

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

High cost of migration and the woes of our workers



THE importance of international migration in Bangladesh can hardly be overemphasised. Bangladeshis constitute the fifth largest migrant community in the world. Migration has consistently remained a key source of foreign exchange (bringing in more than USD 18 billion in 2019) and job creation (employing more than 8 million or roughly 11 percent of the Bangladeshi workforce). It is certainly key to the steady economic growth of the country. Migration is also a viable option for many, especially the underprivileged youth, to change their life trajectory. On average, migrant households earn twice as much as the non-migrant households, a 2010 study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found.

But the cost of migration from Bangladesh is unusually high—it is actually considered one of the highest in the world. It is a long-standing issue. More than a decade ago, a Bangladeshi migrating to the Middle East paid an amount equivalent to USD 3,000 on average, which was two to four times higher than the cost for the migrants in neighbouring countries including India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The situation has barely changed over the years. A male migrant, interviewed by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) for a 2017 study on migration vulnerabilities, recalled being ridiculed by his Nepali colleagues for paying an exorbitant amount for migration, four times as high as what they paid for the same job. The BIGD's 2020 survey among returnee migrants found that 40 percent paid an equivalent of USD 3,500 or more for their latest migration.

The high cost of migration has several negative consequences for the workers and their families. Low- and semi-skill and,

some extent, high-skill blue-collar jobs in the Middle East are the most sought-after ones for Bangladeshis. These jobs are most appealing to the youth coming from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, because they cannot earn enough to change their fate from similar types of jobs in their country, nor do they have the right education and skills to find better overseas employment. Left with limited options, they often resort to selling their assets and borrowing from friends and family as well as moneylenders. It makes them vulnerable in many ways.

Remittance is the main source of income for most migrant families. This was apparent in the BIGD 2020 survey among the returnee migrants, which found that 92 percent of migrant families had a monthly income of more than BDT 20,000 when the migrants were working abroad, and the figures completely flipped after their return. This implies that most migrants fully support their families alongside paying back their loan.

The high cost of migration combined with family needs and the repayment burden put the migrants in a stressful situation, which is exacerbated by the generally low income of Bangladeshi migrants. A 2017 BRAC survey found that most workers in the Middle East were paid a monthly salary of around Tk 20,000 only, and very few were paid Tk 40,000 or higher. Consequently, it often takes them years to finish repaying and start investing in productive assets. That is why, the 2020 survey found that 40 percent of returnee migrants had absolutely no source of income after returning. The high cost thus substantially curtails the long-term welfare enhancing potential of the migrants and their families.

The high cost is not merely of economic consequence, however. It also exposes the migrants to other forms of vulnerabilities. Desperate to recover the investment and repay the loan, migrants are forced to hold on to their jobs even when the work environment is abusive and precarious, which is often the case. For the same reason,



File photo of migrants gathering at the Biman Bangladesh Airlines office in Chattogram for return plane tickets to the Middle East, in August 2020.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

many take the risk of illegally changing jobs when they find that their salary is too low, or the working conditions are unfavourable. Sometimes men get involved in illegal activities out of desperation to earn extra money. In the 2017 BIGD study, a female migrant commented, "I worked at a hospital in Saudi Arabia for two and a half years. After the hospital closed, my employer offered me a return ticket or a job as a domestic worker. I thought, since I spent so much money to come here, let me stay back. But oh, the kind of work and treatment I got in that house! There were 16-17 children in the house, and I had to do all the work."

The situation is particularly problematic for poorer migrants. They have the greatest need to turn around their economic reality, yet they fall in the most stressful situation. Because they have limited means, they are more likely to borrow, borrow more, and

borrow from moneylenders at a high interest rate. Because of their lower skills, they are more likely to earn less abroad. Because of their poverty, they are more likely to be financially responsible for their families. They are even more likely to pay higher for migration because it is easier to cheat them.

Why is the cost of migration so high in Bangladesh? The answer perhaps lies in the chaotic migration process of the country.

Involvement of multiple intermediaries in the process is a crucial factor. Recruitment agencies are based mainly in Dhaka and rely on middlemen or *dalals* to recruit potential clients. A potential migrant goes through multiple middlemen, often four or five of them. Every one of them adds to the cost of the migrant. By the time potential migrants reach a recruitment agency, they may have spent lakhs of taka. The cost of intermediation is steep, 59-75 percent of the

overall cost, according to different estimates.

The involvement of multiple middlemen also makes it easier to dodge accountability, deliberately obfuscate information, and even cheat. Because of this, it is almost impossible to get the money back if potential migrants change their minds. About a third of those who try to migrate fail and incur an average monetary loss exceeding USD 818, finds the 2017 BRAC study.

It would be unjustified to assume that intermediaries are pure evil and add no value. They perform an important function as the recruiters do not find it financially viable to get directly involved in the recruitment process. Intermediaries can take advantage of that because there is no other viable alternative and migration is a complicated process, which most potential migrants know nothing about.

But according to the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013, the recruiting agencies are supposed to select aspiring migrants from the list prepared by the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). However, the database is not complete or updated, and thus not very useful. Today's digital technology offers many innovative and viable solutions for managing an updated and useful nationwide database of aspiring migrants. When or if it is made available, the intermediaries are likely to become largely redundant. A centralised database will also bring more transparency to how the recruiting agencies deal with the migrants.

"Facilitating orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies" is the SDG that the government of Bangladesh has signed up for. Reducing the cost of migration falls squarely into its scope. It is not only about increasing the migrants' economic welfare but also about amending the injustice that our migrants have been facing for so long.

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Women migrant workers and the Covid-19 crisis

The article is written on behalf of the UN Network on Migration in Bangladesh

THE Covid-19 crisis is impacting women and men differently, depending on the sector they work in, the fragility of their employment situation, their access to labour and social protection, and their care responsibilities. Health, education, and other social and personal services are traditionally female-dominated sectors. Domestic workers, in particular, have been highly vulnerable as a result of containment measures and the lack of effective social security coverage.

There are an estimated 67 million domestic workers in the world, 80 percent of whom are women and 11.5 million of whom are migrants. Nearly three quarters of domestic workers are at significant risk of losing their jobs and incomes during or due to the crisis. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there are over 1.2 million migrant workers from Bangladesh working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and most women migrants are employed as migrant domestic workers (MDWs). From April to October 2020, a total of 20,788 migrant women returned to Bangladesh through Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka.

"I worked in Jordan for a year and a half under difficult conditions where the houseowner made me sleep on the floor and she would kick me awake. I don't want to return to Jordan," said Safa, who returned to Bangladesh in September 2020.

Before the current pandemic, the domestic work sector was already one of the most marginalised, least protected and least valued employment sectors. Now, due to the movement restrictions, women MDWs are often placed in even more precarious positions. Due to employer's fear of possible transmission of Covid-19, many MDWs were dismissed from their jobs early in the crisis. These women were stranded, unable to find new work or return to Bangladesh as borders were closed.

Rehena travelled from her hometown in Laxmipur to Saudi Arabia in 2018 where she



There are an estimated 67 million domestic workers in the world, 80 percent of whom are women and 11.5 million of whom are migrants.

PHOTO: AFP/MUNIR UZ ZAMAN

worked as a MDW up until the Covid-19 outbreak, when her employer stopped her salary. According to Rehena, "Without a salary, I could not send money home to my family and soon I left the house, found somewhere to stay for long enough till I could borrow money to travel home to my family and my five children. But now I have no job and I need to pay back the loan. I need support to start a business to provide for my children." For MDWs in Malaysia, Singapore, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, their work permits are tied to their specific employer and once the contract is terminated, often they irregularly reside in the country and are at risk of arrest or deportation, as well as trafficking, violence and exploitation.

Women MDWs' work predominantly takes place inside the private home where, due to the intimate nature of domestic work, MDWs

are at an increased risk of being exposed to the virus, especially when caring for the ill. During the crisis, there have been reports of employers locking MDWs inside households and not letting them outside due to fears of contamination. As a result, these women MDWs were trapped at home all day with their employers, and many faced violence within these households.

Many MDWs continue to lack labour and social protection; they have little to no access to health-care services and are unable to obtain unemployment or sickness benefits if they lose their jobs. In the absence of these protection measures, there is a risk of spreading the virus among communities, including those that are in the MDW's care.

Migrant women's labour is keeping many countries' health and social care systems and households running during this crisis;

however, migrant women are also in need of care and support during Covid-19. Due to the pandemic and subsequent movement restrictions, job losses, cramped living conditions, and economic pressures that households are under, there has been a substantial increase in levels of domestic violence. However, many support services remain temporarily closed. Migrant women are particularly vulnerable in these situations, due to language and information barriers.

When movement restrictions were eased, and if they could afford to, some women migrant workers have travelled back to Bangladesh where the health-care system and the economy have been impacted by returning migrant workers, both in relation to the availability of jobs and the ability of the health care system to cope with the additional number of Covid-19 cases brought in by returning workers.

Women returnees are faced with multiple challenges to sustainable reintegration, some of which include stigma from the community, effects of social dislocation, limited job opportunities, accumulating debt burdens, and little recourse to social protection or unemployment assistance. And while national labour markets continue to contract, the loss of employment has a detrimental impact on the women migrant workers, but also on families and communities that rely on their remittances for their survival. Social protection and safety net programmes need to target those most at risk of falling into poverty as a result of the pandemic: particularly, remittance-dependent households of women migrant workers.

Since March 2020, women's employment has contracted at a large scale, and if contractions in employment deepen, an upsurge in women's unemployment is to be expected. It is crucial to do whatever it takes to prevent women from losing their jobs in their countries of work, maintain women's representation in the labour force, and establish mechanisms for women to re-enter

employment with enhanced measures to ensure job security and protect their dignity as early as possible. In the meantime, supporting women's livelihoods and health is essential to avoid further impoverishment.

While emergency policies have helped alleviate some of the labour market impacts of the Covid-19 crisis, governments will need to put in place measures that support the transition into a job-rich recovery. It will be important to ensure that measures explicitly counterbalance the gender-specific effects of the Covid-19 crisis and create the conditions to support women's decent employment creation.

The United Nations Network on Migration in Bangladesh is working with the government to identify and support returning women migrant workers. Similarly, the Network is working with governments in countries of destination, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council countries, to identify stranded migrants in need of support and also working with stakeholders to provide food, accommodation, medical, psychosocial, and repatriation support.

The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) is a tool to develop practical solutions to the greatest challenges in migration, now amplified by the pandemic. The Network recognises Bangladesh's commitment to the implementation of the GCM and applauds the government's pledge to become a GCM champion country. The Network is committed to support the government to develop and implement effective responses articulated in the GCM and guide collective action to support the Covid-19 response and recovery.

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This article is written on behalf of the Bangladesh United Nations Network on Migration by Mia Seppo, UN Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh; Giorgi Gigauri, Chief of Mission, IOM Bangladesh; Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO; Steven Corliss, Country Representative, UNHCR; Shoko Ishikawa, Country Representative, UN WOMEN; Sudipto Mukerjee, Resident Representative, UNDP Bangladesh; Asa Torkelson, Representative, UNFPA; Tomoo Hozumi, Representative, UNICEF; and Sergey Kapinos, Representative, UNODC Regional Office for South Asia.

QUOTABLE
Quote

DESMOND TUTU
(Born on October 7, 1931)
Human Rights Activist

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Storybook elephant
6 Muffler's kin
11 Peace goddess
12 Michael Caine movie
13 Friday's creator
14 Climber's spike
15 Casino figure
17 1969 Series champs
18 Be bold
20 Miles off
22 Bar rocks
23 Far from subtle
26 Writer Zola
28 Allude
29 Cabinet department
31 King beater

32 "Beetle Bailey" dog
33 Sets the price at
34 Horse's home
36 "Art of the Fugue" composer
38 Goaded on
40 Less cordial
43 Long attack
44 Un-manned plane
45 Squelched
46 Yellow-gray

DOWN
1 Auction action
2 Verb for you
3 "While we're on the topic ..."
4 Battery end
5 Clarinet part

6 Easy mark
7 Ecologist's concern
8 In some way
9 Mob revolt
10 Marshes
16 Mule of old song
18 Went out, as a fire
19 High point
21 Going rate
23 Crooked
24 Bottle part
25 "— bien!"
27 Prisoner's plea
30 Cry loudly
33 Ghana port
34 Bother
35 La Scala song
37 Lends a hand
39 Bear abode
41 Wrap up
42 Spanish king

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12-11

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43						44			
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT