

International Journal of Small Economies

Vol. 6 No. 1 Year 2021 Pages 27-35



www.ijse.maldivesresearch.org

ON THE CROSSROAD OF RECEPTION AND REJECTION: THE CASE OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY OF THE MALDIVES

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ABSTRACT

The migrant population of the Maldives makes up one-third of the island's population, with Indian and Bangladeshi migrants forming the bulk of the migrant population. Over one-third of the migrants are undocumented, and local and international sources have reported frequent discrimination and violation of rights. Hence, this study explores the levels of acceptance by the Maldivian community towards the migrant workers, particularly the Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers living in the country. A representative sample from North, South and Central atolls of the Maldives was surveyed to analyse their perception of sociocultural and socioeconomic determinants of acceptance towards integration of the migrant community. The sociocultural dimensions explored local's acceptance of social gatherings, language, cuisine, inter-cultural marriage, religious practice, cultural celebrations and broadcasting content suitable for the migrant community. The socioeconomic determinants explored the acceptance of migrant communities in terms of the occupation they represent. The study concluded that Maldivians have 'selective acceptance' towards migrant workers in specific socioeconomic and sociocultural determinants, determined by the display of determinants in public and private spheres of life.

Keywords: Migrants, Integration, Culture, Migration, Xenophobia

1. INTRODUCTION

The International Labour Organization defines a migrant for employment as being 'a person who migrates from one country to another with a view of being employed otherwise than on his or her own account' (ILO 2020, Chapter 2, Clause 8). Foreign migrant workers are considered 'regularly admitted' or 'regular' when their entry and work activity comply with the immigration laws of the country in which they work. When foreign migrant workers are employed without being regularly admitted, they are considered 'irregular' or 'undocumented' migrant workers (ILO 2020, Chapter 2, Clause 8). For this study, regular and irregular migrant workers are taken into account. Estimates of the number of migrant workers in the Maldives vary widely, from 145,000 to over 230,000 (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Table 1 shows the classification of Bangladeshi migrant workers by type of occupation between the years 2016 and 2018. Among the cohort of Bangladeshi migrant workers, the highest registered category is found in the construction industry, and the lowest is found in financial intermediation and education.

Table 1: Bangladeshi migrant workers by occupational classification

Year	Agriculture	Construction	Education	Electricity, gas & water supply	Financial intermediation	Fishery	Health & Social Work	Hotels & Restaurants	Manufacturing	Other Community, Social and Personal	Real Estate, Renting & Business Activities	Recycling	Tourism	Transport, Storage & Communication	Wholesale & retail trade; repair of motor
2016	1358	13472	974	1543	943	967	1175	3577	3398	2118	1383	1100	2016	1751	2849
2017	679	6320	584	784	569	612	658	1065	1272	1861	657	601	1108	1715	1136
2018	1091	18959	1014	1286	1002	1010	1057	1770	2135	6689	1098	1041	1998	6531	2139

Source: Maldives Immigration, 2019

Table 2 shows the Indian migrant workers by type of occupation. The highest number is found in the categories of construction, while the lowest numbers are found in the category of fisheries and financial intermediation.

Table 2: Indian migrant workers by occupational classification

Year	Agriculture	Construction	Education	Electricity, gas & water supply	Financial intermediation	Fishery	Health & Social Work	Hotels & Restaurants	Manufacturing	Other Community, Social and Personal	Real Estate, Renting & Business Activities	Recycling	Tourism	Transport, Storage & Communication	Wholesale & retail trade; repair of motor
2016	1003	3670	1047	1186	968	965	1377	1447	1367	1129	1171	1013	1738	1104	1503
2017	918	8190	868	1154	801	812	1363	1828	1835	1175	1123	950	2302	1154	1833
2018	729	2448	728	827	691	688	975	1046	1114	905	826	733	1097	855	1062

Source: Maldives Immigration, 2019

The recent statistics from the Ministry of Economic Development show that between the year 2013 and the first quarter of 2019, 174,551 migrant workers registered in the Maldives (Ministry of Economic Development 2019). A National Taskforce on Issues Related to Migrant Workers was set up in the year 2019. On 11th April 2019, the government opened a detention centre for illegal expatriates to be in custody until deportation arrangements are made (Waheed 2019). In September 2019, the government launched a regularisation programme to tackle the matter of undocumented migrants (Ministry of Economic Development 2020). At the same time, the government also banned the recruitment of unskilled Bangladeshi labourers for a period of one year. An office was set up where undocumented workers could register, after which employers would hire them. Other plans include restricting the employment of foreigners with quotas in various categories. The deposit required from employers were also to be lowered while the government is exploring a possibility of an insurance scheme to cover deportation costs (Maldives Independent 2019). Furthermore, the Maldives Immigration also set up a portal for monitoring expatriates with the help of the Island Councils (Malsa 2020). The migrant workforce has been one of the hardest-hit communities in the Maldives amidst the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Maldives. A decongesting programme to relocate over 1500 expatriates living in congested spaces was also launched in April 2020. Accommodation blocks have been built by the government. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the bilateral relations have enabled several Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers to move back to their countries (A. Shareef 2020).

The changes in the labour market, lack of monitoring in implementation of regulatory frameworks, skill gap, negative perception towards particular occupations has resulted in an imbalance in the labour market. As seen from Table 1, the highest number of migrant workers are found in the category of the construction industry. The statistic complements the boom of the construction industry, where the sector's contribution to GDP increased on an average of 5.8 percent in 2002 to 9.1 percent in the last ten years (Rashfa 2014). The changes in the labour market are also evident by the number of locals occupying jobs in the construction industry accounted as minimal as 9.8 percent of the resident employed population (National Bureau of Statistics

2014). The statistics from the A report by the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives stated that despite the efforts of the government, the efforts were not adequate to match the demand for skilled and semi-skilled workers (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives 2009). Furthermore, two years have passed since the government formed a Minimum Wage Advisory Board, still pending minimum wage implementation. The Labour Act 2/2008, its regulations, Immigration Act and Deportation Act no 1/2007 provide protection for migrant workers. The Anti-Human Trafficking Act 12/2013 also declared human trafficking as a criminal act. Nonetheless, the practice continues due to a lack of monitoring (Mohamed 2020). The US State Department stated in its Trafficking in Persons Report that the migrant workers pay agents around US\$2500 to US\$4000 to work in the Maldives. The report further outlined that over 200 registered agents bring migrant workers to the Maldives (United States Department of State 2017). Often, this results in a vicious cycle of debt to migrant workers. Efforts by various administrations have not improved the nation's status regarding trafficking persons, and the country remains on the Tier 2 watchlist under the US State Department.

The records from Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) shows that the total outward remittance in 2019 amounted to USD 75.1 million. A 16 percent increase compared to 2018 (ILO 2020). Although there is a need to maintain a healthy and sustainable balance, it is important to acknowledge the incalculable contributions of migrant workers to the socioeconomic development of the country. However, the perception of the locals towards the migrant workers are not always positive, oftentimes viewing them as lower class non-citizens, with harassment against them been normalised. The local media generally portrays them as the problem and not as victims even in harassment attacks; see, for example, Ali (2019), Sunmv (2019) and Dhenmv (2020).

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study is to understand the type of determinant and the level of acceptance by the locals towards the integration of migrant workers in the country. Given that Bangladeshi and Indian migrant working population makes up to one-third of the country's population (Mohamed 2020), the study explored levels of acceptance by the locals towards Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers in Maldives. The determinants analysed in this study were sociocultural determinants, more specifically, social gatherings, language usage, cuisine, intercultural marriage, religious practice, cultural celebrations and broadcasting content suitable for the migrant community. The socioeconomic determinant explored is the representation of the migrant community in terms of the type of occupation acceptable to locals.

This exploratory analysis was based on a survey in which a sample of 728 respondents answered a questionnaire. The country comprises 26 administrative atolls and 185 inhabited islands. The classification used in this study is Northern atolls (Ha, Hdh, Sh, N, R, B, Lh), Central atolls (K, Aa, Adh, V, M, F, Dh) and Southern atolls (Th, L, Gh, Gn, S). From Southern Atolls, participants were selected from S and L atoll. From Central atolls, participants were selected from K atoll, and from Northern atolls, participants were selected from Sh and Hdh atoll. Voluntary response sampling was observed where 100 participants from each of the seven islands belonging to five atolls were selected for this study, culminating in 700 respondents. The remaining 28 respondents belong to K atoll and were taken for pilot testing, also taken into account for study analysis. 56 percent of the respondents were female, while 44 percent of the study respondents were males. The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the specific factors and the acceptance level of locals towards migrant workers in the Maldives. To understand the sociological paradigm, the research examines how the locals interact with the migrant workers in social, religious and cultural practices. Given that this is an exploratory study, it is limited to understanding the perception of the locals and does not expand to comprehend deeper questions such as forming of perception, maintenance and articulation.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study is based on two predominant theories of migration: Four-Fold Assimilation Model by John Berry (2010) and the Unidimensional and Bidimensional Model of Assimilation by Fons Van de Vijver (2004). In addition, diasporic studies were found useful due to their vast discussion on the acceptance of migrant communities. The conceptual framework is presented in as Input-Process-Output cycle.

Input

The Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers are considered herein.

Process

Assimilation is referred to as the process of taking in and fully understanding information and ideas. The acculturation strategies framework developed by John Berry over the years between 1966 and 2010 have elaborated on the four-fold Model (Sam and Berry 2010). The four-folds are assimilation, integration, marginalisation and separation. The first acculturation strategy is assimilation, and this occurs when individuals adopt the cultural norms of a dominant culture over their original culture. The second strategy is separation, and this occurs when individuals reject the dominant culture in favour of preserving their culture of origin. Separation is often facilitated by immigration to ethnic enclaves. Integration is the third strategy of acculturation. The integration occurs when individuals can adopt the cultural norms of the dominant culture while maintaining their culture of origin. Integration leads to and is often synonymous with biculturalism. The fourth acculturation strategy is marginalisation; this occurs when individuals reject both their culture of origin and the dominant culture. The two dimensions of this model are retention/rejection of an individual's minority or native culture and adoption/rejection of the dominant group (Sam and Berry 2010). Most of the studies on migrant workers has been focused on the assimilation process of the migrant community but has neglected the acceptance levels by the locals.

Output

While the fourfold model does not give a clearer picture of separation and integration at the same time, Fons Van de Vijver's study explains this phenomenon (Vijver 2004). Fons Van de Vijver, in his study of multiculturalism in the Netherlands, identified that Turkish-Dutch adults made a distinction in public and private domains; integration was preferred in public domains and separation in private domains. In public domains, both cultural groups agreed that Turkish migrants should adapt to Dutch culture, while there were no such agreements in private domains. He explains this instance, as an individual may reject the values and norms of the dominant culture in his private life, whereas he might adapt to the dominant culture in public parts of his life. In this process, there is both separation and integration taking place (Vijver 2004). Hence, this study has adopted both John Berry's Four-Fold Model and Van de Vijver's explanation of acceptance in private and public spheres of life. The Output Model is adopted from a study conducted in the Maldives to explore Diasporic cultures in the Maldives (Shafina and Rasheed 2019). The three phases of the Output Model are; Complete Acceptance, Selective Acceptance and Complete Rejection

Output- Complete Acceptance

The Complete Acceptance phase is where the local community and migrant community assimilates and integrates to form a hybrid community. Hybridity is the process by which the local community accepts and negotiates the cultural and identity differences of the migrant community. When two cultures meet, inevitably, there will be a dominant culture. Often, deculturalisation is the result of hybridity. Deculturalization strips away the culture of a group to mix and fix the cultural differences where assimilation comes at a cost. This process may not always be smooth and is sometimes referred to as acceptance by force (Shafina and Rasheed 2019).

Output- Selective Acceptance

Selective Acceptance is the process by which the local community only accepts some parts of the migrant communities' identity and culture. Most often, in Selective Acceptance, the local community is the dominant ideology as a migrant community is seen as the 'foreign' subject. There is no formation of a third culture in this phase since there is no assimilation and integration taking place. The dominant ideology dictates what to accept. The process of the Selective Acceptance process by the local community is quite the opposite of the Selective Acceptance process by the migrant community; the migrant community usually rejects assimilating the aspects of their private life and accepts assimilation in the aspect's public life for the purpose of acceptability. However, when we consider the process of Selective Acceptance by the local community, they usually reject assimilating the aspects of public life and accepts assimilating the aspects of their private life. Labelling, stereotyping, marginalisation and discrimination often take place in this phase (Shafina and Rasheed 2019).

Output- Complete Rejection

The Complete Rejection phase is one in which none of the characteristics or identities of the migrant community is accepted. This leads to deculturation in members of the local community when they fail to acknowledge the migrant community and hence continue to be the dominant culture. This often leads to social exclusion and separation (Shafina and Rasheed 2019).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is a common pattern in the Maldives, particularly in the capital city of Male' where there are particular sites of social gathering by the migrant community, usually during weekends, to spend time with their friends and family. It is often observed that Maldivians would rarely opt to stay or gather in such places on said days/timings. When the respondents were asked about their perception of migrant workers spending leisurely time in public spaces, 78.57 percent of the survey respondents stated that they do not accept migrant workers to be gathered in public places and the respondents view such gatherings as 'occupying' spaces which otherwise belong to the local community. This is also evident by some of the regulations and practices in the country. For example, when Sultan Park (one of the most commonplace of social gatherings in the capital) was renovated and opened in the year 2017, migrants were charged a fee of approximately five US dollars per visit. This regulation was enforced till the end of 2020, when the park was again renovated and opened by the current government (CNM 2020). Lack of acceptance by the locals for public display of migrant's leisurely gatherings relates to selective acceptance traits of integration.

In sociocultural determinants, one of the most primary factors is language usage. The majority of the Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers do not speak either the first (native) language or the second language in the Maldives, Dhivehi and English language, respectively. Due to language barriers, most migrants working in the Maldives learn local language through informal means, which is through work and social interactions. As an easy way of communicating with the locals, migrants tend to mix up words, avoid language structure and pronunciation. However, what is more significant is when the migrant community use this pattern of language to communicate with the locals, a mirror effect takes place, and the locals also tend to respond accordingly. The survey respondents were asked about their perception of migrant workers speaking in the native language, and 70.46 percent of the respondents stated that there is a negative impact on language usage and development due to the adoption of the native language by the migrant community. Minimal positivity in the usage of the native language by the migrants is also seen as a trait of selective acceptance in the public sphere.

The survey respondents were asked about cuisine and dining experience separately to explore the acceptance traits based on the private and public sphere. The majority of the survey respondents stated that Indian and Bangladeshi cuisine is acceptable to them as the local cuisines are similar to Indian and Bangladeshi cuisines. However, when questioned about the dining experience, over 65 percent of the survey respondents said they do not accept dining in the same restaurant as the migrant working community. Whilst the low-income category workers usually get only one off-day per week, and their limited income and increase in saving/ remittance do not allow them to dine in restaurants where locals dine-in, it is seen as a separating factor. Their meals are usually packaged and delivered at a substandard rate by food providers belonging to their community. The situation is somewhat different among the medium-high income workers. Although they may be adequately paid, long and odd working hours may hinder them from gathering in the dining facilities. Nevertheless, it is seen that although survey respondents accept Indian and Bangladeshi cuisine, they are not amenable to dine in the restaurants where migrant working communities would dine-in, giving evidence to differences in acceptance determined by private and public spheres of integration.

The statistics from the Civil Court of the Maldives between the years 1997 and 2001 shows 647 intercultural marriages between Maldivians and foreigners. Concerning the statistics from the Civil Court of the Maldives, the trend is of marriage between locals and foreigners falls into two categories; they are elderly Maldivian men marrying young Indian women and elderly Maldivian women marrying young Bangladeshi men (Civil Court 2001). More recent statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics show 25 marriages between Maldivian women and foreign men were registered in the Maldives. In comparison, 77 marriages between Maldivian men and foreign women were registered in the Maldives in the year 2018 (National Bureau of Statistics 2018). Acceptability towards intercultural marriages was explored in this study. Survey respondents were asked about their approval of intercultural marriages, to which 67.44 percent of survey respondents stated that they would approve intercultural marriages, with reservations of public display of affection and engagement. It is also important to note that there is an existing discriminatory attitude and labelling towards intercultural marriages. In the recent past, the media focus has been on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is seen that when there is a positive case related to an intercultural marriage, the case has been specifically highlighted with no regard to the severity of the case, for example (Shareef 2020). Similarly, intercultural marriages have also been portrayed in the media as elderly Maldivian men marrying younger foreign women and elderly Maldivian women marrying younger men for temporary affection. See, for example (A. S. Ali 2014) and (Shah 2019). Approval of intercultural marriages, with reservation of public

engagement and discriminatory attitude towards intercultural marriages, also shows traits of selective acceptance.

Exchange of cultural troupes takes place regularly between countries. Hindi commercial films, TV serials and music are immensely popular in the Maldives. With the introduction of satellite television, the Hindi serials are also widely watched by Maldivians (Manoharan 2014). Furthermore, the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC), upon its establishment in 2011, also conducts courses in yoga, classical music and dance (Ministry of External Affairs 2015). However, it is important to note that these activities are closed-doors, or restricted invitees only activities, taken part by the locals. Hence, to explore acceptance in public spheres, the survey respondents were questioned about their perception of migrant workers were celebrating their cultural events. Eighty-eight percent of the survey respondents expressed that they would not accept any form of public or community display of cultural events or celebrations by the Indian or Bangladeshi migrant communities in the Maldives. To further explore the cultural dimension, survey respondents were also asked about their acceptance of broadcasting content suitable for migrant communities through the local television channels, for which 72.1 of the respondents said they would not accept it to be done. In the sociocultural dimension, acceptability in terms of religious tolerances was also explored. The Maldives is constitutionally a 100 percent Muslim country. Recent literature gives evidence of an increase in religious conservatism and intolerance displayed in Maldivian society (Storey 2019). The survey respondents were questioned about their perception of the migrant workers practising their religion. Over 95 percent of the survey respondents did not agree to the migrant workers practising their religion in the country. This is only exceptional when the migrant worker is of the Muslim faith. The respondents stated that they do not believe that migrant workers should pray in separate mosques in such cases. This finding also resonates with the assertion made earlier that the level of acceptance varied based on the public and private display of the determinants.

The socioeconomic determinant explored in this study is the type of occupation represented by the migrant workers. The survey explored the perception of the locals in accepting the migrant workers based on the occupation they represent. Table 3 gives details of the occupations, and the number and percentage of respondents agree to migrant workers representing the specified occupations.

Table 3: Local community perception in accepting migrant workers based on the occupation they represent

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Number of respondents agreed</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents agreed</i>
<i>Farmers and fisherman</i>	322	44.23
<i>Domestic help and Childcare-takers</i>	406	55.76
<i>Doctors</i>	448	61.53
<i>Construction workers/labourers</i>	541	74.31
<i>Teachers</i>	582	79.94

The statistics from the Ministry of Economic Development states that there are 3270 foreign teachers registered under the authority between the years 2013 and 2018, mostly in the category of subject specialists and secondary teachers (Ministry of Economic Development 2019). Subject specialists and secondary teachers are professions lacking among Maldivians. From table 3, based on the given occupations, the highest acceptability was found among the occupations of doctors, teachers and construction labourers. The survey revealed that 61.53 percent and 79.94 percent of the respondents agreed that migrant workers are acceptable to work as doctors and teachers, respectively. Furthermore, 74.31 percent of the respondents agreed that migrant workers are acceptable to work in the construction industry as labourers. On the other hand, the survey also revealed that only 44.23 percent of respondents stated that migrant workers are acceptable to work as fisherman's or farmers, which are perceived as hallmark economic sectors of the Maldives. According to the statistics from the Ministry of Economic Development, there were only 192 foreign workers categorised under the farmers' category between the years 2013 and 2018. Furthermore, the statistics also show that only 200 fisheries-related labourers registered under the authority between 2013 and 2018 (Ministry of Economic

Development 2019). On the other hand, 55.76 percent were amenable to the migrant workers' working as domestic help and child caretakers (social sectors). The data from the Ministry of Economic Development shows that there are 4038 domestic servants registered under the authority between the years 2013 and 2018 (Ministry of Economic Development 2019). This dimension of the study revealed that the local community was, in general, more accommodating of the migrant workers working in areas where there was a lack of expertise or in areas Maldivians chose to ignore participating in. Hence, the local community accepts the migrant workers insofar as they provide sufficient benefits and fill in the gaps in terms of knowledge, skill and requirement in the society. This determinant also shows traits of selective acceptance in certain occupations based on the perceived utility that they provide to the local community.

5. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the local community has traits of 'selective acceptance' in accepting integration of the migrant community. The selective acceptance traits are primarily based on the basis that some parts of migrant communities' identity and culture are accepted, while the ideology of the local community remains dominant. Assimilating in public life is often rejected by the local community, while they accept assimilation in private life. In this regard, the study concluded that locals lacked acceptance for the migrant community to gather in public places during their leisure time. Furthermore, it was also found out that regardless of the increased usage of the native language by the migrant community, the locals had minimal positivity in accepting migrants using the native language for communication. In analysing sociocultural determinants, the study also ascertained locals accept Indian and Bangladeshi cuisine. However, they do not accept to dine-in in the restaurants where migrant communities would dine-in. Similarly, it was found out that there is a high approval of intercultural marriage, with reservations of public engagement and discriminatory attitudes towards intercultural marriages. The local community also lacked acceptance for the migrant community to practice their religion in public places. Similarly, the local community was also not amenable to accepting broadcast content suitable for migrant communities through local television channels. The study found that the local community had reservations in accepting determinants or part of the determinants that displayed any form of public appearances with the migrant community. In the socioeconomic dimension, the study concluded that survey respondents displayed traits of selective acceptance of occupations based on the perceived utility to the community. The study adopted John Berry's four-fold model and explored the notion of assimilation, integration, marginalisation and separation in relation to Indian and Bangladeshi migrant communities in the Maldives, while also expanding the theoretical notion of Fons Van de Vijver by exploring the realities of integration and separation of migrant communities in public and private domains. The study findings reaffirmed the distinction in integration and separation between public and private domains.

The selective acceptance of migrants by the local community poses several policy implications for the future. While the Maldives have a huge stock of migrant workers, the local community must be made aware of not merely their existence but their livelihood needs and expectations. In this stance, it is necessary to dispel the myth that for every migrant with access to economic opportunity, a local is denied a job or an opportunity to establish an income-generating activity. On a broader level, the fundamental strategies of integration should be focused on 'becoming' rather than 'being', thereby accepting the migrant workers as part of the wider society rather than merely as passive recipients and objects of the local community. Since migration is simply not a movement of people but also the movement of cultures within themselves, successful integration requires migrants to interact with new society while having the freedom to keep their culture of origin alive to enhance a positive environment. National-level policy directions should be aimed at incorporating migrants into development strategies. The policies need to be more comprehensive and cover more than 'who is allowed into the country. There is also a lack of legal frameworks to keep a healthy balance in the economic spheres. Better monitoring and recruitment process will also ensure that safe and legal channels of recruitment of migrant workers are in place. On a regional level, bilateral cooperation between SAARC countries will also help establish common safety, security, legality, and remittance matters. While the research findings show that there is selective acceptance from the local community, there is a dire need to take an all-of-society approach to discuss the challenges and opportunities for the successful integration of migrants.

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