

Princess's journey and the promise of skilled migration

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FILE VISUAL: STAR

When I first met Princess, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor of a tiny concrete room in Davao City on Mindanao island in southern Philippines, her notebook open to a page covered in neat rows of Japanese hiragana. The room was very crowded, with a third of the space taken up by a bunk bed with two single mattresses for her mother, stepfather, baby sister, and her to squeeze into. The one luxury was a small air-conditioner. Princess' mother explained that they prioritised the AC purchase to make the room cool and comfortable for Princess, so that she could focus on her Japanese studies. In fact, the neighbour's daughter was also drawn to this tiny comfort and on most days came in to study together with Princess. Like Princess, she too was enrolled in the Japanese language, culture, and vocational training program run by my partner Onodera User Run (OUR), a subsidiary of a large Japanese food service and restaurant conglomerate that has recently entered the migrant labour

intermediary business in response to the strong demand for young workers in Japan. Both girls were preparing for their Japanese language proficiency exams, the final hurdle before they could qualify for a work visa that would take them to Japan for jobs in nursing homes and restaurants.

For Princess, now 20, that dream is nearly within reach. After six months of language and vocational training at a local academy, she passed her employer interview – conducted entirely in Japanese over Zoom – and received her visa. Reaching this stage required a significant amount of sacrifice from her entire family. Her mother had decided to leave the comforts of their more spacious home in rural Mindanao to come to this tiny apartment in Davao city so that her daughter could attend

classes at the OUR Training Academy – a private training institute licensed in the Philippines to provide skills training, and licensed in Japan to connect young Filipinos to long-term, legally protected jobs in Japan. Princess' stepfather installs and fixes appliances, and his client base remains in their hometown in rural Mindanao. He was commuting back and forth to Davao to support her learning, because they believed what so many families across South and Southeast Asia believe: that access to the labour market in a high-income country, if earned safely and skillfully, can transform not just one life but an entire family's future. When I asked the step father why he was willing to make such a big sacrifice, he explained that it was his dream to work in Japan when he was younger, but he never made it due

to the strict language and visa barriers. Princess is now living out his dream, and if she continues working hard, one day the whole family might be able to move to Japan.

A mirror for Bangladesh

Princess' story is not unique, but it is instructive – especially for countries like Bangladesh. Across South and Southeast Asia, millions of young people face the same dilemma: they are willing to work, eager to learn, and yet locked out of decent employment opportunities at home. In Bangladesh, more than one in four young people remain unemployed despite years of education. The energy that fueled last year's July Uprising – a powerful demand by youth for dignity and opportunity – was born from this same frustration.

As Bangladesh approaches a change in government through a free and fair election that was born out of that movement, one question looms large: how can the country turn that collective energy into lasting, productive change? One promising answer lies in expanding skilled international migration – a strategy that can open new doors for youth while meeting the needs of ageing societies like Japan and South Korea.

The new geography of work

Japan's population is ageing faster than almost any other in the world. By 2040, it will need an additional 5 million foreign workers just to maintain modest economic growth. South Korea's labour shortage is similarly severe; it has already tripled its migrant worker quota to 150,000 for 2024. Across Asia's wealthier nations, employers are struggling to find jobs in caregiving, hospitality, and food service – sectors that sustain both economies and communities.

These trends create an extraordinary opportunity for countries like Bangladesh, which already has a long history of migration. About 8-10 million Bangladeshis work abroad, primarily in the Gulf, sending home billions in remittances each year. Yet most of these jobs are low-wage, temporary, and precarious. The future lies not in expanding low-skill migration but in "moving up the value chain" – training youth for better paying, rights protected roles in countries like Japan and Korea.

The language barrier – and the market failure

If the opportunity is clear, why has skilled migration from Bangladesh remained so limited? The biggest barrier is language. Learning Japanese or Korean is far more demanding – and far less transferable – than learning English.

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KEY POINTS

1. Expand publicly supported, employer-financed skilled migration pathways.
2. Invest in language and vocational training for high-demand global sectors.
3. Use public-private partnerships to reduce risks for migrant workers.
4. Shift migration policy from low-skill labour to rights-protected careers.
5. Treat skilled migration as development strategy, not brain drain.

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