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ARTICLE



An empirical study of the factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have been the most preferred destination for professional migrants from Sri Lanka. However, with the boom in the petroleum industry of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in the 1970s, the Gulf has increasingly become an appealing destination for Sri Lankan professional migrants. Among Gulf countries, Qatar is the most common destination. A combination of various factors motivates highly-skilled Sri Lankan workers to migrate to the GCC in general and Qatar in particular. The primary objective of this paper is to analyse these factors. The study is based on primary data gathered via in-depth interviews with 12 key informants and an online survey of 125 professionals. The sample for the questionnaire was selected using a combination of non-probability methods and the data gathered was analysed using a mixed methodology. The study identifies that among the numerous factors that influence Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to the GCC, the tax-free salary which the respondents believe to be higher than the disposable income they can earn in OECD countries is the primary reason for migrating to a Gulf country over OECD countries. The study also identifies that whereas quality-of-life-related factors play a key role in the migration decision to OECD countries, income-related factors are the most crucial in migrating to GCC nations.

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Introduction

Migration of professionals has increasingly become an area of importance in migration research due to the continuous movement of highly-skilled persons from developing countries to developed nations (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2018; Kone & Özden, 2017). The majority of studies on high-skilled migration from developing countries have focused on professional migrants to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries as the destination of around 85% of highly-skilled migrants across the world is an OECD country. However, high-skilled migration to non-OECD countries such as the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC)¹ nations accounts for a significant per cent of labour outflows in certain countries (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). The Gulf is the third-largest regional hub for international migrants in the world after the European Union and North America (Babar, 2013; Shehan, 2012), and there is

a considerable outflow of professionals from South Asia to Gulf countries (Carrington & Detragiache, 1999). Therefore, it is essential to analyse the reasons for and the trends in the migration of professionals to Gulf nations to understand the consequences of the highly-skilled labour outflow from developing nations to the Gulf region. However, studies on the migration of professionals from developing nations to the GCC is sparse.

In the Sri Lankan context, migration of the highly-skilled and the most educated members of the country is not a new phenomenon. During the colonial period, highly educated persons in executive positions of the country migrated in small scale to other colonies of the British empire for employment (Collyer, Wimalasena, Ansar, & Khan, 2009). Beginning in the mid-1950s, professionals such as doctors, engineers and accountants belonging to wealthy, English-speaking elite families of the country left for OECD countries in search of greener pastures (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2013). With the increase in the global oil prices in the mid-1970s following the Arab-Israel war of 1973, and the resultant economic expansion and the development projects undertaken in the Gulf region (Kapiszewski, 2017), the GCC also became an alluring destination for Sri Lankan professional migrants (Wickramasekara, 2010).

The data published by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) indicates that migration of professionals has significantly increased in the past two decades (by around 800% between 1998 and 2017). According to the SLBFE statistics, countries in the GCC attract the highest number of professionals from Sri Lanka with an average of more than 70% of professional migrants leaving for Gulf nations between 2013 and 2017 (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). However, studies on Sri Lankan professional migrants like that of the majority of studies on professional migrants around the world have focused entirely on those who migrate to OECD countries. According to the best of our knowledge, professional migrants to the Gulf has not been covered in the existing literature on either Sri Lankan professional migrants nor Sri Lankan migrants to the Gulf. However, as professional migrants to the Gulf are temporary guest workers and cannot easily settle down in their host countries like those to OECD countries (Hvidt, 2016; Valenta, 2016), it is vital to analyse the reasons for and trends in their migration patterns to analyse the effects on Sri Lanka and other South Asian nations that experience high-skilled labour outflows to GCC nations.

Among the Gulf nations, on average, Qatar has attracted the highest number of Sri Lankan professionals since 2010, with around 34% of professional migrants to the GCC migrating to Qatar (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Therefore, this paper attempts to assess the reasons for the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to the GCC using professional migrants to Qatar as a case study. A mixed methodology has been used to analyse 1) the factors that influenced Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar to migrate to a GCC country instead of any OECD country, 2) factors that drove them to select Qatar over other GCC countries and 3) specific push and pull factors that influenced them to migrate to Qatar.

Literature review

Reasons for international migration

There is no unified theory or model on migration that encompasses the diverse forms, reasons and consequences of migration (Popjaková & Plešivčák, 2009). Instead, there exists

a range of disjointed and fragmented theoretical models that explains the various aspects of international migration (Massey et al., 1993). These theories can be broadly classified into three categories based on the level of analysis; macro-, meso- and micro-level theories (Boswell, 2002; Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Wickramasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2016).

Micro theories view migration as an individual decision and focus on how prospective migrants compare costs and benefits of migration (Boswell, 2002). These theories are often based on a rational choice model of behaviour where it is assumed that rational, profit-maximising individuals migrate with the expectation of positive net benefits based on a personal cost-benefit analysis (Massey et al., 1993; O’Rielly, 2015). Micro theories include Lee’s push-pull model which posits that positive and negative factors at the country of origin and destination push and pull migrants towards various destinations hindered by existing barriers (such as distance and language) and personal factors (such as age and family status) (Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Olejarova, 2007).

Macro theories of migration disregard micro-level decisions and analyse migration decisions based on forces that operate at a higher level of aggregation (Massey et al., 1993), i.e. the aggregate economic conditions of the country of origin relative to those at the destination (Boswell, 2002). Macro theories emphasise structural and objective conditions which translate into push and pull factors. For example, unemployment, low salaries, political repression, crime and violence in the country of origin act as common push factors while favourable labour market conditions and immigration policies in the destination country act as common pull factors (Boswell, 2002).² Macro theories include Piore’s dual labour market theory which links international migration to the continuous demand (pull) for immigrant labour inherent to developed nations (Massey et al., 1993); the world systems theory which views immigration as a capitalist system where poor nations provide a constant supply of labour to wealthy nations (O’Rielly, 2015) and the neoclassical macro theory which posits that international migration takes place due to geographical differences in supply of and demand for labour (Massey et al., 1993).

Meso theories perceive migration flows to occur within a complex system of linkages between nations where certain countries are linked by economic, political and cultural connections and migration flows (Boswell, 2002). Hence, family ties, peer groups, other social networks, and symbolic relations such as ethnic, religious and political groups play an essential role in influencing migratory decisions in meso theories (Olejarova, 2007; Wickramasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2016). According to meso theories, these social networks and other bonds provide resources for potential migrants in the forms of information, contacts, social and financial support and significantly influence the volume and direction of migration flows (Boswell, 2002). Meso theories include new economics of labour migration theory, network theory, institutional theory and cumulative causation theory (Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Wickramasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2016). The new economics of labour migration theory argues that migration decisions are made not by individuals but by larger micro-units of people such as families and households in order to maximise income and reduce risks by operating in different labour markets (Massey et al., 1993). On the other hand, network theory accepts the view that international migration is a personal or household decision, but argues that ‘acts of migration at one point in time systematically alter the context within which future migration decisions are

made, greatly increasing the likelihood that later decision-makers will choose to migrate' (Massey et al., 1993; p.499).

Even though existing theories of migration are disjointed and fragmented, they play a crucial role in analysing the relationship between various variables related to international migration (Wickramasinghe & Wimalaratana, 2016). Micro theories emphasise the role of individual desires, values and expectancies in migration decisions (Hagen-Zanker, 2008) and are useful in analysing how individuals process various factors influencing the migration process, and demonstrate how macro- and meso-factors affect an individual's decision to migrate (Boswell, 2002; Olejarova, 2007). Macro theories focus on macro-level opportunity structures and provide macro explanations on aggregate migration patterns (Hagen-Zanker, 2008) while meso theories emphasise the role of systems and networks and explain the reasons for the choice of destination and continuous voluntary migration from certain parts of the world (Boswell, 2002). This paper uses a combination of these micro, macro and meso theories in its analysis to determine the drivers for the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to the GCC, particularly to Qatar.

Sri Lankan migration profile – from post-independence to recent developments with particular focus on professional migrants

Mass international migration for employment and settlement is a relatively new phenomenon in modern Sri Lankan history. During the colonial period, highly educated persons in administrative positions in the country migrated on a small scale to other countries of the British empire for employment (Collyer et al., 2009). However, after gaining independence in 1948, the number of migrants substantially increased due to various reasons. Beginning in the mid-1950s, professionals such as doctors, engineers, accountants and university lecturers belonging to wealthy, English-speaking elite families left for OECD countries in search of greener pastures (Colombage, 2010; Gamburd, 2010; Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2013). This was intensified in the 1960s due to political unrest, the switch from English to national languages as the medium of instruction at schools and universities (Wickramasekara, 2010), imposition of inward-looking government policies such as import substitution, nationalisation of private assets, and limitations imposed on land ownership (Karunaratne, 2008; Wickramasekara, 2010). Even though the government tried to control the outmigration of the educated by imposing an exit permit system and restrictions on the issue of passports, a significant number of professionals managed to leave the country due to the very existence of such controls (Wickramasekara, 2010). However, none of these can be compared to the momentum in the Sri Lankan migration history that occurred with the boom in the economies of oil-exporting Middle-Eastern countries in the 1970s.

With the hike in oil prices in 1973, Middle-Eastern countries (especially GCC countries) began to invest in massive infrastructure projects to revamp their economies which created a high demand for migrant labour from countries such as Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Colombage, 2010; International Organisation for Migration & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009; Zachariah, Prakash, & Rajan, 2003). The relaxation of legal requirements for migration for employment in Sri Lanka in 1976 (Karunaratne, 2008) and the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy in 1977 facilitated Sri Lankans to reap benefits from the opportunities provided by the oil boom in the Gulf

region (Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2013; Withers, 2019). In the beginning, the majority of job opportunities in the GCC were for low-skilled male construction workers. However, by 1990s, female domestic workers were more in demand and accounted for the vast majority of out-migrants from Sri Lanka (Wickramasekara, 2010). During this period, the outflow of professional migrants from Sri Lanka continued in the same pattern as was in the previous decades due to opportunities in the Middle-East and the commencement of the civil war in the country which resulted in outmigration of professionals using both regular and irregular channels (Wickramasekara, 2010).

In recent years, the outflow of professional migrants from Sri Lanka has significantly increased. According to the data published by the SLBFE, between 1994 and 1998, an average of 601 professionals left Sri Lanka seeking foreign employment. This figure increased to an average of 5945 between 2013 and 2017, which is an increase of 889%. Along with the number of professional migrants, the proportion of professional migrants as a percentage of total departures for foreign employment has also increased over this period from an average of 0.42 between 1994–1998 to an average of 2.33 between 2013–2017 (SLBFE, 2017). The vast majority of these professional migrants of Sri Lanka migrate to GCC countries with an average of 4496 (75.8%) professionals migrating to the Gulf between 2013 and 2017 (SLBFE 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

However, these figures on Sri Lankan professional migrants are underestimations since they only include migrants who have registered with the SLBFE and approximations of migrants who have sought employment abroad through direct means computed through pre-departure immigration procedures (Arunatilake, Jayawardena, & Weerakoon, 2011; Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2013). Migrants who register with the SLBFE are mostly domestic, unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Most of the skilled workers and professionals emigrate under the general emigration laws of Sri Lanka and do not register with the SLBFE (International Organisation for Migration, & Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, 2009). Moreover, the information gathered through pre-departure formalities is not very organised, and hence, the accuracy is questionable (Arunatilake et al., 2011). Therefore, the data available on Sri Lankan migrant workers is highly selective and is a misrepresentation of the country's actual migration profile. For example, according to the SLBFE data, only one professional migrated to the United States in 2017. This is 'a gross underestimation and contrary to the evidence in the foreign employment patterns for professional workers' (International Organisation for Migration, 2009, p.29). The outflow of professional migrants is more significant than the SLBFE statistics indicate.

Reasons for the migration of Sri Lankan professionals

Even though SLBFE statistics indicate that the Gulf region is the primary destination of Sri Lankan professional migrants, the limited research on the reasons for the migration of Sri Lankan professionals has mostly focused on professional migrants to the OECD while the literature on Sri Lankan migrants to the Gulf has exclusively looked into the reasons for the migration of unskilled and low-skilled workers. To the best of our knowledge, the reasons for the migration of professionals to the Gulf has not been covered in the existing literature on either Sri Lankan professional migrants nor Sri Lankan migrants to the Gulf.

The studies that have been conducted on the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to the OECD reveal that a combination of various push and pull factors motivate the highly skilled tertiary-educated Sri Lankans to migrate to the OECD. A survey conducted by De Silva et al. (2013) on the migration of medical specialists in Sri Lanka has identified that the mandatory appointments to rural areas given to specialist doctors on completion of their training abroad to be the most critical push factor that motivates them to migrate. In addition, lack of opportunities for professional development in Sri Lanka as well as higher quality of life, better working conditions and excellent educational opportunities available for their children in the OECD countries have been identified as significant push and pull factors that contribute to their decision to emigrate.

A cross-sectional study conducted by de Silva et al. (2014) involving medical students and pre-intern medical graduates of the University of Colombo has also investigated the factors that affect the migration of medical professionals in Sri Lanka. It reveals that perceived better quality of life in the OECD countries and the need for a better income as the key factors that have influenced the migration decision of medical students and pre-interns who have plans to migrate. On the other hand, the main factors in favour of migration identified by those who are yet to decide whether they are going to migrate are the better quality of life, higher income and favourable political climate in the OECD countries.

A survey conducted by Anas and Wickremasinghe (2010) on Sri Lankan expatriate scientists has identified that higher-quality postgraduate study options available in the OECD as the primary reason for the migration of Sri Lankan scientific community, followed by better career opportunities. In addition, the study reveals that the expatriate scientists are also concerned about push factors such as shortage of intellectual guidance, bureaucratic barriers and low job satisfaction. Anas and Wickremasinghe argue that high-quality lifestyles, better employment opportunities and the immigration policies of the OECD that favour professionals to be the pull factors that attract the Sri Lankan scientific community towards those countries.

Methodology

According to the data published by the SLBFE, Qatar is the primary destination of Sri Lankan professional migrants to the Gulf with an average of around 1577 professionals choosing to migrate to Qatar per year between 2013 and 2017 (SLBFE, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017).

Out of the many categories of Sri Lankan professionals working in Qatar, three were selected for this study: engineering, quantity surveying and accounting³. These three professions were selected since each of them have a substantial number of Sri Lankan migrants working in Qatar and have well-established professional bodies⁴ encompassing a significant proportion of the total number of Sri Lankan engineers, quantity surveyors and accountants in Qatar⁵.

Sampling and data collection

This study is solely based on primary data gathered through two instruments: an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews with key informants.

- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants identified by the researchers through judgemental sampling. These key informants included three members of the executive committee of the Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) – Qatar Chapter, an office-bearer from the Society of Sri Lankan Quantity Surveyors (SLQS) – Qatar as well as engineers, quantity surveyors and accountants with two to ten years of experience in Qatar.

Data from the key-informants were collected in two segments. The first batch of interviews, which included seven in-depth interviews, was conducted from 20 to 30 June 2017, prior to sending out the online questionnaire. The data from these interviews were used in designing the survey. The second group of interviews were conducted in parallel with the online survey from 15 July to 5 August 2017.

During the interviews, the key informants were encouraged to describe their personal experiences in addition to being representatives of their respective professions. An interview schedule containing open-ended questions was used as a guide. However, the conversations were not limited to the interview schedule, and the researchers explored new topics that emerged during the discussions.

- Online survey

The online questionnaire was developed based on the researchers' personal experience, data collected from the first group of key informants and extensive review of the literature. Most of the questions in the survey were designed as closed-ended questions, and personal topics (such as income and expenditure data) were avoided in order to maximise the response rates and eliminate the probability of non-submission of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a group of five professionals who were not a part of the survey.

Since a list of all members of the population was not available, the sample for the questionnaire was selected using three non-probability methods; snowball sampling, judgemental sampling and convenient sampling. Initially, the survey was conveniently emailed to quantity surveyors and engineers respectively through the Society of Sri Lankan Quantity Surveyors (SLQS) – (Qatar Chapter) and the Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) – (Qatar Chapter). However, since the response rates from engineers were low, data on engineers was also gathered through purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. Data on accountants was solely based on the snowballing sampling method.

Altogether, the questionnaire was sent out to more than 600 professionals (around 500 quantity surveyors, 70 engineers, 50 accountants) but received only 125 responses (20.8%). This sample of 125 includes 64 quantity surveyors, 47 engineers and 14 accountants. Even though the numbers of engineers and accountants in the sample is far below than that of quantity surveyors, the authors do not consider it as a limitation since it is assumed that the number of Sri Lankan quantity surveyors in Qatar far exceeds those of engineers and accountants.

Data analysis

All the data gathered were used in a mixed-method analysis to gain more precise in-depth insights into various aspects of the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar. The KIs were used in thematic qualitative analysis, whereas the information collected through the online survey was analysed using quantitative methods.

The average ranking method was used to address the third research objective of determining the push and pull factors that influence Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar. This method was mainly utilised to determine the specific order in which various factors affect the migration decision of the respondents. Accordingly, the respondents were asked to rank seven push and pull factors in the order of their importance in deciding to migrate to Qatar. These seven factors were selected as the most influential from a pool of factors based on the KIs. The respondents were given the option of marking factors that did not play a role in their migration decision-making process as 'non-applicable' to ensure that even the lowest-ranked factors still had a role in their decision to migrate to Qatar.

The average rank was calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{Average rank} = \frac{x_1w_1 + x_2w_2 + \dots + x_7w_7}{\text{Total}}$$

X = the number of responses for the particular factor

W = weight of the ranked position

The weights were applied in the reverse order for the seven ranks with the gap between each rank being equal to 1 (i.e. the factor that is ranked in the first place weights 7 and the factor that is ranked in the 7th position weights 1). The non-applicable responses were not included in calculating the average ranks.

Limitations

Since a complete list of Sri Lankan professionals currently working in Qatar is not available, the researchers had to resort to the use of non-probability methods of sampling. Therefore, the extent to which the selected sample of Sri Lankan professional migrants represents the entire population of Sri Lankan professional migrants in Qatar remains unknown, and it is the primary limitation of this study.

Secondly, the researchers had to limit the research to three categories of professions (quantity surveyors, engineers and accountants) due to time constraints. Even though these three categories of professions are presumed to be among the top five categories that mostly represent the Sri Lankan professional migrant population in Qatar, limiting the study to these three professions makes the analysis somewhat biased towards these occupations.

Results

Reasons for migrating to Gulf countries over the OECD countries

Traditionally, the OECD countries, especially countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA have been the favoured destination among Sri Lankan professional migrants since these countries provide citizenship for skilled-migrants from

other nations. However, as discussed earlier, with the expansion in the economies of oil-exporting Gulf nations in the 1970s, a significant number of Sri Lankan professionals began to migrate to the GCC. According to the respondents (N = 125), their primary reason for migrating to a Gulf country instead of to an OECD country is because they can earn a high tax-free salary in the Gulf (69.6%) (Figure 1). This is followed by plans of settling down in Sri Lanka (62.4%), relative ease of finding jobs in the Gulf (48.8%), relative ease of obtaining work visas in the Gulf (40.8%), and the relative ease and lower cost of travelling back and forth between Sri Lanka and the Gulf (40.8%).

Tax-free remuneration packages offered in the GCC is one of the key factors that attract professionals from both the developing and developed countries to this region (Chaudoir, 2010). According to the key informant interviews, even though the salary of professionals in OECD countries is extremely high compared to that of in Sri Lanka, they believe that due to income tax regulations in OECD countries, the disposable income of professionals in those countries is less than that of in the Gulf. Comparison of the average annual after-tax income of a civil engineer in Australia and Canada with the average annual salary of a civil engineer in the GCC using data provided by 'Salary Explorer'⁶, a popular salary comparison website supports the survey results and the views held by the interviewees. As can be seen in Table 1, whereas the average annual gross income of a civil engineer in Canada is higher than that of in all Gulf states, the average annual disposable income of a civil engineer in Canada is less than that of in all GCC countries. However, the disposable income of a civil engineer in Bahrain is lower than that of a civil engineer in Australia. This shows that there could be instances in which the disposable income in OECD countries is higher than that of in GCC nations. However, discussions with the interviewees led to the conclusion that the Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar believe that the disposable income of professionals in the GCC is higher than that of their counterparts in OECD countries. Their assumptions are based on the average salaries received by friends with similar qualifications residing in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

One of the reasons for the relatively low disposable salaries received by Sri Lankan professionals in OECD countries could be due to the occupational downgrading that some of them experience in these countries. According to Siar (2013), even though

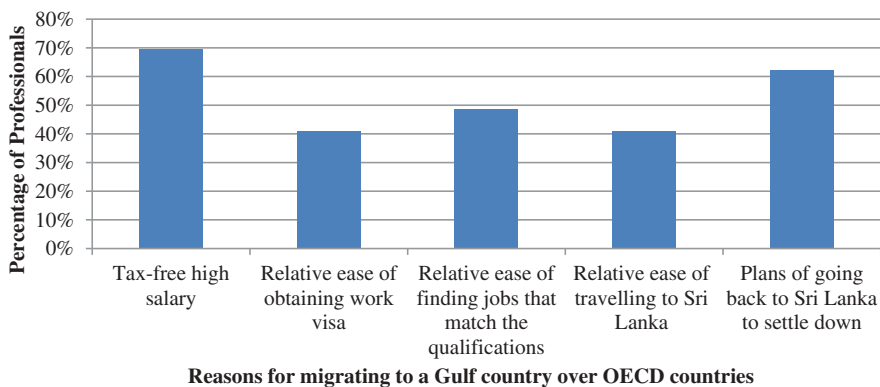


Figure 1. Reasons for deciding to migrate to a Gulf country over an OECD country.

Note: Survey data (2017)

Table 1. Comparison of the average annual disposable income of a civil engineer with 5–10 years of experience in selected OECD and GCC countries.

Country	Average annual gross salary (in local currency) ⁷	Conversion rate to USD ⁸	Average annual gross salary (in USD)	Income tax (in USD)	Average annual net salary (in USD)
Australia	AUD 70,413	0.68	47,881	9,813 ⁹	38,068
Canada	CAD 56,757	0.76	43,135	9,109 ¹⁰	34,026
Qatar	QAR 145,874	0.27	39,386	0	39,386
Saudi Arabia	SAR 159,347	0.27	43,024	0	43,024
UAE ¹¹	AED 152,829	0.27	41,264	0	41,264
Kuwait	KWD 11,877	3.29	39,075	0	39,075
Oman	OMR 15,768	2.60	40,997	0	40,997
Bahrain	BHD 13,952	2.65	36,973	0	36,973

Note: Author's calculations based on data obtained from salaryexplorer.com

professionals are admitted to OECD countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand based on immigration policies that favour skilled-workers, more often than not, professionals who relocate to those countries from developing countries experience an occupational downgrading in their host countries, especially during the initial transition period when migrants are still in the process of adjusting to their new environments and due to factors such as entrenched discrimination and non-recognition of educational qualifications attained in developing countries. The key informants who have plans of eventually relocating to Australia, Canada or New Zealand (N = 5) believe that they will have to initially struggle to find work that is consistent with their qualifications and social status in these OECD countries. For example, Malith, a quantity surveyor who at the time of the interview was finalising his plans of migrating to Australia after working in Qatar for ten years stated that he had heard about the difficulties faced by Sri Lankan professionals in finding jobs in Australia from his uncle who lives in Brisbane and that he is planning to utilise the savings he made in Qatar to cope with potential unemployment upon migrating to Australia. He added that he is worried that he might have to take on a manual job at least until he settles down.

Conversely, professionals who migrate to the Gulf have the assurance that they have jobs that match their skills before emigrating from their countries. All of them know what their position and salary will be before migrating. This is ensured by the *Kafala* system, which is the arrangement employed by Gulf countries to regulate the influx of migrant workers (Hvidt, 2016).

Key informant interviews revealed that prior to migrating to OECD countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, prospective migrants have to fulfil specific requirements which are far more challenging than those involved with migrating to a Gulf state. These include but not limited to facing language proficiency tests, preparing career portfolios and filing applications with relevant immigration authorities. For example, according Chamal, a thirty-two-year-old engineer who is planning to obtain a skilled migration visa to Australia, engineers who wish to migrate to Australia to settle down has to obtain a high band score (7 or above) at the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination, submit a Competency Demonstration Report (CDR) to the Institute of Engineers – Australia and file an Expression of Interest with the Department of Home Affairs using a government website called the Skillset, and then

wait for an invitation to apply for visa. This process tends to be complicated, costly, time-consuming and competitive.

Compared to these lengthy and tiresome procedures involved in migrating to OECD countries, migration to the Gulf is relatively easy. According to key informants, in general, a Sri Lankan professional seeking an employment opportunity in the Gulf only has to apply for a job, get through the interview process, obtain a police clearance by the local police station and get his/her educational qualifications attested by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sri Lanka. The other documents necessary for obtaining an employment visa is taken care of by the employer in the Gulf country. Hence, even though professionals who intend to obtain citizenship in OECD countries go through stringent procedures, professionals who have plans of eventually settling down in Sri Lanka tend to select the relatively easy option of migrating to the Gulf.

Reasons for selecting Qatar among other Gulf countries

According to interviewees, the main reason for the migration of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar over other countries in the GCC is due to the relatively high number of job opportunities available in Qatar. As the annual reports published by the SLBFE indicate, until 2010, the UAE was the most common destination for Sri Lankan professional migrants to the Gulf. However, this changed to Qatar in 2010. This could be due to the saturation in the construction sector in the UAE following the global economic recession in the late 2000s as well as the boom in the construction sector in Qatar over its successful bid in 2010 to host the international football world cup (FIFA world cup) in 2022. The saturation in the construction sector in the UAE could have reduced the number of jobs available for Sri Lankan professionals in the country. On the other hand, selection of Qatar to host the FIFA world cup in 2022 resulted in an expansion in the construction sector led by massive investments in building stadiums and related infrastructure, and the number of vacancies for professionals in Qatar spiked. Even though the initial surge in the job market in Qatar has somewhat saturated now, as the data published by the SLBFE indicates, still, Qatar is the most common destination for Sri Lankan professionals in the Gulf.

The second reason for selecting Qatar among other Gulf nations is its relatively liberal atmosphere, which the interviewees believe is second only to that of in the UAE. According to the interviewees, there are many job opportunities for professionals in Saudi Arabia, and as the cost of living in Saudi Arabia is lower than that of Qatar, professionals can save a higher percentage of their salary. However, they are hesitant to migrate to the country due to its stringent rules and regulations and lack of opportunities for entertainment and recreation. The same reasons apply to their reluctance to migrate to Kuwait also. For example, according to Darith, an engineer who migrated to Qatar after working in Saudi Arabia for two years, life in Saudi Arabia can be mundane due to lack of options for entertainment such as movie theatres and musical shows.¹² Moreover, according to Darith, 'Saudi Arabia's rigid alcohol ban makes it hard to access liquor through legal means which further restricts the options for entertainment. Even though there are many illegal channels through which liquor can be obtained, these can be risky and can result in severe punishments such as prison sentences and flogging.' Darith further added that his decision to find a job in another Gulf country was

influenced by the persuasions of his parents who were worried that working in Saudi Arabia will hurt his marriage prospects as Sri Lankans in general have a negative opinion about working conditions Saudi Arabia due to the negative image of Saudi Arabia portrayed by Sri Lankan as well as world media.

Factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar

The seven push and pull factors that were identified as the most influential in motivating Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar can be categorised into three clusters as a) income-related, b) career-related and c) quality-of-life-related factors. The income-related factors are the highly attractive salary and the benefit-package offered in Qatar, the meagre salary received, and the inability to save as desired due to the high cost of living in Sri Lanka.¹³ The career-related factors are opportunities for professional development available in Qatar and the lack of jobs that match the skills of professionals in Sri Lanka while the quality-of-life-related factors are the relatively poor quality-of-life in Sri Lanka and the perceived better quality-of-life enjoyed by friends who work in Qatar. Even though an adequate income is necessary to maintain a high quality-of-life, income-related factors have been identified as a separate category to highlight the difference between income factors and the other aspects of quality-of-life.

Out of all the factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar, the highly attractive salary and benefits package offered in Qatar with a weighted average rank of 5.5 was identified as the most influential (Table 2). Even though there are slight deviations in the order of ranking of the seven factors across the three professions, still, the income-related factors are the top three factors across all professions, followed by career-related factors and quality-of-life-related factors.

Income-related factors

Income-related factors are the main reason for the migration of professionals from Sri Lanka to Qatar with more than three-quarters (76.8%) of all respondents (N = 125)

Table 2. Push and pullfactors that influenced the migration decision of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar.

Category	Factor	Overall		Engineers		Quantity Surveyors		Accountants	
		Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank
Income-related	Highly attractive salary and benefit package offered in Qatar	5.5	1	5.7	1	5.4	1	5	2
	Inability to save as desired in Sri Lanka	5.1	2	5.1	2	4.6	3	5.2	1
	Insufficient salary received in Sri Lanka compared to skills and experience	4.9	3	4.9	3	5.3	2	4.8	3
Career-related	Opportunities for professional development in Qatar	4.1	4	3.8	5	4.3	4	4.3	5
	Lack of job opportunities that match the skills of professionals in Sri Lanka	4.1	4	4	4	4.1	5	4.6	4
Quality-of-life-related	Relatively lower quality of life in Sri Lanka	3.4	6	3.3	6	3.4	6	4.1	6
	Perceived better quality-of-life enjoyed by friends/family who had migrated to Qatar	3.1	7	3.3	6	3	7	3.4	7

Note: Survey data (2017)

ranking one of the three income-related factors as the most crucial reason for migrating to Qatar. Compared to Qatar, the salary scale of professionals in Sri Lanka is extremely low and is often perceived by professionals to be inadequate compared to their qualifications and needs. Even though these three groups of professionals tend to earn reasonably higher salaries compared to most of the other professional categories in Sri Lanka, most of them fail to save as they desire due to the ever-increasing cost of living in the country. Moreover, various social engagements they have to be a part of in Sri Lanka such as weddings and alms-giving ceremonies hinder their ability to save the amount they wish to. In the sample, the average amount saved by professionals from their monthly salaries when they were in Sri Lanka was around 18%¹⁴. Moreover, nearly 45% of professionals said that they were able to save only 10% or less. What is even more noteworthy is that nearly one-fifth (19.6%) of professionals stated that they were unable to save at all when they were in Sri Lanka.

According to the key-informant interviews, the basic salary of a professional in Qatar is more than four times the total remuneration package of a professional with similar qualifications in Sri Lanka. Moreover, in addition to the basic salary, professionals in Qatar receive various other benefits such as accommodation and transportation allowances and access to free and high-quality health-care. Because of the benefit-package that accompanies the high salary, most professionals can save a substantial proportion of their salaries in Qatar. On average, Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar tend to save around 53% of their salaries and remit around 48% to Sri Lanka¹⁵. More than one-quarter of respondents in the sample stated that they save 70% or more of their salaries in Qatar¹⁶. According to the interviewees, the principal reasons for their ability to save a higher percentage of their salaries are the relatively low cost of transportation and lack of social engagements in Qatar.

Career-related factors

The second most important group of factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar is related to job opportunities available for professionals in Qatar and Sri Lanka. According to the key informant interviews from the quantity surveying profession, there are limited job opportunities available for quantity surveyors in Sri Lanka. This is mainly due to the scarcity of mega-scale construction projects in the country which require their services. Even in instances where there are mega projects which require the services of quantity surveyors, quantity surveyors have to compete with civil engineers as a significant proportion of civil engineers in Sri Lanka have the qualifications necessary for quantity surveying positions. On the other hand, the interviews revealed that some quantity surveyors choose the profession in the first place with the hope of securing jobs overseas.

Even though engineers and accountants have sufficient job opportunities in Sri Lanka compared to quantity surveyors, according to the key informant interviews, the increasing supply of engineers and accountants have increased the competition among these professionals. This has driven down their bargaining power in the Sri Lankan job market. Therefore, most of the time, these professionals have to settle down for jobs that neither provide them with satisfactory remuneration packages nor much opportunities for career development.

In contrast to Sri Lanka, Qatar presents plenty of opportunities for career development for professionals, especially in its thriving multibillion-dollar construction industry. Since Qatar has been selected to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, there are many mega-scale construction projects ongoing in the country such as expressways, stadiums and entertainment centres. This has opened up a massive amount of job opportunities for professionals from all corners of the world.

Quality-of-life related factors

The third group of factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar is related to their overall expected quality-of-life. According to the interviewees, Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar perceive their quality-of-life in Sri Lanka was low not only due to financial reasons but also due to other reasons. These include but not limited to reasons such as lack of quality time they got to spend with family, the traffic conditions in the country which made them feel as if they were always on the road, lack of time for recreational activities, lack of access to high-quality health-care and lethargic bureaucracy in the country.

Even though life in Qatar also entails certain pitfalls, according to the key informant interviews, for most Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar, quality-of-life tends to be better than that of in Sri Lanka. However, quality-of-life related factors have a lower level of importance in the migration decision of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar. 32% of the respondents stated that low quality of life in Sri Lanka did not play any role in their decision to migrate to Qatar while another 26.4% of the respondents ranked it in the bottom two positions (sixth and seventh). More than one-quarter (26.4%) of respondents stated that the perceived better quality lifestyles enjoyed by friends in Qatar did not affect their decision to migrate to Qatar while 33.6% of respondents gave it low ranks (sixth and seventh positions). The lower level of importance given to quality-of-life related factors in the migration decision of Sri Lankan professionals to Qatar could be due to reasons such as the harsh environment in Qatar during summer, negative image portrayed about the working conditions in the Gulf by Sri Lankan media (which mostly applies to low-skilled workers) and restrictive laws in Qatar and the Gulf.

Differences in the reasons for migrating to Gulf countries from that of migrating to an OECD country

26.4% of the respondents (N = 33) stated that they have plans of eventually settling down in an OECD country that provides permanent citizenship such as New Zealand, Australia and Canada. The primary reasons for their decision to migrate to these countries are the better quality of life (69.7%) and the better educational opportunities for children (66.7%) available in those countries. The other main reason for planning to migrate to an OECD country is the lack of trust in the future development prospects of Sri Lanka. 57.6% of the respondents stated that instability in Sri Lanka is a principal reason for their decision. Apart from these, the other reasons behind planning to migrate to countries that provide citizenship are better opportunities for professional development provided in those countries (27.3%) and low salary received in Sri Lanka (27.37%). This shows that even though professionals migrate to the Gulf primarily for

income-related purposes, their reasons for migrating to countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are not mainly related to financial purposes, but other aspects of quality of life.

Conclusion

According to the survey results and key informant interviews, the tax-free salaries provided in GCC nations which the respondents believe to be higher than the disposable income they can earn in OECD countries is the primary reason of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar for deciding to migrate to a Gulf country over OECD countries which are traditionally the popular option amongst Sri Lankan professional migrants. Apart from that, complexities involved in obtaining visas to OECD countries also play a key role in their decision to migrate to a Gulf state. This suggests that migration is not always a free choice even for highly-skilled migrants and the complexities in immigration systems limit their decision-making power. On the other hand, among the factors that influenced Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar to migrate to Qatar over other Gulf countries, the availability of job opportunities due to ongoing massive construction projects aiming for the FIFA world cup in 2022 and the relatively liberal atmosphere in the country are prominent.

Among the income-, career- and quality-of-life-related factors that motivate Sri Lankan professionals to migrate to Qatar, the income-related factors play the most significant role followed by career-related factors while the quality-of-life related factors play only a minimal role. Conversely, the quality-of-life related factors play the most significant role in the migration decision of Sri Lankan professionals in Qatar who intend to eventually settle down in an OECD country while the income-related reasons play only a minimal role. This implies that even though professionals who migrate to the GCC are primarily motivated by income-related factors, those who migrate to OECD countries are mainly influenced by quality-of-life-related factors.

Notes

1. The GCC region includes six nations; Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.
2. Lee's push and pull model is a micro theory as his theory includes individualistic interpretations of these factors (Olejarova, 2007).
3. This study defines a professional migrant as a migrant with at least two years of tertiary education in a given profession which is the most commonly used definition of professional migrants in migration literature and the basic definition of highly skilled migrants used by the International Organisation for Migration (2008). All engineers and accountants in the sample have at least four years of university education. The majority of quantity surveyors have more than three years of tertiary education.
4. The Institute of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) – Qatar Chapter, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka (ICAS) – Qatar Chapter, Society of Sri Lankan Quantity Surveyors (SLQS) – Qatar.
5. There is a significant number of Sri Lankan teachers and managers working in Qatar. However, their professional qualifications greatly vary and do not fit the definition of professionals used in this study. Hence, they were not included in the study.
6. The data from www.salaryexplorer.com was used as it is a popular website for comparing salaries in various cities around the world based on profession, level of education,

experience and other criteria. In order to calculate the average salaries, this website utilises salary data provided by its users, recruitment agencies, companies and employers.

7. Data obtained from www.salaryexplorer.com, .
8. The currency conversion rates were obtained from <https://www.xe.com/> on 7 August 2019.
9. Calculated based on the simple tax calculator provided by the Government of Australia's Taxation Office (www.ato.gov.au/calculators-and-tools/simple-tax-calculator/) .
10. In Canada, the income tax rate differs based on the province. For this calculation, the tax rate of Nunavut was used as it has the lowest tax rate in Canada. The total tax was calculated based on the calculator provided by <https://simpletax.ca/calculator>.
11. The average of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the two main cities in the UAE.
12. This interview was conducted in 2017. Movie theatres began to operate on a commercial scale in Saudi Arabia from 2018. However, they are still strictly censored and are centred around major cities.
13. Even though the latter two can be considered as different experiences of the same factor, there are slight deviations between the two. Insufficient salary refers to the low remuneration package received vis-à-vis skills, experience and the earnings of other job categories (such as doctors) while the inability to save can be the result of the high cost of living despite the reasonable salary received in comparison to the earnings of other professionals.
14. This average has been calculated based on the answers given by 112 respondents. The answers of the rest of the respondents were not included in the calculation since they included non-quantifiable responses such as 'I cannot remember', 'I did not work in Sri Lanka'.
15. These averages have been calculated based on answers given by 110 respondents.
16. This average has been calculated based on answers given by 110 respondents.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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