

ISSUES CAUSED BY EMPLOYMENT OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE SRI LANKAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

W.G.H.K. Nawarathna¹, M.D.T.E. Abeynayake² and I.E. Illeperuma³

ABSTRACT

Construction is one of the industries with a very high growth rate in Sri Lanka. With this growth, recent decades have seen a considerable rise in the number of migrant workers because of globalisation, wars, conflicts, poverty, and economic developments. While this wave offers the construction industry, organisations, and migrants many benefits, it also has drawbacks. Due to several reasons, migration has an impact on the Sri Lankan construction industry. However, this migration has several negative consequences and difficulties for the industry. Therefore, it is vital to recognise them and offer solutions. This paper discussed issues caused by the employment of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry, and research aimed to develop strategies to mitigate the issues caused by migrant workers in the Sri Lankan Construction Industry. The study used a mixed-methods approach, collecting data through questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. Through a questionnaire survey, the research findings identified the top 13 issues brought on by the employment of migrant workers in Sri Lanka. "Communication issues," "Language barriers," "Competition for jobs," "Outflow of currency," and "Spread of Diseases" are the top five most important issues. Through expert interviews, the definitive significant management methods for those identified significant concerns were developed. The suggested solutions are divided into two categories: Strategies that construction organisations can use to overcome the issues and Strategies that the Sri Lankan government can use to overcome the issues. Implementing training sessions, forming support groups, improving visual communication, modifying Sri Lankan government rules and regulations, and promoting an open Health and safety culture are the key strategies suggested in this study.

Keywords: *Construction; Issues; Migrant Workers; Sri Lankan Construction Industry; Strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

The success of a construction project depends on a variety of elements (Hickson & Ellis, 2014). In any given project, construction labour is the largest set of human resources (Hickson & Ellis, 2014). As such, the availability of labour resources is essential to the success of a project (Hamid et al., 2011). But due to various reasons, such as local labour

¹ Undergraduate, Department of Building Economics, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, kawshika1@gmail.com

² Senior Lecturer, Department of Building Economics, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, abey92@hotmail.com

³ Temporary Lecturer, Department of Building Economics, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, isurierandi123@gmail.com

shortages, a strong demand for unskilled labour for laborious tasks, and migrant workers' willingness to accept lower pay rates, migrant workers currently account for a significant percentage of the construction industry's workforce (Atakul et al., 2018). In the recent past, the rise of migrant construction workers has become a distinguishing feature of global construction and recent decades have witnessed a rise in migrant construction workers, which has become a distinctive aspect of global construction (Tutt et al., 2011).

The post-war period in Sri Lanka has strengthened the government and corporate sectors' readiness to invest heavily in major capital projects such as high-rise buildings, airports, ports, roadways, highway repairs, land reclamation, and water and sanitation infrastructure (Ramalee et al., 2016). This increase brought great possibilities as well as severe challenges, such as a shortage of human resources (Silva et al., 2018). Contractors engage foreign laborers (migrant workers) to work in Sri Lanka's construction industry because of the lack of local labour (Manoharan et al., 2021). According to Silva et al. (2018), some migrant workers from Bangladesh, China, and India have already been introduced to Sri Lanka, and this option was seen as a quick and easy solution to the skills gap. However, there are numerous significant economic, social, legal, and political effects of the current influx of migrant workers on local communities, particularly those from a single nation (Hamid et al., 2012). Further, on construction sites, several migrant-related problems have been reported that have an impact on both sectoral and project performance. These problems include substandard workmanship, poor construction methods, a disregard for safety, social and legal problems with education and accommodations, violations of human rights, and health and safety concerns (Atakul et al., 2018). Hence, it is crucial to recognise the issues and drawbacks and identify solutions to the negatives of using migrant workers in the construction industry (Hamid et al., 2012).

Manoharan et al. (2021) claimed that the migrant notion was embraced by the Sri Lankan construction sector as a novel idea. But for further clarification, not many studies relate to this concept. However, most prior studies in the Sri Lankan context focused only on health and safety issues relating to the construction industry. As a result, there is a research gap in the strategies employed to address the issues caused by migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry. In view of this, this study explores the impact of migrant workers on the Sri Lankan construction industry. This study was conducted with the aim of developing strategies to mitigate the issues caused by migrant workers in the Sri Lankan Construction Industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The rate of migration has begun to noticeably grow due to globalisation (Atakul et al., 2018). The migration of construction workers is having a strong effect on the construction sector overall (Rahul, 2015). On the other hand, one of the short-term solutions to handle labour shortages is hiring migrant workers (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2021). They used to use low-cost workers from neighbouring countries and rural areas to fill the labour shortage in the small country's big construction sector (Anelauskas, 2017). There are other reasons for migration besides the labour shortage. Factors influencing migrant workers' employment can be categorised as follows: term availability, pay working conditions, working hours, and educational level (Marhani et al., 2012). Three of them stand out as being particularly significant: availability, educational attainment, and working circumstances (Achim et al., 2017). According to Robertson's (2018), a migrant worker

is someone who crosses a "political or administrative" border and is about to, is engaged in, or has previously engaged in a paid activity in a country of which they are not citizens. Construction as a sector looks to be mostly pro-migration (Green, 2015). Under this, International (across continents), intercontinental (between countries on the same continent), and interregional migration occur on a variety of scales (within countries) (Rahul, 2015). Furthermore, three subcategories of "migrant labour" have been established: temporary migrants; highly qualified migrants; and unauthorised or undocumented workers (Robertson, 2018). Yet, in general, migrant laborers may not have the intention of settling permanently or be authorised for this purpose (Wells, 2018).

2.1 ISSUES CAUSED BY HIRING MIGRANT WORKERS IN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Table 1 shows the issues brought on because of employing migrant workers under five primary categories: socio-cultural, health and safety, project performance, legal, and economic.

Table 1: Issues caused by the employment of migrant workers in the construction Industry

No	Issue	Reference
Socio-cultural issues		
1	Contamination to local culture	[2], [3], [5]
2	Competition for jobs	[2], [5]
3	Communication issues	[3]
4	Unequal Treatments	[4], [5]
5	Accommodation problems	[2], [5]
6	Increase criminal cases	[3]
7	Spread of Diseases	[5]
Health and Safety issues		
8	Poor working conditions	[1], [3], [4], [5]
9	Language barriers	[1]
10	Communication Barriers	[4]
11	Cultural aspects issues	[1]
Project Performance issues		
12	Productivity issues	[2], [3], [5]
13	Quality issues	[3], [5]
Legal issues		
14	Human Rights issues	[4], [5]
15	Applying for a Work Permit	[4]
16	Working Visa issues	[4]
Economic issues		
17	High Cost	[2], [3], [4]
18	Outflow of currency	[5]
[1]- (Shepherd et al., 2021) , [2]- (Hamid et al., 2013) , [3]- (Hamid et al., 2012) , [4]- (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2015) , [5]- (Atakul et al., 2018)		

The construction industry has a relatively bad safety track record (Buckley et al., 2016). Construction workers, who make up a significant portion of the workforce and are often non-nationals or migrants, are particularly at risk for accidents, injuries, and fatalities (Shepherd et al., 2021) and also they mentioned that there are differences between the working conditions experienced by migrant and native laborers, and these differences may have an impact on workers' safety. Because migrant employees typically start at the lowest level feasible in their professions, working conditions won't typically be at a high level (Oswald et al., 2020). The project has been impacted by the language barrier (Ian, 2006), which is not surprising given the diversity among the workers (Tutt et al., 2011). Because migrant workers usually work in small groups with their family and friends, migrants frequently have poor language proficiency in their native tongue (Al-bayati et al., 2017). Thus, it is crucial to consider language to protect the security of migrant employees (Shepherd et al., 2021).

One of the primary problems brought on by the employment of migrant workers in the construction industry is cross-cultural misunderstandings (Bust et al., 2008). According to Phua et al. (2011), if cultural diversity is managed effectively, it can improve workplace relationships, productivity, and safety as well as have a positive impact on creativity and innovation. Compared to the natives, migrant workers have different cultures (Son et al., 2018). Parallel to the rise in global construction activity, there is a growing understanding of the importance of better cross-cultural management (Bust et al., 2008). Otherwise, separate nations and immigrant minorities communicate and perceive the world in a variety of ways that are shaped by particular sets of cultural norms (Bust et al., 2008). Soon, migrant workers will nevertheless significantly boost the competitiveness of the sector (Deng et al., 2013). The employment options for local people are impacted by migrant workers, who also make the industry more competitive. Lack of quick verbal communication is one of the biggest barriers to managing migrants on construction projects effectively (Bust et al., 2008). Communication makes it possible to deliver and share ideas, opinions, thoughts, and knowledge effectively. Issues could occur that would restrict how effectively the information would be conveyed or communicated if the communication process was ineffective (Matullah et al., 2021). To maximise efficiency on the work site, personnel must communicate effectively with one another (Olanrewaju et al., 2017). Unequal treatment is another issue that mostly affects migrant foreign workers because it is uncommonly challenging for them to receive the same treatment as local employees (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2015). Further compared to non-migrant labour, migrant workers are more likely to contract diseases (Mucci et al., 2019). According to the author, pulmonary fibrosis, chronic bronchitis, and lung cancer are examples of serious illnesses that have an impact on migrants. Other symptoms of high-altitude work syndrome include headaches, asthenia, respiratory disorders (like dyspnea, chest pain, and pulmonary edema), and various diseases. The most recent instance of this is the spread of the COVID-19 illness. The most frequent amenity that companies must offer migrant workers when they are needed for a construction project is accommodation. Yet, according to Atakul et al., (2018), migrant workers who live in poor conditions sleep in partially constructed buildings with little room, unmaintained lavatories, and no electricity facility (Abdul-Aziz, 2001).

Having foreign workers who are unable to communicate in the appropriate language has caused misunderstandings between the company and its employees. The performance of the works and productivity were impacted by frequent reworks due to nonconformance

to the work standards. For instance, Emad and Rahman, (2017) said that the bulk of Saudi Arabia's construction workforce is made up of foreigners from other countries, who have diverse knowledge bases, skill sets, and cultural backgrounds, making management of them challenging to assure project success.

Construction companies advertise high salaries to attract foreign workers to their nations, but once they get there, they are almost always taken advantage of and mistreated. Foreign workers have limited power to defend the rights mentioned in their contract because of the language barrier, cost of engaging a counsel, and duration (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2015). Also, most migrant workers had temporary work permits, which may cause several legal complications in projects (May, 2022).

In contrast to local workers, migrant workers see a large increase in labour costs because of insurance, medical, allowance, and Employee Provident Fund payments. However, when it comes to migrant labour, there are several additional costs for lodging, transportation, and other amenities compared to native local workers. Moreover, The balance of payments and currency flow of the economy will suffer from an overreliance on migrant workers (Hamid et al., 2012). Since this has a detrimental influence on the country's economy, it must be addressed by considering the areas that are most affected.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research has used a mixed approach to accomplish the research aim. Identification of specific issues caused by migrant workers in the Sri Lankan Construction Industry needs quantitative data to analyse because this objective is aiming to present “what are the specific issues”. However, the selection of strategies to mitigate identified issues will need expert opinion because it aims to discuss “how the strategies can be applied to mitigate these issues”. Kothari (2004), asserts that a quantitative method is more suited to answering "what" inquiries, while a qualitative approach is better suited to responding to "how" queries. Thus, a mixed approach is the ideal choice for this research. Further, a mixed-methods approach is beneficial when one of the quantitative or qualitative methodologies is insufficient to completely understand a study problem or when the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research can produce the best insight (Creswell, 2014). Explanatory design is chosen among these design methodologies because quantitative data must be assessed before qualitative data to accurately identify the research's findings and recommend the most appropriate response. The general goal of the Explanatory Design, a two-phase mixed methods design, is that qualitative data contributes to the explanation or development of initial quantitative findings. In Exploratory design, use the outcomes of the first technique (qualitative) to construct or inform the second approach (quantitative).

A questionnaire survey was conducted to determine specific issues caused by the employment of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction sector. The questionnaire has three sections in addition to a brief introduction to the study. Gathering participant information was the focus of section A. The second and third sections (Section B and Section C) concentrated on identifying and analysing specific issues. In the fourth section, Likert scale questions were used to assess the frequency of multiple issues brought on by the hiring of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction sector. The survey was administered to 30 participants

Collected data through questionnaire survey statically analysed using relative importance index (RII).

$$Relative\ Importance\ Index = \frac{\sum w}{AN} = \frac{1n_1 + 2n_2 + 3n_3 + 4n_4 + 5n_5}{5N}$$

w -respondent's preference for each element

A -the highest weight (in this case-5)

N- the total number of respondents

n- represents the number of respondents who respond to the relevant occurrence frequency.

Under a qualitative approach to understanding more about the participants' perspectives, thoughts, and attitudes, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Using semi-structured interviews, this study identified the root causes of special issues in the Sri Lankan industry and invents mitigation strategies for the unfavourable effects of the issues presented by the employment of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction sector. 12 industry professionals with exposure to the research area and contractor experience engaged in semi-structured interviews. Based on the details of the literature review and the results of the questionnaire survey, interview guidelines were developed. Additionally, interviews were conducted both physically and online. The findings of expert interviews were analysed using the manual content analysis technique. Table 2 illustrates the details of 12 professionals.

Table 2: Details of the interviewees of expert interviews

Code	Profession	Designation	No. of years of experience	No. of years of experience at the site
E1	Engineer	Project Control Engineer	15	13
E2	Engineer	Site Engineer	10	6
E3	Project Manager	Project Manager	13	12
E4	Quantity Surveyor	Site Quantity Surveyor	14	12
E5	Project Manager	Project Manager	15	15
E6	Project Director	Project Director	15	15
E7	Engineer	Site Engineer	26	26
E8	Project Manager	Project Manager	21	21
E9	Quantity Surveyor	Site Quantity Surveyor	19	15
E10	Quantity Surveyor	Site Quantity Surveyor	26	22
E11	Project Manager	Project Manager	28	24
E12	Engineer	Site Engineer	12	10

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

As per the initial phase of data collecting, a questionnaire survey was conducted to determine specific issues caused by the employment of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction sector. The survey was administered to 30 participants. Table 3 provides the basic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 3: Details of the respondents

Professionals	No. of Participants
Quantity Surveyors	15
Engineers	5
Architect	3
Project Manager	7

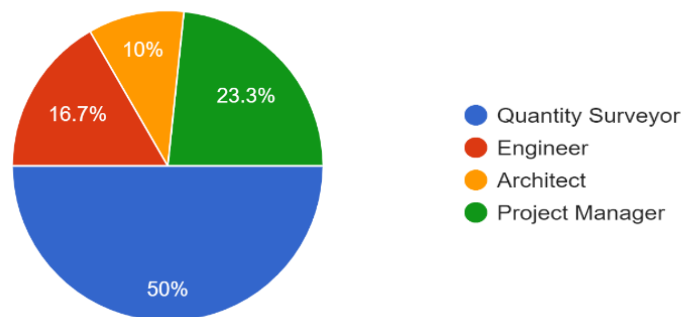


Figure 1: Respondent details according to professions

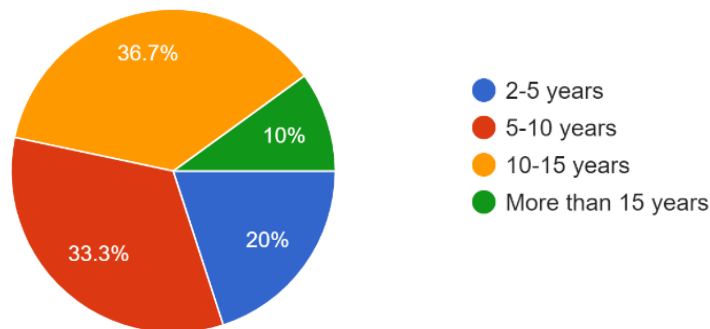


Figure 2: Respondents details of experience in construction industry

Each issue is different from the others in terms of actual occurrence. The RII approach has been applied to achieve the most accurate results from the questionnaire surveys. The RII of each issue caused by the employment of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry is shown in Table 4, and it is sorted from highest to lowest incidence.

Table 4: RII of each issue caused by migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry

No	Issue	RII	Rank
1	Contamination to local culture	0.8	6
2	Competition for jobs	0.83	3
3	Communication issues	0.95	1
4	Unequal Treatments	0.66	9
5	Accommodation problems	0.67	8
6	Increase criminal cases	0.26	16
7	Spread of Diseases	0.81	5
8	Poor working conditions	0.3	15
9	Language barriers	0.92	2
10	Productivity issues	0.45	14
11	Quality issues	0.49	10
12	Human Rights issues	0.47	12
13	Applying for a Work Permit	0.47	12
14	Working Visa issues	0.49	11
15	High Cost	0.78	7
16	Outflow of currency	0.83	3

The most frequent issue caused by hiring migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction sector., according to the questionnaire survey analysis using the RII approach, is "communication challenges." It has an RII of 0.95. The sample's responses indicate that "Language hurdles" is the second most frequently occurring problem. Its RII score is 0.92. With a 0.3 RII score, "competition for jobs" and "outflow of currency" are the third most frequent difficulties. Results indicate that "spread of diseases" is the fifth most common reason for occurrence. Its RII score is 0.81. Contamination to local culture ranks sixth among the concerns with a RII value of 0.8. According to RII values of more than 0.4, issues with high cost, accommodations, unfair treatment, quality, working visas, human rights, and productivity have occupied positions 7 through 14. The issues with the lowest RII values and lowest ranking are more criminal cases and poor working conditions. According to the table above, both concerns have RII values that are less than 0.4. According to the sample, these two problems only occasionally arise in the Sri Lankan construction sector because they both have RII values of less than 0.4. Thus, the problems brought on by migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry might be regarded as minor.

4.2 EXPERT INTERVIEWS ANALYSIS

4.2.1 Specific issues caused by migrant workers in Sri Lankan construction industry

Most significant issues related to the Sri Lankan construction industry were identified through questionnaires discussed and analysed under expert interviews. There are cultural issues at work, according to the interviewees, because of the diversity of cultures, faiths, practices, and behaviours. Local workers in the construction business in Sri Lanka practice a variety of religions, and foreign workers from China, Japan, and India also follow a variety of cultures, religions, and behavioural norms. Hence, it can be difficult for both professionals and migratory workers to adapt to a new culture. Acculturative

stress, culture shock, homesickness, confusion, a lack of support, prejudice, and communication difficulties are the results. Foreign migrant laborers mostly contribute to further cultural pollution in the surrounding area. Since they adhere to diverse cultures and lifestyles. Therefore, local employees try to assimilate that culture and way of life. It can occasionally result in a variety of troubles with the website.

Another main issue brought on by hiring migrant workers in Sri Lanka's construction sector is competition for jobs. It is stated that some job opportunities in the construction sector were lost to local workers due to political decisions and government changes and that foreign construction companies hire their staff primarily to fill those job openings. As a result, qualified locals have fewer employment options. Further, the chances accessible to local workers are limited when some projects are given to international organisations, who then hire foreign workers as labour resources for the project. Communication issues are discussed under the two main categories of migrant workers, which are migrant local laborers and foreign workers. Nonetheless, some unskilled workers may come from China and Japan has very little interest in using the English language. Most foreign workers with professional qualifications can speak English but most local migrant workers could not be literate in writing and reading. Hence, interacting with them can occasionally be challenging.

unequal treatment is another identified issue, and it arises mainly between migrant workers from abroad and those from locally. Foreign migrant employees are more knowledgeable than local migrant workers when comparing those two groups of workers. Also, certain Sri Lankan professionals in the companies are prone to treat local migrant workers unequally due to the standard disparity between international migrant workers and local migrant workers. As a result, occasionally they negatively handled locals. Local and foreign workers staying in the same accommodation may experience accommodation issues. Moreover, the potential of a disease outbreak exists. On the other hand, poor working conditions can make employees unwell and demotivated, which has an impact on their ability to perform their duties well. As a result, the most important facility required by project workers is accommodation. High-quality accommodation, however, is more expensive and harder to come by in Sri Lanka. As a result, companies are forced to spend more money on migrant workers' accommodation. There is a very significant chance that numerous diseases will be brought into the nation by migrant workers. Hence, by having to halt the projects, the construction will be interrupted, and the development would be hampered (diseases such as bird flu, coronavirus, etc.). Also, most foreign migrant workers' lifestyles involve clubbing and unprotected sexual activity, which raise the risk of STIs, including HIV, spreading. Legal issues mainly occur since there is no standard process for requesting work permits, and occasionally there are problems with false licenses being created.

The Sri Lankan construction industry is also plagued by a few visa-related issues, including difficulties in getting visas and the occurrence of situations in which temporary workers continue to work there after their visas have expired. The high-cost issue mainly occurs by using migrant workers for a project necessitates additional expenses for accommodation, food, and transportation. However, those extra expenses can be reduced if the company employs locals in the region where the project is being carried out. One of the main effects of recruiting these foreign workers is the money outflow, which has an impact on the economy. Money or goods may be expelled in this way. It will deplete

the nation's resources and money when migrant employees send a percentage of their pay, whether in cash or commodities, home to support their relatives.

4.2.2 Strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of the specific issues caused by hiring migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry

Strategies can be presented under two main categories as (1) strategies that construction organisations can use to overcome the issues and (2) strategies that Sri Lankan government can use to overcome the issues. Table 5 shows proposed strategies under those two main topics.

Table 5: Strategies to overcome the issues caused by hiring migrant workers

No	Strategies
Strategies that construction organisations can use to overcome the issues	
1	Implement training sessions
2	Develop a detailed integration plan
3	Formation of support groups
4	Monitor and address discrimination and exploitation
5	Implement cost-saving measures
6	Regularly review the process
7	Develop a risk management plan
8	Improve visual communication
9	Using Fair and Formal Employment Procedure
10	Promoting an open Health and safety culture
Strategies that Sri Lankan government can use to overcome the issues	
11	Modify Sri Lankan government rules and regulations
12	Implement fair hiring policies
13	Mitigate the tendency of rural to urban migration.
14	Investment in training and re-skilling the local labour force

Language and health and safety training are the most needed training sessions for migrant workers according to the experts' opinion. Organisations can establish a training period under Language Training to train workers who migrate from countries that use their languages (such as China) in the English language. It will enhance cooperation and communication on construction projects and provide language training to both foreign and local migrant workers. Further, these training sessions are important to guarantee that local safety laws are followed and to lower the possibility of accidents and injuries on construction sites. formation of support groups for foreign and local migrant workers to provide them with a sense of community and to address any issues that arise established by this strategy. It will help encourage migrant workers to become involved in the local community and participate in local events and activities. Further, it will lead migrant workers to open communication and collaboration between all stakeholders and other professionals involved in the project. Experts provide an example of this strategy, using interpreters. It will reduce the impact of communication and language issues. Further health and safety precautions and other important information can be shared by using visual communication such as images and symbols. On the other hand, visual content grabs our attention, keeps us engaged, and helps us retain information for longer periods. Further, it's faster than reading something or having to listen to it.

When considering strategies that Sri Lankan government can use to overcome the issues, the main strategy suggested by the study is to modify Sri Lankan government rules and regulations. Under that, the government can adopt or modify migration policies to control the inflow of foreign workers and attempt to identify the migrant workers' requirements and issues that arise due to migrant worker recruitment and eventually try to decrease those issues and provide requirements to minimise those issues. Implementing fair employment practices that guarantee migrant workers receive the same wages as local workers and have access to the same protections and benefits is a must.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study supported the issues caused by the employment of migrant workers in the Sri Lankan construction industry. Nevertheless, it may be said that the construction industry has been negatively impacted by this outcome. A nation and an industry need to consider the negative aspects since, in the end, the stability of the nation's economy, society, and politics should come first. So, it is currently recommended to consider these issues, lessen their bad consequences, and strategically use their positive advantages. The Sri Lankan government should adopt clear norms and regulations to manage the hiring of migrant workers in the construction industry. These rules should include provisions for reasonable pay, safe working conditions, and safeguards against exploitation and abuse. Also, the government should do more to ensure that existing regulations, such as labour, and immigration laws, that control the hiring of migrant workers, are strictly followed. This will guarantee that migrant employees are treated fairly and that businesses that breach the law are held accountable. Therefore, it is critical to strive toward increasing knowledge of and educating migrant workers' rights and obligations as well as employers. This can be achieved through outreach initiatives, educational campaigns, and training programs. Encouragement of migrant workers' social integration into Sri Lankan society is another suggestion that might be made. Giving them access to social services, healthcare, education, and opportunities for intercultural conversation and civic engagement is necessary to achieve this. When external factors are considered, the suggested strategies may be a very drawn-out process. To maximise its success, Sri Lankan construction industry professionals should put this concept into practice as soon as is practical. The Sri Lankan construction sector would therefore have a better position globally with a highly respected performance.

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