

# YOUTH

## As Researchers

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Sri Lanka & Maldives

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# Youth As Researchers Programme

## WHAT IS YAR?

The Youth as Researchers on COVID-19 initiative was launched by UNESCO in 2020 as the world's largest youth-led action research project in response to the pandemic. Its core mission is to equip young people with the skills and resources to conduct social research, which in turn informs policies addressing youth challenges. YAR empowers youth to document their perspectives on social issues, formulate actionable policy recommendations, and engage with policymakers. Conceptualized by the UNESCO Chair on Children, Youth, and Civic Engagement in Ireland, the initiative's premise is that youth understand their problems and solutions best.

YAR's success led to its expansion globally, underlining the importance of incorporating youth voices and scientific evidence into policy decisions. By providing young researchers with knowledge resources and technical skills, YAR facilitates their contribution to policy change and tailor-made solutions for their generation. It excels in offering unique insights into the issues, opportunities, and challenges young people face in their communities and is ideal for enhancing youth capacities, promoting positive youth development, and advancing youth-driven participatory action research.

While YAR complements rigorous scholarly research, it focuses on grassroots insights and should not be confused with high-level professional research. The hope is that YAR's findings will inspire scholars to explore overlooked areas and contribute to filling gaps in the existing literature, ensuring youth perspectives are prominently featured.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF YAR

The YAR initiative holds significance for organizations primarily focused on rigorous scholarly research by providing an additional avenue for gaining grassroots insights and evidence from youth. While the initiative does not intend to replace or challenge scientific scholarly research with its widely generalizable statistical findings, randomized control studies, and large multilevel samples, it serves as a valuable mechanism for incorporating the perspectives of young individuals. It should not be mistaken as a method where youth conduct high-level professional research that typically requires postgraduate education and advanced research skills. However, we anticipate that the findings generated through the YAR initiative will inspire scholars to delve into previously overlooked areas and address gaps in the existing literature through academic research. By leveraging the unique insights provided by youth, the initiative can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of various issues and encourage further scholarly investigations.

## YAR IN SRI LANKA & MALDIVES

UNESCO's Youth as Researchers programme was implemented in Sri Lanka and the Maldives and aimed at strengthening the access and ability of youth to participate and contribute to participatory action research and evidence-building, particularly related to issues of peace and social cohesion. By ensuring their inclusion in processes of knowledge creation and decision-making, the project aimed to promote youth perspectives on peace and security issues, to ensure that their voice is heard, and to document successful youth-led solutions to identified challenges.

Out of a total of 462 applications for the YAR programme from Sri Lanka and Maldives, 79 youth researchers were shortlisted/selected. Participants were selected from a total of 28 cities in Sri Lanka and 8 cities in Maldives, respectively.

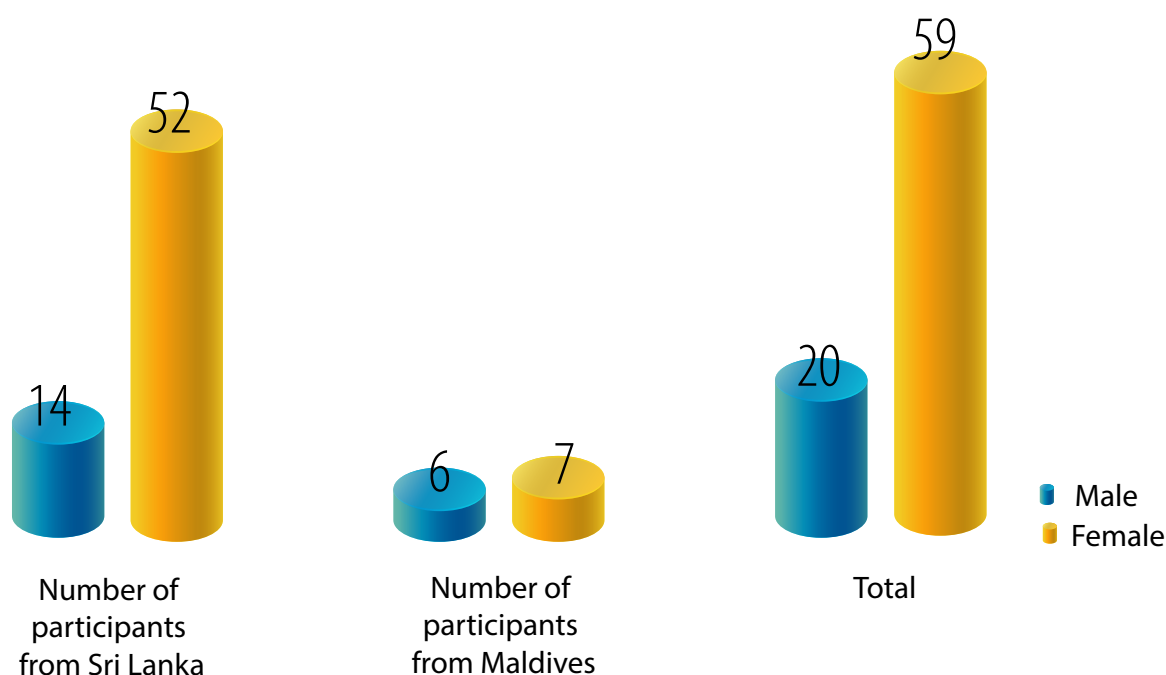


Figure 1: Number of Participants in Sri Lanka and Maldives

A total of 6 sessions were conducted, to build the capacities of research teams, in the following areas:

- a. Research
- b. Gender Perspectives and conducting Gender Sensitive Research
- c. Community-based Participatory Research
- d. Research Methods and Research Analysis
- e. Research Project Formulation, Dissemination and Ethics in CBPR
- f. Data Analysis and Dissemination

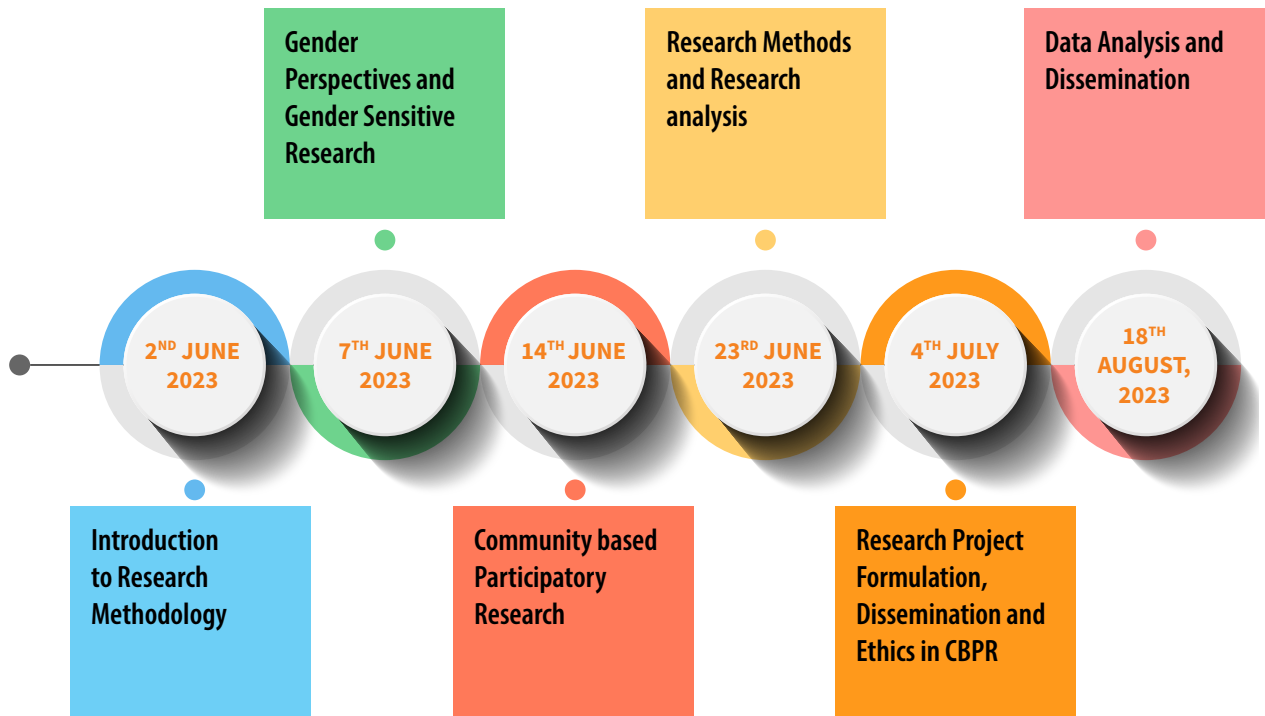


Figure 2: Timeline of the sessions conducted for the YAR Programme

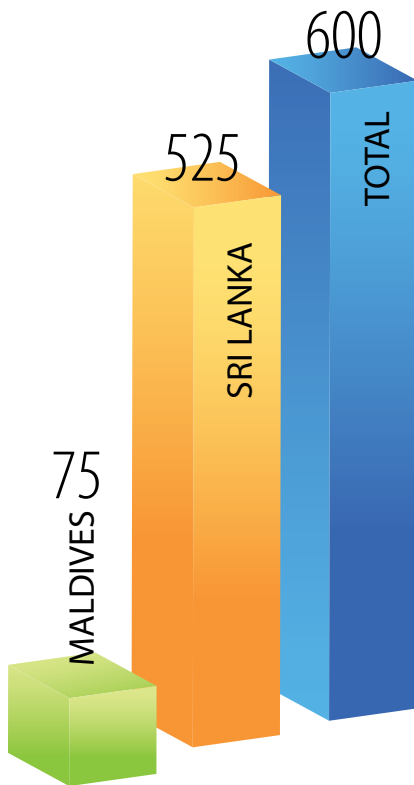


Figure 3: Number of people surveyed in Sri Lanka and Maldives

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDIES

The YAR studies in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, though academically supervised, have notable limitations. These include a restricted geographical scope that limits the diversity of perspectives, short study durations that hinder capturing long-term trends, and the potential influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis on participants' perceptions. It's essential to acknowledge these shared constraints when interpreting the findings and shaping policies. Despite these limitations, the YAR initiative provides a valuable foundation for addressing complex youth-related challenges and opportunities in these contexts.



# An exploratory study into the challenges faced by university students amidst the socio-political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka

Afra Laffar, Denanjalee, Neema Jayasinghe, Ruwanika Bandara and Shannon Hardy

## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has been experiencing the worst socio-economic crisis in its post-independence history. This has been exacerbated in recent times due to years of economic mismanagement, political instability, poor policy choices, and external events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and global inflation. Socially, the impact of the crisis is manifested in the nationwide protests that broke out in May 2022. The Poverty and Equity Brief on Sri Lanka (2023) by the World Bank indicates that over 40% of Sri Lanka's population has fallen below the official poverty line. The economic crisis has resulted in widespread poverty, unemployment, and other social issues, adversely affecting the well-being and quality of life of people living in Sri Lanka.

Inevitably, the cascading effects of the crisis are apparent in the education sector. Even before the Easter bombing of 2019 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the education sector had already been significantly impacted. Specifically, in the higher education sector, the closure of universities had a detrimental effect on the experiences of university students. The Labour Migration Research on Sri Lanka by the International Labour Organization raises concerns over the adverse outcomes of the economic crisis, such as dropouts and brain drain. Therefore, systematically exploring the impact of the crisis is timely and essential for the revival of the higher education sector.

The repercussions of the crisis have undeniably manifested in the education sector. The events of the Easter bombing in 2019 and the subsequent onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have both inflicted significant harm on education. Specifically, the closure of universities has had a profound impact on the experiences of university students, particularly within higher education. Numerous reports have raised concerns regarding the adverse consequences of the economic crisis, including rising dropout rates and the potential for a brain drain. Hence, it is of utmost importance and timeliness to conduct a systematic examination of the crisis's effects to revitalize and rejuvenate the higher education sector.

## FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore how the current socio-economic crisis that emerged in April 2022 has affected university students' experiences. 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 university students and four staff members. The online survey questionnaire was distributed among the students at state and private universities. There were over 103 respondents from 17 different universities. Most respondents (72%) were from state universities. The sample was 77% female, 51% from rural areas, and 29% from minority communities.

- 90% of the students highlighted that the crisis negatively impacted their learning experience (moderate to very high).
- Online methods have been the primary mode of education since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Slow internet connections, a lack of devices, and poor IT literacy have exacerbated the existing digital divide and frequent power cuts have interrupted education for many.
- The increasing cost of living has negatively affected students due to the increase in costs of food, accommodation, transportation, and stationery items. Additionally, the funds they received from scholarships were inadequate to cover the rising costs.
- The crisis has led to heightened uncertainty regarding future goals and employment, leading to frustration and emotional distress.
- Female students have reported encountering additional burdens, primarily resulting from the pervasive influence of gender-based stereotypes in society. These challenges encompass increased household responsibilities, experiences of sexual abuse in public transportation, and the rising cost of sanitary items. These difficulties are not inherently due to their gender but rather stem from the societal presence of these harmful stereotypes.
- At a systematic level, students faced challenges when attempting to voice their concerns, encountered a lack of uniform rules, regulations, and guidelines across various faculties and universities, and were hampered by limited resources and support in effectively utilizing and benefiting from online education.

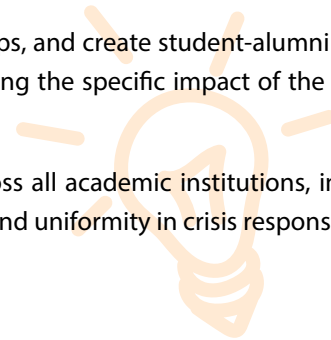




# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the complexity of the crisis, this study employed Mitchell et al. (2022) framework to outline the recommendations. It characterizes education systems as complex and aims to assist policymakers in formulating decisions during an educational crisis, where all challenges are interdependent. Therefore, the following recommendations are provided to the policymakers:

- Implement a flexible hybrid approach, combining online and in-person instruction to cater to diverse student needs during economic recovery. Redesign curricula, train educators for hybrid teaching, and ensure student access to technology and connectivity.
- Improve internet connectivity and provide affordable devices through public-private partnerships to support online learning during the recovery phase.
- Establish an online feedback system to gather student input. Analyze data and take prompt action to address concerns, enhancing transparency and accountability in higher education.
- Promote mental well-being among students through awareness campaigns and increased funding and staffing for counselling centres.
- Form partnerships with local organizations, NGOs, and grassroots groups to create a robust support network for students facing socio-economic challenges.
- Develop mentorship programs, conduct gender equality workshops, and create student-alumni support networks to empower and support female students, acknowledging the specific impact of the crisis on them.
- Implement clear and comprehensive emergency procedures across all academic institutions, including emergency response teams and regular drills, ensuring resilience and uniformity in crisis response.



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# Bridging the Gap of Youth Representation in the Sri Lanka Parliament

Dilini Hettige, Manuja Wickramasinghe, Meddepolage Kalara Nethmini Perera, Navaretnarajah Sanjeevan and Rafhan Mohamad

## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has a diverse and vibrant population of about 22 million people. Like many other countries, it has a parliamentary system of government in which citizens elect representatives. However, the country has been underwhelming in terms of youth representation in Parliament. As per the UNDP in Sri Lanka, youth make up about 23.2 % of the population which is like a quarter of Sri Lanka's total population. Despite this, only a handful of young politicians serve in Sri Lanka's Parliament. According to data from the Government of Sri Lanka, only 2% of young people aged 18 to 29 were interested in politics. In the year 2020, out of the total 225 Members of Parliament (MPs) in the Sri Lankan Parliament, there were only 17 MPs who were under the age of 35. The absence of youth representation in Parliament has serious consequences for Sri Lanka's democracy and governance. The Sri Lanka Youth Parliament Report emphasizes the need to expand opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making processes. In 2012, the Mixed Member Representative System Amendment was introduced, which changed the term "shall be" to "may" and reduced the youth quota from 40% to 20%, making it optional to have one. A draft report of the amended act was submitted to Parliament in 2017, and it was even processed to the point of receiving Supreme Court approval and including a 30% youth quota. Evaluating the presence of young individuals in Parliament is crucial as it ensures that a diverse range of perspectives and innovative ideas are considered in policy making and decision-making processes. When young voices are underrepresented, it can result in policies and decisions that may not fully address the unique needs and concerns of the youth population, which is why assessing youth representation is vital for fostering inclusiveness and enhancing the quality of decision-making.

## FINDINGS

This study sought to assess the status quo of youth participation and representation in the Sri Lankan Parliament and to investigate the barriers to further youth representation. It also investigated the roles of different stakeholders in promoting youth representation and made recommendations for increasing youth representation in the Sri Lankan Parliament. To gather data from diverse young people aged 18 to 35 years, the study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to understand the perspectives, experiences, and challenges faced by the youth in their representation in Parliament. Findings from the study include:

- Although a youth quota was introduced in 1990, to enable the inclusion of youth candidates on nomination lists, this was never implemented due to a repeal stemming from the 1988 and 1989 insurgencies.
- According to Sri Lankan demographics, more than one-quarter of the population is between the ages of 15 and 30. However, as a country, Sri Lanka does not have enough young people involved in decision-making processes affecting their future.



- Young MPs under the age of 40 currently account for only 6% of all MPs in Parliament.
- Less than 10% of those surveyed have worked with or participated in youth parliaments.
- While more than half of the survey respondents expressed an interest in politics, they also emphasized various obstacles, including nepotism, limited financial resources, lack of expertise, and insufficient political awareness, which have hindered their entry into the field. Some respondents also identified factors such as ethnicity (37.5%), relevant education (32.5%), and gender (47.5%) as potential barriers to entering politics.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



- Amend the Constitution to allow legislation supporting direct youth participation in parliamentary and political affairs. Implement a committee to draft these changes and launch a nationwide awareness campaign to garner public support for these amendments.
- Encourage government stakeholders to establish structured internship programs for young professionals to enter politics mid-career. Pair them with experienced mentors to navigate the political landscape effectively.
- Develop online platforms to involve young Sri Lankans living abroad in policy discussions and the country's democratic processes. Conduct outreach efforts to actively engage the diaspora in homeland affairs.
- Offer specialized training programs in political affairs, emphasizing skill development and civic engagement. Create political academies that provide practical courses in political affairs and leadership. Develop an accessible online platform for information on training programs and opportunities for youth involvement.
- Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of initiatives and policies aimed at enhancing youth representation and participation in the political process, with a focus on advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Assess their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments.

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# Impact of the Current Socio-Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka on Youth Employment Prospects

Chathuri Jayasooriya, Hiruni Liyanaarachchi, Kishan Amarasinghe,  
Ranavi Thantrige Saumya Amali

## INTRODUCTION

Unemployment and underemployment have been major issues for young people all over the world, especially in developing countries. Sri Lanka is currently experiencing its worst socio-economic crisis since independence, which has impacted the living standards of its citizens. The country's already high unemployment rate has been exacerbated by the ongoing crisis, causing a profound sense of disaffection and loss among the nation's youth. Recent studies highlight the substantial impact of the economic crisis on the outlook and employment prospects of young people in the country.

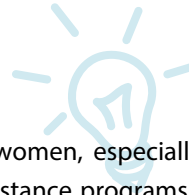
According to the Annual Report of the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey 2020, a survey conducted in the same year revealed alarming statistics: 40% of young people in Sri Lanka were unemployed, with an additional 26% classified as underemployed. This stark reality has contributed to economic uncertainty, resulting in mental health issues and fostering a pervasive sense of pessimism about the future among the nation's youth. Further, several studies have indicated that the pandemic led to a decrease in hiring by businesses as well as a reduction in wages and working hours for those who were able to find work. Furthermore, the Sri Lankan socio-economic crisis has resulted in an increase in mental health issues among young people. These multiple research studies have discovered that young people are stressed, anxious, and depressed because of economic uncertainty and a lack of job opportunities.

## FINDINGS

- This study, conducted by young researchers in Sri Lanka, attempts to assess the impact of the current socio-economic crisis on youth employment prospects. The data was captured through a literature review and engagement with 59 university students between 18 and 35 years old pursuing higher education in Sri Lanka using a convenient sampling methodology. A huge majority of respondents (80%) expressed concerns about their employment prospects especially those in the social science and humanities fields.
- The economic crisis has made it difficult for the government to provide jobs for graduates, which has led many college students to aspire to work in the private sector instead of the public sector, despite the perceived job security and benefits associated with public sector employment. A majority of companies have not hired new workers, and even finding internships has also been challenging, due to the closure of companies and reduction in workforce, negatively impacting the students.
- The economic crisis and socio-political unrest caused confusion and heightened stress levels among many students, raising various concerns such as low wages, underemployment, prolonged degree programmes, and increasing living costs. Even though most universities have career development centers, more than 30% of participants said that online websites and search engines were their primary sources of employment information.

- Most participants have mentioned how being unemployed and having few changes have impacted their mental health.
- A major problem stated has been the mismatch of skills, which occurs when either the economy fails to produce jobs that fit people's skills or when education and training fall short of meeting market demands.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



- Ensure equitable access to digital devices and services for women, especially those from vulnerable communities, during crises. Implement targeted financial assistance programs with a focus on gender-sensitive measures to address unique challenges and disadvantages faced by women.
- Enhance higher education curriculum to bridge the gap between theory and practical skills. Integrate real-world experiences, align academic programs with market demands, and create dynamic learning environments in higher education institutions.
- Foster strategic partnerships among local governments, higher education institutions, and employment organizations to connect students with companies matching their skill sets and career aspirations. Enhance youth employability by creating pathways to suitable job opportunities.
- Integrate comprehensive career development modules into university curricula, equipping students with essential job-seeking skills. Establish virtual and on-site platforms, including seminars and job fairs, to facilitate connections between students and potential employers, bridging the education-employment gap.
- Enhance and institutionalize mental health support systems at the university level to proactively address mental health challenges resulting from high youth unemployment. Promote mental health awareness, expand access to services, and ensure robust support mechanisms for students facing mental health issues, fostering their overall well-being and long-term prospects.

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# Better Living, Better Opportunities: Exploring how economic distress influence the intention to emigrate

Dinithi Samanmali, Fahim Aslam, Gayan Madushanka, Mithuni  
Jayawardana, Tharudini

## INTRODUCTION

A small island country in South Asia, Sri Lanka has a population of 21 million people, of which 25% are young people. Following the Easter 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka, society underwent several changes that had a negative effect on its standard of living. Several scholars have claimed that Sri Lankan citizens had been thinking about 'civil repair' as they sought out ways to reduce the effects of the Easter attacks. However, a bigger threat emerged in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a series of events that brought about the country's economic collapse.

Following the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, several industries, including small-scale businesses, were forced to close due to the country's limited supply-demand chain. For two years, the Sri Lankan government struggled to recover from the pandemic and defaulted on the country's debts, resulting in multiple shortages of essential goods for the people. The manufacturing, tourism, and agricultural sectors were affected the most, causing a significant decline in the demand for labour, and resulting in several companies cutting down on staff to combat the crisis. Unemployment, disrupted family settings, low income, and overall hampered standards of living lead to mental health issues such as depression, higher alcohol consumption, and suicidal ideations. In this context, the people's uprising resulted in a change of power, which eventually drove many people to migrate to other countries in search of a more secure and stable future. According to the World Bank, nearly 92,400 people migrated in 2021, and nearly 300,000 migrated in 2022, with youth constituting 60% of this population.

Currently, Sri Lanka faces a major challenge in holding their staff members in the country, where both young adults and skilled professionals are moving to other countries that provide significantly better salaries. National statistics, according to the Ministry of Health (2019), show an overall negative impact on mental health in Sri Lanka in 2019. Based on the literature review, this research tries to understand the interplay of socioeconomic crisis, mental health, and conflict management styles (as a component of the problem-solving procedure, which aimed to direct young people towards making decisions that would have a positive effect on their decisions regarding migration).

## FINDINGS

This study has focused on youth aged 18 to 25 to explore the connection between the increasing distress levels of the population and their inclination to emigrate from the country in pursuit of improved living standards. These improvements encompass enhanced employment prospects, infrastructure facilities, and recreational opportunities, particularly within the youth population of the Western Province, which now constitutes a substantial 62.5% of Sri Lanka's total youth demographic. This province is considered the commercial hub for education and employment. To ensure the sample size accurately represents the current demographic



composition, the study recalculated the sample size to 427, taking into account the latest data from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Statistics in 2023.

The primary objective of the study was to delve into the ramifications of the ongoing socio-economic crisis on the mental well-being of Sri Lankan youth and its consequential impact on their conflict management strategies. These dynamics are crucial in influencing their decision-making processes, particularly concerning the prospect of youth migration. However, it is noteworthy that only 105 participants (comprising 75% females and 25% males) provided consent for the study. In a pilot study, we aimed to gain insights into youth perspectives and their response to in-person questionnaires. This preliminary research unearthed a significant correlation between the socio-economic crisis and the deteriorating mental health of Sri Lankan youth. The study employed quantitative methods, incorporating Conflict Management Styles Assessment, inspired by Wang's research in 2020. This tool was instrumental in identifying potential conflict resolution mechanisms during periods of crisis.

- 33% of respondents have completed advanced-level coursework, 9% have completed diploma-level coursework, 59% have completed degrees, and 1% have completed doctoral degrees.
- All respondents agreed that living in Sri Lanka would not provide them with the necessary skills to compete on a global scale.
- Almost 66% stated that they would leave the country as soon as a job opportunity presented itself to ensure a better future and to be rewarded for their success.
- Due to uncertainty, nearly one-third of respondents said they had lost focus on their studies and daily activities. They reported increased anxiety, a lack of uninterrupted sleep, and peer pressure.
- Despite the crises and challenges that have been thrown at them, more than half of the respondents said they have been living their lives the way they want.



- In terms of conflict management styles and skills, 21.4% of the population identified as collaborating, 20.7% as accommodating, and 20.2% as compromising, indicating a willingness to resolve conflicts without involving multiple people. 2% would rather avoid conflict, while 17.9% would rather compete and win the debate. 39% of people would rather compromise and negotiate any problem than never compromise, while 25% would never compromise.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mandate private and public sector organizations to recruit a minimum of 25% of their workforce annually from the youth demographic.
- Implement state-backed initiatives to support young entrepreneurs and encourage self-reliance by nurturing startup enterprises.
- Develop comprehensive mental health guidelines for employees and university students. Establish anonymous helplines within universities for open communication, ensuring widespread access to these services.
- Mandate universities and workplaces to employ a minimum of one mental health specialist, fostering an environment where students and employees can openly discuss and seek assistance for their mental health concerns.
- Implement participatory research practices at the district level to assess diverse community needs comprehensively and create sustainable mechanisms for advancing youth-driven initiatives.
- Foster cross-border collaborations within state universities to provide students exposure to international academic frameworks, equipping them with the skills required to meet global demands effectively.

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# Gender-Based Violence and Economic Crisis: Impacts and Implications

Anuradhika Uduwana, Gagani Athukorala, Druvinke Peiris, Suhela Abeynaike and Varuni Michelle Fernando

## INTRODUCTION

The Council of Europe defines gender-based violence (GBV) as “violence that is directed against a person based on gender. It constitutes a breach of the fundamental right to life, liberty, security, dignity, equality between women and men, non-discrimination, and physical and mental integrity”. Amongst different forms of GBV, violence at the workplace is a prevalent issue. Sexual harassment, specifically, is one of the many forms of GBV and discrimination that deter women from meaningfully participating at work. As per a study conducted by the Women’s Education and Research Centre (WERC), although sexual harassment affects people of all genders, women in Sri Lanka are particularly vulnerable to it in the workplace, educational institutions, and even public transportation. As per UNFPA Sri Lanka, about ninety % of women in Sri Lanka have endured sexual harassment while taking public transport. This affects their physical, mental, and social well-being. In Sri Lanka, one in four women has been subjected to physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives, a figure that is expected to rise as incomes dwindle and tensions at home increase.

Sri Lanka is currently grappling with a complex economic crisis exacerbated by ongoing socio-economic and political challenges. The widening gap between the country’s financial obligations and available resources has significantly hampered its economic stability. [AZ2] The current economic crisis, combined with internal political turmoil, is driving people into poverty, and jeopardizing their right to a decent standard of living. In the context of the workplace, GBV has become more prevalent, alongside unemployment, salary cuts, and unequal pay. It is not the result of a single social factor; there are numerous factors (cultural, legal, economic, and political factors) and their interactions that contribute to the problem.

## FINDINGS

This study aimed to examine the status of various forms of GBV at the workplace using available statistics and information, as well as identifying various trends of GBV during and before the crisis. To capture this data and provide pertinent recommendations, the study collected data from online surveys of 100 young employees aged 18 to 35 (15 male and 85 female) and a literature review including legal frameworks and government regulations from Sri Lanka and other nations. This international perspective gave us a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and provided valuable comparative insights.

- There has been a significant rise in unemployment due to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. One-third of the respondents had lost their jobs due to the economic crisis and around 65% of women and 18.2% of men reported being under additional stress as the breadwinners of their families.
- Out of the 100 respondents, 11 men and 76 women experienced GBV at some point in their lives. More than half of female respondents have experienced physical, verbal, psychological, or sexual violence or harassment at work, while 40% of male respondents have experienced similar situations.

- The crisis in Sri Lanka caused 78% of respondents (7 male; 71 female) to face an increase in GBV (physical, verbal, psychological or sexual violence or harassment at the workplace). Most male respondents (60%) stated that they had faced a minimum amount of such violence at the workplace before the crisis. However, this figure has shifted dramatically during the socioeconomic crisis, with 72.7% of male respondents reporting an increase in workplace violence (bullying, physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment, inadequate and unsanitary facilities at the workplace, and excessively long work hours).
- Out of the 100 responses, almost all participants (92%) were of the view that their environment and culture play a large role in defining men's and women's equity in the workplace. Despite the circumstances, 82% of the participants believed that during the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the awareness about GBV has increased to some extent.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enact targeted legislation to combat sexual harassment within workplaces and conduct national-level studies to understand its underlying causes, with a focus on the impact of economic crises on women and girls in the workforce. This will guide the development of responsive strategies.
- Institute a comprehensive framework within organizations to prevent, prohibit, and address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in workplaces and public institutions. This framework should ensure safe and equitable environments for all.
- Enhance research infrastructure to better understand GBV and identify gaps in workplace policies related to GBV prevention, prohibition, and redress. This research will inform evidence-based strategies to address GBV professionally.
- Integrate community-based participatory research (CBPR) into research studies as a collaborative social action pedagogy and research methodology. CBPR empowers communities to address inequities and foster social justice. Building capacity for CBPR in research ensures that discussions on GBV are more inclusive, responsive, and impactful.

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# Challenges Faced by Youth in the Work Environment: An Empirical Study on the Mental Health of Youth in the Maldives and Sri Lanka

Hoodh Ibrahim, Krishni Jayanath, Maryam Mizra and Nethmi Prabashani

## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that allows people to cope with life's stresses, realize their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community”. These health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities, as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. The issue of mental health, which is becoming a global concern, can also be examined through the lens of workplace stress. Over the last few decades, the corporate world has become increasingly competitive, putting additional strain on employees. Maintaining work-life balance and having support systems in place has thus become critical. However, mechanisms at the workplace to help staff cope with these issues are inadequate in developing countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

A World Health Organization - All India Institute of Medical Science (WHO-AIIMS) report on the Maldives mental health system stated that, despite having a formal list of essential medicines, the country lacked a mental health policy, legislation, or plan. In Sri Lanka too, mental health issues are becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly among the youth. According to WHO approximately 1 in 5 Sri Lankans suffer from a mental health condition, with depression and anxiety being the most common. Several reports have also highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the mental health crisis in Sri Lanka, with increased stress and anxiety levels among the population. Moreover, the high rate of brain drain in Sri Lanka has resulted in a lack of human and financial resources available to participate in mental health activities. Mental health is becoming a growing concern among youth in both countries. However, there are a limited number of studies on the mental health challenges faced by youth at the workplace and dealt with by the institutions in both the Maldives and Sri Lanka; thus, the findings and recommendations from this research will explore this issue and try to fill in the existing gaps.

## FINDINGS

This study examined the challenges faced by employed youth in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, as a result of a lack of mental health awareness. To collect the data, a total of 50 young employees between the ages of 18 and 35 were selected from each country using convenient and purposive sampling methods. All the participants who were selected responded to the survey questionnaire. In addition, 52 participants were purposely selected to participate in the semi-structured interviews to gauge experiences and perceptions of employees from various sectors (61 % in the private sector, 39 % in the government sector, 10 % among the self-employed, and 2 % in the online sector).

- Out of the 102 participants, almost half of the respondents stated they worked 8 hours a day, while a few (12 %) engaged in work for more than 10 hours a day. They attributed the hostile working environment to heavy workloads and a lack of guidance from senior managers.
- Although a majority of young employees reported job satisfaction, their personal experiences shared during interviews were not favorable, reporting primarily mental exhaustion due to their job environment.
- The findings indicate that young workers in Sri Lanka and Maldives are facing significant mental health challenges, which are often unrecognized due to their limited awareness and experience in identifying and managing these issues appropriately.
- It was found that workers face two major types of workplace-related challenges. The first category relates to management issues such as toxic working conditions resulting from poor management, which causes organizations to function inefficiently with little integration with subsystems such as recruitment, retention, and development. Additionally, values inherent in the organizational culture, such as a lack of respect for staff, inflexibility of schedules, channels of communication, and organizational set-up, can also affect workers' mental stability.
- The second category involves employee-related issues, which include concerns about professionalism, aggressiveness, workplace bullying, disrespectfulness, lack of cooperation, and disparaging behaviour towards colleagues.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



- Enact legislation or regulations outlining stringent consequences for organizations failing to adhere to workplace mental health standards. Establish mechanisms for regular assessments and audits to ensure accountability in safeguarding employees' mental well-being.
- Increase budget allocations to enhance workplace mental health infrastructure. This investment will support comprehensive mental health programs, training, and support mechanisms within organizations, fostering a healthier and more productive workforce.
- Create district-level mental health care facilities in coordination with the labor department in each country to provide accessible and localized support for workforce mental health concerns.
- Promote the adoption of corporate policies that include dedicated mental health guidance units, anti-harassment and anti-bullying programs, and principles enhancing inclusion, diversity, resilience, and equity within the employment industry. These measures collectively address mental health concerns while creating a more supportive work environment.

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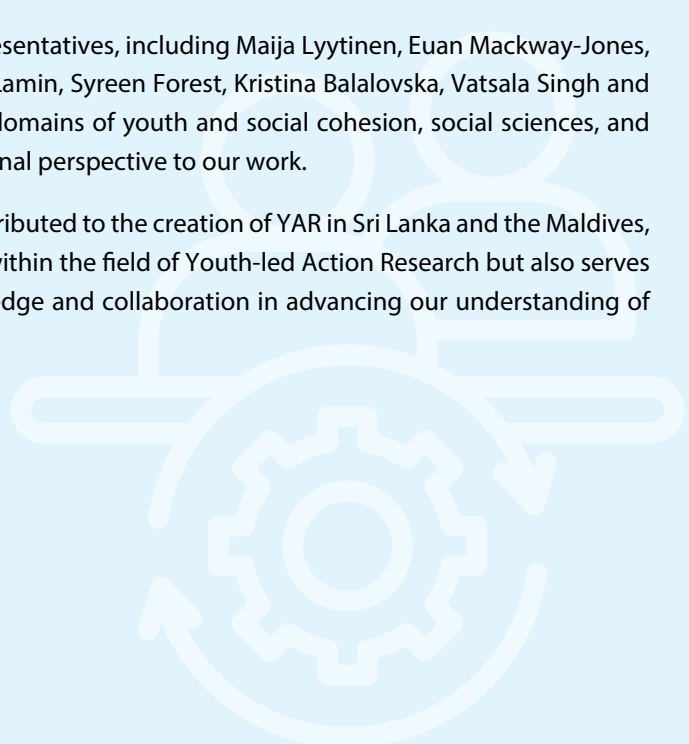
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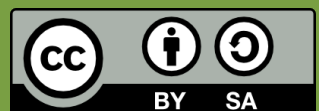


1 San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri  
New Delhi 110 021, INDIA

T: +91-11-2611 1873/5 & 2611 1867/9

E: [newdelhi@unesco.org](mailto:newdelhi@unesco.org)

W: <https://www.unesco.org/en/fieldoffice/newdelhi>



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