

# Demographic Characteristics of Recently Migrated Sri Lankan Youths for Foreign Jobs

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## ABSTRACT

Young migrants make up more than 10 per cent of the overall 232 million international migrants, and, are the most mobile social group (International Labour Migration, 2023). Young people constitute the bulk of annual migration movements in most countries. Within this background the objective of this study is to identify the Demographic characteristics of recently migrated Sri Lankan youths for foreign jobs from 2018 to 2022. This study builds on the secondary data obtained from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. From the mass data set carried out 901,778 migrants, 1% of the probability sample has been selected using a simple random sampling method with less than 2 percent of margin of error. Youth migrants aged 20 – 34 have been derived as the study sample. Thus, 3814 cases have been utilized to carry out this study. According to the study, 76% of the migrants are males while 24% of them are females. Under the SLBFE classification of skill category and gender, there is a visible connection between gender and skill level. Pearson Chi-square value proves it with 0.000 <math>P</math> value. The majority of the migrants have migrated for skilled jobs while the second largest share is unskilled migrants. As revealed from this study, the problematic scenario is the majority of the male migrants migrated for skilled and unskilled jobs. It can be identified that 59% of youth migrants are expecting elementary jobs such as Cleaners, Helpers, Labourers etc. Most of the females are still migrating as housekeeping assistants while the literacy level of females is very high. Policies and programs should be implemented to improve the intention of young females and males to seek employment opportunities such as professional and skilled level categories.

**Keywords:** youth migrants, skill level, gender, relationship

## INTRODUCTION

Emigration of youth population has become a significant phenomenon under the existing economic crisis. Generally, men are more likely than women to emigrate if given the chance. As groups of outward migrants are concerned, there is a trend that the greatest desire to emigrate are youth and university graduates. However, it should be noted that in terms of changing the desire to migrate into actual plans, the better-off and more educated are far more likely to have started preparations, demonstrating that personal resources are also a key factor enabling Sri Lankans to migrate (Institute for Health Policy, 2021).

Although people have always moved, current flows are more than ever influenced by globalization. Globalization has enabled and requires the increased mobility of people, as well as the mobility of capital, goods, and services. At the international level, skilled and unskilled people from developing countries are meeting labour gaps in more developed economies (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Young migrants make up more than 10 percent of the overall 232 million international migrants, and, being the most mobile social group, young people constitute the bulk of annual migration movements (International Labour Migration, 2023). While international migration represents an opportunity for youth to provide a better life for themselves and their families, pursue educational aspirations, improve their professional skills and prospects, or satisfy a desire for personal development through the adventures and challenges that come with living abroad, the migration of young people takes place in the context of high

youth unemployment and the lack of decent work creation at home (International Labour Organization, 2023).

It is conspicuous that emigration of working aged population, especially young persons aged 20-34 has become a significant phenomenon under the existing economic crisis. Thus, young people are the largest group of individuals migrating each year and they do so mainly in search of decent work and better living conditions, education, family reunification and for humanitarian reasons. In 2010, some 3.6 million young people were enrolled in tertiary education abroad (International Labour Organization, 2023).

Unemployment, underemployment, low wages, and family poverty are major factors, as is the availability of higher-paying jobs abroad. In developing countries, migrants’ remittances help households cope with poverty, financial crises, and natural disasters. Pressure to migrate will become even stronger because of differentiated demographic and income trends. Thus, this paper focuses on the demographic characteristics of recently migrated youths for foreign jobs.

**Theoretical Background**

Migration theories can be classified into three main categories. They are namely, micro, macro, and meso level theories. Micro-level theories basically focus on individual-level migration.

Aggregate migration trends are looked at in Macro-level theories where the Meso level focuses between Macro and Micro level which is simply on the household or community perpetuation of migration (Joseph & Dissanayake, 2022).

The Table 3.1 shows an overview of migration theories.

**Table 3.1: An overview of migration theories**

Micro Level	Meso Level	Macro Level
Lee’s Theory	Social Capital Theory	Neoclassical macro migration Theory
Neoclassical micro migration Theory	Institutional Theory	Migration as a system
Behavioral Models	Network Theory	Dual Labour Market Theory
Theory of Social Systems	Cumulative Causation	World Systems Theory
	New Economics from Labour Migration	Mobility Transition

**Source: Joseph & Dissanayake, 2022**

Neoclassical macro migration is describing migration as a piece of economic development.

As a result of geographical differences in the supply and demand of labour, internal migration occurs (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). Dual Labour market theory describes migration as a cause of a temporary pull factor which is precisely a strong Lee’s Theory of Migration and push pull factors which is precisely a strong structured labour demand in a developed country (Piore, 1981).

As a result of colonialism and the capitalist expansion of neoclassical governments and multinationals, the role of destruction and dislocation happened in the peripheral parts of the world. It is also known as a historical structure approach and in other words, it is the world system theory (Wallerstein, 1974). According to (Zelinsky, 1971) migration is a part of economic and social changes which is again emphasized in the modernization process. He argues that the patterns and rates of migration can be linked

with the process of modernization. He further mentions that preferences for personal freedom are a part of the modernization process.

Meso-level theories and factors are particularly focused on access to knowledge about living abroad. This can be related to various personal, community, and diaspora ties, work-based networks as well as recruitment channels for both those in employment and students. Networks, including those established online, play a key role in migration decisions (Boyd, 1989; Epstein & Gang, 2006), by facilitating access to accommodation and employment, easing the initial stress after the arrival.

People moving from one country to another due to better living conditions or to escape from dramatic situations in a homeland are major two drivers of the push and pull theory which was introduced by Lee in 1966. (Castelli, 2018). This theory mentions that an individual can be pushed by economic, environmental, social, and political factors of the homeland and attract him/her to the destination. Neoclassical micro migration theory explains the human capital approach in which migration is treated as an individual investment decision to increase the productivity of human capital. (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). Behavioral models leave out some of the unrealistic assumptions of the human capital approach. The behavioural approach considers non-economic factors and societal influences which could be vague and rational decision-making is still assumed. (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). According to the Theory of Social Systems, migration can be a result of resolving power questions which in other words structural tensions and agnominal tensions which are prestige questions (Joseph & Dissanayake, 2022).

### **Lee's Theory and push pull factors**

Moreover, Lee's theory links with this study directly. Migration is broadly understood as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence. In other words, migration may be defined as a form of relocation diffusion (the spread of people, ideas, innovations, behaviours, from one place to another), involving permanent moves to new locations. The reasons that people migrate are determined by push and pull factors, which are forces that either induce people to move to a new location or oblige them to leave old residences. These could be economic, political, cultural, and environmental. Push factors are conditions that can force people to leave their homes and are related to the country from which a person migrates. Push factors include non-availability of enough livelihood opportunities, poverty, rapid population growth that surpasses available resources, "Primitive" or "poor" living conditions, desertification, famines/droughts, fear of political persecution, poor healthcare, loss of wealth, and natural disasters. Pull factors are exactly the opposite of push factors: they attract people to a certain location. Typical examples of pull factors of a place are more job opportunities and better living conditions; easy availability of land for settling and agriculture, political and/or religious freedom, superior education and welfare systems, better transportation and communication facilities, better healthcare system and stress-free environment attractive, and security.

Everett Lee has conceptualized the factors associated with the decision to migrate and the process of migration into the following four categories: (1) Factors associated with the area of origin; (2) Factors associated with the area of destination; (3) Intervening obstacles; and (4) Personal factors (Lee, 1966).

Lee elaborates all these four categories by pointing out that, in each area, there are numerous factors which act to drive away the people from the area, or to hold the people in the area or to attract the people to it. In this respect, there are significant differences between the factors associated with the area of origin and those associated with the area of destination. Migration may take place after both these are properly weighed. Usually, however, a person has a better and more realistic knowledge about the place of origin, while his knowledge about the place of destination is somewhat superficial and inexact.

Intervening obstacles also have to be overcome before migration finally takes place. These include distance and transportation. Technological advances, however, have lessened their importance in modern times.

Finally, the personal factors are of the utmost importance because, instead of the actual factors associated with the place of origin and/or destination, the individual's perception of these factors is found to influence the actual act of migration.

## METHODOLOGY

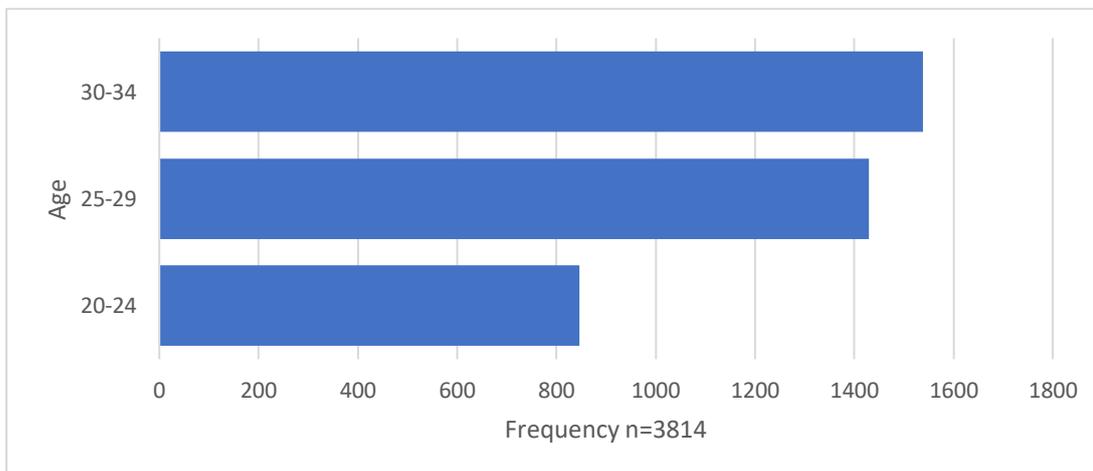
This study uses the secondary data obtained from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) over the period from 2018 through 2023. The SLBFE has collected the information about the outward migrants such as age, gender, permanent residence in Sri Lanka of youth migrants, destination country, expected job, expected salary, skill category, and arrangement of their migration process (by themselves or by agencies) for several previous years but to examine the main issue of this study the data set is considered from 2018 to 2022. The mass data set carried out data of 901,778 migrants. From that mass data set 1% of probability sample has been selected using simple random procedure with the less than 2 percent of margin of error. Further, to focuses the target group of youths from that sub-sample, youth migrants aged 20 – 34 have been derived as the study sample. Thus, 3814 cases have been utilized to carry out this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The life course perspective proposes that the motivations and consequences of immigration differ by age. Immigrants who migrate at younger ages are more likely to be seeking education and employment opportunities, while most later life immigrants migrate to be reunited with family members.

The Figure 4.1 indicates that 30-34 age group contains the highest volume of youth migration. 25-29 age group shows the second highest volume while 20-24 age group displays the lowest volume.

**Figure 4.1: Age at Departure, 2023**



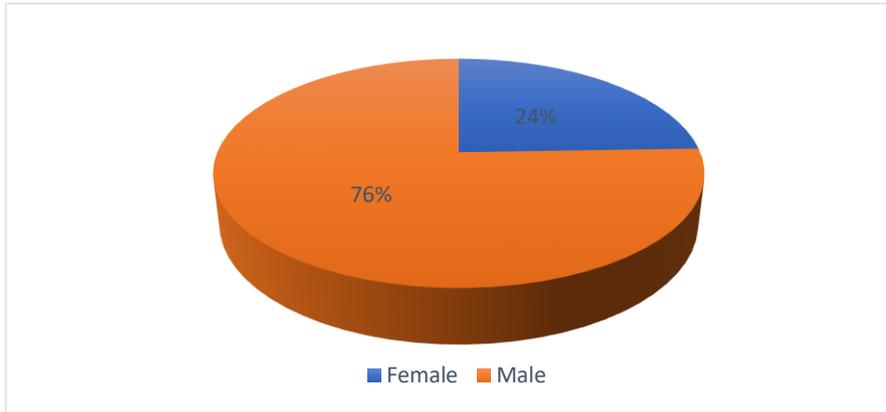
**Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment , 2023**

### Gender

Gender plays a significant role in migration, influencing people's access to rights, their roles and responsibilities, their opportunities, and experiences. Gender has an influence on the reasons why people move; the places to which they migrate; the protection and support they receive; and the ways they are perceived and treated.

According to the Figure: 4.2, 76% of the youth migrants are males. Females are only 24% of the sample.

**Figure: 4.2 Gender of migrants, 2023**



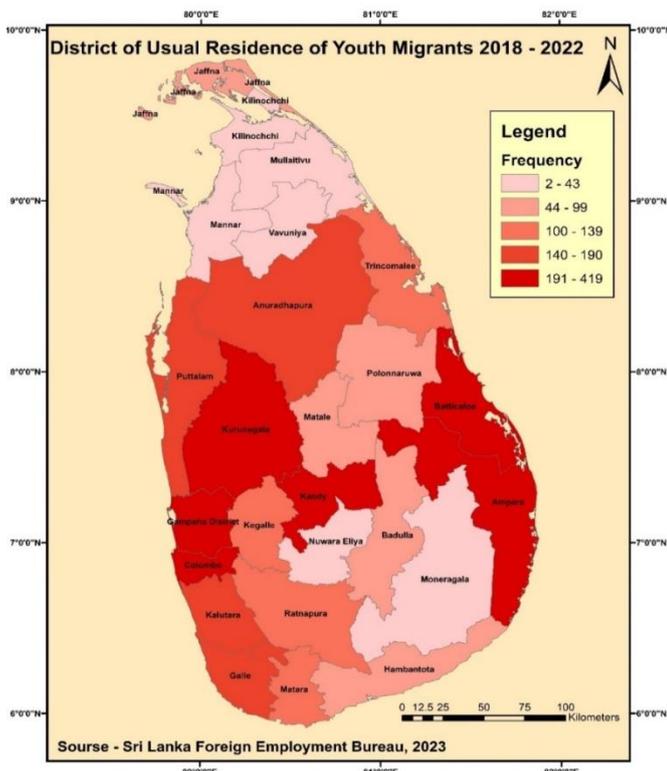
**Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2023**

This figure goes with the literature that rise in male migration is due to concerted government efforts encouraging migration of skilled workers and providing more opportunities for men to become skilled and migrate as semi-skilled and skilled workers (Ekanayake, 2022: International Labour Organization, 2023).

**District of usual residence of youth migrants**

Map 4.1 shows the districts of usual residence of youth migrants from 2018 to 2023. Kurunegala, Batticaloa, and Ampara districts have had the highest volume of youth migrants throughout the years. Literature proves that Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy and Kurunegala contain the highest popularity in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Due to the high population above, we can argue that these districts face challenges related to unemployment, low job wages, loss of employment due to Covid-19 (mainly primary jobs), difficulty finding dynamic job opportunities, inflation-related financial barriers, hopelessness, demotivation, etc. The above factors could be the main reason for the highest youth migration in the above districts. More studies should be conducted to determine the specific reasons for this behavior.

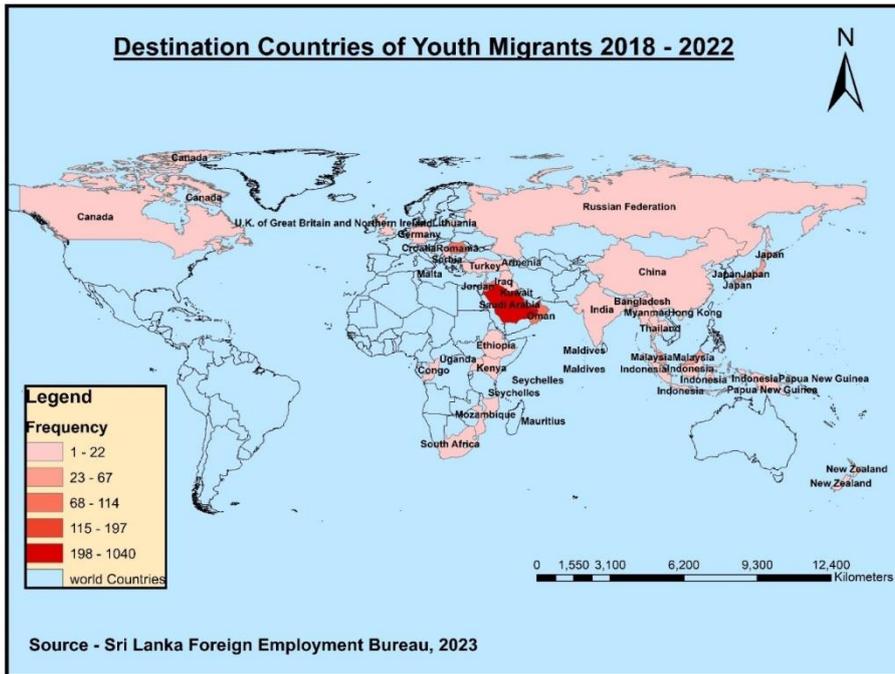
**Map 4.1: District of usual residence of youth migrants**



### Destination countries of the youth migrants

Map 4.2 indicates the destination countries of the youth migrants from 2018 to 2023. Saudi Arabia has been the most populous destination of youth migration during the last five years, and Orman, Jordan, Kuwait and Romania are the second leading destinations. Newly industrialized countries such as Japan and Malaysia also have the attraction of Sri Lankan youth. Latin American region has the lowest youth migration attraction because no one has migrated to that region.

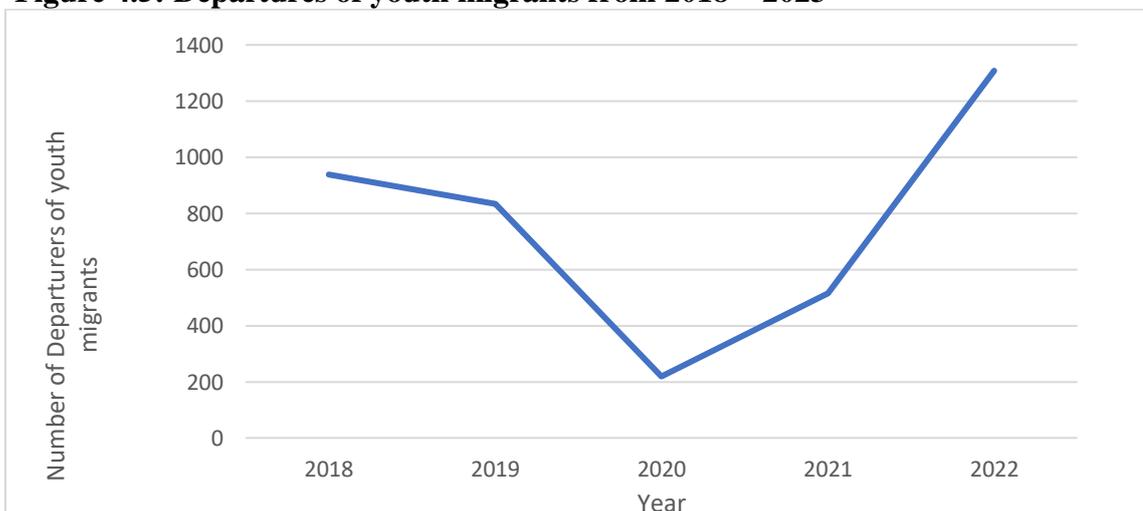
**Map 4.2 Destination countries of the youth migrants, 2023**



### Migration Trend

Figure 4.5 indicates the number of departures of youth migrants (20-34 years) who have migrated to different countries and various job categories. It can be clearly seen that 2020 is a turning point of the migration flow of the country.

**Figure 4.5: Departures of youth migrants from 2018 – 2023**



Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2023

From 2019 it can be clearly identified a shrinking pattern and 2020 shows the lowest number of departures. From 2020 to 2022 it can be identified a sharp upward trend which is very important for this study. However, literature discusses that there is not any significant improvement in labour migration in Sri Lanka (Ekanayake, 2022) but this study proves that there is a significant improvement in youth labour migration in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, Intention of migrating of youth in 2022 have been increased when it compares with 2018.

While it can be argued that the perceived increase in migration is a more recent phenomenon accentuated by the pandemic in 2020, it is also possible that young people depart more frequently for other pursuits such as employment and education. To further complicate matters, it is unclear whether most youth consider employment as a pathway for long-term residence abroad or intend to return to Sri Lanka with their acquired qualifications. Literature suggested that youth aged 18-29 have the highest desire to migrate at around 48%. But it was people in areas such as the Western province who indicated greater capability of preparing for migration. This is likely due to the high initial cost including airfare, tuition fees and initial living expenses. Departures in categories other than short-term employment, therefore, seem to be mainly associated with high and middle-income groups. One frequently discussed implication of this is brain drain or the emigration of highly knowledgeable people. However according to this study majority of the youth migrants are not migrating for professional jobs. Further studies should be focused on this trend to investigate what is the aspiration of recently migrated youths.

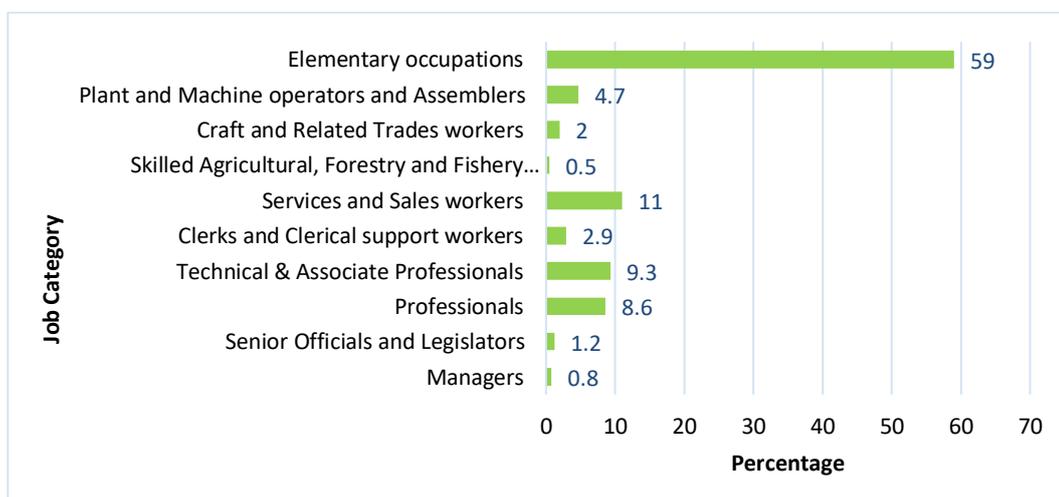
Out-migration can also affect economic growth as these social segments provide a stable source of demand for goods and services and contribute to investments. Beyond economic impacts, such communities also hold significant socio-political power in the country. Although understanding the full extent of the desire of young people to migrate remains difficult due to the lack of comprehensive data, a more strategic approach is still warranted to mitigate the adverse effects of migration and leverage its unique advantages.

### Expected job categories of youth migrants

Youth employability is key access to young people the space, support, and confidence to have their voices heard on issues that matter to them and to provide volunteering and social action opportunities.

Figure 4.3 indicates the expected job categories according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) (International Labor Organization, The International Classification of Occupations, 2023).

**Figure 4.3: Expected job categories of youth migrants**



Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2023

It can be identified that 59% of youth migrants are expecting elementary jobs such as Cleaners, Helpers, Labourers etc. Technical & Associate Professional, Professionals, Senior Officials and Legislators and Managers account for 9.3%, 8.6%, 1.2% and 0.8% respectively.

Literature proves that, around 44% of the global workforce is working in low-skilled occupations. In Sri Lanka, the unskilled workforce was around 25% in 2020 (International Labor Organization, Skilling Sri Lankan migrant workers towards the Global talent pool, 2023: International Organization for Migration, 2018, IOM Sri Lanka Country Strategy 2018-2020)

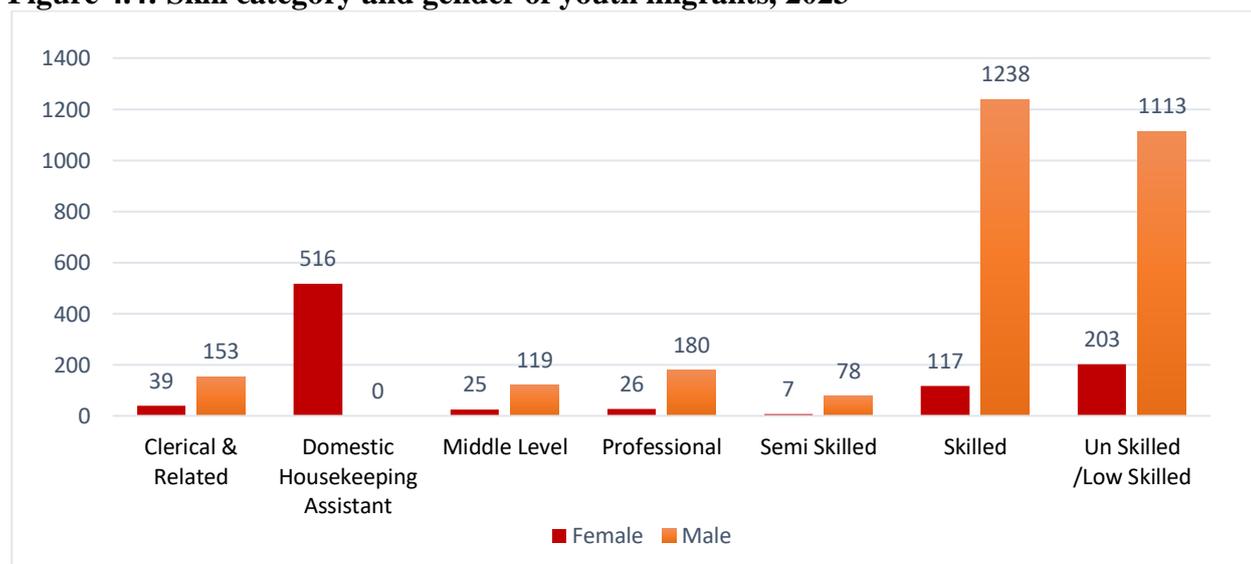
In 2021, only 121,000 Sri Lankans left for overseas employment; and in 2020, only 53,000 were abroad due to the pandemic. The destination countries' requirement was to have skilled labor for all categories of employment including in the helping category (International Labour Organization, Skilling Sri Lankan migrant workers towards the Global talent pool, 2023) Data displays that skilled share of migrants is higher than the other skill categories.

### Skill category and gender of youth migrants

The development of skills can contribute to structural transformation and economic growth by enhancing employability and labor productivity and helping countries to become more competitive. Investment in a high-quality workforce can create a virtuous cycle, where relevant and quality skills enable productivity growth and foreign direct investment, which result in more and better jobs for the current workforce and more public and private investment in the education and training system (Boyd, 1989). This, in turn, increases the employability and productivity of both the current and future workforce.

Among female migrants, domestic housekeeping assistant account for the largest share while the second largest share indicates unskilled / low skilled female migrants. The special feature is very low shares displayed by skilled, professional, and semi-skilled female migrants. Among male youth migrants, skilled migrant category owns for the largest proportion. However, the unskilled / low skilled category also shows a higher proportion (Figure 4.4).

**Figure 4.4: Skill category and gender of youth migrants, 2023**



**Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2023**

According to the SLBFE classification of skill category and gender, there is a visible connection between gender and skill level. Pearson Chi-square value proves it with  $0.000 < P$  value.

Literature proves that Since 2008, the share of women has declined because of government policies such as encouraging skilled migration over low-skilled migration, higher minimum wages for domestic workers,

and restriction on the migration of mothers (Sucharitakul & Punpuing, 2011; Ukwatta, 2011; Ukwatta, 2010; Ratnayake, 1999).

The decline in the percentage of women among migrant departures is largely due to the increase in male workers and not because of a significant reduction in the absolute number of female departures. This rise in male migration is due to concerted government efforts encouraging migration of skilled workers and providing more opportunities for men to become skilled and migrate as semi-skilled and skilled workers. The emphasis on migration of skilled workers stems from the National Labor Migration Policy (NLMP), which is aimed at increasing inward remittances as well as minimizing the vulnerability of low-skilled migrant workers, who were previously predominantly female. However according to the SLBFE data it can still be identified majority of the youth migrants are migrating for the low skilled jobs and domestic works.

## CONCLUSION

Young migrants make up more than 10 per cent of the overall 232 million international migrants, and, being the most mobile social group. The young people constitute the bulk of annual migration movements in most countries (International Labour Organization, 2023). It is conspicuous that the emigration of the working-age population, especially young persons According to the migrant volumes of the study, 25-29 age group shows the second highest volume while 20-24 age group displays the lowest volume. aged 30-34 has become a significant phenomenon under the existing economic crisis. Study reveals that 76% of the youth migrants are males. Females are only 24% of the sample.

As revealed from this study, the problematic scenario is the majority of the migrants both male and female migrated for low-skill jobs. Especially, Migrant women's vulnerability includes poor working conditions, low earnings, long working hours, lack of freedom like communication skills and verbal and physical abuse.

The study also found that 59% of youths have migrated for elementary occupations, of which 29% of them are identified as unskilled persons from 2018 to 2022. Among the outward migrants, the number of youths, migrated for professional and high-income jobs is significantly low. The majority of the youths have migrated from Colombo, Gampaha, Kandy and Kurunegala districts. Saudi Arabia is the most populous destination of the youth migrants.

Most of the females are still migrating as housekeeping assistants. However according to the population census 2012, the literacy level of females is very high. Programs and policies should be implemented to improve the intention of youth females to seek employment opportunities such as professional and skilled. There should be a program to minor predicate preparation and the proper use of remittances to avoid the barriers that hinder the development of migrating families. It should be explored more employment opportunities abroad for males.

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