

POLICY BRIEF

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Towards an Effective Support System for Migrant Workers

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Abstract: Current interventions for migrant workers—such as welfare funds, and pre-departure training—are fragmented, underfunded, and poorly implemented. Compared to countries like the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, Bangladesh lags significantly in offering comprehensive, life-cycle support. This policy brief assesses the shortcomings of Bangladesh’s support mechanisms across the entire migration journey and highlights successful practices from peer countries. It calls for a distinct, well-resourced programme for migrant workers, expanded social insurance, stronger bilateral agreements for benefit portability, improved training, reduced migration costs, digitised service delivery, and transparent fund management. By adopting comprehensive, stage-specific interventions—from pre-departure to reintegration—Bangladesh can enhance worker protection, align with global standards, and secure sustainable economic gains. The brief underscores the urgency of systemic overhaul to safeguard migrant workers, ensuring their welfare and maximising their contributions to national development.

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I. Introduction

Migrant workers are vital contributors to Bangladesh's economic development, playing a key role in boosting household incomes and foreign exchange reserves. During periods of economic instability—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—their remittances served as a crucial buffer, enhancing national economic resilience. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET), in 2024 alone, over one million Bangladeshi migrant workers were employed abroad, collectively sending home USD 26.9 billion in remittances. Despite this substantial economic contribution, migrant workers often face serious challenges, including exploitation, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to legal and social protection measures. Structural barriers such as restrictive immigration policies, informal employment arrangements, and financial constraints further undermine their access to essential services. Moreover, their needs are often neglected in existing policy frameworks. Although recent years have seen growing policy interest in the welfare of migrant workers, current support initiatives remain limited in scale and scope. This policy brief explores the status of social protection for migrant workers in Bangladesh, identifies critical policy and implementation gaps, draws lessons from regional good practices, and offers actionable recommendations for building a more inclusive and effective support system.

II. Current Support Measures for Migrant Workers

With a growing focus on migrant workers' welfare in Bangladesh, social protection for this group has become a key policy priority. Social protection is a broad term encompassing any form of assistance provided to individuals to enhance their well-being and economic security. The FY25-26 proposed budget for social protection covers 95 programmes categorised with a budget of BDT 1,167 billion, which is 2.03 per cent of the country's GDP and 14.78 per cent of the national spending, out of which only one programme with a minimal budget of BDT 500 million under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment targets this group. This is perhaps because, considering the principles of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), migrant workers do not neatly fit within the framework as they do not fall under conventional definitions of poverty or vulnerability. Additionally, their challenges are episodic and location-specific, varying across pre-departure, employment abroad, and reintegration stages, making them an unsuitable fit for the existing life-cycle framework. Nevertheless, Bangladesh has adopted various supportive measures for the migrant workers, but some limitations have led to inadequate security and services for its large migrant workforce.

One of the supportive measures is mandatory insurance schemes for the migrant workers. These insurance mechanisms are administered through the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) in partnership with Bangladesh Life Insurance Corporation (BLIC), which offers coverage ranging from BDT 200,000 to 500,000 and a modest one-time premium of Tk 1,000, which is lower in terms of

benefit value compared to its regional peers. This gap is symptomatic of a broader systemic underinvestment in worker protection, suggesting that many Bangladeshi workers might face severe financial hardship in the event of injury, disability, or death while abroad. Additionally, Bangladesh's pre-departure training, overseen by BMET, is marred by low participation and inconsistent quality. Despite being mandated by law, many migrant workers depart without adequate preparation, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and workplace challenges abroad (Rashid & Ashraf, 2018; World Bank, 2010). These critical gaps in both mandatory insurance and pre-departure training underscore the urgent need for Bangladesh to overhaul and enhance its support framework to ensure that its migrant workforce is as well-protected and well-prepared as its counterparts in neighbouring countries.

Bangladesh's legal aid mechanisms, largely channelled through the WEWB and BMET's arbitration system, are severely constrained. Low awareness among migrant workers, bureaucratic delays, and limited outreach efforts mean that many workers do not receive the necessary legal assistance when facing disputes or exploitation abroad. This inadequacy in legal support leaves Bangladeshi migrants at a significant disadvantage, exacerbating their vulnerability in an increasingly complex global labour market.

In light of the social security system, Bangladesh relies on the fragmented Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) and newly launched Universal Pension Scheme (UPS), both of which suffer from low awareness, limited financial resources, and poor coverage. Probash Scheme, a component of the UPS, is tailored for expatriate Bangladeshis, allowing them to contribute in foreign currency to secure a pension upon retirement. Despite its potential, outreach has been insufficient: by September 2024, only 372,168 individuals had registered across all UPS schemes, with the Probash Scheme attracting a mere 894 participants (National Pension Authority, 2024). The insufficiency of these systems in Bangladesh not only leaves workers without adequate long-term protection but also undermines their financial security and ability to reintegrate successfully upon return. Additionally, Bangladesh's bilateral and multilateral agreements, often limited in scope, tend to focus on managing migration flows rather than on enhancing worker protection (ILO, 2021). They frequently lack robust provisions for health insurance, pension schemes, and legal safeguards, leaving Bangladeshi migrant workers significantly more exposed to exploitation and precarious working conditions.

Moreover, Bangladesh's digital infrastructure remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Low digital literacy among migrant workers and inconsistent system updates delay service delivery and reduce transparency, thereby diminishing the overall effectiveness of support measures intended to protect its migrant workforce. Furthermore, as transitional support mechanisms, welfare funds and reintegration programmes play a vital role in cushioning migrant workers against the economic and social shocks of return. Bangladesh's WEWF, financed by a fixed Tk 3,500 contribution per worker, suffers from limited scope, low awareness, and poor management. This fragmentation restricts the fund's ability to address the diverse needs of a vast migrant workforce, leaving many workers unable to access the essential benefits they require. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's reintegration initiative has

focused on building capacity, developing policies, and providing comprehensive services—including skills training and employment support—to ensure a smooth return for migrant workers. To date, approximately 13,220 returnee migrants have been supported through partnerships with NGOs such as BRAC and the Manusher Jonno Foundation, with an ambitious long-term goal of benefiting up to 500,000 returnees by January 2027 (Bossavie, 2023; SDC, 2023).

Furthermore, the cost of migration in Bangladesh is notably higher than in many other countries, largely due to a fraudulent recruitment process where middlemen exploit workers with exorbitant fees. The unprecedented proliferation of recruiting agencies has led to widespread corruption, further inflating costs and compromising ethical recruitment practices. Additionally, the Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) has shown inadequate performance and transparency in managing and disbursing funds, while the Technical Training Centres (TTCs) often deliver subpar training, leaving workers inadequately prepared for the challenges abroad. A robust labour registry is lacking, and there is little coordination among the responsible ministries, resulting in fragmented support and a lack of transparency in fund management. This disjointed approach leads to non-portability of benefits, as well as limited interoperability of support systems. Furthermore, the market remains dominated by low-skilled or semi-skilled workers, emphasising the urgent need for strengthened capacity building to upgrade worker competencies. Given these complexities, it is crucial to develop specialised, targeted support mechanisms beyond the current social protection system to effectively address the needs of migrant workers.

III. A Cross-country Analysis of Support Measures for Migrant Workers

Labor migration plays a crucial role in the economies of many South and Southeast Asian countries, with governments implementing various support measures to protect their migrant workers. Countries like the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have developed frameworks that provide social protection, legal aid, financial security, and reintegration support (Table 1). These measures ensure that migrant workers are prepared before departure, can be supported while abroad, and upon their return. When examining mandatory insurance schemes, the regional leaders—the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal—have established comprehensive programmes providing financial security for migrant workers. In the Philippines, mandatory insurance covers a wide spectrum of risks by offering high accidental and natural death benefits (USD 15,000 and USD 10,000, respectively), permanent disability coverage, repatriation cost reimbursement, subsistence allowances, and even legal expense support. India's Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) similarly guarantees global coverage, augmented by hospitalization and family benefits. Sri Lanka's and Nepal's schemes also ensure substantial protection with considerable benefit ceilings and additional services addressing both health-related and unforeseen employment risks.

Looking into the pre-departure training programmes, the Philippines and Nepal have invested in extensive, multi-dimensional training curricula that go well beyond basic orientation. Their programmes cover language skills, cultural adaptation, legal rights, and financial literacy, ensuring

that workers are comprehensively prepared for the complex challenges of working in foreign labour markets. India's Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PKVY) takes this further by aligning worker competencies with international standards, thereby enhancing employability and empowering workers with the knowledge to navigate new environments safely and assert their rights, thereby minimising the risk of exploitation. Furthermore, India has established legal aid clinics and specialised programmes through a combination of government efforts and NGO partnerships, ensuring that workers have access to timely legal recourse. Sri Lanka's Legal Aid Commission, with its dedicated migrant workers' desks, also offers targeted legal support for labour rights violations, including non-payment or underpayment of wages, fraudulent recruitment practices, and physical and sexual abuse.

Furthermore, the Philippines' Social Security System (SSS) extends extensive benefits, including retirement, disability, death, and maternity coverage to overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) through a range of contributions set by the SSS based on their monthly salary credit (MSC). India's social security framework is bolstered by initiatives like the Employees' Trust Fund, the Universal Pension Scheme, and state-level schemes such as Kerala's Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme, all of which provide comprehensive and sustained support. Additionally, contributory schemes like Sri Lanka's Manusavi Pension Scheme and Nepal's Social Security Fund (SSF) offer substantial benefits and demonstrate a strong commitment to worker welfare.

The Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have negotiated bilateral and multilateral agreements that extend well beyond simple labour mobility; these arrangements explicitly include provisions for social protection, benefit portability, fair recruitment practices, and dispute resolution. For example, the Philippines' agreements ensure that workers can seamlessly transfer social security benefits between home and host countries, while India's Social Security Agreements (SSAs) with countries such as Germany and France protect workers from double contributions and secure essential welfare services.

Digital platforms are another significant supportive measure for the migrant workers globally. The Philippines has invested in advanced digital infrastructure, such as the DMW Mobile App and the e-SHRAM Portal, which offer real-time access to employment documentation, legal aid, and welfare benefits. India's digital initiatives, integrated with systems like Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) and the SWADES programme, enable migrant workers to monitor and manage their entitlements efficiently. These platforms provide a wide range of services, such as assessing the skills and experiences of the migrant workers and then sharing them with potential employers.

Welfare funds and reintegration programmes serve as critical safety nets for migrant workers. In the Philippines, for instance, the Emergency Repatriation Programme (ERP) is backed by a ₱15.5 billion allocation in the 2024 national budget, ensuring rapid response and comprehensive support for distressed workers. India's Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) and Nepal's Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) benefit from structured, mandatory contributions that facilitate substantial

financial aid, repatriation assistance, and educational scholarships. Sri Lanka's Welfare Fund, managed by the SLBFE, collects mandatory registration fees to provide a wide array of support, from medical aid to repatriation services.

Additionally, the Philippines and Nepal have developed comprehensive frameworks that encompass skill development, vocational training, entrepreneurship, and psychosocial support to ensure that returning migrant workers can successfully re-enter the domestic labour market. India's PKVY serves as a prime example of proactive reintegration measures that not only harness the skills acquired abroad but also contribute to local economic development through remittances. Sri Lanka's collaborative projects with the ILO and IOM have implemented projects focused on skills development, entrepreneurship training, and support for establishing small and medium enterprises is also considered a good practice.

Collectively, these disparities underscore a critical reality: while countries such as the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have invested significantly in comprehensive support measures that cover the entire migration cycle—from pre-departure to reintegration—Bangladesh's support framework remains fragmented, underfunded, and inadequately implemented. This imbalance not only leaves Bangladeshi migrant workers more vulnerable to the multifaceted risks of overseas employment but also reflects a broader systemic failure to prioritise their welfare.

Table 1: Summarised support measures taken for migrant workers

Major Support Measures	Philippines	India	Sri Lanka	Nepal	Bangladesh
Mandatory Insurance (including Health Insurance)	Comprehensive insurance covering accidental/natural death, disability, repatriation, medical costs, and legal expenses. Includes PhilHealth coverage for OFWs.	Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) covers ₹10 lakh for death/disability, hospitalization, and legal expenses. Maternity benefits for female workers.	SLBFE provides life, disability, medical, repatriation, and education benefits. Covers all registered migrant workers.	Mandatory insurance of NPR 500,000 for death/disability protection. Covers repatriation and medical expenses.	Probashi Kormi Beema Nitimala (2019) provides BDT 200,000–500,000 coverage with a one-time premium of Tk 1,000. Limited coverage and benefit ceilings.
Pre-Departure Training Programmes	Financial literacy and reintegration programmes under OWWA, TESDA provides competency	Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PKVY) aligns skills with global standards and focuses on	SLBFE pre-departure training includes financial literacy, safety,	The Foreign Employment Promotion Board (FEPB) oversees orientation and training for	BMET conducts pre-departure training but suffers from poor quality and low

	assessments and vocational training.	employment abroad.	and labour rights.	better employment opportunities.	participation rates.
Legal Aid Services	Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) provides legal representation, counselling, and repatriation assistance.	National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) offers free legal aid, dispute resolution, and legal awareness programmes.	Legal Aid Commission (LAC) operates a Migrant Workers' Rights desk for contract violations and abuse.	Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) and NGOs provide legal assistance and awareness programmes.	WEWB and BMET offer legal aid but are ineffective due to bureaucratic delays, limited outreach, and lack of awareness.
Social Security Benefits	The Social Security System (SSS) covers retirement, disability, death, and maternity benefits. Monthly Salary Credit (MSC) ensures contribution-based benefits.	Kerala's Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme offers accident coverage, health insurance, and repatriation assistance.	Manusavi Pension Scheme and Employees' Trust Fund (ETF) provide retirement benefits and disability coverage.	Social Security Fund (SSF) covers accident, disability, dependent family security, and pensions.	Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) and Universal Pension Scheme provide limited benefits with low awareness and accessibility.
Bilateral/Multilateral Agreements	Strong BLAs with Japan, Germany, and Saudi Arabia ensuring labour rights, dispute resolution, and social security portability.	SSAs with Germany, France, and Belgium prevent double contributions and provide welfare access.	BLAs ensure standardised employment contracts and rights protection. Agreements with Qatar provide partial social security.	BLAs with GCC and Malaysia ensure ethical recruitment and contract enforcement.	Existing agreements focus on labour migration management but lack social security and worker protection clauses.
Digital Platforms	DMW Mobile App offers real-time access to employment documentation, legal aid, and emergency support.	e-SHRAM Portal and DBT system streamline welfare access, SWADES database aids in job matching for returnees.	SLBFE digital services enable job matching, worker registration, and online training.	FEIMS centralises labour data, improving migration management.	BMET digital services remain fragmented and outdated, with low digital literacy affecting accessibility.
Welfare Funds	Emergency Repatriation Programme (ERP) backed by ₹15.5 billion, provides	Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) offers repatriation,	SLBFE Welfare Fund provides medical, financial, and	FEWF provides financial aid for repatriation, medical assistance, and	WEWF is funded by Tk 3,500 per worker but suffers from poor

	repatriation, medical aid, and crisis support.	medical aid, and legal assistance.	repatriation support.	education for children of deceased workers.	awareness, management, and access issues.
Reintegration Programmes	OWWA provides financial aid, livelihood programmes, and psychosocial support.	PKVY supports the skill development and reemployment of returning migrants.	SLBFE collaborates with ILO and IOM for training, self-employment, and financial assistance for returnees.	Reintegration Directives (2022) focus on employment, entrepreneurship, and social reintegration.	WEWB reintegration efforts remain fragmented, with weak coordination and inadequate coverage.

Source: Compilation of authors based on various governmental and international developmental partners' documents.

IV. Policy Recommendations

Bangladesh's existing support mechanisms for migrant workers remain inadequate compared to regional best practices, leaving workers vulnerable at various stages of the migration cycle. To ensure comprehensive protection and sustainable economic benefits, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

1. Establish a distinct support programme for the migrant workers

The traditional lifecycle-based social protection framework is unsuitable for migrant workers, as their risks are different from those intended to be addressed by the NSSS. Unlike poor and vulnerable populations, migrant workers face episodic and location-specific challenges at different stages. In the short term, policies should provide immediate benefits, such as basic healthcare and work injury compensation, to protect workers during their overseas employment. Simultaneously, long-term provisions must include robust contributory pension schemes that offer old-age, disability, and survivors' benefits, as well as post-retirement healthcare. Additionally, tailored interventions must be introduced at different stages: pre-departure training to enhance financial literacy, legal awareness, and vocational skills; in-country support to ensure access to comprehensive insurance and legal aid; and post-return reintegration programmes that facilitate skill-building, employment support, and family benefits. Hence, establishing a distinct support programme will ensure that the migrant workers are effectively protected and supported, thereby promoting long-term economic stability and social well-being for both workers and their families.

2. Expand and enhance social insurance coverage to provide timely and robust supportive measures

Migrant workers are often found vulnerable to financial shocks, workplace injuries, and long-term insecurity. To redress this imbalance, the government must implement a multi-pronged reform strategy that expands insurance coverage, enhances financial security schemes, and improves accessibility. The current scheme, which offers minimal lump-sum compensation for accidental death and disability with low benefit ceilings (BDT 200,000–500,000), must be broadened to include comprehensive workplace accident and health insurance, unemployment and income protection, as well as emergency repatriation and legal aid benefits. Long-term security should be ensured through contributory pension schemes covering old age, disability, and survivors' benefits. The National Pension Authority (NPA) should enhance the Probash scheme by introducing competitive savings and investment options tailored to migrant needs, while digital portals and mobile-friendly platforms must be developed to integrate social insurance registration, track contributions, and ensure transparent benefit claims. This holistic approach is essential for safeguarding migrant workers and promoting economic stability.

3. Strengthen bilateral and multilateral agreements for benefit portability and strengthen labour laws for migrant worker protection

Bangladeshi migrant workers face multiple challenges at the workplace abroad due to weak, fragmented bilateral agreements. Unlike the Philippines and India, which secure comprehensive, benefit-portable social security arrangements, Bangladesh lacks robust mechanisms ensuring the portability of pensions, health insurance, and other benefits. To address these gaps, Bangladesh must negotiate strong bilateral and multilateral agreements aligned with global labour standards and intensify diplomatic efforts with key labour markets to secure fair wages, safe conditions, and legal recourse.

4. Modernise pre-departure training to equip migrant workers for global labour market demands

Bangladesh must urgently overhaul its pre-departure training programmes to better equip migrant workers for overseas challenges. Current BMET-run centres are outdated and ineffective, failing to impart essential skills for fair wages and safe conditions. Reforms should focus on practical, job-specific training at TTCs and integrate modules on legal rights, financial literacy, crisis management, and cultural awareness. Additionally, country-specific programmes addressing local labour laws are essential for reducing exploitation and ensuring long-term economic stability. Enhancing digital literacy through training programmes will be equally significant to the welfare of the migrant workers.

5. Reduce migration costs and enhance digital infrastructure for Bangladeshi migrant workers

The high migration costs, exacerbated by fraudulent recruitment, excessive middleman fees, and agency corruption, must also be reduced. Unlike Nepal and the Philippines, which regulate fees and offer subsidised migration loans, Bangladesh lacks effective control mechanisms. The government should enforce strict regulations on recruitment agencies, ban middlemen, and introduce subsidised loans to alleviate debt bondage. Additionally, Bangladesh's weak digital infrastructure hampers service delivery. Modernising this system by establishing a centralised digital labour registry, enforcing digitised recruitment contracts, and integrating financial, legal, and welfare services through mobile-friendly platforms is essential to improve policy implementation and worker protection.

6. Ensure transparency and accountability in fund management

ILO's review of Bangladesh's WETF found that it suffers from a lack of transparency and accountability, leading to poor fund utilization and limited accessibility for migrant workers (ILO, 2015). To address these shortcomings, it is imperative to mandate periodic audits and enforce public disclosure of all WETF expenditures, ensuring that funds are allocated and managed effectively. Furthermore, the development of a robust digital claims system is essential; such a system should enable migrant workers and their families to track applications, monitor payment progress, and review fund utilization in real-time. This digital transparency will not only improve accountability but also build trust among beneficiaries. Additionally, simplifying claim procedures and launching targeted awareness campaigns will ensure that more workers are informed about and can easily access the available benefits.

V. Conclusion

Bangladesh's migrant workers are a cornerstone of the national economy, yet current social protection measures are inadequate and weak. While neighbouring countries such as the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have developed more improved frameworks, including social insurance, targeted skills training, and effective legal and bilateral support, Bangladesh continues to struggle with weak insurance coverage, inadequate pre-departure training, and disjointed welfare funds. This policy brief underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive, tailored policy framework that can address the unique challenges at each stage of the migration cycle. By expanding social insurance to cover accidents, health emergencies, repatriation, and unemployment, ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions, enhancing skills training, and negotiating bilateral agreements that ensure benefit portability, Bangladesh can significantly enhance migrant workers' protection. These reforms will not only improve the well-being of migrant workers but also contribute to long-term economic stability and sustainable development in the country.

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