

GENDERED STATE: ‘GOVERNMENTALITY’ AND THE LABOUR MIGRATION POLICY OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Governments’ use of its authority to control the behaviour of their citizens through ‘mechanisms of management’ such as education, laws, rules, and regulations is discussed widely in the Foucauldian concept of ‘governmentality’. This research broadly discusses the ‘Family Background Report’ which was introduced in 2013 by the Government of Sri Lanka as a part of their labour migration policy regulation, as an instance of a government effectively utilising the concept of ‘governmentality’ to intervene in the decision-making authority of individuals. The research concludes revealing how government re-establishes obsolete gender norms in society to achieve this purpose. It further reveals how movements of female migrant workers have been controlled over the years to accommodate policy interests of consecutive governments since 1980s.

Keywords: *Family background report, Gender norms, Governmentality, Migrant women, Sri Lanka*

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Introduction

In June 2013, the government of Sri Lanka changed its labour migration policy through a series of circulars (starting from circular 13/2013) issued by the government's specialized agency on labour migration, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. These circulars included a set of restrictions targeting the females who are migrating under the category of unskilled workers i.e., domestic and care workers. The new regulations imposed a mandatory prerequisite of producing a 'Family Background Report' and obtaining the government's approval to migrate for the females who migrate under this category.

The regulation was only applicable to the female workers who migrate to Gulf countries at the initial stage, but later expanded to all female unskilled migrant workers disregarding their country of destination. Despite heavy criticism leveled by scholars, human rights activists, UN officials etc., who interpreted the new circulars as a violation of women's right to work, the government continued to emphasize the importance and the necessity of implementing these regulations as they were intended to ensure social stability, by highlighting the protection of under-aged children and family members of the migrating females (Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, 2008).

This article aims to discern the above action of the government as an instance of using its power over a classified group, i.e., unskilled female migrant workers to control their behaviour by using its 'mechanisms of management'. Within this context, we attempt to answer the research question as to how government intervened in individual decision-making (to control their behaviour) of a classified group of people to reach the interest/s of the state?

We will take theoretical backing from the Michael Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' for this analysis. The intervening mechanisms of government could be direct i.e., laws and regulations, as well as indirect i.e., educating desires/aspirations, configuring habits and re-enforcing beliefs of the population (Murray & Li, 2007). The focus of these interventions, as Foucault underlined in his concept of 'governmentality', is mainly to reach the government endorsed goals of securing "welfare of the population and to improving its condition" (Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991:100). Governments often utilizes the operational practice of classification of individuals, which is mostly done based on socioeconomic norms and demarcations such as race, religion, profession, income level, ethnicity etc. (Huff, n.d.), and selectively make disciplinary interventions to achieve their larger goals.

The arguments of this paper are twofold: the government uses its authority to regulate the behaviour of unskilled female migrant workers through re-establishing gender norms and to do so, they highlight appealing terms such as value of the ‘role of mother’ and ‘the wife’ for the wellbeing of the family. By examining the policy changes of the successive governments in past four decades, the research further argues that the governments’ use of the ‘mechanisms of management’ to regulate the behaviour of unskilled female migrant workers are largely shaped by the economic interests (or financial priorities) of each period.

Even though many studies have conducted to study the different aspects of the new labour migration law implemented by the government of Sri Lanka, there are no research conducted to examine this phenomenon as an instance of controlling the behaviour of migrant women. This paper intends to fill this research gap and contribute to the literature by revealing how does the concept of ‘governmentality’ can be used to explain the conduct of the migration policies by the government to control the behaviour of female labour migrants.

Materials and method

This emancipatory research adopted a combined methodology. The study analyses selected policies implemented by the GoSL concerning labour migration to explain how the concept of ‘governmentality’ has been successfully implemented by the government to execute its policies. The study conducts an extensive review of literature on labour migration as well as on the concept of ‘governmentality’ to support its argument. The materials collected from the government reports and international organisations are being utilized in addition to the scholarly articles. Thus, the research also employed empirical data collected from a structured interview with relevant government officials is also utilized.

Results and discussion

The government of Sri Lanka’s introduction of the National Policy on Migration and therein categorization and justification of female migration workers as a ‘vulnerable’ category to place its mechanism of management (laws and regulation) to intervene/control the behaviour this select group of citizens based on the state’s interests over the period, reveals the government’s embedded thinking of group manipulation by invoking specific social and cultural norms. This study brought out that, in this process, how the government has reproduced gender norms in the society with a view to convincing its decisions regarding female migration to its citizens as well as justifying them to the international community.

The study further reveals how government of Sri Lanka successfully practices its authority, as explained by Foucault in the concept of ‘governmentality’, to control the movements of a selected group of individuals, unskilled female migrant workers through ‘mechanisms of management’. The study reveals how does the movement of female migrant workers are being controlled in different phases based on the policy priorities of each Sri Lankan government. It also attempts to reveal how traditional gender norms exist in South Asian societies are being framed through policies to justify government’s decisions. The study also reveals how the ‘power’ of the government depends over how the action of power is demonstrated by the citizens.

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