

## **Comprehensiveness of the policy on submission of Family Background Report (FBR) by female Sri Lankans leaving for foreign employment**

### **Abstract ÷**

From 1990s women began to dominate the foreign employment market for Sri Lankans, mainly owing to high demand for domestic workers in the Middle East (SLBFE,2019). Then it depicts the transition in departures for foreign employment from women dominance to male dominance since 2008. Among the reasons attributed for the decline in departures of females for foreign employment, mandatory requirement of Family Background Report (FBR) for women makes a considerable influence to decrease the opportunities for many women to migrate for employment. Also rising opposition against women migrating as domestic workers based on the negative impacts on the children and families of women domestic workers has led to curtail the migration of women to the domestic work sector. Some people argue that FBR may be pushing many female migrant workers into undocumented and unsafe migration, exposing them to greater risk of abuse/ harassments. Hence, the aim of this study was to identify whether these children of migrant mothers are vulnerable for dangers due to the absence of the mother or other social factors. Furthermore, is FBR fuelling irregular migration and the number of requests made for premature repatriations due to problems of child well-being after implementing the submission of FBR was examined in this study by using 60 primary care givers and 42 children in Kurunegala DS division under the purposive sampling method. Both primary and secondary data collection methods were employed in this study and primary data were collected mainly through the questionnaire from the selected respondents. According to the findings, only 1.23% of complaints reported to the Sri Lanka Police Dept. on child abuse were received related to the children of migrant mothers during 2010-2020, while it showed a decline drastically in the complaints received by NCPA on children of migrant mothers since 2015. Additionally, findings suggest that majority of females attempted to migrate abroad for employment using visit visa after 2016, which took the highest percentage by males earlier. Moreover, the number of complaints for premature repatriations due to problem at home related to the issues of child care showed a sharp slowdown after the implementation of FBR in 2014. The results findings are practical for applying the necessity principle and suitability principle in arranging alternative care system for children of migrant mothers.

Key words – foreign employment, women migration, domestic workers, Family Background Report, child protection

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Globalization has added impetus to the growing mobility of labour force across borders. Hence, migration becomes an important phenomenon globally, associated with employment. In Sri Lanka, liberalization of economic policies in 1977 impacted to strengthen the Sri Lankans' decisions to find the employment in overseas. Accordingly, from 1980's labour migration has been identified as a key priority in Sri Lanka considering the number of persons engaged in foreign employment, it's contribution to the national economy, and the importance of looking after the interests of migrant workers. Therefore, foreign employment has generated substantial inflows of remittances to the country while relieving pressure on unemployed youth by providing foreign job opportunities. There is almost one female migrant for every male migrant, and migrants account for more than 3 percent of the world's population (World Bank, 2016) In average, Sri Lanka had an annual outflow of more than 200,000 persons since 2002 (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment,2019).

According to the statistics of Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), women began to dominate the foreign employment market for Sri Lankans from 1990s, mainly owing to high demand for domestic workers in the Middle East. However, the relative share of women migrant workers has gradually declined over time while depicting the transition in departures for foreign employment from women dominance to male dominance. Among the reasons attributed for the decline in departures of women for foreign employment, mandatory requirement of Family Background Report (FBR) for women was also an influential policy decision that caused to decrease the opportunities for many women to migrate for employment.

Migration decisions have many implications for the children and family left behind. Hence, FBR is one of the initiatives taken by the government to ensure the well- being and protection of the children of migrant worker families. Hence, the primary aim of the FBR is to minimise any harm that might be caused to the children left behind as a result of women leaving for overseas employment. According to Gamburd (2020), the implications of the FBR policy on migrants and their families is restrictive, which narrows the household's employment options and potentially harms multiple generations of kin.

However, it is necessary to verify whether these children are vulnerable for dangers due to the absence of the mother or other social factors.

Therefore, this research was designed to find out the comprehensiveness of implementation the policy on submission of Family Background Report (FBR) by female Sri Lankans leaving for foreign employment.

Section 2 discusses the previous attempts on positive and negative consequences of labour migration and bans on labour migration, while Section 3 focuses on the methodology of the current study. Section 4 discusses the findings from the primary and secondary sources followed by the conclusion in Section 5.

## **1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Some policy makers argue that FBR may be pushing many female migrant workers into undocumented and unsafe migration, exposing them to greater risk of abuse/ harassments. Further, there is a social dialogue that employment abroad is the only solution for some women and their families to care for the children and the family in many situations. Alternatively, some polemicists suggest sometimes women are in seek of an escape as they are facing abuse or exploitation at home. In such cases, implementation the policy on submission of FBR may impede choices available to the women.

In this backdrop, many studies have explored about the positive and negative impact of women migration in different perspectives. However, sufficient research has not been conducted to verify whether the only reason for unsafe of children is the absence of the mother or other social factors.

## **1.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

This study is aimed to investigate whether the only reason for unsafe of children is the absence of the mother or other social factors in the case of mother being in a foreign employment. Additionally, this study identifies whether FBR fuelling for the irregular migration and the effect on the requests for premature repatriations due to problems of child well-being.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

In 2020, 272 million people (3.5 per cent of world population) lived outside their country of birth and many emigrants are young men and women from developing countries seeking greater economic opportunity in more developed countries (World Migration Report, 2020). Among the reasons that they motivate to migrate, specific impacts of parent's migration on children wellbeing the first is positive effect associated with higher incomes, which is typically the main motivation for migration (Albert, P. et al., 2010)

However, children and adolescents left behind may be at greater risk to drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, psychological problems and violent behavior while the research of UNICEF also found that the increase of the juvenile crime rate between 1993 and 2000 is positively correlated to a rise in the number of left behind children who accounted for nearly 60% of the offenders (UNICEF, 2008).

According to the Save the Children Report (2006), one million Sri Lankan children are left behind by their mother who migrates for employment abroad and parental support is a significant predictor of student's capacity to deal with stress, anxiety and loss of control. The study findings indicate that even the best caregivers were not succeeded to give the love, attention and proximity of the mother as expected by children, with 77% of the children indicating that they felt lonely due to the absence of the mother. According to the report, even though women migrate in order to provide their children with a better future, the psychosocial costs are large and could violate a child's right to development, survival and education. However, previous research findings suggest that children who live with single mothers performed lower academic scores than others and may have possibility to early drop out while frequency of contact by the children with non-resident fathers showed very little effect on child outcomes (Albert, P. et al., 2010).

In this backdrop, imposing bans on women for foreign employment stretch back to the early years of domestic worker migration to the Gulf, specifically the Bangladesh government has repeatedly imposed bans or restrict the overseas migration of certain categories of 'low-skilled' women workers from early 1981 to 1998 (International Labour Organization, 2018). Since then, numerous labour-sending states attempted periodically to restrict the migration of workers including fairly recent bans by the governments of Cambodia (2011), Sri Lanka (2013), Nepal (2014) and Indonesia (2015). Many countries, such as the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, have imposed policies on age restrictions, consent requirements, or bans on female migration to achieve their macro-level objectives (Napier & Moore, 2017).

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), as the government authority mandated to govern labour migration, formulated FBR policy in 2007 by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Child Protection and were fully implemented in July 2013 by the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare and the SLBFE. By 2020, the FBR policy had been revised several times. The FBR policy in Sri Lanka led to a decrease in women migration (Weeraratne 2016, 2018) and as women continue to travel without permits, with visitor/tourist visas, through convoluted routes, bribing officials, and forging documents, official data on labour migration has become incomplete (ILO, 2015).

According to Sijapati (2015), women's vulnerability in their employment and risk of exploitations can be increased by introducing policies such as age-base bans or excluding women from certain countries or sectors, which resulted to restrict the mobility of women. Then it might forces them into migration through informal channels.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Kurunegala Divisional Secretariat Division where the highest number of FBRs approved by the SLBFE in 2018. In here, even though the study was conducted in 2021, the sample was selected from the women who migrated in 2018 by giving considerable time duration to assess the comprehensiveness of implementation the policy on submission of FBR by female Sri Lankans leaving for foreign employment. Both primary and secondary data collection methods were applied in this study. Target group of this study was both primary care taker/ guardians and migrant mothers' children and. As this study is a qualitative study, survey design was applied to collect data. Hence, structured questionnaire and interviews used to collect primary data from target group. Accordingly, by using purposive sampling method, primary data were collected from 60 caretakers who are responsible for child protection after mothers' departure and 42 children of migrant mothers as the interviewer met the saturation while conducting the data collection.

Secondary data gathered from several government institutes such as Sri Lanka Police Department, National Child Protection Authority, Probation and Child Care Department, SLBFE and relevant publication such as books, magazines, annual reports, newspapers, web sites and other relevant research documents. Collected data were analyzed by using descriptive research methods.

### 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Findings from the secondary sources

Table 01: Number of complaints received on abuse of children according to the migrant status of parents 2010-2020

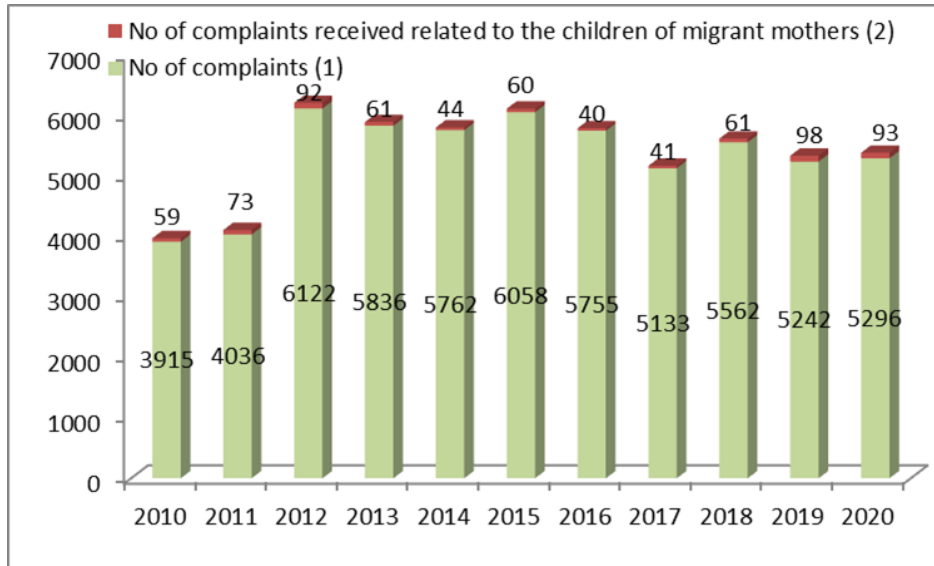
Total no of received complaints 2010-2020	No of complaints received related to the children of migrant mothers	No of complaints received related to the children of migrant fathers	No of complaints received related to the children of migrant parents
58717	722 (1.23%)	304 (0.52%)	155 (0.26%)

Source- Sri Lanka Police Department

Generally, there is a perception in society that many children left behind by migrant mothers have become vulnerable to abuse. However, the statistics of Sri Lanka Police Department upside down the general idea in society as during 2010-2020, only 1.23% of complaints on child abuse were received related to the children of migrant mothers while the figure was only 0.52 about the children of migrant

fathers. Out of 58717 complaints on child abuse, the number of children victimized for child abuse when both parents work abroad was only 0.26 percent of total complaints.

Figure 01. Complaints received on abuse of children whose mothers in abroad



Source- Sri Lanka Police Department

According to the statistics of Sri Lanka Police Department, complaints on child abuse received during 2010-2020 imply that the number of complaints received on abuse the children of migrant mothers is around one percent during the considered period. Accordingly, the majority of children who victimized for abuses were other than the children of migrant mothers.

Table 02. Reported complaints on child abuse - by province and migrant status

Province	2010			2011			2012			2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019			2020			
	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad	mother abroad	father abroad	both abroad				
North	4	4	1	5	4	3	4	3	1	4	1	1	3	2	2	3	3	0	2	1	1	2	2	1	7	3	0	6	5	5	6	5	3	
Eastern	5	2	1	6	2	2	6	2	3	2	1	0	3	2	2	4	2	2	3	2	1	3	1	0	5	4	1	3	3	6	4	2	0	
Central	5	3	0	8	4	2	10	6	1	8	3	2	9	5	1	6	5	0	7	5	1	4	2	1	6	4	2	10	9	3	14	4	1	
Western	8	3	3	11	4	5	12	11	6	9	4	2	9	3	1	13	3	2	5	3	1	4	3	1	11	6	4	9	9	5	12	3	3	
North central	17	3	1	19	4	3	27	1	4	12	6	3	5	3	1	13	1	1	7	4	1	7	1	1	7	3	2	25	4	3	23	6	1	
North eastern	7	2	2	10	4	2	14	5	4	12	5	2	8	2	1	14	4	3	7	3	0	6	5	1	9	4	3	15	7	7	20	6	0	
Southern	6	1	2	4	3	2	8	2	3	4	2	0	2	2	0	3	3	0	5	1	1	6	2	1	6	1	1	4	6	1	5	1	2	
Uva	2	1	0	4	1	1	4	2	1	2	2	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	2	1	4	1	1	2	1	0	3	2	0	2	1	0	
Sabaragamuwa	4	0	0	3	3	1	5	1	1	7	4	1	3	2	0	1	2	0	3	1	0	3	2	0	5	1	1	4	1	0	5	2	1	
child & women bureau	1			2	1		1		1				1			1					1	1		1			1							
child authority		1		1		1		1		1					1	1				1		1			2		2	1				1		1
	59	20	10	73	30	22	92	33	25	61	28	11	44	22	10	60	24	8	40	23	8	41	19	7	61	27	14	82	47	30	93	31	11	

Source- Sri Lanka Police Department

Even though the highest number of child abuse was reported from the Western province since 2010, the majority of children of migrant mothers who became vulnerable to child abuse were the residents of North Central province since 2010. During 2010-2020, the highest number of complaints reported from North Central province is 27 in 2012, followed by 25 in 2018 and 23 in 2019.

Table 03. Reported complaints to National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) regarding children of migrant parents 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>Total no of complaints</b>	6076	7418	10273	10315	10732	9361	9014	9512	8556	8165
complaints on children of migrant mothers	375	443	735	605	391	208	195	152	102	82
complaints on children of migrant mothers as a % of total complaints	6.17	5.97	7.15	5.86	3.64	2.22	2.16	1.59	1.19	1.00
complaints on children of migrant fathers	56	50	124	104	64	46	45	43	10	20
complaints on children of migrant fathers as a % of total complaints	0.92	0.67	1.2	1.00	0.59	1.49	0.49	0.45	0.11	0.24
complaints on children of migrant parents	12	11	26	1	20	18	12	9	1	5
complaints on children of migrant parents as a % of total complaints	0.19	0.15	0.25	0.00	0.18	0.19	0.13	0.09	0.01	0.06

Source – NCPA,2021

As observed in Table 4.13, the highest number of complaints on child abuse reported to NCPA in the year 2015. Since 2015, the decline could be observed in number of complaints reported to NCPA. Furthermore, the number of complaints reported from the children of migrant mothers was drastically decline since 2013. During the period, the highest number of complaints related to the children of migrant mothers was reported in 2013 as 735.

Table 04: Information of parents of the children in child care institutions at the time of institutionalization

<b>Background characteristics</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Background characteristics</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>where father reside</b>			<b>where mother reside</b>		
In prison	646	9.5	In prison	190	2.1
In another country	92	1.3	In another country	664	7.5
Elsewhere	4387	64.3	Elsewhere	6418	72.3
Not known	1659	24.3	Not known	1534	17.3
Not specified	40	0.6	Not specified	66	0.7
<b>Economic status of father</b>			<b>Economic status of mother</b>		
Was employed/had a permanent source of income	1827	26.8	Was employed/had a permanent source of income	1577	17.8
Not employed/had no permanent source of income	2452	35.9	Not employed/had no permanent source of income	5129	57.8
Not known	2536	37.2	Not known	2154	24.3
Not specified	9	0.1	Not specified	12	0.1

Source- – Probation and Child Care Department,2021

Fathers of 646 and 92 children were residing in a prison or another country at the time the child was institutionalized while mothers of 190 and 664 children were residing in a prison or another country respectively which is significantly higher than corresponding figures for fathers.

It is also noteworthy that barring the children of fathers of whom the economic status is not known (37.2%), a considerable number of children of unemployed men who do not have a fixed income (35.9%) entrust the care of their children with Child Care Institutions proving how importance the economic status for a child's upbringing. It has been observed that more than half (57.8%) of the children whose mothers are either not employed or have no permanent income to provide for their children which may be a leading factor for the placement of children in child care.



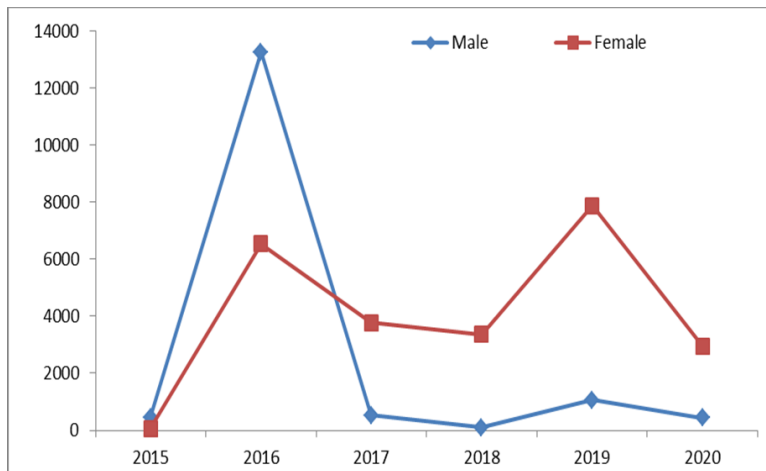
Table 05: Requests made by female migrant workers for premature repatriations due to problems of child well being

Year	Registration with SLBFE with valid FBR	Complaints on problem at home	Problems on child well being	Problems on child well-being as a % of Complaints on problem at home
2010	-	769	353	45.90
2011	-	649	353	54.39
2012	-	671	417	62.15
2013	-	765	433	56.60
2014	56234	563	263	46.71
2015	55814	442	183	41.40
2016	48694	268	123	45.90
2017	36189	210	96	45.71
2018	41235	202	98	48.51
2019	43100	209	130	62.20
2020	10467	164	99	60.37

Source- – SLBFE,2021

Overall, the number of complaints for premature repatriations due to problem at home related to the issues of child care showed a slowdown after the implementation of FBR in 2014. The majority of complaints (above 50%) were other than the problems of their children while requests for premature repatriation due to problems of children were below 50 percent during 2014-2018. However, the complaints reported during the covid19 pandemic period in 2019 & 2020 showed a growth, which is beyond the normal situation in the society.

Figure 02 : Complaints received on attempting to migrate for employment abroad using visit visa- 2015-2020



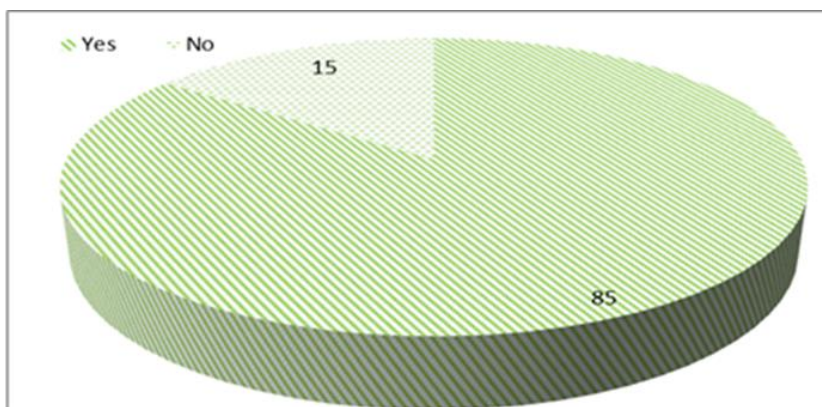
Source- – SLBFE, 2021

Majority of females attempted to migrate abroad for employment using visit visa after 2016, which took the highest percentage by males earlier. However, not being eligible to have valid FBR may be significantly attributed to increase the departures through visit visas of females.

#### 4.2. Findings from the primary data collection

In this section, I provide the data collected via structured questionnaire and the structured interviews in order to answer the problems on child well-being and protection.

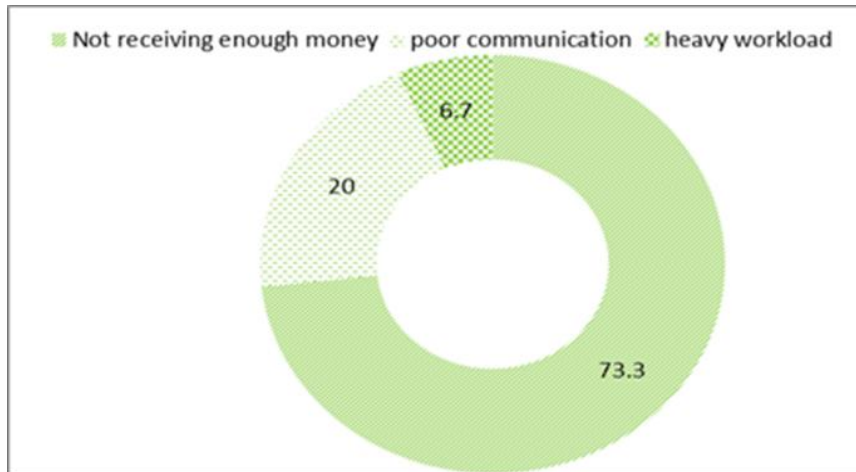
Figure 03. Satisfaction on the decision taken by women to migrate



Source : Sample survey, 2021

Majority of caretakers (85%) satisfy about the decision taken by children's mother to migrate abroad for employment while 15% caretakers do not satisfy about the decision to migrate abroad. Specifically, among the dissatisfied caretakers, majority were grandmothers of children.

Figure 04: Reasons for the dissatisfaction on the decision taken by women to migrate



Source : Sample survey, 2021

73.3 per cent of the respondents' main reason for their dissatisfaction was that money sent by remitter is not enough to cover their monthly expenditure. 20% of respondents are worrying about the poor communication of migrant worker with their family members. However, few respondents stated they do not satisfy about the decision taken to migrate as they couldn't manage the heavy workload.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Migration is a major household decision, which takes into consideration, and in turn influences, many other household circumstances and strategies. The Government of Sri Lanka has made significant efforts and taken a number of initiatives to enhance the protection of migrant workers and their families. Accordingly, Family Background Report (FBR) for women is one of the initiatives taken to ensure the well-being and protection of the children of migrant worker families.

Under such scenario, FBR mainly addresses the surface issues of child-care based on a logic that kids / young children in the absence of mother are vulnerable for dangers. However, it needs to verify whether these children are vulnerable for dangers due to the absence of the mother or other social factors. This study mainly aimed to investigate whether the only reason for unsafe of children is the absence of the mother or other social factors in the case of mother being in a foreign employment. Hence, according to the statistics of Sri Lanka Police Department, during 2010-2020, only 1.23% of

complaints on child abuse were received related to the children of migrant mothers while the figure was only 0.52 about the children of migrant fathers. According to the statistics of NCPA on complaints received on child abuse, complaints received on children of migrant mothers was around 5% -7% during 2011 to 2014 while it showed a decline drastically in the complaints received on children of migrant mothers since 2015. The figure was decline year-on-year and it was only 1% in the year 2020. Accordingly, above figures upside down the general perception in society that many children left behind by migrant mothers has become vulnerable to abuse. According to the statistics of Sri Lanka Police Department and NCPA, it is evident that children are vulnerable for dangers due to other social factors and mother is not the significant factor for children being vulnerable for abuses.

Further, this study focused to identify whether FBR fuelling for the irregular migration and the effect on the requests for premature repatriations due to problems of child well-being. Accordingly, the study findings indicate that majority of females attempted to migrate abroad for employment using visit visa after 2016 and not being eligible to have valid FBR may be significantly attributed to increase the departures through visit visas of females. Further, complaints for premature repatriations due to problem at home related to the issues of child care showed a sharp slowdown after the implementation of FBR in 2014.

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