

Navigating Uncertainty: Challenges of Youth Migration in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Migration can be identified as the movement of people from their roots to other surroundings, whether inside or outside the country, and has multiple consequences. It can have a significant impact on a country's economy, politics, environment and socio-economic conditions. Security concerns and conflicts are the two major reasons for human movements since early times. In recent years, the outflow of Sri Lankan workers has shown an increasing trend. The majority of the migrant workers are comprised of those in the 25-29 year age group (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2013). This trend remains constant for all manpower groups. Then why this migration scenario is sociologically important? That's why this paper will draw on Youth Migration in Sri Lanka, and try to identify the specific challenges faced by youth migrants and navigate future uncertainties based on case studies and earlier work.

Methodology

Five Case studies were explored in short form for data analysis, and a literature-based qualitative research approach was employed herewith. Data analysis was conducted using primary data collected through purposive sampling. For this study, I considered the young age group as 15 to 29 years according to the country's youth policy. The study focused on case studies from Sri Lanka's North Western Province, involving participants aged 15 to 29 years in the year 2025. Secondary data sources were migration pre-studies, scholarly works in Sri Lanka including books, research articles, and scholarly journals. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. For ethical considerations, pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' real names.

Literature review

Youth Immigration across Borders

Increasing youth immigration rate is a problem in South Asia is a problem. It is going to be the most burning issue, especially in the most populous and high-growth developing countries. Although South Asia has one of the largest youth populations

in the world, there is very rapid immigration and urbanization. Countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have what is called a ‘youth bulge’ (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, this youth bulge will become a demographic bomb, because a large mass of frustrated youth is likely to become a potential source of social and political instability and create demographic uncertainties with workforce, dependency rate, unemployment, poverty, etc. These region faces a convergence of issues, including persistent youth poverty, widespread inequality, and limited access to local opportunities and resources.

In post war 2019, starting with the Covid-19 pandemic and the Sri Lankan Economic crisis, all ethnic young people navigate life choices while dealing with new pressures like political instability and economic stress (Jayawardena,2020). These generations faced challenges such as limited job opportunities, ethnic tensions, regional inequalities. For many Sri Lankan youth, the legacy of the civil war, the post–COVID-19 environment, and the ongoing economic crisis continue for migration decisions. Although, established Tamil diaspora networks, which are more concentrated in Europe , Asia and the growing Sinhala diaspora communities in destinations such as Australasia, East Asia, Middle East etc. act as distinct pull factors that influence different groups of youth to migrate.

Discussion

This neglect is concerning, as youth migration for foreign employment or education represents the dominant trends in Sri Lanka, carrying profound economic and social implications for the country’s future. Connecting with my case studies and literature findings together based on Sri Lankan youth migration and their challenges; I identified a few factors that can be placed according to literature findings that relate to youth and their migration challenges. The key points, such as poverty, violence, discrimination based on gender, insecurity, labour exploitation, and socio-psychological problems, are mainly caused by migrants’ challenges.

1.Socio-cultural Pressures on Youth migrants

Youth migrants face disadvantage of being migrants. Considering gendered roles such as cleaning, catering, entertaining, and providing care (Faist,2016) and traditional family functions has changed due to the youth migration. According to Ceylonese traditions, women are seen as the “mothers of the nation and the locus of tradition and culture’ On the other hand, their work is needed to help the economy grow, but women working outside the home are sometimes seen as going against Sri Lankan traditions (Frantz,2011). It’s changing and challenging women’s traditional roles and womanhood, as well as the social security system.

Gayani, a 29-year-old unmarried woman from Kurunegala, migrated to Kuwait as a domestic worker to earn money for housing. During her stay abroad, she became unexpectedly pregnant and returned to Sri Lanka for childbirth in 2017. Concealing her pregnancy from her family under the pretext of a stomach illness, she secretly gave birth and abandoned the newborn near the jungle beside her home. When her family discovered the baby, they decided to raise the child rather than punish her. Despite her parents' strong objections, Gayani chose to migrate again. After several years, she returned to Sri Lanka, got married, and began living separately, while her parents continued to take care of her child (Case study, 2025).

This case reflects the complex intersections of gender, economic necessity, stigma, and the pressures of transnational labor migration. In Sri Lanka, young women face double disadvantages of both being a migrant and female.

Maduka, a 29-year-old woman from Kuliyaipitiya, migrated to Japan to work as a caregiver for individuals with psychological disorders. In 2024, she returned to Sri Lanka to get married and soon went back to Japan alone, with the intention of later sponsoring her husband as a dependent. After marriage, he left his job and became financially dependent on her income. Over time, Maduka discovered that he had developed a heavy drinking habit and frequently socialized with friends involved in risky behaviors, including associating with sex workers and misusing her earnings. Additionally, both her husband's extended family and her own family became economically reliant on her. Struggling with emotional and financial stress, Maduka eventually decided to leave her job abroad and return to Sri Lanka to protect her marriage and seek stability in her family life (Case study, 2025).

This highlights how shifting gender roles challenge individuals with lifetime burdens. For Frantz, Migration contributes to family and marital breakdowns, though not in a straightforward or linear manner. This aligns with Pathirage's (2025) work on Sri Lankan Migration, explored in terms of violence. migration process, which has a highly significant impact on cultural values, changing stereotypes, roles and societal expectations. The violence of migration categories infiltrates the institution of family and marriage. It disrupts family relationships, humiliates and frames migrants as, 'irresponsible or bad parents' or framing them as irresponsible partners (Pathirage, 2025) who violate family obligations or framing them as irresponsible partners who violate family obligations. These studies show that some sociological aspects like violence, insecurity and gender discrimination are suggestive of relevant themes. Hence, migration has a negative impact on youth under the pressure of loneliness, helplessness, harassment, etc. It is in the latter part of the twentieth century that public discourse on migration seems to have become riddled with explicit references to "culture" (Vertovec, 2011).

2. Socio-political Pressures on Youth migrants

Based on country political instability, war and ethnic conflicts, economic crisis, and unemployment, Youth are pressured and seeking opportunities abroad through both legal and illegal migration. In Sri Lanka, One young former LTTE combatant in the Eastern province said that he had tried to leave for Australia by boat because of his poor opportunities for employment, fought during the final stages of the war (Howie,2013). This shows how country and societal politics push youth to migrate in illegal ways. Again It also affects individuals, families and nation as a whole, particularly in relation to issues of human trafficking and migrant safety.

Haridharshana, a 27-year-old Sri Lankan student migrant from Chilaw, pursued his master's degree in hardware engineering at a reputed state university in Delhi, India. After completing his studies, he returned to Sri Lanka in search of employment. However, he faced a significant mismatch between the international demand for skilled professionals in his field and Sri Lanka's limited capacity to absorb such expertise. He identified only one IT company related to his specialization in Colombo, but his job application was rejected, reportedly due to his Indian Tamil identity, despite his strong qualifications. Additionally, he encountered difficulties in getting his foreign educational credentials recognized for government sector employment. Confronted with these structural and identity-based barriers, Haridharshana eventually migrated back to India, where he successfully secured a position in a high-demand IT company (Case study,2025).

This case comes up with Bourdieu's concept of capital and Inequality (Faist,2016), which is important to understand how migration is related to different forms of social inequality through socio-politics and identity, creating challenges to youth in Sri Lanka. Social inequalities consist of the uneven distribution of costs and benefits with respect to goods among social units such as individuals, groups, organizations, regions, and states. For Bourdieu, Inequality is not just about money or income, but also about people's power, class mobility, identity and status in society. On the other hand, this case also reminds us to be watchful of issues related to 'brain drain' and 'brain gain', socio-political and psychological uncertainties on youth migrants and the state.

3. Socio-economic Pressures on Youth migrants

Mostly rural middle or lower class migrants are facing both a micro level, and macro level social, financial consequences from migration, which have not yet been comprehensively studied in a sociological aspect, showing a research gap here. Most migrant families in rural areas depend heavily on remittances for their livelihood. Migrant workers also face difficulties at their destination, including Trafficking that involves fraud, coercion, or deception and safety. Is it Israel? or South Korea? etc. migrant complaints are reported daily in each country.

Piyal, a 29-year-old married man from Kurunegala and a father of two, migrated to Israel after leaving his job in the army. His decision was driven by the need to earn foreign remittances to support his family and children's education. However, for the past four months, his family has been unable to contact him due to the ongoing conflict situation in Israel in 2025. Despite continuous efforts, his wife has not been able to obtain any information about his whereabouts, and he is now considered a missing person. This situation has placed his family in severe emotional distress and financial hardship, highlighting the precarious conditions and risks faced by Sri Lankan migrant workers in conflict-affected regions (Case study, 2025).

This shows that if a migrant faces any form of risk for themselves and their family, the entire family system consequently becomes vulnerable. Beck's cosmopolitan perspective, explained migration also as a 'Risk Society' (Faist, 2016). Beck's concept of the "risk society" aligns with the cases of Sri Lankan youth migration. Especially from the recent decades, the post-war, post-COVID, and economic crisis period creates challenges for youth to migrate, and now it shows how risk society turned into risk person through migration.

On the other hand, the impact of youth outmigration on the domestic labour market has intensified. At the same time, employment opportunities within Sri Lanka remain insufficient to meet the growing domestic labour demand. Although there is a large mismatch between the international demand for jobs and Sri Lanka's supply capabilities, for example, in the Haridharshana's case. The impact of migration on wages is harder to measure as the required data is not available. However, migration has become a major problem, and migrant workers in Sri Lanka face future uncertainty.

4. Socio-psychological Pressures on Youth migrants

Youth migration drives the pursuit of earn money and gain status, but it also entails separation, caregiving burdens, control challenges, and new dependencies Campbell (2010), in both mentally and physically such as: face separation, caregiving burdens, control issues, Ideas of lost of 'Home', 'homeland', 'lifeless'.

Sandun, a 28-year-old married man from Kurunegala, migrated to Malaysia to work as a junior chef, leaving his wife in Sri Lanka. During his stay abroad, his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. Due to the high cost of her treatment, he was unable to return home, as losing his job would have left him without any means of income. His wife's family took responsibility for her care, while Sandun continued to send remittances to support both her and his elderly parents, who were also financially dependent on him. In May 2025, Sandun returned to Sri Lanka with hopes of starting a small hotel business, but the venture failed, leading to significant financial losses. Struggling with economic

instability and emotional distress from being unable to care for his ailing wife and aging parents, he migrated again—this time to Dubai—in search of work. Sandun expressed deep emotional pain and guilt over the sacrifices and separations caused by his migration experience (Case study, 2025).

This examines the challenges faced by migrants and their family members, highlighting issues related to the notions of ‘lost home’ and ‘violated relationships’ (Pathirage, 2011). Although, it aligns with Marjorie DeVault’s (1991) explanations of emotional economy. Accordingly, family looks like one of the range of invisible emotional labour that is performed in families, unpaid caring activities performed in personal life (Steinberg & Figart, 1999). Migration renders all these notions challenging for both migrants and their families. Migrants and migration always link with emotional labor, though a valuable defense against stress, because it is through our feelings. Hochschild (2012) In private life, we try to induce or suppress love, envy, and anger through deep acting or “emotion work. From migration, a notable psychological effect is that their socio-economic solidarity has collapsed, and there has been insecurity in family life. Although, The migration of children has resulted in significant care gaps for families and aging parents, thereby intensifying a range of socio-economic and psychological challenges in the contemporary context. These challenges, coupled with insecurity, underscore the tensions between personal emotions and the broader uncertainties surrounding the country’s future.

Conclusion

In this study, I examine the challenges of Sri Lankan youth migration. What does Sociology have to say regarding the migration scenario in Sri Lanka? Sociologically, this phenomenon highlights the crucial role of complex, structural pull and push factors such as inequality, poverty and social capital. Therefore, migration serves as a key alternative for youth to achieve their goals. From the earlier work on Sri Lankan migration studies, this paper highlights the four major challenges emerged from the case studies’ and literature based review: Socio-cultural Pressures, Socio-political Pressures, Socio-economic Pressures and Socio-psychological Pressures on Youth.

After identifying migrant trends, profiles, and context, I noticed that all youth migrants ‘challenges come out due to the inequalities in the home country. Sri Lanka as a third world country in South Asia, and due to lack of opportunities, resources, instability, poverty; it creates youth to migrate for betterment of their lives. For betterment of lives means, its aligning with social capital, wealth, status etc. In Bourdieu’s account, it is called the capital, including authority in households, cultural capital - lifestyle, education, and knowledge, social capital- social networks and connections, honorific capital, civil capital, human capital- rights and citizenship, etc. Therefore, migration can be mentioned as an alternative choice for young people to avoid the consequences of inequality and maintain their social class status and high standard of living. For that reason, I would like to argue that many of those pull and push factors surrounding

young migrants are related to youth migration aspirations, and also create challenges themselves within the contemporary scenario. The analysis reveals that migration is not merely a response to inequality or poverty, but also deals with emotions, care through home and family kinship relations, as pressures on youth. Mainly, this case studies identified the care economy and emotional economy as major sources of pressure and challenges for migrants and their families, highlighting the need for deeper sociological exploration of these dimensions.

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