

## An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment



**Rumana Yasmin**

Post-Graduation from The University for the Creative Arts, London, UK

**ABSTRACT:** Since its independence, Bangladesh has supplied millions of its skilled and unskilled manpower to hundreds of countries, which, in turn, has positively influenced the domestic labour market and GDP growth. Remittances coming from migrant workers have immensely contributed to the micro and macro economy of Bangladesh. Studies show that the rising flow of overseas employment due to labour shortage in numerous developed and developing countries after the pandemic has generated both opportunities and challenges for Bangladeshi manpower. This study found that there are inflated demands for skilled and professional workers all over the world. However, Bangladesh is still unable to supply expected quality workers foreign individuals, companies and countries have demanded. The reasons behind this, our study found, are insufficient government initiatives, recruitment agencies failure, not having enough opportunity for training and education and lack of awareness among workers as well as syndicate issues and illegal migration. This study suggests that addressing the above-mentioned issues could help the respective authorities perpetuate the rising flow of foreign employment of Bangladeshi manpower.

**KEYWORDS:** Migration, Overseas, Employment, Remittance, Management, Development

### INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has been a reservoir of manpower for years. A growing number of skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled and professional manpower is available for foreign employment and the country has been a major source of migrant workers for numerous individuals and companies around the globe. Bangladesh met with regular and enormous labour migration overseas from the 1960s and it is still one of the most remittance earning countries among the developing ones in Asia (Liton Islam, R.M, Alaudin, M & Sadekin, N.M. , 2016). Last two decades, we have seen an overflow of migration in multiple developing and developed countries which, in turn, positively correlated with GDP growth of Bangladesh. The contribution of remittances, which comes from migrant workers, in the national economy of the country is crystal clear. According to World Bank data, remittance increased from 1.97 billion in 2000 to 22.21 billion dollars in 2021, which has become a key source of foreign exchange earnings. Remittance contributed 61% of Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserve buildup in 2014 -2015.

The overall impact of overseas employment at the micro and macro level in Bangladesh is evident. Reducing poverty, increasing per capita income, domestic economic growth acceleration and a steady increase of foreign exchange reserves are bright examples. Recognising the contribution of migrant workers in Bangladesh's economy, the government and the respective authorities should investigate the worldwide labour market considering the opportunities and challenges they have in this sector.

Bangladesh has a huge opportunity with its labour surplus as there has been a growing demand of migrant workers not only in the Middle East and South East countries, but in many western countries. Most European countries are having an enormous shortage of skilled workers in recent years resulting in the closing down of medium level industries in several countries like Germany. As a primary initiative, the respective authorities of the EU have already taken key plans hiring skilled labourers from third countries. Similarly, Australia and Canada are facing a massive dearth of skilled and professional manpowers in various fields, including economy and health sectors. Therefore, their central government and provincial authorities as well as private companies have decided to hire quality workforce from all over the world and provide residence permits if they satisfy at least necessary requirements. So, Europe, Australia and Canada would be substantial destinations for Bangladeshi educated and skilled manpower.

Now, the challenges for Bangladeshis are insufficient education, absence of proper skills and enough experience. It is evident from numerous studies that a large number of interested people moving abroad are unskilled or semi-skilled and a small number have met the requirements for working and getting residence permits both in European countries and other ones. It has

## An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment

also been expected that in the upcoming years a large number of skilled and professional workers would be demanded all over the world, especially in the Western and South East and Middle East countries as well as some East Asian countries, but Bangladeshi manpowers could be less fit due to lack of enough education, skills and experiences. So, this is the high time for both the government, recruiting agencies and interested people to prepare themselves in advance. Our research found that initiatives taken by the Bangladesh governments and respective authorities are not quite sufficient and there are still gaps in the management and development process.

Thereby, this paper intends to examine the reasons behind the backwardness of Bangladeshi manpower abroad in terms of holding quality in spite of having great opportunities. The objective of this study is to investigate the current status of foreign employment of Bangladeshi manpower and thereafter, to find out challenges the workforce could face in near future. In a broad sense, why such a surplus manpower country cannot ensure its highest outcomes from foreign employment?

This paper follows the primary and secondary data sources where primary sources are Bangladesh government and other institutions' research reports, official documents and information and interviews of related experts. The secondary sources are published journal papers, research magazines, books, newspapers' articles and websites' information of related public and private institutions.

### OVERVIEWS OF OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON NATIONAL ECONOMY

Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, a number of people started moving abroad for employment, but there was a sharp increase during the 2000s (ADB report, 2016). After its independence, a formal migration for employment started in 1976 (Lito Islam, R.M, Alauddin, M & Sadekin, N.M (2016). After 2005, more than half a million people have moved abroad for work. In addition to this, a number of Bangladeshi students and professionals are going overseas for education and training, especially in the western countries. According to the report of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), around 1 million Bangladeshi citizens were sent overseas until November, 2022 (see table 1). The report also mentions that, on average, more than 90 thousands workers were supplied every month in this year while the number was between 60 - 70 thousands in the pre-pandemic period. Moreover, over 1.3 crore Bangladeshis have been employed abroad between 1976 and 2021, according to government information.

Key destination countries of Bangladesh workforces are the Gulf regions such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Libya and Lebanon. In addition to this, a significant number of people migrate to some SouthEast Asian (i.e. Malaysia and Singapore) and East Asian countries (i.e. South Korea and Japan). The Bangladeshi working class people migrating to western countries do not constitute a large amount, though in the UK and the U.S. the number of Bangladeshi manpower has increased over the years.

**Table 1: Bangladesh's annual overseas employment (2017 - 2022)**



Several key factors influence Bangladeshis to go abroad for employment; among them economic, demographic, and social issues play key roles. In recent years, an increasing flow of migration has been recorded which, in turn, positively correlated with GDP growth of Bangladesh (World Bank report, 2022). Several countries are more interested in hiring Bangladeshi labourers due to relatively cheaper salaries, which also generated a significant opportunity for semi-skilled workers in the related areas. It has been noted that these growing numbers of people who are interested in migrating overseas are coming from rural areas. However,

## **An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment**

thousands of them migrate through traditional channels, including relatives and friends who are already working abroad for several years. Besides, there are hundreds of recruiting agencies and third parties - called 'brokers'- work sending people for overseas employment.

The contribution of overseas employment at both the micro and macro level is immense. At the micro level, the impact of overseas employment in reducing poverty and maintaining, at least, a medium level of standard of life is notable. In addition to this, income, savings and household consumption of migrated people (and their families) are much higher than average people in the society. This is very clear from several public and private institutions' data, including the World Bank report, 2022.

At the macro level, nobody can deny the contribution of migrant workers in the economy of Bangladesh. This is because remittances from overseas manpower have become the prime source of foreign reserves of the Bangladesh government. If we look at the foreign reserves of the country that come from migrant workers, it would be easy to justify how they help the country in keeping the balance of international payment stable.

### **PROSPECTS OF OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT FOR BANGLADESHI MANPOWER**

Bangladesh and its manpower have vast opportunities in overseas employment if they can positively and properly use them. While the population in the developed countries decreases and industrial sectors increase, the government and companies are being forced to hire a large number of workers from third world countries. In this context, the chances for Bangladeshi manpower to migrate to those countries grow day by day. In this section, we would like to discuss the opportunities Bangladesh can get if they aspire to contemplate its surplus manpower and remittances.

### **LABOUR SURPLUS**

Bangladesh is significantly a enormous labour surplus country and consequently has contributed (and still continues) in the supply side of the worldwide labour market (Liton Islam, R.M, Alauddin, M & Sadekin, N.M (2016), especially in the Middle East and industrialised countries of SouthEast Asia. People working foreign countries are mostly males and a small fraction of women used to go outside of Bangladesh for work. However, the trends have changed drastically after 2014 accounted for double of 2012. According to statistics, the major destinations for female workers were Jordan and Lebanon who are mostly engaged in household and garments works. In recent years, there are vast demands for female workers, both skilled and semi-skilled, in many Arab countries not only in household and garments work, but as nurses in the hospital. According to Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), they received demand orders from Kuwait government for 1100 diploma and BSc nurses for their hospitals, and already a significant number were sent among 900 who were primarily selected.

The country has sent over 76 thousand manpower in November 2022 alone, Shahidul Alam, director general of BMET says, even the number could hit a record above one million at the end of this year if the rising trends continue, he added. Moreover, a number of companies in the Middle East countries like Saudi Arabia have increased the quota for Bangladeshi migrant workers by 40 percent, according to Bangladesh government data. Besides, Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL) has recorded sending over four thousand manpower to some East Asian countries like South Korea by October 2022 who are mostly skilled and professional workers.

The rising flow of overseas employment helps in reducing the unemployment rate in Bangladesh. In addition to this, the labour market in Bangladesh becomes strong due to easing pressure of a sizeable number of workers. It is quite difficult, even impossible for Bangladesh to create employment of around two million people entering the domestic labour market every year. One of the solutions of this massive surplus of workers could be to attract them to overseas employment and for doing this, the respective authorities need to take necessary initiatives and its proper implementation.

### **CHEAP LABOUR**

Cheap labour is one of the key reasons for boosting garments business in many countries such as Bangladesh, China and India. Last one and a half decades, it has been one of the prime engines of Bangladesh's economic growth and development. Frankly speaking, Bangladesh is well-known throughout the world for supplying its cheap labour forces to many countries, especially to the gulf and South East Asian ones. Many studies show that Bangladesh ranks first compared to many countries in the global South like India and Pakistan in sending cheap labour abroad. Furthermore, the country earned the second largest amount of remittances by exporting readymade garments products all around the globe with the help of its cheap labourers. Bangladeshi workers are generally accustomed to work hard in a variety of jobs, especially working in the garment industry and mining sectors and so on. Additionally, the causes of cheap garments products produced in Bangladesh is its low labour costs. For the same reason, it has been evident from many studies that a significant number of migrant workers who work with a relatively lower salary are mostly coming from Bangladesh.

## **An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment**

In an interview with Shahadat Hossain, an official of a recruiting agency '4 – Site International, it has been known that most workers going to Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Oman and United Arab Emirate work with a monthly salaries between TK 25000 – Tk 40000 (\$250 - \$400). So it has been proved that there is still demand for cheap labour in many countries where Bangladesh can send its manpower.

### **LABOUR SHORTAGE IN EUROPE**

Labour shortage in most European countries has been a matter of discussion in recent years due to a drastic decline in birth rate and a large number of people going into retirement. In addition, after the pandemic period as global supply chains are restored and economies are reopened, companies are facing an enormous lack of labour (Asadullah, 2022). In this case, Bangladeshi manpower has opportunities to replenish the vacancy of the European companies and industries. The country usually sends its skilled manpower to many European countries, such as Italy, Spain and Germany for years. According to the Bangladesh government report, Italy officially takes 5000 Bangladeshi workers in 2022 and signed a memorandum for taking more skilled and professional manpower in the upcoming years.

Recently the European Commission has taken several master plans to invite more people from third world countries. According to euobserver, the European home affairs, employment and social rights authorities hold numerous discussions on how to build a bridge between migration and employment to mitigate the challenges the European economies face. The EU home affairs commissioner Ylva Johansson says "Labour shortages have a catastrophic cost. Of course, there is an economic cost. In Germany alone, €86bn per year in lost output,"

According to Reuters (Jan 12, 2023), more than fifty three percent of companies in Germany have a lack of manpower which amounts to two million vacancies. In addition to this, they nowadays are facing difficulties in hiring skilled workers. "Today, two working people support somebody who doesn't work. But in 2070 it will be one-to-one, if we don't do anything about it," Johansson said to Reuters. As a future initiative, they commenced a program "the EU Talent Partnership" which is designed to assist European employers who struggle for hiring job seekers from third world countries. The program initially focuses on countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where they are thinking of offering job seekers training and language learning courses before they arrive in Europe. As Bangladesh has strong relations with the European Union due to its one of the largest garments markets, it can use the opportunity by establishing some training and language centres for Bangladeshis who are interested in working and migrating to Europe.

### **WORKING AND RESIDENCE OPPORTUNITIES IN SEVERAL COUNTRIES**

Several industrialised countries in recent years are increasingly offering both working and residence privileges for skilled manpower who fulfil their minimum requirements. In this regard, Canada is ready to welcome more than 1.3 million new immigrants from different countries by 2024 (Niren, 2022). It would be a great opportunity for a significant number of people to work and live in a developed country. However, immigration to Canada is not as easy as Europe. There are multiple steps you have to follow in order to apply and be approved by the Canadian authority. According to some experts living in Canada have told us that many Bangladeshis, both educated and professional, can apply for work permits, but among them who have work permits, a very few are eligible for residence permits.

As Canada is inviting skilled workers, Bangladesh can prepare its skilled and professional manpowers, especially students who have a degree from abroad to make them fit for moving to Canada. First, the government and interested citizens need to investigate the relatively easier ways as there are multiple paths of migrating to Canada.

Australia could be another destination for Bangladeshi manpower because the country has relaxed its immigration policies and invited foreign skilled workers to mitigate the current shortage in the workforce. As an initiative, the Australian government increases its target from 160,000 to 195,000 for 2022 - 23. Bangladeshi skilled and graduate students from colleges and universities can apply for getting work and residence permits in Australia.

In addition to this, there are many countries such as Russia and Portugal who relax immigration policies for graduate students and skilled workers. What Bangladeshi manpower needs is to make them qualified to be best fit for the jobs and residence permits in those countries.

### **CHALLENGES OF OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT FOR BANGLADESHI MANPOWER**

The rising flow of overseas employment and its effect on the aggregate economy of Bangladesh could be slower or halted due to numerous reasons. The key challenge of migrant workers is slow progress of human resource management and development both in Bangladesh and abroad. Although the country has a colossal manpower who are interested in overseas employment, a significant number of them are unable to accomplish the requirements needed for the foreign companies and employers. In recent

## **An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment**

years, the Bangladesh government, several recruitment agencies and language and training centres have taken multiple initiatives, including establishing development and training institutions, but they are not enough for such a large volume of the population interested in foreign employment. As an initiative, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment and its department the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) are adopting various measures to regulate the migration process, but they are still not enough as experts claim. This section will investigate the challenges Bangladeshi workforce recently face and may face in near future.

### **SLOW PROGRESS OF GOVERNMENT'S INITIATIVES, MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

Bangladesh adopted Overseas Employment Policy in 2006 to ensure the prospect of regular migration of short term and long run for both men and women from all parts and sectors of Bangladesh at a rational cost (Islam, 2011). To implement its policy, the central government established the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment in 2001 to ensure welfare of the expatriate workers and increase overseas employment. Now, we need to address the government's initiatives and their proper implementations in a detailed manner.

First, government initiatives play significant roles in rising manpower exports to demanded countries and companies. In this case, foreign policy of a country and economic diplomacy work well, but Bangladesh is still unable to satisfy the foreign recruitment companies and countries with quality manpower. According to many migration experts, Bangladesh needs to focus more on the quality of its workforce exports for maintaining the rising flow of foreign employment. Otherwise, there might be a sharp decline of the flows due to massive industrialisation and technological development in every sector.

Second, a common problem migrant worker usually face is sending remittances to their families, especially those who live in the rural areas (Liton Islam, R.M, Alauddin, M & Sadekin, N.M., 2016). They usually deprive help, in some cases, from the government administrative authorities in sending remittance through public banks due to slow and complicated processes. Moreover, there is dissatisfaction among migrant people in sending money through public banks after disclosure of irregularities and corruption of some of the government regulated banks and financial institutions.

Third, the foreign missions of Bangladesh in several countries are not as efficient as the reality demands. As Bangladesh's foreign reserves mostly depend on remittances from migrant workers, the respective authorities of the Bangladesh government should work closely for the development of the sector. However, due to improper guidance, lack of training and support from the foreign mission, Bangladesh cannot ensure the welfare of its migrant workers as expected.

Finally, Migrant workers in many cases are not fully satisfied with the behaviour of the respective officials both in Bangladesh and abroad. Sometimes, they are victims of physical and mental harassment at the airport, at their working places and even by the officials of foreign missions. In addition to this, domestic political instability, corruption and irregularities in the banking sector play vital roles in the behaviour of migrant workers. It has been noticed from the Bangladesh Bank data that expatriate Bangladeshi remittances amounted 1.5 billion dollars in November 2022, which is 5.48% lower than previous month and 26% year - on- year (The Business Standard, 2022).

### **LACK OF EDUCATION, SKILLED AND PROFESSIONAL MANPOWER**

The worldwide demand for skilled and professional employees in this technology-based labour market is evident, especially in the Western countries. Bangladesh, however, has an enormous shortage of skilled manpower who cannot satisfy the demands of foreign companies and individuals. It has been crystal clear from various statistics and reports such as World Bank and ILM that a large number of Bangladeshi migrant workers are less educated and semi and unskilled who are mostly unable to compete with other workers coming from many developing countries like India and China. Although the number of quality employees is increasing, statistics show that less than 35 percent of total manpower exported is compatible with their counterparts in the workplace. As developing initiatives, the government of Bangladesh has established several science, technology and polytechnic institutes, colleges and universities as well as vocational training centres (Liton Islam, R.M, Alauddin, M & Sadekin, N.M., 2016). However, the annual graduation rates from those institutions are much smaller than expected, even though they have very limited capacity than actual demand.

In addition to this, unskilled and semi-skilled constitute the highest number of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Most of them did not complete their primary or secondary level of education, even though they haven't had enough training before moving to a foreign country. In 2021, around 74 percent Bangladeshi migrant workers were unskilled, according to the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU). Although most of the migrant labourers went abroad through the public and private recruitment agencies, they did not get sufficient information and training beforehand. As a result, they are unable to compete with their counterparts, and therefore, forced to come back to Bangladesh or work with lower salaries.

## **An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment**

Since 1973, Bangladesh has been sending people abroad for work, especially in the oil-rich gulf countries and surrounding regions. They required workers and Bangladesh has supplied its cheap labour to those countries to fill the gap in their labour market. Bangladeshi workers sent to the Middle East countries were mostly semi-skilled and unskilled, but nowadays they have demanded skilled and professional workers. Now, it has been a challenge for Bangladesh to prepare its workforces with appropriate skills to maintain the rising flow of sending manpower to those countries.

As labour demand increases all over the world, Bangladeshi respective authorities keep trying to supply more manpower through various channels. The secretary general of BAIIRA, Shamim Ahmed Chowdhury Noman, says "Bangladesh has been able to send a record number of workers this year as expected due to an increased labour demand in Middle Eastern countries after Covid and new workers going to countries like Malaysia and the UAE". However, skilled manpower is yet to be ensured due to a growing worldwide demand for quality workers and for ensuring higher remittances, experts say.

In Europe, a significant number of companies struggle to find workers with the skills they need (euobserver, 2023). According to Reuters, Jan 12, 2023, above 50 percent of German companies, the largest economy in Europe, are unable to fill up their vacancies due to not finding skilled workers. The Digital Economy and Social Index posits that 4 out of 10 workers in Europe lack basic technical skills (ELA, 2021). The problem we see is a dearth of skilled workers throughout the world. There is a colossal number of semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the third world countries, however, most of them are not fit to replenish the vacancies that European and many other developing and developed countries' companies need. According to statistics and many Bangladeshi medium and small level companies in Europe, spaces for Bangladeshi manpower in European countries are being limited due to a variety of reasons. Among them lack skills and experience and not having work and living permits are key reasons that somehow force some European countries and their companies not to hire workers from Bangladesh. The European commission also announced actions against illegal migration from Bangladesh and not to provide visas for workers.

The problems for Bangladeshi manpower in the western countries, especially in Europe and Canada, we have found that they do not have enough technological skills, even lack basic digital skills and have problems with language and unable to finish their education who came for study purpose. In addition to this, many Bangladeshis moved to Europe with visiting visas, but they did not return back, which has a very negative impact both on Bangladesh and its manpower. So, these types of activities occurred by some Bangladeshis causing a huge challenge for its labour market abroad.

### **BROKER AND SYNDICATE PROBLEMS**

After the pandemic, in the Global South, many countries like Singapore and Malaysia are facing an acute shortage of employees resulting in a focus on migrant workers to replenish the vacancies (Asadullad, 2022). After that, a number of recruiting agencies, syndicate and broker groups became active to send workers to those countries through both legal and illegal ways. However, they are demanding a huge amount of money from the interested migrant workers, even though it has been a challenge for many people to reach to appropriate channels due to a presence of brokers everywhere in every sector.

The recent Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, has admitted the syndicate issues in hiring workers from Bangladesh. He promised to closely work with government to government in hiring manpower from Bangladesh to reduce syndicate business. Although the officials of Bangladesh have been trying to send workers directly to Malaysia, the workers have not yet gone as expected, according to the BAIIRA report, 2022. The 25 agencies primarily responsible for sending workers to Malaysia have not been able to work effectively, BAIIRA claims. Here syndicate issues among the agencies have largely been evident and a major issue resulting in Bangladesh and its manpower becoming losers. Now one can ask if 25 agencies are associated with sending Bangladeshi workers to a single country, how many public and private agencies are working for sending to other countries? Now, it is obvious that a vast number of Bangladeshi workers are moving abroad with the help of agencies and brokers, both legally and illegally, are, unfortunately, facing various problems, including wasting a large amount of money.

### **ILLEGAL MIGRATION**

Illegal migration has been a common issue throughout the world for decades. After the COVID - 19, with the reopening of the labour market, illegal migration has tremendously increased. A small number of Bangladeshi illiterate people have recently been trying to illegally migrate to some countries with the help of brokers and human traffickers, but in most cases they have been cheated, even killed by the brokers or human traffickers. It has been reported in Bangladeshi media that hundreds of Bangladeshi citizens have been tortured and killed when their families have failed to give those gangs (brokers) a large amount of money they demanded.

It is also noted that there are thousands of Bangladeshi manpower living and working in several countries without visas and proper documents. Among them a large number of workers legally migrated to those countries, but did not renew their visas, contacts and documents, and later days they moved to other countries illegally. As a result, the government of Bangladesh and

## An Analysis of the Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Manpower in Overseas Employment

its foreign missions of those countries as well as recruiting agencies, sometimes, have to face a variety of difficulties with these illegal migrants when they get pressure to return back its illegal migrant citizens.

### CONCLUSION

The overseas employment of Bangladeshi manpower brings positive outcomes and well-being of the country for years and its population, at the end of the day, are getting benefited. However, the respective authorities and interested manpower need to be productive and develop themselves to keep in track the rising flow of overseas employment and to properly use the opportunities they have all over the world. Bilateral relations and agreements between Bangladesh and receiving countries, training and education for ensuring skills, the governance of recruitment process, reducing dependency on private recruitment agencies, resolving syndicate issues and keeping in track of migrant workers are critical factors to further support and develop overseas employment of Bangladeshi manpower.

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