Turkmenistan's migration policies: Reshaping economy and society

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Abstract

Turkmenistan's migration regime has produced a paradox.

The state depends on outmigration. Remittances have become a de facto welfare system, sustaining household consumption amid inflation and limited state support, masking structural weaknesses and reducing pressure for economic reform.

And yet, the state restricts outmigration, tightening controls via passport delays and opaque administrative rules, pushing migrants toward irregular routes.

How does a state simultaneously depend on and obstruct the thing it depends on?

This brief argues that the answer lies in part in who, under these conditions, ends up migrating. As men face heightened scrutiny at borders and in consular processes, women are increasingly becoming primary earners, sustaining families through remittances and building their own lives abroad. Their earnings and transnational networks have become central to family survival, even as female migrants face heightened vulnerability due to legal precarity and social stigma.

The feminization of migration is not a separate phenomenon running alongside remittance dependence and exit controls. It is what those two forces, in tension with each other, have produced. Understanding how this dynamic has unfolded is essential for designing realistic policies on social protection, labor mobility, and regional migration governance.

01 The Migration Trap

Since independence in 1991, Turkmenistan may have lost close to a third of its population to outmigration.

One estimate puts the figure at 29% between 1991 and 2017. Separate reporting suggests that 1.9 million Turkmens emigrated between 2008 and 2018. Around 110,000 departures were recorded in 2019 alone, by another reckoning.

Precision is elusive: Turkmenistan is one of the world's most opaque states, and its demographic data is contested at best.

Most Turkmens migrate in search of higher earnings and better working conditions, amid persistent unemployment at home. Limited educational opportunities and restricted political freedoms have further pushed young people to leave. These pressures have also reshaped who migrates: in recent years, more young women have left independently, a shift linked to gendered inequalities at home and demand for care and domestic work abroad.

Turkey has emerged as the primary destination for Turkmen migrants. Visa-free access (until recently), linguistic and cultural proximity, and well-established migration networks have all made it the obvious choice. The scale is notable. Between 2019 and 2022, Turkmen citizens accounted for 13.8% of all foreign residents in Turkey, including 124,478 with permanent residency, 102,344 on student permits, and 4,913 on family permits. Given Turkmenistan’s official population of around 7 million (a figure widely disputed) this suggests a substantial share of the country’s citizens are now living in Turkey.

Russia remains another significant destination, particularly for students. Applications from Turkmen students rose from 22,401 in 2016 to a peak of 49,444 in 2019. But since 2022, migration patterns have begun to shift. Following the end of visa-free travel to Turkey in 2022 and the disruption caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Belarus has emerged as an alternative destination for labor migrants. Around 16,300 Turkmen nationals entered the country in 2024.

Meanwhile, intra-regional student mobility has grown, though on a smaller scale. In Uzbekistan, Turkmen students formed the second-largest group of international students, with 1,430 enrolled in the 2024-2025 academic year. Kazakhstan has also seen an uptick: 9,510 Turkmen nationals entered in the first quarter of 2025, and 11,641 held valid visas overall, making them the second-largest group of visa holders.

Turkmen students are also present in Malaysia, particularly in engineering and petroleum programs, while Vietnam has emerged as a smaller destination for Turkmen educators.

While geopolitics and the COVID-19 pandemic may have disrupted migration flows, the underlying drivers and main destinations have remained largely unchanged. The composition of migration has shifted, however. Women now make up a slight majority of Turkmen migrants (52.3%), a gap that has widened modestly over time.

But leaving Turkmenistan is as complicated as ever. Prospective migrants must navigate a complex set of formal requirements, including passports, visas, invitation letters, and proof of funds, alongside informal costs such as bribes. These barriers make exit both time-consuming and expensive.

02 Exporting Labor, Importing Stability

On paper, Turkmenistan looks like an outlier in the region. In nearby Tajikistan, remittances accounted for 47.9% of gross domestic product in 2024, making it the most remittance-dependent economy in the world. Kyrgyzstan (17.7%) and Uzbekistan (14.4%) also rely heavily on inflows from abroad. Resource-rich Kazakhstan sits at the other end of the spectrum at just 0.1%.

By contrast, the available data for Turkmenistan suggest almost no dependence at all. The only World Bank figure puts remittances at 0.2% of GDP in 1996, while other estimates suggest they fluctuated between 0.18% and 0.01% of GDP between 2000 and 2018. Official data are similarly sparse: just $1 million was recorded as entering Turkmenistan from Russia in 2021.

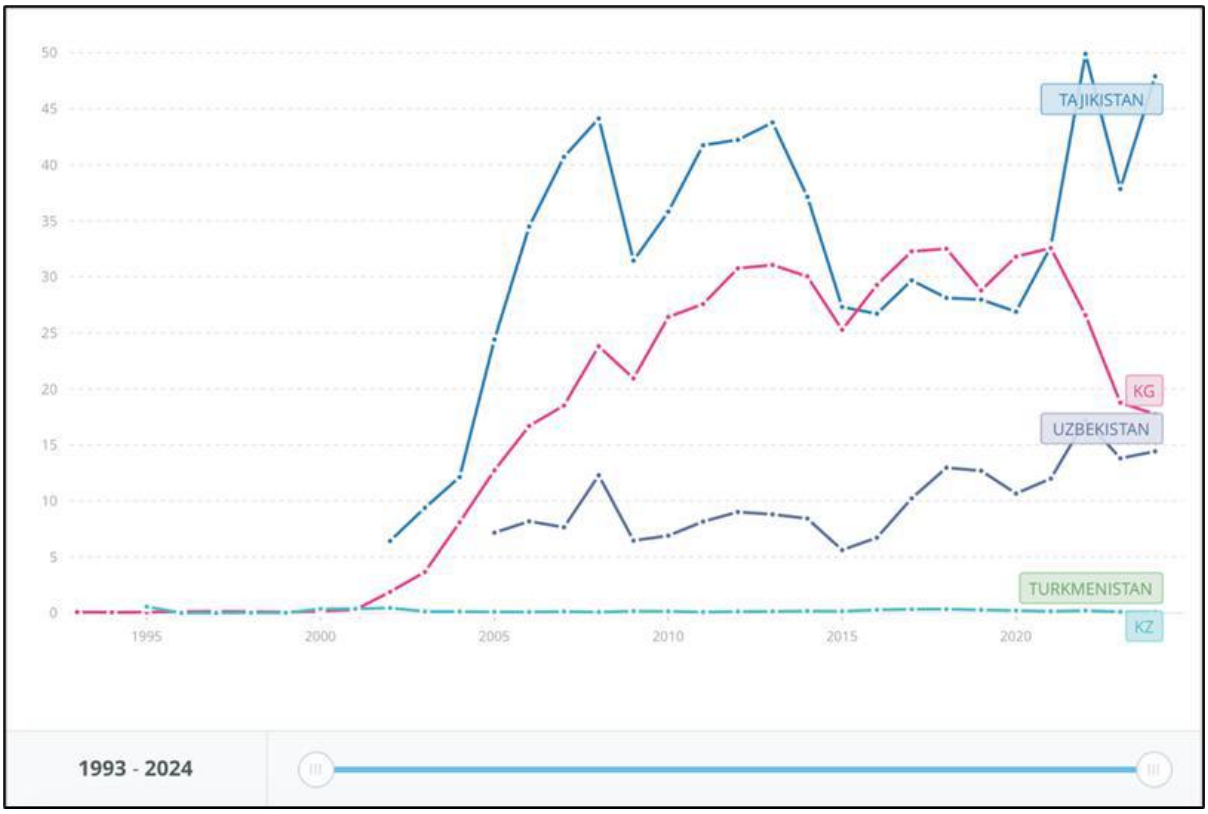

Figure 1. Personal remittances received as % of GDP in Central Asia.

Taken at face value, these figures would suggest that remittances play a negligible role in the economy. In reality, they say more about the limits of the data than the scale of the flows.

Most remittances to Turkmenistan never pass through formal, traceable channels. Instead, they move through informal networks similar to hawala, where money is transferred via trusted intermediaries without physically crossing borders, are carried in cash, or are routed through accounts in third countries, such as Russia or Turkey. Because these transactions bypass the banking system, they are largely invisible to official statistics.

The country's exchange rate system reinforces this opacity. Since 2015, the official rate has been fixed at 3.5 manat to the U.S. dollar, but in practice very few people can obtain foreign currency at that price. A parallel market has emerged instead, where the dollar has traded at far higher levels; around 9 manat in 2017, 15 in 2019, and as high as 40 in 2022. Access to dollars at the official rate is tightly restricted, limited to a small number of approved uses and capped amounts.

The result is straightforward. Households and small businesses rely on the informal market, where remitted dollars can be exchanged at a much higher rate. This sharply increases their real value on arrival and makes them central to everyday consumption. Turkmenistan may not appear remittance-dependent in macroeconomic terms, but at the household level, these flows are often indispensable.

Despite the lack of reliable data, remittances are central to household survival in Turkmenistan, routinely offsetting low wages and limited state support. What matters here is not just their scale, but their political function. The government does not acknowledge this dependence. Instead, outward migration effectively substitutes for domestic reform: it shifts unemployment abroad, eases pressure on the welfare system and helps sustain consumption at home.

03 Governing Through Exit Restrictions

Turkmenistan is not, on paper, opposed to migration. In practice, it has built an elaborate architecture of impediments to it.

Before the pandemic, departure was often straightforward. Students needed little more than a university invitation letter. Travel to Türkiye required no documentation at all, just a $25 fee paid on arrival.

Since that time, the system has become far more restrictive and unevenly applied. Exit is neither fully open nor fully closed, but is instead selectively managed, filtered, and often monetized.

Three overlapping logics underpin this system: (1) political filtering, which blocks or deters individuals deemed undesirable; (2) administrative control, which makes exit discretionary through opaque and burdensome procedures; and (3) financial extraction, which raises the cost of leaving and channels resources from those who do so. Together, these mechanisms shape who is able to migrate, under what conditions, and at what price.

Exit controls, arbitrary travel bans, and the blacklisting of individuals perceived as politically undesirable are not a recent innovation. They have been a constant feature of Turkmen governance since independence, across all three of the presidents the country has ever had.

The first group includes political figures, journalists, and other individuals perceived as a political threat, who are affected disproportionately and are systematically prevented from leaving the country. In 2023, Turkmen photojournalist and Geneva for Human Rights Award nominee Soltan Achilova and her family were barred from traveling abroad. Two years later, journalist Nurgeldy Halykov faced similar restrictions. These restrictions also extend to the Turkmenistan-based family members of activists and politicians in exile.

The Turkmen government has over a number of years published “a list of "acceptable" foreign universities. Universities suspected of promoting liberal ideas, or views deemed suspicious by Turkmen authorities, have been blacklisted, with students enrolled in them facing exit restrictions. In 2009, such measures targeted Turkmen students enrolled at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Kyrgyzstan and the American University in Bulgaria, who were prohibited from traveling back after summer holidays. The policy disrupted the education of an estimated 1,500 students and placed many on travel blacklists, restricting their mobility for up to seven years.

Exit restrictions are often introduced arbitrarily. In December 2022, Turkmen students were reportedly barred *en masse* from departing Ashgabat International Airport in the months preceding the national census, at a moment when the government was acutely sensitive to emerging evidence of population decline. Since the cancellation of the visa-free regime with Türkiye, approximately 60 Turkish spouses have been separated from their Turkmen partners, as Turkmen citizens returning home to renew passports have subsequently been subjected to three-to-five-year travel bans.

Overall, it is reported that since 2010, 37,057 Turkmen citizens have been barred from leaving the country.

Exit as Economic Control

Although domestic legislation permits Turkmen citizens permanently residing abroad to obtain or renew international passports through diplomatic missions, consular authorities routinely refuse such applications. This compels citizens to return to Turkmenistan and undergo lengthy and costly procedures. Turkmens this forced to return to their country do so only to face a new set of restrictions.

The financial burden of exit further illustrates the coercive nature of the system. Reports indicate that some Turkmen citizens have paid between $2,000 and $5,000 to migration officials at airports to secure permission to leave, a striking sum in a country where the official minimum monthly wage is 1,280 manat (around $65 at the black-market rate).

This creates a basic constraint. The ability to leave often depends on access to foreign currency or external support, which many households obtain through remittances. In effect, those seeking to migrate may need to draw on money earned abroad to finance their departure. Exit, in this sense, is not only restricted but conditional on prior access to the very system it sustains.

For outside observers, these layers of paperwork and procedure can appear as routine bureaucracy. In practice, they operate as a system of control. Formal requirements (passports, invitation letters, visas, return tickets, and proof of funds) sit alongside informal practices (arbitrary travel bans, blacklists, and payments to officials). Together, they serve a dual political function: restricting the exit of individuals deemed undesirable, while allowing enough migration to continue to sustain remittance-based household survival.

A benevolent reading of all this might conclude that it is simply the work of a poorly run state that cannot get its paperwork together. But the chaos is functional. The state does not want to stop migration entirely; it needs the remittances.

What it wants is control over who leaves, when, and on what terms. By making exit discretionary rather than impossible, it can block those it deems undesirable while allowing enough migration to continue that remittances keep flowing. The dysfunction is the design.

04 The Feminization of Turkmen Migration

The design of this system has had consequences that may not have been entirely intended, and that are beginning to reshape Turkmen social norms in potentially far-reaching ways.

Women now make up a growing share, and in some cases a majority, of Turkmen migrants, a trend most visible in Türkiye, where they are concentrated in domestic work, care labor, and service-sector employment. In Türkiye specifically, women represented 47.3% of Turkmen migrants in 2019, rising to 53.3% in 2024. This pattern is not confined to a single destination. Women have consistently constituted more than half of Turkmen migrants to Russia since the 1990s, suggesting a broader structural shift in migration dynamics.

The feminization of migration is driven by a set of persistent push factors within Turkmenistan itself.

According to Progres, a Turkmen-run non-profit organization, women remain underrepresented in political leadership, holding only 24.8% of seats in the lower and 27% in the upper chambers of parliament. At the same time, they are overrepresented in some of the most exploitative sectors of the economy: they constitute 90% of cotton pickers, of whom 78.4% lack legal documentation and face poor working conditions and nutrition. Across low-paid sectors such as education, services, and agriculture, a gender pay gap of 23% persists in favor of men.

Gender-based violence further shapes migration decisions. One in four women in Turkmenistan has experienced harassment at home or in public, while 65% of victims justify abuse due to entrenched social norms, limited institutional protection, and distrust in authorities.

The picture that emerges is its own paradox. The marginalization of women within Turkmen society is simultaneously driving their economic empowerment abroad, albeit at the cost of family separation and confinement to lower-tier professional sectors.

New Gendered Migration Patterns

Destination-specific factors reinforce this trend. Reports suggest that Turkish employers are more responsive to women's needs than their domestic counterparts, helping explain why Türkiye has become a primary destination for both labor migrants and asylum seekers.

Between 2001 and 2019, Progres recorded 1,847 Turkmen women and 929 men seeking asylum in Türkiye, alongside 1,677 women and 290 men in Germany. Despite the depreciation of the Turkish lira, Türkiye remains particularly attractive due to linguistic familiarity, established networks, relatively accessible labor markets, and comparatively safe migration pathways.

The feminization of migration is neither new nor unique to Turkmenistan, but its scale and drivers reflect distinct domestic dynamics. Increasingly, Turkmen women migrate independently rather than for family reunification. In fact, Le Goff highlights female migrants from East and Central Asia, particularly Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, has outnumbered their male counterparts in OECD countries as early as in the mid-2010s.

These female migrants are more likely to stay abroad long-term or permanently according to recent scholarly findings. In practice, this shifts household dynamics by altering traditional caregiving roles, creates 'mobility orphans' (children left behind), and makes women crucial remittance senders. Given that roughly 20% of young women and 56% of young mothers aged 18-22 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), this creates a strong impetus to look for opportunities elsewhere. While

Turkmen society is patriarchal, the Turkmen government has historically restricted the exit of men at various times, leaving families with few options.

This shift is not only a conscious decision but also an emergent pattern, shaped by labor-market demands abroad and by the state's own stance toward women's mobility; one that is, in practice, more permissive than its treatment of men.

The contrast is the sharpest in the military. As reported in 2025 by Amsterdam-based outlet Turkmen.News, Turkmenistan's Defense Minister has for several years withheld passports from officers and sergeants seeking to resign, effectively trapping them in service. Without a passport, a person cannot legally work, apply for visas, or leave the country. As men face this kind of heightened scrutiny at border crossings and in consular processes, women have greater freedom of movement and increasingly become the primary earners sustaining their families through remittances and building their own lives abroad.

These patterns are reshaping Turkmenistan's demographic landscape. As more Turkmen women choose foreign spouses abroad, the domestic population is being altered in both home and host states. For example, Turkmen women hold 18,432 family-residence permits in Turkey, second only to Uzbek women, while Turkmen citizens hold the highest permanent residence permits, reaching 184,229 in 2026. When placed against independent estimates that Turkmen population may be as low as 2.5 million, the concertation of such a large share of Turkmen long-term residents in a single country underscores the demographic, social and political significance of Turkmen migration patterns.

At the same time, independent migration exposes women to heightened risks, including legal insecurity, economic vulnerability, and the threat of human trafficking.

Turkmenistan is, in this respect, among the worst offenders in Central Asia. According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, it acts as both a source and destination country for trafficking and modern slavery. Turkmen women are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked abroad for sexual exploitation, while the broader pattern of labor migration into sectors like agriculture and domestic work creates further exposure to forced labor conditions.

This is not incidental to the migration trap described in this brief, it is one of its most acute consequences.

The Signpost

The maze described in this paper is not without exits, but any reforms that would meaningfully benefit ordinary Turkmen citizens require buy-in from a state that has shown limited inclination to provide it. The recommendations that follow are therefore framed with that constraint in mind. Each is designed not only to improve outcomes for migrants and their families, but to offer tangible benefits to the Turkmen economy and, by extension, to the state itself. The case for reform is not purely humanitarian; it is also fiscal and strategic.

Visa regime reforms, drawing on examples from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan where visa-free arrangements have been implemented, could reduce irregular mobility and ease the administrative burden on Turkmen citizens seeking education, work, or family reunification abroad. Crucially, regularizing mobility would also serve the interest of the Turkmen state: formal channels of movement make remittance flows more transparent, more easily monitored, and therefore more readily taxable. This offers the government a predictable source of foreign currency at a time when economic diversification remains limited. In this sense, easing mobility is not merely a humanitarian or administrative reform but a fiscally rational strategy that aligns migrant wellbeing with state revenue generation.

Remittance facilitation mechanisms, modelled on Kyrgyzstan's partnerships with money-transfer operators such as Zolotaya Korona, Contact, and Western Union, would allow households to receive funds through safer, more transparent channels, and would begin to close the gap between the official and parallel exchange rates that currently distorts the economy.

Bilateral or regional labor-mobility agreements, including seasonal work schemes or mutual recognition of skills such as Kazakhstan's Employment Permit System, the

Uzbekistan-Türkiye Agreement on Protection of Migrant Workers, or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) labor mobility scheme for Kazakh and Kyrgyz citizens, could provide regulated pathways that reduce reliance on intermediaries and mitigate exploitation.

Social-protection measures for families of migrants, such as targeted subsidies, childcare support, or access to legal aid (as exemplified by Tajikistan's Migrant Resource Centers and Kyrgyzstan's Support for Children of Migrants initiatives) would strengthen household resilience and reduce the vulnerabilities created by informal remittance dependence.

Finally, the international community has a distinct responsibility with regard to Turkmen female migrants.

As this paper has shown, women now bear a disproportionate share of the migration system's risks: legal insecurity, economic precarity, and acute vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. Host countries, regional bodies, and international organizations should calibrate their policy positions, accordingly, extending specific protections to Turkmen women in irregular or informal employment and ensuring that asylum and residency processes are responsive to the particular circumstances female migrants face.

Ultimately, addressing Turkmenistan's migration trap requires recognizing migration not as a threat but as a structural component of the country's political economy, one whose costs are currently borne overwhelmingly by the migrants themselves.
