

THE SCOURGE OF BRAIN DRAIN

Why Bangladesh's best and brightest are leaving for greener pastures

From academics to healthcare professionals, young talents are increasingly choosing to build careers abroad, citing systemic barriers, political constraints, and limited opportunities for growth in their homeland.

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The increasing exodus of educated professionals from Bangladesh reveals a complex web of barriers facing the nation's brightest minds.

From academics to healthcare professionals, young talents are increasingly choosing to build careers abroad, citing systemic barriers, political constraints, and limited opportunities for growth in their homeland.

A recent study commissioned by the British Council, titled "Next Generation Bangladesh 2024", revealed that 55 percent of young people aged between 18 to 35 years in Bangladesh express a desire to migrate abroad.

For many, opportunities overseas hold promise as a potential solution to the perceived lack of economic prospects at home.

As per the findings, the most attractive countries for young Bangladeshis are Saudi Arabia (27 percent), Canada (18 percent) and Australia (13 percent).

The primary reasons these countries are seen as attractive are education opportunities (26 percent), language, history, and culture (25 percent), employment opportunities (23 percent), and common religion (16 percent).

In 2015, 60 percent of the youth believed the country was on the right track, but this dropped to 51 percent by 2023. The researcher, however, could not confirm how many youths wanted to go abroad in 2015.

A SCHOLAR'S STRUGGLE

Sheikh Farid, a PhD scholar at the University of Connecticut, US has had a particularly poignant journey, exemplifying the frustrations and

Bangladesh. Will my country value my expertise?"

His current intention to return comes with conditions – the ability to use his skills effectively and contribute meaningfully to his field.

The latest "Human Flight and Brain Drain 2024" index shows that Bangladesh scored 6.7 on a scale of 10 compared to the global average of 4.98, based on data from 176 countries.

It placed Bangladesh in 37th position, more than 50 places ahead of neighbouring nations like the Maldives, India and Pakistan, which all scored below 5.5.

FROM DHAKA TO MONTREAL

Mahmudul Hassan's path has many parallels to Farid's, yet carries its own distinct challenges.

At 33, Hassan, now a PhD candidate at McGill University, is another example of brain drain from Bangladesh.

After completing his master's from Dhaka University's Institute of Social Welfare and Research in 2014, Hassan found himself grappling with systemic barriers.

"If I wanted to do well in my career, I needed a foreign degree," Hassan explains, revealing a bitter truth about the value placed on international credentials by local companies.

However, his decision to leave his motherland wasn't purely academic.

"There was also frustration over how much Bangladesh would evaluate my qualifications," he adds, pointing to a broader issue of professional recognition in his home country.

Hassan, who is married and has a son, sees the irony in Bangladesh's educational landscape.

"There are more opportunities to study in Bangladesh because there are many universities. But how much that education is used is a different story," he observes.

This disconnect between educational opportunities and their practical application in the job market represents a fundamental challenge in Bangladesh's development.

Both Farid and Mahmudul highlight how political interference and nepotism affect professional growth.

Hassan is particularly candid about the situation: "There is more politics in government jobs and more nepotism in the private sector. The only alternative is to go abroad for a better life."

He specifically points to university faculty appointments as "a very big political process", explaining why many academics seek to escape this hellish nexus.

BRAC, in collaboration with BRAC Institute of Governance and Development and BRAC University, conducted the "Youth Survey 2018", focused on 4,200 youths across 30 upazilas and towns of Bangladesh.



"Bangladesh is losing its brightest minds in three key areas. First, in higher education, because many young people are pursuing better opportunities abroad.

"Second, there is a large exodus of expecting mothers who seek better healthcare and a safer environment to raise their children. Third, young people are leaving due to issues like traffic congestion, limited facilities after having children, poor healthcare, and concerns about the quality of education. These young people are leaving the country in search of career opportunities, higher education, and a more secure future for the next generation."

He added that there are many opportunities abroad that simply don't exist in Bangladesh.

"Take our neighbouring country India for example. It has been successful both domestically and internationally, while Bangladesh is losing out economically. With many of our youth settling abroad, we are experiencing brain drain. We're unable to fill key vacancies within our own country and are forced to hire foreign workers to do the jobs that local talent should be doing."

He added that this problem posed a grave threat.

"When young people see better opportunities elsewhere, they won't hesitate to take them. As a result, our country is at risk of falling deeper into poverty. The government must prioritise strengthening the social safety net and improving the conditions that will keep our youth in the country and allow them to thrive. This must happen at any cost."

As per a study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, Bangladesh lags behind its South Asian peers in average productivity. Although the country has a large labour force, it is

country is unsafe for their families. High-performing individuals are willing to migrate, uncertain of their future, but driven by the desire for a better life. The key question is: Can the country retain its youth by meeting their aspirations? If they can thrive abroad with better opportunities, why wouldn't they choose to settle there?"

Vocational training is undoubtedly necessary to empower the youth, she added, but it must lead to tangible outcomes.

"Recently we have seen that CPD [Centre for Policy Dialogue] conducted a study and it reveals that 81 percent of technical and vocational graduates face the issue of low wages."

Identifying the skills that are relevant and urgently required in the market is critical. Additionally, ensuring safety, security, and a better quality of life will naturally encourage young people to choose to stay, she suggested.

LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR

The scourge of systemic barriers permeates nearly every field.

Dr Syeda Farhana Sabah, 37, is now working as a clinical fellow at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in the UK and echoes similar concerns about professional development in Bangladesh.

After completing her MBBS from Chittagong Medical College Hospital, she found that pursuing advanced medical training in her homeland came with significant constraints.

The move wasn't just about professional development – it was a family decision.

With a husband working as a civil engineer and a 10-year-old daughter, the UK offered comprehensive benefits.

"The UK offers greater economic stability and reliable career opportunities,

"The ecosystem in the US is lot more advanced," he explains, describing the vast network of vendors and partners in media advertising analytics that is "mostly absent in Bangladesh".

But although these familiar hurdles could be overcome, it was the political environment that sealed his decision to stay in America.

Rayed's observation of political freedom in the US was eye-opening: "I arrived here during Trump's first term and people were holding protests, creating caricatures, criticising him intensely."

The contrast with Bangladesh was stark.

"In Bangladesh, everyone I knew had to self-censor to the point that we worried after making any stray remarks that may have portrayed the Awami League government in a negative light."

Prof Bokhtiar Ahmed, dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Independent University Bangladesh, said migration is more closely linked to national development and domestic issues than to the economy itself.

"There are two main forms of labour mobility: one involves educated individuals, such as students, who migrate to the Global North, while the other consists of unskilled workers, who contribute significantly through remittances," he said.

Stronger economies are increasingly focused on knowledge-based industries rather than labour-intensive sectors, he explained.

"Our educated, skilled, and tech-savvy population is leaving due to brain drain, a phenomenon exacerbated by the lack of policies to retain talent and create employment opportunities at home. The current economic structure has failed to generate sufficient growth to absorb this workforce."

"Brain drain highlights the disconnect between national economic growth, planning, the job market, and tertiary education. There has been insufficient review of how our skillset can contribute to the national economy. If this gap is not addressed, the country will fail to harness these skills. The issue of brain drain is not that the youth are lacking in patriotism. Brain drain should be viewed as a political and social policy issue, and it needs to be addressed from an economic, policy-driven perspective," he added.

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, executive director at the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, said: "The primary reason for brain drain is the lack of job security. Many young people are unable to find jobs that match their qualifications. Even if they do, the prospects for future advancement are minimal. Job security is also a major concern, as laws and regulations are weak, leaving workers vulnerable. Additionally, salaries and benefits are low, which discourages young people from staying."

He added that social media had exposed the country's youth to the global job market, which led to greater disappointment with the local employment situation.

"Another issue is the lack of social security for workers in Bangladesh. The government's support for skills development is insufficient, and even ambitious young people struggle to find favourable opportunities in the job market here."

He further said the labour laws in Bangladesh do not adequately protect young professionals, nor do they cover those engaged in outsourcing work.

As such, he said the laws must be expanded to ensure job security and create an environment conducive to future development.

Without these changes, young people will continue to lose interest in working within the country, he warned.

"Skilled workers from countries like Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, and Pakistan are filling high positions in Bangladesh while our own youth are leaving for better opportunities abroad. The education system also needs urgent reform to equip young people with the skills they need to succeed. At present, there are limited opportunities for skills training, and the disparity in job benefits and facilities further frustrates young people, pushing them to seek opportunities elsewhere."

Prof Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the CPD, said: "Many university students in Bangladesh study subjects that don't have job opportunities in the country. Plus, the job market here is very tight. Moreover, the economic benefits available abroad are not offered domestically, making the push factor stronger."

"To address this, we need to foster export growth and economic diversification in our job sector to boost productivity. We must also incentivise new technology sectors and entrepreneurship. Many individuals, after completing their studies or acquiring skills abroad, return as investors, academicians, or employers, creating a cycle of circular mobilisation."

"This is also a different dimension. These young people are not lost forever."



difficult choices many talented Bangladeshis face in pursuit of a career.

In 2016, after completing his master's at the age of 31, this accomplished researcher from the Institute of Social Welfare and Research at the University of Dhaka found himself at a crossroads.

"I wanted to pursue a career in academia," Farid explains, detailing his six-year journey working on various research projects while attempting to secure a teaching position in Bangladesh's public universities.

Farid was the top student in his batch – securing the coveted "first-class first" in both his honours and master's level examinations – but his qualifications and research experience held little value in a system that seemed to value connections over competence.

"The entire process depends on certain people's personal preferences. Merit is not appreciated," he lamented, describing the opaque hiring practices in academic institutions.

The most frustrating aspect was watching less qualified candidates secure positions while his applications were overlooked.

However, Farid's decision to pursue a PhD in the United States did not come without significant personal cost.

His wife and two children remain in Bangladesh, a painful separation.

"I did not want it to happen like this," he said, explaining that his original plan was to become a university teacher in Bangladesh and then pursue further education abroad.

The quality of education in Bangladesh also concerned Farid.

"There are actually fewer educational facilities in our country. First of all, this is not practical. It's also old school education, so we cannot learn real things at global standards," he observed.

This gap between local educational standards and global requirements further motivated him to seek opportunities abroad.

Professionals like Farid also face a multi-faceted decision about whether to return.

"Whether I will go back to Bangladesh depends on the situation," Farid explains. "It depends on what kind of opportunities I will get if I go to

The survey found that about 20 percent of respondents, mainly males aged 15 to 35, were interested in going abroad for better living conditions and career opportunities.

According to the Population and Housing Census 2022, Bangladesh has a total population of 16.98 crore, of whom around 27.96 percent are aged between 15-29 years – highlighting the fact that Bangladesh's youth population has increased by 15.81 percent to 4.59 crore in the past decade.

Mamun Rashid, an economic analyst and banker, shared: "Having worked extensively in the corporate sector, I believe there is a significant leadership problem in Bangladesh. We are not addressing the real issues that young people face today. The emerging demands, aspirations, and desires of the youth are not fully understood or appreciated. Instead of adapting to their needs, we continue to use traditional leadership methods, which creates a disconnect. We fail to nurture and develop their talents, which is why many educated, unmarried youth are choosing to move abroad."

mostly unskilled.

Shamima Akhter, director of corporate affairs, partnerships and communications at Unilever, said they offer a highly sought-after management training programme.

"These are the individuals we aim to retain within the organisation. The trainee investment is substantial and promising youth join the programme. We still lose many of them."

"The issue isn't just about training – it's about broader societal factors. Many young people are leaving the country due to a lack of social safety and a perceived absence of future opportunities here."

She also referred to the data of employees who have left Unilever Bangladesh Limited and Unilever Consumer Care Limited, which shows that 28 percent of the employees who left the organisations did so as they were migrating, compared to 24 percent in 2023 and 28 percent in 2022.

"To address this, we need to upskill our workforce and close the gap between education and real-world skills," she opined.

"Despite training, many still feel the

particularly in healthcare, which can be less predictable in Bangladesh."

When she got there, the contrast in overall conditions was stark.

"Access to clean public spaces, reliable public services, and advanced healthcare facilities create a more comfortable and secure living environment," she notes.

Perhaps most significantly, she found the work-life balance she had sought. "The UK offers a structured environment where professionals can maintain a balance between work and personal life."

The political environment in Bangladesh, with periodic instability and uncertainty, also influenced her decision to leave.

"A more stable environment here in the UK offers greater personal security and better career prospects without the disruptions that political volatility can bring," she added.

Muhtasim Rayed's narrative provides yet another dimension to Bangladesh's brain drain. At 31, working as a business analytics manager at Beauty Co-Lab in the US, his story is particularly telling of how political constraints can drive away talent.