

JUSTICE ON BRAIN DRAIN: ROLE OF PERCEIVED ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE ON TALENT MIGRATION INTENTION OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

While migration in the healthcare sector has been widely examined, far less attention has been given to the role of perceived organisational justice, particularly in shaping the intentions of nurses in Sri Lanka to seek opportunities abroad. This study addresses that gap by exploring how fair perceptions within hospitals influence nurses' migration decisions. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from nurses working in three major government hospitals in the Badulla District: the Badulla District Provincial General Hospital, the General Hospital Welimada, and the General Hospital Mahiyanganaya, representing a total workforce of 1,169 nurses. A total of 291 nurses were selected through simple random sampling, based on Morgan's table, and responses were gathered via a structured questionnaire using standard measurement scales. The data were analysed using SPSS and Excel through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and multivariate hypothesis testing. Results revealed that perceptions of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice significantly shape nurses' intentions to migrate, underscoring the importance of fostering fairness, equity, and respect in healthcare organisations. By highlighting organisational justice as a key determinant of migration intention, this study offers critical insights for policymakers and hospital administrators seeking to address the brain drain and strengthen Sri Lanka's health sector.

Keywords: Brain drain, organisational justice, talent migration

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Introduction

The healthcare system in Sri Lanka operates on a dual basis, providing free healthcare to over 92% of the population through several strong public sector institutions, while also supporting an increasing private sector to offer more advanced diagnostic and specialised treatments. The public health services sector, overseen by the Ministry of Health, provides health services to the majority of the population and has facilitated numerous impressive health milestones in Sri Lanka, including high life expectancy and low maternal and infant mortality rates (SLMA, 2022). A variety of challenges currently exist in health service delivery, including the increasing intention of nurses to migrate. One of the primary issues is a shortage of nursing professionals, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This is due to poor staff selection and engagement, but it can also be attributed to an overarching global demand for health workers. This gap is more pronounced among nurses in rural areas, who are left with an increasing burden to fill the lack of doctors.

The migration of healthcare professionals has become a persistent global issue, especially for developing countries like Sri Lanka. Nurses, who form the backbone of the health system, often seek opportunities abroad due to economic, professional, and social reasons. This outward migration, often referred to as 'brain drain,' negatively impacts the local healthcare system by creating staff shortages, overburdening those who remain, and reducing the overall quality of healthcare. Sri Lanka's dual healthcare system offers free services through public institutions and advanced treatment through the private sector. Despite notable achievements, such as high life expectancy and low maternal and infant mortality rates, the system struggles to retain qualified nurses. Many cite poor working conditions, limited resources, stagnant salaries, and a lack of recognition as reasons for seeking employment abroad. The disparity between local compensation and benefits offered in developed countries such as the UK, Canada, and Australia makes migration an attractive option. While economic and social push-pull factors have been widely studied, the role of perceived organisational justice, nurses' perceptions of fairness in outcomes, processes, and interpersonal treatment, remains underexplored in Sri Lanka. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how perceived justice affects migration intentions among nurses in government hospitals.

Literature Review

Migration intentions are shaped by multiple factors. Lee's (1966) push-pull theory posits that individuals are driven out of their home country by negative factors (low wages, political instability, poor work environments) and drawn to destination countries by positive factors (higher pay, career advancement, safety). For healthcare workers, these forces are particularly strong due to global shortages and high international demand.

Social exchange theory, as highlighted by Blau (1964), emphasises the reciprocal relationship between employees and organisations. If nurses perceive unfair treatment, such as inequitable rewards or a lack of recognition, they may choose to migrate to settings where their contributions are valued and appreciated. Adams' (1965) equity theory emphasised distributive justice, which is the fairness of rewards relative to effort. Similarly, Bies and Moag (1986) identified interactional justice, which stresses respectful and transparent communication. Together, these dimensions form the basis of perceived organisational justice. Empirical studies suggest that perceptions of justice have a strong influence on employee attitudes and turnover intentions. Buchan et al. (2019) found that unfair pay structures and opaque decision-making processes were key predictors of healthcare worker migration. Shah et al. (2020) highlighted that disrespectful treatment by supervisors further encouraged nurses to seek employment abroad. Thus, organisational justice is a critical but underexplored determinant of nurse migration in Sri Lanka.

Distributive justice

Distributive justice is concerned with the perceived fairness of the outcomes or rewards received by employees in exchange for their efforts, such as salary, promotions, and recognition. This dimension is based on the equity theory, which posits that equity exists when the ratio of inputs (work, time, skills) to outcomes (rewards, compensation) is perceived as equal among employees. Employee-level outcomes of such equity perceptions include organisational commitment and satisfaction when rewards are viewed as merit-based, effort-based, or need-based (Adams, 1965). Conversely, perceived inequities-whether under-or overpayment-may lead to negative emotions or responses, such as lack of motivation, turnover intentions, and poor organisational commitment (Greenberg, 1990).

Procedural justice

Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the processes and procedures by which decisions are made within the organisation. In contrast to distributive justice, which pertains to the fairness of the outcome, procedures become the arena in which fair treatment determines whether decision-making processes are transparent, unbiased, and consistent. Procedural justice was introduced by Thibaut and Walker (1975), who argued that individuals cared about the fairness of decision-making procedures, as these processes had direct implications for

their hopes of subsequent outcomes. Procedural justice is crucial in shaping trust in management, commitment to organisational goals, and the acceptance of decisions that may not be favourable to employees (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Conversely, students or employees consider the necessary procedures to arrive at decisions to be fair and are more likely to be satisfied with the outcomes, regardless of how unfavourable (Leventhal, 1980).

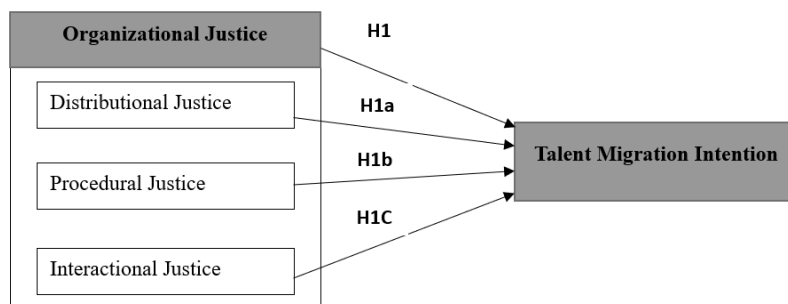
Interactional justice

Interactional Justice refers to the relatively fair way the employee is treated during decision-making. It concerns the quality of communication by employees with superior officials. There are generally two smaller dimensions within interactional justice: Interpersonal Justice, which emphasises that respect and decorum are reflected in decision-making, and, on the other hand, Informational Justice, which requires that explanations regarding decisions be transparent and accurate (Bies & Moag, 1986).

Hypothesis Development and the Conceptual Framework

A hypothesis is a provisional statement which can be subjected to empirical testing to determine the extent of the relationship between the variables (Sethy, 2021). Based on the theory of organisational justice and its potential impact on the migration intentions of nurses in Sri Lanka, the following hypotheses are developed. The hypotheses aim to explore the relationship between perceived organisational justice and the migration intentions of nurses, focusing on three dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice.

Figure 1
Conceptual framework



(Source: Authors' compilation)

H1: *Organisational justice significantly impacts the talent migration intention of nurses.*

Organisational justice has been identified as a crucial determinant of employee attitudes and behaviours, particularly in professions requiring high commitment, such as nursing (Colquitt et al., 2001; Niehoff & Moorman, 1993). When employees perceive fairness in workplace decisions, outcomes, and treatment, they are more likely to remain committed to their organisations (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Moorman, 1991). Conversely, perceived unfairness creates dissatisfaction and increases turnover and migration intentions (Abou Hashish, 2017; Mengstie, 2020). In the Sri Lankan healthcare context, nurses frequently face challenges related to resource allocation, promotion systems, and recognition of their contributions (Fernando & Jayawardena, 2020). As these factors are closely linked with organisational justice, it is reasonable to expect that the overall perception of justice will significantly influence their intention to migrate abroad (Gunawardana & Senadheera, 2023).

H1a: *Distributive justice significantly impacts the talent migration intention of nurses.*

Rewards, including salaries, promotions, and recognition. According to Adams' (1965) Equity Theory, when individuals perceive inequity between their input (effort, skills, and time) and outcomes (rewards and compensation), they experience dissatisfaction, which may drive them to seek better opportunities elsewhere. For Sri Lankan nurses, low salaries and limited recognition compared to their international counterparts represent a strong push factor. Therefore, distributive justice is expected to play a significant role in shaping their migration intentions.

H1b: *Procedural justice significantly impacts the talent migration intention of nurses.*

Procedural justice emphasises the fairness of the processes used to make organisational decisions, such as promotions, performance evaluations, and work assignments (Leventhal, 1980; Colquitt et al., 2001). Nurses are more likely to accept unfavourable outcomes if they perceive the processes as transparent, consistent, and unbiased (Greenberg, 1990; Folger & Konovsky, 1989). However, opaque decision-making, favouritism, or lack of employee involvement in policy formulation diminishes trust in the organisation (Cropanzano, Bowen &

Gilliland, 2007). In the Sri Lankan healthcare sector, the absence of fair and transparent procedures has been a recurring concern (Fernando & Jayawardena, 2020). Therefore, procedural justice is expected to be a particularly strong predictor of nurses' migration intentions (Gunawardana & Senadheera, 2023; Mengstie, 2020).

H1c: *Interactional justice significantly impacts the talent migration intention of nurses.*

Interactional justice refers to the quality of interpersonal treatment employees receive from supervisors and colleagues, as well as the adequacy of explanations provided for organisational decisions (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt et al., 2001). Respectful communication, empathy, and transparency foster trust and commitment, while disrespect, neglect, or lack of information erodes employee morale (Greenberg, 1993; Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel & Rupp, 2001). For nurses who work under stressful conditions, supportive interactions are essential in building loyalty to the organisation (Abou Hashish, 2017; Hadian Nasab & Afshari, 2014). When such respect and recognition are absent, nurses may view migration as a path to more dignified and supportive workplaces (Fernando & Jayawardena, 2020; Gunawardana & Senadheera, 2023). Hence, interactional justice is expected to significantly influence migration intention.

Methodology

The study focused on three major government hospitals in the Badulla District: Provincial General Hospital Badulla, General Hospital Welimada, and General Hospital Mahiyanganaya, which together employ many government nurses in the region. These institutions were selected because they operate under a common administrative structure of the Ministry of Health, ensuring comparable organisational policies and work conditions. Moreover, the Badulla District has been identified as an area experiencing notable challenges in nurse retention and migration, making it a relevant context for examining the effects of perceived organisational justice on migration intentions (Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population comprised 1,169 nurses, from which a sample of 291 was selected using Morgan's table and simple random sampling to ensure representativeness. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of standardised scales for distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Flint et al., 2012) and migration intention (Hou & Shiau, 2020).

Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded values above 0.85, indicating strong internal consistency. Validity was established using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression analysis with SPSS to test the hypotheses. The conceptual framework positioned organisational justice as the independent variable (with three dimensions) and migration intention as the dependent variable. Hypotheses were developed to test the direct impact of each justice dimension on migration intentions.

Results and Analysis

Descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels of perceived organisational justice among nurses, with mean scores around 2.4 on a 5-point scale. Migration intentions were also moderate, suggesting a mixed sentiment toward remaining in or leaving the profession. The descriptive statistics for the key variables in this study show that perceptions of organisational justice are moderate among the participants. Distributive Justice has a mean of 2.39, indicating a moderate perception of fairness in the distribution of reward, with a standard deviation of 0.95, reflecting some variability in responses. Similarly, Procedural Justice (mean = 2.40, SD = 0.96) and Interpersonal Justice (mean = 2.40, SD = 0.95) both suggest moderate levels of perceived fairness in decision-making and interpersonal treatment, with slight variations in responses. Regarding Talent Migration Intention, the mean of 2.44 suggests a moderate intention to migrate, with a standard deviation of 0.99, indicating a diverse range of intentions among the nurses. Overall, these results suggest that while perceptions of justice are relatively balanced, there is considerable variation in nurses' views on migration intention.

Correlation analysis showed strong positive relationships between all three justice dimensions and migration intention ($r > 0.87$, $p < 0.01$). Regression analysis further demonstrated that organisational justice explained 83.5% of the variance in migration intention ($R^2 = 0.835$). Procedural justice was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.397$, $p < 0.001$), followed by distributive justice ($\beta = 0.286$) and interpersonal justice ($\beta = 0.262$). These results suggest that perceptions of fairness, particularly in procedures such as promotions, evaluations, and resource allocation, play a significant role in determining whether nurses consider migrating.

The regression analysis confirmed the robustness of the model, with an R value of 0.914 indicating a very high correlation between distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice and nurses' migration intentions. The R^2 value of 0.835 shows that 83.5% of the variation in migration intention is explained by the three justice dimensions, while the Adjusted R^2 (0.834) further confirms model fitness. The ANOVA results ($F = 480.235$, $p < 0.001$) validate the overall significance of the model, demonstrating that the predictors collectively have a

meaningful impact. Coefficient analysis revealed that distributive justice ($\beta = 0.298, p < 0.05$), procedural justice ($\beta = 0.410, p < 0.05$), and interpersonal justice ($\beta = 0.274, p < 0.05$) all significantly influence migration intention, with procedural justice emerging as the strongest predictor. These findings collectively suggest that perceptions of organisational justice play a critical role in shaping nurses' intentions to migrate, with fairness in decision-making exerting the greatest influence.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that organisational justice plays a significant role in influencing nurses' talent migration intentions in government hospitals in the Badulla district. The analysis confirms that perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice are positively correlated with the intention to migrate, highlighting the importance of fairness in organisational practices and their direct impact on employee retention and migration decisions. The regression analysis results reveal that the three dimensions of organisational justice, distributive, procedural, and interpersonal, collectively explain a substantial portion (83.5%) of the variance in talent migration intention. This suggests that when nurses perceive their workplace as just, in terms of both outcomes and processes, they are less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere. These findings align with previous studies, which have demonstrated that fairness in resource allocation (distributive justice), procedural fairness (the perceived fairness of decision-making processes), and interpersonal treatment (respectful interactions) significantly influence employees' attitudes and behaviours (Bankins et al., 2022).

Among the dimensions, procedural justice had the strongest effect on talent migration intention, followed by distributive justice and interpersonal justice. This is consistent with the work of Lambert et al. (2020), who found that procedural justice often has a more profound impact on employee behaviour than distributive justice, particularly when employees perceive that they have some level of control over the decision-making processes. Moreover, the positive influence of interpersonal justice underscores the significance of respectful and fair treatment by supervisors, supporting findings by Aboobaker and KA (2024) who argued that fair interpersonal treatment can foster trust and reduce employees' intentions to leave. The results also imply that healthcare administrators should focus on enhancing fairness in all aspects of organisational operations, as improving perceptions of justice can reduce the likelihood of talent migration. This is especially the case in areas like the health care system, where there is usually a huge demand for personnel with certain skills. This viewpoint is in agreement with social exchange theory, which postulates that organisational good treatment warrants commitment and loyalty from employees (Khan & Iqbal, 2020). When managers foster a good, premised work environment, they may aid in preventing talent migration amongst nurses.

Conclusion and Implications

This study highlights the pivotal role of organisational justice in shaping nurses' migration intentions in Sri Lanka. The study revealed that organisational justice is a significant factor influencing nurses' migration intentions, with fairness in rewards (distributive justice), decision-making processes (procedural justice), and interpersonal treatment (interpersonal justice) all playing crucial roles. Nurses who perceived fairness in these dimensions were less likely to consider migrating, while perceived injustice strongly increased migration intentions. Among these, procedural justice emerged as the strongest predictor, highlighting the importance of transparent, impartial, and standardised processes in decisions related to promotions, resource allocation, and scheduling. This finding is consistent with prior studies that identify procedural justice as a dominant factor shaping employee behaviour. Distributive justice, tied to equitable salaries, benefits, and recognition, also significantly reduced migration intentions when perceived positively. Meanwhile, interpersonal justice, characterised by respectful treatment and supportive relationships, was similarly linked to stronger retention. Overall, the results suggest that strengthening both the actual practice and the perception of organisational justice can be an effective strategy for discouraging migration among Sri Lankan nurses. This requires healthcare administrators to ensure genuine fairness in policy implementation, decision-making, and daily interactions with staff.

The findings of this study present several practical implications for healthcare administrators, policymakers, and organisational leaders in Sri Lanka. First, reducing unfairness in organisational processes is critical, particularly by strengthening procedural justice through transparent promotion, staffing, and resource allocation systems, while also involving nurses in decision-making to ensure their voices are heard. Second, enhancing the efficiency of organisational procedures requires fairness and clarity in task assignments and promotions, as transparency helps reduce perceptions of bias. Third, distributive justice must be prioritised by ensuring equitable salaries, recognition, and performance-based rewards so that nurses feel adequately compensated for their contributions. Finally, interpersonal justice should be strengthened by fostering respectful communication, empathy, and supportive supervisory practices, thereby creating a culture of fairness and dignity that discourages migration. Collectively, these measures can enhance job satisfaction, improve retention, and mitigate the brain drain of skilled nurses from Sri Lanka's healthcare sector.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the findings of this study, it is essential to note that this study is not without limitations. The study was conducted with nurses in government hospitals in the Badulla district, thus limiting the generality of the study findings to the nursing sector in Sri Lanka or any other country. The study could be improved in the future by increasing the sample size and including more respondents from different regions, private facilities, and other sectors of healthcare. The study used a cross-sectional survey that only involved collecting data at one specific point in time. This results in limited evidence of the causal link between organisational justice and migration intention. Perhaps, more longitudinal research might provide a broader understanding of how fluctuations in organisational justice over the given time span affect the migration intentions of the nurses concerned. This research did not consider other environmental attributes that might affect migration decisions, such as political environments, economic influences, and personal aspirations.

The findings of this study set the stage for future research to look at the moderating role of these external factors on organisational justice and migration intention. While some qualitative information was obtained from a limited number of respondents, more regular and flexible qualitative study which investigates further the quantitative outcomes and individual characteristics of the participants, along with their beliefs and attitudes toward organisational justice, can produce a better understanding of the deeper causes of migration intentions observed among nurses.

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