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COVID-19 AND BANGLADESH'S MANPOWER EXPORT: PANDEMIC INDUCED VULNERABILITIES AND POLICY OPTIONS

Abstract

Export of manpower is a major source of Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings. It is also one of the significant aspects of its diplomatic relations. Along with several socio-economic repercussions, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the flow of manpower export. At the same time, with a huge number of returnee migrants, Bangladesh is now exposed to a double-edged concern: managing livelihood and economic stability of the non-migrant citizens; and ensuring remigration of the returnee population. In this context, this article tries to answer two relevant questions – i) What are the vulnerabilities associated with Bangladesh's manpower export due to COVID-19 pandemic? and (ii) What are the ways to deal with the vulnerabilities? To answer these questions, this article studies the period between March 2020 and March 2021 and tries to provide policy options. It also argues that to frame the policies for COVID-19 induced vulnerabilities in manpower export, pre-existing and new challenges have to be considered simultaneously. To address probable solutions, it suggests interventions in a few areas—exploring new markets, capitalizing existing markets, capitalizing unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, opening consulates in a number of locations, and instituting legal frameworks.

Keywords: Manpower Export, Migrants, Returnees, COVID-19, Pandemic, Expatriate Welfare, Remittance

1. Introduction

In a globalized world, export of manpower contributes significantly to the economic development of a state. For Bangladesh, manpower export is one of the key areas through which the country is walking towards the path of prosperity. Bangladesh has recently achieved the final recommendation for its graduation from the Least Development Country (LDC) status. By 2026, it is supposed to officially earn a new title.¹ Foreign remittance is a major driving force behind Bangladesh's

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¹ Fahmida Khatun, "Making Bangladesh's LDC graduation smooth and sustainable," *The Daily Star*, March 01, 2021, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/macro-mirror/news/making-bangladeshs-ldc-graduation-smooth-and-sustainable-2052709>.

economic excellence. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on global, regional, and national economies, general predictabilities have become quite uncertain. Bangladesh managed to collect a good amount of remittance in the middle of the pandemic and became the third-highest recipient of remittance in South Asia.² Yet, at the same time, the increasing number of returnees from different host countries turned out to be alarming. Against this backdrop, it is important to look for credible options to remigrate the returnees, utilize their potential and open up opportunities for new group of aspirant migrants.

Bangladesh has always been exploring outward since its independence. The establishment of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in 1976 institutionalized manpower export. Following the 1982 Emigration Ordinance, the Emigration Act set the legal trajectories for future development. In the 1990s, Bangladesh made itself part of multiple international treaties, for example, the 1990 United Nation's (UN) International Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Over the years, BMET started to work with several of public and private stakeholders, including Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), the only government-owned manpower exporting company and the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). Gradually, the significance of female migration was understood and incorporated into the mainstream agenda. Despite these advancements, several challenges interrupt the flow of manpower export. These became further evident during the pandemic. Regular export of manpower had already been decreasing for a certain period, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, during the pandemic, there was a total collapse in manpower export. An increasing number of migrants returned to Bangladesh not only as a result of the pandemic but also because they were being treated as 'illegal' in many countries. All of these happened when Bangladesh was looking forward to its Vision 2041. In this situation, a backtrack in the policy maneuver is both harmful and challenging.

The article looks forward to framing policy options to address the pandemic induced vulnerabilities in Bangladesh's manpower export. It has two primary objectives: (i) finding out the vulnerabilities in Bangladesh's manpower export during the COVID-19 pandemic and (ii) suggesting specific guidelines for relevant government stakeholders (i.e., The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment) to deal with the crises. To facilitate the purpose and objectives, the article examines existing literature from different sources, including official reports from relevant government and non-government organizations, articles published in academic journals, book chapters and newspaper

² Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Information and Communication Technology Division, "Post-COVID-19 ICT Roadmap: The Labour Migration and Remittance sector," 2021.

articles. The study is qualitative in nature. It relies on four semi-structured interviews. The interviewees were purposively selected based on their expertise in the area as researchers and practitioners.³ The timeline between March 2020 and March 2021 was chosen consciously to collect and analyze the one-year dataset after the first lockdown had been imposed.

The article is divided into six sections. After the introductory part, the literature review section provides an understanding of central research areas, trends, challenges, and critical points of view relevant to the study. The next two sections respectively discuss the vulnerabilities created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways to combat those vulnerabilities. The final section presents the concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

A wide range of literature covers the issues of manpower export and existing challenges. Structurally, they can be seen from three perspectives: manpower export and its connection with the international political economy; the context of South-South migration with a specific focus on Bangladesh; and literature that illustrates the differences between pre-pandemic and the pandemic-induced situations.

2.1 *Labour Market, International Political Economy (IPE) and the Crisis Factor*

Concepts of 'market', 'manpower' and 'export of manpower' cannot be discussed adequately without considering the international political economy (IPE) perspectives. This also involves global, regional and sub-regional economic tiers as well as discourses on development and governance. Theoretically, in a globalized world, the flow of migration would have 'unrestricted movements' directed by market forces and the highest level of marginal products.⁴ However, there are several factors that disrupt the flow. Massey and Taylor⁵ have identified a channel motivated by two-fold variables: lack of well-developed markets and geographical disequilibrium of labour. Movements of human beings have also been institutionalized, politicized

³ The list of KIIs include Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka; Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka; Director General, Southeast Asia Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; Deputy Secretary, Mission and Welfare Wing and Senior Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment.

⁴ Christopher Rudolph, "Security and the Political Economy of International Migration," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 603-620.

⁵ Douglas S. Massey and J. Edward Taylor, eds., *International Migration: Prospects and Policies in a Global Market* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

and securitized by states themselves. Particularly, in the Western world, a subtle call for restriction on immigration could easily be noticed since the 1990s.⁶ At the same time, South-South migration became very popular, particularly among the developing countries in South Asia.

According to Freeman and Kessler⁷, since the 1970s, IPE's approach towards international migration and the labour market has expanded with the inclusion of three different actors – states, institutions, and interest groups. The authors also observed a shift in the interpretation of the roles of these actors. The role of non-state institutions became more prominent in the post-World War II period. According to Castles⁸, the flexible workforce promoted by the 'neoliberal boom' in the 1980s created vast opportunities for manpower export. However, critiques identified that this neoliberal structure would depend on a hierarchical system where the process of production was taking place in low-income countries yet was controlled and monitored by advanced economies.⁹ Nevertheless, tension between domestic and immigrant labour forces is a concern for the developed economies. It becomes crucial at the moment of crises, be it a prolonged economic depression or an unexpected situation resulting from pandemic.

2.2 *South-South Migration & the Bangladesh Question*

Unbreached channel of South-South migration not only helped the countries sustain economic downfall in the Cold War era but also kept the unemployment rate 'virtually unchanged.'¹⁰ According to Ratha and Shaw¹¹, the drivers of South-South migration are proximity, networks, income, seasonal migration, petty trade and conflict/disaster. Although 'disaster', in this context, refers to warfare and ecological crises, it can also be used to understand the impacts of pandemic-induced situation on a vulnerable group of people. Siddiqui's¹² analysis manifested how diplomatic networks with the Middle Eastern countries in the 1980s facilitated manpower export to the Arab countries. The upward trend in migration also increased global remittance in general. Remittance hence has been proven to be a 'counter-cyclic instrument'

⁶ Jennifer Fitzgerald, David Leblang and Jessica C. Teets, "Defying the Law of Gravity: The Political Economy of International Migration," *World Politics* 66, no. 3 (2014): 406.

⁷ Gary P. Freeman and Alan K. Kessler, "Political Economy and Migration Policy," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34, no. 4 (2008): 655-678.

⁸ Stephen Castles, "Migration, Crisis and the Global Labour Market," *Globalizations* 8, no. 3 (2011): 311-324.

⁹ Stephen Castles, "Migration, Crisis and the Global Labour Market."

¹⁰ Tasneem Siddiqui, *Migration as a Livelihood Strategy of the Poor: The Bangladesh Case* (Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, 2003), 6.

¹¹ Dilip Ratha and William Shaw, *South-South Migration and Remittances* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2007).

¹² Siddiqui, *Migration as a Livelihood Strategy of the Poor*.

which acts as a source of investment during crisis moments.”¹³ Deshingkar and Farrington¹⁴ examined the evolution of the rural economy of Bangladesh and found out that migration helped a bulk of population who lacked any functional land ownership during the transitory phase.¹⁵ This is an example where an agrarian economy started to look out for means of income in non-farm sectors which are beyond seasonal agricultural work.

Throughout history, various crises have had an immediate impact on migration flow. The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 can be mentioned in this regard. As Farid et al. noted, this financial crisis had two major impacts¹⁶. First, it shifted the financial condition of respective countries. Second, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) replaced Malaysia as one of the top destination countries for Bangladesh. However, it has been reported that during the crisis period, immigrant groups in most destination countries face insufficient support regarding social production, income protection, support from trade union, and rights at work.¹⁷ Therefore, for a significant number of returnee population, Bangladesh has to deal with two issues: locating destinations for newly aspiring migrants; and, ensuring safe return and protected rehabilitation of the existing returnee population who are either unsure or unenthusiastic about the returns.¹⁸

2.3 Pre-COVID vs COVID-induced Contexts in the Export of Manpower

International migration in Bangladesh is motivated by the aspiration of economic development at household, community and national levels. To explain this issue, most authors have referred to the neoclassical theory of migration which is one of the oldest of its kind. This theory addresses people’s motivation for migrating towards a particular destination based on difference in wages in origin and destination countries.¹⁹ For Bangladesh, the list of destination countries more or

¹³ Katja Hujo and Nicola Piper, “South–South Migration: Challenges for Development and Social Policy,” *Development* 50, no. 4 (2007): 19-25.

¹⁴ Priya Deshingkar and John Farrington, “Rural Labour Markets and Migration in South Asia: Evidence from India and Bangladesh,” Background Paper for the World Development Report, 2008.

¹⁵ Priya Deshingkar and John Farrington, “Rural Labour Markets and Migration in South Asia: Evidence from India and Bangladesh,” 20-23.

¹⁶ Kazi Shek Farid, Lavlu Mozumdar, Md Shajahan Kabir and K. B. Hossain, “Trends in International Migration and Remittance Flows: Case of Bangladesh,” *Journal of the Bangladesh Agricultural University* 7, no. 2 (2009): 387-394.

¹⁷ Tasneem Siddiqui, “International Labour Migration from Bangladesh: A Decent Work Perspective,” *Policy Integration Department Working Paper* 66 (Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, 2005).

¹⁸ Tasneem Siddiqui, “International Labour Migration from Bangladesh: A Decent Work Perspective.”

¹⁹ Md Nazirul Islam Sarker, Bo Yang, Wang Tingzhi, Aditi Chakrovorty, Md Abdus Salam and Nazmul Huda, “Impacts of Internal Migration on Poverty Alleviation in Bangladesh,” *International Transaction Journal of Engineering, Management & Applied Sciences & Technologies* 11, no. 11 (2020): 1-8.

less remained unchanged over the years. Currently, more than 400,000 international migrants can be marked as an eminent source of remittance for the country and their families.²⁰ The initial shock of COVID-19 pandemic affected Bangladeshi migrants in all these countries. A study carried out by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) mentioned that 13 per cent of these immigrants lost their jobs due to the pandemic.²¹ Reports also show that most of these labour forces were either semi-skilled or unskilled.²² While conducting their study on the immigrant labour force in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Birks et al. found that approximately 73 per cent of the Bangladeshi workforce were low-skilled and only 0.1 per cent belonged to the ‘professional’ category.²³ Therefore, resending these people to destination countries will also require additional skill-development maneuvers so that they can compete with the growing challenges and meet the demands of the destined sectors.

Ahsan et al.’s work²⁴ focused on the relations between risk exposure and migration patterns in developing countries. They argued that long-term migration pattern must be considered while studying the pandemic-induced situation. It was evident that after the first week of lockdown in March 2020, Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, witnessed a sudden upsurge of COVID-19 infection from the migrants who came back from Malaysia. Regarding the district level of risk factor, Cumilla and Narayanganj were next to Dhaka, and both of these districts contained significant number of international migrants.²⁵

Contemporary literature has also significantly focused on the feminization of labour migration in Bangladesh. According to Balanger and Rahman²⁶, returnee women create a different kind of ‘social conversation’ as women’s major motivation to go outside of the country also sometimes comes from an objective to escape from

²⁰ “Covid-19: an uncertain homecoming for Bangladeshi migrant workers,” United Nations Development Programme, July 19, 2020, accessed March 03, 2021, <https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/stories/covid-19--an-uncertain-homecoming-for-bangladeshi-migrant-worker.html>.

²¹ “13pc people lost jobs due to Covid-19 pandemic: BIDS survey,” *The Daily Star*, June 25, 2020, accessed March 03, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/13pc-people-lost-jobs-in-bangladesh-due-covid-19-pandemic-1920309>.

²² John S. Birks, Ian J. Secombe and Clive A. Sinclair, “Labour Migration in The Arab Gulf States: Patterns, Trends and Prospects,” *International Migration* 26, no. 3 (1988): 267-286.

²³ John S. Birks et al., “Labour Migration in The Arab Gulf States: Patterns, Trends and Prospects.”

²⁴ Reshad Ahsan, K. Iqbal, M. Khan, A. M. Mobarak and A. Shonchoy, “Using Migration Patterns to Predict COVID-19 Risk Exposure in Developing Countries,” *Policy Brief, Yale School of Management*, accessed March 03, 2021, <http://yriise.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Using-migration-links-to-predict-COVID-spread-policy-brief-2>.

²⁵ Reshad Ahsan et al., “Using Migration Patterns to Predict COVID-19 Risk Exposure in Developing Countries,” 5-7.

²⁶ Daniele Belanger and Mahmuda Rahman, “Migrating against All the Odds: International Labour Migration of Bangladeshi Women,” *Current Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2013): 356-373.

conjugal conflicts.²⁷ A number of these women are widowed, divorced and single mothers. Social stigma also plays a critical role. Particularly, in the rural areas, returnee women face stigma and verbal abuse, and they are often portrayed as ‘bad women’.²⁸

This section has shown how the pieces of literature have looked at the issue of manpower export and COVID-19 crisis from diverse perspectives. More or less, all of them suggest the need for identifying trends before the pandemic to find out the root causes. However, the studies fail to connect between the existing legal and instrumental challenges and the crisis-induced challenges. From the review, it is clear that proper and comprehensive rehabilitation of this returnee population is important for Bangladesh. The following chapters of this article aim at unfolding the migration patterns and other relevant factors so that the vulnerabilities and challenges can be properly addressed.

3. Trends and Challenges in Bangladesh's Manpower Export

Over the years, Bangladesh's manpower export evolved positively depending on the country's economic transition and diplomatic networks. Bangladesh maintained a sustainable performance in the economic sector and, at the same time, consolidated strong diplomatic partnerships—both regionally and globally. Upon these developments, manpower export in different countries also became smoother. This section elaborates on the trends in Bangladesh's manpower export and its challenges.

3.1 *Analysis of Destinations and Composition*

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and BMET's data show a positive trend in international migration from Bangladesh to other developing or developed countries. The total number of migrants moving in between 1976 and 2019 is around 12 crore (Figure 1).²⁹ Overseas employment rate saw a significant rise in 2017 which indicates 33.1 per cent yearly increase, recording the total number at 1,008,525 compared to 757,732 in the previous year.³⁰ However, after 2017, the numbers started to decline gradually and went down to 734,181 in 2018; 700,159 in 2019 and drastically 217,669 in 2020.³¹

²⁷ Daniele Belanger and Mahmuda Rahman, “Migrating against All the Odds,” 364.

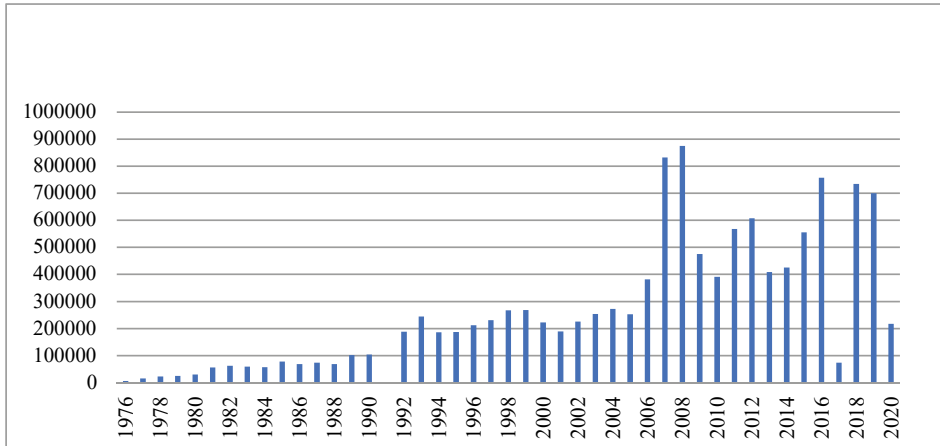
²⁸ Daniele Belanger and Mahmuda Rahman, “Migrating against All the Odds.”

²⁹ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Statistical Reports 2020, accessed March 03, 2021, <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>.

³⁰ BMET Statistical Reports 2020.

³¹ BMET Statistical Reports 2020.

Figure 1: Year-wise Overseas Employment from Bangladesh (1976 to 2020)



Source: BMET and RMMRU

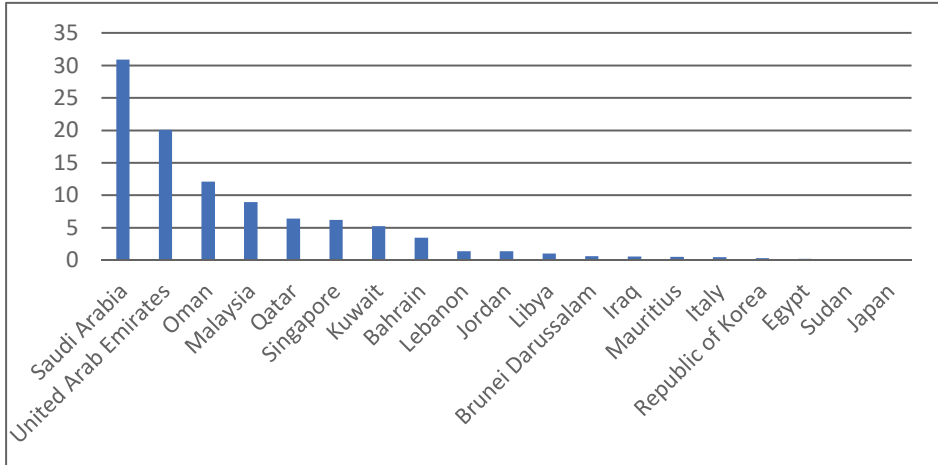
Among the top three major destinations, there are three Middle Eastern countries – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), UAE and Oman (Figure 2). Malaysia stands as the fourth largest destination for the migrants and as the first Southeast Asian country.³² Gulf region has always been a popular destination for most migrants. International Organization for Migration (IOM) and BMET’s reports present that, except for Singapore, from 1976 to 2018, the top destination points were the GCC countries.³³ Political and economic conditions of the destination countries impacts on the flow of migrants. RMMRU, for example, has pointed out several issues like nationalization in Saudi Arabia or political instability in Libya, which reduced the number of migrants. This also impacted on the psychology of the mass who were expected to apply for jobs in those countries. In 2019, the number of migrants who went to Libya was only 213.³⁴

³² Tasneem Siddiqui, *Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2019: Achievements and Challenges* (Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, 2020).

³³ International Organization for Migration and European Union, *Bangladesh Migration Crisis Operational Framework* (Dhaka: IOM, 2019).

³⁴ Tasneem Siddiqui, *Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2019*, 4-6.

Figure 2: Country of Destination vis-à-vis Number of Migrants from Bangladesh in 2019 (per cent)



Source: BMET and World Bank.

Among the non-Middle Eastern countries, apart from Malaysia, Singapore is a popular destination. There are Japan and South Korea from East Asia and Italy and the United Kingdom in Europe.

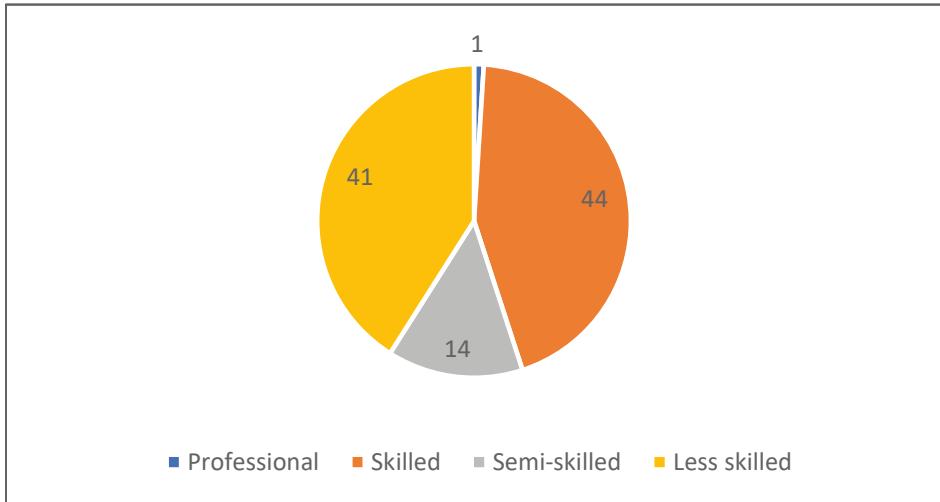
Among the workers, only 1 per cent were professionals, 44 per cent were skilled, 14 per cent were semi-skilled, and 41 per cent were less-skilled (Figure 3).³⁵ Looking at the trends, one can also notice that the number of female migrants has increased over the years. Starting from almost a minimal presence of female migrants in the 1990s, in 2019, 62,578 women workers migrated from Bangladesh to find out opportunities to work.³⁶ Three different districts of the Chattogram division are the top suppliers (between 2005 and 2018) – Cumilla (848,652 male, 24,678 female), Brahmanbaria (406,910 male and 31,121 female) and the Chattogram district (672,774 male and 7,874 female).³⁷

³⁵ Tasneem Siddiqui, *Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2019*, 3.

³⁶ Tasneem Siddiqui, *Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2019*, 2.

³⁷ BMET, Statistical Reports 2020.

Figure 3: Distribution of Skills among Migrant Workers of Bangladesh (per cent)

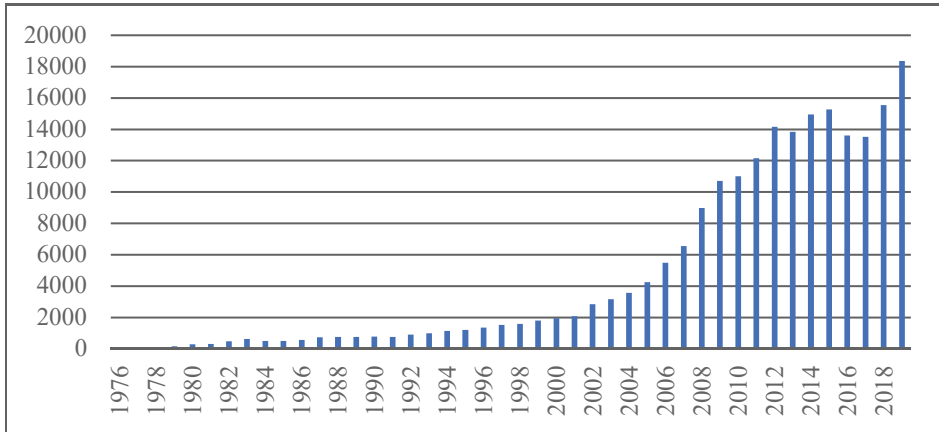


Source: BMET and IOM.

The remittance inflow has seen a constant increase since 1976 (Figure 4). In early 2020, the remittances’ predictions were negative due to the COVID-19 crisis. Later, however, Bangladesh not only exceeded the expectation but also made a record-breaking collection of around US\$ 21 billion in 2020 and became the eighth-highest receiver of remittance in the world.³⁸ As a source of income, remittance is equally important at national and household levels. According to a study conducted by RMMRU, 60 per cent of those households who receive remittance depend entirely on the remittances for daily expenses. To keep the flow static, the migrants residing in overseas areas have to have jobs to support themselves and send money to their families through proper channels.

³⁸ “Remittance inflow tops \$21b in 2020,” *The Financial Express*, January 03, 2021, accessed March 04, 2021, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/remittance-inflow-tops-21b-in-2020-1609687724>.

Figure 4: Year-wise Remittances (Million USD) Earned by Bangladesh (1976 to 2019)



Source: BMET, RMMRU and IOM.

3.2 Challenges Prior to the Pandemic

The long-standing challenges in Bangladesh’s overseas employment, stemming from the existing regimes of labour migration, can be divided into three categories: socioeconomic, institutional and legal.

3.2.1 Socioeconomic Challenges

The previous section has shown that one of the greatest challenges for Bangladesh’s manpower export is to produce skilled labour for the countries of destination. Bangladesh is the fifth-largest country of origin.³⁹ However, both developed and developing worlds are going through some changes following the fourth industrial revolution and rapid technological developments. Therefore, certain skill sets are necessary for every individual looking forward to making a living out of this process. This includes cognitive and metacognitive skills, physical skills as well as technical knowledge with self-efficacy.⁴⁰ Even though the opportunities are routinely offered by BMET and other organizations, it is important to monitor if each of the social classes is being benefited by the opportunities.

The World Bank noted that poverty in Bangladesh, between 2000 and 2016, for 0.1 per cent increase in the migrant population in a district, poverty fell at a rate

³⁹ IOM, Bangladesh Migration Crisis Operational Framework.

⁴⁰ “Skill set workers need for the future job market,” *The Daily Star*, February 19, 2021, accessed March 03, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/30th-anniversary-supplements/aspirations-the-next-50-years/news/skill-set-workers-need-the-future-job-market-2047581>.

of 1.7 per cent.⁴¹ Among the pull factors, socioeconomic conditions in destination countries and security issues in the origin countries play a significant role. IOM has listed social security and access to healthcare as factors which drive the aspirant migrants' decision making process.⁴² IOM report also shows that most of the returnee migrants in Bangladesh had to face personal challenges (89 per cent), household level challenges (90 per cent) and community level challenges (84 per cent).⁴³ To tackle these challenges, state has to engage the working-age population through the means of education and entrepreneurship.⁴⁴ In the destination countries, the migrants face maltreatment and abuse. In 2019, around 800 female migrant workers had to return from Saudi Arabia in the face of sexual and physical abuse.⁴⁵ Female migrants also face denial of salaries, lack of proper healthcare facilities as well as inability to find job corresponding to their skills more frequently than men.⁴⁶

3.2.2 Institutional Challenges

Institutionalization of manpower export is another major challenge. Over the years, the number of institutions involved in migration has increased. However, an alarming number of manpower exports take place through informal channels. To facilitate the formalization of migration, there are 10 guiding principles from Global Compact for Migration (GCM) which include people centric approaches, rule of law, sovereignty concerns, gender responsiveness, child sensitivity, human rights issues as well as whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.⁴⁷ The whole of government approach, among others, requires adherence to strong institutional framework, clear migration strategy, institutional transparency and coherence and engagement of partners.⁴⁸ BMET has been working as the key organization in this sector for overseeing employment and training for the expatriates (Table-1). However, it is often debated to what extent the trainings are efficient for the aspirant population. A generic platform and common training format often are not suitable

⁴¹ Shoaib Alam, "What is the future of our migrant workers?," *The Daily Star*, February 19, 2021, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/30th-anniversary-supplements/aspirations-the-next-50-years/news/what-the-future-our-migrant-workers-2047573>,

⁴² International Organization for Migration (IOM) and European Union (EU), *Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile* (Dhaka: IOM, EU and Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2020).

⁴³ IOM and EU, *Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile*, 19.

⁴⁴ Shoaib Alam, "What is the future of our migrant workers."

⁴⁵ Shuprova Tasneem, "No country for Bangladeshi women," *The Daily Star*, September 25, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/no-country-bangladeshi-women-1966953>.

⁴⁶ "Women migrants from Bangladesh need skills, returnees need support," *New Age*, March 06, 2020, accessed March 02, 2021, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/101414/women-migrants-from-bangladesh-need-skills-returnees-need-support>.

⁴⁷ IOM and EU, *Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile*, 3-7.

⁴⁸ IOM and EU, *Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile*, 9.

for the divergent level of skill-set obtained by the migrants. Combining all these different types of training programmes and managing them as per the demands of the destination countries are also challenging.

Table 1: Options of Training in the Technical Training Centers (TTCs) Organized by BMET

<i>Diploma in Marine Engineering</i>	<i>Diploma in Ship Building Engineering</i>	<i>Marine Diesel Engine Artificer</i>	<i>Ship Fabrication</i>	<i>Drafting Civil</i>
<i>Drafting Mechanical</i>	<i>Refrigeration & Air-conditioning</i>	<i>General Electronics</i>	<i>Automotive/Automechanics</i>	<i>Carpentry/Wood Works</i>
<i>Plumbing Construction/Civil Construction</i>	<i>General mechanics</i>	<i>Dress Making/Garments</i>	<i>Consumer Electronics</i>	<i>Computer Operation, Troubleshooting & Networking</i>
<i>Pattern Making, Marker Making & Cutting</i>	<i>Electrical Machine maintenance</i>	<i>Welding & Fabrication</i>	<i>Architectural Drafting with Auto CAD</i>	<i>Electrical House Wiring</i>
<i>Arc & Gas Welding</i>	<i>Auto CAD 2D & 3D</i>	<i>Machine Tools Operation</i>	<i>Auto-Mechanics with drioing</i>	<i>Ship Building & mech. Drafting</i>
<i>Building & Architectural Drafting</i>	<i>Welding (6G)</i>	<i>House keeping</i>	<i>Graphics & Design</i>	<i>Fruit & Food processing</i>
<i>Plastic Technology</i>	<i>Catering</i>	<i>Shuttering</i>	<i>Boutique/Block</i>	<i>Rod Binder</i>
<i>Tiles Fixture</i>	<i>Mason</i>	<i>Mechanical Fitter</i>	<i>Sewing Machine</i>	<i>Mid Level Garments Supervisor for RMG Sector</i>
<i>English Language</i>	<i>Korean Language</i>	<i>TIG/MIG Welding</i>	<i>Duct Fabrication</i>	<i>Quality Control Management(Garments)</i>
<i>Sewing machine Maintenance</i>				

Source: BMET

Looking at the list of trainings, one can notice that most of these trainings are focused on developing technical skills. Experts have called for expanding the training opportunities for social skill development, i.e., basic knowledge of culture and tradition of the destined workplace.⁴⁹ There is also a demand for simplifying the migration process and ensuring prompt collaboration among the stakeholders.

Institutionalization of the welfare concerns of the migrant workforce was an eloquent move by the government of Bangladesh. Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) was established in 1990. This fund is supposed to cover a wide range of supportive programmes for the migrants – from online registration to the establishment of one-stop welfare buildings. However, Siddiqui notes a huge discrepancy in the *modus operandi* of welfare management where the spending for

⁴⁹ Mir Mostafizur Rahaman, "Revamping manpower export," *The Financial Express*, February 24, 2018, accessed March 05, 2021, <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/revamping-manpower-export-1519485652>.

the labourers has been cut down.⁵⁰ Instead, money from the welfare fund is being used for opening new branches of the organization and payment of the employees.⁵¹

The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment is responsible for supervising the rules and policies regarding manpower export, i.e., the 1982 Emigration Ordinance and the 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act.⁵² However, both district level and local level offices are often located in 'isolated, lagging' areas.⁵³ These offices have to be properly upgraded and maintained through unanimous frameworks. At the same time, BAIRA struggles in sharing dialogues and mediating among Government to Government (G2G) and private stakeholders. Another great challenge in the institutional process of manpower export is the *dalal* (middleman) system that which leads to informal recruitments, human trafficking, and unauthorized activities.⁵⁴

3.2.3 Legal Challenges

Several policies and legal decorums serve as the base-rules for manpower export in Bangladesh. These are: i) Overseas Employment Act 2013, ii) Emigration Rules 2002, iii) Recruiting agents conduct and license Rules 2002, and iv) Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) Rules 2002.⁵⁵ These rules are drafted under the 1982 Emigration Ordinance. Proper implementation of these legal rules and policies is a major challenge. On the other hand, when it comes to the question of bilateral and multilateral issues, existence and signing of rules are not enough as they still have to be ratified and supported by the respective parliaments of all signatory countries.⁵⁶

Miscommunication and lack of diplomatic momentum in bilateral or multilateral processes thus can unexpectedly disrupt manpower export. For example, Malaysia imposed a ban on manpower export following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. However, some countries were excluded when it started the process again. Bangladesh, despite having a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Malaysia, became one of the victims and some other countries like Nepal got benefited at its expense.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Siddiqui, "International Labour Migration from Bangladesh: A Decent Work Perspective," 10.

⁵¹ Siddiqui, "International Labour Migration from Bangladesh: A Decent Work Perspective."

⁵² World Bank, Institutional Assessment of Migration Systems in Bangladesh: Initial findings meant to inform future areas for Bank support on policy reforms/capacity building (Dhaka: World Bank, 2021).

⁵³ World Bank, Institutional Assessment of Migration Systems in Bangladesh, 13.

⁵⁴ World Bank, Institutional Assessment of Migration Systems in Bangladesh, 15.

⁵⁵ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, accessed March 01, 2021, <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/aboutAction>.

⁵⁶ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training.

⁵⁷ Tasneem Siddiqui, "International Labour Migration from Bangladesh: A Decent Work Perspective," 66.

However, the presence and application of protective laws are also country-specific and sometimes region-specific. In the Middle Eastern countries, prevalent legal maneuvers fail to cover all different kinds of workforces, for example, domestic workers. Again, the facilities and legal or insurance services are too expensive for them to be a part of.⁵⁸ Formatting or amending the laws based on needs is an excruciating task. For instance, the 2006 overseas employment policy was supposed to act as a formalized and sufficient legal platform for advocacy, dissemination of information and providing ample training opportunities for a growing and competent global market.⁵⁹ However, as analysts have found, due to lack of comprehensive action plan and prompt movement, the policy failed to meet the expectations.⁶⁰ It was also not revised or amended until 2013 before turning into Overseas Employment and Migrants act.

Finally, legal options cannot address all sorts of groups, genders, ethnicities and ages and are unable to protect their needs. For instance, although women comprise a small section of the overseas' workforce, they are highly vulnerable to physical, psychosocial and sexual abuse.

4. COVID-19 Pandemic Induced Vulnerabilities

The COVID-19 induced vulnerabilities have multiple dimensions and both short-term and long-term implications on manpower export. This section aims at unfolding those problems and subsequent uncertainties created by the pandemic.

4.1 Movements and Mobilities: Lockdown at Home and Abroad

As mentioned before, Bangladesh imposed an initial lockdown at the end of March 2020. Before the lockdown was declared, only around one lac people could be sent to the destination countries, whereas only Saudi Arabia alone expects around seven lac every year from Bangladesh on an average.⁶¹ At the same time, another one lac aspirant migrants were waiting to go abroad.⁶² The entire process of migration had to be postponed or delayed since most of the destination countries required police clearance and medical certificates.⁶³ From the migrants' point of view, it became

⁵⁸ Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, *Migration and Gender in Asia*, Working Paper 16 (Dhaka: RMMRU, 2013).

⁵⁹ World Bank, Institutional Assessment of Migration Systems, 7-9.

⁶⁰ World Bank, Institutional Assessment of Migration Systems, 7-9.

⁶¹ Shakhawat Hossain, "Bangladesh Bank stresses manpower export," *New Age*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/117296/bangladesh-bank-stresses-manpower-export>, accessed March 06, 2021.

⁶² Shakhawat Hossain, "Bangladesh Bank stresses manpower export."

⁶³ Jamil Mahmud, "New hurdle for fresh migrants," *The Daily Star*, October 19, 2020, accessed March 07, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/new-hurdle-fresh-migrants-1980349>.

more struggling as many of them had already invested a ‘lucrative amount of hard-earned money’ for a possible job opportunity in the overseas market.⁶⁴

Added to that, a significant number of expatriates arrived from abroad who were laid off from their jobs without any compensation.⁶⁵ Until October 2020, around 2,25,000 people came back to Bangladesh.⁶⁶ Many of them were already highly indebted. According to Bangladesh Bank’s report, around 65 per cent of these people had to spend BDT 300,000 for the cost of migration, while around 20 per cent of them had to pay BDT 500,000.⁶⁷ At that time, analysts predicted an overall reduction of global GDP at 5 per cent contraction rate. Therefore, the destination countries were not embracing the new group of migrants being concerned about both economic and health risks.⁶⁸ According to Syeda Rozana Rashid, the challenges during the first wave of the pandemic were mostly social, related to the kind of stigmas they had to face in their localities.⁶⁹ Economic, legal and administrative challenges came to the fore during the second wave. As these challenges arose, the importance of coordination among different stakeholders became evident.

Particularly, migrants had to suffer severely with the issues of vaccination. They had to fulfill the receiving countries’ vaccination requirements if they wanted to remigrate. However, there were few special options for them to get the vaccines earlier. Later, a new issue emerged regarding the vaccination of the returnees. Different destination countries required different standard operating procedures (SOPs) and rt-PCR test certificates. On 18 September 2021, returnees from the KSA protested in front of the Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital demanding Moderna or Pfizer vaccines since Sinopharm vaccine was not being recognized by the KSA authorities.⁷⁰ According to an interviewee, this crisis of vaccination was under the consideration of the government and there was a procedure being taken into account through which the migrants could be prioritized.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Jamil Mahmud, “New hurdle for fresh migrants.”

⁶⁵ United Nations Development Programme, “Covid-19: an uncertain homecoming for Bangladeshi migrant workers.”

⁶⁶ Masud Karim, “Ehono Katychena Probashi Kormider Onishchoyota,” *The Daily Jugantar*, October 27, 2020.

⁶⁷ Masud Karim, “Ehono Katychena Probashi Kormider Onishchoyota.”

⁶⁸ The World Bank, “The Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World,” June 08, 2020, accessed March 02, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/08/the-global-economic-outlook-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-changed-world>.

⁶⁹ Authors’ interview with Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid, Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka, September, 2021.

⁷⁰ “Migrant workers protest in Dhaka over vaccine shots,” *Dhaka Tribune*, September 18, 2021, accessed October 07, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/09/18/migrant-workers-protest-in-dhaka-over-vaccine-shots>; Although these concerns were not primal during the timeline that was specifically taken for this study, the authors opine that vaccination has indeed become a crucial issue and should be incorporated to problematize manpower export in a holistic manner.

⁷¹ Authors’ interview with Md. Nazmul Huda, Director General, Southeast Asia Wing, Ministry of Foreign

Following the initial shock, the Gulf countries were afraid of economic downfall. According to a report published by World Bank in June 2020, the Middle Eastern and North African regions were supposed to have the third-highest downgrade in the GDP growth (4.2 per cent), right after Latin America (7.2 per cent) and Europe and Central Asia (4.7 per cent). As a result, around 50-60 thousand people also lost the opportunity to go outside the country again since they lost work permits or access to their previous job. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has identified migrant workers and returnees as a group “at risk, subject to “high level of socioeconomic marginalization.”⁷² Nevertheless, another group that came back to the country were the prisoners being granted general forgiveness.⁷³ Dealing with this population is critical because the country has to study their records and ensure resettlement if remigration is not possible.

4.2 Job Market, ‘New Poor’ and the Wage Factor

The COVID-19 pandemic brought some new challenges to the prevalent economic conditions of the vulnerable groups. IOM’s Rapid Assessment Report made a study focused on 2,765 respondents, which included 1,486 international returnees.⁷⁴ The report showed that around 55 per cent of the respondents (individually) or their families were indebted to someone. Among them, 47 per cent did not have any household income and 41 per cent had to face a drop in the household income level at 60 per cent rate. However, the greatest challenges were regarding the question of employment. Around 63 per cent of the respondents were struggling to find a job, 21 per cent were facing difficulties with the repayment of debt, and around 29 per cent of them were involuntarily told to leave the country where they were working.⁷⁵

Bangladesh faces challenges with co-opting this newly emerged unemployed population into the existing job sector. After the first lockdown was imposed in March 2020, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) quickly evaluated the job opportunities in the Bangladeshi market. Call for jobs had a 35 per cent reduction in March compared to February and 87 per cent reduction in April compared to March.⁷⁶ In February, the reduction was only 1 per cent compared to January.⁷⁷ The report by IOM mentioned that 32 per cent of the respondents wanted to be self-employed or take a new entrepreneurship, while 97 per cent of them wanted to remigrate to the

Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, October 07, 2021.

⁷² UNDP, “Covid-19: an uncertain homecoming for Bangladeshi migrant workers.”

⁷³ Karim, “Ehono Katycheda Probashi Kormider Onishchoyota.”

⁷⁴ International Organization for Migration, *Rapid Assessment on International Returnees* (Dhaka: IOM, 2020).

⁷⁵ International Organization for Migration, *Rapid Assessment on International Returnees*.

⁷⁶ Binayak Sen, Zulfiqar Ali and Muntasir Murshed, “Poverty in the Time of Corona: Trends, Drivers, Vulnerability and Policy Responses in Bangladesh,” *BIDS Working Paper*, Version: 24-06-2020.

⁷⁷ Binayak Sen, Zulfiqar Ali and Muntasir Murshed, “Poverty in the Time of Corona.”

country they had returned from.⁷⁸ Another study from BIDS brought up the concept of ‘new poor’ - the population “pushed into poverty due to inevitable lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic”.⁷⁹ According to the study, the number of ‘new poor’ in the country might rise from 9.4 million to 35.5 million as a result of the pandemic.⁸⁰ Thus, Bangladesh will also have to find out a balanced job opportunity framework to fit in both the migrant and non-migrant population who are at risk of unemployment and sufferings.

According to a study by RMMRU, there was no flow of remittance during the first three months of 2020.⁸¹ Some of the migrants were given a lump-sum amount which was minimal compared to the wage they were supposed to receive from the authorities in the destination countries.⁸²

The impact of pandemic on the wage distribution of the migrants also has gendered dimensions. As Dr Tasneem Siddiqi explained, women are mostly involved in domestic sectors in the receiving countries. Therefore, male returnees had to face more job loss in the formal sector compared to their female counterparts.⁸³ However, the experience of live-in and live-out migrants differ. Most female migrants were working as domestic house-helps and were under 24-hour scrutiny by the employers during the lockdown. Along with increased workload or partial payment, some of them were forced to reduce communications with their families in the home country.⁸⁴

Migrant workers were also unable to utilize the ‘work from home’ option. Since most of the returnees had been engaged in blue-collar jobs, it was highly unlikely for them to operate from their home country and continue the workflow. Some of them were unable to facilitate the opportunities due to complex institutional mechanisms. For example, although Saudi Arabia, in the earlier days of lockdown, extended the validity of work permits given to the employees from outside of the state (*iqama*), many of the expatriates could not contact the sponsor and utilize the opportunity to extend their permit.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ IOM, *Rapid Assessment on International Returnees*.

⁷⁹ Sen et al., “Poverty in the Time of Corona: Trends, Drivers, Vulnerability and Policy Responses in Bangladesh.”

⁸⁰ Sen et al., “Poverty in the Time of Corona.”

⁸¹ Authors’ interview with Dr. Tasneem Siddiqi, Professor of Political Science, University of Dhaka and Founding Chair of RMMRU, September, 2021.

⁸² Authors’ interview with Dr. Tasneem Siddiqi.

⁸³ Authors’ interview with Dr. Tasneem Siddiqi.

⁸⁴ Authors’ interview with Dr. Tasneem Siddiqi.

⁸⁵ Shahiduzzaman Khan, “Overseas job market in deep crisis,” *The Financial Express*, October 07, 2020, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/overseas-job-market-in-deep-crisis-1602083251>.

An overall reduction in the migrants' wage and associated job loss contributed to the degradation of remittance. Remittance earnings were expected to reduce by 14 per cent by FY 2021.⁸⁶ As per the report of Bangladesh Bank, although in the first year of COVID-19 pandemic, remittance earnings had an upward trend, it began to decrease in mid-2021. In July-August 2021, Bangladesh received US\$ 3.68 billion as remittance, compared to US\$ 4.56 billion in the same period of 2020, which marks a 19 per cent drop.⁸⁷

4.3 *Diplomatic Deficiencies and Legal Challenges*

Both diplomatic and legal areas faced bureaucratic hurdles during the pandemic. In most cases, these areas are covered by Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) and Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs). Bilateral agreements are well recognized by the 2013 Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (Article 25). Additionally, there are also Memorandum of Agreement (MoA), framework agreements and inter-agency understandings.

Most of the good examples of bilateral agreements come from the North-South relationship.⁸⁸ However, most of the destination spots for Bangladeshi migrants are situated in the South, particularly in the Middle East. However, legal frameworks and diplomatic ties often become problematic during a crisis. One example is the case of UAE. Back in February 2020, there was a prediction that the ban on Bangladeshi migrant workers would be lifted after an eight-year block.⁸⁹ However, as a result of the pandemic, the country not only shifted from these probable commitments but also suspended issuance of visa for 12 other countries including Pakistan, one of its closest allies.⁹⁰ There were around 100,000 aspiring migrants in Bangladesh under constant uncertainty.⁹¹ This way, the diplomatic momentum was broken and the blame-game between the countries and different stakeholders continued to make the situation worse.⁹²

Major bilateral or multilateral treaties also do not address a crisis like a pandemic. It is, however, quite understandable since the world has not seen any

⁸⁶ Shahiduzzaman Khan, "Overseas job market in deep crisis."

⁸⁷ "Remittance earnings drop 19% in July-August," *The Business Standard*, September 01, 2021.

⁸⁸ International Labour Organization and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, *Good practices and provisions in multilateral and bilateral labour agreements and memoranda of understanding* (Dhaka: ILO, 2020).

⁸⁹ "UAE to reopen Labour market for Bangladeshis 'very soon': Envoy," *Arab News*, February 01, 2020.

⁹⁰ "UAE to reopen Labour market for Bangladeshis 'very soon': Envoy."

⁹¹ "Virus closes door on 100k Bangladeshi migrants," *Arab News*, August 20, 2020, accessed March 04, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1721921/world>.

⁹² Humaun Kabir Bhuiyan, "UAE job market all but shut for over 7 years," *Dhaka Tribune*, January 14, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2020/01/14/uae-job-market-all-but-shut-for-over-7-years>.

major pandemic like COVID-19 for a very long time. However, the 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act says,

If the Government is satisfied that the migration of Bangladeshi citizens to a particular country shall be against the public or state interest or that their health and safety may be jeopardized in that country, the state may, by order, restrict the migration to that country.⁹³

Diplomatic efforts with other countries are often kept out of the table due to the over-emphasis on Middle Eastern countries. There are reports that in January 2020, Japan had promised to take a significant level of skilled workforce for its labour market.⁹⁴ As soon as the pandemic hit the world, there was hardly any diplomatic initiative taken to address these untapped potentials.

5. Addressing the Vulnerabilities

To address the vulnerabilities, Bangladesh needs to explore new avenues and ensure that both short-term and long-term goals are taken into account. This chapter elucidates five different categories through which the export of manpower in multiple regions of the world can be modified or revisited.

5.1 Exploring New Markets

Already COVID-19 has had some negative impacts on the entire world and limiting options will not be fruitful for Bangladesh. Recently, Bangladesh has signed two MoUs with the Maldives on sending new workers and formalizing documentation of illegal migrants.⁹⁵ From 110,084 migrants who were working in the Maldives in 2019, 15,000 came back to Bangladesh.⁹⁶ However, Maldives is now interested in bringing a new form of skilled labour, more precisely – the nurses. Therefore, it can easily be understood that, although the COVID-19 pandemic has been a curse for the entire country, it has also opened up new markets to explore. Bangladesh hence can look for opportunities in other countries where nursing skills are in demand.

⁹³ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013 (Act No. VLVIII of 2013), Chapter 1.

⁹⁴ Sheikh Iraj, "Bangladesh needs more skilled workforce," *The Independent BD*, January 17, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/232616>.

⁹⁵ "Bangladesh signs deal with Maldives to send workers, regularise undocumented ones," *Bdnews24.com*, March 06, 2021, <https://bdnews24.com/economy/2021/02/09/bangladesh-signs-deal-with-maldives-to-send-workers-regularise-undocumented-ones>.

⁹⁶ "Bangladesh signs deal with Maldives to send workers, regularise undocumented ones."

The government is also looking for alternatives. It has been reported that 50 Bangladeshi migrants are going to visit Romania, and, at the same time, 260 additional visas are under process.⁹⁷ About 240 skilled labour had also been sent to Uzbekistan in 2019.⁹⁸ Among other countries, there are Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Libya, Sudan and South Sudan. For Bangladesh, Africa offers many resourceful options and these potentials must be properly utilized.⁹⁹

Along with country-specific approaches, sector-specific initiatives are also needed. On the other hand, non-government partners can make it handy by contributing to economic diplomacy. The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh suggested private investors to invest more into those countries and create new business opportunities for the migrants who could engage in and utilize their skills.¹⁰⁰ South Africa can be an alternative market for Bangladesh as the country shelters around 300,000 – 400,000 asylum seekers from Bangladesh who are currently working in different business sectors.

Bangladesh's graduation from the LDC status and technological, economic and educational developments can create job opportunities for skilled labourers. Destinations in Europe and North America ask for skilled population for mostly non-blue-collar jobs. Therefore, digitalization, freelancing, small and medium-scale entrepreneurship, telemarketing etc., can be lucrative options for students opting for higher studies and trying to have income options simultaneously.

5.2 Capitalizing Existing Markets

Capitalizing on existing markets can help build new scopes for previously explored areas. By investing limited resources and utilizing limited diplomatic momentum, a smooth and positive transition can be made.

The issue of Japan comes again since the number of migrants going to Japan from Bangladesh is very low compared to the long-standing relationship.¹⁰¹ According to BMET, between 1976 and 2020, only a few thousand Bangladeshi

⁹⁷ "Labour Market: Govt now looking for alternatives," *The Daily Star*, January 21, 2021, accessed March 03, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/labour-market-govt-now-looking-alternatives-2031285>.

⁹⁸ "Labour Market: Govt now looking for alternatives."

⁹⁹ "Labour Market: Govt now looking for alternatives."

¹⁰⁰ Porimol Palma, "Post Covid-19 labour market: Bangladesh eyes Africa," *The Daily Star*, June 14, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/post-covid-19-labour-market-bangladesh-eyes-africa-1914029>.

¹⁰¹ "Japan opens doors to migrant workers. Can Bangladeshis seize the opportunity?," *The Business Standard*, August 08, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/migration/japan-opens-doors-migrant-workers-can-bangladeshis-seize-opportunity-116692>.

migrants migrated to Japan. Japan has extended its hiring targets from 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the total workforce and extended the working period from three years to five years. Considering the booming technological market in Japan, there is a very good opportunity for skilled labours, particularly for the youth.

Good developments in manpower export can also facilitate ‘nation branding’. Bangladesh needs to maintain a stable and positive image among the manpower recruiting countries.¹⁰² It cannot be forgotten how the Rana Plaza incident in 2013 created a negative image of Bangladesh in these countries and several opportunities were suspended or put under hold. Therefore, in the post-pandemic phase, administrative issues relevant to the export of manpower need to be properly executed. The government has already taken some initiatives. These include BDT 2 billion cash initiative for the returning workers and small loans up to BDT 500,000 at 4 per cent interest rate from the *Probashi Kalyan Bank*.¹⁰³ However, the process of vaccination should be carried out specifically targeting vulnerable returning communities so that they can be certified and easily remigrated within the shortest possible time.

It has been reported that 67 per cent of the returnee migrants returned home with no money in their hands.¹⁰⁴ RMMRU’s Regional Multi-stakeholder Consultation on 13th GFMD on 14 January 2021 brought up issues like inter-agency communication between and among countries and reducing the cost of migration. There was a suggestion from the spokesperson from BAIRA to set up support-centres for migrants in each country so that they can easily come up to those places and place their complaints.¹⁰⁵ Among the existing Southeast Asian nations, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei have been highlighted by one of the key informants.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, another multi-actor project is being initiated that involves the CEOs of major export and import oriented manufacturers to facilitate the returnee population’s repatriation and engagement in governmental, non-governmental or semi-governmental sectors based on the needs and availabilities.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Shakhawat Hossain, “Bangladesh Bank stresses manpower export.”

¹⁰³ UNDP, “Covid-19: an uncertain homecoming for Bangladeshi migrant workers.”

¹⁰⁴ “67 per cent migrant workers return empty handed,” *The Daily Prothom Alo (English Version)*, January 28, 2021, accessed March 07, 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/67-per-cent-migrant-workers-return-empty-handed?fbclid=IwAR1TE1PkpCHyoyxOUO5zG6ja3Nc88G5yx5OniffaPIYhqbUUGGPZACXDR8s>.

¹⁰⁵ “Regional Multi-stakeholder Consultation on 13th GFMD,” Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, Live Video, <https://www.facebook.com/RMMRU/videos/84857607235269>, accessed March 06, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ From consultations with Md. Nazmul Huda, Director General, Southeast Asia Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, October, 2021; Mohammed Rehan Uddin, Deputy Secretary, Mission and Welfare Wing, and, Md. Sarwoer Alam, Senior Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment, October, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ From consultations with Md. Nazmul Huda.

5.3 Capitalizing Unskilled and Semi-skilled Labour

While existing and new markets should be the prime focus, capitalizing on unskilled and semi-skilled labour must be considered simultaneously. As mentioned before, the largest section of aspirant migrants falls under those two categories. BMET can announce short time courses based on existing trends or demands. Priority areas can also be listed by looking at Bangladesh's competitors in those countries. For example, in the foreign labour market, India's strength is the IT professionals who mostly take part in skilled jobs.¹⁰⁸ The Philippines has also set a new bar through its growing economy and focus on technology.¹⁰⁹ Having an acceptable level of skill can also help the workers get additional facilities. For instance, in Japan, the expatriate workforce is generally divided into two categories based on their skill set. The category one workers get a renewal of their contract after five years once they complete Japanese language course.¹¹⁰ BMET's four-month long Japanese language course is one of the useful initiatives in this regard.

To compete with the existing market factors, there is no other option for Bangladesh but to take the issue of skill development seriously. It has been reported that the Government of Bangladesh is taking necessary steps to match those skills and utilize the resources properly. According to IOM, an average Bangladeshi worker at a certain period earns half of the earnings of an Indian worker and one-third of a Sri Lankan worker.¹¹¹ Two important reasons mentioned by IOM are: lack of compact and uniform curriculum for skill set and lack of a proper method of recognition. Some of the technical and cognitive skills do not match the skills demanded or recognized by the host countries. Even if the labourers from Bangladesh are apt at developing skills in the new workplace, due to the lack of proper certification from the sending country, they cannot utilize the opportunities.¹¹² These migrants cannot move towards a new or a higher category of jobs. BMET has previously worked with other organizations like Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to arrange different skill development programs for the youth. Collaboration among these different platforms and stakeholders can arrange rapid and prompt responses and collectivize the skill set.

¹⁰⁸ Asian Development Bank, *Labour Migration in Asia: Increasing the Development Impact of Migration through Finance and Technology* (Dhaka: Asian Development Bank, 2018).

¹⁰⁹ Asian Development Bank, *Labour Migration in Asia*.

¹¹⁰ "Dhaka, Tokyo sign MoC for recruiting skilled workers to Japan," *The Daily Star*, August 27, 2019, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/politics/japan-hire-skilled-workers-from-bangladesh-1791376>.

¹¹¹ International Organization for Migration, *Migration and Skills Development*, May 23, 2018, <https://bangladesh.iom.int/news/migration-and-skills-development>.

¹¹² International Organization for Migration, *Migration and Skills Development*.

5.4 *Amending Legal Frameworks*

IOM substantiates the need for change in legal frameworks and providing proper standardization as per the popular demand of the international market. Even skill development is subject to comprehensive legal and policy frameworks. One of the most cited policy frameworks is the National Skill Development Policy 2011 of GoB. It is widely acknowledged that the policy had served compartmentalized, systematized and a base form of framework for any skill development. However, at the same time, it is needless to say that this policy requires a certain degree of revision and amendment to correspond to the current needs.

Another key area is the rights and security concerns of the returnee migrants. Therefore, there is a need for an evaluation or monitoring system to address social and job security concerns. Among the existing good examples, it can be seen that a visit from around 2,555 Bangladeshi attachés in different international workplaces was conducted to ensure proper implementation of labour and migrant rights. This idea can be revisited particularly on a short time basis for the post-COVID-19 period.¹¹³

Except for the Overseas Employment Act 2013, the rest of the rules have not been revised for a long time. These rules, i.e., Emigration Rules, the Recruiting agents conduct and License Rules, and the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) Rules, were developed in the early 2000s, and they can be updated to support current needs. In the face of human right concerns of migrant workers, the WEWF rules are very pertinent. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has provided a list of 27 steps in the migration process of an expatriate worker.¹¹⁴ The necessity to build up training facilities for soft skills, general literacy rate and training for the trainers are highlighted here. Licensing permits and suspension of permits provided to recruitment agencies must also be more structural.

The question of health and safety beyond the borders has to be re-interpreted and properly accentuated in legal documents. Loopholes in acts and policies can certainly be used for different kinds of unfair means against the migrant workforce. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has proposed a fund for the expatriates at the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). However, this kind of initiative requires multi-party agreements, and it is hard to finalize or ratify them quickly.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ "Committee on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers considers initial report of Bangladesh", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, April 04, 2017, accessed March 07, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21478&LangID=E>.

¹¹⁴ "Committee on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers considers initial report of Bangladesh."

¹¹⁵ "Bangladeshi Workers in Middle East: Diplomatic efforts on to stop repatriation," *The Daily Star*, July 09, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/bangladeshi-workers-middle->

In the 2017 OHCHR meeting on the Committee on Rights of Migrant Workers, the questions of recruitment through agents and exorbitant fees were raised.¹¹⁶ In this regard, the example of Singapore is relevant as the migrants here had to pay their agents extremely high fees, sometimes equivalent to two or three times of their annual salaries. This leads to the importance of setting up legal mechanism for justice, complaints and mistreatment in the process. Other relevant policies like the Overseas Employment Policy 2006, Special Privilege Policy of Expatriate Bangladeshis for Remittance, Medical Test Policy for Overseas Employment 2008, etc., have to be amended following recent needs. Especially, the medical test policy has to incorporate the situation of the pandemic - not only the health of the workers themselves but also the condition of their family or family members in the home and abroad.

5.5 *Diplomatic and Transnational Initiatives*

Focusing on diplomatic areas can ensure smooth continuation of transitional policy-oriented issues. One key initiative can be the establishment of consulates in different parts of the destination countries to support the process of easy migration and other official purposes.

Setting up training centers under the consulates of those countries can also be a long-term goal to address the skill level of the migrants. BMET, therefore, can look forward to setting up specialized Technical Training Centres (TTCs) in those countries to continue the trainings that the migrants had been taking in Bangladesh beforehand.

The UAE is an interesting case as many aspirant migrants have reportedly visited the country on tourist visas and tried to get jobs informally.¹¹⁷ The situation is very complex—a number of employers are accepting them, but some are getting betrayed, and they have no other option but to wait for an uncertain future. Introducing digital or ‘smart-card’ can help with the process of verification. The trend of automation and indigenization among the Middle Eastern countries can cause scarcity in demand for cheap labour.¹¹⁸ Extending diplomatic endeavours in diverse countries thus will help Bangladesh in reducing dependence on a particular region.

east-diplomatic-efforts-stop-repatriation-1927309.

¹¹⁶ “Bangladeshi Workers in Middle East.”

¹¹⁷ “Dubai e Sromobazar e Jhunki,” *Ekattor Television*, <https://www.facebook.com/ekattor.tv/posts/5325502820855636>.

¹¹⁸ Brig General Md Manzur Qader (Retd), “OIC, a new emerging Muslim alliance and Bangladesh,” *The Independent BD*, September 20, 2020, accessed March 06, 2021, <https://www.theindependentbd.com/post/253494>.

6. Conclusion

The outbreak of coronavirus and subsequent catastrophes affected the global flow of movement. Migrants represent a vulnerable group in society. In a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, every state needs to take necessary policies to address its vulnerabilities. This article has tried to incorporate the short term and long-term challenges of this pandemic and tried to address them from a holistic perspective.

As the research has found out, COVID-19 pandemic-induced vulnerabilities are not standalone issues, and also, they are not taking place entirely as a result of the incidents happening after March 2020. Therefore, the key here is to look forward to the issues from legal, institutional, diplomatic and policy-oriented perspectives. The core focus shall be on the smooth return of the migrants to the destination countries and on opening up opportunities for the remaining aspirants.

The article has tried to systematically analyze each of the vulnerabilities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Definitely, there is an immediate concern, but crisis-driven decisions at a critical moment can disrupt the entire process and negatively impact Bangladesh's image. One of the major problems with the COVID-19 pandemic is that the situation has an uneven impact on different countries and sectors. There is no alternative to a multi-stakeholder approach. However, a large portion of the activities regarding manpower is still completely under states' control. Policy options suggested in this article, i.e., exploring the older markets, gazing at the newer markets, or arranging programmes to develop the skills, require active participation of both government and non-government stakeholders. Finally, conducting quantitative and qualitative research in this field is important for advancing the debates and providing food for thought. Combining all these concerns, proper implementation of the strategies and their constant evaluation can bring a solution to the problems and ensure the safe return of the returnees.