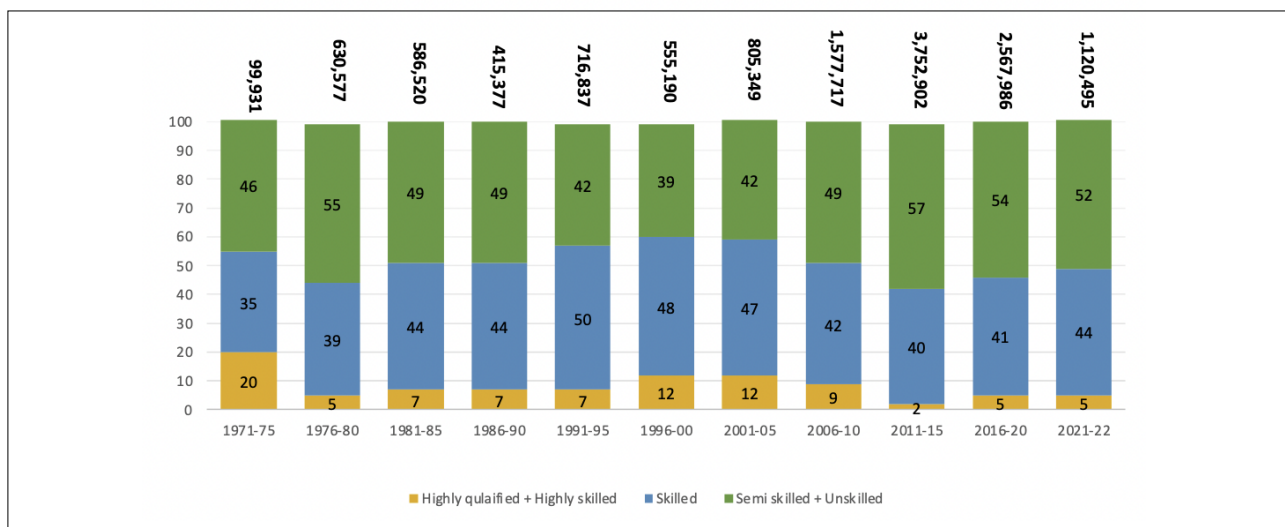


Five Decades of Semi- and Unskilled Labour Migration from Pakistan

Nasra M. Shah, Professor of Migration and Development at the Lahore School of Economics and Scientific Director of GLMM

Pakistan is a major emigrant country with a stock of about 9 million overseas Pakistanis, about half of whom are temporary labour migrants. Between 1971 and 2022, 12.5 million migrant workers left the country after registering with the concerned authorities. Ninety-five to 98 percent of the registered emigrants concentrated in the oil-rich Gulf countries; 50 to 60 percent went to Saudi Arabia and around a third to the UAE. These numbers do not include irregular migrants.

Skill Level of Pakistani Migrant Workers 1971-2022



Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment website - <https://beoe.gov.pk>.

Notes: Bars represent the 5 years average percentages of migrant workers according to their skill levels. The values above the bars are 5 years aggregate of total migrant workers.

About half (53 percent) of all labour migrants during 1971-2022 were semi-skilled or unskilled. During the last decade, 54 percent fell in this category. Highly qualified workers such as doctors and engineers and highly skilled workers such as nurses and computer programmers comprised only 4 percent from 2011-2022.

The major reason for the lack of increase in skilled worker migration is the slow progresses in the education level among the Pakistani population. In 2020-21, only 32.2 percent of the employable male population aged 10 and over completed secondary education (i.e., 10 grades) and only 15.6 percent of the females did so. Efforts at skill development through vocational institutes have not been very successful. The ever-decreasing skill level of migrants is alarming since the host countries are now demanding better skilled and certified workers. Pakistan competes with other South Asian countries to fill the demand for migrant workers and may lose without an improvement in skill levels among its workforce.

A questionable political debate has recently emerged regarding the apparently high level of brain drain from the country, not supported by the data. Pakistan relies heavily on remittances sent home by migrants, contributing 8.3 percent of the GDP in FY 2022 and assisting in lowering the unemployment rate. A lack of recent legislation on Pakistan's migration policy adds to the confusion about whether labour migration, including highly skilled workers, should be interpreted as a net benefit or net loss for the country's development.