education or in employment. She also sought to advance her life through higher education. 'My greater expectation was to study well and be free...find a good job in New Zealand'.

Sunjula is a data analyst who graduated with first class honors in economics and moved to New Zealand at twenty four. Her main reason was to find a good job and use her educational qualification.

These brief extracts from the women's accounts, provide the key reasons for their migration, reasons that involve greater independence and autonomy along with opportunities to develop careers. For them financial security readily available in their Sri Lankan homes, is less important than the financial independence of one's own career.

Footloose Female Professionals

Migrant literature usually depicts women as passive, rather than active in migration, because traditional migration involves women moving with their husbands or parents (Campani 1995). Their role is to make a home in the new country. However, the new type of migration experienced by the young professional women in my research study shifts agency to the women as decision-makers. The Sri Lankan Foreign Employment Bureau (SLFEB 2007) estimated that approximately 1.64 million migrants worked abroad in 2007. The vast majority of these women were not professionals but domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries. However, the recent increase of professional women migrating suggests a new and significant phenomenon that warrants investigation. In 2000, 935 female professionals from Sri Lanka migrated to OECD countries. By 2005, this number had increased to 2,678 (De Mel & Kulatunga 2007). Skilled migration with accompanying migrant spouses and families continues however the autonomous migration of females and the increasing numbers of students are significant additions (Perera 2008). Those who go abroad for education and training, especially to settler countries like New Zealand, tend to find employment and settle in those countries after completing their studies or training. However, the documentation on this area of Sri Lankan migration is very poor (Wickramasekara 2008).

Luke's study of the socio-cultural and political issues related to women and education in the South East Asia, (Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Malaysia) examined women who, after choosing careers in different fields, found themselves breaking away from their traditional social environment. This is also the case with many middle class Sri Lankan women. Their tertiary education enables them to consider previously unimaginable ways of living (Gordon 2002). For example, some well-educated Sri Lankan women, as well as women from other developing countries, now marry out of their ethnic groups. This is an identified feature of 'footloose' female professionals (Arnot 2000; Luke 2001; Vidich, Hymowitz, 2008) which has implications for increased ethnic fluidity at a global level. My research seeks to contribute to Luke's (2001) theoretical analysis of the new feminised phenomenon in global migration patterns, through the case studies of the experiences of six individual professional women from Sri Lanka. As part of the investigation into these Sri Lankan women's experiences, the study focus was to examine attitudes and behaviours concerning family and gender roles, including attitudes to marrying out of the ethnic group.

While migration from developing to developed countries is a well-established and well-documented phenomenon, the migration of young women moving without their families from developing countries, such as Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia, to professional employment in developed countries is a new phenomenon (Luke 2001; Perera 2008). As in the past, today's migrants hail increasingly from developing regions and move towards multiple destinations in the developed world in search of economic opportunities. The new patterns of migration are a response to the recent and rapid expansion of the global knowledge market. This itself is a feature of the fundamental shift in global capitalism from its industrial form to one characterised by flexibility, technology, and consumerism (Held 2001; Hoogvelt 2001) and known variously as 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey 2005; Giddens 1995, 2000; Robertson 2002; Castells 2004), post-Fordism (Harvey 2005), and post-modernism (Giddens 1999; Harvey 2005). The very newness of this market means that it is less well understood and documented than more established forms of migration. Since the 1980s, impact of globalised capitalism on education systems have had a dramatic effect on professional women who become increasingly integrated as players in the world production and consumption process. This study inquired into this new type of female migrant.

New Zealand provides a market for extremely mobile male and female global knowledge workers. Marketing experts, IT consultants, legal affairs specialists, financial accountants and top managers move frequently in order to obtain the highest price for their services in an increasingly competitive market. The global market acts as a competitive force that equalises payment for services across national boundaries.

The research findings contribute to better understanding New Zealand's role in the globalised 'brain exchange'.

Methodology

The study used in-depth interview techniques to investigate the reality of the migration experience of six young female professionals between the ages of 22 to 34. The data collection occurred three times during a six-month period. The first interview was a ninety-minute conversation followed by second and third interviews of not more than half an hour. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed then checked for accuracy by the interviewee. The women had been asked to keep a journal as a reflection of their perspectives for a six-month period and I have used these journals as source of data collection. In addition, reviewed literature and sources of statistical data and my own journal used as sources of data. The research question asked: how does the experience of single, well-educated Sri Lankan female professional who are recent migrants to New Zealand demonstrate the phenomenon of 'footloose' migration? This type of qualitative research technique allows to 'interacting fully with the interviewee' (Scott 2004, p.306). As a result I obtained content rich data including descriptions of their deeper feelings about migrating and learning to live in New Zealand.

The investigation was designed using an ideal or archetypal feminised global knowledge worker constructed from literature (for example, Luke 2001; Harvey 2005; Hymowitz 2008) to serve as a reference point in identifying and examining the characteristics of the participants. The archetype is conceptualised according to three fields of inquiry: 'cultural identity' 'belonging' and 'careers', each field is the basis for categories of data collection and analysis. Through the participants' accounts, the in-depth case studies are examined what extent to which the archetype corresponding to these fields exists in reality and how is the cosmopolitan culture of consumerism experienced by these young women? To what extent are their present lives and future plans transnational or toward overseas travel as part of the overseas experience of many young Kiwis? (*New Zealand Herald* 8 July 2008). How does their structural position in global capitalism provide and restrict opportunities?

Participants

I selected the six women were employed in a range of occupations: engineer, IT expert, food technician, and economist, business management profile and a designer. Three out of six have undertaken both higher education and employment in order to upgrade their qualifications and skills further. Two women have completed their graduate diploma and masters at higher educational institutions in New Zealand. Three women have enrolled at the University of Auckland, the University of Massey and Auckland University of Technology for master of commerce, master of food technology, and computer science degrees respectively. In spite of their first degree, they had obtained IT and CIMA qualification in Sri Lanka. Before arriving in New Zealand, two of the women had secured employment. Those who migrated with student visas found part time jobs and later acquired full time jobs with good wages. They were all goal driven young women who were committed to hard work for the sake of their futures and wanting to continue with higher education as well as developing careers.

Findings

The research study showed that traditional gender identities are changing. This suggests that educational systems may have to respond to the gap between the educational success of women and the discrimination they face on the labour market and the disadvantages associated with a celebration of masculinity. The finding indicates that the women professionals were interested in crossing the cultural barriers by breaking national boundaries for find better places for them. Inquiring about gender experiences, the study examined whether the move to New Zealand was a means to an end in the way of settlers of the past or a staging point on the path to other destinations such as Australia, Britain, United States and Canada. The response indicated that moving further would be for career progression but not a permanent. In order to do this the case study investigated the participants' attitudes and practices towards settling in the host nation or in taking on a transnational lifestyle. The reification of tradition emphasizing strong cultural identity and belonging that characterises post-modern explanations of ethnicity was not a feature of the women I studied. One of the participant called Thanuja's opinion on cross-cultural marriage was 'for me nationality

is not a problem'. This suggests that they are modern women, preferring 'westernized' independence rather than being the preservers of traditional culture.

The research findings show the women's 'post-national' interests in terms of their identification with, and the commitment to, New Zealand. Given the effect of the brain drain on Sri Lanka, and the effects on the families and communities in their perspectives, signified that they are independent individuals who enjoy greater freedom which means there are no dependant family members on the remittances or no need of financial assistance from them.

Following responses are the reflection of freeing of obligation to the family. Asanka says that... 'My parents have enough to spend for their need and my mother has come from a well established business family. She also an educated woman but she does not work... I wanted to get out from that social context and I moved to New Zealand. My purpose was to improve my career paths and employ my skills in a better place... And I wanted to enjoy my freedom and... to live a free life'. As Young (2004) stated that for young women freedom meant more variation in what different girls dare to do.

Thanuja said that '...there is no effect on my family...only emotional effect due to separation from the family...'

Achini says, 'there are no effects on the family I think...'

Hiranya's opinion was, 'I am a dependant of my parents when I am there. But now I am free to work and having a good income... I send some gifts for my sisters but not money. They do not need... money'.

The research was initially motivated by my awareness of the invisibility of Sri Lankan professional young women in New Zealand and in the research literature despite the growing numbers of these women in knowledge work force who engaging with the constructive effort within the wider community. It is intended that the research will contribute to a better understanding of the experience of Sri Lankan young professional women migrants as they contribute to the knowledge labour market in New Zealand. I was interested to know how and why their experiences as highly educated women led them to integrate to a new social order. Two of the women lived in New Zealand over seven years and another two lived six years and obtained citizenship in New Zealand. Achini had a student visa but preferred to be a citizen. Sanjula, a data analyst who has been in New Zealand for three years with her work permit was willing to accept New Zealand as her second home.

The dramatic increase in higher education participation has become one of the key themes in higher education for governments in third world as well as first world countries. This heightened the skills base and advancement of human capital through the increasing marketisation of higher education institutions, products and services (Stavros 2009). Women's access to higher education has also increased during this period resulting in significant changes to traditional societies such as Sri Lanka. There are a number of consequences of the huge increase in highly educated women: upward social mobility, increased social status, improved economic circumstances as well as loss of highly skilled people as these women migrate to first world countries. These significant social changes affect both sending and receiving countries. For traditional male-dominated societies like Sri Lanka, one of the consequences is a discontinuity in gender relationships within the society.

Those professional women exhibit the disposition of modernity. Unlike uneducated female migrants who seek to maintain their traditional ways in the new country, the young well-educated professional woman is rational and instrumental in her approach to the migration experiences and the dilemmas within these experiences (Susan 2003; Baker 2007). However, there is a new type of dilemma. The young women have many destinations to choose from. They have the freedom to move to a number of First World countries seeking their professional expertise and they have the range of opportunities that such freedom brings. They are disposed to embrace change and possibility in the globalised world market that provides free access to those who have achieved educationally. The new group of educated Third World women enter the global knowledge worker arena, one created by the global higher education market, simultaneously freed from the restraints of tradition to become members of a 'footloose' and 'flexible system' (Harvey 2005).

In an increasingly globalised educational economy women's academic career mobility has removed traditional barriers and created new places for women in local circuits within the push-pull dynamics of global flows (Luke 2001). Luke uses the terms 'domestic self' and 'political self' to describe the

contemporary woman who is experiencing a complex duality in her daily life one that is fundamentally paradoxical. One of the ways the global market in higher education has changed middle class women from Third World countries is by giving opportunities to access world top ranked universities. Women are graduating from universities in their own countries then moving to first world countries for professional employment (De Mel & Kulatunga 2007; OECD 2007). The liberation of many Third World middle-class women from the 'domestic-self' of the family and into the 'public self' of the world of work in what some commentators call the 'global village'(Glassman 2004) is not as straight forward as first appears as Luke (2001) points out in recognising the on-going duality between the two selves. Because with many subject to the tensions created in the ambivalence between domestic and public selves.

Higher education institutions are at the centre of the rapid shift being made by developing economies, such as Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, China and Indonesia, to fully developed market economies (Kurian 1999; Vidich 1995; Harvey 2005). The transformations of Sri Lankan culture in the past decades by the expansion of consumer culture and other forces of contemporary global capitalism have led to the emergence of a rapidly expanding new middle classes (Clammer 2002). The effect of this global market in higher education has created 'brain exchange' as global phenomenon. Sri Lanka is an excellent example of a developing country, which, as a consequence of its colonial heritage, has very high standards of public education with English as the language of instruction, so is ideally placed to export quality brains to mainly First World nations. Other countries almost certainly capture the lion's share of Sri Lanka's education dividend (Rankin 2001). Almost certainly, Sri Lanka seems to be better at creating rather than employing graduates because employers cannot pay as much for educated Sri Lankan workers as can employers in other countries. Sri Lanka considers its brain drain as one of the major costs of labour migration.

It is the much globalised character of the education systems in First World countries that provide opportunities for the new middle class young women to move to other countries to expand their futures. These young women have a new structural location in the world that is produced by global economic forces which shape and direct their lives. How this inclusion does provide experiences, which changes the women in significant ways? I explored the effects of this inclusion into a new structural location, how the placement changed the women and what significance has given to their new experiences.

Women professionals, as members of the globalised proletariat or knowledge workers, move freely across borders with dramatic changes in their personal lives as well as more general changes for the societies they leave and the societies they join. The growing reliance on female labour made possible by the new technologies sees a demand for educated and employable women. The migration of graduates, including women, to universities in First World countries, at a stage of the developing countries' own emergence into developed market economy status, has consequences for the society left behind, the new host country, and of concerned for this study, on the women themselves. The employment status of these professional women in the host country has implications for the home nation, especially in terms of financial flows, and job market crisis.

Women in migration

In addition later marriage reduces female fertility and leads to greater independence and freedom. These wider social changes are 'modifying cultural definitions of women's roles as wives and mothers' (Gugler, 1995 p. 453), and setting them free to move. Significant numbers of women who have never married or who are separated, divorced and widowed are attracted by the opportunities the global economy offers them will succeed in terms of work as well as marriage. This has transformed the gender composition of net rural- urban migration (IOM 2002).

Wanasundara (2000) states that economic liberalization which facilitated the influx of foreign capital to the country resulted in increasing numbers of women being used as cheap labor. Notably those domestic labourers are victims of violence often because they are less educated than the tertiary educated women who migrate and less able to change their circumstances. The status of Sri Lankan women in New Zealand is very different to that of the women used as a source of cheap domestic labour. In the 1960s predominant phenomenon was 'brain drain' to developed countries and as recent trend globalization and the liberalization of opportunities have encouraged temporary or permanent skilled movement. Iredale (2003, p.121) argues that skilled migration still incorporates brain drain in search for greater opportunities and better life chances and lifestyles by professional people from both developing and developed countries.

However, these Sri Lankan women are educated, qualified, and experienced professionals who have become a new breed of modern women.

Sri Lankan women and higher education

In making such a life-changing decision, they exercised autonomy and independence, and fulfilled the aspirations of Sri Lankan middle class professionals. The women were conscious that, in leaving Sri Lanka, they were freed from the traditional social norms and traditions of the family and able to engage in the consumerism of the globalised middle-class professional. Cultural cosmopolitanism was to be part of the new subjectivity of these women. Fine (2006) identifies this cosmopolitan consciousness with the phenomenon of globalisation and the resultant weakening of national identification, one predicated on the freedom to travel. Along with a cosmopolitan consumer culture, the archetypal global knowledge worker is characterised by transnationalism. The worker is 'footloose' and not a settler in a new land as was the case for migrants in the 20th century. She is also positioned within the class structures of global capitalism. Her knowledge is a commodity brought in the global higher education institutions and sold in the global market. It is subject to those competitive forces with its value and price fixed by the market.

Sri Lankan, transnational or Kiwis?

The study found significant changes to traditional gender roles, delaying marriage or choosing to remain single, along with the adoption of cosmopolitan identity and modern lifestyles. As for Sri Lankan unskilled female migration, these educated, skilled women may not be the part of transnational migration and they have no dependent family members to send remittances. Their professions are directly related to IT, engineering, laboratory based or technical jobs. Those professions are far from the responsibilities related to traditional wife and mother roles.

Four women are holding modern identity in the contemporary age rather than having a tendency to romanticisation of culture. These women preferred to be New Zealanders because they understand that residence visa facilities and citizenship as the source of opportunities to move further. The fascinating factor is that they are maintaining their own modified culture as western or modern Sri Lankan women while living here. Hiranya and Sanjula have come from strong Buddhist and Catholic background respectively and preferred to marry a man from their own nationality while becoming active consumers who participating in Western consumer culture. These two women at their late twenties indicated that they are not determined to marry but prefer to consider marry a 'transnational-Sri Lankan' from their own religious faith and well educated, well off Sri Lankan whom already living in a western country and please to live in New Zealand. They expect to be changed the traditional Sri Lankan characteristics of autonomous, patriarchal model, authentic husband figure to an equal status modern man to share their daily life. If such man is not available they would remain single. However they all prefer to be New Zealanders.

Study shows that there are no cultural barriers for those young women in terms of interaction with other cultures. They have crossed over the geographical boundaries being empowered by knowledge to walk freely within the global sphere. They are very familiar with the western culture that was inherited from the colonial experience and their education system which back up the western cultural context. They read and learned and to be more westernised young women in the 21st century. They are thoroughly free to accept the new social ideas and to hold the similar attitudes because they are free professionals. Being well educated they have an exceptional understanding about the wider world and different cultures. In the work environment they have to deal with the western ideologies and also the work based experience and the training provides interaction opportunities with the wider community. They have no reluctance to accept 'bit and pieces' from the other cultures that they feel free to merge with the practice they have to move on and absorbed some of them to their personal life. The food habits and dress code, is not of the emblematic Sri Lankan. Being well-educated they have a good understanding about harmony of the wider society and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. With a sense of cross-cultural harmony therefore, they have no cultural issues. One of the participants called Nimmi said that 'I have only two Sri Lankan friends here, one of them is a Sinhalese and the other is a Tamil'. Engaging with the wider community, they feel the solidarity with the host culture in a multicultural setting. They dress, sing, talk and participate in the activities of the people in the host culture and follow its rules. More than the distinctive Sinhalese they can be seen as archetypal young women in the globalised cultural and social mingling. They are very keen to be

here as New Zealanders as modern western young women who are living in the western society rather than typical Sri Lankan young women living according to gendered traditional socio-cultural norms and values.

Conclusion

This paper presents the preliminary findings from my recent research on experience of Sri Lankan professional women who migrated to New Zealand. My main focus was to investigate the contemporary global social phenomenon through the experience of these young professionals who engaged with the global knowledge labour market. Findings indicate that higher education has facilitated the migration of young female professional from developing countries to developed countries and they are upwardly mobile. Their migration impacts gender roles and they accept the changes occurring in their personal life and their career. These women are adapting a modern lifestyle that represents the features of the contemporary global female phenomenon that is depicted by the literature. They aspire to non-traditional occupations and become autonomous decision makers. Findings confirmed the migration is permanent, and the social implication of migration on sending and receiving countries are explicit.

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