

Migrant Workers from Afghanistan A FACTSHEET

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is one of the major labour-sending countries in the South Asian region. Many households rely on remittances for their daily livelihood. Despite the contribution of migration to the overall well-being of the society and development of the country, it continues to pose several challenges for migrant workers. As such, aspiring migrant workers have to pay exorbitant fees during the recruitment process for jobs abroad. Furthermore, many workers also end up working in precarious situations without adequate wage and facilities. In this context, this paper seeks to provide an overview of labour migration from Afghanistan. It provides further information about the population size of Afghan migrant workers, preferred destination countries and working conditions during their employment abroad. The paper also explores the situation of employment and unemployment within Afghanistan.

Migration and migrants

Total out-migration

According to the World Bank Bilateral Migration Matrix of 2017, the total stock of out migrants from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was 5,055,219, with 7,813 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 435,810 in Saudi Arabia, 1,602 in Qatar, 2,908 in Kuwait and 680 in Bahrain—a cumulative of 448,813 in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries; and 507 in Malaysia.¹ The largest number of Afghans were in Iran (2,324,884) and Pakistan (1,515,738),² mostly as refugees and asylum-seekers.³

According to a World Bank (2019) report, Malaysia has identified Afghans as among the 21,890 refugees and asylum-seekers from Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Sri Lanka, and other vulnerable countries in the Middle East and Africa [exact figures for Afghans not known].⁴ The report adds that ‘these registered asylum seekers are not legally allowed to access the labour market, and,

1 World Bank. 2017a. *Bilateral Migration Matrix (2017)*. Washington, D.C: The World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

2 World Bank 2017a.

3 Wickramasekara, Piyasiri and Nilim Baruah. 2013. *Labour Migration for Decent Work in Afghanistan: Issues and Challenges*. Bangkok: ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

4 World Bank. 2019a. *Malaysia: Estimating the Number of Foreign Workers*. Malaysia: World Bank Group.

hence, mostly rely on the informal labour market for their livelihood'.⁵

A report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Organization for Migration, published in 2012, shows that a number of Afghan migrants used Pakistan as a transit country to enter the Islamic Republic of Iran due to difficulties in crossing the border to enter Iran directly. Similarly, Iran was used as a transit country for travelling to the GCC countries, Turkey and Europe.⁶ Most of the labour migrants departing from Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, depended on smugglers for border crossings.⁷

Process and cost of recruitment

Like most other Asian labour-sending countries, private recruitment agencies facilitate the migration of the workers overseas from Afghanistan. The recruitment agencies are required to be registered at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD), the focal government agency for monitoring labour affairs. There were 18 registered recruitment agencies in Afghanistan till 2013, of which only half were active.⁸ As per a World Bank report from 2018, the number of private recruitment agencies registered with MoLSAMD has reached 70, although many of them are inactive. Only about 15 were in the position to recruit prospective migrants, according to the Overseas Employment Unit (OEU) under the MoLSAMD.⁹ The report further suggested that given their short history and the lack of legally open migration corridors, information regarding the operational modality of private recruitment agencies in Afghanistan is not known.¹⁰

Wages of Afghan workers in GCC and Malaysia

The minimum wages for Afghan workers have not been established in all the GCC countries, especially for migrant workers. The minimum wages for workers in the various destinations with Afghan migrants are: a national minimum wage of Qatari Riyal (QAR) 750 (USD 206) for all the workers in Qatar; a national minimum wage of Omani Rial (OMR) 325 (USD 845) for Oman, albeit only applicable to Omani nationals; a minimum wage of Bahraini Dinar (BD) 300 (USD 798) for Bahrain, albeit only applicable to the public sector; and a minimum wage of Kuwaiti Dinar (KD) 75 (USD 247) for Kuwait, also only applicable to the private sector. Currently, there are no minimum wage applications for UAE and Saudi Arabia.¹¹

In Malaysia, the Minimum Wages Order (Amendment) 2018 came into effect from 1 January 2019, setting the minimum wage at Malaysian Ringgit (RM) 1,100 per month or RM 5.29 per hour for workers paid at an hourly rate.¹² However, these figures might not apply to Afghans working in the informal sector in Malaysia.

5 World Bank 2019a, p.40.

6 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Organization for Migration. 2012. *Situation Report on International Migration in South and South-West Asia: Asia-Pacific RCM Thematic Working Group on International Migration including Human Trafficking*. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_PUB_Sit-Rep-book.pdf

7 Stigter 2004; as cited in United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Organization for Migration 2012.

8 Wickramasekara and Baruah 2013.

9 Smith, Rebekah. 2018. *Managed labor migration in Afghanistan: Institutional requirements and policy processes with and in Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/319551516914929208/Managed-labor-migration-in-Afghanistan-institutional-requirements-and-policy-processes-with-and-in-Afghanistan>

10 Smith 2018.

11 International Labour Organization. 2019. *Minimum Wages and Wage Protection in the Arab States: Ensuring a Just System for National and Migrant Workers*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_660002.pdf

12 Bernama. 2019. 'Employers reminded to heed minimum wage order.' *Malaysiakini*, 2 January 2019. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/458632>

Remittance to Afghanistan

The remittances received in Afghanistan in 2018 was about USD 384 million, equivalent to 1.9 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP),¹³ out of which USD 166 million was remitted from Iran, and USD 125 million from Pakistan (see the table below).

Table 1: Remittance received in Afghanistan

Country	Total remittance outflow (in million USD)*	Remittance received by Afghanistan (in million USD)†	% of remittance received by Afghanistan	% of total remittance received by Afghanistan in 2017(=410 million USD)‡
Bahrain	2,466	0	-	-
Kuwait	13,760	0	-	-
Oman	9,815	0	-	-
Qatar	12,759	0	-	-
Saudi Arabia	36,119	61	0.17	14.87
UAE	44,367	1	0.002	0.24
Malaysia	9,363	0	-	-

* World Bank. n.d.d. Annual Remittance Data- Outflows (updated as of April 2019). Washington, D.C:

† World Bank. n.d.d. Annual Remittance Data- Outflows (updated as of April 2019). Washington, D.C: The World Bank. Accessed 14 September 2019. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

‡ World Bank. n.d.e. 'Migration and Remittances Data: Bilateral Remittance Matrix 2017.' Accessed 15 December 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

Status of bilateral agreements with destination countries

Afghanistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Qatar in 2008.¹⁴ Though the MoU was expected to permit the outflow of 25,000 Afghani workers to Qatar, no worker has received employment through this agreement.¹⁵ Afghanistan has also signed an MoU with India, for cooperation in labour-related areas, and, with Iran, for the improvement and consolidation of cooperation on labour and social affairs.¹⁶ However, in practice, labour migration from Afghanistan is not governed by any bilateral labour agreements or MoUs. In addition, the country also doesn't have any agreements with Iran and Pakistan, the top destinations for labour migration from Afghanistan.¹⁷ Wickramasekara and Baruah, in their 2013 report, explain that Afghanistan's major challenge has been 'to move from a refugee-oriented framework to a labour migration framework in a sustainable manner'.¹⁸

In 2016, there were discussions regarding an MoU on labour migration from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia, and a verbal agreement was reached, the formal signing of which is still in its draft stage.¹⁹ Likewise, a 'labour dispatch protocol' has been signed with the government of Qatar, and there are dialogues ongoing with the governments of Iran, Kuwait and UAE to strengthen bilateral relations.²⁰

13 World Bank. 2019c. *Annual Remittance Data- Inflows (updated as of April 2019)*. Washington, D.C: The World Bank. Accessed 14 September 2019. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

14 Marchand, Katrin, Melissa Siegel, Katie Kuschminder, Nassim Majidi, Michaela Vanore, and Carla Buil. 2014. *Afghanistan: Migration Profile*. Kabul: International Organization for Migration, Afghanistan.

15 Smith 2018.

16 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Organization for Migration 2012.

17 Smith 2018.

18 Wickramasekara and Baruah 2013, p.12.

19 Smith 2018.

20 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Organization for Migration 2012, p.127; Marchand et al. 2014.

Employment and workers

Economic growth rate in the country

The economic growth rate of Afghanistan was at 2.2 per cent in 2017, with agriculture accounting for 3.8 per cent, industry for 0.4 per cent, and services for 2.5 per cent.²¹ The nominal GDP at market prices account for USD 20,192 million.²² There was an estimated growth of 2.9 per cent in Afghanistan's economy in 2019.²³

Employment and unemployment

The national labour force participation rate in Afghanistan was 53.9 per cent in 2018, with 80.6 per cent for males and 26.8 per cent for females.²⁴ In the same year, the unemployment rate was 23.9 per cent, with 18.3 per cent for males and 41 per cent for females; and the youth unemployment rate was 30.7 per cent, with 24.3 per cent for males and 47.4 per cent for females.²⁵

Status of informal and formal employment and the future of work

The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) has categorised employees as salaried workers in the public and private sectors. In addition, day labourers are classified under a separate category as 'own-account' workers. Usually, salaried employment is indicative of formal employment, and day labourers, 'own-account' workers and family workers are considered as engaged in vulnerable employment due to informal work arrangements, insecure nature of employment, small and irregular earnings, and low job security (for details, see annex 1 to 5).²⁶

Major employment sectors in Afghanistan include agriculture (44.3 per cent); community, social and personal services (19.7 per cent); and wholesale and retail trade in addition to restaurants and hotels (11.0 per cent).

According to the ALCS 2013-14, the data of working-age children (14-17) shows that 24 per cent were from urban areas, 54.7 per cent from rural areas and 77.3 per cent from Kuchi areas 'were engaged in child labour or were otherwise working.'²⁷ Afghanistan has a low coverage of social protection, and it does not effectively target the poorest and most vulnerable households. Only 6 per cent of all Afghan households participated in any social protection program in 2013-14, such as food-for-work, cash-for-work, or any income-generating activity. Only 8 per cent of all poor households received any formal social protection, compared to 6 per cent coverage among the non-poor.²⁸

Working conditions in Afghanistan

According to Afghanistan's Labour Law (No. 35 of 2007), the minimum age for employment is 18, and 15 for doing light work. The average working hours is 40 per week in a year. For the youths between 15 to 18, and pregnant women, the working hour is reduced to 35 per week. For the workers

21 World Bank. 2019d. *The World Bank in Afghanistan: Overview*. Washington, D.C: The World Bank. Accessed 15 September 2019. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

22 World Bank 2019d.

23 World Bank. n.d. 'The World Bank in Afghanistan: Overview.' Accessed 15 January 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

24 Central Statistics Organization. 2018. *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-17*. Kabul: Central Statistics Organization. <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2018-07/Afghanistan%20ALCS%202016-17%20Analysis%20report.pdf>

25 Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.v.

26 Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.71.

27 Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.60.

28 World Bank and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Economy. 2017. *Afghanistan Poverty Status Update: Progress at Risk*. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/667181493794491292/pdf/114741-WP-v1-P159553-PUBLIC.pdf>.

engaged in underground work, or work which affects health, the working hour is further reduced to 30 per week.²⁹

The government has set a minimum wage of Afghani (AFN) 5,000 (approximately USD 70) per month.³⁰ The hourly overtime wage is 25 per cent more than the official working hour rate on ordinary days and 50 per cent more on weekend or holidays.³¹ Extra compensation is mandatory for night workers depending on the type of work (an increment of 15 per cent on the regular wage for administrative or service employees, and an increment of 25 per cent for production employees).³²

There is a provision of break and paid leave in the Afghani labour law. The breaks are available for prayer and eating during office hours. There is a provision of public holidays (national and religious), and annual leave (recreational, sick and necessary or urgent leave). The employees can get sick leave of up to 20 days with pay and allowance in a year. Female workers are entitled to 90 days of paid maternity leave, of which, 30 days of leave can be taken before delivery.³³

Ratification of ILO Conventions

Afghanistan has acceded to two international instruments on migration in 2005—which are the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.³⁴ With regard to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, Afghanistan has ratified a total of 19 Conventions, out of which, 17 are in force.³⁵ Afghanistan has ratified five, out of eight, fundamental conventions including the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (C100); the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (C105); the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (C111); the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (C138); and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (C182). Similarly, Afghanistan has ratified one governance Convention called the Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976 (C144); and 13 technical conventions including the Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, 1921 (C014); the Protection of Wages Convention, 1949 (C095); and the Rural Workers' Organisations Convention, 1975 (C141), among others.

29 Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 2007. *Labour Law (No. 35 of 2007)*. Official Gazette, 2007-02-04, No. 914. <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/travail/docs/546/Labor%20Code.pdf>

30 Kakar Advocate LLC. 2019. *Employment: Afghanistan Law and Practice*. Kabul: Kakar Advocate LLC. <https://kakaradvocates.com/data/brochures/EmploymentChambers.PDF>

31 Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2007.

32 Kakar Advocates LLC 2019.

33 Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2007.

34 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and International Organization for Migration 2012, p.175.

35 International Labour Organization (ILO). n.d. 'Ratifications for Afghanistan.' Accessed 12 January 2020. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11200:0::NO::P11200_COUNTRY_ID:102945

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Annex 1: Status of employment in Afghanistan (in percentage)

Status in employment	Male	Female	BS
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Employer	2.7	2.3	2.6
Salaried worker, private	8.2	3.1	7.1
Salaried worker, public	11.6	4.7	10.1
Own-account worker	45.5	20.7	40.1
Day labourer	19.5	1.9	15.7
Unpaid family worker	12.4	67.4	24.5
Of which vulnerable employment	77.5	89.9	80.2

Source: Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.72.

Annex 2: Employed population by age group and employment status in Afghanistan (in percentage)

Age	Unpaid family worker	Day labourer	Own-account worker	Salaried worker, private	Salaried worker, public	Employer
Total	24.5	15.7	40.1	7.1	10.1	2.6
14-19	46.6	15.6	26.0	6.8	1.9	3.1
20-29	25.9	17.9	33.2	8.0	12.2	2.8
30-39	18.7	17.0	43.9	7.0	10.7	2.6
40-49	17.7	14.1	48.7	6.4	10.4	2.7
50-59	15.7	10.2	52.5	5.9	14.0	1.7
60-69	14.6	10.5	55.1	6.8	10.9	2.2
70-79	17.9	6.2	63.5	2.8	8.1	1.6
80+	6.8	13.4	70.3	2.2	7.1	0.3

Source: Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.73

Annex 3: Sector and industry of employment in Afghanistan (in percentage)

Sector	% of the total	share of male (%)	share of female (%)
Total		78.0	22.0
Agriculture	44.3	67.2	32.8
Community, social and personal services	19.7	90.4	9.6
Wholesale and retail trade and restaurants and hotels	11.0	98.2	1.8
Construction	9.8	99.1	0.9
Manufacturing	8.1	35.6	64.4
Transport, storage, communication and information	5.8	99.8	0.2
Financing, insurance, real estate and business services	1.0	95.6	4.4
Mining and quarrying	0.2	99.1	0.9
Electricity, gas and water	0.1	100.0	0.0

Source: Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.77-78.

Annex 4: Mean and median weekly working hours of employed population in Afghanistan

(Mean)

Residence	Male	Female	Total
Total	42.5	21.2	37.8
Urban	50.0	24.9	46.3
Rural	39.9	20.3	35.4
Kuchi	42.3	22.1	35.6

(Median)

Residence	Male	Female	Total
Total	42	18	36
Urban	48	21	48
Rural	42	15	35
Kuchi	42	21	30

Source: Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.81.

Annex 5: Labour force by sex and decent work status in Afghanistan (in percentage)

Decent work status	Male	Female	Total
Unemployed	18.3	41.0	23.9
Underemployed	16.1	14.1	15.6
Vulnerable employment	49.0	39.4	46.6
Over-qualified	1.6	0.3	1.3
Decent work, matching education	6.9	2.3	5.8
Decent work, under-qualified	8.1	2.9	6.8

Source: Central Statistics Organization 2018, p.85.



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