

# Sri Lankan Labour Migrants in Romania: Work Conditions and Gendered Vulnerabilities

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**Abstract:** Romania has recently emerged as a destination for Sri Lankan labour migrants due to labour shortages in Eastern Europe and worsening economic conditions in Sri Lanka. Previous studies on migration to new European destinations have highlighted precarious employment, limited institutional protection, and gendered vulnerabilities; however, empirical evidence on Sri Lankan migrants in Romania remains limited. This study examines the drivers of migration, recruitment processes, working and living conditions, gendered challenges, and future migration aspirations of Sri Lankan labour migrants in Romania. The study is theoretically grounded in Push–Pull Theory, Dual Labour Market Theory, and Migration Systems Theory. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with thirty migrants, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and participant observation conducted in Romania and Italy between September and December 2025. The findings indicate that migration decisions in Sri Lanka are shaped by unemployment, indebtedness, and economic crisis, alongside pull factors such as labour demand and perceived opportunities for European mobility. Migrants experience precarious employment, misleading recruitment practices, language barriers, and limited institutional support. Gendered challenges are particularly evident among women, including restricted job mobility, housing insecurity, and reliance on informal support networks. Although Romania offers relative safety and income opportunities, dissatisfaction with labour conditions fuels aspirations for onward migration. The study highlights the need for stronger recruitment regulation, gender-responsive migration governance, and enhanced bilateral cooperation to promote safer and more sustainable labour migration pathways.

**Key words:** Labour migration; Sri Lankan migrants; Romania; precarious employment; gendered vulnerabilities; migration governance

**JEL Classification:** J61; J16; J49; F22

## 1. Introduction

Labour migration has been a key driver of Sri Lanka's socioeconomic development since the 1980s. Economic liberalization, together with rising demand for labour in Middle Eastern markets, facilitated large-scale overseas employment. Government policies also indirectly encouraged labour out-migration, particularly to developed countries and the Middle East. International labour migration has long served as a livelihood strategy for Sri Lankans facing economic insecurity and limited employment opportunities. Over the past decade, however, migration patterns have been shifting away from traditional destinations such as the Middle East toward newer destinations in East Asia and Europe. In this context, migration policies in Romania, including work permits for non-EU nationals and the country's entry into the Schengen Area, have made migration to Romania more feasible for foreign workers.

Since 2020, Romania has emerged as a key destination for Sri Lankan workers due to labour shortages in construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and service sectors, along with relatively accessible recruitment pathways for non-EU workers. The situation was further accelerated by Sri Lanka's economic crisis in 2022, which was marked by severe foreign exchange shortages, rising debt, inflation exceeding 70%, and poverty rates above 24% (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2023). The crisis compelled many, particularly working-age men and women, to seek employment abroad, making Romania one of the fastest-growing European destinations for Sri Lankan workers. Despite this emerging trend, migration to Romania remains largely absent from academic literature, which continues to focus on Western Europe and Gulf countries.

This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of Sri Lankan Labour migrants in Romania. It focuses on migration drivers, recruitment mechanisms, working and living conditions, gendered vulnerabilities, and migrants' plans, including return and onward migration. By doing so, the paper contributes to migration scholarship on emerging European destinations and offers policy-relevant insights for improving migrant protection.

## 2. Literature Review

Migration is a complex process shaped by economic, social, cultural, and political forces. Classical migration theory, particularly Lee's push-pull framework, explains mobility as the interaction between pressures in origin countries and attractions in destination contexts (Lee, 1966). For migrants from Sri Lanka, low wages, limited employment opportunities, and household financial pressures operate alongside pull factors such as labour demand, legal migration pathways, and perceived economic stability in emerging European destinations, including Romania (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014).

Over the past decade, Romania has emerged as a key destination for non-EU labour migrants due to demographic decline, labour shortages, and sectoral growth in construction,

manufacturing, hospitality, retail, and agriculture. Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development indicate a sharp increase in work permits issued to non-EU nationals, reflecting Romania's growing reliance on migrant labour (OECD, 2023). Recruitment is mediated through licensed agencies and informal intermediaries, shaping migrants' expectations regarding wages, employment conditions, and mobility (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1995). Official statistics further reveal a strong gender imbalance among Sri Lankan migrants, with men dominating manual labour sectors while women are concentrated in service-oriented and often more precarious employment. Despite these trends, research on Sri Lankan migrants in Romania remains limited, as most scholarship focuses on the Middle East or Western Europe. Transnational migration perspectives emphasize household decision-making, remittances, and gendered responsibilities, highlighting migration as a negotiated social process across borders (Mahler & Pessar, 2001; Parreñas, 2001). OECD studies also show that migrants' experiences vary significantly by gender, legal status, and sector of employment, with women facing heightened vulnerability (OECD, 2020). Migration produces important transnational outcomes through remittances and livelihood diversification but may also reinforce dependency and gendered inequalities (Castles et al., 2014). Decisions regarding settlement, onward migration, or return are shaped by labour conditions, legal precarity, and family considerations (Lee, 1966; OECD, 2021).

To address existing gaps, this study draws on Push–Pull Theory, Migration Systems Theory, and Dual Labour Market Theory to examine migration drivers, labour market participation, and gendered experiences of Sri Lankan migrants in Romania.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

These three theories provide a structured lens for analyzing the factors influencing migration and the roles migrants play in the host country.

#### **Push and Pull Theory (Lee, 1966)**

The Push and Pull Theory provide a foundational lens for understanding the motivations behind Sri Lankan migration to Romania. According to Lee (1966), migration decisions arise from a combination of push factors in the country of origin and pull factors in the destination. In the Sri Lankan context, push factors include economic instability, unemployment, low wages, limited career opportunities, inadequate social services, and broader social and political uncertainties. These conditions create strong incentives for individuals, particularly youth, to seek better prospects abroad. Conversely, Romania offers several pull factors, such as higher wages, improved employment opportunities, safer living environments, and better access to healthcare and education. Additionally, Romania's recent entry into the Schengen Area has enhanced its attractiveness by providing greater mobility within Europe. The rapid expansion of Romania's foreign labour market, from 15,000 workers in 2018 to nearly 100,000 annually since 2022, further illustrates the growing demand for non-EU migrant labour and situates Sri Lankan migration within broader regional labour dynamics.

#### **Migration Systems Theory (Castles & Miller, 1993)**

Migration Systems Theory posits that migration flows are shaped by the interaction of multiple structural and relational factors, extending beyond individual motivations. Castles and Miller (1993) highlight the influence of global economic inequalities, labour market demands,

state policies, social networks, and historical and geopolitical ties in sustaining migration pathways. In the case of Sri Lankan migration to Romania, this theory is particularly relevant as it explains how formal recruitment agencies, manpower companies, and informal migrant networks create a system that facilitates labour mobility between the two countries. These interconnected channels not only generate opportunities for migration but also reproduce vulnerabilities, including dependence on intermediaries, limited bargaining power, and heightened exposure to exploitative recruitment and employment practices. This framework helps contextualize the Sri Lanka–Romania migration corridor as a product of systemic forces rather than isolated individual decisions.

#### **Dual Labour Market Theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971)**

Dual Labour Market Theory provides insight into why migrant workers, including Sri Lankans in Romania, are often concentrated in low-wage and precarious forms of employment. Doeringer and Piore (1971) argue that labour markets in receiving countries are structurally divided into a primary and a secondary sector. The primary sector consists of stable, well-paid jobs with career advancement, typically reserved for local workers who have the required qualifications, language proficiency, and institutional advantages. Migrants, by contrast, are frequently channelled into the secondary sector, which is characterised by low wages, insecure contracts, limited protections, and minimal opportunities for upward mobility. In Romania, this includes sectors such as construction, hospitality, manufacturing, and care work—jobs often avoided by local workers due to poor working conditions and low prestige. This theory underscores how structural labour market conditions in receiving countries create demand for migrant labour and shape the employment trajectories and vulnerabilities of Sri Lankan migrants.

Together, the three theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for analysing the multifaceted experiences of Sri Lankan migrants in Romania. Push and Pull Theory clarifies the motivations behind migration, highlighting how structural conditions in both Sri Lanka and Romania shape individual decisions. Migration Systems Theory situates these movements within broader global processes, showing how institutions, networks, and policies link the two countries and influence migrants' opportunities and vulnerabilities. Dual Labour Market Theory explains why Sri Lankan migrants are concentrated in specific sectors of the Romanian economy and how labour market structures shape their working conditions, integration challenges, and long-term prospects. By combining these perspectives, the study is able to capture the structural, relational, and economic dynamics that underpin migration, offering a richer and more nuanced understanding that strengthens both the analysis and the policy relevance of the findings.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences of Sri Lankan Labour migrants in Romania, with supplementary interviews conducted in Italy. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for examining migration precarity, recruitment processes, and gendered vulnerabilities, as they enable in-depth exploration of migrants' perceptions and everyday realities. Fieldwork was carried out between September and November 2025.

Data collection employed multiple methods to facilitate triangulation: thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews with Sri Lankan migrants (20 males and 10 females); four focus group discussions (three in Romania and one in Italy); key informant interviews with officials from the Sri Lankan Embassy, recruitment agencies, and intermediaries; participant observation in migrant residences, workplaces, and community spaces; and a review of policy documents, migration statistics, and media sources. Snowball sampling was used to access participants across diverse employment sectors, a common approach in qualitative migration research involving hard-to-reach populations. Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on migration drivers, recruitment pathways, working and living conditions, gendered experiences, institutional support, and future migration aspirations. This approach allows systematic identification of recurring patterns and meanings across narratives.

Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, with particular care taken when engaging undocumented migrants. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any stage, and identifying details were removed to minimize potential risks.

## 4. Result and discussion

### 4.1 Profile of Respondents

The study sample exhibited considerable variation in education, skills, and prior work experience. Among participants, some males and females had completed education up to ordinary level (O/L), while the majority had completed advanced level (A/L), and a smaller group from both genders were university graduates, reflecting slightly lower educational attainment among females. Most female participants and over one-third of males were unskilled, whereas skilled workers were predominantly male, with only a small number of females in skilled employment. A few female respondents were students. About one-third of respondents had prior overseas work experience before migrating to Romania, although only a limited proportion were currently employed in jobs aligned with their previous occupations in Sri Lanka. One female explained:

"I completed my education up to the O-level exam. My husband works as a hospital attendant in Sri Lanka, while my mother takes care of our children. I came to Romania in 2023, paying 3,700 euros to an agency and mortgaging land I owned. Before this, I worked as a domestic worker in Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia for six years. I had always dreamed of moving to a developed European country and living there with my family. I am currently working my second job in Romania as a warehouse labourer"

In terms of marital status, most male respondents and more than half of female respondents were married with family responsibilities, while some females were divorced and a smaller group from both genders were unmarried.

Regarding employment and age distribution, many migrants had changed their job field after their initial employment in Romania, and a substantial number had also changed workplaces. Male migrants were employed across diverse sectors including bike delivery, construction, bakery work, tailoring, CNC operation, hotels, sales, recruitment services, housekeeping, marketing,

engineering, and business. Female migrants were mainly engaged in cleaning, garment work, hospitality, bakery work, engineering, and childcare. Three respondents were undocumented — one dismissed after one year and two following company closures, yet they continued to hold Temporary Residence Certificates (TRCs) despite the expiration of their 90-day period. Age-wise, the sample was dominated by middle-aged migrants, with fewer younger participants and only a very small number above 50 years.

#### 4.2 Drivers, Barriers, and Pathways of Migration

Sri Lanka has functioned as a labour-exporting country since the early 1980s. In recent years, however, migration dynamics have shifted significantly in response to a series of internal crises. The 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, and the severe economic crisis of 2022 profoundly disrupted small businesses, self-employment, and household livelihoods. The 2022 crisis, marked by severe foreign exchange shortages, rising debt, inflation exceeding 70 per cent, and poverty rates surpassing 24 per cent (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2023), created acute shortages of fuel, medicine, and other essential goods, intensifying socio-economic instability. In this context, Romania emerged as an attractive destination, offering accessible migration and job opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers, particularly those with limited education and financial resources. In response to these challenges, the Sri Lankan government introduced a policy allowing public-sector employees to obtain up to five years of unpaid leave to pursue overseas employment. One migrant, who previously worked in the government sector, explained:

“I came to Romania in mid-2024. Previously, I worked in the Special Task Force of the Sri Lanka Police and also ran a business alongside my government job, which collapsed during the 2022 economic crisis. Due to the economic difficulties caused by the crisis, the government granted a five-year leave without pay for government workers, which prompted me to seek employment abroad. I spent 4,750 euros to migrate, selling my property to cover the cost. I now work as a bike rider, earning 700 euros per month, in addition to a food card and tips. This income allows me to cover my living expenses and send money to support my family in Sri Lanka.”

As a consequence of these overlapping crises, labour migration intensified markedly. According to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE, 2024), more than 923,213 Sri Lankans, including a considerable proportion of women and skilled workers, departed for employment abroad between 2022 and 2024, primarily to developed countries and the Middle East. Since 2020, a total of 45,244 Sri Lankans have migrated to Romania (as of 31 October 2025), with over 55 per cent departing during the peak crisis period of 2022–2023. The migration flow is highly gendered, with approximately 86 per cent men and 14 per cent women. Reflecting this broader national trend, 43 per cent of respondents in the present study arrived in Romania during 2022–2023, while 63 per cent migrated after 2022, highlighting the post-crisis acceleration of overseas labour mobility.

Decisions to migrate are strongly shaped by multiple information and support networks, including print and electronic media, social media platforms, family members, friends, and

established Sri Lankan communities in Romania. These networks provide practical guidance, initial accommodation, and assistance in securing employment opportunities. Intermediaries operating in both Sri Lanka and Romania, including recruitment agents also actively promote Romanian job prospects and facilitate the migration process for prospective workers. The appeal of the “European dream,” together with expectations surrounding Romania’s potential accession to the Schengen Area, further enhances its attractiveness as a destination.

Migration to Romania involves substantial upfront costs, approximately €4,300–5,000, which constitute a significant financial barrier. Many prospective migrants finance these costs through high-interest loans, pawning jewellery, or selling household assets. Although migration was comparatively affordable in its early phase, recruitment costs have risen sharply due to increased competition among agencies, high demand following Romania’s Schengen accession, and substantial profit margins for intermediaries in Sri Lanka. Recruitment agencies often fail to explain contracts adequately, provide insufficient time for review, or offer copies in migrants’ own languages, creating further challenges. Previously, processing work permitted, and related documentation could take nearly a year; more recently, this period has been reduced to approximately six months. Despite these improvements, a significant number of applicants fail embassy interviews after paying substantial initial fees, resulting in financial losses and deepening economic vulnerability.

Recruitment agencies and intermediaries play a central role in Sri Lankan migration to Romania, assisting migrants with visas, work permits, and job placements. Some migrants rely on official agencies, while others turn to independent intermediaries. Despite regulations such as the 2024 ban on self-migration, intermediaries continue to operate alongside official channels, often in opaque ways. Many function outside formal frameworks, creating risks of hidden fees, misinformation, and contract issues. While they provide essential support, intermediaries also expose migrants to financial and legal vulnerabilities, highlighting their complex and ambivalent role in the migration process.

Recent initiatives, such as the SLBFE’s five-day pre-departure training, have sought to improve preparedness; however, migrants report dissatisfaction with these programs, which are general in nature and primarily designed for Middle East-bound workers. These challenges highlight the ongoing importance of support networks, practical guidance, and tailored training to facilitate successful integration abroad.

#### **4.3 Working Conditions, Agency Practices, and Migrant Vulnerability**

Compared with other major destinations for Sri Lankan labour migrants, Romania offers certain welfare-related incentives that enhance its appeal. Free accommodation and food cards are often highlighted as key benefits, particularly for low- and semi-skilled workers, and migrant families with children report satisfaction with government-provided welfare benefits and health-care facilities. Many migrants also value the smaller hierarchical gap between employers and employees compared with Sri Lanka. However, these benefits are not always consistent, with some companies providing overcrowded or poorly maintained accommodation and insufficient food

allowances, particularly during periods of high inflation. Poor Romanian language skills further hinder workplace adaptation and access to essential services.

Working conditions in Romania vary widely. Migrants often face reduced or delayed salaries, unpaid overtime, mandatory holiday work, unagreed duties, and disrespectful treatment, particularly in sectors such as construction and garbage sorting where safety and sanitation facilities are inadequate. Some employers require migrants to sign contracts upon arrival that differ from those in Sri Lanka, and recruitment agencies often provide misleading information about working hours, salaries, holidays, job roles, accommodation, and overtime. Despite these challenges, migrants who build trust with employers report fair treatment and opportunities for promotion.

Many migrants are placed with manpower agencies rather than directly employed, which increases vulnerability through frequent relocations, salary withholding, and minimal basic support. Recruitment costs for migration are substantial, approximately €4,300–5,000, often financed through high-interest loans, asset sales, or pawning jewelry. Some Sri Lankan agencies also require a refundable security deposit of up to €860, which is returned only after 1 year of service, further constraining financial flexibility. Migrants frequently work long hours or hold multiple jobs, often at levels below their qualifications, to repay loans and support families in Sri Lanka, resulting in skill underutilization and heightened financial strain. According to one male migrant:

“I came to Romania in 2024 through an intermediary. My work permit stated that my job role was cleaning. I paid him €5,000. I used my savings, took loans, and pawned my wife’s jewelry to pay this amount. Before coming to Romania, I worked on a construction site in Sri Lanka as a technical assistant. However, due to the 2022 economic crisis, I lost my job. After that, I decided to migrate to a foreign country. I am now working as a waiter assistant at a hotel. However, during the off-season, I also have to do gardening and construction work. In the summer, we work from 10 a.m. to 12 midnight. If I work more than 11 hours, they pay overtime; if I work fewer than that, I do not receive overtime pay. After one year of service, I requested a job release, but they did not give it. I am hoping to go to the labour department in Romania. I still have to pay €1,700 of my debt. I explained my difficulties to the intermediary, but he did not respond. They have a good connection with the hotel owner.”

Migrants with prior experience in the Middle East or East Asia reportedly adapt more easily to Romanian work culture. Social media, family contacts, and community networks remain essential for maintaining ties with relatives, as only a small proportion of migrants live with family in Romania. Access to health services is available through insurance, but some migrants incur out-of-pocket costs for medication. Language barriers, limited legal knowledge, and fear of job loss often prevent migrants from addressing workplace disputes, contributing to stress, emotional strain, and, in some cases, substance misuse.

Remigration to Italy has emerged as a related challenge. Some migrants initially view Romania as a gateway to Italy, while others relocate due to poor working conditions in Romania, including delayed salaries, unpaid overtime, and unagreed tasks. Recruitment agencies and intermediaries sometimes actively encourage this “Italy wave” for personal gain, using social media and financial incentives. Remigration often increases physical and emotional distance from

families in Sri Lanka, exacerbates living costs, extends working hours, and limits access to stable employment. Many migrants who moved to Italy later expressed regret, citing high accommodation costs, long commutes without transport allowances, restricted mobility due to work permit regulations, and limited savings potential. These patterns of remigration also create operational challenges for employers, agencies, the Romanian government, and the Sri Lankan embassy, as well as for remaining Sri Lankan workers.

Overall, while Romania provides certain welfare benefits, fair treatment opportunities, and relative safety compared with Sri Lanka, persistent challenges—including agency malpractices, inadequate working conditions, language and cultural barriers, and financial pressures—contribute to ongoing vulnerability among Sri Lankan migrants. Effective oversight of recruitment practices, improved workplace standards, targeted pre-departure and on-site training, and tailored support networks are essential to mitigate these risks and enhance the well-being and integration of migrants.

#### 4.4 Social & Economic Impacts of Migration

Sri Lankan migrants in Romania experience a range of social and economic impacts, shaped by income, living conditions, family responsibilities, and work patterns. Some migrants survive primarily on food cards and tips, while others supplement their income through part-time or commission-based work. Food allowances generally range between 400 and 900 lei per month, while manpower workers earn approximately 30 lei per day, reflecting relatively low- and unstable-income levels. Rising inflation disproportionately affects migrants receiving minimum wages, as food allowance amounts typically remain fixed despite increasing living costs. Commission-based employment, particularly delivery work, further contributes to income instability. At the same time, many migrants spend more than a year repaying migration-related debts while continuing to provide financial support to their families in Sri Lanka, intensifying economic pressure and financial precarity. Remittance remains a critical lifeline for households, funding education, healthcare, and family events, creating ongoing financial pressure on migrants.

Despite higher qualifications, many migrants remain in low-skilled positions, leading to skill underutilization. To meet financial commitments, migrants frequently work long hours or hold multiple jobs, which impacts their well-being and work-life balance. Housing conditions are often shared or overcrowded, reducing privacy and comfort. Access to healthcare is available through insurance, but some migrants still incur out-of-pocket costs for medication. Social connections are maintained through social media, as migrants visit family in Sri Lanka only every few years. About 17% of migrants reported that their spouse or children also migrated to Romania, either living together or apart, adding complexity to household arrangements. Economic insecurity, job instability, and prolonged separation from family contribute to stress, anxiety, and emotional strain. Some male migrants report substance abuse, including unrestricted alcohol use and occasional use of illegal drugs, as a coping mechanism. Agencies and migrants have also raised concerns regarding the misconduct of certain Sri Lankan workers in workplaces, residences, and public areas, which can affect community dynamics and social cohesion.

Overall, migration generates both opportunities and challenges. While remittances enhance the economic well-being of families in Sri Lanka, migrants face financial, emotional, and social pressures that impact their quality of life and integration in the host country. These dynamics underscore the need for targeted support measures, including financial literacy, mental health services, and safe housing initiatives, to mitigate vulnerabilities and improve migrants' social and economic outcomes.

#### 4.5 Migration Decisions and Future Aspirations

A notable share of Sri Lankan migrants in Romania are reconsidering their long-term plans. Many express interest in returning to Sri Lanka or relocating to another EU country, while a substantial portion prefers to remain in Romania. Female migrants, in particular, are more likely to consider leaving, either by returning home or moving onward within Europe. Although the desire to return is common, Sri Lanka's ongoing economic challenges—persistent inflation, limited job opportunities, and financial instability—discourage immediate repatriation, especially among those still repaying migration loans or supporting families back home. Among migrants choosing to stay in Romania, long-term plans primarily focus on securing legal residence, pursuing citizenship, and achieving family reunification. However, economic caution remains high, and very few migrants make investments in Sri Lanka until their future abroad is more secure.

#### 4.6 Gender-Specific Challenges in Female Migration

A combination of high migration costs, traditional gender roles, and widespread economic inactivity among women in Sri Lanka constrains female participation in Sri Lankan labour migration to Romania. Family resistance or lack of approval further limits women's decision-making, reducing access to potentially beneficial employment opportunities abroad.

Women migrants are often employed in low-skilled, low-paid roles, such as garment factories, warehouses, or domestic work, with limited scope for career advancement or economic independence. Some roles are physically demanding, while domestic workers frequently experience overwork, long hours, no holidays, and restricted privacy, increasing vulnerability to exploitation and burnout. Despite these challenges, women report feeling relatively secure in open workplaces and communal environments, highlighting the nuanced nature of occupational risk. Limited knowledge, shared accommodations, and unfamiliar cultural environments exacerbate sexual and reproductive health challenges. These factors contribute to unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, and emotional distress, including stress arising from unsolicited sexual propositions by male migrants. Dependence on male networks for guidance, emotional support, and job leads can also expose women to coercion or exploitation, particularly during sudden job losses or eviction. Recruitment agencies' reluctance to deploy women to demanding roles reinforces these gendered barriers, limiting access to overseas employment despite women's capacity to contribute effectively to the labour market. Additional challenges include homesickness, loneliness, and the difficulty of adapting to unfamiliar work and social environments, which agencies often cite as reasons to avoid female placements. As reported by one female migrant

"I migrated to Romania in 2018 and currently work as a machine operator in a garment factory. Before migration, I was also employed in the garment industry in Sri Lanka. Since arriving

in Romania, I have worked in three different garment factories. Although I faced several difficulties in my previous workplaces, my current working conditions are comparatively better. There is greater personal freedom, and accommodation is shared between two workers per room.

Workers receive a monthly food allowance of approximately 630 lei, and health insurance is provided. However, accessing medical services can be challenging, as doctors are often unavailable when needed. In urgent situations, workers sometimes rely on ambulance services. Employers occasionally advise workers to report that illnesses are not work-related, which appears to be intended to limit employer responsibility.

I have also witnessed challenging personal and social situations among migrant workers. For example, a Sri Lankan female worker who lived in my accommodation experienced serious difficulties related to a relationship, including two unintended pregnancies, which caused significant emotional distress and a medical emergency. Fortunately, timely intervention helped save her. Challenges related to drug use and excessive alcohol consumption were observed among both male and female migrants”.

Such experiences highlight the social and emotional vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers living abroad. While Romania offers considerable personal freedom compared to Sri Lanka, some migrants struggle to adapt responsibly to this new environment. This underscores the importance of better preparation, awareness, and support systems for migrants adjusting to different social contexts.

Overall, the combined effects of structural, social, and institutional factors amplify the vulnerabilities of female migrants, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive recruitment practices, targeted support mechanisms, and protective measures to enhance women’s safety, well-being, and economic participation abroad.

## 5. Conclusion

This study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of Sri Lankan labour migration to Romania. Migration decisions are shaped by a combination of structural, economic, and socio-political factors, including internal crises in Sri Lanka, accessible opportunities in Romania, and the influence of family, community networks, and intermediaries. While Romania offers certain welfare benefits, relative safety, and avenues for employment, migrants encounter significant financial, social, and occupational challenges, including high migration costs, precarious working conditions, language barriers, and limited legal protection.

Female migrants face additional vulnerabilities stemming from gendered constraints, including traditional family expectations, restricted employment opportunities, overwork, and exposure to sexual and reproductive health risks. The role of recruitment agencies and intermediaries is ambivalent; while they facilitate migration, they also create economic and legal vulnerabilities through opaque practices, misleading information, and high fees. Despite these challenges, migrants demonstrate resilience, relying on social networks, prior migration experience, and community support to navigate work and life in Romania. Remittances remain a critical economic lifeline for households in Sri Lanka, though they contribute to ongoing financial

pressure and stress for migrants. Decisions about long-term residence, remigration, or return are influenced by both opportunities abroad and persistent economic uncertainties at home, reflecting cautious and strategic planning among migrants.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for enhanced regulatory oversight of recruitment practices, gender-sensitive support mechanisms, targeted training programs, and policies that address financial, legal, and social vulnerabilities. Strengthening these measures would improve migrant well-being, facilitate successful adaptation, and optimize the socio-economic benefits of overseas labour migration for both individuals and their families.

#### Relevance of the Selected Theories

The findings of this study align closely with the analytical framework based on Push–Pull Theory, Migration Systems Theory, and Dual Labour Market Theory. The structural crises in Sri Lanka—including the 2022 economic collapse, COVID-19 disruptions, and socio-political instability act as push factors, compelling individuals to seek employment abroad, while Romania’s accessible work permits, welfare incentives, and perceived safety function as pull factors, consistent with the Push–Pull Theory. The role of migration networks, including family contacts, social media, and intermediaries, illustrates Migration Systems Theory, showing how institutional, social, and economic linkages facilitate migration, reduce uncertainty, and support settlement and employment in Romania. Finally, the prevalence of low- and semi-skilled employment among Sri Lankan migrants, despite varying educational levels, reflects the Dual Labour Market Theory. Migrants fill labour shortages in sectors that are less attractive to local workers, often under precarious conditions, while contributing to Romania’s economic demands.

Overall, these theories collectively explain the drivers, pathways, and vulnerabilities observed in Sri Lankan migration to Romania, linking structural, social, and economic factors in a coherent analytical framework.

#### Policy Implications

The findings of this study highlight several areas where policy interventions can improve the well-being and protection of Sri Lankan migrants in Romania. First, stronger regulation and oversight of recruitment agencies and intermediaries are essential to ensure transparency in fees, accurate contract provision, and accountability, thereby reducing the financial and legal vulnerabilities that many migrants currently face.

Second, migration policies should adopt a gender-sensitive approach. Expanding safe employment opportunities for women, coupled with pre-departure and on-site training tailored to address gender-specific risks, can mitigate exploitation, overwork, and occupational burnout. This includes attention to workplace conditions, privacy, and support networks for female migrants. Third, the development of targeted training and integration programs is critical. Providing migrants with practical knowledge about workplace rights, language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and financial management can enhance both professional and social integration, particularly for those with limited prior international experience. Fourth, improving workplace and welfare standards is vital. Enforcement of minimum conditions for accommodation, sanitation, occupational safety, and fair pay, alongside accessible grievance mechanisms, can strengthen migrant well-being and reduce instances of labour turnover, unpaid overtime, and contract substitution.

Finally, policies that address financial stability and support family networks are necessary. Regulating migration costs, facilitating low-interest loans, and promoting mechanisms that sustain communication and remittances to households in Sri Lanka can help reduce economic stress, emotional strain, and the pressures of family obligations. Collectively, these measures can enhance the overall safety, integration, and economic contribution of Sri Lankan migrants abroad while reducing the vulnerabilities identified in this study.

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#### Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the European Commission through the Research Executive Agency under the PRELAB exchange program. The secondment was hosted by the University of Bucharest.