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**Migration Drivers and Post-
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Bangladeshi Immigrants in
Canada**

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MEMO

The Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective (MEMO) projects a six-year (2022–2028) research project that examines internal, interregional, and intercontinental migration flows and their drivers across three main regions: South/Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Malaysia), West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire), and the Americas (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Canada). Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC) Partnership Grant, MEMO brings together a diverse, multi-institutional, and multidisciplinary team of 38 academics and 32 partner organizations across three continents and is led by CERC Migration at Toronto Metropolitan University.

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Abstract

This paper examines the interconnected drivers shaping Bangladeshi migration to Canada and how these drivers are reconfigured through post-migration experiences during early settlement. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twenty-two Bangladeshi migrants in Ontario who arrived after January 2019, the study links pre-migration decision-making with post-migration realities, conceptualizing migration as a cumulative and processual phenomenon shaped by interacting economic, educational, political, environmental, social, and informational factors.

Findings show that migration was rarely driven by immediate economic deprivation. Instead, aspirational drivers—such as the pursuit of career mobility, education, and institutional predictability—motivated migration decisions, while reinforcing factors including politicized advancement, governance fatigue, environmental and health pressures, gendered social constraints, and information infrastructures amplified these aspirations and made migration appear both necessary and feasible. These infrastructures enabled migration pathways but also produced uneven preparedness and, at times, inflated expectations.

Post-migration experiences reveal pronounced expectation–reality gaps. Labour market integration was marked by credential devaluation and prolonged precarity; housing affordability emerged as a central challenge; healthcare involved trade-offs between environmental health gains and access constraints; and social integration combined increased autonomy with loneliness and identity disruption. Overall, migration drivers did not disappear after arrival but were reworked through new institutional, social, and economic contexts. Participants recalibrated timelines, redefined success beyond economic mobility alone, and increasingly understood migration as an open-ended process. Canada was often viewed as a strategic destination rather than a final endpoint, with citizenship framed as mobility insurance.

Keywords: Bangladeshi migration, Canada, Multiple migration drivers, Post-migration settlement, Expectation–reality gap, Migration governance

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1. Introduction

Migration shapes labour markets, demographic change, and social transformation, yet governance responses often treat it as the product of a single driver (e.g., jobs, politics, climate). This siloed approach obscures how migration decisions form through multiple, interconnected pressures that accumulate over time, and why settlement trajectories frequently diverge from policy expectations. Understanding migration as a multi-phase process matters because linear assumptions about decision-making and integration can misalign programs with migrants' lived realities across pre-migration planning and post-migration settlement.

Empirically, fewer studies connect what motivates migration before departure with how migrants interpret and renegotiate those motivations after arrival. Drivers rarely end at the border; they are reshaped through immigration systems, labour markets, housing conditions, service access, and everyday settlement experiences. Tracing this continuity and reconfiguration is essential for evidence-informed, rights-based migration governance, especially where early settlement reveals gaps between expectations and lived conditions.

This study is part of the SSHRC-funded Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective (MEMO) Partnership, which addresses these gaps through a socio-ecological systems approach linking macro-level structures with micro-level decision-making (Triandafyllidou, 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2018; McLeman et al., 2018). MEMO foregrounds aspiration, capability and culturally embedded meanings in shaping mobility decisions (Carling & Schewel, 2017; Belloni, 2016; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016) and conceptualizes migration as relational and non-linear across origin, transit, and destination contexts (Hillmann et al., 2018). Central to this framework is an emphasis on migrant agency that shapes when, how, and why people move (Carling & Schewel, 2017; Belloni, 2016; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016). The partnership examines three migration systems: Central America–North America, West Africa–Europe/North America, and South Asia–Canada, with a focus on Nepal and Bangladesh.

This paper contributes to the South Asia–Canada migration literature by examining Bangladeshi migration to Canada, with a focus on migrants residing in Ontario who arrived after January 2019. While Bangladesh is a major country of origin globally, Bangladeshi migration to Canada remains comparatively under-studied, and existing research often prioritizes post-migration outcomes over the intersecting drivers shaping migration decisions and their reconfiguration after arrival (Van Hear, 2010; Triandafyllidou, 2019). Drawing on semi-structured interviews, this study adopts a longitudinal perspective across pre- and post-migration phases, analyzing both migration drivers and how early settlement experiences reshape motivations, expectations, and strategies. By placing Bangladeshi migrants' experiences at the centre, the study highlights their agency in migration decision-making. The findings offer policy-relevant insights into migration trajectories and the alignment of settlement supports with migrants' lived realities.

2. Objectives

This paper has three interrelated objectives. First, it examines the multiple drivers of Bangladeshi migration to Canada, focusing on how economic, educational, political, environmental, social, and informational factors interacted to shape decision-making, timing, and migration pathways.

Second, it analyzes post-migration experiences and reflections among Bangladeshi migrants in Ontario, including labour market integration, housing and cost-of-living pressures, healthcare access, social belonging, and evolving mobility aspirations. While many trajectories unfolded

during the COVID-19 period, the analysis emphasizes broader structural and institutional conditions that predate the pandemic and continue to shape settlement (Sharma, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2022).

Third, it advances an understanding of migration as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. By linking pre-migration motivations with early settlement realities, the study examines how drivers are reconfigured after arrival and how migrants recalibrate expectations, strategies, and goals through interaction with new institutional, social, and economic contexts.

Together, the paper situates Bangladeshi migration within the broader South Asia–Canada system and contributes to MEMO’s aim of moving beyond single-cause explanations. It shows how migration decisions emerge from intersecting drivers and how these drivers persist—often in altered form—after arrival, with implications for rights-based, evidence-informed governance in Canada.

3. Bangladeshi Immigrants in Canada

In recent decades, Canada’s immigration patterns have shifted significantly from traditional European source countries toward more diverse origins in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Immigrants from Asia now constitute the majority of new arrivals, accounting for over 60% of recent immigrants, with South Asian populations growing rapidly since the 1990s (Statistics Canada, 2024a; 2024b). While countries such as India dominate these flows, migration from smaller and previously underrepresented countries—including Bangladesh—has also increased, contributing to the diversification of Canada’s immigrant population (Kalhor et al., 2025). Within this context, Bangladeshi immigration represents a relatively recent but significant component of broader migration flows, shaped by both immigration policies and longer-standing processes of racialized integration. The 2021 Canadian Census reports approximately 75,000–80,000 individuals of Bangladeshi origin in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023), while estimates from Global Affairs Canada suggest that the population may exceed 100,000 (Global Affairs Canada, 2025).

Drawing on earlier census-based research, Bangladeshi immigrants in Toronto can be characterized as a relatively recent, young, and highly educated population, yet one that experiences significant socio-economic disadvantage. Data from the 2006 Census show that the majority are of working age (over 77% between 25 and 54 years) and have arrived largely after 1990, with nearly half arriving between 2000 and 2006 (Akbar, 2016). They exhibit high levels of human capital, with more than half holding a university degree and high levels of official language proficiency. However, these advantages do not translate into commensurate labour market outcomes. Bangladeshi immigrants have been consistently identified as one of the lower-income immigrant groups in Toronto, reflecting a pronounced mismatch between education and economic returns (Ghosh, 2005; Ornstein, 2006; Akbar, 2016). These patterns align with broader Canadian scholarship documenting persistent wage penalties and declining returns to education among racialized immigrants (Baker & Benjamin, 1994; Li, 2003; Reitz, 2001; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005).

Settlement patterns and family structures further reinforce these outcomes. Bangladeshi immigrants are more likely to reside in rental housing and in spatially concentrated, lower-income neighbourhoods in the Greater Toronto Area, often within ethnic clusters. Families are predominantly nuclear with children, and relatively larger household sizes shape economic

pressures and labour market strategies. Qualitative research further illustrates how these structural inequalities are experienced at the household level. Interviews with Bangladeshi women conducted by Akbar (2016) document widespread experiences of blocked mobility following migration, particularly as men's foreign credentials are devalued and employment pathways stall, generating financial strain and emotional stress within families (Akbar, 2018). Subsequent studies highlight the gendered consequences of these dynamics, as women often enter paid work or expand their economic roles while continuing to shoulder disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities (Akbar & Preston, 2020, 2021).

The present study examines a more recent cohort of Bangladeshi migrants who arrived in Canada after January 2019. The participant profile (Section 4.3) indicates that this cohort shares key similarities with earlier cohorts, particularly in terms of high educational attainment alongside persistent employment challenges. While earlier research has documented integration outcomes among previous cohorts, this study extends existing scholarship by examining how these structural conditions are encountered and negotiated during early settlement today, and by explicitly linking pre-migration drivers with post-migration experiences. In doing so, it offers a dynamic account of Bangladeshi migration to Canada that captures both continuity and change across migration and integration trajectories. Given that Bangladeshi immigrants remain relatively underrepresented in the Canadian migration literature and are frequently subsumed within the broader "South Asian" category—where the experiences of Indian-origin populations tend to dominate both scholarly and policy discussions, despite evidence that "South Asian" identities are themselves socially constructed and internally differentiated (Ghosh, 2013)—the present study offers a more focused and disaggregated analysis of Bangladeshi migrants in Canada.

4. Methods

This study uses a qualitative design to examine migration drivers and post-migration experiences among Bangladeshi immigrants in Ontario. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were selected to capture decision-making processes, lived experiences, and meaning-making in participants' own terms while maintaining comparability through a shared interview guide (Creswell, 2013). The study received institutional ethics approval. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that confidentiality and data security measures were in place. Interviews were conducted with attention to potentially sensitive topics, and participants could skip any questions.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling based on eligibility criteria (Patton, 2015): self-identifying as Bangladeshi by birth, arriving in Canada after January 2019, residing in Ontario (including the GTA and surrounding cities), and being 18 or older. This ensured the study captured the experiences of recent migrants navigating early settlement. The study period overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic and immediate aftermath, enabling analysis of how crisis conditions shaped settlement experiences and strategies, even when the pandemic itself was not a primary migration driver. Recruitment aimed to include a range of pathways (economic, skilled, family-based, student, and non-student routes) and was conducted through community networks, referrals, and online circulation of the study flyer.

4.1 Data Collection

Twenty-two interviews were conducted between November 2024 and March 2025 via Zoom to accommodate geographic dispersion across Ontario. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were

conducted in English or in a mix of English and Bangla, based on participant preference. All participants provided informed consent. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and Bangla portions were translated into English by the interviewer to support consistent analysis. The interview guide covered migration decision-making and motivations; economic, political, social, environmental, and informational drivers; planning and information sources; and post-migration experiences related to employment, housing, healthcare, and social integration. Participants also reflected on expectation–reality gaps and on future mobility aspirations, including possible return or onward migration.

4.2 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Analysis began with repeated readings to build familiarity, followed by open coding to identify recurring concepts and narratives. Codes were then consolidated through axial coding into themes and subthemes capturing patterns across participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analysis distinguishes between migration drivers (pre-departure factors) and post-migration experiences (settlement realities), enabling systematic comparison across phases and supporting a process-oriented account of migration (Van Hear, 2010; Carling & Schewel, 2017). Through this iterative process, migration drivers were further organized into two analytical categories— aspirational core drivers and reinforcing drivers—based on their relative role in directly motivating migration or shaping and amplifying existing aspirations. Attention was paid to how similar themes (e.g., employment, education, healthcare, social freedom) operated differently before and after migration as drivers were reshaped through new institutional, social, and economic contexts (Triandafyllidou, 2019). All names are pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed.

4.3 Participant Profile

This study draws on in-depth interviews with twenty-two Bangladeshi migrants residing in Canada who migrated after January 2019 and were living in Ontario at the time of recruitment (Table 1). Participants represent a range of migration streams, including economic, skilled, and family-based pathways, as well as student routes. Collectively, the sample is characterized by high levels of educational attainment and strong professional orientation, consistent with patterns observed among earlier cohorts of Bangladeshi migrants to Canada.

All participants had completed secondary education or higher. Nearly 87% held postsecondary credentials, and approximately 32% had completed or were enrolled in graduate-level education at the time of interview. This educational profile situates the sample firmly within skilled and semi-skilled migration pathways and underscores the centrality of credentials in shaping both migration decisions and settlement trajectories. The prominence of graduate education further reflects the growing role of education-linked mobility within Bangladeshi migration to Canada.

Gender representation within the sample was uneven, with men comprising approximately two-thirds of participants and women just over one-third. Gendered differences were also evident in labour market positioning at the time of interview. Men were more likely to report full-time employment or prior professional stability, whereas women were more frequently students, recently unemployed, or navigating transitional labour market statuses. These patterns point to gendered inequalities in post-migration labour market integration, even among highly educated migrants.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Interview Participants (N = 22)			
Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	14	63.6
	Female	8	36.4
Age Group	25–34	12	54.5
	35–54	10	45.5
Marital Status	Married / Common Law	12	54.5
	Single	8	36.4
	Not Specified	2	9.1
Children	Has Children	8	36.4
	No Children	14	63.6
Highest Education	High School	3	13.6
	Bachelor's Degree	12	54.5
	Graduate Degree (completed or enrolled)	7	31.8
Current Employment Status	Full-time	5	22.7
	Part-time	1	4.5
	Student	2	9.1
	Not Employed	7	31.8
	Not Specified	7	31.8
Current Residence (Canada)	GTA (Toronto, North York, Scarborough, Etobicoke)	14	63.6
	Ottawa	2	9.1
	Oshawa	2	9.1
	Waterloo	2	9.1
	Mississauga	1	4.5
	St. Catharines	1	4.5

Participants' migration trajectories were diverse and often non-linear. While many migrated directly from Bangladesh to Canada, several reported multi-step migration pathways involving prior residence in the United States, Europe, or other regions. Such experiences shaped participants' expectations of Canada, with those who had lived abroad previously expressing more calibrated and critical assessments of settlement, employment, and institutional functioning. These trajectories highlight the importance of understanding migration as part of longer mobility histories rather than as a singular event.

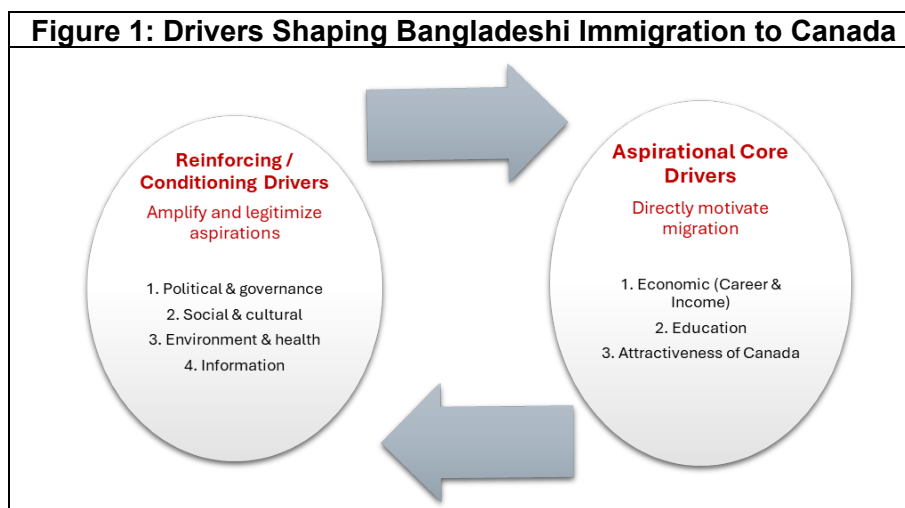
Settlement patterns were strongly concentrated in urban Ontario. Nearly two-thirds of participants resided within the GTA, including Toronto, North York, Scarborough, and Etobicoke, reflecting the region's concentration of employment opportunities, educational institutions, and established migrant networks. Smaller numbers of participants lived in surrounding or secondary urban centres such as Ottawa, Oshawa, Waterloo, Mississauga, and St. Catharines, often due to employment, spousal education, or housing considerations. These patterns illustrate both the continued pull of the GTA and the role of structural constraints in shaping intra-provincial settlement decisions.

Linguistically and culturally, the sample demonstrated substantial adaptive capacity. All participants reported bilingual or multilingual proficiency, with Bangla–English dominance across the group. Many also had prior exposure to international education or professional environments, contributing to high levels of cultural and institutional literacy. However, as the findings section illustrates, these forms of cultural capital did not uniformly translate into smooth labour market integration or economic security following migration.

Overall, the demographic profile reflects a group of highly educated, urban-oriented, and globally mobile migrants, whose characteristics complicate simplified narratives of economic migration driven by deprivation alone. Instead, these attributes provide essential context for understanding both the migration drivers and the post-migration experiences examined in the sections that follow.

5. Migration Drivers Shaping Decision Making

This section examines the factors that influenced participants' decisions to leave Bangladesh and choose Canada. Building on the analysis, migration drivers are conceptualized as operating at two interrelated levels: aspirational core drivers and reinforcing or conditioning drivers (Figure 1). Aspirational core drivers—such as economic opportunities, education, and the perceived attractiveness of Canada—directly motivate migration by shaping long-term goals and desired futures. In contrast, reinforcing drivers—including political and governance conditions, social and cultural contexts, environmental and health concerns, and access to information—are not primary motivations in themselves but instead amplify, legitimize, and render these aspirations actionable. Across interviews, these factors rarely operated in isolation. Instead, they interacted dynamically over time, reinforcing one another and gradually narrowing perceived futures in Bangladesh while making migration appear both necessary and achievable.



5.1 Aspirational Core Drivers

5.1.1 Economic Drivers

Economic considerations functioned as a core aspirational driver, shaping participants' long-term goals and motivating migration decisions. Participants described a combination of rising affordability pressures, constrained professional mobility, and future-oriented economic planning that made migration feel necessary even for those who were relatively secure or "comfortable" in Bangladesh. This pattern supports research showing that long-distance migration often increases with education and resources rather than poverty, as those with capacity are better positioned to convert aspirations into mobility (De Haas, 2010; Dao et al., 2018; McKenzie, 2017).

A recurring theme was the distinction participants drew between having employment and having an economically viable future. Several respondents emphasized that while they were working, everyday costs—housing, education, and basic consumption—were rising faster than wages, making long-term stability feel increasingly fragile. Rehana, who worked as a schoolteacher in Dhaka, described how affordability pressures shaped her decision-making:

"As a teacher, everything like the price and tuition fees, everything is super high back in Bangladesh. The economic condition is not good. Even to afford our own expenditures, it has become a bit difficult."

Although she had been steadily employed for several years, Rehana emphasized that low wages eroded the value of professional work overtime and limited her ability to plan ahead. Reflecting on her salary trajectory, she explained:

"I was a teacher for five years, and my salary was around 35 to 40,000. Yes, I did feel that I was underpaid... for other people, I would say that they really struggled with the salary."

Beyond affordability, many participants pointed to limited career mobility despite holding stable, professional, or socially respected positions. Selim, who worked in senior finance roles prior to migration, articulated this tension clearly:

"I had a good career path, maybe a little slow one, but there was ample opportunity and a stable economic environment for me. But I still chose to leave that and come over here."

For Selim, the economic issue was not instability but the absence of credible pathways for recognition and advancement. He linked migration directly to the desire for institutional systems where effort and performance could translate into progress:

"I wanted my work to be recognized, my work to be properly valued. I felt like that scenario in Bangladesh was not conducive to that."

Economic drivers were also deeply future-oriented and intergenerational. Participants frequently framed migration as a form of long-term risk management, particularly in relation to housing, healthcare, aging parents, and the costs of raising children. Rehana described how these cumulative calculations reshaped her sense of what was sustainable:

“When you started calculating everything—rent, future children, parents getting older—it felt like even managing everyday expenses was becoming difficult. Migration felt like a way to protect ourselves in the long run.”

A recurring theme across interviews was the aspiration to secure a better future for children. Even among participants without children, migration was framed in anticipatory terms, linked to future family formation, access to education, healthcare, and stable institutional environments. This intergenerational orientation positioned migration as a long-term investment rather than an immediate economic necessity.

Even where day-to-day survival was not in question, participants described a shrinking horizon of security. Migration was thus framed not simply as a search for “better jobs” but as a strategy to secure durability—access to systems perceived as more predictable, transparent, and supportive over the life course.

5.1.2 Education as a Migration Driver

Education functioned as another core aspirational driver, linking long-term goals of professional mobility and recognition with concrete and accessible migration pathways. Rather than being framed purely as human capital accumulation, education was understood as a structured route into systems perceived as more transparent, merit-based, and globally legible (Robertson, 2013; Waters, 2012; Moskal, 2017). Several participants migrated initially as international students, viewing Canadian education as a deliberate and calculated entry point rather than a default choice. For Javed, the decision to migrate was explicitly tied to securing funded education, which he saw as essential to ensuring long-term returns. He explained that he delayed migration until such an opportunity materialized:

“I didn’t want to just come by paying a lot of money without knowing what would happen after. If I was going to leave everything behind, it had to make sense in the long run.”

Similarly, other participants emphasized the reputational and symbolic value of Canadian credentials. Deepa and Reham contrasted Canadian degrees with those obtained in Bangladesh, noting that the former were perceived as more portable across global labour markets and more credible to employers. As Reham put it:

“A Canadian degree opens doors in a way that our local degrees just don’t. It’s recognized, not only here but internationally.”

Importantly, education was framed not only as skill acquisition but as a strategic positioning mechanism within Canada’s immigration system. Participants described educational enrolment as increasing eligibility for post-graduation work permits, facilitating transitions into permanent residency pathways, and providing a structured temporal sequence from student to worker. Rather than being described as an end in itself, education functioned as a practical route for maintaining legal status and reducing uncertainty during migration and early settlement.

Education also operated at the household level, shaping collective migration decisions rather than individual ones alone. In several cases, including Rehana and Reham, one partner’s admission to a Canadian institution anchored the family’s migration strategy, determining both timing and

destination. Rehana described how her spouse's educational pathway became the organizing logic for their move:

"When the offer came, we realized this was the most realistic way for us to move. Everything else—jobs, future planning—started from that point."

Participants also described higher education obtained in Bangladesh as a critical enabling condition for migration aspiration. University degrees were widely understood as assets within Canada's points-based immigration system, increasing eligibility for skilled migration pathways and allowing participants to assess whether migration was achievable in the first place. As Salman explained, having his education assessed and meeting language requirements gave him "sufficient points" to apply under Express Entry, making Canada a realistic option.

Overall, education-linked mobility functioned as a critical bridge between aspiration and realization, enabling participants to translate economic goals into migration pathways by accessing institutional eligibility, legal status, and longer-term security.

5.1.3 Attractiveness of Canada

The perceived attractiveness of Canada also operated as a core aspirational driver, shaping destination choice by aligning migrants' long-term aspirations with a context viewed as stable, predictable, and attainable. Destination selection reflected strategic compromise rather than idealized preference, shaped by immigration regimes, language accessibility, anticipated settlement costs, and risk tolerance. In this sense, Canada emerged as the most feasible option for translating migration aspirations into durable outcomes within an uneven and restrictive global mobility system (Carling & Schewel, 2017; Czaika & De Haas, 2013).

At the same time, the idea of Canada carried strong positive meaning. Participants imagined Canada as a place where a better life—defined not only by economic advancement but also by dignity, security, and predictability—was possible. Canada was valued for procedural clarity and enforceable rules rather than idealized political perfection. Javed articulated this contrast succinctly:

"Here [Canada], if you follow the process, you [get the service]. No one asks who you know or what side you're on."

Relatively accessible permanent residency and citizenship pathways were central to Canada's appeal, particularly when contrasted with the United States, where long processing times and visa uncertainty were viewed as risky. As Papiya noted, "The U.S. always felt risky. Canada felt easier." Participants also framed Canadian citizenship as a form of mobility capital, expanding future options for travel and professional movement and reducing dependence on restrictive visa regimes. In this sense, Canada was valued not only as a destination but as a platform for longer-term mobility and risk management.

Language accessibility further reinforced this choice. The English-language environment lowered early settlement barriers and enabled participants to function socially and professionally from the outset. Social openness also featured prominently: participants associated Canada with multiculturalism, religious freedom, and acceptance of diverse identities and relationships. In contrast to political instability and governance constraints in Bangladesh, Canada was widely

perceived as offering greater personal security and freedom of movement, grounded in rule of law, institutional protection, and enforceable rights.

Finally, family and spousal ties strengthened Canada's appeal by reducing uncertainty and providing informal support during early settlement. As Rehana reflected, "Knowing someone here made a huge difference."

These factors show that while Canada was chosen through pragmatic calculation, it was also imagined as a space of possibility—where participants could envision a more secure, autonomous, and livable future, even as they remained aware of the challenges involved in making that vision real.

5.2 Reinforcing Drivers

5.2.1 Political and Governance Drivers

Political and governance conditions functioned as reinforcing drivers, shaping and intensifying migration aspirations rather than independently initiating migration. Participants described everyday life, professional advancement, and access to basic rights as shaped by corruption, political affiliation, and weak institutional accountability. Rather than acute political crisis, it was the routinization of these governance failures that constrained long-term futures (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Van Hear et al., 2018). Several participants also described routine encounters with informal payments and discretionary practices in public services, where compliance with formal procedures did not guarantee outcomes, undermining confidence in institutional fairness and reinforcing the sense that rights were conditional rather than assured. Deepa, for example, described frustration with bureaucratic processes in which compliance with formal rules did not guarantee outcomes, reinforcing the perception that rights were conditional rather than assured.

Beyond bureaucratic interactions, participants emphasized the politicization of professional and organizational life. Career advancement was widely described as contingent on political alignment rather than competence, particularly in public-facing sectors and senior roles. Selim explained how political affiliation shaped professional visibility and progression:

"If you want to be visible or move up, you have to associate yourself with the ruling party. Otherwise, no matter how good you are, you stay stuck."

Javed echoed this assessment, emphasizing that professional merit alone was insufficient for advancement: "Being educated was not enough—politics mattered more than skills."

These dynamics generated what many participants described as governance fatigue—a cumulative sense of exhaustion, disengagement, and resignation rather than immediate fear or persecution. Nurul, who did not consider himself politically involved, explained that governance failures permeated everyday life regardless of political stance:

"I was never directly targeted, but everyone was affected in some way. Politics affected traffic, offices, how things worked every day. You couldn't really escape it."

For many, migration was framed as an exit from systems perceived as arbitrary, personalized, and unpredictable. Overall, political and governance drivers operated as background structural constraints that narrowed perceived futures in Bangladesh. Migration thus represented a search for institutional environments where rights, recognition, and opportunity were less contingent on informal power, political proximity, and constant negotiation.

5.2.2 Environmental and Health Drivers

Environmental and health conditions in Bangladesh did not emerge as immediate or standalone triggers for migration. Rather, they functioned as cumulative, reinforcing pressures that gradually weakened participants' attachment to place. Environmental stressors were embedded in everyday life and interacted with economic, social, and governance constraints, shaping long-term migration imaginaries rather than prompting abrupt departure. This pattern aligns with research showing that environmental influences on migration often operate indirectly through slow-onset exposure, declining health, and reduced livability (Black et al., 2011; McLeman, 2018).

Air pollution in Dhaka was the most consistently cited concern. Participants described chronic respiratory problems, fatigue, and recurrent illness that had become normalized over time. As Reham noted, "In Dhaka, being sick all the time felt normal." For many, the significance of environmental exposure became clear only after migration, when symptoms eased. Reena reflected, "I didn't realize how much I was struggling to breathe until... here."

Participants also highlighted extreme heat, monsoon flooding, and waterlogging as sources of everyday stress that constrained mobility and productivity. Deepa explained, "During the rainy season... just getting to work became stressful." Mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue and chikungunya were similarly described as persistent background risks rather than episodic crises, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability: "It felt like it could happen to anyone, anytime" (Rumana).

Environmental exposure was not uniform. Participants contrasted Dhaka with other regions and emphasized that class-based mitigation strategies—air conditioning, private healthcare, flexible commuting—reduced but did not eliminate risk, effectively privatizing environmental harm. Analytically, environmental and health drivers operated as background conditions of constraint, contributing to incremental detachment and reinforcing other drivers such as economic insecurity, governance fatigue, and social exhaustion. Migration was thus framed less as environmental "escape" than as a longer-term strategy to secure bodily wellbeing and a more predictable quality of life.

5.2.3 Social and Cultural Drivers

Social and cultural factors operated as reinforcing drivers, intensifying dissatisfaction and amplifying migration aspirations, particularly for women and for participants whose relationships or life trajectories diverged from dominant social norms in Bangladesh. Rather than operating as acute triggers, these factors accumulated over time, producing what many participants described as social exhaustion—a persistent sense of scrutiny, constraint, and limited autonomy in everyday life. This pattern aligns with scholarship emphasizing the role of gendered norms, moral regulation, and routine social control in shaping migration decisions (Kabeer, 2012; Gardner, 2012; Ahmed, 2019).

Women consistently described gendered expectations around marriage, domestic labour, and respectability as central to their migration decisions. These pressures often intensified after completing education, eclipsing professional aspirations and personal timelines. As Rumana explained, “After undergrad, it’s like there’s a clock on you,” while Deepa noted that even professional success did not displace expectations of caregiving and marriage.

Beyond explicit expectations, participants emphasized pervasive family and community surveillance that shaped everyday decisions around dress, mobility, relationships, and career choices. This constant monitoring was described as psychologically burdensome, producing a sustained sense of scrutiny and the need for self-justification. Migration was frequently framed as an exit from this regulatory gaze and a source of mental relief. As Reena explained: “I wanted mental space. Just to live without answering questions all the time.”

Religious norms further constrained personal life for some participants. Javed linked his migration decision to the lack of social acceptance for inter-faith relationships, noting, “There was no future for us there.” For others, particularly women, marital breakdown carried enduring stigma. Sharmin described divorce as an inescapable marker: “No matter what I achieved, divorce would always come first.” Everyday safety concerns—especially for women—also shaped perceptions of livability. Participants described harassment, restricted mobility, and constant vigilance in public spaces, contributing to a sense of conditional autonomy. As Rumana noted, “It becomes normal, but it’s exhausting.”

Overall, social and cultural drivers operated through everyday regulation rather than overt coercion. Gendered expectations, religious constraints, reputational stigma, surveillance, and safety concerns intersected to narrow participants’ sense of viable futures. Migration thus emerged as a pathway toward privacy, dignity, and self-determination for those whose lives did not align with dominant social expectations in Bangladesh.

5.2.4 Information Infrastructure Drivers

Information infrastructure functioned as a key enabling and reinforcing driver. Migration decisions were shaped by a multi-layered information infrastructure combining official government sources, digital media platforms, and interpersonal networks. Participants emphasized that migration was rarely navigated through a single channel. Instead, they described a process of information triangulation—cross-checking multiple sources to assess feasibility, manage risk, and determine timing. This aligns with research conceptualizing information as a key component of migration infrastructure that structures who migrates, how, and with what expectations (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

Official government websites, particularly those of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), were widely viewed as authoritative and trustworthy. Many participants completed applications independently by closely following official instructions, often contrasting the clarity of IRCC processes with bureaucratic experiences in Bangladesh. As Javed explained, “I mostly followed the IRCC website... everything was written there step by step.” Access to clear official information reinforced perceptions of Canada as a rules-based and procedurally predictable destination.

At the same time, digital and social media platforms played a crucial role in translating formal policy into practical, everyday knowledge. Participants frequently used YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Reddit to understand application steps, timelines, and early settlement

procedures. Online peer groups were particularly valued for revealing delays, refusals, and informal practices not always explicit in official guidance. As Reena noted, “The website tells you the rules, but people online tell you what actually happens.”

Participants also cautioned against the uneven quality of online information. Several highlighted how aspirational narratives and selective success stories created unrealistic expectations about employment and settlement. Nurul remarked, “Some videos make it look like you arrive and start earning immediately. That’s not the reality,” while Javed noted that struggles with credential recognition, housing, and early underemployment were often omitted.

Interpersonal networks—including family, friends, and colleagues—played a key mediating role by contextualizing information and calibrating expectations. Reham described relying on friends in Canada to assess housing and job prospects: “They would tell me what was realistic.” Access to such networks was uneven, leaving some participants more vulnerable to misinformation and distorted expectations. Overall, information infrastructure functioned not simply as technical support but as a critical mechanism shaping preparedness, expectations, and early settlement experiences, reinforcing inequalities in readiness beyond individual motivation or capacity.

Taken together, these findings show that while aspirational drivers provided the primary motivation for migration, reinforcing drivers shaped the conditions under which these aspirations became urgent, legitimate, and actionable.

6. Post-Migration Experiences

This section examines post-migration experiences as a continuation of pre-migration decision-making rather than a final stage of migration. Drawing on participants’ accounts, it shows how expectations formed in Bangladesh interacted with institutional structures, labour markets, and social relations in Canada, producing uneven and evolving outcomes across employment, credential recognition, social belonging, and the recalibration of aspirations.

6.1 Labour Market and Economic Experiences

Post-migration labour market experiences were a central site where pre-migration expectations met institutional realities. Participants generally viewed the Canadian labour market as rule-based and formally meritocratic, yet difficult to access for newly arrived migrants with foreign credentials. These encounters often produced economic shock, status dislocation, and prolonged uncertainty, even among highly educated and professionally experienced individuals, reflecting well-documented gaps between formal equality and stratified labour market outcomes for immigrants (Bauder, 2003; Reitz, 2001).

Limited recognition of foreign education and work experience emerged as a dominant theme. Many participants arrived with substantial professional backgrounds in finance, healthcare, sustainability, research, and management, only to find their credentials discounted. Deepa described this as a professional reset: “It felt like everything starts from zero again.” For those in regulated professions, barriers were particularly acute. Reham explained that architectural licensing requirements placed his career on hold: “Professionally, you’re stuck, even if you’re qualified.” Healthcare professionals similarly described lengthy, costly accreditation processes that delayed entry into their fields and reshaped professional identities.

In the absence of immediate professional opportunities, many participants entered survival employment in retail, warehouses, call centres, or gig work. Although framed as temporary, these jobs often extended longer than expected, contributing to exhaustion and self-doubt. As Rumana noted, “Here, you first prove you can survive.” Downward mobility was experienced not only economically but symbolically, as participants managed family and peer expectations that migration would automatically translate into success.

Networking emerged as an informal yet essential pathway to employment—one that many had underestimated prior to migration. Participants emphasized that online applications alone were insufficient and that progress often depended on referrals, bridging programs, and professional associations. Rumana explained, “Nothing really changed until I started networking,” while Selim described the difficulty of learning to self-promote in unfamiliar professional cultures. This reliance on social capital disproportionately disadvantaged newcomers without established networks, reinforcing inequalities linked to timing, familiarity, and prior mobility.

Labour market conditions at the time of arrival further shaped outcomes. Participants arriving after 2022 described heightened instability marked by layoffs, contract work, and prolonged job searches, even among long-term residents. Papiya characterized the period as exceptionally volatile: “Even people who’ve been here for years are struggling.”

Overall, labour market experiences produced a significant economic recalibration. While migration was motivated by aspirations for stability and merit-based advancement, institutional barriers, credential regimes, informal hiring practices, and adverse timing delayed these outcomes. Rather than interpreting these challenges as failures of migration itself, participants framed them as unanticipated settlement costs that required resilience, adaptability, and extended timelines. As Rumana reflected, migration did not feel like a failure, but it unfolded over a much longer and more difficult period than she had initially expected.

6.2 Housing and Cost-of-Living

Housing and cost-of-living conditions emerged as one of the most immediate and emotionally charged arenas where pre-migration expectations met post-migration realities. While participants anticipated that Canada would be expensive, the scale, instability, and psychological effects of housing precarity often exceeded expectations, shaping settlement strategies and longer-term aspirations. Housing was not a background issue but a central organizing force in post-migration life, closely intertwined with labour market insecurity and wellbeing.

Participants consistently described high rents, limited availability, and intense competition—particularly in the Greater Toronto Area. Many spent a disproportionate share of income on housing while navigating unstable employment. As Rehana explained, “I knew rent would be high, but it was unimaginably expensive.” Rapid depletion of pre-migration savings heightened vulnerability, especially for students and those on temporary permits, who often remained in shared, basement, or short-term housing far longer than anticipated.

Some participants also encountered housing fraud and exploitation, experiences that deeply undermined trust in the rental market. Papiya described paying rent for an apartment she was ultimately unable to access, forcing her into short-term accommodation and prolonged insecurity. Limited familiarity with tenant rights and local rental practices further increased newcomers’

vulnerability in tight housing markets, making housing precarity both a financial and institutional challenge.

In response, many participants engaged in geographic recalibration, prioritizing affordability over proximity to work or social networks. Moves from central Toronto to peripheral regions were described as necessary compromises rather than preferred choices. Selim explained, “Housing pushed me east. It wasn’t ideal, but it was necessary.” Such moves reduced costs but often increased commuting burdens and social isolation.

Housing pressures also reshaped long-term settlement imaginaries. Expectations of homeownership were widely reassessed amid job insecurity and high prices. As Rumana noted, “The idea of a 25-year mortgage feels scary when jobs are so unstable.” For some, these pressures prompted consideration of onward or return migration later in life.

Overall, housing and cost-of-living constraints reshaped economic security, emotional wellbeing, and spatial belonging. Rather than negating migration decisions, these challenges led to revised timelines, strategic compromises, and recalibrated definitions of success, positioning housing as a central axis of post-migration adjustment.

6.3 Health and Healthcare Services

Health and healthcare experiences were a key domain in which pre-migration expectations were reconfigured after arrival. While access to “better healthcare” was a common migration motivation, participants’ encounters with Canada’s healthcare system produced ambivalence rather than unqualified satisfaction. They described a trade-off between improved environmental health and institutional access constraints, reshaping how healthcare was understood and valued.

Many participants—particularly those from Dhaka—reported noticeable improvements in physical health, including fewer respiratory issues, allergies, and recurrent illnesses due to reduced air pollution. Several noted that only after migration did they realize how normalized chronic illness had been in Bangladesh, with broader gains such as better sleep and energy reinforcing a sense of improved wellbeing.

At the same time, participants faced significant challenges navigating Canada’s healthcare system. Long wait times, shortages of family physicians, and complex referral processes contrasted sharply with expectations of timely care. These experiences complicated assumptions that universal coverage ensures accessibility. In comparison, healthcare in Bangladesh—though costly—was often perceived as faster and more responsive for those who could afford it. As Reham summarized, care in Canada was “better in principle, but harder in practice.”

Mental health concerns also featured prominently, though often indirectly. Participants described stress and emotional exhaustion linked to employment uncertainty, housing precarity, social isolation, and seasonal factors such as reduced daylight. While some accessed counselling or settlement-based services, others cited stigma or uncertainty around seeking support.

Overall, healthcare emerged as a site of expectation recalibration. Environmental improvements enhanced physical health, while institutional constraints complicated access to care. These experiences highlight healthcare not simply as a service domain, but as a central arena of post-

migration adjustment where migrants renegotiate understandings of care, entitlement, and wellbeing.

6.4 Social Integration, Identity, and Belonging

Post-migration social integration emerged as one of the most emotionally consequential and least predictable dimensions of settlement. While participants anticipated greater personal freedom and reduced social surveillance compared to life in Bangladesh, they often encountered new forms of isolation, relational loss, and identity disruption that complicated their sense of belonging. Belonging was not understood as an automatic outcome of legal status, but as a gradual and uneven process shaped by time, stability, and everyday social practices (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Ager & Strang, 2008).

A recurring theme was the loss of dense, informal social networks that had structured everyday life in Bangladesh. Participants contrasted spontaneous interactions at home with the planned and time-constrained nature of social life in Canada. As Reena noted, “In Bangladesh, you never had to plan to see people. Here, everything needs a calendar.” This shift contributed to prolonged loneliness, particularly when combined with labour market uncertainty and housing precarity.

Canadian social norms were described as polite but individualized, requiring sustained effort to initiate and maintain relationships. While some participants valued reduced judgement and clearer boundaries, others found the emotional labour of constant initiation exhausting. As Selim explained, “People are friendly, but you have to make the first move—again and again.” At the same time, strong transnational ties with family and friends in Bangladesh provided emotional support but also reinforced feelings of distance, highlighting the dual role of transnationalism in both alleviating and sustaining isolation.

Participants also described ongoing identity renegotiation, particularly among those who had held respected positions prior to migration. Limited recognition of credentials contributed to status loss and dissonance between self-perception and external validation. Over time, some redefined success in terms of resilience and long-term stability rather than immediate professional recognition. Gender further shaped these experiences, with women bearing disproportionate emotional labour during settlement, reflecting the transformation rather than disappearance of gendered responsibilities.

Experiences within Bangladeshi communities were mixed, offering both support and the reproduction of familiar social pressures. Overall, social integration revealed a central paradox: migration reduced social surveillance while introducing loneliness, identity disruption, and emotional labour. Belonging thus emerged as a fragile, relational, and evolving process shaped by structural conditions and everyday practices.

6.5 Safety and Urban Experiences

Safety emerged as a complex and ambivalent dimension of post-migration life. While participants associated migration to Canada with greater personal security and freedom of movement, post-arrival experiences revealed new forms of risk, uncertainty, and vigilance—particularly in urban public spaces. Rather than replacing insecurity with safety, migration reshaped how risk was

perceived and managed, underscoring the relational and context-dependent nature of safety (Pain, 2001; Day, 2009).

Prior to migration, Canada was imagined as governed by rule of law and institutional protection, in contrast to everyday life in Bangladesh where safety—especially for women—required constant planning. As Rumana noted, it was not about daily danger but “always thinking—should I go, how will I go, who will be there.” Migration was thus associated with mental ease and unconditional mobility.

After arrival, however, participants encountered unfamiliar forms of urban disorder, including homelessness, visible mental health crises, and substance use in public spaces. These experiences prompted new forms of alertness and adaptive behaviour, shaping route choices, travel times, and use of public space. As Reena explained, “You don’t know how someone will react. That uncertainty stays with you.”

Gender shaped these reassessments. Women described relief from harassment and moral policing in Bangladesh alongside heightened vigilance in unfamiliar urban environments, reflecting a shift from fear of social judgment to situational uncertainty. Migration thus reconfigured, rather than eliminated, the geography of fear.

Despite these challenges, participants overwhelmingly viewed Canada as safer in comparative terms, emphasizing institutional reliability and access to legal recourse. As Javed noted, “There are problems here, but there is still a system.” Over time, safety was learned through experience, as participants developed routines and strategies for navigating urban environments. Spatial differences also mattered, with suburban and smaller-city contexts often perceived as safer than downtown areas. Overall, safety emerged as an ongoing process of adjustment and negotiation, challenging binary assumptions of absolute security and highlighting migrants’ adaptive strategies in complex urban contexts.

7. Expectation–Reality Gap and Post-Migration Recalibration

Across interviews, participants articulated a pronounced and recurring gap between pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities. However, this gap did not translate into regret or rejection of migration. Rather, it unfolded as a process of reassessment and recalibration, through which participants actively reinterpreted their aspirations in light of new institutional, social, and economic contexts. Migration drivers did not disappear upon arrival; instead, they were reconfigured, often producing outcomes that diverged from initial expectations while still sustaining long-term goals. Participants learned to hold these tensions simultaneously—recognizing both expanded opportunities and new constraints—while maintaining a forward-looking orientation.

Themes	As a Driver (Pre-Migration)	As an Experience (Post-Migration)	Re-Calibration
Economy	Hope for stability and advancement	Precarity Underemployment Delayed mobility	Incremental trajectories Cumulative success
Education	Pathway to recognition and mobility	Credential discounting Institutional challenge	Credential upgrading Value of PR and citizenship
Healthcare	Expectation of better access	Long wait times System navigation	Emphasis on the quality of healthcare
Social & Cultural	Escape from surveillance and pressure	Loneliness Emotional isolation	Slow development of networks
Safety	Expectation of greater personal security and freedom of movement	Feelings of risks Lack of security in urban space	Trust in institutions Legal recourse Procedural response

Importantly, this expectation–reality gap was not episodic or individualized, but patterned and structural. Participants consistently encountered the same domains that had motivated migration—economic opportunity, education, healthcare, social freedom, and safety—but in altered forms. As summarized in Table 1, aspirational drivers were not negated but reshaped through lived experience. Economic aspirations, for instance, shifted from expectations of immediate stability to acceptance of incremental and cumulative career trajectories. Similarly, education remained central, but its meaning evolved from a pathway to recognition into a longer process of credential upgrading and strategic navigation. Across domains, post-migration experiences introduced friction, but also new forms of understanding and adaptation.

Participants' narratives underscore that migration is best understood not as a rupture between a clearly bounded “before” and “after,” but as a continuum in which motivations are continually reworked. Education, initially framed as a pathway to mobility, became a site of institutional barriers, yet also a space for strategic investment. Social freedom, while achieved in terms of autonomy, was accompanied by loneliness, prompting gradual efforts to rebuild networks. Healthcare, though marked by long wait times and procedural complexity, was ultimately revalued for its quality. Safety, initially imagined as the absence of risk, came to be understood in relational terms—anchored in trust in institutions, legal recourse, and procedural protections. These shifts illustrate how migration drivers persist beyond arrival, acquiring new meanings through everyday engagement with settlement contexts (Carling & Schewel, 2017; Van Hear et al., 2018).

In response, participants engaged in an active and ongoing process of recalibration—adjusting expectations, timelines, and strategies while sustaining their broader aspirations. Rather than abandoning their goals, they redefined success in more gradual and achievable terms. Career mobility was reframed as a long-term, cumulative process built through persistence, credential upgrading, and local experience. Importantly, success was also reoriented beyond individual achievement toward longer-term family wellbeing, including the prospect of better opportunities for children and overall family stability. As Nurul noted, settlement was less about immediate outcomes than about the capacity to endure and progress over time. This recalibration reflects not resignation, but agency—an adaptive strategy that allows migrants to navigate constraints while maintaining hope for future mobility.

Crucially, recalibration extended beyond economic outcomes. Participants emphasized gains in personal autonomy, freedom from social surveillance, institutional predictability, and relative safety as meaningful achievements. These gains enabled them to sustain a sense of progress even amid ongoing precarity. Hope was not tied to immediate success, but to the expectation of eventual stability, often linked to permanent residency or citizenship. Temporal reorientation—separating present challenges from anticipated future outcomes—was central to this process.

Migration was thus reimagined as an open-ended and iterative project rather than a linear transition. Participants remained pragmatic and future-oriented, with some expressing openness to onward mobility in response to changing opportunities. At the same time, interest in permanent return to Bangladesh declined, with return framed primarily as temporary or situational. Citizenship emerged as a key marker of long-term security—not only as a symbol of belonging, but as a resource enabling mobility and flexibility in an uncertain global context.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that migration drivers do not end at departure or arrival; they evolve through ongoing engagement with structural conditions and lived realities. By foregrounding migrants' agency, adaptability, and sustained hope, this study highlights migration as a dynamic, iterative process shaped by both constraints and possibilities. This challenges static models of migration and calls for greater attention to how aspirations are maintained, redefined, and enacted over time (De Haas, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This study examined the migration drivers and post-migration experiences of Bangladeshi migrants who arrived in Canada after January 2019, highlighting migration as a multi-phase and adaptive process rather than a single decision or linear transition. The findings show that migration was rarely driven by immediate economic deprivation. Instead, aspirational drivers—particularly career mobility, education, and institutional predictability—motivated migration decisions, while reinforcing factors including politicized advancement, governance fatigue, environmental and health pressures, and cumulative social constraints amplified these aspirations and made migration appear both necessary and feasible.

Education played a central role in translating aspiration into mobility. Higher education obtained in Bangladesh and Canada functioned not only as human capital but also as migration infrastructure, enabling eligibility under points-based systems and access to legal status. At the same time, post-migration experiences revealed significant gaps between expectations and realities, particularly as foreign credentials were discounted in the Canadian labour market. These patterns align with broader evidence on the racialized nature of labour market integration in Canada, where visible minority immigrants experience differential returns to education (Akbar, 2025; Akbar & Triandafyllidou, 2025). Although not always explicitly articulated by participants, structural forms of discrimination shape access to employment, recognition, and mobility, reinforcing inequalities despite high levels of human capital. Similar reconfigurations were evident across other domains: aspirations for merit-based opportunity encountered labour market precarity and prolonged underemployment; expectations of social freedom were accompanied by loneliness and identity disruption; and anticipated access to superior healthcare required sustained navigation within complex systems.

Importantly, migration drivers did not disappear after arrival but were reworked through new institutional, social, and economic contexts. Participants actively recalibrated goals, timelines, and

definitions of success, shifting from expectations of rapid professional continuity toward longer, incremental trajectories shaped by credential upgrading, local experience, and network-building. This recalibration reflects not resignation but agency, as migrants adapted to constraints while sustaining long-term aspirations. Success was increasingly defined in multidimensional terms, including autonomy, safety, institutional predictability, and dignity alongside economic stability, underscoring migration as a process of continuous negotiation.

A key insight from this study is that migration was understood as open-ended rather than terminal. Canada was rarely framed as a final endpoint; instead, migrants expressed openness to onward mobility and limited interest in permanent return to Bangladesh, even as emotional and familial ties remained strong. Within this context, citizenship was valued less as a marker of belonging than as a form of mobility security, enabling flexibility and reducing vulnerability in an uncertain global landscape.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of centring migrant narratives to capture migration as it is lived—marked by aspiration and ambivalence, opportunity and constraint, and ongoing recalibration. Recognizing migration as an iterative and processual phenomenon is essential for developing migration and settlement policies that reflect migrants' agency and their actual trajectories rather than idealized or linear models of integration.

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