

# POLICY BRIEF

## CLIMATE CHANGE and HUMAN MOBILITY in SRI LANKA

### Climate Impacts on Labour Migration

Developed by SLYCAN Trust

April 2022

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Research indicates a connection between climate change impacts and decision-making around labour mobility in Sri Lanka.
- The Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including Kuwait, are among the primary destinations of Sri Lankan labour migrants. This labour mobility can bring adaptation benefits but also have negative impacts, for example to health or social cohesion.
- A detailed understanding of the interconnections between climate change and labour migration is not yet formalized in Sri Lanka's institutional and policy landscape.
- In a survey conducted by SLYCAN Trust among labour migrants in Kuwait, 63% had experienced some kind of climate- or weather-related impact that contributed to their migration decision.
- To better support labour migrants, there is a need to develop a stronger evidence base, connect and integrate policy frameworks on this nexus, and provide capacity-building, for instance on financial literacy or vocational skills.
- Other recommendations include further mapping and analysis of migration patterns and decision-making, promoting economic diversification and resilient livelihoods, establishing communication and coordination processes between institutions, and providing further assistance and support for migrant households.

As a developing tropical island nation, Sri Lanka is vulnerable to adverse impacts of climate change. Rising temperatures, unreliable rainfall patterns, floods, storms, prolonged dry spells and droughts, pests and diseases, invasive species, human-wildlife conflict, and slow-onset processes affect communities across the island in different ways, pushing them to adapt or abandon their livelihoods.

Consequently, climate change also influences the patterns of human mobility in Sri Lanka and affects the movement of people between rural areas, urban areas, and across international borders. **Human mobility can be described as a function of aspirations situated within a given set of (perceived) opportunities and geographical differences.** The patterns of mobility are deeply interconnected with the broader socioeconomic environment and can be characterized by parameters such as duration, distance, direction, choice, motivation, demographic background, and socio-cultural aspects.

In the Sri Lankan context, there is scope for further studies on the **linkages between labour migration and climate change.** However, existing research, including a case study conducted by SLYCAN Trust, suggests that climate change plays a role as an additional push factor and catalyst of underlying vulnerabilities, influencing the decision of individuals or families to migrate for foreign employment.

**Citation:** SLYCAN Trust (2022). *Policy Brief: Climate Change and Human Mobility in Sri Lanka. Climate Impacts on Labour Migration.* Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change #6. Colombo, Sri Lanka: SLYCAN Trust.

# 1. LABOUR MIGRATION and FOREIGN EMPLOYMENT

Across the world, more than a hundred million people are working in a country that is not their birth country. In Sri Lanka, labour migration has greatly increased after economic reforms in 1978, leading to a **major migration stream of skilled and unskilled workers toward the Gulf Cooperation Council states** (the Sri Lanka-GCC economic migration corridor). From the 1980s to 2010s, women migrants outnumbered men, with the ratio shifting for the first time in favour of men in 2012, mostly due to policy changes and the Family Background Report circulars.

In the pre-COVID year of 2019, a total of **approximately 200,000 Sri Lankans departed for foreign employment, 60% of them men, 40% women**. The reasons for this out-migration include unemployment, under-employment, indebtedness, inflation, low income, and lack of access to resources. Sri Lanka's unemployment rate in 2019 was 4.8% overall, the highest percentage within at least a decade. It is higher for women (7.4%) and varies based on age, education level, and geographic area. Women also make up the majority of the country's economically inactive population, with almost 5.8 million women economically inactive (as opposed to 2 million men).

Economic needs or opportunities, whether actual or perceived, are one of the main incentives for migration, particularly for those who do not have sufficient opportunities at home or whose traditional livelihoods are increasingly impacted by weather- and climate-related factors. **The decision to migrate is usually made at the household level to offset a lack or loss of other income or repay loans for larger investments**, such as building a house. Registration costs can in some cases force prospective migrants to take additional loans, liquidate assets, or borrow funds, leading to pre-migration indebtedness.

However, in many cases, destination country sponsors pay the total cost of migration plus an upfront incentive to migrant workers, employing them on short-term contracts of usually 24 months.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been conducted by SLYCAN Trust with the invaluable support and cooperation of the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Kuwait. We would like to especially thank Mr. Mohammad Jauhar, the Ambassador, and Ms. Kethma Rajapaksha Yapa, the Counsellor of the Sri Lankan Embassy in Kuwait, as well as the thematic experts and researchers of SLYCAN Trust and external experts who generously contributed their knowledge and expertise to review and validate the findings.

In the **case study conducted by SLYCAN Trust in Kuwait**, some migrant workers reported issues with their migration agents, such as long waiting times, complaints being ignored, or misleading information provided about the workplace. Despite existing regulations, there are still those who choose unregistered options to engage in migrant work, for example by leaving Sri Lanka on a tourist visa when official working visas were not granted due to medical conditions.

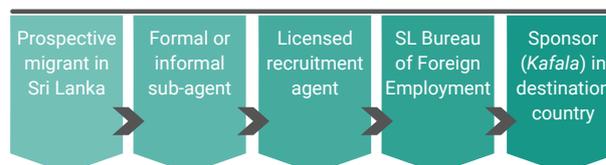


Fig. 1: The labour migration process from Sri Lanka to the destination country.

In addition, many migrants were unable to return at the planned time due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions. However, overall, most migrants going through the official channels reported a positive experience with the migration agency process, with several stating that they received training from the Bureau of Foreign Employment that helped them in their destination countries.

## 1.1. The ROLE of REMITTANCES

**Labour migration through safe and regular channels can be beneficial to both countries—origin and destination—by creating employment opportunities for the former and filling key labour market shortages in the latter.** When it is facilitated well, labour migration can alleviate unemployment and generate a substantial inflow of remittances. In pre-COVID 2019, remittances constituted more than 40% of Sri Lanka’s overall export earnings, with one in every fourteen households receiving remittances from a family member working abroad. However, it has been observed that more training and information about the workplace, contract, and Kuwait labour law should be provided to migrant worker to help safeguard their rights.

Remittances can provide an additional income source for poor households, act as a safety net against climate-related losses and damages, and can connect to social protection or remittance-linked insurance schemes. They can strengthen household adaptation through economic diversification and render entire communities more resilient to covariate shocks and systemic impacts. According to research studies, there is a **positive link between economic growth and remittances in both directions**, with higher economic growth

increasing remittances and higher remittances increasing economic growth.

Beyond money, **foreign employment can also facilitate a transfer of knowledge and experiences, capacity-building, skill development, cross-cultural exchange, establishment of networks, access to foreign markets, and exposure.** However, labour migration often has negative aspects as well and can seriously affect the health and wellbeing of both migrants and their families staying behind. Such issues are often connected to asymmetric power relations between migrants and citizens in destination countries, information gaps on salary levels, working hours, and employment modalities, abusive employers, and sickness.



### COVID-19 and SRI LANKAN LABOUR MIGRATION

**The COVID-19 pandemic has affected migrant workers** and particularly cross-border mobility patterns since 2020, mainly in the following four ways:

- Restricting the mobility of migrant workers and thereby preventing them from returning to Sri Lanka or seeking foreign employment;
- Affecting livelihoods and income of migrant workers, for example in the form of pay cuts (particularly in the first months of the pandemic), termination of employment, and loss of savings;
- Exacerbating vulnerabilities of migrants due to living and sanitary conditions, limited access to healthcare, and lack of resources, exposing them to greater danger of infection and sickness;
- Impacting the physical and/or mental health of migrant workers, either due to infection or pandemic-related restrictions (such as stay-at-home orders and social distancing).

**Migrant workers can be more vulnerable and at-risk in their host countries due to their status as non-natives, dependency on work visa and sponsors, and often limited language skills.** With the COVID-19 pandemic, many Sri Lankan migrant workers also found themselves stranded in their destination countries for various periods of time, unable to return because of travel restrictions, reduced number of flights, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient resources. Therefore, COVID-19 adds an additional dimension to “safe migration” that needs to be addressed in policies and actions to protect migrants from the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic.

## 1.2. The ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Sri Lanka has a **robust institutional, legal, and policy framework to facilitate labour migration**. The institutional framework for labour migration in Sri Lanka is centred around the Foreign Ministry, the State Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Market Diversification, and the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, the regulatory authority for the country's foreign employment industry.

Other key entities include the **Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Agency and the Association of Licensed Foreign Employment Agencies** on the recruitment side, as well as inter-ministerial coordination bodies such as the National Border Management Committee, the National Advisory Committee on Labour Migration, the National Steering Committee on Return and Re-integration for Labour Migrants, the National Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force, the National Coordination Committee on Readmission, and the Programme Advisory Committee on Safe Labour Migration.

However, **an understanding of the interconnections between climate change and migration flows is not yet formalized in the institutional structure or policy landscape of Sri Lanka**. To connect the separate institutional structures and processes, it would be important to collect data, enhance the evidence base, and strengthen policy integration between climate change and labour migration governance and planning.

**Table: Analysis of relevant policies & laws in Sri Lanka**

Provisions relevant to climate change  and/or mobility 

 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) 	2021 2016	Acknowledges human mobility in the context of climate change and commits to establishing a national WIM mechanism under L&D NDCs. Addresses climate change as an underlying migration driver through adaptation, resilience-building, and risk reduction in multiple sectors.
 Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour 	2019	National policy framework; includes commitment to provide incentives to promote labour migration, such as tax exemptions for remittances, a special loan scheme, a contributory pension scheme, and stronger legal provisions to obtain compensation for workplace accidents taking place abroad.
 National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change Impacts in Sri Lanka 2016-2025 (NAP) 	2019	Climate-induced displacement from sudden- and slow-onset disasters is listed as an impact in the human settlements and infrastructure sector. Addresses climate change as an underlying migration driver through adaptation, resilience-building, and risk reduction in multiple sectors.
 Sub-Policy and National Action Plan on Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers 	2015	Complements the National Labour Migration Policy through five strategies; no mention of or provisions related to climate change impacts.
 Family Background Report Circulars 	2013	Aims to reduce adverse social impacts due to breakdown of family cohesion and children left behind by discouraging female migration; no provisions related to climate change.
 Sri Lanka National Migration Health Policy 	2013	Addresses physical and mental health needs of out- and inbound migrants as well as their family members; lists "natural or human-made disasters" as a driver of migration for Sri Lanka, but no direct reference to climate change.
 National Climate Change Policy of Sri Lanka 	2012	Commits to developing and strengthening an inter-institutional mechanisms for coordination collaboration, and monitoring for effective implementation of activities related to climate change at all levels as well as enhance legal and regulatory mechanisms.
 National Labour Migration Policy for Sri Lanka 	2008	Does not mention or address connections between climate change and migration
 Colombo Process 	2003	Provides a non-binding, informal environment for labour migration from member countries, including Sri Lanka; no specific focus on climate change.
 Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment Act No. 21 of 1985 	1985	Provides a legislative framework to regulate foreign employment of Sri Lankans under authority of Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, which has instituted measures to promote ethical recruitment, handle grievances, and facilitate repatriation procedures; no mention of climate change.

## 2. CASE STUDY: SRI LANKAN LABOUR MIGRANTS in KUWAIT



Kuwait is a Middle Eastern country and member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Sri Lanka-GCC economic migration corridor channels a steady circulation of workers from Sri Lanka to the Gulf states and back, including to Kuwait, which sees a large influx of foreign nationals, to the extent that only around 30% of its population are Kuwaiti nationals. The country is a **major destination for Sri Lankan labour migration** and has consistently been among the top four countries receiving Sri Lankans.

In 2019, more than a fifth (21%) of all Sri Lankan labour migrants went to Kuwait to work as housemaids (66%) or unskilled labourers (8%). Contrary to the overall gender ratio, the vast majority of departures to Kuwait are women (70%), making it the number one destination for female migrant workers from Sri Lanka.

Many of these migrants are classified as **female migrant domestic workers (FMDWs)** who come to work in private houses instead of for companies, performing tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, or supporting the elderly. FMDWs are typically aged between 35-45 years and educated to 6th to 10th grade. At the time of departure, most of these migrants are unemployed (70%) and married (80%). Often, migrants move back and forth between Sri Lanka and their destination countries several times, spending up to two decades of their adult life (mid-20s to 40s/50s) as circular migrants.

### 2.1. SURVEY RESULTS

The data presented in this **case study is based on interviews with Sri Lankan migrant workers in Kuwait**. 42 questionnaires were filled by migrant workers through structured interviews and another 15 in-depth interviews were carried out remotely with migrant workers in Kuwait trying to return to Sri Lanka. **All 57 interviews took place between June 2020 and July 2021**.

#### CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

To support the literature review and policy analysis conducted by SLYCAN Trust, **empirical data was collected in collaboration with the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Kuwait** to develop a case study.

**57 migrant workers currently in Kuwait were interviewed with a structured questionnaire** about their family and economic background, including key pre-migration household characteristics, their migration history, and the existence of any weather- or climate-related impacts to their livelihoods and household income in Sri Lanka. The survey also evaluated whether the migrant workers were interested in receiving training and skill development to diversify their livelihood upon returning to Sri Lanka.



## 2.1.1. BACKGROUND and ECONOMIC CONTEXT

28% of the surveyed migrants come from Anuradhapura (15.7%) and Kurunegala (12.3%) district, most of the others from Gampaha, Colombo, Puttalam, Kandy, Badulla, Kegalle, Kalutara, and Trincomalee (together 51.6%). There are smaller groups from Rathnapura, Matale, Hambantota, and Nuwara Eliya (together 14%), the rest comes from districts such as Batticaloa, Polonnaruwa, or Galle. Approximately one quarter of prospective migrants were unemployed in Sri Lanka (23%), another quarter engaged in small-scale agriculture (25%). A third of migrants worked as daily wage earners, in factories, or in estates (33%), the remainder was either self-employed (12%) or working in a shop or other business (7%).

The occupation of the surveyed migrants in Kuwait corresponds to the general statistics mentioned above, with the vast majority (74%) employed as housemaids or in other domestic roles (such as cleaning, cooking, or babysitting). Apart from these FMDWs, the next biggest group is working as drivers (14%), with only a handful active as labourers (5%) or other occupations such as translator or public administration worker (7%).

The surveyed migrants stated economic difficulties as the key reason for their migration to Kuwait, with a perception of greater opportunities and income-earning potential as compared to Sri Lanka. Since the average household income of interviewed migrants in Sri Lanka is only around LKR 19,000/month, and in many cases significantly less, they are unable to meet expenses for household maintenance and their children's education (for example paying for tuition classes), let alone larger investments such as house repairs or building a house. Therefore, migrants plan to stay for a certain amount of time in the host country with the goal of saving money, usually for a house (33%), to repay loans, or to afford recurring expenses such as education or medical bills.

However, the success of this strategy seems mixed, with only one third of migrants reporting that they completely or partially fulfilled their objectives and

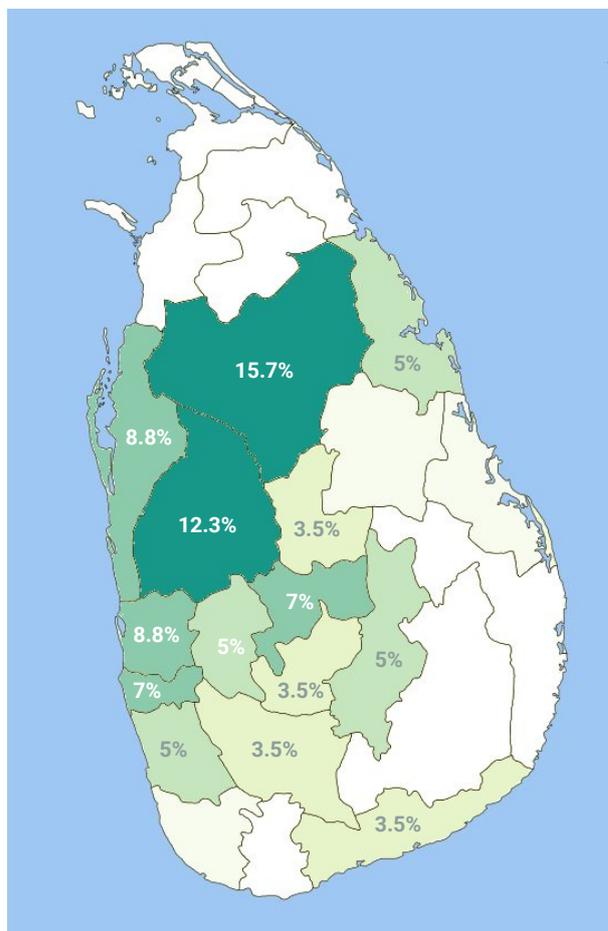


Fig. 2: Distribution of origin districts of surveyed migrants

were able to earn the amount of money they had hoped for. In several interviews, issues with financial literacy and management of personal finance were brought up as well, with migrants indicating that they had no bank accounts and were not well equipped to create one or engage with banks due to lack of awareness or knowledge on setting up accounts in Kuwait. Many reported that they had been unable to accumulate savings, or had encountered issues with the improper use of remittances sent to family members.

Many of the interviewed migrant workers mentioned their desire to return to Sri Lanka and generate an income there. Of a sub-group that was asked if they would be interested in receiving vocational training for this purpose, more than two thirds (69%) responded positively, with another 9% being generally interested, but considering themselves unable to participate due to age or sickness. Agriculture and food-related training was named by the majority (64%), with a smaller group interested in training for tailoring/sewing (18%), driving (9%), or setting up a small business (9%).

## 2.1.2. SOCIAL IMPACTS

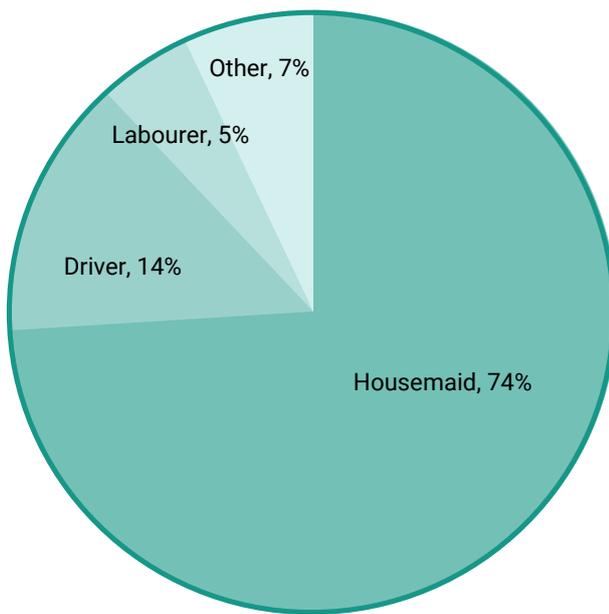


Fig. 3: Occupation in destination country

From the interviews with migrant workers in Kuwait, it is clear that the long-distance migration can **severely affect family cohesion and marital relations**. Many migrants report problems within the marriage, with the husband leaving, changing his behaviour in significant ways, or misusing remittances (21%). In other cases, children have developed issues such as depression or were left in vulnerable situations with only elderly caregivers.

In one case, two daughters (17 and 11 years) were left with their grandmother and found themselves on their own when the grandmother suffered a heart attack and died, with no possibility for the mother to return on short notice. Most of the interviewed migrants also explicitly stated **spending more time with their children as a priority for themselves when returning to Sri Lanka**.

## 2.1.3. CLIMATE CHANGE and LABOUR MIGRATION

So far, there is no representative country-wide study of climate impacts on human mobility and household decision-making in Sri Lanka. However, based on local case studies and input from key experts and stakeholder agencies, it is clear that **both sudden- and slow-onset events and processes related to climate change impact lives and livelihoods, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, and alter aspiration/opportunity frameworks and perceptions related to migration**.

Out of the surveyed migrants, only 37% reported no weather- or climate-related impacts to their livelihoods in Sri Lanka. 46% have been affected by heavy rain, 28% by droughts or water scarcity, 26% by floods, and another 16% by other hazards such as landslides, high temperatures, or agricultural salinity. Around **a third of migrants even reported two to four different hazards** that reduced their main income source or causing other adverse impacts, for example the destruction of houses or other property.

Table: Climate impacts on livelihoods

Hazard	Percent	Impacts
Heavy rain	46%	Rainy days prevent work (for example brick cutting, estate work, manual work, daily labour, small businesses) and interrupt crop cultivation; heavy rains can destroy cultivation and lead to losses and yield reduction; in some cases, heavy rains have destroyed or damaged houses.
Drought	28%	Drought can lead to reduction of crop yields, destruction of fields, and loss of entire harvests, resulting in economic consequences such as loss of income or inability to repay loans.
Flood	26%	Floods damage or destroy cultivation, houses, and other property; they can also affect shrimp farming.
Other	16%	Other impacts mentioned by the respondents include landslides, high temperatures, salinity intrusion into agricultural lands, and sea level rise.

*While the sample size of this case study is too small to draw representative conclusions, these findings strongly suggest that climate change affects livelihoods and contributes to decision-making on migrating abroad.*

## 2.2. NEEDS and RECOMMENDATIONS

As outlined above, **key issues and needs identified for Sri Lankan migrant workers in Kuwait** include the following along the timeline of the migration and return process:

**Table: Issues and needs along the migration timeline**

Before migration	During migration	After return to Sri Lanka
Livelihood impacts from climate-related events	Inability to generate sufficient income or reliably safe money	Need for vocational training and livelihood development
Inability to repay loans taken for medical expenses, house construction, education etc.	Need for guidance and support in managing personal finances and sending remittances	Need for additional training on financial inclusion and management of finances
Lack of livelihood skills and suitable opportunities for employment	Issues with family cohesion and wellbeing of children left behind	Need for psychosocial support for returning migrant workers, particularly during COVID-19
Lack of seed funding to invest in livelihoods	Adverse acute or chronic health conditions	Strengthening social protection of migrants and their families
Lack of financial safety nets in case of unexpected expenses (i.e. medical bills)	Limited awareness of and access to local banking and financial services	Creating awareness of climate impacts and adaptation actions to address them
Need to receive skills training (this is an official requirement from the Foreign Employment Bureau, but many workers say that they did not receive it)	Limited access to healthcare in host country; need for stronger safety nets (such as social protection or insurance) in case of sickness or injury	Strengthening public-private partnerships to support returning migrant workers in finding employment; providing start-up support for SMEs
	Difficulties in returning home during COVID-19	Need to enhance financial literacy and capacities to manage finances and investments on arrival

To better address these issues, barriers, needs, and challenges, the research has identified **several recommendations based on the literature review and input from the interviewed migrant workers** as well as the Sri Lankan Embassy in Kuwait.

### Data:

- Strengthening the evidence base on how climate change impacts influence labour migration decisions on the household level and which districts in Sri Lanka are most affected by this.
- Identifying and ranking key climate-related decision-making factors when it comes to labour migration.
- Assessing and prioritizing adaptation options in areas with high out-migration and providing this information to those involved in climate-related policy and implementation processes.



- Mapping the links between climate change impacts, vulnerable populations, and labour markets to enable better planning and prioritization.
- Evaluating the role of labour migration policy in Sri Lanka for climate change adaptation and assessing the links between interventions and funding streams for both areas.
- Identifying and quantifying the effects of labour migration on household adaptation and resilience, including both direct (remittances) and indirect benefits (such as livelihood diversification, access to services from external stakeholders, transfer of knowledge and skills, development of networks, or changes in household composition).

#### Capacity and support:

- Strengthening financial inclusion and literacy, especially in districts with large out-migration; offering trainings and capacity-building on setting up bank accounts and managing finances on the individual and household level, both in Sri Lanka and the destination country.
- Providing vocational training opportunities to migrant workers returning to Sri Lanka that allow them to take up climate-resilient and sustainable livelihoods.
- Promoting economic diversification and livelihood resilience to prevent “forced” or illegal migration, for example of those with underlying chronic illnesses or sole caretakers.



- Providing assistance and support for construction of houses and sustainable, climate-resilient living arrangements.
- Identifying key needs to be addressed in the migration process through licensed foreign employment agencies, including slow processing times, delays, and gaps in the provision of information.
- Enhancing support networks both in destination countries and in Sri Lanka, especially for migrant workers and children left behind.

#### Coordination:

- Identifying options for the integration of climate change adaptation into policies and actions related to labour migration, and vice versa.
- Setting up a communication and coordination process for identified entities to enhance actions and understanding of interlinkages between climate change and labour migration.
- Addressing the nexus of climate change and labour migration through a focused policy or set of guidelines for relevant institutions.

### GENDER DIMENSIONS of SRI LANKAN LABOUR MIGRATION

The **National Labour Migration Policy of Sri Lanka** is **gender-sensitive** and contains a provision that the state “shall apply gender-sensitive criteria in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes affecting migrant workers and the composition of bodies tasked for the welfare and empowerment of migrant workers.”

During the 1980s until the early 2000s, most temporary international labour migrants from Sri Lanka were women. However, the ratio of men to women began to shift in subsequent years and has now resulted in a larger number of men migrating abroad, mostly due to the **Family Background Report (FBR) requirements introduced in 2013**.

The Family Background Report rendered it more difficult for women to migrate, requiring the consent of their husband or “guardian” as well as proof of childcare arrangements in their absence. While these provisions highlight family cohesion and the wellbeing of female migrants, they also exemplify a **problematic gender bias**, as none of these requirements are applied for male migrants.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS and OUTLOOK

Findings from the case study indicate a **connection between climate change and Sri Lankan labour migration**, with climate-related impacts playing a significant role in decision-making processes and perceived opportunity structures. Furthermore, the analysis of the enabling environment in Sri Lanka points to a need for stronger integration of policy frameworks covering the thematic areas of climate change adaptation and foreign employment.

**Labour migration can function as a cross-regional adaptation strategy** that increases the resilience of households and communities, but it can also be a maladaptive measure borne out of desperation and a (perceived) lack of alternatives. The enabling environment (policies, laws, institutions, migration governance, and social protection systems, but also sociocultural attitudes, existing networks and connections, knowledge, and gender roles) plays a key role in determining the success or failure of labour migration for adaptation and resilience.

It is important that **further research is conducted to enhance the evidence base and understanding of positive and negative interconnections**, including challenges, barriers, issues, and risks, but also potential co-benefits and synergies. By enhancing data, capacity, support, and coordination, policies and actions could be strengthened to better facilitate climate change adaptation hand in hand with safe migration and foreign employment, allowing labour migrants to fulfill their objectives and build resilient and sustainable livelihoods.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on the **thematic area of human mobility in the context of climate change** and how to engage with the related work of SLYCAN Trust, please contact us by email under [dennis@slycantrust.org](mailto:dennis@slycantrust.org) or visit our [homepage](#) and the [Adaptation & Resilience Knowledge Hub](#).

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