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### **Patterns and risk factors of child abuse among migrant worker families in Matara Police Division, Sri Lanka**

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**Background:** Parental labor migration is a significant socio-economic phenomenon in Sri Lanka, contributing to household financial stability while inadvertently increasing the vulnerability of left-behind children to abuse. The primary objective of this study was to assess the patterns and risk factors of child abuse among migrant worker families, with special attention to demographic characteristics of the victims as well as the perpetrators and their associations.

**Method:** This retrospective study analyzed 95 documented cases of child abuse reported across 20 police stations in the Matara Police division from 2022 to 2023. Secondary data was extracted from police records and subjected to statistical analyses using SPSS (Version 27), applying chi square tests for associations.

**Results:** Among the reported cases, 74.7% (n=71) were classified as sexual abuse, 14.7% (n=14) as physical abuse, and 10.5% (n=10) as neglect. The majority of victims (82.1%; n=78) were female, with the highest vulnerability observed in the 10–16-year age group (57.9%; n=55). A statistically significant association was found between maternal absence and increased risk of sexual abuse ( $P < 0.01$ ), with 69% of sexual abuse cases occurring in households where the mother was abroad. Caregivers were the primary perpetrators in 55.8% (n=53) of cases, with stepfathers (31.6%; n=30) and other male relatives (24.2%; n=23) being the predominant offenders. Children in households with maternal absence due to migration have 4.88 times higher risk (OR=4.88) of experiencing abuse compared to those with paternal absence. An increase in abuse after two years of parental migration was observed with the highest frequency of abuse observed between 3 to 4 years ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings underscore a statistically significant correlation between parental migration and heightened child abuse risk, particularly sexual abuse, with caregiver involvement being a major determinant. Enhancing community-based surveillance to mitigate abuse risks in migrant households and further longitudinal research to assess the long-term psychological and social consequences for affected children is recommended.

**Keywords:** Child abuse, parental migration, sexual exploitation, caregiver perpetration.