

Master's thesis

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# Serial, Circular, and Stepwise Sri Lankan Labour Migrant Patterns in Gulf Countries

Master's thesis in Globalisation and Sustainable Development

Supervisor: Marko Valenta

April 2021



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## **Abstract**

Some of the world's largest share of temporary migrant workers originate from Asian countries. In contrast, GCC countries are one of the largest receivers of temporary workers in the world. Due to the temporary nature of employment prospects in GCC countries, migrants are continuously engaged in various itinerary patterns. Circular, serial, and stepwise migrant itinerary patterns are such variations. This thesis explores circular, serial and stepwise migration trajectories of Sri Lankan labour migrants in the GCC countries. A variety of migrant motivations, goals, migrant strategies and drivers are identified in the study.

I have employed semi-structured interviews as the primary technique of my data collection method. I gathered data from Sri Lankan labour migrants who had worked in multiple locations in GCC countries, migrants who moved back and forth to Sri Lanka from a particular GCC country and migrants who have moved out of GCC (other than the home country). My interviewees represented skilled and semi-skilled categories. I have also employed other researches and government sources to support and strengthen my theoretical subjective findings.

Several theoretical models facilitated to construct my study, such as the push-pull theory and NELM theory supplemented with other relevant theories. These theories helped me to identify migrant drivers, migrant decision-making process in each migrant trajectory and the intrinsic and extrinsic forces needed to create recurrent migrant patterns. Despite of the temporary migration worker permits, I understood that Sri Lankan labour migrants engaged in multi migrations within and out of the region. This main characteristic influenced me to study about the different types of patterns rather than one migration journey. Therefore, I explored the re-migration journeys of each migrant and categorised in to circular, serial and stepwise migration concepts. In addition, I have explored individual and collective migrant aspirations, short-term or long-term goals, and migrant capital the results in sum produced the resultant of circular, serial and stepwise migrations or similar combination of migrant itinerary patterns.

Dissimilar social and human capital influenced migrant trajectories and several mobility patterns. My findings demonstrated that circular and serial migration patterns were more frequent than stepwise migrations due to the temporary nature of employment in GCC. A

variety of migrant trajectories were chiefly influenced depending on the individual migrant capital, their aspirations and family and personal goals. A great deal of variation in migration drivers, forces and motives related to individual, and household level migration, eventually represented by economic transnationalism. Furthermore, these migrant strategies helped me to distinguish individual circular, serial, or stepwise migration mobility patterns.

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## Abbreviations

EMN	European Migration Network
FBR	Family Background Report
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration and Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International non-governmental organization
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LMB	Labour Migration Branch
NELM	New Economics of Labour Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSD	Norwegian Centre for Research Data
NZ	New Zealand
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
POEA	The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
SL	Sri Lanka
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
ST	Structuralist Theory
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN ESCWA	The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia
UNEC	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*More sustained attention to migration journeys could continue to counter the limitations of traditional representations of migration flows by revealing trajectories that are non-linear, circular, seasonal, multi-directional, repetitive and ambiguous. The study of journeys in which migration trajectories remain undetermined and uncertain allows us to think critically about the political, economic, social and personal consequences of non-arrival, arrival, and the spaces between 'successful' and 'failed' migration.*

(Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016, p. 250)

The pattern of population migration has fundamentally changed in the twenty-first century, raising hopes for many and adding to the frustrations and agonies of many others (Rahman, 2004). Demand-supply functions and push-pull forces of classical theories, among other factors, have contributed to some of the changes in migration patterns (Ahsan Ullah, 2013). While the demand for foreign labour continues to expand, labour migration flows have also become increasingly diverse and complex (International Labour Organization, 2003; L. McDowell, 2008). One defining feature is the sponsorship based (Kafala) migration system in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC) (Valenta, 2020). Providing temporary working opportunities to large numbers of labour migrants, the GCC member countries<sup>1</sup> have proven to be one of the most chosen working destinations for migrants from Southern and South-Eastern countries since the late 1970s (Castles et al., 2014). Among all alternative destination regions, the GCC countries have been consistently attracting the largest share of labour migrants from Sri Lanka. The GCC is an essential corridor for Sri Lankan labour migrants due to the alignment of demand and supply forces in the destination countries and Sri Lanka (Weeraratne, 2020).

In this thesis, I seek to explore the labour migration trajectories of Sri Lankans employed in GCC countries. As Mainwaring and Brigden (2016) suggest, migration journeys are both

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<sup>1</sup> The GCC countries are Oman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain.

ambiguous and clandestine, and the first step of the migration journey can be a continuation of a much longer life trajectory. With specific reference to Sri Lankan labour trajectories in this study, I seek to identify recurrent migration drivers and motivations that generate circular, stepwise and serial migration. Few studies have been carried out concerning circular, serial and stepwise migrant trajectories in South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka. Previous studies have also highlighted that it may be hard to track the trajectories of those migrants as they are circulating between different destinations throughout their migration life cycle (Ossman, 2004; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014).

Studying the migration experiences of Sri Lankan labour migrants, I also attempt to discover, distinguish and identify the grey areas of the above mentioned three migration concepts. The study is primarily based on 12 interviews of Sri Lankan labour migrants who have worked in GCC countries using the qualitative research approach. To explore the migration trajectories, I have distinguished between: (i) Migrants who have been employed in more than one GCC country, (ii) Migrants who have worked in a particular GCC country and moved back and forth to Sri Lanka, and (iii) Migrants who have worked in the GCC region and moved further (other than the home country).

Several scholars have shown keen interests in the following aspects of *Circular Migration*, *Stepwise International Migration* and *Serial Migration* (Ali, 2011; Chang, 2019; Collins, 2020; Paul, 2017; Silvey & Parreñas, 2019; Valenta, 2020). Building upon previous related research, I distinguish between circular, serial and stepwise migration trajectories to the Gulf. I explore the circumstances under which the migrants decided to leave their home country and choose to change their receiving country after that. Further, I discuss the main intentions and external forces to migration that perpetuate circular, serial and stepwise migrations. To do that, I have based my study on the following inter-related research questions,

1. What are the visible migration trajectories and patterns of Sri Lankan labour migrants?
2. What are the key drivers, forces and motives of migrating and for changing destinations?
3. What is the degree of intentionality and individuality of the migration decision?
4. How can we differentiate the various categories of mobility patterns through migrant strategies and trajectories?

I have used several theoretical approaches to interpret and propose my research findings. For instance, the Push-Pull migration model used to identify Sri Lankan labour migrants' motives and prospects. By applying the concepts of New Economics of Labour Migration theory, I intended to identify the reasons for migrant decision, expectations and forces that initiated and re-initiated migration. This theory helped me explain that often migration decisions are collective family decisions and seldom individual migration plans. Other migration theories, such as migration network theory, migration systems theory, and structuralist theory, have also been used. I have explained the theories in the theoretical chapter. I utilised those theories to identify how migrants are motivated to explore in different ways, such as using connections, expanding networks to make their way to the expected goal. Migrants are keen to experiment new forms and identify new opportunities to move at least one-step ahead in their goals.

## **1.1 Thesis Outline**

The thesis consists of nine chapters—the first chapter of the thesis aims to address the study's outline. The second chapter of the study presents a literature review and background of the study area in three sections. In the first section, I discuss international labour migration in macro framework. It consists sub sections of Asian labour migration patterns and European labour migration patterns. It is then followed up with Labour migration trends with specific reference to South Asians in GCC. To provide a more precise understanding, I give an outlook of how Sri Lankan migration is shaped, its current trends and migrant patterns.

Chapter three is the theory section which provides theorisation of international labour migration patterns. In the first half of the chapter, I discuss several theoretical approaches such as the push and pull model, NELM theory, and network theory etc. In the second section, I discuss the theoretical concepts of circular, serial and stepwise migration. Here, I intended to make relevance with each approach to real-life migratory situations and provide the base of the theories. The fourth chapter consists of the methodology of the thesis. It is the chapter where I explained how I have carried out my thesis with scientific understanding. Following this, the fifth chapter consists of circular migration patterns of Sri Lankan labour migrants, which is the first part of my empirical section where the research findings are put forward. The chapter further discourses circular migration and enhanced mobility using other research findings as well. Similarly, Chapter six discusses the conceptualisation of serial migration. This chapter discusses the empirical findings of serial labour migration patterns concerning Sri Lankan



labour migrants. Chapter seven discusses Sri Lankan stepwise migration labour trends, where I discuss the possibilities and what hinders achieving stepwise wise migration prospects. Overall, I compared and contrasted with other research findings for a clear understanding of Sri Lankan migration labour patterns. This conceptual framework aims to comprehensively understand migrant trajectories and why migrants create various patterns throughout their migration cycle using my primary and secondary data. Chapter eight concludes a summary of my overall empirical results and final thoughts.

## CHAPTER 2

### RELEVANT PREVIOUS RESEARCH

*The 'migration journey' has attracted increasing attention in migration studies – and not without reason. It has proven to be a fruitful analytical lens to debunk the simplistic notion that the outcome of migration solely depends on a momentous go/no-go decision in a country of origin. With the focus on the journey, migration scholars have become sensitive to the non-linearity of migration processes, the encounters between migrants and mobility regimes, the importance of serial decision-making and changing identities.*

(Schapendonk, Bolay, & Dahinden, 2020, p. 1)

#### 2.1 International Migration Framework

In this chapter, I outline international migration from a macro perspective. Under which, I discuss previously identified migration patterns in different regions using previous literature. This framework helps to understand the patterns of international migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and get an overview of Sri Lankan migrant patterns. Thereby I discuss the contextual framework of overall migration trends in Sri Lanka. The second part of this chapter sets to identify the circumstances for choosing frequent destinations and preferences of Sri Lankan migrants in general. In the third section, I demonstrate how I understand the central concepts of circular, serial and stepwise migration using relevant previous studies.

When assessing the current trends of international migration, a logical question arises: Has international migration become beyond control despite all the policies and regulations? As Castles, De Haas, and Miller (2019) argue, in the face of the apparent failure to curb immigration, the effectiveness of migration policies has been highly contested. One major factor could be due to the *globalisation of migration*, which is *the tendency for more and more countries to be crucially affected by migratory movements at the same time* (Castles et al., 2019, p. 10). Migrant experts also argue that current labour market demand, internal conflicts, insurgencies and income equalities due to economic and political situations in origin countries have resulted in further migration movements (ILO, 2017; Massey, 1988; Vezzoli, Villares-Varela, & De Haas, 2014; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014).

As we see, these reasons primarily affect the growth of economically active migrants. Recent ILO (2017) statistics state that 164 million are international labour migrants out of the estimated 258 million international migrants. From 1990 to 2019, the number of international migrants as a share of the total population increased in more developed and high-income countries. In contrast, the number in less developed regions also changed but very little, and the number of international migrations was declined in lower-income countries.<sup>2</sup> Further, the UN report on International Migration (2019) declares that in 2019, more than half of all international migrants worldwide live in Europe and Northern America, with roughly 82 million residing in Europe and nearly 59 million in Northern America. Needless to mention that most international migrants originate from developing countries. Statistical analysis reveals that migrants prefer to find opportunities in the West than creating opportunities in the home countries.

### **2.1.1 Asian Labour Migration Patterns**

Here I mainly look at South Asian and South-East Asian labour migration patterns. One key feature among both regions is most countries in the region are migrant-sending countries. Several countries significantly send and receive temporary labour through skills transfers within the cross borders in the region. Some Asian countries have government to government agreements to send and receive labour. For instance, Korea hires labour from selected countries in Asia, and Gulf employs labour from most Asian countries through the Kafala system, while Indonesia, Philippines are significant labour sending countries. Also, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia and Thailand import labour from many other Asian destinations as well (Kaur, 2018; Kim, 2018; Lian, 2019). Graziano (2014) argues that Asian labour migration patterns have grown out of the box and little complicated to identify specific migration trends and patterns. However, the Middle East and East Asia are well known for receiving countries. In contrast, South Asia and South-East Asia is known as labour sending destinations that reflect circular and serial migration patterns (Graziano, 2014). Castles (2009) points out the entire migration system built as a temporary labour migrant contract system. It indeed leads to a platform for repeated migrations, return migrations, circular and serial and many other types of migration patterns. Another feature is that female migration is evident within the region, considerably from Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and India (Graziano, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> UN report on International Migration 2019

According to Wickramasekara (2014), South-East migration has shifted into an intra-migration move, yet South Asian countries still tend to rely on Middle Eastern countries. Most South Asian countries send their labour to Middle Eastern countries based on temporary migrant labour. Due to the temporary labour, we can see a mixture of migration patterns circulating between the home country and the destination countries. Destination countries are primarily countries in the Gulf Region. Some scholar suggests that patterns of Asian migration differ from Europe and North America (Reza, Subramaniam, & Islam, 2019; Walmsley, Aguiar, & Ahmed, 2017). In general, Asian labour migration is diverse. A larger part of labour migrants are semi-skilled and lower-skilled migrants who move within the region, particularly to the Middle East, also movement among ASEAN and South East Asia to East Asia (Hugo, 2012).

### **2.1.2 European Labour Migration Patterns**

The free movement in Europe enables those who are EU citizens to move and work within the borders. Therefore, even though it is somewhat complicated to find the patterns, we can identify the labour migration patterns within Europe in three main categories. Short term, long term and seasonal migration trends. In these migration patterns, we can identify circular migration trends. As I understood, seasonal labour migrants can often be categorised as circular migrants. Studies have pointed out migrants who move within the European borders are often migrants from the East European countries to the West and Northern Europe (Engbersen, 2012; Engbersen, Leerkes, Grabowska-Lusinska, Snel, & Burgers, 2013; Favell, 2008). For instance, migrants from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria primarily work in western European countries. For instance, Polish migrants arrive to Norway to engage in the construction sectors (Friberg, 2013; Lafleur, Stanek, & Veira, 2017; Napierała & Trevena, 2010). In Europe, there is not much evidence given on serial and stepwise migrants. One reason can be due to free movement as EU migrants do not need to wait for years and years, step by step, to move to countries in their preference for work and live.

On the contrary, it is much more complex and complicated for other regions, predominantly Asian and African labour migrants. However, the free movement in ASEAN makes it somewhat similar to enjoy free cross-border movements for work, which is not the same for South Asian migrants. As we see, Most African and Asian migrants circulate within their own regions or to the Middle East as circular migrants. Many migrations move across the borders to find livelihood opportunities, and they derive from rural or average income families. Despite

different regional migration patterns, factors of supply and demand, individual decision to migrate, financial affordability, and external factors such as the recent pandemic certainly affect the continuation of migration patterns.

The nature of migrants' patterns in the Asian and EU context and the developed and developing gap in the region make migrants want to reach better places. Each occurrence of labour migration reflects migrants' hope to find a better solution from a variety of factors that they cannot find in the home country. In a larger extent, migrants leave to avoid push and pull factors that arise within socio-political issues and economic challenges. The reasons being, these factors bring challenges to their day today life, individual and family economy, and self-developments (Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018; Siriwardhane, De Silva, & Amaratunge, 2014). Therefore, migrants may want to move to a country where they can feel economically and socio-politically safe and develop other factors such as personal growth and self-esteem.

## **2.2 Labour migration trends with specific reference to South Asians in GCC**

Highly liquid economies and potential labour market opportunities have made GCC countries a hub for labour migrants from all over the world. Arab, Asian, and European migrants have converged their skills, cultural diversity, several religious and political identities to GCC. It has been highlighted that the foreign population percentage is higher than the local population. For instance, Qatar has outnumbered the labour workforce by over 90 per cent. Likewise, Oman and Saudi Arabia are similar instances (Thiollet, 2016). In the region, the labour is hired particularly from developing regions, about 15 million migrants out of which about 12 million comprise Asian migrants (De Bel-Air, 2014; Rajan, 2018). South Asians constitute an essential segment of this labour force (Jain & Oommen, 2016). The Gulf region also has a unique strategy for hiring temporary labour through a Kafala system since the early 1970s, just after the oil boom (Arnold & Shah, 1984).

According to the United Nations database of 2015, GCC has one of the most extensive migrant stocks worldwide, with around 25 million migrant workers who constitute about 60% of the region's total population.<sup>3</sup> Increased demand for the labour categories in the marketing field,

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<sup>3</sup> Calculation given by the authors based on source data by the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, International Migration Report 2015: Highlights (New York: United Nations 2016), (ST/ESA/SER.A/375), Annex pp. 28–32.

nurses, and domestic workers are primary factors for the speed of migration of South Asian nationals during the past few decades (Castles et al., 2019; Iketaki, 2018). Most of them are unskilled and semi-skilled migrants. The temporary contract workers include women and men deriving from South Asian and South-East Asian countries, notably Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. They work in various sectors – women mainly in domestic work and in factories, and men in construction, manufacturing, security, transport and other sectors (Shah, 2013). As Docquier (2014) points out, the possible opportunities to find employment compared to the home country and how migrants can use ‘receiving countries’ as a support system to explore more and find more opportunities in the receiving country are primary considerations.

The ILO estimates that in 2019 over 29.94 million foreigners (which equates to 52.9%) are employed across the Arab States, with over 80% of these roles undertaken by women, largely from Asia and Africa (UN DESA, 2019). There is also a smaller percentage of Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco etc. Nonetheless, the gender breakdown of migrants originating from various countries is markedly different. In Sri Lanka, women constitute the majority (65%) of migrant workers, while in the Philippines, they constitute about half. Sri Lanka had about 583,000 female workers in early 2000 employed in many different countries who were making a notable contribution to the country's foreign exchange earnings. In recent years, however, a remarkable shift was shown in the gender composition of registered migration flows where men represented a higher percentage (66%) compared to female (34%) migrant workers (ILO, 2017).

Other countries in the Asian subcontinent, such as India and Bangladesh, have fewer female domestic workers in the Gulf, while Pakistan and Bhutan have almost no female workers. In the case of Asian workers who have come to constitute an increasingly more significant proportion of all expatriate workers in the Gulf, women and men typically migrate without their spouse and children (Shah, 2004). The nature of work performed by migrant women goes a long way towards explaining why they tend to migrate as individuals rather than family. The countries contributing most to the proportion of migrant workers are from Southern Asian countries of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Rutledge, 2018).

Dito (2008) claims that the nature of labour in the GCC can be identified in two ways. The first factor is the massive demand for labour by large infrastructure projects and private sector

labour requirements. The second is the position adopted by the GCC related to the "integration" of migrant workers. The first is strongly affected by many factors, among which the rentier is seeking activities based on the *Kafala* sponsorship system through a contract (Shah, 2013). Generally, all foreign workers in the Gulf are hired under contract for a fixed period—usually about two years—through a person or an institution's sponsorship (*Kafala*). The second represents the official perception that migrant workers in the Gulf are there temporarily. Both factors contribute to maintaining the quality of work available and the number of migrant workers stable and constant. As we understand, the nature of current economic developments in this region has set the stage for increasing demand for various skills from migrant workers.

### **2.3 An Overview of Sri Lankan Migration Patterns**

In this section, I shall explore how Sri Lankan labour migrant patterns are naturally created. Meanwhile, I discuss why migrants make up their minds to move abroad and specifically to GCC countries, considering it as the ideal destination, instead of moving to other regions in the world. I will be focusing it through a macro and micro perspective by assessing the possibilities, opportunities, and convenience in selecting GCC. The decision to migrate is indeed an individual or a collective decision made for various complicated reasons. The foremost of which given are generally due to socio-economic priorities and employment possibilities. The other aims of migration are improving quality of life and fewer satisfaction levels within the country (Weeraratne, 2020).

Sri Lanka is considered to be a significant emigration friendly country (Hugo & Dissanayake, 2017). Although there have been many forms of migration in Sri Lanka, foreign employment is one of the primary reasons for migration (Sriskandarajah, 2002). Meanwhile, Tamil minorities' settlement and migration to some of the South-East Asian countries occurred since the early colonial period due to Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic conflict. The internal political turmoil in the country has intensified overseas labour migration in the late 1970s to OECD and GCC countries (Jain & Oommen, 2016). Other forms of migration include refugee migration, migration for higher education, tourism, and irregular migration. In addition, permanent settlement migration, employment migration, irregular/ clandestine migration, student migration and tourism are other examples of migration for Sri Lankans (Lueth & Ruiz-Arranz, 2007).

The two decades following 1972 showed a definite advancement in the labour migration from Sri Lanka (Shah, 2006). In the middle of 1973, the oil-exporting OPEC countries gained huge profits from the oil price boom. The resultant was economic development in these countries, influencing a tremendous impact on the labour market by turning these countries into a virtual open market for migrant labour (Menaka, 2015). The oil boom opened up the job market for many Asian, Arabian and European workers. It was also a prospect for labour exporting countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Philippines and India to supply this newfound demand in the expanding Middle Eastern labour market. According to the Ministry of Plan Implementation's statistics, in 1979, 25,875 persons left Sri Lanka for employment abroad (Ruhunage, 2006). This increase in out-migration from Sri Lanka coupled with the second oil boom in 1979 was conducive to developing constructive domestic policies such as the relaxation of travel and exchange rate restrictions in 1977/78 (Jayawardhana & Jaythilaka, 2009). The below chart illustrates recent statistics of foreign work departures to the Middle East region.

Category	2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>1. Middle Eastern Countries</b>										
<b>Males (Total)</b>	131,805	100	163,404	100	175,147	100	156,508	100	140,305	100
Saudi Arabia	38,359	29	39,467	24	41,951	24	44,544	29	37,109	26
Kuwait	12,547	9	13,984	9	15,844	9	14,305	9	13,074	9
U.A.E.	24,098	18	29,311	18	31,250	18	28,940	18	26,932	19
Qatar	50,050	38	72,861	45	78,351	45	60,511	39	55,018	39
Other	6,751	5	7,781	5	7,751	4	8,208	5	8,172	6
<b>Females (Total)</b>	132,512	100	112,701	100	105,697	100	86,572	100	77,603	100
Saudi Arabia	59,633	45	41,420	37	38,529	36	30,350	35	26,280	34
Kuwait	31,682	24	28,756	26	27,708	26	24,168	28	19,341	25
U.A.E.	14,136	11	19,191	17	19,097	18	14,726	17	13,192	17
Qatar	7,428	6	7,863	7	6,271	6	4,628	5	4,509	6
Other	19,633	15	15,471	14	14,000	13	12,700	15	14,281	18
<b>Total (M/East)</b>	264,317	100	276,105	100	280,844	100	243,080	100	217,908	100

**Figure 1:** Immigration of Male and Female departures to GCC countries from 2012 – 2016, Source – SLFBE (2017)



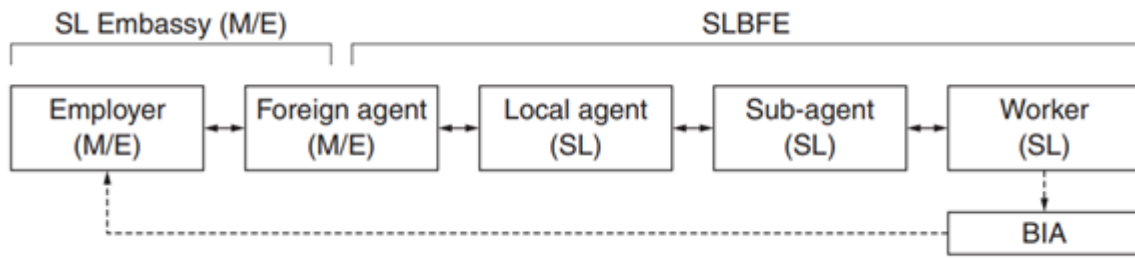
The Sri Lankan economy relies on foreign employment to a greater extent, especially on the unskilled labour workforce in the Middle East. During the past few years, foreign work has become the second-largest source of foreign exchange in the Sri Lankan economy. Since formal employment migration commenced in 1970, the Sri Lankan economy has generated substantial remittance inflows while relieving pressure on youth unemployment by providing employment abroad (Chaloff & Hervé, 2020).

As shown in figure 1, the annual report of SLBFE shows the Middle East as the most chosen destination for foreign employment. Amongst, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are well-known for Sri Lankan male migration, while female migration ranks higher in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Overall, as we can see, Saudi Arabia has a significant male and female migration compared to the rest of the destinations. However, Kuwait, Qatar and UAE respectively stand as other major receiving countries in the region.

During the year 2016, the worker's remittances accounted for a sum of Rs. Million 1,091,972 represented approximately 8.2% of the country's GDP (SLBFE, 2017). Foreign employment has also been significant in terms of skills transfer, investment, and white-collar jobs. This is in addition to contributing to overcome the problems of balance of payment, poverty and unemployment. As of 2017, the unskilled and housemaid categories account for around 55 per cent of total migrations. Only 3 per cent of worker departures were under the professional category, and 3.4 per cent of worker departures were under the middle-level category (SLBFE, 2017). Overall, most of the professional level Sri Lankan workforce migrated to Qatar, whilst most housemaid level job seekers moved to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (SLBFE, 2017). These numbers explain the government's rationale for promoting their foreign employment of Sri Lankans at the macro level. They explain why people intend to find work abroad to add comfort and upgrade the existing lifestyle in their surroundings at a micro-level.

Several parties are involved in connecting foreign employers in the Middle East with potential migrant workers in Sri Lanka. Who gets involved depends on the migrant's choice of channels, which usually include state agencies such as SLBFE, licensed recruitment agencies, private individuals and unlicensed agencies. For example, if a licensed agency is used, it would involve a foreign agent (for example, in the Middle East) who would seek out or receive job orders from the employee, and a local agent who, through subagents, would recruit workers for the

vacancy (Rahman & Tan, 2015). Figure 2 describes the general process that a Sri Lankan migrant goes through in order to find employment in the Middle East.



**Figure 2:** The process of getting a foreign employment opportunity – Source - SLBFE (2017)

Even though female migration has been outnumbered male migration for several decades, there has been a considerable decrease in departures since 2015. This decline was presumed to be due to economic downturn, labour market reforms in the GCC, and regulatory measures that have affected the movement of migrant women (mainly domestic workers). In turn, the same grounding reasons might have pushed them towards informal and unregistered migration (SLBFE, 2017). Even with the changes, approximately 26 per cent of all registered migrants in 2017 were women working with domestic duties (SLBFE, 2014, 2017).

The possibility of getting a higher salary for average educated women in Sri Lanka is less than men. Due to limited opportunities, they have no other choice than to work in low skilled jobs with poor working conditions, for instance, in the plantation sector or garment factories with longer working hours. They often get paid less and often work exploited. Some women also engage in home-based self-employment (Gamburd, 2010b; Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010). In comparison, men earn significantly higher salaries in male-dominated informal sectors of coconut sector, carpentry, and masonry. Women also engage in informal sectors such as maid service, plantation and agriculture and various other low-skilled jobs (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2007).<sup>4</sup> Yet, migrant women consistently claim that one salary alone cannot meet the family needs and migration to the Middle East is their only available economic alternative (Gamburd, 2020). Several studies have also revealed that many female breadwinners and some families depend entirely on their income (Gamburd, 2010b; Jayaweera, Dias, & Wanasundera, 2002; Weerakoon, 1998). As noted by Swarna Ukwatta (2010) migration decision is highly associated with family concerns. Those are macro-level

<sup>4</sup> Source - the annual report of Central Bank of Sri Lanka, (2016).

factors related to improving living standards. Not having enough or a stable income, unemployment, inequality, inability to prosper income and employment expectations have also led to repeated migration (Hugo and Ukwatta (2010)).

## **2.4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has presented previously studied literature related to my study area from a macro perspective to a micro, Sri Lankan context. I have discoursed the international labour migration framework with a recent outlook of labour migration statistics. In fact, it depicts labour migration as one of the most critical and attended topics in the migration field. Asian and European migration patterns have been discussed to highlight some differences and similarities regarding migrant choices in inward migration and outward migration. South Asian migration in GCC and Sri Lankan labour migration is discussed in the latter part of the chapter. From these two topics, I intended to illustrate regional migration trends. The discussion of Sri Lankan labour migration brings out an overview of the country's migration and how different factors may influence to evolve certain labour migration patterns.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORISING INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MIGRATION PATTERNS

*While many theories of migration have been elaborated by academics from different fields – in particular, economics, geography, and sociology – they are fragmented, and no dominant paradigm has been established. Moreover, migration studies developed in the epoch of nationalism, and most migration research was linked to specific national assumptions on migration and minorities. One of the major challenges for migration researchers today is that the process has become multi-layered and dynamic – taking on new forms, involving new populations and destinations, and adapting to the ever-changing global context.*

International Migration Institute –(IMI, 2006, p. 6)

#### 3.1 Background on relevant human migration theories and concepts

International migration concepts and theories involve multi-faceted and complex theories. Massey et al. (1993b) identify that, currently, it is difficult to find a coherent and consistent set of theoretical concepts about international migration. Osanloo and Grant (2016) also argue theoretical framework is the "blueprint" that thoroughly guides the research inquiry. Different approaches deal differently to answer the questions and difficulties raised in migration. Therefore, migration experts suggest that the existing migration process does not need an isolated set of boundaries. Correspondingly, studying several theoretic models in the relevant research field helps structure the research inquiry philosophically, methodologically, epistemologically, and analytically. I relate and examine several theories and conceptual understandings of mobility patterns that assess my empirical findings.

Theories of human migration help to understand why people migrate, return, circulate and change destinations. I predominantly discuss the micro-part of migration theories, sometimes considering also the meso-level. These theories allow me to investigate the mechanisms underlying individual decisions. The individual decisions reflect the central causes of perpetual labour migration, expectations, migrant patterns, identifying migrant trajectories and motives of the migration. A migrant movement is directly or indirectly influenced by micro and macro

social structures, which can significantly transform migrants themselves and their migratory moves. Different patterns of mobility reflect economic, social, and environmental costs. Different kinds of individual patterns are also transformed from preferences, affordability, motives, availability of options and coping mechanisms. Overall, we see, internal and external factors, motives and drivers, changes in decision making, or even unplanned movements affect migrants' moves. Examining the theories and concepts help me to relate Sri Lankan labour migration mobility patterns in the GCC. Further, it allows me to recognise the scientific relation, evaluate and present my arguments more scientifically.

After careful investigation, I identified that many migration-related theories explain how certain migration patterns are influenced and how those theoretical explanations help those patterns to keep going. E. G. Ravenstein (1889) formulated a model on laws of migration based on geographical movements. Lee (1966) argued that the migration decision is determined by plus and minus factors in areas such as origin and destination. This also includes intervening obstacles such as distance, physical barriers, immigration laws, and personal factors (Castles et al., 2019). For instance, in push-pull model theory, push factors considered as motivating factors that initiate the migration move. Pull factors are the factors that attract a migrant to a particular destination from the first move to multiple times. Whereas NELM helps to identify how family approaches initiate migrate decision collectively as a family strategy to achieve a family goal. Network theory helps to identify how migrants gradually expand their networks during the migration process and how it can be helpful to achieve migrant goals. Migration systems theory and structuralist theory are also discussed in this chapter to get further understanding of how and why particular migration patterns are evolved. With that being stated, I link those theoretical grounding to answer my questions of 'how' and 'why' of my research participants created their unique types of migratory patterns in GCC countries.

### **3.2 Relevance of Push and Pull model in labour migration patterns**

Lee proclaims to Ravenstein (1885)'s 'Laws of migration' that "*migration was rather distinguished for its lawlessness than for any definite law*" (Lee, 1966, p. 47). In fact, that statement itself reflects how complex it is to measure migration. Any migration pattern can generate a new form of pattern or transform into another based on internal and external factors that cause migration. Nevertheless, Ravenstein (1885)'s 'Laws of migration' and Lee (1966) Push and Pull model build explicit illustrations of the complexity and dynamics of migration

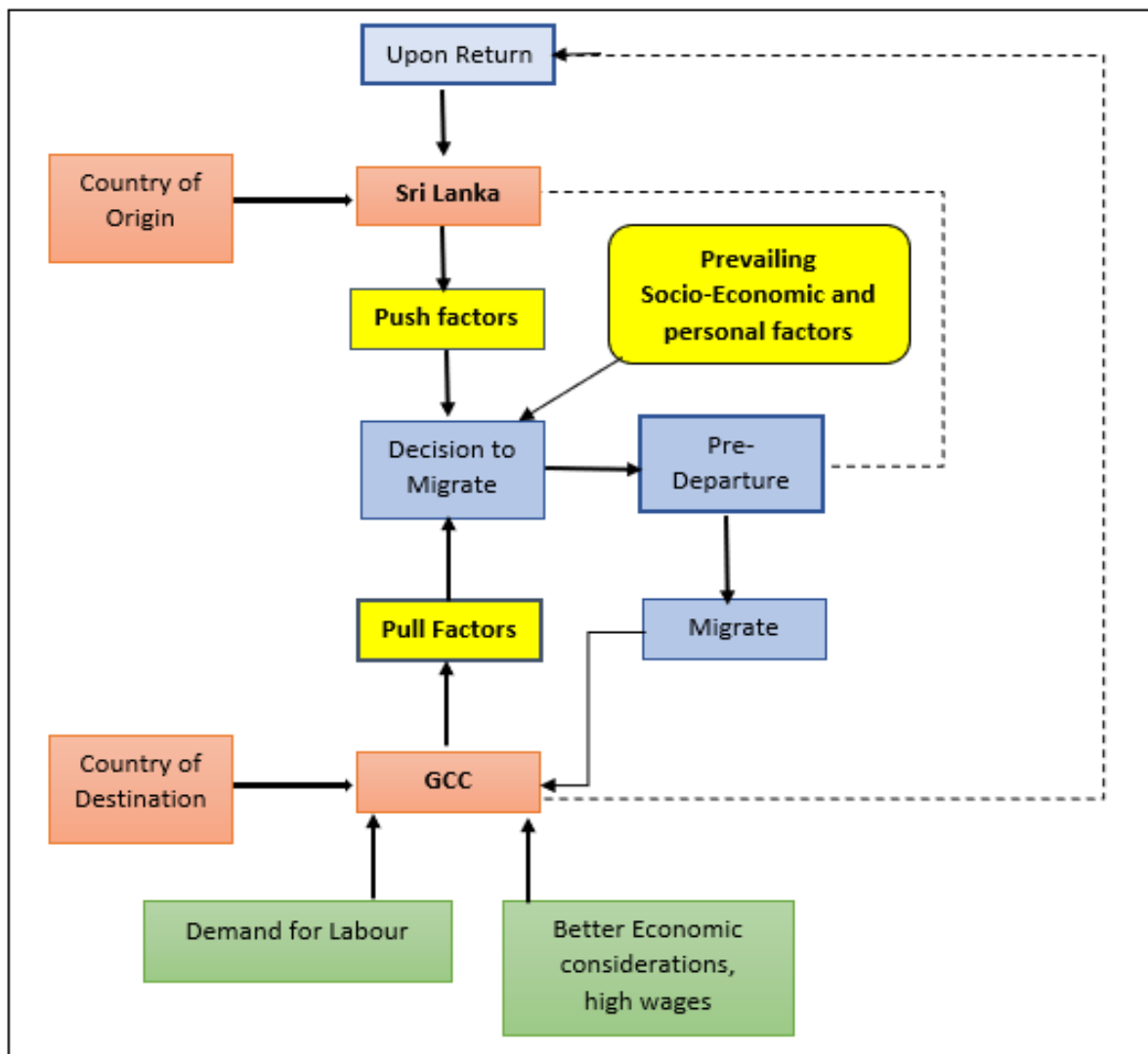
flows. Both the models facilitate explaining the motivating factors of migration. As per the theory, migration cycle happens concerning not only 'push' or 'pull' factors but also 'intervening obstacles' and 'personal factors' for an eventual migration. Unemployment, poverty, lack of job satisfaction in the home country, and other interpersonal factors are 'push factors' to leave the country of origin. Likewise, opposite factors of the above mentioned are 'pull factors' that lie in the destination country. As I see in labour migration, push and pull factors also may influence migrants to leave the country of origin for work even with no personal willingness. Labour migration arises out of choice in the hope of an improvement of the existing life. Upgrading the quality of life through labour migration is mostly measured in materialistic wise; however, it also can be for their self-freedom. For instance, to be away from stressful marriages and family or experience a new working environment in another country. Whatever the reason may be, this theory is constructive to identify the general 'Push' and 'Pull' factors of migration.

When studied Reveintin's five general assumptions, we can noticeably link how initial migration eventually leads to repeated and patterns of further migration moves. He predicts the first assumption as the relationship of migration distance with gender difference where male migrants tend to go on longer distance and women prefer shorter distances. In addition to this proposition, I hypothesise that women generally take frequent but shorter migration moves back and forth while men tend to stay abroad in more prolonged periods. It is discussed and evidenced in the empirical chapters.

Second, migration occurs through stages of migration. Even though he has predominantly mentioned about rural-urban migration, the same grounding can be applied to international migration as well. At first, Sri Lankan labour migrants generally thrive hard to move to easy access destinations such as the Middle East. Afterwards, they pursue other high-wage destinations, eventually aiming at settling down in their preferred country. Third, considering rural-urban migration, he assumes that the rural population has a higher propensity to migrate than the urban population. It is still valid in Sri Lankan context because many Sri Lankan labour migrants are from rural areas.

The fourth and fifth propositions also undoubtedly increase the chances of repetitive moves of migration. Fourth is, increase in technology and transportation increase migration moves. The fifth, migration decision, is ultimately an individual rational decision concerned with cost-

benefit calculations. Further Lee (1966) elaborates how migration movements attract by plus and minor factors especially to change the country of origin to the destination country. In the same way, we can relate how migrants change their current destination when plus and minor factors float in addition to the change of personal decisions. Lee also mentions that change of personalities makes an impact on the moving patterns, for instance, marriage. He describes that the main systematic factors in this model are economic, environmental, and demographic, which are assumed to push migrants out of places and pull them into other places (Castles et al., 2019).



**Figure 3:** The theoretical explanation for the process of SL labour migration primarily to GCC  
 – Source – Own compilation

In Figure 3, I provide my initial assumption, based on the outlined theories on how push and pull factors are affecting Sri Lankan labour migration based. According to recent statistics,

most Sri Lankans search for foreign employment and GCC appears as the primary searched destination (Ferwerda & Gest, 2020; Withers, 2019).<sup>5</sup> In line with the theory and previous research, I outline some of the factors that generate the migration move from Sri Lanka. Due to increased opportunities, Sri Lankan migrants consider the GCC a labour demand destination with easy access compared to other destinations, such as Europe or East Asia. As such, migrants strive to find the best suitable destination. However, over time, one pull destination can become a push destination. These well-described motives of “Push and Pull migration” and propositions of Ravenstein’s migration laws are an attractive approach to observe factors in labour migration as they explain the observed migration patterns. Identifying initial and perpetual migratory factors that lead Sri Lankan workers to move overseas, I also explore in the empirical chapters how push and pull factors are modified by temporal and spatial variations creating several itinerary patterns among Sri Lankan foreign workers.

### **3.3 NELM for labour migration patterns**

The new economics of labour migration (NELM) emerged as a critical response to neoclassical migration theory (Massey et al., 1993b). This theory asserts that migration decision is not solely initiated by one-self but usually by families and households in the developing world. NELM shows that there are many other factors also influencing labour migration apart from income maximisation. One such feature is the risk-sharing behaviour of families and households. Stark and Levhari (1982) argue that one or two members in the family migrate to diversify their income. Another feature is that NELM sees migration as a family or household strategy to provide resources for investment in economic activities. So that it allows migrants to have a regular income even when they return to the home country. Collective decisions are one of the insurances and future investments migrants make with their wages while working abroad, knowing that it was/will be impossible to achieve when working back home.

NELM shows migration as a response to relative deprivation rather than absolute poverty. With the NELM theory, migration economists began to address questions of household composition traditionally posed by anthropologists and sociologists (Lucas & Stark, 1985). NELM is better equipped in developing and migrant-sending countries as a livelihood approach than developed countries. Scholars have observed that the poor cannot be reduced to passive victims of global

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Primary Source (ILO, 2017)



capitalist forces but exert human agency by trying to actively improve their livelihoods despite the severe conditions they live in (Lieten & Nieuwenhuys, 1989).

In circumstances of uncertainty and economic hardships, people tend to organise their livelihood collectively, such as family households. Therefore, NELM explains the risk-sharing behaviour where the decision is taken together, not individually. The household is highlighted as the most appropriate primary unit of analysis in migration for reasons pertaining to diversifying and securing livelihoods (C. McDowell & De Haan, 1997). This condition is visible in the Sri Lankan context to a more considerable extent as a migrant-sending country. Absolute poverty often deprives people of the capacity to migrate for longer distances, and initially, it is much more costly. In that case, the GCC is primarily a destination to seek employment at an affordable cost at the beginning. Migrating for work can be considered as a tool to attain higher socio-economic status within the community.

As observed, we can see that migration cannot only be focused on income maximisation alone. Instead, many factors contribute to migration determinants such as social security, income risk and inequality, the chances of securing employment, access of the poor to credit, insurance and product markets (Castles et al., 2019). For instance, a migrant may secure small enterprises and start something of their own prior to their host country's return. Migrants can also save enough social capital so that they can plan their future to settle down in a preferred destination. These instances are more in line with the NELM, where the returnees are satisfied with their migration experience abroad and utilise their savings and knowledge for good use at home. In addition, we can relate that migrants have pre-established or ongoing plans<sup>6</sup> and till those are achieved; migrants continue to migrate and change destinations to get the maximum advantages. According to the perspectives mentioned above, when migration aims are not met, the return migration becomes temporary, and migrants decide to migrate back and forth till their goals are achieved.

Castles et al. (2019) portray: it is vital to see the intra-households struggles as well in migration decision through NELM. It also explains why migration can occur in recurrent or circular movements. As we see, household studies are particularly useful studies to explain migration in developing countries as a strategy of improving livelihood and strengthening social security

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, buying/building a house, starting a small business, paying off debts

through foreign wages. They also demonstrate the importance of family decision making and mutual help in households. With that said, I intend to explore the accountability of contribution and risk-sharing behaviour in household decisions on initial and repeated migration moves of my research participants.

### **3.4 Migration Systems theory for labour migration patterns**

We have looked at the role of migration network theory in enhancing migration patterns through social ties. Similarly, migration systems theory looks at how forms of migration and patterns are changed in line with the changes of the migration system. As Bakewell (2014) emphasises, the migration system is not able to define in exact terms. But it can be elaborated and compared with the social systems of the country of origin and the country of destination. Migration systems consist of countries or alternatively places within different countries that exchange relatively large numbers of migrants; concomitant flows of goods, capital, ideas and information (Castles et al., 2019). Wallerstein (1974) identifies international migration as an inevitable consequence of economic globalisation when the world market expands across national boundaries and creates economic development in the periphery regions (Constant, 2020). Migration systems theory helps us understand how migrations decision-making changes over time as a response to social system. For instance, it can be a change of migrants' policies and labour demand and supply in both countries of origin and destination. For example, policy changes in the migration hiring system in GCC as a labour receiving country will directly impact on labour sending countries. It certainly has an impact on individual level in decision making as well due to these structural constrains.

When looking at the positive side, migration systems theory focuses on a broader process of social transformation and development, which helps to observe the changes on a micro level. Migration systems link people, families, and communities over space. They encourage migration along specific individual pathways (Castles et al., 2019). The theory discusses the return and circular migration with market globalisation. As we see, when the world market expands internationally, that creates economic development in the periphery market. That is to say, migrants from developing countries can work where there is a demand for labour and send remittances back home. It also enables transnational movements between the peripheral and core countries. Studying this theory helps to study how macro factors, directly and indirectly, affect microscale and change in migration patterns. The ultimate result obtained through the

migration systems theory builds on a mixture of new experiences, ideas, exposure to new beliefs and modern lifestyles. In that way, it is expected that migrants' capabilities increase, realise their preferences, and aspirations through their experiences. Further, this theory is useful to investigate changes that occurred due to migration both in the origin and destination.

### **3.5 Migration Network Theory for labour migration patterns**

A migrant industry has been created consisting of migrant recruitment organisations, agents, and other intermediaries who have a keen interest in continuing migration (Castles et al., 2019). In simple terms, the migration network theory can be understood as a conceptual framework that describes how a set of social connections get widen gradually in the migration journey. The knowledge we have in the first migration move is not the same in later migration moves. Gradually, migrants become expertise of migration of what they want to achieve, their goals, and expectations. Migrants can compare, re-think of their first initial migration decision, and destinations with their expanded knowledge. Migration network theory says migrants map their own networks gradually, not overnight (Massey et al. (1993b). It can be formal, informal, social relationships, family, and friends. These networks add trust and certainly be influential to change, revise and consider their migration journey. When they acquire more experiences, then they seek more opportunities to grow. Such networks are meso-level social structures that tend to facilitate further migration (Castles et al., 2019).

The choices made by pioneer migrants or recruiters influence the location choices of subsequent groups and former migrants, through same location. Further, these migration social networks increase the chance migration moves and change their current destinations. Thereby, when migrants increase social capital, they gain access to working in different destinations. Once the number of migrants reaches a critical threshold, the expansion of networks reduces the costs and risks of movement, which in turn causes the probability of migration to rise, which causes additional movement, which further expands the networks, and so on. Over time migratory behaviour spreads outwards to encompass broader segments of the sending society. Migrant networks tend to decrease the economic, social, and psychological costs of migration. Besides, the cost and risk reduction behaviour of migration networks allow for lives with increased migratory choice.

Network theory captures migration dynamically through time and space. Migrants get opportunities to move, create new social networks that expand and allow other aspiring migrants to reach their destination. Migrants use migration network as a helpline to reduce risks, costs and find the best choices. Wage differentials or employment rates are not as important for prospective migrants when the costs are low, and networks can help migrants to find jobs (Massey et al., 1993b). It also helps for further expansions of the migration network that reach more people and create self-perpetuating movements. Creating networks in the migration journey help migrants to move from one destination to another, and also to share experiences. Even though it does not specify any repeated migratory movements, still migrants can further expand their network after the initial move, which can affect further movements. By studying this theory, I was able to identify how migrants changed their initial decisions, which was not on their plan. The prime reason for that was their expansion of the network. Since it is influential, the impact of migration journey may be a little harder to track how beneficial it is to some migrants in their overall life. In some cases, migrants such as house maids wanted their initial migratory move to be their first and last, but it became an unstoppable continuous migration cycle.

### **3.6 Structuralist Theory for labour migration patterns**

As evaluated by Cassarino (2004), the structuralist theory also explains repeat migration upon first return. The theory argues that structural relations within the political economy cause the initial migration; immigrants return because of nostalgia (Constant, 2020). Migrants find the homeland changed compared to the initial migration and lack time-space dimensions. Especially when migrants had moved to a developed country from a developing land, they tend to feel differently. They see things in a broad way and think of themselves as foreign. Returnees are not the same after their first migration either. Thus, migrants would want to re-migrate where they feel more comfortable and more convenient for them. As Constant (2020) describes, the return becomes a social issue as migrants clash with their compatriots who see them as a threat. *Neither the returnees nor the stayers are ready for a symbiosis, which causes a social rupture leading to a re-return and/or repeat migration* (Constant, 2020, p. 9). The use of the structuralist theory allows me to identify how Sri Lankan labour migrants are shaped after their initial migration journey and analyse aftermath motives for repeated migrations. In addition to that, I intend to discover other ideological reasons for causes of return and continuous migration.

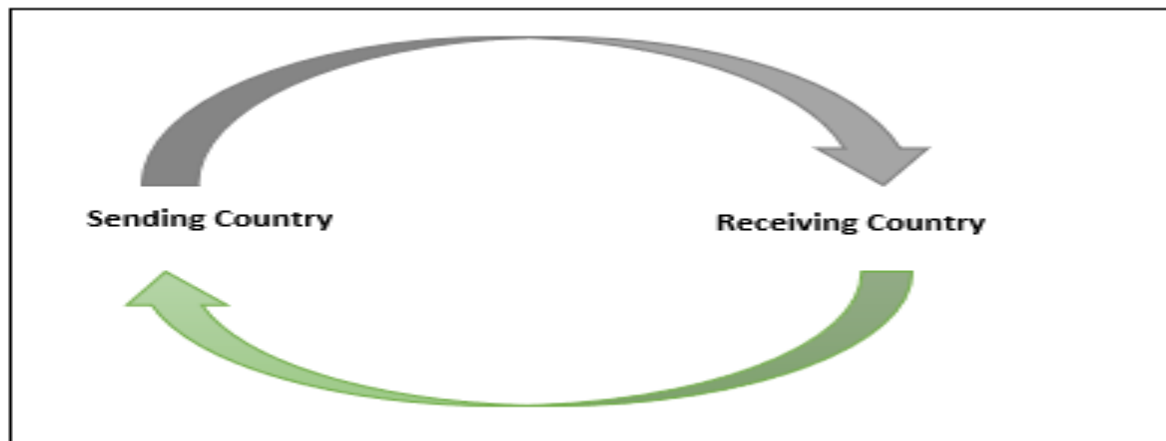
### **3.7 Conceptual framework for Circular, Serial, and Stepwise mobility patterns**

The enhancement of economic, cultural, social, and political globalisation has amplified greater importance in migration in almost all parts of the world. There seems to be a worldwide unwritten law that people require to improve their living conditions and situation. To do that, people search for new opportunities and, if necessary, by moving from one place to another. Those moves may or may not be aligned simultaneously with the decision to return or stay. Thereby, migrants create multiple and multi-directional mobility patterns other than the classic model of one-point singular immigration movements. Newer patterns have been in vogue latterly, generating much attention in the field of migration in the new century. In this section, I aim to theorise and explore circular, serial, and stepwise migration patterns. In the present migration dynamics, migration experts have shown a keen interest in Circular, Serial and Stepwise migration concepts (Agunias & Newland, 2007; Collins, 2020; Newland, 2009; Paul, 2017; Silvey & Parreñas, 2019; Valenta, 2020). As per my understanding, circular, serial and stepwise migration patterns are theoretical concepts rather than theories. However, just as theories, dimensions and factors influence create these patterns and build theoretical conceptualisations. These three different concepts uniquely characterise trans-nationalisation, fluctuating from simple to unidirectional singular immigration to complex multi-directional repeated transnational movements.

#### **3.7.1 Theoretical understanding of circular mobility**

The report of “Task Force on Measuring Circular Migration” specifies the greater need to create a standard definition as it can sometimes be confusing. As Babar and Gardner (2016) claim, circular movements represent an enduring connection and an eventual return to the homeland. According to GFMD (2008), circular migration is defined as “*the temporary, recurrent movement of people between two or more countries, mainly for purposes of work or study*” (GFMD, 2008, p. 3). GFMD sees circular migration as differing from singular permanent or temporary migration. Constant, Nottmeyer, and Zimmermann (2013) describe circular migration as organised regular movements of migrants between their country of origin and host country. Nevertheless, circular migration gives the idea of an occurring series of migrant moments between a specific destination and country of origin and which can be for work or study (GFMD, 2008). Based on the above illustrations on circular migration, figure 4

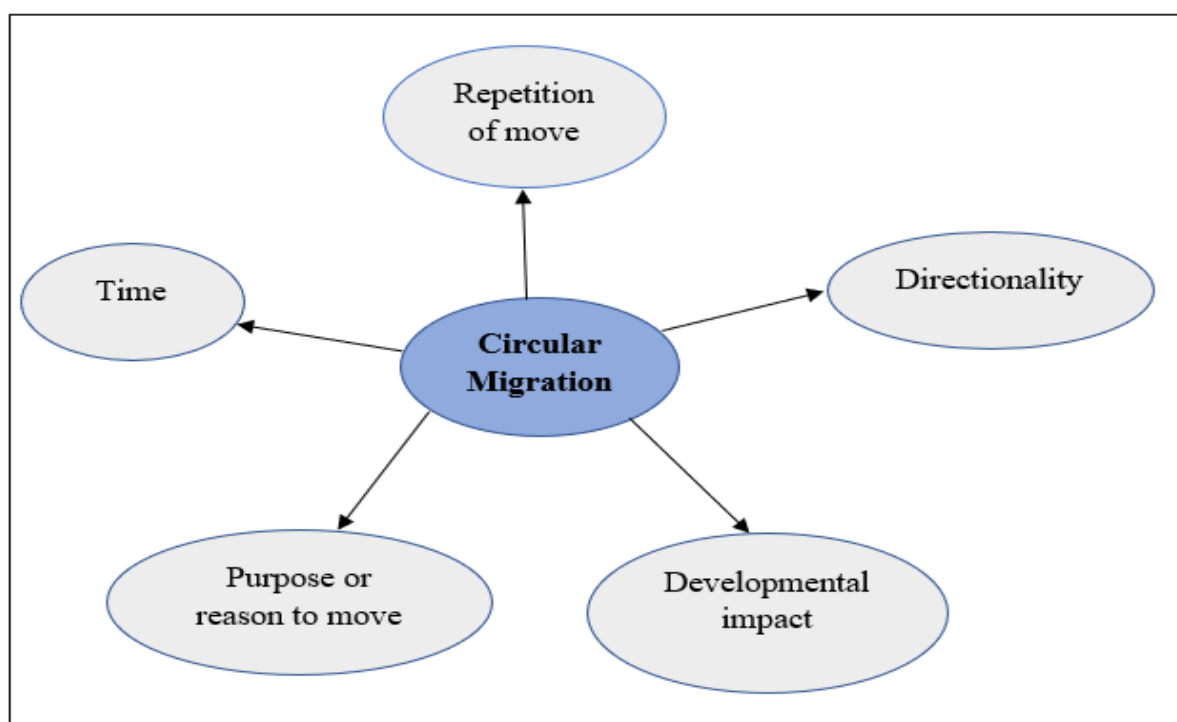
is an interpretation of how circular migration is formed with repeated movements to one host destination.



**Figure 4:** Visual prediction of circular migration

Constant (2020) characterises repeat and circular migrants as typically seasonal workers in agricultural, construction, and other sectors. They can later turn into “perma-temp” low-wage labour, through perpetual guest worker programs (Constant et al., 2013). This situation is relatable to temporary wage migrants in the GCC. After having moved for the first time, migrants may return home at the end of their contract and then possibly move back and forth multiple times. The choice to move again may be an integral part of the initial migration decision or an ad-hoc decision based on a change in circumstances. The extent to which these chains are part of a pre-planned strategy and the extent to which they evolve depending on time and experience.

Discussions of circular migration have contributed to highlighting the repetitive nature of labour migration sojourns. Still, they do not capture the geographic scope or spatial complexity of contemporary cross-border migrations (A. C. Skeldon, Derks, & Dijk, 2016). Based on the mentioned literature; figure 5 indicates key dimensions to consider in Circular migration patterns (Constant, 2020; IOM, 2008; UNEC, 2016; Vadean & Piracha, 2009). The report UNEC (2016) further highlights that these key aspects are ones to consider when differentiating circular migration from other migration concepts.



**Figure 5:** Dimensions in Circular Migration – Source - Own compilation inspired by UNEC (2016)<sup>7</sup>

The dimensions of circular migration point out that even though the initial move to the host country is governed by uncertainty, circular migration decisions occur with a set of information to reduce search, relocation and psychological costs (Constant et al., 2013). Understanding the concept of circular migration inspires and guides to map the circular migration pattern of my informants. While identifying the arguments for circular movement, I will also scrutinise individual circular strategies and intentions behind the migration decision.

### 3.7.2 Theoretical understanding of serial migration

A. C. Skeldon et al. (2016) illustrate that although circular migration patterns have contributed to showing the recurrent nature of labour migration sojourns, they do not capture the geographic scope or spatial complexity of contemporary cross-border migrations. It is mostly a monotonous move between a sending and receiving country. Serial migration, on the other side, has gained similar prominence for temporary contract workers (Chin, 2013; Hwang, 2018; L. M. B. ILO, 2015). This concept can be recognised as one of the emerging patterns of

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

mobility and exchange. Ossman (2004) defines serial migration occurring when people have lived in at least three countries for a significant period of time. Similarly, Silvey and Parreñas (2019) identify it as multi-country, itinerant labour migration frequently found among low wage contract workers.

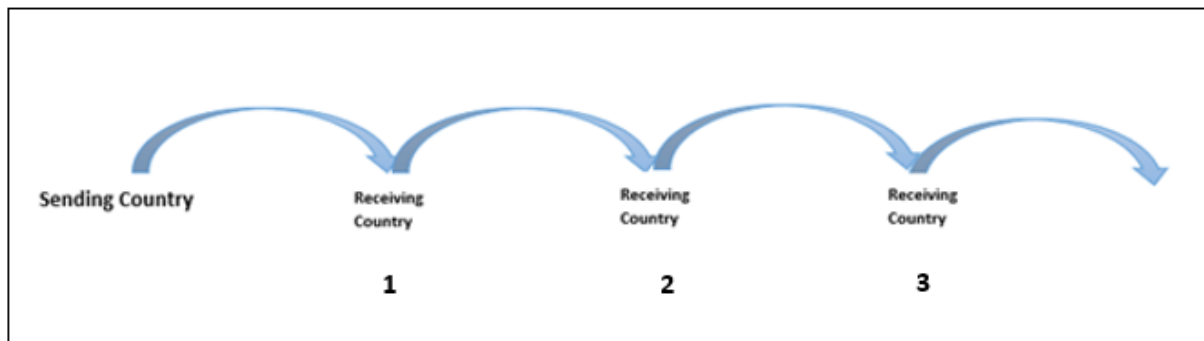
Current studies promote that serial migration is rising as a global pattern for temporary migrant workers from the developing world (Ali, 2011; Ossman, 2004; Parreñas, Silvey, Hwang, & Choi, 2019). With a focus on Indonesian and Filipino migrant domestic workers, Parreñas et al. (2019) identify that initial migration arises due to financial insecurity among the low wage workers, primarily in low wage countries, which in turn, transforms into repeated migration journeys as a mode of livelihood. The limited opportunities for settlement and the lack of labour market opportunities in the home country encourage migrant workers to engage in non-stop migration. According to some scholars, serial migration is an experience shared by low wage migrants, particularly from South and South East Asia in the GCC (Gardner, 2010; Kathiravelu, 2016).

Serial labour migration emerges in response to a range of geographical, societal, and temporal constraints that confront low-wage migrant workers and takes place upon contexts of departure, reception, and return. Studies of onward and serial migration assume that each migration decision is made independently without the benefit of an overarching migration strategy (Paul, 2011). According to Parreñas et al. (2019), serial labour migration emerges from particular state policies that shape the experiences of temporary labour migrants across their cycle of migration. Serial labour migration represents only one of the various migration pathways that have been documented among low-skilled workers in their attempts to navigate the borders and boundaries constraining their mobility in the era of contemporary globalisation (Parreñas et al., 2019).

Studies of serial migration discuss three primary elements that have given rise to this pattern: First when migrants have access to a wide range of low-cost destinations (Hagan, Eschbach, & Rodriguez, 2008; Silvey, 2004); Second, migrants' exclusion and ineligibility for permanent residency and vulnerability to deportation (Goldring & Landolt, 2012); Third, owing to exclusionary migration policies within the broad context of neoliberalism and reduced economic opportunities for return migrants in less developed origin regions (Sassen, 2000). figure 6 is an interpretation of how serial migration is formed with repeated movements to



parallel host destinations. Serial migration may or may not include the returns to the country of origin before moving to the following receiving country.



**Figure 6:** Visual prediction of Serial migration

Silvey and Parreñas (2019) conceptualise a “precarity chain” based on serial migration. The “precarity chain” of migration occurs due to the consequences of financial and labour market insecurities. Financial insecurity initially prompts migration, then consequently, for the same reason encourages to engage in repeat migration. This occurs in response to a range of geographical, societal, and temporal constraints (Silvey & Parreñas, 2019).

Scholars also argue that serial migration pattern arises from both a lack of labour market opportunities in the home country and a lack of settlement opportunities in the receiving country, resulting in several lateral movements (Ossman, 2004; Paul, 2011; Silvey & Parreñas, 2019). Serial migration emphasises lateral mobility between lower tiers countries, highlighting temporary labour migration among low-skilled migrant workers with limited rights and resources. Serial migration involves several lateral, low-cost destinations<sup>8</sup>, differentiating it from circular migration, which is a point to point journey. Circular migration pattern does not capture the geographic scope or spatial complexity of contemporary cross-border migrations (Silvey & Parreñas, 2019; R. Skeldon, 2012). Circular migration basically argues for a repetition of movement between a receiving country and the home country but not across different destinations (Wickramasekara, 2011).

Inspired by the above-mentioned perspectives, I intend to examine various pathways taken by employed Sri Lankan labour migrants in GCC countries. Sri Lanka is known as a labour

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<sup>8</sup> GCC constitutes one of the examples of low destinations where many low wage labour migrants are employed (Dito, 2008; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2016; Winckler, 1997).

sending country, and most Sri Lankans are likely to move to more than one destination (primarily in the GCC) during their migration journey (Chin, 2013; Hwang, 2018; ILO, 2017). I principally discuss micro and meso conditions that have given rise to serial migration among Sri Lankan wage workers. Studying the theoretical facets of the pattern enables me to find what are the circumstances behind the change of countries. The circumstances may include voluntary, forced, internal and external forces.

### **3.7.3 Theorising stepwise migration pattern**

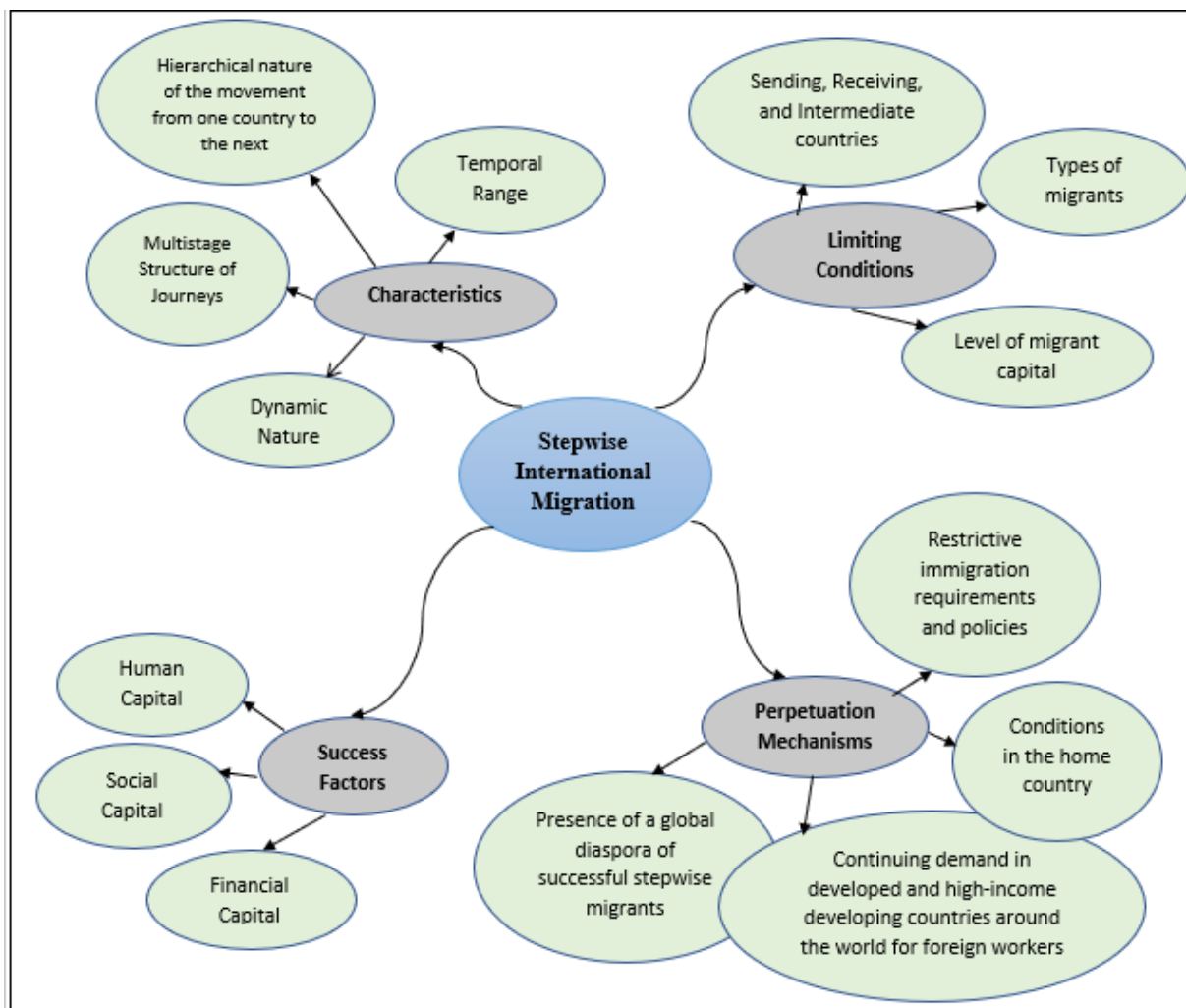
Parallel to economic and financial globalisation, the itinerant movements of migrant labourers have also largely evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stepwise international migration is an ideal example. With globalisation, this migration pattern has been diverted to an international arena. Initially, it was identified as an internal migration pattern. Conway defines stepwise migration as:

*...a process of human spatial behaviour in which individuals or families embark on a migration path of acculturation which gradually takes them, by way of intermediate steps, from a traditional-rural environment to the modern-urban environment (Conway, 1980, p. 10).*

Stepwise migration was first inspired by E. Ravenstein (1885) in his *laws of migration*, highlighting internal rural-urban migration (Ossman, 2004). Conversely, stepwise migration has taken a different angle when individuals started moving between multiple countries until they climb the ladder of their desired endpoint. Chiefly, this pattern is indicative of an alternative strategy for aspiring migrant workers from developing countries to gain legal entry into their preferred destinations, as Paul (2017) suggests ‘often in the West’. Paul (2017) is one of the scholars who redefine the study of the multi-stage pattern of international stepwise migration.

In her article on Stepwise International Migration: A Multi-stage Migration Pattern for the Aspiring Migrant, Paul (2017) indicates that *stepwise international migration has become an alternative strategy for migrants from the developing world to surmount the structural barriers that prevent them from acquiring legal entry to their desired destinations preferably in Europe or West* (Paul, 2011, p. 1843). Paul (2011) identifies a variety of aspects of stepwise international migration that set it apart from conventional forms of international migration:

journeys structured by multiple stages, hierarchical nature of the movement from one country to the next, the span of staying in each stop, and the intentionality of the migrant. Scholars suggest that low-capital migrants usually adopt the stepwise migration strategy (Carlos, 2013; Collins, 2020; Paul, 2011, 2017). Figure 7 refers to Paul (2011) theorisation of key diverse dimensions of the stepwise international migration.

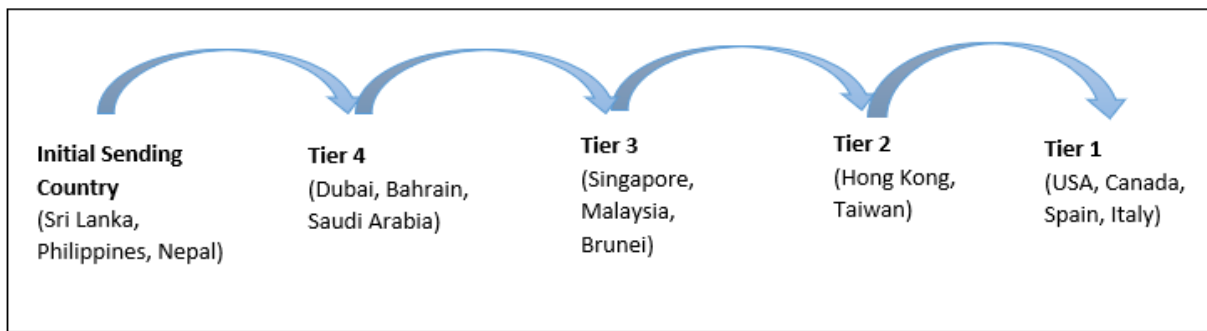


**Figure 7:** Theorisation of stepwise international migration – Source: Own compilation based on the article by Paul (2017)

Several studies on Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers are examples of stepwise migration pathway (Carlos, 2013; Hwang, 2018; Parreñas, 2008; Paul, 2011). Stepwise, migrants accumulate migrant capital through increasing enough savings in addition to educational qualifications, and work experiences also build their network of overseas contacts (Paul, 2011). Low wage workers such as domestic and unskilled workers often follow this multi-stage labour migration pattern starting from the bottom and, making their way through

various countries, intending to accumulate enough migrant capital to eventually qualify to enter their desired destinations (Collins, 2020; Paul, 2011).

While this process involves stints of substantive duration, working in intermediate countries, stepwise international migrants attempt to increase savings, acquire necessary work experience and educational certifications (Paul, 2011). Her theorisation helps to understand multi-stage migration pattern and strategies adopted by migrants. Figure 8 summarises stepwise migration patterns on how migrants gradually reach their desired destination by passing through different tiers with country examples. These tiers plus the countries are illustrated according to Paul (2017).



**Figure 8:** Visual prediction of Stepwise migration – Source: Own compilation basing the article by Paul (2017)

Stimulated by the studies of this pattern, I will analyse how these characteristics apply in a Sri Lankan context and to its labour migrants. According to these studies, the initial stage often starts with countries in the Middle East, which offer the lowest wages but impose few immigration restrictions. Migrants work their way through various countries, intending to accumulate enough migrant capital (of all kinds) so as, eventually, to reach their aspired destinations (Carlos, 2013; Chang, 2019; Paul, 2011). I will also explore the success rate of stepwise Sri Lankan migrants and how they accumulate additional power to reaching their preferred destinations. I will examine the process of pathways taken and motives behind aspiring migrants' journeys and the individual characteristics of the aforementioned pathways and motives.

Building on the contributions mentioned above, in this study, I utilise the concept of (i) circular migration, which involves one receiving country and one sending country, (ii) serial migration

that involves multi-state migrations within the same tiers and finally, (iii) stepwise migration that shows migratory steps from lower tiers to upper tiers.

### **3.8 Chapter Summary**

Migrants' mobility patterns are diverse and complex. Correspondingly, migrants go and work in several transit destinations. The theoretical understanding of these migration concepts evidence that it is difficult for some labour migrants to reach their preferred destination straight. Still, migrants undergo most of the hardships to prosper a better life circling in different forms of migration patterns. In this theoretical chapter, we identified some of the emerging migration patterns of circular, serial, and stepwise patterns in addition to the main theories discussed. It has acquired growing importance in distinguishing cross border moves. The discussed theories are highly pertinent to my research project. In my study, I intend to apply these conceptual frameworks to map Sri Lankan migrants' trajectories and identify different migratory patterns from primary and secondary data. It will also help me uncover various migrant strategies and intentions in reaching different destinations and their motives and drivers. I am aware that Sri Lankan migrants engage in complex and diverse migrant trajectories. However, I try to investigate and explore direct and indirect notions of multinational migrations using circular, serial and stepwise terms.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*The ultimate goals of research are to formulate questions and to find answers to these questions. The immediate goals of research – exploration, description, prediction, explanation and action – provide us with a strategy for figuring out which questions to ask and which to seek.*

(Dane, 1990, p. 56)

#### 4.1 Research Design: Qualitative method, and Study Setting and Approach

This study employed a comprehensive qualitative approach to explore Sri Lankan labour migrant trajectories in the GCC countries. Using the qualitative method was immensely helpful in identifying migrants' lived experiences and perceptions through first-person informal interviews. Likewise, the use of this method allowed me to grasp how unique and meaningful each individual migration journey is. According to Hay (2016), qualitative research is concerned with elucidating human environments and human experiences within a variety of conceptual frameworks. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research method leads to explore complex and rich textual descriptions. There can be various kinds of research design in qualitative research. This research is a descriptive phenomenological approach as it describes what people think, say, and do (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2016).

I believe qualitative researches that deal with people's experiences get the best outcome and give added value as the data are descriptive and non-quantifiable (Behague & Ogden, 1996). Besides, this strategy was most helpful in elucidating the intrinsic and extrinsic migration decisions of migrants in this study. Using the qualitative method was easier to analyse more in-depth insight of migration circumstances, migrant experiences and decision making towards a spontaneous situation. As pointed out, the primary justification for using the qualitative research design was to get a deeper understanding and identify the variety of different migrant experiences occurring in their migration journeys. Moreover, the data collection required of me being flexible towards the process and having a qualitative research design helped me complete the research (Hamre, 2019). Therefore, I have used oral and textual methods of

qualitative approach to help assess individual migration patterns related to circular, serial and stepwise concepts (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

#### **4.2 Choice of informants: Sampling and Inclusion Criteria**

The choice of the informants recruited through purposive sampling is in line with my research objectives. Through purposeful sampling, the researcher “*can learn a great deal about matters of central importance to the purpose of the research*” (Emmel, 2013, p. 169; Patton, 1990). Several techniques were employed when using purposive sampling in my study. Initially, I was aware of five to six potential informants who have worked in two or more countries in the GCC. I also used snowball sampling to find more interviewees who are likely to be in similar categories. There were also trial and error process in the middle of selecting participants. I had to eliminate some research participants that met similar criteria but were not in my reach. In addition, some participants were not eligible since they engaged in migrant trajectories outside the GCC region.

I used several strategies to produce an equal representation of my research goals. For that, I had composed a list of inclusion criteria to be used in recruiting my research participants. The list of qualifications were,

- migrants who have worked in two or more countries in the GCC
- migrants who have moved back and forth to a specific country in the GCC; and
- migrants who have worked in one or more country in the GCC and moved out for higher pursuits.

There were some limitations in selecting the choice of methodology. The primary reasons were time, distance and financial strains. No face to face interviews could be conducted as my respondents were located in different places in the GCC and outside the region. Therefore, the interviews were conducted through digital communication. The interview guide was developed in line with previous relevant research. Key respondents were contacted primarily through personal networks. There were limited number of respondents that were in my range to fulfil my sample size. Overall, I was able to select only 12 research participants who matched my research criteria and my primary objectives.

## **4.3 Construction of Research Data**

### **4.3.1 Formulation of Research Question**

My study explores Sri Lankan labour migration to the GCC. I distinguished between patterns of circular, serial, and stepwise migrations. I have justified why GCC has been taken for my research study as the research destination in the previous chapters. The grounding reason is that the highest number of Sri Lankan labour migrants are employed in the Middle East region. There is also a wide range of researches exploring Sri Lankan labour migrants in GCC whose studies are related to migrant remittances, gender, return migration and domestic maids (Ranathunga, 2011; Siriwardhane et al., 2014; Wickramage, De Silva, & Peiris, 2017). Nevertheless, I was not able to locate literature that is directly related to Sri Lankan circular, serial, and stepwise migration.

My research questions helped me to find out Sri Lankan migration trajectories that I assumed would have similar patterns to circular, serial, and stepwise migrations observed among other groups. My internship foreordained me to investigate this matter as I could find out that many Sri Lankan migrants do not stop their migration journey at one go. Instead, they engage in several and constant migration journeys. As a fact, I wanted to study on circular, serial and stepwise migration patterns with a specific study on Sri Lankan migrants. Given the circumstances, this study attempts to fulfil that gap by exploring Sri Lankan labour migration patterns on the aforementioned concepts. To achieve this objective, I based my study on exploring and answering the following research questions.

1. What are the visible migration trajectories and patterns of Sri Lankan labour migrants?
2. What are the key drivers, forces and motives of migrating and for changing destinations?
3. What is the degree of intentionality and individuality of the migration decision?
4. How can we differentiate the various categories of mobility patterns through migrant strategies and trajectories?

The first research question is the primary base for the study as it led to guide my initial interviews. The next question was followed up with the push and pull factors of key drivers and motivation behind continuous migration patterns. As the NELM theory suggests, migration is often considered as a household strategy (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). That theoretical grounding



led me find my third question to discover the individuality of migration decision to create such migration patterns. To find out whether the repetitive migration movement are forced, voluntary, collectively taken within the family or as a sole individual decision were my main targets. Once all the migrant patterns were identified, I wanted to differentiate it through my identified theoretical concepts of circular, serial, and stepwise migration patterns. As Lee (1966) portrays, we cannot define laws in migration, which depicts the certainty of migration lies within the uncertainty of migration. The migration pattern itself can be temporarily based on migrant needs. Therefore, differentiating migrant abstract patterns through migrant strategies, trajectories considering future intentions were my last question. It was an evaluating question to identify possible scenarios of how migrant patterns and migrant trajectories can be changed based on migrant needs. The research questions slightly modified as I moved ahead in the thesis process. Since this is a new research in Sri Lankan labour migrant patterns context, I wanted to reflect my capacities as a valid contribution to the migration field.

#### **4.3.2 Selection of Research Respondents**

My respondents came from a mixture of semi-urban and rural parts of Sri Lanka. My informants comprise a mixture of migrant workers. All the respondents had stayed in more than one destination in the GCC. Interviewees were composed of both males and females. The interviewees represented different socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity, and educational levels. All of them were average or above than primary education level, but the level of education differed. Male migrants had a relatively higher level of education compared to women migrants. All males had been employed in Sri Lanka, and most of the females were unemployed prior to their migration. Some migrants continuously re-migrated to the same destination from Sri Lanka. Others had re-migrated to different destinations in the GCC for higher incomes. Also, some respondents had moved to higher tiers from the GCC. I have illustrated these three described migrant portfolio in section 4.6 under table 2,3 and 4. In general, all the above respondents migrated multiple times. They worked in more than one destination in the GCC or outside the region. Table 1 outlines my sample.

**Table 1:** Interviewees: Sri Lankan labour migrants who have worked in GCC

<b>Participants' Characteristics</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>
<b>Age category</b>	
20-29	0 (0%)
30-39	3 (25%)
40-49	4 (33%)
50-69	5 (42%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	4 (33%)
Female	8 (67%)
<b>Level of Education</b>	
≤ Primary	0 (%)
Secondary	9 (75%)
University	3 (25%)
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	2 (17%)
Married	8 (67%)
Widowed	2 (17%)
<b>Type of Skilled Job</b>	
Skilled	3 (25%)
Unskilled	9 (75%)
<b>Occupation</b>	
Service (Domestic work) and Sales workers	8 (67%)
Logistics and Transport	1 (8%)
Managers	2 (17%)
Hospitality	1 (8%)
<b>Current country/region at the point of interviewing</b>	
Sri Lanka	3 (25%)
GCC	5 (42%)
Outside of GCC	4 (33%)

#### **4.4 Data Collection and Techniques: Primary data (Interviews) and Secondary Data**

In order to understand the unique aspects of the migrant trajectories of Sri Lankan labour migrants, I utilised the qualitative method to get the maximum results of my study. The primary form of technique to collect data was interviewing. In ethnographic researches, interviewing is a contextual form of getting to know various aspects of people's social, economic and political lives (Crang & Cook, 2007). Similarly, prior to conducting the interviews, I had a background preparation on similar researches to ask the most knowledgeable questions. Cochrane (1998)

emphasizes investing on a tape recorder and preparing a semi-structured questionnaire simply does not fulfil research goals (Crang & Cook, 2007). Instead, it certainly requires a level of critical thinking to seek and get answers to the central theme of qualitative research (Hay, 2016; Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2002).

There are several methods of interviews. Researchers distinguish between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Crang & Cook, 2007; Hay, 2016). I chose semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a significant list of themes and questions to pose to the respondents allowing flexibility (Valenzuela & Shrivastava, 2002). It does not involve strict rules as the interview questions can be altered depending on the interview flow. Nevertheless, I experienced that the interview guide has been handy as it assured the important topics not to be missed, concentrated me on the research questions, and helped me achieve my research objectives.

A semi-structured interview guide is a flexible tool for small scale research (Drever, 1995). It is a frequently used method in studying qualitative data, experiences and perceptions (Tjora, 2017). Semi-structured interviews allowed my respondents to express their migrant trajectories casually and giving as many details as possible. There was much valuable information that came up during the interviews. I followed my initial questions with elaborated questions as well to divulge their own experiences with expressions and get a thorough understanding of individual situations.

Following Hay (2016) advice, I was cautious not to ask threatening questions where my interviewees feel uncomfortable and not be able to deliver their own thoughts. The main aim was to gather the maximum of data on their long migration journeys and life stories within a limited time frame. The questions composed of ‘why’, ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘where’ helped me map most of the migrant trajectories.

The interviews were conducted in ‘*Sinhala*’: the formal language of Sri Lanka and in English. Before conducting the interview, I asked my interviewees which language they preferred to be interviewed in. For those who preferred to be interviewed in Sinhala, I translated the interview into Sinhala. During the interviews, I followed strategies such as repeating the question, translated into Sinhala for those who preferred to speak in their mother tongue. The interviews were booked in advance, and information about the aim of interview was provided to the

informants prior to the interviews. Even though some interviewees requested more details, such as the interview guide and what sort of questions will be asked before starting the interview.

The flexibility of the interviews allowed the respondents to engage in an open conversation when describing their coping strategies and the migration journeys. The coping strategies and experiences of the respondents were unique and diverse. I approached all the informants through online platforms of Skype, WhatsApp, and other communication channels. First, I approached the respondents over a message and booked a convenient time for them in accordance with the convenient sampling method. Afterwards, I also followed the snowball sampling technique to find more respondents who had migrated to multiple destinations for work. All my interviewees were in different continents and regions when I contacted them. Hence, the most suitable and practical method was contacting them over the phone and via internet.

Along with the literature review, my informal communication with contacts whom I already knew in both the GCC countries and Sri Lanka provided me with imperative guidance regarding how to phrase my interview questions and suitability of time to contact them. My mental preparation, along with written interview guidelines before proceeding towards the interview, have also helped me to cover the diversity of experiences and opinions of my respondents. This approach was applied throughout the interviews. The nature of my study consisted of an exploratory and descriptive study of migrants' experiences and trajectories.

#### **4.5 Secondary Data and Literature Review**

I used secondary data to help my research design and to support my primary data. Secondary data refers to data that are already been analyzed and published (Kothari, 2004). Using secondary data is complementary also widely used research method to support the data obtained from interviews (Hamre, 2019; Shrestha, 2020; Tjora, 2017). Initially, I started exploring related pieces of literature as soon as I decided on my thesis topic. I studied the concepts of circular, serial, and stepwise migration, including other scholars' research done in other regions or countries. During theorizing international labour migration, I reviewed different theories and concepts and learned different scholars' views regarding the subject. Later, once I completed my interviews, I used documents and literature to compare, validate and support my findings. These secondary data included various government and non-

government bodies, books, scholarly articles and other related and reliable sources. Throughout the use of secondary data, I used adequate, reliable, suitable, and most recent available data that are in relevance to my research topic. The various secondary data sources were mostly obtained from the internet. In addition, I also gathered knowledge from hard copies of relevant books and publications as well. These secondary data helped me to connect, reconnect, strengthen and support the findings obtained from my research participants.

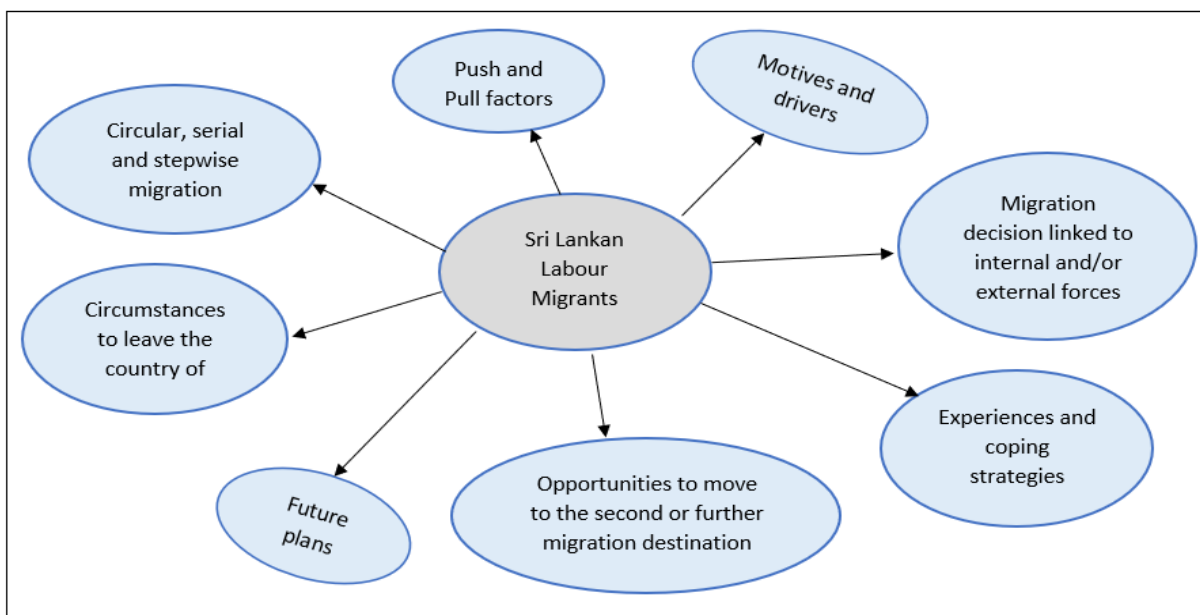
#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

There is no mandatory and exhaustive process involved in qualitative research analysis. The strategies discussed by Crang and Cook (2007) helped me analyse the data. According to Crang and Cook (2007), the data analysis is “*about chopping up, (re)ordering, (re)contextualizing and (re)assembling the data we have so diligently constructed. It’s about translating a messy process into a neat product*” (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 133).

I used several strategies and went through a coding process to analyse my raw data. Most of the raw data from the interviews I considered as very essential and relative to my data analysis. Hence, I collected my data through transcribing into a word document and made separate file folders for each interview. I first started the coding process through ‘categorizing’ technique in the coding process (Leavy, 2014). Categorizing was done by making themes by re-ordering and re-organizing into separate clusters. Those clusters were, for instance, based on possible inter-related actions of migrants, migration patterns and migration decisions. In the meanwhile, I highlighted and made connections in a notepad while I was obtaining and collecting relevant data from primary and secondary sources.

My data analysis mostly involved a non-linear method along with a parallel process of ‘reading’ and ‘doing’ (Crang & Cook, 2007). Then I proceeded with reasoning which guided me to construct arguments and conclusions. Summarising findings, evaluating, and coming into conclusions through migrants’ expression were done altering between deductive and inductive reasoning. At all times, I was cautious about concluding through migrants’ expressions not just on my own. When analysing, I made sure to be empathic, recalling perspectives of my participants while going through the coding process.

Family responsibilities, motives and reasons for the migration decision, prioritizing, ambitions, goals, and appreciation of migrants' development are some of main codes I identified while analysing migrant trajectories and the factors affecting the patterns of the multiple migrations. Even though the analysis process took place after the interview, there were instances where certain analysis process went hand in hand during data collection. Following Cope's advice, I often took notes in the middle of the interviews, which would help me concentrate on relevant expressions and important keywords. This strategy helped me to reflect and make use of connections in the actual data analysis (Cope, 2016). Figure 9 outlines the major analytical categories that emerged during my analysis.



**Figure 9:** Analytical categories

Particular categories of themes that have emerged are illustrated in the figure above. During my analysis, I could identify that there were specific migration patterns and that the migrants' trajectories included different destinations. Table matrix 2, 3 and 4 illustrate the different migratory destination moves of my respondents.

During the theoretical coding of my data, I divided the migrants in three analytical categories:

- 1) Stepwise migrants: Migrants who had worked in the GCC countries and later moved to higher tier countries
- 2) Serial migrants: Migrants who had recurrently migrated to the GCC, to the same countries or by switching between different receiving countries in the region; and
- 3) Returnees: Migrants who worked in GCC countries and moved back to Sri Lanka.

**Table 2:** Multiple migrations to the GCC

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Different Destinations in GCC</b>			
1	Kuwait	Iraq	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait
2	UAE	Qatar	Qatar	
3	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	UAE	
4	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	

While table 2 shows serial migrations to the GCC, table 3 shows onward serial migrations.

**Table 3:** Migrations from the GCC and onwards,

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>From GCC to Multiple Destinations</b>			
5	Saudi Arabia	Canada		
6	UAE	Kuwait	Singapore	
7	Kuwait	Japan	Italy	
8	Saudi Arabia	Kuwait	Cyprus	Germany

Firstly, I focused on the migration trajectories of my migrants. Later, I analysed the time spent in different host countries looking after possible patterns and causal relations. Here, two several additional analytical categories emerged, among others, I distinguished between short and long stays, and between frequent and less frequent remigrations. Table 4 shows that illustration where migrants had multiple immigrations to the same host country.

**Table 4:** Migrants who worked in a specific GCC country with relapses in Sri Lanka

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Time Duration (GCC)</b>		
		Initial migration	Second migration	Third migration
9	Doha Qatar	1 year	3 years to present	
10	Saudi Arabia	13 years	5 years	8 years to present
11	Kuwait	2 years	2 years	
12	UAE	2 years	3 years	

One cannot exclude the presence of some bias because of the interpretative way of analysing the qualitative research. However, I used and made connections through individual migrant

interpretations, inter-relating and analysing how one action affect and influence another. In the empirical part of my study, I use the relevant quotes from the interviews. They are added my interpretations wherever necessary to illustrate migrants' experiences and strengthen the findings in the upcoming empirical chapters of this thesis.

#### **4.7 Reflexivity and Positionality**

Reflexivity and positionality are two central processes that are essential to practice in qualitative research when engaging with human experiences. According to Callaway (1992) '*reflexivity is a continuing mode of self-analysis*' (Callaway 1992, p. 33) while Miled (2019) interprets '*reflexivity is a process to dig deep into who/what we are*' (Miled, 2019, p. 5). I considered reflexivity as a process that ought to go parallelly with the data collection and data analysis. Being reflexive and analytical on a balanced central ground helped me listen to every story in a fresh mind and arrive at conclusions and research findings.

*"There's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all"* (Hall, 1990, p. 18). That cognition helped me to position myself as an 'insider' and 'outsider'. A combination of both help the best to see the findings through the researcher's eye and then evaluate the findings of research participants. I made sure not to involve my emotions into their stories and come into conclusion. Also, every detail was important, not to be bias, and impartial at all times.

I was cognizant that I was an 'insider' and 'outsider' for my research participants. I was aware that, I am from Asian culture, and as a Sri Lankan with temporary residence in Norway, I am also a migrant working part-time jobs even though I came for study and they were in their host countries primarily for work. My insider position was a clear asset because when communicating I realised that I was able to understand them because I was from the same community. I, as the researcher and they as participants were able to build an interaction through both parties' mother tongue. Therefore, I realised that my participants were willing to be open and connected when sharing their experiences. However, I was also an outsider because I am in Norway as a Master student without any personal experience with migrations to the GCC. Meanwhile, my participants were either in or outside of the GCC countries, or former migrant workers who returned to Sri Lanka.



I have tried to have a wholistic viewpoint in my study rather than being occupied by some of my pre-existing ideas about the GCC countries or belief that I might have as an individual coming from the same cultural and national background. I did this by understanding the perspective of all respondents, tallying it with other researchers, and further learning concepts from my supervisor, other friends and students from my home country and elsewhere. Some of my interview participants were related to me. But for me, I was aware of my role as researcher during my interactions with the research participants. Overall, I positioned myself consciously trying to achieve a balanced relationship with the informants altering between various identities, as a researcher, acquaintance and a member from the same community living in a different country.

#### **4.8 Ethical Consideration of the research**

A research is made for the good of others using people's unique experiences and trajectories for study purposes. According to Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001) there are three main components of ethical principles to alleviate minimal or no harm during research. Those are autonomy, beneficence, and justice which represent all the ethical principles that must be followed in a research. Nevertheless, throughout the research, I ensured that it is the researcher's responsibility to protect anonymity, confidentiality, and research interviewees' rights guided by research ethics. In simple terms, ethics refers to avoiding harm of research subjects in a research process (Orb et al., 2001). Ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness (Gajjar, 2013).

In accordance with my university guidelines at NTNU, I obtained the approval from Norwegian Centre for Research Data, in Norway before the start of the research. Upon receiving the ethical approval, I started my thesis process. Prior to the data collection, I contacted potential research participants through a personal message and asked for their voluntariness. Moreover, I have sought their permission in a written consent and voluntary participation before involving them in my research. I mentioned in the copy of the informed consent that "All the information collected in the study will be treated as strictly "confidential" and "No individual information will be released". The research respondents had a thorough understanding of the aim of the research and objectives. Further, I informed my research participants that their data will be analysed only in my master thesis study. Thereby, I provided adequate information about what

is expected from them by giving them the freedom to participate or withdraw from the research interviews. Only and after thorough awareness, I involved my research participants in my study. I was also flexible enough to explain some of their doubts before the start of the interviews. I prioritized their free time to schedule the interview time and adjusted accordingly as most of the research participants were employed. Even though my interviews were not related to highly sensitive information apart from their migration journeys, there were incidents that some migrant mothers were emotional when they recalled their families and children. At that time, giving a pause where necessary, I empathically responded to them making sure that they are not emotionally disturbed.

Likewise, honesty and integrity were continuously maintained throughout the research process. The data are presented in its original form, and no falsified information or false interpretation given. At all times, proper acknowledgement given for the data included in my study in both primary and secondary sources (Gajjar, 2013). When presenting the interviewees' findings and direct quotations, I have given pseudonym names to reassure their anonymity and confidentiality. Further, the recordings and transcripts used in my study were handled with integrity and extra cautiousness, making sure not to expose to the public or anyone else other than myself to protect the confidentiality of all my informants (Arifin, 2018; Dowling, 2005).

#### **4.9 Quality of the Research and Limitations**

The researcher becomes a part of the study improves the quality of the study (Crang & Cook, 2007; Stenbacka, 2001). Identifying 'good data' through semi-structured interviews played a key role in it (Stenbacka, 2001). To achieve my objectives in the study, I entered into the research process with pre-understanding gained from the literature. Being reflective, analytical and critical thinking were my main tools to produce a good research within my limitations. I believed that every word interpreted by my research respondents had a connection to their continuous migration journey as it dealt with the first-hand experience. The concepts of 'validity', 'reliability', 'generalisability' and 'sampling' often come into account when assessing the quality of the research (Mays & Pope, 2000; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001).

Interview participants selected through purposive sampling, who were able to fulfil my purpose of the study was my key tool to accomplish 'sampling', 'validity' and 'reliability'. Similarly, building a healthy interactive connection with my research participants also helped me achieve

these phenomena. The generalizability with specific reference to ‘analytical generalization’ is also considered as another dimension of the quality of a qualitative study (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008). The idea is that my findings can further be utilized as a guide in another research with similar interest or occurrence (Kvale, 1994). Overall, I trust that this research is relevant in studying the labour migration patterns from Sri Lanka and that the findings are valid and reliable can further be generalized in future studies.

As in every study, I came across with some limitations while conducting the study and writing the thesis. I do believe that in-person interviews could have been more impactful for the study. The on-going situation of COVID-19 pandemic restricted me from my travel plans, and I could not conduct some interviews that way I had planned it. Similarly, another limitation was finding the right participants within a given limited time in accordance with my research timeline. Nevertheless, the interview guide was prepared by referring to several scholarly articles, and it proved to be a very useful navigator during the interviews. But I consider that the flexibility of interviews sessions went on for long duration of time in some instances. As the nature of interviews were of semi-structured form, the respondents were willing to share a lot of things which were not related to the scope of the research. Even though at times it was difficult to follow the interview guide and stick to the time allocated, I also learnt skills to suitably manage and direct interview sessions. In contrast to these limitations, I consider that I was able to retrieve sufficient resources material on migration patterns and trajectories through my second method of data collection referring to relevant literature and documents. However, the explicit study of Sri Lankan migration patterns was still limited. This might also have had some limits in theorising and analysis process of the research.

Though there may be some limitations that have been discussed earlier, I have done it with morality and integrity in my methodology and research quality to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Halldorsson & Aastrup, 2003). There is a need to have more study on migration patterns from Sri Lanka to GCC countries, and my study is only a small piece trying to understand the motivation and trajectories of labour migration. I still believe that this study contributes to further research on Sri Lankan labour migrant patterns and trajectories.

#### **4.10 Chapter Summary**

A qualitative approach had been employed in my study, and its relevance for the study has been argued based on different paradigms. The choice of the approach was justified using different theoretical and methodical positions. Semi-structured was my main method of collecting data due to its flexibility and dealt with human experiences. I have provided a detailed description of the data collected for analysis using qualitative data process via categorizing, reasoning, inter-relating and analytical memos. Reflexivity, positionality and ethical considerations were discussed in the last section of the chapter. In addition, I have discussed the quality of the research and limitations of my study. The next three chapters discuss the empirical data analysis, which is the core of my study that include circular, serial and stepwise migrant trajectories of my interview participants. I have discussed my findings with other scholars' findings to compare and contrast to provide a rich understanding with specific reference to Sri Lankan labour migration patterns in GCC.

## CHAPTER 5

### CIRCULAR MIGRATION AND ENHANCED MOBILITY

*“Circular migration has recently been promoted as a triple win solution, bringing benefits to destination countries, origin countries and migrant workers themselves – and a major mechanism to reap development benefits of labour migration. Simply defined, circular migration refers to temporary movements of a repetitive character either formally or informally across borders, usually for work, involving the same migrants.”*

(Wickramasekara, 2011, p. 1)

#### 5.1 Two Way Direction - Virtues of Circular Migration

Virtues of circular migration are often linked to expectations of mutual gains for migrant sending-receiving countries, migrants and their families. While most studies dealing with circular migration patterns have focused on their effects on the home or destination country, there are fewer insights about the experiences of circular migrants and their families. Inspired by that idea, this chapter focuses on empirical evidence of Sri Lankan circular migrant trajectories in the GCC. Interestingly, different socio-economic motivations and determinants can be phased out within Sri Lanka-GCC<sup>9</sup> circular cross-border movements. Firstly, I discuss migrants’ natural preferences for circular migration and the primary factors leading towards their initial migration decision. Secondly, I present the causes and consequences of the return of the migrants. Thirdly, I explore the immediate causes of re-migration manifesting a circular migration pattern. In the following section, I examine the settlement of short-term migrants, or more specifically, circular migrants who engage in repeated short periods of work in a specific country in the GCC. Here I also pay attention to how blurred is the information concerning their next move or the forthcoming phase of their uncertain migrant trajectory. The primary purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to serve as a framework to the volume of data by providing a common ground to the different contributions.

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<sup>9</sup> Here, I discuss in relation to a specific GCC country destination

GCC has hosted a large transient migrant population for decades, and we can see circular migration as being spontaneous. Conventionally, a prospective migrant to GCC requires to pay fees to recruitment agencies and brokers located in the home and host countries. Most Gulf employers pay the airfare, passport, and medical costs for the prospective migrant. Many of these workers are low-skilled, particularly involved in the construction sector, sanitation, transportation, hospitality, health care, and the domestic sector (Shah, 2013). Wickramasekara (2011) confirms the visibility of a long-stranding contract workers system with Asians in the Middle East. Therefore, I argue that efforts trying to account for circular migration should also take into account how the lived experiences of circular migrants occur in spontaneous circular occurrences. Studying circular migration in the GCC is important. My results displayed that individual motives together with push and pull factors affected continuous migrants' decision for circular mobility. In addition, macro-level policies block the possibility of permanent settlement and citizenship, which created more migrant moves, such as the Kafala System of managing foreign employees (Longva, 1999).

## **5.2 Is circular migration a natural preference?**

Some scholars argue that circulation is not necessarily an ideal scenario expected by migrants because migrants naturally would prefer not to be separated from their families in host societies due to immigration restrictions (Priya & Farrington, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2011). Conversely, Newland (2009) claims that circular migration is a “natural preference” of migrants. Yet, according to some of my informants, circular migration was “not a natural preference.” For them, circular migration has occurred as a result of “no-option” circumstance while having “a preferred option.” This will be clarified further in upcoming sections. I also explain how internal and external barriers hinder migrants’ country preferences.

Shah (2013) claims that, despite the vulnerability of the migration system, GCC has the vital feature of providing economies for the household, particularly in South Asia and some African countries. This method works well as certain countries in GCC have a higher demand for low-skilled occupations. Statistics show that migrants from Sri Lanka are more in demand in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Qatar (ILO, 2017). My findings are also in line with the above analysis. Without a doubt, labour hiring companies as well are reliant on higher labour demand. Therefore, when migrants go through consultation agencies, they may not get the preferred country as the first available option. Many of my respondents were employed in Kuwait, Saudi

Arabia, Qatar and UAE. Even though we see similar labour hiring policies and systems in GCC countries, I found some migrants still show a little interest in particular GCC countries. For instance, most domestic workers prefer Kuwait compared to Saudi Arabia (SA). They assert working in Kuwait has fewer restrictions, and the working environment is better than in SA. One of my respondents mentioned:

*We are not waiting for the best country option because you never know the waiting time. And there are many people like us waiting to migrate. It is better to grab the first available option than to regret later. But according to my experience, I like working in Kuwait than in Saudi Arabia. Also, I will choose the same in the future. The main reasons are less restrictions and it is easy to get adapted. But, workwise, I don't think there are vast differences in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia because eventually, we are going to do the same job. (Chamila; female, 49 years)*

As we can see, migrants might go for the first available opportunity, even if it may not be the natural preference. As this migrant depicts, she is not entirely seemed to concern about the country but has gained knowledge on 'what is the slighter better option given the two countries'. Wickramasekara (2011) articulates that many of the temporary migrants go through circularity migrations not out of choice but because of the framework of the employer sponsorship system, which does not allow the migrant to stay for longer periods. It was also noticeable in my interviews that about two-thirds of the migrants were willing to return home after their initial migration. Most of my respondents were not certain of their future migration plans at their initial move. Knowing the strict immigration policies, they did not expect or plan for family reunification in the host country. Also, some migrants were not willing to go back and forth leaving families and loved ones in difficult situations, especially parents with small children. The temporary working system is another element that migrants would rather do without. For instance, one migrant parent mentioned:

*Leaving my children behind always breaks my heart. Every time I travel, the pain is much heavier than the previous time. Even when the pay was good in Kuwait, I prepared myself to go back to the apparel factory in my village because I want to be with my children. I did not like to go back and forth several times. Rather I would choose to work continuously for a longer period and save money before I permanently return*

*home. In that way, the pain happens only once, and I can be happy when I return because there is no going back. (Kumari; female, 46 years)*

She has been migrating to the same country (Kuwait) two times. Her words express the importance of family bond over economic concerns. The priority given to her children is an indicator that she would not prefer subsequent migration. As we can see, some migrants like Kumari are not willing to go back and forth several times. Having such thoughts, if migrants engage in recurrent movements, certainly it may not be out of natural preference.

A correspondent study done by the POEA<sup>10</sup> (2002) has found that a combination of micro-macro factors largely contributing towards circular migration. The study shows that about 70-80 per cent of Filipino workers become circular migrants without natural preference. Fewer savings upon return, failed attempts of setting up businesses due to lack of training and information on business conditions in the Philippines make subsequent migrations a forced choice rather than a voluntary decision (Gabriela, 2003). Taking that into consideration, circular migration appears as two sides of the same coin. It can be favourable as long as it is a desirable situation. But if migrants subsequently choose to migrate without free will, it is a decision that is forced, unwilling rather than desirable. However, the basic issue is whether migrants have a free choice in the circular migration.

As I mentioned earlier, the employment agents<sup>11</sup> in Sri Lanka are the ones who offer the destination to migrants depending on the employer vacancies. The vacancies are mainly from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Therefore, migrants automatically become circular migrants due to market factors. Some migrants may not intentionally prefer to get the first option. But they make it a choice out of their free will to better themselves and their family. My primary findings, along with previous research evidence, show that natural preference of circular migration is not a strong determinant, but it may result rather as a strategy to avoid the possible risk of income failure.

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<sup>10</sup> The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration

<sup>11</sup> Legal agents are operated under ministry of foreign employment in Sri Lanka



### 5.3 One-Shot migration - the first phase of initial Migration decision

Massey (1989) argues that the migration decision is constantly diverse and multiple. As Stark and Taylor (1991) affirm, migration decision is often a household strategy to diversify risk and accumulate capital for investment in the developing countries. Most migration streams begin due to economic concerns followed by a cumulative causation approach.<sup>12</sup> All participants described the prime migration decisions behind their first migration moves. It was an unprecedented step in their migration cycle. Some migrants initially assumed only one emigration and immigration. Nonetheless, all of my interviewees ended up engaging in a 'more than one migration cycle.

*Leela; one of my migrants stated that one of the main reasons for her to migrate was the loss of her husband's business, as it was a substantial economic loss. She had to migrate as a solution for her family's finance difficulties. It was a tough decision for her to make as her kids were small and needed her attention. The huge financial debt, on the other hand forced her to migrate to cover both medical expenses, family expenses and the additional debt due to the loss of the family business. Migration for work was the best solution as she could not support her family economy with an average income in Sri Lanka. In her opinion, it was not a voluntary choice to migrate but a consequence of her economic situation.*

Research conducted by Gamburd (2010b) found out that Sri Lankan migrant women play a significant financial role in the household or sometimes become the sole breadwinners. She explains that migrant women tend to see moving to the Middle East as the only available economic alternative due to the poor pay of locally available jobs, sometimes five times lower than what they can earn in the Middle East. My findings presented most migrant parents as sole breadwinners of the family, irrespective of gender. Similarly, I found that married individuals primarily initiate the migration decision to support the family's daily consumption needs and educate children based on a collective family decision. This situation was visible even among unmarried participants. Lahiru; one of my participants, migrated due to unsatisfactory wages and to establish personal growth in addition to some of his family responsibilities. He stated:

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<sup>12</sup> Causation [of migration] is cumulative in that each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely (Massey et al., 1993a, p. 451).

*I worked in a well-reputed bank in Sri Lanka. Even after working for almost four years, I felt there is nothing much I have done for myself except covering monthly expenses. And in Colombo it is not easy to save if you are living on your own. I barely saved any money during these years. I needed some cash for my sister's wedding and to buy a vehicle for myself. As I am the only boy in the family, I am automatically filled with responsibilities. That is why I went via an agency and found this job in Qatar. Even though it is a sales representative job, I earn a much better salary than in Sri Lanka. (Lahiru; male, 30 years)*

Lahiru's interpretation displays how individuals compare wage differences between what they can earn in Sri Lanka and abroad, especially if they are professionals or depending on their job qualifications. As Sumulong and Zhai (2008) emphasise, the income gap between developing and developed countries plays a significant role in attracting migrants to capital abundant and labour scarce countries such as Qatar. Therefore, comparative income differences between the country of origin and country of destination push skilled professionals to initiate the migration decision.

I realized that most of my respondents' decision to migrate was collectively taken within the family. Many of my respondents used migration strategy as a typical behaviour of "risk-sharing" against income loss (Castles et al., 2019). Many of my respondents stated that traditional agricultural work, work in private organisations and other manual work as possible income risks and failures. Also, I discovered that even the educated tend to migrate for higher wages in GCC or other regions. Some other initial migration decision factors were needed to secure an additional income source or fulfil a specific need.<sup>13</sup>

Some secondary findings have explained that another cluster of households living in Sri Lanka in absolute poverty also seeking migration (Karunaratne, 2012). These families are hardly able to feed their families. For instance, a tea-plucker in Sri Lanka, a semi-skilled or unskilled worker, earns a monthly salary within a range of fifty USD to seventy-five USD. Despite their profession, people find it challenging to cover their minimum expenses with current standards of living styles (Arumainayagam & Morais, 2020; Sriskandarajah, 2002). As a result,

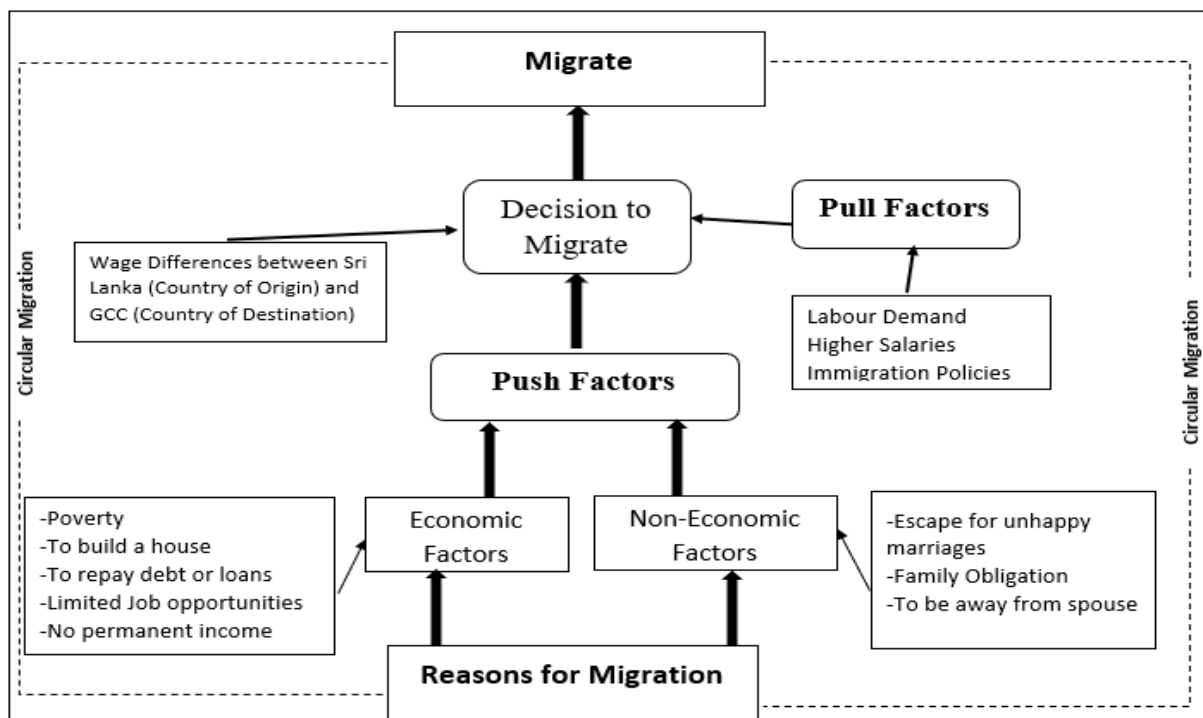
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<sup>13</sup> Specific needs include to pay a debt, to support a child's marriage, to complete a house etc.

impoverished people who lack any other possible alternatives for earning money choose to emigrate.

Swarnalatha Ukwatta (2010) has found out that there are also non-economic reasons for migration. To distance themselves from unhappy marriages, to escape from their husbands or due to domestic violence count among those factors. Additionally, according to Swarnalatha Ukwatta (2010), macro factors such as structural changes in the economy, migration policies, changes in women's role also initiate migration decision. However, she has pointed out that those reasons do not rank as high as economic reasons.

By drawing examples from my interviews complemented by secondary researches, I argue that the majority of the migrants make the decision to migrate based on economic reasons. Willingly or unwillingly, migrants choose to migrate, knowing they can contribute more to the family's finance through remittances.



**Figure 10:** The Decision-making process of Sri Lankan migrant workers – Source: Own compilation

Figure 10 indicates Sri Lankan migrant workers' decision-making process based on my primary and secondary data explorations. I have shown the reasons for migration through two

main arrows, economic and non-economic factors. Those are push and pull factors initiating the migration decision. Push factors come from the country of origin, while pull factors come from the receiving country. In the figure, I have connected “reasons for migration” and “migrate” with a dashed line. Based on my findings, I indicate that the same push and pull factors of the initial migration may affect circular migration or repeated migration.

Research conducted by Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2020) has found out that pull factors such as wage differences or salary differences between SL and GCC and the nature of immigration policies attract Sri Lankan migrations to GCC. According to the rational theory, individuals act as resourceful actors who select from a set of alternatives and opportunities (Browning, Halcli, & Webster, 1999). Overall, I have identified that most of my interviewees were strategic enough to follow a cost-benefit approach to make the best rational choice when initiating the migration decision.

#### **5.4 Return migration and the transition period at home**

*“Overseas migration for even comparatively short spells facilitates not only the accumulation of financial capital on a scale not otherwise possible but also the accumulation of new useful skills that increase enterprise investment on return” (McCormick & Wahba, 2003, p. 515).*

The return to home could be voluntary or forced, based on migrants’ preference. Upon the end of their first contract, some of my interviewees moved back to Sri Lanka with no further migrating plans. One of my respondents said:

*It was my first experience working abroad and living in another country. That was a tough time. I was not able to adapt to a different working environment. It was challenging to interact with the people at work because I did not get to deal with the same calibre of people. Usually, I love to have an outgoing and social life. It was difficult in Doha as I had to work with Muslims. Most of my co-workers were Pakistani. I felt we did not have the same calibre, and I had difficulties to work. Therefore, I decided to come back to Sri Lanka once I finished my first year. My options were to start something on my own or get a job in a better company. I had some savings that I thought I could also invest in the stock exchange. (Sumudu; male, 30 years, living in Qatar)*

Sumudu's story shows that a new environment and different lifestyles altered his initial migration plans. My findings also demonstrate that in addition to economic concerns, a decent working environment, similar calibre of peer and social life in the host country are factors to be considered in the analysis. Migrants tend to compare what they had in their country of origin and the host country. If they are not satisfied, some migrants reverse their migration plans and return. As Borjas and Bratsberg (1994) argue, a return may occur due to a revision of the initial migration plan or failure in achieving initial migration targets. Higher returns, location-specific preferences, and higher utility for consumption at home are also argued as reasons for return migration (Djajić & Milbourne, 1988; Mesnard, 2004). This was visible in Lalith's migrant trajectory who shared this with me:

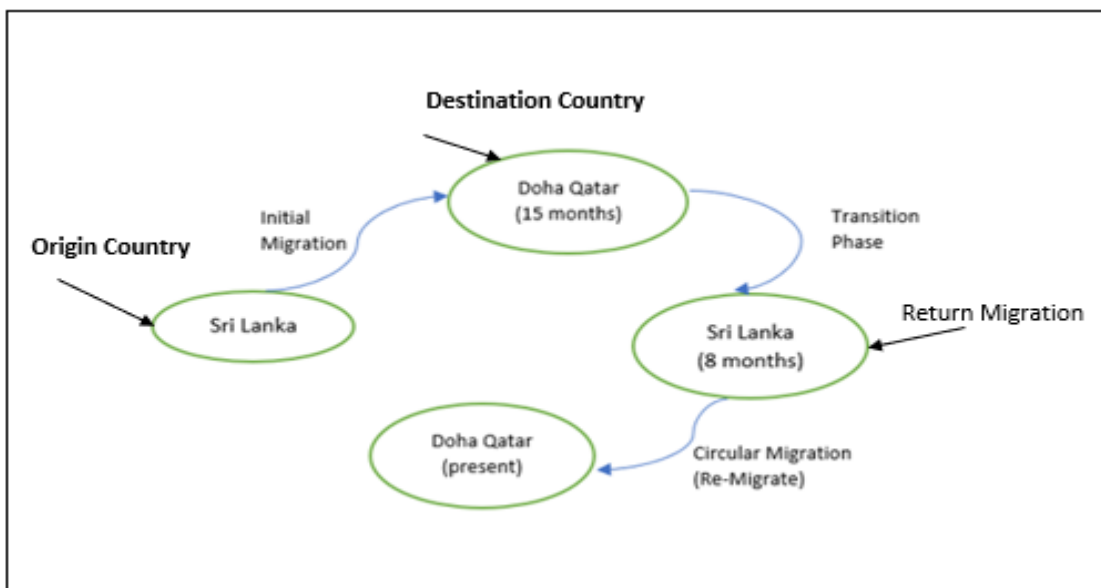
*On two occasions, I resigned from my company in SA and returned home. Half of my life was only about living abroad for work. That is why I tried to come home two times and live with my family. I even started a business in Sri Lanka with my savings so not to have future worries. Unfortunately, it did not meet my expectations. I started a restaurant in my hometown. The income was almost two times less than what I earned in SA. It generated a loss ultimately, and I sold the restaurant to recover the initial venture. On top of that, my younger child faced a severe health issue. I realised that the best solution was to move back. Even though I am far away from my family, I feel it is risk-free. And I was fortunate enough to get back the job from the same company in both times. (Lalith; male, 51 years)*

Lalith's story expresses that having earned substantial rewards from working abroad, individuals' wish to settle down with the family they belong to. His preferred location was home. He also had enough savings, and his higher purchasing power motivated him to return home. As Vadean and Piracha (2009) argue, increased purchasing power and accumulated capital can result in return migration. In general, the primary goals for migrant workers are to gain higher earnings abroad and related remittances, utilise skills acquired in the home country and reunite with their family. Increasing the possibility of good income upon return through investments in business and enterprise development are further rewards.

## 5.5 Circular move initiates with Re-migration

*“What appears to be a conscious decision for an extended stay is, often, revealed as a series of economic catastrophes, located both at home and abroad that are a direct result of the exploitative relations that lock the migrant in a never-ending cycle of debt-driven servitude”* (Babar & Gardner, 2016, p. 58).

Kamal (30 years), who works in Qatar said that *even though he had made up his mind to stay in Sri Lanka, he reversed his plan due to lower wages. He indicated that what he earned as an executive in a well-reputed bank in Sri Lanka was not even enough to cover his own expenses. He had at times to contract loans. Hence, for his benefit, he decided to move back. Kamal approached his connections and network to find employment. He was not willing to go through an agency to save money and time. The familiarity of the places, lower cost of living compared to other GCC countries are his reasons for choosing Qatar.* Kamal’s trajectory is presented in figure 11.



**Figure 11:** Circular Migration Pathway of Kamal

Kamal is an unmarried migrant. His story highlights that having no family commitments, unmarried migrants may also find it challenging to have a decent lifestyle in Sri Lanka. One reason is that salaries are not enough compared to the host country. Lower salary scales and fewer comfort in life push migrants to the previous destination in order to sustain their expenses and lifestyles. Many migrants such as Kamal feels the initial phase of migration is associated

with high levels of uncertainty. By contrast, upon their return, migrants get familiar with the customs, culture, and language of the host country, in addition to widening their network. As a result, they tend to emigrate to the same destination based on previous experiences. In my study, I define the second emigration as the first circular move. As Hill (1987) indicates, the choice of circular migration can be considered an integral part of the initial migration decision. Vadean and Piracha (2009) argue that given the higher income opportunities abroad and preference for living at home, an individual path of residence in the home and host countries is decided according to its utility and is maximised by choosing the optimal amount of time spent abroad as well as the frequency of trips (Vadean & Piracha, 2009, p. 3).

Gamburd (2015) claims, '*remittances create further obligations within the family*' (Gamburd, 2015, p. 3). According to her study on remittances and intergenerational family obligations among Sri Lankan migrant workers, duties and obligations are the causes of subsequent migrations. She illustrates how circular and subsequent migration can be initiated when no further migrations were planned after the return. Comparably, Locke (2013) argues when people are not able to meet demands at home, they re-migrate in order to support their families. Re-migration plans are often made through family negotiations with children and spouse.<sup>14</sup> According to Huijsmans (2013), migration decision is an '*intergenerational contract between parents and children*' (Huijsmans, 2013, p. 300).

Migrants' express preferences for some places over others depend on potential opportunities in destinations with similar economic, social and political opportunities. At the same time, choosing a previous destination also comes with income comparison of two past destinations with working experience. It was shown in my findings as well. For instance, Lalith's migrant trajectory illustrates that his repetitive migrations occurred due to unsuccessful attempts at making profits in the home country. Family complications and the inability to achieve expected financial stabilisation at home further pushed him to re-migrate. Along with that, his migration network contributed to his circular mobility. He knew his former employer, and they were flexible enough to hire him back.

A study conducted by Hugo (2013) found out that circular migrants can find it challenging to re-integrate in the origin society. Reasons can be difficulties to re-enter the labour market,

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<sup>14</sup> Or immediate family members and close family members such as grandparents.

enhanced exposure to different working environments, or negative effects on interpersonal relationships. On this matter, my interviewees often used to compare the working environments in Sri Lanka and working environments in the GCC. Upon return, some of my respondents found it challenging to get adapted to the working environments in Sri Lanka. One of my informants stated that:

*if a person has worked abroad, he would not be glad to work again in Sri Lanka for an average salary. It is because the wages are less than half of what they used to make in GCC. They would return intending to start their own business. Else, another very personal reason would be that they were not able to commit themselves to working abroad. (Lahiru; male, 30 years)*

Another observation was that migrants are not willing to commit for years of planning at home to generate revenue from their remittances. Instead, they find re-migration more convenient and less hazardous. “*Working in GCC is hassle-free*” was one of my informants’ statements based on his working experience in Sri Lanka after his return. Remigrations happen in the nexus of push and pull forces. They should also be related to the cost of migration and to the emerging opportunities. One informant said:

*My second migration happened because of my flatmate, with whom I used to share accommodation during my first employment. My flatmate opened his own business in Doha and invited me to come and work with him. (SL migrant living in Doha, Qatar)*

In this instance, the repetition of the moves was caused by peer influence. The familiarity of the working environment was another consideration. As we can see, some of my interviewees who decided to circulate had prior knowledge of the destination. They had established friendships or work relations on their first trip in the host country. For most, finding decent, better-paying jobs is at the heart of their quest to move repeatedly. In general, I found that migrants prefer to choose the same destination based on their previous experience, networks and social freedom.

Based on my respondents’ answers and other secondary data, I interpret the contractually promised wage levels in the Gulf states to remain competitive and substantially surpass salary levels in Sri Lanka just like any other South Asian countries from which many migrants come



(Mohammad, 2011; Rahman, 2012). Moreover, previous research and my findings indicate wage differentials between Sri Lanka and the foreign labour market encourage migrants to move in and out from Sri Lanka to high wage destinations in GCC or similar destinations (Swarnalatha Ukwatta, 2010; Weber & Saarela, 2019). The same economically grounded justification for migration is so widespread in the migrants' narratives about the decision to come to the Gulf that it explains why, in the face of such difficulties, men and women continue to stream to their preferred migration country. In other words, migrants are in a nonstop voyage seeking to better their situation through re-return followed by re-migration to the same destination.

## **5.6 Circular migration as a process of returning home**

Working migrants are not permitted to settle permanently in the GCC. Upon their return, many find their savings or investments are not enough to support them and result in re-emigration. In such cases, circularity is not freely chosen but compelled by both regulations and circumstances. On the contrary, some migrants have no choice other than staying at home even with the burdens. In the circular migration journey, I found that most permanently returned migrants were likely to be females. A similar study on circular migration in the context of the European East-West migration experience found that permanent return occurs due to the following,

- family reasons,
- failed migration attempts,
- fulfilment of a savings target or
- negative selection of reasons that generated the initial migration flow (Vadean & Piracha, 2009).

Comparing to the above study, my findings mostly show family reasons and fulfilment of savings target. In many of my migrants' stories, migrant parents return home intending to reconnect with their family and community. Most returnees were domestic workers and particularly mothers. One of my circular returnees described:

*I am happy that I could help in stabilising my family's finance by paying off a huge debt. In both return times, there were not much savings left after paying off loans and clearing off mortgages. Even our house was about to be foreclosed. Unfortunately, I*

*cannot make my mind to go another time because of my children. (Swarna; female, 61 years).*

Her thoughts depicted it would be great if she could migrate back because of higher returns in Kuwait. Nevertheless, she found a way to help her family economically by working in the same clothing factory that she used to work before her migration. Moreover, she has no idea to re-migrate as well. Thus, family obligations hinder further migration opportunities in spite of capabilities. Kusum is another circular returned migrant. She mentioned:

*I have no intentions to re-migrate because of my two little children. They are in the right age, yearning for my affection. Besides, even if I am willing, my husband will not allow me to leave the kids because he works away from home. So, I don't think I can go abroad again with such responsibilities. My migration ended just after I got married. But during that time, I could save enough money for my wedding, buy jewellery and help build our house. When I remember those times, I think it will be nice if I could get an opportunity to re-migrate. But then again, I think it is impractical. By the time when my children grow older, my age will be a barrier to emigrate. Also, I am not sure whether I can work as hard as how I used to work in those days. You see, we are not getting any younger. (Kusum; female, 46 years)*

Here both migrant trajectories took place owing to family reasons, and similarly a partial fulfilment of initial migration targets. Both returnees showed their willingness towards a re-migration and interpreted what blocked them from migrating. In fact, GCC attracts semi-skilled or unskilled workers such as domestic workers and therefore can sustain in GCC countries at least for a couple of more years ahead. Therefore, I argue that migration decision is subjected to alter any given time. The reason is the growth of development in terms of economic and social status mostly thrives towards more migratory moves despite strict labour policies and integration in GCC (Shah, 2004). My research, along with other studies show that transnational circular migration can be identified as a profit-seeking industry for most of the unskilled workers (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Iketaki, 2018). While knowing that, permanent return migration may always not be an intentional or self-willed decision.

## 5.7 What next?

Labour migrants in the GCC are intensely trapped in a complex web of household relations and dependencies. I explored that married migrants encounter this challenge when migrating and returning multiple times. The well-being of the extended family could come before the individual migrants' interests when deciding to migrate for work. Additionally, recent dynamics in international migration are also notable. Migration is increasingly projected as a powerful tool that can buy power and wealth for those from a society mired in economic stagnation and social immobility (King & Skeldon, 2010).

As argued by Skeldon (2016), the circular migrant engages in a regular and repetitive series of outward and return movements between an origin and a destination or destinations; and that the circular migrant is free to return at any time. He further says that the very fact that a migrant is moving through some form of institutional labour framework that regulates his or her movement essentially excludes that person from being a circular migrant in the strict sense of the term. This point was demonstrated in my anthropological study. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to identify the changes in the movements as they can be very spontaneous, and then the pattern could change depending on the migrant's decision. For example, the first phase of a migrant circulating back and forth between the destination country and the home country may change if the migrant decides to move to another country, possibly to a higher paying off country or similar destination. Anju Paul (2011) emphasises higher-paying off countries, or higher tiers are mostly in the West and well-developed countries. In that sense, initial circular pattern may transform into serial or stepwise migration patterns.

Nevertheless, according to some scholars, the ideal type of circular migration could also be used as a risk-reduction strategy based around the household; the impact is yet likely to be generally positive (Newland, 2009; UNEC, 2016). Since absences are short, the purpose of the migration is to achieve some objective set within the household. Similarly, family ties also have conflicting effects on migration. Vadean and Piracha (2009) have found that being married has increased the probability of at least one spouse working abroad to reduce income risk.

On the other hand, the low size of a household reduces the likelihood of being a migrant. The reasons may pertain to social ties within the family, perhaps an increase in the emotional cost

of migration. This was evidently shown in my respondents' answers, as well. When children of migrant families begin to live away from home, get married or find an income for themselves, it lessens the responsibilities of their parents. That also reduces the number of trips away from home. Much of the research on such "multilocational livelihood strategies" suggests that "*circular migration either improves living standards or, at worst, prevents a further downward slide into poverty*" (Priya & Farrington, 2009, pp. 10-11). As Wickramasekara (2014) emphasises, circular migration seldom allows for family unification due to immigration restrictions imposed by destination countries, and it is difficult to suggest that migrants naturally prefer to be without their families in host societies.

## **5.8 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have analysed lived experiences of migrants who in some way or another, fit the patterns that typify circular migration. Initially, I presented the experiences of my informants regarding the first "one-shot" migration decision. The decision process to migrate to the Gulf lies typically not on the individual but the family (and, in the case of South Asia, the extended family). The family may or may not have extensive information about the wages and conditions migrants potentially face in the Gulf states. I have also contended that the economic rationale for migration, while undoubtedly important, is often not the only factor involved in the decision to migrate.

Utilising the concept of structural violence, we can begin to connect the low wage levels and lack of opportunities in the home country. The fact that many of these potential migrants face in their homeland a much more comprehensive array of social and political forces is intricately intertwined with the decision to migrate to the Gulf. Wage differentials between Sri Lanka and foreign labour markets also encouraged my informants to reverse their migration decision. The responders indicated family reasons as primary reasons to migrate overseas repeatedly, where they could have higher comparative savings than residing in the origin country. I have also mentioned how the initial migration move expanded into a process of circular migration. Under the section titled "what next" I have mentioned the uncertain future of the circular migrants as they try to figure out what would be their next step due to push and pull factors in the country of origin and the host country. In each migrant trajectory, migrants ensure the cost-benefit calculations and choose the best available option.

In concluding, I explained circular migration as a generic concept in the sense of spontaneous movements within a liberalised migration framework where migrant workers have the choice to move back and forth across borders. However, many motives underlie the migrants' decision to move back and forth, voluntary or involuntary preliminary decision making, forced or willing and surrounded by macro and micro factors to choose the same destination. Likewise, I have presented migrant trajectories from initial migration moves, transition periods and re-return movements in the previous host country to illustrate the circular migration patterns.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCEPTUALISING SERIAL MIGRATION

*The concept of serial labour migration contributes to the migration literature by providing a holistic analysis of the migration process of temporary labour migrants. In doing so, it shifts from a singular focus on the process of emigration, integration, or return toward an examination of each stage as a co-constitutive step in the migration cycle itself.*

(Parreñas et al., 2019, p. 1231)

#### **Introduction**

As we have discussed already, circular migration is premised on the repetition of movement between a specific sending and receiving country or a seasonal flow. However, studies show that many temporary contract migrant workers, whether from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, or the Philippines, are likely to migrate to more than one destination in the course of their labour migration histories (Chin, 2013; Hwang, 2018; Parreñas et al., 2019). GCC has a large transnational migration flow despite its variety of integration restrictions. This platform allows migrants to change between several host destinations in the GCC (Carling, 2012; Gulf Research Center, 2019; Valenta, 2020). Here I examine how Sri Lankan migrant workers in the GCC create serial labour migration patterns through various transnational practices. I discuss the micro conditions that have given rise to serial mobility in the migrant's life cycle. Some studies acknowledge that low wage workers are mostly engaged in a continuous migration cycle with various migration patterns in GCC destinations (Silvey & Parreñas, 2019; Valenta, 2020). In addition, I have identified that serial migration patterns differ from low wage workers to skilled professionals.

#### **6.1 Modes of initiating itinerant migrant patterns.**

Many migrant workers who aspire to go to GCC countries must go through labour recruitment agencies. These agencies are certified by the host state and authorised by the home country government. One of the 'Kafala' system requirements is that labour is hired based on a working contract (Longva, 1999). The temporary work contract offered to migrant workers in the GCC

usually lasts for a period of two years with a possible option for renewal. If migrants wish to extend their stay, visa renewals are available given the approval of hired employer in GCC (Murray, 2013).

There are also other ways and means where migrants arrive in GCC through personal networks, generally through visit visa (Dito, 2008). Migrants use this approach as a strategy to find a job of their interest, and interestingly most end up getting a job (Neupane, 2019; Valenta, 2020). Some of my participants also mentioned that they are aware of many Sri Lankan migrant workers who follow that strategy, but most are skilled workers. What they say is that going solitarily to find a job in GCC is more advantageous and inexpensive. This way, it allows exploring working conditions in any number of companies, possibly ending up with several different options (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2020). One of my research participants working in Qatar shared his story. I depict his migration journey through serial labour migration steps and how he arranged a visiting visa to find work in GCC:

*I got the opportunity to move to the Middle East, thanks to my aunt, who was working in Dubai. She encouraged me to come for a visit to Dubai. I grabbed this chance and went to Dubai on a tourist visa for three months, intending to search for a job. It was an exciting prospect for me because I had banking experience. Luckily, I got my first job in the UAE in a well-known bank and worked for approximately seven years before moving to Qatar. (Hasitha; male, 31 years)*

This informant describes his strategic experiences of coming to GCC via a visit visa and obtaining a job offer in the UAE. I identified that most respondents preferred to go on their own to avoid additional manpower charges. But also, many participants who went for low skilled work did not want to get a risk as finding a job is not guaranteed. Therefore, they chose a secure option going through a manpower agency with guaranteed work above their preferences. Nevertheless, migrants such as Hasitha's opinion is that exploring the job market is better than directly coming through a manpower agency in the home country. From his own experience, he indicated that if migrants come with talent and experience, they can end up in a well-paid company. Also, this approach is comparatively a more migrant-friendlier option than going through a manpower agency. He further explained that his salary would have been considerably less if he had come through a labour recruiting company. Also, he would have had no other choice except to work for the company he had arranged to come to. From my

observation, I noted that this characteristic mainly visible among skilled workers, mostly in Qatar and UAE. For instance, I identified from Hasitha's migration trajectory that he had a wider network, professional qualifications, working experience, and he is a person who is continuously looking for better opportunities. In addition, he is updating himself through professional business websites such as 'LinkedIn', 'Glassdoor' and 'Indeed'. He indeed got his recent opportunity through one of these websites. Therefore, professionals and skilled workers moving across GCC countries seeking better-paid jobs are possible as they hold the capacity to compete in the job market. Similar studies also have explored how immigrants from South Asia have followed comparable strategies to gain working permits in GCC countries (Ali, 2011; R. Skeldon, 2012).

From the migrant views, I observed that many are concerned about the renewal of their work contract. It was primarily visible amongst male migrants. Female migrants were also willing to extend, but they were more emotionally attached to the family. Hence, as soon as their contract ends, or in between, they prefer to visit Sri Lanka. Once returned, their migration cycle becomes diverse as it contains some more extended periods in the home country.

On the contrary, the itinerary cycle of men was mainly visible within the GCC region. They mostly return home for shorter visits. I identified that male migrants try their best to renew visa while working. In line with this finding, studies show that some migrant workers commonly extend their stay in the GCC for decades by switching jobs and companies. Before the work permit expiry, the migrant applies for visa extensions to avoid any longer stays in the home country (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Gardener, 2011). In the recent past, the majority of Sri Lankan migrant workers went for foreign employment through labour hiring agencies. Until the recent years to 2014 or so; about 60 per cent of the migrant workers used this method (ILO, 2019). As we have evidenced through primary and secondary data, there has been a recent shift to a preferred recruitment mode used by workers. As SLBFE data from 2017 suggests, workers prefer to migrate through the support of personal networks rather than through a registered recruitment agent. In fact, in 2017, more than 62 per cent of (registered) migrant workers migrated through private sources without an intermediary (called "self-basis") (ILO, 2017).

One of my more interesting findings was that all the interviewees found it easy to move between multiple destinations. Moving between countries is considered a useful experience for comparing the lifestyles and different employers. For some migrants, this constitutes an



advantage enabling them to choose the most efficient and best option among the countries they have worked in. One of my informants, a domestic worker, Nalini (48 years old), stated that she migrated to various countries in the GCC. *Her first destination was Saudi Arabia. After her contract, she came back to Sri Lanka. By the time her contract came to an end, she had decided that she would want to move to Kuwait, not Saudi Arabia. The reason was she wanted to get a different experience and work under a different employer. Even though unexpected family problems delayed her migration decision, she moved to Kuwait as she planned. After finishing her contract, she wanted to move to Dubai. During her third migration, she explained that different salary scales, working environment and social freedom encouraged her to move to Kuwait again. Currently, she is in Kuwait for a two-year work contract.* Including her and many other participants showed that self-experiences in the migration journey, financial needs, and temporariness of contracts are substantial factors in serial migration moves throughout the migrant life cycle. These itinerary patterns also happen as a cause of going through manpower agencies, and this feature was predominantly visible among domestic workers, including shorter to more extended periods of stays in the home country. Additionally, scholars have shown that the serial migration pattern is one of the labour migrant pathways used in the era of globalisation (Valenta, 2020; Zufferey, 2019).

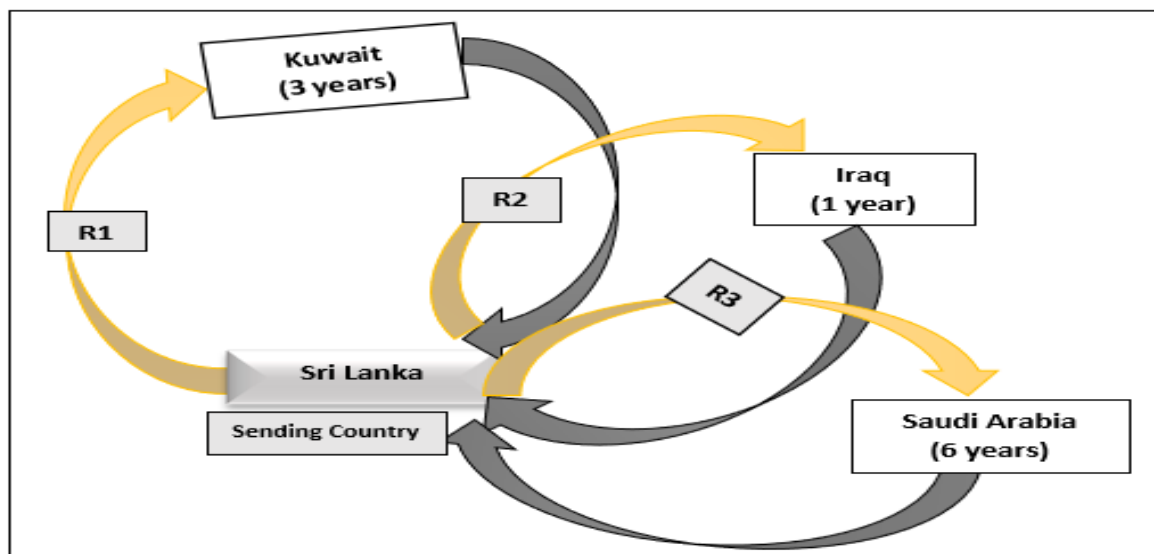
## **6.2 Patterns of Serial Migration**

Serial migrations imply that migrants engage in various complex migrant trajectories and move across several countries (Valenta, 2020). When serial migrants move to a third nation, they conduct a kind of implicit comparative social study. The comparisons of bureaucracies, social norms, and political systems move beyond simple contrasts of the new country's ways with those they knew at home. Whatever educational background a serial migrant has, he/she utilises a practical sense of problems posed by an increasingly interconnected international system (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000; Ossman, 2004). Below mentioned is an example of a complex serial migration story of a domestic worker.

*Deepika, a 56-year-old serial labour migrant, migrated first when she just turned 18. She migrated through a labour recruiting agency in a Nittambuwa suburb area, in Sri Lanka directed by one of her friends. Usually, the available job offers eventually determine a particular employer and destination country in the Middle East. Kuwait was her first opportunity, where she worked for three years. After that, she returned to Sri Lanka to take*

care of her mom due to her ill health. Deepika stayed in Sri Lanka for almost a year. When her mother's health got better, she wanted to move to Bagdad in Iraq as her sister was working there. The ability to speak Arabic was an added requirement when applying for a position in Iraq through the agency. Despite this, the contract period was only for one year. When she returned, she had a long pause in Sri Lanka being a housewife and taking care of kids close to a decade. As her family had financial issues, she decided to pursue work abroad once again, and this time it was Saudi Arabia. She then repeatedly worked in SA for six years with short vacations to Sri Lanka by renewing the contract every two years. She changed her employer only once during this time. As she added further, she could have worked more, but she had to prioritise her husband's medical condition, as he needed her attention. Otherwise, she would have preferred to work in the Middle East, as it is a secure income compared to working in Sri Lanka, considering her education.

Below is shown Deepika's serial migration pathway.



**Figure 12:** Serial migration pathway of Deepika – Source – Own compilation.<sup>15</sup>

Her cycle of migration is an example of a combination of micro and macro factors of serial migration. Family obligations and financial needs were her main reasons for migration. Her migration to Saudi Arabia was mainly to provide financial support to her family. Afterwards, she preferred to work in multiple destinations for the sake of exploration and gaining experience. Her second migration to Egypt included socio-political factors. Subsequent migrations occurred depending on the available vacancies from labour hiring employers.

<sup>15</sup> R1 – Receiving country.

A similar study carried by Parrenas (2019) claims that serial labour migrants are primarily those who have pursued labour contracts in more than one destination. She has identified three patterns of serial labour migration by studying Filipino domestic workers in the GCC. The first represents the majority, who are domestic workers who have exclusively migrated within the Middle East. They tend to be a group of migrants who lack the educational qualifications to migrate elsewhere and whose access to migration has been enabled primarily by a migrant recruitment agency and not by their social networks. The second pattern concerns migrants who begin at low-cost destinations such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and proceed to a higher-cost destination such as Malaysia or Hong Kong and return to a lower-cost destination such as the UAE. The third pattern was exemplified by migrants who engaged in step-down international migration, as they started at a higher-cost destination such as Singapore or Taiwan and later migrated to a lower-cost destination where the extrinsic conditions of their employment such as salary declined.

In my study, I largely found serial migrations within the GCC in contrast to the serial patterns observed by Parreñas et al. (2019). Even though the majority of my serial migrant interviewees were domestic workers, I have also encountered skilled workers engaged in serial migrations within the GCC. Sanka's migrant journey is an example that starts from UAE. *He worked as an account manager for a mobile company in the UAE for almost seven years. During this time, he got a job offer to move to Qatar. He got this opportunity through social networks and moved as a banker to Qatar. However, he was not able to continue for a longer period due to the Qatar crisis. With the Qatar crisis ongoing, he was offered two options by the company for who were cutting down employees. It was either a transfer to Jordan or UAE or move back to Sri Lanka. He was stuck in this situation because he did not want to come back to Sri Lanka nor did he want to move to UAE or Jordan. He preferred Qatar. The primary considerations were the high pay and the lesser cost of living compared to the UAE. However, he finds UAE labour law more flexible than Qatar law when it comes to changing employers. He was also living with his fiancée and did not wish to move.*

As we can see, Sanka's migration trajectory did not have any return plans to Sri Lanka. Wage differences and personal commitments were the primary reasons for that. I also observed that unmarried migrants mainly were professionals, and career growth was their primary concerns. Such migrant trajectories show that serial migrations may occur not only among domestic

workers but also among skilled migrants, even though multi-country itinerary patterns are commonly found among low wage workers (Parreñas et al., 2019).

### **6.3 Causes of Serial Labour migration**

Studies show that recurrent migrants in the GCC occur primarily due to human capital, income prospects and relative easiness to travel to the Gulf. This is evidenced by the millions of migrants flowing to the GCC despite strict migration policies (Castles et al., 2019; Parreñas et al., 2019). I found that the inability to belong in the host country other than the economic benefits was one reason to move between destinations. By default, migrants are aware that each country in the GCC is a temporary place, and most do not treat it as a place where they will either find it hard to return home or change destinations (Balasubramanian, 2019). In another study of serial migrants, Ali (2011) exemplifies how migrants of South Asian descent keep coming and going in the GCC, creating transnational mobility patterns. He points out that migrants were at ease to live and work between multiple countries. Even though some of the migrants were born in the GCC, they are not able to gain legal citizenship yet enjoy consumer citizenship. For them, it is a home but not their own. Those migrants who have studied and stayed out of GCC still find that vibe to return because of the lifestyle, booming job market and good money. The flexibility of gaining a visa to the GCC gives rise to transnational mobility patterns and serial migration occurrences. Given the reasons, I also figured that serial migration may include direct relocations and indirect relocations, where migrants mostly return to their home country before their next move (Takenaka, 2007).

Migrants expect to bring clear improvements in their journey through multinational migration. Parreñas (2019) postulates that serial labour migration emerges in response to a range of geographical, societal, and temporal constraints that confront low-wage migrant workers and occur upon particular contexts of departure, reception, and return. Studies show that economic opportunities and involuntary migration are key causes of serial migration (Ali, 2011; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2016). Serial migrants are unlikely to be found in statistics (Simon, 1997). Like other migrants, they often travel to a new place because of educational or professional opportunities or personal relationships or family obligations. However, people who have moved across national borders more than once, do not tend to explain their migrations in quite the same way as migrants who have left only one nation to live in another (Ossman, 2004).

Valenta (2020) argues that moving from one country to another in the GCC are not uncommon, which eventually represents voluntary or involuntary serial or circular migration. Further, Parreñas (2019) highlights serial migration as an emerging global pattern of temporary labour migration among low-skilled migrant workers with limited rights and resources. Similarly, I found in my study that serial migrations result from a wide range of similar choices. They include short term contracts, inability to permanent settlement or family reunion, economic challenges upon return, and constant family commitments at home cause in re-migration.

Bringing out several migrant cycles of serial and circular trajectories in the GCC, Valenta (2020) also asserts that most migration trajectories are generated within the nexus of migrant agency, family obligations and the push and pull forces in the sending and receiving countries. Recurrent migrations across the GCC have also been related to job instability and precarity, both in the home country and in the receiving country (Ali, 2011; Babar & Gardner, 2016). Studies show that deportations and re-migration bans also end up in migrants moving across multiple destinations (Arnold, 2019; Balasubramanian, 2019).

#### **6.4 Popularity among domestic workers and gender difference**

Fewer studies have focused on the migratory processes of domestic workers, though the migration studies that do exist span a wide range of themes, including state determinations of migration, routes and pathways of migration, and experiences of return migration (Bélanger & Silvey, 2019; Parreñas et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). In the case of the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Poland, which are three key sending countries of domestic workers, the state and local nongovernmental organisations uphold and promote traditional gender divisions of labour in the family, suggesting a stigma and pushback against migrant women's efforts to reconstitute gender relations in the family (Parreñas, 2008).

For many years, Sri Lankan labour migration has been associated with the issue of "feminisation of migration." From the early 1990s, women have dominated migration flows, constituting more than 70 per cent of the total number (SLBFE, 2017). Although the share of registered women domestic workers have fallen in recent years, women still accounted for about 26 per cent of all registered migrants in 2017 (SLBFE, 2017). Figure 13 shows the trends of foreign labour migration from 1986 to 2016 based on the SLBFE report 2017.



**Figure 13:** Total registrations for overseas employment, by gender and year – Source SLBFE (2016)

As we can see in figure 13, there are fluctuations in women migration for employment abroad and a visible decline in recent years. The restriction of migration for mothers with children under the age of four could be one of the primary reasons for this downturn (Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018). In 2013, the SLBFE adopted a regulation, the directive of the Family Background Report (FBR), banning prospective women domestic workers with children under the age of five from migrating for work overseas. The regulation has limited the opportunities for many women to migrate for employment through regular channels, and as such it has contributed to a recent and significant shift in the proportion of unregistered women migrant workers (Gamburd, 2010a). The rule was adopted to address the social impact on families “left behind” and address protection challenges. However, ILO (2017) claims that women still tend to migrate through irregular channels.

Another aspect is that women tend to take longer pauses due to family commitments. They wait until their kids grow older and then seek migration opportunities. Flexibility in the contract and no binding for extended periods allow domestic workers to create serial migration pathways by changing destinations. Domestic workers have plenty of options and choices because of the high demand in the GCC. Below is shown a similar story illustrated by Leela.

*Leela is a Sri Lankan domestic worker in her late 40s. She has been working in the GCC for over a decade by changing between several destinations in the Middle East. Going back and forth to Sri Lanka and working in multiple countries in the Middle East is something she has*

*been doing for several years. Her intention is to continue to work in the Middle East as much as she can. She says it is the best available option for unskilled workers to earn a decent amount of money to pay for family expenses. For now, she has worked in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and UAE. Of all of these, she says she mostly gets offers to work in Kuwait, where she has been for more than two years. Even though she can renew the contract with a particular employer, she chooses not to because she likes to work for new employers. Furthermore, she finds having a two-year contract is much more comfortable and that she is not bound to work for the same employer. She also says having short contracts allows her to have frequent returns and stay at home until she decides to go back.*

Her story reveals a state of global precarity throughout her migration cycle due to financial insecurity. She illustrates the destiny of many Sri Lankan and other South Asian domestic workers. At first, migration is undertaken as a way to face financial insecurity, and that consequently pushes into an ongoing cycle of migrations as a mode of livelihood (Gardner, 2010; Kathiravelu, 2016; Solé, Parella, Martí, & Nita, 2016). They are entrapped in "a never-ending cycle of debt-driven servitude" that results in their "circular migration" not just to one but to multiple destination countries in the region (Gardner, 2010). It also suggests their engagement not solely with circular migration but also with serial labour migration. Statistics have shown that most Sri Lankan female migrant workers migrate as housemaids (domestic workers) to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (SLBFE, 2017). Frequent opportunities and the flexibility to move back and forth and short-term contracts make it easier to change the destinations (Parreñas et al., 2019; Valenta, 2020).

## **6.5 Why leave Sri Lanka?**

Similar to the country outlooks of South and South-West Asia, low capita income, unemployment, inequality of income distribution and social disparities are few macro scenarios for out-migration in Sri Lanka.<sup>16</sup> Statistically, over 90 per cent of Sri Lankan employees working abroad were employed in Arab states, and more specifically in the GCC countries as of 2017.<sup>17</sup> The top four countries of destination were Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab

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<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE).

<sup>17</sup> Sources- UNDESA, SLBFE statistics, World Bank

Emirates and Qatar which alone hosted almost 80 per cent of all Sri Lankan labour migrants in 2017. Qatar became the leading destination in 2017 (SLBFE, 2017).

Annual SLBFE reports also highlight that migrant workers from Sri Lanka have also predominantly been concentrated in low-skilled. Most Sri Lankan workers are recruited under the SLBFE categories of “skilled” or as “unskilled” workers, accounting for approximately 61 per cent of all registered migrant workers. Nevertheless, macro factors such as being unable to compete in the local job market and lack of job satisfaction are drivers for leaving Sri Lanka for foreign employment. Despite skilled and unskilled differences, many of my informants mentioned that it is one of the main reasons they migrate. Saman’s story illustrates one of the macro drivers of searching for work in the GCC.

*It is challenging to get into the job market nowadays. Especially to find something that matches our qualifications. Not only in the government but in the private sector as well. The reason I had to leave Sri Lanka was that I was working for a private bank on a contract basis. It was not a good pay. My work responsibilities were twice for the given pay. In that sense, working abroad is the best strategy to find a decent income. (Saman; male, 31 years employed in Qatar)*

Saman indicated that his move to Qatar was purely for economic reasons, implying a comparison with his working conditions in Sri Lanka. As we can see, income comparisons and economic reasons initially prompt migration of individuals like Saman. The absence of labour market opportunities in the country discourage returns and encourage impulsive recurrent migrations (Silvey & Parreñas, 2019).

Studies show that, although most contract migrant workers, especially the housemaids and unskilled migrants, prefer to work on "low" ranking jobs abroad, they will not be willing to be engaged in the same type of job at home mostly due to social and cultural reasons. My findings and other sources support that this is corroborated in Sri Lanka (Gamburd, 2020; Swarnalatha Ukwatta, 2010). And not only that, migrant workers originate from the unemployed and underemployed categories but also from the employed workforce because of the poor wages or salary—for instance, Saman’s case. According to the interviewed migrants, the paramount need was to secure a better income and support family needs.



## 6.6 Why come back to Sri Lanka and re-migrate?

The demand for migrant workers in the GCC countries has dropped in recent years, but the labour market demand for low- and semi-skilled migrant workers in the GCC private sector is projected to remain high in the short term. In the longer term, there will still be a structural demand for migrant workers, even though the number and profile (in terms of skills) of migrant workers are expected to change (ILO, 2017; Kuhn, Milasi, & Yoon, 2018). Similarly, Sri Lankan labour migrants are considered contract “labourers” or “guest-workers.” Often, the nature of this type of migration is that once they have completed their contract period, the migrants must return to their place of origin. Most of my initial data collected comprised of female migrants who had completed a one-time contract and returned to Sri Lanka. When the contract ended, they returned to Sri Lanka with or without the future intention of re-migration.

On the other hand, labour regulations and immigration rules in Middle Eastern countries also do not allow migrant labourers to stay permanently in these countries (Mohammad, 2011). Therefore, with or without willingness, most of the Sri Lankan migrants choose to come back and re-migrate (Arnold, 2019). Gardner (2010) observes South Asian migrants’ returns are likely to be shortened by a “cataclysmic financial event” (Gardner, 2010, p. 61). My findings indicate that many migrants prefer to stay with their family and find a stable income while remaining in Sri Lanka.<sup>18</sup> Some migrants prefer to start something on their own with their savings. When migrants find it challenging to achieve expected prospects, re-migration is seen as the final solution. With the experiences and knowledge migrants have gained, they assume moving back is the best solution compared to the available options in the home country. For instance, one of my respondents who was working in a clothing factory in Kuwait indicated that “*it would take years to do what I have done for my family if I were to do it with my salary in Sri Lanka.*” What she indicated was that there were no skill gaps for what she did (Juki Machine Operator) in both places. Yet, there were drastic wage differences in Sri Lanka and Kuwait.

Valenta (2020) points out that the need for a family reunion also occurs in recurrent migrations. According to the regulations, the low-income migrant workers cannot sponsor or take their families to GCC (Thiollet, 2016). At the end of their contract, low-income migrants who were

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<sup>18</sup> Mostly migrant parents with family responsibilities

unable to bring in their families usually return to the home country to reunite with them. As I have mentioned above, unsuccessful attempts at stabilising in the home country and various family obligations result in re-migrations (Parreñas et al., 2019; Valenta, 2020). Czaika and Varela (2015) point out that “among other factors on the micro-level the intersection of the life cycle, migratory cycle and family cycle plays an important role in the decision to return home” (Czaika & Varela, 2015, p. 319). We may add that both return and re-migration occur within the nexus of the dimensions mentioned above. The accounts of migrants in my study indicate that shorter visits to their home country may transform into unintended longer stays, followed by re-migration.

## 6.7 What next?

We have looked at various causes and consequences of Sri Lankan serial migration. One of my most interesting findings was that some migrants do their research to choose the best or most preferred destination after multiple journeys. Some migrants make up their mind to stay with the family back home. For some migrants, GCC is a “pit stop” to collect experiences and move to a better destination where they can settle permanently outside the home country. Akheel; a serial migrant, who is in his early thirties, stressed that:

*I believe I have achieved some growth in working for different employers in UAE and Qatar during this time. Since all my job experiences fall into skilled working, it is much easier to move to Canada or Australia. It is possible to apply to those countries from here, and even the migration cost is lower than applying from Sri Lanka. My friends also have done the same because there are higher chances of moving through migration consultations with the broader network. I have already initiated my process to move once I get married, which will probably happen in one or two years. (Akheel; male, 32 years, living in Qatar)*

Akheel’s perception was that even though his job in the GCC provided a good pay and other facilities, he knew that a little further down the road this is not where he belongs. A shared theme that emerged from my interviews were that, for many, even though they were happy enough to work in the GCC, they were fully prepared to leave. Just as Akheel observed, almost every informant strongly has sensed that GCC could hardly be their home, of which they make memories with their loved ones. Akheel also mentioned that he is aware that he will have to

pack his bags and leave at some point. For the same reason, he was afraid to get too comfortable with his current lifestyle. Further, Akheel's migration aim shows an onward migration trajectory of an aspiring migrant. Onward migrations are considered an opportunity. As Paul (2011) stresses, it is a stepwise migration move where people expect clear improvements in life circumstances. Such migration trajectories include migrant expectations beyond economic advantages.

My research findings include that some migrants are uncertain about their next move. As NELM proves, a migration decision is unlikely to be a decision made by a single person. While they may think and intend to migrate, family cycles or crises could cause unintended or unconfirmed delays (Silvey & Parreñas, 2019; Valenta, 2020). One migrant indicates her uncertain thoughts of her future migration plans.

*My husband will not object and try to influence me if I want to migrate back. I still wish to migrate for work and earn rather than staying at home unemployed. Nevertheless, due to my husband's medical condition, I hesitate to leave. (Leela; female, 43 years, returnee)*

Leela was a serial migrant and now a returned migrant in Sri Lanka. Samitha, another serial migrant, mentioned that *unexpected family problems had occurred even though she wanted to move back to Kuwait when she returned for a short holiday. The main issues were that her kids were small, and there was no one to take care of them. Also, her younger child got sick and needed her close attention and care. As a result, she stayed in Sri Lanka for close to 7 years. During that time, she could not find any work in Sri Lanka; however, she told me she was waiting for that tough time to pass to go to Kuwait.*

Just as women migrants like Leela and Samitha, many returned domestic workers hold back their thoughts of moving back due to family commitments (Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010; Swarna Ukwatta, 2010). While they trust that they may leave again for work, many are uncertain as to when. Most of these domestic workers are mothers and wives who want the best for their family despite the economic barriers. Most of them say that there are no restrictions to migrate back except for family commitments. Obligations on the one hand as income providers, and on the other hand, as care givers for their families at home have resulted in conflicted situations concerning migration (Lueth & Ruiz-Arranz, 2007; Valenta, 2020). As I have observed from

my research participants, married migrants are eager to find solutions for their in-home needs and little savings to sustain their future to fulfil their responsibilities if they are parents. For them, migration is a family achievement taken for the betterment of the family. Most informants mentioned that re-migration is the ultimate decision as it sounds safer and more accessible. I comprehended that regardless of social status, some migrants get trapped in micro-scale consequences resulting from macro-scale causes. Many migrants become a part of a continuous diverse cycle of migration trajectories when being unable to solve them within the home country. As researchers, we identify and conceptualise serial migration patterns by observing their transnational migration practices' behaviour.

## **6.8 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have visualised serial migrant trajectories relating to my participants' migrant journeys. I have brought out their experiences and coping strategies when dealing with the temporary migration working system in GCC. First, I presented modes of initiating migrant journeys as to how migrants enter to GCC, such as through labour hiring agencies in the home country or personal networks. Then I highlighted the patterns of serial migration journeys analysing the reasons and causes for several migrations for home and re-migrations.

Additionally, I also explored the popularity among domestic workers in the serial migration pattern through gender difference. There are also skilled and unskilled differences I pointed out when it comes to their itinerary patterns of serial migrations. I also discovered that even though there is a drastic decrease in women's migration in recent years, they still play a significant role in the migration to GCC countries. I highlighted how macro-level developmental factors affect the family at micro-levels in line with the push and pull factors model. My primary and secondary data explore that many middle-income holders in developing countries find labour migration as a convenient, fast and safe solution to work in GCC countries despite several migration moves.

## CHAPTER 7

### MULTI-NATIONAL MIGRATION FROM GULF TO THE WEST

*The stepwise international migration has become an alternative strategy for aspiring migrants from the developing world to surmount the structural barriers preventing them from gaining legal entry into their preferred destinations, often in the West. Stepwise international migration is a pattern of multi-stage international labour migration involving stints of substantive duration working in intermediate countries as an intentional strategy adopted by low-capital migrants unable to gain immediate entry into their preferred destination countries.*

(Paul, 2011, p. 1843)

#### Introduction

We have discussed circular and serial migration trajectories and their motivations in the previous two chapters. We observed that it is relatively easy for Sri Lankan migrants to come to the GCC and move across destinations. Nevertheless, several researchers point out that it is difficult for the migrants to stay for a longer time because the GCC provides only short term resident permits (Chang, 2019; Valenta, 2020; Valenta & Jakobsen, 2016). In this chapter, I explore recurrent migrations from GCC countries to onwards. I present my findings through patterns of multi-national migrations outside the GCC. Multi-national migration is also conceptualised as stepwise migration due to its hierarchical nature involving complex migrant trajectories (Paul, 2017). I discuss the variations of successful stepwise trajectories and aspiring migrants who thrive to move in the future. There is limited research on Sri Lankan stepwise migrants. Therefore, when analysing the interviewed stepwise migrants' experiences, I compare the focus given to both micro and macro scales by the concepts elaborated by Collins (2020); Paul (2011, 2017).

Paul (2011) elaborates on four-tier destinations of the stepwise migration. In her article,<sup>19</sup> she places countries in the Middle East at the bottom, East Asian countries like Hong Kong and

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<sup>19</sup> Stepwise international migration: A multi-stage migration pattern for the aspiring migrant (Paul, 2011).

Taiwan in the second tier, Singapore and Malaysia in the third tier and Western destinations such as Canada and Italy in the highest tier. The tiers are divided according to increased wages, the possibility of accessing resident or permanent right of stay, labour protection rights, social freedom, including living and working conditions.

Similarly, Collins (2020) discusses stepwise international migration via a “pathway dependency.” He claims transnational skill regimes, migrant subjectivity, and prior experiences are fundamental keys in the stepwise migration journey. Along with high-cost barriers and human capital from the migrant’s side, studies point out that securing a visa, particularly to the West require additional capital (Castles et al., 2019; Hatton, 2009; Paul, 2011). As I have pointed out through previous research literature, reaching the desired tier involves migrants moving between destinations. Ordinarily, it is achieving incremental fashion involving a hierarchy of destinations until they reach a point and settle down (Paul, 2017).

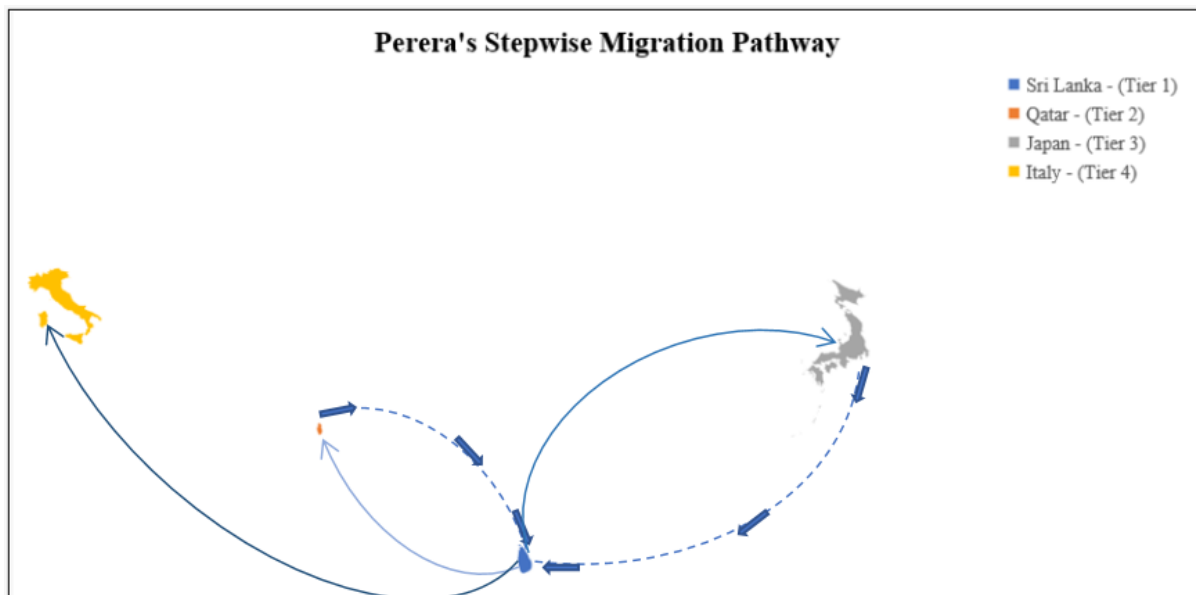
### **7.1 Stepwise Migration strategies and opportunities in Sri Lanka**

Since the oil boom, several scholars researched and covered various types of Sri Lankan migrant studies in the GCC. Some researches include labour migrant integration, female labour migration, trends and patterns (Karunaratne, 2012; Lueth & Ruiz-Arranz, 2007; Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018). When it comes to the migration trends, there are two primary flows migration types in Sri Lanka; labour migration and political migration (Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018). According to Sriskandarajah (2002), these flows are distinguished by ethnic characteristics and differences in the destination. Labour migration involves mainly Sinhalese workers moving to the Gulf region and the broader Middle East.

In contrast, predominantly of Tamils, political migration has resulted more often in permanent migration to the Global North, mainly to Canada, Australia and Switzerland, also Malaysia and Singapore, but actually to countries all over the world. Recent studies have found that a growing number of Sri Lankan migrants are employed in Europe, particularly in Cyprus and Italy (Henayaka-Lochbihler & Lambusta, 2004; Pathirage & Collyer, 2011). However, few researchers have shown particular interest in studying stepwise migration of Sri Lankan migrants.

Most migrations to the West have been documented as “one-go” from Sri Lanka to a particular country, not as multi-migrations. One reason I argue is that fewer successful cases of Sri Lankan low wage migrants achieve this through multi-national migration compared to other labour sending countries such as Indonesia and Philippines (Parreñas, 2008; Paul, 2011; Valenta, 2020). Anju Paul (2017) observes, there has been limited research on how migrants accumulate migration-related capital while working overseas in order to expand their destination options over time. This could be observed in my research too, as with Perera’s case. His mobility pattern shows multi-migration stopovers from Sri Lanka to Italy, and it is illustrated in figure 14.

*Perera is a multi-national migrant. He is a professional chef and currently lives in Italy. His story of migration can be traced back to several countries before he settled in Italy over four decades. He started his migration journey as a bachelor, and now he is a father of two grownup children. Initially, he was not satisfied with the wages in Sri Lanka and moved to Qatar as his first migration destination. Perera spent three years working in Qatar. Once the contract ended, he returned to Sri Lanka with the desire of moving to a better destination. He was not*



**Figure 14:** Tiers involved in stepwise migration - source: Own compilation

*confident of where it would be. Somehow, Japan was his second destination, facilitated by his close friends. After 5-6 years, he got married, and things became complicated. He returned to*

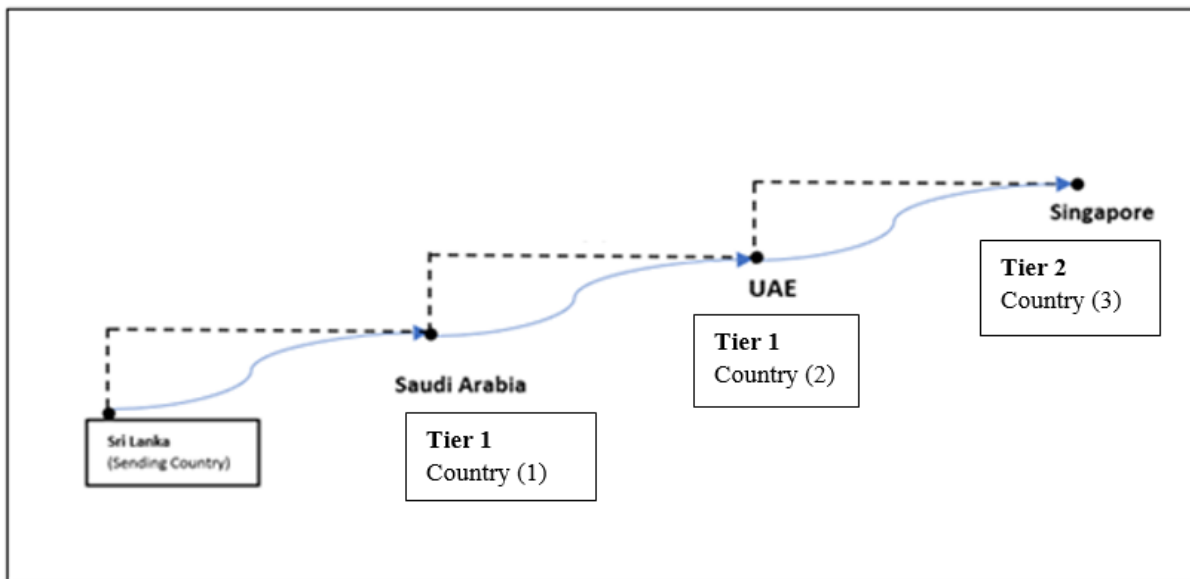
*Sri Lanka and tried to settle down. He interpreted that he was not able to achieve personal and professional goals as he wished in SL. In other words, Perera looked for more personal freedom and a place to settle down permanently. Japan, in that sense, became a problematic option for him. Besides, he preferred a destination in Europe. Italy was one of his preferred destinations. A few years later, he could achieve his dream with the help of his network. As he expected, he was able to gain permanent residence for himself and his family.*

In the map (figure 14), I have shown the hierarchy of reached destinations from tier 1 to tier 4. The journey starts from Sri Lanka, a lower-tier country, to Qatar, then to Japan and eventually to Italy. The dashed arrows show Perera's returns to home country. His stepwise pathway shows how migrants perform multi-stage migrations as a method to climb possible hierarchical destinations. This case is also an indirect stepwise migration pattern that involves returns and stays in the home country prior to moving to new destinations.

Perera's pathway can be considered one of the options for people to reach their dream destination and gain residence rights. The multi-national character of this migration reflects elements of the patterns observed in Anju Mary Paul (2017) and multi-national skills regimes observed by Francis L. Collins (2020). Both these scholars depict the stages that migrants go through in reaching their aspirations and preferred destinations, ranking them into different tiers, ranging from lower to upper and higher tiers. As I have mentioned in the previous chapters, migrants may change their mobility patterns depending on the possible available opportunities. Serial migration transforming into stepwise migration is an example. Lalitha, a domestic worker and a caregiver in Singapore, narrated her story, and her serial and stepwise alteration pathway is shown in figure 15.

*I first went to work in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker. I worked for five years and returned to Sri Lanka. After that, I got an opportunity to work in Dubai, UAE. The salary was less compared to Saudi Arabia, but I liked it better than Saudi Arabia due to the fewer restrictions. Back then (in 1998), domestic workers in Saudi Arabia almost had no social life. After working in Dubai, I could not migrate until my children had grown a little older. Also, I was not particularly eager to go to the Middle East again. I got to know from my friends that we could also go to Singapore and Hong Kong. So, I tried through an agency and managed to go to Singapore. A little knowledge of English and previous work experience was an added advantage. I also followed a short-*





**Figure 15:** Serial and Stepwise Alteration pathway

*term care-taker course carried out by the migration agency in Sri Lanka. For now, this is my second time working in Singapore. I have changed employers thrice since then, and I am satisfied with working here. There are no such restrictions in clothing and going out as compared to SA and UAE. I have got new friends from the church where we go to every Sunday. I am also so glad that I could bring my husband for a visit once. My son will come soon too. Overall, I certainly like working here, and my employer also treats me well. I am safe in Singapore and will continue to work here as long as I can. (Lalitha, serial-stepwise migrant working in Singapore)*

In figure 15, I have illustrated Lalitha’s story through serial movements within the same tier (such as between Saudi Arabia to the UAE) may lead to improvements in the migrant’s life circumstances by moving to a higher tier (Singapore):

Lalitha’s case illustrates her first experience did not involve many expectations other than economic support to fulfil her family needs. Later on, she attempted to increase her savings and gain necessary work experience in both countries. While working, she expanded her network and found out she could also seek work in other destinations than the Middle East. It was an added advantage with her previous experience. Therefore, when she went to the manpower agency in Sri Lanka, she was only required to sit for an exam after a short language

course. Accumulating enough migrant capital resources, she was able to reach her target. As Paul (2017) argues, *‘moving thus in an iterative fashion up a hierarchy of destination countries, stepwise migrants aim eventually to enter their desired destination’* (Paul, 2011, p. 1843). Lalitha’s trajectory is a combination of serial-stepwise alteration migrations. Her migration from Sri Lanka to SA and UAE could be described as serial migrations while Singapore is considered as middle tier country (Paul, 2011).

My findings showed fewer successful stories of migration who reach their aspired destination countries compared to serial and circular labour migrant trajectories. Despite this fact, many of my interviewees had preferred destinations out of the GCC other than the home country. It was also interesting to note that migrant aspirations were divided based on gender. For instance, some female migrants (the majority are domestic workers) were not interested in migrating into higher tiers, specifically in the West. Internal and external barriers were a significant blockade. Lack of human capital, required education, and family commitments are some of the other reasons. However, some of my respondents such as Lalitha showed higher interest to work outside of GCC such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Nonetheless, stepwise migration has been a creative response towards the increased immigration restrictions imposed by developed and high-income developing countries. In turn, this has led to the establishment of programs to import temporary workers into many of the same destinations, to meet the pent-up demand for cheap foreign labour in a variety of occupational sectors (Collins, 2020). I observed that stepwise migration from the GCC to higher tier countries is still somewhat an emerging concept for Sri Lankan migrant workers.

## **7.2 Trends that hinder Stepwise migration prospects in Sri Lanka**

Capital resources in prospective Sri Lankan migrants reaching their ultimate destination being less compared to other labour sending countries such as the Philippines, India or other South Asian/Southeast Asian countries (Inland Revenue Department, 2019; Jayawardhana & Jaythilaka, 2009). There are many reasons for this lack of capital such as low-capita income, unemployment or underemployment, quality of life-related factors, relative poverty, and lack of access to other alternative resources (Karunaratne, 2012; Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018). Studies have shown how migrants from developing countries reach their preferred destination by accumulating migrant capital and mapping out multi-stage migration trajectories (Chang, 2019; Paul, 2011, 2017).

Sri Lanka has been traditionally concentrating on sending unskilled workers and housemaids. Since the late 1970s, Sri Lankan migrants have primarily been engaged in lower categories of skilled workers, unskilled workers and housemaids (Dias & Jayasundere, 2004; Peebles, 2006). Sri Lankan women primarily migrate for domestic work, and a high percentage of migrants come from the lower-income groups (Swarnalatha Ukwatta, 2010). Many temporary migrant workers traditionally focus on the unskilled labour market in the Middle East and the other skilled categories to East Asia and the West. Also, a significant number of people migrated during the conflict period in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country under refugee status to Western countries (ILO, 2017; Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018).

Scholars observe that present demand concerns are for more skilled and professional categories of workers requiring internationally recognised qualifications to enter these markets (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2020; ILO, 2017). In that case, Sri Lanka faces obstacles in supplying for the required demand (Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018). For instance, labour migrants from the Philippines require "caregiving" experience or a closely related job category that requires some formal certification or a minimum amount of relevant experience prior to their migration which Sri Lankan domestic workers, mostly, do not have. Also, Filipino domestic workers are often preferred by international employers, thanks to their English proficiency, educational attainment, and cosmopolitan outlook (Chang, 2019).

In the recent past, Sri Lanka has been experiencing a further challenge with the mismatch between demand and supply factors in foreign employment opportunities, as most of the jobs that are offered require skills that are not available among the foreign job seekers (Jayawardhana & Jaythilaka, 2009). Studies have shown that there has been a steady growth in male departures during the last few years. It may primarily be due to the increased demand for skilled and unskilled male jobs in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Jordan within the construction and manufacturing sectors. On the other hand, female departures for foreign employment has slowed down during the last few years. This is due to the increase in the availability of job opportunities in Sri Lanka and the government discouraging mothers with children under the age of five to migrate; this has thus affected the total female departures (Gamburd, 2010b). These attributes hinder migrant opportunities to move for better destinations on a macro scale.

### 7.3 Stepwise migration goals of circular and serial migrants

In the circumstances of migrants given an opportunity from circular, serial, and stepwise migration methods, the majority of my participants preferred stepwise migration. I observed that some migrants were so enthusiastic to reveal their future in general terms that are directly related to stepwise migration goals. Simultaneously, some of my participants mentioned that while they came to GCC to prosper short-term goals from a developing country, realising their long-term goals was not easy. Here, the short-term goals included getting better salaries than Sri Lanka, increasing savings, paying debts, etc. Long-term goals included migrating to a West destination (primarily Europe) with the family or for work, gain resident rights, or live in a country where no major economic issues affect their lives. Migrants were also realistic that they might undergo several obstacles when achieving long term migration goals. Interestingly, some migrants were also curious to know about my migration to Norway during these conversations, even though I was not a labour migrant. However, it represented the willingness to expand their network, know more information, and continuously search for opportunities.

Similarly, Anju Paul (2011) describes the way how migrants aspire to go to developed countries through several patterns. As I pointed out my respondents also endeavoured in collecting professional experiences, educational achievements and relevant financial support. Some were skilled aspiring migrants who were already in the process of accumulating enough migrant capital resources to move out of GCC. Through the interviews, I found out that most young migrants employed in GCC countries were unwilling to move back to Sri Lanka. They considered it as a step-back of their hard work. Lack of desired employment opportunities, working and living conditions were considerable reasons not to return to Sri Lanka. Migration to Western countries was considered as an investment for their future security, accelerating career drive.

Sandun is a computer engineer employed in Qatar and currently getting prepared to move to Australia with his wife. *An immigration agency in Qatar is assisting him to prepare the necessary documents to move to Australia. He stressed that it is a little costly but worth the cost and time when thinking about his future. He is seeking for a destination that gives the ability to get permanent residence. And Australia was one of his preferred destinations.* Like Sandun, most of my young informants were seeking to move out of GCC. This could be observed amongst skilled professionals who were unmarried or recently got married. They had

come to GCC to provide a little more for themselves than fulfilling the basic needs. In other words, GCC is only a foundation and the first tier of their destination journey. All have been employed in Sri Lanka as bankers or in other related business administration jobs. My young respondents largely aspire to immigrate to a Western country or Australia or Canada. Sandun's key explanations were that:

*Australia or Canada are great places to move to permanently for skilled workers like us. I think I would also get that opportunity in due time. First and foremost, I must be financially stable because the initial cost is high, and I do not want to take a risk. That is why I am in Qatar for now. At the same time, I would like to migrate with my partner so that the expenses can be shared by us both. If I do not get a job offer at once, I am prepared to go on a student permit as it is an added advantage. I am sure it will be much more peaceful in the latter stage. So, I am giving it a try as it has always been my dream. (Sandun; male, 32 years)*

This was one of a few responses of migrants who are willing to move to their favourite destination. He has done specific research and contacted few persons who live in both countries. His option was to choose either Australia or Canada depending on the best value for his expectations.

In comparison, semi-skilled and unskilled were interested in terms of the financial drive if they were to go to Europe or the West. But they directly brought out lack of financial and social capital plus educational qualifications that constrained their aims. These are multiple barriers that are considered general barriers to any migrant who aspire to go to West due to competitiveness and strict policies (Carlos, 2013; Pathirage & Collyer, 2011). But skilled professionals launch their migration journey in GCC countries and continue to move on intending to acquire experiences and monetary support to reach their goals (Mohapatra, Ratha, & Silwal, 2011). For them, migration to the GCC is relatively more straightforward and incur less of a financial burden (Collins, 2020).

Paul (2011) argues that not all migrant workers aspire to move to higher tier destinations. Some migrant workers find situations where they are happy with their employers and earn enough to maintain comfortable lifestyles for themselves and their families back home without proceeding to the top of the migration ladder. For instance, in Lalitha's story, she was aware

that gaining resident rights in Singapore was not possible with her current status. Even then, she was happy with the full scope of her compared to that in GCC. In addition, the achievement of personal social mobility through stepwise migration is quite rare (Paul, 2017; Valenta, 2020).

Similarly, I found that most domestic workers were engaged in complex circular and serial migrant alterations but not stepwise migration. Paul (2017) points out that low skilled workers who eventually gain access to Western markets like Canada often find themselves trapped in low-wage positions and face more struggle rather than less. In my cases, despite the agentive nature of women's mobility projects, domestic workers preferred immobility. They wanted to live in Sri Lanka rather than having recurrent mobility foisted upon them. This feature was visible in married women respondents with children. According to them, migration was a tough decision, but it was imperative as income providers and caretakers in the family. Eventually, migration was not a personal desire but a family goal for them. My findings and other findings demonstrate some migrants are aware that moving with their family to the West is a challenge requiring necessary human capital and meeting other policy requirements (Parreñas, 2008; Paul, 2017).

#### **7.4 Degree of intentionality and motive**

Studies on stepwise migration claim that stepwise migrations are most likely to happen among “middle category of migrants” (Collins, 2020; Paul, 2017). Middle category migrants refer to migrants who initially do not have resources to move directly to the most desired countries from the home country. Nevertheless, they are able to accumulate resources gradually, climbing, step-by-step in the hierarchy of the receiving countries. As a fact, countries in the Gulf are their intermediate destinations, as the area are relatively easy to gain access to, while they accumulate sufficient incentives (Carlos, 2013; Paul, 2017; Valenta, 2020). I found these attributes mostly among skilled professionals who were from IT, banking, and hospitality sectors. Most of them had links to the West through friends or relatives who inspired them to move to the West by sharing their experiences.

My findings also demonstrate that stepwise migration is not always necessarily planned from the beginning. Some migrants come to the GCC without any plans to move out of the region but may end up living in higher tier countries through accidental moves. Moves that were not

planned in the beginning of their migration journey eventually enabled them to reach a destination that allows gaining permanent residency or citizenship. Such migrants may receive unexpected opportunities when working in intermediate or secondary destinations. It is also a part of stepwise migration pathway. In Ravenstein's description of stepwise migration, there is also an unplanned quality to this incremental movement:

*"It often happens that a migrant in search of work wanders from parish to parish, settling down at each place for a time, until on the day when the census is taken he finds himself far away from the place from which he originally started"* (E. Ravenstein, 1885, p. 183).

Nirosha's journey from Saudi Arabia to Germany illustrates these processes. She was a domestic worker whose migration journey started nearly 20 years ago. She told her story:

*I did not even dream that I will end up living in Germany. I first moved to work in Saudi Arabia. I had a good education back in Sri Lanka but was not interested in working there because of the lower salaries. I told myself that it is better to be a domestic worker and earn more money than working for an average salary in my country. I was migrating back and forth several times to make myself a future before getting married. In my family we did not have much savings because my mother was the sole breadwinner. So, I first moved to Saudi Arabia when I just reached 21. It was my first time and it was a hard time too. SA contract was for three years, and then I moved to Kuwait for another three years. It was much better than the first experience, and the madam (employer) was also nice to me. Hence, I ended up working in Kuwait for four years. Afterwards, I was able to go to Cyprus through my agent in Sri Lanka, which was a significant turning point in my life, because that is where I met my husband. He was an Indian working as a chef when I met him. After years of trying, we applied to come to Germany through one of his contacts, and I was also able to come with him as his spouse. (Nirosha;female, 47 years living in Germany)*

*Nirosha stated it was because of her husband's qualifications that they both could move to Germany. He was a chef by profession. For her, it was a good opportunity to come to Europe through family visa. If it was not for her husband, she may be a recurrent serial migrant rather than her current upgrade. She insisted that she never expected she would be able to move to*

*Germany or any other Western country. Settling down in a Western country was almost impossible for her due to strict policies and inability to fulfil the necessary requirements.*

Her story reflects that when migrants collect experiences, expand their network, and gain ample resources they tend to see the possibility of moving to the desired destination. We may call it a transition period, as migrants start planning further moves in the middle of migration. As we can see, Nirosha's pathway went via Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Cyprus and eventually ended in Germany. Her work was first restricted, with no social freedom. She eventually gained experience through agents, friends and some relatives who had migrated before. That is how she ended in Cyprus, which is less strict compared to her initial moves. Nonetheless, she informed that it is almost rare to move from the GCC to an EU country because no appropriate certificates qualify them to work as housemaids or nannies. For instance, Filipino migrants are offered opportunities because of their English language skills and higher educational training. They are often able to command a higher wage than workers from other developing countries (Constable, 1997; Martin, Martin, & Weil, 2006; Pratt, 1997). My respondents and related studies show that Sri Lankan domestic workers do not frequently get such opportunities (Gamburd, 2010a; Sriskandarajah, 2002).

I found out from my interviewees that the main desire to migrate to Western countries is exclusively to get permanent residence and citizenship. The relative benefits of living in a well-developed country must also be factored into the equation. Several previous studies as well concur with my findings (Ali, 2011; Carlos, 2013; Valenta, 2020). Additionally, migrants consider moving to a Western destination a prestige, to flag among relatives or friends back in the home country. Valenta (2020) asserts through his findings that *some migrants prized Western countries as the best place for permanent resettlement. Others provided more ambivalent evaluations* (Valenta, 2020, p. 18).

### **7.5 Serial migration alters to Stepwise?**

Multi-national migrants illustrate vividly the trajectories of workers who can navigate the paths of the global economy to earn a living, to support families back home and increase their earning potential over time (Parreñas et al., 2019). Francis (2020) has comprehensively outlined the pathways of multi-national migration and how the migrants have directed their ways to the destination country via distinct pathways. As he describes, the most common pathways are



migrants migrating with the required qualifications directly from the home country. If they do not have a good enough skill set, migrants tend to acquire further qualifications by completing relevant courses, skills acquisition and experience. Here in my interviews, I found that migrants who had been circulating in the GCC eventually found pathways to reach their desired destinations. These migrants had clear intentions about further migrations and had taken concrete actions to achieve that aim. It was chiefly the skilled category migrants.

Simultaneously, Paul (2011) points out genuine hardships and obstacles that serial migrants encounter when altering into stepwise migration. She discusses that placement agencies often exploit migrant workers and extract large fees from their modest earnings. They are forced into a situation of debt bondage in which they pay their agency fees by accepting steep salary deductions for a while. Even though she brings up this fact related to domestic workers, other migrant workers in the GCC also confront similar struggles (Arnold, 2019; Jureidini, 2010). Most of my respondents who came through agencies had salary deductions in the first few months. As a fact they found their pay was meagre. On top of that, they had to send money home to support their family, which was the key motive to come to the Gulf. These challenges obstruct opportunities for further migration moves when evaluating costs and benefits.

Aside from barriers related to financial needs to consulting agencies, studies show that potential human capital is essential to reach Western destinations (Zufferey, 2019). My general finding is that opportunities altering from serial to stepwise migrations are limited for many unskilled migrant workers while recurrent and serial migrations are visible among them (Collins, 2020; Parreñas et al., 2019). Furthermore, my findings are in line with those of other researchers in the field, that serial and circular trajectories towards top tier destinations in the West are more common among high-skilled than low-skilled in the Gulf (Kelly & Hedman, 2016; Valenta, 2020; Zufferey, 2019). In many Western countries, the majority of the migrants that have arrived through second destinations are typically professionals and well educated individuals (Agrawal, 2016; Takenaka, 2007).

## **7.6 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed how Sri Lankan migrants turn over all the stones needed to migrate to a perceived better destination, in their search for an improved quality life beyond work and wages. The pathways and strategies they use are stepwise migration moves reaching

from the lowest tiers to higher tiers. I have also discovered that some Sri Lankan migrants determine their destination from the beginning and work progressively towards it. For such migrants, GCC is a temporary destination to achieve their dreams.

This multi-national movement also indicates that Sri Lankan labourers pursue more opportunities than comparatively they work in Sri Lanka. I have also indicated the stepwise migration strategies and opportunities in Sri Lanka, as well as the trends that hinder those prospects in Sri Lanka. Inability to offer sufficient supply, essential credentials and training is one of the issues identified. It was observed that most Sri Lankan youth labour skilled migrants consider GCC as their first destination to move to their aspired country. Most of them prepare their pathway towards reaching their preferred destination country while sojourning there.

In conclusion, I have observed that it is a long journey for the stepwise migrants who go through GCC. Semi-skilled and unskilled migrants are fewer to be successful in reaching their preferred destinations than the skilled migrants. Hence, migrants who have more migrant capital succeed in this process. For instance, a computer engineer has more potential to achieve their goals in stepwise migration trajectory than a domestic worker. However, when facilitated through links and relations, migrants like Nirosha can also get the opportunities they desire of.

Nevertheless, as Anju Paul (2017) suggested, it is hard to assume the quantity of successful stepwise international migrants from the developing world. It was, however, clearly seen in my study of Sri Lankan stepwise migrants. Besides, my findings mostly show motivations related to improving certain living conditions, enhancing their capital and capacities in the GCC as temporary residents or transient workers. However, as we have analysed, migrants continuously evaluate options, cost and benefits and opportunities. Thereby, migrants practise various migrant mobility patterns which indicate circular, serial and stepwise trajectories of itinerant migration. It all represents a response to life's circumstances and obligations brought out within their families and communities.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

*Although each migratory movement has its own specific historical patterns, it is possible to generalise on the social dynamics of the migratory process. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between migration that is primarily economically motivated and forced migration. Most economic migrations start with young, economically active people. After a period in the destination country, some of these migrants return home, but others prolong their stay, or return and then re-emigrate.*

(Castles et al., 2019, p. 56)

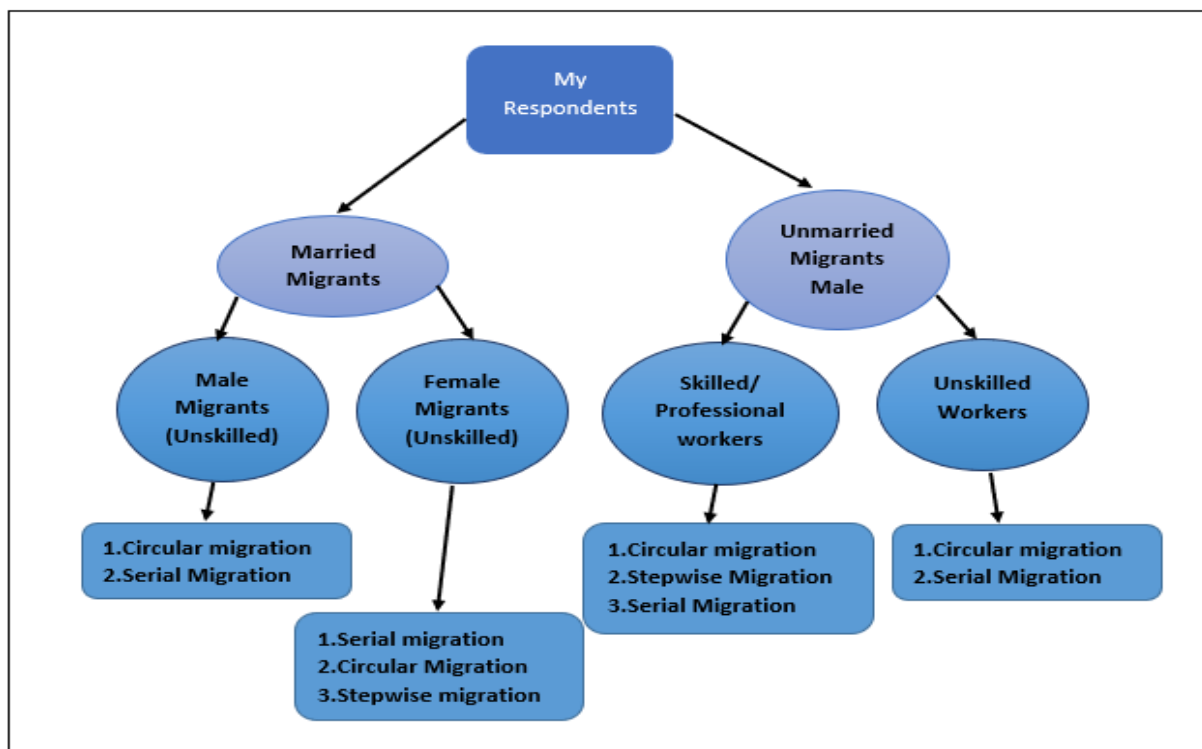
The recent flourish in literature on circular, serial and stepwise labour migrant itinerary patterns inspired this study. Also, my internship, academic conversations with my supervisor, and interviews conducted during my internship as part of my master's programme were my other strengths to carry out this research. I identified that relatively little justification was concerning the micro-level migrant trajectories, coping strategies, and different migrant mobility patterns within Sri Lankan migration literature. Few studies have given particular focus on circular, serial and stepwise itinerary patterns of Sri Lankan migrant labour in the GCC countries and their migrant trajectories. The GCC was selected based on the popular decision making of Sri Lankan labour to work in GCC.

The first four chapters in the study has been dedicated to previous literature, theoretical concepts, and methodology. I used my theoretical conceptual framework to illustrate Sri Lankan labour migrant trajectories and have demonstrated in the empirical chapters of how these migrant trajectories and their coping strategies have mapped circular, serial, and stepwise directions. This thesis is propounded by employing a qualitative methodology. The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews guided by the flexibility to capture all migration experiences that helped me map into circular, serial, and stepwise migration concepts. Hence, I selected the following criteria to select my participants,

- (i) Sri Lankan labour migrants who have worked in more than one GCC country,
- (ii) migrants who have worked in GCC and moved back and forth to Sri Lanka and
- (iii) migrants who have worked in GCC and moved on further, outside of GCC region (other than the home country).

To strengthen my findings, I have also linked with many secondary data that included several scholarly articles, government statistics, non-governmental statistics and books etc.

The second part of the thesis consisted of empirical data findings. As my thesis emphasises circular, serial, and stepwise concepts, I dedicated each chapter to each concept for comprehensive analysis based on several of my participants' migrant trajectories. There was no bias in gender when selecting my research participants. Yet, it brought out a significant difference that married migrants were mostly circular and serial migrants of unskilled and semi-skilled. While unmarried migrants represented only males and were skilled professionals. Further, I have figured out there were blurred boundaries in categorisation migration patterns in some cases. Figure 16 illustrates identified common choices of migration patterns of my respondents.



**Figure 16:** Visible migration patterns according to gender difference, skilled and unskilled status of migrants.

In figure 16, I describe my findings in several diameters. I have used arrows from the top to indicate my findings. The first two down arrows indicate married and unmarried migrants—participants who were married migrants comprised of both male and female, while unmarried migrants were only men. Married men and women participants represented only under the

category of unskilled. In the unmarried male category, there were both skilled and unskilled workers. Under each of those categories, I have highlighted which migration pattern I identified from them. For example, my participants, who were married male migrants, represented circular and serial migrants. Likewise, I have represented which migration patterns I found within each category.

My first research question was: What are the visible migration trajectories and patterns of Sri Lankan labour migrants? My findings demonstrated that circular and serial migration patterns were more frequent than stepwise migrations due to temporary employment in GCC. Individual migrant capital, different perspectives and unique preferences were main reasons to their circular, serial and stepwise migrations. Nonetheless, circular migrations were the most notable among my interviewees in the GCC countries. As I have highlighted in figure 16, stepwise migrations were fewer and represented more favourably among skilled professionals.

My second question was: What are key drivers, forces, and motives for migrating and changing destinations? My findings revealed that migrants' mobility patterns were chiefly influenced depending on their migrant capital, aspirations, family, and personal goals. Simultaneously, I have explored through the secondary data that the temporary nature of migrants' policies in the GCC is also largely influential in creating migrant recurrent patterns. A great deal of variation in migration drivers, forces and motives relate to individual, and household level migration, eventually represented by economic transnationalism. Changing destinations, particularly stepwise migrations to high tier destinations, were primarily based on individual long-term plans of getting a permanent residence or searching for higher living standards. The forces and drivers to circular and serial migrations were primarily found among married individuals. Circular and serial migrants were engaged in recurrent mobility patterns due to fulfilling family demands, inability to cope with the working environment, new migrant opportunities, and revisions in the initial migration decisions. Inequalities, lack of job satisfaction in the home country, and high unemployment were other factors of migration.

My third question was: What is the degree of intentionality and individuality of the migration decision? My findings revealed that intentionality and individuality of the migration decision were not always in favour of migrants themselves. It was highlighted in my findings that circular and serial migrations were mostly dependent on the migrants' marital status and the

degree of responsibility in the family. At times, migration decisions were taken out of natural preference to improve current living standards or achieve individual goals in life for better life circumstances. Nevertheless, most of the migrants considered migration decision as a far better solution than working in the home country. Therefore, I have pointed out in my findings that migrants are engaged in a continuous journey of migration through circular and or serial migration patterns regardless of the natural preference.

Stepwise migrations were frequently visible among youth professionals. There were also aspiring migrants who were looking for opportunities to stabilise in a western country at the time of interviewing. They were in GCC to develop their migrant capital through education, finance and employment experience. Often, the migration decision of the migrant individuals has been taken as a collective decision justifying the NELM theory. However, changing destinations displayed the individuality of mobility patterns through migrant preferences, opportunities, and aspirations.

My last question was: How can we differentiate the various mobility patterns through migrant strategies and trajectories? My respondents proved the fact that migrants were always trying to rationally think to choose what is best for them. I have presented in my findings how some migrants, primarily males were keen to analyse cost-benefit calculations throughout their migration journey. There were also mother migrants who had financial responsibilities and felt the need in providing an income to the family. They were in real struggles to be with the family physically but also become foreign wage earners. Therefore, their migration trajectories were bouncing with frequent returns and re-migrations creating circular and serial migrations. These diverse migrant strategies helped me to distinguish individual circular, serial, or stepwise migration mobility patterns. Some migrants represented a combination of circular-serial and serial-stepwise itinerary patterns. I differentiated the specific migrant pattern observing their migrant trajectories. Trajectories were created based on migrant individual opportunities, migrant capital, migrants' preferences and comparing through self-experiences. These migrant strategies helped me to categorise into the relevant migrant patterns: examples include family obligations - a temporary worker system and a large variety of working opportunities for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled.

My findings suggest that successful stepwise migrants use working in GCC as a strategy of achieving their long-term goals. Migrants who were engaged in circular and serial migrations

were semi-skilled workers who wanted immediate solutions and short-term plans. Therefore, these migrants were involved in continuous migrations, including long-term to short sojourns in the home country. Dissimilar social and human capital influenced migrant trajectories and several mobility patterns. In conclusion, I discoursed that migration patterns are recurrently subjected to alterations when levels of migrants' goals and aspirations fluctuate during their migration journey.

This thesis has presented rich information about Sri Lankan labour migration trajectories and patterns. However, in research, it is evident to come across limitations, and that is why interestingly, the gaps and limitations always open a new path for another new research. My research also produced with several limitations. My sample is not statistically representative. I have based my thesis on a qualitative study based on a limited number of qualitative interviews with strategically selected informants. I also conducted most of the interviews before the Covid pandemic, and it seems that migrations in the region are severely altered by the pandemic. However, I believe that future studies on migrations in the region may build on insights from my study. Here, it will be pertinent to compare patterns of migration observed in my study with those that will occur during and after the pandemic. Furthermore, my findings may be used to develop surveys and to construct and test assumptions in the quantitative studies on migration patterns from Sri Lanka. They may also be used in comparative studies on recurrent migrations of other nationalities in the region and aid future research in debating and discovering diverse migration patterns relating to migrant labour trajectories.

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