

Low-skilled temporary migration policies: The case of Bangladesh

Background paper to the *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*

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Abstract

Policy makers in origin countries often struggle to achieve the joint objective of maximizing temporary migration flows and the returns to migrating, while minimizing risks and vulnerabilities among migrants. Using the case of Bangladesh, one of the main origin countries of low-skilled temporary migrants, this paper presents policy lessons on how to better achieve this objective. The paper illustrates that maximizing the returns to low-skilled migration while minimizing its risks requires policy interventions at all stages the migration life cycle: predecision, predeparture, during migration, and after migration. More importantly, it argues that migration policies must consider the interconnections between the different stages of the migration life cycle, and therefore cannot be thought of in isolation. It shows that predeparture policies—in particular, the regulatory framework for the recruitment process of migrant overseas—are key to minimize subsequent vulnerabilities during migration and after return. Beyond policies in the origin country, the paper highlights that protecting migrants against risks and abuses also requires the coordination of numerous actors involved in the migration process, including destination countries but also other migrant sending countries, to avoid a “race to the bottom.” Recent policies implemented by Bangladesh, such as publicly intermediated government-to-government (G2G) arrangements, are a promising alternative to the status quo to reduce migrants’ vulnerability and increase the returns of temporary low-skilled migration.

Keywords: low-skilled emigration, temporary migration, migration policies

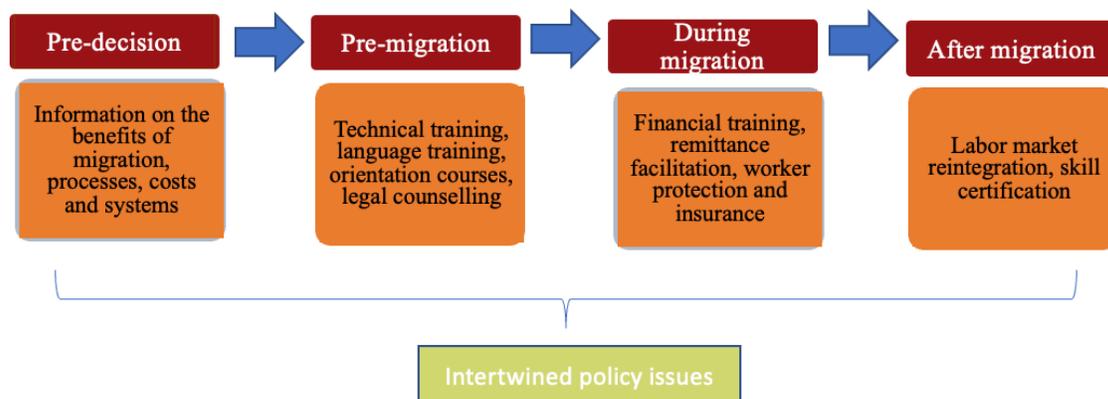
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Introduction

Temporary migration is part of life in many regions of the world, especially for low-skilled workers from low- and middle-income countries (Dustmann and Görlach 2016). Every year, millions of mostly low-skilled workers depart with temporary employment visas and short-term contracts from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East to oil-rich destination countries on the Persian Gulf. Once their contracts expire, workers return to their country of origin (OECD 2008; World Bank 2018). Bangladesh is one of the main senders of low-skilled migrants overseas, ranking fifth in the world in the number of nationals overseas in 2018. Despite the importance of the phenomenon, the empirical and policy literature has traditionally focused on permanent migration from the perspective of high-income destination countries.

The temporary nature of labor mobility from lower-income countries such as Bangladesh requires departing from traditional policy frameworks that treats migration as a permanent, one-time episode. To articulate policy challenges and responses specific to low-skilled temporary migration, this paper relies on the migration life cycle as a policy framework. This framework describes temporary migration as having four stages (figure 1). The first stage is predecision, when a worker weighs the costs and benefits of migrating based on available information and decides whether to migrate overseas. The second stage is predeparture, when, after the worker decided to move overseas, he or she can take steps to improve employability, find and secure a job, obtain the necessary legal documents to migrate (clearances from national authorities, visas, passports, and so forth), and complete the logistical preparations for migration (tickets, financing). The third stage is during migration, when the migrant is employed overseas. The final stage is after migration: that is, after the return to the origin country.

Figure 1. The four stages of the migration life cycle framework for temporary migration policy



Source: Adapted from Ahmed and Bossavie 2022.

At each stage of the life cycle, migrants require information and support from the migration management systems of both their country of origin and the destination country. Because all stages of the life cycle are part of the same lifetime decisions (Dustmann and Goerlach 2016; Bossavie et al. 2021), they cannot be seen in isolation: they are all intertwined, and policies implemented at one stage of the life cycle have dynamic repercussions on other stages. For example, employment outcomes before migration and age at departure are linked to the duration of stay abroad. Duration of stay, in turn is affected by migration costs and wages abroad, which determine how long migrants need to stay overseas to achieve a given savings target. Closing the full cycle, the ability to finance entrepreneurial activities after return will be affected by the monetary costs of migration, wages abroad, and the duration of stay at destination. Policies that aim to influence any of these decisions or outcomes will thus, by the very nature of these links, also influence the

others. It is thus critical for policy makers to consider these links when designing policies related to temporary migration.

At the end of the migration life cycle (the return stage), one key policy challenge is to productively reintegrate temporary migrants into labor markets in the origin country and take full advantage of the human and financial capital they bring back. One critical barrier in achieving this objective is that, almost by design, return migrants currently fall through the cracks of standard registries because they have been away from the country of origin. As a result, they cannot be linked to interventions tailored to their needs to support reintegration and maximize the benefits of their migration experience for the origin country. Addressing this critical gap starts with collecting detailed data on temporary migrants and their migration and employment history at the return stage. Such registries can then be linked to national registries or existing employment registries so that return migrants can be directed to tailored employment interventions to support their needs.

Background and context

Bangladesh is the eighth largest country in the world in terms of population, with about 165 million people. The country has experienced rapid economic growth over the past few decades, with a sharp decline of the poverty rate from 43.5 percent in 1991 to 14.3 percent in 2016. Despite this progress, it remains classified as a lower-middle income country, ranking 171 out of 225 countries in terms of GDP per capita.

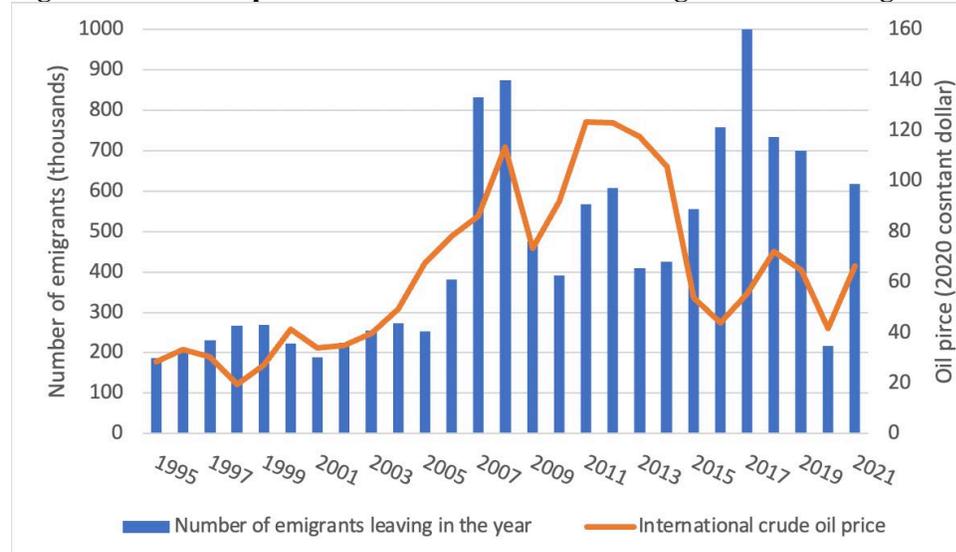
Like many other developing economies, Bangladesh is at a stage of demographic transition with hundreds of thousands of young workers entering the workforce every year. Despite rapid economic development, job creation in the country has not been able to keep up with the massive influx of youth into the labor market. Good-quality, formal, and higher-wage jobs are not being created rapidly enough to accommodate new entries into the labor force (Farole et al. 2017). Labor earnings in Bangladesh remain quite low by international standards, and low-skilled workers can expect to earn about four times more overseas than they would in Bangladesh. In addition to increasing the welfare of migrants and their families during the migration episode, migration can also generate benefits in the longer term by allowing temporary migrants to overcome credit constraints and engage in entrepreneurial activities when they return to Bangladesh (Bossavie et al. 2021). The large monetary returns of migration generate strong incentives for low-skilled Bangladeshi workers to go and work overseas.

Bangladesh is one of the main countries of origin of labor migrants globally. It ranked fifth worldwide in the number of nationals overseas before the COVID-19 pandemic, with an estimated 7.8 million Bangladeshis working abroad in 2018. The magnitude of international labor migration from the country has risen steadily since 1976, driven by an increase in labor demand from the main destinations. Data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) show that the annual outflow of low-skilled workers from Bangladesh has increased from about 200,000 workers in 2000 to well over 500,000 in recent years, with the exception of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (figure 2). During the decade preceding the emergence of COVID-19, more than 750,000 workers emigrated annually. The annual number of labor migrants departing from Bangladesh reached a record high of 1 million workers in 2017, with more than half of them going to Saudi Arabia. The incidence of emigration from the country is also high in relative terms: as of 2017, more than 10 percent of the total male working-age population of Bangladesh (aged 15–64) was currently overseas or had worked there in the past.

As a result, remittances sent by workers from Bangladesh have become an important source of national income. Between 2000 and 2017, remittance inflows increased by almost seven times and grew at an annual rate of about 12 percent. At their peak, between 2008 and 2012, remittances made up one-tenth of the

national GDP. In 2019, Bangladesh was the tenth largest remittance-receiving country globally. Remittances from workers abroad have been a key driver of poverty reduction in Bangladesh, and they continue to provide a large share of household income for poorer households (Hill and Endara 2019; World Bank 2013, 2015).

Figure 2 Annual departures of international labor migrants from Bangladesh, 1995–2020



Sources: Adapted and updated from Bossavie et al. 2021.

Note: Data on annual migration flows from Bangladesh are administrative data from Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET).

Temporary labor migration from Bangladesh is largely low skilled, reflecting the overall low levels of educational attainment among the working-age population by international standards (Barro and Lee 2013). An average migrant from Bangladesh has incomplete secondary education, and one-third of migrants have at most primary education. Despite low levels of educational attainment, international migrants have on average completed two more years of schooling than Bangladeshi workers who do not migrate (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022). Labor migrants are overrepresented among individuals with intermediate levels of schooling, as opposed to individuals with a tertiary education or no education. Consistent with global evidence, migrants from Bangladesh are also disproportionately young adults: the average age of Bangladeshi migrants at destination is 30, significantly younger than the average male in the working-age population. The gender distribution among migrants is also strongly skewed: the vast majority of migrants are males. The prevalence of male labor migration is driven by the low labor force participation of women domestically (Farole et al. 2017), combined with the concentration of foreign labor demand in occupations requiring physical strength, such as construction.¹ Policies in Bangladesh have also been restricting female migration for a long time: semi-skilled and low-skilled migration among women from Bangladesh was banned until the 2000s. The ban was then progressively lifted, leading to an increase in female migration to 12 percent of total migration flows in 2017.²

Oil-exporting member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are the main destinations of migrants from Bangladesh, as for many other countries that send low-skilled migrants. This pattern is driven by a strong demand for low- and semi-skilled labor in the nontraded services sector of the GCC countries, to fill labor shortages in occupations that nationals are unwilling to take. According to administrative data from BMET, more than 80 percent of migrants from Bangladesh go to the Gulf countries. Historically, the leading destinations have been Saudi Arabia (30 percent), the United Arab Emirates (19 percent), Oman

(12 percent), Malaysia (9 percent), Qatar (6 percent), and Singapore (6 percent) . In addition to being heavily concentrated in a few destinations, migrants from Bangladesh are concentrated in a few sectors of employment: more than 60 percent of migrants are employed in the construction sector overseas. The high concentration of Bangladeshi migrants in the construction sector of oil-exporting economies generates significant year-to-year variability in emigration flows, which closely follow fluctuations in oil prices (figure 2).

Low-skilled international migration from Bangladesh is temporary by design, due to labor market regulations and strict residency laws in the main destination countries in the Gulf and Southeast Asia. Migrants' stay in the main destinations is strictly conditional on holding a valid employment contract with an employer overseas. Low-skilled migrants cannot migrate without one, and they must return to their origin country once their employment contract expires or is not renewed. They also cannot retire in the destination country. The average duration of stay overseas of a low-skilled migrant from Bangladesh is about five years, with some variation depending on the destination (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022).

Low-skilled temporary migration policies in Bangladesh

This section describes the migration system currently in place in Bangladesh to achieve the triple policy objective of: (1) maximizing migration flows and remittances; (2) maximizing the benefits of temporary migration for workers, their families, and the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh; and (3) minimizing migrants' vulnerability. Current systems attempt to tackle these issues through policies at each stage of the migration life cycle: predecision, predeparture, during migration, and after migration (Amer and Bossavie 2022; IOM 2018b). This section starts by describing the overall institutional and regulatory framework that governs low-skilled temporary migration from Bangladesh. It then discusses specific policies that are being implemented at each stage of the migration life cycle to optimize the migration process— maximizing its benefits while reducing its risks.

Institutional and regulatory framework

The institutional and regulatory framework that governs low-skilled temporary migration from Bangladesh consists of four building blocks: (1) the institutional framework in Bangladesh; (2) regulations in destination countries; (3) bilateral agreements between Bangladesh and destination countries; and (4) nongovernmental migration programs.

Institutional framework in the origin country

Government institutions

Bangladesh has established a dedicated ministry that aims to enhance overseas employment opportunities for Bangladeshi workers through migration management, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE). The ministry is in charge of the following functions: (1) ensuring the overall welfare of migrants, protecting their rights, and contributing to the socioeconomic development of the country through overseas employment; (2) providing training to ensure the labor force meets the needs of foreign labor markets; (3) managing and enhancing migration systems with existing foreign labor markets while exploring new foreign labor markets and expanding to them; (4) negotiating and signing agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with foreign governments, international organizations concerned with migration, and various other international organizations regarding manpower export and training; and (5) creating public awareness about safe migration process in order to ensure the overall welfare of migrants.

To fulfill these objectives, MEWOE has been formulating and implementing policies and plans; enacting laws, rules, and regulations; and developing projects and programs. The main policy adopted by the ministry to govern low-skilled migration is the 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act, which provides a legal basis for the operations of various migration-related agencies. The Act aims to promote overseas employment and enhance safe migration while supporting the rights and welfare of migrant workers and members of their families. This Act includes a provision to enhance the regulatory oversight of private migrant recruitment agencies. However, the relevant implementing rules of this Act—the Recruitment License and Code of Conduct—were not officially circulated until January 2020. Under the main 2013 Act, several related rules have been formulated, including the 2016 Policy on Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment, which provides a comprehensive labor migration framework with a particular focus on the protection of migrant workers; the 2017 Overseas Employment and Migrants’ Management Rules, which regulate the obtaining of passports, visas, and predeparture training; and the 2018 Migrant Workers’ Registration Rule.

Under the overall authority of MEWOE, a set of four government institutions is in charge of specific functions related to migration: the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET); the Wage Earners’ Welfare Board (WEWB); the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL); and Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB). BMET is the main executive agency in charge of international labor migration in the country. It is responsible for vetting and receiving job demands from foreign employers, providing the necessary clearances to outbound migrant workers, and preparing workers for migration overseas by providing predeparture orientation programs as well as skills training for migrants. It is also in charge of regulating and monitoring private recruitment agencies and can take punitive actions against them. WEWB is responsible for offering welfare support to migrants and their dependents. BOESL offers government-intermediated migrant recruiting services for selected destination countries; these services extend to less than 1 percent of total recruitment. Finally, PKB is a government bank mandated that provides predeparture loans and after-return reintegration loans. Policies related to remittances are managed by the Bangladesh Bank separately from institutions under MEWOE.

Private entities

The core function of labor intermediation is undertaken by Bangladesh’s private sector, mainly due to the government’s limited administrative capacity. There are currently about one thousand migrant recruitment agencies in Bangladesh. Together with their individual agents, they are in charge of disseminating information related to migration opportunities, finding interested and qualified applicants for overseas jobs, and supporting them in the process, as well as matching them to vacancies in foreign labor markets. Both recruitment agencies and their agents are registered entities; however, their informal subagents (dalals), which they rely on to reach out to workers—especially in more remote rural areas—are not legally registered and also are not covered by the 2013 Overseas Employment and Migration Act. These generally unlicensed intermediaries are embedded in the local communities and serve the important function of linking migrants with recruitment agents. They offer a service package that includes handling visas, tickets, BMET clearance, and insurance in return for a high fee. These subagents are typically members of the aspiring migrants’ social networks, such as relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Nongovernmental organizations

In addition to government-led policies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh have been playing an important role in the development and improvement of migration systems through specific programs targeted at the poorest and most vulnerable migrants. BRAC—the leading NGO in Bangladesh—has been offering a full “360-degree” service to poor and vulnerable migrants to ensure the safe, regular, and responsive migration of these workers. BRAC’s migration program provides support to poor and vulnerable migrants at each stage of the migration life

cycle: before, during, and after migration. It aims to improve knowledge about migration, reduce illegal practices by recruitment agencies, and improve contact between relevant agencies in destination countries and in Bangladesh (Sarker 2018). From 2006 to 2018, BRAC provided 937,000 potential migrants with information regarding safe migration and reintegration. Several CSOs, including the Awaj Foundation, BOMSA, the Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), and the Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Programme (OKUP), have also been playing important roles in promoting a rights-based protection regime for migrants at various stages.

Regulations in destination countries

Low-skilled temporary migration from Bangladesh is also governed by regulations in destination countries. In the 1950s, the Gulf states—the main destination of low-skilled migrants from Bangladesh—adopted a new approach to procuring foreign labor, the so-called kafala (sponsorship) system, which requires foreign labor migrants to obtain the sponsorship of a citizen or a government entity in the destination country, including for a visa and work permit. Under these sponsorship rules, labor migrants can enter and stay in the country only through a sponsor, a local employer who takes on both legal and economic responsibility for the migrant. These contracts are typically of fixed duration and tied to a specific employer, but they can be extended, which allows migrants to stay longer than their original contract stipulated. In this context, the termination or nonrenewal of the work contract entails mandatory return to Bangladesh. Although the main destination countries in Southeast Asia do not have a sponsorship program per se, stays in these destinations are also tied to holding an employment contract. In addition, the total duration of stay of low-skilled migrants is capped at 8 years in Singapore and 10 years in Malaysia. While there is no official cap in duration of stay in the GCC countries, migrants cannot retire at destination because residing overseas is conditional on being employed. The acquisition of citizenship or permanent residency in destination countries is also effectively impossible, irrespective of migrants' occupation, education, nationality, or duration of stay (Fargues 2011; Fargues and Bel Air 2015; Wahba 2015). Furthermore, low-skilled migrants are not allowed to take their families with them in the main destination countries, providing additional incentives to return to Bangladesh (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022).

Given the abundance of low-skilled labor from Bangladesh and other migrant-sending countries, as well as the large returns to migrating (Mobarak, Sharif, and Shrestha 2020), the supply of low-skilled foreign labor relative is well in excess of demand from destination countries. To limit and regulate these flows, the main destination countries in the GCC and Southeast Asia set quotas for low-skilled foreign labor on a yearly basis. In the GCC countries, these quotas are closely tied to fuel exports, the single-most important source of income and a major determinant of demand for foreign labor. As a result, labor demand is the binding constraint while the labor supply of foreign labor is quite elastic. This generates significant year-to-year variability in emigration flows from Bangladesh, which are closely aligned with fluctuations in oil process (figure 2).

Agreements between destination and migrant-sending countries

Bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) between Bangladesh and destination countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia are common practice to regulate and manage migration flows. Several hundred thousand low-skilled workers from Bangladesh migrate every year under such temporary labor agreements. A BLA is essentially a legal agreement between countries to ensure that migration takes place in accordance with agreed-on principles and procedures. These agreements, for example, fix the maximum quotas of manpower that can migrate temporarily between origin and destination each year and regulate important conditions that affect labor migrants' contract durations, renewal policies, minimum wages, and, in principle, migration costs. For origin countries, these agreements ensure continued access to overseas labor markets and opportunities to promote protection and welfare of their workers. For destination countries, bilateral

labor agreements help achieve a flow of labor that meets the needs of employers and industrial sectors while allowing that flow to be managed and regulated.

BLAs in place between Bangladesh and the main destination countries are of two types. The first type of BLAs are privately intermediated, meaning that the government of Bangladesh delegates the labor intermediation between prospective migrants and foreign employers to private agencies. This type of arrangement predominates in the context of low-skilled migration from Bangladesh, especially with destination countries in the GCC. The second type of BLAs are publicly intermediated; the government of Bangladesh, together with the destination country government, directly takes charge of intermediation activities. Those are the minority in the Bangladesh context because they require special administration to ensure their smooth implementation.³ Examples of publicly intermediated government-to-government (G2G) programs include the agreement between Bangladesh and Malaysia for agricultural work in the palm oil sector, and the Employment Permit System (EPS) with the Republic of Korea. Beyond these two programs, the MEWOE's in-house recruitment agency, BOESL, administers other programs with Jordan and Japan that are similar, but smaller in scale, than the Korean EPS.

Less formal than BLAs are Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs). Those are often preferred both by the government of Bangladesh and destination countries due to their flexibility. Compared to BLAs, MoUs are nonbinding agreements that are easier to negotiate, implement, and modify according to changing economic and labor market conditions. The effectiveness of MoUs is thus largely determined by subsequent implementation and enforcement (IOM 2011). Bangladesh, for example, signed MoUs with the United Arab Emirates in 2007 that aim to regulate the employment of the relevant temporary contractual workers, reduce the role of illegal recruitment agencies, and diminish labor abuse, among other issues. In 2015, Bangladesh signed another MoU with Saudi Arabia concerning the recruitment of female domestic workers, lifting the ban Saudi Arabia had imposed in 2008 on Bangladeshi migrants. In the MoU, the Saudi government set quotas for the recruitment of female Bangladeshi labor migrants by agencies (World Bank 2018).

Predecision policies

At the predecision stage, workers weight the costs and benefits of migration based on the information available to them, to decide whether to go work overseas or in Bangladesh. At this stage, two types of policies play a critical role: (1) provision of information on migration opportunities; and (2) regulations controlling migration costs. These policies affect not only how many and which type of individuals migrate overseas, but also have dynamic repercussions on the trajectories of migrant workers by affecting outcomes both during migration and after return. Once migrants have arrived at the destination country, inaccurate information provided to them before they left, for example, affects their decision to return early due to disappointment, or, on the contrary, induces migrants to stay longer than expected to achieve a targeted level of savings. Similarly, migration costs can affect when migrants leave, how long they stay at destination, and even what they do after they return to Bangladesh (Bossavie et al. 2021). In combination with the regulatory framework that governs low-skilled migration from Bangladesh, migration costs can also affect the bargaining power of migrants with respect to their employer at destination and place them in vulnerable situations (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022).

Information provision

Despite the importance of low-skilled temporary migration for Bangladesh, formal governmental sources of information about employment opportunities overseas are currently quite limited. BMET maintains multiple but unconnected databases of prospective migrants who are seeking information, trying to match with employers, and seeking financing. As a result, Bangladesh does not have a formal labor market information system for employment overseas. Furthermore, job opportunities overseas are typically not

publicly advertised because the government only permits recruitment agencies to advertise vacancies in the newspapers (subject to the government's prior approval) if they do not find qualified workers.

MEWOE, BMET, WEWB, and the District Employment and Manpower Offices (DEMOs) are also in charge of disseminating information related to safe migration practices. As part of celebrating International Migrants' Day each year, MEWOE circulates leaflets and organizes public rallies to create awareness among prospective migrants. BMET authorizes DEMOs to offer predecision information. DEMOs collaborate with local NGOs and local government officials during their monthly meetings at the field level to share information on safe migration in all districts of Bangladesh. However, these information centers do not currently have the capacity to reach the masses, especially in rural areas. Communication campaigns are currently being run by various organizations, although often on too modest a scale to reach relevant rural areas.

In this context, information about foreign employment opportunities is primarily disseminated through social networks and private intermediaries, especially among prospective migrants from remote rural areas. Recruitment agencies and aspiring migrants alike rely on additional intermediaries, referred to by different names, such as middlemen, subagents, or dalals (in Bangladesh). These individual recruitment agents go to villages, disseminate job information, and scout out workers for recruitment companies in main cities. Subagents typically support them by disseminating information, mobilizing potential applicants, and collecting documentation at all stages of the migration process. These intermediaries are embedded in the local communities and serve the important function of linking migrants with recruitment agents. Prospective migrants seek information about overseas employment opportunities from these individual intermediaries primarily because of trust, proximity, and access to support services. Workers from rural areas, who have limited, if any, access to information, are most likely to use such middlemen for information.

Community-driven information programs through NGOs and CSOs are also being implemented in Bangladesh. These programs are targeted to the poorest and vulnerable households and remain limited in scale in comparison to the overall magnitude of migration from Bangladesh. The migration program of BRAC, the leading NGO in Bangladesh, leverages an intensive community-based approach to improve information provision to prospective migrants. The program provides information to and orients potential migrants and their families about the social and economic costs and benefits of migration, and how to navigate the migration process safely and finance migration and manage remittances effectively. The program relies heavily on local NGOs and community-based organizations to reach potential migrants and provide them with information and training. Their voluntary members are from the local community, including returning migrants who are respected by migrant workers (Sarker 2018). In addition to the BRAC program, other smaller-scale CSOs such as BOMSA, OKUP, and RMMRU have field-level programs that disseminate migration information. Several local NGOs receive support from UN Women to offer predecision awareness campaigns targeting women and people with low socioeconomic status. Information campaign tools include door-to-door information services, courtyard meetings, popular theatre shows, and counselling.

Migration cost policies

In a context of large excess supply of foreign labor compared to demand in destination countries, policies and regulations in Bangladesh have a critical role to play in ensuring that migration remains affordable, especially for workers from poorer households who can benefit the most. In principle, regulations in Bangladesh together with bilateral agreements fix the official cost of migration: for example, as a function of earnings potential at a specific destination (MEWOE 2017). The government of Bangladesh has also set country-specific ceilings for the recruitment agencies to charge jobseekers and has fixed the maximum migration costs for low-skilled male and female migrant workers.

In practice, migration costs are set and charged to migrants by intermediaries and their unofficial subagents working under private recruitment agencies. While one of BMET's function is to monitor agencies and take punitive actions against their irregular practices, implementation capacity is weak in practice. In addition, informal subagents (dalals) working with private agencies are excluded from the coverage of the Migrants Act 2013. As a result, intermediaries and their unofficial subagents often take advantage of their market power to charge very high fees to prospective migrants, which far exceed the official costs stipulated by government agencies. The average intermediary costs paid by migrants from Bangladesh amount to about US\$2,000, and constitute more than half of the total migration costs paid by Bangladesh workers, which are among the highest in the world (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022). They are especially high when compared to wages earned in Bangladesh and overseas.⁴

Given the very high costs of migration compared to wages in Bangladesh, most migrants borrow to finance their migration episode. According to the World Bank Bangladesh Return Migrant Survey (BRMS), more than 60 percent of temporary migrants borrowed to migrate overseas, and among those, more than one-third entirely financed their migration episodes through loans. The only state-owned and migration-focused bank, PKB, offers Tk 200,000 (US\$2,500) loans to finance the costs of migration for a first-time migrant and Tk 100,000 (US\$1,250) loan to a returnee opting for remigration. The NGO BRAC offers migration loans for outgoing migrants with an upper limit of Tk 500,000 (US\$6,250) at a high interest of 25 percent. About one-third of migrants, however, do not borrow from private or government banks or use NGO migration loans and rely instead on unregulated informal money lenders, which charge even higher interest rates (Shrestha, Mobarek, and Sharif 2019).

To reduce the costs of migration, the government of Bangladesh has launched several smaller-scale programs with select destination countries. Those agreements are entirely managed by origin and destination country governments without any private intermediation. Under those agreements, migration costs are set through negotiations between the two governments, and actually implemented. One example is the Korean EPS program, which is managed directly by Human Resource Development Korea and open to Bangladesh, among other countries that send low-skilled migrants. Under this program, temporary migrants pay about US\$900 to migrate, compared to more than US\$4,000 with privately intermediated programs to the same destination. A second example is the government-to-government agreement between Bangladesh and Malaysia for agricultural work in the palm oil sector, for which migrant workers pay only about US\$500 compared to US\$4,500 with private intermediation. These G2G programs, however, require substantial investments in government capacity for sustained service delivery. As a result, they remain low-scale compared to the magnitude of low-skilled migration from Bangladesh: between 2008 and 2017, 16,721 migrants were sent to Korea. Similarly, the Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G program experienced excess demand from aspiring migrants, with about 1.4 million eligible candidates applying for the 30,000 vacancies (Shrestha, Mobarak, and Sharif 2019).

Predeparture policies

Labor intermediation

Once low-skilled workers have made the decision to migrate and have secured funding, a critical step of the migration process is to find an employer overseas. This stage is essential and mandatory in the context of low-skilled migration from Bangladesh, as for many other migrant-sending countries to the Gulf, because temporary migrant workers cannot move to these destinations without the sponsorship of a specific foreign employer.

There is currently no formal, systematized procedure to match prospective migrants to employers overseas, even for destinations where there is a significant history of immigration from Bangladesh. This is partly driven by the type of employment low-skilled temporary migrants from Bangladesh take up at destination,

which are largely based on physical strength and do not require specific technical skills. As a result, there is a presumably a high degree of substitutability between foreign workers, which limits the gains of using more sophisticated matching procedures. The main tasks of intermediation—finding interested and qualified applicants for overseas jobs and matching them to the positions—are undertaken by private recruitment agencies, their agents, and subagents (Das et al. 2019). Job offers by employers are sent directly to private agencies, or directly to BOESL in the case of government-recruited migration, which are in charge of finding suitable workers through their middleman. While some of these middlemen are based in Bangladesh, many are friends or relatives of prospective migrants who are already overseas. Middlemen help migrants with key services related to matching with employers, including arranging interviews, preparing for interviews, and accompanying them to various places (such as to medical tests or the airport) as needed.

Some of the smaller-scale government-led intermediation programs implemented with select destinations utilize a more systematized and formal approach to employee-employer matching. High-quality intermediation is offered as part of the Korean EPS program, for example. Employers' needs for skills and workforce size are closely monitored to facilitate the rigorous matching of migrant workers to employers. Under the EPS, selected migrants must meet rigorous qualifications, including proficiency in the Korean language and other skills, and must come from a preselected list of destinations through a process that is completely managed by Human Resources Development Service of Korea (Cho et al. 2018). The hiring of foreign workers as part of the EPS program is a strict step-by-step process. Candidates are eligible if they are between the ages of 18 to 39 and pass a basic Korean language exam. An agency in the origin country (a public employment body) then assesses their qualifications and holds their profiles in the application pool for one year. The information is then sent to the respective department of the Korean government, which checks the qualifications of foreign job applicants. The Korean government also ensures that the small and medium enterprises that want to hire foreign labor migrants receive prior authorization (ADB, OECD, and ILO 2019). As a result, migrants and employers in Korea do not need to rely on informal brokers to find workers.

Predeparture orientation and training

Once low-skilled temporary migrants have completed the different steps to be able to migrate overseas, they need to be sufficiently prepared to maximize the benefits and reduce the risks associated with migrating overseas. This includes being equipped with knowledge and skills required to perform well on the job at destination, being aware of the legal and logistical procedures to complete at destination, knowing their legal rights and possible recourse with employers at destination, and understanding the culture and work practices in destination countries.

BMET currently offers predeparture orientation to prepare workers for work and life overseas. It provides two types of predeparture orientation in 62 of its training centers: a three-day mandatory predeparture orientation; and a seven-day predeparture orientation for labor migrants to Korea. The topics covered include: (1) migration requirements (medical tests, certification, and documentation); (2) work contracts; (3) immigration and flight procedures; (4) working conditions, rules, and regulations, and culture and code of conduct in the destination country; (5) workplace safety; (6) access to support from the embassy, legal aid, and health and insurance in a foreign country; (7) safe remittance and banking procedures; (8) physical and psychological health; and (9) return and reintegration challenges. However, these modules are typically restricted to simple logistical information to migrants about life abroad, including rules, employment, resources available in times of difficulty, culture, and finances. They typically deliver basic information in a rather perfunctory manner, and sometimes omit essential information, such as how to obtain necessary paperwork. In addition, these orientation programs are often very generic and do not consider the specific contexts of migrants' destinations or the relevant sector of employment.

Regarding skill training for migrants, many privately managed and government-accredited private technical training centers (TTCs) in Bangladesh offer a wide range of skills training program. TTCs, operating under BMET, provide training to a wide array of people in diverse trades. Currently, female domestic workers going to the Middle East are required to undertake a 30-day mandatory training free of cost from the TTCs. These centers do not maintain any database of their graduates and their career paths, so there is no mechanism in place to determine how many TTC graduates have pursued an overseas career.⁵ These trainings are also not compulsory and are concentrated in high-density areas of Bangladesh, whereas many migrants originate from more remote rural areas. As a result, the uptake of these training programs is rather low.

In addition to government-managed skill trainings, several private recruitment agencies (PRAs) have their own training facilities, where aspirant migrants acquire professional skills before their overseas deployment. These facilities comprise about 5 percent of the market share in skills training provision. In most cases, these trainings are provided as part of the PRA's recruitment contract and are covered by total recruitment costs. They mainly provide training for construction work and cleaning. Some facilities also collaborate with BMET and five TTCs to facilitate housekeeping training for female migrant workers.

Policies while migrants are abroad

Once temporary migrants have departed overseas, a critical element of low-skilled temporary migration policies is to ensure sufficient protection of migrants in the main destinations. This is especially important because regulations of the main destination countries offer little protection to low-skilled migrants. Migrants' protection starts with policies before departure discussed in the previous subsections: for example, by ensuring migrants have accurate information about safe migration overseas and pay reasonable costs to reduce vulnerability to employers at destination. Once migrants' have departed, origin countries can also implement policies to reduce migrant vulnerabilities and ensure protection against possible abuses by foreign employers.

Given the large excess supply of foreign low-skilled labor to GCC and Southeast Asian countries, governments of migrant-sending countries such as Bangladesh seemingly face a policy trade-off regarding the protection their migrant workers. On the one hand, protecting migrants is needed to maximize the returns of the migration episode for workers, their families, and the origin country economy. On the other hand, governments from origin countries can be tempted to minimize workers' protection regulations to make their low-skilled workforce more attractive to foreign employers in a so-called "race to the bottom." For example, after India implemented a new system to enhance their migrants' protection, including the issuance of a contract specifying that the worker will receive at least a minimum wage set by the Indian government, Saudi Arabia signed a less restrictive MoU with Bangladesh in the same year. Subsequent migration flows from Bangladesh soared while those from India collapsed (Amer and Bossavie 2022).

The vulnerability of migrants at destination is made especially acute by regulations in the main destination countries, in particular in the GCC, with its kafala (sponsorship) system. The system even used to grant employers the right to withhold workers' passports and to send them back to their origin countries at will, at any time, although reforms in recent years have sought to reduce the prevalence of these abuses (Malit and Naufal 2016).

Labor attachés

Labor attachés are one common mode by which the government of Bangladesh provides on-site support services to its migrant workers within the laws and regulations of destination countries. Labor attachés have been entrusted with the responsibility of dealing with host country authorities, employers, and recruiting agencies to protect migrants. Practically, the functions of the labor attachés include authentication and verification; approval of documents pertaining to recruitment; counseling and assistance to workers in

settling disputes related to work contracts; market exploration; assistance to workers in claiming termination benefits to which they are legally entitled; registration of death and assistance in follow-up work with sponsors and local authorities, including local burial or transportation of the body; assistance to family members in claiming compensation for death due to accidental or other unnatural causes; and assistance in taking up problems of a personal nature faced by migrants or their kin in countries of origin (Abrar et al. 2014).

Welfare funds

Another mechanism to support migrant workers is migrant welfare funds, although these funds are financed by migrant worker fees and their functions are currently limited. Until 2018, the scope of protection services was limited to extreme cases of distress such as sickness, disability, or death. Services cover the repatriation of migrants, and compensation and financial assistance to migrant workers for disability or to their families for occupational death. The Wage Earner's Welfare Board is also used to provide predeparture briefings and legal support. Coverage does not, however, include mental health issues. Thus, when compensation is awarded for abuse, it is only a portion of the money due to abused migrants in unpaid wages, and does not include compensation for harm suffered (United Nations Children's Fund and Global Migration Group 2014). In 2018, the Welfare Fund was reformed to become the Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB), under an Act of the same name. This reform is aimed to decentralize WEWB activities to the field level and broaden its scope of services.

Bilateral agreements

High-quality bilateral agreements with destination countries are also important instruments to protect low-skilled migrants and improve their welfare outcomes while overseas. Bangladeshi migrants who participate in the EPS in Korea are paid Korean minimum wages, are able to change employers, have access to grievance redressal mechanisms, and are covered by Korean labor laws against abuse and exploitation. Within the EPS, Korea provides various services to foreign workers, such as the resolution of workplace conflicts, integration in the national community, and assistance finding new jobs (Cho et al. 2018). The EPS, however, is a channel for relatively modest demand from Korea (relative to labor demand from GCC countries, for example), with a total of about 30,000 workers needed from all migrant-sending countries combined.

Remittances

One of the most important services required by migrants abroad is the safe and low-cost transfer of remittances. The Bangladesh Bank has authorized a number of private banks and relevant institutions to facilitate the transfer of remittances from overseas employees. Although the state-run Probashi Kallyan Bank has planned to do so, it has yet to start offering remittance transfer services. Remittance transfer services are usually offered by public and private banks, online money transfer agencies such as Western Union and MoneyGram, and migrants themselves. Almost all the private banks operating in Bangladesh offer remittance transfer services.

Policies at the return stage

In Bangladesh and many other low-skilled migration contexts, returns are an integral part of the migration life cycle because migrants cannot permanently stay in destination countries. The return stage is critical for origin countries and temporary migrants to reap the full benefits of the migration experience, beyond remittances sent during the migration episode. International evidence shows that temporary migrants accumulate human capital and savings overseas that can ultimately benefit the origin country (Bossavie and Özden 2022). The benefits of return migration for the origin country and migrants, however, depend on whether the right policies are in place in the origin country to fully benefit from the migration experience.

Returns to the origin country can be either planned or unexpected. Unexpected or forced returns are especially common in the context of low-skilled temporary migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf because stay at destination is strictly conditional on employment, and thus directly affected by negative shocks in destination countries.⁶ Temporary migrants who unexpectedly return are especially vulnerable: they have paid very high upfront costs to go overseas, often by taking loans; are not able to stay as long and to earn as much as expected overseas; and may not find employment in Bangladesh upon return. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light vulnerabilities faced by forced returnees. Most of them existed before the pandemic and are likely in the case of forced return due to any future shocks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all migrant workers (87 percent) who returned to Bangladesh in the first quarter of 2020 were found to either lack any source of earnings since returning or to be dependent on family members or minor agricultural activities (BRAC 2020). Because of the high levels of debt they took on to migrate and the unexpectedly short duration of their stay at destination (because of the pandemic), most return migrants are reportedly liquidating savings or taking loans from various formal or informal sources.

Although efforts have been made in recent years, Bangladesh currently lacks a formal and systematized approach to support return migrants' reintegration into domestic labor markets or to remigrate overseas. Policies implemented for temporary migrants at the return stage have mostly been one-time programs focused on forced/unexpected returns due to specific negative shocks, rather than being systematized. In addition, most of these programs have been small scale. The Prottasha program was put in place by both the International Organization for Migration and the European Union to reintegrate migrants who were forced to return from Europe after holding irregular immigration status. The support to return migrants was provided in the returnees' home districts and consisted of four main interventions: (1) social support, including psychosocial support; (2) awareness-raising programs; (3) economic empowerment; and (4) institutional development. The third component included entrepreneurship and motivational skill training, vocational skills training, access to finance, and referrals to economic reintegration services. The effectiveness of the intervention is unclear because no impact evaluation has been undertaken.

The government of Bangladesh also implemented support programs targeted at reintegrating forced returnees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with the World Bank, a program implemented by the WEWB under MEWOE delivers services to return migrants who are interested in either sustainable reintegration into the domestic labor markets or to access services to prepare for remigration. Specifically, the program offers training, counseling, recognition of prior learning, and social reintegration and referral services, as well as cash transfers to cover immediate needs to workers who returned from overseas in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The program also aims to build interventions and systems that can be used in the medium term to support returnees beyond the pandemic context. In line with this effort, the government of Bangladesh is now in the process of preparing a reintegration policy to respond more broadly to the return phase in the medium and long term.

A few other programs have also been implemented to support temporary migrants who returned under more standard conditions. These programs are small scale and are not systematized, and typically are implemented by NGOs and CSOs. For example, BRAC, as part of its migration program, has been providing psychological services, training, and financial support to facilitate the socioeconomic reintegration of return migrants. Together with the World Bank, BRAC has also implemented a pilot project supported by UN Women that offers income-generating activities and skills development training sessions for return migrant workers, especially women, in Bangladesh (Sarker 2018).

Some limited support to return migrants is also provided as part of government-intermediated programs with select destination countries. For example, the government-to-government EPS program with Korea includes support for the repatriation of migrants. While efforts to help returnee workers utilize their improved skills and financial resources in their origin countries are under way, current policies are primarily aimed at ensuring that temporary migrants return in a timely manner, rather than facilitating their

reintegration in domestic labor markets. Those programs, for example, provide repatriation cost insurance for returning migrants together with support in the form of a lump-sum payment for reintegration in Bangladesh upon completion of the contract period.

Policy results and impacts

The BLAs and MoUs put in place with the main destination countries have been effective in increasing the inflow of Bangladeshi labor migrants to GCC countries. In 2007, when Bangladesh signed the MoU with the United Arab Emirates, the inflow of Bangladeshi labor migrants to the United Arab Emirates was roughly 226,000, a 74 percent increase over the previous year's total of about 130,000. In 2008, the inflow increased again by 85 percent to about 419,000. Finally, when Bangladesh signed the MoU with Saudi Arabia in 2015, the number of Bangladeshi labor migrants was approximately 58,000, more than four times higher than in the previous year (roughly 11,000); in 2016, the inflow further increased to about 144,000.

Ensuring the protection of low-skilled migrants through these agreements has been more problematic. The enforcement mechanisms of the BLAs and MoUs remain weak, leading to gaps between de jure and de facto agreements. There is currently a lack of transparency in the bilateral negotiation process and secrecy around the agreements, which makes it difficult to work with destination countries on issues affecting migrants while in their jurisdiction. A lack of mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation hinders proper enforcement of BLAs (Migrant Forum in Asia 2014). The general and vague objectives set out in bilateral instruments make it difficult to follow up on state obligations, and the secrecy of negotiations prevent legislatures and people from holding their governments accountable. The implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of BLAs and MoUs are feasible only if the process is open and inclusive of relevant stakeholders. In addition, the BLAs and MoUs signed by Bangladesh often fail to reflect national laws, let alone relevant international human rights and labor rights treaties. As a result, they overlook fundamental issues in the protection of the rights of migrant workers and members of their families (Migrant Forum in Asia 2014). In destination countries, there is no trace of government action to implement agreed-on provisions of the MoUs, such as strengthened workplace inspection procedures and increased awareness of workers' rights on the part of employers.

Publicly intermediated government-to-government agreements between Bangladesh and select destination countries, however, have been very effective in improving migrant workers' welfare and reducing vulnerability. A rigorous impact evaluation of the Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G program showed that the G2G program reduced migration costs by a factor of 8, borrowing by 16 percentage points (19 percent), the average amount borrowed by Tk 136,000 (72 percent), and average interest rates by 6 percentage points compared to private intermediation (Mobarak, Sharif, and Shrestha 2020). The program increased migrants' net earnings from a three-year migration, after deducting the cost and interest payments, by 87 percent, compared to private channels. Migrants participating in G2G arrangements were also more likely than migrants who went through private channels to migrate with necessary clearances, training, orientation, employment contracts, and proper insurance. They were also likely to start work earlier upon arrival and have contracts that allow for extensions. Korea's EPS has also led to significant welfare improvements for migrant workers along multiple dimensions. Migrating through this program resulted in a drastic reduction of migration costs from US\$4,000 for privately intermediated migration to US\$900 under the program. Because migrants earned Korean minimum wages and paid significantly lower migration costs, they were able to remit a larger share of their earnings and larger absolute amounts (ADBI, OECD, and ILO 2019). Temporary migrants who took part in the G2G agreement reported satisfaction with their contract-based salaries, benefits, and low living expenses. The program also reduced reliance on informal brokers and sharpening respect for the rights of labor migrants overall.

The current lack of formal information sources about migration opportunities in Bangladesh has multiple adverse consequences on migration decisions and migrants' outcomes. First, it reduces access to migration

among the working-age population, which lacks social networks: among workers who migrate through private channels, 30 percent had family or relatives in the destination country compared to only 7 percent of the working-age population. Second, this leads to frequent migration failures. One-third of migration attempts from Bangladesh currently end in failure, which imposes a very large cost for already poor households, with a medium loss of US\$250 (Das et al. 2019). Third, individuals who manage to migrate often lack information on how to migrate safely, which can place them in vulnerable situations. Although disseminating information about safe migration is one of MEWOE's official functions, 60 percent of migrants had never been exposed to information about safe migration. Of those who had learned about safe channels, 58 percent said their source of information was their friends rather than any official channel (IOM 2018a). Finally, migrants are often disappointed by outcomes at destination. They often find the work abroad to be very different from what they had anticipated (Das et al. 2019) and receive lower wages than they expected: more than three-quarters of return migrants in Bangladesh earned less overseas than they expected before they left, and their actual wage represented on average, only two-thirds of what they anticipated. As a result, many migrants return earlier than expected or overstay illegally to achieve their targeted savings (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022).

In contrast with largely unregulated information provision through private intermediaries, community-driven information can ensure more accurate provision of information to prospective migrants and reduce vulnerability along several dimensions. The Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Workers pilot program—supported by the World Bank and implemented by BRAC—was found to reduce the rate of migration among poor households, which had better information about the costs and benefits of migration (Das et al. 2019). As a result, the rates of migration failure declined: the proportion of poor households whose chosen migrant either did not depart or had to return prematurely dropped significantly.

The lack of policies regulating de facto migration costs for private intermediation results in intermediaries taking advantage of their market power to charge very high fees. Intermediaries' costs equate to about two and a half years of the median household income in Bangladesh, and much more for the poorest households. Those extremely high costs represent a substantial barrier to migrating for the poorest households in Bangladesh, which would otherwise benefit from migration the most. As a result, only 2 percent of the households in the first and second consumption deciles have one or more migrating family members, compared to about 12 percent in the top quintiles (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022).

The high upfront costs paid by migrants, together with migration regulation in destination countries and the limited protection offered by origin countries, exposes low-skilled migrants from Bangladesh to abuses at destination. In a context of very high upfront migration costs, migrants need to spend enough time working for their employer overseas—at least about one year—to just break even on their original investment. This creates strong incentives to keep working for the employer, irrespective of working conditions, exposing migrants to abuses. This exposure is facilitated by the kafala (sponsorship) system that prevails in GCC countries, which makes it practically very difficult to switch employers at destination.

In addition, there are gaps in the two main institutional arrangements aimed at ensuring the safety of migrants at destination: labor attachés and welfare funds. Labor attachés offices are often understaffed and under-resourced, and employees have insufficient training. Migrants report a perceived lack of capacity at labor attaché offices, as well as differential treatment for low-skilled migrants, and limited opening times, which makes it difficult for them to access services. Labor attaché offices are often located in major cities, which complicates efforts for labor attachés to reach out to migrants working in remote rural areas of destination countries (Abrar et al. 2014). If labor attachés are not fluent in the local language of the destination country, they typically also need the assistance of interpreters and legal advisers to bring migrant worker issues to the attention of local authorities, making cumbersome processes even lengthier.

Regarding welfare funds, migrants often face major obstacles in lodging grievances and resolving complaints. Barriers to accessing formal assistance leave migrant workers vulnerable to labor rights violations during recruitment and employment (Harkins and Ahlberg 2017). Weaknesses in the system to enforce the rights of temporary migrant workers mean that abuses may go undetected and unaddressed. Migrants typically prefer informal mediation methods to formal mechanisms and are willing to settle cases before they reach official channels. This preference may occur partially because the scale of justice tends to be biased against migrants regardless of the merits of their cases. The willingness to settle is also often simply a matter of time and cost, given that all the grievance services are centralized and migrants need quick payments to repay loans. The lack of information about these grievance services also plays a role, but the overriding consideration is the view that manpower companies are very powerful and can buy themselves out of any awkward situation. There is also very little trust that a government regulatory agency will conduct a thorough investigation (essential when documentation is weak) or follow up on cases to ensure that victims are genuinely compensated. The risk from the migrant's perspective is, therefore, that considerable effort (and associated delays) will only ultimately yield refund of recorded recruitment costs, which are significantly lower than actual costs.

In this policy environment, low-skilled migrants from Bangladesh report multiple rights violations or unsafe work conditions (Khan and Harroff-Tavel 2011). The top three human rights violations that Bangladeshi labor workers suffer abroad are prolonged exposure to extreme heat—that is, to temperatures above 45°C (37 percent of respondents); the inability to change employers (30 percent); and withholding of travel or identity documents by the employer (24 percent). Very large migration costs also induce a sizeable share of migrants from Bangladesh to overstay at destination in the absence of an employment contract, which can end up in deportation back to Bangladesh.⁷

At the return stage, migrants who unexpectedly return earlier than expected are especially vulnerable. They have often accumulated a large amount of debt (resulting from high migration costs that most probably will not have been recouped) after working at destination for a shorter period of time than expected. The employment rate of return migrants who voluntarily return is lower than that of nonmigrants, even a few years after their return (Bossavie and Wang 2022). This suggests potential frictions in reintegrating into labor markets in the origin country among returnees who are looking for wage jobs as opposed to becoming entrepreneurs. In addition, compared to other contexts, the wage premium earned by return migrants to Bangladesh relative to nonmigrants is small and statistically insignificant, suggesting that return migrants are not able to take much advantage of their experience overseas in the domestic wage market. Finally, a large share of return migrants to Bangladesh report not being to save as much overseas as they anticipated before they left.

Policy lessons

Policies implemented at each stage of the migration life cycle (predecision, predeparture, during migration, and after migration) affect migrant outcomes at other stages of the life cycle. Using the case of Bangladesh, this paper illustrates that policies targeted at a given stage of the migration life cycle have repercussions on migrants' outcomes and vulnerabilities in other stages. Therefore, policies implemented at each stage of migration life cycle cannot be considered in isolation. For example, the provision of inaccurate information at the predeparture stage affects the vulnerability of migrants at destination and can lead them to return earlier than expected. Similarly, policies regulating migration costs paid by workers before departure will affect migrants' exposure to employers' abuse at destination, their incentives to overstay illegally, their return decisions, and even their reintegration after they return to the origin country, by for example affecting their ability to launch and pursue entrepreneurial activities after they return (Bossavie et al. 2021). As a result, gaps in information provision and policies to regulate costs may require stronger measures to support

migrants while at destination and avoid abuse. Support to help migrants reintegrate into domestic labor markets or to remigrate also need to be enhanced.

Actions taken in origin countries to regulate intermediary fees and the recruitment market play a key role in making low-skilled migration more affordable. In the presence of a large excess supply of low-skilled labor for work overseas compared to demand in destination countries, policies to regulate the recruitment costs of migrant workers and specifically migration costs are essential to keep costs affordable. The case study of Bangladesh shows that delegating migrant recruitment to private entities without adequate and enforceable regulations can dramatically drive costs up, with important consequences on migrants' vulnerability and outcomes throughout the migration life cycle. While regulations in origin countries play a critical role, policy actions taken in destination countries also matter: migrant costs paid by Bangladeshi workers are higher for destinations with weaker labor laws and regulations. Altering practices allowed by some destination countries, such as visa trading, can also help drive costs down.⁸ High-quality publicly intermediated G2G arrangements have also been shown to be very effective in reducing migration costs, as opposed to private intermediation.

Reducing vulnerability among low-skilled temporary migrants requires the coordination of numerous actors involved in the migration process to avoid a “race to the bottom.” By its very nature, migration involves a multiplicity of actors, including government entities in countries of destination and origin, private entities at origin such as recruitment agencies, employers at destination, migrants themselves and their households, and in some cases other migrant-sending countries in the region. Some of the policy actions to reduce vulnerability can be taken unilaterally and require the involvement and coordination of actors in the country of origin only, such as providing systematic information about employment opportunities abroad. Those require regulatory action from the government combined with verifiable and monitored compliance by recruitment agencies, and the use of formal information channels by prospective migrants. In contrast, policy instruments such as BLAs require close partnerships between governments both at origin and at destination and even regional collaboration to ensure uniformity and avoid a “race to the bottom.” In addition, coordination between the international standards-setting agencies is crucial because they are in a strong position to advise all stakeholders in the development of bilateral instruments that serve the common interests of state parties and the protection of migrant workers' rights.

Strengthening the tracking of and collection of data on migrants abroad is also critical to reduce vulnerabilities, together with mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation. Migrant-sending countries such as Bangladesh have made substantial progress in recent years in improving administrative databases to track outbound and returning migrants—an area of weakness in the past. However, databases are still far from comprehensive. In addition, detailed data on vulnerable migrants are often unavailable, unclear, or dispersed, even though such data are universally regarded as essential to providing proper services to migrants, to informing policy makers, and to monitoring safe migration. It is thus essential to create and maintain national databases to pull together and manage data (currently scattered across different organizations and agencies) in the interests of national and transnational cooperation built on information exchange. If a country seeks to provide genuinely safe avenues for migration and mobility, it must analyze the intentions—and monitor the effects—of policies and procedures. The use of standardized registration data systems in different countries could improve the quality of the data collected and thus enable better comparison activities.

Publicly provided intermediation through government-to-government agreements is a very effective tool to increase the benefits of migration for migrant themselves, the domestic economy, and destination countries, but requires strong administrative capacity. As evidenced by the results of Bangladesh's G2G agreements with Malaysia and Korea, these programs can drastically reduce migration costs, improve information provision, and significantly enhance workers' protection and welfare at destination. They can also increase access to migration opportunities among households that lack migration networks, and can provide avenues

into new markets, for both new destinations and new types of professions. Those programs are, however, currently limited and will require significant investments to strengthen administrative capacity in order to be scaled up.

Policies at the return stage must distinguish between forced and voluntary returns and need to be rigorously evaluated to learn what is effective. The circumstances behind migrants' return have important implications for the type of policies needed to maximize the benefits of return migration and reduce vulnerabilities. Interventions needed to support return for temporary migrants who voluntarily come back after accumulating sufficient savings overseas differ from those targeted at migrants who were expelled from the host country, have returned earlier than expected after suffering disenchantment, were laid off by their employer at destination, or were forced to leave because of an external crisis such as the pandemic or negative shocks to the destination economy. While voluntary returnees can be accompanied by referrals to more standard labor interventions tailored to their needs, such as labor intermediation or support for entrepreneurship, forced returns may require social assistance interventions, including support for repatriation or cash grants to meet immediate needs and commence the process of restoring their livelihoods. Because a large share of returning migrants to Bangladesh become small-scale entrepreneurs (Bossavie et al. 2021), support to return migrants in setting up and growing their business could be effective, as well as effectively channeling overseas savings into productive activities. There is currently, however, a lack of evidence on whether interventions targeted at the return stage are effective, either for forced or voluntary returnees. Whereas interventions in Bangladesh and other migrant-sending countries have been mostly focused on forced returnees, those have not been rigorously evaluated. There is a strong need to carry out rigorous impact evaluations on programs targeted at return migrants, especially in the low-skilled context where evidence is almost entirely lacking (McKenzie and Yang 2015). If these interventions are found to be effective, there could be a case to scale them up and systemize them to cope with future shocks, or any forced return by migrants overseas. Meanwhile, interventions aimed at improving the management of savings and financial literacy throughout the migration life cycle have been shown to improve the welfare of all returnees, irrespective of the reason for returning to the origin country (Doi, McKenzie, and Zia 2014).

Notes

¹ According to the 2016/2017 Bangladesh Labor Force Survey, the domestic labor force participation of women between ages 15–64 was 35 percent, compared to 88 percent for men in the same age group.

² Until the lift of the ban on low-skilled and semi-skilled female migration in 2000, the share of female migrants was less than 1 percent. In 2003, further relaxation took place, and females aged 35 and above were allowed to migrate. In 2006, the age limit was further relaxed from 35 years to 25 years, increasing the share of female migrants to about 4 percent. The share of women among temporary migrants from Bangladesh has further increased in recent years, boosted by a 2015 bilateral agreement with Saudi Arabia.

³ This includes the recruitment, testing, and certification of applicants and timely data flow between the two countries.

⁴ Total migration costs—more than US\$4000—are estimated to equate to about 30 months of migrant household income before departure (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022).

⁵ Interview with BMET officials, September 2017.

⁶ According to the Bangladesh Return Migrant Survey 2018/19, 43 percent of return migrants to Bangladesh report that they returned earlier than originally planned or before the end of their employment contract term (Ahmed and Bossavie 2022). The leading reasons for returning earlier are being expelled from the host country, low wages at destination, and being laid off by the employer. The fact that many migrants return earlier because of low wages suggests imperfect information about earnings overseas at the time of migration. Forced returns have also increased sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁷ According to the 2018/19 World Bank Bangladesh Return Migrant Survey, 12 percent of return migrants to Bangladesh report expulsion from the destination country because of issues with visas and work permits.

⁸ Visa trading refers a practice in which the foreign employer who is officially sponsoring a migrant trades or sells the worker's visa to another sponsor, with whom the worker is informally employed.

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