

Policy Report

Special Issue

*Highly Skilled Migration to the Gulf States:
How Do GCC Countries Fare in the Global
Competition for Talent?*

No.6

Trends, Patterns, and Policies Regarding Highly Skilled Migrant Workers from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE

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Executive Summary

Being the fifth largest country in the world, Pakistan's population stands at 241.5 million according to its latest population census of 2023. Its labour force stands among the top ten labour forces in the world. Labor migration from Pakistan to the Gulf dates to the early 1980s. Emigration of Pakistani workers to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar has had wide ranging financial as well as socio-cultural impacts on Pakistan through increased material well-being accompanied by enhanced social status and prestige of the migrant households. In 2023, around 96 percent of the registered migrant workers headed to the Gulf region, with Saudi Arabia being the largest recipient (49.5 percent), followed by the UAE (26.7 percent), and Qatar which received 6.4 percent of all the migrants. More than half of these workers fell in the unskilled and semi-skilled occupational categories. During the last ten years the percentage of highly skilled and highly qualified workers has remained below 10 percent among all migrant workers. Highly skilled/qualified workers include accountants, computer analysts, doctors, engineers, pharmacists, managers, nurses, and teachers. In 2023, the percentage of highly skilled workers among all emigrants was much higher in the UAE than in Saudi Arabia--17.5 percent vs. 1.4 percent, respectively. As a percentage of the stock of various highly skilled workers in the country, doctors constituted about 1 percent, pharmacists 0.3 percent, nurses 4.4 percent, and engineers 3.4 percent of the outflows.

During the last four to five years, there has been much debate in the media around the issue of brain drain associated with the exodus of highly skilled workers. Policymakers in the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) reported there were no policies in place to inhibit the outflow of highly skilled workers. Academics, however, presented mixed views with some considering it as a beneficial force in economic growth generating financial remittances and serving as an opportunity for 'brain-gain' incurring positive social remittances. Others believed Pakistani workers lacked the skills to contribute to the upgradation of various industries which will likely pose a serious challenge to their global competitiveness. The government aims to enhance the skills for employability of all entrants to the labour force through diversification of skills, competency-based training, and recognition of prior learning. About 150,000 people have received training in high-end and high-tech occupations since 2005, including electrical engineering, mobile application development, advanced Python programming and applications, robotics, artificial intelligence, and more. However, additional efforts are required to upskill the quality of Pakistani workers, especially in the sectors of IT, health care, and hospitality in view of the growing host country demand in these sectors. At the same time, skill certification agreements should be reached with an increasing number of host countries for higher prospects of employability of highly skilled workers in the Gulf and beyond.

Introduction and Background

With a population of 241.5 million, Pakistan is the fifth largest country in the world. A relatively high level of fertility has resulted in a youthful population supplying an abundance of new entrants to the labour force. According to the latest Labour Force Survey held in 2020-21, about 71.7 million people were estimated to be economically active ¹. The labour force participation rate of males and females aged 10 and above were 67.9 and 21.4 percent, respectively. It has been estimated in the recent labour force surveys that about 1.5 million new workers join the labour force every year.

Migration to the Gulf countries dates back to the early 1980s when a legislative framework and a vast administrative system for registering migrant outflows from the country was established. A comprehensive Emigration and Welfare policy aimed at restructuring the Ministry for Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resources Development (MOPHRD) has been drafted and is awaiting government approval ². One of the main goals of the above policy is to identify new avenues of emigration for

Pakistani workers, both men and women. It also aims to improve the automation and digitalisation of the emigration process and to strengthen global accreditation and certification of workers' skills.

Migration Trends and Patterns

Pakistan is one of the largest contributors of migrant labour to the Gulf. In 2023, a total of 862 thousand migrant workers left the country after registering with the concerned authorities, about 96 percent heading to the Gulf region. Saudi Arabia was the largest recipient (49.5 percent), followed by the UAE (26.7 percent), while Qatar received 6.4 percent of all the migrants. Almost half of those who left the country were classified as unskilled and low-skilled workers.

Migration data disaggregated according to skill level was obtained for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) that registers Pakistani migrant workers and manages the database on them. Highly skilled/qualified workers are defined by BEOE to include those employed as accountants, computer analysts, doctors, engineers, pharmacists, managers, nurses, and teachers. It should be noted that the BEOE data includes only those migrants who emigrate on a work permit and must register with the Pakistan government's protectorate system. Those who leave on a student, or an immigrant visa are not required to register with the BEOE. Also, those Pakistanis who move to the Gulf from third countries are not required to register and are therefore not included in the BEOE database. Finally, those who leave on a visit visa and then find a job in the Gulf are not required to register with the BEOE. Thus, the number of highly skilled migrants reported by the BEOE is likely to be an underestimate of all Pakistanis who leave the country for overseas employment.

The percentage of highly skilled migrants has remained below 10 percent over the last five decades³. A comparison of highly skilled migrants to the various Gulf countries shows marked differences; a larger percentage of migrants to the UAE were highly skilled compared to Saudi Arabia, about 17.5 percent as opposed to 1.4 percent, respectively (Table 1). As a percentage of the total stock of various highly skilled workers in the country, estimates from various sources indicate that about 1 percent are doctors, 0.3 percent are pharmacists, 4.4 percent are nurses, and 3.4 percent are engineers. Reliable estimates of the stock managers and accountants are unavailable, as these occupations do not require licensing and can span a rather wide range of skills.

Table 1: Number and percentage of Pakistani migrant workers who went to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar according to skill level, 2023

Skill Level	Saudi Arabia		UAE		Qatar	
Total	426,586	(100.0%)	229,880	(100.0%)	55,104	(100.0%)
Highly Qualified	5,334	1.25	40,198	17.49	3,704	6.72
Highly Skilled	401	0.09	445	0.19	116	0.21
Skilled	17,1048	40.10	78,445	34.12	38,812	70.43
Semi-Skilled	24,987	5.86	39,764	17.30	4,286	7.78
Unskilled	224,816	52.70	71,028	30.90	8,186	14.86

Source: Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (BEOE)

Debates on Brain Drain and Brain Gain

Whether the exodus of highly skilled migrants leads to brain drain that might exert negative impacts on Pakistan's economy and development is a controversial subject that has received a great deal of attention during the last four to five years. Writings in newspapers generally lament the outflow of highly skilled workers and presume that the outflow of such workers is detrimental to the country and reflects the declining socio-economic and political situation.

Our interviews with policymakers, academics, and some highly skilled workers reflect a wide range of opinions on the subject. Policymakers in MOPHRD reported that the government does not have any policies to inhibit the outflow of highly skilled workers and believe it should not take any steps to do so. In fact, they appreciated the government's policies aimed at facilitating the processing of highly skilled workers, such as providing online access to such services. The only highly skilled occupation that requires a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the government is that of nursing for which there is a recognised shortage within the country⁴. In 2013, about 315 nurses left Pakistan; in 2023 that number had increased to 4,880. It is estimated that the current nurse-patient ratio in the general wards of Pakistani hospitals is 1:40, while the Pakistan Nursing Council recommends a nurse-patient ratio of 3:10. Despite the relative difficulty of obtaining permission to leave the country, the outflow of nurses has registered a marked increase during the last two years, which probably reflects the increasing worldwide demand for these professionals.

Academics presented mixed views about the pros and cons of highly skilled migration. Some believe that the migration of skilled workers is akin to trade, which is generally a beneficial force in economic growth. Others believe that the departure of the brightest and most entrepreneurial workers has major negative impacts on the development of Pakistan. We lack information on the quality of highly skilled workers who emigrate to the Gulf or other countries, making it difficult to estimate the net effect of such an exodus on the economic and social development of the country. Given the global competition for highly skilled workers, it is likely that the best and brightest from Pakistan find it easier to secure overseas employment. On the other hand, some highly renowned economists in the country believe that Pakistani workers lack the skills to contribute to the upgrading of various industries, which may pose a serious challenge to their global competitiveness⁵.

Government Policies and Initiatives

In order to improve the skill capabilities of Pakistani workers, the government has implemented wide-ranging policies to enhance skills for the employability of all entrants to the labour force through the diversification of skills, competency-based training, and recognition of prior learning. The government has established a National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) at the federal level to regulate and guide the work of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutes in each of the provinces. The NAVTTTC has engaged in specific programmes for providing training in emerging, cutting-edge, high-tech fields. Since 2005, it has provided training to about 150,000 persons in hi-end and hi-tech trades such as electrical engineering, mobile application development, advanced Python programming and application, artificial intelligence, and robotics.

While predicting the future of Pakistani migration to the Gulf is uncertain, several policies, and initiatives, as well as recent trends suggest that a sizeable outflow of workers will continue. In terms of the future of highly skilled migration to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, Pakistan has pro-emigration policies and has been making efforts to enhance the volume of safe, orderly, and regular migration. It holds high potential both in terms of new graduates and efforts at upskilling through high-level vocational training.

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About 3.5 million students were enrolled in colleges and universities beyond the high school level. Also, about 472,000 Pakistanis earned various graduate degrees in 2020-21, and advanced training courses in IT skills are being provided by various institutions. The largest number of students were enrolled in arts and humanities (700,396), followed by natural sciences and statistics (415,671) and business administration and law (404,445). Women comprised about 67 percent of students enrolled in education and a little over half in several other disciplines. Disciplines such as engineering, information and communication technologies and business administration and law were dominated by males. In terms of collaboration between Pakistan and host countries, advances have been made in terms of skill certification between the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Human Resources Development and the NAVTTC in Pakistan which is likely to facilitate emigration to Saudi Arabia.

Despite these possibilities, a few additional hurdles remain. One is the low work participation of Pakistani women. Only about 1 percent of all migrant workers are women ⁶. Of all graduates in 2020-21, almost half were women, a large percentage of whom were not employed in the labour market. Of all the women who graduate as doctors, for example, about 35 percent are not active in the labour force ⁷. At the same time, the unemployment rates of highly educated women, such as engineers and IT specialists are much higher than that of males. Cultural values in Pakistan are not supportive of the migration of unaccompanied women which may pose another hurdle in their overseas employment.

Socio-Economic Impact and Future Outlook

Emigration of Pakistani workers to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar has had wide-ranging financial as well as socio-cultural impacts on Pakistan. Of all the migrants in 2023, these three countries received 82 percent of migrants, who contributed about 46 percent of all the remittances sent home by overseas Pakistanis. Foreign remittances constitute about eight percent of Pakistan's GDP, thus providing a major contribution to economic growth.

At the household level, previous research shows that remittance-receiving households demonstrate higher levels of educational enrolment as well as positive health impacts on women and children compared with non-remittance-receiving ones. It has also been reported that the economic resources gained from overseas employment gave migrants the strength to seek independent employment, and there was a clear move out of the production-service occupations into business and agriculture occupations.

Highly skilled migrants from Pakistan constituted about eight percent of all emigrants in 2023, and their outflow has shown an upward trend in recent years. Also, about half of adults with a post-secondary education express a desire to leave the country if an opportunity is available. Thus, the future may see an increasing percentage of highly skilled migrants among all those seeking employment in the Gulf and beyond.

Policy Recommendations

A few policy recommendations that would aid in supporting the pro-emigration policies of the government are as follows:

1. Efforts to further upskill the quality of Pakistani workers must be continued and upgraded. The sectors of IT, healthcare, and hospitality may be given priority in view of the growing host country demand in these sectors. At the same time, skill certification agreements should be reached with an increasing number of host countries.
2. Efforts to find employment beyond the Gulf region have not been very successful and must also be accelerated. Bilateral agreements with additional host countries should be signed and progress on them should be regularly followed up on.
3. During the process of highly skilled migration from Pakistan, some consideration should be given to the impacts on the country's labour market and economy to ensure that the costs of emigration do not outweigh the benefits.

Endnotes

- 1 Pakistan Bureau of Statistic 2022: Labor Force Survey 2020–21, in: <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/labour-force-publications>.
- 2 Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development 2024: National Emigration and Welfare Policy, Zero Draft, June 2024.
- 3 Shah, Nasra. M. 2023: "Five Decades of Semi- and Unskilled Labour Migration from Pakistan." Gulf Labor Markets and Migration Factsheet No. 3, Gulf Research Centre.
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- 5 Husain, Ishrat 2007: "Perils to Pakistan's Competitiveness." *Speech delivered at Institute of Business Administration*, in: https://ishrathusain.iba.edu.pk/speeches/Perils_to_Pakistan_s_competitiveness_2007.pdf
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- 7 Dawn News 2023: "Survey reveals alarming unemployment among women doctors", 12.09.2023, in: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1775343>

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