

## A desk review of Sri Lankan migrant worker deaths in 2009

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(Index words: migrant worker, death review, foreign employment, Sri Lanka)

### Abstract

**Objectives** A desk review and indirect standardisation techniques are used to describe the mortality risk for Sri Lankan migrant workers.

**Methods** Anonymised data were extracted from Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment case files recording deaths during 2009. Indirect standardisation is used to compare death rates taking into account age-sex distribution of the groups. As the actual age death distribution of the departures for 2009 was not available, estimates were derived using departure for 2007, 2008 and 2009.

**Results** Out of 333 deaths reported in 2009, 328 were analysed. The mortality rates for males and females based on 2007, 2008 and 2009 estimates were consistent for all age groups. Females aged 25-29 years were at an increased risk of death relative to their counterparts in Sri Lanka.

**Conclusions** Although information from the country of death is inaccessible, data available locally can be analysed systematically to highlight pertinent migrant workers' issues.

*Ceylon Medical Journal* 2012; **57**: 120-122

### Introduction

The number of deaths among Sri Lankan migrant workers has been steadily increasing over the years, however, details of these deaths come mostly from anecdotal communications lacking scientific validity [1, 2, 3]. This paper based on a desk review using information available at the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) is used to describe the mortality risk for Sri Lankan migrant workers.

### Methods

The SLBFE maintains a case file for each migrant worker containing personal information, and all correspondence received locally. A desk review was conducted using the files recording deaths during 2009. Data were extracted using a pro-forma. No contact was made with any of the families and all data collected were anonymous.

The information obtained was analysed to obtain age-sex distribution of deaths for the year 2009.

Denominator data for calculation of rates were not directly obtainable from the SLBFE. Although the yearly number of departures by age-sex groups is available the actual age sex distribution of those employed in 2009 is not available [4, 5]. Therefore estimation was necessary to arrive at a denominator to be used for calculation of standardised mortality rate (SMR). This approximation was based on the observation that most work contracts were of two years duration and a person who died in 2009 was most likely to have migrated within the period 2007 - 2009 [4, 5]. Therefore 3 estimates of SMR were derived based on the age-sex distribution of departures for 2007, 2008 and 2009. Standardised mortality ratios were calculated using the indirect standardisation method based on national age-sex mortality rates for 2007, the latest available rates.

### Results

Out of 333 deaths recorded by the SLBFE during the period of January to December 2009, five files did not record date of death clearly and these were excluded from the analysis. The foregoing discussion is based on 328 deaths recorded during the year 2009 of which 213 (65%) were of males and 115 (35%) were of females.

All case files were examined for a death certificate and this was available only in 166 (52%) case files (Table 1). Only 56% of deaths in Kuwait, 50% in Lebanon and 41% in Saudi Arabia carried a death certificate.

A question that is asked is whether the migrant workers are at an increased risk of death? In order to answer this question the number of deaths that would have occurred among the departures in each of these years based on Sri Lankan age specific mortality rates (expected deaths) was calculated (Table 2). The actual number of deaths in each age group within 2009 (observed deaths) was compared with expected deaths in 2007, 2008 and 2009 to derive standardised mortality ratios based on departure data of all three years (Table 3).

The SMRs for males and females based on 2007, 2008 and 2009 departure show a consistent pattern for all ages. The overall SMR for males and females is less than 100 indicating their risk of death was not more than what it would have been if they were in Sri Lanka. However, The females aged 25-29 years with a SMR of 112.1 (2007 estimate), 103.8 (2008 estimate) and 103.7 (2009 estimate), are at an increased risk of death relative to their counterparts in Sri Lanka.

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**Table 1. Number of deaths with a death certificate by country of death**

Country	Issued death certificate number	%	Total number of deaths reported
Saudi Arabia	49	41.2	119
Kuwait	33	55.9	59
United Arab Emirates	27	69.2	39
Doha	26	66.7	39
Lebanon	8	50.0	16
Oman	5	71.4	7
Korea	5	71.4	7
Jordan	3	37.5	8
Bahrain	1	33.3	3
Other	9	29.0	31
Total	166	50.6	328

\*Cyprus, Malaysia, Israel, Maldives, Yemen, Rwanda

**Table 2. Age and sex distribution of departures, national ASDR/1000 population (2007) and number of expected deaths for 2007, 2008, 2009**

Year	2007		2008		2009		National ASDR/1000		Expected deaths in 2007		Expected deaths in 2008		Expected deaths in 2009	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
< 19	2803	2698	2407	2648	2446	2546	1.1	0.7	3.1	1.9	2.6	1.9	2.7	1.8
20-24	19022	15326	22447	15008	18904	14977	2.7	0.8	51.4	12.3	60.6	12.0	51.0	12.0
25-29	23916	21190	33281	22885	28991	22904	3.1	0.8	74.1	17.0	103.2	18.3	89.9	18.3
30-34	16327	17999	24212	20986	23414	23248	3.1	0.8	50.6	14.4	75.1	16.8	72.6	18.6
35-39	12224	19582	17721	20505	17172	21154	4.8	1.3	58.7	25.5	85.1	26.7	82.4	27.5
40-44	8675	18117	12506	20513	12481	21627	4.8	1.3	41.6	23.6	60.0	26.7	59.9	28.1
45-49	5890	10153	9036	13390	8741	14621	8.7	3	51.2	30.5	78.6	40.2	76.0	43.9
>50	3889	3822	6495	6273	7050	6708	36.8	24.1	143.1	92.1	239.0	151.2	259.4	161.7
Total	92746	108887	128105	122208	119199	127785	-	-	473.9	217.1	704.2	293.6	694.0	311.8

**Table 3. Age and sex distribution of observed deaths in 2009 and SMR# estimates based on 2007, 2008 and 2009 departures**

Age group	Observed deaths in 2009		SMR 2007 estimate		SMR 2008 estimate		SMR 2009 estimate	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
< 19	0*	1	-	52.9	-	53.9	-	56.1
20-24	11	7	21.4	57.1	18.1	58.3	21.6	58.4
25-29	33	19	44.5	112.1	32.0	103.8	36.7	103.7
30-34	27	13	53.3	90.3	36.0	77.4	37.2	69.9
35-39	29	24	49.4	94.3	34.1	90.0	35.2	87.3
40-44	31	21	74.4	89.2	51.6	78.7	51.7	74.7
45-49	31	15	60.5	49.2	39.4	37.3	40.8	34.2
>50	51	15	35.6	16.3	21.3	9.9	19.7	9.3
total	213.0	115.0	44.9	53.0	30.2	39.2	30.7	36.9

#SMR = observed deaths/expected deaths x 100 \*No observed deaths in group

### Discussion

This review, based on available information at the SLBFE, is dependent on the recording and reporting of data from different sources and settings. Lack of accurate denominator data was a limitation and three estimates of SMR were derived. Accuracy of these estimates depends on the consistency of age-sex distribution of departures and the duration of work contracts, which was assumed to be 2 years. Assuming both these assumptions to be valid, estimates of SMR describe risks to female migrant workers aged 25-29 years. Although it is not possible to determine the actual risk of mortality from cross sectional data, when considered together with other reports of widespread and frequent harassment of housemaids the possible high risk of mortality for female domestic workers in this age group cannot be dismissed [8-10].

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