

HONOURING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MIGRANTS AND ENSURING THEIR RIGHTS



CMS Policy Brief 7



Background

Migration is an important social phenomenon. Although, since the beginning of time, people have moved within and across borders for better lives, employment opportunities, and safety, migration also has positively contributed to poor countries' economic growth and development. For example, in Bangladesh, migration can be considered a blessing in terms of employment and economic growth. From 1976 to 2023, more than 16 million Bangladeshi workers migrated overseas and earned USD 297.14 billion worth of remittance (BMET, 2024). Most of these migrants are low-skilled and semi-skilled workers working in the Middle Eastern, South-East Asian, and European countries. However, a significant number of Bangladeshi migrant aspirants, mainly young people, are entering these countries by undertaking irregular routes. Also, despite migration being an essential topic for researchers, one of the main problems that Bangladeshi researchers face is the lack of proper data on the issue. Although the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) provides a quick snapshot of migration in Bangladesh, it is hard to understand the migration patterns from the HIES alone. Hence, the researchers need to rely on other sources.

Bangladeshi expatriates living across continents have played a significant role in the recent Quota Reform Movement, also known as the July Revolution, in 2024 in Bangladesh. For actively participating in the peaceful protests, the UAE authorities detained, convicted, and sentenced 57 Bangladeshi protesters to long prison terms. When the protesters from Bangladesh repeatedly requested through social media the expatriates to stop sending remittances through legal channels or to completely halt remittance transfers, the Bangladeshi expatriates began participating in the movement from that point on. As a result, within a few days, we saw that the amount of remittances sent by expatriates to Bangladesh was approximately 35% less compared to June. Consequently, Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves decreased by 1.3 billion dollars in July compared to the previous month. Thus, their contributions to the July Revolution cannot be denied.

The current interim government led by the globally renowned economist and Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus has already started reforming several sectors that have become heavily corrupted in the last 15 years. Despite migrant workers being the second largest source of foreign remittance in Bangladesh, migration was a corrupt and neglected sector. The past government certainly took some actions to improve the lives of migrant workers at home and abroad, however, most of the actions failed to match the needs of both internal and international migrants in Bangladesh. Along with the cost of recruitment still being very high, there are not enough services for them to ensure safe and regular migration pathways, and the policies to support their reintegration into society are largely ineffective. Hence, the reforms in the migration sector have become essential.

In this context, the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) of the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG) at North South University organized a colloquium on 22 December 2024. Eminent academic researchers, policymakers, government officials, trade unions, employers' associations, labour rights activists, NGOs, INGOs, CSOs, and other stakeholders graced the event with their presence. The discussion focused on the gaps in existing service delivery mechanisms for migrants, possible ways to improve the rights of migrants at home and abroad, and policy suggestions for honouring the contributions of migrants by ensuring safe and regular migration pathways for the expatriates. This policy brief is prepared based on the discussion of the colloquium.

Key Challenges in Ensuring the Rights of Workers

Despite migrant workers being the second largest source of foreign remittance, migration is still a corrupt and neglected sector in Bangladesh. Along with the high recruitment cost, there are not enough services to ensure safe and regular migration pathways for migrant aspirants and policies to support their reintegration into society. The following section outlines the major challenges the policymakers face while ensuring the rights of workers at home and abroad.

Skill Matching in the Labour Market

Our current education system often fails to produce graduates that fulfill the skills Bangladeshi employers demand. Academic degrees often fail to provide the most relevant skills to graduates, and thus, do not prepare them for local and international labour markets. Back in 2019, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) conducted a research to understand the relationship of unemployment to education, gender, and location. It was found that 36% of bachelor's degree holders and 34% of master's degree holders in Bangladesh are unemployed (Murshid et al., 2019). When these students later go abroad for work, their skills also fail to match the demands of foreign employers. Hence, there's an existing gap between the skills of Bangladeshi foreign workers in the global labour market.

“If we can build and retain skilled talent within our country, we can drive the productivity of organizations to new heights. We need to work together to build a future where our youth are equipped with the necessary skills and given the opportunities to thrive, both at home and abroad.”

Mr. Mohammad Sufiur Rahman
Senior Research Fellow
SIPG, NSU

“We are training women as domestic workers, but we are not preparing them to handle specialized caregiving roles, which are in high demand. This is an area where we could have made significant strides.”

Ms. Sumaiya Islam
Executive Director,
Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra
(BNSK)
Member, Women Affairs Reform
Commission.

Struggles of Female Migrant Workers

Bangladesh is still struggling to prepare its female workers for overseas markets. As the global market diversifies, Bangladesh is losing opportunities to use its female workers for specialized caregiving roles abroad. Moreover, the number of overall female workers is decreasing day by day (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics BBS, 2024). The existing training programs for female domestic workers usually don't focus on specialized caregiving roles, such as care for the elderly or other specialized work.

Lack of Statistics

One of the main problems that Bangladeshi researchers face is the lack of proper data for migration research. Along with the number of both internal and external migrants, any kind of research on migration requires data on remittance use, how migration is affecting the consumption pattern, the employment rate of the migrants' households, gender-based analysis on migration, etc. Since there is no comprehensive database on migration in Bangladesh, searching for reliable data often becomes time-consuming and challenging for prominent researchers. Lack of reliable data can impact the overall purpose of the research. Moreover, due to data scarcity, policymakers find it difficult to design effective reintegration programs for returnee migrant workers.

“We often calculate how many laborers leave the country, but we seldom ask the critical question: how many of them return, and what happens to them after they come back? There is little to no follow-up on the reintegration of these workers, and as a result, we are not addressing the full picture of migration—its social, economic, and psychological impacts on the workers themselves.”

Mr. Rajekuzzaman Ratan
President
Samajtantrik Sramik Front (SSF)

Lack of Policy and Governance in the Migration Sector

Worldwide, only 3.5% of the global population migrates at different points in their lives (IOM, 2020). However, it is considered a global crisis due to existing misconceptions, possible economic and social change due to migration, and political manipulation. Negative attitudes often provide policymakers with misinformation. Countries like Bangladesh suffer from weak governance among their different stakeholders, resulting in several kinds of exploitation for migrant workers. Moreover, there is a lack of policies to improve coordination, to provide proper support, protections, and opportunities for migrant workers.

“When it comes to policymaking, migration is typically treated as an afterthought. Migration issues rarely hold a strong position at the policymaker’s table. We must continue to advocate for stronger, more inclusive migration policies that recognize the rights and dignity of migrants while addressing the broader societal and economic challenges that arise from migration.”

Mr. Shahidul Haque
Professor
SIPG, NSU

Exploitation of Migrant Workers

Most of the migrant aspirants find the migration process in Bangladesh complicated. Hence, they opt to rely on recruiting agents and brokers for migrating overseas. However, there is a lack of regulations for recruiting agents and brokers, allowing them to exploit vulnerable workers. Those who enter the foreign land in irregular and illegal ways, often end up being exploited by brokers and smugglers.

They are forced to work for longer hours in poor working conditions and are denied their wages. In most cases, these workers are unaware of their legal rights. Their lack of knowledge often makes it difficult for policymakers to provide them with the rights. Moreover, the Kafala system in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries also exposes migrant workers to vulnerability.

“There is a lack of coherent, structured channel for migration in Bangladesh, leaving many migrant workers unprotected.”

Dr. Md. Mizanur Rahman
Research Associate Professor
Gulf Studies Center, Qatar
University

“Bangladesh is now ranked first in crossing the Mediterranean Sea illegally. We are a country at peace; there is no ongoing war here. So, the question arises: why are so many people from Bangladesh so desperate to leave? What drives this urgency? Why are people leaving the country and dying at the sea? And what is the role of stakeholders in the case of the reintegration of the returnee migrants? If we don't give them respect, who else will give?”

Mr. Shariful Hasan,
Associate Director
Migration Programme and Youth Platform,
BRAC

Desperation for Irregular Migration

A large number of people from Bangladesh migrate illegally overseas despite knowing all the possible risks that can be encountered on the journey. While migrating overseas can open opportunities for financial benefit for some, it is often not the same for everyone. The well-educated young people from Bangladesh are also migrating overseas for better opportunities. However, the increased number of migrants doesn't always result in higher remittance.

Lack of political willingness

Migrant workers are usually treated as a mere source of foreign income, and often denied of practicing their political rights. The lack of willingness to address their political rights is evident across several countries in South Asia. The politicians and policymakers fail to integrate them into the political process. The lack of easy and accessible voting procedures, such as polling places located within embassies exaggerates the situation.

“Migrant workers are often treated as the sources of foreign income. However, they are denied their fundamental right to vote. Across South Asia, there is a lack of political willingness to recognize their voices, leaving them voiceless and without recourse.”

Mr. Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed,
Chief
Labour Reform Commission

Reintegration Failure

Despite their significant contribution to the society and economy, there is a lack of support for migrant workers abroad. Moreover, there is no reintegration policy for returnee migrants. Hence, they face challenges such as a lack of support in resources and opportunities to build their lives and contribute to the local communities. These challenges cause a long-term social, economic, and psychological impact on the migrant workers.

“Returnees often face significant difficulties in finding employment upon their return. Many of them even express a desire to go back to the countries they came from, as they find it harder to reintegrate and make a living here.”

Dr. M. Mahfuzul Haque

Member, Labour Reform Commission
& Former Secretary, Ministry of
Labour and Employment, GOB

Policy recommendations

Migrants cannot be considered as remittance earners only. Their contributions must be honoured by ensuring their rights. Hence, effective policies need to be implemented to protect their rights at home and abroad.

- To get better results from migration-related research, policymakers should emphasize collecting and preserving data on different elements of migration. Academicians, practitioners, and statisticians can work with the government for this purpose.
- Government should focus on making the migration processes more simplified, and streamlined. This will allow the migrant aspirants to make the process less challenging.
- The interim government can create a reform commission on the migration sector. This commission will draft updated policies, and deal with the needs of migrant workers timely.

“As we look to the future, it is essential that upcoming policies and measures consider the complexities of labor migration and ensure that our workers are equipped with the necessary support, protections, and opportunities to thrive.”

Mr. Tuomo Poutiainen

Country Director, International Labour Organization (ILO), Bangladesh

- Policymakers should come up with policies that would address different aspects of migration, such as the dynamics of the global market, and the challenges faced by migrant workers. While designing, the policymakers need to make sure these policies have a long-term impact on the betterment of migrant workers and address future challenges in different aspects. These policies should also be designed to address the demographic challenges faced by migrant aspirants.
- The migrant aspirants should be provided adequate knowledge of the existing support system, their legal rights, required job training, and resources that would empower them.

- Expanding and strengthening legal migration pathways, through international cooperation and transparent regulatory reforms, is crucial to protect migrant workers from exploitation and ensure safe, orderly migration.
- The recruiting agents and brokers associated with the migration sector must be regulated and controlled by the government to ensure safe and legal migration pathways.
- Safe and legal migration should be promoted through international cooperation, detailed regulations, and by creating accessible channels to protect their rights.

“One of our primary concerns is supporting regular migration pathways. We must advocate for and promote legal migration channels, ensuring that migrants are not only able to travel safely but also have access to the vital services and protections they need during their migration.”

Ms. Disha Sonata Faruque

Senior Programme Officer & Head of the Mission Support Unit,
International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

- While protecting the rights of workers, recruitment policies of the destination countries, such as the Kafala system, should also be examined to liberate the workers from the exploitative nature of the system. These policies will also work towards raising awareness among the migrant aspirants from Bangladesh.
- To pave the way for the successful reintegration of the returnee migrant workers, the government should collaborate with non-government and private stakeholders. They should jointly work together to provide all kinds of economic, skill-based, and psychological support for the returnee migrants.
- To fulfill the demand of the global labour market, our education and training systems need to be revised, and redefined to provide students with relevant skills and international education and employment opportunities.

“Restriction for regular migration promotes irregular migration. If destination countries can set up skill development institutions in Bangladesh, it will benefit our migrant workers. The system in destination countries needs to be developed to encourage regular migration from Bangladesh.”

Dr. Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Sociology, NSU

Conclusion

Despite migrant workers being the second largest source of foreign remittance in Bangladesh, the migration sector has evolved as a corrupt and neglected sector. This sector fails to match its full potential due to the lack of governance, adequate data, and reintegration policies for returnee migrant workers. Moreover, there is a lack of opportunities for people living in the countries. Hence, an urgent reform is needed. Effective solutions require more effective information, more efficient processes, a dedicated reform commission, and stricter rules. International cooperation,

broader legal paths, and strong reintegration programs are essential for protecting migrants' rights and well-being. Finally, an extensive approach is required to ensure safe, consistent, and beneficial migration.

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