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## **Coping with Exploitative Working Conditions: A Case of Sri Lankan Migrants in Bahrain**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This case study is a detailed description of the experience of Sri Lankan migrant workers in Bahrain, exploring the labour market exploitation after arriving in Bahrain and coping strategies. These migrants' labour market experiences show contrasting and negative experiences after arriving at their destinations. The qualitative research method was utilised, drawing descriptive analysis (thematic analysis technique) of compiling data through semi-structured interviews. Thirty in-depth interviews with Sri Lankan migrant workers, who stayed with their families in Bahrain for more than six months, were conducted using a purposive sampling. The study has identified negative experiences of relationships with employers and co-workers in which migrants went through a range of exploitations. The study revealed that the power exercised by employers and co-workers was the prominent cause behind this exploitation. The findings have confirmed that the foremost goal of migration, earning through productive employment, has collapsed due to wage exploitation. Finally, the study highlights acceptance of exploitation as a coping strategy that the migrants had adopted to endure their exploitative labour market. The information explored on the exploitation of migrant workers in Bahrain enriches the literature with a new sociological and empirical study that provides new evidence about their severe challenges.*

*Keywords: Middle East migrants, exploitation, employment relationship, coping strategy*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lankan migrants' migratory wave shifted to the Middle East, particularly since the 1970s coupled with the discovery of oil in the Middle East, as individuals discovered new avenues to overcome immediate economic problems or make quick investments for their future lives (Gamburd, 2000; Hettige, 1989; Ukwatta, 2010). However, the migrants, while they earn at their destination countries many of them suffer from appalling abuse. In the labour market, a migrant can be subjected to labour exploitation, sexual harassment, and psychological trauma, thus causing unhappy endings for many families (Ambrosini, 2015). Exploitation is commonly experienced by migrants who rely on paid work for their rights of residence and undocumented migrants (Lodder, 2019). According to the studies reviewed, multiple reports by NGOs show that the common work burden that migrants experience is exploitation both in sending and receiving countries.

Literature has shown the pre-departure precarity from the sending country, where the migrants experience exploitation by the recruiters engaging in a deceptive recruitment process and recruitment charges (Weeraratne, 2014). A deceptive recruitment process includes vague promises on work and wages (ILO, 2012), which are not materialised upon arrival (Mak et al., 2021a). Sometimes, migrants pay the recruiters for what they did not receive from them, such as pre-departure training (Yea, 2019).

Similarly, exploitation is a more reported issue among migrant workers in the receiving countries. Stead and Davies (2021) found that Papuan and New Guinean women work as domestic workers in Australia without proper pay and care. In a similar vein, Camargo Magalhães (2017) found that undocumented and documented workers are exploited in the domestic sectors in Belgium, particularly prone to the trafficking victim, which is not possible only tackling using anti-trafficking human beings measures to make sure the protection of the migrant workers. Sometimes the migrants willingly undergo the trafficking process and exploitation when it is compulsive to seek employment (Lodder, 2019). Like domestic workers, low-skilled workers are susceptible to exploitation in various destinations. Yea (2019) found that Singapore's construction and cleaning workers experience non-payment of wages, pay cuts, and restrictions on free movement. It is further evident, as found by Zimmerman and Kiss (2017), that exploitation among low-wage workers is prevalent in various sectors such as factories, agriculture, mining, and domestic work. It has received global attention, including in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), as migrants should be free from any abuses (United Nations, 2015).

Among the studies, the migrants who have been facing exploitation in Middle East countries have been revealed (ILO, 2017). Field Amnesty International's (2014) findings among domestic workers in Qatar revealed that domestic workers are a vulnerable group who heavily depends on their employer, experiencing exploitation by their employers through long working hours, low wages, lack of rest, and dehumanising treatments. Studies concerning Sri Lankan migrants have examined work-related exploitations that migrant workers experience in Middle East countries, such as non-payment of wages, overwork, sexual harassment, and inhuman treatment (Arachchi, 2013; Hewage et al., 2011; Shaw, 2010). Most Middle East countries, for example, have a dual economy with well-paid nationals and poorly-paid foreigners (Gamburd, 2010; Leonard, 2002). Thus, getting an appropriate job and payment matching their education level and skills is often non-existence (Gardner, 2008).

In the migration setting, particularly in the Middle East, most existing studies revealed the consequences of exploitation and low-skilled migrant workers' experience, and little attention had been given to identifying the causes of exploitation (IOM, 2015). This paper attempts to fill the gap by drawing evidence from the Middle East labour market, where many migrants are employed (Gardner, 2011). Arslan (2020) identified in the Pakistan labour market that the power relationship that is practised in the institutions causes exploitations whereby managers and supervisors exercise power in favour of company owners because of fear of losing their jobs, ignoring the workers' rights, but only focusing on the company profit. These managers exercise power to control and exploit workers by giving inadequate and holding wages, terminating workers without prior notice, and neglecting the safety of the workers.

Similarly, labourers depend on employers for multiple needs such as jobs, housing, food, health, and work permit, thus causing them to work under forced labour conditions. According to ILO (2012), withholding wages, abusive working, and living conditions, and excessive overtime indicate forced labourers' experience in the labour market. Wilkinson (2014) identified the exploitation in the UK within the forced labour condition that leads to unpleasant and unsociable labour, contrary to human

dignity, in which migrants experience the absence of safety equipment, underpayment, threats of violence, and psychological trauma. However, how exploitation occurs in the labour market is still blurring.

This study gathers the views of migrants staying with family to reveal the relationship between the causes of exploitation and its consequences. The exploitation is related to multiple stakeholders, such as mediators, employers, and co-workers, which are included in the framework of the employment relationship. The significant consequences of these exploitative relationships are related to wages. Both these relationships and wages impact the psychological well-being of the migrants. Furthermore, coping during the experiences of exploitation has been considered since migrants accept the present situation to achieve the migration target, which is to be economically active.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Framing the Exploitation based on the Relationship***

Migrant workers are exploited when interacting with various communities in the migrated destination, including employers and employees. Although migrants can earn more than they earned in their origin country, employers or sponsors often exploit many co-workers, causing them to lose their fundamental human rights and dignity as human beings (Auwal, 2010). First, migrants are connected to employers based on power. Putul and Mia (2020) stated that employers in Malaysia heavily practise supremacy by forcing employees to work. Yea (2019) found in Singapore that due to the high level of employee dependency on the employer, employees cannot change their employer as they wish, and agreeable work must be completed within the contract period. Arnold and Hewison (2005) found that the far most intolerable difficulty that Burmese migrants endure in Thailand is exploitation, whose labour force is used by employers to maximise their profits. Still, they receive a meager return and must work longer.

Co-workers work close to other employees in the organisation and are responsible for being helpful to other employees, increasing job satisfaction and work performance (Charoensukmonkol et al., 2016; Srimarut and Mekhum, 2020). Furthermore, workers work in companies in different positions with hierarchical power where they can control other co-workers, particularly juniors and newcomers. Field Chan et al. (2019) identified in China that in small-scale businesses, non-Chinese workers, who occupy managerial positions due to the long relationship with their bosses, have the hierarchical power to manage the new migrant workers, serving as their Chinese employers' strategic allies. As found in Bangladesh by Ahmed and Arun (2022), managers assign unrealistic and inhuman production targets in factories, which cannot be achieved without female workers' capacity. Thus, the condition of employees' relationships with co-workers and supervisors impacts the job burnout they experience (Charoensukmonkol et al., 2016).

In contrast, amicable relationships positively impact personal achievement in one's work throughout the work period (Austin and Fernet, 2010). However, most of the time, co-worker relationship leads to dissatisfaction with the job. Charoensukmonkol et al. (2016) opined that when the employees' efforts are not being recognised or not producing expected results, employees feel a lack of achievements in their careers. Furthermore, a lack of support from co-workers and managers causes employees to feel alienated and demotivated in high performance on the job.

Among the migrants, undocumented migrant segments far more experience exploitation by employers and co-workers in the same workplace. Agudelo-Suárez et al. (2009) opined that immigrant

workers in Spain experience discrimination by being restricted from meeting their employers, and they are employed for low wages or sometimes unpaid for overtime work done because of their illegal status. At the same time, they are mistreated by being overworked in companies managed by immigrants of the same nationality and workmates. Immigrants who experienced such discrimination and exploitation in Spain were more affected by declining health than those in their country of origin (Agudelo-Suárez et al., 2011).

As found in Qatar by Amnesty International (2014), migrant domestic workers heavily depend on their employers, which causes multiple problems in the domestic sphere in the form of physical and verbal abuses. Nisrane et al. (2020) found that Ethiopian migrant women are frequently threatened in the domestic sphere by their employers and sometimes sleepless because of fear of being assaulted at night. Similar exploitative practices, such as beating, scolding, and mistreatment, were experienced by the Sri Lankan migrants also (Pinnawala, 2009; Weeraratne, 2014). By reviewing the literature above, the exploitation in the receiving country can be framed based on the employment relationship, where employers and co-workers exploit the migrants in various categories, such as middle and low-skilled workers and domestic workers.

### ***Exploitation on Wages***

Wage exploitation can occur as a result of an unfavourable relationship with employers. Furthermore, psychological distress can cause either because of exploitative relationships and wage exploitation, or both. Generally, the working hours of migrant workers in host countries are stressful, sometimes contrary to their expectations. Migrants work in the migrated destinations more than they did in their origin countries (Qin, 2009). However, the wages they receive for their work are meager. Arnold and Hewison (2005) found that Burmese migrants in Thailand were exploited by paying low wages below Thailand's minimum wage limit. According to the studies, migrant workers report being treated and paid unfairly in the job and are exploited by being forced to work. Vora (2008) identified that Indian nationals in skilled categories experienced discrimination and high work pressure in the UAE workplace, favoring Western-educated workers with higher salaries.

Constantly, wage exploitation in the Middle East has been identified as a severe problem that worsens employees' income, causing an expenditure burden for the migrants and their families (Rasool and Haider, 2020). In another study, Auwal (2010) discovered that many blue colour workers, particularly in construction and cleaning in Kuwait, remained unpaid for months at a time, thus causing them to go hungry while working. Some Labour intermediaries who practice deceptive recruitment processes facilitate exploitation by recruiting labourers to abusive employers (Zimmerman and Kiss, 2017). Then employers commit serious breaches to migrants in various categories (IOM, 2015). Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004) and Moukarbel (2009) interviewed Sri Lankan migrant workers during their stay in Lebanon. These investigations discovered that women working in Lebanese houses were exploited through overworking and lacking freedom due to being on call for the employer's family. Furthermore, these women in Lebanon were denied the right to an independent life outside the employer's homes, such as having love affairs with other migrant workers and starting a new life by marrying their romantic partner in the destination country (Moukarbel, 2009). Furthermore, no payment of agreed wages was a commonly reported problem among these Sri Lankan migrant workers (Rosario, 2008; Shaw, 2008).

This exploitative relationship that was identified as problematic affects the wages and psychological well-being of migrants. Chung and Mak (2020) concluded that abusive employment conditions and not receiving salaries on time were associated with worsened mental health among the

migrants in Hong Kong. Thus, migration destinations, particularly in the Middle East, are reported to be more demanding regarding wages and happiness.

### ***Migrants' Acceptance of the Exploitation***

Migration motivations are rooted in desires to earn money for family necessities and future investments, such as building a new house, starting new business ventures, and educating children (Hewage et al., 2011). Gamlath (2019) realised that migrants in Sri Lanka who experienced uncertain economic conditions sought employment opportunities as a survival strategy overseas. Thus migrants are ready to accept the situations ahead of them. Migrants employ acceptance as a coping strategy, such as patience, connection to religion, and remaining silent.

Sometimes, workers are tasked to remit money from their birth family, on the one hand, suffering from inadequate social benefits and wages in the workplace on the other, thus amplifying their more significant level of precarity (Piper and Lee, 2016). Lui et al. (2021) found in Hong Kong that this pressure on sending money caused the migrants to tolerate abusive employment relationships where employers pressure them to work more, intensifying their already vulnerable status. Workers silently endure the situation during the exhausting time when supervisors and managers keep scolding, assigning excessive work, and non-payment of wages (Ahmed and Arun, 2022).

The primary goal of migrants is to attain their desired migration goal by compromising the present situation, thus causing them to accept economic and psychological stress during their migration. According to Herbert et al. (2008), Ghanaians experienced racism and discrimination in the London labour market. However, they complied patiently and accepted the situation, as the London labour market is a place to achieve economic prosperity. Mak, Zimmerman, et al. (2021) noted that Nepal migrant workers in Malaysia use the problem-solving strategy to achieve the desired migration outcome, analysing and strategising their financial difficulties during the migration. Migrants consider the two different stages of coping with the present situation. Eid and Diah (2019) concurred that Palestinian refugee families in Malaysia build a positive image of the present situation by comparing their lives to their relatives experiencing worse conditions in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine.

When workers have an uneasy connection with their employers or homes, causing psychological distress, they only shift jobs or quit, accepting another work in the same labour market. Näre (2011) identified that in Italy, domestic workers with hard work mainly change their employers intermittently when they find it challenging to find suitable employers who could provide health care and legal aid and treat them respectfully and humanely instead of just providing money.

Religious attachment is a significant asset among migrants to improve their quality of life (Eid and Diah, 2019). For instance, most domestic workers cope with the burdens by employing spiritual values, such as patience and reading religious scriptures. van der Ham et al. (2015) explored that Filipino women in the domestic sphere cope with stress caused by their low income and loneliness by turning to prayer, mainly by reading religious scriptures such as the bible.

The primary goal of migration is earning money in productive employment. The studies reviewed reveal that migrants endure an exploitative environment in the work destination because of the employment relationship and subsequent challenges in receiving wages regularly.

## METHOD

### *Study Approach and Data Collection*

The present qualitative research on Sri Lankan migrant workers has applied the case study method. The qualitative approach studies situations in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret facts regarding the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Accordingly, the present case study brings the experience of Sri Lankan migrant workers regarding the exploitative working condition they encountered during the migration and the coping strategies they employed to cope with them.

The informants of the present study were 30 breadwinners of the family who had resided with families in Bahrain for more than six months. The Kingdom of Bahrain is reported as one of the wealthiest countries in the region, and it employs labour from the South Asian region field (Hugo, 2007). Furthermore, Bahrain shares common Middle East culture and competes in oil exports with other oil-exporting countries in the region (Gamburd, 2003). By 2018, the total departure of Sri Lankan migrant workers to Bahrain was 2922 (SLBFE, 2019). First, breadwinners of families were identified with the help of Darul Iman Bahrain, a welfare organisation for Sri Lankans. Then, the sample was collected using the purposive sampling method and snowball technique, which enabled the selection of informative informants and referred to other cases.

Table 1- Demographic Information of the Interview Groups

Demographic Categories	Interview group	Sub-Categories	%
Gender	Male	-	67
	Female	-	33
Number of children in the family	One child	-	6
	2-3 Children	-	88
	4-5 Children	-	6
Duration of stay as a family	Six months – 5 years	-	15
	6 – 10 years	-	15
	11 – 15 years	-	25
	16 – 20 years	-	12
	21 years and above	-	33
Monthly income level	≤ 400BD	-	33
	401-600BD	-	20
	601-800BD	-	37
	801BD and Above	-	10
Employment	Skilled and Middle-skilled workers	Engineering Finance and accountancy IT and designing Administration	53
	Low skilled workers	Helpers Security guard Driving Domestic work and babysitting	47
Managers of employees (nationalities)	Bahraini	-	40
	managers/employers	Indians	35
	No-citizens	Pakistanis	18
		Sri Lankans	7
<b>Total</b>			<b>100</b>

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the informants. As per the gender of the participants, the study had 33% female participants and 67% male participants. Almost all migrants had

been with families in Bahrain. Among them, 88% of families lived with two-three children. The stay of families was reported from six months to above 20 years. According to the monthly income level of the families, the minimum income level was decided according to the essential requirement of a family visa, which remains at 400BD in Bahrain (Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), 2020). According to the interviews, however, the minimum requirement does not meet their basic survival needs. Therefore, those who reported beneath these minimum criteria come into the first category of participants. Accordingly, one-third of the families fall into lower-income families. Furthermore, families earning barely beyond the basic salary of 600BD have been categorised as lower-middle-income families, despite continuing to struggle for basic survival and savings. The third category of migrants, who can save and remit to Sri Lanka, falls between 601BD to 800BD axis. Families earning more than 800BD are considered wealthy. Accordingly, 20% of lower-middle-income families, 37% of middle-income families, and 10% of high-income families were reported in the sample.

Furthermore, table 1 shows the interview groups from whom data were collected. Data were collected from two interview groups, skilled and middle-skilled workers and low-skilled workers. Most low-skilled workers engaged in precarious jobs, such as maids, babysitting, taxi riders, security guard, and daily paid work. Among the skilled and middle-skilled workers, interview responses were taken from quantity surveyors (QS), assistant accountants, IT designers, and various categories in administrative divisions. Both skilled and low-skilled workers had worked under Bahrainis and other nationalities. According to the data received, 40% of informants worked under Bahraini managers or employers, while the rest of the 60% opined that they were working under other nationalities, including Pakistanis, Indians, and Sri Lankans. More explorative information based on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics was discussed in the findings.

In-depth interviews, which lasted an average of 45 minutes, were conducted from August 2020-August 2021 with migrant workers using a semi-structured questionnaire. The present research used an online platform, such as Zoom and WhatsApp, with the informants' consent due to pandemic restrictions. Accordingly, the recording process was convenient. However, prior approval from informants was taken to record the interview. The consent forms were signed, mentioning the preserving confidentiality of the information, and the freedom to reveal information was given. These ethical processes helped to build trust between the researcher and the informants. After the interviews with 26 informants, the researcher received repeated information that reflected that data saturation was achieved.

### ***Data Analysis***

A thematic approach, a digital method (ATLAS.ti), was used to present the findings. First, recorded interviews were transcribed and checked concerning what the participants meant. Then, the data were analysed by organising categories based on themes. Finally, narratives and detailed interpretations of the cases come under the theme topics to cover surprising information and exciting concepts.

## **FINDINGS**

The present study found that middle and low-skilled workers were exploited in the Bahrain Labour market. Despite the fact that different cohorts were interviewed, the majority of the consequences of exploitation revealed were similar, except some causes in relation to the relationship in which co-workers or managers exploited skilled workers and low-skilled and domestic workers commonly were exploited either by employers and managers, or both. Thus the findings of this section

combined the causes of exploitation under the theme of worker relationship and then the consequences of exploitation presented based on wages, which is the primary aim of migration. Mostly psychological well-being is combined with relationships and wages. Finally, coping during this exploitation exclusively focused on acceptance of the exploitation.

### ***Exploitation based on the Relationship***

The findings of exploitation based on the relationship have been divided into two sub-themes, Skilled workers and low-skilled workers, who were subjected to exploitation.

#### ***Skilled Workers***

The present study revealed that skilled workers worked in companies and offices with various countries migrant workers such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Primarily Middle East working place is competitive for skilled migrants. Under these circumstances, when skilled and middle-skilled Sri Lankan workers were recruited under foreign managers employed by Bahraini owners, the relationship with those co-workers worsened and became exploitative. Thus, Sri Lankan migrant workers worked under the strain of overwork, wage issues, and distant relationships with managers, resulting in adverse living conditions for migrant families. Informants revealed that these managers used their power to prioritise their countrymates and to oppress them in work distribution. For example, Raheem, an IT designer, who lived with two children in Bahrain, elaborated on such experiences in his company as follows:

*I had much pressure from seniors from India. Indians were the managers in my company. Sometimes, they give preference to their own country. They need to distribute the work among the employees according to our skills. We were not allowed to talk to the Bahraini boss. (Raheem: July 2020)*

In another case, Ihsan, an assistant accountant, explained that the Pakistani manager's scolding and negligence in public caused him to be uncomfortable. He stated that:

*I am disappointed and frustrated due to the manager from Pakistan, one of the employees but senior to the company. Sometimes, my manager publicly scolds me. I do not have the opportunity to interact with Bahraini directors to show my performance because managers always restrict that. (Ihsan: August 2020)*

Harees, working in the administration division, also justified Ihsan's view about the relationship since he worked with a Pakistani manager settling company disputes with the Bahraini directors. He referred to this as a "behind the scenes" relationship between directors (Bahrainis) and employees (migrants). However, assuming this is a natural setup in Middle Eastern companies is difficult. He stated:

*My Pakistani manager mediates all the company matters with the Directors. He doesn't allow me to meet them regarding any matters. (Harees: August 2020)*

According to the above explanations, such malpractices were committed by personnel from Asian countries such as Pakistan and India, on which the Middle East relied heavily. The primary reason for such exploitation was employees' greed for positions and power. Thus, these regular disturbances in the workplace make them uncomfortable and unpleasant in their career.

### **Low Skilled Workers**

Low-skilled interviewees were domestic workers, helpers, security guards, and taxi drivers. This migrant cohort was exploited either by Bahraini employers and managers from other nationalities or both. Migrants must maintain an amicable relationship with sponsors, probably Bahrainis, to preserve their facilities and privileges. As reported among the participants, minor disputes between Bahraini employers and workers caused the loss of employees' family privileges. For example, Ibrahim was living with his three children in a house with other family facilities given by the company. When Ibrahim had a dispute with his employer that stemmed his family privileges, which worsened his income afterward, he narrated as below:

*My new employer was harsh to the employees, and many disagreed with him. Thus he terminated many employees and cut all my previous family facilities, including family accommodation and utilities. Then I couldn't afford them with low salary (Ibrahim: November 2020)*

Similarly, the exploitation of employers was reported by domestic workers, thus causing them to leave their homes, sometimes without passports. For example, Nisa, a mother who worked under a Bahraini owner in the domestic sphere, explained the inhuman treatment while she was a domestic worker. She recounted:

*Taking care of my sponsor's stubborn children with all the other house chores in that home was annoying and challenging. My boss did not recruit another worker to reduce my work. Instead of that, he compelled me to do everything. (Nisa: November 2020)*

According to Marry, she suffered from similar exploitation, such as a lack of food and excessive work. Due to these inhuman treatments, she left that home without her travel document, and eventually, she worked under an Indian as a helper in a shop.

*The place recruiters assigned me was challenging. I had to do more than 10-hour work. Sometimes I started my work without breakfast. Finally, I left that home without my passport. Now I am working in an Indian shop temporarily. (Marry: November 2020)*

The recognition and trustworthiness that employers had shown towards employees were marginal, which caused psychological distress among the employees. In an interview with Raslan, whose wife also worked as a housemaid in Bahrain, he said that when he worked as a helper in a shop, the Indian shop manager always showed a lack of trust in him and constantly scolded him.

*In the shop where I work Indian guy who is the manager in that shop suspected me that I stole their property. Due to this, he scolds me every time until I cry. (Raslan: November 2020)*

According to the informants, they revealed signs of this power relationship that turned into exploitation in the workplace. As a result of the power behind this exploitation, migrants had no power to negotiate with the employer or bring that issue to someone.

### ***Exploitation based on Wages***

Wage exploitation was by far a reported problem by migrant workers, which employers cruelly practiced. Some companies were not generous enough to provide the agreed salaries upon recruitment, causing the migrant workers to suffer from getting their salaries regularly. Getting their salary on time was necessary for these migrant workers and their families to cover their monthly expenses. For example, when Reeza shifted his position to another company as an accountant, expecting a salary better than before, he received less than the agreed amount, which also caused him to lose his job. Then he found a job below his capacity and at a low salary to secure the family visa and cover his family expenses. He elaborated:

*I changed my position to another company as I got the job better than the previous one. But the company still needs to give me the salary agreed upon in the offer letter. My Bahraini boss was not interested in solving this problem and instead held my salary for a few months with him. Finally, I lost my job and found a job for a low wage, at least to renew my family visa and overcome my financial burden. (Reeza: March 2021)*

In other instances, some migrants who worked in low-level positions in Arab families faced a similar problem with salary retention. Piyasiri, among the interviewees, a watchman throughout his life, attributed his challenges in receiving wages on time and claimed that his work is generally miserable most of the time. He described his experiences as below:

*When I make any small mistakes, the Bahraini employer and his family scold me badly, and they do not provide a salary once the month ends. (Piyasiri: February 2021)*

Apart from Bahrainis, some migrants encountered wage issues from other nationalities, such as Pakistanis and Indians, in managerial positions in the company or shops. Simaya, one of the participants, revealed how difficult it was for her to demand and get a salary for her job. Since she was without a proper visa, retaining her right to work and earning wages was troublesome. The following excerpt explains her experience with an Indian shop owner who took advantage of her by holding her salary.

*I worked for Indian Shops. Sometimes, they hold three or four months' salary because they know I can not act against them or go to the police as I don't have a proper visa to show. (Simaya: May 2021)*

Migrant workers experienced oppressive work relationships and wage issues in the companies run by Bahrainis and Pakistanis and Indians hired by Bahraini owners. According to the exploitative relationships in the workplace, Pakistani and Indian managers prioritise employment for their countrymates, thus undermining Sri Lankan migrants' skills and experiences in the company. Those employers had taken advantage of such migrants by mistreating them and holding their salaries. Thus the living conditions of migrant workers in a foreign country showed that, in addition to wage disparities, the working environment was not peaceful, causing psychological distress to them.

### ***Acceptance as a Coping Strategy during the Exploitation***

Most migrants recounted that they had to accept this exploitative situation to achieve their goals through migration. These migrants' target was earning money in a productive economic environment. Thus Sri Lankan migrants employed acceptance in various forms, such as being patient with religious content, remaining silent, and creating a positive image of the present situation.

First, though the migrants faced multiple problems in the host country, they accepted the situation and moved forward to achieve their migration target. Participants stressed that their economic goal might be met by utilising the migration opportunity they took with patience despite the life challenges they have been facing. For example, Nihal portrayed his coping as follows:

*I want to earn money to care for my family and build a house. The problem ahead of us would be worse than what I currently face. (Nihal: November 2020)*

The present study found that religion and patience functioned as a coping strategy profoundly dominating migrants' work and family lives. Ihsan said his patience and connection to Allah SWT helped him cope with the exploitative working environment.

*I am disappointed with the present work because of the relationship with managers in my company. I thought of changing jobs, but it took position. Therefore, keeping quiet is the only way to move forward. I always keep asking the prayers to Allah SWT (Ihsan: August 2020)*

Finally, according to the findings, the migrants, without proper documentation, accepted the situation remaining silent. The primary barrier for undocumented migrants to avoid complaining about their exploitative situation, such as holding a salary and physical abuse, is fear of being reported to the police, thus causing them to face the problem of remaining silent. The following excerpt explains Sheema's experience encountering her exploitative employer, who held her salary for a few months.

*I don't have a proper visa to bring this issue to someone. It would be a problem for me. Thus I remain silent until I see a solution by Allaah SWT (Sheema: April 2021)*

According to Jazeera's conversation, the Middle East life taught her patience and tolerance. She said:

*I cannot consider settling in Sri Lanka since my family has no legal documents. I patiently work here for at least our survival. (Jazeera: August 2021)*

Migrants knew their migration goal could be achieved by withstanding the exploitation, including relationships and wages, and persevering in their journey. Thus, migrants mostly found a way to accept the present condition to accomplish their mission. Among the finding, undocumented migrants were the vulnerable group. They found that getting the situation patiently and remaining silent was the only mechanism they could employ to balance the stress from exploitation.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The work complexities that this study demonstrated were the contrasting situation of what migrants expected before the migration. The migrants' primary source of income at the transition

destination is labour force activities, through which their foremost goal of migration is achieved. The present study discovered that exploitation is a negative experience in this particular destination. Migrants were exploited based on their relationships and wages. Firstly, the exploitative practices happened more likely in organisations that employed skilled and middle-skilled workers owing to relationships between the employees and managers of different nationalities, such as Pakistan and India. In the present study, migrants were restricted by Pakistani and Indian managers from meeting Bahraini sponsors, assigned extra work, and denied opportunities to advance in the companies. Agudelo-Suárez et al. (2009) discovered a similar practice in Spain where workers were restricted from meeting their employers. As reported by informants, the managers, the employees assigned by Bahrainis, exercised powers as they were senior to the company to fulfill the Bahraini bosses' desires. Consistent with the present findings, Chan et al. (2019) identified in China that this hierarchical power is exercised in small-scale businesses, serving as their Chinese employers' strategic allies. However, the present study identified that even in large-scale companies, skilled and middle-skilled migrant workers are prone to exploitation by co-workers since the employment opportunities in the professional category are limited and competitive.

The low-skilled workers revealed some signs of this power relationship that turned into exploitation in the workplace, where they had less power to negotiate with their employers. In some cases, native sponsors exploited such migrant workers by delegating extra work without giving them food and rest, paying low salaries, and sometimes terminating them without wages. These findings are similar in this particular context, where Auwal (2010) found that labourers in blue-collar jobs remained unpaid for months at a time. Moukarbel (2009) found in Lebanon, among domestic workers, that the relationship with the employer was confined. They were exploited through overworking and lacking freedom due to being on call for the employer's family. However, more dialogue is needed on the causes of exploitation, mainly what low-wage workers go through (Zimmerman and Kiss, 2017).

Similarly, undocumented migrants reported that companies that recruit them pay less and terminate them after one or two weeks after their appointment. Undocumented migrants always choose a solitary existence owing to the legal dread of being apprehended by authorities. Considering that these undocumented migrants are a vulnerable group, finding and helping them is rare in the migrated destinations, as observed in the present research.

Although assessing psychological distress is not a part of the present research, the work-related problems associated with poor psychological well-being were explicitly expressed by participants. Migrants in this study reported the challenges they experienced, such as work-related stress during the migration. Being unemployed, sacked, or exploited exacerbated stress, emotional distress, and anxiety. Berth et al. (2005) discovered in Germany that losing a job decreases satisfaction in life. Similarly, little advance notice of work termination that migrants receive contributes to their distress and unhappiness (Schneider and Harknett, 2019). Even when they believe they cannot meet their expenses with their wages, migrants remain dissatisfied (Agyei et al., 2014). As discovered among Ethiopian migrants, returned migrants from Middle Eastern countries have mental illnesses (Tilahun et al., 2020).

The migrants cope with the exploitative labour market. The commonly identified coping mechanism was accepting the exploitation under which they employed patience, remaining silent, and religious attachment to accomplish their migration mission. Thus these spiritual characteristics provided them with better psychological solace over employment difficulties. Given that migrant workers have less power to change this evil act of exploitation, they can remain silent if the situation permits, which is the weakest part of the faith, as Islam says. For instance, in Islam, there is a hadith

that says: I heard the Messenger of Allah (SWA) say, “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart - and that is the weakest of faith (Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim*, ed. 1991).”

The coping strategy of accepting one’s present situation helps to achieve the desired goal through migration, such as earning money, which is similar to what was found as a problem-solving strategy among Nepali migrants in Malaysia (Mak et al., 2021a). Uddin et al. (2019) emphasised that professionals who can adjust to whatever situation they go through in the migrated countries may work effectively and fulfill their goals. Not forgetting that undocumented migrants reported in this study were a vulnerable group, though they employed acceptance as their coping mechanism. Remaining silent among them is natural; they cannot discuss their matters with anyone because doing so would result in legal action against them. Burton-Jeangros et al. (2020) found that undocumented migrants are silent workers and are unwilling to expose their problems to the public due to security issues.

Acceptance is a direct coping method to cope with the exploitation employed by migrants at least to achieve their target. However, a permanent solution should be made by receiving and sending countries. The Middle East continuously support Sri Lankan migrants who spend much of their life there to earn money. Gamlath (2019) and Mak et al. (2021) predicted that many people continue to migrate to the Middle East to survive. According to the latest data, after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted, migration from Sri Lanka exceeded 300,000 by 2022 (Nanayakkara, 2022). As a result, the origin and destination countries must evaluate such activities, including exploitation that migrants experience, and implement proper mechanisms to prevent it. According to Mak et al. (2021), adhering to and adopting the best practices approaches and international guidelines will help avoid, minimize, or better support labour migrants.

The present study gathered information from 30 Sri Lankan migrant workers to investigate exploitation as a challenge experienced by migrant workers and coping strategies. The present study found the power employers exercised as an apparent cause behind the exploitation. However, more samples in this particular destination and other Middle Eastern destinations would increase the understanding of the phenomena. Undocumented migrants and employee and employer exploitation were recorded, but in some cases, the sources of these challenges were ambiguous. Thus, the employers’ views would be more relevant in future research to ensure proper portrayal.

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