The Hidden Social Costs of International Migration in Bangladesh

The Hidden Social Costs of International Migration in Bangladesh

Acknowledgement: This report has been prepared by Takia Islam Toma, Project Assistant.

Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme
Cabinet Division and General Economics Division (GED) of Bangladesh Planning Commission
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
www.socialprotection.gov.bd

Table of contents

1. Abstract

International migration has emerged as a critical driver of Bangladesh's economic development, with remittance inflows contributing substantially to national income, foreign exchange reserves, and household livelihoods. While the economic contributions of migration have been extensively documented, considerably less attention has been paid to the structural and social consequences accompanying labour mobility. This review paper examines the interrelationships between health, education, migration, and the hidden social costs of international migration in Bangladesh through an integrated conceptual framework that combines human capital theory, push–pull theory, the healthy migrant effect, and social reproduction theory. Drawing on secondary literature, peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and empirical evidence from Bangladesh, the study explores how health status and educational attainment shape migration decisions and how migration, despite generating significant economic benefits, produces multidimensional social costs for migrants and their families.

The review finds that migration from Bangladesh is characterised by positive selection, whereby individuals with better health, financial stability and higher levels of education are more likely to migrate, particularly for skilled employment and higher education abroad. At the same time, migrant workers experience elevated risks of occupational hazards, mental health challenges, chronic diseases, and psychosocial stress. Migration also reshapes household dynamics by redistributing unpaid care responsibilities, increasing the burden on women, elderly carers, and other family members left behind. Children in migrant households may experience emotional distress, disruptions in education, and reduced parental care despite improvements in household income through remittances. These findings demonstrate that migration simultaneously strengthens financial capital while weakening aspects of human and social capital, revealing a significant policy gap in migration governance.

The paper argues that evaluating migration solely through remittance growth provides an incomplete understanding of its developmental implications. A more holistic approach is required, which integrates health protection, educational opportunities, psychosocial services, gender-responsive social protection, and family-centred migration policies into national migration governance. Such an approach would better balance the economic benefits of migration with the well-being of migrants and the households they support, thereby contributing to more sustainable and inclusive development outcomes in Bangladesh.

Keywords: international migration; remittances; Healthy Migrant Effect; Human Capital; education; Push-pull factors; social costs; social reproduction; care economy; family well-being;

2. Introduction

International migration has become one of the most influential drivers of economic and social transformation in developing countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), more than 280 million people currently reside outside their country of birth, with labour migration accounting for a substantial share of global human mobility. For many developing economies, migration serves as an important livelihood strategy by reducing domestic unemployment, generating remittance income, facilitating knowledge transfer, and strengthening household resilience.

Bangladesh has emerged as one of the world's leading labour-sending countries. Over the past four decades, millions of Bangladeshi workers have migrated primarily to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America in search of improved employment opportunities. Consequently, remittance has become one of Bangladesh's largest sources of foreign exchange earnings, contributing significantly to national economic stability, poverty reduction, and household consumption (Bangladesh Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Policymakers therefore often regard migration as an essential component of Bangladesh's development strategy.

Despite these undeniable economic contributions, migration is far more than an economic phenomenon. Migration simultaneously reshapes family structures, labour markets, gender relations, health outcomes, educational opportunities, and social protection systems. Existing public discourse and policy debates in Bangladesh have largely emphasized the financial benefits of migration while paying comparatively less attention to its multidimensional social consequences. This imbalance has created a knowledge gap regarding the structural costs of migration that extend beyond remittance inflows.

Recent empirical studies indicate that migration is a selective process rather than a random event. Individuals possessing better physical health, greater educational attainment, and stronger financial resources are generally more capable of undertaking international migration because migration requires substantial physical, psychological, and financial investments (Alam et al., 2024). At the same time, migrants frequently encounter occupational hazards, mental health challenges, chronic illnesses, and social isolation in destination countries (Kuhn et al., 2020). Furthermore, migration generates significant consequences for left-behind family members through increased unpaid care responsibilities, changes in gender roles, emotional stress among children, and pressures on elderly caregivers (ECONS, 2026).

Education represents another important dimension of migration. Highly educated individuals increasingly pursue overseas education and skilled employment opportunities, contributing to the international mobility of human capital. Although educational migration may generate long-term economic returns through enhanced skills and professional networks, it also raises concerns regarding brain drain and the loss of highly skilled professionals from Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2024).

Given these multidimensional impacts, migration should not be evaluated solely through the volume of remittances it generates. Rather, migration represents a complex social process involving both opportunities and vulnerabilities that affect migrants, their households, and society as a whole. Understanding these trade-offs is particularly important for designing migration policies that promote sustainable development and inclusive social protection.

This paper therefore examines the relationship between health, education, and international migration in Bangladesh while critically analysing the hidden social costs associated with labour mobility. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions:

1. How do health and education influence international migration decisions in Bangladesh?
2. What evidence supports the Healthy Migrant Effect among Bangladeshi migrants?
3. How do the social, health, and family consequences of international migration affect economic well-being?

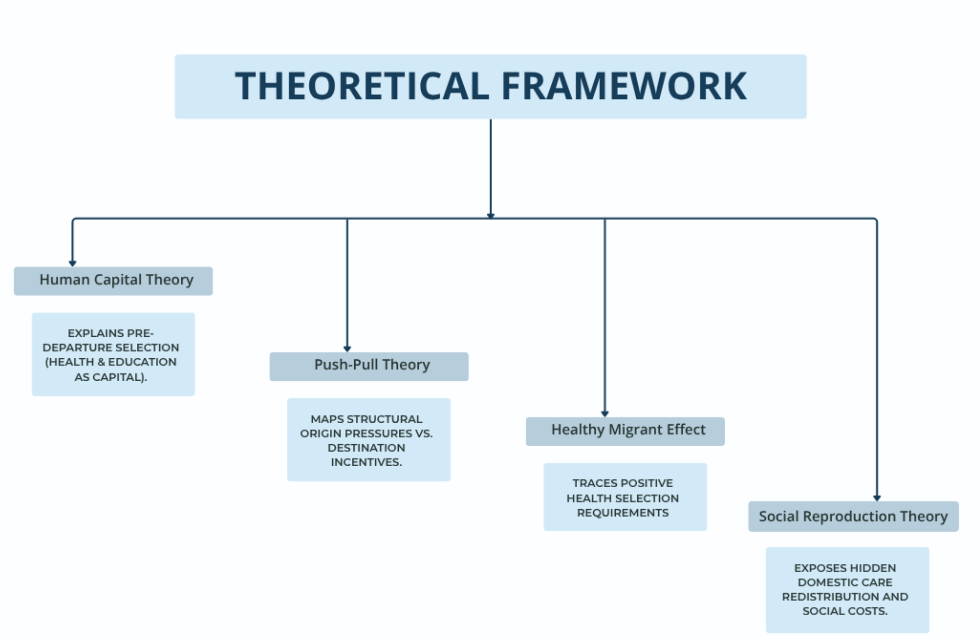
Drawing upon an integrated conceptual framework combining human capital theory, push-pull theory, the healthy migrant effect, and social reproduction theory, this review argues that migration simultaneously produces economic gains and structural social costs. Consequently, migration policy should move beyond an exclusive focus on remittance growth toward a more comprehensive approach that places equal emphasis on human well-being, family resilience, and sustainable development.

3. Literature Review

Migration has long been recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by economic incentives, social institutions, human capital, demographic characteristics, and policy environments. Contemporary migration literature has progressively shifted from viewing migration solely as an economic decision toward understanding its broader implications for health, education, gender relations, and household well-being.

3.1 Theoretical Foundations of Migration

Understanding international migration requires a multidisciplinary perspective, as migration decisions are influenced by economic, social, demographic, and institutional factors. This study draws upon four theoretical perspectives: Human Capital Theory, Push–Pull Theory, the Healthy Migrant Effect, and Social Reproduction Theory, to explain how health and education influence migration decisions and how migration produces both economic benefits and hidden social costs.



3.2 Migration as an Economic and Development Strategy

Classical migration theories largely explain migration through differences in wages and employment opportunities between origin and destination countries. Push–Pull Theory argues that adverse conditions in the country of origin, including unemployment, poverty, environmental vulnerability, and limited educational opportunities, push individuals to migrate, whereas higher wages, better living standards, and improved career prospects attract migrants to destination countries (Lee, 1966).

The New Economics of Labour Migration further argues that migration decisions are often made collectively by households rather than individuals. Families invest in migration as a strategy to diversify income sources, reduce economic risks, and overcome market failures such as limited access to credit or insurance (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Within Bangladesh, migration has become an important household livelihood strategy, particularly in rural communities where overseas employment provides opportunities to improve living standards through remittance income.

3.3 Human Capital, Health, and Migration

Human Capital Theory proposes that individuals invest in education, skills, and health to improve their productivity and lifetime earnings (Becker, 1964). International migration can therefore be viewed as an investment decision in which individuals possessing greater human capital expect higher economic returns abroad.

Health plays an equally important role in migration. The Healthy Migrant Effect suggests that migrants are generally healthier than non-migrants because physically fit individuals are more capable of bearing the financial and physical demands associated with migration (Jasso et al., 2004). Recent longitudinal evidence from Bangladesh supports this proposition. Alam et al. (2024) found that individuals with better health status were significantly more likely to migrate internationally than those experiencing chronic illness. Similarly, Kuhn et al. (2020) observed that Bangladeshi international migrants demonstrated better physical health at departure but subsequently experienced higher rates of hypertension, obesity, and depressive symptoms following migration.

These findings suggest that migration simultaneously reflects positive health selection while exposing migrants to new occupational and psychosocial risks after arrival.

3.4 Education and International Migration

Educational attainment significantly shapes migration aspirations and opportunities. Highly educated individuals are more likely to migrate through skilled employment or higher education pathways because education enhances employability and international competitiveness (de Haas, 2021). Student migration has also become an increasingly important component of global human mobility, particularly among developing countries seeking improved research opportunities and internationally recognised qualifications.

Evidence from Bangladesh indicates that perceptions regarding limited research facilities, insufficient job-oriented curricula, and constrained professional opportunities motivate many students to pursue education abroad (Chowdhury, 2024). Although overseas education contributes to knowledge acquisition and human capital development, it also raises concerns regarding brain drain when graduates fail to return to Bangladesh.

3.5 Social Costs of Migration

While remittances improve household income and consumption, migration simultaneously generates hidden social costs that receive comparatively limited policy attention. Social Reproduction Theory argues that societies depend upon unpaid care work, including childcare, elderly care, and domestic labour, to reproduce labour and sustain households (Bakker & Gill, 2003). Migration redistributes these responsibilities among remaining family members, particularly women.

Research on female labour migration in Bangladesh demonstrates that when women migrate internationally, caregiving responsibilities are frequently transferred to grandmothers, daughters, sisters, and other female relatives rather than redistributed equally within households (ECONS, 2026). This phenomenon reflects broader global care chains in which labour migration shifts unpaid care work across households and national boundaries (Hochschild, 2000).

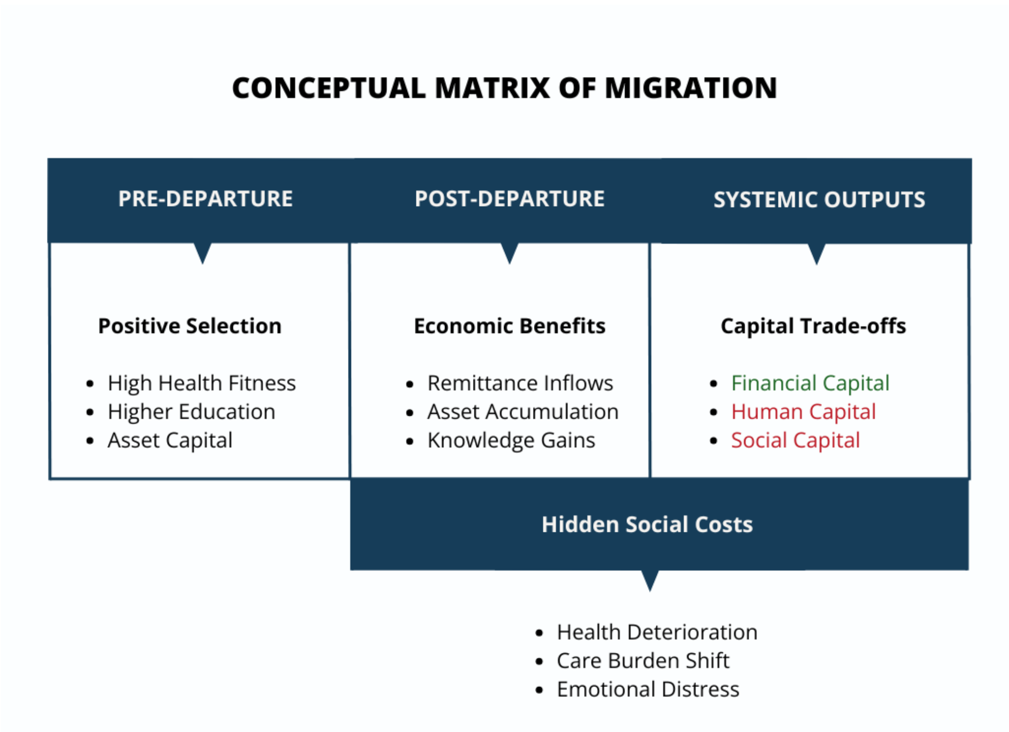
Children left behind may experience emotional distress, reduced parental supervision, and interruptions in educational attainment, while elderly caregivers frequently face increased physical, emotional, and financial burdens. These social consequences often remain invisible within national migration statistics because policy attention primarily focuses on remittance inflows rather than household well-being.

3.6 Research Gap

Although extensive literature documents the economic contributions of migration in Bangladesh, relatively few studies integrate health, education, and social consequences within a single analytical framework. Existing research frequently examines these dimensions independently, for example, focusing exclusively on remittances, migrant health, or gendered care work, without considering their interrelationships. This paper addresses that gap by synthesising evidence from multiple disciplines and applying an integrated conceptual framework that explains how human capital influences migration while simultaneously generating economic benefits and hidden social costs.

4. Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated conceptual framework combining Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966), the Healthy Migrant Effect (Jasso et al., 2004), and Social Reproduction Theory (Bakker & Gill, 2003). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of migration as both an economic investment and a social process with multidimensional consequences.



Human Capital Theory serves as the primary analytical foundation of this study. It argues that education, skills, and health constitute productive assets that increase an individual's capacity to obtain higher economic returns. Individuals possessing better health and higher educational attainment are therefore more likely to migrate internationally because they possess greater capabilities to overcome migration costs and compete in foreign labour markets.

Push-Pull Theory complements this perspective by explaining the contextual factors that shape migration decisions. Economic inequalities, unemployment, climate vulnerability, and limited educational opportunities in Bangladesh function as push factors, whereas higher wages, better employment prospects, quality education, and improved living conditions in destination countries operate as pull factors. Migration occurs when individuals possess both the aspiration and capability to respond to these incentives.

The Healthy Migrant Effect further explains that migration is selective. Rather than representing a random sample of the population, migrants are generally healthier than non-migrants because migration requires substantial physical endurance, financial investment, and psychological resilience. However, the initial health advantage frequently diminishes after migration because migrants encounter occupational hazards, psychosocial stress, discrimination, and lifestyle changes.

Finally, Social Reproduction Theory broadens the analysis beyond migrants themselves by examining the consequences experienced by households left behind. Migration alters family structures by redistributing unpaid care work, changing gender roles, increasing responsibilities for elderly caregivers, and affecting children's emotional and educational development. Consequently, migration produces both economic benefits through remittances and significant social costs that are often overlooked within migration governance.

Accordingly, this study conceptualises migration as a dynamic process in which human capital influences migration decisions, migration generates financial gains, and these gains are accompanied by structural social consequences that affect migrants, households, and communities. This framework enables a holistic assessment of migration that extends beyond conventional economic indicators and incorporates health, education, gender, and social protection into the analysis.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Human Capital as a Driver of International Migration

The literature consistently demonstrates that migration from Bangladesh is characterised by positive human capital selection, whereby individuals possessing better health and higher educational attainment are more likely to migrate internationally.

Human Capital Theory explains this relationship by suggesting that migration represents an investment intended to maximise the economic returns generated by education, skills, and health.

Health plays a particularly important role in migration decisions because international migration often requires considerable physical endurance and financial commitment. Alam et al. (2024) found that individuals with chronic illnesses were significantly less likely to migrate than healthier individuals, indicating that migration is selective rather than random. Families investing substantial financial resources in overseas employment frequently choose household members who are physically capable of sustaining demanding work environments abroad.

Educational attainment similarly increases migration opportunities. Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to access skilled employment and overseas higher education programmes. Education therefore expands migrants' capabilities while increasing their expected earnings in destination countries. These findings support both Human Capital Theory and the aspirations–capabilities framework, demonstrating that migration depends not only on individuals' aspirations but also on their ability to realise those aspirations.

5.2 Migration as a Source of Economic Development

International migration continues to make substantial contributions to Bangladesh's economy through remittance inflows, foreign exchange earnings, poverty reduction, and household income diversification. Remittances improve household consumption, facilitate investments in education and healthcare, strengthen housing conditions, and contribute to local economic development.

From the perspective of the New Economics of Labour Migration, migration functions as a household strategy for managing financial risks rather than merely an individual employment decision. Families often finance migration with the expectation that remittance income will compensate for the substantial costs associated with overseas employment.

Educational migration further contributes to human capital development by enabling students to acquire internationally recognised qualifications, technical expertise, and professional experience. These skills have the potential to contribute to national development if migrants return or maintain productive transnational connections with Bangladesh.

Although these economic contributions are considerable, they represent only one dimension of migration's overall impact.

5.3 Health Consequences of International Migration

While migrants are generally healthier at the time of departure, the literature demonstrates that this health advantage frequently diminishes following migration. Bangladeshi migrant workers commonly encounter hazardous occupational environments, physically demanding employment, limited access to healthcare services, prolonged working hours, and psychosocial stress arising from social isolation and family separation.

Kuhn et al. (2020) reported that Bangladeshi international migrants experienced significantly higher rates of hypertension, overweight and obesity, and depressive symptoms than comparable non-migrant populations. These findings suggest that the Healthy Migrant Effect operates primarily during the migration selection process but does not guarantee long-term health advantages.

Mental health has emerged as an increasingly important concern among migrant workers. Anxiety, depression, loneliness, and emotional distress are frequently associated with separation from family members, insecure employment, exploitative labour conditions, and limited social support in destination countries. Consequently, migration policy should extend beyond pre-departure medical examinations to include long-term health promotion and psychosocial support services throughout the migration cycle.

5.4 Hidden Social Costs of Migration

Despite generating significant financial benefits, migration simultaneously produces substantial social costs that are often overlooked within migration policy. Social Reproduction Theory provides a useful lens for understanding these consequences because migration redistributes unpaid care work among household members who remain in the country of origin.

Evidence from Bangladesh indicates that caregiving responsibilities are predominantly transferred to women, including grandmothers, daughters, sisters, and other female relatives. Rather than promoting a more equitable distribution of domestic labour, migration frequently reinforces existing gender inequalities by increasing unpaid care responsibilities for women.

Children in migrant households may experience emotional distress, reduced parental supervision, behavioural challenges, and disruptions to their educational development despite improvements in household income. Elderly caregivers likewise experience increased physical and emotional burdens while simultaneously assuming greater responsibility for childcare and household management.

These findings demonstrate that remittance income cannot fully compensate for the loss of parental presence, emotional support, and family cohesion. The hidden social costs of migration therefore remain largely invisible within conventional economic indicators.

5.5 Integrating Economic Benefits and Social Costs

The findings suggest that migration in Bangladesh is characterised by a fundamental paradox. On one hand, migration strengthens financial capital through remittances, expands employment opportunities, facilitates knowledge acquisition, and contributes significantly to national economic development. On the other hand, migration weakens important dimensions of human and social capital by exposing migrants to health risks, increasing psychosocial stress, redistributing unpaid care work, and altering household relationships.

This study's integrated conceptual framework demonstrates that migration should be understood as a multidimensional development process rather than simply a source of foreign exchange earnings. Evaluating migration exclusively through remittance statistics risks overlooking its broader implications for health, gender equality, education, family well-being, and social protection.

Accordingly, sustainable migration governance requires policies that simultaneously maximise the economic benefits of migration while mitigating its hidden social costs. Integrating health services, psychosocial support, family-centred social protection, gender-responsive policies, and reintegration programmes into Bangladesh's migration governance framework would contribute to more inclusive and sustainable migration outcomes.

6. Conclusion

International migration plays a vital role in Bangladesh's economic development strategy, supplying necessary foreign exchange reserves and offering crucial household income support. However, evaluating migration purely through the lens of remittance growth presents an incomplete picture of its true development impacts. This review demonstrates that labor mobility is accompanied by significant non-monetary trade-offs, specifically including health deterioration among workers abroad, expanded care burdens on left-behind women and elderly relatives, and emotional distress among children.

While international migration draws heavily on Bangladesh's healthiest and most resilient individuals, the poor working conditions encountered abroad frequently erode these initial health advantages over time. Simultaneously, the reallocation of unpaid domestic labor exposes gaps in local care infrastructure that remittance income alone cannot fill.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward a more balanced, human-centered migration policy framework. Integrating occupational health safeguards, mental health resources, family-focused social protection, and gender-responsive care policies into national governance structures will better protect the well-being of migrants and their families. Balancing economic objectives with social protections is essential to ensure that international migration contributes to long-term, sustainable, and inclusive development in Bangladesh.

References

1. Alam, N., Haider, M. M., Rahman, M. M., Bashar, M. I., Amin, M. T., & Wander, K. S. (2024). Do healthy people migrate more? A 21-year follow-up of a rural cohort in Bangladesh. Heliyon, 10(e39647). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e39647,.
2. Evaluation and Consulting Services Limited (ECONS). (2026). Female labor migration and household care dynamics in Bangladesh: Implications for gender-responsive social protection. Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme, Cabinet Division, and General Economics Division (GED) of Bangladesh Planning Commission,.
3. Kuhn, R., Barham, T., Razzaque, A., & Turner, P. (2020). Health and well-being of male international migrants and non-migrants in Bangladesh: A cross-sectional follow-up study. PLOS Medicine, 17(3), Article e1003081. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003081
4. Bakker, I., & Gill, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Power, production and social reproduction: Human in/security in the global political economy*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230522404
5. Bangladesh Bank. (2024). *Annual report 2023–2024*. Chief Economist's Unit, Bangladesh Bank.
6. Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
7. Chowdhury, R. R. (2024). *A study on the trends of student migration* (Unpublished bachelor's thesis). Department of International Business, University of Dhaka.
8. de Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: The aspirations–capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *9*(1), Article 8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4
9. ECONS. (2026). *Female labour migration and household care dynamics in Bangladesh: Implications for gender-responsive social protection*. Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme.
10. Hochschild, A. R. (2000). Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In W. Hutton & A. Giddens (Eds.), *On the edge: Living with global capitalism* (pp. 130–146). Jonathan Cape.
11. International Organization for Migration. (2024). *World migration report 2024*. International Organization for Migration. https://doi.org/10.18356/9789292686123

12. Jasso, G., Massey, D. S., Rosenzweig, M. R., & Smith, J. P. (2004). Immigrant health: Selectivity and acculturation. In N. B. Anderson, R. A. Bulatao, & B. Cohen (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on racial and ethnic differences in health in late life* (pp. 227–266). National Academies Press.
13. Lee, E. S. (1966). A theory of migration. *Demography*, *3*(1), 47–57. https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063
14. Stark, O., & Bloom, D. E. (1985). The new economics of labor migration. *The American Economic Review*, *75*(2), 173–178.
15. World Bank. (2024). *Migration and development brief 40: Leveraging diaspora finances for development*. World Bank Group.

Annex A: Glossary & Keyword Elaborations

Remittances: Financial or in-kind transfers made by migrant workers directly to individuals or families in their home countries. In Bangladesh, remittances constitute a primary driver of macro-economic stability, significantly augmenting foreign exchange reserves and financing household consumption, healthcare, and education.

Social Capital: The networks, relationships, shared values, and understandings in a society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and work together. In the context of migration, social capital can be stretched or eroded as family structures and community networks adapt to the prolonged absence of key household members.

Gender-Responsive Social Protection: Policy measures and public interventions designed to address the specific vulnerabilities, risks, and economic burdens faced by women. This includes addressing the uneven redistribution of unpaid care work, mitigating risks faced by female head-of-households, and offering targeted safety nets for women left behind by migrant spouses.

Brain Drain: The emigration of highly trained, educated, or skilled individuals from a particular country, leading to a loss of human capital and technical expertise in the nation of origin. In Bangladesh, this primarily concerns tertiary-educated professionals and students migrating to Western nations for higher education and professional employment.

Global Care Chains: A series of personal networks across the globe based on paid or unpaid care work. It describes the phenomenon where women migrate to take up care work or labor abroad, leaving the care of their own children and elderly relatives to other women (such as grandmothers, aunts, or hired local workers) in their home country.

Annex B: Extended Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, developed by Becker (1964), argues that individuals invest in education, skills, training, and health to improve their productivity and increase their lifetime earnings. These investments enhance an individual's economic value and ability to compete in the labour market. From a migration perspective, international migration can be viewed as an investment decision in which individuals seek higher returns on their accumulated human capital by accessing better employment opportunities or higher-quality education abroad. Consequently, individuals with better health and higher educational attainment are generally more likely to migrate because they possess greater capabilities to overcome the financial, physical, and informational costs associated with migration.

Push–Pull Theory

Lee's (1966) Push–Pull Theory explains migration as the outcome of opposing forces operating in origin and destination countries. Push factors are conditions that encourage individuals to leave their home country, such as unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, or limited educational opportunities. Pull factors, on the other hand, include higher wages, better employment prospects, quality education, improved healthcare, and higher living standards available in destination countries. Migration occurs when the perceived benefits of moving outweigh the costs and barriers associated with migration.

Healthy Migrant Effect

The Healthy Migrant Effect suggests that migrants are generally healthier than non-migrants because migration is a selective process requiring physical fitness, psychological resilience, and financial capacity (Jasso et al., 2004). Individuals suffering from chronic illnesses or poor health are less likely to undertake international migration, particularly labour migration that often involves physically demanding occupations. However, research also shows that migrants' health advantages frequently decline over time due to hazardous working conditions, occupational stress, discrimination, limited access to healthcare, and lifestyle changes in destination countries (Kuhn et al., 2020).

Social Reproduction Theory

Social Reproduction Theory examines how societies sustain themselves through unpaid activities such as childcare, elderly care, domestic work, and emotional support (Bakker & Gill, 2003). These activities are essential for maintaining households and reproducing the labour force but are often disproportionately performed by women. In the context of migration, when one household member migrates, caregiving responsibilities are redistributed among remaining family members, particularly women, grandmothers, and older daughters. As a result, migration may improve household income through remittances while simultaneously increasing unpaid care work, emotional stress, and gender inequalities within left-behind households.

Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of migration by demonstrating that international migration is not solely an economic decision but a complex social process influenced by human capital, structural opportunities, health selection, and family dynamics. Together, they form the theoretical foundation for the conceptual framework developed in this study.