

# The Socioeconomic Consequences of Brain Drain and Migration in Sri Lanka: A Comprehensive Literature Analysis

Gayanthi Maussawa<sup>1#</sup>, Chelsea Wijerathne<sup>2</sup>, Janaka Gunasekara<sup>3</sup>, Colinie Wickramarachchi<sup>4</sup> and Samantha Thelijjagoda<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1#</sup>SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe, Sri Lanka, [bm19562834@my.sliit.lk](mailto:bm19562834@my.sliit.lk)

<sup>2</sup>SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe, Sri Lanka, [bm19563510@my.sliit.lk](mailto:bm19563510@my.sliit.lk)

<sup>3</sup>SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe, Sri Lanka, [bm19557120@my.sliit.lk](mailto:bm19557120@my.sliit.lk)

<sup>4</sup>SLIIT Business School, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe, Sri Lanka, [colinie.w@sliit.lk](mailto:colinie.w@sliit.lk)

<sup>5</sup>Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Malabe, Sri Lanka, [Samantha.t@sliit.lk](mailto:Samantha.t@sliit.lk)

**Abstract** - Over the years brain drain has given risen to a lasting imprint on the economy of Sri Lanka, which has resulted variose consequences. Currently educated professionals from various sectors are migrating to developed countries at an increasing rate. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding on the factors influence skill migration in Sri Lanka. This study utilizes a comprehensive systematic review of past literature over the period of 22 years (2000-2022). The findings of this study demonstrate that migration of skilled professionals has been increased up to 2022 and how social, economic, and political factors affected migration. Some identified examples for economic factors that influence skill migration are better working opportunites, higher wages and higher living standards. Some identified social factors are political violence and better facilities like health and educational services. Increasing income tax rate and loss of liberty are some recongized political factors that affect skill migration. Some of the studies have argued that there are positive concequences of skill migration in Sri Lanka, while some other studies have brought up arguments that negative impacts of skill migration take over the positive impacts.

**Keywords:** Brain drain, Economic Impact and Migration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, migration has been an ongoing concern in Sri Lanka. The major reason for that is the political, economic, and social evolution that has been occurred during the past few years. Reiling (2018), have stated that brain drain means the emigration of skilled people from developing countries to developed countries. The reasons why individuals migrate are numerous and always changing. The migration of skilled people in a knowledge economy that is globally integrated is caused by more than just the shifting composition of the economy.

In Sri Lankan context, most educated and skilled people commonly leave from country, and this trend is not new. The majority of studies on professional migrants worldwide, including those on Sri Lankan migrants, have only looked at those who move to OECD nations (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2021). Many employees actively plan their departure, specifically those from small island economies like Sri Lanka that lack the scale economies to offer well-paying occupations at home (Ngoma & Ismail, 2013). Asian countries are creating internatioual migration strategies, but most of this is not guided by high – quality research on the causes and consequences of migration (Hugo,

2005). Previous research studies have highlighted that developing countries' human capital is being drained by the movement of their most skilled workers (Ullah, 2018). In the case of Sri Lanka, it has been observed that the country has been facing a significant shortage of skilled labor due to the migration of educated people to developed nations (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2022).

The aim of this study is to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of the variables that influence migration and brain drain in Sri Lanka. Early research on this topic in a global context concluded that developing countries' human capital was being drained by the movement of their most skilled workers. What is the nature of brain drain and migration in Sri Lanka over the period of 2000 – 2022 and what are the key components that determine the skill migration are the identified research questions for this study. To address these research questions, we have identified two main research objectives. Those are to investigate the brain drain and migration nature in Sri Lanka between 2000 – 2022 and to investigate the key components that influence skill migration in Sri Lanka. The scope of this study includes investigating the primary reasons behind the skill migration from Sri Lanka as well as the nature of the skill migration and brain drain in Sri Lanka.

The main constraint of this study is, in this study only consider the key components and nature of the brain drain and migration in Sri Lanka. This study have not been examining the impact on Sri Lanka economy towards the brain drain and migration in Sri Lanka.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

This study has used systematic literature review method to analyze the nature of brain drain and migration for the period of 2000-2022, and to investigate the key components of brain drain and migration in Sri Lanka.

As a first stage 50 publications were identified through various databases such as Emerald Insight, Scopus, Science Direct, Research Gate etc. Those 50 publications identified from above databases by using keywords such as migration, Sri Lanka, professional, brain drain and economic growth. Then we strained the most suitable articles that related to the area of our study. For that process, out of 50 publications 40 publications were identified after screening for skill migration, GDP per Capita, political instability, and unemployment rate. The other 10 publications excluded full texts were not available, irrelevant to the main subject and language limitations. Next, out of 40 publications, 30 publications screened based on context. 10 publications excluded as they loss quantitative data. After excluding those articles 30 publications were used to develop the literature review of this study.

## **III. RESULTS**

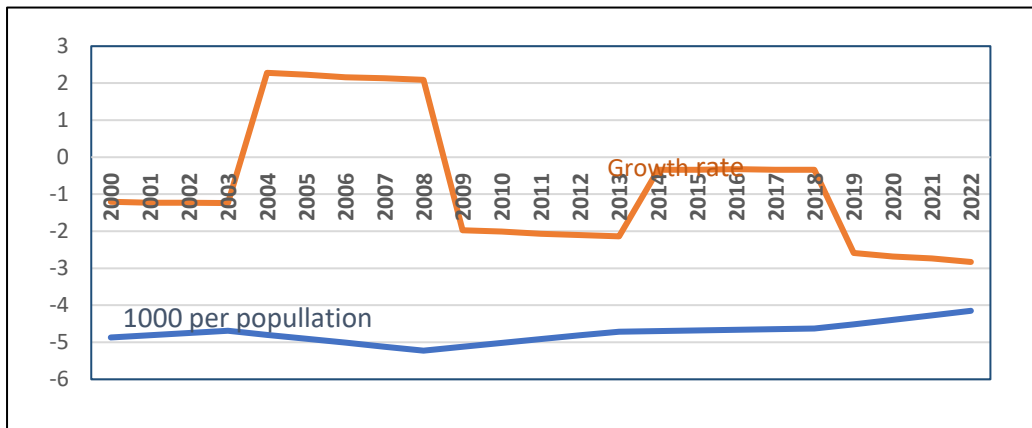
### ***A. Investigate the Nature of Migration and Brain Drain in Sri Lanka***

In recent years both temporary and long term or permanent migration for jobs has increased in Sri Lanka. During the colonial period of Sri Lanka, the educated people who held administrative positions in high ranks left the country to work in British Empire countries. Most of the Sri Lankan skilled migrants prefer OECD countries such as, Australia, Canada and United Kingdom as their destination country because those countries provide citizenship to skilled migrants and there are many facilities and benefits provided by those countries (Cattaneo, 2009; Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2022).

A new student migration wave has been identified in 2000. They were migrated for their educational reasons (Jayawardena, 2020). In the same time period various professionals from sectors such as medicine, finance and administration have migrated to developed countries with an aim of gaining higher wages and to facilitate their children a high quality schooling (Jayawardena, 2020). As per the Sri Lanka's net migration rate statistics available for the period of 1950 – 2023, the migration rate was -4.87 per 1000 population in 2000. That migration rate has decreased by 1.20% in 1999. Afterwards, there are no significant changes in net migration population between 2000 to 2004. The net migration rate in 2005 was -4.906 per 1000 population and it has declined by 2.23% from 2004 (Jayawardena, 2020). In between 2005 to 2008 no significant changes have been occurred. Between 2008 to 2009 there was a serious reduction in growth rate Sri Lanka Net Migration Rate (1950 - 2023). From 2010 to 2013 there were some fluctuations in the net migration rate, that were not very notable. Despite that, 2014 must be considered when addressing the migration population in the Sri Lanka. Because so far, the largest migration population in Sri Lankan history has occurred within that time and it is 300,413. It was more than twice the previous year's migrated population (Wijesinghe & Jayawardane, 2021). Again 2014 – 2018 period did not show a notable change in net migration population. Then between 2009 – 2020 the migration population has been increased in 2022 311,269 people left the country and that records the highest in the history Sri Lanka Net Migration Rate (1950 - 2023).

The unemployment rate in Sri Lanka increased from 2012 – 2013. And during this time the number of migrants has also grown throughout this time. The number of migrants increased in Sri Lanka during 2012 – 2013, along with the country's rising unemployment rate (Gunawardena & Nawaratne, 2017). Figure 1 shows Sri Lanka's net migration rate for the period of 2000- 2022.

**Figure 1. Sri Lanka net migration rate 2000 – 2022.**



Source: Authors' compilation.

**B. Identify the Key Components that Determine the Skill Migration.**

By utilizing a comprehensive literature analysis, we have identified the key components that influenced the skill migration can be divided into 3 main categories namely, social, economic, and political factors. Below we discuss those factors separately.

**1) Social factors:** It has been identified social factors directly have an impact towards the brain drain and migration in Sri Lanka. Asis and Piper (2008) have identified according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2005), there were few violent conflicts in Sri Lanka that has occurred in the last decades except the civil war. This is also a reason that influenced skill migration. Expectations of higher living standards would also be a key component that influenced skill migration (Silva, 2018).

**2) Economic factors:** Past research studies have investigated that there are numerous economic factors that influenced skill migration. According to Lowell and Findlay (2001) it has been investigated that low wages in public and private sectors encourage qualified professionals to migrate to developed countries. As professionals are unable to meet their basic needs in their own country many educated people will be persuaded to migrate to developed nations (Ullah, 2018). Zweig et al. (2008) have investigated that US has received 106 psychiatrists, and Australia has received 13 psychiatrists from Sri Lanka in 2007 seeking better training opportunities. The same research reviewed that Sri Lanka has experienced high number of psychiatrists' skill migration. One of the major factors that encourages educated people to migrate developed country is the difference between salaries in their home country and the destination country. This is a major issue specially in low – income countries (Gunawardena & Nawarathane, 2017). According to Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021) they identified the major push and pull causes for professionals to migrate to abroad are a lack of prospects for professional growth, better working conditions, a higher standard of living, fewer better educational options for their children.

**3) Political factors:** The political influence and corruption that currently exist in Sri Lanka are some of the main driving forces behind the migration of skilled professionals from the country (Wijesinghe & Jayawardane, 2021). The two military conflicts that broke out in Sri Lanka at the same time prompted these migrants to leave the nation (Jayawardena, 2020). One of every nation's most important resources is skilled labor. Since they frequently cannot provide for their needs in their own nation, many educated people will be attracted to migrate to developed countries.

Here, we first take into consideration the reasons of migration of people in other Asian countries besides Sri Lanka according to the past literature. Countries such as China, India, South Korea, and the Philippine mainly face the brain drain as a current challenge (Anas & Wickremasinghe, 2010).

**1) India:** India is the main country of origin for international migrants and accounts for most of the domestic migration. Low skilled and semi-skilled employees migrate to improve their economic well-being, because of low wage rates in less developed states in India, persistent salary differences between regular and casual workers, and a lack of formal employment alternatives (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021).

**2) China:** For China's overseas education, the brain drain has become a growing concern, specially after the Tiananmen incident in June 1989. Educated and skilled citizens in China are mostly driven to look for development prospects outside of their home country due to political instability, low pay, poor living standards, a lack of research facilities, and poor leadership of highly skilled employees (Deng, 2007). The developing world was

powerless to prevent its most talented people from moving to the west where they might find higher pay, better working conditions, more stable political system and a more comfortable lifestyle for years, either to study overseas or after receiving their training at home (Zweig et al., 2008).

**3) South Korea:** The USA is the home of more than 80 per cent of skillful Korean engineers and scientists (Song, 1997). The returnees were unable to find job due to a weak industrial basis, insufficient R & D infrastructure, and the restricted capabilities of higher educational institutions, let alone incentives to return. In fact, lot of analysts were worried that a large influx of emigrants returning home would lead to significant political and economic issue for a a nation where there weren't enough jobs for them to fill (Yoon, 1992).

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

It is noted that the trend of migrating professionals for a temporary period as well as long term period has been increased since last decades in Sri Lanka. As described by Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021), they have pointed out that, Sri Lanka has long been fighting with the departure of skilled individuals from the past. When going through the past literature, the reasons for migration can be identified as political factors, economic factors, and social factors. When it compares Sri Lanka with other countries relating to the skilled migration it is proven that the other countries such as India (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021) is currently facing the same challenge due to various factors including economic disparities and political instability. As a result, skilled professionals look for skilled migration opportunities abroad.

This study focuses on how it motivates people to migrate abroad over the past few years. During the colonial period it was identified that migration was done for the administrative positions. Whereas in today's context, it is noted that most of the students who migrate, and the professionals seek higher wages as well as quality education for their children have become prominent reasons for migration. The motivation for migration has been increased because of economic dynamics and educational opportunities (Jayawardane, 2020).

In the current context, political instability, and violence act as a major social influencing factors for the skill migration. The counties which have conflicts beyond the civil wars have become the major driving forces for the decision of migration and this was identified by International Organization for Migration. This was further discussed by Asis and Piper (2008) about aggressive conflicts in the country. Moreover, as mentioned by Silva (2018), provides a clear picture about the social factors living standards as motivational factor which drives migration. Moreover, as mentioned by Silva (2018) provides a clear understanding about the social factors such as living standards as motivational factors which drive migration.

It has identified the important characteristics of economic factors which drives the motivation to skill migration. According to the Lowell and Findlay (2001), it has proved the impact of lower wage rates has a major influence on both public as well as private sector skilled professionals to search for better job opportunities abroad. This disparity in wages has resulted in the major common concern in lower-income countries try to find job opportunities abroad, making the paramount driver of migration (Gunawardena & Nawaratne, 2017).

## V. CONCLUSION

In summary this study focuses on significant implications in Sri Lanka. It is noted that, policymakers should consider the economic restructures to reduce wage disparities and further implement processes to create better job opportunities. It is critical to retain skilled professionals by improving political stability and enhancing living standards. Moreover, it is identified that the research is needed to explore long term effects of skilled migration on the Sri Lankan economy as well as the society and further to assess the effectiveness of policy inventions for the purpose of brain drain.

This shows the comprehensive understanding regarding brain drain and migration in Sri Lanka since in 2000 to 2022. It is noted that the long term as well as temporary migrations has dramatically increased in Sri Lanka when compared to this timeframe. In past, most of the skilled professionals left the country by reaching OECD nations such as Canada, Australia as well as United Kingdom. It is highlighted that there's been a new wave of student migration since the year 2000. Further, skilled professionals in various sectors including medicine, finance, administration and so on, have been migrated to developed countries, for better wages and quality of their children's education.

In the year 2014, it shows the highest migration rate in Sri Lanka. This trend causes a major concern as this directly impacts to the Sri Lankan labour force and economic development. By carrying out a comprehensive literature review, it is identified the main three categories which influence the decision of skill migration as social, economic, and political factors.

Political violence as well as higher living standards have been identified as the main contributing factors to skill migration. In recent past, apart from civil war there were number of violent conflicts occurred in Sri Lanka. This was reported by the International Organization for Migration and identified that these conflicts have prompted the migration decisions of individuals. The main concerns of better living standards and improved quality of lives have been identified as the most influencing factors to take the decision of migration.

When considering the economic factors, the migration of skilled professionals has increased mainly because of lower income in both private as well as public sectors. Which means that most of the skilled individuals are struggling to meet basic needs by their income in their home country. Therefore, they try to compel them to migrate to developed countries. When considering the low-income countries, the wage disparities between the home country and the destination countries are majorly concerned. Political factors of migration can identify as lack of liberty, war, conflicts, corruptions, and loss of human rights. Those political factors directly impact on brain drain in Sri Lanka.

## REFERENCES

- Anas, M.U.M., & Wickremasinghe, S.I. (2010). Brain drain of the scientific community of developing countries: The case of Sri Lanka. *Science and Public Policy*, 37(5), 381–388. <https://doi.org/10.3152/030234210X501199>
- Asis, M.M.B., & Piper, N. (2008). Researching International Labor Migration In Asia. 49, 423–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730500125953>
- Cattaneo, C. (2009). International migration, the brain drain and poverty: A cross-country analysis. *World Economy*, 32(8), 1180–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2009.01178.x>
- Deng, Z. (2007). China's brain drain problem: Causes, consequences and policy options. *Journal of Contemporary China*, (December 2011), 37–41.

- Ekanayake, A., & Amirthalingam, K. (2022). Impact of migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar on skill acquisition and brain drain. *Migration and Development*, 11(3), 450–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2020.1787106>
- Ekanayake, A.P., & Amirthalingam, K. (2021). An empirical study of the factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar. *Migration and Development*, 10(3), 403–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2019.1665923>
- Gunawardena, C., & Nawaratne, R. (2017). Brain drain from Sri Lankan Universities. *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, 40(2), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljss.v40i2.7541>
- Hugo, G. (2005). The New International Migration in Asia. *Asian Population Studies*, 1(1), 93–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730500125953>
- Jayawardena, P. (2020). Sri Lankan Out-Migration: Five Key Waves Since Independence. *University of Colombo Review*, 1(1), 101. <https://doi.org/10.4038/ucr.v1i1.32>
- Khan, A., & Arokkiaraj, H. (2021). Challenges of reverse migration in India: a comparative study of internal and international migrant workers in the post-COVID economy. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00260-2>
- Lowell, B.L., & Findlay, A. (2001). Migration of highly skilled persons from developing countries: Impact and policy responses. *International Migration Papers*, 44(January), 1–41.
- Ngoma, A.L., & Ismail, N.W. (2013). The determinants of brain drain in developing countries. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 40(8), 744–754. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-05-2013-0109>
- Silva, G.A.S.K. (2018). A Review of the Skill Shortage Challenge in. *International Journal of Economics, Business and Management Research*, 2(01), 75–89.
- Song, H. (1997). From brain drain to reverse brain drain: Three decades of Korean experience. *Science, Technology and Society*, 2(2), 317–345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097172189700200206>
- Sri Lanka Net Migration Rate 1950 - 2023 (no date). Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/LKA/sri-lanka/net-migration>
- Ullah, A.A. (2018). Skill drain from ASEAN countries: can sending countries afford? *International Journal of Development Issues*, 17(2), 205–219. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-12-2017-0210>
- Wijesinghe, D.P.S., & Jayawardane, V.P.T. (2021). The determinants of migration of Sri Lankan young engineers to Australia – A case study. *KDU Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 3(2), 113. <https://doi.org/10.4038/kjms.v3i2.34>
- Yoon, B.S.L. (1992). Reverse brain drain in South Korea: State-led model. *Studies In Comparative International Development*, 27(1), 4–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02687102>
- Zweig, D., Fung, C.S., & Han, D. (2008). Redefining the brain drain: China’s ‘diaspora option’. *Science, Technology and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097172180701300101>