



Vocational and technical training may also help the aspirant migrant workers land overseas roles that are managerial, more secure, and well-paid.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

How will artificial intelligence transform the labour market?

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To date, Bangladesh's policymakers, industry leaders, and educators placed limited emphasis on envisioning or planning for such a fully integrated future. Contrary to this doom and gloom, professions requiring vocational or technical skills appear relatively resilient to AI takeover for now. This is because contemporary AI

non-routine manual work such as automobile repair, construction, cooking, and plumbing. These jobs also require on-premises diagnosis and problem-solving, decision-making, experience and intuition, and human interactions. AI-powered automation may perform some individual tasks more efficiently than human workers. However, AI is incapable of situational judgment that requires a holistic combination of all, or most, of the above tasks.

This represents a ray of hope for Bangladeshi workers. The country enjoys a demographic dividend, with some 4 in 10 Bangladeshis are under the age of 25. Yet, the economy is incapable of generating sufficient well-paid 'white-collar' jobs for the two million or so new jobseekers entering the labour market. Consequently, many are either unemployed or underemployed, with reports of workers with postgraduate qualifications filling menial roles. Here, vocational and technical skills can assist these workers reach their earnings potential and avoid getting replaced by AI and automation. Vocational and technical training may also help the aspirant migrant workers land overseas roles that are managerial, more secure, and well paid. As such, 'blue-collar' skills can further boost Bangladesh's remittances receipts. However, participation in formal vocational and technical training and work in Bangladesh is lacklustre (2%; Figure 3), due to unfavourable societal attitudes, insufficient and underfunded formal training as well as institutional support.

Bangladesh's labour market economics also presents an apparent reprieve from worrisome technological unemployment. Bangladesh has developed little or no indigenous AI technologies and is almost entirely

import-dependant. Imported AI-powered automation remains expensive and, against the backdrop of abundant cheap labour, remains economically untenable considering the costs and benefits—especially for manual- and service-based roles. This scenario presents a case for AI-assisted productivity gain rather than AI replacement of jobs, especially in low- and middle-income economies like Bangladesh.

AI-powered automation is expected to aggravate gender inequality, as more women languish in automatable roles. This is in part due to societal barriers women face while accessing vocational training and technical jobs, which often require travel and after-hours work.

In conclusion, AI will disrupt Bangladesh's labour market, akin to that in other countries. AI-powered automation—a once-in-a-lifetime disruption—poses substantial risks and opportunities to Bangladesh's workers and the economy. Yet there is a lack of readiness among the country's policymakers, education system, workers, and business community. It is important to develop a cohesive, competitive, democratic, and forward-looking strategy to prepare our labour and industry to implement AI to their advantage—analyse data, develop robust systems, and formulate creative solutions. If executed properly, AI-powered automation could help leapfrog Bangladesh's development trajectory and improve citizens' quality of life.

On a final note, I love writing—and I'd like to think AI-powered automation won't take my job... yet.

SOURCE: 2023 & 2024 LABOUR FORCE SURVEYS, BANGLADESH BUREAU OF STATISTICS.

SNAPSHOT

Skills taught in the education system remain poorly aligned with emerging, AI-resilient jobs.

1. Informal employment makes workers more vulnerable to AI-driven job erosion and inequality.
2. Vocational and technical skills offer relative protection and new income opportunities at home and abroad.
3. Bangladesh's limited AI adoption creates scope for productivity gains rather than large-scale job loss.
4. AI will not simply eliminate jobs in Bangladesh. It will expose long-standing weaknesses.
5. In skills, informality, and labour market preparation that the country can no longer afford to ignore.
6. More than two million Bangladeshis enter the labour market each year, including over six lakh university graduates, yet formal vocational and technical training participation remains below 2%.

systems are often centred around large language models which are suited to replacing desk-based routine tasks. In contrast, the latest automation and robotic technologies lack dexterity and adaptability needed to undertake

Figure 1: Employment in Bangladesh by Task Type

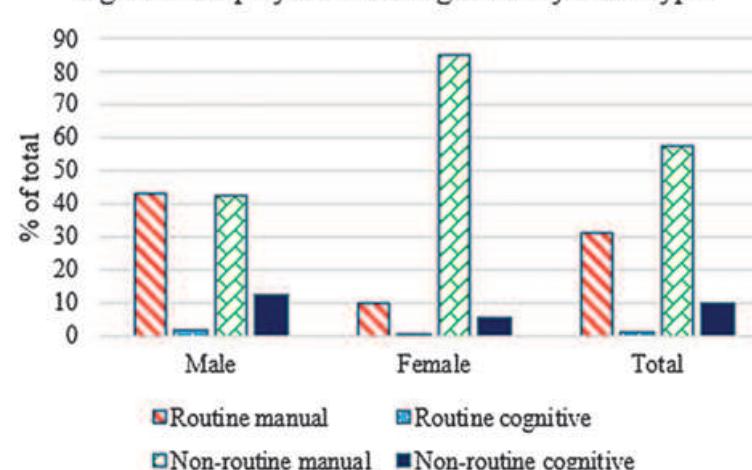


Figure 2: Bangladesh Labour Market Informality

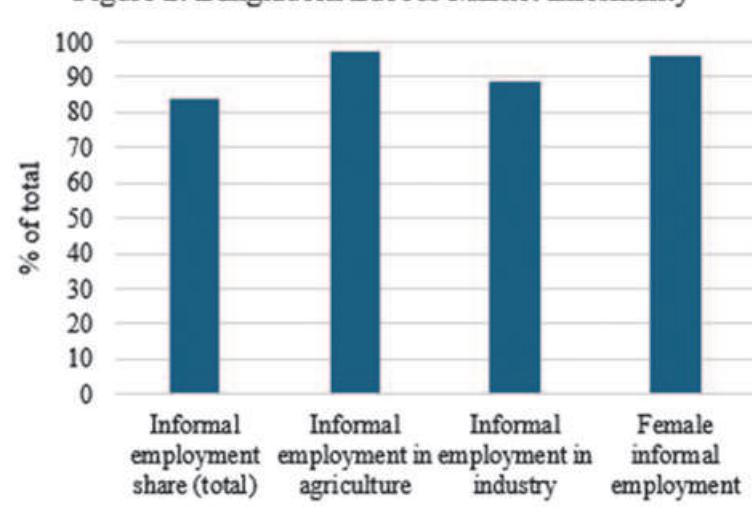


Figure 3: Participation in Formal Vocational and Technical Training in Bangladesh

