

YANGON UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
MASTER OF ECONOMICS

**A STUDY ON OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF
WORKFORCE MOBILITY UNDER EMPLOYMENT PERMIT
SYSTEM (EPS)**

THAZIN MOE

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SYSTEM (EPS)**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Economics (M.Econ) Degree**

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This is to certify that this thesis entitled **“A Study on Opportunities and Challenges of Workforce Mobility Under Employment Permit System (EPS)”** submitted as a partial fulfilment towards the requirements for the degree of Master of Economics has been accepted by the Board of Examiners.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the opportunities and challenges of Myanmar workforce mobility under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS). Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this study combines secondary data from official reports with a survey of 100 Myanmar returnees, analyzed using descriptive statistics and a Five-Point Likert Scale. Secondary results show that EPS has expanded Myanmar's labor migration, with manufacturing as the primary sector and remittances playing a vital role in household welfare and economic stability. The program also enhances skill development, financial literacy, and intercultural awareness. However, challenges still include job immobility, workplace hazards, language barriers, discrimination, family separation, and weak reintegration support. Survey results reveal that significant financial gains, improved living standards, and personal growth for many returnees, but also reveal dissatisfaction with pre-departure training, high migration costs, and limited recognition of overseas-acquired skills in Myanmar. The study recommends enhancing training, improving skills recognition, and strengthening reintegration programs to maximize the developmental impact of EPS migration.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	v
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	vi
 CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION	 1
1.1 Rationale of the Study	1
1.2 Objectives of the Study	2
1.3 Method of Study	3
1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study	3
1.5 Organization of the Study	3
 CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW	 4
2.1 Nature and Concepts of Employment Permit Systems	4
2.2 The Role of Employment Permit Systems in Workforce Mobility	7
2.3 Classification of Employment Permit Systems	8
2.4 South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS)	11
2.5 Opportunities and Challenges under South Korea's EPS	13
2.6 Review on Previous Studies	18
 CHAPTER III THE ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT PERMIT SYSTEM (EPS) AND WORKFORCE MOBILITY OF MYANMAR	 22
3.1 The Role of the Employment Permit System in Myanmar	22
3.2 Importance of the EPS for South Korea and Myanmar	25
3.3 Migration Trends of Myanmar Workers to South Korea	27
3.4 Opportunities for Migrant Workers of Myanmar Under EPS	33
3.5 Challenges for Migrant Workers of Myanmar Under EPS	35

CHAPTER IV SURVEY ANALYSIS	38
4.1 Survey Profile	38
4.2 Survey Design	38
4.3 Survey Results	41
 CHAPTER V CONCLUSION	 47
5.1 Findings	47
5.2 Suggestions	48
 REFERENCES	
APPENDIX	

LIST OF TABLES

Table No.	Title	Page
3.1	Annual Deployment of Myanmar Workers to South Korea by Sector (2011–May 2025)	24
3.2	Myanmar Residents in South Korea by Visa Type (May 2025)	29
3.3	Annual Entry of Myanmar Nationals from Myanmar to South Korea (2011-May 2025)	32
3.4	Distribution of Myanmar Migrant Workers by Destination Countries (1990–May 2025)	33
4.1	Reliability Statistics	40
4.2	Demographic Profiles of Respondents	41
4.3	Results of Opportunities of EPS	43
4.4	Results of Challenges of EPS	45

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLAs	Bilateral Labor Agreements
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EPS	Employment Permit System
ESDC	Employment and Social Development Canada
FWP	Foreigner's Work Permit
GEP	General Employment Permit
HRD	Human Resources Development
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMP	International Mobility Program
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
LMIA	Labour Market Impact Assessment
MoUs	Memoranda of Understandings
MOEL	Ministry of Employment and Labor
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
ROK	Republic of Korea
SAFEA	State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs
SAWP	Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program
sMLG	State-led Multilevel Governance
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TFWP	Temporary Foreign Worker Program
TITP	Technical Intern Training Program
TOPIK	Test of Proficiency in Korean

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale of the Study

Labor migration is an increasingly important issue in today's worldwide economy, influencing the economic and social landscapes of both sending and receiving nations. In particular, it plays a critical role in alleviating labor shortages in developed countries while simultaneously providing employment opportunities, skill development, and income generation for workers from developing nations (Cho et al., 2018).

South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), which was implemented in August 2004, is a structured and state-led initiative that addresses the workforce requirements of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that encounter difficulty in recruiting local workers. This system is unique among the numerous international labor migration programs (Park, 2016). Through the EPS, South Korea has opened its doors to workers from 17 countries, including Myanmar, offering legal employment opportunities abroad under a regulated framework.

The EPS program offers numerous benefits to Myanmar migrant workers. It enables them to gain international work experience, acquire valuable skills, and generate remittances that contribute significantly to household welfare and national economic growth (Cho et al., 2018). Beyond economic contributions, returning migrants often bring back enhanced human capital and broader worldviews that can positively influence their communities and the labor market at home (Park, 2024).

However, despite its notable benefits, participation in the EPS exposes Myanmar workers to several challenges. Financial burdens associated with recruitment and migration, linguistic and cultural barriers in the workplace, and difficulties adjusting to the South Korean environment are prominent issues (Ko et al., 2025). Moreover, upon returning to Myanmar, many workers face reintegration challenges, such as difficulties in utilizing acquired skills, limited local employment opportunities, and socioeconomic adjustments (Kim & Koo, 2016).

Understanding the real impact of the EPS on Myanmar workers is crucial. It not only reflects the immediate economic advantages but also sheds light on long-term effects such as employment mobility, skill utilization, and the ability of returnees to contribute to Myanmar's labor market (Seo, 2018). By studying these factors, this research aims to provide comprehensive insights that could inform policymakers, labor agencies, and aspiring migrants about maximizing the EPS's advantages and mitigating its drawbacks.

Furthermore, as Myanmar continues to develop its labor migration policies, a deeper understanding of programs like the EPS is essential. Migration is not merely an individual decision; It has broad consequences for individuals, communities, and the development of the country. Thus, examining the experiences of EPS returnees can offer valuable lessons on improving pre-departure training, reintegration programs, and overall labor migration management (Lee, 2022).

This study is especially relevant given the growing competitiveness of today's global labor markets. Countries like Myanmar must ensure that their workers are prepared, protected, and able to transform migration experiences into long-term socioeconomic gains (Ko et al., 2025). By focusing on the workforce mobility and reintegration of EPS returnees, this study seeks to bridge the gap between overseas employment opportunities and sustainable development outcomes at home.

Therefore, this study is driven by the critical need to explore the real-world experiences of Myanmar's EPS workers, understand their challenges, and identify strategies to enhance their contributions to the domestic labor market upon return. The findings are expected to contribute to better policymaking and improved migrant support systems in Myanmar.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are;

1. To study the role of the Employment Permit System (EPS) and the workforce mobility of Myanmar.
2. To analyze the opportunities and challenges of Myanmar returnees under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS).

1.3 Method of Study

This study employed descriptive statistics to thoroughly analyze the experiences of Myanmar workers under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), using a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Primary data were gathered through a structured survey of 100 Myanmar returnees who had taken part in the EPS program. The survey captured in-depth details about their working conditions abroad, skill development, labor mobility, and reintegration into the workforce after returning home.

Secondary data sources were used to supplement the findings, including government reports, official documents, academic publications, and previous studies related to labor migration and the EPS program.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on Myanmar workers who returned from South Korea after completing the Employment Permit System (EPS). It investigates their working circumstances overseas, skill development, and post-return workforce mobility, including reintegration into the local labor market. The analysis is based on the data collected from 100 returnees in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of their socioeconomic outcomes and experiences. The study was conducted from January to May 2025.

However, the study has certain limitations. Relying on self-reported survey data may result in personal biases or reporting errors. Furthermore, the sample size may not be representative of the broader population of Myanmar EPS participants, and the study does not contain a comparative analysis with migrants from other countries.

1.5 Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction, including the rationale, objectives, methodology, scope, limitations, and organization of the study. Chapter II presents a literature review. Chapter III discusses the role of the Employment Permit System (EPS) and the workforce mobility of Myanmar. Chapter IV presents survey analysis. Chapter V concludes the thesis with a summary of findings and practical suggestions for improving labor migration outcomes.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Nature and Concepts of the Employment Permit Systems

Globally, structured labor migration systems like EPS are seen as a model for fair labor mobility. Although the term Employment Permit System (EPS) is most commonly used to describe South Korea’s government-to-government labor migration program, other countries also operate similar employment permit frameworks under different names, such as Ireland, Canada, China, Japan, and Singapore. The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasizes that effective implementation of systems like the EPS plays a key role in advancing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8—promoting sustained and inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (ILO, 2022). The World Bank has also highlighted EPS as an effective mechanism for reducing recruitment costs and ensuring ethical labor migration (World Bank, 2023).

In a globalized economy, EPS-type systems benefit both labor-importing and labor-exporting countries — the former addressing workforce shortages in low-skilled sectors, the latter gaining economic inflows and skill transfers. This win-win scenario positions EPS as not only a tool for economic growth but also for international labor justice.

EPS is economically significant for developing countries. Remittance inflows, which are the funds that migrant laborers send home, are one of the most significant advantages. According to the World Bank’s Migration and Development Brief (2023), global remittances reached USD 860 billion in 2022, with countries like the Philippines, Nepal, and Bangladesh heavily dependent on overseas earnings. For example, remittances make up around 24% of Nepal’s GDP (World Bank, 2023). These funds are vital for household consumption, education, healthcare, and local investments, creating a multiplier effect in domestic economies.

Additionally, the Employment Permit System (EPS) helps alleviate unemployment pressures in labor-surplus economies by channeling excess labor into foreign markets, thereby reducing joblessness at home while fostering skill

development. Such labor migration strategies are often part of broader national economic policies to manage population–employment imbalances (Hetmantseva et al., 2021).

Workers participating in EPS programs frequently return with technical expertise, industrial discipline, and exposure to international work standards, which can contribute to domestic productivity, entrepreneurship, and technology transfer upon reintegration (Dumont, 2019).

From a social perspective, EPS provides safer migration pathways, thereby combating illegal migration, human trafficking, and labor exploitation. Many sending countries face persistent challenges with unregulated migration channels that expose workers to contract substitution, wage theft, and hazardous conditions (Ericstam, 2017). EPS addresses this risk by offering structured, government-monitored recruitment and employment systems that minimize the role of private brokers, enhancing transparency and worker protection (Megiddo, 2021).

At the political level, EPS promotes bilateral relations between sending and receiving nations, encouraging collaboration in areas other than labor migration, such as trade, tourism, cultural exchange, and development aid. For example, South Korea’s EPS agreements have facilitated broader economic diplomacy, including vocational training projects, scholarship programs, and infrastructure aid in partner countries (Kim & Koo, 2016).

The EPS is a structured G2G labor migration framework designed to allow foreign workers to be legally employed abroad, typically to meet shortages in designated labor-intensive sectors (Park, 2024). Originally developed and implemented by the Republic of Korea in 2004, the EPS replaced the earlier Industrial Trainee System, which had been criticized for inadequate worker protections and its tendency to blur the lines between training and low-paid labor (Ha Gap-Rae, 2011).

Under EPS, sending and receiving countries sign bilateral agreements that govern recruitment, employment, and repatriation, with the goals of reducing illegal migration, protecting workers’ rights, and ensuring fair treatment (Cho et al., 2018). The system operates on a non-discriminatory employment principle, meaning employers must hire foreign workers only when qualified domestic candidates are unavailable. Covered sectors typically include manufacturing, agriculture, fishing, and construction, and the program incorporates transparent recruitment, pre-departure

training (covering language, job duties, and labor rights), fixed-term contracts, and government oversight to prevent exploitation (Kim Min-Wook, 2014).

According to the Korean Ministry of Employment and Labor, more than 500,000 workers from 16 partner countries—including the Philippines, Nepal, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Bangladesh—have participated in the EPS program since its launch (MOEL, 2023). This model has since inspired similar frameworks in other countries, such as Japan’s Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and Singapore’s Work Permit Scheme. However, Korea’s EPS is often regarded as a best-practice example due to its strong legal protections and minimal private sector involvement in recruitment (Dumont, 2019).

Workers in underdeveloped countries frequently select EPS for both economic and social advancement. Firstly, EPS provides legal employment opportunities in high-income economies with wages significantly higher than those in their home countries. For instance, a manufacturing worker under EPS in South Korea can earn between KRW 2.1–2.4 million monthly (approximately USD 1,600–1,800), which is several times higher than the minimum wage in countries such as Nepal or Myanmar (Cho & Denisova, 2018). This income differential allows workers to send substantial remittances home, which is a primary motivation for participation in labor migration schemes (Hetmantseva et al., 2021).

Secondly, EPS offers stronger labor protections compared to irregular migration or private recruitment channels. Workers are entitled to labor insurance, workplace safety regulations, standard wages, and access to dispute resolution mechanisms (Kim & Koo, 2016). Recruitment costs are also regulated and significantly lower than those charged by private intermediaries (Megiddo, 2021).

Thirdly, EPS mandates pre-departure language and skill training, which enhances employability both abroad and upon return home. This is critical because many returning workers leverage their improved technical skills, workplace discipline, and accumulated savings to start small businesses or invest in property (Park, 2024).

Finally, workers often choose EPS for its transparency and reduced risk of recruitment fraud. Because hiring is conducted through official government channels, trust in the system is higher among both workers and their families (Ericstam, 2017).

2.2 The Role of Employment Permit Systems in Workforce Mobility

Globally, EPS mechanisms play a dual role in workforce mobility. By creating structured pathways for foreign workers, EPS programs reduce irregular migration and provide transparent recruitment channels for facilitating legal migration (Cho et al., 2018). For matching labor supply and demand, EPS frameworks target sectors with chronic labor shortages, such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction and domestic work, enabling employers to fill vacancies that local workers avoid (Pukelienė et al., 2015).

However, the mobility enabled by EPS is often highly regulated. Many systems restrict workers to a particular employer, limiting their capability to change occupations even when exploited, strengthening their dependence and ability (Ericstam, 2017). On a macro level, EPS arrangements influence migration corridors, shaping transnational labor flows through bilateral or multilateral agreements. They also contribute to "circular migration," where workers repeatedly migrate between their home and host countries, sustaining remittances and economic ties (Dumont, 2019). Workforce mobility denotes the movement of employees across roles, industries, or geographies—whether within the same organization or to different ones (Papaya Global, n.d.; Deel, n.d.). The EPS refers to a structured framework used by the Republic of Korea to manage temporary labor migration via government-to-government (G2G) agreements, facilitating legal mobility while mitigating risks (World Bank, n.d.).

EPS is a fixed-term labor migration system for non-seasonal jobs created by South Korea in 2003, codified into law in July 2003, and operational from 2004 (Kim, 2015; World Bank, n.d.). It serves as a key mechanism enabling workforce mobility by offering regulated pathways for low-skilled migrant workers from multiple countries (World Bank, n.d.; Kim, 2015).

Distinctly, EPS functions through bilateral MOUs with partner countries—initially six, later expanding to sixteen—covering recruitment, matching, and post-migration support in a transparent, government-managed framework (World Bank, n.d.; Kim, 2015). This model eliminates the reliance on private recruiting agents, thereby reducing corruption and improving accountability (Kim, 2015).

EPS addresses labor shortages in sectors like manufacturing, agriculture, and caregiving by integrating temporary migrants from countries with surplus labor. This contributes to workforce mobility from sending countries and sustains productivity in receiving ones (World Bank, n.d.).

Temporary workers remit significant income to their home countries, enhancing household welfare, enabling investments in health and education, and stimulating local economies (World Bank, n.d.). These remittances can amount to over 25% of GDP in certain partner countries like Nepal or the Kyrgyz Republic, illustrating EPS's development impact (World Bank, n.d.).

EPS includes multi-phase processes—pre-job matching, pre-departure, in-service in Korea, and return migration—that ensure better job matching and worker protection (World Bank, n.d.). These phases help manage migration costs, reduce overstays, and curb human rights violations relative to previous systems (World Bank, n.d.).

Because EPS operates on G2G arrangements, it controls recruitment more tightly, improves transparency, and enhances protection for migrant workers. It has been praised for drastically lowering policy costs and corruption compared to previous trainee programs (Kim, 2015; World Bank, n.d.).

While workforce mobility broadly encompasses remote work, intrafirm shifts, and global assignments (Papaya Global, n.d.; Deel, n.d.; Velocity Global, n.d.), EPS represents a specific legal and regulatory instrument enabling geographic mobility in the international labor market—unlike virtual mobility enabled by technology.

EPS exemplifies how structured, policy-led frameworks can support sustainable labor mobility, balancing the requirements of both sending and receiving countries through managed migration, worker protection, and economic development.

2.3 Classification of Employment Permit Systems

The concept of Employment Permit Systems (EPS) varies significantly across countries, depending on regulatory frameworks, labor market needs, and migration policy approaches. While some nations use named programs, many employ classification systems based on skill levels, critical occupations, or employer-specific needs. Simultaneously, international occupational standards such as ISCO support consistent policy design and cross-border comparisons.

Among the classifications of employment permit systems, Some Operational classifications in the National EPS are as follows;

Ireland classifies employment permits into three distinct categories to address labor market needs while safeguarding local employment. First, the Critical Skills Employment Permit (CSEP) targets highly skilled roles—typically in fields such as

medicine, ICT, engineering, and finance—listed on the Critical Skills Occupations List; eligible roles require earning no less than €38,000 per year (for specified critical occupations) or €64,000 (for other eligible positions), and must not appear on the officially designated Ineligible List of Occupations (Citizens Information, 2024; Government of Ireland, 2024a; Enterprise Ireland, 2024; Immigration Advice Service, 2024).

Second, the General Employment Permit (GEP) covers a broader range of occupations not on the Ineligible List and is intended for roles where employers can demonstrate an inability to fill vacancies from within the resident workforce; the GEP typically requires a minimum annual remuneration of €34,000, with lower thresholds for specific roles such as healthcare or horticulture (Clark Hill Media, 2024).

Finally, occupations classified as ineligible—including various managerial, beauty, property, therapy, and other service roles—are explicitly listed under Schedule 4 of the Employment Permits Regulations 2024 and may not qualify for either type of employment permit (Government of Ireland, 2024b; Enterprise Ireland, 2024; Clark Hill Media, 2024). Overall, this structured approach helps Ireland align immigration with strategic economic sectors while ensuring domestic labor protections.

China's EPS is a regulatory framework designed to manage and monitor the employment of foreign nationals within the country. Under the current policy, applied by the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs (SAFEA) since April 2017, foreign workers are categorized into three classes—A (high-level talent), B (professional talent), and C (ordinary workers for short-term or seasonal needs)—based on a points-based system evaluating factors such as educational background, professional experience, age, and Chinese language proficiency (China Briefing, 2022). The system consolidates previous dual-track permits—*Foreign Expert Certificates* and *Alien Employment Licenses*—into a single unified *Foreigner's Work Permit* (FWP), streamlining the application process and reducing bureaucratic overlap (Liu, 2017).

Employers intending to hire foreign nationals must register with the relevant local Human Resources and Social Security Bureau and submit documentation for both pre-approval (Work Permit Notice) and post-arrival issuance of the physical permit. The FWP is typically valid for one year but may be extended if the individual continues to meet eligibility criteria. Enforcement measures include strict penalties for unlicensed employment and violations of permit terms, reflecting China's emphasis on labor

market order and immigration control (Xinhua, 2023). This system not only facilitates the attraction of skilled foreign talent but also aligns workforce composition with China's long-term economic and technological development goals.

These national EPS frameworks often rely on or can be understood through broader international systems that categorize occupations by skill levels and tasks, such as the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08). Developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO), ISCO-08 categorizes jobs into a hierarchical model—major groups, sub-major groups, minor and unit groups—based on shared duties and responsibilities. Its emphasis on skill level and specialization makes it a key tool for aligning international labor demand and supply (China Briefing, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2012; Wikipedia, 2024a).

Canada's employment permit system operates through two main frameworks: the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and the International Mobility Program (IMP). The TFWP, jointly managed by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) and Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), enables Canadian employers to hire foreign workers for temporary roles when qualified Canadian citizens or permanent residents are not available to fill the positions. Employers must secure a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) as proof of this need before applying for a work permit (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre [ACLRC], 2024; Canadavisa.com, 2024a; Wikipedia, 2024b).

By contrast, the IMP operates under IRCC without requiring an LMIA, as it serves broader economic, cultural, or social objectives, such as intra-company transfers, reciprocal agreements, free trade arrangements, or family- and youth-oriented programs (Canadá en México, 2024). Both the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and the International Mobility Program issue two types of work permits: open work permits, which allow individuals to work for any employer in Canada, and employer-specific (closed) work permits, which restrict employment to a designated employer and require additional documentation, such as a job offer and, in most cases, a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). (Canada Immigration Services, 2024; Canadavisa.com, 2024b; Wikipedia, 2024c).

Several specific streams warrant attention. The TFWP includes programs such as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and the Live-in Caregiver Program, which enable temporary, sector-specific labour mobility. The caregiver program was recently revamped (since 2019) to replace employer-specific

requirements with occupation-based criteria and to introduce spousal and family supports (ACLRC, 2024; Wikipedia, 2024d). Under the IMP, initiatives like International Experience Canada offer youth from partner countries the opportunity to work in Canada on working holiday, young professional, or internship pathways (Canada By Choice, 2024; Wikipedia, 2024e).

Recent policy updates reflect ongoing adjustments. As of June 27, 2025, Canada increased wage threshold criteria for LMIA-based TFWP applicants to better align foreign worker compensation with domestic labour standards (Canada.ca, 2025a; Canadavisa.com, 2025; The Economic Times, 2025). Since May 27, 2025, a revised public policy under the IMP has allowed temporary foreign workers already in Canada to change jobs more swiftly—even before their new permit is fully processed boosting labour market flexibility (Job Bank, 2025).

2.4 South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS)

South Korea's Employment Permit System, which was implemented in 2004, is a critical mechanism for managing the inflow of low-skilled foreign labor to satisfy the domestic workforce's requirements. Specifically, it was intended to provide a lawful and structured process for hiring foreign labor to access the Korean labor market, particularly in sectors currently experiencing chronic labor shortages, including manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and fishing.

The EPS was initiated in the Philippines in 2004 and has since expanded to include countries such as Mongolia and Sri Lanka. In 2023, Tajikistan also signed an agreement to participate in the program (Moamoa1, 2024). The system expanded as more countries signed bilateral agreements with South Korea to participate in the program. The South Korean government coordinates with approved sending countries under the EPS program to ensure transparency and reduce reliance on private brokers.

The EPS has expanded to 17 countries as of 2025. The following countries are currently included in the list of participating countries: Philippines, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Cambodia, China, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Myanmar, East Timor (Timor-Leste), Laos and Tajikistan (Moamoa1, 2024). These nations utilize the E-9 visa category, which permits employment in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and fisheries. The system is still government-managed and structured to ensure that worker rights are protected and that recruitment is fair.

The primary objective of the EPS is to address labor shortages in SMEs by enabling employers to employ foreign laborers when local labor is unavailable legally. It also endeavors to enhance transparency, hinder the exploitation of migrant workers, and diminish the influence of private intermediaries. Workers are selected through government-to-government agreements and must pass the EPS- TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean) to ensure basic communication abilities in the workplace (Cho et al., 2018).

EPS permits are issued up to four years and ten months with the option to reapply upon returning to the native country. The program is implemented through formal contracts between the employer and the migrant laborer, which grant access to regulated wages, social insurance, and labor protections. The EPS has provided numerous advantages to South Korea and participating countries. It has assisted South Korea in addressing labor shortages in critical industries while ensuring that the number and status of foreign workers are under control. Significantly, it has enhanced transparency in the recruitment process and decreased the proportion of undocumented laborers (Park, 2016).

EPS has generated substantial employment opportunities in foreign countries for migrant-sending countries. Workers frequently remit significant amounts of their income to their families, thereby supporting their families, contributing to national economies, and earning higher wages than they would in their native countries. The EPS is widely regarded as a model for other nations due to its bilateral structure, cost-control measures, and labor rights provisions. It is a government-managed alternative to private recruitment systems that often expose workers to fraud and exploitation (Cho et al., 2018).

Despite its successes, the EPS has also faced criticism for its limitations on labor mobility and inadequate protection of migrant rights. Workers are tied to specific employers and cannot change workplaces freely unless under exceptional circumstances like abuse or bankruptcy. This restriction creates a power imbalance, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and unable to escape poor working conditions without risking their legal status (Seo & Skelton, 2017).

Furthermore, some critics argue that the EPS prioritizes South Korea's economic interests over promoting labor migration integration. Workers are frequently denied larger social integration options, such as family reunions or permanent

residency, strengthening their transient and marginal position in Korean society (Kim & Koo, 2016).

Despite being designed to facilitate professional communication, the EPS-TOPIK language requirement has also been criticized for lacking relevant cultural and job-specific material. Numerous immigrants claim that the exams and study materials do not adequately prepare them for the realities of working in Korea (Ko et al., 2025).

From a governance standpoint, the EPS is an example of state-led migration management. South Korea has created a multilevel policy framework to coordinate activities among ministries, local governments, and foreign missions. This centralized management enables the state to manage labor mobility while eliminating reliance on private intermediaries and the risk of corruption (Park, W., 2024).

However, this tight management reduces worker autonomy and raises concerns about balancing economic efficiency and human rights. Migrant worker unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Korea have constantly advocated for EPS reforms, notably in workplace mobility and abuse prevention.

2.5 Opportunities and Challenges under South Korea's EPS

The introduction of South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2004 represented a major transition from the less regulated Industrial Trainee System toward a state-managed, rights-based approach to hiring foreign low-skilled workers. One of its most significant opportunities lies in addressing critical labor shortages in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, fisheries, and construction—industries that domestic workers often avoid due to demanding conditions and lower wages (Cho et al., 2018).

By establishing government-to-government recruitment channels, EPS minimizes the role of private brokers, thereby reducing recruitment costs, preventing fraudulent practices, and promoting transparency (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2015). Moreover, it enables sending countries to benefit from steady remittance flows, which can represent a substantial share of GDP for some economies, while also enhancing skill acquisition and cross-cultural exposure for migrant workers. For Korea, EPS has improved labor market stability, expanded bilateral cooperation with 17 partner countries, and enhanced Korea's image as a country promoting ethical recruitment in line with international labor standards.

However, the system also faces notable challenges. First, the restriction on job mobility—where workers are tied to specific employers and can change jobs only under limited conditions—can lead to power imbalances, heightened vulnerability to exploitation, and difficulties in escaping abusive workplaces (Lee, 2017). Second, despite standardized contracts, migrant workers sometimes face wage discrimination, substandard housing, and occupational safety risks, especially in smaller enterprises.

The fixed-term nature of EPS visas (typically 3–4 years, extendable under certain conditions) limits pathways to permanent residency, which can discourage long-term integration and make skill retention difficult for employers. From the perspective of sending countries, the temporary migration cycle can lead to "brain waste," as the acquisition of skills abroad may not find effective application at home. Furthermore, Korea must balance domestic labor protection with demographic realities, as the country's rapidly aging population may require greater openness to longer-term migration solutions.

Overall, while EPS stands out internationally as a transparent, structured, and relatively fair labor mobility program, its long-term sustainability will depend on reforms that increase worker mobility, improve conditions, and create mutually beneficial migration pathways.

2.5.1 Identification of Opportunities

The Employment Permit System of South Korea has substantially impacted the workforce's mobility in both South Korea and the countries that send workers there. In sectors where labor is in short supply, this system allows foreign workers, predominantly from developing countries in Asia, to work in South Korea legally.

i. Skills Development and Transfer

A primary advantage of the EPS for sending nations is enhancing skills. Participants in the EPS acquire significant job experience and technical knowledge while employed in South Korea. Numerous individuals return to their nations possessing enhanced talents, work ethics, and proficiency in advanced technology. This improves the overall skill level of domestic labor, increasing workers' employability locally and internationally. (Kim & Park, 2023).

ii. Increased Labor Mobility and Employment Opportunities

The EPS establishes legal pathways for workers who move abroad for employment, thereby minimizing the risks of illegal migration. Countries participating in the EPS, such as Indonesia, Mongolia, and Cambodia, have seen increased labor mobility as more workers can obtain jobs in South Korea without fearing exploitation or deportation (Moon et al., 2022). This regulated system enhances the reliability of international employment and motivates additional workers to look for legal employment opportunities abroad. It also motivates sending countries to enhance their labor market policies to support migrant laborers better.

iii. Economic Benefits through Remittances

The remittances that EPS employees send back to their home countries benefit local economies. The employment opportunities provided by the EPS are legal and stable, ensuring that workers receive a consistent income that enables their families to enhance their standard of living and support education and healthcare (World Bank, 2023). In sending countries, this financial support plays a crucial role in reducing poverty and fostering economic development.

iv. Strengthening Bilateral Relations

The EPS has facilitated the development of stronger relationships between South Korea and its partner nations. Agreements that require collaboration in worker protection and training programs form the foundation of the system. This collaboration enhances diplomatic relations and establishes frameworks for the responsible management of workforce mobility (Choi, 2024). These partnerships support sending countries in developing more effective labor export policies and protecting their citizens abroad.

v. Encouraging Institutional Improvements in Sending Countries

To satisfy the EPS requirements, sending countries must enhance their recruitment systems and worker training programs. Adopting more transparent and ethical recruitment practices has reduced the exploitation of unscrupulous agents (ILO, 2022). Better training institutions that prepare workers for overseas

employment enhance the competitiveness and likelihood of domestic and international success.

vi. Social Benefits and Cultural Exchange

Working in South Korea exposes migrant laborers to various cultures and work environments, thereby broadening their perspective. Many laborers positively impact their communities upon their return by sharing their knowledge and experiences (Lee, 2023). The exchange of cultures cultivates mutual respect and understanding among nations, a social benefit often overlooked yet of immense importance.

2.5.2 Identification of Challenges

The Employment Permit System of South Korea enables foreign laborers, primarily from developing countries, to legally work there for a limited period. Although the system attempts to address labor shortages and safeguard the rights of migrant workers, it also faces various challenges and adverse effects for both the host country and the migrants.

i. Limited Rights and Job Security

Limited job security is a common experience for many migrant laborers in the EPS, despite the existence of legal protections. Employers can remove or replace employees at will, making them victims of exploitation. According to a 2023 report by the Korea Labor Institute, approximately 35% of EPS employees were subjected to sudden contract terminations without proper compensation (Korea Labor Institute, 2023). The families of migrants who have returned home experience economic instability and stress as a result of this uncertainty.

ii. Wage and Working Conditions Issues

A significant number of migrant laborers have reported that their working conditions and wages are discriminatory. Some employers delay wages or pay less than the minimum wage, despite EPS guarantees. Safety standards are not fully enforced, particularly in small enterprises and farms, and working hours are frequently extended. Unpaid overtime or unsafe work environments were reported by 28% of foreign laborers under EPS in the 2022 Ministry of Employment and Labor survey (MOEL, 2022).

iii. Language and Cultural Barriers

A significant number of migrant laborers have reported that their working conditions and wages are discriminatory. Some employers delay wages or pay less than the minimum wage, despite EPS guarantees. Safety standards are not fully enforced, particularly in small enterprises and farms, and working hours are frequently extended. Unpaid overtime or unsafe work environments were reported by 28% of foreign laborers under EPS in the 2022 Ministry of Employment and Labor survey (MOEL, 2022).

iv. Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Some residents and employers discriminate against numerous migrants. Negative assumptions regarding foreign laborers can result in exclusion from communities and workplaces. In 2024, Seoul National University conducted research that revealed that EPS laborers frequently experienced social isolation and discrimination, which had a detrimental impact on their mental health and integration into Korean society (Kim et al., 2024).

v. Limited Opportunities for Permanent Residency

The EPS is intended for temporary labor migration, which means that workers are generally unable to establish permanent residence in South Korea. This limits their long-term prospects and discourages investment in community integration or skill development. The uncertainty surrounding their future frequently impacts the motivation and well-being of migrants. To enhance the stability of migrant laborers, a 2023 policy review suggested the establishment of additional pathways for permanent residency (Kwon, 2023).

vi. Family Separation and Emotional Stress

Many EPS workers experience emotional tension and loneliness because they arrive without their families. For years, they have been separated from their spouses and children. This separation can result in family disintegration and has an impact on their mental health. In 2022, the Migrant Rights Network conducted a survey that revealed that 40% of EPS laborers had experienced depression or anxiety as a result of family separation (Migrant Rights Network, 2022).

vii. Exploitation by Brokers and Illegal practices.

Illegal brokers who demand high fees for job placement under EPS rely on certain migrant workers. Despite South Korea's efforts to control brokers, these practices remain and add to migrants' debt load. Additionally, some migrants risk detention or deportation by working illegally beyond their visas. According to reports from 2024, unlicensed work and continuous illegal recruitment are still significant problems (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

As a result, South Korea's EPS provides many migrants with legitimate employment opportunities, thereby helping to close labor shortages. Job insecurity, unequal pay, discrimination, limited residence possibilities, family separation, unlawful exploitation, and language barriers are some of the significant issues facing the system. Better linguistic and social support, greater enforcement of labor regulations, and policies that support the long-term integration and protection of migrants are all necessary to address these problems.

2.6 Review on Previous Studies

A significant amount of research has been done on the structure, strengths, and limitations of South Korea's Employment Permit System, particularly in the context of promoting fair migration and protecting foreign labor. These studies offer valuable insights into the policy design, migrant worker experiences, and sending-country implications, even though research specifically concentrated on Myanmar is still limited.

Cho, Y., Denisova, A., Yi, S., & Khadka, U. (2018). Bilateral arrangement of temporary labor migration: Lessons from Korea's employment permit system— Main report. The number of people crossing international borders has surged in recent years, driven by diverse motives. International migration is varied, with displaced people being refugees who escape conflict, violence, or persecution involuntarily. Voluntary migrants fall into two groups: temporary labor migrants who move for work over a set period and immigrants who aim to settle permanently for reasons like family reunification or better economic opportunities. Bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) are formal agreements between sending and receiving countries that are designed to optimize the benefits of temporary migration and govern these labor flows. This study investigates Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), a temporary migration

program for low-skilled laborers that is globally recognized for fostering co-development, benefiting both the sending and receiving countries. The EPS has achieved significant progress by lowering costs for migrants, increasing transparency, reducing overstaying, and improving worker protections. However, the system's method of matching employers with temporary labor migrants still needs substantial enhancement.

Khin Soe Kyi (2021) explores the impacts of migration and remittances on families left behind by Myanmar migrant workers in Mon State. Using a qualitative and quantitative methods approach, data were collected from 494 surveyed households and 15 in-depth interviews. Key reasons for migration included limited job opportunities, low income, and lack of employment matching qualifications. Thailand was the most popular destination for migration, but it had the lowest levels of remittances sent back home. Most families used the Hundi system for money transfers. Financial and economic conditions improved post-migration, as did perceptions of social well-being. However, psychological issues among left-behind family members worsened. Migrant experiences were grouped into three themes: migration as a norm, as hardship, and as success. While migration boosted household income, it negatively affected emotional well-being. The study draws attention to the need for safer migration practices, better social protections, and local job creation through technical and vocational training to reduce reliance on migration.

Lee, K., Lim, Y., & Cho, S. (2023) analyzed migrant laborers' optimization mechanism under the Employment Permit System: introducing and analyzing the 'skill-relevance-self-selection' model. Migrant workers under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) face a trade-off between the host country's higher wages and the loss of skill relevance caused by immigration, while also considering migration costs. This study models the decision-making process of migrant workers and their employers, using game theory's backward induction to identify the Subgame Perfect Nash Equilibrium (SPNE). Analysis of variable interactions at the SPNE reveals two key findings: (1) a positive relationship between the host country's skill relevance and wage differences, and (2) a negative relationship between the emigrant country's skill relevance and wage differences. These findings form the basis of two hypotheses: the Host Nation Skill-Relevance Hypothesis (H1) and the Emigrating Nation Skill-Relevance Hypothesis (H2), which are tested using OLS regression across gender categories. Results strongly support both hypotheses, validating the model. This paper

contributes by promoting an economic perspective on migrant labor, unveiling the EPS's microeconomic processes, and integrating deductive modeling with empirical analysis.

Park, W. (2024), explored the concept of 'state brokerage' in migration infrastructure through South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS). It proposes the idea of state-led multilevel governance (sMLG), combining multilevel governance and state transformation theories, as a new way to understand how states actively shape migration systems. Using state archival data, the paper shows how the South Korean government has created a governance model that crosses both national and subnational boundaries. This transformation includes building diplomatic ties with other countries, coordinating international policy efforts, and reshaping domestic governance through the creation of new institutions, legal reforms, and shifts in institutional relationships. These strategic moves have enabled the EPS to manage the migration of low-skilled workers without relying on private brokers. In doing so, the study expands the migration infrastructure field by highlighting the state's central role in directly structuring and managing cross-border labor flows.

Wai Phyto Htet (2024) examined a study of factors affecting international migrants from Myanmar. This study seeks to address the perceptions that drive migration. It relies on both primary and secondary data sources, employing a descriptive research approach. Primary data is collected through a structured questionnaire, while secondary data comes from magazines, official government publications, and online resources. The participants include 385 individuals who have chosen to migrate abroad. While both push and pull factors influence migration, this research exclusively concentrates on the economic, political, educational, and social aspects of the destination country. The results reveal that all these factors—economic, political, educational, and social—have an impact on migrants' decisions. Among them, economic factors emerge as the most influential in motivating migration, outweighing the effects of the other variables studied. This highlights the dominant role of economic considerations in shaping migration choices compared to political, educational, and social influences.

Ko, Y., Kyeongjae, P., Jung, S., Sosrohadi, S., and Andini, C. (2025) examined the process of revisiting EPS-TOPIK to address the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by migrant workers in South Korea. International labor migration continues to rise as workers seek better employment opportunities across borders. South

Korea, a key destination for migrant labor, mandates Korean language proficiency through the EPS TOPIK under its Employment Permit System. While this test is designed to promote clear communication in the workplace, many online learning materials fall short of addressing the real-world needs of migrant workers. These resources often lack cultural and contextual relevance, limiting their effectiveness in helping workers adapt to Korean social and professional settings. This study critically examines the alignment of online EPS TOPIK materials with the communication challenges faced by migrant workers. Through qualitative methods, including case studies and interviews, the research explores migrant experiences and evaluates the content's cultural depth. The goal is to offer practical recommendations for creating more culturally grounded and context-aware learning tools that can strengthen language skills, boost job performance, and ease the integration of migrants into Korean society.

CHAPTER III

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT PERMIT SYSTEM (EPS) AND WORKFORCE MOBILITY OF MYANMAR

3.1 The Role of the Employment Permit System in Myanmar

The inclusion of Myanmar in South Korea's Employment Permit System marked a turning point in Myanmar's approach to managing overseas labor. Myanmar was initially excluded due to administrative inefficiencies and high worker disappearance rates under the former Industrial Training System (ITS), re-evaluated in 2006, and successfully reinstated into the EPS.

On November 28, 2007, Myanmar and South Korea signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), initiating the legal dispatch of labor through Shwe Inn Wa Company Limited. Between 2007 and 2010, it successfully sent 1,201 workers to Korea during its tenure. On October 29, 2010, the Ministry of Labour of Myanmar and the ROK's Ministry of Employment and Labour signed a new MoU for sending Myanmar workers under EPS. The Public Overseas Employment Agency (POEA), supervised by the Ministry of Labour of Myanmar, was designated as the agency responsible for sending workers to Korea. Additionally, under the MoU, an Assistant Director from Myanmar's Ministry of Labour was assigned to the Myanmar Embassy in Seoul starting from January 15, 2011, to handle labor-related matters.

Initially, Myanmar workers under the EPS were limited to the manufacturing sector. In 2013, their employment opportunities expanded to include the agricultural and construction industries, providing more job prospects for people in rural areas. (Ministry of Labour, 2023)

Prospective EPS employees are required to complete the Korean language and skill tests, receive health examinations, participate in 45 hours of pre-departure training, and fulfill three days of post-departure training. To prevent premature job abandonment and guarantee contract completion, the POEA mandates a security deposit from employees as an assurance. The deposit is refunded following the fulfillment of the employment contract (Thin Thin Lwin, 2018).

Under the EPS, Myanmar workers are generally provided a three-year contract, with the possibility of extending employment for an extra one year and ten months, resulting in a total duration of four years and ten months. Upon the conclusion of the maximum duration, if the initial employer consents to reemployment, the worker may return to Korea via the Re-entry System. This technique allows workers to skip re-testing obligations following a one-month residency in Myanmar, reducing the return procedure for seasoned laborers.

Moreover, Myanmar workers who have legally fulfilled at least three years of employment in Korea may reapply via a faster procedure that includes a Computer-Based Test (CBT), thereby facilitating return migration. (Ministry of Labour, 2023)

Table 3.1 presents the annual count of Myanmar workers assigned to South Korea under the Employment Permit System, categorized by sector, from 2011 to May 2025. The data underscores the dominance of the industrial sector, which comprised the majority of deployments (58,587 out of 71,793 total workers). Notably, 2025 marked the initial documented involvement of Myanmar workers in the service sector, including female workers.

As of May 2025, the South Korean Immigration Office reports that 31,936 Myanmar migrants are employed under the EPS system (E-9 visa), with an additional 3,723 workers having moved to skilled labor (E-7 visa). The E-7 visa categories are divided into the following: E-7-1 and E-7-2 for different skilled workers, E-7-3 for Shipyard laborers performing welding, painting, and spray coating, and E-7-4 for employees transitioning from E-9 visas after fulfilling three or more years of EPS employment. Currently, 32 Myanmar nationals are employed in South Korea using E-8-2 seasonal visas, which are issued to relatives of Korean citizens or their spouses. This visa category permits family members of Myanmar-Korean spouses to participate in temporary employment.

**Table (3.1) Annual Deployment of Myanmar Workers to South Korea by Sector
(2011–May 2025)**

Sr. No.	Year	Sector						Total
		Manufacturing	Construction	Agriculture/ Livestock	Forestry	Service Sector		
						Male	Female	
1	2011	1,970	-	-	-	-	-	1,970
2	2012	3,602	-	66	-	-	-	3,668
3	2013	2,670	631	704	-	-	-	4,005
4	2014	3,120	751	615	-	-	-	4,486
5	2015	2,787	919	766	-	-	-	4,472
6	2016	4,018	926	789	-	-	-	5,733
7	2017	4,328	719	342	-	-	-	5,389
8	2018	5,450	341	587	-	-	-	6,378
9	2019	4,057	245	435	-	-	-	4,737
10	2020	477	32	191	-	-	-	700
11	2021	25	-	-	-	-	-	25
12	2022	6,617	343	661	-	-	-	7,621
13	2023	9,208	305	1,098	-	-	-	10,611
14	2024	8,726	552	639	19	-	-	9,936
15	2025 (May)	1,532	217	249	45	12	7	2,062
Total		58,587	5,981	7,142	64	12	7	71,793

Source: Myanmar Ministry of Labour (2025)

According to data from Myanmar's official Public Overseas Employment Agency (POEA), 22,789 workers have formally returned to Myanmar after completing their job in South Korea under the Employment Permit System (EPS). It does not consider those who returned without reporting, including individuals who may have fallen ill, workers who died during their stay, those who remained in South Korea without legal status, and others who did not register upon return for various personal or

administrative reasons. The actual number of Myanmar returnees from South Korea is likely considerably greater than the official figures indicate.

3.2 Importance of the EPS for South Korea and Myanmar

A critical policy instrument that promotes regulated international labor mobility and addresses labor market demands is the Employment Permit System (EPS). Since its establishment in 2004, the EPS has had a dual purpose of mitigating labor shortages in South Korea while offering economic prospects for workers in Myanmar. The bilateral structure of the system emphasizes its importance for sending and receiving nations across economic, institutional, and social dimensions.

3.2.1 Significance for South Korea

South Korea continues to experience chronic labor shortages in sectors unfavorable to domestic workers, particularly in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and fisheries. These sectors are characterized by "3D" occupations, which are dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. In response, the Employment Permit System (EPS) has emerged as a key tool for the recruitment of foreign laborers in a legal manner. The number of E-9 visa holders employed in these sectors reached 168,755 by the end of 2023, a 25% increase from the previous year and a new record high for foreign laborers in non-professional roles (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2024).

Additionally, in 2023, 923,000 foreign laborers were employed in South Korea across all employment categories, with approximately 64.5% employed. Manufacturing and agriculture experienced 41,000 net increases compared to 2022 (Statistics Korea, 2023). These figures emphasize the EPS's success as a structured, government-managed channel that supports industries essential to South Korea's economic performance and the sustained demand for migrant labor.

The EPS ensures South Korea can maintain industrial productivity and competitiveness without utilizing informal labor channels. The program replaces the previous trainee system, which was criticized for violating labor rights, with a government-regulated, structured framework. Employers can now legally employ foreign workers who have completed a standardized language and skills test, which guarantees improved performance and communication in the workplace. This fosters compliance with labor laws, reduces accidents, and improves workplace harmony (Cho et al., 2018).

3.2.2 Significance for Myanmar

The EPS provides a crucial legal pathway for overseas employment in Myanmar, providing substantial income and socio-economic advantages for migrant workers and their families. Due to constrained employment prospects and ongoing poverty, labor migration is an essential survival strategy, particularly in rural areas. Through EPS, workers from Myanmar obtain access to well-regulated employment opportunities that offer significantly greater earnings than those accessible within the country.

Remittances from EPS workers significantly influence household well-being in Myanmar. These proceeds are generally allocated to address fundamental necessities, education, housing, and investments in small enterprises. The World Bank reports that remittance inflows to Myanmar approached USD 2.2 billion in 2022, with a significant portion originating from workers in South Korea (World Bank, 2023). These remittances enhance individual households and improve macroeconomic stability via foreign money inflows.

At the institutional level, EPS participation has been necessary in Myanmar to enhance its labor migration governance. The government officially collaborates with HRD Korea to oversee the recruitment process, language instruction, and pre-departure orientation. The regulation of private recruitment firms has been enhanced, with more focus on the rights of migrant workers and their reintegration assistance. Consequently, Myanmar is systematically enhancing its competence in ethical recruiting and commitment to international labor standards (ILO, 2019).

3.2.3 Mutual Benefits and Diplomatic Implications

The EPS functions not just as a labor policy but also as a diplomatic instrument. The program relies on intergovernmental agreements defining labor exchanges and fostering confidence between South Korea and its partner nations. Myanmar's involvement in EPS enhances bilateral connections, facilitates avenues for technical support, and improves its worldwide profile as a collaborative migration partner (Choi, 2024).

Furthermore, both nations gain from less irregular migration. The regulated recruitment system reduces dependence on smuggling networks and unlicensed brokers, thereby mitigating the risks of exploitation and trafficking. This safeguards at-

risk migrants, enhances migration results, and bolsters South Korea's global reputation in labor administration (Abella & Kouba, 2016).

The EPS additionally facilitates regional labor market convergence. South Korea's transparent, government-administered strategy is seen as a model of Asian best practices, shaping migration policy in other nations. Myanmar's involvement in the EPS enables it to partake in regional discussions and incorporate insights into its labor export initiatives (ADB, OECD & ILO, 2019).

3.3 Migration Trends of Myanmar Workers to South Korea

Since the early 2000s, South Korea has become an increasingly significant destination for a variety of Myanmar migrants, including low-skilled workers under the Employment Permit System (EPS), illegal workers, marriage migrants, students, and refugees.

- i. Employment Permit System (EPS) Workers:** Myanmar formally joined the EPS in 2007 through a bilateral agreement administered by HRD-Korea and Myanmar's Ministry of Labour (ILO, 2019). The program provides a regulated migration pathway for low-skilled employment in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. Workers are required to pass the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), which serves as both a language assessment and a means of ensuring workplace communication (Ko et al., 2025).
- ii. Undocumented Workers:** Despite the availability of legal migration channels, irregular migration from Myanmar to South Korea persists. Such migration is often facilitated by informal brokers, leading to exploitative conditions, hazardous work environments, and precarious legal status (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Undocumented workers face heightened risks of workplace abuse, wage theft, and limited access to legal recourse (Kim et al., 2024).
- iii. Marriage Migrants (F6 Visas):** A smaller but notable stream of migration involves Myanmar nationals—predominantly women—marrying Korean citizens and obtaining spousal visas. This trend is shaped by cross-border marriage brokerage networks and the growing social diversity within South Korea (Lee, 2022).

- iv. **Students (D2/D4 Visas):** The number of Myanmar students in South Korea has gradually increased, driven by the perceived value of Korean higher education, scholarship opportunities, and the influence of cultural exchange programs (Choi, 2024). However, compared to other sending countries such as China and Vietnam, Myanmar's student migration remains relatively modest. Female students constitute the majority, especially in language programs and university-level studies (ADB, OECD & ILO, 2019).
 - v. **Refugees and Asylum Seekers:** Myanmar nationals also appear prominently in South Korea's asylum system, often linked to political instability, ethnic conflicts, and human rights concerns in Myanmar (UNHCR, 2023). While precise figures are difficult to verify, many asylum applicants are categorized under visa types typically associated with humanitarian or temporary stay statuses (Abella & Kouba, 2016).
- Myanmar residents in South Korea by visa type is shown in the table (3.2).

Table (3.2) Myanmar Residents in South Korea by Visa Type (May 2025)

No.	Visa Types	Male	Female	Total
1.	B2 Transit Tourism	148	1	149
2.	C3 Short-Term Visit (Tourist, business, etc.)	409	175	584
3.	C4 Short-Term Employment	1	-	1
4.	D1 Culture and Arts	-	3	3
5.	D2 Study (University/College)	967	3,330	4,297
6.	D3 Industrial Training	37	-	37
7.	D4 General Training (Language School, non-degree training)	1,218	2,669	3,887
8.	D6 Religion	30	83	113
9.	D8 Business Investment	5	3	8
10.	D9 Trade Management	4	3	7
11.	D10 Job Seeking	104	275	379
12.	E1 Professor	1	-	1
13.	E3 Researcher	8	15	23
14.	E6 Arts & Entertainment	-	4	4
15.	E7 Specially Designated Activities	3,640	83	3,723
16.	E8 Seasonal Work	6	6	12
17.	E9 Non-Professional Employment	31,927	9	31,936
18.	E10 Crew Employment (Seafarer, etc.)	999	-	999
19.	F1 Visiting and Cohabitation	19	79	98
20.	F2 Resident	335	314	649
21.	F3 Dependent (Family of visa holders)	120	561	681
22.	F5 Permanent Resident	21	39	60
23.	F6 Marriage Migrant (Spouse of Korean citizen)	64	361	425
24.	G1 Miscellaneous (Medical treatment, lawsuits, humanitarian, etc.)	6,497	879	7,376
25.	Any other types not categorized above	138	80	218
Total		55,670	46,698	8,972

Source: Korea Immigration Service (Immigration and Foreigner Policy Statistics Monthly Report May 2025)

According to the table (3.2), as of May 2025, there are 55,670 Myanmar residents living in South Korea. The majority are men (46,698) compared to women (8,972), showing a strong gender imbalance, primarily due to labor-related migration.

In the E9 – Non-Professional Employment category, the total number of workers is 31,936, with 31,927 men and only 9 women. This is the largest group, overwhelmingly male. It shows that most Myanmar nationals in Korea are male laborers in sectors like manufacturing, agriculture, or fishing. G1 – Miscellaneous (Medical, Legal, Humanitarian, etc.) has a total of 7,376, Men: 6,497, and Women: 879. This group is sizable and consists of individuals in varied circumstances, which may include undocumented migrants on humanitarian stays, victims of workplace issues, or those receiving medical care.

The D2 Study (University/College) has a strong female majority. Many women from Myanmar are pursuing higher education in Korea. Training and language school visas are commonly obtained by women, indicating that education is a primary reason for their migration. In E7 – Specially Designated Activity, this visa type is male-dominated and typically includes skilled workers in fields like IT, engineering, or trades. Clear female majority, reflecting the pattern of Myanmar women marrying Korean men and settling in Korea for F6 – Marriage Migrant (Spouse of Korean). Other visas total 4,026: men, 2,385, and women, 1,641. A mixed group could include dependents, religious workers, interns, or those with permanent residency. According to Gender Trends, men dominate in employment and skilled worker categories. Women lead in education (D2, D4) and marriage migration (F6).

Therefore, the Myanmar population in South Korea is shaped by labor migration (mostly male), education and marriage migration (mostly female), and a notable presence of residents under humanitarian or miscellaneous categories. The gender split and visa types reflect distinct migration purposes for men and women.

Table 3.3 shows general trends (2011– May 2025). There was a steady decline in the number of Myanmar entrants. The number of migrants or travelers decreased from 70,425 in 2011 to 59,237 in 2015, a trend that continued for five years. It indicates that there has been a decrease in the demand for labor, economic factors, or policy changes. During 2016–2019, the trend reversed with consistent annual growth. The number of workers increased from 68,822 in 2016 to 74,243 in 2019, indicating a recovery or an increase in demand. Peak pre-pandemic entry was in 2019. In 2020, a sharp drop of 41.19% was due to COVID-19 impacts. Travel restrictions and border

controls drastically cut entries to 43,637. In 2021–2022, a strong rebound followed. Entries surged to 57,023 in 2021 and further to 66,301 in 2022. This increase can be attributed to the relaxation of pandemic restrictions and the normalization of movement.

The year 2023 saw a notable decline of 13.7% in entries. Entries dropped to 57,212, potentially due to new visa policies, labor market changes, or domestic issues in Myanmar. 2024 showed a significant recovery, with the highest entry volume in the data set—76,957, a 34.5% jump from 2023. This could reflect increased demand for workers in Korea or improved Myanmar-Korea mobility agreements. The period from January to May in 2025 saw 34,467 new entries in just 5 months. If this pace continues, 2025 could surpass 2024. The pandemic caused the lowest point in 2020, while the highest point was reached in 2024, indicating a robust recovery and potentially favorable migration conditions. The period from 2020 to 2024 was the most volatile, marked by significant fluctuations caused by external shocks and the subsequent recovery.

Table (3.3) Annual Entry of Myanmar Nationals from Myanmar to South Korea (2011-May 2025)

No.	Year	Total Entrants (by annually)	Change in Total Entrants as percentage (%)
1.	2011	70,425	-
2.	2012	68,120	-3.3
3.	2013	63,722	-6.5
4.	2014	60,112	-5.7
5.	2015	59,237	-1.5
6.	2016	68,822	+16.2
7.	2017	70,288	+2.1
8.	2018	71,517	+1.7
9.	2019	74,243	+3.8
10.	2020	43,637	-41.19
11.	2021	57,023	+30.7
12.	2022	66,301	+16.3
13.	2023	57,212	-13.7
14.	2024	76,957	+34.5
15.	2025 (Jan~May)	34,467	-

Source: Korea Immigration Service

Table 3.4 indicates the estimated distribution of Myanmar migrant laborers in key destination countries, including South Korea, from 1990 to May 2025. Official data from the Myanmar Ministry of Labour (2025) indicates that roughly 3.09 million Myanmar people are employed overseas.

South Korea plays a growing role in Myanmar's labor migration landscape. While smaller in volume than Thailand or Malaysia, Korea offers more structured, better-protected opportunities. The EPS is now the most significant legal pathway for Myanmar laborers, particularly men, in the industrial sector. Female migration is primarily observed in education and family/marriage-based visa categories. Despite irregular flows, formal migration is steadily rising due to improved policy and labor demand.

**Table (3.4) Distribution of Myanmar Migrant Workers by Destination Countries
(1990–May 2025)**

No.	Country	Total Workers	Percentage (%)
1	Thailand	2,548,418	82
2	Malaysia	336,448	11
3	Japan	90,213	3
4	Singapore	62,442	2
5	South Korea	36,527	1.20
6	Other Countries	20,603	0.80
Total		3,094,651	100

Source: Myanmar Ministry of Labour (2025)

3.4 Opportunities for Migrant Workers of Myanmar Under EPS

The EPS has provided various socio-economic results for Myanmar migrants, especially regarding revenue production, skill enhancement, and increased labor mobility. The system has effectively facilitated legal employment opportunities and financial benefits, although it has concurrently presented complex problems concerning reintegration, rights, and enduring socio-economic stability.

i. Economic Upliftment through Remittances

A primary advantage of EPS migration is the financial remittances transmitted to Myanmar. These profits are frequently allocated to fulfill fundamental requirements such as education, housing, and healthcare, and, in certain instances, to support small-scale entrepreneurial endeavors. South Korea has regularly been positioned within the top 10 countries for remittance transfers worldwide (Cho et al., 2018). For low-income families in Myanmar, remittances provide an essential safeguard against poverty and income volatility, particularly in rural regions with scarce local work prospects.

Recent remittance data highlights the increasing economic influence of Myanmar laborers in South Korea. Records from the Central Bank of Myanmar indicate that migrants remitted roughly USD 418.88 million between 2023 and May 2025. This comprises USD 44.13 million in 2023 (27,311 transfers) and a significant rise to USD 164.83 million in 2024 (127,846 transfers). In the first five months of 2025, remittances totaled around USD 209.92 million, comprising 204,264 documented transfers. This swift expansion not only signifies the growing number of Myanmar workers under the

EPS system but also highlights the crucial role these earnings play in supporting households and local economies in Myanmar (Myanmar Ministry of Labour, 2025).

ii. Skills Acquisition and Human Capital Enhancement

Often, migrant workers return home with improved technical skills, more work discipline, and valuable intercultural experiences. The presence of these competencies contributes to Myanmar's labor pool and has the potential to enhance employability in domestic sectors or to facilitate the development of entrepreneurship. According to research conducted on the EPS, the acquisition of skills is one of the outcomes that returnees appreciate the most, even though these abilities are not often formally recognized in Myanmar's labor market (Lee et al., 2023).

iii. Financial Literacy and Resource Management

Residing and working in South Korea encourages numerous EPS migrants to adopt more systematic financial practices. Employees frequently utilize formal banking systems to oversee their finances, enhancing their savings, budgeting, and long-term financial planning proficiency. Evidence indicates that access to financial literacy and compulsory pre-departure training enhances money management among returnees.

Migrants may participate in financial training programs provided by the Myanmar government and NGOs, or through reintegration assistance. These programs aim to enhance migrants' understanding of remittance utilization, investment strategies, and debt management. Despite the absence of formal financial education, the experience of residing overseas often drives migrants to construct personal financial strategies that are frequently more sophisticated than those employed before their departure (Jang et al., 2019).

iv. Social and Cultural Enrichment

EPS migration provides Myanmar workers with opportunities to earn professional and economic benefits and exposure to a variety of cultural experiences and global labor standards. While living in South Korea, migrants learn to adjust to new social conventions, language usage, and job structure. This kind of exposure frequently results in enhanced self-confidence, adaptability, and global knowledge, which may benefit various contexts, including professional and personal ones.

Additionally, cultural exposure helps improve intercultural abilities, enabling returnees to serve as informal knowledge holders in their respective communities. This phenomenon can potentially cause changes in work ethics, gender roles, and attitudes towards education or contemporary technologies in rural areas. However, migrants frequently acquire a heightened understanding of labor rights and safeguards, which can have long-term benefits for civic involvement and advocacy in Myanmar (Kim & Koo, 2016).

v. Strengthened Bilateral Cooperation

Myanmar's involvement in the EPS strengthens diplomatic ties with South Korea. The program is governed by official Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) stipulating reciprocal obligations, worker safeguards, and compliance methods. These bilateral arrangements facilitate continuous collaboration, technical support, and discourse on labor governance.

Myanmar's participation in the EPS, frequently regarded as a model for temporary labor mobility in Asia, enhances its global standing as a responsible labor-exporting nation. The alliance facilitates additional collaboration on vocational training, migration policy reform, and regional best practices (Park, 2024).

Therefore, Myanmar's engagement in the EPS has delivered significant socio-economic dividends. From remittances and human capital growth to financial literacy and institutional development, the program has positively transformed the lives of many migrant workers and their families. Continued investment in pre-departure education, returnee reintegration, and regional cooperation will be essential to maximizing the long-term gains of labor migration under the EPS.

3.5 Challenges for Migrant Workers of Myanmar Under EPS

Despite the advantages of the EPS, Myanmar workers in South Korea continue to face significant challenges. These encompass job immobility, hazardous working environments, cultural and linguistic obstacles, discrimination, mental health issues, and insufficient support following return. These issues become worse by inadequate education, insufficient institutional support, and ineffective reintegration frameworks.

i. Restricted Job Mobility

The EPS restricts job mobility, allowing employees to change companies independently under specific circumstances, such as company closure or misconduct.

Numerous Myanmar laborers suffer from inadequate conditions that could affect their legal status. This dependency frequently results in power disparities and pushes employees to endure hazardous or exploitative conditions, which have been associated with increased rates of occupational injuries.

ii. Occupational Health and Safety Risks

Myanmar migrants are often employed in labor-intensive occupations, including agriculture, fishing, construction, and manufacturing. They face a significant risk of damage due to long working hours, inadequate safety training, and a lack of enforcement of labor regulations. Language barriers frequently increase risk factors, since employees may not fully understand orders or warnings.

iii. Language and Cultural Barriers

Passing the EPS-TOPIK exam is a requirement for migration; however, the exam focuses on basic vocabulary rather than practical communication skills. Consequently, many employees struggle to comprehend contracts, safety signs, and workplace standards fully. Language limitations can lead to isolation and high stress, particularly in the absence of cultural orientation.

iv. Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Workers from Myanmar often face discrimination because of their color or nationality, and they are rarely accepted into Korean society. They are generally regarded as temporary laborers rather than an essential part of the community. Restricted social engagement, insufficient access to public services, and exclusion from social gatherings foster a sense of isolation and emotional distress.

v. Family Separation and Mental Health Strain

EPS contracts generally extend for approximately 5 years, during which family reunion is prohibited. This results in extended separation intervals between migrants and their spouses or children. Korean immigration law indicates that only individuals holding professional or managerial visas can bring family members; EPS workers are not included in this provision (Choi, 2013).

vi. Workplace Conflicts, Injuries, and Legal Disputes

Myanmar workers frequently report serious issues on the job, including:

- **Injuries and Deaths:** On-the-job accidents can cause lasting disability or even death. Off-duty injuries and mental health struggles—including rare cases of suicide—further highlight the risks.
- **Physical Abuse:** Conflicts with superiors or colleagues have led to instances of physical assault.
- **Wage Theft:** Some workers experience unpaid wages, particularly near the end of their contracts or when disputes arise.
- **Excessive Workloads:** Long working hours, often beyond legal limits, are commonly reported.
- **Lack of Rights Awareness:** Many are unaware of their legal protections or how to file grievances.

Labor complaints are often resolved through the Myanmar Labour Attaché and the HRD Korea's foreign workers support centers. Although significant issues such as injuries, hospitalizations, or violations of contracts are typically settled by discussion, challenges remain:

- **Job Transfer Documentation:** New employees often request early transfers before completing skill adaptation, leading to disagreements with employers.
- **Medical Expenses:** While industrial accident insurance covers significant treatments, conflicts frequently emerge around costs such as hospital transportation for follow-up care.
- **Undocumented Workers:** These migrants have no chance of health coverage and receive no assistance from employers in cases of accident or fatality. In such instances, fellow migrants often gather contributions to help cover medical or funeral expenses.

vii. Weak Reintegration Support Post-Return

Despite numerous returnees arriving in Myanmar with financial resources and valuable skills, organized reintegration programs are absent. Government support for employment placement, business startups, or skill acknowledgment is limited. As a result, numerous returnees consider their experiences as depreciated, reducing the long-term developmental effects of their move. This disparity also drives some individuals towards remigration or informal work.

CHAPTER IV

SURVEY ANALYSIS

4.1 Survey Profile

This section presents an overview of the survey conducted to assess the opportunities and challenges of Myanmar returnees under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS). The survey targeted individuals who had worked in South Korea under EPS and returned to Myanmar. These returnees had been employed in various sectors, including manufacturing, agriculture, fishing, construction, and others. The primary aim was to gather information about their demographic background, overseas experience, and post-return challenges and opportunities.

4.2 Survey Design

This study was conducted about the data of EPS workers who had returned to Myanmar with a primary survey, and the secondary data was obtained from government reports, official documents, academic publications, and previous studies related to labor migration and the EPS program. The survey was carried out from January to May 2025. The primary data used for the study was concerned with the opportunities, challenges of EPS on workforce mobility among Myanmar returnees. The sample included only male participants from rural and urban areas, with a range of age, education, and work experiences. A total of 100 returnees were selected using judgmental sampling. They were selected based on their eligibility: having legally worked in South Korea through EPS and returned within the last ten years. The data was gathered through an online survey via Google Forms. Most respondents had worked in the manufacturing sector, with a smaller portion from construction.

This survey has a total of 27 questions covering the three parts: part one is demographic characteristics of EPS workers who had returned to Myanmar; part two is about opportunities of EPS on workforce mobility and part three presents challenges of EPS. 100 respondents were asked for their respective sectors, measured on a Five-Point Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5 (where 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for average (neutral), 4 for agree and 5 for strongly agree). This study focused on 100

respondents with 27 questions, including three parts about the demographics, opportunities and challenges of EPS on workforce mobility among Myanmar returnees.

4.2.1 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. Part one focused on the demographic characteristics of EPS workers who had returned to Myanmar. It has (7) questions related to the respondents' place of residence (rural or urban), gender, age, education level, marital status, dependent family size and employment sectors. Part two consisted of the opportunities of EPS on workforce mobility, which included ten (10) questions related to skills improved, useful pre-departure training, financial improved, remittances used productively, created better opportunities, improved standard of living, gained valuable intercultural experience, created personal development, learned to save and manage money better, and recommended EPS.

Part three revealed challenges of EPS on workforce mobility, which consisted of ten (10) questions related to language barriers, faced discrimination, harsh or unsafe working conditions, struggled with Korean culture, limited protection, hard to get a job after returning, skills not recognized in Myanmar, Myanmar labor rights weaker than South Korea labor right, high cost, and socio-economic difficulties.

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction and experiences with the items in the questionnaire. The Five Point Likert-Scale rate ranged from strongly disagree, disagree, average (neutral), agree, and strongly agree. Descriptive statistics (percentages and tables) and a mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative methods) were used in this study. The data was concerned with the opportunities and challenges of EPS on workforce mobility among Myanmar returnees.

4.2.2 Target Population

The target population of this study included respondents aged 21 and above who had worked in Korea under the EPS and returned to Myanmar, whether from rural or urban areas. The participants were mainly between 20 and 50 years old, with the majority aged 31 to 40, and the fewest in the 41 to 50 age group.

4.2.3 Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire using Cronbach's Alpha. This statistical measure evaluates how closely

connected a group of items is as a whole.. It is commonly used to test the reliability of scales in surveys. In this study, the questionnaire included items that measured both the opportunities and challenges of the EPS program on workforce mobility among Myanmar returnees. Separate reliability tests were conducted for these two categories.

Table (4.1) Reliability Statistics

No.	Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Opportunities of EPS	10	0.798
2	Challenges of EPS	10	0.70

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table (4.1) presents that the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.798, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency among the items for the opportunities scale. This suggests that the questions used to measure the benefits of EPS were consistent and reliable.

For the challenges scale, the Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.70, which also reflects an acceptable reliability. This means that the items related to challenges were also consistent in measuring the intended concept. Therefore, the results confirmed that the questionnaire used in this study was reliable and suitable.

4.3 Survey Results

4.3.1 Demographics Information

The demographic profiles of respondents were illustrated in table (4.2).

Table (4.2) Demographic Profiles of Respondents

No.	Item	Particular	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Gender	Male	100	100
Total			100	100
2.	Age	Between 21-25	6	6
		Between 26-30	29	29
		Between 31-35	37	37
		Between 36-40	24	24
		Between 41-45	2	2
		Between 46-50	2	2
Total			100	100
3.	Education	High School	75	75
		Graduate	25	25
Total			100	100
4.	Dependents	None	1	1
		Between 1-5 people	79	79
		Between 6-10 people	19	19
		Between 11-15 people	1	1
Total			100	100
5.	Sector	Manufacturing	70	70
		Agriculture	7	7
		Fisheries	1	1
		Construction	18	18
		Other	4	4
Total			100	100
6.	Marital Status	Single	47	47
		Married	45	45
		Divorced	7	7
		Widowed	1	1
Total			100	100

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table (4.2) presents the demographic characteristics of the 100 Myanmar returnees who participated in the survey after working under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS). All respondents were male, reflecting the male-dominated nature of labor migration under EPS, especially in physically demanding sectors such as manufacturing and construction.

In terms of age, the majority of respondents (61%) were between 31 and 40 years old, indicating that the most EPS workers were in their prime working years. In contrast, only 4% were in the 41–50 age group, suggesting that older individuals were less likely to migrate under the EPS.

Regarding educational background, 75% of participants had finished high school, while only 25% held graduate-level qualifications. This highlights that EPS primarily attracted individuals with lower to moderate educational attainment, which aligned with the program's focus on low-skilled labor migration.

Dependents' family size data show that most respondents (79%) had between 1 and 5 family members, while 20% reported larger families (6 or more). This indicates that many EPS workers had dependent family members, underscoring the importance of remittances for household livelihoods.

In terms of the employment sector, the majority of respondents (70%) had worked in manufacturing, followed by 18% in construction. A smaller proportion were employed in agriculture (7%), fishing (1%), and other sectors (4%). This distribution confirms the concentration of EPS workers in Korea's industrial labor market.

Finally, marital status data reveal that nearly half of the respondents were single (47%), while 45% were married. A smaller proportion were divorced (7%) or identified as other (1%). These figures suggest that many EPS workers were either unmarried or temporarily separated from their families during migration, which could affect their emotional and social well-being.

4.3.2 Opportunities of EPS on Workforce Mobility

The opportunities of EPS on workforce mobility in Myanmar were illustrated in table (4.3).

Table (4.3) Results of Opportunities of EPS

(5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Average, 2=Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree)

No.	Questions	5 (%)	4 (%)	3 (%)	2 (%)	1 (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Skills improved	42 (42)	24 (24)	18 (18)	8 (8)	8 (8)	3.84	1.277
2	Useful pre-departure training	13 (13)	23 (23)	38 (38)	13 (13)	13 (13)	3.10	1.185
3	Financial improved	58 (58)	21 (21)	15 (15)	2 (2)	4 (4)	4.27	1.053
4	Remittances used productively	55 (55)	17 (17)	16 (16)	3 (3)	9 (9)	4.06	1.286
5	Created better opportunities	32 (32)	19 (19)	23 (23)	11 (11)	15 (15)	3.42	1.423
6	Improved standard of living	43 (43)	15 (15)	29 (29)	9 (9)	4 (4)	3.84	1.195
7	Gained valuable intercultural experience	46 (46)	26 (26)	16 (16)	5 (5)	7 (7)	3.99	1.210
8	Created personal development	34 (34)	25 (25)	22 (22)	9 (9)	10 (10)	3.64	1.307
9	Learned to save and manage money better	34 (34)	27 (27)	26 (26)	7 (7)	6 (6)	3.76	1.173
10	Recommend EPS	40 (40)	26 (26)	19 (19)	9 (9)	6 (6)	3.85	1.218
	Overall mean						3.78	

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table (4.3) exposes the positive experiences of Myanmar returnees who participated in South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS). The results show that most respondents recognized multiple benefits gained from participating in the EPS program. The highest-rated item was financial improvement (mean = 4.27), indicating that a majority of workers experienced increased income while working in Korea. In addition, the productive use of remittances (mean = 4.06) and improved standard of living (mean = 3.84) suggest that migrants used their earnings effectively to support their families and enhance their quality of life.

Additionally, valuable intercultural experience (mean = 3.99) and learning to manage money (mean = 3.76) reflected the development of both personal and professional skills. Notably, many respondents also recommended the EPS to others (mean = 3.85), which further indicating a favorable overall experience. Similarly, skill improvement (mean = 3.84) revealed that most workers enhanced their skills during the program.

However, some areas received relatively lower ratings. The usefulness of pre-departure training scored the lowest (mean = 3.10), suggesting that many returnees found the training inadequate in preparing them for actual work and life in South Korea. Likewise, creating better opportunities (mean = 3.42) and personal development (mean = 3.64) had moderate mean scores. This suggests that while some respondents felt they had gained new opportunities and experienced personal growth through the EPS program, others did not report the same level of benefit, showing that individual experiences varied.

Overall, the average score of 3.78 indicates a generally opportunities of the EPS program. Although individual experiences varied, most returnees indicated that the EPS program had a generally positive impact on their lives, particularly in terms of job-related skills, financial situations, and opportunities for workforce mobility. These results indicate that the EPS contributed meaningfully to both their personal and professional development.

4.3.3 Challenges of EPS on Workforce Mobility

The challenges of EPS on workforce mobility in Myanmar were illustrated in table (4.4).

Table (4.4) Results of Challenges of EPS

(5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3=Average, 2=Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree)

No.	Questions	5 (%)	4 (%)	3 (%)	2 (%)	1 (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Language barriers	39 (39)	15 (15)	30 (30)	9 (9)	7 (7)	3.70	1.267
2	Faced discrimination	33 (33)	13 (13)	31 (31)	12 (12)	11 (11)	3.45	1.351
3	Harsh or unsafe working conditions	20 (20)	16 (16)	41 (41)	8 (8)	15 (15)	3.18	1.274
4	Struggled with Korean culture	16 (16)	12 (12)	39 (39)	20 (20)	13 (13)	2.98	1.223
5	Limited protection	17 (17)	16 (16)	27 (27)	12 (12)	28 (28)	2.82	1.438
6	Hard to get a job after returning	21 (21)	15 (15)	38 (38)	13 (13)	13 (13)	3.18	1.274
7	Skills not recognized in Myanmar	39 (39)	13 (13)	31 (31)	11 (11)	6 (6)	3.68	1.262
8	Myanmar labor rights weaker than South Korea labor rights	69 (69)	10 (10)	16 (16)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4.40	1.025
9	Costs are high	20 (20)	13 (13)	47 (47)	9 (9)	11 (11)	3.22	1.194
10	Socio-economic difficulties	21 (21)	9 (9)	40 (40)	14 (14)	16 (16)	3.05	1.313
	Overall mean						3.37	

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table (4.4) outlines the main challenges reported by Myanmar returnees from the EPS program. The most significant concern was the weaker labor rights in Myanmar compared to South Korea (mean = 4.40), suggesting that returnees were dissatisfied with local working conditions and labor protections after returning home.

In addition, language barriers (mean = 3.70) and skills not being recognized in Myanmar (mean = 3.68) were also reported as common difficulties. These results show that many workers faced communication difficulties while in Korea and could not fully apply the skills they gained abroad after returning home.

Furthermore, other notable concerns included discrimination (mean = 3.45), high costs (mean = 3.22), and difficulty finding a job after returning (mean = 3.18). These results highlight the challenges workers faced both during their time abroad and after returning to Myanmar.

By contrast, some areas, such as limited protection (mean = 2.82) and struggles with Korean culture (mean = 2.98), received lower mean scores, suggesting that not all participants experienced these issues to the same extent.

Regarding socio-economic challenges, the mean score was 3.05, indicating that some returnees experienced moderate difficulties in adjusting to life in Myanmar. These may include issues such as unemployment, financial instability, or limited access to support services.

Similarly, harsh or unsafe working conditions had a mean score of 3.18, indicating that some respondents faced difficult or hazardous working environments while in South Korea. Although the score is not very high, it reflects that unsafe conditions were a concern for a considerable number of workers during their time abroad.

Overall, the average score for challenges was 3.37, showing a moderate level of difficulty. Although the EPS offered clear economic and personal benefits, the findings also reveal concerns, especially with post-return employment, social reintegration, and recognition of skills and rights.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings

South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) has become a significant pathway for facilitating the legal migration of Myanmar workers to fill labor shortages in key sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and fisheries. This study indicates that the EPS framework not only ensures regulated recruitment and standardized labor rights protection but also minimizes irregular migration risks by operating through bilateral agreements between Myanmar and South Korea. EPS highlights an increasing trend in Myanmar workers' participation, driven by competitive wages, skill development opportunities, and remittance potential, which contribute substantially to household incomes and local economic growth. However, the challenges, such as language barriers, limited career advancement, and dependency on seasonal contracts, indicate the need for targeted policy interventions to optimize long-term benefits for both the host and sending countries.

According to the survey analysis, most participants reported beneficial experiences under the EPS program. The most frequently cited positive outcome was financial improvement, with many workers experiencing increased income while abroad. Remittances were often used productively, helping support families, education, and improved living conditions. Many returnees also gained valuable intercultural experience, learning to adapt to different cultural environments. Additionally, workers reported improvements in their standard of living and the development of both technical and soft skills during their time in Korea. A significant number of participants said they would recommend the EPS program to others, suggesting overall satisfaction with the experience.

The survey revealed that returnees faced a moderate level of difficulty after completing the EPS program. The most pressing concern was the weaker labor rights in Myanmar, with many participants expressing dissatisfaction with local working conditions upon their return. Language barriers and the lack of recognition for skills gained abroad also posed significant challenges, making it harder to reintegrate into the

local workforce. Some respondents reported experiencing discrimination and difficulty securing employment after coming back. Moreover, numerous individuals considered the overall expenses associated with participation—comprising relocation fees, living costs in South Korea, and reintegration charges in Myanmar—as a significant financial burden.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that although the EPS program provided clear economic and personal development benefits, returnees also faced multiple barriers to reintegration—particularly related to employment, skill recognition, and access to adequate support systems.

5.2 Suggestions

Based on the above findings, the following suggestions are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of the EPS and improve the reintegration experience for Myanmar returnees. First, it is essential to strengthen pre-departure training programs by revising and expanding the training content to include practical workplace skills, education on labor rights, cultural orientation, and safety protocols. Language training should be specifically tailored to address real-life communication needs in Korea, incorporating both industry-specific terminology and everyday conversational skills.

Second, it is essential to establish systems for recognizing skills. Creating national frameworks to certify the skills gained through the EPS officially will help confirm the abilities of returnees. Additionally, connecting returning workers with vocational training centers and local industries can improve the match between their skills and available jobs in Myanmar.

Third, support for reintegration after return should be improved by developing programs that provide job-matching services, business training, and access to microfinance for returnees who wish to start their own businesses. Additionally, offering counseling and mental health services is essential for those experiencing difficulties with readjustment and family separation.

Fourth, the legal protection of migrant workers must be reinforced. Advocacy should aim to strengthen labor rights and protection for Myanmar workers both overseas and in their home country. Improving the role of Myanmar's labor representatives and support centers in Korea will help them respond more quickly and effectively to labor rights violations.

Finally, there is a need to facilitate improved data collection and monitoring systems. More accurate tracking of returnees will provide valuable information on long-term outcomes and the overall effectiveness of policies. Collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions should be promoted to ensure continuous research on labor migration and workforce development.

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APPENDIXES

EPS Returnee Survey Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

I'm a Master's student at the Department of Economics, Yangon University of Economics. I am conducting a research study titled "A Study on Opportunities and Challenges of Myanmar Workforce Mobility Under South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS)."

The purpose of this survey is to gather information from EPS returnees about your experiences, challenges, and suggestions regarding your migration and reintegration journey. Your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Thank you for your time and valuable contribution.

Section 1: Demographic Information and Migration Details

1. What is your gender?

☐ Male ☐ Female

2. What is your age?

3. What is your highest education level?

☐ Primary ☐ High School ☐ Graduate ☐ Master

4. Are you from a rural or urban area?

☐ Rural ☐ Urban

5. How many dependents do you support?

6. What sector were you employed in?

☐ Manufacturing ☐ Agriculture ☐ Fisheries ☐ Construction ☐ Other

7. What is your marital status?

☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed

Section 2: Opportunities of EPS on Workforce Mobility

Please write at cell which you would prefer in the table and answer.

1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3 – Average, 4- Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree

No.	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1	I improved my job skills while working in Korea.					
2	I received useful pre-departure training.					
3	My earnings improved my family's financial situation.					
4	Remittances I sent home were used productively (Education, Health, Saving, etc.)					
5	My Korea experience helped me find better opportunities.					
6	My standard of living improved after EPS.					
7	I gained valuable intercultural experience.					
8	EPS encouraged my personal development.					
9	I learned how to save and manage money better.					
10	I would recommend EPS to others.					

Section 3: Challenges of EPS on Workforce Mobility

Please write at cell which you would prefer in the table and answer.

1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3 – Average, 4- Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree

No.	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1	I experienced language barriers in Korea.					
2	I faced discrimination while working.					
3	My working conditions were harsh or unsafe.					
4	I struggled adjusting to Korean culture.					
5	I had limited legal protection or support.					
6	I found it hard to get a job after returning.					
7	My skills from Korea were not recognized here.					
8	Myanmar's worker rights are considerably weaker than South Korea's labor rights.					
9	The costs associated with working under EPS are high.					
10	After returning from South Korea, there are socio-economic difficulties in contributing to business activities.					