

Home country resistance against return migrants during Covid-19: The case of return Sri Lankans from Italy

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International migration is severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in different ways. Many states have closed their borders to prevent from the spread of the virus. Sri Lanka started controlling her airport arrival gates from 18th March, 2020. During the last days before the border control, there was a significant increase of the demand by Sri Lankan labour migrants to come back to Sri Lanka. The key reason for this demand was their sense of insecurity to continue working and living in those countries where the Covid-19 virus was spreading rapidly. However, this increased demand of labour migrants to return met with severe resistance from the Sri Lankan society, which was a new phenomenon. Even though Sri Lankan society has a prevalent hostility against certain types of Sri Lankan migrants, such as Tamil diaspora members and Sri Lankan dual citizens, hostility against labour migrants has never been visible before.

In this paper, I attempt to understand whether this animosity against labour migrants is completely a new construction or whether it exists in the society unnoticeably but became visible during the pandemic times. Deeply understanding such responses of the Sri Lankan society towards another group of Sri Lankan citizens is important as it shows us how the society determines who is “us” and “them,” or “inclusion” and “exclusion.” I draw data for this study from three sources: observations, semi-structured interviews with migrants and discourse analysis of media reports. Analysing the data, the study found that the Sri Lankan society always has a contradictory approach towards labour migrants. On one hand, it is believed that those who leave the country (for any reason) are disloyal citizens. On the other hand, it is believed that the remittances they send contribute to the national economy positively. The first belief is usually overshadowed by the latter belief. However, the pandemic situation led the society undermine the economic contribution of emigrants to the national economy, and to view the labour migrants’ interest to return to Sri Lanka merely as an intentional attempt to spread the virus in their home country, because they are disloyal citizens. The study also found that the media reporting at the time significantly affected such social constructions.

Key words: Sri Lankan migrants, return migrants, Covid-19, resistance