

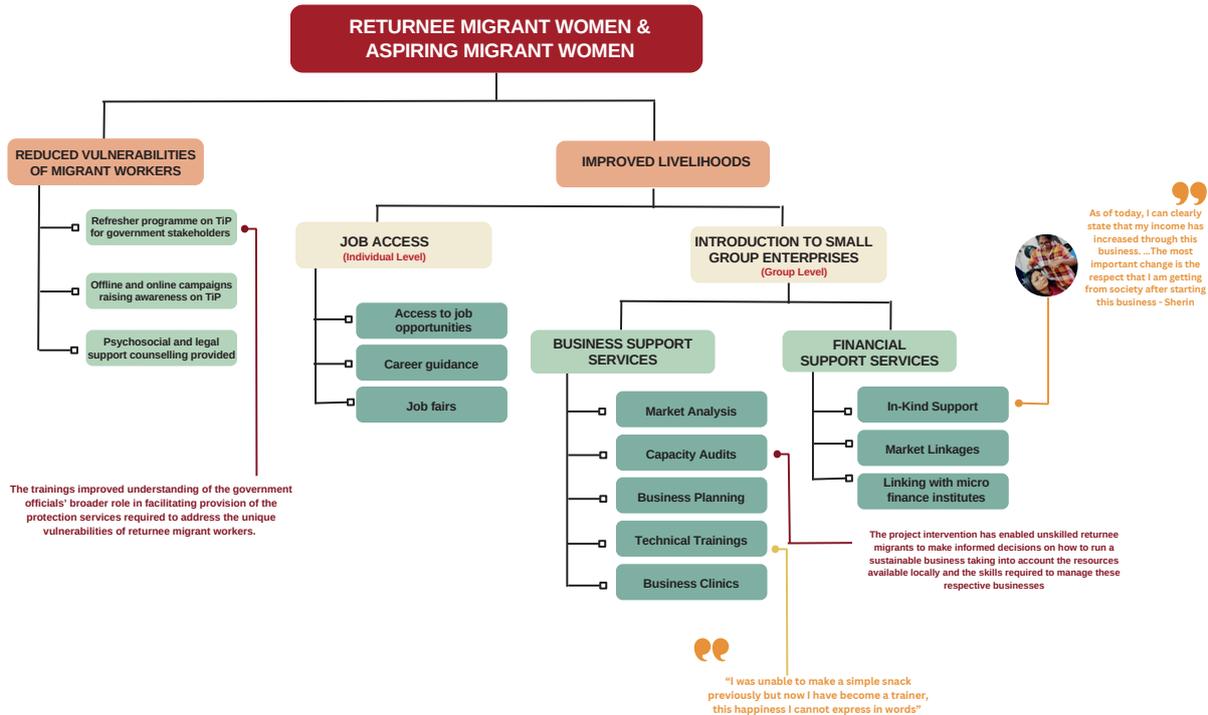


CROSSING BORDERS

RECOVER: The Best Practices, Lessons Learned, and Replicable Features of the Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers

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RECOVER PROJECT INTERVENTION



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SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY THROUGH ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

BACKGROUND

The RECOVER project aimed to support the economic recovery and reintegration of 200 female migrant workers from the districts of Puttalam and Gampaha who were compelled to return to Sri Lanka due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The project intervention sought to improve their economic prospects through ensuring access to sustainable income generation or employment opportunities, while also facilitating an enabling environment for thousands of other returnee migrant workers to reintegrate into society while avoiding the risks of human trafficking, illegal smuggling, psychological distress, and trauma.

As per available statistics, from the total migrants who returned to the districts of Puttalam and Gampaha since April 2020, well over 80% were women, mostly from the unskilled and informal sectors. These two districts also record high numbers of human trafficking and smuggling incidents, thus, resulting in a high potential for these returnee migrant women to fall victim to unethical recruitment practices, smugglers, and human traffickers owing to their extreme socio-economic vulnerabilities. Thus, supporting the access to sustainable economic opportunities not only sought to ensure their smooth reintegration to the local economy but also the psychosocial wellbeing of these returnee migrant workers and their family members.

The project has provided technical and resource support for livelihoods while collaborating with the state and non-state sector to foster sustainable economic opportunities and alleviate poverty. Furthermore, in order to ensure the intervention follows a holistic and sustainable approach, orientation and refresher workshops on combating Trafficking in Persons (TiP) for government officials, to enhance their knowledge on TiP vulnerability factors, the available supporting mechanisms, and methods of victim referrals were provided to further strengthen the support mechanisms available for vulnerable returnee migrant workers. Both online and offline campaigns were conducted as part of the project intervention, reaching an audience of over 100,000 direct and indirect beneficiaries, thus further increasing awareness on TiP.

This series of stories will shed light on how the RECOVER Project has positively impacted its beneficiaries through its project intervention

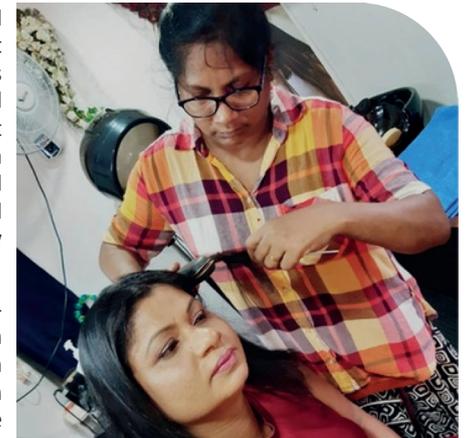
TRANSFORMING DREAMS INTO REALITY

A story of how an economic migrant was able to turn an unimaginable dream of running her own Salon into reality through the RECOVER project

Sherin, a 42 year old resident of Gampaha and a returnee migrant worker is a beneficiary of the RECOVER project. In the year 2018 Sherin decided to migrate for work in order to improve the economic status of her family and contribute to her family's income so that she could support and educate her son. Three months after her departure, Sherin was devastated to find the passing of her husband due to suicide – he had long been suffering from a drug addiction. She was unable to perform his last rights due to her work; but little did Sherin realize that her problems would escalate following the death of her husband due to the COVID-19 outbreak. During the onset of the pandemic Sherin found it challenging to continue her job; in 2020 she lost her job and had no option but to return back to Sri Lanka. Lacking a stable foundation or the financial backing to sustain her family, Sherin was stranded to single handedly fend for her son.

In 2020, HELVETAS initiated the RECOVER project through which Sherin's family was identified through the development officers in her division as a woman-headed household and a low-income family, and was given the opportunity to participate in the project.

Along with two other like-minded women, Sherin took part in the training on Business plan preparation through which they were



able to identify a suitable business based on their capacities and the resources available. She was able to develop a joint business plan and also able to receive psychosocial support through the counseling session conducted during the session. ***“During this training, they made me understand what skills I possessed and what business was suitable for it. They motivated me to start my own business and changed my attitude as an entrepreneur. Through that, I was able to lay the foundation to start my own salon, which has been my dream for a long time. When I came to Sri Lanka, I had lost my job. I was hopeless. My husband also passed away by then. Through the counseling session, my mental condition improved, and I became aware of how to access such services”***

Following the business planning session, a series of technical skills trainings were conducted to upskill migrant women in selected fields under the project. This was a golden opportunity for Sherin and her business partners to acquire skills to grow their business and expand their knowledge on beauty culture and the various skills and techniques required in order to run a beauty salon. Sherin learnt how to work with different skin types and how to use the right type of beauty products on her clients. The trainings were not only useful to them in building a successful business but was also followed-up through provision of in-kind capital, such as the necessary tools and equipment required to develop these businesses, which were identified during the creation of the business plans. ***“Through this project, I was able to get a facial steamer and a curling iron that enabled me to provide these services on a professional level. As of today, I have a monthly income between Rs. 10,000-20,000 obtained through this business. It is a huge relief for my family”.***

Sherin is one of the many women who has received a lifeline through participating in the RECOVER project. ***“As of today, I can clearly state that my income has increased through this business. It is not the only benefit that I have received from this project. The most important change is the respect that I am getting from society after starting this business. On the other hand, I am not the only person who has benefited from this project. Like me, a large number of female migrant workers who returned to their country after being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic became the beneficiaries. It is an honor to be a part of that group. My ambition is to create my own network of salons one day”***

ALTERNATE SOURCE OF INCOME TO REDUCE VULNERABILITY AMONG ASPIRING FEMALE MIGRANTS

This story sheds light on how the RECOVER Project intervened to provide an alternate source of income through psychosocial support and business development trainings for Pradeepika given her responsibilities towards her family and the wellbeing of her only daughter

Thirty-one-year-old Pradeepika Madumali is a resident of the Kohombleagaswewa village, Puttalam. She has a 5 year old daughter and her husband is a farmer by profession. Pradeepika who only received education up to high school is an aspiring migrant woman who has been looking for opportunities for foreign employment to stand on her feet.

Pradeepika encounters the RECOVER project while participating in a psychosocial counselling programme, where afterwards she had inquired of the possibility of starting her own business in order to be financially stable. She was then directed to a career guidance workshop conducted through the project where she was guided to identify a potential path to income generation ***“During that training, the resource person enabled me to understand my strengths and guided me to opportunities where I could potentially seek employment. I was able to identify my natural ability and inclination towards the arts and how my innate talent for drawing could lead to a job opportunity. That’s when I realized that I have the potential for income-generation via designing batik clothes”.***

Motivated to pursue this, Pradeepika participated in the job fair held at the Puttalam District Secretariat on the following day where she met the Foreign Employment Officer who was able to direct her to the relevant officers. She was able to meet the Entrepreneurship Officer for the Anamaduwa region who gave her an opportunity to join a training in creating batik designs. Pradeepika hopes that together with her friend who can sew ready made clothes they will be able to start a small group enterprise creating batik clothes by utilizing their joint talents, as well as the skills acquired through the trainings.

Unable to make a clear decision on her career path Pradeepika was given a ray of hope on the possibility of self-employment ***“I was able to access the right guidance that enabled me to work with my skills; similarly, many women who***

had difficulty understanding their abilities received the guidance they required by attending the programme”.

NEW HOPE FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY

A story highlighting the best practices of the RECOVER project in engaging groups to start small enterprises to promote economic sustenance

Priyangani Chathurani who resides in a fishing village (Iranavila) in Mahawewa area of the Puttalam district lives with her mother, husband and two school going children aged 15 and 9. Like many other women in the village, Priyangani was only educated until the 5th grade. Her family survives on the little income brought in by her husband who by profession is a fisherman. Since the single income they live on was insufficient to manage her household expenses, Priyangani would often sell porridge in the mornings to earn an additional income to make ends meet – however her business was conducted in an informal manner as she did not have access to a space where she could set up shop.

The economic struggles Priyangani and her family were facing continued with little to no improvement and therefore, she decided to migrate to Saudi Arabia in 2018 as a housekeeper. Priyangani, who worked there until 2021, returned to Sri Lanka with the end of her service contract during the COVID-19 outbreak. Prior to traveling abroad, Priyangani had arranged to pay off a large amount of debt that she had taken with the income she had earned as a migrant worker. ***“I worked abroad in a house with good masters, they treated me well and paid what was agreed on time. If I did not decide to migrate, our family would have struggled due to the debt that we owed at that time”.***

Although Priyangani was able to pay off her debts, following her return to Sri Lanka, her financial situation did not improve. She had exhausted her income earned during her work abroad to cover their debts and was left with no savings to sustain her family. The collapse of the fishing industry due to the COVID-19 outbreak further worsened the family’s financial situation and impacted Priyangani severely. ***“I had to start my porridge business once again although it was still not enough to manage my household – this was a very difficult time for me; It was during this time that I learned of the RECOVER Project through district Secretariat”.***

Priyangani was selected as a beneficiary of the project given her circumstance as a returnee migrant. She was engaged in a number of trainings under the project through which she was able to gain important knowledge; ***“During the first training, we were educated on human trafficking, and provided psychosocial awareness due to the difficulties we faced financially and psychologically under the current country context”.*** Following the initial trainings, Priyangani formed a group consisting of 4 members interested in starting a joint venture. The group then received trainings in business plan preparation and technical trainings on food preparation to support their proposed business plan. These training enabled her to better plan her small business with a renewed set of skills and work towards a common goal together with the rest of her team. ***“Through the trainings, I got the confidence to take the business forward towards a proper goal. Others who came with me became business partners and I gained much confidence in my team and realized that by being more creative using our combined efforts, analyzing costs and assigning proper profits margins that we could develop our business in a way that ensures the economic and social well-being of everyone on the team”.***

Further to that, HELVETAS through the RECOVER project provided the team with a small space where they could sell their food which they did not previously have. ***“As a result of this, our life is changing for the better. Economically, the income which was Rs. 1000/= a few months ago is now around Rs. 4000/=.*** The economic situation of the members is also improving. We also have other



vendors who supply other types of food to our store which is not only a value addition for us but also we are able to support the local community through our small business”.

In the near future, the group hopes to register their business as a joint venture with the government and hopes to expand their products to include dried fruits and vegetables. ***“At present I am able to save a small amount of money for me and my two children in a women’s society account; our team members have not been happier with the results we are seeing. We are hopeful of our future and are grateful for the support and encouragement given to us by HELVETAS, the Ministry of Foreign Employment and the Puttalam District Secretariat to make our dreams come true”.***

ACCESSIBILITY TO REBUILDING LIVELIHOODS

Jayanthi’s story is one that sheds light to the vulnerabilities faced by a woman and her family due to being caught in a vicious debt trap. Her story is one of hope where she is now able to regain control over her life by improving accessibility to the right services that is leading her to the path of financial recovery through proper guidance and training that was provided through the RECOVER project.

Jayanthi Ilangakoon is a 39 year old resident of Wilpotha village in Pallama, Puttalam whose husband is an electrician by profession. Jayanthy was engaged in selling cashew nuts as her main source of income - ***“In my region cashew is grown as a cash crop so my husband and I decided to invest our savings and took loans from two different banks to set up our cashew business. We got some women from the village to help us while we also invested in machinery, buildings for storage facilities to start processing cashew. We had no issues finding a market but we incurred great losses in the business and our business collapsed before our eyes/ under our watch. We were unable to repay our debts and my family was mentally and emotionally drained”.*** Not knowing how to deal with the situation, Jayanthy and her husband had to make a collective decision to migrate overseas for work to financially uplift themselves as a result of falling into a debt trap following her failed business venture selling cashew nuts.

Jayanthy went abroad first and her husband planned to join her later. But after

a few months, she fell ill and had to come back to Sri Lanka due to the difficulty of getting treatment in the respective country due to the COVID-19 situation. She has now fully recovered, however; with her debt issues largely at hand, this time around, she had to face a more complicated situation since she was unable to contribute to her family income due to illness; therefore both Jayanthy and her husband started cultivating vegetables to sustain themselves for income generation. It was during this time that the couple heard of the RECOVER project and decided to participate in the trainings. ***“I was able to take part in the psychosocial counseling session which was a great strength as myself and my husband were emotionally and mentally drained due to our debt situation”.*** Jayanthy also took part in trainings on business plan preparation which enabled her to gain valuable insights on managing her present livelihood.

Jayanthy is now well equipped to direct her vegetable cultivation in a more sustainable manner however she also has interests to rebuild and grow her cashew nut business as an additional income generating activity to increase her monthly income. Jayanthy received an SYB (Start Your Business) training through the resource person of the business planning workshop conducted under the project. Through the networks and connections built with government services on business development through the RECOVER project, Jayanthy was able to connect with an official that gave her access to an advanced business training.



Jayanthy is now fully engaged in a group cultivation of vegetables together with her husband and other members, but is also currently making plans to start-up her cashew business to generate more income. She is in a better position to access government services when necessary and is confident her business venture will not end up in failure due to her involvement and engagement with the RECOVER project.

RIPPLE EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Dharmika's story depicts how the RECOVER project helped build her business through the provision of technical skills that has enabled her to transfer that knowledge to support aspiring migrants in her community

Fifty-one-year-old Dharmika, who is a resident of the Pallama village in the Puttalam district is a returnee migrant worker. As Dharmika suffers with challenges with her health, her family depends on the income of her husband who is a driver by profession. Due to the seasonal nature of his work, the family struggles with financial difficulties. Dharmika's son who was to enroll in university had to forego that opportunity in order to support his family financially.

It is on her road to recovery that Dharmika learns of the RECOVER project by HELVETAS. Prior to engaging with the project Dharmika had plans to start a business selling snacks to minimize their financial burdens. She had attempted on several occasions to prepare and sell packaged snacks but due to lack of experience and knowledge on food preparation standards had made losses and was on the brink of giving up. **"I attempted to make snacks on several occasions but ended up wasting a lot of ingredients due to wrong measurements and consistencies – these were losses that I could not afford to bear"**. However, after her engagement with the RECOVER project, Dharmika was trained at the Vidatha Institute by a food preparation expert where she learnt the proper methods of food preparation and packaging which enabled her to build confidence in continuing her business. Once she identified her ability to successfully sell her snacks, she was further motivated to diversify her



product range. Dharmika now prepares and sells snacks, pickles, traditional dishes and chutneys. She has successfully been engaged in preparing and selling healthy, affordable and safe food to the community. Although Dharmika's health has not fully recovered she continues to successfully engage in her business of selling snacks.

As a result of the RECOVER project Dharmika was able to connect with government officials who have been supportive towards her business. She was approached by a Foreign Employment Officer who had made requests to conduct a training for a group of returnee migrants - this was a proud moment for Dharmika. She took up the task and successfully trained 15 beneficiaries at her home. **"I was unable to make a simple snack previously but now I have become a trainer, this happiness I cannot express in words"** – She thanked the project with tears of joy for her understanding of where she was making errors when preparing her snacks.

Dharmika went on to start a group business selling snacks following these technical skill development trainings.

CREATING AN ENABLING SPACE FOR BUSINESS GROWTH

A story that reflects how the RECOVER project intervention enabled the growth of a business through the engagement of groups and the provision of in-kind capital proving that a little goes a long way.

Pushpa Kumari is a 40-year-old mother of two who resides in Anamaduwa. Pushpa and her husband are jointly engaged in the pottery industry. Pushpa met her husband whilst they worked at a garment factory and married amidst opposition by their families due to differences in caste. Following their marriage, they had to leave their jobs following which the pair struggled with many financial difficulties

Pushpa turned to traditional employment making clay pots together with her husband although both her and her husband had little previous experience in the industry. Pushpa would receive production orders through her brother following which she would produce the pots and sell the unbaked pots to buyers in her village who would bake them and sell it to the market. with many in her community being engaged in the industry Pushpa was able earn a decent living.

However, this was not sufficient to sustain their family with little prospects of progression within the industry, given that her products were not finished products. So, her husband decided to migrate abroad for employment.

Pushpa too had hopes to migrate however could not do so with her two children. **“I also wanted to go abroad, but I was unable to make a clear decision because of my two small children. So, I went seeking help from various government offices to see if I could find any support for my pottery business. This is when I came across the RECOVER Project”.**

Pushpa took part in the business development and psychosocial training in Anamaduwa, and met a few other returnee migrants, thus making the decision to establish a group business. Through the training they develop business plans where they identify areas they had to improve on **“We had not effectively taken into account factors such as work sharing, pricing, methods that can increase efficiency and productivity. Accordingly, we have changed the operational process of the business”.** In addition to the trainings received through the project, the team was also provided with in-kind capital to advance their business. **“Now we are producing twice as much work as before. All 5 members of the team are getting some income.”**



With the group's participation in the Market exhibition, Pushpa's business caught the attention of many government institutions who were able to understand the importance of having a complete operation setup so that the pots could be made and baked in the same facility. The RECOVER project hopes that the business will flourish and grow to be the most successful operation in the village among the others.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND LESSONS LEARNT DURING IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOVER PROJECT

Key challenges encountered during the implementation of the RECOVER project are explored below, as well as the steps taken to address these, and the lessons learnt from this experience.



The inception of the RECOVER project intervention coincided with the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the imposition of health and travel-related restrictions affecting timely implementation of activities. Despite potential delays, effective implementation of the project's activities was prioritized, supported by the donor's generous understanding.



The economic crisis and ensuing political instability also posed challenges, as the rapid contextual changes resulted in the livelihood conditions of the project stakeholders' undergoing a rapid deterioration. Sensitivity to this issue was considered throughout the implementation, while also underscoring the necessity for interventions focused on economic reintegration to be responsive to potential external shocks.



Challenges were encountered upon the participants separation into small groups and the inception of their businesses. Issues such as differences over opinions, and disagreements over the trajectory of the businesses were evident in certain groups. However, where possible efforts were taken to mediate these disagreements and foster a sense of cohesion between the group members. Further, as the project had ensured the involvement of local level officials since the early stages, responsibility was also vested with these officers to follow-up with these small group businesses and mediate any potential issues that could arise. This underscored the importance of fostering not just a sense of economic interdependency between the group members, but also a sense of social cohesion and common purpose.

BEST PRACTICES:

KEY HIGHLIGHTS



A collaborative approach integrating the public, private, and non-governmental sectors.

RECOVER was conceptualized through a consultative process, considering the opinions of varying stakeholders. Government ownership was prioritized with a 'whole of government' approach involving intersectoral connections between government entities responsible for entrepreneurship development, small businesses, women's development, and skills officers.

HELVETAS as an NGO was responsible for overall implementation of the project through implementing the requisite activities and trainings.

Private sector stakeholders such as banks and entrepreneurs were involved in providing financial backing and the marketing of goods in a joint approach.



Establishment of 'mixed groups' containing returnee migrants, aspiring migrants, and migrant family members

While the initial goal of RECOVER was to create 20 groups of returnee migrant women, in practice, factors such as the distance between each of the women, their differing businesses, and their varying strengths and skills, challenged the implementation of this model.

A new model was implemented wherein returnee migrant women, aspiring migrant women, and in certain instances a close relative such as their husband/son formed a group. This addressed the practical issues, and brought in added benefits such as experience sharing between the returnee and aspiring migrant women, the aspiring migrant women having a pre-established business to return to if taking the decision to migrate, as well as improving the sense of community within the group.



Implementation of a complete programme

RECOVER had a great impact in transforming the participants from individuals who engaged in business out of necessity, to individuals possessing an entrepreneurial mindset, and an awareness of the support services available to them.

This was achieved through:

- Providing special training such as business planning
- Providing technical awareness of product quality, pricing, and packaging
- Provision of capital goods required for the production process.
- Introducing trade fairs and vendors for market linkages
- Facilitating meetings with banks and other financial companies for financial backing
- Providing psychosocial counselling
- Involving the oversight and guidance of government officials in the relevant fields.

The intervention is designed to receive oversight and guidance from government officials even after the project period ends, thus ensuring its sustainability.

Economic Reintegration Model of Returned Migrant Workers



ASPIRING AND RETURNEE MIGRANT WOMEN

Psychosocial and legal counselling provided



PREPARATION FOR ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION



DIRECT LINKAGES WITH GOV OFFICIALS

- Increased access to information on the existing support system
- Access to good Agencies
- Access to Counselling / psychosocial support services - through Counselling Officers
- Awareness on safer migration and Human trafficking – through DA and Dos
- Access to Skill development training – through DA and Dos
- Access to Health service through Health clinics
- Family plan development – through Migration Dos



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

- Developing business plans
- Talent identification
- Technical skills trainings
- Technical awareness of product quality, pricing, packaging etc
- Entrepreneurship skill development
- Grouping

Career Development

- Soft skills trainings
- Career guidance training
- Job Fairs



VALUE CHAIN INTEGRATION

- Provision of capital goods required for production process.
- Provision of tools/ Equipment
- Linking with micro finance institutes



FINANCIAL SUPPORT

- Market linkages
- Business fairs



IMPROVED PROSPECTS FOR INCOME GENERATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND LIVELIHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Increased skill set and power to choose career path

Reduced social cost of migration

Financial independence and self sufficiency

Social stability

Psychosocial wellbeing



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