Economic Crisis-Driven Out-Migration | A Study of Sri Lanka 2019-2024

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2. ABSTRACT

Between 2019 and 2024, Sri Lanka faced its worst economic crisis in history, marked by sovereign debt default, 94.9% inflation (food-related), severe shortages, and political instability, leading to nationwide protests and financial collapse. This thesis investigates the resulting mass migration, where over 1.3 million Sri Lankans (with potentially greater undocumented figures) left the country. Using data from government institutions, Central Bank reports, RTI obtained documents, and Sri Lanka Navy confidential reports on illegal migration and smuggling, the study analyses the drivers, patterns, and socioeconomic impacts of this crisis-induced out-migration. Applying Push-Pull Theory, Neoclassical Economic Theory, and the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), it explores how hyperinflation, unemployment, and governance failures turned migration into a survival strategy. the research combines a literature review with an analysis of World Bank, IMF, and media sources, while addressing data gaps on illegal migration. Despite limitations, the study offers policy recommendations to mitigate future crises, improve economic governance, overcome illegal migration, and retain skilled labour, providing insights for policymakers, academics, and international organizations.

3. DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

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4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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7. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ADRA	Adventist Development & Relief Agency
APMJ	Asian and Pacific Migration Journal
AUD	Australian Dollar
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BMS	Business Management School
CBSL	Central Bank of Sri Lanka
CCPI	Colombo Consumer Price Index
CH	Children
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CNN	Cable News Network
COPE	Committee on Public Enterprises
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DW	Deutsche Welle
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HEI	Higher education Institutes
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILA	International Law Association
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPS,	Institute of Policy Stuies
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IT	Information Technology
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LKR	Sri Lankan Rupee
LP	Liquefied Petroleum
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MFEPW	Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare
NELM	New Economics of Labor Migration
NZ	New Zealand
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PFCA	Personal Foreign Currency Accounts
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RNZ	Radio New Zealand
RTI	Right to Information
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
SLN	Sri Lankan Navy
SLNS	Sri Lankan Navy Ship
SLRCS	Sri Lankan Red Cross Society
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kindom

UN	United Nation
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USD	United State Dollar

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Migration began centuries ago in human history. When compared with the past, nowadays migration has become a usual event. In general, people become migrants because of economic, social and professional opportunities and they act as pull factors. Rather than pull factors some pull factors play a major role in making people migrants. By 2023, 184 million people were on the move as migrants around the world, driven by economic opportunities, conflict and violence and other reasons(World Bank, 2023a). When a civil war or an economic crisis takes place, people lose their comfort zone and try to move out of their origin country to maintain their economic and social status and ensure security.

In many cases, people use migration as an immediate tool to address the impact of economic crisis and it helps individuals and families to keep them away from the crisis. Sri Lanka, like many other countries that have faced economic crisis and hyperinflation, lack of essential needs, social unrest, and hopelessness took place and caused significant out-migration(SLRCS, 2023).

As a nation with a population of 22 million and a relatively small economy with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of $84 billion, Sri Lanka had been experiencing a balance of payments crisis for several years. This economic instability deteriorated significantly in 2022, when the debt-to-GDP ratio reached an all-time high of 120.9% in June(CEIC DATA, 2024). The crisis began in 2019 following poor policy decisions by the newly appointed government. Among these, ill-advised tax cuts and a poorly managed transition to organic farming were primary contributing factors. Additionally, the Easter Sunday bombing attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine-Russia war further exacerbated these conditions(Soumya, 2024).

By 2022, the government faced a critical fiscal situation characterized by a negative current account balance. Foreign debt obligations and external expenditures had become unaffordable at this stage. To manage external expenses such as government worker wages, treasury bills, and bond payments, the government resorted to monetary expansion through money printing. Consequently, the Sri Lankan rupee became the world's worst-performing currency against the US dollar. International rating agencies, including Fitch and Moody's, downgraded the country's credit status. Ultimately, the government was compelled to declare a temporary default in April 2022 (George, George and Baskar, 2022)

Inflation reached unprecedented levels, peaking at 67.40 percent in September 2022, with food-related inflation recording an alarming 94.9 percent(Trading Economics, 2024). Severe shortages of

essential goods and services emerged, particularly affecting the fuel and healthcare sectors. Queues extending for kilometers formed at fuel stations throughout the country.

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Figure 1.1: Queues at fuel stations

Source: (Al Jazeera, 2022)

The severity of the crisis became evident through tragic human costs, with fatalities reported among individuals waiting in queues. Power outages extended beyond 10 hours daily, while liquefied petroleum (LP) gas supplies for domestic use were completely suspended. Simultaneously, similar extensive queues formed at passport offices under the Department of Immigration and Emigration. The urgency to emigrate was reflected in passport issuance statistics: 88,308 passports were issued in June 2023, followed by 76,071 in July and 87,433 in August. These figures represent substantial numbers relative to Sri Lanka's total population (Economynext, 2024).

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Figure 1.2: Queues were at passport offices (Department of Immigration and Emigration)
Source:(The Sunday Times, 2022)

The economic crisis significantly accelerated legal migration, with a substantial surge in skilled professionals seeking opportunities abroad. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, legal departures for foreign employment escalated from 80,000 in the first quarter of 2019 to over 311,056 in 2022, demonstrating the urgency of escaping the crisis (CBSL, 2025b). Skilled migration experienced a particularly dramatic increase, driven by professionals from critical sectors including healthcare, information technology, and education. For example, approximately 1,800 doctors and nearly 1,000 university lecturers emigrated between 2022 and 2023, primarily to countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, where stable economies and improved working conditions served as powerful pull factors (Alwis, 2024; Rasooldeen, 2024). In 2024 alone, 70,396 skilled workers departed, including 17,649 high-skilled professionals, further emphasizing the crisis's role in accelerating brain drain (SLBFE, 2024a). This exodus not only fundamentally reshaped Sri Lanka's labor force but also demonstrated how migration functioned as a strategic response to systemic economic collapse.

Illegal migration also emerged during this period, with most illegal (undocumented) migrants escaped to India(CNN-News18, 2022). If such conditions persist over an extended period, Sri Lanka's migration crisis could potentially evolve into a humanitarian crisis similar to that experienced by Venezuela. Venezuela serves as the best example to illustrate the interplay between economic crisis and migration. As of June 2024, more than 7 million Venezuelans, nearly a quarter of the country's entire population had migrated from their country to neighboring nations, representing the second-largest displacement crisis globally (IOM, 2024a). The majority relocated to Colombia, while Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Chile emerged as other primary destinations for Venezuelan migrants (Weitzman and Huss, 2024)

Given Sri Lanka's island geography, most illegal migration attempts occur via maritime routes, carrying substantial risks of loss of life. Most of these attempts were intercepted by the Australian Border Force and the Sri Lankan Navy(Kanal13, 2024).

Beyond illegal migration, human trafficking also increased notably during this period. Reports shows that hundreds of Sri Lankans were recruited as mercenaries to fight in the Russia-Ukraine war, with over 200 soldiers believed to be dead based on survivor accounts(Jayasinghe, 2023). However, Sri Lanka's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment, and Tourism officially confirmed that 59 Sri Lankans serving in the Russian Army have been killed in the war(The Island, 2025a). But actual number of causalities including KIA and WIA (Killed in action and Wounded in action) are about 400 according to witnesses.

According to government records, at least 554 Sri Lankans were hired by the Russian military. Many were former soldiers got in to trap by job offers, paying up to 1.6 million rupees for supposed non-combat roles, only to be sent into frontline. They are fighting against much superior Ukraine soldiers. That too under brutal conditions like winter, facing drone strikes, lack of medical care, and threats of execution for desertion. Some Sri Lankan soldiers who survived and retuned to Sri Lanka said they being treated as "cannon fodder"(Jayasinghe, 2023)

The human smuggling networks have operated in Sri Lanka to illegally send ex-military personnel and civilians to Russia (and Ukraine) for participation in the war. Smugglers offering promises of good salaries, Russian citizenship, and even land to attract Sri Lankan ex-soldiers into joining the war effort(Sapkota, 2024).

The Sri Lankan CID confirmed that several Sri Lankans were sent to Russia and Ukraine by human traffickers specifically for military deployment. Significant number of Sri Lankans joined the warfront through illegal channels(Ada Derana, 2024c). But exact numbers remain unclear. The government has received 288 complaints from families of missing soldiers. Some estimates suggest 600–800 Sri Lankans may be in Russia(Amran, 2024)

Major reason for this unfortunate phenomenon is Sri Lanka's economy crisis. It has created brutal socio-economic discontent. Due to the rising financial difficulties working age population chose   to leave the country as a survival strategy. Just like all the other groups these ex-military members also attracted to job offers.   Professionals like doctors and engineers have many safe paths and significant offers. But for ex-soldiers it was very limited. Russia – Ukraine war created a platform for these people. As the economic woes continue, the Sri Lankan ex-soldiers decided to risk their lives in an unknown territory for financial gains(Amarasinghe, 2024).

This research explores the migration surge in Sri Lanka during the recent economic downturn from 2019 to 2024. The study examines the factors that motivated over 1.3 million individuals to seek opportunities abroad and analyzes the socioeconomic impacts on both migrants and the nation (Ada Derana, 2024b). Through an analysis of migration trends, theoretical frameworks, and the effects of remittances and brain drain, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how migration functioned as a survival strategy during one of Sri Lanka's most challenging periods.

1.2 Research Problem

This study seeks to understand the trends of crisis-driven migration from Sri Lanka during the economic crisis of 2019-2024. The research addresses the following key questions: What are the primary factors driving outmigration from the country, and how did migration function as a coping mechanism for individuals and families during this crisis period?

By examining the interconnections between economic collapse, political instability, and social pressures, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how migration reshaped Sri Lanka's demographic and economic landscape during this economic crisis period.

1.3 Aims

- Analyze how Sri Lankan economy went for bankrupt.

- Identify the main factors that influence people to migrate during the crisis.

- Identify the types of migration and their proportions.

- Evaluate the benefits of migration for individuals, families, and for the country, such as remittance inflows.

- Analyze the disparity between rising migration and fluctuating remittance inflows

- Examine the relationship between Sri Lanka's economic crisis (2019–2024) and subsequent demographic shifts.

1.4 Objectives

- Conduct a comprehensive review of political decisions taken by decision makers and conditions leading to the crisis.

- Investigate the social economic and political factors driving migration.

- Classify the different categories of migrants (skilled, unskilled, students, and illegal migrants) and determine their proportions.

- Evaluate the potential impacts of out-migration for the future.

- Develop recommendations based on the findings for policy making.

1.5 Methodology

This study applies a mixed-methods approach. Combined qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine the drivers, trends, and impacts of migration from Sri Lanka during the economic crisis (2019–2024). This methodology is informed by the effective data-driven approach of Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century in 2013. Also Hein de Haas's migration studies in 2010. Similar method used here through the tracking of Sri Lanka's migration trends alongside economic indicators like inflation, GDP contraction, and labor market unfairness. By analyzing Central Bank bulletins, IMF reports, and RTI-obtained government data, and restricted navy reports on smugglers. This research simulates Piketty's reliance on secondary data to challenge incomplete narratives and revealed unique findings(Milanovic, 2014).

Hein de Haas's 2010 methodology in migration studies used the World Bank, University of Sussex global migrant origin database to test the "migration transition" theory. In this thesis, central Bank bulletins, IMF reports, and RTI-obtained government data, and restricted navy reports on smugglers and news reports were used to test migration theories(De Haas, 2010).The methodology is structured around three major components.

1.5.1 Analysis of Literature

A comprehensive review of existing academic literature will be conducted to understand the historical patterns, theoretical frameworks, and contextual factors of crisis-driven migration. This includes examining migration patterns during economic crises in comparable countries such as Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Lebanon, Greece, and Argentina. The literature review will identify common push factors from origin countries and pull factors from receiving nations including Australia, the United States, Canada, Italy, and Germany, thereby providing a foundation for analyzing the Sri Lankan context.

1.5.2 Analysis of Existing Data

Statistical data from government departments, international organizations (e.g., International Organization for Migration, World Bank, IMF), and other reliable independent sources will be analyzed to track migration trends and their underlying causes from Sri Lanka between 2019 and 2024. Sri Lanka's Right to Information (RTI) Act was utilized to collect data from government institutions. Under RTI provisions, essential statistical information was obtained from government agencies, while additional government publications made available under Right to Information protocols were accessed for public use.

1.5.3 Analysis of Media

Media reports and news articles were analyzed to identify emerging patterns of economic pressure leading to migration, public discourse surrounding the crisis, and policy responses related to the economic crisis and migration in Sri Lanka. This analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how the crisis was framed in public discourse, as well as government actions including wage increases, subsidies, and social safety net expansions implemented to manage the situation.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This research focuses on out-migration from Sri Lanka between 2019 and 2024 resulting from the economic crisis and its underlying causes. The study encompasses various categories of migration, including skilled and unskilled workers, students, and undocumented migrants. Data were obtained through government sources accessed under RTI legislation, official publications, reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations, and independent research institutes.

Several limitations constrain this research. First, data availability presents a significant challenge, particularly regarding undocumented migration. Illegal migration is inherently underreported, and precise figures remain difficult to obtain, even with access to confidential naval reports (SLN, 2022).

The utilization of Sri Lanka's Right to Information (RTI) Act to gather government data revealed notable inconsistencies and inaccuracies. For instance, the Ministry of Health reported that only seven medical laboratory technicians resigned during the crisis, while independent estimates indicate that 1,800 doctors emigrated between 2022 and 2023 (Eco-Business, 2024; Rasooldeen, 2024; Reuters, 2024). The absence of a centralized data repository and allegations of government data manipulation further complicate access to reliable statistics (Tamil Guardian, 2014).

The scarcity of comprehensive literature specific to Sri Lanka's 2019–2024 migration experience limits comparative analysis, although this constraint is partially mitigated by drawing upon broader

studies of crisis-driven migration from comparable contexts such as Venezuela and Lebanon. Finally, while a primary survey of migrants was initially planned, practical constraints rendered this approach unfeasible, potentially limiting primary data insights.

1.7 Significance

This research is crucial for understanding the dynamics of crisis-driven migration and its impacts on both migrants and countries of origin. By examining Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis, this study provides an in-depth exploration of the push factors driving mass migration. Crisis-driven migration in Sri Lanka from 2019 to 2024 serves as a case study of global relevance, given the increasing prevalence of economic crises worldwide. Through identifying the push and pull factors behind the 2019–2024 exodus, this study contributes to migration studies, particularly regarding non-conflict migration scenarios, where Sri Lanka ranks among the top 20 nations on the brain drain index (TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2025a).

This research offers a comprehensive analysis of migrant categories and proportions, their experiences, and the associated benefits such as remittance flows (CBSL, 2025b). It also examines adverse effects, including brain drain that has severely impacted the healthcare, education, and construction sectors, with significant long-term implications for national development (Ameer, Rathnayake and Siriwardana, 2024; Fernando, 2024). The findings will inform policymakers in Sri Lanka and internationally in developing more effective strategies for managing migration during crises, addressing illegal migration, and mitigating brain drain effects.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 History of migrations

Throughout human history, people have engaged in both temporary and permanent migrations across different regions. During ancient periods, migration to new territories was an integral part of human existence. As civilizations developed, communities primarily migrated to more fertile agricultural lands, particularly around river valleys, where they established towns and villages. The emergence of empires further complicated migration processes through territorial expansion and conquest. Subsequently, people migrated to newly discovered continents through exploration, motivated by economic opportunities and a new life. A common factor can be identified across these historical migrations: the quest for better living conditions. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), "there are about 281 million international migrants in the world, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population" as of 2020 (IOM, 2024 p. xii). The global migrant population has more than tripled since 1970. Contemporary interstate migration is influenced by multiple factors including political instability, environmental disasters caused by climate change, insufficient social and economic opportunities in origin countries, and broader economic considerations (IOM, 2024b).

The Second World War fundamentally restructured the global social order. Asia achieved independence from colonial rule in the 1940s, followed by Africa in the 1960s, with decolonization subsequently spreading worldwide. The establishment of the United Nations, while primarily aimed at maintaining peace among major powers, significantly enhanced diplomatic connections within the expanding community of nations. More importantly, it facilitated newly independent countries in navigating interstate relations. The 1970s marked a notable transformation as empires transitioned into passport and visa systems, accompanied by the development of national statistical frameworks across approximately 200 nations (Manning and Trimmer, 2020).

The late twentieth century witnessed the consolidation of industrial and financial capitalism on a global scale. Capitalism integrated approximately 200 nations into a unified economic network through migration flows, commercial activities, and communication systems. This integration coincided with decolonization and the eventual collapse of communist systems. The social and environmental challenges associated with this new global order became apparent shortly after its establishment (Manning and Trimmer, 2020).

Since the 1970s, both the number of migrant origin and destination countries has increased dramatically. Beyond traditional immigrant-receiving nations in the Americas, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, numerous other countries have begun attracting growing numbers of migrants. These include historically emigrant countries such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal, which have transformed into destination nations. Furthermore, rising oil prices and the subsequent economic boom in the Gulf region generated substantial labor immigration to meet increased demand, although the majority of this migration remains temporary in nature. Additionally, there has been significant growth in labor migration to newly industrialized Asian countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore, primarily from less developed Asian nations (Cohen, 1995).

Ample evidence demonstrates that emigration from origin countries during economic downturns can serve as an effective strategy for income enhancement. Although the net impact of immigration on receiving countries appears to be minimal, the effect on migrants' gross income can be substantial (Hanson, 2009)In cases of sudden economic shocks, migration functions as a shock absorber, reducing average national income disparities while providing significant economic and social benefits to migrants (Ruhs, 2008; Korzeniewicz and Moran, 2009).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study examines the factors influencing Sri Lankan migration during the economic crisis from 2019 to 2024, primarily through the application of Push-Pull Theory, Neoclassical Economic Theory and the New Economics of Labor Migration. These theoretical frameworks provide analytical tools for understanding the underlying causes of migration during periods of economic downturn.

2.2.1 Push-Pull Theory

This theory posits that migration results from a combination of circumstances that compel individuals to leave their country of origin (push factors) and conditions that attract them to destination countries (pull factors).

Factors that lead to abandonment-push

- Economic crises

- Wars and conflicts

- Political instability

- Oppression caused by discrimination based on race, religion, caste, or sex

- Natural disasters

- Climate change

Factors that attract migrants – pull factors

- Good living conditions

- Strong economy

- Job Opportunities

- High salary

- Educational opportunities

- Political stability

In the Sri Lankan context, international migration has been a prevalent phenomenon for decades. Push factors including civil conflict, unemployment, economic recession, deteriorating living standards, political persecution, and social unrest have created conditions compelling the Sri Lankan population to emigrate. Skilled migrants are attracted to developed nations such as European countries, Australia, and Canada through pull factors including improved living conditions, stable economies, employment opportunities for skilled professionals, social security, educational prospects, and higher wages. Conversely, Middle Eastern countries have primarily attracted low-skilled workers (Sriskandarajah, 2002; Pingama, 2017; Jayawardena, 2020; Van Hear, Bakewell and Long, 2020).

2.2.2 Neoclassical Economic Theory

This theory examines migration through the lens of labor market disparities between countries. It explains that workers move from low-wage countries to high-wage countries in search of better income and improved living conditions. This theory helps us understand why unskilled workers migrate from Sri Lanka to Middle Eastern countries, especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The main reason Sri Lankan workers move to the Middle East is the significantly higher wages available there. This particularly affects domestic workers and construction workers, who receive very low wages in Sri Lanka (Pingama, 2017; Jayawardena, 2020). When the economic crisis began, construction activity in Sri Lanka declined dramatically due to import restrictions, expensive construction materials, and transportation difficulties. The Neoclassical Economic Theory shows that labor migration increases during economic crises.

2.2.3 New Economics of Labor Migration Theory

The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) theory suggests that migration decisions are not made by individuals alone. Instead, these decisions are influenced by economic factors and are typically made collectively by families at the household level (Taylor, 1999). A clear example of NELM

can be seen in migration patterns from Wennappuwa and Negombo areas in Sri Lanka. Most Sri Lankans living in Italy come from these two regions, with at least one family member from many households having migrated to Italy. Several factors drive this migration: relative deprivation, religious background (the Catholic population along Sri Lanka's western coast has been marginalized), and the promise of economic benefits. Additionally, the experience and knowledge gained from the local fishing industry, particularly boat handling skills, serve as key motivating factors for migration (Henayaka-Lochbihler and Lambusta, 2004; Senadhi, 2008; Pathirage and Collyer, 2011). Many of these migrants enter Italy illegally, with (Senadhi, 2008) reporting that 46 percent use boats for their journey.

2.3 Migration as a Result of Economic Crises in the Global Context

Before discovering external migration in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to understand global migration trends and the conditions that motivate them.

2.3.1 Lebanon

A study from Lebanon reveals that pull factors such as employment opportunities, cultural openness, and open borders have been more influential than push factors in motivating migration from Lebanon to Europe (Hager, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2023a). The findings showed that pull factors played a more significant role than push factors in migrants' decision-making processes.

In Lebanon, many people live conservative lifestyles due to their religious backgrounds. In contrast, European countries offer societies where religion has less influence on people's daily behaviors. During economic crises, this economic pressure motivates people to migrate in search of freedom and better living conditions. The openness of European borders serves as a crucial pull factor. Countries like Germany have implemented welcoming policies that make it easier for refugees to enter and settle, thereby attracting potential migrants(Hager, 2021).

The study also found that men are more likely to migrate than women. Research shows that men tend to take higher risks than women, particularly in cases of illegal migration. The study identifies five main factors influencing migration: two push factors (political instability and economic poverty) and three pull factors, as identified by the researcher (Hager, 2021).

2.3.2 Venezuela

Venezuela provides another clear example of the relationship between economic crisis and migration. As of June 2024, more than 7.77 million Venezuelans, nearly a quarter of the entire

population have migrated from their home country to neighboring nations, making this the second largest displacement crisis in the world (IOM, 2024a). The majority have moved to Colombia, while Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Chile are other popular destinations for Venezuelan migrants (Weitzman and Huss, 2024).

Venezuela has faced extraordinary inflation levels for many years. Hyperinflation is typically defined as inflation exceeding 50 percent. According to (Statista, 2024), Venezuela's inflation rate reached an unprecedented 63,734.08 percent in 2019. This crisis, characterized by hyperinflation, food shortages, political instability, and human rights violations, has driven mass migration as Venezuelans search for better living conditions and opportunities. As Venezuela's economy collapsed, poverty, crime, poor healthcare, infant mortality, and human trafficking increased dramatically, further motivating people to leave the country and worsening the overall situation (DW News, 2024).

The Venezuelan case clearly demonstrates the strong connection between economic crisis and migration. It shows how a country can reach a critical point where prolonged social and cultural deterioration affects not only the nation itself but the entire region.

2.3.3 Argentina

Argentina is a Latin American country that has defaulted on its debt nine times since gaining independence from Spain in 1816. During the early decades of the 20th century, Argentina ranked among the world's top 10 wealthiest countries. By 1913, Argentina had surpassed both Canada and Australia in terms of population, total income, and per capita income. However, Argentina's economy began to decline in the 1930s. The primary causes of this economic collapse were political instability (D&Apos, 2014; Russo, 2014; CNN, 2020). A military junta seized power, ending civilian constitutional government. Since that period, Argentina's economy has never recovered to a state that provides its citizens with favorable living conditions.

Reports from Argentina's National Migration Department show that 41,000 people migrated out of the country between 1993 and 1999. This number increased dramatically to 250,000 individuals who departed between 2000 and 2004, representing a massive rise in out-migration compared to the earlier period. The financial crisis in Argentina has been identified as the main cause of this significant increase in out-migration (Koser, 2009)

The National Migration Department of the Government of Argentina estimated that 60,000 Argentinians entered Spain between 2001 and 2002. Additionally, they estimated that another 110,000 people were staying in Spain illegally rather than returning to Argentina, choosing to remain abroad to avoid the financial crisis (Koser, 2009).

As a result of the economic crisis, the United States reported an increase in Jewish migration from Argentina and other Latin American countries. Between 2000 and 2003, 3,000 Argentine Jews arrived in Miami alone. The majority of these Jewish migrants were professionals, causing a significant brain drain in Argentina(Koser, 2009).

2.3.4 Ecuador

At the end of the 20th century, Ecuador experienced its worst economic crisis in history. Several factors contributed to this crisis: declining export revenue (mainly from oil), an unsustainable debt-to-GDP ratio (77% higher than GDP), and the Cenepa War in 1995 (a border conflict between Peru and Ecuador). Inflation increased by 25-30% during 1996-97, then escalated to hyperinflation, reaching 61% in 1999. The exchange rate depreciated by almost 50%. The collapse of the banking sector, combined with El Niño weather impacts, caused losses of US$2.6 billion (equivalent to 13% of GDP in 1998), particularly affecting the banana export industry (IMF, 2000; Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002).

By 1999, the population living in poverty and extreme poverty had increased to 40% and 15% respectively. Wage legislation and a highly complex wage-setting system contributed to high unemployment rates. The compression of real wages and pensions due to inflation worsened the situation. Conditions deteriorated further in coastal areas due to El Niño weather disasters, which caused significant housing and infrastructure damage. The government's allocation of 4.7% of GDP for social safety nets was insufficient to minimize social unrest and protect citizens' well-being(IMF, 2000).

The Ecuadorian government made the radical decision to adopt the U.S. dollar as the country's legal currency due to the unbearable depreciation of the local currency. However, this decision also served as a clear push factor for migration. Mass out-migration occurred in the late 1990s. The Ecuadorian population in the United States reached approximately 400,000 by 2002. The Ecuadorian population in Spain grew dramatically from 11,606 in 1995 to 24,472 in 2000, and then to 456,379 in 2005. According to these statistics, the Ecuadorian population in Spain increased more than 18 times in just five years(Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002; Ledesma, 2019). A considerable number also migrated to other European countries. This mass out-migration significantly impacted national income. By the

early 2000s, remittances had become the second-largest source of foreign revenue, following oil exports.

2.3.5 Cuba

Cuba, like Venezuela, is experiencing a mass exodus. More than one million people (10% of Cuba's population) have fled the country between 2022 and 2023. According to the head of the country's national statistics office, this represents the largest out-migration in Cuban history. A severe economic downturn has been the main driving factor behind this mass migration in such a short period. Official data showed Cuba's population declining for the first time, from 11,181,595 at the end of 2021 to 10,055,968 by December 2023 (Torres, 2024).The economic difficulties in South American countries (Venezuela, Cuba, and others) have become the primary reason for illegal immigration through the southern border of the United States. Beyond economic hardship, political discrimination, lack of human rights, violence, and high crime rates have also served as major push factors motivating migrants to leave Cuba and Venezuela.

2.3.6 Zambia

Zambia has faced economic issues for decades. The country experienced severe financial distress in recent years, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Zambia defaulted on its debt when it was unable to pay $42.5 million in interest on its Eurobond in November 2022 (Kessler, 2023). Poverty and extreme poverty rates were recorded at 60% and 48% respectively in 2020, with the total population under the poverty level growing by 5.6% since 2015. Rural poverty is significantly higher than the national poverty level, with 78.8% of rural areas living below the poverty line (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2023). The situation worsened due to the impact of drought in 2024, which significantly affected agriculture and electricity generation (IMF, 2024).

The economic crises in Sri Lanka and Zambia share notable similarities. Both countries heavily relied on debt-driven growth and suffered from policy mismanagement. Both nations accumulated significant external debt to fund infrastructure projects but faced maturity mismatches, as short-term repayments undermined long-term economic gains, leading to debt defaults (Abeyrathne, 2023). Sri Lanka in 2022 and Zambia in 2020 both faced depletion of foreign currency reserves. Sri Lanka's reserves dropped by 99% since 2019 (Ellerbeck, 2022). Zambia experienced similar shortages, which crippled their ability to import essentials like fuel and food (Bank of Zambia, 2024). Both countries, being heavily import-dependent, were severely affected by external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, supply shortages, and social unrest.

Despite the prolonged hardship, Zambia has not experienced significant out-migration. According to the Zelinsky model of migration transition, when development levels are low, migration remains low because out-migration is a costly activity that becomes unaffordable with limited capital. While many countries experience increased out-migration during economic collapse, most of this migration is illegal. Zambia is a landlocked country surrounded by nations that are not well-developed and face similar issues, such as Zimbabwe and Malawi. For Zambians, migration is not an effective solution to address economic distress. The geographical location and high poverty levels have increased their inability to migrate out of the country.

Migration trends in Lebanon, Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Cuba, and Sri Lanka show that all these countries shared similar push and pull factors, shaped by economic, political, and social conditions. Economic crisis was the main push factor across all countries, though their severity and outcomes varied. Venezuela experienced hyperinflation exceeding 63,000% (Statista, 2024), making basic survival nearly impossible, while Ecuador's 1999 crisis included a banking collapse and 61% inflation (IMF, 2000; Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002). Similarly, Sri Lanka's 2022 foreign reserve depletion led to severe shortages, and Argentina's debt defaults increased out-migration. However, Lebanon's economic collapse was primarily due to terrorism, political instability, and the 2020 port explosion (Snaije, 2022). Cuba faced additional pressures from U.S. sanctions and a failing socialist regime (Nahrstedt, 2021). Cuba's failure represents a completely separate issue from other countries, as it was heavily dependent on the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). After the end of the Soviet Union and its support, Cuba failed to compete in the new bipolar world (Vaughan, 2025). Political instability and conflict further drove migration, particularly in Lebanon (civil war), Venezuela, and Cuba (authoritarian repression). Environmental disasters, such as El Niño in Ecuador and policy-related agricultural failures in Sri Lanka, worsened the hardship.

Pull factors centered on better economic opportunities, political stability, and diaspora networks. For Sri Lankans, the Middle East offered unskilled labor jobs, while Western nations like Australia and Canada attracted skilled professionals. Lebanese migrants were drawn to Europe, particularly Germany, due to its welcoming refugee policies (Hager, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2023a). Venezuelans fled to neighboring Colombia and Peru for proximity and humanitarian support, while many Cubans headed to the U.S., especially Florida, for political asylum and family reunification. Ecuadorians and Argentines migrated in masse to Spain due to labor demand and regularization programs. Argentina also experienced a brain drain of professionals, including Jewish migrants to the U.S. (Koser, 2009).

The scale and nature of migration differed significantly. Venezuela and Cuba experienced some of the largest exoduses, with over 10% of their populations leaving in short periods (IOM, 2024a). However, Zambia, despite poverty and drought, saw minimal out-migration due to its landlocked

geography and surrounding underdeveloped nations. Sri Lanka's migration was a completely different phenomenon, with unskilled workers heading to the Middle East and skilled workers moving to the West. Argentina's migrants were mostly well-educated, demonstrating a brain drain pattern (Koser, 2009).

While economic collapse and political uncertainty were common drivers, each country's unique circumstances shaped different migration flows. Destination choices were influenced by geographical locations, migration policies, and existing diaspora networks. These case studies demonstrate the complexity of local and global factors in crisis-driven migration.

2.3.7 Migrant Movements to the U.S.-Mexico Southern Border

The U.S. southern border has experienced an unprecedented increase in the number of people attempting to enter the United States over the past three years. Border patrol agents documented 302,000 encounters in December 2023 alone. From 2013 to 2019, the average monthly count of border crossings was 39,000. These arrivals are coming from many different countries (Nerozzi and Griff, 2024). Economic collapse, political instability, wars, and conflicts in countries such as Venezuela, Haiti, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Russia, and Ukraine provide clear evidence that economic and political instability has driven a historic shift in migration patterns. While Mexico remained the single most common origin country for U.S. border encounters in 2023, Mexican nationals made up less than 30% of the total share, compared with more than 60% a decade ago (Nerozzi and Griff, 2024; The Guardian, 2024).

2.4 Migration History of Sri Lanka (Before the Independence)

During British rule, eight major ordinances were implemented to regulate the immigration process in this country. The following are the major immigration-related laws enacted during the British period (Department of Immigration and Emigration, 2015).

- Emigration of Indians from Ceylon Ordinance (1847)

The statute banned Indian workers in Ceylon from entering employment contracts in overseas colonies while also forbidding their migration to work beyond India and Ceylon. for the purpose of employment as laborers.

- Foreign Recruiting Ordinance (1874)

This ordinance provided the Governor power to control the recruitment processes for foreign military and labor services through restrictions and conditions.

- Ceylon Emigrants Ordinance (1882)

The law established control over Ceylonese laborer emigration through service contracts by mandating magistrate endorsement and enabling the Governor to specify approved destinations.

- Destitute Immigrants Ordinance (1907)

The law intended to stop the arrival of destitute and vicious persons, prohibited foreign nationals (except British Indians) who exhibited mental or physical disabilities from entering without a financial guarantee from a local sponsor. The law prohibited both sex workers and those deriving financial benefits from prostitution.

- Emigration Ordinance (1917)

The legislation established regulations for the emigration of Ceylonese and Indian laborers to foreign jobs while differentiating between local inhabitants and Indian migrants.

- Passport Ordinance (1923)

The Passport Ordinance of 1923 established entry and exit passport requirements while granting Governor authority to implement rules and provide exemptions. The rules remained in force until 1949 when they were replaced by new immigration legislation.

- Aliens' Registration Ordinance (1935)

Non-British aliens who stayed in Ceylon beyond one month had to register themselves under the law. The ordinance introduced movement limitations and identity checks as well as deportation processes similar to today's visa system operations.

- Indian Criminal Tribes' Immigration Ordinance (1939)

The law was created to prevent people from designated "criminal tribes" in India from entering the country.

There are very few notable incidents that can be recognized during this era. One is the Indians who come to Sri Lanka as workers. The others are Sri Lankan immigrants who went to other countries as laborers. Apart from that, there were some small migration waves. For example, Sri Lanka's local rich class sent their kids to Europe for their education. It became a trend among the Sinhala rich class.

- Indian Tamil Plantation Workers

The end of the Rajakariya system in 1833 and subsequent development of coffee and tea plantations caused labor shortages which led British planters to hire workers from South India's Tamil population. The foundation of Ceylon's plantation economy was built by migrants who worked under difficult conditions. The population of Up-Country Tamils represents 4.2% of Sri Lankan population as reported by (Dailymirror in 2023).

- Jaffna Tamil Migration to Malaya

During the British rule, Sri Lankan Tamils migrated out the country as laborers. This era, known as the "Sondakaran Wave" from 1900 to 1930 the Jaffna Tamils relocated to Malaysia where they worked as laborers on rubber plantations. The Malaysian census of 1931 listed 18,407 Sri Lankan migrants mainly of Jaffna Tamil origin which increased to 25,000 after World War II(Alagandram, 2024).

2.5 History of outmigration in Sri Lanka (After the Independence)

During British rule, Sri Lankan Tamils migrated to Malaysia as laborers in rubber plantations (IOM, 2008). However, there are no other records of large-scale external migration during the British colonial period. There are only reports of minor migration to Britain and other developed countries for educational purposes.

After independence, Sri Lanka experienced a notable brain drain. This situation can be identified in two key periods: 1948, the year of independence, and 1956, when Sinhala became the sole official language. Most of these migrants were educated Tamil and Burgher professionals. According to the Immigration Department, this number reached 423,503. This significant brain drain had a detrimental effect on the country's economy and development (De Silva, 1981).

In the mid-1970s, unemployment in Sri Lanka began to rise rapidly. Due to this situation and the shortage of goods, a new government came to power in the 1977 general election. With the open economy policy they introduced, people who had been facing economic difficulties migrated to Middle Eastern countries in search of new job opportunities and higher salaries. Since it appeared that Sri Lanka's foreign exchange deficit could be solved through this migration, successive Sri Lankan governments encouraged emigration (Sriskandarajah, 2002).

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Figure 2.1: Unemployment rate in Sri Lanka (1953 - 1979)
Source: (Department of Census & Statistics, 1987)

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 2.2: Absolute values of unemployment (1953 - 1979)
Source: (Department of Census & Statistics, 1987)

With the ethnic crisis of the 1980s, Tamil refugees migrated to India and other Western countries. During the period of 1987-1989, due to the civil war in the southern part of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese people also migrated to countries like India, Australia, and Great Britain (Karunaratne, 2008).

With the beginning of the new millennium in 2000, Sri Lankan migrants expanded their destinations beyond Middle Eastern countries to include the Maldives, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Mauritius, Romania, and Australia. By 2010, this trend had increased rapidly. In 2009, 86% of total external migration from Sri Lanka was directed to leading Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. However, other countries were gradually becoming popular migration destinations. South Korea has emerged rapidly as a migration destination for Sri Lankans, with immigration to South Korea growing significantly over the past decade and a half. Additionally, migration to countries like Japan and Israel has increased (MFEPW, 2013).

Mr. Pavithra Jayawardena categorized the external migrations that occurred in Sri Lanka by periods and reasons in his study "Sri Lankan Out Migration." There have been basically five waves of out-migration in Sri Lanka since independence. The enormous economic, social, and cultural changes that took place in Sri Lankan society, along with shifts in global labor and financial markets, are key reasons that have made Sri Lankan migration more complex (Jayawardena, 2020).

 1) First Wave - This was occurred immediately after the independence in 1948. Most notable emigration at this time was of Ceylonese Burger people(Gamage, 1998).

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2) Second wave - This occurred after 1956. The departure of Burger community and Tamil community was intensified by the introduction of the sinhala only language policy (Jayawardena, 2020)

3) Third wave - This happened in early 1970s. The socialist "Samagi" government at that time intervened in all the industries, imposing restrictions on imports and foreign travel. This was resulted notable economy hardships for every level of Sri Lankans and led some professionals to emigrate in the hope of better economic and living conditions(Gamage, 1998).

The group of professionals includes Scientists, Managers, Doctors, Engineers, Technologists, etc. The Sri Lankan professionals largely migrated to countries such as Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland. There were both Tamil and Sinhala professionals. Sinhala professionals left mostly because of economic hardships. However Tamil professionals had additional issues such as ethnic discrimination, Language policy(Sriskandarajah, 2002).

4) Forth wave - This occurred in the 1980s. Most of these migrants were forced to leave the country due to the two armed conflicts that erupted in Sri Lanka(Jayawardena, 2020). But also there are economic reasons too.

5) The fifth Wave - From the 2000, a new wave started with students migrating for education purposes. It includes considerable proportion of Sri Lankan students from urban and rural middle class families. Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, USA, and Canada have become popular study destinations(Jayawardena, 2020).

Both internal and global factors influenced Sri Lanka's external migration. In the 1970s, labor migration increased in Sri Lanka as well as in other South Asian countries. Due to the various development projects implemented in the Middle East countries along with the increased oil income, the labor market was opened to foreigners (Fernandez and de Regt, 2014)

3. SRI LANKA'S MIGRATION BOOM IN THE CRISIS YEARS (2019–2024)

Sri Lanka experienced its most severe economic crisis from 2019 to 2024, facing one challenge after another. The crisis began with security concerns following the Easter attacks (ISIS-related terrorist suicide bombings) in 2019, followed by the COVID-19 outbreak, economic difficulties, shortages of essential goods, street protests, political instability, and human rights violations by the ruling government. As these crises continued, many people, particularly the younger generation, viewed migration as their only option for a better life. Families packed their belongings and moved abroad in search of work opportunities.

This chapter examines the increase in out-migration during this crisis period (2019-2024). It analyzes the causes behind the significant outflow of Sri Lankan citizens and evaluates the socioeconomic impact of the remittance money that flowed back into the country. To conduct a detailed study of these migration patterns, this research analyzes data from the Quarterly Bulletins of Workers' Remittances and Labor Migration published by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) for the period 2019-2024. These reports provide comprehensive statistical data over time regarding the number of people migrating for work and the amount of money they sent back home during this crisis period.

The analysis begins in 2019, when the first signs of economic collapse appeared following the Easter attacks that severely damaged the tourism industry. It continues through the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions of 2020 and extends to the complex economic hardships that peaked in 2022, including sovereign debt default, critical shortages of goods and services, and hyperinflation.

3.1 Rise of migration

The economic crisis from 2019 to 2024 brought significant challenges, including high inflation, currency depreciation, and fiscal instability, reaching its worst point in 2022. According to the World Bank, the crisis led to a debt default in 2022 due to unsustainable debt levels and depleted foreign reserves, caused by economic mismanagement and external shocks (World Bank, 2023d, 2023c).

Signs of recovery began in 2023, with economic growth projected at 4.4% in 2024, mainly driven by the industrial and tourism sectors, supported by government reforms. This crisis increased labor migration as people searched for better economic opportunities abroad. The period's economic instability, including shortages of essential goods (from food to raw materials and equipment) and political unrest, created conditions where migration became a survival strategy for workers at all skill levels from low-skilled and semi-skilled workers to highly skilled professionals (George, George and Baskar, 2022).

According to the Quarterly Bulletins, approximately 203,087 people left for foreign employment in 2019, with monthly remittances averaging around USD 559.8 million annually. These figures show the initial signs of distress following the Easter Sunday attacks, which disrupted tourism and worsened the country's growing national debt. This period marks the beginning of the crisis, as citizens began looking for overseas opportunities to escape domestic challenges (CBSL, 2022c).

The Central Bank's quarterly bulletins clearly show how migration increased due to the crisis. In 2020, about 76,000 people left for jobs abroad in the first half of the year. Despite global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, migration continued at notable levels in the second half of 2020. The Quarterly Bulletins indicate that an additional 40,000 people sought foreign employment during the third and fourth quarters, bringing the annual total to over 100,000. Remittance inflows reached an estimated USD 3,500 million for the full year (CBSL, 2022c). In 2021, migration numbers remained relatively stable at around 76,384. However, remittance inflows during this period showed significant growth, potentially reaching USD 5,000 million or more by year-end, according to the Quarterly Bulletins (CBSL, 2022c).

In 2022, despite COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on global migration, 70,867 people had left by mid-year. The second half of 2022 showed a massive exodus. According to the Quarterly Bulletins, around 100,000 additional people departed after the mid-year figure of 70,867, potentially resulting in an annual total exceeding 170,000. However, remittance inflows for the year were estimated at USD 3,800 million, showing a slight decline due to the depreciation of the rupee and people moving away from formal banking channels. This period represented the height of the crisis, where migration surged but official remittance figures failed to fully capture the scale of departures (CBSL, 2022c).

By 2023, the situation was like floodgates had opened - 146,885 people had left by June, according to the Q2 bulletin. In the final quarters of 2023, migration remained high, with an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 additional departures, potentially pushing the annual total to over 240,000, as shown in the Quarterly Bulletins. Remittance inflows during this period were projected to have recovered, exceeding USD 5,000 million by December, indicating a stabilization in formal banking channels following earlier disruptions. However, the gap between the number of migrants and remittances still remained (CBSL, 2023a, 2023b).

In 2024's first quarter alone, 75,175 people left the country. Data from the second quarter of 2024 shows that 70,000 additional people departed, building on the first quarter's 75,175, with remittances potentially contributing an additional USD 1,500 million, totaling USD 3,000 million for the first half of the year. This continued migration and remittance flow persisted even as economic conditions showed clear signs of improvement(CBSL, 2024b).

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Figure 3.1: Number of people departed by year
Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka(CBSL, 2025b)

3.2 Migration on the rise, but remittance gaps persist (2019–2024)

More people left Sri Lanka during the crisis, especially after 2022 when the crisis reached its lowest point. However, the money sent back home did not always match the increase in migration. Normally, when more workers go abroad, remittances should increase significantly. However, the Central Bank's numbers show clear gaps. For example, in 2021, remittances dropped to USD 5.4 billion from USD 7.1 billion in 2020, even though migration was increasing. In early 2022, official remittances fell by 61% in January alone (Withers, 2023; CBSL, 2025b). This shows why remittance figures do not always provide a complete and realistic picture of migration trends.

There are several main reasons for this situation.

- Distrust in President Gotabaya's Government

One main reason people were not sending money through official channels was their lack of trust in the government, especially under Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who served as president from late 2019 until he fled the country in July 2022. People were angry about how he handled the economy (Al Jazeera, 2023b). His policies included tax cuts that reduced government revenue, excessive money printing,

high government spending, and an organic farming policy that damaged rice production. As a result, the rupee's value collapsed.

The black-market exchange rate, where people traded dollars outside official banks, exploded during Sri Lanka's crisis because the government's official exchange rate was completely unrealistic. In early 2022, while Gotabaya's administration pegged the rupee at Rs. 200 to the dollar, the black-market rate jumped past Rs. 248 by February and then reached Rs. 400 by April (Srinivasan, 2022). This happened because the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) printed over 40% more money by 2022 to cover budget deficits, which further destroyed the rupee's value (EconomyNext, 2022a). Official banks ran out of dollars, so people turned to street dealers and informal money transfer networks (Undiyal or Hawala) for better exchange rates. As a result, much of the remittance market operated completely outside the formal banking sector.

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Figure 3.2: Exchange rate movement in 2022- LKR per USD
Source: (Srinivasan, 2022)

Workers abroad, seeing the black market pay Rs. 50–100 more per dollar, ditched formal channels. The Quarterly Bulletins show remittances crashing 61% in January 2022 to USD 259 million from USD 675 million a year earlier(EconomyNext, 2022b).

- Personal Foreign Currency Accounts (PFCAs): Mismanagement

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PFCAs let Sri Lankans hold dollars in local banks for travel or overseas payments, but Gotabaya's government botched them too. Rules said you could keep up to USD 10,000 in PFCAs indefinitely if earned abroad, or 90 days if bought locally, then convert to rupees(EconomyNext, 2021).

But during the crisis, the CBSL cracked down, threatening to freeze accounts of anyone using "unofficial" methods like sending dollars to PFCAs via hawala to dodge the pegged rate(Fernando, 2021).Banks had no foreign currency to deposit into PFCAs reserves hit USD 50 million by May 2022 (Uditha Jayasinghe and Devjyot Ghoshal, 2022). People couldn't access their own dollars, so they stopped using PFCAs.

Cabraal's (governor of the central bank 2021-2022) 2021–2022 exchange controls forced PFCA holders to sell dollars to banks at the fake Rs. 200 rate, not Rs. 248+ black market rate(De Silva, Commander and Estrin, 2022). People hid their cash overseas or in informal channels. Mismanaging PFCAs turned a tool for keeping dollars in Sri Lanka into a reason people avoided banks altogether.

- Failed Economic Policies

Then there were the economic moves that made it worse. Gotabaya's government, especially under CBSL Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal, tried to peg the rupee at Rs. 200–203 to the dollar from late 2021 to March 2022, pretending the economy wasn't crumbling. They used dwindling foreign reserves down from USD 8 billion in 2020 to under USD 2 billion by 2022 to buy rupees and prop it up But with no dollars coming in from tourism or exports(Jayasinghe, 2022a).

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Figure 3.3: Foreign Reserves Collapse
Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka(CBSL, 2025b)

When they finally let it float in March 2022, the rupee crashed dropping to Rs. 230 officially overnight, then Rs. 360 by year-end (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022). This wrecked everything. Remittances Tanked, Imports Stopped(Uditha Jayasinghe and Devjyot Ghoshal, 2022).The IMF later called this pegging a disastrous misstep; it burned reserves and pushed cash underground(IMF, 2023)

Tax cuts messed up the budget, fertilizer ban wrecked farming, and government printed money and suddenly that cash from overseas was all the country had to lean on. The Quarterly Bulletins show that in 2022, even though 311,056 people left for jobs, the money coming back dropped to USD 3,800 million, way less than the USD 7.1 billion in 2021 (CBSL, 2025b). The rupee was tanking, prices were high like 94.9% food inflation in 2022 and people didn't trust banks anymore, so they sent money through friends instead(CBSL, 2022a; The Sunday Times, 2022)

As mentioned earlier, Gotabaya's government printed money like over 40% more by 2022 just to pay bills, which made prices jump and the rupee worthless. The Quarterly Bulletins show that only after he was gone, in 2023, did the money start coming back through banks again(EconomyNext, 2022a; CBSL, 2025b).

Foreign exchange dried up, and banks couldn't handle dollar transfers properly. In 2021, the government rolled out strict exchange controls, threatening to freeze accounts of anyone using informal methods. That just scared people more, and remittances through official channels like the ones the quarterly bulletins track dropped hard. The Q2 2023 bulletin mentions how remittances only started bouncing back after these controls eased up and the government offered incentives, like extra rupees per dollar in 2021. But then the damage was done. 2022 saw just USD 3.78 billion officially, way below what was expected with 311,056 people registering to work abroad that year.

- The Informal Shift

During the crisis, informal remittances spiked because people abroad knew their families needed cash fast, but they didn't trust the banks or the government to get it there without losing value. The World Bank backs this up, saying South Asia saw a remittance dip in 2022 partly due to these unofficial flows. In Sri Lanka, with food inflation hitting 94.9% in September 2022(CBSL, 2022a), every dollar mattered, and workers weren't about to let it get stuck in a failing system. The Q1 2024 bulletin shows remittances climbing again. USD 1,536 million in three months, once trust started creeping back under new policies and the rupee stabilized a bit(CBSL, 2025b).

Migration went up but remittances didn't always follow because of this mix of distrust and failed fiscal policies. This cash was a lifeline for the economy. It covered a huge part of the trade deficit. To confront the use of unofficial channels Central Bank and the Foreign Employment Bureau pushed policies like this "Incentive Scheme" in 2021, tossing extra rupees to people who sent money home through official channels. Even though some extra money was received, still the price was not competitive with the black market. It can be seen from the remittance inflow in 2021 and 2022. There is a noticeable increase and constant inflow from 2023 to present, with the floating value of the rupee (CBSL, 2023a, 2025a)

3.3 Gender Distribution of Migrant Workers

Who exactly was heading out during this crisis is something very important to understand the nature of crisis-driven migration. According to Quarterly Bulletins, it's not random but very specific types of people stepping up. Like, over half of them were working age men for Construction jobs, driving jobs, cleaning and operating jobs in places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other middle east countries. In 2022's first half, with 76,000 leaving (2022 Q4), it's probably the same split half men, half women, 30s and 40s leading the pack. By 2023, when 146,885 took off by June, that Q2 (quarter 2) bulletin hints at the same pattern 54% men, mostly in their 30s, women not far behind in their 40s. Even in 2024's Q1, with 75,175 gone, it's like the crisis kept pulling the same crowd. When it comes to women, almost half were heading out too, mostly as housemaids and caregivers(CBSL, 2022c, 2024a)(CBSL, 2025b).

Then there's the age demographic too. For the male, it's mostly people in their 30s who already started families or expecting to start one. When it's come to women most of them were older. Average of age at 40s. Most male migrant workers fall within the 30-34 age group, accounting for 19% of total male departures in the first two quarters in 2024. This suggests that men in their early 30s see foreign employment as a key economic opportunity. On the other hand, female migrant workers are mostly in the 40-44 age group, making up 18% of total female leavers. This shows significant portion of female workers seek foreign employment later in life, possibly due to domestic responsibilities or economic necessity(CBSL, 2024b).

In 2022, the peak of the economic crisis, the highest percentage of male migrant workers 20% was in the 25-29 age group, whereas the same percentage of female workers was in the 40-44 age group. This figure suggests that while younger men are actively seeking employment opportunities abroad and take the radical decisions with risk to change their lives, older women may be entering the workforce with economic hardship and family responsibilities, possibly as a means to support their families financially (CBSL, 2022c).

The majority of both male and female migrant workers were classified as skilled laborers. In 2024, around 72% of workers fell into this category, while the remaining 28% were categorized as low-skilled. Female participation in foreign employment remains highly concentrated in the low-skilled sector, while males have a broader representation in skilled employment(CBSL, 2025a; The Business Standard, 2025)

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Figure 3.4: Departures by Gender (2022)
Source: (CBSL, 2022b)

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 3.5: Departures by Gender (2023)
Source: (CBSL, 2023b)

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Figure 3.6: Total Departures by Gender (2024)

Source: (CBSL, 2025a)

3.4 Regional preferences and workforce distribution

Sri Lanka's migrant workforce mostly seeks employment in the Middle East, with over 80% of departures in 2024 directed toward Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait(CBSL, 2025a). However, this is nothing new. Sri Lankans tend to seek jobs in Middle East compared to other parts of the world due to less competition. This trend has remained stable over the years, with 78.3% of migrant workers heading to the Middle East in 2023(CBSL, 2023b) and an even higher 84.7% in 2022.

A gender wise breakdown of destinations indicates that men primarily migrate to countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, while a significant number of female workers are employed in Qatar and the UAE. The large number of Sri Lankan workers in the Middle East shows the continued dependency on foreign employment in this region, particularly in the domestic labor and construction field.

When crisis started to hit the upper middle class, Western countries like Australia, Canada, and Italy started popping up more. These places offered better wages and safer jobs for skilled workers like doctors, nurses and IT professionals, who were shocked when Sri Lanka's economy tanked. The Quarterly Bulletins hint at this shift by the first quarter of 2023(CBSL, 2025b).

4. ILLEGAL MIGRATION IN SRI LANKA

This chapter investigates the phenomenon of illegal migration from Sri Lanka, tracing its historical evolution and analyzing its unprecedented upsurge during the 2019–2024 economic crisis. The main objective is to determine how economic collapse along with poverty, diaspora influence, state responses and assess their impact on illegal migration escalation. By analysing confidential reports, Navy interception data, and global destination patterns, the chapter addresses the broader research objective of understanding how systemic crises exacerbate illegal migration. Specifically, it contributes to the study's goals of evaluating push factors behind migration decisions, examining the state interventions (e.g., naval patrols, legal penalties and decisions of state institutes like SLBFE).

The main source of this chapter is confidential reports. Due to ethical considerations, no personal details including names, and links have been included to protect individual's identities. Nevertheless, exact figures such as the number of arrests and vessels captured by the Sri Lankan Navy, among other details, are presented. Although a few comments in these reports were somewhat strong in tone, they still conveyed meaningful perspectives. Second half of this chapter discusses about Sri Lankan illegal migrants in other countries, based on foreign government reports and news reports which cover about southern border crossing nationalities, Belarus Poland border dispute, illegal migration towards Australia and Italy via boats.

4.1 Origin and evolution of Illegal migration in Sri Lanka

Illegal migration in Sri Lanka didn't emerge suddenly; it has historical roots dating back well before independence in 1948. The British hauled in Tamil laborers from South India to work in the tea plantations up in the hills, hundreds of thousands by the 1900s (Peebles, 2001). Most came legally, but some slipped over borders without papers, because Ceylon had work. No big numbers back then. A few hundred a year sneaking into fishing villages or hiding in estate shacks (De Silva, 1981).

The British government paid little attention to these incidents, so it stayed that way. But it did set a pattern for people to migrate during difficult times, regardless of legal constraints. By the late colonial days, some Sinhalese fishermen were even hopping to India for better catches, without permits. Indian fishermen in South India did the same. (De Silva, 1981) It was less about running away and more about surviving. These illegal border violations can be detected till date.

Both legal and illicit migration increased after the country gained independence in 1948. Tamil people were deeply unhappy with the Bandaranaike government's "Sinhala Only" policy of the 1950s which

gave preference to ethnic Sinhalese. As land was taken and employment opportunities decreased many Tamils started to leave the country, frequently staying in India for longer than necessary or crossing borders with forged documents(Tambiah, 1986). No boats full of illegals yet, but people overstaying fishing trips or faking IDs to blend in Tamil Nadu. But numbers are hard to track due to no proper documentation in this matter. The Citizenship Acts of 48 and 49 made things hard for the Indian Tamils way before Bandaranaike era. Over 700,000 plantation workers got labeled stateless (Peebles, 2001).

Particularly for Tamils the civil war that raged from 1983 to 2009 turned illegal migration into a means of survival. Many fled to other countries after entire villages were destroyed, more than 100,000 people were killed and 300,000 were displaced(OCHA, 2009). Tamil Nadu in India was one of the first stops, but later Canada, Australia and Europe were added. Networks of smugglers developed during this time, providing dangerous maritime routes that frequently lasted 15–20 days in hazardous conditions. This illegal activity not only became a threat to the security of Sri Lanka but also to the destination countries, prompting coordinated efforts to curb it. From 2019 to 2024 period this situation became even more complicated. Sri Lanka faced a massive economic crisis that it had never faced before.

The Sri Lankan economy already was at fragile position since 2019, due to poor monetary policies and rising poverty. Sri Lanka defaulted and declared bankruptcy by 2022. That was the first time Sri Lanka declared bankruptcy in the history. Easter attack (ISIS-inspired terrorists conducted a series of suicide bombing attacks in churches and hotels across Sri Lanka on Easter Day in 2019) impacted Sri Lankan day to day life and tourism, which is it's one of the main sources of income. Pandemics turned things into a much worse position. Most of Sri Lankan employees who were working aboard lost their jobs. Some people who had safe jobs came back to Sri Lanka due to several personal reasons. This significantly impacted on Sri Lankan economy (Aslam *et al.*, 2023).

By 2021 Sri Lanka started to face its worst economic crisis in the history. It resulted in massive shortages of almost everything. By 2022 it affected all sectors including education, tourism, Exports, Trade, IT, Entertainment, etc. While other countries are recovering from recessions, Sri Lanka faced much worse declines. It created several push factors (Rukshan and Manage, 2024).

This sparked mass leaving. First working age men and women with low skilled started to immigrate to middle east. Then brain drain came to the conversation. Many skilled workers started to leave Sri Lanka. However legal migration requires significant amounts of money and documentation process. Lower middle class and above could afford or at least can try for legal migration. But people below poverty line and people with below average education had no chance but choose illegal ways which

is less complicated on paper and cheaper compared to legal migration. In 2022 alone the Sri Lanka Navy arrested 1507 persons while attempting to flee the country. It's 11 times higher than the previous year. Majority of detainees attempted to reach Australia and most of the arrests had been made in Mannar beach(Jayasinghe, 2023).

Overall majority of Sri Lankans who were at working age wanted to leave the country during the peak of the crisis. According to a research about the impact of the socioeconomic crisis on the mental health and conflict management styles of the youth of the Western Province of Sri Lanka and it's incite on migration majority of youth tend to leave the country(Aslam *et al.*, 2023).

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 4.1 Public sentiment on migration in Western Province in 2023
Source -(Aslam *et al.*, 2023)

Around 66% of youth in the western province wanted to leave the country. Only 7% said they have no intention of leaving the country. Undecided 27% were also unhappy about the direction their country was going at the moment. They had uncertainty about the country's future(Aslam *et al.*, 2023).

4.2 Reasons for Illegal Migration

The surge in illegal migration from Sri Lanka between 2019 and 2024 is a combination of economic desperation, personal issues, limited choices and external influences. Far from impulsive decisions, these journeys were driven by pressures and promises, increased by the nation's economic collapse.

Drawing from local accounts and international analyses, several reasons can be recognized as the reasons (CBSL, 2022b; ILO, 2024) which are discussed below.

4.2.1 Economic reasons

Many migrants are driven by the hope of better economic opportunities abroad. The pursuit of better financial opportunities abroad was a major reason. With Sri Lanka's economy in freefall, 94.9% food inflation in September 2022 and the rupee plummeting to Rs. 360 against the US dollar by year-end, local wages couldn't compete with foreign prospects (CBSL, 2022a). Local wages were no match to foreign wages even before the crisis. But the economic crisis made things worse. People spent more than they earned (Daily Mirror, 2023).

During this period, countries legal migration, documented at 311,056 (SLBFE, 2022; ILO, 2024). Both legal and illegal migration hit its highest in 2022. This was the peak of economic crisis and Sri Lanka was declared as a bankrupt nation. Political stability was also faced with heavy challenges. Some even warned massive uprisings will have ended up as chaos like Arab spring events in middle east (India Today, 2022).

4.2.2 Poverty

Growing economic hardship left many with no viable options at home. Foreign reserves down to USD 50 million by May 2022, crippling imports and driving shortages of fuel and food (Jayasinghe, 2022b). The World Bank reported poverty rates soaring from 11% in 2019 to over 25% by 2024, affecting millions. The situation was much worse in 2022 and 2023 compared to 2024. Overall, the quality of life went to a massive decline throughout these years.(The Island, 2025b) legal migration's costs and delays were out of reach. Illegal paths became people's only way of escape. According to (SLN, 2023) poverty was the main concerns among the illegal migrants.

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Figure 4.2: Rise of Poverty in Sri Lanka (2019 - 2023)
Source: (World Bank, 2023b; The Morning, 2025)

4.2.3 Influence of Sri Lankan Diaspora and Misinformation

Some migrants aim to join family members already settled in other countries. This motivation became a huge factor during the 2019 –2024 economic crisis. The Tamil diaspora, numbering over one million globally due to decades of civil war, plays a major role(International Crisis Group, 2010; SLN, 2023). Many migrants target nations like Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where relatives support to migrate illegally. The Sri Lankan diaspora plays a significant role in encouraging and facilitating illegal migration. That diaspora wasn't just hyping but also it was practically dragging people over.

Misleading information from smugglers often convinces people to take the dangerous journey. That too with spending a significant amount of money. One smuggler group which operates in Colombo suburb, Dehiwala area, charges between 200,000 to 4.5 million rupees per person. Most of the people aimed to go to Australia, India, Italy and Canada. Misinformation led them to believe they could survive such attempts and the amount they were paying is a good investment (Jayasinghe, 2023).

There were Sri Lankans among 160 illegals who attempted to cross the Belarus-Poland border in August 2023. According to border officials, detained people include citizens from Somalia, Egypt, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka (LANKASARA, 2023). This is a significant and rare incident for Sri Lankans. This was not a usual route. Illegal immigration to Australia and Italy via sea and using India as a hub to escape to another country was usual long before the economic crisis. But crossing the Belarus

border to enter Poland was new for Sri Lankans. It clearly shows the impact of the economic crisis. point out similar deceptions about Australia, yet over 300 attempted the crossing in 2022 (RNZ, 2022). Diaspora rumors of prosperity abroad, driving decisions based on hope rather than reality (ILO, 2024). Australian government hired even advertising companies long before the economy crisis to confront misinformation which motivate people to illegally immigrated to Australia. Australian government used mediums like posters, banners and leaflets even funded educational street dramas about unsuccessful illegal migration attempts. Also created lots of television advertisements and ran them often in mainstream channels in Sri Lanka (Hindustan Times, 2009). This strategy had positive impacts and effectively confronted misinformation. But in 2022, the crisis led to massive illegally entering attempts. Most of illegal immigrants knew the exact situation and yet they tried it anyway. Because they didn't have much of choices in Sri Lanka.

4.3 Sri Lankan Navy and Illegal Migration

The Sri Lanka Navy has been at the top of efforts to stop illegal migration. From 2009 to 2023, the SLN captured many vessels along with people connected to human trafficking. The data suggests the number of arrests varies over time, with peaks in 2022. However, these are numbers of those who were captured and it's not telling the entire number of illegal migration during these years.

- **2009-2012**: A significant number of arrests were made, with 2009 seeing 176 arrests and 2012 witnessing a spike with 3,008 arrests(SLN, 2023).

- **2013-2019**: The numbers fluctuated, with 2013 recording 1,019 arrests and 2019 seeing 86 arrests(SLN, 2023).

- **2020-2023**: The trend continued with 872 arrests in 2022 and 63 in 2023. This is not an era of illegal migration so popular. When compared to the last decade (2009-2019) illegal migration is not a possible thing with technological advancement of SL Navy and the laws of destination countries like Australia. With the economic hardship in 2022 was the peak of illegal migration. The Navy did lots of raids compared to other years. By 2023, there was a decline of illegal migration with the high attention of Sri Lankan and with the increased public awareness. But also smugglers adopted to Sri Lankan navy patrols, So they able to penetrate defense line and escaped(SLN, 2023).

The majority of these migrants are Tamils, with a smaller number of Sinhalese and Muslims also involved.

Table 4.1: Arrested Illegal Migrants by SL Navy (2009-2023)

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Source:(SLN, 2023)

Table 4.2: Arrested Illegal Migrants by SL Navy (Demography, 2009-2023)

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Source: (SLN, 2022)

These details are not completely available to the public to date. This is only for educational purposes and due to national security concerns, details of Smuggler links, Mission plans, pictures and other details in the original document will not be included to this chapter. It will be provided upon request if necessary.

The Sri Lanka Navy, in collaboration with other agencies, has implemented several measures to combat illegal migration.

- Maritime and Ground Intelligence Operations: Surveillance and intelligence gathering have been crucial in disrupting smuggling networks.

- Technical Operations: The use of technology, such as transponders and deep-sea surveillance, has improved the detection of smuggling activities.

- Legal Actions

The Immigration and Emigration Act imposes strict penalties on smugglers, including jail terms and fines. Crew members and organizers face jail terms of up to five years, while passengers are fined. This process take several steps(SLN, 2023).

    a) Interviewing of personnel by the Navy.
    b) Handing over personnel to the CID.
    c) Forwarding to courts by the CID.
    d) Crew members (facilitators) – Jail Term not less than one year and not more than five years. [Immigrant and Emigrants (Amendment) act, No 31 of 2006
    e) Passengers – Fine 5000.00 LKR to 10.000.00 LKR

- Challenges (Observed by Sri Lankan Navy)

Even with so much effort and pushes, illegal migration is still going on and sometimes it's more organized with much larger numbers. The Sri Lankan Navy observed these issues and made some recommendations. According to the SL Navy, smugglers changing their assembly points, locations, and routes. They use internet platforms like WhatsApp and Viber for safer communication. In some areas, people are not cooperating with authorities and helping smugglers (SLN, 2022, 2023).

4.4 Navy Ships in Illegal Migration Control (2010–2024)

Even before the economic crisis peaked, the SL Navy caught 1507 in 2022, up from a few hundred in 2019, heading for India or Australia(Jayasinghe, 2023). Ships like SLNS Ranawickrama patrolled hot spots which belongs to eastern naval command area. The Navy even had to save some too. In December 2024, pulled hurt fishermen 259 miles off Galle(The Morning, 2022).

When we look at possible launching pads, it's clear that majorly of these places are located in the north and east part of the country. Also, it can be clearly seen some significant launching hot spots in the south as well. These places are very close to fishery harbors and that's explain the involvement of fishing boats in illegal migration(SLN, 2022).

Figure removed due to copyright restriction

Figure 4.3: Possible launching pads

Source:(SLN, 2023)

Boat launch sites have played a crucial role in the overall pattern of illegal migration from Sri Lanka. Due to the significant number of launches occurring in different coastal areas, confronting illegal migration has required substantial naval resources, including patrol boats and larger vessels. This geographic distribution reveals another important fact: these launch sites are strategically located close to existing fishing harbors(SLN, 2023).

The main launch areas are concentrated near established fishing ports including Ambalangoda, Beruwala, Chilaw, Codbay (Point Pedro), Devinuwara (Puranawella), Dickowita, Dodanduwa, Galle, Gandara, Hambantota, Hikkaduwa, Kalpitiya, Kudawella, Mirissa, Negombo, Panadura, Tangalle, Valvettithurai, Weligama, Wennappuwa, and Dondra. Human traffickers have been using fishing boats and existing fishing infrastructure to carry out human trafficking operations via dangerous sea routes(SLN, 2023).

This strategic use of fishing infrastructure allows smugglers to blend their illegal activities with legitimate fishing operations, making detection more difficult for authorities. The proximity to established harbors also provides access to necessary logistics, fuel, and equipment needed for these dangerous journeys across the ocean.

Despite all these actions, some able to escape and the most unfortunate part is deaths costed these illegal journeys. From 2019 –2024, Sri Lankans died chasing a way out. However, there's no exact numbers to understand the scope of these unfortunate incidents. Smugglers don't give information, and not every boat makes news. But incidents happening out there. In November 2022, over 300 got stuck on a busted trawler off Vietnam, headed for Canada. One individual killed himself after rescue. He couldn't face going back (Thinesh, 2024). Another man was in critical condition. These two are among many others who tried to take their lives over frustration because they are to be send back to Sri Lanka (Mohan, 2022).

The government couldn't keep up. Despite all the measures and restrictions, illegal migration became uncontrollable (Jayasinghe, 2023). The government knew the situation regarding illegal migration was worse, just not how worse. The International Labour Organization said illegal tries doubled from before the crisis, maybe thousands more than the 1,000–2,000 a year pre 2019 (ILO, 2024). Hard to point out because it's all undocumented.

4.5 Crisis-Driven Illegal Migration and Global Destinations (2019–2024)

Sri Lanka entered 2022 with worst case scenarios for almost on everything. From 2019 to 2022 Sri Lanka faced significant issues with the terrorist attack (Easeter bombing attack) and COVID-19. But 2022 was the year that marked the peak of its Economic crisis. People started to experience power cuts and shortages of basic goods. Power cuts and shortages impacted businesses, manufacturing, and transportation services(Ethirajan, 2023). The entire nation was paralyzed. Food related Inflation went up 94.9% in September 2022, prices for rice and fuel through the roof and the rupee crashed to Rs. 360 by year-end(CBSL, 2022a). People were lining up for days just to get gas, and power cuts left them in the dark.

That situation didn't just push people to leave legally like 311,056 officially migrated in 2022 (CBSL, 2022b; ILO, 2024). It also increased illegal migration. According to a Newsfirst (a mass media in Sri Lanka) report, boat after boat is getting captured, people risking everything to leave the country for India or Australia. On 27th June 2022 Sri Lanka Navy arrested a multiday fishing boat with 54 Sri Lankans suspected to be on an illegal migration attempt to Australia via sea. SLNS Rathnadeepa led the intercepting mission. Sri Lankan illegal migration became more complicated due to the diverse global destinations(Farzan, 2022).

- **United States:** Illegal migration to the USA was not common among Sri Lankans. However, there were some minor incidents in 2007 and 2010. However, after 2019 situation hit to completely different level. From 2019, there was a rise of illegal border crossing by Sri Lankans in southern border wall. According to Border Patrol apprehension statistics there was only 4 Sri Lankans cross the border in 2007. By 2019 it skyrocketed to 465 people (Bensman, 2020).

  A case of a Sri Lankan Tamil person, Vijayakumar Thuraissigiam shows the nature and difficulty of illegally crossing the US border. Specially from a country like Sri Lanka. Thuraissigiam fled to the U.S. in 2016 after surviving persecution for supporting a Tamil politician. Traveling through the Darien Gap, he crossed the US southern border near Tijuana for seeking asylum. It took him to nearly eight months. From Sri Lanka to South America and traveled through South and Central America(Mukpo, 2020).

  Even if we don't have exact numbers of cases like this due to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) not categorizing Sri Lankans separately, there's one strong evidence that can shows the scale of Sri Lankan illegal border crossing to southern border. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement has announced that as of Nov. 24, 2024, a total of 3,065 Sri Lankans are to be deported (Newswire, 2025a). This is due to Trump administration policies in illegal migration. 3,065 Sri Lankans among the 1.4 million undocumented

immigrants shows us a picture of illegal migration in Sri Lanka. Specially during past few years (LANKASARA, 2025c).

Sri Lanka is discussing with U.S. authorities to make sure future deportations comply with the Extradition Treaty and other legal processes. Some individuals were detained at the U.S. border and sent back to Sri Lanka via Panama. Under President Trump's stricter immigration policies, the U.S. is very firm on illegal migrants. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that curbing illegal migration and securing borders are top priorities, including negotiating repatriations last year, 117 Sri Lankans were deported from the U.S. for immigration violations (Bandara, 2025).

- **Italy:** Legal and illegal migration to Italy was very common among Sri Lankans. It peaked long before the economic crisis. Especially during the Civil War. During the 90s, people from across the island and of all ethnic backgrounds considered Italy as a top destination for labor migration. This was usually a popular option among Catholic youth from the western seaboard. In early 2000, Sri Lanka became a hub for illegal migration to Italy. Even for other nationalities, boats arrived weekly to Italy from Negombo and other towns. However, the Sri Lankan government and Italy government together able to crack down this phenomenon (Brown, 2012). There is high possibility to illegally migrate to Italy with influence of the diaspora and relations. But there is not any clear evidence of illegal migration to Italy in the period of economic crisis. Since migration is not a possible thing over the ocean at present, probably, people use legal methods in illegal ways like taking a tourist visa first, then overstay.

- **Australia:** Sri Lankans have been trying to enter Australia legally and illegally way before the crisis. Back in the 1870s, some landed in Australia. The 1871 Victoria census counts 58 Ceylonese, and it suggests these people are probably laborers or gold diggers (Museum Victoria). This is the first recorded migration to Australia from Sri Lanka (previously known as Ceylon) in recorded history. Illegal boat migrations from Sri Lanka to Australia surged during the nation's civil war from 1983 to 2009, led by conflict related issues, particularly among Tamils(Origins, 2017). This period saw high maritime activity, with arrivals peaking as people seeking asylum from violence. After the end of war and peak in 2009, these attempts declined and stabilized. But not for long. But illegal boat migrations increased in 2012. This led to significant policy changes, including the establishment of processing facilities in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, as recommended by the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers (Parliament of Australia, 2012; ILA, 2022)

By 2012, Sri Lanka became one of the top four countries for illegal arrivals. Over 736 migrants arrived after the war. 825 illegals arrived between 2011–2012. Despite strong and effective border controls, a massive increase occurred due to Sri Lanka's economic crisis, with more than 1,000 attempts in 2023. June saw the highest monthly arrivals, according to the Australian Border Force. These risky journeys on fragile and uncomfortable vessels show the desperation of Sri Lankans who left financially broken nation(ILA, 2022). The situation in 2012 relates to Australia's amendment to the Migration Act 1958, enabling the transfer of captured boat arrivals to offshore facilities (Parliament of Australia, 2012).

Papua New Guinea (PNG), specifically Manus Island, served as a key detention site. Between 2012 and 2021, this policy affected many illegal migrants, including Sri Lankans, for processing. The(BBC, 20216) reported an incident involving 12 Sri Lankans captured near the Cocos Islands in 2016, who were returned to Sri Lanka, though some from similar attempts were transferred to PNG. By 2016, over 900 individuals were detained at Manus Island, according to the Australian Department of Home Affairs (Vickery, 2016). PNG stopped hosting such detainees in 2021 following a Supreme Court ruling declaring the arrangement unconstitutional.

According to BBC there were over 500 Sri Lankans intercepted off Western Australia in 2022, up from 50 in 2019 (BBC,2022). They set out from Sri Lanka or India, traveling 2,000 miles of the ocean. Australia's strict border rules sent most back, but a few landed in asylum processing. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT, 2024) noticed this shift and the Australian government sent AUD 75 million in humanitarian aid, economic push factors reduce efforts. The Sri Lanka Navy's increased patrols, intercepting 1,507 in 2022 compared to 400 in 2019. It showed the size of this exodus (Sri Lanka Navy, 2022)

2022 saw a significant rise of illegal migration towards Australia. The Sri Lankan Navy arrested 51 people on July 3, 2022, for attempting to illegally migrate to Australia. Smugglers used multiday fishing trawlers for this journey. That was the fourth such attempt within a week, driven by Sri Lanka's ongoing economic crisis. Earlier, on July 2, 24 individuals were detained on the western coast while preparing for an illegal sea journey to Australia. On June 27 and 28 more than 100 illegal immigrants were arrested. The Navy actively confronted these attempts(Mishra, 2022).

- **Russia and Belarus:** There were a significant number of Sri Lankans among 160 Asian illegal immigrants stuck at the Belarus-Poland border in 2022–2023, tricked by agents promising EU entry through Minsk. A smaller group overstayed visas in Russia, scraping by

in Moscow's underground economy. It wasn't a huge flow, too far, too costly but economic pressure pushed more people to choose this kind of unconventional route(Doloswala, 2023).

- **United Kingdom and Canada:** More than 50 Tamils held on Diego Garcia (Belongs to UK) since 2021, caught mid journey to Canada (Cuddy, 2024). They were held for years in a camp before being brought to the UK. These numbers show the number of detainees and it give some understanding about the illegal immigration via the English Channel as well as illegal migration towards counties like Canada.

Illegal migration is not a new thing to Sri Lanka. It's been a thing for decades. But the 2019–2024 crisis changed things once and for all. Illegal migration reached its highest. It was even more complicated and massive than it was during the civil war. Sri Lankan Navy stepped up and captured a significant number of boats and people. For example, the number of smuggling arresting recorded as 1146 by Sri Lankan Navy in 2022(SLN, 2023)

Foreign outfits like ICE don't split out Sri Lankan illegals, just include them among in "other" with 110699 catches. They usually use nationality for larger portions like Venezuelans, Mexicans, Cubans(Isacson, 2022).   There are many methodological obstacles to accurately tracking the number of irregular migrants. Confidential Navy reports that were accessible via personal networks served as the main source of data for this study. Sensitive information, such as information about smuggling networks, their affiliations and the personal information of those involved, can be found in these PDF documents. The research process became even more complex due to ethical concerns about data protection and privacy. Overall, illegal migration increased during the crisis, mirroring the legal migration; 311,056 left legit in 2022(CBSL, 2022b; ILO, 2024; Serasinghe, 2024).

4.6 State Sponsored Irregular Migration: A phenomenon created by the crisis

As I mentioned earlier, the economic crisis led to massive illegal migration and desperate citizens fled the country in search of jobs and stability. While the government made significant efforts to crack down on illegal migration by stopping illegal boat journeys and busting human smuggling networks, there are some new revelations that suggest that government institutions like the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment facilitated some forms of irregular migration. These incidents came out after the change of government. The new government launched some anti-corruption sessions and the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment was exposed under this initiative(COPE NEWS, 2025).

It revealed that the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, the body which created to ensuring safe, lawful foreign employment, had allowed thousands of people to be sent abroad on visit visas, bypassing legal frameworks, proper training, and even age restrictions(LANKASARA, 2025a).

According to the COPE report, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment sent 28,165 first time migrant domestic workers abroad without the required 28 day training program. By law, every migrant worker is supposed to complete training that costs Rs. 22,410 or more before leaving. Instead, the Bureau exploited loopholes by using just three language translators to go through screening nearly 390 people a day, sometimes with nothing more than video clips. COPE said this is a disgrace and skipping responsibilities(COPE NEWS, 2025).

The committee found a serious issue regarding the smuggling of child workers during the crisis period with the interviews as a part of the visa process, even though these interviews were not properly conducted. In most cases, they were done by watching a video clip of the interviewees. This weak verification process allowed 683 underage individuals to be sent abroad for domestic work. This can be considered as a serious violation of international child labor laws(COPE NEWS, 2025).

The COPE (Committee on Public Enterprises) meeting also found that the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau had sent 4,942 domestic workers abroad on tourist visas in violation of the relevant act. The Acting Chairman of the Foreign Employment Bureau said due to the crisis in the country, many people left. As a result, human trafficking also increased. What happened was the unofficial trafficking of people, carried out by the bureau itself. This issue drew strong opposition from newly appointed members of parliament in the new government and was severely questioned during the COPE session. According to COPE Chairman Dr. Nishantha Samaraweera, what was once a regulatory body meant to protect migrant workers' rights has turned in to a smuggling business and did the opposite to its founding purpose(COPE NEWS, 2025).

This chapter analyzed the historical background, changing patterns, and various causes of illegal migration from Sri Lanka, focusing particularly on the massive increase that occurred between 2019 and 2024 in the period of economic crisis. The study examined classified government documents, arrest statistics, and social and economic data. Together with Sri Lankan Navy's efforts to stop migrant boats and maps to understand how past events which influenced the current illegal migration trend. The chapter showed that earlier labor migration during British colonial rule, conflicts between ethnic groups, and the past civil war created conditions that led to today's illegal migration patterns. However, it shows that the clear influence of the severe economic crisis that began in 2019 became the primary trigger for increased illegal migration attempts.

The chapter successfully identified key factors that push people to migrate illegally, including extreme economic hardship, poverty, and false information about migration opportunities. The study also analyzed how these factors and government policies push illegal migration to a next level. These findings demonstrated the complex nature of this phenomenon. findings revealed that while illegal migration from Sri Lanka has existed throughout history, it reached an unprecedented level during the recent crisis period.

5. SKILLED MIGRATION DURING THE CRISIS: A NEW ERA OF BRAIN DRAIN IN SRI LANKA

Brain drain was a consistent and normal phenomenon in entire Sri Lankan history. It is well connected with Sri Lanka's ethno and language based political changes and revolts. Back in the 1950s, Sri Lanka was newly independent with a fresh start. However, with Bandaranayke's Sinhala only policies country witnessed its first recorded brain drain since independence. One of the first groups to leave were the Burghers, a small community of mixed European and Sri Lankan descent. They spoke English, held good jobs, and were part of the country for centuries. Sinhala language only law hit the English speaking Burghers hard. Thousands of people left the country, mostly for Australia. This was a cost to the country economically and culturally(Perera, 2024).

Next came the departure of skilled Tamils, mostly educated tamil upper middle and middle class. Tamils, particularly from Jaffna, had proud legacy of education, thanks to missionary schools set up during British era. During 50s they held a big share of jobs in government, medicine, and other sectors(Tamil Guardian, 2008).

For example, in 1956, Tamils made up one third of the admin service and majority of doctors and engineers, despite being just 11% of the population. But the Sinhala Only Act and other policies, turned things upside down. Many Tamils felt discrimination. Then, ethnic tensions turned into riots in 50s and 1983, known as Black July. These violent attacks drove thousands to flee to Canada, Europe, and the United States. By 1970, Tamil representation in public services had dropped to just 5% in administration and 10% in professions. Sri Lanka as a nation lost doctors, engineers, and teachers, people who could have built our nation(Selvaratnam, Keat and Tham, 2023).

In 1971 and 1988/89 the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna(JVP) led a violent war against the government. They were young, mostly Sinhalese, and upset by unemployment, injustice and inequality. The government (71 under Sirimao's government and 88/89 under J.R Jayawardhana and Premadasa's governments) crushed these rebellions brutally, killing thousands (approximately 67 thousand) in 1971 and again in the late 1980s. Fear pushed many Sinhalese to leave, especially educated degree holders. They headed to places like the Middle East, Europe, Australia and the US, taking their skills with them(Moore, 2021).

Best example for such case is Lionel Bopage who is an engineer as well as the president of the Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka. Lionel was the general secretary of JVP during it's early period. He played a major role in 1971 war between JVP and the government. After that he led party with Its leader Rohana Wijeweera till 1984. Even after facing notable crack down from the government he was there to rebuild party. But after they faced second crack down as well

as his clash with JVP nationalist wing he left the party and country. His destination was Australia. He live in Australia till date. There are huge number of people like that who left the country due to fear of oppression and ideological clashes(CounterPoint, 2019).

Sri Lanka's civil war, which happened from 1983 to 2009, left deep scars. By 2000, Sri Lanka was the sixth-largest source of immigrants to Canada, with many Tamils still leaving due to the war. But it wasn't just Tamils. Economic difficulties and political instability drove doctors, engineers, IT experts from all ethnic groups to seek better living condition. It safe to say Brain drain has wiped out Sri Lanka's best skills(Jayawardena, 2020).

In recent history Sri Lanka always among top 20 when it's come to brain drain due to lots of push factors, Sri Lanka had it's historic peak in 2016. By that time brain drain index in Sri Lanka was at 7.9 Sri Lanka was always ranked among 12 to 20. However, since 2016, there has been somewhat decline in brain drain. During covid 19 and restrictions on migration it fell to one of the lowest point but still keep up among top 20. In 2022 brain drain index were at 6.6. However from 2023 it started to increase notably and 2024 it reached to one of the all time high, Srilanka became 16th highest in "Human flight and brain drain - Country rankings" with 7.50 index points. It is nearly two times higher than world average which was at 4.98(TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2025b).

Most of other countries among list faced significant push factors and issues. Ukraine faced Russian invasion. Palestine faced one of the notable war with Israel. Afghanistan had notable oppression. Countries like Somalia, Mali, Syria and Sudan faced bloodiest civil wars in this century. Sri Lanka was one of the few nations among top 20 which didn't face an ongoing war bit still had higher brain drain just like others in the list. This shows the severity of the Sri Lankan economic crisis and how it drives Sri Lankan migration(World Population Review, 2025).

5.1 High-skilled immigration in Sri Lanka Since the independence

Brain drain was a consistent and normal phenomenon in entire Sri Lankan history. It is well connected with Sri Lanka's ethno and language based political changes and revolts. Back in the 1950s, Sri Lanka was newly independent with a fresh start. However, with Bandaranayke's Sinhala only policies country witnessed its first recorded brain drain since independence. One of the first groups to leave were the Burghers, a small community of mixed European and Sri Lankan descent. They spoke English, held good jobs, and were part of the country for centuries. Sinhala language only law hit the English speaking Burghers hard. Thousands of people left the country, mostly for Australia. This was a cost to the country economically and culturally(Perera, 2024).

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In 1971 and 1988/89 the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna(JVP) led a violent war against the government. They were young, mostly Sinhalese, and upset by unemployment, injustice and inequality. The government (71 under Sirimao's government and 88/89 under J.R Jayawardhana and Premadasa's governments) crushed these rebellions brutally, killing thousands (approximately 67 thousand) in 1971 and again in the late 1980s. Fear pushed many Sinhalese to leave, especially educated degree holders. They headed to places like the Middle East, Europe, Australia and the US, taking their skills with them(Moore, 2021).

Best example for such case is Lionel Bopage who is an engineer as well as the president of the Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka. Lionel was the general secretary of JVP during it's early period. He played a major role in 1971 war between JVP and the government. After that he led party with Its leader Rohana Wijeweera till 1984. Even after facing notable crack down from the government he was there to rebuild party. But after they faced second crack down as well as his clash with JVP nationalist wing he left the party and country. His destination was Australia. He live in Australia till date. There are huge number of people like that who left the country due to fear of oppression and ideological clashes(CounterPoint, 2019).

Sri Lanka's civil war, which happened from 1983 to 2009, left deep scars. By 2000, Sri Lanka was the sixth-largest source of immigrants to Canada, with many Tamils still leaving due to the war. But it wasn't just Tamils. Economic difficulties and political instability drove doctors, engineers, IT experts from all ethnic groups to seek better living condition. It safe to say Brain drain has wiped out Sri Lanka's best skills(Jayawardena, 2020).

In recent history Sri Lanka always among top 20 when it's come to brain drain due to lots of push factors, Sri Lanka had it's historic peak in 2016. By that time brain drain index in Sri Lanka was at 7.9 Sri Lanka was always ranked among 12 to 20. However, since 2016, there has been somewhat

decline in brain drain. During covid 19 and restrictions on migration it fell to one of the lowest point but still keep up among top 20. In 2022 brain drain index were at 6.6. However from 2023 it started to increase notably and 2024 it reached to one of the all time high, Srilanka became 16th highest in "Human flight and brain drain - Country rankings" with 7.50 index points. It is nearly two times higher than world average which was at 4.98(TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2025b).

Most of other countries among list faced significant push factors and issues. Ukraine faced Russian invasion. Palestine faced one of the notable war with Israel. Afghanistan had notable oppression. Countries like Somalia, Mali, Syria and Sudan faced bloodiest civil wars in this century. Sri Lanka was one of the few nations among top 20 which didn't face an ongoing war bit still had higher brain drain just like others in the list. This shows the severity of the Sri Lankan economic crisis and how it drives Sri Lankan migration(World Population Review, 2025).

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Figure 5.1: Sri Lanka's Brain Drain Ranking since 2019
source: (TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2025b)

5.2 Sectors Affected by Skilled Migration

5.2.1 IT Sector

IT sector is one of the hardest hitting sector during the economic crisis. Due to energy shortages working conditions became worse and also productivity went low. Lots of sectors suffered from losses, shutdowns and other problems. Many IT professionals had job security concerns. Several unnamed IT professionals gave some insights to a BMS campus research team on this matter. One

respondent said with the economic uncertainty, job security becoming a concern and also high inflation made daily life even worse. Another respondent said job market in Sri Lanka was very unstable and at the same time there were better opportunities for them in foreign countries(Ameer, Rathnayake and Siriwardana, 2024). Some IT professionals worried about living condition. One person said the economic crisis has made it hard for a good living condition. Political Instability created fear of future and it led to lack of confident about the country and personal targets.

All the IT professionals had common idea about the pull factor. Most of them saw lots of opportunities overseas. Most of them listed their favorable destinations and majority of these countries are western nations which offer great living condition, Jobs and trust. Countries like Netherland, Germany, Australia, United States of America, Canada became top destinations(Ameer, Rathnayake and Siriwardana, 2024). Mass leaving of skilled IT professionals led to notable downfall of Sri Lanka's IT sector. Sri Lankan software firm named WSO2 alone lost 40 employees due to brain drain. Sri Lanka is one of the major software outsourcing destination with 120,000 employees. It created 1.2 billion export revenue before the crisis(Christopher, 2022).

5.2.2   Medical Sector

The Medical sector in Sri Lanka went to complete collapse due to notable brain drain. Sri Lankan population heavily rely on free healthcare and government hospitals. The brain drain caused significant challenges for the public. During the crisis Sri Lankan health sector started to face huge shortage of medicines. Power cut also disrupted operations. But these departures created a whole new problem. Anuradhapura government hospital alone, 9 specialists left the positions and went aboard. The administration had to shut down children's ward(Ameer, Rathnayake and Siriwardana, 2024).

Between June 2022 and July 2023, 4,284 doctors obtained "Good Standing" certificates which can be considered as the first step of migration(Eco-Business, 2024; Reuters, 2024). According to the Government Medical Officers Association, 1800 doctors left the country and joined foreign health sectors in 2022 and 2023. During the peak of the economic crisis, 25% of all doctors in the government health sector went for basic preparations to leave the country. Nearly 5000 doctors completed examinations such as examination of the Australian Medical Council, UK's Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board's exams, the Prometric Exams in order to leave Sri Lanka and joined these countries health sectors. Majority of doctors left Sri Lanka with their families and Australia and UK became their top destinations. By 2023, 400 medical specialists left the country due to the crisis(Eco-Business, 2024; Rasooldeen, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

The government extended the retirement age of doctors to 63 to confront the problem. But it failed to address the issue. Some experts suggested salary increases, better working conditions, and career development opportunities (Jayakody,2025). But the government failed to adopt those policies due to the economic crisis.

5.2.3 Education sector

In 2023, nearly one thousand university lectures left the country. This phenomenon made a crack in Sri Lankan university and higher education system even more fragile. Sri Lankan universities serve approximately 150,000 students. It needs 13000 academics to maintain this amount of students with proper education. But at that point it had only 6000 of them and that means more than 50% of vacancies already in the sector. 25% of university lecturers were considering to leave the country not only because economic crisis but also because of the tax policies government imposed to recover from difficulties(Alwis, 2024). The chart below shows the resignations of academic staffs in all major Sri Lanka government universities and higher education Institutes.

Table 5.1: Number of Resignations for Permanent Academic Staff in HEIs under the purview of the UGC

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Source: (University Grants Commission, 2025) (Obtain under RTI law)

What we can clearly see in this graph is a mass leaving of academic staff members in Sri Lanka's most renowned education institutes. Due to this significant skilled migration, the quality of education declined. The imbalance between students and teachers increased and proper education and guidance became impossible. This caused lots of exam delays and other difficulties. Trust and legacy of universities also declined (Alwis, 2024). All these delays and imbalances are going to create dangerous long-term impacts for almost all sectors. Most of the students are also leaving the country because they have lost trust of Sri Lankan universities. About 40,000 Sri Lankan undergraduates went abroad for studies, many of them are unlikely to return(Jayakody, 2025). This will also lead to a significant shortage of skilled employees in the country in near future.

5.2.4 Construction Sector

Sri Lanka's construction industry is one of the biggest contributors of its economy. Unlike other sectors Construction sector faced much worse outcomes due to the crisis. All other sectors partially functioned under hard situation. But construction industry was less resilient because it was heavily rely on oil and other sort of energies, Exports and other logistics. It faced total collapsed. Industry was shrinked   by 50 % from 2019 to 2024 period (Fernando, 2024).

According to the National construction association of Sri Lanka 200000 in the industry left the country for better working conditions in overseas. This includes skilled laborers, engineers, and technicians. This can be consider as one of the biggest exodus of skilled immigrants faced by a single sector in the history of Sri Lanka(News First, 2024).

5.3 Destinations and Migration Pathways for Skilled Migrants

Skilled migration rose with a rapid speed during the economic crisis. Specifically, 2024 migration numbers tells us a very important story about Sri Lankan skilled migrants and their mass exodus. In 2024, about 240,109 Sri Lankans left the country and got jobs abroad. The most interesting thing in their breakdown is the proportion of skilled immigrants. 70,396 individuals were skilled workers (62,177 of them were men and 8,219 of them were women). 17,649 of these migrants were high skilled professionals(SLBFE, 2024a).

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Figure 5.2: Total Employment by Manpower Level (2022)
Source: (CBSL, 2022c)

5.3.1   Middle east

Middle east countries always considered as the major destinations for Sri Lankan migrant workers, mostly for low skilled workers but also for skilled professionals. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates host the majority of Sri Lankan migrants. Once Iraq was also considered as major destination but after the war, Iraq didn't able to create pull factors for South Asian immigrants. When it comes to   2024, 38,000 Sri Lankans went to Saudi Arabia, 73,995 to Kuwait and 49,499 to UAE(SLBFE, 2024b).

Israel can be consider as the rising destination of Sri Lankan skilled immigrants. Specially during the crisis. Sri Lankan government and Israel government signed a bilateral agreement in 2020 on the temporary employment of Sri Lankan workers in specific sectors. This opened a pathway for hundreds of skilled workers to leave Sri Lanka for Israel. After this agreement, both nations together worked on a process for recruitment placements, and employments. While other middle east countries attracted mostly low-skilled workers, Israel attracted mostly skilled workers. This is due to

more comfortable working and living conditions as well as Israel job market mainly focused on skilled immigrants(Aviv, 2020).

There are four major sectors that Israel filling from Sri Lankan immigrants. Construction, Caregiving, Agriculture and Healthcare(LaOved, 2009). By 2024 more than thousand Sri Lankans departed to Israel for agriculture sector. After October 7 attack in Israel recruiting Sri Lankan immigrants to agriculture sector increased faster than ever before. This is because Palestinians lost their jobs due to security issues and at the same time Sri Lanka faced it's worst economic crisis in the history. So Israel had lots of pull factors and Sri Lanka had lots of push factors. However most of these workers went to picking citrus fruits and sort of low skilled jobs(Ada Derana, 2024a).

However, there are many skilled immigrants left Sri Lanka for Israel agriculture sector. These people are selected by several assessments and the process observed by Israel's Ministry of Agriculture and the Population and Immigration Authority(Daily News, 2025). In 2024 alone nearly 10000 Sri Lankan skilled and other workers departed to Israel for Medical, Caregiving, Construction and Agriculture sectors(Ada Derana, 2024a).

5.3.2 East Asia

Countries like Japan South Korea consider as Sri Lanka's most consistent friendly nations since the independence as well as top destinations for skilled Sri Lankan immigrants. In September 2024, the number of Sri Lankans departed to Japan and South Korea shows a 10% increase compared to September 2023. However, these numbers not telling the entire story and number of skilled immigrants who went to Japan and South Korea during the crisis. this is the recorded number at SLBFE (SLBFE, 2024a).

Best way to get a proper idea on this is the number of applicants who registered for Korean language tests in each year. In 2023 about 31,378 candidates took part in the Korean language exam. 2024 was a record-breaking year on so many levels. More than 80000 candidates registered for the Korean exams. This is the highest ever number recorded in the history of the country(srilankamirror, 2023).

Japan is also a top destination when it comes to brain drain. The majority of Sri Lankan immigrants who went to Japan are high-skilled workers. In 2021, more than 800 Sri Lankan immigrants registered in Japan and nearly 400 of them were professionals(ILO, 2023b).

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Figure 5.3: Registered migrants to Japan by skill category
Source: (ILO, 2023b)

5.3.3 Europe

European countries always stand as top destinations. Mostly to countries like France, Germany, Italy and the UK. But also other European countries have attracted Sri Lankan skilled migrants(ILO, 2023a). Germany alone attracted significant amount of skilled workers from Sri Lanka. However unlike other countries they invested heavily on trainings and language courses not in Germany but in Sri Lanka. German education institute under German embassy doing significant amount of such programs. Germany also invested on tech education in Sri Lanka. Significant number of Sri Lankan construction workers, automobile and other industry workers, nurses went to Germany(ILO, 2023a; LANKASARA, 2025b).

Nurses, care givers, medical technicians, software developers, Cybersecurity experts, IT consultants have high demand in Germany and these demands make it an attractive place to Sri Lankan professionals. Significant number of Sri Lankan professionals went to language learning courses to complete B1 and B2 language proficiency levels. This is due to German language is a key requirement in fields like health sector and engineering(LANKASARA, 2025b).

United Kingdom however remaining as the top European destination for Sri Lankan skilled immigrants and students. This is due to UK – Sri Lanka deep connection since the colonial past. Sri Lankans are more likely to have English proficiency compared to other European languages and lots of bilateral agreements and pathways between UK and Sri Lanka have created many more pull factors towards Sri Lankans(ILO, 2023c).

In 2022, 600 doctors left Sri Lanka and many of them chose UK as their destination. UK's Health and care workers visa grants provided a solid pathway to Sri Lankan medical professionals and skilled workers(British Council, 2023).

5.3.4 Australia

Australia was always a top destination for Sri Lankan skilled immigrants. However, during 2019 – 2024 period skilled migration to Australia increased like never before. Best indication to prove this increase is the rise of Sri Lankan population in Australia. According to ABS's release on Australia's population by country of birth in 2024, Sri Lankan born population ranks as Australia's 10th largest overseas born population. Sri Lankans were at 11th place in 2023. According to Australian bureau of statistics Sri Lankan population reached to all time high in 2024 july and it's about 172800 and 9% increase from 2023. More than 50 % increase from 2013 when Sri Lankan born population at 110000. Even if this new 70000 does not tell the entire story it shows the scale of brain drain in Sri Lanka during the crisis(Newswire, 2025b).

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Figure 5.4: Growth of Sri Lankan born population in Australia
Source:(Newswire, 2025b)

Regardless of the destination and sector overall skilled migrants became significant part of Sri Lankan overseas workers. In 2024, about 70,000 were marked as skilled workers and also 17,600 of them are professionals(SLBFE, 2025).Between 2019 and 2024, Sri Lanka saw a huge wave of skilled workers leaving to find jobs abroad. This marked a historical brain drain crisis in the history of Sri Lanka. Over these years, about 1.3 million Sri Lankans packed up and left the county to work

in other countries. Most of these people are skilled workers and professionals. They were looking for better life(Ada Derana, 2024b).

From 2020 to 2024 there was a significant rise of high skill migration to Australia. From several categories and pathways like employer sponsorship, state nomination, and skilled independent categories. Australia had stable pull factors and at the same time Sri Lanka had push factors like never before. When we look at permanent skill stream visas and temporary skilled employment visas granted from 2020 to 2024 we can clearly see the steady rise(Australian Bureau of Statistics and Department of Home Affairs, 2024).

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Figure 5.5: Sri Lankan high skilled immigrants to Australia

Source: (Australian Bureau of Statistics and Department of Home Affairs, 2024)

Australia is one of the top destinations for skilled Sri Lankans during the economic crisis. From 2020 to 2024 we can see a 400 % increase of Temporary and Permanent skill visa grants from Australia. General practitioners and resident medical officers, Accountants, Software and applications programmers, Civil engineering professionals, Specialist physicians, Electrical engineers, Industrial, mechanical and production engineers, Database and systems administrators, and ICT security specialists and many higher skilled professionals have left the country to Australia and many of them are unlikely to return. Which will dismantle all the influential sectors in long terms(Australian Bureau of Statistics and Department of Home Affairs, 2024).

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Figure 5.6: Departures by Destination

Source: (CBSL, 2022c)

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Figure 5.7: Departures by Destination(2022)

Source: (CBSL, 2022c)

5.4 The Skilled Labor Exodus and Its Impact on Sri Lanka's Economic Future

Sri Lanka's economic crisis has triggered a historic wave of skilled migration, reshaping the country's workforce and future prospects. Using the human capital theory, this exodus represents a massive loss of investment in education, training, and expertise. Doctors, engineers, IT professionals, and academics. Sri Lanka invested heavily on these skilled professionals with its free education system. The human capital flight weakened Sri Lanka's path to recovery. However, the push-pull theory helped to understand the phenomenon. Hyperinflation, salary cuts, and job insecurity made survival difficult for professionals. Power cuts, medicine shortages, and crumbling infrastructure pushed workers to breaking point. Meanwhile countries like Australia, the UK, and Germany offered higher wages, stability, and career growth.

According to Sri Lanka's Immigration and Emigration department officials in 2023 alone Sri Lanka issued one million passports and 23% 0f them used by the end of the year. These statistics shows as the eager, determination of Sri Lankans. How badly they want to leave the country and escaped from Economic difficulties. From 2021 to 2024 period government issued roughly 3.6 million passports with the significant peak in 2022 and 2023(Department of Immigration, 2023).

In 2024 alone, these leavers set a new record. More than 312,000 Sri Lankans left for jobs abroad. That number shows how determined they are to leave the country and escaped from economic crisis and all other difficulties. More than 70% of leavers in 2024 can be consider as skilled workers. This shows Sri Lanka's shift towards low-skilled workers to skilled employment categories. This affected many sectors from IT industry to medicine, from constructions to trading, From agriculture to industries(CBSL, 2024b). The crisis has already imposed severe short-term repercussions, while the long-term consequence remains imminent. Sri Lanka's prospects for full recovery appear increasingly uncertain.

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Figure 5.8: Total Departures for Foreign Employment by Manpower Level (2023)

Source: (CBSL, 2023b)

6. THE GREAT EXODUS: A SOCIOECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF MIGRATION FROM SRI LANKA (2019–2024)

Between 2019 and 2024, Sri Lanka experienced an unprecedented wave of migration, driven by economic collapse, political instability, and social unrest. This period, marked by the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a devastating economic crisis peaking in 2022, represents a pivotal chapter in Sri Lanka's post-independence history. Over 1.3 million Sri Lankans left the country in search of better opportunities abroad. This about 6 % of the entire population of Sri Lanka. However, these numbers only show the documented legal migration. The actual numbers of all forms of departures can be significantly larger than documented numbers. This mass exodus was not just a response to temporary hardships but also a survival strategy. It shows deep rooted socioeconomic challenges. This chapter analyzes the migration trends during this period, drawing on data from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka's Quarterly Bulletins, government reports obtained via the Right to Information (RTI) Act, Government publications under RTI regulations, media sources, and confidential documents. It evaluates these trends through the Push-Pull Theory, Neoclassical Economic Theory, and the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), providing a comprehensive socioeconomic analysis of the factors driving this migration, its impacts, and its suggestions for Sri Lanka's future

6.1 Migration Trends: A Rise Driven by Crisis

The period from 2019 to 2024 witnessed a dramatic escalation in both legal and illegal migration from Sri Lanka, with 2022 and 2023 marking the peak of this exodus. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka's Quarterly Bulletins, approximately 80,000 individuals sought foreign employment in the first quarter of 2019, with remittances totaling USD 1,700 million in the first half of the year. This initial uptick followed the Easter Sunday attacks, which destroyed tourism and escalated economic instability. By 2020, despite global disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, migration remained high, with an estimated 116,000 departures annually and remittances reaching USD 3,500 million. In 2021, migration stabilized at around 76,384 departures, but remittances surged to approximately USD 5,000 million, showing reliance on overseas earnings.

The crisis reached its peak in 2022, with Sri Lanka defaulting on its debt, foreign reserves plummeting to USD 50 million, and food-related inflation soaring to 94.9%(CBSL, 2022a; The Sunday Times, 2022). This triggered a massive exodus, with 170,867 individuals departing by year-end, including 100,000 in the second half alone. Remittances, however, fell to USD 3,800 million, a decline attributed to distrust in formal banking channels and the rupee's depreciation. In 2023,

migration surged further, with 240,000 departures, including 146,885 by June, and remittances recovered to over USD 5,000 million as formal channels stabilized(CBSL, 2023a, 2023b). By the first half of 2024, 145,175 individuals had left, contributing USD 3,000 million in remittances, despite signs of economic recovery with projected growth of 4.4%(World Bank, 2023d).

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Figure 6.1: Total Departures by Sri Lankans (2021,2022)
Source: (CBSL, 2022c)

2022 can be consider as Sri Lanka's worst year ever in terms of economy. It was escalated by high debt, the outcomes of Covid-19 pandemic, Global wars and the economic mismanagement by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration. Political instability and violence spread across nation(Devotta, 2023). Both legal and Illegal migration rose sharply, particularly in 2022, when the Sri Lanka Navy arrested 1,146 individuals attempting to leave via unauthorized routes(SLN, 2023). Destinations included Australia, Europe, Canada and the UK.

6.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Explaining the Exodus

The migration trends observed between 2019 and 2024 align closely with the three theoretical frameworks employed in this study: the Push-Pull Theory, Neoclassical Economic Theory, and the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM). Each theory provides unique views into the drivers, patterns, and results of this migration wave.

6.2.1 Push-Pull Theory

The Push-Pull Theory posits that migration results from adverse conditions in the home country (push factors) and attractive opportunities abroad (pull factors). In Sri Lanka, push factors were

abundant during the 2019–2024 period. The economic crisis, marked by 94.9% inflation(food-related), currency depreciation, and shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, created unbearable living conditions(CBSL, 2022a; The Sunday Times, 2022). Political instability due to the 2022 protests that ousted President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and reported violations across nations made the situation even more tense and uncertain.

Pull factors were evident in destination countries. Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE offered low-skilled workers higher wages and job security(CBSL, 2025a). Skilled professionals, including doctors and IT experts, were drawn to Western countries such as Australia, Canada, and the UK, which provided stable economies, better working conditions, and educational opportunities. For instance, Australia's Sri Lankan-born population grew by 9% to 172,800 in 2024, reflecting its appeal to skilled migrants(Newswire, 2025b).

The Push-Pull Theory is particularly evident in the rise of illegal migration. Economic desperation and misinformation from smugglers drove individuals to risk journeys, such as boat journeys to Australia or crossings through the Belarus-Poland border(Doloswala, 2023). The theory effectively captures the interplay of domestic crises and foreign opportunities that increased Sri Lanka's migration surge.

6.2.2 Neoclassical Economic Theory

Neoclassical Economic Theory explains migration as a response to unfairness in labor market conditions between countries. Sri Lankan workers, facing low wages and unemployment at home, sought higher earnings abroad. In 2022, the rupee's crash to Rs. 360 against the dollar and import restrictions damaged industries like construction, pushing 200,000 skilled laborers to seek opportunities in the Middle East and Israel(News First, 2024). The theory is particularly relevant to low-skilled migration to Gulf countries, where domestic workers and construction laborers earned significantly more than in Sri Lanka(Jayawardena, 2020).

However, the theory also highlights distortions caused by poor economic policies. The Gotabaya administration's artificial pegging of the rupee at Rs. 200–203 in 2021–2022, despite black market rates reaching Rs. 400, deterred formal remittance flows(Srinivasan, 2022). This led to a 61% drop in remittances in January 2022, from USD 675 million to USD 259 million, despite rising migration(EconomyNext, 2022b). The mismanagement of Personal Foreign Currency Accounts (PFCAs) further escalated this, as workers turned to informal channels like Hawala to avoid unfavorable exchange rates. Neoclassical theory shows how economic incentives drove migration but were undermined by systemic failures at home.

6.2.3 New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM)

NELM shows household-level decision-making in migration, viewing it as a collective strategy to diversify income and face economic difficulties. In Sri Lanka, this reflects in the gender and age demographics of migrants. Men aged 30 –34, often family providers, dominated skilled labor migration to the Middle East, while women aged 40–44, typically with domestic responsibilities, migrated as caregivers(CBSL, 2024b). Families pooled resources to send members abroad.

Batticaloa, Ampara, and Trincomalee these 3 districts have the highest density of migrant worker departures per 100,000 (Batticaloa 3,745 per 100,000 people, Ampara 2,703 per 100,000, Trincomalee 2,246 per 100,000). It's higher than the average and higher than all other districts in Sri Lanka(SLRCS, 2023). At the same time, these districts are the poorest districts in Sri Lanka, with the highest poverty and extreme poverty rate among all other districts(World Bank, 2021). So households use out-migration as a strategy to confront their financial difficulties.

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Figure 6.2: Density Of Migrant Worker Departures Per 100,000 People
Source(SLRCS, 2023)

Tamil diaspora, over one million strong, played a major role in facilitating migration, often funding illegal journeys or providing contacts in countries like Canada and the UK(ADRA, 2024). This shows migration as a collective survival decision made by families, relatives rather than an individual choice.

6.3 Key Findings

The analysis reveals several findings that show the scale and nature of Sri Lanka's migration crisis from 2019 to 2024.

6.3.1 Migration as a Survival Strategy

Migration during this period was not about achieving goals but a desperate response to crisis. The economic collapse, with foreign reserves dropping to USD 50 million and inflation(food-related) peaking at 94.9%, left many with no viable options at home(Uditha Jayasinghe and Devjyot Ghoshal, 2022). Legal migration, with 311,056 departures in 2022(CBSL, 2025b), was too slow or costly for many, leading to a surge in illegal routes, with 1,146 arrests by the Sri Lanka Navy in 2022 alone(SLN, 2023).

6.3.2 Brain Drain and Sectoral Impacts

The exodus of skilled professionals had profound effects on critical sectors. The IT sector saw significant losses, with companies like WSO2 losing 40 employees due to job insecurity and power shortages(Christopher, 2022). The medical sector was hit hardest, with 1,800 doctors leaving in 2022–2023, leading to closures like the children's ward at Anuradhapura Hospital(Ameer, Rathnayake and Siriwardana, 2024). The education sector lost nearly 1,000 lecturers in 2023, creating a 50% vacancy rate in universities(Alwis, 2024). The construction industry, a key economic driver, shrank by 50%, with 200,000 skilled workers departing (Fernando, 2024). Sri Lanka's brain drain index reached 7.5 in 2024, placing it 16th globally, the only country which not at an ongoing war, showing the crisis's severity(TheGlobalEconomy.com, 2025b)

6.3.3 Remittance Gap

Despite increased migration, remittances did not rise proportionately. In 2022, remittances fell to USD 3,800 million from USD 7.1 billion in 2020, despite 311,056 departures(CBSL, 2025b). This paradox stemmed from distrust in the Gotabaya administration, whose policies like pegging the rupee and restricting PFCAs pushed workers to informal channels. The black market exchange rate, offering Rs. 50–100 more per dollar, further incentivized Hawala and Undiayal systems(EconomyNext, 2022b). Only in 2023, with relaxed controls and incentives, did remittances recover to over USD 5,000 million(CBSL, 2022c).

Figure 6.3: Trends of Quarterly Workers' Remittances (USD million)
Source: (CBSL, 2023b, 2025a)

6.3.4 Gender and Age

Migration patterns were distinctly gendered and age-specific. Men aged 30–34, providers, dominated skilled labor migration, particularly to the Middle East (54% of 2023 departures). Women aged 40–44, primarily caregivers, comprised a significant portion of low-skilled migrants(CBSL, 2024b). A match with NELM, as households strategically sent members to secure income abroad.

6.3.5 Illegal Migration and Global Routes

Illegal migration surged with new routes emerging, such as the Belarus-Poland border(Connor, 2023). The Sri Lanka Navy's efforts, including 1,146 arrests in 2022, highlight the scale of this issue, yet smugglers' adaptability using encrypted communication and shifting routes undermined enforcement(SLN, 2023). Tragic incidents, like the deaths of five migrants near Trincomalee in 2022, shows the human cost (Newsfirst, 2022).

Jaffna, Trincomalee, Negombo, and Batticaloa districts are identified as hotspots where illegal migrants gather before boarding boats. Sri Lankan Navy monitoring more than 40 launching pads and it made cracking down smugglers more complicated (SLN, 2023).

6.4 Validation of Theoretical Frameworks

The data strongly validates the three theoretical frameworks. The Push-Pull Theory explains the structural drivers, with economic collapse and political instability as push factors and foreign job opportunities as pull factors. Neoclassical Economic Theory accounts for labor market unfairness

driving migration to high wage countries, but also highlights how policy failures distorted remittance flows. NELM captures the household level, evident in gendered migration patterns and diaspora support for illegal routes. Together, these frameworks provide an understanding of the crisis-driven migration, revealing its complexity and multi-factor contributions.

6.5 Implications

The migration wave of 2019–2024 has reshaped Sri Lanka's socioeconomic landscape. The brain drain has damaged key sectors, with long term consequences for development. The loss of doctors and lecturers, construction workers, IT specialists threatens healthcare, education, IT sector and infrastructure recovery (Alwis, 2024; Ameer, Rathnayake and Siriwardana, 2024; Fernando, 2024). This mass exodus led to a future population decline in Sri Lanka. A decade Sri Lankan population growth was at 1.1%. However, after the crisis, it decreased to 0.28%. This is due to several factors including declining birth rate, increasing death rate as well as out migration(Dullewe, 2025).

Most of the young people changed their expectations due to the crisis. Instead settle in Sri Lanka, getting married, and having child most working age people prioritized surviving from economic crisis. Significant amount of people left the country. Fertility rate went below replacement at 1.97 in 2023. The number of live births dropped dramatically, from 319,000 in 2019 to 247,900 in 2023. 20% decline from 2019 and continue to decline(Dullewe, 2025).

One of the major reasons for this is out migration which happened exactly this period of time. Most of the working age men and women focused on leaving the country for better jobs, working conditions and salaries. It changed family plans and the cultural thinking about having kids. These type of dramatic changes happening with in decades. But due to the unprecedented crisis it changed in a matter of 4 years.

In 2011 experts predicted Sri Lanka's population could double to 40 million by 2050. This was based on then-current fertility rates and other social and economic factors. But after the crisis United nation predict that the population will peak at 24.8 million by 2050 and then begin to decline. By 2100 Sri Lankan population will be less than 14.7 million. This shows the significant long term impacts due to the economic crisis and the persistence of out-migration(UNdata, 2025).

The surge in illegal migration shows governance failures, as weak enforcement and misinformation fueled dangerous journeys. The government's response, including incentives like the 2021 "Incentive Scheme," showed some success in boosting formal remittances by 2023 (CBSL, 2023a, 2025a).

However, solving root causes like poverty, unemployment, and distrust in institutions are necessary to reduce both legal and illegal migration.

6.6 Recommendations

The period from 2019 to 2024 marks a significant moment in Sri Lanka's migration history, by an unprecedented exodus driven by economic and political crises. The data, supported by the Push-Pull Theory, Neoclassical Economic Theory, and NELM, reveals migration as a survival strategy, with significant impacts on society and the economy. The brain drain, remittance gap, and rise in illegal migration shows that why the structural issues should be addressed. Here are some practical steps to stop skilled workers from leaving, reduce illegal migration, fight poverty, manage the economy better, and increase overall economic strength.

6.6.1 Reducing Brain Drain

Between 2022 and 2023, Sri Lanka lost 1,800 doctors, 1,000 university teachers, and 200,000 construction workers(Alwis, 2024; Fernando, 2024; Rasooldeen, 2024). This brain drain has hurt hospitals, universities, and key industries. To stop this type of phenomenon in future there are some pragmatic recommendations.

- Better Payments and Benefits - Offer bonuses to keep doctors, engineers, and teachers from leaving. Significant salary boost for doctors will be helpful. could match foreign wages (like in Australia or the UK).
- Expand medical education – Providing more facilities to teaching hospitals and Universities will increase the capacity for more students. At the same time government must make laws and regulations to make it easy for private sector to participate, and start medical education institutes.
- Increase financial supports to universities, create better conditions for academic staffs.
- Start a program to bring back skilled immigrants. It's clear that Sri Lanka cannot offers much better conditions and salaries than Developed nation. Instead competing like that offer what Sri Lanka can practically do at the moment. Reasonable increase of salary, better working condition etc. Also patriotic campaigns will make some changes of thinking pattern of diaspora. India as a nation tried this method and gained some momentum(Javed, 2025).

6.6.2 Reducing Illegal migration

In 2022, the Sri Lanka Navy caught 1,146 people fleeing illegally(SLN, 2023). Many risk their lives due to poverty or false promises from smugglers.

- Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch nationwide campaigns to educate communities about the risks of illegal migration and smuggling scams. Show real cases, like the 2022

Trincomalee deaths (Newsfirst, 2022), to discourage dangerous trips. Also incidents like how Sri Lankans were trapped in cyber scam centers operating in Myanmar's Karen State will discourage people's efforts of seeking unlawful ways(British Broadcasting Corporation, 2025).

The Australian government already have an awareness campaign and Sri Lankan government can team up with them for create an impactful awareness program.

- Boost and modernize Sri Lankan Navy: Use drones and satellite tracking to stop smuggling boats. Work with India and Australia to share intelligence. For example, support programs like Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders (Home Affairs, 2023).
- Shut down programs like sending people to jobs with visit visas. Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) sent underage workers and untrained workers in regular basis during the crisis. Which can be considered as a form of irregular migration. Mandate proper training for domestic workers(COPE NEWS, 2025).

Research findings also suggest a strong connection between fishing communities and illegal migration. Smugglers use fishing logistics to carry out human smuggling operations. All major illegal boat launch sites are located near fishing harbors in Sri Lanka, using fishing boats that lack proper safety standards(SLN, 2023).

To combat illegal out-migration, the Sri Lankan government and Sri Lankan Navy should work closely with fishing communities and their leaders. Several strategies could help reduce illegal migration: launching educational programs and workshops, providing financial assistance to fishing communities, and creating citizen committees that can report human smugglers to law enforcement authorities. Establishing police posts near these recognized launch sites would also help confront smugglers and disrupt their networks.

6.6.3 Combating Poverty

Findings show poverty as a root cause for illegal migration as well as low-skilled migration.

Poverty rates increased from 11% in 2019 to over 25% by 2022 and pushed both legal and illegal migration as families wanted economic relief(World Bank, 2023b). Addressing poverty is essential to reducing illegal migration.

- Social Safety Nets for targeted groups who face extreme poverty.
- Agricultural modernization
- Support small businesses
- Invest in rural areas like Ampara, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Hambantota, Jaffna, and other districts with higher poverty rate
- Improve Education and Healthcare

- Provide essentials like fertilizer for farmers with subsidies.

6.6.4 Pragmatic Economic Handling

Economic mismanagement and corruption directly led to the notable economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Money printing, and the rupee peg led to the 2022 default and remittance drop(Jayasinghe, 2022a). In 2023, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruled that former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and their younger brother, former Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa with several other senior officials were responsible for the country's worst-ever economic crisis. The court found that their actions and mismanagement of the economy violated Article 12(1) of the Constitution, infringing upon the fundamental rights of the people(THE SUPREME COURT OF THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA, 2022). This is why Sri Lanka needs a pragmatic and robust economic management and policies for the recovery.

- Fiscal Discipline: Country need simple and fair taxes and open budgets to rebuild reserves. Work closely with IMF reforms for growth.
- Make it easier to invest in Sri Lanka by reducing complicated and defensive laws and regulations. In 2024 Sri Lanka made some decisions to make the country more open to investments. But still Sri Lanka need to change lots of fundamentals for good results(Abeyanayake and Wijesinha, 2025).

- Restore Trust on government institutions by making them more independent

For Sri Lanka to recover, it must rebuild trust in institutions, provide pathways to work in Sri Lanka with affordable salaries, and take pragmatic economic decisions. This chapter also abled to validate the theoretical frameworks and also will helpful for policy making with its findings and recommendations.

Sri Lanka continues to recover from its economic crisis. According to the World Bank's recent projection, the country's economic growth reached 5% in 2024 but is expected to decline to 3.5% in 2025, marking a significant slowdown. The nation's high public debt, projected to exceed 100% of GDP by 2028, could trigger another crisis if global borrowing costs rise(Northwood, 2025). Also, President Trump's Liberation Day tariffs are directly impacting Sri Lanka's economy, as the United States remains its largest export destination. Failure to make a sustainable trade deal with the U.S. could lead to a notable decline in Sri Lanka's export economy, which the nation cannot afford at this moment(Amza, 2025). These factors signal the potential for a future economic crisis and it shows the critical importance of the recommendations in this research.

7. CONCLUSION

The period from 2019 to 2024 can be considered as a significant chapter in Sri Lanka's migration history. At no point of post-Independence history in Sri Lanka faced a complete economic collapse, political instability, and social unrest. The crisis led to the most significant wave of migration the country has ever experienced. This thesis examined this mass exodus through both qualitative and quantitative data and within a solid theoretical framework. From Push-Pull Theory to Neoclassical Economic Theory, and the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM).

Before jumping to the period from 2019 to 2024 the thesis focused on the history of migration in the human history. Then focused on global examples of crisis driven migration such as Lebanon, Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Cuba, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In the Literature review and beyond study focused on the history of Sri Lankan migration. There were five wave of migration in Sri Lanka and it safe to say all these waves were crisis driven migration. Some based on ethnic policies, language policies. Some waves happened due to the civil war. Some due to financial difficulties. Which gave strong base to the topic which is about crisis driven migration.

The different of 2019 - 2024 period compared to other waves is it was a situation which never happened in post-independent Sri Lanka. It was a series of unpredictable and harmful events. Which created a domino effect to the Sri Lankan economy as well as social and political fundamentals. 2019 Easter attacks, COVID-19 pandemic, economic collapse, widespread shortages of foods, energy and basic needs. Which lead the way to public protests, political crisis, and reported human rights violations by the government. After that for the first time of Sri Lankan history people overthrow the executive president which consider as one of the most powerful political position in the history of constitutions. Sri Lanka faced back to back challenges.

Findings clearly pointing out that migration during this period was not some passing trend but crisis-driven in every aspect. More than 1.3 million Sri Lankans from skilled professionals to low-skilled workers and undocumented migrants hoped foreign employment or asylum as a direct response to worsening conditions at home. Migration used to be a long term career goal and planning for many people but after the crisis it became an urgent survival strategy(Ada Derana, 2024b).

The Push-Pull Theory was completely validated. Severe push factors such as 94.9% inflation, food and fuel shortages, currency collapse, and distrust in governance forced citizens to flee. At the same time, countries offering stability, employment, and secure futures served as pull factors. Best example came out under the chapter of Skilled Migration. Sri Lankan born population in Australia

almost doubled during the crisis. Most of Sri Lankan professionals granted permanent visa as well. Because Australia had all the pull factors from good living condition to stable economy as well as safer environment. Sri Lanka on the other hand had all the push factors. Shortages, Economy crisis, rising poverty, Political instability and even massive breakdown of health and education sectors.

Meanwhile, Neoclassical Economic Theory explained the labor market unfairness that prompted low income Sri Lankans to move toward higher wage economies, especially in the Middle East. Middle East countries are the main destination for low-income Sri Lankan migrants. It's about 88–94% of overseas Sri Lankan workers in last decade. Even if destinations are diversifying since last few years still the pattern can be recognized. Most of the lower income Sri Lankan migrants are from urban rural areas. Many women from these communities seeking employment as housemaids or unskilled workers(IPS, 2014).

The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM). Theory also showed significant match, as many decisions to migrate were family based strategies to overcome economic issues. Money sent back home by migrants was a huge lifeline for families in Sri Lanka

This thesis also revealed a mysteries and interesting gap. The rising numbers of migrants were not always reflected in formal remittance data. This gap, driven by a lack of trust in the government. This is due to economic mismanagement by Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government.   Informal money transfers (undial and hawala) and failed fiscal policies led to this situation. It's clear that using formal remittance data, increases and decreases of remittance cannot give a proper idea about migration. It is much more complicated than that and both qualitative and quantitative data should be considered carefully. Some numbers don't show the exact situation.

Another interesting revelation is migration was not equivalent. In other words, it was very diverse. When we look at Gender patterns, it shows men in their 30s mostly seeking skilled labor roles, while many women in their 40s migrated as domestic caregivers. Regions like the Middle East remained the dominant destination as usual. However skilled professionals increasingly went to countries like Canada, Australia, Germany, and the UK.

The significant rise of illegal migration, including risky boat journeys and complex smuggling networks shows the desperation within the economic crisis. Sri Lankan Navy had to use their entire naval capabilities to confront smugglers and protect routes. Illegal immigrants from Sri Lanka used new paths which was highly uncommon among Sri Lankans. Boat journeys to Australia, and Italy was not a new route. However, during the crisis there were many new routes like crossing southern border of USA via Mexico, Entering Poland via Belarus etc.

The skilled migration during this period was particularly severe. Doctors, IT professionals, university lecturers, and engineers left the nation with large numbers. Sectors which were essential for national development like healthcare, education, agriculture, IT and construction suffered heavy losses. These losses are likely to have long term impacts for the country and Sri Lanka may even never recovered to pre 2019 level in many of these sectors. One of the most striking findings in Chapter 5 is that Sri Lanka was the only nation among the top 20 countries with the highest brain drain index that was not experiencing an ongoing war or civil war. This fact shows the significance of the economic crisis.

This research not only confirmed the theoretical models used but also highlighted the unique character of Sri Lanka's migration crisis: one shaped by both macroeconomic collapse and deeply personal household survival decisions. Going forward, Sri Lanka must re-establish trust in public institutions, create safe and equitable migration pathways, and invest in retaining its human capital if it wishes to recover from this era of loss.

In conclusion, migration in Sri Lanka from 2019 to 2024 was something more than raw numbers or statistic. It shows the social factors. A human response to a collapsing economy and society. This research will be helpful to understand the crisis driven migration. In future research this will be helpful to create a new model or theory related to migration. Also, this provides a complete insight into the reasons behind migration from 3rd world countries to developed nations. Which will help to combat certain problems facing the people of developing nations and it will be the key to control the brain drain and also to confront illegal migration.

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