

How many Kulsums have to die!

SHARIFUL HASAN

ACCORDING to her primary education certificate, Umme Kulsum was only 14-years-old. But to send her to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker, her passport falsely portrayed her as 25—since that is the minimum age for women to go as labour workers to Saudi Arabia. But the dream that the middleman had sold to Kulsum's family was broken within a year and a half when she returned to her family as a corpse.

Kulsum died on August 9 this year while undergoing treatment at the King Faisal Hospital in Saudi Arabia. Her lifeless body arrived in the country on September 12. The family claimed that her employer and his son had beaten Kulsum, breaking her legs and arms, as well as injuring her waist. Her eye was also damaged. Merciless as they were, she was left on the street in this miserable condition. Later, Saudi police rescued her and took her to the hospital where she died after a few months.

Kulsum is the daughter of Shahidul Islam and Nasima Begum of Nurpur village in Gokarna union of Nasirnagar Upazila of Brahmanbaria. In 2017, Kulsum sat for her final examination of primary education from Nurpur Lahajura Government Primary School. According to the certificate, her date of birth is December 24, 2006. The family also confirmed that the girl was born in 2006. But the date of birth mentioned in her passport is March 13, 1993.

Her family is saying that the agency and the broker made the passport using the birth certificate issued by the chairman of the local union council which mentions her year of birth as 1993.

The family also mentioned that on April 7, 2018, Kulsum was sent to Saudi Arabia by the agency MH Trade International of Fakirapal, with the help of local middleman Razzak. But after moving there, the employer used to physically abuse the teenaged Kulsum. The family informed the local broker Razzak, but he did not take any action. Even the police weren't helpful when the family visited them again and again for assistance.

On August 18, the family lodged a complaint to the Director-General of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in Dhaka. In the complaint,

the family claimed that Kulsum was a victim of physical and mental abuse. The agency did not respond to the repeated calls to bring her back to her family. One day, the family received the news that her employer and his son had beaten her in April, breaking her legs, arms and waist, leaving her on the street with one eye damaged. Three months later, on August 9, Kulsum died at King Faisal Hospital in Saudi Arabia. The family requested that her body be sent back home.

Kulsum's family finally got to see her on September 12, but as a lifeless body. The anticipation of her parents of meeting their daughter after so long turned into a pit of sorrow. Their wait was finally over but their tears will continue to be shed, remembering their lively, smiling daughter, Kulsum.

Kulsum's mother Nasima Begum told the media in a teary voice that they were informed one afternoon during Ramadan over the phone that the girl was in the hospital. They then learned that the owner had beaten her for not agreeing to his inappropriate advances. They last talked to Kulsum while she was in the hospital the day after Eid-ul-Adha. Unfortunately, Kulsum could not recognise anyone in the family or respond to anyone's queries.

After the news of Kulsum was published in the media, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested two people, including the recruiting agency owner from Dhaka's Fakirapal area in connection with the death of Kulsum. The police said, even though the minimum legal age for a female migrant worker was 25, the agency hid her age and sent her to work abroad. Hence, they will file a charge against the agency for human trafficking, under the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, for knowingly sending a minor girl to be exploited. But what will happen to the Saudi employers? Will they remain out of reach?

Of course, Kulsum is not the only one! According to the Expatriate Welfare Desk at the airport, 410 women who went to work in different countries in the last four years from 2016 to 2019 have returned home in a shroud. Among them, 153 women lost their lives in Saudi Arabia alone. In addition, 64 died in Jordan, 52 in Lebanon, 36 in Oman, 23 in Dubai, 20 in Kuwait and 60 in other countries.

Out of these 410 people, 67 have died by suicide. In Saudi Arabia alone, 39 people died by suicide. In addition to the suicides, 69 women have died in accidents in the last four years of whom 29 have died in Saudi Arabia.

Families say every death is a mystery. Begum is only an example. She went to Saudi Arabia in April 2019 through a recruiting agency. But no one knows the mystery of her death in Egypt.

According to the Bangladesh embassy in Egypt, a female domestic worker named Mosammat Begum died after falling from the rooftop of a five-storey building on May 29,

is around three lakh, went to Saudi Arabia. To evade poverty and unemployment, many women migrate to the Middle East, especially to Saudi Arabia. Many of them returned because of reasons like physical torture, sexual abuse, and irregularities in the payment of their wages.

Although there is no actual report of how many women have come back from KSA, according to the embassy and various media reports of the last five years, the number is more than 10,000. Many more are reportedly waiting to return at the safe homes and immigration camps in KSA with already

Ministry of Labour arrived in Dhaka, where Bangladesh signed an agreement to send women. After that agreement, 21,000 women workers went in 2015, 68,000 in 2016, 83,000 in 2017, 83,000 in 2018 and in 2019, it was 72,000. How were they doing in Saudi Arabia? Just listen to these stories...

A woman from Kurigram went to Saudi Arabia in the hope of prosperity for her family and was raped by her employer and became pregnant. She later fled to the Bangladesh embassy in Riyadh to save her life. She eventually came back to the country two months later.

On her return, a woman from North Badda in Dhaka said that the men of the house where she worked used to physically abuse and sexually harass her. When she protested, her hair was pulled out. A girl from Manikganj said she used to work in the Bani Yasar area of Saudi Arabia. She jumped from the rooftop of the four-storey house due to torture. Later, she found herself in the ICU of a hospital. A woman from Cumilla was tortured and needed 14 stitches on her head.

Last year, Sumi Akhter's video from Saudi Arabia went viral, urging and pleading everyone to save her life. She was later rescued and brought back to the country.

Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) sent a report to the parliamentary standing committee in August last year. The report said that they had talked to about 110 female domestic workers who returned from Saudi Arabia and 35 percent of them returned home after being physically and sexually abused. Forty-four percent of these women were not paid regularly.

Sometimes officials say that 300,000 women went to Saudi Arabia and less than 10,000 returned which is not a big percentage. The rest must be living in better conditions. But that is unknown to us. And the fact remains that more than 153 women have died. Why has there been no justice even in a single case? Why hasn't a single perpetrator been punished? Isn't there any value of Kulsum's life? How many more Kulsums need to die to get justice and stop this culture of modern-day slavery?

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2019. Begum's husband Abdul Aziz said he had learned through the union chairman a few days ago that someone called Begum had died in Egypt. But he did not take the matter seriously as his wife was in Saudi Arabia. It was after he got a call from Egypt that he realised it was his wife who had died.

The mystery behind her death was never revealed. But the families who lose their daughters know the pain and that it has no end.

Of course, those who die somehow get saved in one sense, but those who survive have no end to their misery.

According to the BMET, more than eight lakh women went abroad between 1991 to 2019. Of these, the largest number, which

shattered hopes. According to media reports, women from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka who went to Saudi Arabia to work as domestic workers were also subjected to physical and mental abuse. While these countries stopped sending their women as domestic workers, the country became interested in taking female domestic workers from Bangladesh in 2010.

Saudi Arabia said if Bangladesh doesn't send women, they will not open the labour market for men, which was closed from 2009 to 2015.

In 2015, Bangladesh agreed to send women as workers and on February 2015, a 19-member delegation led by Deputy Minister Ahmed Al Fahad of the Saudi

What if a 7.9 Richter-scale earthquake hit Dhaka?

This is a fictional article based on historical facts and analysis

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

THE runway of Dhaka's international airport was torn asunder along the axis. The damage forced all international flights—carrying emergency medical supplies, food, temporary shelters, and heavy-duty rescue machines—to divert to Chittagong and Sylhet. Large cargo helicopters like Chinook airlifted emergency aid to makeshift sites in and around Dhaka. Local and international aid workers laboured round the clock to bring help to as many Dhakaites as possible. But time was running out, as over 2 million people desperately waited for urgent medical care all across the city.

A temporary shelter was created along the entire length of Manik Mia Avenue, where nearly 400,000 people huddled under tarpaulin tents. Yards away from there, a forlorn government official at an emergency kiosk intently listened to a radio. A sombre voice on BBC spoke: "Two days ago the Bangladesh capital Dhaka and its surrounding areas were hit by a seismic Armageddon of magnitude 8.2 on the Madhupur fault. The devastation is incalculable."

CNN reporter Jordan Fitzgerald, along with his local journalist colleague, Raihan Adil, scoured the city by foot, bicycle, and motorbike for a glimpse into what was one of the most devastating earthquakes in modern times.

There were collapsed buildings everywhere, debris-strewn and split city arteries, and decomposing human bodies, making the city unnavigable. Shell-shocked homeless

people squatted on the streets, wailing and crying out for help. The quiet of the city was occasionally perturbed by the shrill siren of ambulances and the thudding noise of drilling machines, trying to reach the dark womb of flattened buildings in search of survivors.

Raihan Adil and Jordan Fitzgerald furiously pedalled their bicycles on their way to old Dhaka, one of the gruesome epicentres of the wreckage. It has been reported that almost 80 percent of old Dhaka's buildings have been levelled. Worse still, the old city's narrow, crooked streets remained mostly inaccessible to any rescue efforts, and injured people perished without any medical help.

Still numb from the jolt 48 hours ago, Raihan dolefully asked his CNN colleague, "Jordan, do you have the latest number of people killed?"

"Well, I only have an unofficial CNN estimate. Approximately 570,000 people have been reported dead or missing so far. Do you know that this is more than the combined human casualty in the two deadliest modern-era earthquakes? The 7.5 quake near Beijing in 1976 killed 240,000. The one in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 2010, had a lower magnitude of 7.0, but it took the lives of about 316,000 people."

"You can never predict things accurately about earthquakes because they are Mother Nature's sheer eccentricities!"

Raihan agreed, "That's true. But I keep thinking about the 1897 Great Assam Earthquake, eight years before the Bengal Partition that put East Bengal and Assam together. That quake had a higher magnitude of 8.7, but it claimed only 1,626 lives."

"Well, you are talking about a region more than a century earlier. But it is a radically different scenario now. The population has increased manifold. Built-up areas spread like an octopus. The rapid urbanisation of mostly

agrarian societies resulted in poorly planned cities, crammed with people and shoddy buildings."

"Yes, you are right. It is now a totally different urban geography. In 1900, Dhaka's population was only a little over 100,000. In 1961, it was around 500,000. Even when the country became independent, Dhaka was a city still with a rural flavour, marked by a sparse population. But within three decades or so the city became a megalopolis, competing with Tokyo, Mexico City, Mumbai, and Karachi! But look at it now. It is like a ghost city. It's worse than a nightmare... But, you know, I saw it all coming..."

Surprised, Jordan asked "How? What do you mean?"

"The city grew too fast too soon and, sadly, there has been very little planning for the seismic menace in Bangladesh. True, earthquakes are one of nature's compositional irrationalities, inexplicably embedded in the DNA of the planet. You can't prevent them, but you can surely prepare well to minimise their effects. There was very little effort to shore up critical facilities like hospitals, schools, and airports. There were no concerted national initiatives for the capacity building of earthquake professionals."

Jordan agreed and said, "Yes, you are totally right about pre-planning for earthquakes. Do you remember two recent quakes and their very different results? The most powerful magnitude ever recorded on Earth was 9.5 in the Great Chilean Earthquake in 1960, with its epicentre being 350 miles south of Santiago. Approximately 6,000 people were killed in that quake. But Chile learned a valuable lesson from the jolt. It developed appropriate seismic design codes for new buildings. These codes allowed buildings to endure strong vibrations later on."

As he pointed to collapsed buildings along Nazimuddin Road in old Dhaka, Raihan asked, "Then what happened?"

"Well, there was another strong 8.8 quake in Chile 50 years later, in February 2010. The death toll was only 550. But then compare this earthquake in Chile with a weaker one that devastated Haiti a month earlier, in January of 2010. The Haiti quake's magnitude was 7.0, but it reportedly killed 316,000 people. Why such a discrepancy? Of course, the difference is partly due to the differing distance between the epicentre of two earthquakes and human settlements. But the experts also think that Chile's planning and capacity building for seismic mitigation since 1960 made a huge difference."

"So, the Chileans were better prepared?"

"Yes, on many fronts. Think about this. A building stands up because it has a concrete cage of vertical columns and horizontal beams, all strengthened by steel reinforcements. When there is a strong geologic vibration, the structural members of the cage tend to buckle and collapse. To gird against this seismic threat, the Chileans systematically followed what is known as the 'strong columns weak beams' system."

"What is this system?"

"When an earthquake strikes, according to this system the concrete on the beams should break near the end, dissipating a lot of energy of the quake. But because there is steel reinforcement in the beams, they ultimately survive and columns remain standing up. There may be a bit of damage here and there in the structure, but the building would not collapse to the ground. As for Haiti, the country has a much poorer economy, and the buildings there are built with little regulation, let alone seismic considerations. The stark difference between the devastations of the Chilean and Haitian earthquake in 2010 offers an invaluable lesson."

Raihan nodded approvingly, "See, there have been frequent minor tremors in Bangladesh during the past 10 years. The government has been strengthening building codes based on a revised seismic map. Its disaster agency was even training nearly 75,000 volunteers in earthquake response. There were indeed some efforts."

As they turned a corner in Armanitola, Jordan asked impatiently, "So what happened? Why this massive destruction in Dhaka?"

"I suspect that seismic building codes remained mostly policies on paper. They were not widely adopted or implemented. The government agencies were very poorly equipped to monitor building constructions and assess post-occupancy building performance. Besides, the government had very little control over the private-sector building industry."

Jordan and Raihan reached Babu Bazar. They had to put on masks because the putrid air of ghostlike old Dhaka became unbearable. They now slowly approached Ahsan Manjil. A makeshift hospital has been set up in front of the partially damaged Nawab house. Two Red Cross helicopters just descended there and a foreign medical team hurriedly approached an emergency operation theatre under a large tent.

It was on the bank of River Buriganga that Dhaka began as a modest city centuries ago. Looking at the ruins Raihan wondered whether it would end here too. But he resolved not to give up on his beloved city. In case Dhaka survived this time around, the earthquake should be a solemn reminder for a fresh beginning.

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ACROSS

- 1 Headings
- 6 Fire proof
- 11 Be of use
- 12 Crab's place
- 13 Barista's creation
- 14 Soak
- 15 Series-ending abbr.
- 16 Groom's promise
- 18 Country singer David Allan -
- 19 Slangy denial
- 20 "Vamoosel!"
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- 24 Auction actions
- 25 Overall profit
- 27 Hamster holder

DOWN

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- 38 Nebraska city
- 40 Museum piece
- 42 Biographies
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- 45 Fills completely
- 5 Artifice
- 6 Monastery figure
- 7 Isle surrounder
- 8 Conspirator's activity
- 9 Reverberated
- 10 Thin window curtains
- 17 Chart
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- 24 Sizable
- 26 Colorful sky shows
- 27 Winter airs
- 28 Like some clocks
- 30 Galahad's mother
- 31 Hula and hora
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