

Examining Changes in International Labor Migration and Socio-economic Profiles of Married Male Migrants in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper examines the Zelinsky model of migration transition and its influence on international labor migration in Sri Lanka. The study identifies five stages of migration trends, with the "Early transitional society" phase marked by significant rural-urban movement due to modernization. Sri Lanka experiences a substantial annual international labor out-migration, with remittances amounting to US\$ 6000 million. Male labor migration has been dominant, especially among married individuals. The research explores the demographic and socio-economic attributes of 103 married male migrants, highlighting reasons for migration and their role in supporting families with high dependency ratios. Most migrants are unskilled or semiskilled, leading to financial challenges. Policy interventions are recommended to improve the well-being of both migrants and their families.

Keywords: *Zelinsky Model, Migration Transition, International Labor Migration, Sri Lanka, Demographic Characteristics.*

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Introduction

The Zelinsky model of migration transition proposes that changes in migration patterns within a society are influenced by social, economic, and demographic transitions. This model identifies five stages of migration trends. In the second phase, known as the "Early transitional society," there is a significant movement of people from rural areas to cities as a result of the modernization process (Zelinsky, 1971). Consequently, international labor migration begins during this phase and continues in subsequent stages. Sri Lanka's migration flow has been influenced by these characteristics.

At present, Sri Lanka experiences an annual international labor out-migration of over 232,000 individuals, with approximately 1.9 million people employed overseas under contractual agreements. The remittances from these migrant workers have amounted to US\$ 6000 million (Central Bank, 2013).

According to data from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (Table 01), 76.25 percent of male workers migrated to foreign destinations in 1986. International labor out-migration has been viewed as a means of generating additional employment opportunities for underutilized labor since the late 1970s (Karunaratne, 2007). The large-scale contract labor migration from Sri Lanka began in 1976, coinciding with a surge in oil prices in Middle Eastern countries (Korale, 1985). Initially, there was high demand for male workers in construction sites in those countries (De Silva, 2014).

In the late 1970s, the conditions for international labor migration were favorable in Sri Lanka, resulting in an increasing trend of male labor migration during that period. Although there was a higher presence of female migrants towards the end of the 1980s, the current situation once again sees male labor migration as dominant. Notably, a significant characteristic of male migrants is that a majority of them are married (ILO, 2013).

Table 1: Departures for Foreign Employment 1986 - 2014*

| Year | Male | | Female | | Total |
|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|----------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | |
| 1986 | 11,023 | 76.25 | 3,433 | 23.75 | 14,456 |
| 1987 | 10,647 | 75.37 | 3,480 | 24.63 | 14,127 |
| 1988 | 8,309 | 45.09 | 10,119 | 54.91 | 18,428 |
| 1989 | 8,680 | 35.11 | 16,044 | 64.89 | 24,724 |
| 1990 | 15,377 | 36.08 | 27,248 | 63.92 | 42,625 |
| 1991 | 21,423 | 32.97 | 43,560 | 67.03 | 64,983 |
| 1992 | 34,858 | 28.00 | 89,636 | 72.00 | 124,494♣ |
| 1993 | 32,269 | 25.00 | 96,807 | 75.00 | 129,076♣ |
| 1994 | 16,377 | 27.22 | 43,791 | 72.78 | 60,168 |
| 1995 | 46,021 | 26.68 | 126,468 | 73.32 | 172,489 |
| 1996 | 43,112 | 26.52 | 119,464 | 73.48 | 162,576 |
| 1997 | 37,552 | 24.99 | 112,731 | 75.01 | 150,283 |
| 1998 | 53,867 | 33.71 | 105,949 | 66.29 | 159,816 |
| 1999 | 63,720 | 35.45 | 116,015 | 64.55 | 179,735 |
| 2000 | 59,793 | 32.82 | 122,395 | 67.18 | 182,188 |
| 2001 | 59,807 | 32.50 | 124,200 | 67.50 | 184,007 |
| 2002 | 70,522 | 34.61 | 133,251 | 65.39 | 203,773 |
| 2003 | 74,508 | 35.51 | 135,338 | 64.49 | 209,846 |
| 2004 | 80,699 | 37.59 | 134,010 | 62.41 | 214,709 |
| 2005 | 93,896 | 40.60 | 137,394 | 59.40 | 231,290 |
| 2006 | 90,170 | 44.65 | 111,778 | 55.35 | 201,948 |
| 2007 | 103,476 | 47.37 | 114,983 | 52.63 | 218,459 |
| 2008 | 128,232 | 51.19 | 122,267 | 48.81 | 250,499 |
| 2009 | 119,381 | 48.31 | 127,745 | 51.69 | 247,126 |
| 2010 | 136,850 | 51.16 | 130,657 | 48.84 | 267,507 |
| 2011 | 136,307 | 51.84 | 126,654 | 48.16 | 262,961 |
| 2012 | 144,135 | 51.03 | 138,312 | 48.97 | 282,447 |
| 2013 | 175,185 | 59.75 | 118,033 | 40.25 | 293,218 |
| 2014* | 189,924 | 63.22 | 110,489 | 36.78 | 300,413 |

Source: Information Technology Division-SLBFE

♣ Airport Survey-SLBFE 1992-1993 *Provisional

International migration dynamics have had profound implications for the population growth and various socio-economic and cultural aspects of Sri Lankan society (De Silva, 2014). Despite internal labor shortages, the number of male workers migrating abroad has been steadily increasing over the years. The figures rose from 11,023 in 1986 to 93,896 in 2005, with a slight decrease in 2006 but then steadily grew to reach 144,135 in 2012 (Table 1). Since 2007, the annual male migration has consistently remained well over 100,000.

Notably, the profile of migrant workers has undergone significant changes over the past few decades. There have been notable shifts in the age and sex structure, manpower categories, as well as the origin and destinations of the migrants (De Silva, 2014). In the mid-1980s, males dominated the flow of contract labor migration, aligning with theoretical perspectives on gender issues in migration (Lee, 1969). Until the mid-1980s, it was primarily males who took the risk of migrating to labor-demanding countries (Jayaweera & Dias, 2011).

Objectives

The main aim of this study is to explore and identify the demographic and socio-economic factors that have played a significant role in shaping the character of the international migratory flow of labor in Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology

The study primarily relies on data collected from the Kochchikade North Grama Niladhari Division, which was randomly selected from the Colombo District Divisional Secretariat to facilitate research convenience. The sample was chosen using purposive sampling, a non-random sampling method. The study comprised 103 spouses whose husbands had migrated to foreign destinations for labor, and these respondents were selected using the snowball sampling method.

Both primary and secondary data collection methods were employed in a mixed methodology approach. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through

informal interviews. The informal interviews were analyzed in-depth to provide background information essential for drawing conclusions.

Secondary data were obtained from various sources such as the Department of Census and Statistics, International Labor Organization, International Organization for Migration, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, it is worth noting that the statistical database developed by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) for migrant workers only accounts for registered individuals, potentially resulting in some under-registration in the overall phenomenon. An important limitation of the study is that the SLBFE data do not include statistics based on marital status, which could have been valuable for the research.

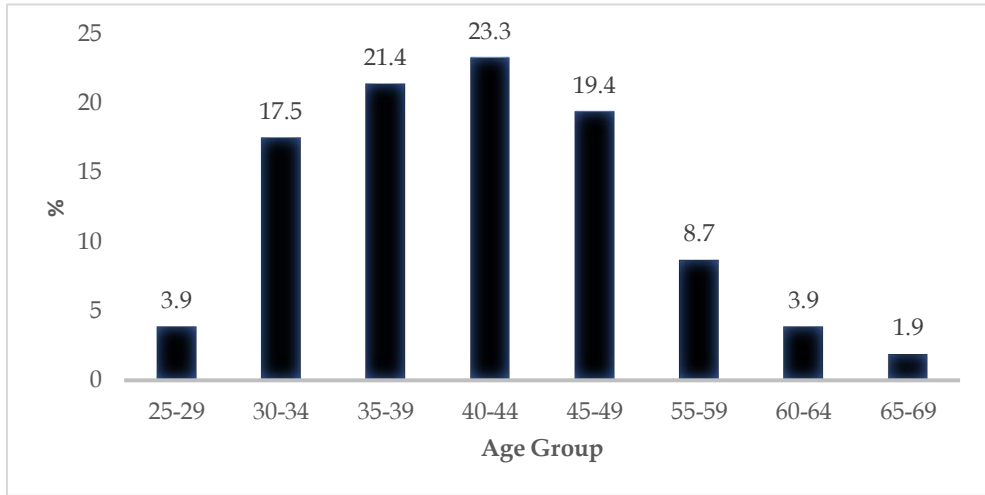
Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS with univariate and bivariate analysis techniques, while qualitative data were subjected to content analysis to focus on the main themes relevant to the study's objectives.

Results and Discussion

When examining the demographic background of the respondents, the age distribution emerges as a crucial factor. The sample consists of 103 male migrant workers, and their age distribution is depicted in figure 1 below. The age range spans from 25 to 67 years, with a mean age of 41.1 years and a median age of 40 years. The standard deviation for age is 8.3.

The age distribution of labor migrants shows some notable characteristics. The 40-44 age group contains the highest proportion of international male labor migrants in the sample, and the majority of migrant workers are 45 years old. Notably, the mode of the age structure falls at 45, representing the most frequently occurring age group among the 103 male labor migrants. The predominance of migrants in the middle-age group can be attributed to legal constraints, as foreign destinations typically do not have labor demand for individuals over the age of 60. This observation aligns with migration theories, which suggest that young adults are more likely to migrate compared to other age groups (Ravenstein, 1885).

Figure 1: International Male Migrants by Age



Source: Sample Data, 2017

N =103

Based on Table 2, it can be observed that the largest proportion of male workers (42.7 percent) fall under the category of unskilled labor. These male workers have migrated for various professions such as heavy/light vehicle drivers, cooks, storekeepers, mechanical engineers, carpenters, masons, electricians, technicians, welders, accountants, sales workers, and others. Figure 5 illustrates the education levels of the sample, indicating that a significant number of migrants possess a medium level of education. Consequently, the majority of male migrants were unable to secure white-collar jobs, with only 12.6 percent of migrants having professional-level positions.

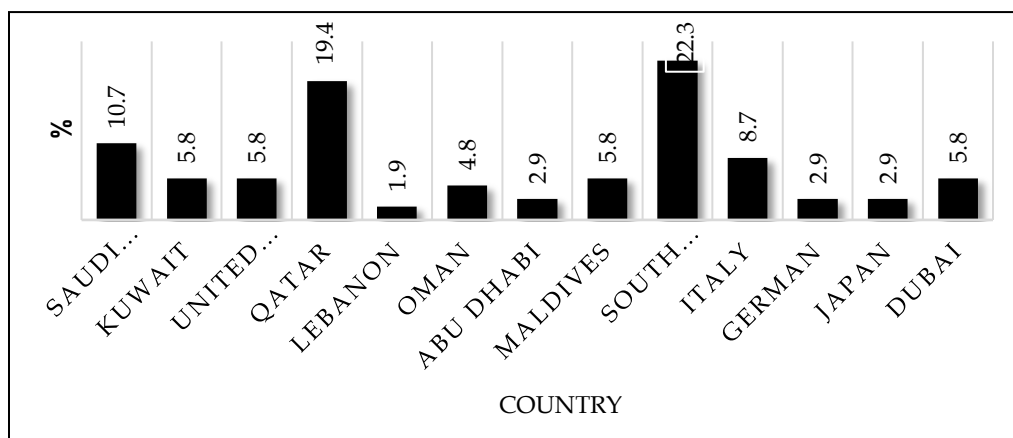
Table 2: Manpower Categories

| Manpower level | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| Professional | 13 | 12.6 |
| Skilled | 9 | 8.7 |
| Semi - Skilled | 29 | 28.2 |
| Middle Level | 5 | 4.9 |
| Clerical & Related | 3 | 2.9 |
| Unskilled | 44 | 42.7 |
| Total | 103 | 100 |

Source: Sample Data, 2017

N =103

Figure 2: Departure for Foreign Employment of Male Migrants



Source: Sample Data, 2017

N =103

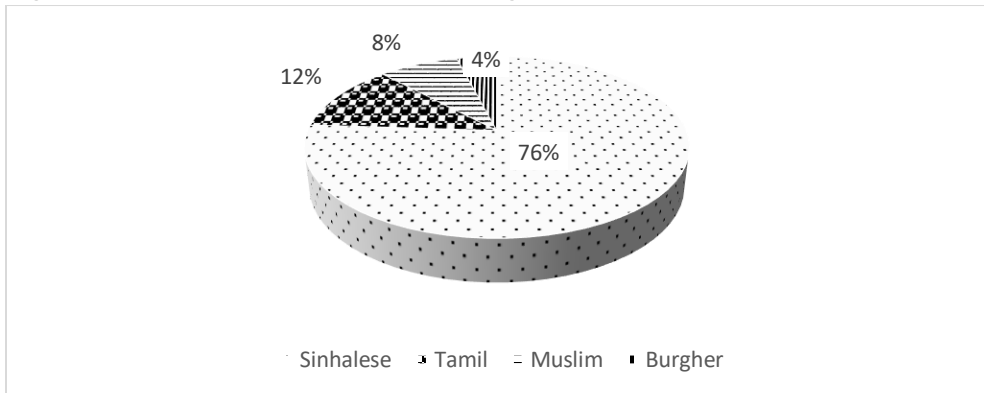
In recent times, a significant portion of Sri Lanka's labor migrants have been heading to countries in the Middle East. Data from the SLBFE in 2012 indicates that around 88 percent of Sri Lankan migrant labor was directed to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), and Jordan. However, as depicted in Figure 2, there has been a notable shift, with a considerable proportion (41.7 percent) of male migrant departures now directed towards countries outside the Middle East.

It is interesting to note that European countries currently receive a relatively low number of Sri Lankan labor migrants, with Italy and Cyprus being the preferred destinations for many migrants (SLBFC, 2014). Despite the continued popularity of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, other nations like South Korea, Maldives, Cyprus, and Malaysia have recently emerged as prominent destinations for labor migration. South Korea attracts unskilled male migrants, whereas the Maldives absorbs skilled male migrants (SLBFE, 2014). The study shows a notable trend in migration departures towards South Korea and the Maldives, with 22.3 percent and 5.8 percent of male migrants, respectively, having migrated for labor in these countries. Additionally, it is observed that most of the male migrants who moved to South Korea are unskilled workers.

In examining the social characteristics of labor migrants and their families, the study delves into the ethnic, religious, and educational composition. According to the data, 76 percent of migrants are of Sinhalese ethnicity,

making them the majority among labor migrants. Additionally, 12 percent of male migrants are Tamils, while 8 percent are Muslims, highlighting the diverse ethnic makeup of the migrant population. Further insights into their religious and educational backgrounds are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Sri Lanka's labor migration.

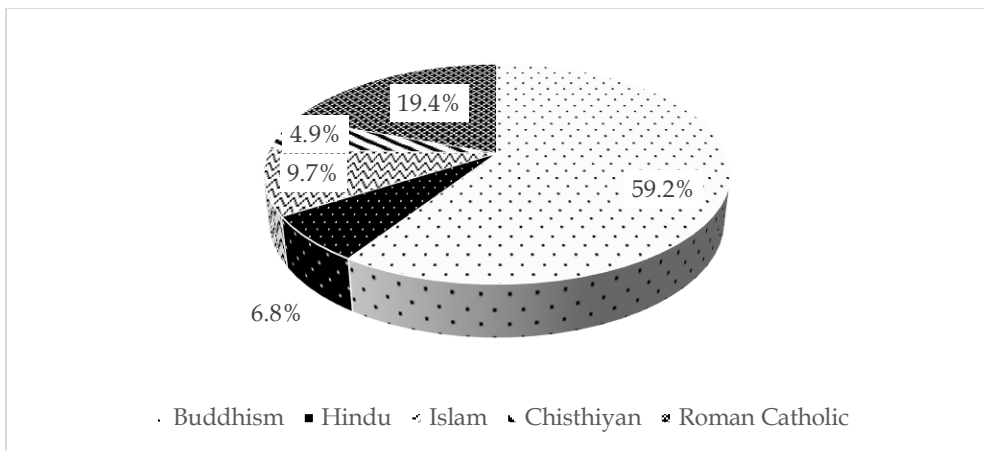
Figure 3: Ethnic Composition of Male Migrants



Source: Sample Data, 2017

N =103

Figure 4: Religious Composition of Male Migrants



Source: Sample Data, 2017

N =103

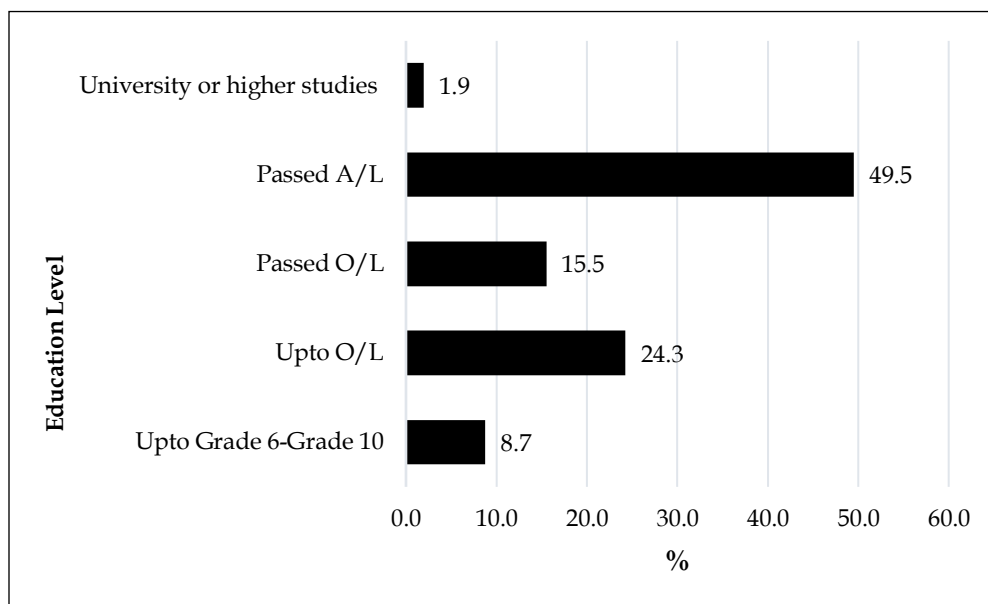
According to Figure 4, a significant proportion of labor migrants (59.2 percent) in the sample identify as Buddhist, while 19.4 percent follow Roman

Catholicism, and 9.7 percent practice Islam. This observation emphasizes the diverse and multiethnic nature of the labor migrant population.

Analyzing the educational background of labor migrants is essential as education plays a crucial role in influencing their choice of profession. Figure 5 displays a positive correlation between higher education levels and the likelihood of securing white-collar jobs. Among the migrants, the majority (49.5 percent) have completed the G.C.E. A/L examination, 24.3 percent have studied up to the G.C.E. O/L examination, and 1.9 percent have attained higher education qualifications.

An interesting finding is that all migrants in the study have completed their primary education. This indicates that while higher education levels are relatively low, a basic level of education is prevalent among the labor migrant population. Understanding these educational characteristics provides valuable insights into the employment patterns and opportunities available to these migrants in their destination countries.

Figure 5: Education Composition of Male Migrants



Source: Sample Data, 2017

N = 103

Studying the family structure of labor migrants is crucial, and Table 03 below presents the age composition of their family members. A significant

proportion (54.4 percent) of family members are part of the labor force, indicating their active involvement in work. However, it is important to note that 45.6 percent of family members are categorized as either child dependents or elderly dependents. The increasing dependency of family members can potentially have a negative impact on family finances, as these dependents may rely on the remittances sent by the labor migrant for their financial support. This aspect highlights the complex financial dynamics and responsibilities faced by labor migrants and their families, which should be taken into consideration when analyzing the implications of labor migration on the overall well-being of the household.

Table 3: Family Age Structure (including labor migrant)

| Age composition | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Children (Below 15 years) | 149 | 31.3 |
| Working age population (Between 15-59 years) | 258 | 54.4 |
| Elderly Population (Year 60 and more) | 68 | 14.3 |
| Total | 475 | 100 |

Source: Sample Data, 2017

N = 475

The study reveals important insights into the monthly income of male migrants' families. A significant majority of migrants (72.8 percent) have a monthly income exceeding Rs. 60,000. However, it is noteworthy that only a small percentage (2.1 percent) of male migrants earn more than Rs. 150,000. This is largely attributed to the nature of the jobs they are engaged in, which are often categorized as 3D (Dirty, Dangerous, and Demeaning) jobs. These 3D jobs are in high demand in developed countries, as the local population tends to avoid them.

The demand for labor in many of the fastest-growing countries has already exceeded their available workforce, including workers who used to work seasonally or part-time. This has created a need for new labor sources. As better-educated youth increasingly reject the physically demanding 3D jobs, migrants often take up these positions to fill the labor gaps (Martin, 1996).

In facilitating the movement of workers to the Middle East and redirecting migrants within Asia, well-established labor networks play a significant role.

These networks involve labor brokers, policies promoting employment opportunities abroad, and financial support systems (Martin, 1996). These mechanisms contribute to the smooth flow of migrant workers, ensuring that labor demands in various regions are met efficiently. This efficient labor flow, in turn, supports economic growth and development in both the host and sending countries.

Table 4: Monthly Income Category

| Monthly income category | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Rs.10,000 - Rs.40,000 | 12 | 12.1 |
| Rs.40,001- Rs.60,000 | 16 | 15.1 |
| Rs.60,001- Rs.100,000 | 56 | 54.3 |
| Rs.100,001 - Rs.150,000 | 17 | 16.4 |
| More than Rs.150,000 | 2 | 2.1 |
| Total | 103 | 100 |

Source: Sample Data, 2017

N = 103

Conclusion

The primary objective of this paper was to investigate the changes in international labor migration flow and explore the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of married male migrants in Sri Lanka. The study involved gathering data from 103 respondents, providing valuable insights into the reasons driving labor migration, such as unemployment, insufficient wages, seeking better opportunities for their children, and building a house.

In recent years, the migration flow has been predominantly comprised of married male workers migrating to Middle East and Southeast Asian countries. The majority of these male migrants are of Sinhalese ethnicity and follow the Buddhist faith. Furthermore, the highest proportion of migrants falls within the 40-44 age group, and a considerable number possess a medium level of education.

A significant finding indicates that these male migrants support families with high dependency ratios, making their remittances crucial for their family members' well-being. However, the study also reveals a concerning aspect: most of these workers are unskilled or semiskilled, which often results in inadequate wages and financial challenges.

In conclusion, policy makers should pay close attention to the problems faced by male migrant workers and their families. Addressing these issues can contribute to better policies and support systems that assist the families left behind and improve the overall well-being of migrant workers. By understanding the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of this group, targeted and effective policies can be developed to ensure the welfare and prosperity of both the migrants and their families.

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