

## Brain Drain: the Exodus of Sri Lanka's Healthcare Workforce

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### *Difficulties in establishing a migration profile for Sri Lanka*

Despite public and industry concerns about the departure of professionals as migrants from Sri Lanka, there are no comprehensive centralized mechanisms to track and document the migrant outflow from the country. This poses a significant challenge in quantifying “brain drain” within the national context.

The annual outflow of labour migrants is estimated to range between 230,000- 250,000 persons (IOM, 2022). The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE, 2021) documents 122,264 labour migrant departures in 2021. There is a decline in the outward migrants in 2020 and 2021 compared to the average of 226,510 annual migrants in the preceding 5 years from 2015-2019 (SLBFE, 2021), which is expected considering the mobility restrictions adopted internationally to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in 2022, 311,056 labour migrants departed from the country (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022), when Sri Lanka experienced significant changes in the sociopolitical and economic landscape as it emerged from the global pandemic; with adverse conditions akin to, and possibly worse than those which created waves of migrant exodus in the past (Jayawardena, 2020).

However, the SLBFE statistics do not accurately reflect the migration profile of Sri Lanka (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). The SLBFE documents “outward labour migrants”, as those who complete the process of ‘mandatory registration of Sri Lankans leaving for employment abroad’, which limits the statistics to mostly domestic, unskilled, and semi-skilled workers who seek employment abroad directly via the SLBFE and foreign employment agencies. Most skilled workers migrate to OECD countries (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2020) and do so via the routine emigration process with little incentive to voluntarily complete the registration with the SLBFE, leading to under- documentation of this population of labour migrants. Therefore, professional and skilled worker departures are under-represented in the national statistics (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019). For example, in 2021, the SLBFE documents only 17 skilled and professional workers departing for the UK and only 19 to Canada (SLBFE, 2021).

The SLBFE statistics also do not account for those with professional qualifications who depart for higher education in foreign institutions utilizing the “study abroad” strategy (Jayawardena, 2020) to lay the foundation for future employment and residence in the countries where they receive their education.

In a study conducted among 107 Sri Lankan students enrolled in an educational program abroad, of whom 43 (40.2%) were enrolled in a postgraduate program, most stated they had no intention to return to Sri Lanka, indicating the trend toward ‘brain drain’ within the albeit small sample population.

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There is limited data on the migration of persons with professional qualifications as students (Weeraratne, Weerasekara & Bandara, 2022). However, category of “study abroad” migrants should not be neglected where brain drain is discussed, as it depletes the young, educated, and employable population from the local labour market.

With the lack of reliable and official records on outward migrants, proxy records must be utilized to assess the extent of the problem. A potential proxy indicator of migration is the trend in the flow of foreign remittances to Sri Lanka. Remittances from workers employed abroad are an accepted benefit of migration to home countries. In 2021, foreign remittance inflow declined compared to the previous 5 years which is consistent with the decline in outward migrants and return of migrant workers back home during the pandemic. However, despite the departure of a large number of migrants in 2022, the foreign remittance inflow continued to decline further. The socio-political instability and the economic crisis were the likely deterrents to sending migrant worker earnings back to the country. Most remittances originate from Gulf countries (Foreign Remittances Facilitation Department, 2022), where a majority of the Sri Lankan migrant population are employed as domestic housekeeping assistants (SLBFE, 2021). Therefore, remittances are unlikely to fully indicate the extent of professional labour migration as most professionals who migrate via the emigration processes, do so with their families, thus having little incentive to send their earnings back to Sri Lanka (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2020).

The desire to migrate has surged among Sri Lankans. The aforesaid survey by the IHP in 2021 found that 27% of Sri Lankan adults expressed a desire to migrate (Institute for Health Policy, 2021). More Sri Lankans expressed a desire to migrate compared to the regional estimate of the desire to migrate at 11% (Pugliese & Ray, 2023). Among those who indicated a desire to migrate from Sri Lanka, 53% were university graduates holding a degree

or higher qualification. 23% of the survey sample had plans to migrate and 16% had already started preparations. Of those who had started preparations to migrate, most held degrees or higher qualifications.

A survey conducted by the institute of health policy (IHP), among 746 adults selected randomly, found that the number of Sri Lankans intending to migrate has doubled in the last 3-5 years. A majority of adults were experiencing a worse economic situation than in the year prior and only expected the economy to worsen within the year, reflecting dissatisfaction with the economy. The study concludes that the major driver of the increasing desire to migrate within the current context is most likely disenchantment with the government (Institute for Health Policy, 2021).

Trends in acquisition of passports are another potential indicator of intent to migrate. Sri Lanka issued 911,757 passports in the year 2022 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022), almost twice the average of 466,024 passports issued per year in the previous 5 years (Department of Immigration & Emigration, 2021). The Sri Lankan passport application and renewal forms request applicants to disclose their occupation. The holder's occupation is then printed on the information page of the passport. However, the Department of Immigration and Emigration does not enter the information it collects on the profession of applicants into a database or analyze this information and it is therefore unavailable as a potential source of information to build a migration profile for Sri Lanka. Similarly, departure cards filled out prior to Airport Customs by all departing Sri Lankans request travelers to disclose their occupation as well as the purpose of their visit abroad with separate options for migration and employment. However, this information too is not extracted or analyzed.

In the future, sourcing data from these points along the path to working abroad and analyzing it according to skill level and sector could be a potential mechanism for tracking migrant outflow

to derive the full extent of the migration of professionals.

#### *Migration of the Healthcare Workers*

The issue of health worker migration in Sri Lanka has been capturing increasing attention over the past years, with further aggravation in 2022 due to the economic crisis. The exodus of doctors places further stress on a healthcare system already experiencing shortages of other healthcare personnel (WHO, 2020), funding, and essential medicines and consumables. According to the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), nearly 500 doctors migrated between January to August 2022 (Yusuf, 2022).

There is a lack of data to assess the exact scope of migration of health workers from Sri Lanka even in the present context. Migration of health workers has mostly been an individual decision; encouraging 5 years of unpaid leave to work abroad.

Unlike engineers and IT professionals, doctors must register with the SLMC before being eligible to practice in Sri Lanka. In addition, doctors who are in the stage of preparing for migration, request a Letter of Good Standing from the SLMC. Therefore, the trends in the issuance of Letters of Good Standing by the SLMC is a potential proxy indicator for the preparation to migrate among doctors.

Analyzing the impact of brain drain is not only an issue of quantity. The emigration of a single individual with niche or advanced qualifications can significantly impact their field. Specialist doctors too are among those professionals who can be considered as having niche qualifications. In 2017, 2000 medical specialists were employed in the Ministry of Health (WHO, 2020). Among 579 specialists who left for foreign training between 2006 to 2009, 76 (13%) migrated. Fourteen (21%) doctors who underwent foreign training in general surgery and other surgical specialties emigrated, as did 23 (15%) trained in internal medicine and other medical specialties. Fourteen (21%)

anaesthesiologists and 5 (13%) psychiatrists emigrated. Receiving countries for specialist doctors were Australia, the UK, and New Zealand. (De Silva *et.al.*, 2013). These findings were derived from the official records of the PGIM and the Ministry of Health. The PGIM currently does not possess any records specific to migration. The PGIM releases documents such as academic records and letters indicating the courses completed to doctors who request them with the intention of migration. However, the issuance of these records is not documented.

Therefore, policymakers and the government authorities must devise measures to track migration after considering the impact of migration on the functioning of the healthcare sector.

#### *The Decision to Migrate*

Among a cohort of Sri Lankan students enrolled in educational programs abroad, students cited finding employment outside of Sri Lanka (45%) and continuing higher studies outside Sri Lanka (38%) as predominant “pull” factors to remaining abroad. A minority decided not to return based on personal reasons. Higher salaries, better living conditions, and more employment opportunities made remaining in these countries more attractive to student migrants. Political and economic instability in Sri Lanka and the shortage of employment opportunities were “push” factors (Weeraratne, Weerasekara & Bandara, 2022). These sentiments align with the non-mutually exclusive macro and micro theories on migration where the decision to migrate is influenced by an assessment of the economic conditions, and labour supply and demand in their destinations compared to Sri Lanka and appraisal of the personal cost-benefit of remaining in these countries (Oso, Kaczmarczyk & Salamonska, 2022). Recognized “pull” factors for highly skilled workers are active economic growth, higher quality of life, higher wages and employment rates, labour conditions, easy access to the labour market, and a well-established

knowledge economy. “Push” factors in sending regions are economic depression, political turmoil, and high unemployment (European Committee of Regions, 2018).

Among 107 public university academics who migrated from Sri Lanka, 24.4% chose to migrate as they felt conditions in the country were non-conducive due to low income and having to take on extra income-generating activities, leaving little time for innovation. They also felt that only those with political connections managed to be academically productive and fulfilled. 19.5% felt that the conditions at the university were non-conducive and that they felt as though it was a place with no future. Dissatisfaction with the heavy rules and regulations in the university was also expressed. These sentiments highlight the administrative and financial barriers to innovation in Sri Lanka, their demoralizing effect, and ultimately how they “push” highly qualified academics out of the country. In addition to the lack of time to engage in research, academics felt isolated from the international research community and struggled with limited financial resources.

#### *Retention and Re-Integration*

The WHO has put forth recommendations to attract, recruit, and retain the health workforce in remote and rural settings. These measures are categorized into educational, financial, regulatory, and personal and professional interventions. Though intended to be applied to the rural health force, these principles are broadly generalizable to the retention of workers from most professional sectors in low- and middle-income countries.

Programs that aim to support socioeconomic reintegration have been established in a limited capacity. However, the majority of existing reintegration programs cater to low-skilled workers (Jayaratne et.al. 2014). Improving the number and quality of migrant reintegration programs to provide support specifically for returning skilled and professional migrants may be necessary to facilitate brain circulation.

Students who have sought higher education abroad should be a target group for re-integration measures. Students are disinclined to return following the completion of studies due to a lack of economic prospects. Measures to encourage the return of students with foreign qualifications include matching graduates with potential employers and streamlining the processes for acquiring qualifications to practice locally. Foreign university-educated doctors are often discouraged from returning to Sri Lanka as they must face the sporadically available ERPM examination and be placed lower down in the internship allocation list into placements that are considered undesirable by local graduates. Re-assessing these regulatory barriers faced by foreign graduates to optimize their return is worthwhile.

Economic improvement following return to Sri Lanka is better for skilled workers compared to unskilled workers but is still rather limited (Jayarathne et.al. 2014). The IOM-ILO collaboration for the reintegration of repatriated migrant workers and irregular migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a potential framework for an economic reintegration model for professional workers. This program provided skills development opportunities and the establishment of public employment centers and job portals to facilitate matching with employers and work-based learning programmes (International Labour Organization, no date).

The existing Rataviruvo program is under the purview of the SLBFE which provides housing loans up to Rs. 300,000 and self-employment loans up to Rs. 50,000 (Jayaratne et.al., 2014) are unlikely to appeal to professional migrants enough to facilitate their return to Sri Lanka. Projects such as fellowships, and reintegration grants (European Committee of Regions, 2018) for persons with qualifications identified as being deficient in the local context may be more appealing to those with an interest in research and innovation. Apart from financial interventions, the promotion of lifestyle within the region such as cultural activities and sports may

also appeal to professional migrants (European Committee of Regions, 2018)

Few returning Sri Lankan migrants are aware of the existence of reintegration programs (Jayaratne *et.al.* 2014), therefore the government must act to improve the knowledge regarding the availability of the existing programs to ensure that those entitled to these services receive them. The promotion of reintegration programs should also be developed in parallel to the programs themselves in order to achieve their objectives.

Currently, re-integration efforts have not focused on establishing ongoing contact with the Sri Lankan diaspora network. Building relationships with the diaspora can facilitate brain circulation (Weearathne, Weerasekara & Bandara 2022). These relationships can pave the way to encourage migrants to return to Sri Lanka on a temporary or permanent basis as well, promote re-integration programs. They could facilitate the development of training or exchange opportunities for Sri Lankans in other countries which emphasize applying their experience to the national context. Some Sri Lankan academics who migrated have expressed interest in returning to Sri Lanka to serve the universities during periods of sabbatical and other leave, helping undergraduates financially and training researchers (Gunawardena & Nawaratna 2017).

In addition, alumni of international universities can offer unique insight into measures to improve the local education systems which can improve retention. Strengthening local education systems is of vital importance as many migrants cite better educational prospects either for themselves or their children as a “pull” factor for migration (Weerarathne, Weerasekara & Bandara, 2022; De Silva *et.al* 2013; Gunawardena & Nawaratne, 2017). Options include courses on a fee-levying basis within the government institutions to address the shortage of seats in universities (Weearathne, Weerasekara & Bandara, 2022) and addressing deficiencies in the curricula, infrastructure, and

social environment within public and private institutions and improving research opportunities. Measures to improve education systems improve living conditions for workers and their families.

Worker retention within the industry should target providing a safe working environment and, adequate resources (World Health Organization 2010). Professional bodies and companies should actively seek employee feedback and appoint human resources personnel to ensure that professional standards are maintained.

### *The Way Forward*

The most significant challenge to quantifying and defining brain drain within the current context of Sri Lanka is the lack of complete data. While anecdotal evidence suggests a mass exodus of professionals with the economic and sociopolitical crisis, the data is not available to either support or dispute these claims. Therefore, the first step is to establish means of quantifying brain drain. Inter-sector and public-private cooperation must be established. Tracking labour and student outflows by a central body (Weearathne, Weerasekara & Bandara, 2022), which is capable of integrating data across sectors can generate a more comprehensive profile of the Sri Lankan migrant population. In order to support such a central body, each sector must build capacity to monitor and track its workforce.

The focus should also fall on workforce retention and encouragement of brain circulation by incentivizing qualified professionals to return home if residing elsewhere.

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