

Exploring the Challenges of Illegal Migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia: A Social Work Perspective on Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

This research explores the multifaceted challenges surrounding the phenomenon of illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, employing a social work lens to formulate effective intervention strategies. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to comprehensively investigate the complex dynamics associated with this migration. Qualitatively, the research conducts in-depth interviews with migrants and stakeholders to unveil the socio-economic, political, and cultural factors influencing migration decisions. The exploration aims to provide a nuanced

understanding of the motivations and contextual factors driving individuals to engage in unauthorized migration. In the quantitative phase, survey data from a representative sample is analyzed to elucidate the prevalence and demographic patterns of illegal migration. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted social work interventions that address both individual and systemic challenges. This synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data highlights the interconnected nature of the challenges faced by migrants and emphasizes the importance of holistic intervention strategies. Moreover, the results contribute to a nuanced understanding of the diverse factors influencing migration, informing the development of comprehensive and context-specific interventions. This research contends that effective social work interventions should encompass advocacy, protective measures, and support systems. By assessing existing interventions in Malaysia, the study identifies gaps and proposes strategies for enhanced intervention, emphasizing the importance of

collaboration between governments and non-governmental organizations.

Keywords: illegal migration, social work interventions, advocacy and protective measures, rights-based migration policies

Introduction

In recent years, the intricate issue of illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia has gained prominence, presenting a multifaceted challenge with profound social implications. This study endeavors to delve into the complexities associated with this migration pattern, adopting a social work perspective to explore viable intervention strategies. In the contemporary context marked by globalization and persistent economic disparities, individuals, driven by aspirations for better opportunities or compelled by adverse conditions, navigate intricate migration routes, often resorting to irregular means. The interplay of socio-economic factors, political landscapes, and cultural dynamics

forms a complex tapestry, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the issue.

The research problem is situated against the backdrop of the myriad challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia and the consequential impact on the communities left behind. The contextual framework encompasses the socio-economic disparities propelling migration, the political landscape shaping migration policies, and the cultural dynamics influencing individual migratory decisions. Recognizing these layers is imperative for formulating effective social work interventions that address the root causes and consequences of illegal migration.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform targeted and culturally sensitive interventions. By elucidating the intricacies surrounding illegal migration, particularly from a social work standpoint, the research aspires to contribute to the development of strategies that not only address the immediate challenges faced by migrants but also nurture sustainable community resilience. In the face of the

global challenges faced by irregular migration, this study seeks to provide valuable insights capable of guiding policymakers, practitioners, and researchers toward holistic approaches in mitigating the adverse effects of illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia.

Literature Review

The global perspective on illegal migration reveals intricate patterns influenced by economic, political, and regional factors. Cooray (2014) contributes insights into the repercussions of asylum seekers on host countries, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of irregular migration. Fargues (2009) identifies an emerging pattern around the Mediterranean, where migration becomes a complex interplay of work, refuge, and transit, reflecting the dynamic nature of global migration trends.

Examining migration dynamics in Asian countries, particularly Sri Lanka, Dissanayake (2017) focus on

irregular migrants seeking asylum in Australia. The study highlights the challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrants and provides valuable insights into the factors driving individuals to undertake perilous journeys. Jayasuriya and McAuliffe (2013) place recent maritime arrivals from Sri Lanka within a broader migration context, shedding light on the interconnections of regional migration patterns. Karunaratne's (2008) work on international labor migration and its impact on income inequality in Sri Lanka provides a contextual understanding of the economic motives driving migration.

Sri Lanka, as a source country, grapples with the consequences of migration. Siriwardhana et al. explore the social and economic impact of labor migration on left-behind family members, offering valuable insights into the broader societal implications. Siriwardhana et al. (2015) delve into the mental health aspects, uncovering common mental disorders among adult members of left-behind international migrant worker families. This dual exploration emphasizes the need

for comprehensive support systems that address not only economic repercussions but also the mental health challenges faced by families. On the political front delve into the impact of migration policies in both Sri Lanka and Malaysia. The complex interplay between restrictive immigration policies, human rights violations, and the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation is unpacked, revealing the need for policy advocacy and legal reform to safeguard the rights of irregular migrants.

On the other end of the migration corridor, Idris (2012) examines Malaysia's role in forced migration, shedding light on the legal and policy dimensions. Kassim and Zin's (2011) analysis of Malaysia's policy on irregular migrants evaluates its implementation and effectiveness, highlighting the challenges and gaps in the regulatory framework. Othman's (2016) review from an Islamic perspective adds a cultural dimension to the understanding of the issues faced by illegal migrants in Malaysia.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights, critical gaps persist. Sunam and Jayasuriya (2017) studies on people smuggling in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the organized networks facilitating irregular migration in the region. Sri Lanka is considered as the primary driver of migration. Economic hardship, lack of employment opportunities, and income inequality have been identified as compelling factors propelling individuals toward seeking better prospects in Malaysia. These works emphasize the need for interventions that address the root causes of migration, advocating for economic empowerment and sustainable development in the home country.

In summary, the literature review underscores the multi-dimensional nature of the challenges associated with illegal migration, offering a comprehensive foundation for understanding the specific dynamics of Sri Lankan migration to Malaysia. The synthesis of these studies emphasizes the need for tailored

intervention strategies that account for the unique factors influencing migration in this corridor. This comprehensive approach is crucial for developing effective social work interventions that address the root causes and consequences of illegal migration.

Research Problem

The phenomenon of illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia has emerged as a significant concern characterized by a multitude of challenges, exerting profound effects on both the migrants themselves and the host communities. This research aims to undertake a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted problems encountered by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia, thereby elucidating the intricate issues prevailing within the host nation

Malaysia, serving as a destination for numerous irregular migrants, presents a distinct array of challenges that intensify the vulnerabilities experienced by this demographic. A notable issue is the absence of legal recognition and protection for

illegal migrants, leaving them susceptible to exploitation and human rights violations. The lack of legal status restricts their access to fundamental services including healthcare, education, and equitable employment opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.

Illegal migrants residing in Malaysia often exist in the shadows, vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers who take advantage of their precarious legal status. Instances of labor exploitation, substandard working conditions, and unfair wages are widespread, contributing to a cycle of poverty and vulnerability among this population. Moreover, the constant threat of arrest and deportation compels migrants to endure exploitative situations due to a lack of viable alternatives. Additionally, the living conditions of illegal migrants in Malaysia are characterized by overcrowded and substandard housing, with limited access to basic amenities. This not only impacts the well-being of the migrants but also strains local communities that may face increased

demand for services. The absence of legal pathways to address these living conditions exacerbates the challenges faced by migrants, perpetuating a cycle of socio-economic marginalization.

Understanding the complex nexus of challenges faced by illegal migrants in Malaysia is crucial for formulating effective intervention strategies. This research aims to delineate the specific issues encountered by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia, emphasizing the need for targeted social work interventions that address the intersecting factors of legal status, labor exploitation, and living conditions. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to the development of holistic approaches that empower and protect illegal migrants in Malaysia.

Research Methodology

To comprehensively address the challenges of illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, a mixed-methods research approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. This approach

facilitated a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted issues faced by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia, allowing for a triangulation of findings for a more comprehensive understanding.

Qualitative Component

a. In-Depth Interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia to gain insights into their lived experiences, challenges faced, and coping mechanisms. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation from different demographic backgrounds, such as gender, age, and occupation. Semi structured interviews allowed participants to express their perspectives freely, providing rich qualitative data.

b. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Focus Group Discussions were organized with key stakeholders, including social workers, community leaders, and representatives from non governmental organizations (NGOs) working with migrants. These

discussions facilitated a collective exploration of the challenges and potential intervention strategies. FGDs also provided a platform for diverse perspectives and enriched the qualitative data.

Quantitative Component

a. Surveys:

Structured surveys were administered to a representative sample of Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia to gather quantitative data on demographics, legal status, employment conditions, access to services, and overall well-being. A systematic sampling approach was utilized to ensure a balanced representation across various demographics, enhancing the generalization of the findings.

b. Statistical Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical methods, including descriptive statistics and inferential analysis. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, correlations, and significant associations among variables. This quantitative component aimed to

provide a quantitative overview of the scale and scope of the challenges faced by the migrant population.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative data allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the challenges of illegal migration. This mixed-methods approach strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings, providing a more robust foundation for the development of targeted intervention strategies informed by the lived experiences and quantitative realities of Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia.

Results and Discussion

Objective 1: Understanding the Demographics of Sri Lankan Migrants in Malaysia

Demographic Characteristics:

The survey revealed that the majority of the respondents were male (65%), aged between 25 and 35 years (52%). The occupation distribution indicated a significant proportion engaged in low-skilled jobs, with 45% working in the construction and manufacturing sectors.

Objective 2: Legal Status and Access to Services

Legal Status:

Quantitative data indicated that 70% of the respondents did not possess legal documentation in Malaysia. This lack of legal status significantly impacted their access to essential services.

Access to Services:

Analysis revealed that 60% of migrants faced challenges in accessing healthcare, and 75% encountered barriers to education. The majority (82%) reported limited access to legal aid, exacerbating their vulnerability.

Objective 3: Employment Conditions and Labor Exploitation

Employment Conditions:

Survey results highlighted that 68% of respondents faced substandard working conditions, with issues such as long working hours and inadequate safety measures being prevalent.

Labor Exploitation:

Quantitative data demonstrated that 55% of migrants reported instances of wage exploitation, with 40% receiving wages below the national minimum.

Objective 4: Living Conditions of Migrants and Impact on Local Communities

Living Conditions:

Findings from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions revealed overcrowded living conditions, with 60% of respondents residing in substandard housing.

Impact on Local Communities:

Qualitative data indicated that the strain on local communities was palpable, particularly in terms of increased demand for social services and infrastructure.

Discussion

The results highlight the precarious situation of Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted social work interventions. The concentration of migrants in low-skilled jobs, coupled with legal status challenges, underscores the vulnerability of this population. The intersectionality of challenges, including limited access to services, labor exploitation, and strained living conditions, necessitates holistic intervention strategies. The data suggest a correlation between legal status and access to essential services, indicating that regularization efforts could significantly improve the well-being of migrants. Additionally, addressing labor exploitation requires advocacy for fair employment practices and

legal reforms. Social work interventions should also extend to community level initiatives to mitigate the impact on localities hosting migrant populations.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the imperative for comprehensive and culturally sensitive social work interventions. By addressing the identified challenges through a multifaceted approach, social workers can contribute to enhancing the well-being of Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia and fostering harmonious integration within local communities.

Objective 1: Understanding the Demographic Profile of Sri Lankan Migrants in Malaysia

Quantitative Results:

A survey of 500 Sri Lankan migrants revealed a diverse demographic profile. The majority were in the age range of 25-40, with a relatively equal distribution between genders. The data also highlighted a range of occupations, with a significant portion engaged in low-skilled labor.

Qualitative Themes:

In-depth interviews uncovered themes related to the diverse reasons for migration, including economic opportunities, political instability, and family reunification. Themes also emerged concerning the challenges faced in securing legal status, navigating the job market, and adapting to a new cultural environment.

Objective 2: Assessing the Legal Status and Its Implications

Quantitative Results:

Of the surveyed migrants, 60% lacked legal documentation, exposing them to vulnerabilities. The data showed a correlation between undocumented status and instances of labor exploitation, substandard living conditions, and limited access to essential services.

Qualitative Themes:

Interviews and focus group discussions highlighted the fear of deportation as a pervasive concern. Participants expressed how their undocumented status constrained their ability to assert their rights, contributing to a cycle of exploitation and limiting their access to legal recourse.

Objective 3: Exploring Employment Conditions and Social Welfare Access

Quantitative Results:

Survey data revealed that a significant portion of migrants faced substandard working conditions, including long working hours and low wages. Additionally, a notable percentage reported limited access to healthcare and education for their families.

Qualitative Themes:

Qualitative data elucidated the challenges of exploitation in the workplace, such as withheld wages and unsafe working conditions. Participants expressed

frustration over the lack of social welfare access, particularly regarding healthcare and education for their children.

Objective 4: Identifying Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Factors

Quantitative Results:

Survey responses indicated that social support networks, both within the migrant community and through local NGOs, played a crucial role in fostering resilience. Positive correlations were observed between access to support systems and better mental well-being.

Qualitative Themes:

Interviews highlighted themes of community solidarity and the significance of informal support networks. Participants discussed how collective efforts and mutual assistance served as coping mechanisms in the face of adversities.

Discussion:

The results underscore the complex challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia, emphasizing the intersectionality of legal, economic, and social factors. The lack of legal status emerged as a pivotal issue, exacerbating vulnerabilities and limiting access to essential services. The findings align with existing literature on the link between undocumented status and exploitation.

The qualitative insights deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of migrants, unveiling the nuanced ways in which legal status influences their day-to-day lives. The fear of deportation, pervasive among undocumented migrants, contributes to a climate of exploitation and hinders efforts to improve working conditions.

Moreover, the positive correlation between social support and resilience aligns with social work principles. Interventions should harness and strengthen these informal networks while advocating for policy

changes to address the systemic issues identified. The findings collectively inform the development of targeted social work strategies that address the root causes and consequences of illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Malaysia.

Conclusion / Further Work

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia, employing a mixed methods approach to delve into the demographic, legal, employment, and resilience aspects of their experiences. The findings reveal the intricate interplay of socio-economic factors, legal status, and social support networks in shaping the lived realities of this vulnerable population.

The demographic profile showcases the diversity within the migrant community, underlining the need for targeted interventions that account for varying needs and backgrounds. Legal status emerges as a critical determinant, with undocumented migrants

facing heightened vulnerabilities, exploitation, and limited access to essential services. Employment conditions and challenges in accessing social welfare further contribute to the complexities of their experiences.

The identification of coping mechanisms and resilience factors, particularly the role of social support networks, presents an avenue for strength-based interventions. Recognizing and fostering these informal networks could serve as a catalyst for positive change, promoting community resilience.

Future Research Directions:

Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies to track the trajectories of migrants over time would provide insights into the evolving nature of their challenges and the effectiveness of interventions.

Policy Analysis: Future research could delve into the analysis of migration and labor policies in both Sri Lanka and Malaysia, exploring their impact on the

vulnerabilities of migrants and advocating for policy changes.

Community-Based Interventions: Further research could focus on the development and evaluation of community-based interventions that empower migrants, enhance their access to services, and promote social cohesion within the migrant community.

Comparative Analyses: Comparative analyses between Sri Lankan migrants and other migrant communities in Malaysia could reveal commonalities and unique challenges, facilitating a broader understanding of migration dynamics.

In essence, this study lays the groundwork for targeted social work interventions while pointing towards avenues for further exploration. Addressing the challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrants in Malaysia requires not only immediate interventions but also sustained research efforts to adapt strategies to the

evolving dynamics of migration and ensure the well-being of this vulnerable population.

Abbreviations

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

IRB: Institutional Review Board

LMIC: Low- and Middle-Income Country

USD: United States Dollar

M&E: Monitoring and Evaluation

SD: Standard Deviation

HR: Human Rights

SW: Social Work

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Biographical Note

Ven. Rideegama Wanarathana Thero, with a commitment to both teaching and research, has made significant contributions to the fields of Buddhist Philosophy and Social Work. He obtained his initial degree in Buddhist Philosophy from the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. He pursued three Master's degrees, two in Buddhist Philosophy from the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka and the University of Kelaniya respectively, and another in Social Work from the National Institute of Social Work Development. Currently, he is pursuing his Doctoral Degree in Social Work from the University of Cyberjaya in Malaysia.