

## **Employment aspirations of youth in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka**

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### **Introduction**

Aspirations of youth become so special in the dynamic social and economic structures and that resulted in new outlooks of youth life that are open up in modern socio economic arena. Youth tend to cherish their increased goals and ambitions throughout their life cycle. In this study, an attempt was created to find out nature of aspirations of youth especially in the Labor market in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is characterized as a country that undertake considerable efforts to give access to education to all citizens. This has led to the comparatively good social indicators Sri Lanka has in the field of health and education (Angela et al., 2016). Moreover it also contributed to the widespread perception in Sri Lanka that education is the most important means for upward social mobility. Sri Lanka, with its successful welfare policies and state provided social security measures, has become one of the highest literacy rates in the world (Hettige et al., 2014). Access to free education since the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in increasing numbers of students being admitted to schools. Numbers in the primary and secondary levels of education have swelled rapidly since then leading to significant numbers entering the tertiary level too. Despite the social mobility afforded by educational opportunities, the number of ‘unemployable youth’ has increased over the years pointing to the mismatch between the educational and employment opportunities available to the youth.

“Skill mismatch” or Structural mismatch hypothesis first articulated by the ILO mission to Sri Lanka in 1971 indicates that the types of work which people are willing and able to do, do not match the pattern of opportunities that are available indicating that the unemployment that prevails or a considerable part of it is the product of skills/structural mismatch (ILO, 1971). Put differently, the labor force may be highly educated but not particularly skilled. Thus, those who stress the orthodox view of the structural imbalance mismatch hypothesis believe implicitly that although the economy has employment opportunities jobs expected by a large amount of job seekers are not adequately found or they do not fit to the prevailing jobs. Emphasizing the structural mismatch as an

important reason to having a high level of unemployment. In this background, this study looks into the current aspirations of youth their search for employment. The primary objective of this study was to understand the aspirations of youth in terms of finding an employment. In addition, specifically this research attempted to find out the role of educational achievement and parents' influences over their children's employment aspirations. That there are several problems associated with the school-to-work transition in Sri Lanka. Hence, by analyzing Sri Lanka's Labour Force survey along with key informant interviews and case studies, this study attempted to identify the mismatch between youth employment aspirations and their position in professional qualifications. That is, this study analyzes why there are mismatches between youth employment and their aspirations.

### **Methodology**

The study used micro level data, obtained from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for the year of 2014. And, in order to come with a detailed analysis; the researcher used Key Informant Interviews, and case studies. This study used only youth who fall between 15 years to 29 years old regardless what they do and their civil status. The researcher purposively omitted fulltime students as this study analyses the status of youth employment.

### **Results and discussion**

According to the Key Informant: Prof R. Nanthakumaran, Northern Province is lagging behind other districts as a result of the prolonged Civil war that lasted around three decades.

*'After the war youth prefer public sector jobs than private sector jobs specially Graduate youth they prefer public sector jobs and do not like hard working and like for easygoing jobs (due to its relatively easy nature, good pay, and benefits such as the pension fund etc.) Northern province, during war period, job creation was very very low level but after the war more jobs were created by in the public sector than in the private sector. However the number of jobs created in the Northern Province was insufficient compared to that of other provinces in Sri Lanka' (Prof R. Nanthakumaran, Former Rector, Vavuniya Campus, University of Jaffna).*

Likewise, youth could not find jobs according to their preferences because many youth could not identify the most suitable courses in the vocational education. Mr. Jeyamanon (Deputy Director, Board of Investment, Northern Region) says as following,

*'Some vocational courses have greater supply (to the labour market) than their demand in the labour market. Thus, there is a mismatch between supply and demand in certain vocations. Hence, vocational*

*training programmes should attune it to be demand-driven. Though students usually choose the type of vocational courses the vocational training institutions should restrict admissions to courses, which have less demand in the job market' (Mr. Jeyamanon Deputy Director, BOI, Northern Region)*

The present study reveals that the majority of the youths aspire paid employment rather than self-employment. The lowest percentage (3.3%) of youth who expects self-employment was recorded in the Northern Province while the national figure is 5.9 percent. In Eastern Province 11.8 percent of the youth are willing to engage in self-employments. All the youth in the Northern Province who are interested in starting self-employment expect financial support/marketing/capital resources from the government or any other institution.

The survey reiterates the social perception on public employment. Public sector employment is still preferred by a significant proportion of the youth despite the increasing role played by the private sector in the economy. The system of formal education that Sri Lanka inherited from the colonial time is largely responsible for this attitude. In the Northern Province, 42 percent of youth prefer employment from only public sector where as 9.8 percent prefer employment from private sector only. Others prefer employment either from public or private sector. However, when it comes to the national level, 36.4 percent of youth prefer employment from public sector only where as it is 17 percent of youth prefer employment from private sector only. 25.8 percent of youth of the Western Province expect employment from private sector. Compared to the Western Province and all other provinces of Sri Lanka, youth from the Northern Province are reluctant to accept employment from private sector. And, compared to males, higher per cent of females are curious to do self-employment. It is very interesting that only in the Northern Province, none of the male unemployed youth who was interested in self-employment. On the other hand, 6.3 percent of female unemployed youth were recorded to be interested in self-employment. In Sri Lanka, 3.2 percent of male youth prefer to do self-employment where as it was 8.5 percent for female youth. Self-employment does not come out as a preferred area of employment as it is not considered as prestigious. The formal education system has also implanted such attitudes in the minds of the youth.

Among job-seeking youth with higher educational qualifications, i.e. GCE Advanced Level, a large majority prefers state sector employments. Educated youth expect paid employment to a great extent. Of the youth who completed A/L and university degrees, more than three quarters expect paid employments. It was evident that the higher the age of youth the greater the tendency in looking for public sector jobs. That is, youth were categorized into three categories: 15-19; 20-24; 25-29. The aspiration towards public employment was recorded to be 17.6

percent, 38.2 percent, 44.5 percent respectively in Sri Lanka. However, in the Northern Province, the same aspiration was 12.5 percent, 55 percent and 46.2 percent in the respective age category. About 25 percent of youth in the Northern Province who seek an employment had successfully completed a formal professional/ Technical training, relevant to an occupation/self-employment. It is lagging behind the national rate of 30.1 percent. The lack of a working knowledge in English language is widely perceived today as a major obstacle facing the vast majority of youth in the country, in particular those who originate from a disadvantaged background irrespective of gender and ethnicity.

The problem is connected with the issue of skills development within the general educational system. The current school system is structured and organized in such a way as to equip students to find jobs as white-collar workers in the formal sector or to select those who are keen and capable to move into higher education. This is the result of continuation of educational structures during the British colonial period and after the independence when education was closely linked to securing jobs within the state sector.

*'Job seekers & their parent's attitudes are uncomfortable to the job placements, Most of the job seekers have the choice only Government Jobs they do not have any interest on the private sector Jobs. Job seekers do not have enough soft skills and work experience but their salary expectation is very high, they do not like field work they like to work within the office boundary, companies. Parents expect that if their sons got a government job, they can get higher dowry. Therefore, many parents force their sons to find a government job by taking any risk. There is a proverb 'If you want to do sheep farming, do it at a government place' (Director, Manpower and Employment Division, District Secretariat Jaffna).*

It is very crucial identity that public sector is the most preferred and acceptable employment sector. Many youth get delayed in getting married because of not having government/state employment. Particularly parents of male youth highly expect a public employment to their sons in order to get higher dowry. Many youth's aspirations on working in a foreign country was not identified in the Labour Forces Survey. It is one of the most desired aspiration of many youth particularly in the Northern Province. The youth who prefer 'going abroad' are mostly keen to settle down in a European country.

*'I graduated from Jaffna University with BA degree specialized in Economics. I have been waiting for three years to find a job but now I failed and now I want to go to London (England). I would have earned enough money to build a house if I worked two years in London. But it will not be possible to build a house if I work for 20 year in Sri Lanka. My brother studied up to O/L and he has a car, mansion, super market*

*etc. in London. So, I want to become as rich as my brother'* (Sankar, 26 years old).

According to the above case study, it is clear that many youth try to become as rich as their brothers/friends/relatives who are living in abroad. Their aspiration of 'going to abroad' is further motivated by the employability. He has been waiting for three years for a job and he changed his mind.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study found that there are some mismatches due to the educational, psychological and social factors. The largest share of youth aspire paid employment rather than self-employments. Northern Province was identified as one area with the least percentage of youths prefer self-employments. Public sector employment is still preferred by a significant proportion of the youth despite the increasing role played by the private sector in the economy. Particularly parents of male youth highly expect a public employment to their sons in order to get increased dowry. The system of formal education that Sri Lanka inherited from the colonial time is largely responsible for this behavior. Self-employment does not come out as a preferred area of employment as it is not considered prestigious. Educated youth expect well-paid public sector employments to a greater extent. There is a correlation that as age increases youth tend to find employment from public sector only. Poor English literacy is widely perceived today as a major obstacle facing by the vast majority of youth in the country, in particular those who originate from a disadvantaged background irrespective of gender and ethnicity, encounter a setback due to poor English literacy as a result their communication skills are considered to be weak. Working in a foreign the most desired aspiration of many youth particularly in the Northern Province.

Some recommendations are necessary to avoid the potential problems due to the unsatisfactory youth in terms of their employment aspirations. That is, changing the social perceptions of state employment and self-employment must be proactively implemented by the relevant government institutions as well as private institutions. And, improving employability and competitiveness through the improvement of quality vocational and technical training and the provision of quality professional guidance on educational and career choices are highly recommended by the researchers.

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