

## Labour migration from Pakistan to the countries of Persian Gulf



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**Abstract:** *Migrant workforce contributes to the expansion and development of the countries in which they settle, while their home countries greatly benefit from the money they make and the skills they pick up along the way. Pakistani people's migration trail to the countries of Persian Gulf is very much interlinked with employment situation within the country. Pakistan has an ever-increasing population, with most of the people residing in countryside. There are not enough work opportunities in the country, and decisions with regard to appointment and hiring are not made only on the basis of qualifications, as aspects of right connection and corruption are also rampant. Due to their enormous oil wealth, the Gulf States have given Pakistani workers, both skilled and unskilled, unprecedented financial opportunities, particularly in the infrastructure and building industries. However, years of service and residency in Gulf countries do not get rewarded in the form of citizenship. Moreover, the Kafala system of foreign labour sponsorship binds Pakistani migrant workers in the Gulf countries to their employers, who are in charge of their visa and legal status. The Kafala system was implemented to keep a tight eye on the foreign labour force. Prevalent racism is also visible in everyday life in Gulf countries and reinforced by inherently prejudiced racist legal schemes that make it difficult for people to escape the malicious cycle.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan,

### Introduction

The movement of individuals from one location to another in order to settle in another place is referred to as migration. Migration can be both voluntary or involuntary. The concept of migration has a history as old as the existence of mankind and an influence that has a significant place in people's social memory. The migratory journey of humanity, which began in pre-historic times, witnessed isolated and mass migration of individuals who traveled to thrive

in better conditions than they had in their existing location. Some people move in search of work or economic opportunity, to join family, or to study. Others move to escape war, oppression or large-scale human rights violations. Others migrate due to severe effects of climate change, natural disasters or other environmental factors. Even today, 3 per cent of the world's population, at least 258 million people live outside their country of origin (Blakemore, 2019). Throughout the history of

humankind, migration has been playing a key role in shaping the world as it appears to us today. Migration, in its broad sense includes the voluntary or involuntary movement of refugees, displaced persons, uprooted people and even economic migrants from one place to another (Mesurier, 2012). The continually changing and adapting human structure to new situations has also resulted in the changing nature of migration over time.

It is evident that various fields define migration differently. While geographers concentrate 'time' and 'space' aspects associated to migration, sociologists investigate the social outcomes of migratory movement; on the other hand, economists establish their own definitions by evaluating the impact of migration on the economy (Telsac and Telsac, 2022).

In the realm of International Relations, there are many theories with regard to Migration. One of the theories is the New Economic of Labor Migration (NELM) which explains the significance of payments with poor households. This theory argues migration research unit is not at the individual level but rather at higher levels, particularly at level of household (Stark and Taylor, 1991). According to Network Theory, migrant networks are a web of human ties that, through a variety of factors including friendship or shared community origin, enable migrants, previous migrants, and non-migrants to interact. These networks make it easier to increase the likelihood of international mobility by lowering travel expenses and uncertainties and raising expected migration returns (Gurak and Caces, 1992). The Institutional Theory, is of the view that there exists a lucrative niche for entrepreneurs offering licit and illicit entry services due to disparities between the supply and demand for entry visas into core receiving societies. The exploitation of this disparity, the theory further suggests, will lead humanitarian organizations to intervene on behalf of immigrants (Awan, 2022).

Besides, the promotion of 'push' and 'pull' phenomena occurs has a universal nature. The 'push' factors of migration are those which trigger and encourage population movement from one place to another. Some examples of

'push' factors are, lack of opportunity to find employment, lack of means of livelihood, lack of resources, poor infrastructure, development induced displacement, natural calamities, climate change, famine, poverty, religious persecution, ethnic pogroms, political strife, war, and even fear of attack. On the other hand, 'pull' factors of migration are those which make a place desirable for the migrants, attracting them to come and settle there. Some prominent examples of 'pull' factors are prosperity, security, political and religious freedoms, better living conditions, better employment opportunities, better income, better health and education infrastructure, etc. People are often forced out of their native community, village and countries of origin in pursuit of a better life. Unemployment and a wretched living prompt them to abandon their homes and endure innumerable hardships while seeking better work opportunities in industrialised nations. Labourers, both skilled and unskilled, are relocated to countries with industrialised economies (Nadeem, 2019). Industrial growth acted as a pull factor to attract unemployed labour force, who were ready to work, even in inhuman and dangerous condition to earn money for their family.

In terms of Labour Migration, it can be said that migrant workers help foster the growth and development of their destination nations, while their countries of origin gain immensely from their earnings and the skills acquired throughout their migration experience. However, the migration process entails a number of complicated difficulties in terms of administration, migrant safety, migration and development links, and international cooperation. The International Labour Organization seeks to develop policies that enhance the benefits of labour mobility for all parties concerned. Migration's contribution to sustainable development is acknowledged in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations. Eleven of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have objectives and metrics pertaining to mobility or migration (United Nations, 2019).

### **The Pakistani Scenario:**

Migration, nonetheless, bids economic prospect for people of various classes and backgrounds. This is well understood in the case of Pakistan. The labour force and employment condition of Pakistan is similar with any other developing countries of Asia. Pakistan's populace is increasing speedily and the mainstream population are rural in nature. There are inadequate professional prospects in Pakistan and the selection in jobs is not entirely based on worth of the candidate. The main section the population is less than 20 years in age. In such circumstances, the young people is destined to espouse a labour force; it also cause an increase in migration (Muhammad and Kim, 2020). Resultantly, the current financial history of Pakistan is grounded on the enormous relocation to the Middle Eastern countries, particularly to the Gulf countries.

For Pakistan, labour migration to the Gulf countries has three main functions: it provides as a social safety valve, such as on the labour market; it is a significant source of convertible currency revenue that provides profit to Pakistani economy through payments of migrants; and it sometimes leads to the import of conservative Wahhabi/Salafi version of Islam by the returnees (Kamali-Chirani, 2021).

But lately, Pakistanis are leaving for the Gulf to escape domestic and economic crisis. What's also unparalleled is that in the course of a year, Pakistan's GDP growth rate has gone down from 6.1 per cent to someplace around 0.3 per cent, while large-scale manufacturing has seen a downturn, with growth dwindling from 10.6 per cent in 2022 to -8.11 per cent. Foremost car manufacturers in Pakistan have reported an 80 per cent drop in sales over the past year, while a severe crackdown on imports, carried out to stem the outflow of foreign exchange (Ahmed, 2023).

Furthermore, Pakistan received \$14.99 billion in payments from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members states during the outgoing year (2022), with the overall remittance inflow recorded at \$27.48 billion. According to State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) data Pakistani diaspora

in Saudi Arabia remitted \$6.67 billion in 2022 which was closely followed by its citizens in UAE who sent \$5.10 billion (Ahmed, 2022).

Previously the labourers for countries of Gulf were hired from central and northern areas of Punjab province, along with Karachi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Except Karachi, the other zones somewhat facilitate major chunk of migrant labourers. Therefore, the living standard is higher in these areas in comparison with rural Sindh, Balochistan and southern Punjab. There is no reservation that the phenomenon of migration is restricted to financially better regions of Pakistan, because people belonging to those areas could afford to migrate abroad and also bring huge amount of foreign currency back home as remittances (Arif and Ishaq, 2017).

For Pakistan and its labour force, migration is extremely pertinent. More than 6 million Pakistanis have emigrated, mostly to the Middle East and to Western countries (Chirani, 2021). Almost one in three Pakistani aged under 30 would like to take a job abroad, according to the finding of a survey carried out by Gallup Pakistan and its nonprofit subsidiary the Gilani Foundation in June, 2022, before floods struck the country. Gallup Pakistan, the Pakistani affiliate of Gallup International, is a leading survey research and consultancy firm in Pakistan. Devastating floods of 2022, heightened Pakistan's economic problems, which include shortages of staple foods linked to a dearth of dollars and persistently high inflation that tipped 24 per cent. Therefore, people taking jobs abroad also rose to above 50 per cent among university-educated youth, said Bilal Gilani, Executive Director of Gallup Pakistan (The Express Tribune, 2023).

The MOPHRD, was created in 2013 from the merger of two ministries (Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Ministry of Human Resource Development) to manage the migration of Pakistani labour abroad, uplift the living conditions of the working class and protect decent working conditions for them. Its activities include the supervision of labour relations, social security, socio-economic upgrading for the working class and the promotion of the Pakistani workforce (ILO,

2016). The MOPHRD and, specifically, its BEOE have primary responsibility for handling migration. BEOE is a supervisory organisation that monitors, regulates, and facilitates foreign migration procedure, following, Emigration Ordinance, 1979 and the Emigration Rules, 1979. It issues licenses to the private overseas employment promoters. The BEOE has established seven Protector of Emigrants Offices in areas of Pakistan with a heavy outmigration of workers to provide potential migrants with information and to supervise the dispensation of their papers and credentials (ILO, 2016).

Emigration to the Persian Gulf or more developed countries is perceived similarly. *Dubai chalo* (go to Dubai) was a popular slogan to describe the experience and perceived opportunities for Pakistani labourers working in countries of Persian Gulf during 1970s and 1980s (Gazdar, 2003). According to a widespread study from the MOPHRD, between 1981 and 2018, 52 per cent of all migrant workers from Pakistan came from Punjab, 26 per cent from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 9.5 per cent from Sindh (IOM, 2019). The primary destinations of Pakistani migrants can be used to classify them according to the sort of migration they are undertaking. Most immigrants to North America and Europe intend to relocate abroad with their families and settle there permanently. Those who are unable to migrate to industrialized countries, particularly labourers with low and intermediate levels of competence, migrate in order to find temporary employment. These migrants frequently go to the GCC nations, which forbid permanent residency of foreign labourers. As a result, migration to these nations is normally short or medium term, however it occasionally lasts for ten to fifteen years due to several contract renewals.

Pakistan's economy, which has experienced ups and downs, severe inequality, unequal patterns of growth and development, and a rapidly growing population that is difficult to absorb into the domestic labour market have all contributed to the country's situation where the government and its people are increasingly depending on foreign employment as a way to relieve pressure (Babar, 2022). The employment

of Pakistani workers is comparatively concentrated. Among the five types of labour in the Gulf region, Highly Qualified, Highly Skilled, Skilled, Semi-Skilled and Un-Skilled, the largest number of unskilled labourers and skilled workers are engaged in semi-technical labour and professionals (Jianjun and Daolei, 2018).

According to the government's annual plan 2020-21 Pakistan has the 9th largest labour force in the world and it is increasing very speedily. According to the Labor Force Survey 2017-18 due to worse condition of Pakistan's economy, jobs from the Pakistan labour market also decrease gradually (Awan, 2022). The exact number of labour migrants is difficult to calculate. But, based on the information of those who were registered between 1971 and 2019, the number was 11.3 million (BEOE, 2020).

As unemployment of country has been increased, rate of unemployment in educated group is higher as compared to uneducated group along with that the unemployment rate in youth is much higher than the adults. During 2020, there were 5.8 million unemployed people, but the number of jobless individuals reached 6.65 million by 2021. As mentioned by the Labor force survey, unemployment is maximum among 15-year to 29-year age bracket, which showed that youth struggle to enter in the labour market, but due to high unemployment rates, they suffer by opting for jobs that are under-qualified and below their level of education and skills (Awan, 2022).

### **Migration to the Gulf:**

Labour migration is a worldwide development that offers mutual paybacks to the economies of countries that depend on outside sources of employment and the economies of countries that send citizens to work in foreign lands. Host countries, such as the GCC, require migrant employees to both inspire and endure monetary development. The countries sending labour force think of this relocation as a safety valve contrary to the increase in domestic joblessness and depend on labourers to send back domestic fiscal expenses (Kamrava and Babar, 2012). There are numerous stages in which the workers

moved towards the countries of Gulf from Pakistan. Because of usual job and seaway interactions amongst the littoral areas of Sindh and Balochistan next to the Gulf; due to the initial historic relation between South Asia and Saudi Arabia because of the Hajj. These ancient networks were reinforced during the foreign rule of the British Empire, during the initial years of the last century. It is assessed that during the 70s, there were about 200,000 Pakistani in the region of Gulf (Gilani, 2009).

The Gulf States, with their vast oil wealth, have provided unparalleled financial prospects for Pakistani labourers. Migration increased in the post-World War II, due to large inflow of oil in the Middle East. Pakistani migrants at that time were working as artisans, shopkeepers, government clerks, and in the oil industry. By 1956, some 1,334 Pakistanis worked for Aramco in Saudi Arabia. This denoted almost 7% of all Aramco's labourers and was surpassed only by employees from Saudi Arabia (67 per cent) and the United States (15 per cent). Small numbers of Pakistani workers continued to migrate during the 1950s and 1960s and, by 1972, some 40,000 Pakistanis were working in the Gulf States in general (Addleton, 1981).

However, migration to Gulf States began on a large-scale due to the oil price hikes of 1971 to 1973 and in 1979, which fueled a thriving construction business as the Gulf States accrued enormous current account surpluses. As a result, dissimilar with migration flows to the more financially prosperous countries, migration towards the countries of the Persian Gulf has unlocked new horizons for illiterate youth who used to reside in the countryside and villages of Pakistan (ICIMOD, 2010).

Due to labour migration from Pakistan to the Gulf States there has been a decrease in the burden of domestic labour force, as 5 per cent of total labour force worked abroad, according to rough estimates (Gazdar, 2003). According to the official statistics, during the last four decades, about 8 million labours migrated from Pakistan. All of the oil exporting countries are main destination for the Pakistani labour migrants including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and United Arab

Emirates (Arif et al., 2020). Especially Saudi Arabia and UAE are the largest destination countries for Pakistani migrant workers and also a major source of remittance in Pakistan. International migration decreases unemployment in the home country, which contributes to the encouragement of international migration in Pakistan.

Production workers make up 83 per cent of the immigrant workforce, with more than half being unskilled. The remaining 17 per cent are largely professional workers, traders or salespeople, and civilian staff etc. According to statistics, agricultural labourers account for approximately 12 per cent of unskilled labour migrating to the Middle East. Regular workers and loaders make up the remaining 88 per cent of unskilled labour. Drivers, masons, electricians, carpenters, and tailors are among the most common immigrant occupations, accounting for 28 per cent of the immigrant work force from Pakistan. Machine operators, steel fixtures, mechanics, welders, preservatives, and other talents are also sought after in the Middle East (Nadeem, et. al., 2019).

Pakistani immigrants in countries of the Gulf comprise a huge sum of illiterate and rural people; their payments right away affect unfortunate monetary situation. From the standpoint of macroeconomic managing, migration towards Gulf evidently displays the enormous effect of global relocation on the internal economy of Pakistan. Overseas currency payments from foreign migrants have become a significant autonomous analysis grouping for financial managers. Remittances have also become the major foundation of foreign money and salaries (Gazdar, 2003). Unfortunately, Government of Pakistan has long ignored the need of participation of Pakistani immigrants in all sectors and has left the shaping of international labour migration trends at the pity of the private sector. Of late, there is a realisation that an overwhelming dependence on this sector will not be a safe bet in the future (Ahmed, 2016).

Pakistan remained in the top ranking of remittance recipients despite the turmoil in their economies in 2022. Remittances from immigrant workers are important to Pakistan's

economy, mainly at a time when country's foreign exchange reserves got rapidly depleted and the government repeatedly sought financial assistance from friendly nations and international lenders (Shabbir, 2023). Acknowledging the noteworthy contribution of the remittances to the economies, the governments have provided backing and incentives for migrant workers to transfer remittances through proper and official channels. For instance, Pakistan launched the Sohni Dharti Remittance Program in 2021 with an award incentive for cash-back points for every remittance transaction made. The government also allows nonresident Pakistanis to open digital bank accounts via the program called Roshan Digital Account (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2023).

### **Discrimination of Pakistani labour in the Gulf countries:**

Years of service and residency in Gulf countries does not get rewarded in the form of citizenship. The highly skilled workers and businessmen in these countries, readily, afford the expense of living with their families, but most of the low-skilled workers find it hard. Also, Pakistani government does not permit women under 35 to migrate as labour migrant that's why in Gulf most of the female migrant workers are from Philippines (Ahmed, 2019).

The system of foreign workers' sponsorship, known as Kafala, introduced in 1950s and in place ever since, binds migrant labourers in the countries of Gulf to their employers, who are in charge of their visa and legal status. To keep a tight eye on the foreign labour force, the system was implemented. It creates avenues for exploitation and offers companies tremendous control over migrant labour. Two significant consequences of this system for foreign migrants are protectionism and the lack of opportunities for social integration (Rahman, 2018). Therefore, it is impossible for migratory labourers in the Gulf to formally integrate into the socioeconomic environment of their new country. Correspondingly, the contract period of two years usually given to an émigré employee is very limited to attain the high markers set by Pakistani labourers wanting better life.

Likewise, ceiling on replacing one employer with another, becomes difficult for labourers, who want most of the financial advantages in a limited timespan (Arif and Ishaq, 2017).

Worryingly, heat and humidity, air pollution, excessive workload and abusive working conditions, inadequate occupational health and safety measures, psychosocial stress, and hypertension all pose health concerns to these migrant workers in Gulf countries. Long hours of hard labour in scorching heat also cause heat stress, which can lead to human organ damage (McQue, 2022). At the labour camps, the migrant workers hardly have time to rest before the next workday. They crowd inside small, dingy quarters and the number of inhabitants may rise up to eight per room. Most of them are vulnerable to catch infections from each other (Ahmed, 2016).

Prevalent racism is plainly visible in everyday life in Gulf countries and reinforced by inherently prejudiced and inadvertently racist legal schemes that make it difficult for people to escape the malicious cycle. Individuals actively use racial slurs and abuse discriminatory comments against Pakistani workers in the Gulf countries. Some workers, even in skilled positions, are denied promotions because of their race. So long as tyrannical migrant labour systems remain in place, one can expect the continuation of Arab world's strain of racism (Gashaw, 2021).

### **Conclusion:**

The countries of Persian Gulf region, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been the source of job and also lucrative destinations for working class section of Pakistan. The urge to have a better life for oneself and also for the family drives men from not only urban areas of Karachi, but also interior rural areas to venture out. Along with financial requirements, the tag of 'working abroad' also enhances the social standing of these migrant workers in their native areas.

The immediate effect of migration to the Gulf region on Pakistan's economic development is the role of remittances. Remittances have become an important component of Pakistan's

balance of payments accounts. Pakistan's reliance on remittances shows no signs of abating. An abrupt cut-off, an unforeseen occurrence or economic slump or, more likely, some type of regional political instability - would cause immense turmoil in Pakistan.

Moreover, both underemployment and joblessness have been alleviated to a certain degree but are far from being resolved. Some unskilled labourers and skilled tradesmen have been particularly crucial in the process of migration to the Gulf countries. The labourers /and their families have benefited greatly from the remittances. However, the vast majority of earnings have gone toward consumerism rather than agrarian or industrial investment.

The resources and policies of Pakistani government are in dire need of self-reliance to minimise the risk related complete dependance on labour payments from the countries of Middle-East. Given adequate working environment and job opportunities, both skilled and unskilled or semi-skilled workers would prefer to stay with their families in their hometown in Pakistan, rather than in sub-human condition in workers' colonies in the Gulf. The MOPHRD requires a devoted team of experts to manage with government agencies and transnational investors and to take appropriate measures for improving the condition of Pakistani workers in Gulf.

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