

Personal Level Challenges Associated with Inability of Youth in Urban Underserved Settlements to gain Productive Employment

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Abstract

Many empirical research studies have highlighted that the majority living in urban underserved settlements are engaged in insecure, low income livelihood sources mainly in the informal sector. In that context, the present study sought to understand the personal level factors contributing to the inability of youth in underserved settlements to gain productive employment. A representative, random sample of one hundred youth (men and women from the age group 15 – 29 years and who have left schools) was selected from two underserved settlements in the Thimbrigasyaya Divisional Secretary's Division for the study.

The study has identified thirteen factors as the personal level limitations inhibiting their access to productive employment. Dropping out from schools, low level of educational attainment, lack of participation in vocational training, lack of participation in high demanding vocational training programmes in the labour market, limited access to training programmes offered by recognized training providers and dropping out from vocational training programmes were among the first six factors. The next four factors were lack of interest in investing on human capital, lack of skills in obtaining information on human capital investment and on competitive labour markets, low levels of aspirations and passive acceptance of the underprivileged circumstances. High frequency of changing occupations, marriage at very young ages and lack of skills in handling issues relating to personal relationships were among the last three factors.

It can be also concluded that the above factors identified are often seen to be inter-related and therefore it is not easy to resolve the multifaceted problems that confront youth in these settlements. Therefore, this interdependence nature has to be considered with much concern in order to find solutions for these problems.

Keywords: *urban underserved settlements; youth; productive employment; personal level barriers*

Introduction

Urban poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon and the poor in general suffer from various deprivations such as lack of access to employment, adequate housing and services, lack of social protection, lack of access to health and education and lack of personal security. One dimension of poverty is often the cause of or a contributory factor to another dimension. Even though the percentages are lower in absolute numbers, urban poverty is a significant issue in the urban cities in Sri Lanka.

In relation to the Sri Lankan urban poverty context, it is evident from data that nearly 20% of Colombo's population were poor (Silva, 1998). A large proportion of the urban poor live in and around Colombo city and a majority of them live in low income settlements. In general, these low income settlements were known as slums and shanties or *Watta* settlements and were officially known as low income settlements or underserved settlements or substandard housing units.

One of the most important factors in determining the level of poverty is participation in the labour force and type of employment. Further, labour force participation is a crucial issue among

the urban low income dwellers in shaping their standard of living. Hence, the quality of a labour force is a critical factor in determining the economic, social, political and cultural development of a society.

In many empirical researches, government, officials of non-governmental organizations and the media have highlighted that the majority live in urban low income settlements and are engaged in insecure, low income livelihood sources in the informal sector. The opportunities available to them are mostly on low status, casual employment in construction sites and in the Free Trade Zones. Some of them are self employed such as petty traders and semi-skilled workers. On the other hand people in these settlements are compelled to undertake whatever employment opportunities available to meet their basic needs. Therefore this study was carried out to investigate the factors contributing to the inability of these settlers to find productive employment. On the other hand, the general pattern is that the majority start a vocation when they are at their young ages. Therefore, the study focuses on the youth.

The Study

The primary units of enumeration or the respondents were men and women from the age group 15–29 years who have left schools. They were from two selected *Watta* settlements (Halgahakumbura Watta in Wanathamulla Grama Niladhari (GN) division and Mahawela Patumaga in Dematagoda GN division) in the Thimbirigasyaya Divisional Secretariat Division.

Hundred families from two settlements were selected randomly to identify the respondents. The systematic random sampling technique was used to identify the families. The sample of 100 youth drawn from two settlements represents 55% from Halgahakumbura Watta and 45% from Mahawela Patumaga and of them, 56% were young men and 44% were young women.

Profile of Respondents

With confirming the findings of many empirical research studies, the youth in this study were heterogeneous in ethnicity and religion. Labour force participation rate in the study sample was 90% and it was higher than the data in the urban sector. Labour force participation rate of men (98%) was higher than that of women (79%). The employment and unemployment rates in the overall sample were 79% and 21% respectively. Unemployment rate was three times higher for women than that of men (11% for men and 37% for women). This indicates that youth living in these urban low income settlements compelled to earn to meet their basic needs and at the same time they have found difficulties in finding jobs.

The next major finding was that the majority of employed youth were engaged in low skilled, less remunerative occupations and the public sector was not a significant employment provider for them. The employment categories of the youth in the sample were factory workers such as in the garment industry, service workers in companies, elementary workers, craft and related workers, workers in sales outlets, small-scale business persons, motor vehicle drivers and other services workers.

Youth in these settlements represented both formal and informal sectors more or less equally as nearly half of the employed youth (48%) were in the formal sector and just over half of youth (52%) were in the informal sector. More women (64%) were in the formal sector while more men (59%) were in the informal sector.

Findings

The main objective of the study is to identify the factors contributing to the inability of the youth in the low income settlements to access productive employment. The findings of the study reveal that factors relate to three levels (personal, family and community) have contributed to their present employability and they have acted as barriers in gaining productive employment. This article presents only the factors relate to the personal level. However, even though the factors are listed under three different levels, they are often seen to be inter-related and therefore it is not easy to resolve the multifaceted problems that confront youth in these settlements.

The study found thirteen major personal level factors which have contributed negatively to the performance of youth and it was also observed that they were either direct or indirect results of family or community level negative factors. Access to occupations with good prospects has been limited by these factors. The identified personal level barriers are presented below.

Dropouts from Schools

In Sri Lanka, the compulsory age for education is 5-14 years and unfortunately, more than one fourth of youth (26%) in the sample had not completed compulsory education. Among the youth, 5% were primary school dropouts and 54% were secondary school dropouts. Only 41% had sat for the G.C.E. O/L examination and of them only 15% had sat for the G.C.E. A/L examination. Family and community level barriers have influenced for the majority for not continuing their school education.

Low Level of Educational Attainment

The educational attainment of the youth in the sample was low compared to national figures. Only 14% in the sample had passed the G.C.E. O/L examination. Half of them had continued to the A/L classes, but only four of them had qualified at the G.C.E. A/L examination. However, unfortunately, no one had reached the level to be admitted to universities. More than half (58%) of the youth had dropped out from grade 10–11 and 23% from grade six to nine.

Lack of Participation in Vocational Training

Since the majority of youth have not achieved formal educational qualifications at a satisfactory level, the next possible achievement is to get vocational training in order to get access to proper employment opportunities. The findings of the study reveal that lack of participation in vocational training as one of the limitations attached with the youth which has contributed to limit their participation in productive employment.

Only 44% of youth had followed at least one vocational training programme after schooling. It was also observed that more women (54%) than men (36%) had participated in the programmes. The majority (75%) of youth who had participated in a vocational training had participated in one programme, while 23% in two programmes and 2% in three programmes.

Lack of Participation in High Demanding Vocational Training Programmes in the Labour Market

Even though 44% of the youth had participated in vocational training after leaving schools, the majority of training programmes they had undergone were not able to equip them with recognized high demanding skills in the labour market.

The forty four respondents have participated in 27 vocational training programmes and it was observed that the majority of youth have attended training on craft and related fields. The most popular vocational training programme in the total sample was dress making/sewing (21%) followed by computer skills (16%), masonry (9%), operating machines in factories such as in the garment industry (5%), cookery (5%), motor mechanism (4%) and beauty culture (4%). Other programmes were training in accountancy, pharmacy, photography, English language, announcing, hotel service, driving, electrical mechanism, carpentry, welding, three- wheeler repair, ceiling decoration, mobile phone repairing, making soft toys, fabric painting, training for housemaids and training as a dispensary assistant.

There was a significant difference in demand for vocational training for the young men and women. The most popular training for men was masonry followed by computer and motor mechanism and for women it was dress making, computer, operating machines in factories such as in the garment industry, cookery and beauty culture.

Therefore, after analyzing the types of training they followed, even though they had participated in training, the demand for the skills they gained was low in the labour market compared to the other courses offered by formal institutions. Therefore it is very difficult for them to compete with the other youths who have followed high demanding courses in getting productive employments.

Limited Access to Training Programmes offered by Recognized Training Providers

The trainees providers play a significant role in the labour market to create a high demand for their training programmes. However, the majority of training providers in the sample were not reputed trainers in the labour market and the majority of the programmes were not substantial or comprehensive.

One fourth of youth (25%) had been trained by a relative or a known individual of their families. They had trained respondents in the fields of masonry, carpentry, mobile phone repairing, ceiling decoration, dress making, dispensary assistance, beauty culture, cookery and making of soft toys. The private institutions had offered programmes for 41% of youth in the fields of dress making, computer, motor mechanism, operating of machines, cookery, welding, English language, photography, hotel services, driving, accountancy, and pharmacy. However, in general, they were not highly recognized institutions in the labour market. Only 14% had been trained by a recognized vocational training provider and they were Jinarathana Technical College (electrical mechanism), Technical College of the Department of Technical Education and Training (computer), Maradana Technical College (dress making), Rajagiriya Youth Centre (three wheeler repairs), Youth Front (announcing), Borella YMBA (computer) and one woman has followed a training for domestic services conducted by the Foreign Employment Bureau with the hope of finding a job as a housemaid in a Middle East country.

Dropouts from Vocational Training Programmes

It was observed that of the trainees, more than one fourth (27%) have not completed the programmes due to reasons: financial difficulties to meet the cost of the course, transport and clothing expenditure, poor quality of the programme including severe punishments, change of interest/ ambition, marriage / love affairs, ill health, and change of residence.

Only 54% of trainees stated that the programme they followed had been useful to find or to continue their jobs or livelihoods. Therefore the above mentioned limitations attached with the

training they followed had contributed for not making a demand for their skills in the labour market.

Lack of Interest in Investing on Human Capital

Study found that lack of interest of youth towards education, vocational training and quality life as one of the personal level limitations inhibiting their achievements. Five percent of the youth in the sample (5%) had identified that lack of interest and laziness as one of the most serious problems faced by the youth in their locality. Just over one fourth of youth (27%) believed that lack of interest has resulted high rates of school drop outs in their locality. The following case study is an example.

“When I was a school boy my interest was not to learn but to play with friends and go to cinema with them. My parents were not aware of my behavior. I stopped schooling when I was in year six as there was no one to guide or to tell me the importance of education. Today I think that if I completed my school education I might have been able to find a decent job. At the moment I am unemployed and it is difficult to find a decent job with a good income”. (Male, 24 years, Mahawela Patumaga)

Half of youth (50%) were of the view that lack of interest in learning a vocation as a major barrier in getting productive employment.

Lack of Skills in obtaining Information on Human Capital Investment and Competitive Labour Markets

It was found that none of the youth in the sample had made attempts to search for information on human capital investment and competitive labour markets even at their leisure time. More than half the youth (57%) said that they spent their free time watching television and the programmes they enjoyed were mainly films and Tele dramas rather than educational programmes. Other activities they do during their leisure time were mainly interacting with friends in their locality (25%), playing games with friends in their locality (23%), passing time with family members (18%) and listening to radio or music (12%). The reading habit of the youth was limited as only 14% read news papers. This deprives youth in accessing information on outside their immediate environment which could help them to improve their knowledge and perceptions. This indicates that the youth are not in a position to invest in the human capital which in turn limits their access to remunerative employment.

Low levels of Aspirations of Youth

Low levels of aspirations of youth were identified as one of the personal level limitations in accessing productive employments. Three indicators have supported to draw this limitation: vocational ambitions as students in school, other job aspirations of employed youth, and job aspirations of unemployed youth.

More than one third of youth (36%) did not have any special ambition or they had never thought about a vocation as students. Others had aspired to 24 occupations. Among them, the most popular vocation was teaching (15%), followed by defense officers (13%) and business (7%). Very few had aspired to remunerative and prestigious occupations such as a doctor, engineer, lawyer, accountant, nurse and banker. Other vocations were mainly in the field of craft and related work such as mechanic, driver, carpenter, electrician, mason, and seamstress.

Though they had low levels of vocational ambitions, a few in the sample (9%) said that they had achieved the vocational aspirations they had when they were schooling and it was interesting to note that all of them were men. The vocational aspirations of these successful youth were business persons, mechanics, Army officer and mason. This indicates that it is very difficult for these youth to achieve their vocational ambitions even though they had aspired to low levels of vocations.

More than half of youth (55%) in the employed sample said that they were looking for other job opportunities. Nearly one third (31%) were expecting jobs in overseas particularly in the Middle East countries. However, their target was unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Nearly one fourth (23%) were expecting to initiate own businesses such as sales outlets. One fifth of youth (20%) were expecting government jobs mainly as labourers or peons. Two women wanted to be sales girls in a shop. These job aspirations also indicate that they were looking for different jobs but at the same level as their present jobs and most of them relied on their social networks to find the new job.

Just over one fifth of unemployed youth (21%) wanted to be workers in garment factories, 16% to get jobs overseas particularly in the Middle East countries, 10% as computer operators and another 10% as sales persons in shops. This indicates that only a few had higher aspirations and all the others had low levels of aspirations. Similar to the employed youth, unemployed youth too rely on their social networks to find jobs.

Passive Acceptance of the Underprivileged Circumstances

Many indicators show that the youth in these settlements have accepted their underprivileged circumstances passively. The indicators and their results are shown below.

All the youth in the sample agreed that there were problems for youth in the country as well as in their community. However, nearly half of youth (49%) said that the problems faced by the youth in the community and in the country were similar. They had not recognized that their problems were different from problems faced by youth in the other sections of the country. Only 51% said that there was a difference in problems faced by the youth in their community and in the country.

The youth were inquired about their perception regarding the right to employment compared to the rest of the youth in the country. Nearly two thirds (61%) of youth said that they have the same rights as the others in the country to employment. Only one third of youth (31%) claimed that they have less opportunities and right to employment compared to the rest of the youth in the country mainly because of low recognition for the youth in the low income settlements and limited attention to their problems by the politicians.

The youth were asked about their satisfaction with the current job opportunities available for youth in their community and more than half (55%) said that they were satisfied with the available job opportunities. The main job hubs mentioned by them were garment factories, other factories, shops located close to their residences, sales outlets in the Colombo city, and the high demand for work which required physical strength. However they were not sensitive to the quality of the occupations. Only 45% were not satisfied with the job opportunities available for them and most of them said that they have only low income and low prestigious jobs and it was difficult for them to move up the employment ladder.

In terms of the job satisfaction, though they were in unstable, low income, informal sector jobs, the majority (90%) of employed youth were happy and satisfied with their occupations. Only seven respondents in the sample were not satisfied with their jobs and the reasons for their

dissatisfaction were instability of the work and income, hard work and not compatible with the educational qualifications.

Although they faced many difficulties and problems, the majority of the youth (86%) were happy about their life at the time of the study. Only 11% stated that they were unhappy. The majority of youth (92%) in the sample were optimistic about their future life too.

High Frequency of Changing Occupations

The number and types of jobs in which they were employed from the first job to the time of conducting the study reveals that these youth have changed their jobs frequently. This indicates that their chances to improve the quality of their work have been reduced as they changed their jobs frequently.

Among the ever employed youth in the sample, they were engaged in one to six jobs during their working life of less than one to 19 years. Youth with a working life of less than seven years (59%) have been employed in one to four jobs. Youth with a working life of seven to 12 years (38%) have had one to five jobs. Two men, who had a working life of 19 years, have had two and six jobs during their working life.

Though the youth have changed their jobs frequently, there was not much change in the occupational groups except a few who joined the Sri Lanka Army. The nature of the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth jobs of youth also were similar to the jobs listed as the first job except in a few cases. A few of them had been employed abroad as an electrician, mason and a labourer. It was observed therefore that the youth have moved to a limited range of different jobs but at the same level. It was also observed that more than half of youth (55%) in the employed sample said that they were looking for other job opportunities.

Marriage at very Young Ages

In Sri Lanka, the minimum age of marriage for men and women is 18 years (except for Moors). However, at national level, the average age for marriage is 25 years. However, it was observed that one third of the youth in the sample had got married and the majority of them had started living with their spouses at early ages. Seven had started to live with their spouses before they were 18. Just over two thirds of the ever married (70%) had got married when they were 18 to 23 years of age.

Four percent of youth in the sample claimed that early marriages as the most influential reason for not continuing their school education. Seven percent had the view that early marriage as the main reason for not continuing the school education of youth in their locality. Nine percent of youth were of the view that early marriage as a major barrier resulting low participation in a vocational training. Even though it was a small percentage, it had limited potentials of a few youth who would be in a better position if they were able to handle such situations properly.

Lack of Skills in handling Issues relating to Personal Relationships (Family Problems, Love Affairs and Marriages)

In several occasions, they lack skills in handling issues related to family problems, love affairs and marriages. Just over one fourth of the youth in the sample (29%) have claimed that lack of skills in handling issues relating to relationships was among the most serious problems faced by the youth in their locality.

Conclusion

The majority living in urban underserved settlements are engaged in insecure, low income livelihood sources. In that context, the present study sought to understand the personal factors contributing to the inability of youth in underserved settlements to gain productive employment. A representative, random sample of one hundred youth (men and women from the age group 15–29 years and who have left schools) was selected from two underserved settlements in the Thimbirigasyaya Divisional Secretary's Division for the study.

The study has identified thirteen factors as the personal level limitations inhibiting the access of youth in urban underserved settlements to gain productive employment. It can be also concluded that the above factors identified are often seen to be inter-related and therefore it is not easy to resolve the multifaceted problems that confront youth in these settlements. Therefore, this interdependence nature has to be considered with much concern in order to find solutions for these problems.

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