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## IS THERE A JOB MOBILITY PARADOX IN TRAVEL INDUSTRY WITH COVID-19 PANDEMIC; LEAVING OR BEARING?

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### Abstract

Travel agencies play a premium role in the Sri Lankan tourism industry generating a significant contribution in the country's economy, particularly the employment and foreign exchange earnings. The current outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic affected badly, creating severe affects for many sectors around the world, mainly for travel and tourism industry. It has completely malformed the human life. The fear of traveling, travelling restrictions, need of maintaining social distance has challenged the travel behavior of tourists. However, this pandemic has risked around 50 million of jobs globally in tourism sector including downsizing in employments of 12% to 14% in all sectors in travel and tourism industry. Moreover, the employees in the travel and tourism sector are uncertain about their future; some of them have already shifted for alternative income sources. Hence, this study was expected to investigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the employment and employee's intention on continuation in the travel sector. Consequently, qualitative research approach was used. A sample of ten executive level employees was interviewed from ten travel agencies registered in Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. Convenience sampling technique was used in the study due to the difficulties to reach the employees since they are not operating yet. Thematic analysis derived under phenomenological research design was used to achieve the objective of this research. According to the results, majority of employees have lost their jobs due to pandemic, and salaries were reduced. As a result, the income, social life, experience and family life were severely affected with COVID-19 pandemic; however, few of them used this pandemic as an opportunity to advance their own interests.

**Keywords:** Job mobility, Travel, Tourism, Employees, Impact, COVID-19

### 1.Introduction

The tourism is a rapidly growing industry in the world and its vitality for countries and local economy is unmeasurable. Thus, tourism is an economic and social trend that has taken place over the decades. In the contemporary world, tourism has become a significant as well as essential source of income for many regions, and is one of the most fastest-growing economic sectors in the world (Munasinghe et al., 2019) It was estimated that the number of international tourist arrivals by worldwide would reach approximately 1.4 billion in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019).

Travelling and tourism also have made a, direct as well as an indirect contribution of 8.9 trillion US dollars to the global economy in 2019 (WTTC 2019). Consequently, tourism industry is rewarded as the third largest foreign exchange generator in the country with its direct and indirect contribution of 711,961 Million in 2018 (SLTDA, 2018). After the end of thirty decades of civil war Sri Lankan tourism industry has been developed immensely and recorded billions of tourist arrivals over years. However, with laps of time the industry was devastated with the “Easter Sunday attack” on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019. This incident formed a substantial shock and many of the business operations were challenged. However, with the involvement of many alliances, the waves were positively managed within a shorter period of time.

The COVID-19 pandemic originally started from China was the biggest global challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century forming many socio-economic issues globally. More importantly, the global travel and tourism industry was significantly lost with the limitations of travelling across the borders, fear of travelling, as well as the need of maintaining social distancing (). The current outbreak of COVID-19 has again reminded us how vulnerable the tourism and hospitality industry are to external shocks (Samarathunga, 2020). The Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry is also badly facing this pandemic situation since last month of December in 2019, which is subsequently the slight breath after the Easter Sunday attack.

With this widespread, tourist arrivals were drastically reduced and afterward, it was completely stopped due to government restrictions and it made a colossal impact on all types of tourism related business operations globally disabling the circulation of billions of incomes. Travel agency operation is a premium player in the global travel and tourism circulation and is a significant economic sector in the Sri Lanka tourism sector with the massive income and employment injecting to the economy (Roshana, et al., 2020). Globally, travel and tourism are responsible for 10.3 % of global GDP and 330 million jobs, as a percentage 10.1 % of overall workforce, in 2019 (WTTC, 2019). Moreover, 169,003 and 219,484 people were employed as direct and indirect employees respectively by the tourism industry in Sri Lanka (SLTDA, 2019). This amount can be more than the recorded figures with the contribution from informal sector which is still under estimated or not neglected in the formal statistical reports. However, the sudden downfall in the industry with the COVID-19 pandemic followed by the Easter Sunday attack have strongly discouraged the engagement in tourism and related activities that leads to have un-employability and intention to have job mobility with the employees should be investigated formally.

In Sri Lanka context, employment in the travel agents and tour operators contributed to 7% of the total employment in 2018 (SLTDA, 2018) and this is a significant number in the local economy from a single sub sector. However, the total employability of the sector was rapidly decreased due to the break of tourist arrivals in the recent months in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the world. Thus, looking at the overall arrivals, only 6.5 per cent of the arrivals reported in January in Sri Lanka and even lower in the next two months. The travel organisations have received no single booking for next few months with the consequent global condition. Subsequently, 50 million jobs in the tourism sector are at a risk globally representing a reduction in jobs of 12% to 14% worldwide in the travel and tourism industry (WTTC, 2020).

### **1.1 Research problem identification**

Understanding the perception on job mobility of employees in travelling industry is a crucial factor in this pandemic situation since travel agencies are playing a prominent role to maintain the high standard frame for Sri Lankan Tourism industry. This has a possibility to create a different intention on job mobility in travel and tourism industry due to a smaller number of

tourist arrivals and also this has made a negative impact on existing and new employment opportunities in travel industry. If the role of travel agencies, knockout due to this pandemic situation in Sri Lanka, then it would directly make a massive impact to Sri Lankan Tourism industry as well. Therefore, there is a relationship with jobs and industry due to this crisis situation as well and possibility to create huge market gap with employment jobs in tourism industry.

When considering this massive impact to travel industry then there's a possibility of happening job mobility to a certain extent within travel agencies in Sri Lanka. Then it would create an adverse impact to Tourism industry. In the Sri Lankan context, there is a lack of research that has been studied on this subject because this has been a sudden occurrence in the world. Hence, the prime objective of this research was to identify the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the employees in travel agencies and their perception on job mobility choice to generate new theoretical knowledge for the tourism industry. Hence, the study will try to figure out the employees' intention on their current careers, whether they stay, bear or leave their jobs.

## **1.2 Significance of the study**

This study will be more valuable to the government, and the government will be able to make the policies keep to employees in their specific jobs without moving to another, and it can make a difference when it comes to labour policies. This will add value to the existing literature of job mobility in tourism industry which is totally neglected in the Sri Lanka context and under estimated in many economies. Potential employees who would like to join the travel industry can get a clear idea of their jobs. The findings of this study will enable decision-makers in the tourism industry to develop a deeper understanding of how workers' expectations of job mobility can be strength. Further, this study will be a pioneering guidance for future researchers in job mobility intention with pandemic situations.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Global pandemic scenario and tourism industry**

As, World Travel Organisation (2020) emphasized, tourism is a reason for most of the human mobility in the modern world because humans are willing to travel from one destination to another destination which is the modern tourism of humans in the world. Day by day many international tourist arrivals are increasing. The international tourist arrivals were 1.4 billion in 2018 and it has estimated to achieve 1.8 billion of international tourist arrivals by in 2030 (UN News, 2017). However, this booming industry was again fall down due to these novel COVID-19 viruses in the worldwide. The COVID-19 corona outbreak started from Wuhan City in China in last months of November, 2019 and it has spread over the world by March in 2020 within the short time period, This virus was remarkable in world history which after the most challenging situation occurred in the World War II (Ranasinghe et al., 2020).

Due to this pandemic situation lot of tourism establishments were negatively affected and it has already created massive loss for the country's economy. Apart from this crisis in Sri Lanka, the main loss is the service sector. Therefore, it is important to recover service sector again in Sri Lanka. Ranasinghe et al., (2020) reports the indirect impact in this context on travel and tourism industry cannot measure easily and it definitely is a significant loss in short term as well as long term. Daily FT, (2020) reports the loss of job market in tourism industry especially in Travel agencies they don't have currently any booking for the 2020 winter season and the tour operators are cancelled all the winter season bookings because of the COVID-19 pandemic situation. According to Daily FT (2020) reported the due to the vast outbreak of COVID-19

since the last month of 2019, it has downgraded the number of tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka as 31.5 percent so far this year.

## **2.2 Disasters and impact of disastrous situation on employment in tourism**

According to Gruman, Chhinzer & Smith (2011) elaborated the many organisations were failed to address issues of employees during a kind of disaster in hospitality industry, thus it's directly changing the thinking patten of employees' jobs, specially in hospitality industry. When considering the Sri Lanka travel and tourism industry, it was faced many manmade disasters in last few years (Kaldeen, 2020), it highly destructive duration during the periods of the Sri Lanka Civil War, JVP insurrections, the liberation tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are mainly accused of the destruction caused by terrorism in the country and these terrorist activities highly affected tourism arrivals in Sri Lanka and it increased the unemployment level in tourism industry therefore many employees lost their jobs from the industry due to the less number of tourist arrivals during these crisis situation (Nishla & Rinos, 2019). According to author of . Lee & Warner, (2005) defines when SARS virus happening in Hong Kong the chairman of the Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants and catering service noted that twenty-five restaurants had been closed within the first two weeks of April 2003, and it became to have unemployment of over 1600 restaurant staffs, and over 16,000 of their employees were either on 'no-pay' leave or were forced to accept pay cuts. There may also be a massive amount of unemployment in the tourism industry, because this latest pandemic situation has had a major effect on many industries, especially the tourism sector in Sri Lanka.

According to Samarathunga, (2020) declared that Many tourism establishments like airlines, hotels, tourist shops travel agencies, etc. have already begun laying off temporary and casual workers, stopping wage raises, and even cutting wages at various percentages according to their employees' salary measures. In fact, hoteliers and destination management firms have warned that they would have to lay down. Take off a large number of employees if the crisis continues.

## **2.3 The intention on job mobility**

Job mobility is a very comprehensive factor because it always can be happened due to some employment reason therefore job mobility is an important factor of optimal resource allocation and growth in an economy (Akgündüz, Aldan & Bagir, 2019). According to Lee & Wolpin, (2006) suggested Factors which limit labour mobility also can affect the efficient distribution of resources in the economy and the realization of growth potential. Societal characteristics are another major category of systemic determinants of job mobility choices. Kanter, (1989) provides multiple examples of societal characteristics or phenomena that may impact people's careers, including war, international monetary crises, scientific discoveries launching new professions, technological breakthroughs (Kaldeen & Thowfeek, 2018), civil rights movements, labour struggles or even a wave of corporate takeovers. As job mobility can have both positive and negative benefits because that job mobility directly affected for employees who works in the industry as well as some time it may also affected employers in the organisations. As a positive perspective Job mobility can increase firm productivity through various channels (Pontus & Ding, 2015).

Furthermore, job mobility is positively affected for some times but on the other hand it may harmful for the organisation. The average level of job mobility is a function of the systemic labour market features such as the recruiting and firing costs (Haltiwanger et al., 2018). Moreover, negative impact also can be happened through the job mobility due to some kind of

crisis happening in world. Lazear & Spletzer, (2012) found a stronger negative effect from crisis on job-to-job mobility than on new employment creation.

### **3. Methodology**

This study was driven through the qualitative research design approach to meet the objective of the study. The primary target group of this research was all executive level of employees in Travel agencies in Sri Lanka. The study was examined the intention on job mobility in travel sector with COVID-19 Pandemic from the perspective of executive level employees. Accordingly, the sample was selected only from the registered travel agencies in Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and considering the convenience to contact the employees as well as the data was relevant because those travel agencies were registered. In this study 10 employees were interviewed until the data saturation point satisfied and they were conveniently selected due to the difficulties of travelling and meeting people during the pandemic. Contact details of all the registered travel agencies were available (e-mail addresses and numbers) on the SLTDA. Executive level employees from those agencies were contacted on telephone calls and author explained about the research purpose and interview guidelines, and requested for an appointment if they are willing to participate in the study even with the current situation. Accordingly, the sample unit was an executive level employee who works in registered travel agencies in Sri Lanka. Convenience sampling technique was basically occupied since the organisations were not willing to provide confidential data about the employees or their contact numbers. For the purpose of this study, structured interviews were occupied in the data collection process and extended the study under phenomenological research design which drives through thematic analysis. The phenomenological approach is mainly based on discussions and reflection of direct perception and experiences of the researched phenomenon. Thus, thematic analysis is one of the popular data analysis methods for qualitative researchers because this thematic analysis is giving more accuracy for the data. The big advantage of thematic analysis is a more flexible and it creates the theme pattern for the particular qualitative research data, that analysis can be used for beyond the psychology (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Mckee, 2019).

### **4. Result and discussion**

#### **4.1 Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the employment in travel industry of Sri Lanka**

The purpose of this research study was to identify the intention on Job Mobility in travel sector with COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of executive level employees in registered travel agencies in Sri Lanka. According to the feedback of executive level employees in travel agencies, the impact was basically recognised as direct and indirect as summarized below.

#### **Direct Impact**

##### **Income Impact**

This theme was mainly describing the first objective of this study as to identify impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the employment in travel industry of Sri Lanka. The theme was clearly giving the impact of this pandemic to the employment in industry so most of them out of 10 respondents said that there was huge impact for income generation of employees due to the no arrivals of tourists and for the industry as well. With the details that respondents were giving some major companies which were stable in the market also deduction of employments and impact of COVID-19 but the industry was totally down and it directly affected to whole employments and their income because most of the companies were cut off their salaries.

*“For the employment, In our company not much effected COVID-19 pandemic. But the travel and tourism industry it highly affected. As my knowledge there were lot of companies which they decided to cut-out employees. lot of the hoteliers, sales & marketing peoples they have lost their jobs even just like hotels, lodges, travel companies. And there are people who goes under no pay leaves because of this COVID-19. Some of the companies are giving half of salaries is like that.”* (Respondent 01)

*“Both of our colloquies who are working in other companies they have lost their jobs and they were lost their main income because most of companies in travel and tourism industry which they don’t have any income during this COVID-19. so, it’s really sad to hear that because of there are so many new companies which stated after the war. But this situation as I think it is affected for new companies because they have no prewise foundation in the market, so as I think that this impact for employees.”* (Respondent 06)

*“Yes, there are lot of peoples who cut off their jobs because of this pandemic situation and there are huge impact and affected the tourism industry in Sri Lanka and there are many people who left the industry as well. As I know the well-known travel companies now, they have closed their organisations and totally employees lost their jobs even they were not getting any salaries from those companies.”* (Respondent 03)

*“Yes, there are lot of employees lost their jobs due to this pandemic situation and this significant for all employments in travel and tourism industry because Airport closure and safety concerns has prevented overseas travel and will continue to do so in future. This has been true for both leisure and corporate travel. Without the capability generating sufficient revenue, the agency is having been forced to place its staff on reduced pay scales and carry out retrenchment.”* (Respondent 04)

### **Indirect Impact**

The indirect impact theme investigated the employee’s opinion of the respondents on the minor impact of employment in the travel and tourism industry. Findings reviewed some employees were mentioned this COVID-19 impact will be affected to their social life, job experience and family life.

### **Experience Impact**

The subtheme captured respondents’ indirect impact of employees due to this COVID-19 pandemic situation. Based on that there were mentioned this pandemic situation was highly affected employees experience because this was very important for employees to survive in the market. Although this travel and tourism industry is a very sensitive and most of the time it is depending on the employee’s experience without having good experience, they cannot stable in the market. Most of respondents reviewed this COVID-19 will be impact for job experience of employees.

*“As I think, at the moment there were lot of companies closed in the tourism industry and most of employees lost their jobs so this COVID-19 impact some new employees and well experienced employees but for new employees they lost their jobs with their experience being in the industry.”* (Respondent 10)

### **Social life Impact**

This subtheme captured respondents’ idea for their social life being in the travel and tourism industry with the impact of COVID-19 situation. Some employees highly mentioned this was the first case which is having zero income with stressful life because this COVID-19 destroyed

their social life. Social life is one of the important reasons for employees to work with clear mind set because tourism industry is very sensitive. According to respondents, social life was destroyed and this pandemic was directly affected to their social life.

*“I have worked 10 years in same industry but this was the first time I didn’t get any benefits form my organisation with that I was troubling with my social life because this COVID-19 situation affected for my normal day to day life, just like I can’t work in the office and I can’t work with my team etc.”* (Respondent 03)

### **Family Impact**

This subtheme identified that family life of the respondents with COVID-19 situation because family life is one of the major important reason for employees. Being in the employee of travel and tourism industry the family is very important reason for employees because most of the time employees are working in busy situation in this tourism industry. According to respondents’ ideas they have just mentioned some employees lots their family life because they don’t have any income generation with result of that they have totally destroyed their family life.

*“my salary was also cut off 50% so with that I lost my total family life cycle because I can’t spend much money for my family as normal days, I think this same situation will be affected all my other colloquies in the travel industry.”* (Respondent 08)

*“With the COVID-19 as I think this will be impacted their family life as well because in my organisation was also some employees cut off and some employees permanently cut off so definitely, they will be trouble with their family.”* (Respondent 04)

### **4.2 Job mobility intention of employees**

Currently, the employees are totally desperate about their potential opportunities either in the industry or other industries due to the limited economic activities in the country. Hence, they do not believe in possible opportunities since they do not have any opportunities in the market, as well as no capabilities for moving to another industry because they have specialised in this industry for longer period of time with lot of knowledge and education. However, they expect for more opportunities in the market in various other industries, (possibly not in the travel and tourism sector) when the COVID-19 outbreak is end and, if situation is back to normal. Although they expect more opportunities from other sectors in the economy, still they are doubtful about healthier prospects in the same sector, hence, there is a potential job mobility risk in the industry.

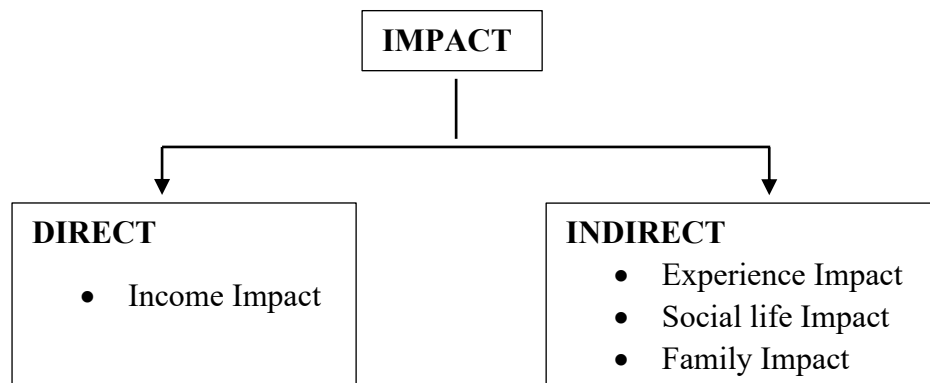
*“Potentially many industries will create greater opportunities than travel sector, and then it will create some potential job mobility with employees. As I think at the moment some executives don’t have any idea for job mobility because as executive level employee, they have good place from the organisation. I also think it’s not easy to move in to another industry since I have no knowledge and experience in such sectors since I am working in this sector for a longer time.....”* (Respondent 02)

*“It can’t predict actually because since industry is with very sensitive and at the moment, we have to struggle with this situation it means low job mobility in right now. after this COVID-19 as well definitely there will be some improvements so potentially as I think bit of job mobility will be happened.”* (Respondent 07)

*“During the COVID-19 the intention on job mobility will be an extremely low because at the moment many employees lost their jobs, fired from the organisation, so as I think in future there*

*will be some intention for job mobility as some travel companies may not possibly generate good opportunities in short term. Short term traffic will be occurred for industry jobs; hence people may look for other possible opportunities for their survival. However, closed companies also will be re-opened when this back to normal, but it will take a longer time for them to recover.”* (Respondent 04)

#### 4.3 Conceptual indicator model



#### 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study primarily investigated the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the employment in travel agencies in Sri Lanka. The impact on employees was mainly recognised under income impact, experience impact, social life impact and family impact. Further, the results revealed that the job mobility during this COVID-19 period is not possible due to the limited economic activities in the country; however, looking at the potential short term and long-term challenges on the industry, there can be possible job mobility since employees are looking for more secured source of income for their survival. The researchers were mainly identified these themes for achieving the objective of this study.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has given a time for all the tourism players to rethink the ways and means of doing the things, so that they can freshly engage with restarting activities. Employees can utilize this time for the self-capacity development (i.e. broaden the knowledge through online learning and webinars), thinking of possible entrepreneurial opportunities or start-ups based on their knowledge, skills and expertise; redesign the business models (i.e. new target markets, new packages, new delivery methods, etc.) in order to enhance the personal as well as organisational capacity.

Government also should carefully investigate the impact on the employees in affected economic sectors and it is necessary to maintain their interest to reduce possible job mobility since this can negatively effect on the sector. However, a carefully designed mechanism should be launched collaboratively with the private sector to protect the industry with the necessary financial, marketing and strategic support.

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