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Between Absence and Dreams: A Phenomenological Study on the Experiences of Malaiyaha Tamil Children with Migrant Mothers.

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Abstract

Maternal labor migration has become a significant socioeconomic strategy among structurally marginalized communities in Sri Lanka, particularly within the Malaiyaha Tamil estate sector. While existing research has largely focused on economic and educational outcomes, there remains limited understanding of children's lived experiences within these contexts. This study aimed to explore how Malaiyaha Tamil children make sense of their mothers' migration for overseas employment. A qualitative design informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents aged 12-17 years residing in plantation communities. Data were analyzed ideographically before identifying shared experiential patterns across cases. The analysis generated three interrelated superordinate themes: (1) mother as emotional anchor and "absent presence," (2) childhood reassigned through role reorganization and educational vulnerability, and (3) living between longing and aspiration within structural constraint. Findings indicate that maternal migration is experienced as a relational paradox, where financial provision coexists with emotional disruption. Children described ambivalent attachment experiences, shifting family roles, and varied educational engagement shaped by available support systems. Despite these challenges, participants articulated future aspirations that reflected resilience within structurally constrained environments. Drawing on Attachment Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Ambiguous Loss Theory, the study conceptualizes maternal migration as a relational and ecological process rather than a singular economic event. The findings highlight the coexistence of vulnerability and agency and underscore the importance of context-sensitive interventions for children in migration-affected communities.

Keywords: Children left behind, Interpretative, Malaiyaha Tamil, Maternal migration, Phenomenological analysis, Resilience.

Introduction

The desire to secure a better future for one's children has long been a powerful driver of migration. For many mothers in economically marginalized communities, migration is not merely an employment decision but a moral and relational choice shaped by sacrifice, responsibility, and hope. In Sri Lanka, maternal labor migration has become an enduring social phenomenon, particularly among women seeking overseas domestic or low-skilled employment as a pathway to financial stability (Perera & Rathnayaka, 2013). Migration, broadly defined as movement across geographical locations within or beyond national borders (Dunusingha, 2020), often emerges as a survival strategy in contexts of poverty, underemployment, and debt. In such conditions, international labor migration is frequently perceived as one of the few viable routes toward economic security (Dissanayake et al., 2014). This pattern is particularly pronounced among the Malaiyaha Tamil plantation community, where longstanding structural disadvantage intensifies the need for migration.

Economic improvement remains the primary motivation for labor migration (Escobal & Flores, 2009). In Sri Lanka, women's migration is driven by persistent poverty, unemployment and underemployment, indebtedness, and aspirations for upward mobility (Jayasuriya & Opeskin, 2015). Over recent decades, Asia has become a major region of transnational labor mobility (Hoang et al., 2012), with Sri Lanka continuing to be one of South Asia's largest labor-exporting countries (Perera & Rathnayaka, 2013). Women constitute a substantial proportion

of this workforce (Dunusingha, 2020), with a large percentage falling within the 25-44 age range a demographic that overlaps with motherhood (Dissanayake et al., 2014). As a result, maternal migration is not an isolated occurrence but a widespread social reality that reshapes family life and childhood experiences.

While remittances may improve household income and material conditions, maternal migration simultaneously transforms caregiving arrangements, attachment relationships, and everyday routines. It is therefore necessary to understand maternal migration not only as an economic process but also as a relational and developmental one. This dual nature is particularly significant in communities where structural disadvantages already shape family life. This phenomenon is especially visible within the Malaiyaha Tamil community of Sri Lanka a historically marginalized population whose socioeconomic conditions intensify the pressures that drive migration. The present study situates maternal migration within this specific sociohistorical context and examines how children interpret and experience their mothers' absence.

Sociohistorical context: Malaiyaha Tamils and structural marginalization

The Malaiyaha Tamil community accounts for approximately 4.1% of Sri Lanka's population and predominantly resides in tea plantation estates (Udayanga & De Zoysa, 2023; Jegathesan, 2015). Their ancestors were brought from South India during British colonial rule as plantation laborers under exploitative conditions (Senanayake, 2021; Udayanga, 2022). This colonial legacy has

produced enduring patterns of marginalization characterized by low wages, limited infrastructure, and restricted social mobility (Jegathesan, 2015).

Contemporary living conditions continue to reflect these structural inequalities. Many families reside in overcrowded “line rooms,” experience inadequate sanitation, and face limited access to quality education and healthcare (Neubert, 2015; Kowsalya, 2014). Persistent debt and unstable income further exacerbate economic vulnerability. Additionally, derogatory labels such as *wathu demalu* and *layime aayo* reflect ongoing social stigma and symbolic exclusion (Piyarathne, 2013).

Within this context, migration emerges as one of the few available strategies for economic mobility. At the same time, aspirations to move beyond plantation-based identities reflect a desire for dignity, stability, and improved life opportunities (Jegathesan, 2015). However, the consequences of maternal migration extend beyond economic outcomes to affect family relationships and children’s developmental experiences within already constrained environments.

Maternal migration and children left behind

A growing body of research highlights both positive and negative consequences of parental migration for children. On the one hand, remittances may improve access to education, nutrition, housing, and other material resources (Baltatescu et al., 2023; Ukwatta, 2010). Such financial support can reduce economic stress and improve living conditions. On the

other hand, maternal migration may disrupt caregiving systems, emotional attachment, and daily routines, leading to psychosocial challenges (Dunusingha, 2020).

Educational outcomes are similarly complex. While increased income may support school-related expenses, the absence of maternal supervision and encouragement can negatively affect attendance, engagement, and academic continuity (Dissanayake et al., 2014). In some cases, children may also face increased risks of neglect, instability, or vulnerability within reorganized family structures (Jayasuriya & Opeskin, 2015).

For Malaiyaha Tamil children, these challenges are further compounded by pre-existing structural disadvantage. Research indicates barriers to accessing quality education, increased risk of school dropout, exposure to child labor, and vulnerability to abuse and substance use within this community (Bandaranayake et al., 2023). Maternal migration therefore occurs within already fragile developmental contexts, intensifying both risks and adaptive demands placed on children.

Recent international research further highlights the complex psychosocial impact of parental migration on children. Studies across low- and middle-income countries indicate that children left behind may experience increased emotional distress, loneliness, and mental health challenges, alongside disruptions in caregiving structures (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Adhikari et al., 2014). Similarly, research in Asian contexts has demonstrated that while remittances may improve material well-being, they do not fully compensate for

the absence of parental care and emotional support (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Nguyen, 2016). These findings suggest that maternal migration involves both protective and risk factors, shaping children's experiences in nuanced and context-dependent ways. Despite this growing body of work, much of the existing literature has focused on economic outcomes or general psychosocial indicators. There remains limited understanding of how children themselves interpret maternal migration and make sense of its emotional and relational implications.

Conceptual orientation: Attachment, ambiguous loss, and role reorganization

Maternal migration can be understood as a disruption to attachment systems, where a primary caregiver becomes physically absent while remaining psychologically present. Children may experience an "absent presence," in which mothers continue to provide financially and maintain contact but are no longer embedded in everyday caregiving. This condition may produce emotional ambivalence, including simultaneous experiences of gratitude, longing, and frustration. In addition, family roles are often reorganized following maternal migration. Children, particularly eldest daughters, may assume caregiving responsibilities within the household, reflecting processes of role redistribution and early responsibility. While such changes may foster resilience, they may also introduce emotional burden and affect developmental trajectories.

Maternal migration may also involve elements of ambiguous loss, where the absence of a caregiver lacks closure due to continued

emotional and material connection. This can result in fluctuating emotional responses and challenges in maintaining stable relational expectations.

Understanding these experiences requires an approach that captures complexity and meaning making rather than reducing migration to purely positive or negative outcomes.

Research gap

Existing literature on migration in Sri Lanka has largely focused on economic patterns, remittance flows, and general psychosocial outcomes (Perera & Rathnayaka, 2013; Dunusingha, 2020; Dissanayake et al., 2014). While these studies provide valuable insights into the structural and outcome-based dimensions of migration, they tend to prioritize measurable indicators such as income, educational access, and general well-being. Although such approaches are important for understanding broader social and economic impacts, they offer limited insight into how migration is experienced at the level of everyday life, particularly from the perspective of children.

While existing Sri Lankan studies have examined the economic and educational outcomes of migration (Dunusingha, 2020; Dissanayake et al., 2014), there remains a limited focus on children lived, subjective experiences, particularly within the Malaiyaha Tamil community. Much of the existing literature adopts quantitative or outcome-oriented approaches, leaving a gap in understanding how children themselves interpret maternal absence, negotiate

emotional ambivalence, and experience shifts in family roles within estate contexts. As a result, the relational, emotional, and meaning-making dimensions of maternal migration remain underexplored. Although global studies have begun to explore these psychosocial dimensions (Fellmeth et al., 2018; Cortina et al., 2012), there remains limited qualitative understanding of children lived experiences within specific socio-cultural contexts such as the Malaiyaha Tamil community.

This gap is especially significant in the context of the Malaiyaha Tamil community, where historical marginalization, economic precarity, and constrained access to resources shape both migration decisions and childhood experiences. Existing research has identified vulnerabilities related to education, labor, and social conditions within this population (Bandaranayake et al., 2023), yet there remains limited qualitative exploration of how children navigate these conditions in the context of maternal migration. Given these limitations, there is a need for in-depth, interpretative research that centers children's voices and examines how they make sense of maternal migration within their socio-cultural and economic environments. Addressing this gap is both academically important and socially relevant, as it provides a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between migration, childhood, and structural marginalization.

Theoretical framework

While Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis adopts an inductive approach, theoretical perspectives are used here as sensitizing frameworks to support

interpretation. This study is informed by Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969,1988), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and Ambiguous Loss Theory (Boss, 2004).

Attachment Theory explains how maternal absence disrupts emotional security and attachment relationships. Ecological Systems Theory situates these experiences within broader structural, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. Ambiguous Loss Theory provides insight into the emotional complexity arising from physical absence combined with psychological presence.

Together, these frameworks offer a coherent lens for understanding maternal migration as a relational and ecological process shaping children's emotional worlds and developmental trajectories.

Integrative perspective

Together, these three theories offer a coherent framework for understanding maternal migration as a relational, structural, and emotionally complex phenomenon. Attachment Theory explains disruptions in emotional security and ambivalent bonding; Ecological Systems Theory situates these disruptions within broader social and economic systems; and Ambiguous Loss Theory illuminates the psychological tension created by prolonged but incomplete separation. This integrated framework aligns with the study's aim to explore how Malaiyaha Tamil children make sense of maternal migration within contexts of poverty, gendered expectations, estate marginalization, and hope for social mobility. It allows maternal migration to

be understood not as a singular event but as an ongoing ecological and relational transformation shaping children's emotional worlds and future aspirations.

Objective of the study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Malaiyaha Tamil children whose mothers have migrated abroad for employment. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study examines how children make sense of maternal absence within contexts of poverty, estate life, and family reorganization. Rather than framing migration as solely beneficial or harmful, the study seeks to capture the relational and psychological complexities embedded in children's narratives, including attachment experiences, caregiving shifts, educational engagement, coping processes, and future aspirations.

Significance of study

By foregrounding children's voices, this study contributes to migration research in three ways. First, it shifts attention from economic indicators to lived emotional experiences. Second, it situates maternal migration within the specific structural context of the Malaiyaha Tamil community. Third, it highlights the coexistence of vulnerability and resilience in children's narratives. International reports also emphasize the need for context-sensitive research on children left behind in migration-affected families (UNICEF, 2020; IOM, 2021).

These insights have implications for policy, education, and psychosocial support systems within plantation communities. The study also contributes theoretically by demonstrating how children navigate dual realities economic improvement alongside emotional disruption within conditions of structural marginalization.

Research questions

The main question of research is, what are the lived experiences of Malaiyaha Tamil children whose mothers have migrated abroad for employment?

The sub questions are:

- i. How do children make sense of their mothers' migration decision?
- ii. How do children experience changes in family dynamics following migration?
- iii. How do children cope emotionally and socially with maternal absence?
- iv. How are educational engagement and aspirations influenced by maternal migration?
- v. How do children imagine their futures within and beyond estate life?

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Malaiyaha Tamil children whose mothers had migrated abroad for employment. IPA is suited to examining how individuals make sense of significant life experiences and relational disruptions (Alase, 2017). The approach prioritizes depth, subjective meaning, and interpretative

engagement rather than generalization. Maternal migration was conceptualized as an ongoing relational condition that reshapes attachment, caregiving, and everyday life. IPA's double hermeneutic allowed for the interpretation of how children themselves understand and respond to maternal absence. The idiographic commitment ensured detailed analysis of individual cases before identifying shared patterns.

Participants and sampling procedure

Purposive homogeneous sampling was used to recruit participants who shared key experiential characteristics (Alase, 2017).

Participants were Malaiyaha Tamil children residing in the Ratnapura (Kalawana) district (Udayanga, 2024). The sample consisted of seven participants ($n = 7$) aged between 12 and 18 years, including both male and female participants. All participants had mothers who had migrated abroad for employment and were living with alternative caregivers such as fathers, grandparents, or extended family members. This age group represents a critical developmental stage characterized by emotional and social transitions (Agarwal et al., 2020). Details of the seven participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Details of the participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Caregiver	Year of Maternal Migration
A	13	Female	Father	2021
B	15	Male	Grandmother	2022
C	12	Female	Father	2022
D	16	Male	Grandparents	2022
E	12	Female	Father	2021
F	13	Female	Grandmother	2023
G	12	Female	Father	Since Childhood

Development of the interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore children's perceptions of maternal migration, family relationships, education, coping, and future aspirations. Questions were open-ended and designed to elicit narrative responses. The guide was reviewed to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. Interviews progressed from general topics to more sensitive areas, allowing participants to gradually engage with emotionally complex experiences.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes to ensure comfort and familiarity. Interviews were carried out by a Tamil–Sinhala bilingual interviewer from the Malaiyaha Tamil community, which facilitated cultural understanding, rapport, and trust. Participants were given the choice of language, and interviews were conducted in Tamil or Sinhala based on participant preference. Each interview lasted between 45 and 80 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. All interviews were transcribed

verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Translation prioritized conceptual meaning rather than literal equivalence. Transcripts were reviewed to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' intended meanings.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the structured and iterative stages recommended for IPA (Behal, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). Each interview was transcribed verbatim shortly after data collection to preserve immediacy and contextual detail. The researchers immersed themselves in each transcript through repeated readings to gain familiarity with both explicit content and underlying emotional tone. The analytic process unfolded in four stages as described below:

Initial noting

Detailed notes were made on semantic content, linguistic features, emotional expressions, and preliminary interpretative reflections. Attention was given to contradictions, metaphors, repetition, and emotionally charged statements.

Development of emergent themes

From these notes, emergent themes were generated for each individual case. These themes captured concise psychological meanings grounded in participants' accounts while moving beyond mere description.

Searching for connections across themes

Emergent themes within each case were clustered to identify conceptual relationships.

This stage involved abstraction, subsumption, and contextualization to generate case-specific superordinate patterns.

Cross-case analysis

After each case was analyzed ideographically, patterns across participants were examined. Shared experiential structures were identified while retaining sensitivity to divergence. This process resulted in three overarching superordinate themes reflecting attachment transformation, role reorganization, and future-oriented meaning-making.

Throughout analysis, reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge the researcher's interpretative role. Interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts while informed by theoretical sensitivity derived from literature on maternal migration, attachment disruption, and family systems reorganization.

Reflexivity and researcher positioning

Given the interpretative nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), researcher positionality was carefully considered throughout the study. IPA recognizes that analysis involves a double hermeneutic process, where participants make sense of their experiences and the researcher interprets these meanings (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were conducted by a Tamil–Sinhala bilingual researcher from the Malaiyaha Tamil community. This insider positioning facilitated cultural understanding, linguistic alignment, and rapport, enabling participants to express their experiences more openly and authentically.

However, cultural proximity also requires ongoing reflexive awareness. The researcher remained attentive to the risk of assuming shared meanings and actively engaged in interpreting participants' accounts based on their expressed experiences rather than personal familiarity. Reflexivity was maintained as a continuous process, consistent with qualitative research practices that emphasize the researcher's role in knowledge construction (Finlay, 2002).

All interviews were translated into English for analysis, introducing an additional interpretative layer. To address this, translation prioritized conceptual equivalence rather than literal accuracy, ensuring that participants' meanings were preserved. The broader research team, including supervisors who were not members of the Malaiyaha Tamil community, contributed to analytic discussions, providing critical distance and enhancing interpretative rigor. This combination of insider data collection and collaborative interpretation strengthened the credibility of the analysis by balancing contextual sensitivity with analytical reflexivity.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the SLIIT School of Psychology Ethics Committee. Written consent was obtained from guardians, and assent was obtained from participants. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymization. Interviews were conducted sensitively, and participants were provided with support resources if required.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and methodological rigor, several strategies were employed throughout the research process. Prolonged engagement with the transcripts allowed for deep immersion in the data, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in careful and repeated reading rather than surface impressions. Consistent with the idiographic commitment of IPA, each case was analyzed in detail before moving to cross-case comparisons, thereby preserving the uniqueness of individual experiences. The analytic process was documented transparently to provide a clear audit trail of how themes were developed and refined. Reflexive journaling was maintained to critically examine the researcher's assumptions and interpretative positioning, strengthening analytic integrity. Additionally, particular care was taken to preserve participants' voices during interpretation, ensuring that experiential meaning remained central to the analysis. In line with IPA methodology, the study prioritized depth over breadth; although the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, they offer rich, contextually grounded insight into children lived experiences of maternal migration within the Malaiyaha Tamil community.

Results and Discussion

The analysis generated three interrelated superordinate themes: (1) Mother as Anchor: From Embodied Safety to Absent Presence; (2) Childhood Reassigned: Premature Responsibility and Educational Drift; and (3) Living Between Longing and Future: Isolation, Emotional Protection, and Hope

(Table 2). Together, these themes illuminate how children make sense of maternal migration within conditions of economic hardship, gendered labor, and estate life. Across accounts, migration was not experienced as a single event but as an ongoing relational process that reshaped attachment, identity, and future imagination.

Table 2.

Description of the three interrelated superordinate themes.

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes
1. Mother as Anchor: From Embodied Safety to Absent Presence	1.1 Mother as emotional protector and stabilizer 1.2 Migration as moral sacrifice and economic necessity 1.3 Financial provision as symbolic care 1.4 Disrupted trust and perceived abandonment
2. Childhood Reassigned: Premature Responsibility and Educational Drift	2.1 Loss of routine and reduced educational engagement 2.2 Parentification and sibling caregiving 2.3 Fathers as partial caregivers amid structural strain 2.4 Gendered redistribution of care roles
3. Living Between Longing and Future: Isolation, Emotional Protection, and Hope	3.1 Social confinement and limited peer intimacy 3.2 Emotional withholding and self-protective distancing 3.3 Ambivalence toward maternal return 3.4 Aspirations, mobility, and hope as psychological survival

Superordinate Theme 1: Mother as anchor – from embodied safety to absent presence

Before migration, mothers were described not only as caregivers but as emotional anchors who structured daily life and reduced fear. Several participants positioned their mother as a protective buffer within households marked by instability, particularly where paternal alcohol use was present. Participant C reflected, “My father drinks and comes home and sleeps... but I was not afraid when my mom was here.” The meaning embedded in this account is relational rather than behavioral; the father’s actions do not change,

yet the child’s emotional experience shifts in the mother’s presence. The mother appears to function as a stabilizing force who transforms a potentially threatening environment into a tolerable one. In this sense, safety is not an abstract state, but an embodied experience tied to maternal proximity.

Mothers were also described as organizers of routine and structure. Participant F explained, “When my mother was here, she did everything.” While this statement appears simple, it suggests a deep reliance on maternal orchestration of daily rhythms waking children, preparing food, supporting

schoolwork, and managing household tasks. The children's narratives construct the mother as both emotional regulator and practical manager, whose presence sustained continuity and predictability.

When discussing migration, children often framed it as a necessary sacrifice grounded in economic hardship. Participant D explained, "There is not enough money... that is why my mother left." Here, children demonstrate early awareness of structural poverty within estate life. Migration is interpreted as a rational response to survival demands. However, this practical understanding coexists with emotional distress. Participant A stated, "I helped her pack clothes," while Participant B added, "I was crying." These parallel positions reveal emotional ambivalence: children adopt a cooperative, understanding stance while simultaneously grieving the impending separation. In IPA terms, children appear to hold two identities at once the responsible child who supports the decision and the vulnerable child who experiences loss.

Following migration, the mother's role transforms rather than disappears. Care becomes mediated through money and communication technologies. Participants frequently described receiving school supplies, medicine money, or regular financial support. For instance, Participant A noted, "I got more school stationery... she sends money every month." Financial provision becomes symbolic evidence that the mother continues to care. Yet this "provider-at-a-distance" role does not eliminate emotional longing. Participant B stated plainly, "We feel lonely when she is not here." Thus, migration creates what may be described as an *absent presence*:

mothers remain central figures in children's lives but are no longer physically available to perform everyday emotional labor.

In some cases, the narrative of sacrifice breaks down when communication or financial return fails. Participant A shared, "She didn't bring a single penny... now we don't even know where she is." Here, migration shifts from being interpreted as moral sacrifice to perceived abandonment. The emotional tone changes from sadness to rupture. Such accounts highlight how children's meaning-making depends heavily on whether migration outcomes align with the original promise of provision and return. When that promise is disrupted, trust becomes fragile.

Superordinate Theme 2: Childhood reassigned – premature responsibility and educational drift

Maternal migration did not only alter attachment; it reorganized family roles and daily functioning. Many participants contrasted structured school attendance before migration with irregular patterns afterward. Participant B reflected, "We did go to school every day when our mother was here... now I go occasionally." The shift from regularity to inconsistency suggests that mothers functioned as daily motivators and monitors. Their absence appears to weaken routine regulation.

Some participants described decreased motivation using language such as "lazy" or "too lazy to get up." While expressed as personal weakness, this may reflect emotional depletion or reduced vitality following separation. For one participant, schooling

eventually stopped: “But now I do not attend school.” Importantly, this discontinuation occurred despite improved financial resources. This tension reveals that educational continuity relies not solely on material support but also on emotional and supervisory presence.

Role reassignment within households was particularly evident among eldest daughters. Participant A stated, “I do all the household chores after mother left abroad.” In some families, children assumed caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings, effectively stepping into maternal roles. A father explained that his eldest daughter left school to care for siblings when he could not manage work and domestic tasks simultaneously. Such accounts reflect processes of parentification, where children prematurely assume adult responsibilities. Although children demonstrated resilience and competence, this role shift may involve hidden developmental costs, including interrupted education and emotional burden.

Fathers’ roles also evolved after migration. Some children expressed appreciation for paternal effort: “He works hard to do everything.” Others, however, described continued alcohol use and emotional distance: “He drinks... I am afraid.” These contrasting narratives indicate variability in paternal adaptation. For some children, fathers partially filled caregiving gaps; for others, maternal absence intensified feelings of insecurity. The mother’s former role as emotional mediator becomes particularly visible in her absence.

Gender norms remained influential. In several accounts, caregiving duties were transferred to grandmothers or sisters rather

than redistributed equally across genders. This suggests that maternal migration does not necessarily disrupt traditional gendered expectations but may reinforce them within alternative female figures. Children appear to internalize these patterns, perceiving caregiving as inherently women’s work.

Superordinate Theme 3: Living between longing and future – isolation, emotional protection, and hope

Beyond structural changes, children described a more internal experience marked by isolation and emotional withholding. Many participants reported limited social engagement outside home and school. Statements such as “I do not go anywhere, I stay at home” reflect restricted social worlds. Friendships were often described as shallow or emotionally distant: “They talked with me. Nothing else.” Migration rarely became a topic of peer discussion. The silence surrounding maternal absence may indicate normalization within the community or discomfort in sharing personal hardship. Emotional non-disclosure was common. Participants frequently stated that they did not share feelings or simply “zone out.” One striking account emerged when Participant E stated, “I said she was dead,” when asked what she told others about her mother. While not literal, this statement may represent a psychological strategy to manage shame, repeated explanation, or unresolved abandonment. Symbolically declaring the mother “dead” may close an emotionally open wound and protect the self from ongoing disappointment.

Children’s responses to maternal return further illustrate emotional ambivalence. Some

anticipated reunions with joy: “I feel happy about her return... she brings me things I like.” Gifts functioned as tangible expressions of love and remembrance. However, others expressed reluctance or guardedness: “I don’t want to talk with her... but I just want to see her.” This suggests controlled longing desire for connection moderated by emotional caution. For some, distancing appears to serve as self-protection against future absence. Despite hardship, children articulated diverse future aspirations, including becoming teachers, doctors, and sports instructors. Participant A maintained, “I still want to become a teacher.” These aspirations appear not merely occupational but symbolic. Several children expressed a desire to build homes outside the estate, reflecting aspirations for mobility, stability, and dignity. Hope, in this sense, becomes a survival narrative. It allows children to situate current suffering within a broader temporal horizon that includes possibility and transformation.

Overall interpretative synthesis

Across themes, maternal migration is experienced as paradoxical. It provides financial security while destabilizing emotional safety. It produces maturity and responsibility while compressing childhood. It creates distance while sustaining attachment through memory, money, and digital contact. Children’s accounts reveal not passive victimhood but active meaning-making within structural constraint. They navigate absence by reframing sacrifice, assuming responsibility, regulating emotions, and imagining futures beyond estate boundaries. In doing so, they live continuously “between absence and dreams,” holding longing and aspiration in the same psychological space

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of Malaiyaha Tamil children whose mothers migrated abroad for employment, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reveal a layered emotional and relational landscape characterized by attachment disruption, role reorganization, educational vulnerability, ambivalent coping, and future-oriented resilience. Rather than portraying maternal migration as wholly harmful or beneficial, the findings illuminate its paradoxical nature: financial stability is enhanced while emotional security becomes fragile. By drawing on Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and Ambiguous Loss Theory (Boss, 2004), this discussion situates children’s lived experiences within relational, structural, and psychological frameworks.

Maternal attachment, emotional security, and separation

The findings strongly support the central tenets of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988). Children consistently described their mothers as emotional anchors figures who provided protection, comfort, and regulation within environments often marked by economic strain or paternal instability. In several accounts, maternal presence appeared to buffer fear, particularly in contexts where fathers struggled with alcoholism. This aligns with Bowlby’s conceptualization of the caregiver as a “secure base,” from which children derive confidence and emotional stability. The departure of the mother therefore represented more than physical relocation; it constituted the removal of a regulatory and

protective attachment figure. Attachment Theory posits that prolonged separations from primary caregivers may contribute to insecurity, anxiety, and difficulties in emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988). In this study, children expressed loneliness, guardedness, and emotional ambivalence following maternal migration responses consistent with attachment disruption. However, maternal migration differs from permanent loss. Mothers remained psychologically present through remittances, phone calls, and symbolic caregiving from afar. This condition complicates traditional attachment interpretations. The attachment bond is neither intact nor fully severed; it exists in an altered state. Children's narratives reflected both continued loyalty and emotional distancing, suggesting adaptive strategies to manage vulnerability. When contact was inconsistent, emotional security weakened further, echoing concerns raised by Baldassar et al. (2016) regarding the limitations of digital communication in sustaining emotional reassurance.

Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie (2002) similarly observed that children in transnational families continue to idealize mothers as protectors, even while experiencing heightened anxiety during separation. The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that in structurally vulnerable households, maternal absence may intensify pre-existing instability rather than simply introducing new stress. Children also expressed cognitive awareness of economic necessity. While they recognized migration as a sacrifice made for family survival, emotional grief persisted. Dreby (2010) and Dreby & Adkins (2010) describe this as emotional

ambivalence, where children hold gratitude and longing simultaneously. Attachment Theory helps explain why such ambivalence emerges: emotional bonds remain active even when cognitive justification is present.

Ambiguous loss and emotional ambivalence

Ambiguous Loss Theory (Boss, 2004) offers critical insight into the psychological complexity of maternal migration. Ambiguous loss occurs when a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present, creating uncertainty and unresolved emotional tension. In this study, children's responses to prolonged separation and reunion reflected this ambiguity. Emotional reactions were not uniformly joyful upon mothers' return; instead, children described guardedness, hesitation, or mixed feelings.

Ambiguous Loss Theory explains why reunion does not automatically restore emotional closeness. Over time, children may develop protective distancing to cope with repeated absence. When mothers return, emotional bonds must be renegotiated. This dynamic aligns with Bowlby's (1988) proposition that inconsistent attachment experiences can generate insecurity and relational caution. Ambiguity also contributes to internal confusion. Children may feel anger towards their mothers while simultaneously appreciating their sacrifices. Boss (2004) emphasizes that ambiguous loss complicates emotional resolution because there is no clear endpoint to grief. Migration sustains hope of return, yet separation remains prolonged. The "absent presence" of the mother creates an ongoing relational tension. Thus, maternal

migration does not fit neatly into frameworks of abandonment or loss; it produces a unique psychological state characterized by controlled longing and emotional oscillation. This insight deepens understanding of the ambivalence observed in the findings.

Role reorganization and ecological reconfiguration

Beyond attachment processes, maternal migration reorganized family roles in significant ways. Children particularly daughters assumed caregiving responsibilities, reflecting patterns of parentification. While some degree of responsibility may foster maturity, sustained caregiving burden can produce emotional strain (Joseph et al., 2019; Gladstone et al., 2006). Children described balancing household labor with academic responsibilities, often at personal cost. These changes are best understood through Ecological Systems Theory. At the microsystem level, maternal absence disrupted caregiving arrangements and redistributed responsibilities. Gendered expectations within estate communities further shaped this redistribution, with daughters more frequently adopting maternal roles. Such patterns reflect entrenched cultural norms regarding femininity and care labor.

At the mesosystem level, the interaction between home and school environments shifted. Without maternal supervision, educational routines became vulnerable. Research by Dissanayake et al. (2014), Pandey et al. (2020), and Dunusingha (2020) similarly reports educational disruption among migrant mothers. The absence of daily encouragement, monitoring, and homework support likely

contributes to irregular attendance and diminished engagement (Udayanga, 2022a). Perera and Rathnayaka (2013) further associate academic vulnerability with paternal alcoholism and caregiver neglect.

However, educational outcomes were not uniformly negative. Some children expressed intrinsic interest in learning and identified supportive teachers as important figures. This highlights the buffering role of the mesosystem, where compassionate educators can mitigate emotional strain. Ecological Systems Theory underscores that child development is shaped by the interaction of multiple systems; maternal absence is one component within a broader network of influences. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, structural marginalization within plantation economies and limited employment opportunities compel migration decisions. Maternal migration must therefore be situated within historical and economic constraints rather than interpreted solely as an individual choice. The structural pressures shaping estate life intensify the relational consequences of migration.

Coping, secondary attachments, and community buffering

Children employed a range of coping strategies, including distraction and emotional withdrawal. While some coping mechanisms provided temporary relief, others suggested emotional suppression. Sustained withholding of feelings may increase vulnerability to psychological strain. Attachment Theory proposes that in the absence of a primary caregiver, children may form secondary attachments to alternative figures. The findings indicate that siblings, grandparents,

teachers, and community members sometimes fulfilled partial attachment functions. These relationships did not replace maternal bonds but provided supplementary emotional support.

Bronfenbrenner's framework (1979) again clarifies this process. Supportive teachers and extended family operate within the microsystem and mesosystem to buffer stress. Ecological resilience emerges when multiple systems compensate for disruptions within one domain. Thus, resilience in this context is not solely an individual trait but a relational outcome shaped by ecological support. The findings suggest that emotional vulnerability and adaptive coping coexist. Children did not uniformly collapse under strain; instead, they demonstrated agency, responsibility, and future orientation. This complexity resists deficit-based narratives.

Aspirations and future orientation within structural constraint

Despite economic hardship and emotional strain, children articulated diverse aspirations. These ambitions challenge assumptions that structural marginalization inevitably constrains future imagination. Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes that aspirations are shaped by interactions across systems (Neal & Neal, 2013). Exposure to local role models, school environments, and community narratives influences how children envision possibility.

Maternal migration, while disruptive, also expanded material resources. Financial remittances improved access to education and school supplies, indirectly supporting

aspirations. Thus, migration functions as both relational disruption and structural investment. Ambiguous Loss Theory helps explain how aspirations may coexist with unresolved emotional tension. Children may channel longing into future-oriented motivation. Dreams of home ownership and family stability reflect attempts to reconstruct security in adulthood. Rather than perceiving children solely as passive recipients of migration consequences, the findings highlight their active meaning-making. They navigate absence while sustaining hope, an adaptive process shaped by attachment bonds and ecological supports.

Limitations, Conclusions and Recommendations

Limitations

This study provides in-depth insight into the lived experiences of Malaiyaha Tamil children with migrant mothers; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. Consistent with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study involved a small, purposively selected sample, with an emphasis on depth rather than breadth of understanding. The focus on a single geographical area within the plantation sector may limit the extent to which the findings reflect experiences in other regions or socio-cultural contexts. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study offers contextually grounded insights that may be relevant to similar migration-affected communities.

Conclusions

Maternal migration within the Malaiyaha Tamil community produces a relational paradox. It strengthens economic stability while destabilizing emotional security. Attachment bonds are disrupted but not erased. Family roles shift, educational engagement fluctuates, and aspirations persist despite strain. Through Attachment Theory, the study highlights emotional security and ambivalence. Through the Ecological Systems Theory, it situates migration within layered structural realities. Through Ambiguous Loss Theory, it explains the unresolved tension of physical absence and psychological presence. Ultimately, these children inhabit a space between absence and aspiration. They experience longing without closure, responsibility beyond their years, and hope shaped by structural constraint. Their lived experiences reveal both the cost and the transformative potential of maternal migration as a reality neither wholly tragic nor purely empowering, but profoundly complex.

Recommendations

Future research could expand this work by including a larger and more diverse sample across different plantation regions or migrant-sending communities. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how children's experiences and relationships evolve over time. Further research could also incorporate perspectives of caregivers, teachers, and migrant mothers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics. Finally, intervention-based studies exploring school and community support mechanisms would offer practical

implications for improving the well-being of children in migration-affected families

The findings indicate the need for multi-level interventions grounded in relational and ecological understanding. Strengthening caregiver support within households may reduce role strain. Schools can function as protective environments through teacher training and structured peer mentorship programs (Karcher, 2014). Community solidarity initiatives may strengthen social buffering.

At a structural level, policy reforms addressing plantation sector inequality and local employment opportunities may reduce forced maternal migration. While migration may remain economically necessary for many families, mitigating its relational impact is critical. Importantly, interventions must avoid pathologizing to children. Their narratives reveal resilience alongside vulnerability. Support systems should amplify protective factors rather than framing children as deficient.

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