



# The brain drain catastrophe: where are we heading?

*By Rasanjale Kularathne & Dr. Manoj Samarathunga*

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**"I'm not happy to live in Sri Lanka"** - a housewife

**"I can earn more money if I go abroad"** - a doctor

**"I want my children to have a better future"** - a school teacher

**"Sri Lanka is on an economic bomb"** - a university lecturer

**"Many of our politicians and government officers are corrupted"** - a social activist

It may be annoying at times to explain this over and over again to others, but the fact that it reflects a major underlying socio-economic problem that many of us are now experiencing. While we all expect to see a better country after the natural disasters, wars, terrorist attacks and pandemics a more serious threat looms in the background. This threat may appear insignificant and unseen to majority of the people, especially to the politicians and policy makers, yet it is something we should treat immediately as a nation. Therefore, based on a series of interviews with professionals who have either migrated or planning to migrate we present some important facts about Sri Lankan “brain drain”.

The development of any country depends on its human capital. Similarly, the success of any organization is a result of competent workforce there in. The burning question is, will this qualified workforce remain in Sri Lanka few years later? According to the professionals we interviewed, all of them are having strong desires to leave the country due to many reasons including, but not limited to: economic turndown, political coups and instability, human rights violations, bureaucracy, absence of national policies aimed at development, bribery and corruption.

At this context, there is an ever-increasing number of young brains who find themselves desiring to invest their abilities to pursue professions in different industries at an attractive remuneration package. Then again a question rises: currently are there any opportunities available for them in the country, and if there aren't, are there any policies in place or actions being done to make this realistic? As a response to this paradox, people select foreign employment opportunities as an alternative option.

Migration is forced by push factors including adverse/unfavorable economic conditions, lack of employment opportunities or the general low wage levels, abusive marriages, domestic violence, lack of social freedom and unstable political governance and pull factors such as the host country's favorable salary rates, predicted increased quality of life, freedom/or independence, and the growing need for workers in the destination country.



Sri Lankan youth view migration as an opportunity for successful employment prospects. The migratory mindset has been widespread among the Sri Lankans today. The lengthy queues in front of the passport office further elucidate on this issue. Migrating to another country for a "better future" is a common attitude and a dream among many educated adolescents from urban and rural backgrounds. Most of the migrants in Sri Lanka are between 25 to 39 age groups.

Sri Lanka's greatest minds are fleeing to study overseas, only to return home to find that there are no jobs available for them in their chosen disciplines. When there are no jobs available for their chosen fields, their only choice is to leave the country in pursuit of employment that is relevant to their disciplines, which pays a higher income than what they can get in Sri Lanka. Having landed at well-paid positions in foreign countries, many people invite their families and obtain permanent residence in developed countries. As a result, many who benefited from free public education in Sri Lanka is now employed abroad. Therefore, the human resource capacity within the country is questionable.

Job seekers with skilled education, especially carpenters, bricklayers, masons, drivers, technicians, mechanics have a high demand in Middle East, European and Pacific countries. Many young women living in the peripheral areas have no choice but to work as housemaids in the Middle East because they find that the living condition and the cost of living is unbearable. Numerous people have become virtual slaves as a result of unreliable and illegal recruiting agencies. At the same time, intending to find out jobs, many others become preys of human traffickers. The illegal migration has headed towards Australia, which is presently working with the Sri Lankan authorities to prevent unlawful entrance. The

illegal migrants face corruption, sexual harassment, human rights violations, and so many tragic experiences.

Sri Lanka is experiencing a shortage of skilled professionals in many disciplines such as health, apparel, advertising, manufacturing, IT, business process outsourcing, tourism, and jewelry. As per the World Bank, in Sri Lanka, only 1.004 doctors are available and 2.18 Nurses and midwives were available per 1000 patients in 2018. Each year around 60 doctors leave for the UK, Australia, Canada, and other nations in the developed world to complete a year's compulsory training, but only half of them return, exacerbating a growing crisis in health care services. Similarly, many more university academics have left the country to pursue higher education but have never returned. Ekanayake, Anoji and Amirthalingam (2018) conducted a study on 'Impact of Migration of Sri Lankan Professionals to Qatar' and they found that 70% of Sri Lankan professionals preferred to stay in Qatar far longer than they anticipated. They also less likely to return to Sri Lanka for work in the near future. Around 39% did not prefer to return back to Sri Lanka due to the lack of trust and confidence about future developments. Nearly 30% of these professionals aim to pursue new jobs in Qatar or other Gulf nations after their present contracts expire, while nearly 21% seek to relocate permanently to countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc. without returning to Sri Lanka. This is a clear evidence of the skills gap Sri Lanka is walking through at the moment.

If this trend continues, the country will confront a problem where the nation's "brains" aren't contributing to the country's future and there's a tremendous flow of money going outside. To discourage international migration and stimulate "brain gain" instead of "brain drain", Sri Lanka needs to take appropriate measures as follows:

- Ensuring political stability in Sri Lanka;
- Introducing conducive policies to enhance the economic condition and stimulate the development;
- Discourage bribery and corruption by enforcing the law;
- Focussing on formulating strategies to keep skilled employees within the country by offering suitable employment opportunities and better facilities, realizing that migration has both push and pull elements;
- Control inflation and increase the production level of the country;

- Strengthening the existing rules and regulations to avoid human rights violations, harassments, and discriminations;
- Attracting the migrated professionals back to Sri Lanka by offering them suitable positions and competitive salaries;
- Attracting more multi-national companies to Sri Lanka for investments, thereby increase international level job opportunities to Sri Lankans;
- Forecast the future human resource needs of the country and develop the existing workforce to meet the future needs;
- Encourage the migrated professionals to contribute back to Sri Lanka through different development and socially responsible projects.

(The writers are attached to the Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. They could be contacted at [rasanjali555@gmail.com](mailto:rasanjali555@gmail.com) )

