



Survey on Returnee Migrant Workers in Sri Lanka 2023

A Gendered Analysis of Living and Working
Conditions and Institutional Support
Mechanisms

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27, Wickramaratne Avenue, Kohuwala, Sri Lanka

URL: www.cmrld.lk

ISSN: 2706-0268

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Acknowledgment

This publication is based on activities and research supported by the British Academy. The Centre for Migration Research and Development (CMRD) led the project activities in Sri Lanka for this study. We thank Dr. Danesh Jayatilake, the Chairman of the CMRD, for his guidance and support. We also wish to thank M. Vijenthiran for managing all field activities in the western and eastern provinces. He was supported by Y.H.P Yasarathna, K.D.A. Ranasinghe, M. Nishandan, P. Sasidaran, B.H. Mitchel, S.S.N.S.I.H Zacky, M.F. Farzana, Dayarathna Ariyawathi, and D.M.C.C. Senavirathna, who worked as enumerators for this research study

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Abbreviations

BLA	Bilateral Labour Agreement
CoD	Counry of Destination
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
MoU	Memorandum of Corporation
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment

1. Introduction

The out-migration of Sri Lankans in search of better economic prospects goes back to the British colonial period when highly educated persons in administrative positions migrated on a small scale to other countries of the British Empire for employment. While the number of out-migrants gradually increased following the independence in 1948 due to various reasons, such as the political turbulence in the mid-1950s and the shift from English to Sinhala and Tamil as the medium of instruction at schools in the 1960s, the most significant increase in the number of Sri Lankans seeking foreign employment occurred in the mid-1970s with the boom in the oil industry in the Middle East. Investments in massive infrastructure projects in the region following the oil boom created a high demand for migrant workers, particularly from the Global South, creating opportunities for Sri Lankans seeking foreign employment as a way out of their economic hardships.¹

At first, most Sri Lankans who migrated to the Middle East were low-skilled male workers who found work in the booming construction sector in the region. However, with the increase in the wealth of Middle Eastern citizens, the demand for female domestic workers in the region soon began to surge.² As a result, female domestic workers dominated Sri Lanka's migrant workforce throughout the 1990s and 2000s, accounting for more than 60 per cent of the country's migrant workforce. While a shift in the policies of the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) in the mid-2000s, which intended to increase skilled male workers and reduce female domestic workers, has led to a decline in the proportion of female migrant workers in recent years, female domestic workers still account for approximately 28 per cent of Sri Lankan out migrants. They are second only to skilled male workers, who account for around 30 per cent of total departures from Sri Lanka.³ Furthermore, domestic workers account for over three-quarters of all female departures, as there has been no significant increase in other categories of female migrant workers.⁴

Though the Middle East region has remained the leading destination among Sri Lankan migrant workers since the 1980s, the GoSL's promotion of foreign employment opportunities in other countries has diversified the destinations. As a result, countries such as the Maldives, South Korea, Cyprus, Singapore and Malaysia have recently become important destinations for Sri Lankans seeking to work abroad,⁵ accounting for approximately ten per cent of the total departures of migrant workers.⁶

¹ Anoji Ekanayake and Kopalapillai Amirthalingam, 'An Empirical Study of the Factors That Motivate Sri Lankan Professionals to Migrate to Qatar', *Migration and Development* 10, no. 3 (2 September 2021): 403–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2019.1665923>.

² Ibid.

³ Anoji Ekanayake and Kopalapillai Amirthalingam, *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in the Gulf Region* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2023).

⁴ SLBFE, 'Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment - 2018', Annual Statistical Report (Battaramulla: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 30 May 2019).

⁵ International Organisation for Migration and Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 'International Migration Outlook - Sri Lanka' (Colombo: International Organisation for Migration, October 2009).

⁶ SLBFE, 'Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment - 2021', Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2022, <http://www.slbfe.lk/file.php?FID=696>.

Over the years, migrant workers have contributed to the Sri Lankan economy in several ways. Their most significant contribution has been the remittances they send to their families, which help address the foreign exchange needs of the country. It is estimated that Sri Lanka received LKR 1,138,124 (6,253,428,571 USD at 1USD=182LKR) as remittances from foreign employment in 2018, which amounted to 65 per cent of the total foreign exchange earnings,⁷ making it the highest foreign exchange earner in the country.⁸ In addition, foreign employment has significantly helped reduce the country's unemployment issues as the country continues to fail to create the required number of job opportunities for those seeking employment. At present, more than a quarter of the country's labour force are migrant workers,⁹ indicating the critical role foreign employment plays in alleviating the unemployment issues in the country.

Despite the economic benefits of labour migration for many Sri Lankans, however, it is not without its challenges. The literature on Sri Lankan migrants, particularly migrant workers to the Middle East, suggests that Sri Lankan migrant workers face many difficulties, including payment irregularities, excessive workloads, and physical and verbal harassment in their destination countries.¹⁰

Over the years, the GoSL has taken many steps to improve the well-being of the country's overseas workforce. These include establishing the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), the apex body on migrant workers, in 1985 and the introduction of the National Labour Migration Policy in 2008.¹¹ In addition, over the years, Sri Lanka has managed to sign Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs), Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) and Memorandum of Corporation (MoCs) with most of the main destination countries popular among Sri Lankan migrant workers, strengthening the institutional mechanisms surrounding foreign employment of Sri Lankans.

Despite these improvements, preliminary interviews the research team conducted with migrant workers indicated that migrant workers continue to face issues with living and working conditions in the host countries. Therefore, this study seeks to determine whether there have been improvements in the living and working conditions of migrant workers and the institutional support mechanisms in place to support them. The study also seeks to determine whether there are

⁷ SLBFE, 'Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment - 2018'.

⁸ Matt Withers, 'Temporary Labour Migration and Underdevelopment in Sri Lanka: The Limits of Remittance Capital', *Migration and Development* 8, no. 3 (7 February 2019): 418–36.

⁹ Hettige Don Karunaratne and Kanaka Abeygunawardana, 'Reintegration of Sri Lankan Returnee Migrant Workers from South Korea', *經濟志林 = 經濟志林* 85, no. 3 (March 2018): 65–94, <https://doi.org/info:doi/10.15002/00014804>; Madhuka Sanjaya Wickramarachchi, 'Sri Lanka GCC Temporary Economic Migration Corridor and the Circular Migration of Female Domestic Workers', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 10, no. 10 (October 2020): 118–28, <https://doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.10.10.2020.p10619>.

¹⁰ W. Indralal De Silva et al., 'Integration of Returned Labour Migrants to Local Labour Markets: A Case Study of Kalutara', *Sri Lankan Journal of Business Economics* 2020, no. 9 (2020): 1, <https://mgt.sjp.ac.lk/bec/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sri-Lankan-Journal-of-Business-Economics-SLJBE-Vol.-09-1-2020-May-Article-01.pdf>; International Labour Organization, 'Reintegration with Home Community: Perspectives of Returnee Migrant Workers in Sri Lanka' (Sri Lanka: ILO Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, July 2013), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms_233365.pdf; M. Withers, *Sri Lanka's Remittance Economy: A Multiscalar Analysis of Migration-Underdevelopment*, 1st ed., Routledge Series on Asian Migration (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); L. Foley and N. Piper, 'Returning Home Empty Handed: Examining How COVID-19 Exacerbates the Non-Payment of Temporary Migrant Workers' Wages', *Global Social Policy* 21, no. 3 (1 December 2021): 468–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680181211012958>.

¹¹ Ministry for Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, 'National Labour Migration Policy for Sri Lanka', October 2008, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/268/Policy.pdf>.

differences in the experiences of male and female migrant workers concerning the living and working conditions, institutional support available and the overall migration experience.

The study consists of two stages. The first stage includes a structured survey of 200 returnee migrant workers, while the second stage involves in-depth interviews with a selected group of migrant returnees who participated in the survey. This report presents the preliminary findings of the survey. However, where necessary, it draws from the unstructured in-depth interviews conducted in the second stage of the study to provide more in-depth analysis. The results presented here are indicative and will be supplemented by further research including in-depth interviews in the next phase of the study.

The rest of the report is organised as follows. Section two explains the methodology followed in the study, while section three presents the summary statistics. Section four is on the migration histories of the respondents. It looks into the countries of destination, duration of stay, number of visits, occupations held and the salary received. Section five explores the migration objectives of the respondents and seeks to examine whether institutional support is required for better migration goal achievement. Section five is on the employment contract and whether the migrants faced contract breaches while in the host countries. Section seven examines the life of the migrant workers while in their host countries, while section eight is on the return migration experiences and remigration intentions of the returnees. Section nine explores the institutional support mechanisms available at each stage of the migration journey, whereas section ten examines whether the migrant workers have any awareness of BLAs, MoUs and MoCs. Section eleven is on the suggestions presented by the migrant workers, while the twelfth and last section provides concluding remarks.

2. Methodology

The sample of this survey was 200 migrant returnees. Since the SLBFE, the central government body on migrant workers, nor any other organisation in Sri Lanka, collects data on return migrants, there is no central administrative data set in Sri Lanka with a complete list of returnees to gather data from a representative sample of return migrant workers. Therefore, the research team had to rely on a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to collect data for this study.

Since the research project under which this survey was conducted sought to assess the usefulness of BLAs, MoUs and MoCs as a migration governance tool, only migrant workers who had returned to Sri Lanka from countries with which Sri Lanka has signed BLAs, MoUs and MoCs were included in the study (Appendix 1 provides information about the countries with which Sri Lanka has signed BLAs, MoUs and MoCs).

The research team aimed for an equal number of male and female respondents to make a gender analysis possible. Only migrant workers who had returned to Sri Lanka for the last time in or after 2011 were included in the study. This time period was selected to reduce lapses in memory in recalling past incidents.

Primary data was collected in May 2022 with the aid of ten enumerators in Western and Eastern Provinces in Sri Lanka (Figure 1).

2.1 Study Area

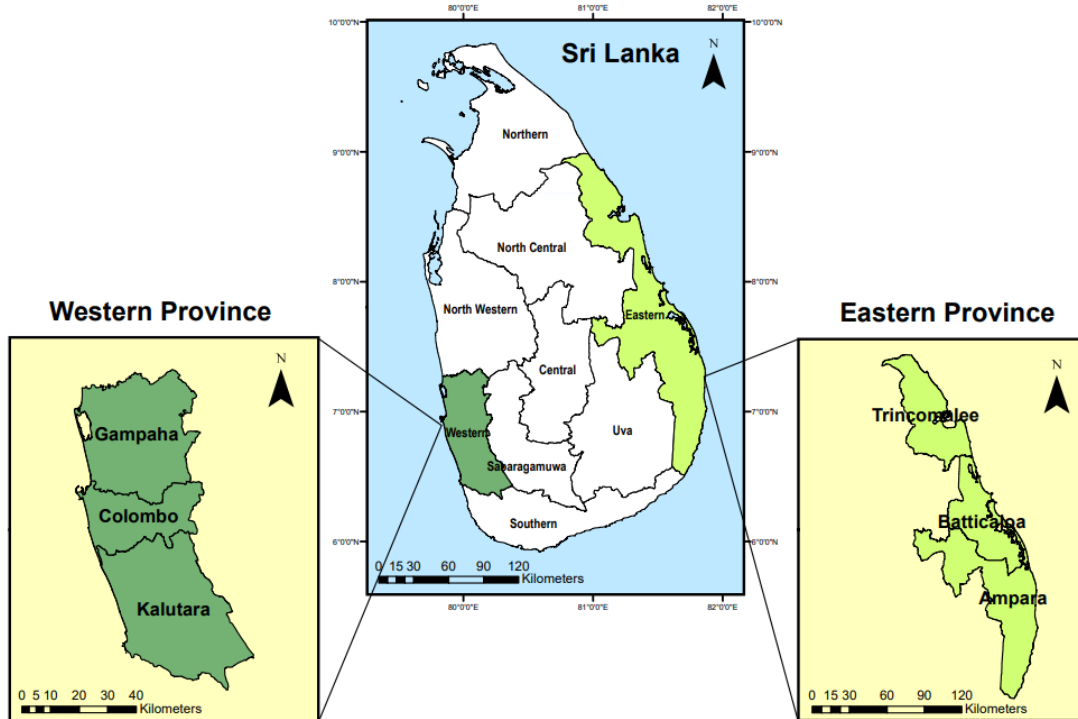


Figure 1: Map of study area

3. Summary Statistics

The total sample size of the study is 200, out of which males account for 44% (N=88) and females 56% (N=112). The mean age of the sample is 40 years, ranging from a minimum age of 21 to a maximum age of 71. The sample tilts towards middle-aged persons, with 55.5% of the respondents aged between 31 and 50. When comparing the ages of male and female respondents in the sample, a higher percentage of women belong to older age brackets than males (Figure 2). In the sample, while 54% of women are above 50 years, only 30% of males are above 50. Moreover, while none of the male respondents is above 70 years, three per cent of females are above 70 years of age. On the other hand, while none of the female respondents is below 30 years, two per cent of males belong to the 21-30 age group.

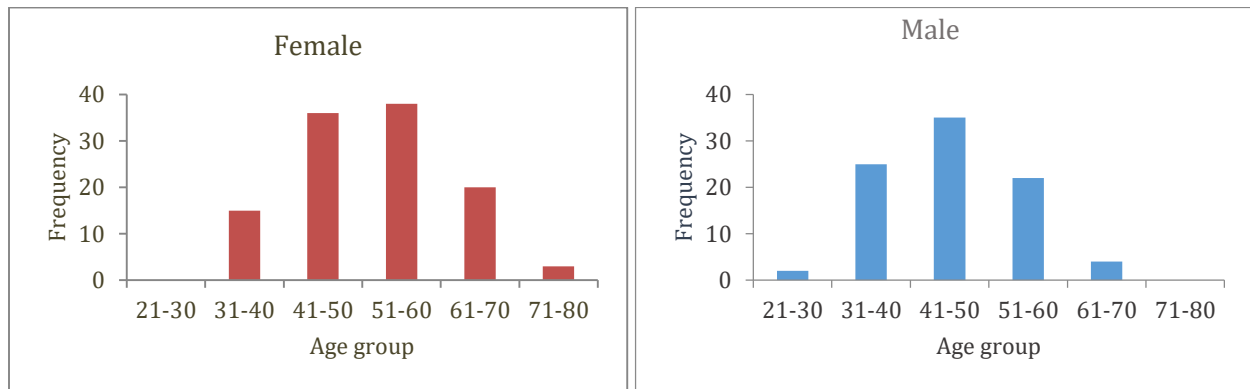


Figure 2: Age distribution of the individuals in the sample

The majority (79%) of the sample is married, while ten per cent is single, eight per cent is divorced and four per cent is widowed (figure not shown). The proportion of married men is higher at 86% than women at 73% (Figure 3). Likewise, the percentage of singles is also slightly higher among males (14%) than females (7%). On the other hand, none of the male respondents in the sample is divorced or widowed, while respectively 13% and 6% of women are divorcées and widows.

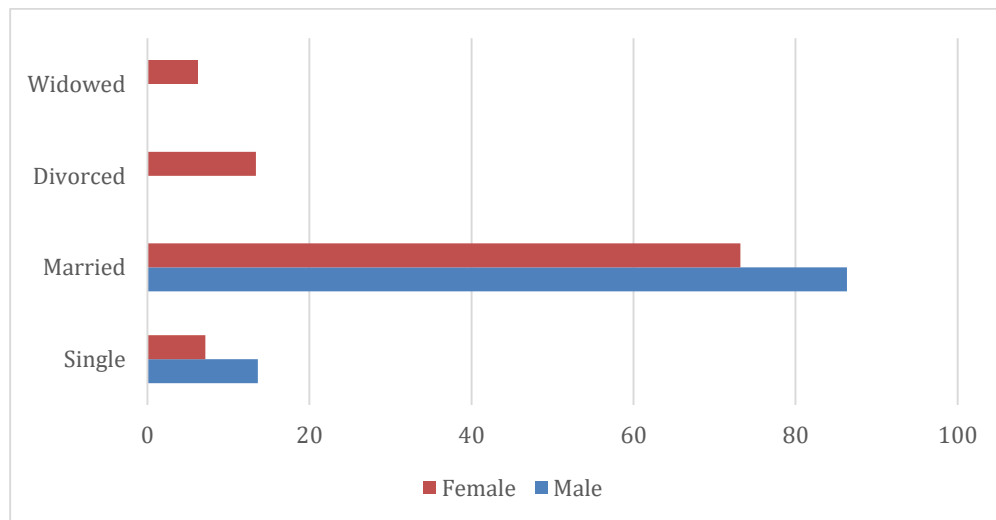


Figure 3: Marital status by gender %

Figure 4 explains the ethnic breakdown of the respondents based on gender. 38% of males are Sinhala, 39% Tamil and 24% Moor. Among the female respondents, 42% are Sinhala, 35% are Tamil, and 23% are Moor.

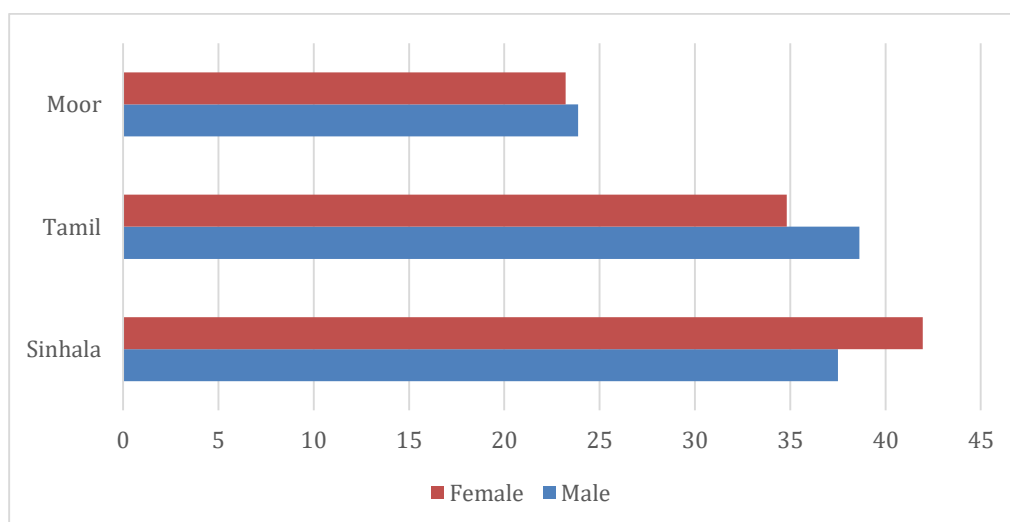


Figure 4: Ethnicity by gender %

Figure 5 shows the educational attainment among the respondents by gender. While nearly two-thirds of males have obtained qualifications equivalent to or beyond Ordinary Levels, more than three-quarters of females have obtained educational qualifications below Ordinary levels.

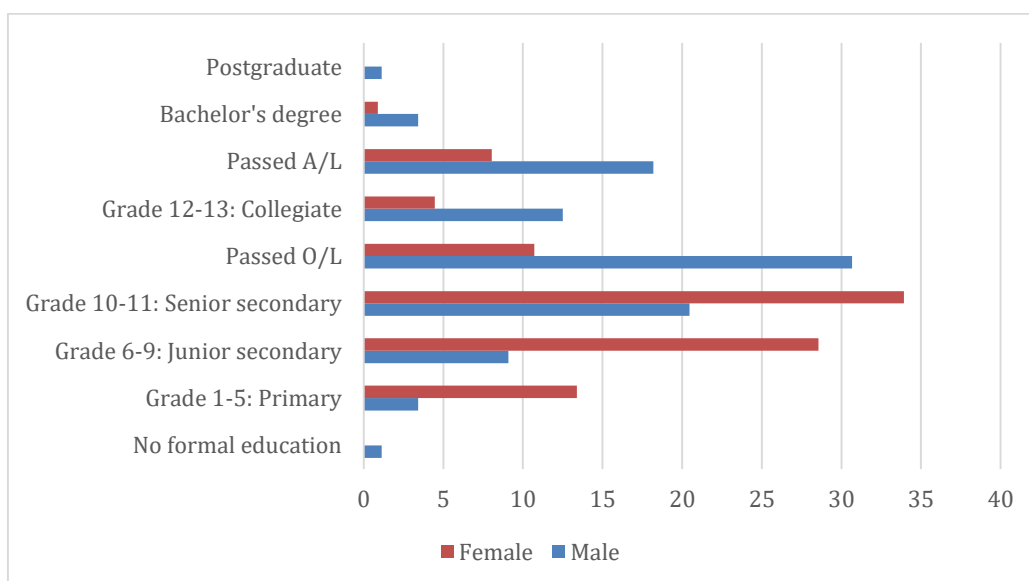


Figure 5: Highest level of education by gender %

Figure 6 illustrates the gender breakdown of vocational qualifications held by the respondents. Again, akin to mainstream educational qualifications, the vocational qualifications held by women are significantly lower than that of men, with only 18% of females stating that they have obtained vocational qualifications as opposed to 44% of men.

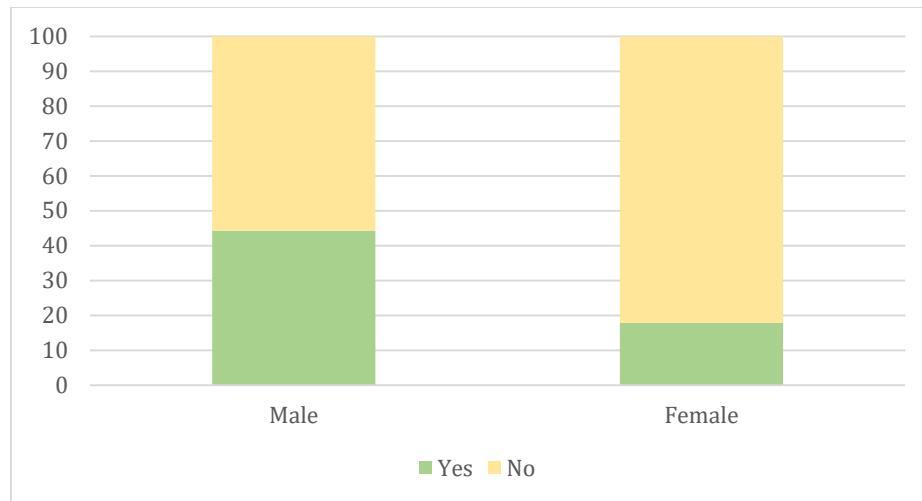


Figure 6: Vocational qualifications by gender (%)

4. Migration History

This section examines the migration histories of the returnees, including the number of migration episodes, countries of destination, duration of stay in these destinations, reasons for returning to Sri Lanka and whether the returnees have any intentions to remigrate.

4.1 Number of foreign employment episodes

Overall, 62.5% of respondents stated that they had been abroad for employment more than once, while 38.5% indicated that they have worked abroad during only one migration episode. Of those who stated they had worked abroad during more than one migration episode, 32.5% had been on two migration stints, 12.5% on three migration episodes, 7.5% on four migration episodes, and three per cent had been abroad on four migration episodes (Table 1). The percentage of those who have travelled abroad for work more than five times is six per cent.

In-depth interviews, which were conducted in the second phase of this study, indicated that some migrants who had been on multiple migration episodes had worked in the same destination country on their multiple migration stints while others had worked in different host countries. However, the survey did not examine whether the migrant workers were in the same or different host countries during their multiple stints.

Figure 7 illustrates the gender breakdown of the number of migration episodes, with a higher percentage of women engaging in multiple migration episodes than men. While 44% of the male respondents stated that they had been abroad only once, only 34% of female respondents said so. Moreover, while ten per cent of females stated that they had been abroad more than five times, only one per cent of male respondents have been abroad beyond five times. One reason for women migrating more often could be that most women in the sample are domestic workers who earned meagre salaries in their host countries. As a result, they might have had to engage in multiple migration episodes to reach their migration goals.

Number of migration episodes	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
1	77	38.5
2	65	32.5
3	25	12.5
4	15	7.5
5	6	3
6	4	2
7	1	0.5
8	2	1
9	1	0.5
10	4	2

Table 1: Number of migration episodes

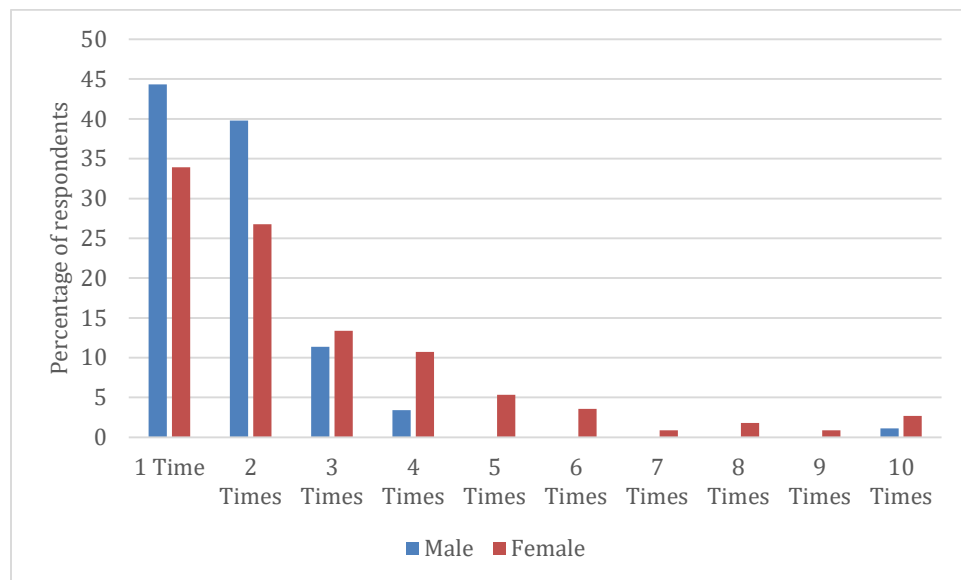


Figure 7: Number of foreign employment stints by gender (%)

4.2 Duration of stay abroad

On average, the respondents have spent 7.3 years abroad during their single or multiple migration stints. However, this figure is slightly higher for women (approximately eight years) than for men (around six years), possibly due to women travelling abroad for more migration episodes than men.

4.3 Countries of destination (CoD)

The survey included two questions regarding the countries the respondents worked in. The first question explored the country where the respondent had worked for most of their time abroad, which is hereafter referred to as the main destination. The second question examined the other countries the respondent had worked in and if they had worked in multiple countries.

Overall, the Middle Eastern region is the leading destination among the vast majority of Sri Lankan return migrant workers in the sample, with 89.5% of all returnees indicating they spent most of their time abroad in one of the Middle Eastern countries. This is consistent with the data collected by the SLBFE, which identifies the Middle Eastern region as the primary destination among Sri Lankan migrant workers, with nearly 90% of Sri Lankan migrant workers migrating to Middle Eastern countries during the 2016-2020 period.¹² The survey data indicates that among the Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait are the main countries of destination (COD), with more than three-quarters of returnees in the sample stating they spent most of their time abroad in one of these countries.

The Middle Eastern region is followed by East Asia, with nine per cent of returnees stating that they spent most of their time abroad in an East Asian country. Among the East Asian countries, South Korea is the most common destination, with seven per cent of all returnees in the sample stating that they worked in South Korea for most of their time abroad, followed by Japan with two per cent. On the other hand, South East Asia and Europe accounted for a mere one per cent and 0.5% of returnees in the sample.

Based on gender, a higher percentage of females (96%) than males (81%) are returnees from the Middle East (Figure 8). Among the Middle Eastern countries, a higher proportion of returnees from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are females, which is in line with the data from the SLBFE, which indicate that these two countries are the most common destinations among Sri Lankan female domestic workers (Figure 9). On the other hand, returnees from Qatar are mostly males, as most Sri Lankan migrant workers to Qatar are skilled male migrants. Likewise, the sample of returnees from South Korea are all men, which signifies the demand for male workers and the nature of occupations available for migrant workers in South Korea.



Figure 8: Main regions of migration based on gender (%)

¹² SLBFE, 'Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment - 2021'.

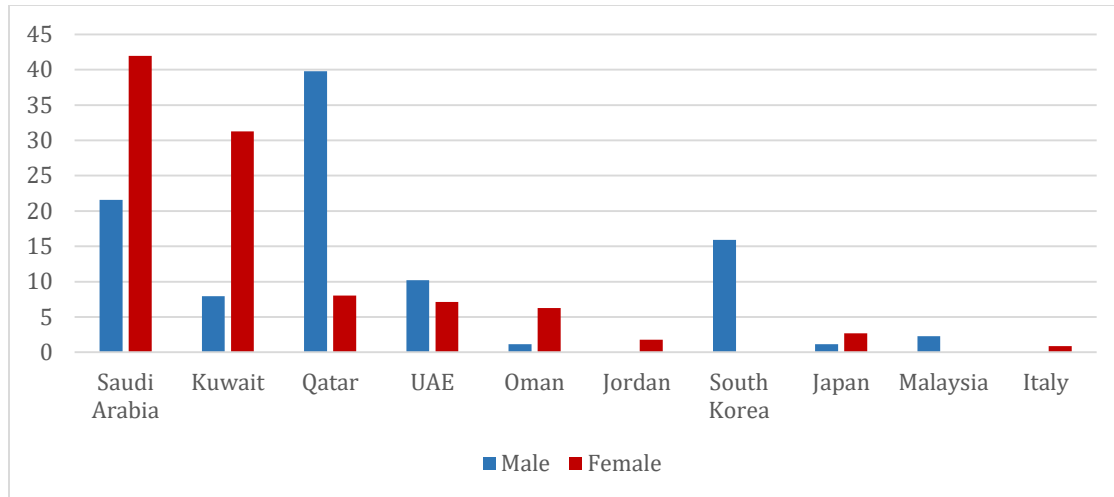


Figure 9: Main countries of destination based on gender (%)

Forty per cent of returnee migrant workers in the sample indicated that they had worked in a country other than their main CoD. Figure 10 illustrates the countries these migrant workers had been employed in other than their main destination country. These secondary destinations included overwhelmingly Middle Eastern countries, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait being the most common destinations, with 39% of those who stated that they worked in multiple countries (N=80) having worked in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

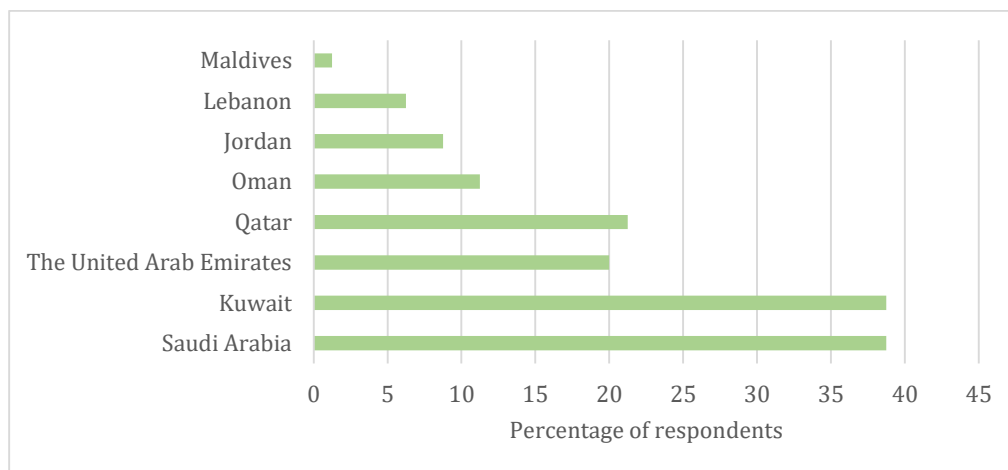


Figure 10: Countries of destination other than the main destination % (N=80)

4.4 Occupation in the last destination country

Table 2 presents the job titles of the respondents with a gender breakdown. The vast majority (86%) of females in the sample had worked as domestic workers during their last migration stint. Apart from domestic work, the other job titles held by women during their last migration episode include care worker (3%), cleaner (3%), and sales assistant (4%). Compared to women in the sample, men held a variety of job titles in their last CoD. The most common jobs held by men include driver (17%), labourer (15%), cleaner (8%), and painter (5%).

Job title	Number of respondents		
	Male	Female	Total
A/C operator	2	0	2
Accountant	1	0	1
Assistant technician	3	0	3
Attendant	0	1	1
Care worker	0	3	3
Caretaker	1	0	1
Carpenter	3	0	3
Chef	1	0	1
Cleaner	7	3	10
Clerk	1	0	1
Cook	1	0	1
Document controller	2	0	2
Domestic worker	0	96	96
Driver	15	0	15
Electrician	3	0	3
Engineer	2	0	2
Fisherman	1	0	1
Housekeeper	2	1	3
Interior designer	1	0	1
Labourer	13	0	13
Machine operator	3	0	3
Office boy	3	0	3
Painter	4	0	4
Plant operator	1	0	1
Plumber	2	0	2
Sales Assistant	1	4	5
Supervisor	2	0	2
Technician	1	0	1
Tutor	0	1	1
Valet	1	0	1
Waiter	1	0	1
Welder	3	0	3
Other	7	3	10

Table 2: Job titles of the respondents by gender

4.5 Salary in the last destination country

Out of the 200 survey participants, 154 respondents (77%) shared the salary they had received in the last month of their stay in their host country. Overall, the average salary of the respondents who shared their salary details was approximately USD 656. The average salary of male respondents who provided salary details (N=76) was higher at USD 775 than that of females (N=78) at USD 540. Figures 11 and 12 give the gender breakdown of the salary.

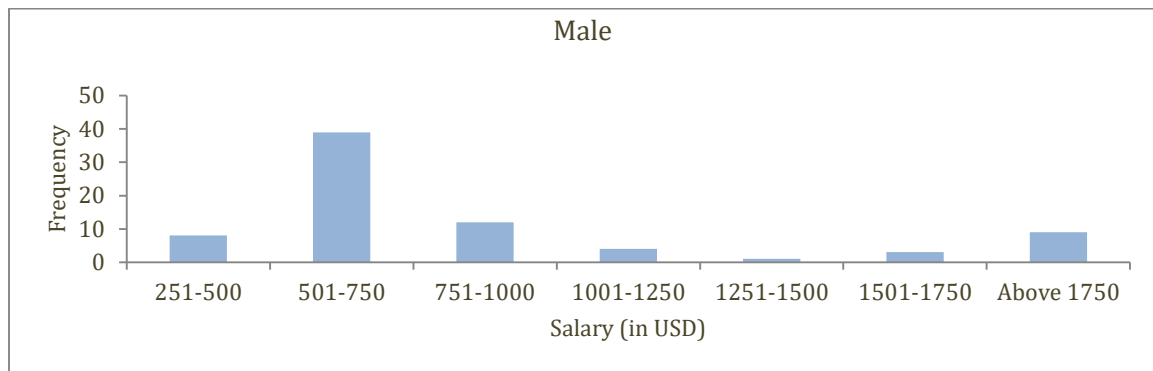


Figure 11: Salary of male respondents

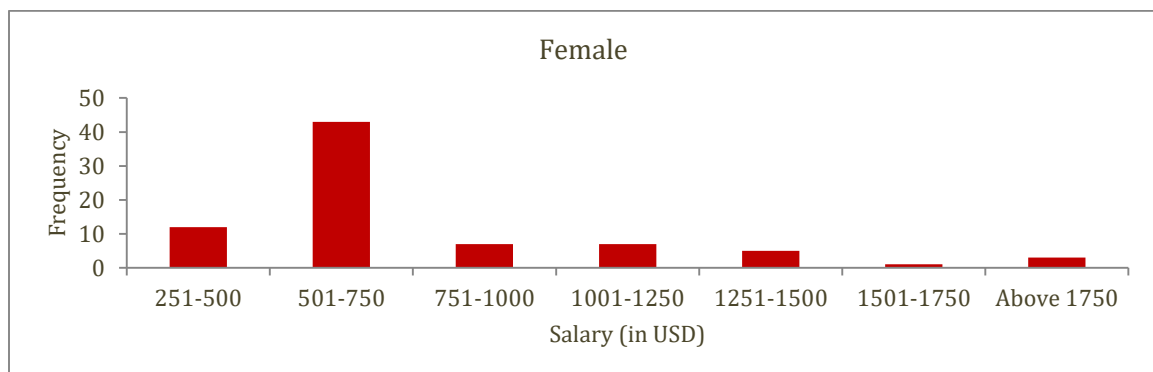


Figure 12: Salary of female respondents

5. Objectives of Migration

The survey results indicate that overall, the main objective of migration of the vast majority (84%) of returnees in the sample is to make savings to build a house. This is followed by meeting daily household expenses (62.5%), saving for educational costs of children (46.5%), business purposes (41.5%), debt repayment (36.5) and purchase of a plot of land (35.5%).

When comparing migration objectives among male and female respondents, there are apparent differences in goals related to children's education, business establishment, purchase of vehicles and wedding expenses (Figure 13). A higher percentage of females indicated making savings necessary to meet their children's educational expenses as a reason for migration than males. This could be because the percentage of women who are married, divorcees or widows and in older age brackets

is higher than that of men. On the other hand, a higher percentage of males expressed capital needed for business establishment, purchase of vehicles and wedding expenses as reasons for migration.

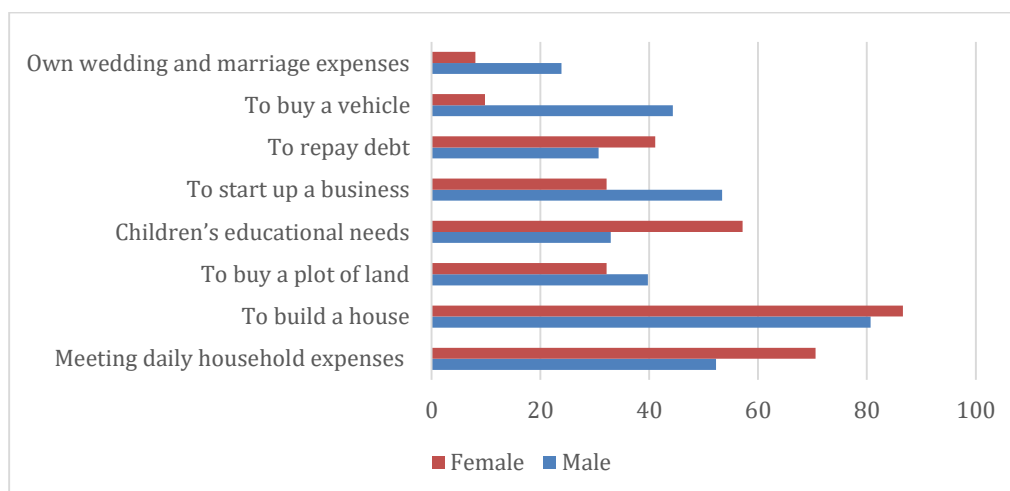


Figure 13: Objectives of migration by gender (%)

5.1 Extent of goal achievement

Figure 14 illustrates the extent to which the male and female respondents achieved their migration goals. While a higher percentage of males than females consider that they were able to achieve their goals either entirely or to a great extent, most female respondents believe they could achieve their goals only to a moderate or small extent. On the other hand, a higher percentage of males (9%) than females (3%) stated that they could not achieve their goals at all.

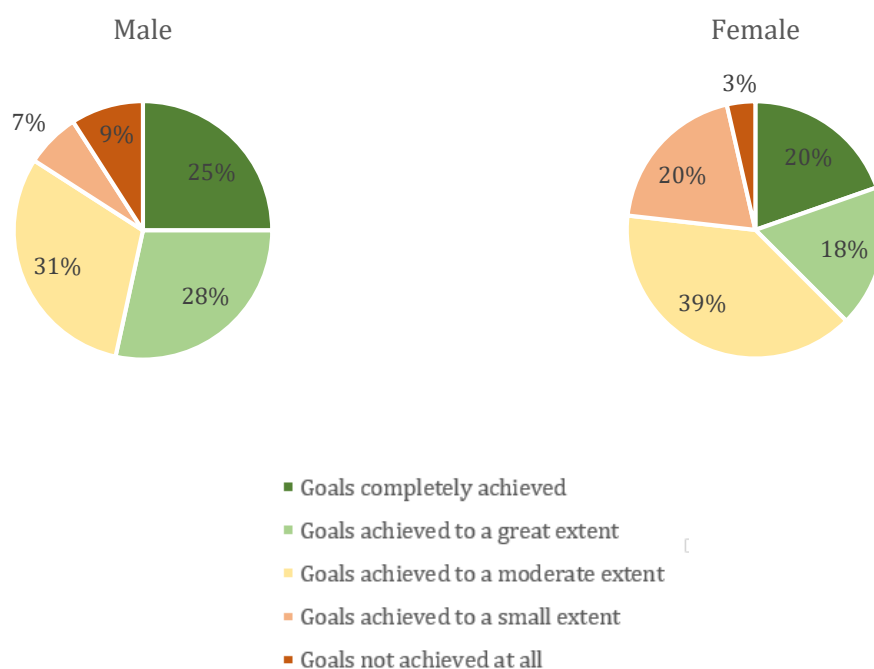


Figure 14: Extent of goal achievement by gender

5.2 Barriers to achieving migration goals

Among the respondents who faced barriers in their paths to reaching their migration objectives (N=156), the rising cost of living in Sri Lanka was the main hurdle, with 67% of female (N=89) and 62% of male (N=67) respondents stating that the inflation in Sri Lanka hindered them in reaching their goals (Figure 15). While careless remittance utilisation patterns of family members in Sri Lanka were also a key barrier to goal achievement for both male and female respondents, it had affected a slightly higher percentage of female (56%) than male (41%) respondents. Likewise, a slightly higher proportion of females (43%) than males (38%) stated that their lack of financial management knowledge adversely affected them in achieving their migration goals. The other critical barriers to fulfilling migration objectives indicated by the respondents were the salary received in the host country being lower than anticipated and returning to Sri Lanka before the end of the contract period.

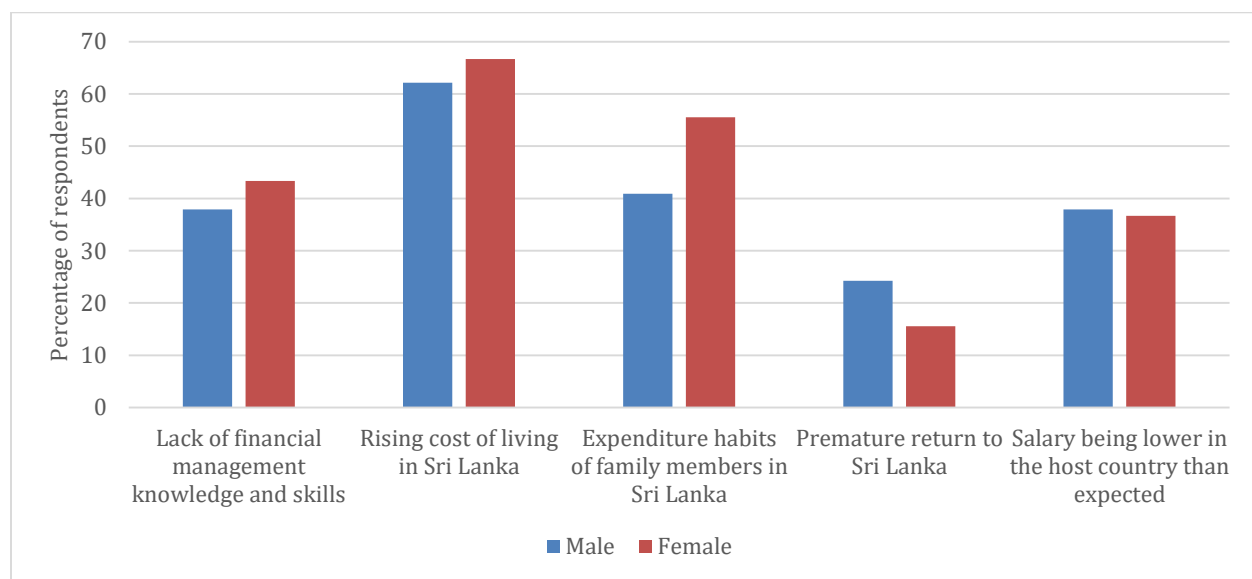


Figure 15: Barriers to achieving migration goals by gender (%)

5.3 Institutional support required for better rates of migration goal achievement

When asked what institutional support mechanisms would have helped the returnees to achieve their migration goals better, more than half of the respondents who faced barriers in goal achievement (N=156) stated that support to obtain bank loans in Sri Lanka would have made realising their migration goals much easier with the percentage of male respondents who indicated that bank loans would have helped them being slightly higher at 55% than females at 50% (Figure 16).

Key informant interviews conducted with Sri Lankan bank representatives by the first author for another study indicate that Sri Lankan banks are, in general, reluctant to extend loans to migrant workers in the lower end of the skill spectrum given their short-term employment contracts and the volatile nature of their jobs in the Middle East due to the cyclical nature of demand for foreign workers in that region. Therefore, Sri Lankan migrant workers have to rely primarily on their earnings to realise their migration goals, which is difficult when achieving goals such as establishing

business ventures, house building and land purchases that require a significant amount of initial capital.

Another critical support mechanism expected by migrant returnees who faced issues in goal achievement is support for extending their employment contracts in the host countries, with 48% of males and 36% of females indicating that contract extension support would have helped them. The percentage of male workers requesting support for contract extension being higher than females is most likely because females prefer shorter contracts as they wish to spend more time with their children and family between their migration stints than males. Moreover, in-depth interviews conducted as part of the second stage of this study indicate that female domestic workers find it easier to obtain contract extensions than low-skilled male migrant workers, particularly those in the construction sector, who have to return once their projects terminate.

Other support mechanisms that the returnee migrant workers consider helpful include awareness about financial management, better-quality pre-migration training to improve their skills, support to change the employer effortlessly, and contract negotiation support by the agent, the SLBFE and the Sri Lankan embassies in the host countries.

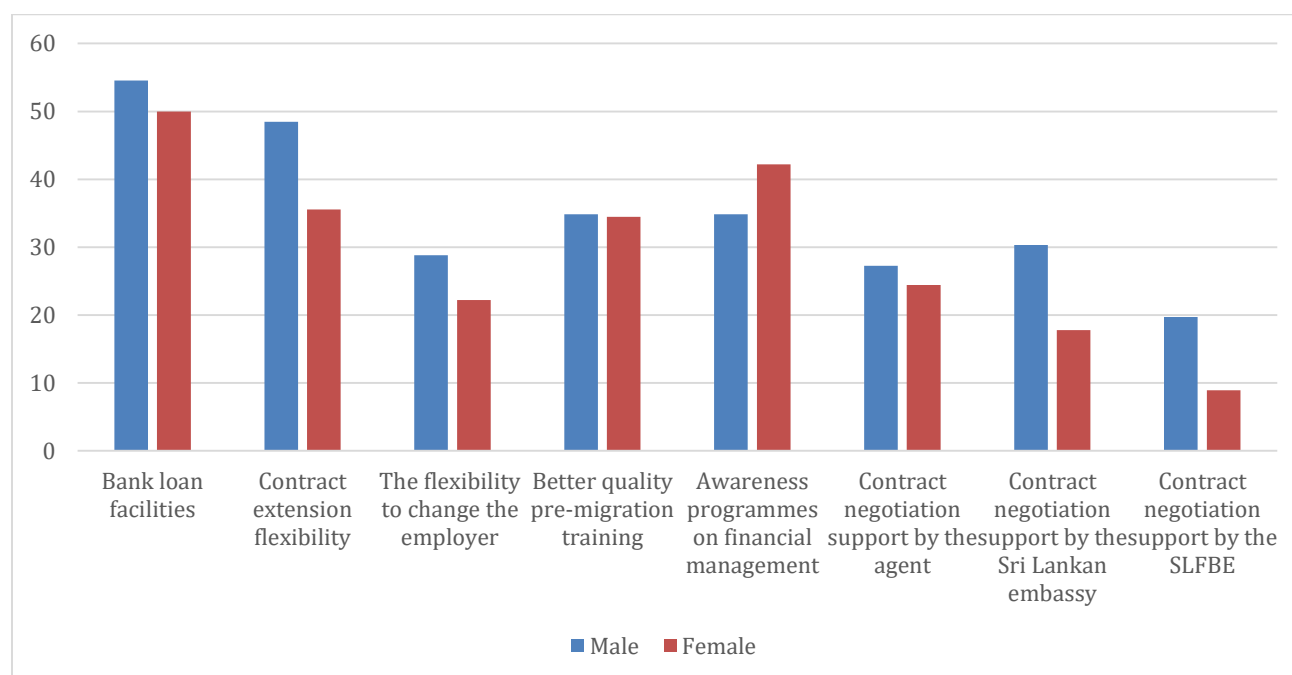


Figure 16: Type of institutional support expected by the returnees to better achieve their migration goals (%)

6. Employment Contract

6.1 Pre-migration contract

Approximately three-quarters of respondents stated that they received a contract before migration, while nearly a quarter indicated that they did not receive a contract before migration. The percentage of respondents who stated that they did not receive a contract before migration was almost equal among male and female respondents, with 26% of male and 23% of female respondents stating they did not receive a contract prior to migration.

Of those who received a contract before migration (N=151), the vast majority (91%) stated that they could understand its terms and conditions either on their own or with the support of somebody else, while a minority said that they could not understand the employment terms. Out of these nine per cent who stated that they could not understand the employment terms, the vast majority (13 respondents, 93%) were women (Figure 17), which could be a result of women in the sample having lower levels of educational qualifications than men.

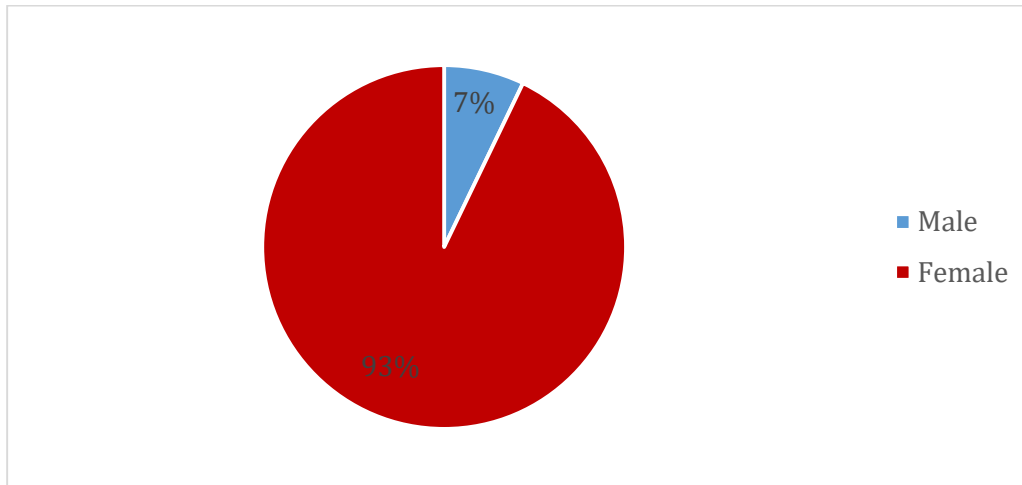


Figure 17: Proportion of respondents unable to understand the terms and conditions of the employment contract

Overall, more than four-fifths of respondents (N=151) stated that their employment contracts included their job title, job description, and the amount of salary and entitled allowances, while 50% to 80% said that their employment contracts included working hours, method of payment and the date on which they will receive their salaries each month. On the other hand, only less than half of the respondents stated that their employment contracts included leave and bonus entitlements.

Gender-wise, the percentage of men stating their employment contracts included their leave entitlement, working hours, payment method, when the salary will be received, entitled bonuses and allowances, and the job description was higher than that of women (Figure 18). The difference was particularly significant with regard to working hours, entitlement of leave, when the salary will be paid, and bonuses and overtime pay.

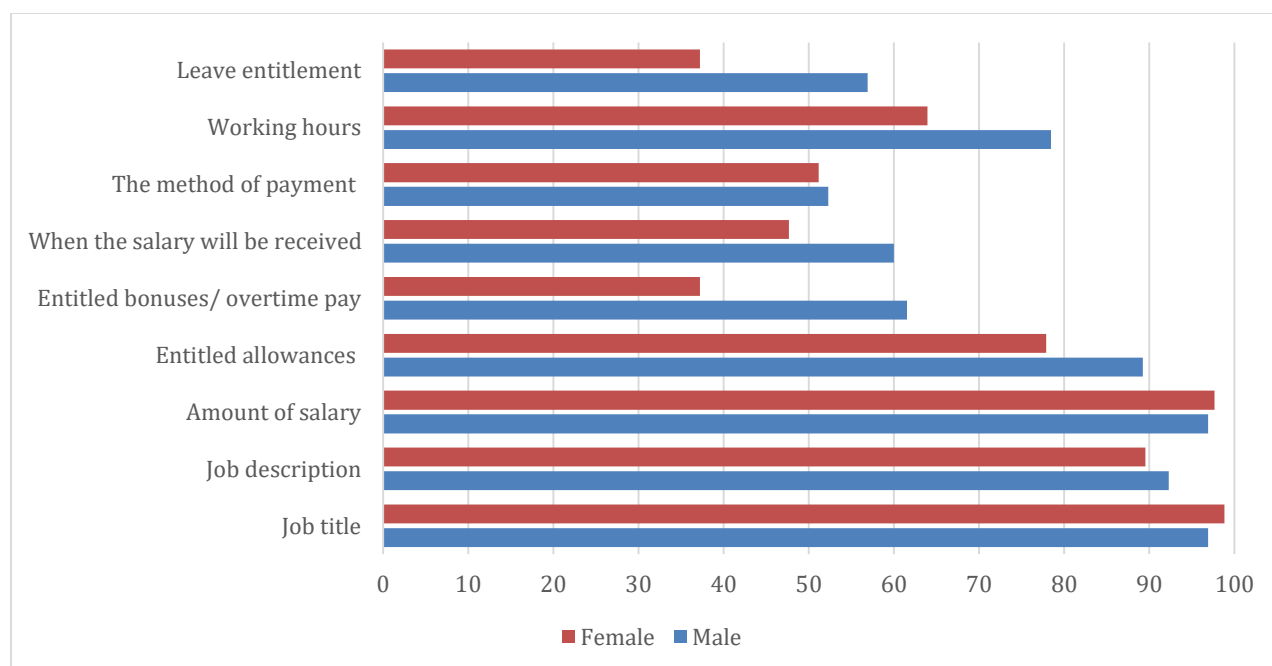


Figure 18: Items covered in the employment contracts by gender (%)

6.2 Breach of employment contract

Overall, approximately three-quarters of respondents who received a contract before migration (N=151) stated that their employers fully met the terms and conditions in the agreement (Figure 19). Twenty-three per cent noted that the terms and conditions were partially met, while nearly three per cent stated that they were not met at all. Gender-wise, the percentage of men who said that the terms and conditions in their contracts were fully met were slightly higher at 77% than that of women at 71%. The main terms of the agreement which were breached include the amount of the salary (66%) and working hours (45%).

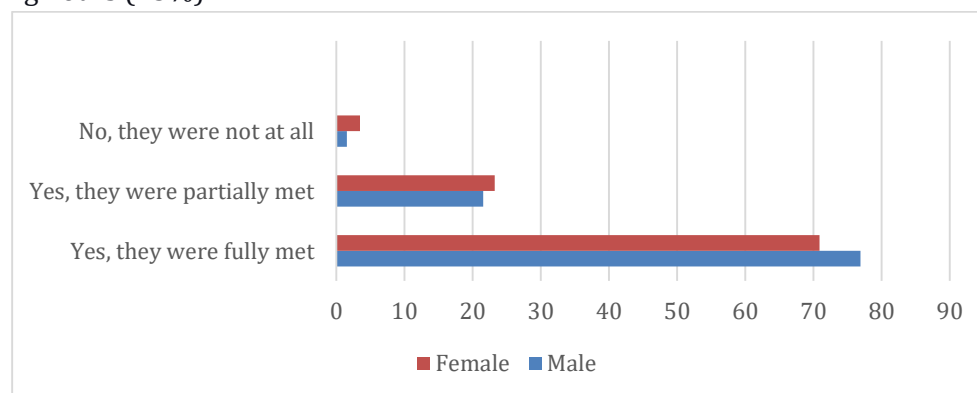


Figure 19: Were the terms and conditions met by the employer? (%)

6.3 Institutional support sought to address contract breaches

Of those who stated that their contracts were partially or fully breached (N=38), 32% said they complained to one or more institutions. A slightly higher percentage of women (35%) than men

(27%) stated that they made complaints. Women have mostly complained to the agency that arranged their contract or the SLBFE. The main reasons for those who did not make any complaints (N=26) were that they did not want to bother about it and fear of retaliatory action by their employer. In addition, their inability to go out to make complaints and the unawareness of the existence of authorities to complain to had influenced the decision of a minority of respondents who did not make any complaints about the contractual breaches.

7. Life in the Host Country

7.1 Working conditions

Most return migrant workers in the sample stated that they were either very satisfied (39%) or moderately satisfied (42%) with their working conditions in their main COD. Eight per cent indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their working conditions abroad, while six per cent each said that they were either slightly or highly dissatisfied with their working conditions in the host country.

Figure 20 illustrates the gender breakdown of returnees' satisfaction with working conditions experienced in the host country. A higher percentage of males (44%) than females (34%) indicated they were extremely satisfied with their working conditions in the host country. Likewise, a higher percentage of male respondents (8%) than females (4%) were extremely dissatisfied with their working conditions in the host country.

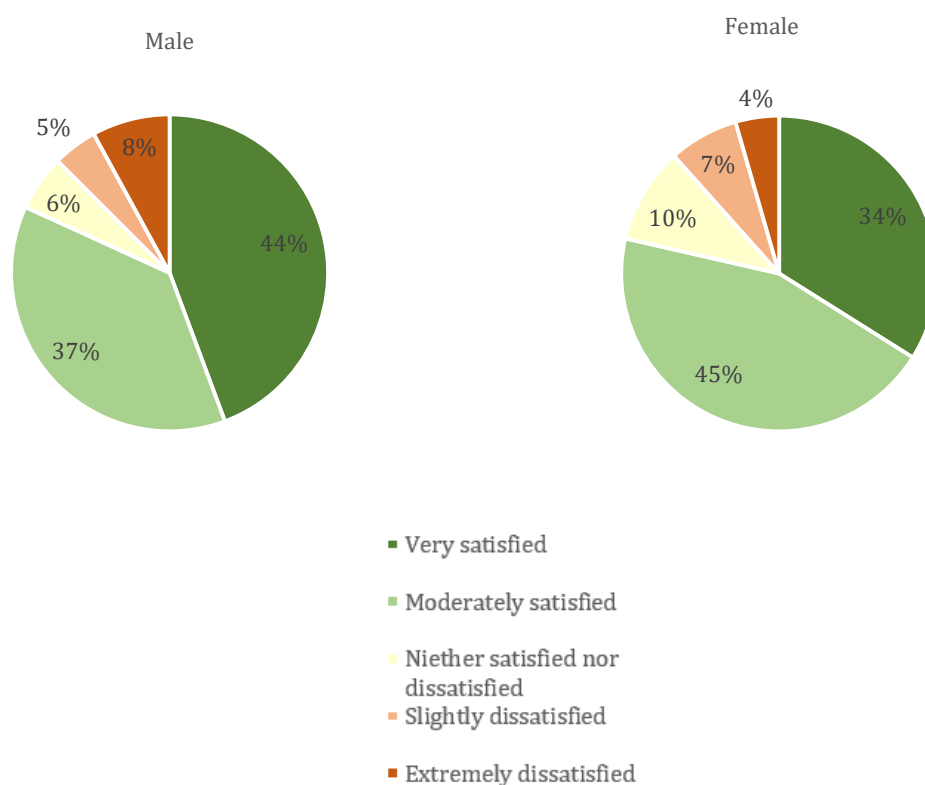


Figure 20: Level of satisfaction with the working conditions in the host country

When questioned whether the respondents faced any issues during their time in their main CoD, approximately two-thirds (67%) stated that their time in their main host country was uneventful, while one-third indicated that they faced various issues at their workplace in their main host country. Gender-wise, the percentage of men and women who stated that they encountered problems at their workplace was equal, with 33% of both men and women saying that they faced multitudes of workplace-related issues in their host country.

Overall, the main issue reported was a heavy workload, with 64% of all respondents who faced problems in their main CoD (N=66) stating that they had an excessive workload to complete. The other key issues faced include delays in salary payments (44%), and payments received being less than the contractually agreed upon amount (30%).

Figure 21 illustrates the gender breakdown of these issues faced by these men and women. As can be seen, a relatively higher percentage of females (73%) than males (52%) have experienced excessive workloads. Furthermore, a higher rate of women than men complained of receiving lower pay than the contractually agreed upon amount, being subjected to verbal harassment, facing non-payment of wages and gratuity, lack of days off from work, and lack of medical care. On the other hand, a higher percentage of males than females complained about delays in salary payments and unsafe working conditions.

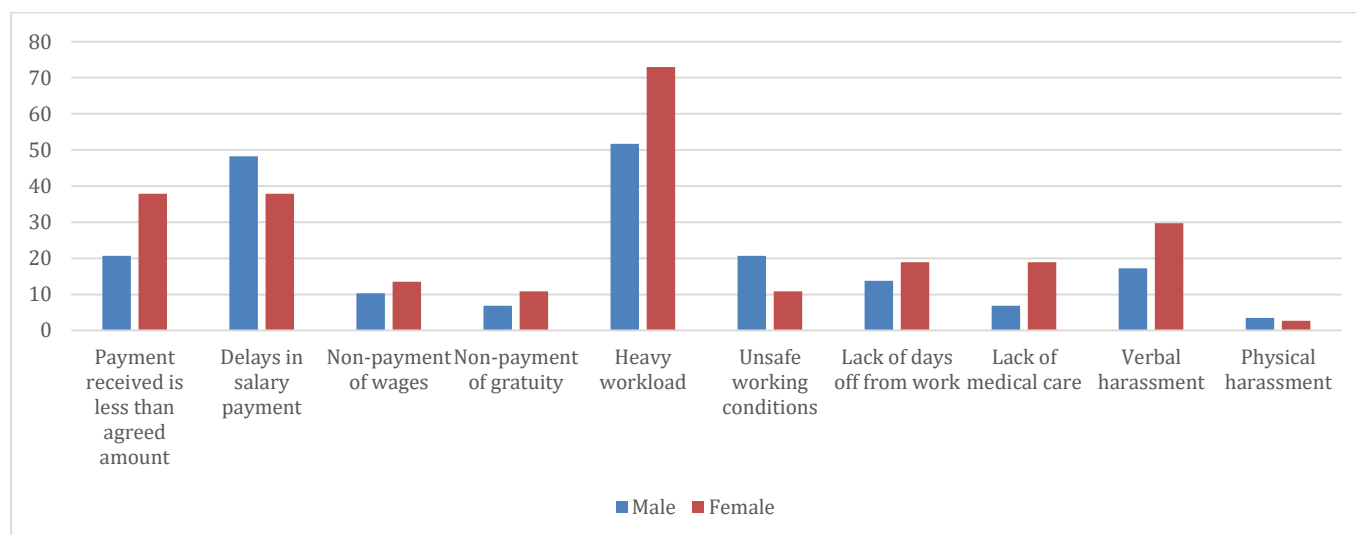


Figure 21: Issues at workplace by gender (%)

7.2 Changing the employer in the host country

Twelve per cent of female and 22% of male respondents indicated that they changed their employer while in their main host country. When asked whether the respondents would have preferred to have had the freedom to change their sponsor while in their main destination country, nearly two-thirds said that they did not have the need to change their employer, while 34.5% said that they wished they could have changed their employer. The percentage of men saying they preferred to have had the freedom to change their employer (41%) was significantly higher than women (29%) who said they wished they had the choice of changing their employer.

7.3 Accommodation and meals

One hundred seventy-three respondents (86%) in the sample stated that they resided in accommodation provided by their employers while in their main CoD. This was 93% among female respondents and 78% among male respondents.

The vast majority of respondents who resided in accommodation provided by their employers were either very satisfied (50%) or satisfied (40%) with the housing. On the other hand, six per cent were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the accommodation, while four per cent were either slightly dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. However, the in-depth interviews indicated that the relatively higher percentage of migrants indicating satisfaction with the accommodation received might not necessarily be a testament to the improved accommodations in destination countries. It could also be due to lower expectations of migrant workers, as most low-skilled Sri Lankan migrant workers lived in small houses with limited personal space before migration. Therefore, they tend to have limited complaints regarding the accommodation provided in the host country unless the accommodation they receive is exceptionally overcrowded or houses non-Sri Lankan migrant workers in the same room, which creates cultural clashes.

When comparing the level of satisfaction with accommodation among male and female respondents, more than half (55%) of female respondents indicated that they were very satisfied as opposed to 43% of male respondents (Figure 22). This is most likely because the majority (86%) of female respondents in the sample were female domestic workers who, according to the in-depth interviews, most often received their own room as opposed to male migrant workers who, more often than not, had to share their room with at least one other worker. On the other hand, while none of the male respondents stated that they were extremely dissatisfied with the accommodation they received, four per cent of female respondents stated so. The in-depth interviews revealed that female domestic workers who were dissatisfied with the accommodation they received mainly felt so when they were made to sleep in the *majlis*¹³ of their employer's house without receiving a private room.

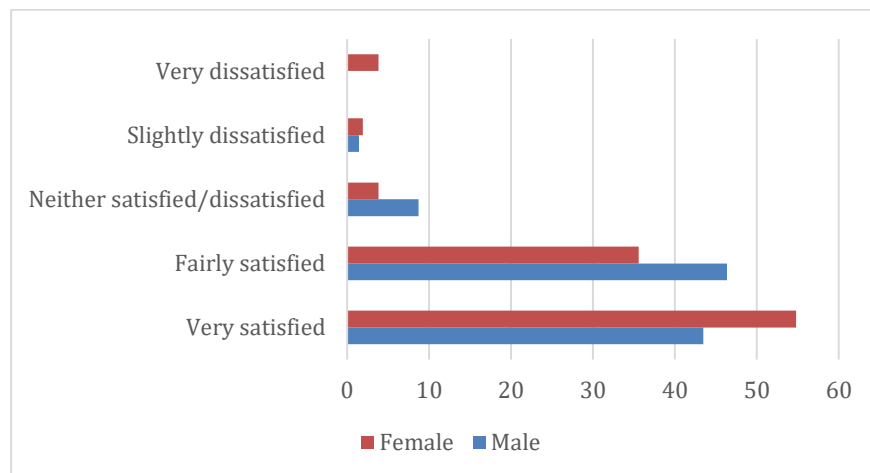


Figure 22: Satisfaction with provided accommodation (%)

¹³¹³ An Arabic term meaning “sitting room”.

One hundred forty-two respondents (71%) stated that their employers provided their meals. This was 88% among female respondents and 51% among male respondents. A higher percentage of female respondents than males received meals from their employer, most probably because most female respondents were domestic workers who resided at their employer's residence.

Akin to the level of satisfaction about the accommodation received, the vast majority of respondents who received meals from their employers were satisfied with the meals they received. Fifty-six per cent said they were very satisfied, while 36 per cent said they were fairly satisfied. On the other hand, four per cent were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the meals, while three per cent were either slightly dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

When comparing the level of satisfaction across male and female respondents, a higher percentage of females (61%) than males (47%) indicated that they were extremely happy with the meals they received. This is most likely because female respondents in the sample were primarily domestic workers responsible for meal preparation for their employers and hence had the freedom to cook according to their native tastes.

On the other hand, while none of the male respondents who received their meals from their employers stated that they were very dissatisfied, three per cent of females who received meals from their employers said they were very dissatisfied with the meals. According to the in-depth interviews, this is because some employers of domestic workers did not allow the domestic workers to serve themselves food and instead controlled the amount of food that could be consumed at each meal.

When asked whether the respondents who resided in the company provided accommodation (N=173) and received meals from their employers (N=142) whether they preferred an allowance to choose their accommodation and meals instead of the company providing them with meals and accommodation, the majority stated no (Figure 23) with a higher percentage of female respondents saying no to an allowance than males. In-depth interviews indicated that while the refusal to accept an alternative arrangement by female respondents was mainly due to their satisfaction with the level of accommodation and meals received, their fear of having to spend more money than the allowance given for food and accommodation, fear of the process of finding accommodation being cumbersome, and their fear of being viewed as promiscuous women by the society also affected their choice for continuing to live in accommodation provided by their employers.

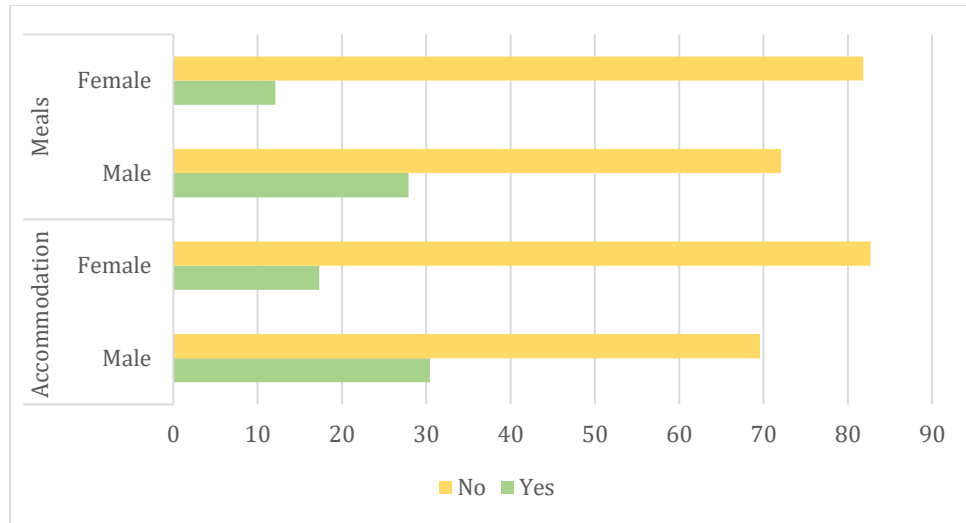


Figure 23: Preference for an allowance by gender (%)

When questioned whether the respondents were aware of any other migrant worker in their position receiving an allowance for accommodation, a significantly higher percentage of men (61%) than women (26%) stated that they knew at least one other person receiving accommodation allowances instead of residing in employer-provided accommodation (Figure 24).

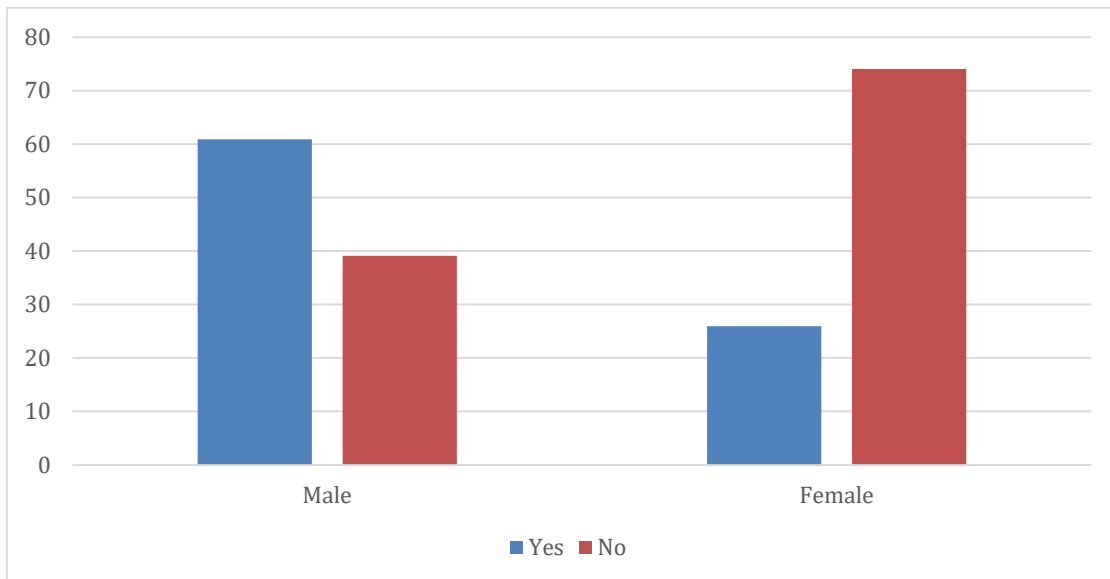


Figure 24: Knowledge of anyone with similar job title residing in an accommodation of their choice %

7.4 Health care services

The majority of the respondents in the sample stated that they were either very satisfied (54%) or satisfied (32%) with the healthcare services they received in their main CoD. On the other hand, four per cent each stated that they were either dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied with the services they received. Gender-wise, a higher percentage of females (6%) than males (1%) indicated that they were extremely dissatisfied (Figure 25).

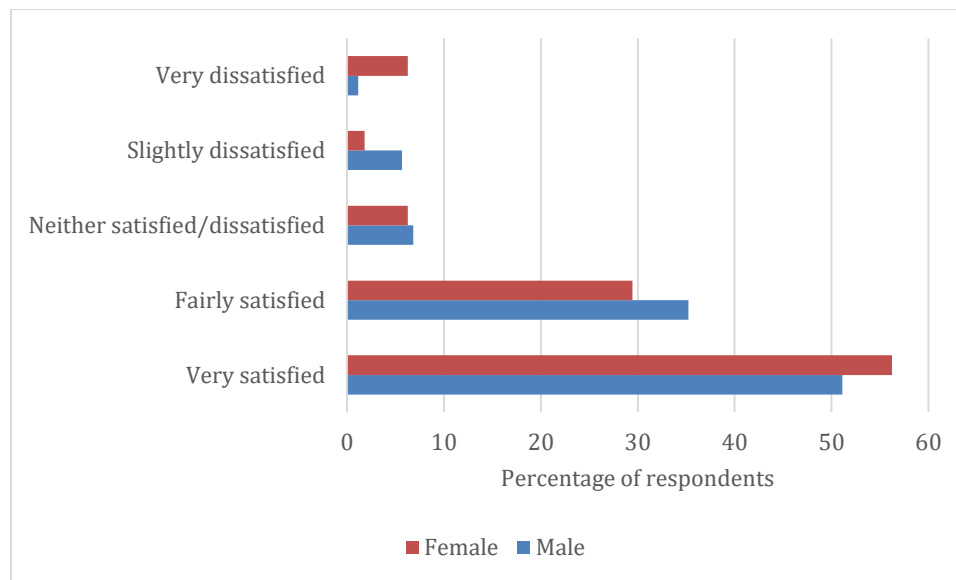


Figure 25: Satisfaction with the healthcare services in host country by gender (%)

The main reasons for the dissatisfaction among those who were either extremely dissatisfied or dissatisfied with their healthcare services in the host country were their inability to afford healthcare services due to the absence of health insurance (eight persons) and their employer not allowing seeking of healthcare services when needed (nine persons). Except for one, all persons who stated they could not access healthcare services when needed were female domestic workers.

7.5 Overall level of satisfaction of life in the host country

The majority of respondents in the sample indicated that they were either extremely satisfied (44%) or moderately satisfied (37%) with their time spent in the host country. On the other hand, six per cent stated that they were slightly dissatisfied with their life in the host country, and seven per cent stated that they were extremely dissatisfied.

When comparing the level of satisfaction with life in the host country among male and female participants, the percentage of males who were very satisfied was significantly higher than that of females (55% vs 35%) (Figure 26). On the other hand, the percentage of males who were very dissatisfied with life in their main CoD was slightly higher than that of females (9% vs 5%).

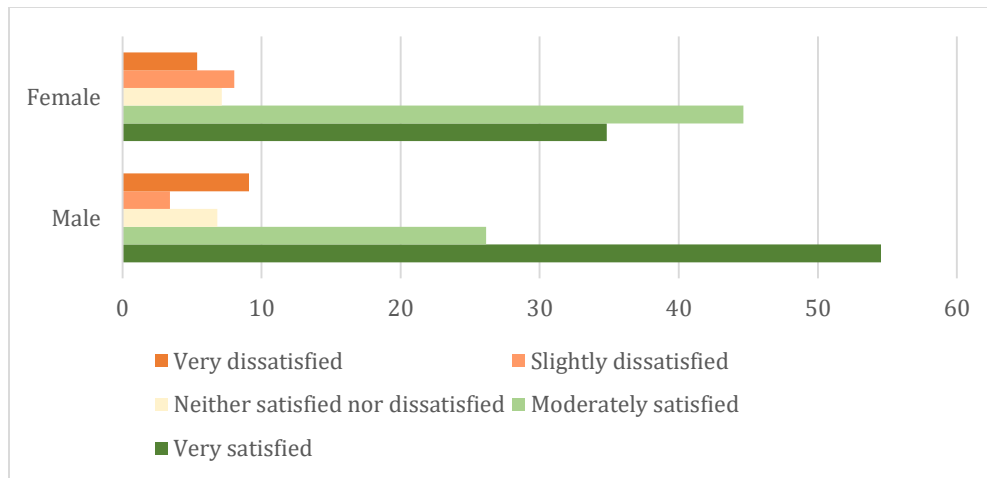


Figure 26: Level of satisfaction with life in the host country by gender (%)

Figure 27 illustrates the gender breakdown of the reasons for satisfaction with life in the host country among the 71 male and 89 female respondents who were either extremely or moderately satisfied with their life there. For male respondents, the two main reasons for satisfaction include empowerment gained through migration (80%) and freedom enjoyed in the host country (79%). In comparison, for female respondents, the two main reasons for satisfaction with life in the host country are empowerment gained through migration (73%) and the opportunity to work under a supportive employer (63%).

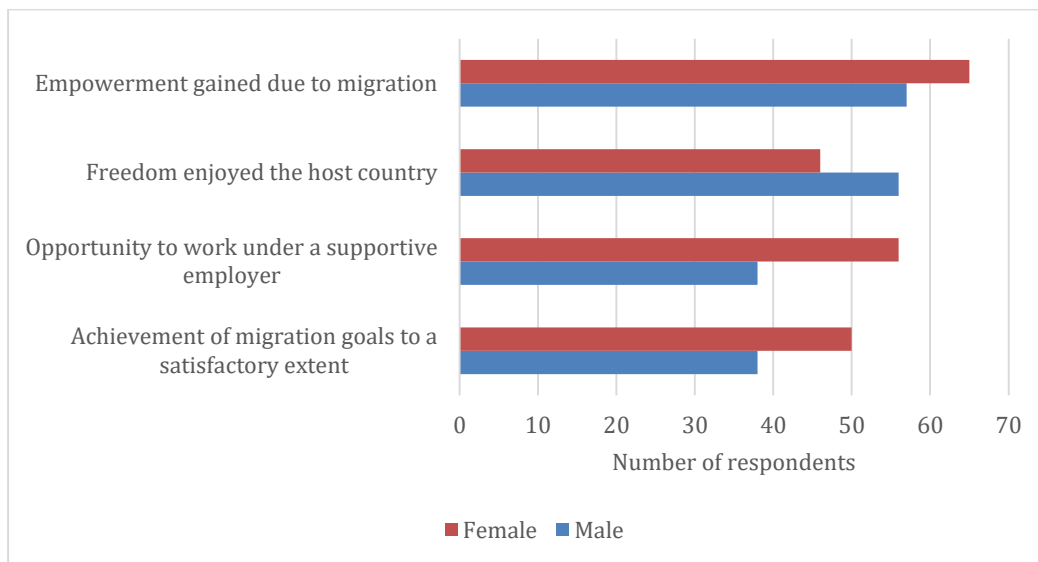


Figure 27: Reasons for satisfaction about the life in the host country %

Figure 28 illustrates the reason for dissatisfaction among the 11 male and 15 female respondents who were either extremely or slightly dissatisfied with their life in the host country. A higher number of females than males indicated an inability to achieve migration objectives to a satisfactory level, delays in payment and harassment by the employer as reasons for being dissatisfied with their life in their main CoD than male respondents.

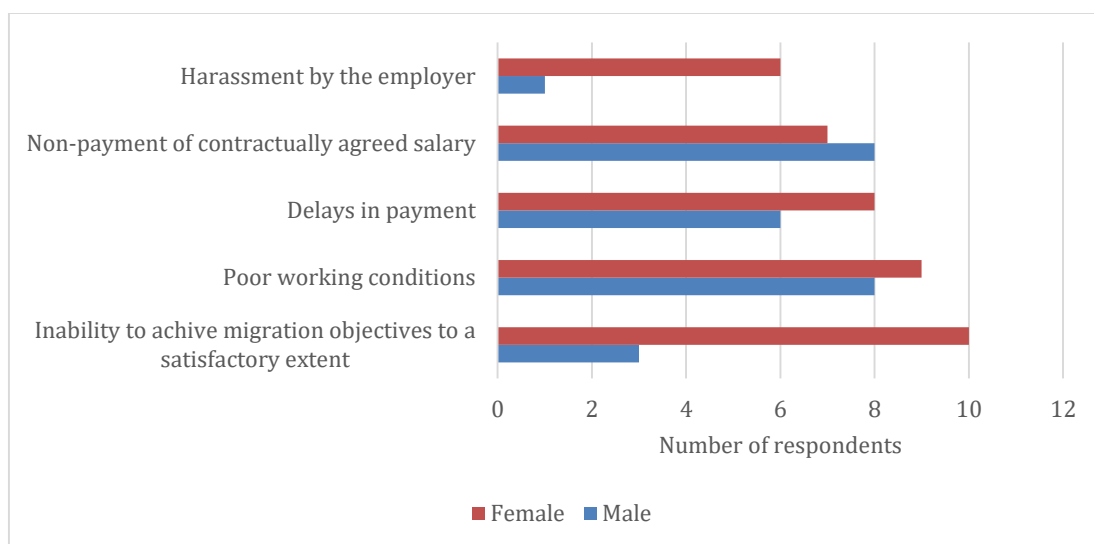


Figure 28: Reasons for dissatisfaction about the life in the host country

8. Return and Remigration

Overall, the majority of respondents (84%) indicated that their last return to Sri Lanka was in the five years prior to the rollout of the survey (i.e. between 2018 and 2022), with the highest percentage of returnees (24%) reporting 2021 as the year of return.

Likewise, the majority (80%) of respondents stated that their return from their main destination country occurred between 2018 and 2022, with the highest percentage (24%) of returns in 2021. However, while less than one per cent of returnees indicated that their year of last return was before 2012, three per cent of returnees stated that they had returned from their main destination country prior to 2012 (Figure 29).

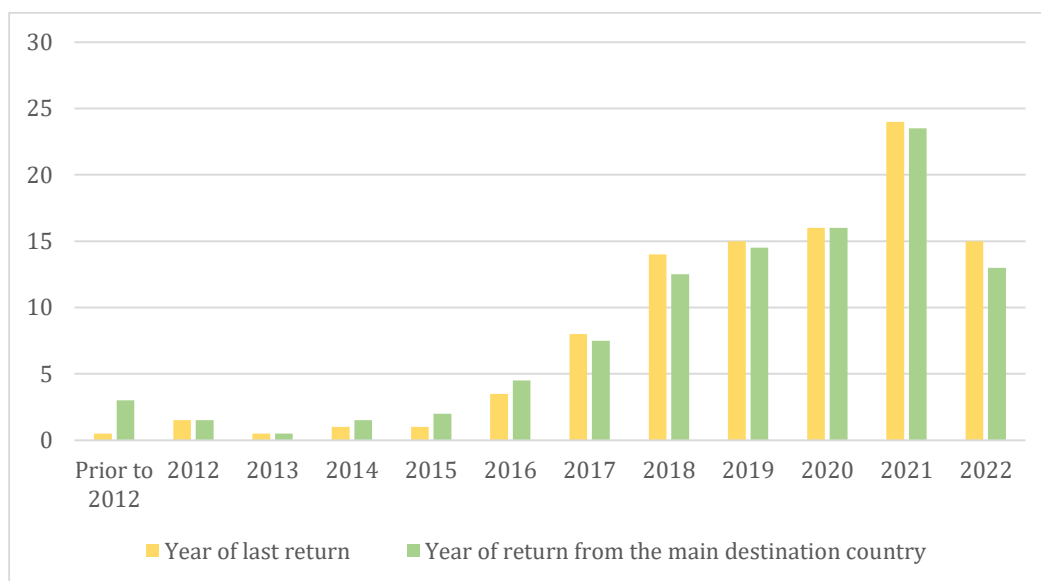


Figure 29: Year of return %

8.1 Reasons for return to Sri Lanka

Overall, the main reason for return from the main destination country among both male and female respondents is the end of their contract period, with a higher percentage of women (63%) citing it as a reason for return than men (56%) (Figure 30). The other significant reasons for the return given by the returnees are family-related reasons and homesickness. The percentage of women citing these as reasons in the sample is significantly higher than that of males. On the other hand, the percentage of men who returned due to achievement of migration objectives, poor working conditions, delays in payments and loss of their job is slightly higher than that of women who returned due to these reasons.

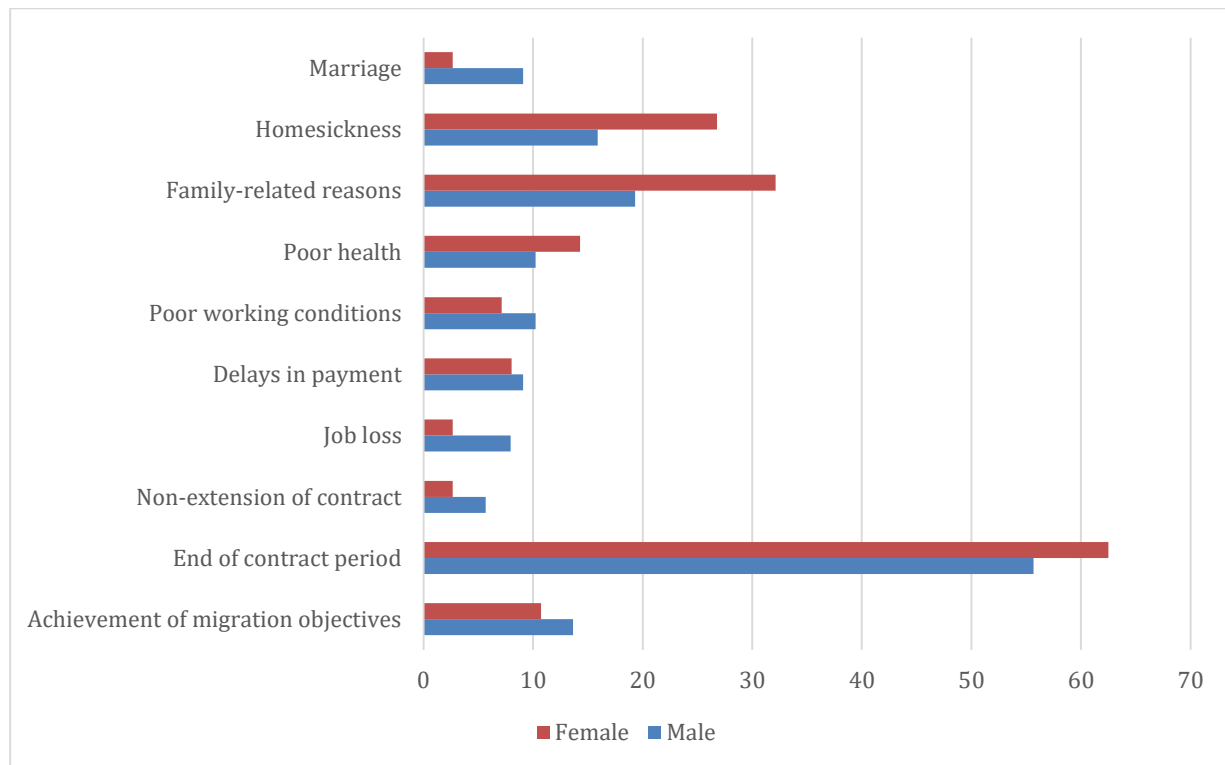


Figure 30: Reasons for return to Sri Lanka %

8.2 Premature return to Sri Lanka

Twenty-eight per cent of the survey participants stated that they wished to return from their main destination country before the end of their contract period. This proportion was slightly higher among males at 31% than among females at 26%.

Among those who stated that they wished to return to Sri Lanka prematurely (N=56), the vast majority (89%) stated that they made attempts to return, while 11% said they made no attempts to return. The percentage of males who said they attempted to return early was higher at 96% than females at 83%.

Among those who said that they tried to return to Sri Lanka before the end of their contract (N=50), 32 said they were successful, while 18 said they were unsuccessful. The number of women who said they were unsuccessful (11) was higher than men (7).

Table 3 illustrates the person/s who bore the air ticket cost for the premature return (multiple answers were allowed for this question).

Person/s who bore the cost of the air-ticket	Number of respondents
The employer	12
The migrant worker	14
The migrant worker's family in Sri Lanka	10

Table 3: Person/s who bore the cost of the air-ticket for premature return

8.3 Remigration

More than half of the respondents indicated that they intend to remigrate. The percentage with remigration plans was higher among males at 60% than among females at 47% (Figure 31).

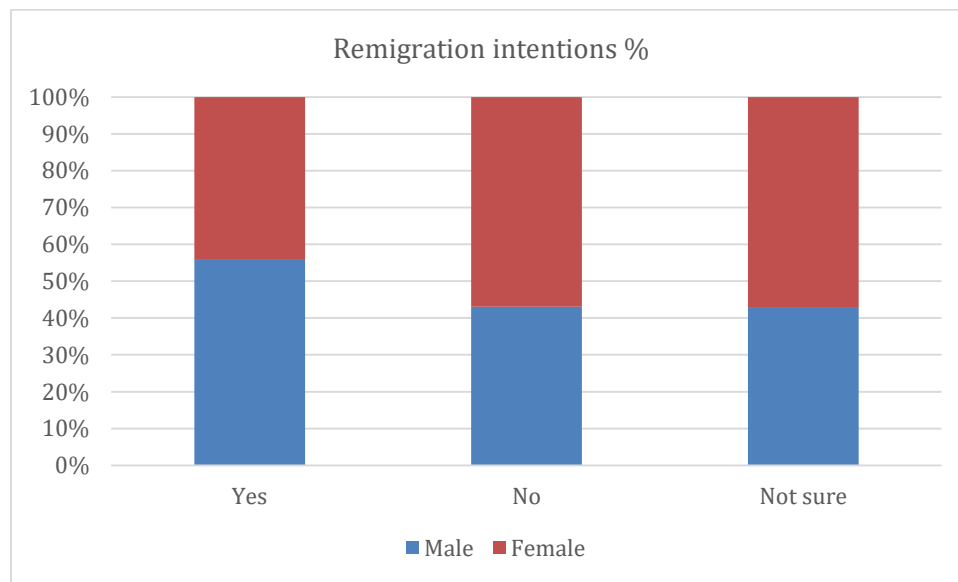


Figure 31: Remigration intentions by gender (%)

Those with remigration intentions (N=106) are divided in their preferences for employers, with 38% stating that they would prefer a new employer and 32% stating that they would like to return to their former employers. Meanwhile, 30% were okay with returning to work for their former employer or a new employer. Figure 32 illustrates the gender breakdown of the preferences for an employer. As can be seen, a higher percentage of males (38%) than females (26%) prefer to go back to their former employers, while a higher proportion of females (42%) than males (34%) prefer to work under a new employer.

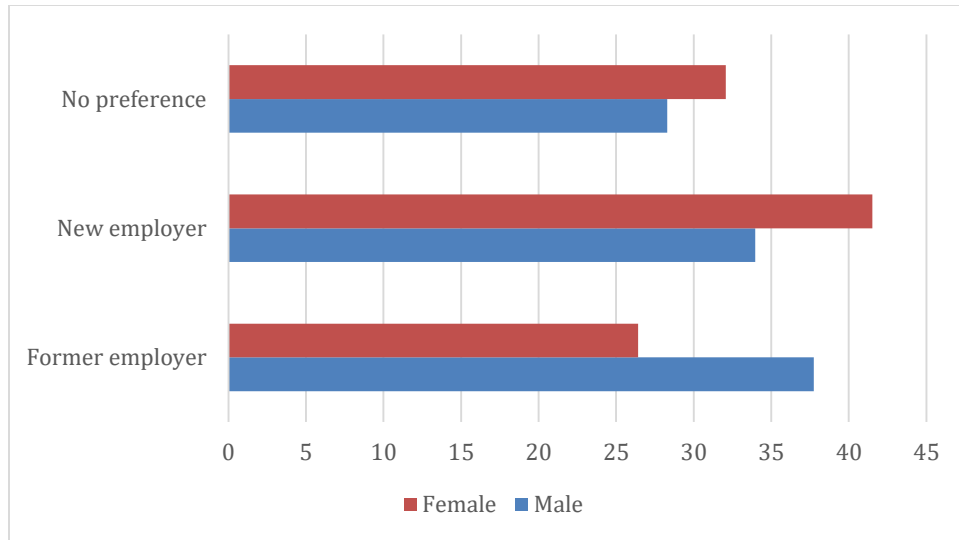


Figure 32: Employer preference for remigration by gender (%)

The vast majority (93%) of respondents with remigration intentions stated that the current economic situation in Sri Lanka was a reason for their remigration plans (Figure 33). The other reasons for remigration expressed by these returnees include the inability to find a satisfactory job in Sri Lanka (45%), running out of savings accumulated during the previous migration stint (36%), failure to achieve the migration goals during the last attempt (35%) and the preference for the lifestyle in the former host country (23%). Figure 32 illustrates the gender breakdown of these reasons. As can be seen, there are no significant differences in the reasons for remigration among the male and female respondents.

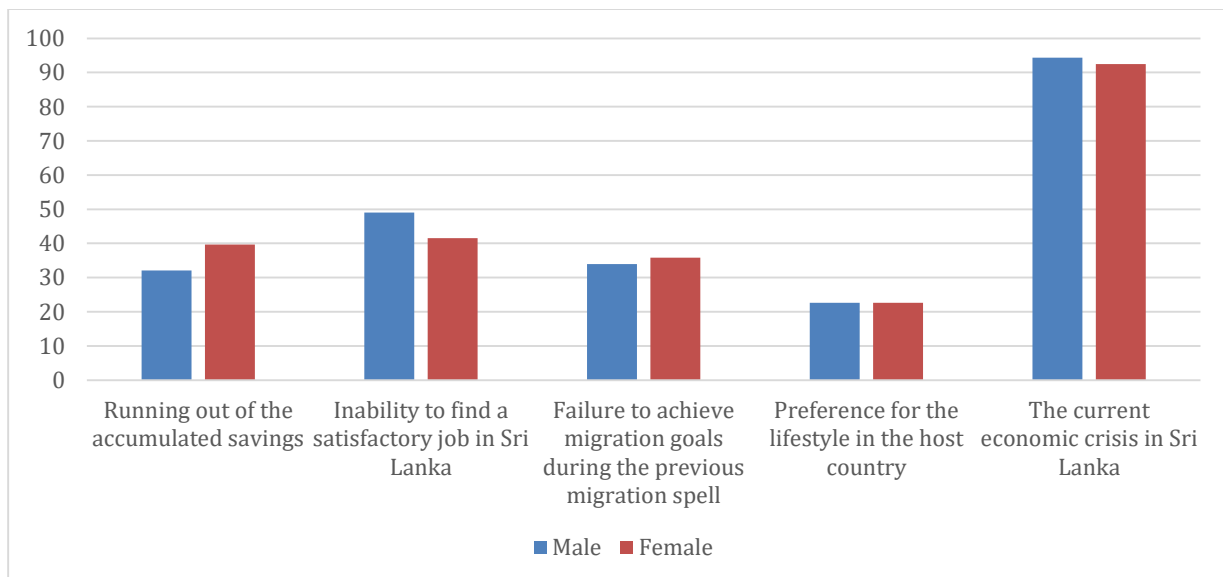


Figure 33: Reasons for remigration by gender (%)

9. Institutional support at different stages in the migration process

This section examines the support extended to migrant workers by various governmental and private institutions during the three main stages of the migration process; pre-migration, while in the host country and after the return.

9.1 Pre-migration stage

The survey mainly examined two types of support extended to migrant workers in the pre-migration stage; pre-migration training and support provided for a better understanding of the terms and conditions of the employment contract.

9.1.1 Pre-departure training

The percentage of male and female respondents stating that they participated in a training programme/programmes before migration was equal at 63%. More than three-quarters of those who participated in training programmes before migration had participated in the programme organised by the SLBFE. Fifty-three per cent had participated in training camps organised by the employment agencies. The in-depth interviews indicated that the training programme organised by the SLBFE was for first-time migrants, while the training camps organised by the employment agencies are for all potential migrants, irrespective of whether they have any prior migration experience.

Figure 34 illustrates the items covered in the pre-migration training programmes.

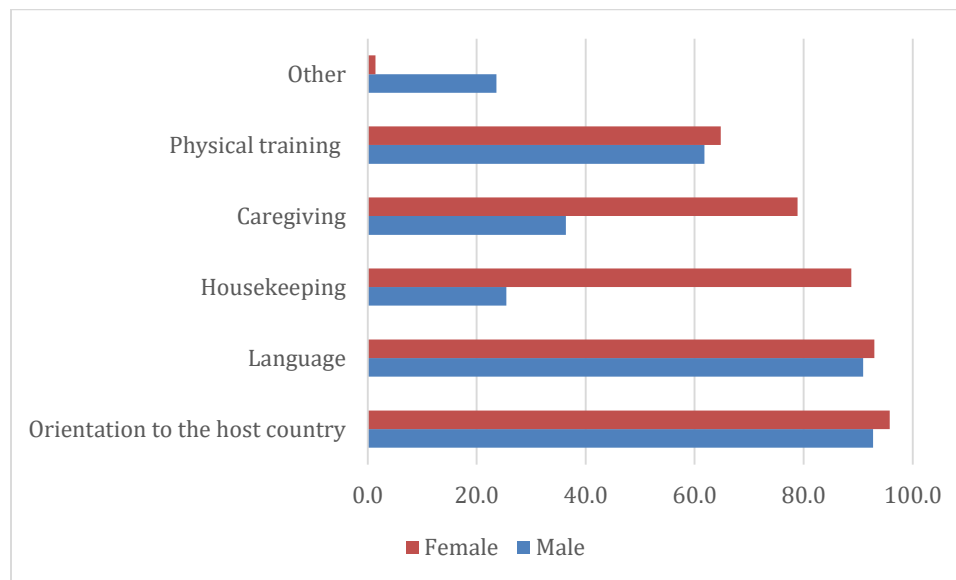


Figure 34: Elements covered in the pre-migration training %

Among the men (N=55) and women (N=71) who said they had participated in a pre-departure training programme, a higher percentage of women stated that their training included housekeeping and caregiving than men. On the other hand, almost an equal percentage of men and women stated that their training included orientation about the destination country, introduction to the native language/s of the host country and fitness training.

The majority (86%) of those who participated in a pre-departure training programme stated that during these programmes, they were made aware of the support mechanisms available in the host country in case of an emergency. This included 58% who said they received detailed information about the support mechanisms available and 28% that said they received some information.

The vast majority (98%) of respondents who had undergone pre-migration training (N=126) stated that they found it useful to some extent. Sixty-three per cent consider the training extremely useful, 29% found it somewhat helpful and six per cent slightly useful. Only two per cent found the pre-migration training not useful at all. The research team did not come across any noteworthy differences in the opinions of the male and female participants regarding the usefulness of the pre-departure training.

The preliminary findings of the in-depth interviews conducted in the second stage of this study indicate that migrant workers find the pre-departure training helpful because it provides them with an introduction to the language, laws and customs of the destination country and the kind of work expected from them. Male migrant workers indicated that they found the information on the destination country's laws particularly useful in navigating their lives in the host country and avoiding getting involved in illegal activities. On the other hand, female domestic workers stated that the elements in the training programme related to housekeeping, such as cleaning, cooking, and caregiving helpful. This is because most Sri Lankan women who migrate as domestic workers are from rural areas and have little understanding of modern housekeeping requirements in destination countries, such as handling domestic appliances, cleaning, laundry techniques and food preparation and table arrangement.

9.1.2 Support for clarifying the terms and conditions of the employment contract

As stated earlier, approximately three-quarters of respondents stated that they received a contract before migration, while nearly a quarter stated that they did not receive a contract before migration. Of those who had received a contract prior to migration (N=151), 59% stated that they received support in understanding its terms and conditions, while 41% said that they did not receive external support to clarify the clauses in the employment contract. Gender-wise, a slightly higher percentage of women (65%) than men (51%) said they sought support in clarifying the clauses in the employment contract than men.

Figure 35 illustrates the sources from which external support was received to clarify the terms and conditions of the employment contract. While an almost equal percentage of male respondents had received support from the employment agency that arranged their travel (52%) and the SLBFE (55%), the majority of female respondents (75%) had received support from their employment agency while only 36% of women had received support from the SLBFE. The in-depth interviews indicated that this is due to a higher percentage of females having signed their contracts at the offices of their employment agency, while most male respondents had signed their contracts at the SLBFE. Apart from the employment agency and the SLBFE, the respondents indicated that they had also sought help from their friends with prior migration experiences and those working overseas to understand the employment terms. However, there are no significant gender differences in the percentage of male and female respondents who sought support from these sources.

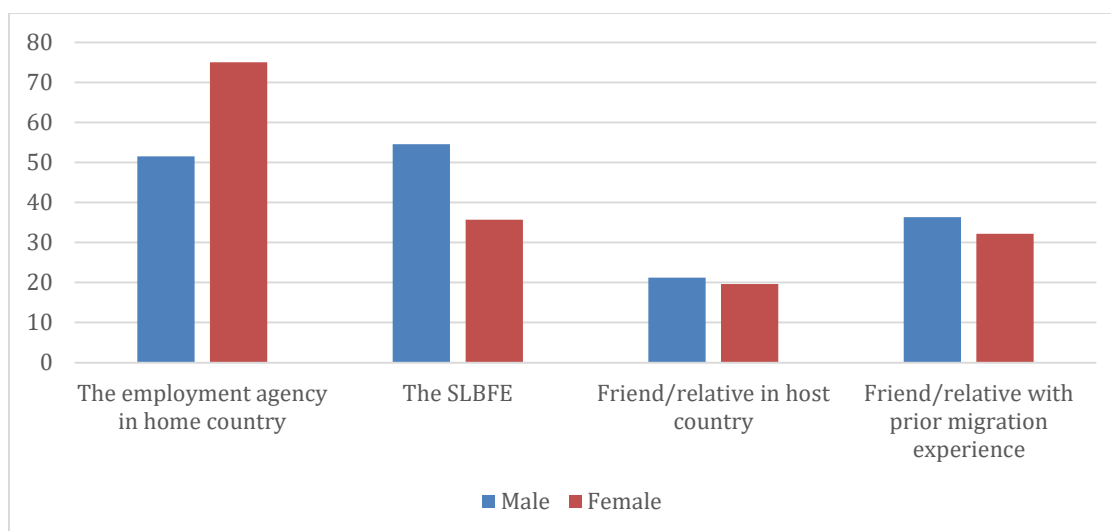


Figure 35: Persons/Institutions that provided support for clarifying the employment contract (%)

9.2 While in the host countries

9.2.1 Support from the SLBFE

Twenty-four respondents (12%) stated that their families on behalf of them sought help from the SLBFE while they were in the host country. Among them, 16 said they were satisfied with the support received from the SLBFE, while the other eight were disappointed with the services they received.

9.2.2 Support from the embassy

On the other hand, twenty-one respondents in the sample had sought services from the Sri Lankan missions in their host countries. The top three sought-after services were attestation, passport renewal and legal advice. While 48% of those who sought services were very satisfied with the services they received, 24% were somewhat satisfied, and nearly 30% were very unsatisfied. Gender-wise, all those who reported they were unsatisfied were male, while all who said they were somewhat satisfied were female. However, an equal percentage of male and female respondents stated they were highly satisfied with the services of the Sri Lankan missions in the host countries..

9.2.3 Support from governmental institutions in the host country

Only six respondents in the sample had requested support from government institutions in the host countries regarding employment issues while they were in those countries. The types of support requested were regarding breach of contract by the employer (three respondents), request for a no-objection certificate (NOC) to change the employer (two respondents) and harassment (one person). All of those who sought support from governmental bodies in the host country were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the services they received from host country institutions.

9.4 Post-return

9.5 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) certificate

The Vocational Training Authority (VTA) of Sri Lanka issues National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certification for skills gathered through formal learning and work experience. This process, known as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), applies to migrants and non-migrants. The National Labour Migration Policy of Sri Lanka highlights the need to promote the RPL system for migrant returnees to secure better employment opportunities in Sri Lanka as well as abroad in case they wish to remigrate.

In the sample, 48% of male and 27% of female respondents stated that they gained new skills through foreign employment. However, among them, only 36% of males and 43% of females said that they obtained an RPL certificate for their new skills gained.

Among those who did not obtain an RPL certificate despite gaining new skills through foreign employment (N=44), 68% said that they did not know about the process, 25% indicated that they were not interested in obtaining certification for the new skills gained, while 7% said that they were not successful.

9.6 Other support sought after

Twenty-four respondents (12%) sought support on matters related to foreign employment other than the RPL certification after returning to Sri Lanka. Table 4 illustrates the institutions from which the support was sought. As can be seen, overall, most of the respondents who needed support after returning to Sri Lanka had reached out to the SLBFE, followed by their Grama Niladhari (i.e. village officer).

Name of the institution	Number of respondents
The SLBFE	14
INGO/NGO	4
Grama Niladhari (Village Officer)	9
Government bank	4
Private bank	1

Table 4: Post-return institutional support

Table 5 provides details about the type of assistance that these respondents needed. As indicated, the highest number of respondents had contacted the above organisations for financial assistance.

Type of assistance	Number of respondents
Financial assistance	20
Business loan	1
Housing loan	1
Scholarship for children	4
Business advice	3
Counselling	4

Table 5: Type of post-return institutional support sought after

9.5 SLBFE registration

Section 51 of the SLBFE's Act No. 21 of 1985, as amended by Act No. 4 of 1994, makes it mandatory for any migrant worker seeking foreign employment to register with the SLBFE by paying the necessary registration fee. This fee is LKR 15,000 (46 USD at 1 USD=322 LKR) and needs to be renewed every two years by paying LKR 3200 (around USD 10) if the migrant continues to work under the same employer. In case of changes to the employer, the full registration fee must be paid again. The SLBFE states that the fees collected are used for the welfare of Sri Lankan migrants for purposes such as maintaining safe houses for female migrant workers, repatriation of workers in emergencies, insurance purposes and legal assistance for those who require them.¹⁴

In the sample, the vast majority (91%) said they had registered with the SLBFE before migrating to their main country of origin. Among those who obtained SLBFE registration (N=182), approximately two-thirds consider that it provided them with benefits, while 33% consider that the registration was not helpful for them in all three stages of the migration process. Table 6 summarises the benefits indicated by those who found the SLBFE registration useful.

Type of benefit	Number of respondents
Access to training	64
Support to understand the employment contract	63
Insurance	62
Safe migration experience	64
Education support for my children	25

Table 6: Usefulness of SLBFE registration

10. Awareness of Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs), Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and Memorandum of Corporation (MoCs)

Over the years, Sri Lanka has managed to sign BLAs, MoUs and MoCs with most of the main destination countries popular among Sri Lankan migrant workers, strengthening the institutional mechanisms surrounding foreign employment of Sri Lankans. Currently, Sri Lanka has BLAs with Switzerland, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Italy, Qatar, and Bahrain, and MoUs with Japan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), South Korea, Oman, Seychelles, Kuwait, and Jordan. The only MoCs are with Japan. Appendix 1 presents when these agreements were signed.

When questioned whether the respondents knew that Sri Lanka had signed BLAs, MoUs and MoCs with certain countries, only 20 per cent of respondents said yes, with a higher percentage (32%) of males indicating their awareness as opposed to 11% of females (Figure 36).

¹⁴ SLBFE, 'Mandatory Registration for Sri Lankans Leaving for Employment Abroad', Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2023, <http://www.slbfe.lk/page.php?LID=1&MID=37>.

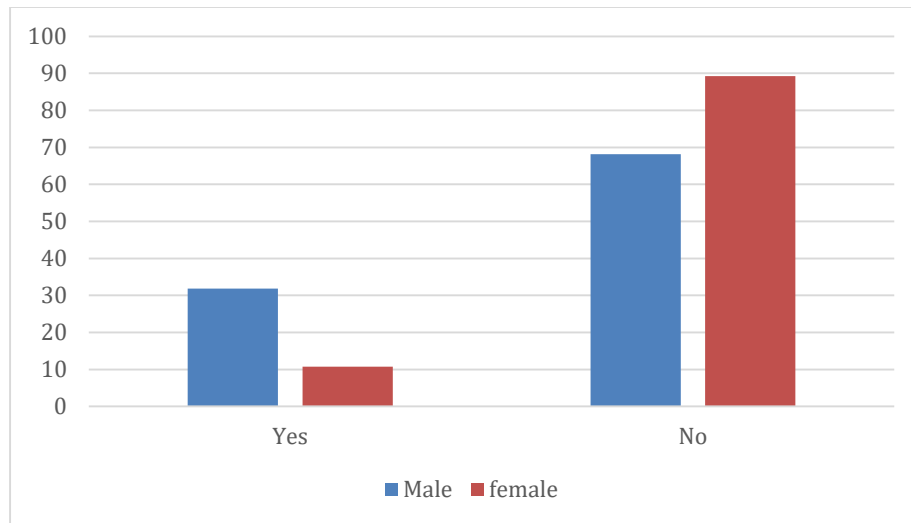


Figure 36: Awareness of BLAs, MoUs and MoCs in general (%)

Among those who knew that Sri Lanka had signed BLAs, MoUs and MoCs with key foreign employment destinations (N=40), only 63% knew whether Sri Lanka had signed any agreements with their former host countries.

11. Suggestions for improvements in the institutional mechanisms

In the final section of the survey, migrant returnees were asked for suggestions for improving the Sri Lankan institutional mechanisms on foreign employment. Their main suggestions were negotiating with key destination countries for better pay for Sri Lankan migrant workers (91%), establishing a helpline or assigning a dedicated officer at the Sri Lankan missions abroad to support migrants facing issues in the host countries (85%), providing legal advice for migrants seeking legal help (83%), negotiating for better compensation for migrant workers who face work-related accidents and health issues (72%), and establishing safe houses in all Sri Lankan missions in key destination countries (66%) (Figure 37).

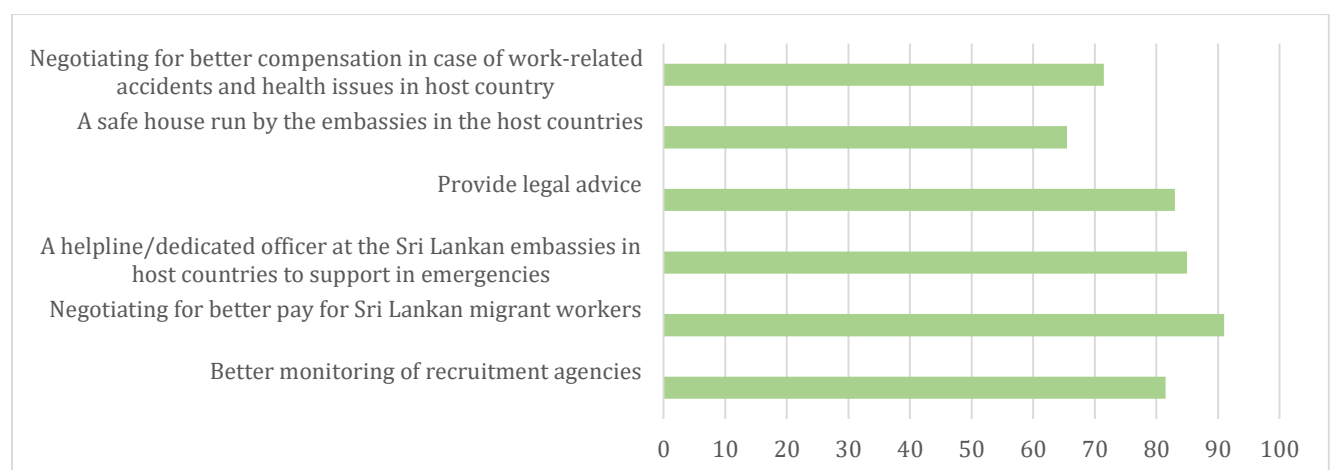


Figure 37: Suggestions to improve the safety and working conditions of migrant workers %

Conclusions

This report presents the preliminary results of a survey of returnee migrant workers conducted in May 2022 in the Western and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The primary objective of this survey was to examine the living and working conditions of Sri Lankan migrant workers in their host countries and the institutional support mechanisms in place to support them. This survey is part of a broader study that aims to ascertain whether migration along corridors regulated via bilateral labour agreements has positively affected the experiences of migrants, with a particular focus on differences by gender. In order to reflect this objective, the survey also sought to determine whether there are differences in the experiences of male and female migrant workers concerning the living and working conditions and the institutional support available.

Overall, the survey indicates that the living conditions of Sri Lankan migrant workers are much better than what is presented in past literature on Sri Lankan migrant workers. This is indicated by the high proportion of migrant workers expressing their satisfaction with accommodation, meals, access to healthcare and living conditions in the destination countries. However, this should not be taken as a testament to improved working conditions for Sri Lankan migrant workers in destination countries, as the survey results also highlight various workplace issues, such as excessive workloads, delays and non-payment of wages, and verbal harassment at workplaces that continue to haunt migrant workers. As the qualitative interviews conducted in the second stage of the study indicate that while most Sri Lankan migrant workers have relatively uneventful experiences in their destination countries, there are still many Sri Lankan migrant workers who struggle due to employment-related issues they face in host countries. Those findings are, thus, consistent with reports by migrant rights advocacy organisations about the problems in destination countries that migrants are grappled with.

From a gender perspective, the preliminary examination of the data from the survey highlights significant disparities in the migration experiences of male and female migrant workers. One of the key differences between the experiences of male and female respondents regards the pre-migration employment contracts. The survey data indicates that the proportion of female respondents stating their employment contracts included their working hours, leave entitlement, bonus and overtime pay and when the salary will be paid were significantly lower than that of males.

Another area in which the experiences of males and females differ is regarding workplace issues experienced in the country of destination. A relatively higher percentage of females than males in the sample had been exposed to excessive workloads. Furthermore, a higher rate of women than men complained of receiving lower pay than the contractually agreed upon amount, being subjected to verbal harassment, facing non-payment of wages and gratuity, lack of days off from work, and lack of medical care.

Since the vast majority of female respondents in the sample are domestic workers, these results confirm that live-in Sri Lankan domestic workers are most often exploited, as the general expectation is that they are on call 24/7. On top of this, their contracts do not mention working hours and leave entitlement; hence, they do not receive any overtime pay even if they work long hours. One key reason is that the domestic work sector's institutional and cultural environment is still mired in gendered perceptions about its informal, low- if not unskilled status. Reflecting this, recruitment

agencies which are typically the first and often the only institutional contact with which migrant women engage, do not seem to have stepped up to support migrant women in negotiating for better pay.

Another area in which these migration agencies have fallen short is helping migrant women faced with various workplace issues. The majority of female respondents in the sample who faced workplace issues indicated that they complained to the employment agency in their host country that placed them with their employer. However, the preliminary results of the qualitative interviews conducted in the second phase of this study indicate that the support extended by these agencies to women faced with workplace issues is generally abysmal and that women are subjected to verbal harassment by agency staff. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to monitor these agencies as the first point of contact for female migrant workers in trouble.

The survey results also shed light upon other institutional support mechanisms that need further improvement to enhance the well-being of both male and female migrant workers. One key area of institutional support that needs improvement is linked to goal achievement. The survey results suggest that migrant workers struggle to obtain bank loans which significantly hinders the achievement of migration goals such as establishing business ventures and house building. In addition, migrant workers in the sample, particularly female migrant workers, highlighted that they need support in improving their financial literacy to manage their income earned in the destination countries.

Other areas of institutional support that need improvement include but are not limited to establishing better support mechanisms for migrant workers faced with workplace issues, ensuring that migrant workers have a proper contract prior to migration, and confirming they clearly understand the terms and conditions of employment before migrating.

Lastly, these preliminary findings also help highlight new lines and directions of inquiry for future research. It is, in particular, the role of RPL certification in the reintegration or remigration processes of migrant returnees that has emerged in our research as an issue that deserves further in-depth research. This is so because skill acquisition is one of the key goals of the migration-development-nexus debate following remittances, and it has also been shown as highly gendered.¹⁵ The institutional mechanisms and processes surrounding RPL certification and their usefulness in successfully reintegrating returnee migrants are not well known. Since bilateral labour agreements govern labour migration as temporary, return migration is an invariable outcome. Hence, the reintegration of return migrants into the labour market from various vantage points, such as skill recognition and financing, is an issue that should be considered in discussions about migration governance, with gender as a key cross-cutting theme.

¹⁵ Anna Boucher, 'Gender Bias in Skills Definition, Labour Market Dynamics and Skills Recognition', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Migration*, ed. Claudia Mora and Nicola Piper (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 187–201, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63347-9_12.

Appendix 1: Countries with which Sri Lanka has signed BLAs, MoUs, and MoCs

BLAs	Year	MoUs	Year	MoCs	Year
Switzerland	2021	Japan	2017	Japan	2017, 2018, 2019
Israel	2020	UAE	2018, 2007		
Saudi Arabia	2014	South Korea	2017, 2011		
Seychelles	2012	Malaysia	2016		
Italy	2011	Oman	2014		
Qatar	2008	Seychelles	2012		
Bahrain	2008	Kuwait	2012		
		Jordan	2006		

Source: Compiled by authors

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