

TIES THAT BIND: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE REINTEGRATION OF SRI LANKAN MIGRANT WORKERS RETURNING FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract

Despite the contribution of remittances to the national economy, the reintegration of migrant workers has received limited scholarly and policy attention. Reintegration is a multidimensional process influenced not only by economic conditions but also by social relationships and community networks. Drawing on social network theory, this study examines how social networks affect the reintegration experiences of Sri Lankan migrant workers returning from the Middle East and South Korea.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, using a survey of 200 returnees, including 143 from the Middle East and 57 from South Korea, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. Snowball sampling was used due to the lack of official data on return migrant workers.

Results indicate that social networks in Sri Lanka play an important role in supporting reintegration, with 85.3% of Middle Eastern returnees and 91.2% of South Korean returnees reporting that local networks facilitated their reintegration. These networks helped returnees to access employment, social support, and community participation. Larger and stronger networks were associated with smoother reintegration. Host-country networks were generally less useful, with only 8.4% of Middle Eastern returnees and 19.3% of South Korean returnees reporting that host-country networks were beneficial for reintegration. However, overseas professional contacts were more effectively mobilized by South Korean returnees for entrepreneurial activities.

The study also reveals that community dynamics such as envy and gossip can hinder social reintegration, particularly in rural areas. The findings support social network theory while highlighting that network utility is context-dependent. The study recommends strengthening institutional support for community-based networks to improve reintegration outcomes for return migrant workers.

Keywords: Social Networks, Reintegration, Return Migrant Workers, Social Capital, Labour Migration

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Introduction

International labour migration has become a defining feature of Sri Lanka's development trajectory, with overseas employment serving as a key source of income for hundreds of thousands of households. Labour migration is also a major contributor to the national economy, primarily through workers' remittances, which constitute one of Sri Lanka's largest sources of foreign exchange and play a critical role in supporting macroeconomic stability. Reintegration of migrant workers is not only an economic process but also a socially embedded one, shaped by family ties, friendships, peer networks, neighbours, and broader community connections. Therefore, understanding the role of social networks is essential for designing effective reintegration policies and programmes.

During the period from 2013 to 2023, annual outflows of Sri Lankan migrant workers generally ranged between 210,000 and 315,000 (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2016; 2020; 2023; 2024). The outflow of Sri Lankan migrant workers fell sharply in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions. Although there are no official statistics, a sizable number of labour migrants return to Sri Lanka after their stay abroad (De Silva et al., 2020). The ILO (2013) also points out that the majority of labour migrants return to Sri Lanka at the end of their employment contracts. Accordingly, the reintegration of return migrant workers needs to be viewed as a matter of national importance in light of their contribution to the national economy and the fact that most migrant workers return to Sri Lanka upon completion of their employment period.

The reintegration of migrant workers is a multidimensional process that involves different spheres, including economic, social, cultural, political, and psychological dimensions. Several definitions of reintegration have been proposed in the literature. Cassarino (2014) defines reintegration as a "process through which a return migrant participates in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country of origin" (p. 184). According to the IOM (2019), reintegration can be defined as "a process which enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood, dignity and inclusion in civic life" (p. 176). It is noteworthy that reintegration must be effective in order to generate the desired outcomes for both the returnee and the home country. Effective reintegration refers to the successful reintegration of returning workers into their families, communities, the

economy, and society (ILO, 2019). Effective reintegration of migrant workers contributes to the socio-economic development of the country while enhancing the personal well-being of returnees.

Although remittances from labour migration contribute significantly to the national economy, the reintegration of returnees has received relatively little attention in both scholarly research and policy-making in Sri Lanka. Return migrant workers face multiple economic and social challenges during their reintegration into Sri Lankan society (Alikahan, 2015; ILO, 2013; IPS, 2014). The ILO (2019) identifies several challenges experienced by migrant workers during their return and reintegration, including inadequate and ineffective employment placement services, lack of information on available services and programmes, absence of provisions for skills certification and recognition, stagnant economic conditions in home countries, poor social protection coverage, and weak institutional support systems.

As mentioned previously, social networks can play a critical role in the reintegration of migrant workers. Social network theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions in transmitting information and influencing behavioural outcomes. Drawing on social network theory, Cassarino (2004) argues that the resources required for return and reintegration are derived from interpersonal relationships and social networks. Family ties, peer groups, and community relationships can provide critical resources, information, and support for returnees as they reintegrate into their home societies.

Existing studies on the return and reintegration of migrant workers in Sri Lanka tend to focus primarily on economic issues, such as the utilization of remittances and employment outcomes, while the social dimensions of reintegration receive comparatively less attention. Although some research has examined issues such as reintegration into families and communities, the specific role of social networks in shaping reintegration outcomes remains underexplored. In particular, Cassarino's (2004) assertion that resources for return and reintegration are embedded within social networks has not been empirically examined in the Sri Lankan context. Accordingly, this study investigates how social networks influence the reintegration experiences of Sri Lankan migrant workers returning from the Middle East and South Korea.

According to statistics compiled by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2023), Sri Lankan migrant workers are predominantly employed in the Middle East. However, significant numbers are also employed in countries such as South Korea, Italy, Cyprus, and Romania. Apart from the traditional Middle Eastern labour market, South Korea recorded the highest number of Sri Lankan migrant workers among non-Middle Eastern destinations during the 2013–2019 period (SLBFE, 2016; 2020). It is noteworthy that migration experiences in the Middle East, often characterized by low-skilled and domestic employment, differ significantly from those in South Korea, where Sri Lankan workers are primarily employed in manufacturing industries. Employment in South Korea takes place under a bilateral agreement between the two countries, with recruitment based on an age limit of 35 years, successful completion of a Korean language proficiency examination, and a maximum five-year employment contract. These conditions differ considerably from those applicable to migration to Middle Eastern countries. Consequently, Korean returnees tend to be younger due to the age restrictions associated with the recruitment process. Given these differences, this study compares the role of social networks in the reintegration experiences of returnees from the Middle East and South Korea.

Research Objective

This study aims to examine how social networks influence the reintegration experiences of Sri Lankan migrant workers returning from the Middle East and South Korea. Specifically, it explores the role of social networks maintained in Sri Lanka and those established abroad in facilitating economic and social reintegration, and compares their relative usefulness across the two migration contexts. Furthermore, the study seeks to assess the applicability of social network theory in explaining how social ties and connections shape the reintegration outcomes of return migrant workers.

Literature Review

Theoretical Literature

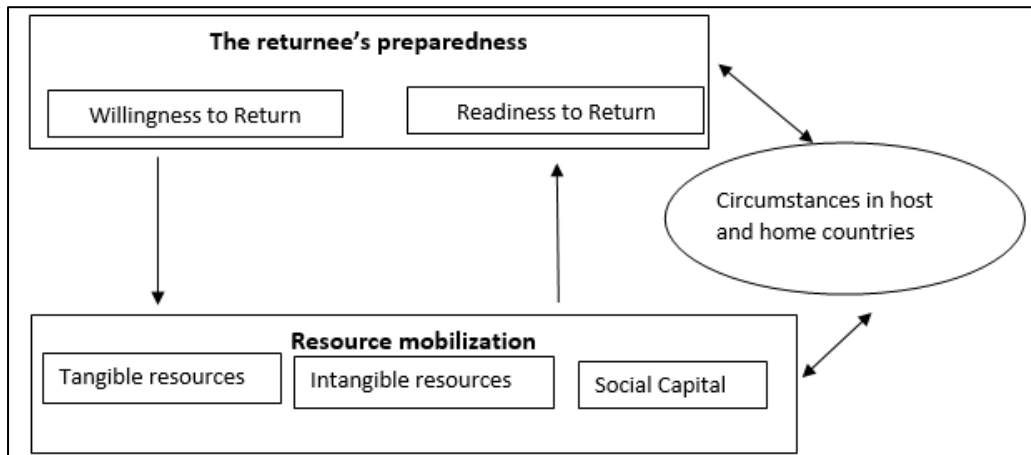
Social network theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction in transmitting information and influencing behavioural changes. From the perspective of social network theory, return and reintegration are understood as processes influenced by social and economic relationships that facilitate access to resources, information, and support (Cassarino, 2004; Debnath, 2016). Social network theory shares similarities with the New Economics of Labour Migration theory in terms of the role of family and community in the migration process (Bachtiar & Prasetyo, 2014). According to social network theory, the resources required for return and reintegration are derived from interpersonal relationships, including social networks (Cassarino, 2004). Accordingly, return migrant workers who possess strong social networks are more likely to reintegrate successfully into their home country.

Social networks refer to the structure of relationships and ties among individuals, while social capital refers to the resources (such as information, support, trust, and influence) that flow through these networks. In this study, social networks are treated as the main analytical focus, whereas social capital is used to describe the benefits and resources mobilized through these networks during reintegration.

As illustrated in Figure 01 below, Cassarino (2004) explains that preparation for return involves not only the willingness of migrant workers to return to their home country but also their readiness to do so. Furthermore, Figure 01 indicates that willingness to return leads to resource mobilization, which encompasses both tangible resources (e.g., financial and physical resources) and intangible resources (e.g., skills and experience), together with social capital. Debnath (2016) argues that, during the migration experience, migrants have the opportunity to build social capital in host countries while maintaining networks in their country of origin. Jonkers (2008) highlights that strong and well-maintained social capital is particularly crucial for successful reintegration, reinforcing Cassarino's argument that the mobilization of both tangible and intangible resources significantly enhances migrants' readiness to return. Successful mobilization of these resources, in turn,

strengthens migrants' confidence in their ability to reintegrate into their home country with minimal difficulty.

Figure 01: Preparation for return



Source: Cassarino, 2004

According to Cassarino (2004), the formation and maintenance of social networks require long-standing interpersonal relationships as well as the regular exchange of mutually valuable items, including information, among different parties. Muschkin (1993) made an interesting observation that migrants returning to their home country after a long stay abroad may find it difficult to secure employment, particularly if they lack a strong social network. Alpes and Majcher (2020) further pointed out that pre-existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated during return and reintegration, especially when returnees do not have a proper social network in the home country.

Empirical Literature

Return migrant workers contribute to the socio-economic development of their home countries in different ways upon return. Bachtiar and Prasetyo (2014) point out that returnees themselves are human capital who bring financial capital (e.g., savings) and social capital in terms of expanded networks. Debnath (2016) explained that the existing literature on the development impacts of return migration can be broadly classified into four categories. The four categories are as follows:

(a) **Human capital** – Returnees bring new skills acquired through work experience and training in host countries.

(b) **Financial capital** – Returnees bring financial capital in the form of accumulated savings, which enables them to invest in their home countries and become entrepreneurs.

(c) **Social capital** – The networks acquired by returnees as a result of their migration experience.

(d) **Social change agents** – Returnees act as agents of social change, influencing positive social transformation.

As further illustrated by Debnath (2016), global evidence shows that the social networks returnees maintain both abroad and at home play a critical role in enabling them to generate significant development impacts after returning. The successful growth of India's information and communication technology (ICT) industry, for example, is attributed to the human and financial capital brought back by returnees, together with their strong ties to overseas Indian professional networks (Debnath, 2016). These transnational connections allow returnees to mobilize key resources such as access to foreign investors, international markets, foreign technology, and local human resource pools (Jonkers, 2008; Dumont & Spielvogel, 2008). China exhibits a similar pattern in leveraging returnees' networks, where return migrants have contributed to technological upgrading, entrepreneurship, and knowledge transfer through their continued connections with overseas professional and business communities, thereby reinforcing the developmental potential of transnational social networks (Debnath, 2016).

Klagge et al. (2007) observe that, in the case of Poland, brain gain is significantly driven by "knowledge networks," with Polish returnees acting as pipelines linking domestic actors to firms and institutions abroad. Similarly, research on Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrants in Southern California demonstrates how transnational ties strengthen community networks at home; hometown associations have successfully mobilized diaspora support to fund development projects (Chinchilla & Hamilton, 1999, as cited by Debnath, 2016).

Although there is a lack of research on the role of social networks in facilitating the social reintegration of return migrant workers in Sri Lanka,

existing studies on social reintegration indicate that returnees often face significant challenges in reconnecting with their communities. For example, Kottegoda et al. (2013) point out that the social interactions of returnees are mainly confined to religious activities, with limited participation in other social activities. Some returnees experience envy from relatives, friends, and members of the local community due to the elevated status achieved through migration, which in turn impedes smooth social reintegration (Hettige et al., 2015). The ILO (2013) points out that although returnees do not experience significant issues with neighbours, relatives, and other members of the community, participation in community organizations and the development of partnerships remain limited, making social reintegration a slow process.

Methodology

This paper is drawn from a broader study on the reintegration of migrant workers in Sri Lanka, which examined the socio-economic challenges experienced by return migrant workers during the reintegration process. Secondary data sources include publications of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, ILO and IOM, research journal articles and books. Primary data were collected through a survey among returnees and in-depth interviews with SLBFE officials and officials of the ILO and IOM etc.

In this study, the researcher focuses on returnees from the Middle East and South Korea who returned to Sri Lanka during the period from October 2015 to March 2019. For the purpose of this study, return migrant workers are defined as those who completed at least two years of employment in the Middle East or South Korea and returned to Sri Lanka voluntarily with the intention of staying in Sri Lanka for the foreseeable future. The reason the researcher focuses only on migrant workers who returned between October 2015 and March 2019 is that, from March 2020, with the outbreak of COVID-19, Sri Lanka experienced an unprecedented economic crisis, which culminated in 2022. Thus, the study takes into consideration only migrant workers who returned to the country before March 2019 so that they had at least one year to reintegrate under normal conditions.

Since there are no statistics available on return migrant workers in Sri Lanka (Alikhan, 2015; Athukorala, 1990; De Silva et al., 2020; IPS, 2014), the snowball sampling method was adopted for this study. Due to time constraints, the sample was limited to 200 return migrant workers, of whom 143 were returnees from the Middle East and 57 were returnees from South Korea. The survey was carried out from October to December 2023.

The researcher adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design for this study. Accordingly, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately and merged only during the interpretation phase. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities (ERCSSH) of the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, before commencing data collection.

Results and Discussion

Sample profile

The sample comprises participants from the Middle East (n = 143) and South Korea (n = 57), as illustrated in Table 01 below. Participants from the Middle East are predominantly female (73.4%), whereas the South Korea group is overwhelmingly male (98.2%). Overall, the sample consists of 106 females and 94 males out of a total of 200 participants.

Table 01: Composition of the Sample by Gender and Region

Gender	Middle East		South Korea		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
Male	38	26.6	56	98.2	94
Female	105	73.4	1	1.8	106
Total	143	100	57	100	200

Source: Survey on Reintegration, 2023

Social Networks in Sri Lanka and Reintegration

As discussed above, social network theory views the resources required for return and reintegration as being derived from interpersonal relationships, including social networks (Cassarino, 2004). Accordingly, in this section, the researcher explores the usefulness of social networks in

supporting the social and economic reintegration of migrant workers in Sri Lanka. In analyzing the role of social networks in fostering reintegration, the researcher divided social networks into two segments: (a) social networks in Sri Lanka and (b) social networks created in the host country.

As illustrated in Table 02 below, the overwhelming majority of returnees from both the Middle East and South Korea indicated that social networks in Sri Lanka were useful for their reintegration. Accordingly, 85.3% of the returnees from the Middle East and 91.2% of the returnees from South Korea mentioned that social networks in Sri Lanka were useful in facilitating reintegration. The above-mentioned findings support the broader proposition of social network theory that social ties provide access to resources and support, which can facilitate the reintegration process.

Table 02: Support for reintegration from social network in Sri Lanka

Duration	Middle East		South Korea	
	Number	%	Number	%
Useful	122	85.3%	52	91.2%
Not useful	21	14.7%	5	8.8%
Total	143	100%	57	100%

Source: Survey on Reintegration, 2023

Return migrant workers have received multifaceted support through social networks in Sri Lanka, supporting the application of social network theory to return migration by demonstrating how social ties provide access to resources that facilitate reintegration. The primary data indicate that local networks were equally important for economic and social reintegration, as they enabled returnees to access economic opportunities and social support. In relation to economic reintegration, returnees from both the Middle East and South Korea highlighted that social networks played a central role in finding employment opportunities in Sri Lanka.

“When I returned to Sri Lanka, I didn’t have a job for a few months and I had to do some casual work. Finally, I got my present job through a person known to me.”

(Respondent 17 of the survey – A female returnee from the Middle East answering an open-ended survey question)

Network Size as a Key Factor

A major theoretical implication of the findings is the importance of network size. The study shows that returnees with larger social networks across family, friends, peers, and community organizations were more successful in securing employment and rebuilding social status.

“Return migrant workers with strong and widespread networks including relatives, friends, former colleagues, and even previous employers, reintegrate more easily than those with limited connections.”

(Respondent 10 – Project Manager implementing reintegration projects in Anuradhapura)

These findings extend social network theory by demonstrating that network size matters for reintegration outcomes, but its benefits depend on the active mobilization of those ties.

Despite their extended stay abroad, migrant workers have been able to maintain their social networks in Sri Lanka through periodic visits and the use of modern communication technologies, as observed during primary data collection. This indicates that social ties can remain strong despite geographic separation and that modern communication tools support the maintenance of social networks. The strength of these networks is also a critical factor, since returnees with stronger and more functional networks tend to reintegrate more easily.

Institutionalized Networks: Migrant Workers' Societies (MWS)

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)-funded Safe Migration Programme has supported the formation of Migrant Workers' Societies (MWS), which consist of return migrant workers in several districts, including Anuradhapura, Kandy, Gampaha, Puttalam, and Kurunegala. MWS are Self-Help Groups (SHGs) that promote economic and social reintegration through regular interactions, community participation, peer support, information sharing, and collective action, while also maintaining relationships with state institutions to ensure access to social services. From a theoretical perspective, MWS represent

institutionalized social networks that enhance the mobilization capacity of social capital, thereby strengthening both economic and social reintegration.

“In migrant worker societies, the returnees make food items from the host country once a month and exchange them among families, so that each family gets a chance to interact with others. Community events of the above-mentioned nature are useful in promoting social reintegration.”

(Respondent 2 - Field Officer attached to a community-based organization engaged in a reintegration project in Kurunegala)

During the primary data collection, it was observed that some MWS have been incorporated as cooperative societies that engage in collective production and marketing, thereby contributing to the economic reintegration of migrant workers.

The survey responses, as well as in-depth interviews with stakeholders, further indicate that Sarvodaya Shramadana Societies, Rural Development Societies, religious organizations, and friendship networks play a critical role in facilitating community participation. These findings support the theoretical argument that social networks influence access to resources, support, and opportunities that can facilitate reintegration.

Institutionalized social networks such as MWS demonstrate that collective networks can strengthen reintegration outcomes. However, the role of state institutions in facilitating networking opportunities among return migrant workers could be further strengthened. The SLBFE Corporate Plan 2023–2027 proposes the establishment of community networks such as cooperative societies, but the operationalization of these initiatives is still at an early stage. This highlights the potential for greater state engagement in the institutionalization of social networks, which could enhance the mobilization capacity of returnees’ social capital and further support both economic and social reintegration.

Host-Country Social Networks

The application of social network theory to return migration suggests that networks formed in host countries may provide resources and support that can contribute to reintegration. However, the findings reveal that,

compared to the usefulness of social networks in Sri Lanka for economic and social reintegration, the social networks acquired in the host country play a lesser role in facilitating the reintegration of return migrant workers. As illustrated in Table 03, only 8.4% of the returnees from the Middle East and 19.3% of the returnees from South Korea believed that social networks in the host country were helpful in facilitating reintegration in Sri Lanka.

Table 03: Support for reintegration from social network in host country

Duration	Middle East		South Korea	
	Number	%	Number	%
Useful	12	8.4%	11	19.3%
Not useful	131	91.6%	46	80.7%
Total	143	100%	57	100%

Source: Survey on Reintegration, 2023

These findings extend social network theory by demonstrating that the presence of social ties alone does not guarantee reintegration support; networks must be capable of being mobilized and must provide resources relevant to the reintegration context. A relatively higher percentage of returnees from South Korea (19.3%) believed that social networks in the host country were useful for reintegration compared to 8.4% of returnees from the Middle East. This difference can be explained by the nature of migration and employment in South Korea, which enables returnees to build professional contacts that can be converted into economic resources upon return. Some returnees from South Korea have started small businesses relying on South Korea for raw materials, machinery, and technology.

“When I returned to Sri Lanka from South Korea, I started an aluminum door manufacturing business for which I imported the required machinery from South Korea, thanks to the contacts I acquired during my period of employment. I also import the required raw materials from the parties whom I became acquainted with during my stay there.”

(Respondent 152 of the survey – A returnee from South Korea answering an open-ended question in the survey)

The limited usefulness of host-country networks is also supported by existing empirical literature. Ishara and Jayaweera (2020) note that returnees often perceive host-country contacts as valuable mainly for re-migration rather than reintegration. Moreover, their study found that many returnees maintain relationships with host-country nationals primarily based on friendship rather than for economic or reintegration purposes. Thus, both primary and secondary evidence indicate that host-country social networks have limited use for reintegration in Sri Lanka, except in specific cases such as entrepreneurial activities among South Korean returnees.

Community Dynamics: Envy, Gossip, and Social Barriers

In addition to reintegration within the family, reintegration into the wider community is a crucial aspect of social reintegration, as community acceptance strongly influences the overall success of reintegration. During the primary data collection, it became evident that some migrant workers who return with elevated social status, reflected in increased purchasing power, new housing, or improved living standards, often become targets of envy among neighbours, friends, relatives, and the community. Such negative perceptions can weaken or obstruct the formation of supportive social networks that are vital for successful reintegration.

“Some return migrant workers with increased purchasing power and overall improvements in living standards are often subject to the envy of neighbours, friends, relatives, and the community. In the case of female migrant workers, some people fabricate stories and gossip to tarnish their image.”

(Respondent 25 – Program Officer attached to an INGO in Kandy)

During the primary data collection, the researcher noted that returnees from rural areas often experience greater envy from neighbours, friends, relatives, and the community than returnees from urban areas, illustrating how local community dynamics can interfere with the development and maintenance of social networks essential for smooth reintegration.

Discussion

In light of the preceding data analysis, it is evident that social networks are immensely useful not only for economic reintegration but also for social reintegration. Attending social events and gatherings such as shramadana campaigns and religious ceremonies is an integral part of community-level reintegration. These findings demonstrate that reintegration is not solely an individual process but is also shaped by interpersonal relationships, collective social relations, and access to community-based support. While further strengthening of state-led initiatives to promote networking among return migrant workers remains important, international development organizations such as SDC have played an active role in establishing Migrant Workers' Societies (MWS) in selected districts, which have contributed to promoting both economic and social reintegration.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of social networks in shaping the reintegration trajectories of return migrant workers in Sri Lanka. The findings indicate that local networks comprising family members, friends, community-based organizations, and Migrant Workers' Societies are primary sources of assistance for both economic and social reintegration. These networks facilitate access to employment opportunities, support participation in community activities, and provide a sense of belonging that helps returnees re-establish their social identity after migration. From a theoretical perspective, this confirms social network theory's assertion that resources and opportunities are distributed through network ties and that reintegration depends on the ability to activate and mobilize these ties.

The study shows that the reintegration process is highly contingent on the quality and receptiveness of these networks. Community-level dynamics such as envy, social scrutiny, and gossip, particularly in rural areas and in relation to female returnees, can weaken or restrict access to supportive ties. This underscores that social networks do not always function as sources of support; they can also become barriers when negative perceptions undermine trust or limit participation. This extends social network theory by showing that, in some instances, network ties can produce exclusionary effects, which may limit the ability of networks to support reintegration.

The limited usefulness of host-country networks further underscores that reintegration is largely driven by local social networks and community ties. While some South Korean returnees benefit from networks formed abroad, the majority of returnees rely overwhelmingly on social networks in Sri Lanka. These patterns demonstrate that reintegration is a deeply relational and context-driven process, shaped by both the resources returnees can mobilize and the social environment into which they return. This extends social network theory by demonstrating that network utility is context-dependent, and that ties formed in one environment may not be easily transferable to another.

The findings also highlight differences between returnees from the Middle East and those from South Korea. While both groups rely heavily on social networks in Sri Lanka for reintegration, a higher proportion of South Korean returnees reported that host-country networks were useful, particularly for entrepreneurial activities. This reflects structural differences in migration pathways: employment in South Korea often provides greater opportunities for skills acquisition, formal work experience, and sustained contact with employers and business networks. In contrast, migration to the Middle East, characterized largely by domestic work and low-skilled labour, offers fewer opportunities to build professional networks that can be mobilized upon return. These differences suggest that the effectiveness of social networks depends on the ability of ties to be mobilized for reintegration, which varies across migration pathways, offering a new perspective on how migration contexts shape network utility.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for more structured mechanisms, particularly from state institutions, to strengthen community-level networking opportunities and support positive social relations. Such interventions can enhance the ability of returnees to harness their social capital and navigate reintegration more effectively. This suggests that policy interventions can enhance the mobilization capacity of social networks, transforming informal ties into organized support systems that facilitate reintegration.

In addition to the empirical findings, the results of this study strongly support the applicability of social network theory in explaining the reintegration of migrant workers. According to the theory, resources required for return and reintegration are embedded in interpersonal

relationships and social networks (Cassarino, 2004; Debnath, 2016). The evidence shows that returnees with stronger and more extensive networks in Sri Lanka were able to mobilize both tangible resources (e.g., employment opportunities and business contacts) and intangible resources (e.g., information, emotional support, and social legitimacy) more effectively, confirming that social networks function as critical enablers of reintegration.

Furthermore, the relatively lower usefulness of host-country networks compared with local networks in Sri Lanka highlights that the value of networks depends on the ability to mobilize resources relevant to the reintegration context. While South Korean returnees could leverage professional and business ties for entrepreneurial activities, Middle Eastern returnees had limited opportunities to mobilize host-country networks for accessing resources after return, illustrating the context-dependent nature of social capital.

The findings also demonstrate that social networks are not inherently beneficial; their effectiveness depends on network quality, receptiveness, and socio-cultural dynamics. Negative community perceptions such as envy and gossip can hinder the mobilization of resources embedded in social networks and limit reintegration success. This suggests that social networks can function as both enabling and constraining structures, highlighting the relational and contingent nature of social capital. Accordingly, the empirical evidence extends social network theory by highlighting how social dynamics such as envy and gossip can turn networks into obstacles rather than sources of support.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the reintegration of Sri Lankan migrant workers returning from the Middle East and South Korea is significantly influenced by social networks in the home country. Family members, friends, community organizations, and Migrant Workers Societies are important sources of support in facilitating economic and social reintegration. The findings further indicate that social networks in the home country are more useful for reintegration than host-country networks, as they provide access to employment, information, emotional support, and social recognition. These results support social network

theory, highlighting that reintegration is not solely an individual process; rather, it is shaped by relationships, social ties and collective interactions.

Beyond its empirical contribution, this study makes a clear theoretical contribution to social network theory in the context of return migration and reintegration. While social network theory emphasizes the role of interpersonal ties in mobilizing resources, this study extends the theory by demonstrating that the effectiveness of social networks is contingent upon their social context, quality, and receptiveness. The findings show that social networks are not inherently enabling; instead, they can function as both supportive and constraining structures. Community-level dynamics such as envy, gossip, and gendered scrutiny, particularly in rural settings, can undermine trust and restrict access to network-based resources, thereby limiting reintegration outcomes. This highlights an exclusionary dimension of social networks that is under-theorized in the existing reintegration literature and underscores the context-dependent nature of social capital, demonstrating that networks do not uniformly benefit returnees and may, in some situations, impede reintegration.

The study further contributes theoretically by showing that the utility of social networks is highly context-dependent. Differences between returnees from the Middle East and South Korea demonstrate how employment conditions in destination countries affect the mobilization of host-country networks. While host-country ties were generally of limited relevance to the reintegration context, South Korean returnees were better able to convert their overseas networks into economic resources, particularly for entrepreneurial activities. This finding extends social network theory by demonstrating that networks formed in one country may not be equally valuable in another.

From a policy perspective, the findings point to the need for stronger state-led and community-based interventions to support reintegration. Institutionalizing networking mechanisms through Migrant Workers Societies and similar collective platforms, such as cooperative societies, can enhance the mobilization capacity of social networks and transform informal ties into sustainable reintegration resources.

Future research should explore how digital communication technologies reshape social networks across different phases of migration and

examine the long-term reintegration and development impacts of Migrant Workers Societies. Further research in this area would refine the theoretical understanding of reintegration as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process.

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