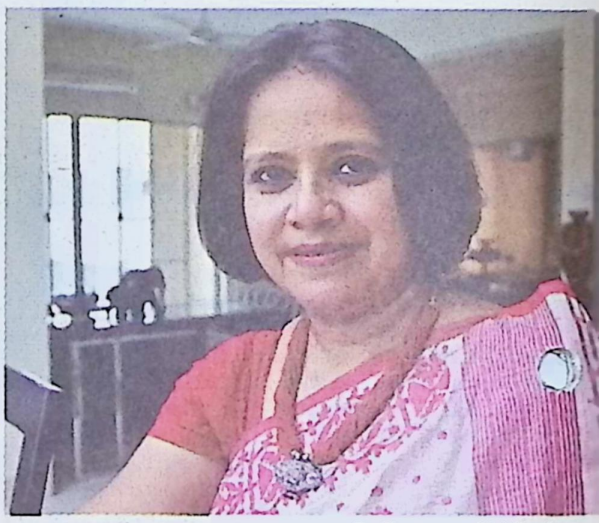
Make Them Visible

Migrant workers are major contributors to our economy. We must do everything to make life in foreign lands easy for them.



Dr Tasneem Siddiqui

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Labour migration is a major economic asset. Each year four to six hundred thousand Bangladeshi male and female migrants go abroad for work. Income from migrant remittance is three times higher than the net foreign exchange earnings from garment sector. They also bring back knowledge and skills.

And yet they are marginalised and abused within Bangladesh and in the countries of destination. "Fraudulence in processing migration, passport confiscation by the employers, restriction on movements, poor work and living conditions characterise the labour market," says Dr Tasneem Siddiqui. Dr Siddiqui is the Chair of RMMRU (Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit) and a professor of Political Science at the University of Dhaka.

The government has acted to remove some barriers. "At the national level a new law has been enacted, a migrant welfare bank has been established; a system of online recruitment is being experimented. To reduce cost the government is also experimenting with G2G with Malaysia," says Dr Siddiqui who was instrumental in lifting a ban from female labour migration in Bangladesh and liberalisation of central bank policies on remittance transfers.

The government needs to do more and do it fast. "It needs to strengthen its offices of labour attachés in the countries of destination. In order to get legal redress it should support migrants through ensuring interpreters and lawyers," says Dr Siddiqui.

Migrant workers have few means of expressing their grievances. The government needs to be more active at international forums to ensure their rights. "GoB should ratify key ILO conventions, C97 on migration for employment and recommendations revised 1949; C143 migrant workers (supplementary provisions 1975); C181 on private employment agencies 1997 and C189 concerning decent work for domestic workers 2011," says Professor Siddiqui. "It should continue its work to incorporate the issue of rights of labour migrants in the 68th UN general assembly sessions on post 2015 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda. It should make significant contribution in the upcoming meeting of UN Global forum on migration development in highlighting the plight of migrants in different destinations."

According to news reports, Bangladeshi labourers working in countries such as Malaysia and some Middle Eastern countries are often treated inhumanly by their employers. "In the context of Gulf and other Middle Eastern countries Kafala system fosters condition of exploitation and abuses of migrant workers," says Dr Siddiqui. "The UN high commissioner for Human rights, N Pillay observed that tying of workers with the employer, retention of passport, non-payment and undue deduction of salary, fines for overstay, slow judicial processes create adverse work conditions for the migrant under the kafala system. The government should articulate the adverse impact of the kafala system and inform the labour receiving countries so that receiving and sending countries can jointly reduce the scope of misuse of the kafala system by the middle man. The government should stop issuing clearance to workers who go under free visa."