

On the move: Gender & seasonal fisheries migration in Sri Lanka

Key messages

- The main pattern of seasonal fisheries-related migration in Sri Lanka is from the west coast to east and northeast coasts during the southwest monsoon (April-September) dating back to the 19th century at least.
- This internal coast-to-coast migration is an important adaptive livelihood strategy of fishing communities responding to monsoonal weather patterns in Sri Lanka.
- Seasonal migration for fishing is not motivated by poverty or resource scarcity but is mainly opportunity-driven in the pursuit of wellbeing and enabled by social networks.
- While most migrants are males, wives and female family members of boat owners also engage in seasonal migration.
- Conflicts over access to the fisheries resource between migrant and host fishing communities have increased due to the depletion of near shore fisheries resources in Sri Lanka, the increase in fishing households on the east coast and post-war political-economic factors.
- Contestation is expressed in terms of rights to a tradition of migration by west coast fishing communities and a right to their own local resources by host fishing communities.
- Migration entails different benefits and costs to migrant and host communities, and to men and women.
- The new Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy of Sri Lanka 2018 has made an important first step in addressing gender inequality and tenure rights of small-scale fishers. However, it is yet to be adequately transformative in responding to issues of migration and gender.
- Fairness of access to fisheries resources is a major concern of fishers.



Rights to access fisheries resources

- *Fishing there [on the east/northeast coasts] is a traditional right for us, from generation to generation. The government accepts that. We go there with the support of some people in those villages. (Men's Focus Group Discussion, Kadalpalli, Puttalam)*
- *Fishermen here have problems with the migrants. It is the mudalali [traders] who profit from them. There are no controls. Sometimes, they bring 300 boats so local people have problems. How can we all get a catch? This sea has only space for 300 boats. If there are 1,000 boats, how can we fish? (Men's Focus Group Discussion, Selippur, Trincomalee)*



This policy brief is based on the Sri Lankan component of a three-country research project on ‘Migration and collectives/networks as pathways out of poverty: Gendered vulnerabilities and capabilities of fishing communities in Asia’. The Sri Lankan study focused on two migrant sending fishing communities in the Puttalam district and two migrant receiving fishing communities in the Trincomalee district. Research findings were generated from a quantitative household survey of 800 households and a range of qualitative methods used in the four study villages. An additional qualitative study on female-headed households in coastal communities in Batticaloa district was also conducted. The social wellbeing approach, which incorporates material, relational and subjective dimensions, was used as an analytical lens to understand motivations and outcomes of migration.

Reasons for seasonal fisheries migration

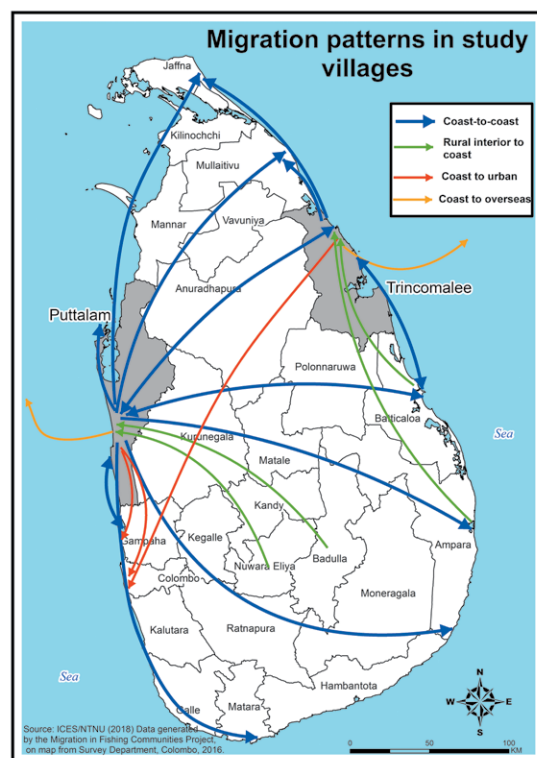
Around 75% of fishing households from all expenditure quintiles in the two west coast study villages, Kadalpalli* and Cattiur*, engaged in internal seasonal migration primarily to the east/northeast coasts of Trincomalee and Mullaitivu districts. Crew, beach seine workers and fishers working on their own motorised fibre-reinforced plastic (OFRP) boats, constituted the majority of male migrants. Wives and female members of boat owning households were most likely to migrate relative to other women, and engage in dried fish processing. West coast fishers perceive seasonal migration as an adaptive strategy to target fish resources on the east coast during the monsoon off-season so that they continue to earn their livelihood from fishing, and as a tradition dating to their grandparents. Colonial records reveal that coast-to-coast fisheries migration has taken place for over 150 years.

Table 1:
Internal out-migrants for fisheries in fishing households in study villages

GN Division	Men		Women		Migrant HHs		All Fishing HHs	
	#	As % of fishing HHs	#	As % of fishing HHs	#	As % of fishing HHs	#	%
WEST COAST (Puttalam district)								
Kadalpalli	145	76.3	71	37.4	146	76.8	190	100
Cattiur	113	72.4	16	10.3	115	73.7	156	100
Both villages	258	74.6	87	25.1	261	75.4	346	100
EAST COAST (Trincomalee district)								
Uppukadal	23	19.0	0	0	23	19.0	121	100
Selippur	6	4.2	0	0	6	4.2	142	100
Both villages	29	11.0	0	0	29	11.0	263	100
ALL	287	47.1	87	14.3	290	47.6	609	100

(Source: ICES HH Livelihoods Survey 2017)

*Names of study villages are pseudonyms.



Fishers in host-communities, Uppukadal* and Selippur*, on the east coast perceived seasonal in-migration by west coast fishing households as motivated by a desire to access fish resources on their coast and earn higher incomes. Only 11% of fishers from the east coast study villages migrated - along the same coast for fishing during their season. Thus, migration was not driven by poverty or resource scarcity, but largely by opportunity.

Enabling and disabling factors

Seasonal migration for fishing from west coast communities is enabled by the strength of social networks within the village to migrate in small groups and to take care of family members left behind, underlying a culture of migration. Linkages to fish traders, who act as sponsors in host villages are also critical. Fishing skills, knowledge of fish migrations and language skills to communicate in host villages are other enabling factors. Disabling factors are the care and education of children in their home villages, as well as the increasing opposition to and restrictions placed on in-migration by host communities and state authorities. Households receiving remittances from family members who have migrated overseas and those with permanent sources of income in their home villages were less likely to engage in seasonal internal migration.

East coast fishers perceived that in-migration is enabled by political and state support from the South, the weakness of local politicians, and disunity within their own fisheries societies. Overcrowding and lack of berthing spaces for boats on the beach was seen as the primary disabling factor for in-migration. Their ability to organize and work together as fisheries societies within the district was also seen as disabling in-migration to some extent. Thus, relational factors were most important in enabling or disabling migration, followed by material factors, on both coasts.

Contestation over access to the fisheries resource, based on rights to a tradition of migration by west coast fishers, and rights to their own local resources by east coast fishers, poses a challenge to the continuity of seasonal migration. As migrants and host fishers are of different ethno-religious groups, there is also potential to ethnicise or regionalise these conflicts.

Benefits and costs

The benefits of internal migration to both women and men in west coast communities are considerably higher earnings from fishing on the east/north east coast and settlement of debt. Migrating women earn from dried fish processing. Male fishers also value a change of environment and a sense of camaraderie in migrant locations. Costs expressed include not always receiving anticipated earnings and therefore incurring further debt, loss of fisheries assets due to conflicts with host communities, separation of family members, neglect of children's education and nostalgia for home. Women in Cattiyur, who migrate in smaller groups than women in Kadalpalli and therefore do not always have safety in numbers, also indicated vulnerability to harassment by crew.

Both men and women in east coast communities perceived no benefits from internal seasonal migration, except to fish traders who sponsored migrants and therefore received bigger profits. Costs were seen in material terms, such as use of illegal fishing gear and methods by migrants, and the loss of fisheries resources and incomes for local fishing households. Relational costs such as conflicts between migrants and local people, pollution of beaches and wells, and spread of disease and prostitution, were also indicated.

Internal migration entails a range of material, relational and subjective benefits and costs to migrant fishing communities on the west coast. However, households in host communities on the east coast perceived more costs than benefits. On both coasts, women tended to bear more of the burden of relational costs. Thus, reconciling the pursuit of wellbeing between migrant and host communities, women and men, who incur differential benefits and costs, remains a challenge.

Although aware of sustainability issues, fishing communities are more concerned about fairness in access to the available fisheries resources.

Social networks

Social networks based on bonding ties with family, friends and neighbours provide critical emotional and crisis support in all four study villages. However, livelihood support from social networks is stronger in west coast relative to east coast study villages. There was no significant gender difference in support from both bonding and bridging networks, such as with traders and religious leaders who have links beyond the community, in the west coast villages. However, support from bridging networks was higher for men than for women in the east coast villages. Fisheries society leaders on the west coast rely on linking ties with regulatory authorities, such as the Fisheries department, politicians and the Church to negotiate on their behalf if confronted with opposition from east coast communities and authorities. Similarly, fisheries society leaders on the east coast seek to gather support from local authorities and politicians to curb in-migration with limited success. Thus, stronger bonding, bridging and linking networks of west coast fishing communities, relative to those of the east coast, enable the continuity of seasonal coast-to-coast fisheries migration.



Policy context

Sustainability of coastal fish resources is an enormous challenge for the fisheries sector in Sri Lanka. The latest stock assessment in 2018 revealed that near shore fish resources have depleted to one fifth of stocks available in 1978-80. Meanwhile, fishing households have increased markedly during the same period, especially on the east and northeast coasts. Fisheries authorities have imposed restrictions on destructive fishing gear on all coasts, as well as restricted the number of migrant boats on the east coast. Policy perceptions by fishing community members in the study villages were relatively narrow. First, fishers assumed that access to fisheries resources was governed by a national policy based on the principle of “the sea is for all”. Second, even though most fishers perceived that there was a depletion of the fish resources and that sustainable management was needed, they did not necessarily agree with bans on specific fishing gear or perceive that these bans were effectively implemented. Foremost, were perceptions on the lack of clarity about prohibitions of different gear in different districts and lack of fairness in enforcement of regulations. Similarly, the quotas on migrant boats were questioned by fishers on both coasts, on the basis that these were too large or small, and not monitored adequately.

The fisheries sector policy context is shaped by the new National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy of 2018. Objectives of this policy include sustainable management of resources using science-based information, compliance with regional and international obligations, increased marine fisheries production, increased aquaculture and inland fisheries production, minimized post-harvest losses and increased value addition, increased per capita consumption of fish, increased export earnings, improved opportunities for leisure, employment and enterprises development, and improved socio-economic conditions of the fisher community. Thus, sustainable management and increased production and consumption are the key priorities. Of the six policy areas – marine fisheries, aquaculture, consumers and markets, blue economy and ‘other areas’, socio-economic conditions of small-scale fishers fall within ‘other areas’.

Included among ‘other areas’ of the 2018 Policy are issues relevant to this study, such as gender, where equal participation of women and men, and gender mainstreaming are promoted. Moreover within the areas of socio-economic conditions, human rights and fisher organizations, issues such as respect of tenure rights of traditional, migrant, subsistence and artisanal fishing communities to land, water and fish resources and improving social safety nets and social security protection for fishers and fish workers including women have been incorporated. Also mentioned are the involvement of fishing communities in designing, planning and implementation of fisheries management measures and the progressive realization of rights of small-scale fishers and fish workers to an adequate standard of living. However, the institutional mechanisms to achieve these socio-economic policies are not adequately articulated in the policy, which lacks a transformative approach.

Transformative policies “fundamentally change social institutions and relations to make them more inclusive and equitable, and redistribute power and economic resources” (UNRISD 2016).

Policy recommendations

The findings of the Sri Lankan study ‘On the move: Gender and migration in four fishing communities in Sri Lanka’ suggest that the benefits and costs of migration are not equally shared between migrant and host communities, men and women. Moreover, the study revealed a contestation of access to resources on the basis of a ‘right to a tradition of migration’ among migrant communities and a ‘right to one’s own local resources’ among host communities. The tendency for this contestation to become ethnicised or regionalised already exists and needs to be addressed. Thus, fairness of access to the fisheries resource is an important concern for fishing communities on both coasts. In the light of these findings, we recommend that:

- The benefits and costs of fisheries migration to migrant and host communities, men and women, are assessed and monitored regularly, in order to maximise benefits and minimize costs to all groups.
- The clarity and transparency in the introduction and implementation of bans on destructive fishing gear be increased so that these bans are not perceived as favouring one group over another.
- The National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy identify mechanisms for respecting the rights of traditional, migrant, subsistence and marginal fishing communities to land, water, and fish resources without infringing on the rights of other such communities.
- These mechanisms need to be negotiated by consulting fishing communities with trained facilitators/mediators.
- The National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy address the regulation of internal seasonal fisheries migration to guarantee the sustainability of the fishing resource, adequate living standards for migrant communities in migratory locations, and prevention of overcrowding/pollution of landings and beaches in host communities.

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