

RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY  
OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND  
METHODOLOGY

# RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND METHODOLOGY

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RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT  
AND METHODOLOGY VOLUME 41B

**RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY  
OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND  
METHODOLOGY: INCLUDING A  
SELECTION OF PAPERS PRESENTED  
AT THE FIRST HISTORY OF  
ECONOMICS DIVERSITY CAUCUS  
CONFERENCE**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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## VOLUME INTRODUCTION

Volume 41B of *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology* features a selection of papers presented at the First History of Economics Diversity Caucus Conference, held online in the summer of 2021. The selection of papers was collectively edited by the Diversity Caucus itself and, in keeping with the Caucus's mission and the conference theme, features an array of papers diversified in terms of authors, topics, and methods. Nadeera Rajapakse, Jaqueline Vilas Boas Talga and Tiago Camarinha Lopes, Rafael Galvão de Almeida and Harley Silva, Valentina Erasmo, Cynthia Hawkinson, Vibha Kapuria-Foreman and Charles R. McCann, Jr, and Toru Yamamori contribute to the selection of papers.

The volume also includes new research essays from Roger Sandilands on Albert Hirschman, Lauchlin Currie, and Paul Rosenstein Rodan, and from Daniel Schiffman and Eli Goldstein on Marion Clawson and Israeli agricultural policy in the mid-1950s. The volume closes with an interview of Francis Wilson conducted by Phil Magness and Micha Gartz.

The Editors of *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*

Luca Fiorito

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# PART I

## A SELECTION OF PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE FIRST HISTORY OF ECONOMICS DIVERSITY CAUCUS CONFERENCE

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# CHAPTER 1

## WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS AND MARKET FORCES: TOWARD AN INTER-DISCIPLINARY REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE LABOR MIGRATION

Nadeera Rajapakse

### ABSTRACT

*The economic literature on labor migration has incorporated insights from various disciplines with regard to content and method, although the representation of migrants has not fully moved away from the neoliberal, market-dominated framework. This paper addresses the issue of women migrant workers using the particular example of Sri Lankan migrant women workers to the Middle East. It aims to highlight the need for more diversity in economic research without which conceptual representation, as well as empirical reach, is limited.*

*After a brief overview of the representation of migrants in economic literature, I develop the concept of vulnerability. I refer to qualitative and quantitative analyses on Sri Lankan migrant women workers to the Middle East from a variety of disciplines in order to differentiate the “vulnerable,” that is, the workers in need of protection, from the “vulnerabilities.” The latter concept refers to the debilitating effects on workers, produced by market forces, which are often perpetuated by underlying assumptions, as well as policies. A broader, inter-disciplinary perspective, which considers the agency of women, can go a long way toward removing some of the limitations and preconceptions*

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*ingrained in most economic representation. This in turn could help to improve the protection of the vulnerable and empower them to better face market forces.*

**Keywords:** Agency; domestic work; gender; inter-disciplinary representation; migrant workers; vulnerability

## INTRODUCTION

Michele Gamburd wrote that “money makes the world go round and makes women go around the world” (Gamburd, 2005, p. 75), referring to Sri Lankan women migrant workers, who are the highest source of foreign exchange earners for the country. Macro analyses of female labor migration and its overall economic results are glowing. However, when the spotlight narrows and individual stories are sought, the narrative offers a different picture. There are stories of horrendous abuse, even death, exploitation, and ill effects on families, especially on children left behind. Even in the official national discourse on the subject, women migrant workers are portrayed with mixed feelings. It took many years for the government to decide to call them “*rata viru*,” national heroes.<sup>1</sup> This paper discusses the representation of migrants in economic literature as a way of explaining the demeaning influence it has had, by using the particular example of Sri Lankan women migrant workers.

As quoted above, money is a key lens through which the reasons for and the effects of migration are analyzed. It is, nonetheless, only one, among many salient factors, and as the author of the quote has shown, understanding migration requires an inter-disciplinary approach. The money perspective has been captured by the economic literature – dominated by the neoclassical framework – in labor economics, migration studies and development economics, to name a few of the strands. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the need for inter-disciplinary studies diverse in both content and method, going beyond the focus on money and economic factors in representing migrants. I pinpoint “vulnerabilities,” which are created by neoliberal free markets and by the commodification of low-skilled labor. I also discuss how migration policy and governance are ineffective without proper understanding and consideration of the agency of women.

Since Ravenstein (1885) proposed the first “laws of migration,” there is a prevailing assumption that people move from low- to high-income places (De Haas, 2010). Lewis (1970) presented the disparities of labor as the underlying theoretical explanation of migration. It then led to analyses based on push-pull factors (Todaro, 1969), cost-benefit comparisons, wage and skills disparities, etc. These analyses have a strong focus on the individual migrant, allowing for human agency to play a central role in the decision to migrate. Following criticisms of the narrow focus on households and neglect of the reality that migrants do not have access to complete and accurate information, criticisms addressed by Marxist-structuralist theoreticians, a more historical, structural approach was endorsed, although this did not address migration theory directly.

The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) was developed in the 1980s by Oded Stark and David Bloom, presenting the motivation for migrating as a collective decision taken at the household level. Migration is viewed as a “rational way of hedging against risk in a world characterized by incompleteness of information and incomplete markets” (Abreu, 2010, p. 58). In this theory, remittances play a big role in influencing the decision to migrate. NELM was presented as a synthesis of the neoclassical and historical-structural approaches. However, it ultimately attempts to explain migration through economically motivated decisions at either the individual- or household level and ignores how even the opportunity to make these decisions is dictated and constrained by broader policies, politics, and interactions.

Economic theory has, in more recent times, also borrowed from sociological and anthropological research on migration to include cultural underpinnings, diaspora and community influences, and gender perspectives. Diaspora knowledge networks – associations of highly skilled expatriates, willing to contribute to the development of their origin countries – emerged in the 1990s (Leclerc & Meyer, 2007). For migration studies, this meant a shift in the existing emphasis on brain drain toward a perspective on brain gain. In addition, instead of focusing on the physical return of people, it considers that origin countries can benefit through these connections. Integrative approaches, which mix various levels of analyses, migration flows, and historical and contemporary processes, include the NELM, the network theory (Boyd, 1989; Massey & España, 1987), cumulative causation theory, and institutional theory (Massey et al., 1993).

While the original neo-liberal economics explored the theoretical foundations for the reasons for migration and its economic impact, the later literature stemming from gender economics explores two key areas: first, the type of jobs and industries that women, both migrant or otherwise, traditionally work in, along with the conditions (monetary and non-monetary) of work. Second, it deals with family-related issues that arise due to women’s empowerment or lack thereof. This shapes, for example, the sphere of intra-household bargaining and the ability to overcome social norms which govern the division of work within a family, and the role of women as mothers. As documented in a comprehensive review by Priya, Venkatesh, and Shukla (2021), there is a long and distinguished discourse conceptualizing and measuring women’s empowerment that goes well beyond the ability to earn and access economic resources, either in the home or host country.

This paper incorporates key contributions made by gender studies and anthropology, notably, in discussing migration. Migration in anthropological studies has been studied through the angle of kinship and family networks (Collier & Yanagisako, 1987; Gamburd, 1995). Anthropologists explore the interconnected social relations which enable people to move and settle and the cultural understandings that are part of all processes of movement and settling. Gender analysis has made a crucial contribution to understanding the institutions that structure migration processes. Gender is seen as “an essential tool for unpicking the migration process” (Sinclair, 1998; Wright, 1995). There is now more emphasis on differential migration responses by men and women (themselves context-dependent), gender discrimination in returns to migrant labor, and the differences in perception of men and women migrants by the greater community. Ncube and Mkwanzani (2020) view the contribution of

migration to development as surpassing economic measures. They provide a human development-informed capability approach, cutting across political, economic, cultural, and social spheres. A number of studies have used the Capability Approach to look at gender (Nussbaum, 2011) as well as migration (Ncube & Mkwanzani, 2020).

Despite the ever-expanding diversity of approaches, research issues, methods, and results with regard to migration studies, the neoliberal, market-oriented approach remains the dominant framework (Haug, 2008, p. 586). The more recent research linking migration, trade, and development (Hollified, 2007; Ratha, Mohapatra, Vijayalakshmi, & Xu, 2007; Wickramasekera, 2009; Jayet & Rapoport, 2010), despite its diverging analyses and conclusions, also remains embedded in this framework.<sup>2</sup> Most research has acknowledged that global labor markets are characterized by neoliberalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003). Hollified (2007) specifies that while trade and finance have been founded on neoliberal regimes, migration, apart from the exception of refugees, has not seen an international liberal regime. This paper notes that the neoliberal regime in place for trade and finance has impacted global labor markets. As such, labor markets are deregulated, the forces of demand and supply for global labor determining wages and the terms on which global labor is employed, and experienced. As I will elaborate, labor in general (i.e., both migrant and non-migrant) has been subjected to the downgrading of standards through the loss of traditional union rights, which is attributed to the spread of neoliberalism (Castles, 2009) and economic globalization characterized by the “race to the bottom” in the search for cheaper labor (Piper, 2008).

#### *Sri Lankan Women Migrant Domestic Workers (SLWMDW)*

The oil boom of the early 1970s in the Persian Gulf region triggered a surge of migration flows to the Middle East, which accelerated from the early 1990s onwards following an increase in the demand for domestic servants and female migration from Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka’s labor migration since the 1970s has been concentrated in low-skilled categories, although recent policies and global trends have given a greater impulse toward male migration. Housemaids belong to this category, which comprised 73% of migrants in 2007 (Wickramasekera, 2010, p. 9). Sri Lanka is the only country in South Asia where women make up more than half of total migrants, although the declining number of female migrants in recent years is a clear trend. Most women migrants are low-skilled domestic workers and belong to one of the most vulnerable categories in destination countries, especially Persian Gulf countries.<sup>3</sup> This paper refers to women migrant domestic workers who are low-skilled temporary (or contract-based) female migrants (whether regular or irregular), mainly working in the Persian Gulf countries.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Neoliberal Market Forces*

Liberalized labor markets have had the strongest influence on the experience of women migrant workers. Although the deregulation of labor markets has created

new kinds of job opportunities for migrant workers, it has also resulted in an erosion of employment standards and an increase in contract labor (Chant & Pedwell, 2008). Research shows how greater labor market flexibility has helped create conditions that maximize the potential for the exploitation of migrants, predominantly in the most disadvantaged segments of the market (Phillips, LeBaron, & Wallin, 2018). There is also a growing body of work revealing “unfree labour,” where some migrants (e.g., day laborers and domestic workers) get trapped in exploitative labor relations. Methods of control include disciplining by employers, debt bondage, and the use or threat of violence (Phillips et al., 2018). Research has also revealed the liberal paradox:

Receiving states are likely to remain trapped in what Hollifield called a liberal paradox for decades to come—the economic logic for migration is one of openness, while the political and legal logic is one of closure. (Hollifield, 2007, p. 7)

These issues afflict SLWMDW, and in keeping with the studies that point to highly exploitative conditions of work in industries, which promote flexible labor practices in order to compete internationally, the need for the protection of migrant workers becomes paramount.

Then there is the issue of gender inequalities that spill over into and grow even bigger in international labor markets. Gender discrimination is hardly confined to the private domain of the home (Kabeer, 2008). It also operates through the institutionalized norms and practices of public institutions of state, markets, and society, so that private and public inequalities serve to reinforce each other. As we will see, women who are active in wage labor face markets that have become increasingly deregulated, with labor reduced to the status of a commodity.

Section 1 will serve to interpret, in this context, the statement that money makes the world go round. I will discuss this by focusing on the predominantly economic measures that determine value with regard to low-skilled labour. The economic gain is pushed to the foreground, using remittances as an indicator. After analyzing the problems arising from this narrow indicator, I will develop “vulnerability,” and explain how economic measures have contributed toward creating the low social perception of low-skilled labor. In Section 2, I will talk about how women go around the world: The case of SLWMDW will enable us to discuss policy measures and governance, by examining two key issues: protecting women migrant workers and ensuring the well-being of children left behind. I analyze policy documents such as the Family Background Report to reveal how they reflect the money focus of standard economic analyses, thus, failing to take the agency of women into account.

## **SECTION 1 – BEYOND REMITTANCES: MEASURING THE SOCIAL VALUE OF LOW-SKILLED LABOR**

### *1.1 Predominant Focus on Remittances*

The Sri Lankan government’s promotion of women’s participation in the labor-export programmes is based on the distinct economic advantages in women working overseas. Earnings can be remitted to alleviate poverty. As a source of foreign

currency, remittances can assist in addressing external balance problems and can also constitute a source of funds to contribute to economic development (Taylor, 2007, p. 201, in [Hollifield, 2007](#)).

Often in economic literature, labor migration is analyzed through the lens of remittances, the money sent back to their home country by migrant workers ([Ratha et al., 2007](#)).<sup>5</sup> Remittances are defined by the International Labour Organization as the portion of international migrant workers' earnings sent back from the country of employment to the country of origin. This viewpoint has enabled authors to illustrate the connection – to varying degrees – between migration and development and also migration and poverty alleviation ([Ratha et al., 2007](#); [Wickramasekera, 2010](#)). The well-being stemming from migration has mostly been studied as a financial gain, via remittances. In the representation of SLWMDW, there is almost no analysis that does not mention the importance of the remittances they send back. Remittances are the key indicator, the main measure of success or failure of labor migration ([Rosewarne, 2012](#)). This paper brings out the discrepancy between high levels of remittances and low levels of effective protection that arises because of this predominant indicator. Even more, I argue that the narrow focus on remittances tends to accentuate the vulnerabilities that these women face.

Remittances have indeed secured Sri Lankan women migrant workers' place on the podium as the highest foreign exchange earner for the Sri Lankan national economy which is estimated to be 8% of gross domestic product ([Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Employment, 2015](#)). While undeniably important when studying migration, the focus on remittances has overshadowed many limits and shortcomings of these analyses.

### *1.1.1 Internal Limits of Remittances*

Starting with internal analytical limits, studies have shown that a calculation of monetary benefits, combined with the post migration economic status of migrants, reveals, in the majority of cases, that migrants' earnings are insignificant ([Abeyasekera & Jayasundere, 2014](#)). Sri Lankan women domestic migrant workers remain small income earners without any significant improvement in their investment capacity. Few migrants are able to pay back their initial debt with one work contract. Even fewer are actually able to save money ([Jayatissa & Wickramage, 2015](#), p. 2). However, in aggregate, they are major contributors to foreign earnings and to the national economy in terms of GDP and export earnings. Despite the divergence between the micro and macroeconomic results, analysts and policy-makers have mostly highlighted the benefits to the home country from remittances ([Athukorala, 1992](#); [Puri & Ritzema, 1999](#); [Wickramasekera, 2015](#)). As for individual migrants, they have been, for the most part, led to renew their temporary contracts, or seek new contracts and depart again in order to earn enough to cover their migration costs, reimburse debt, and manage to save. Repeat migration, also described as contract labor, has become the trend, with only a handful of migrants returning home