

Unskilled labour migration to the Republic of Korea: Passing through a cumbersome process to expected comfortability (with special reference to the Devinuwara secretariat division)

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Abstract

South Korea's transformation into an economic powerhouse has made it a key destination for global job seekers. In the Devinuwara coastal area of Sri Lanka's Southern province, youth from fishing communities are increasingly motivated to seek employment in Korea. This study, using library study and field study in three Grama Niladhari divisions, identifies their primary motivations: the harshness and low income of fishing, lack of social acceptance, and the visible economic success of peers who previously worked in Korea. However, pursuing this dream presents significant challenges. The foremost obstacle is learning the Korean language, which involves finding suitable institutions, affording fees, and managing study time alongside existing work. Even after passing the required exam, youth face prolonged and uncertain waiting periods before actually traveling abroad. To address these issues, government agencies and migration organizations must provide enhanced support. This includes offering clear information on expected timelines, streamlining visa processes, and providing financial literacy and emotional support services. It is the government's responsibility to facilitate a smoother and quicker migration pathway for these aspiring workers, thereby mitigating the current challenges and obstacles they face.

Keywords: - Challenges, Fishing communities, Korea, Migration, Youth.

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Introduction

Labor migration has become a cornerstone of the Sri Lankan economy, serving as a vital source of foreign exchange and a primary strategy for poverty alleviation among rural households (Siriwardhane, 2017). Among emerging destinations, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) has gained significant prominence due to its Employment Permit System (EPS). Introduced in 2004, the EPS was designed to address labour shortages in South Korea's "3-D" industries (Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult) while ensuring transparency and protecting the rights of foreign workers (World Bank, 2013).

South Korea has made significant economic progress in recent decades, transforming from a war-torn country to one of the world's major economies. As a result, the country has become a desirable destination for job seekers worldwide (World Bank, 2022). Many foreign nationals come to work in South Korea; because of the diverse expatriate population, the country's bustling cities, such as Seoul and Busan, which have become cultural melting pots (McKinsey & Company, 2010).

People migrating to South Korea for work from third-world countries is a compelling and multifaceted phenomenon that has gained increasing attention recently. Many people from third-world countries migrate to South Korea for better economic opportunities and higher living standards (Lim, 2008).

The labour migration of Sri Lankans to South Korea is an essential aspect of the region's international labour mobility. South Korea has emerged as a preferred destination for many Sri Lankan workers, providing opportunities for employment and economic advancement. This

phenomenon exemplifies the complex dynamics of labour migration, which involves a plethora of motivations, challenges, and implications for both countries affected. Economic factors are the primary motivators for Sri Lankan labour migration to South Korea (Ukwatta, 2010). Many Sri Lankans are drawn to South Korea's robust job market, which includes various industries such as manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and healthcare. Individuals from Sri Lanka are strongly encouraged to seek employment in South Korea because of the promise of higher wages and better living conditions (Wijayasiri, 2019).

Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Due to the current economic crisis, Sri Lankan youth are motivated to seek foreign employment. However, Sri Lankans seeking job opportunities in South Korea often encounter challenges and obstacles during their migration (Ekanayake, 2022). These challenges range from cultural and linguistic differences to legal and social issues. Such a background prompts the following research problem. “Why are the youth in coastal areas in the Southern province motivated to seek employment in Korea, and what are the problems they face in finding employment opportunities?” As such, this study aims to identify why Sri Lankan youth are motivated by foreign employment opportunities in Korea. Also, it aims to identify the problems they face when migrating to Korea for employment.

Literature Review

There are many theoretical perspectives on labour migration. The foundational economic perspective, exemplified by Harris & Todaro (1970), explains migration as an individual rational choice driven by wage differentials between regions. Building on the economic framework,

Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory broadens the scope to a global level, arguing that structural inequalities between core and peripheral nations create systemic push and pull factors for international labour flows. Moving beyond purely economic drivers, Stark (1991) introduces a socio-economic dimension by emphasising the role of family strategies, social networks, and remittances in migration decisions. Finally, Boswell (2003) incorporates a political lens, highlighting how factors like conflict, instability, and government policies are critical drivers of migration and asylum-seeking behaviour. Together, these theories illustrate labour migration as a complex phenomenon shaped by economic incentives, global structures, social ties, and political conditions.

Labour migration to South Korea has become a significant phenomenon in recent decades, driven by economic growth and the demand for foreign labour in various industries. Yoon (2013) discusses changes in South Korea's labour migration policies, focusing on shifting from unskilled to skilled labour migration. Kwon (2005) explores how South Korea's export-led growth strategy contributed to the demand for foreign labour. Migration for foreign employment is a complex process that involves various challenges and issues for individuals seeking job opportunities in foreign countries. Constant and Massey (2003) observed that Many migrants encounter difficulties obtaining the necessary visas and work permits to work in a foreign country legally. Berry (2006) observed Language Barriers faced by the Migrants. As he pointed out, language differences can hinder effective communication and social integration, challenging interaction with locals and accessing services.

South Korea's rapid industrialization and aging population have created a demand for low-skilled foreign labour (World Bank, 2022). The

Employment Permit System (EPS) is a government-to-government (G2G) recruitment framework established by the Republic of Korea in 2004. It was designed to allow Korean small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to legally hire foreign workers when they are unable to find local labor, this is the primary legal pathway for migrant workers from 16 Asian countries, including Sri Lanka (Kim & Park, 2023). However, competition is intense, with over 500,000 candidates applying annually for limited quotas (International Labour Organization, 2023). Sri Lanka's participation in the (EPS) has grown, yet workers face long waiting periods, high costs, and stringent language requirements (Wickramasekara, 2023). Research indicates that economic push factors (poverty, unemployment) and pull factors (higher wages, better working conditions) drive migration (Perera & Abeyratne, 2024).

However, no in-depth analysis has been made targeting youth in the Sri Lankan coastal area in the Southern province motivated to work in Korea and the problems they face in getting opportunities. Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap in the literature.

Methodology

Approach of the Research

This research was mainly based on qualitative research methodology. The qualitative method has provided ample opportunities to gather a descriptive account of the details regarding social behaviours while performing the thematic analysis of this study.

Data Collecting Techniques

Data was collected using two main approaches: a library study and a field study. Based on the library study, secondary sources such as World Bank

reports, research articles and books were used as secondary sources. A field study was conducted on Grama Niladhari divisions, namely, Devinuwara North, Devinuwara East, and Devinuwara West under the Divisional Secretariat of Devinuwara. In-depth interviews were conducted with 100 Individuals to get the required data. The sample was chosen under the purposive sampling method. The respondents were deliberately selected based on their interest in migrating to Korea, ensuring relevance to the study's objectives. A sample of 100 ensures diversity within the target group (e.g., different ages, education levels, family backgrounds) while keeping the study feasible. This study aims to identify why Sri Lankan youth are motivated to seek foreign employment, particularly in Korea. Also, it aims to identify problems they face when migrating to Korea for Job opportunities. Devinuwara was selected because it represents a region where fishing is the primary livelihood, and recent trends show increasing interest in foreign employment, particularly in Korea.

This study adopted the semi-structured interview method. The interview method of this research depended more on questions than observations. The questions were prepared with the idea of fulfilling the main objectives of this research. Questions were prepared before the interviews. Direct questions related to the main research topic were commonly posed to obtain information. Whenever necessary, probing questions were asked to clarify the main points further. Some information was received through observations. Probing questions were asked- on such occasions to clarify doubts regarding those points. Each interview duration was approximately 45 minutes. At the end of the interview, gaining a clear idea of the whole session was usually possible.

The following sample groups were chosen to participate in the interview process of this research.

Table 1

Interview sample

Group	Number of Individuals
Grama Niladhari	10
Elderly Citizens	40
Young Citizens	50
Total	100

Field Location (Devinuwara North, Devinuwara East, and Devinuwara West Grama Niladhari Divisions)

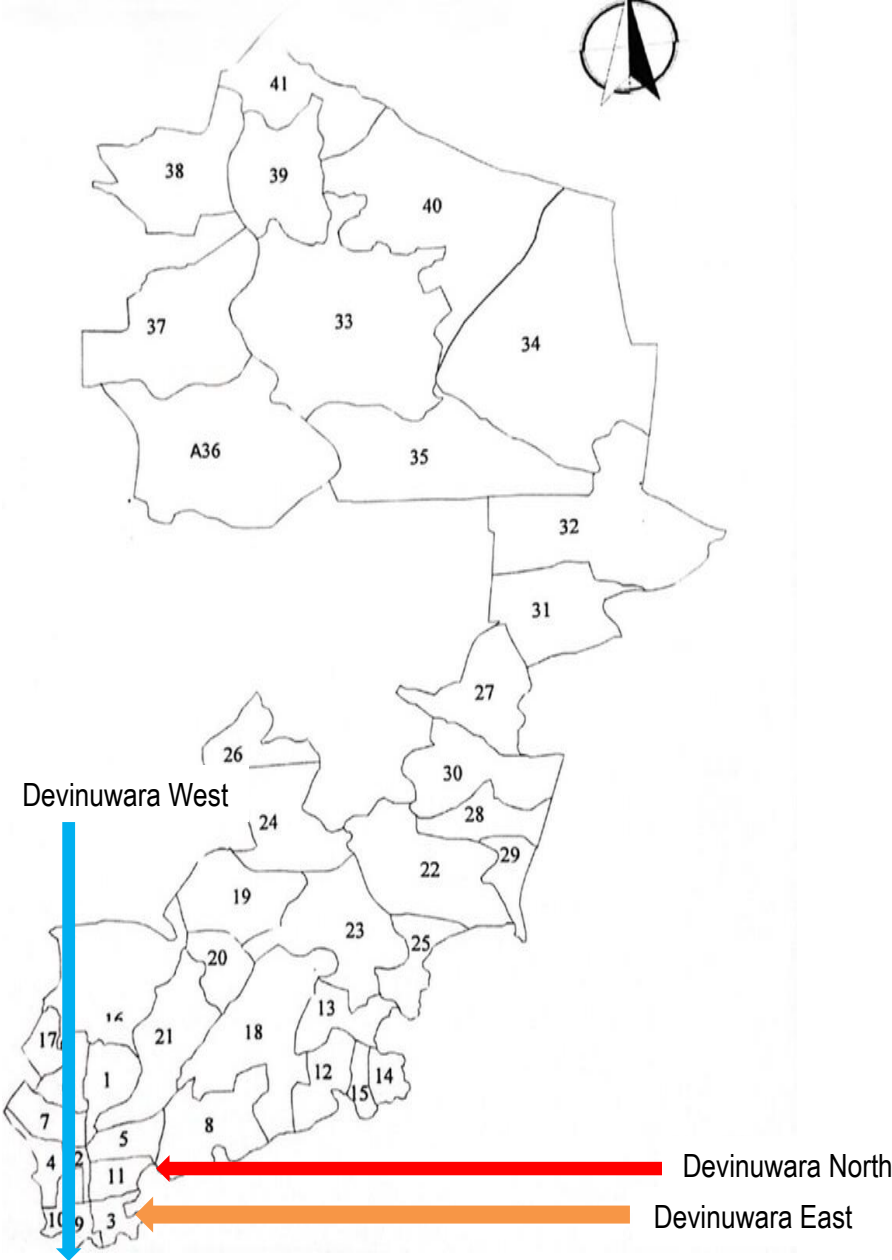


Figure 1: Devinuwara Divisional Secretariat office. (2021). *Map of G.N. Divisions in Devinuwara Divisional Secretariat* [Map]. Source: Devinuwara Divisional Secretariat office.

Data Analysis Method

The transcribed and coded data were subjected to thematic analysis, following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes and subthemes were derived from the coded data, and interpretations were drawn from these themes to address our research questions using thematic analysis. The available information was classified into the following categories.

- Information about the reasons Sri Lankan youth are motivated by foreign employment.
- Information about the problems the Sri Lankan youth community faces in going abroad for Korean job opportunities.

Results and Discussion

Following themes were developed subsequent to thematic analysis of collected data.

- The Compulsion of "Crisis-Driven" Aspirations
 - The Pursuit of "High-Value" Capital
 - Migration as a "Household Survival & Mobility" Strategy
 - Accessing a Structured Global Labor Market
 - The "Korea-Passer" as a Social Identity
 - The Social Network Effect and "Chain Migration"
 - Trading "Traditional Hardship" for "Industrial Order"
- Navigating the "Structural Bottleneck" of the EPS
 - The Linguistic Gatekeeper
 - Information Asymmetry and the "Expectation Gap"
 - The "Waiting Period" as a Socio-Economic Burden

The Compulsion of "Crisis-Driven" Aspirations

Young people from fishing families in Devinuwara, Sri Lanka, want to work in Korea for various reasons. This section captures the transition of migration from a "choice" to a "necessity" for the youth in rural Sri Lanka. It encompasses the internal and external pressures that make the "cumbersome" EPS process seem like the only viable path to a stable future.

The Pursuit of "High-Value" Capital

One of the primary motivators is the potential for a higher income in South Korea as opposed to the limited opportunities available in their home country. South Korea's developed economy offers higher-paying jobs and the ability to send money home. The developed economy of South Korea allows young Sri Lankans to secure employment with significantly higher wages and benefits than traditional fishing. These higher wages promise a more comfortable life for the workers and the ability to support their families back home. These young people are motivated to build better homes, provide a better education, and provide healthcare for their families.

Migration as a "Household Survival & Mobility" Strategy

The prospect of earning a higher income and providing financial support for their families motivates young people from fishing families in Sri Lanka to travel abroad for employment opportunities. Due to the unpredictability of the fishing industry, many fishing families in Sri Lanka face financial hardship. Fluctuating catches and market prices can result in inconsistent income, making meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare difficult. The young individuals in these families witness these struggles firsthand and desire to alleviate financial burden

their families face. For generations, fishing has been the primary source of income, and breaking free from this cycle can be difficult.

On the other hand, the allure of overseas employment in Korea presents a viable opportunity to diversify their family's income streams. Working abroad allows these youth to significantly contribute to their families' financial stability, reducing their reliance on the fishing industry. Aside from meeting basic needs, these young people want to improve their family's overall standard of living.

Accessing a Structured Global Labor Market

South Korea offers more stable and formal employment opportunities than the unpredictable fishing industry. Manufacturing, construction, and service jobs can provide job security and benefits. Through in depth interviews it was found that the fishing industry in Sri Lanka is notorious for its volatility. Fishermen are at the mercy of nature, with unpredictable catches and market prices making it a precarious livelihood. The stability of employment opportunities in Korea is a beacon of hope for the youth who grew up witnessing these fluctuations. The security of a regular pay cheque and predictable working conditions contrast sharply with the uncertainties of their traditional profession.

The "Korea-Passer" as a Social Identity

Working abroad, particularly in South Korea, can help them advance socially and professionally in their home country. It can be interpreted as a symbol of achievement and success. Pursuing overseas employment in Korea is a step toward a brighter future. It represents these young people's desire to break free from the socioeconomic constraints of their upbringing and chart a path to prosperity. It demonstrates their tenacity,

determination, and unwavering dedication to bettering their lives including those of their families

The Social Network Effect and "Chain Migration"

The firsthand experience of success stories within their community is one of the most compelling reasons for Sri Lankan youth coming from fishing families to seek jobs in Korea. It creates a sense of hope and possibility when friends or relatives return from Korea with stories of higher incomes and better living conditions. These personal testimonials demonstrate that the dream of working abroad can be realised, inspiring others to do the same. Migration to a foreign country can be frightening, but the presence of friends or relatives who have gone through the process before provides a sense of security and familiarity. Young people rely on their close friends and family's advice and support, knowing they will have someone to turn to for advice and assistance as they embark on their international journey. Friends and family members who have previously worked in Korea can offer valuable insights and practical advice to those considering a similar path. They discuss the application process, working conditions, cultural differences, and financial planning. This information enables aspiring young people to make more informed decisions and better prepare for their overseas employment experience. The emotional impact of leaving home and travelling to a foreign country cannot be overstated. Knowing that friends and family are available to provide emotional support, companionship, and a sense of belonging can help alleviate the feelings of isolation and homesickness frequently accompanying migration. This dynamic support network is an essential motivator for young Sri Lankans seeking work in Korea.

Trading "Traditional Hardship" for "Industrial Order"

Working in the fishing industry can be physically demanding and dangerous at times. While deeply embedded in Sri Lankan culture, the fishing industry frequently provides limited financial opportunities for its workforce. Seeing their parents' struggles, many young people yearn to avoid these constraints. The prospect of working in Korea offers a way to break free from the rules of the fishing industry and explore other avenues for economic advancement. Young people in Korea may seek alternative employment to avoid the harsh working conditions of the fishing industry.

Navigating the "Structural Bottleneck" of the EPS

Working in Korea has become a compelling aspiration for Sri Lankan fishing youth, promising economic advancement and personal development. However, amid the allure of overseas employment, these young people face various challenges and obstacles that they must overcome to realise their dreams. This section captures the multifaceted difficulties linguistic, financial, and psychological that transform the migration journey into a high-stakes endurance test 5.2.1. The Linguistic Gatekeeper.

The language barrier can be significant for Sri Lankan fishing youth seeking employment in Korea. Korean is the primary language of communication in many work environments in Korea, particularly in formal sectors. So, Sri Lankan Employees must use the Korean Language to communicate effectively with their colleagues, supervisors, and customers. Miscommunications or misunderstandings can have an impact on job performance and work relationships. As a result, Sri Lankan employees must become fluent in Korean.

However, Sri Lankan fishing youth who want to work in Korea and learn the Korean language may need help with several challenges, particularly when preparing to travel to Korea. Access to Korean language classes is limited in Sri Lanka, particularly in smaller towns and villages like Devinuwara. This can make it difficult for young fishermen to find appropriate language instruction. Even when language classes are offered, the quality of instruction can vary. Some classes need more experienced teachers or appropriate teaching materials, reducing the effectiveness of the learning experience. Enrolling in language courses can be costly, and fishing families may need help covering tuition costs, study materials, and transportation to the language school. Many fishing youths are likely to be already involved in fishing activities or other work, leaving them with little time for language classes. Balancing work, family obligations and language learning can be complex. Practice is essential for becoming fluent in a language. Some fishing youth may need help finding opportunities to practice speaking Korean, which can interfere with their language development.

Information Asymmetry and the "Expectation Gap"

A significant problem Sri Lankan fishing youth face when they go abroad for job opportunities is a need for more awareness and advice about preparing passports and other necessary documents. Young fishermen certainly need to know the documentation required for overseas employment, such as visas, work permits, and contracts. Because of this lack of knowledge, documents may be incomplete or incorrectly prepared, resulting in visa denials, delays, or legal issues. Poorly trained records frequently exhibit delayed departures, disrupting their planned employment timelines. These delays can be financially draining because they may incur additional costs while waiting for the documentation

issues to be resolved. Due to document-related issues, fishing families may face unexpected financial burdens. Fees for document processing, notarization, and legal assistance are included, which can strain their already limited resources. More prepared documents may be needed to avoid legal issues in the home and host countries. Fishing youth may face legal issues that require legal counsel to resolve. Fishing communities frequently need more support services or resources to assist young people with documentation. They may need access to reliable sources of information and advice to navigate the complexities of international travel and employment requirements. Access to accurate information about documentation requirements may be limited in fishing communities. Young people may need access to government agencies, legal experts, or reputable advisors who can provide the guidance required to prepare their documents properly.

The "Waiting Period" as a Socio-Economic Burden

Individuals from the fishing community or any other community, as well as aspiring migrant workers, may face significant delays in travelling abroad, even after taking the Korean language exam in Sri Lanka. Obtaining a visa to work in another country can be a time-consuming process. Background checks, document verification, and administrative procedures can all take months to complete. Some countries, such as South Korea, may impose annual quotas on the number of foreign workers admitted. When these quotas are filled, aspirant workers must wait until the next intake, which can result in significant delays. The selection process can be highly competitive in countries with a high demand for foreign labour, such as South Korea. Individuals who pass the Korean language exam may be hired after some time, resulting in lengthy wait times. Individuals who pass the language exam must frequently go

through recruitment agencies or brokers to secure job placements. Delays may occur if these organisations have no immediate job openings or if the matching process is lengthy. It can take time to prepare and process various documents, such as work contracts, medical examinations, and legal paperwork. Delays in any of these steps can cause departure to be postponed.

Conclusion

The Sri Lankan youth community has a penchant for foreign employment. This dream is frequently the result of a symbiotic relationship between economic, social, and personal factors. They will, however, face numerous challenges when travelling abroad. Governments, non-governmental organisations, and community organisations must collaborate to address these issues and provide accessible and affordable Korean language classes, online language learning courses, and mobile applications for fishing youth to continue improving their language skills, as well as education and support for fishing youth in the preparation of passports and other necessary documents. It is also critical for government agencies and organisations involved in labour migration to support and guide prospective migrant workers. This includes providing information on expected timelines, streamlining visa processing procedures, and providing financial literacy and emotional support services to assist individuals and their families in coping with the challenges of preparing to work abroad. Therefore, our country's authorities are responsible for allowing young people who wish to go abroad for Korean jobs as soon as possible and mitigating the challenges and obstacles.

Below recommendations can be given to overcome the challenges occurred when Pursuing Employment Opportunities in South Korea by

the youth of Sri Lanka.

- ✓ The Sri Lankan government, in partnership with Korean language institutes (e.g., King Sejong Institute), should offer free or subsidized Korean language courses (EPS-TOPIK focused) for prospective migrant workers. Strengthen the existing EPS-TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean) preparation programs to ensure workers achieve at least Level 2 or 3 before departure and promote apps (Duolingo, Memrise, Anki) and online platforms (Coursera, Udemy) for self-paced learning.

- ✓ The Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) should create a centralized, multilingual (Sinhala, Tamil, English) online portal with:
 - Step-by-step guides on EPS-TOPIK, job applications, and visa processes.
 - Updates on job openings, quotas, and policy changes.
 - Lists of approved recruitment agencies to avoid fraud.

- ✓ To reduce migration delays, Sri Lanka must:
 - Increase the availability & efficiency of EPS-TOPIK exam.
 - Digitize and streamline government/agency processes.
 - Negotiate for higher job quotas and faster approvals.
 - Optimize pre-departure medical and training procedures.
 - Improve transparency and applicant support systems.

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