PATTERNS IN YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA

N. Balamurali[1] and Priyanka Dunusinghe[2]
[1]*Department of Social Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka*
[2]*Department of Economics, University of Colombo*[b]

Introduction

Sri Lanka has grappled with youth unemployment for several decades, with the portion of out-of-work youth being persistently higher than the national average unemployment rate. Sri Lanka National Human Development Report (2014) highlighted youth unemployment as a significant development gap. This study focuses on the Northern Province of Sri Lanka which comprises five districts: Jaffna, Killinochchi, Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya, where a protracted war came to the end in 2009. In the post-war context, livelihood related obstacles continue as people in the Northern Province, particularly in the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, had multiple and continuous displacements. With this background, this study examines the socioeconomic characteristics of unemployed youth in the Northern Province. Studying the patterns of unemployed youth will help find constructive solutions to unemployment related problems.

Methodology

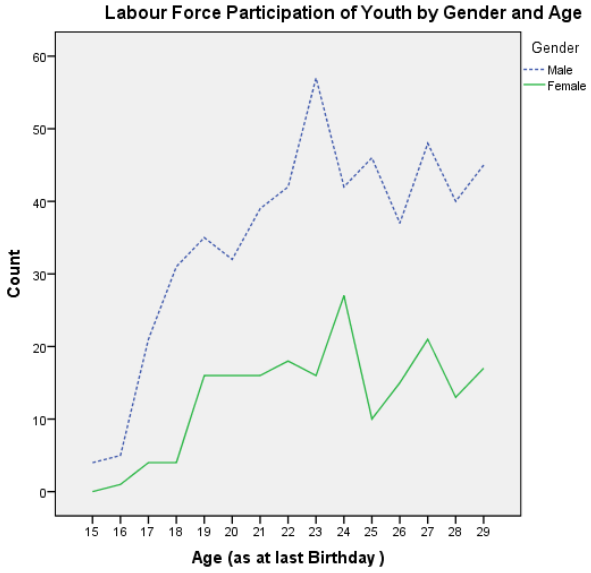
This is a descriptive quantitative study using micro level data from the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey conducted by the Department of Census & Statistics in 2013. This study focuses on youth (i.e in the 15-29 age category) regardless of what they do or civil status. Full-time students were deliberately dropped from the study. Hence, a total of 1324 observations were extracted from the data set to represent youth in the Northern Province. The quantitative results are shown in the form of tables and graphs.

Results and Discussion

The economically active population or labour force comprises all persons of working age who are either "employed" or "unemployed" during the reference period. In the current study, it was found that overall youth labour force participation was 54.2%. Disaggregating by gender shows

78.8% for males and 29.4% for females. In fact, Figure 1 indicates that in all age categories, labour force participation of males is higher than for females.

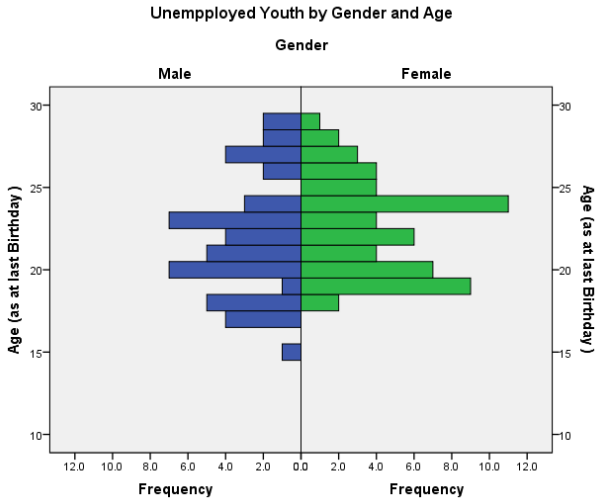
Fig 1. Labour Force Participation by Gender and Age- 2013



The unemployment rate among the youth is 14.5% in the Northern Province. At the district level, the highest unemployment rate of 20.3% was observed in the Kilinochchi district. Additionally, it is 17% in the Mannar district, 13% in the Jaffna district, 11.7% in the Vavuniya district and 11.1% in the Mullaitivu district. The unemployment rate is higher among females (by several folds) than males in all the districts of the Eastern and Northern Provinces according to the latest available data (Annual Labour Force Survey, 2012). This research also found that unemployment rate among males is 9% whilst being 29.4% among females. Figure 2 depicts unemployment by age and gender.

Unemployment rate in the urban sector is 17.6% whereas it is 14% in the rural sector. Based on marital status, it is found that married youth have the lowest unemployment rate; that is unemployment rate among the married youth is 4.7% whilst being 17.9% among the unmarried youth.

Fig 2. Unemployed youth by Gender and Age - 2013



In relation to education, the study found that the unemployment rate is higher among youth with higher educational qualifications. Unemployment rate is 33.3% among youth with postgraduate qualifications and 27.3% among youth with degrees. It was also discovered that 76.9% of unemployed youth have poor English literacy while 94.2% of Tamils are unable to read and write in Sinhala.

Nearly 58.7% of youth expect paid employment while 9.6% expect self-employment. In addition, 31.7% reported that they would accept any type of employment. About 45.9% preferred public sector employment whereas only 6.6% preferred private sector employment. The remaining 47.5% were willing to accept employment from any sector.

Unemployed youth have taken a number of steps to find a job or begin self-employment whilst some have even taken multiple steps. So 65% of unemployed youth have taken a step by inquiring from persons with public sector/private sector contacts/friends/relatives. 39% of unemployed youth have taken the step of registering for a government job. 40% of unemployed youth have responded to advertisements in government gazette/newspapers/published sources. In addition, 21% took actions to find financial and other resources to start self-employment and 16% registered with private sector institutions/via internet.

86.5% of unemployed youth do not have any work experience. Only 21.2% of the unemployed have successfully completed a formal professional or technical training relevant to an occupation or self-employment. Although vocational training is generally considered to be a factor that provides employment opportunities, unemployment is high among those who have successfully completed vocational training. Amongst youth that have gone through any form of training, 30.77% are unemployed. However, all youth who had received training in the fields of Health, Management, and Commerce and Finance are employed. Similarly, although having a professional training in IT is generally identified to be the most common professional training, 41.9% of youth with IT training remained unemployed.

Conclusion

Youth with higher education expect employment from the public sector and paid employment whilst youth with lower educational attainment expect self-employment or employment from any sector. A majority of unemployed youth continue to be unemployed because their expectations are not consistent with the realities in the labour market. That is why higher unemployment rates are associated with youth with higher educational qualifications. Employment in the public sector is perceived as a "good" job and other sectors are not valued to that extent (Aggestam and Hallberg, 2004). Among youth, labour force participants of females is lower compared to males. The steps taken by the unemployed to find an income generating activity seemed to be another reason for their unemployment problems. Constructive methods such as starting a self-employment are not preferred by a majority of the youth.

Finally, this study recommends that promoting self-employment, awareness on the necessity of vocational training as well as English and second language knowledge and skills will offer some practical solutions to the unemployment problem. Further, vocational training or other field of training should meet the job requirements in the market. Hence, proper career guidance should be ensured.

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