

SPOTLIGHT

After three months as a migrant domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, Ejjatun Begum from Barisal realised one thing clearly – she had gotten herself into a trap. She finally understood that the local middleman, who had lured her with the prospect of making a fortune, miles away from her home, was a profit-oriented liar. He had taken from her Tk 350,000 as 'commission', promising her a monthly salary of Tk 20,000. All of this was a lie.

There was no turning back from here – she realised that too.

For Ejjatun, the first three months were not all that bad. But in the fourth month, she learnt that her employer had confiscated her passport. He refused to pay her any salary, since he thought that he had "bought" her for Tk 300,000 from the recruiting agency. She was beaten and abused every time she demanded her salary.

After she fled her abusive employer, the police found her and returned her to the agency office. The office immediately informed the employer who sold her off to another employer. For the next few days, Ejjatun was sent back and forth to her employer, and the cycle repeated itself – she would leave the torture only to get caught by the police and sent back to her abuser. Finally, however, she was able to make a call back home and inform her family of her condition, begging them to take her back. Her family contacted WARBE DF, a civil society organisation that works for migrant rights, to help bring her back. After several meetings with the recruiting agency where constant pressure was exerted on them, the WARBE DF was finally able to bring Ejjatun back home.

She returned home empty-handed, with nothing but this horrid experience.

Bangladesh has been one of the major exporters of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries. Unlike Ejjatun, there have also been many women whose quality of life has improved after being employed as domestic workers abroad thanks to decent employers and trustworthy recruiting agents. However, the numbers who allege that they have been treated like modern day slaves by their employers are no less significant.

We have started prioritising the export of female workers to these labour markets only since the last couple of years. Semi-skilled and skilled Bangladeshi female workers are employed in the garments sector and service sector in different countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Maldives and Mauritius. But the trend of sending female workers abroad has reached an unprecedented rate recently. This upward trend began when the United Arab Emirates opened its labour market to Bangladesh exclusively for female domestic workers after three years of a labour ban. In October 2014, the UAE and Bangladesh signed a MoU which stated that the UAE will employ 1,000 female workers from Bangladesh every month mostly in the category of domestic help, cook, nanny, gardeners, drivers, etc. In 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also requested 400,000

workers from Bangladesh, at least half of whom would be female domestic workers.

To get the most out of these emerging labour markets, the Bangladesh government has taken several steps to boost the export of female workers to Middle Eastern countries. According to Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury Noman, joint secretary general of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), "The government has issued an order to all the international recruiting agencies to recruit and send 200 female workers before sending any men to these countries. After sending 200 female workers, each recruiting agency is further required to send two female workers for every male worker." The government has also instituted zero-cost migration for the female workers as the Bangladesh government, recruiting agencies and employers bear all the expenditures for training, visa processing and travelling to the country of employment.

However, there are several loopholes in these initiatives. Although government and recruiting agencies are stressing on zero-cost migration, aspiring female workers allegedly have to pay Tk 80,000 to Tk 100,000 to the middleman to get 'selected' by the government officials or to reach recruiting agencies overseas. According to Noman, "The selection process is entirely controlled by the government. We often go to the district technical training centres and arrange spot job fairs to recruit female workers. However, a large portion of aspirant workers reach the recruiting agencies through a middleman."

Every aspirant female worker has to receive one month training from the government training centres. The trainers are also appointed by the government officials who have little knowledge about the challenges these workers are going to face in the foreign country.

"We have repeatedly asked the government to include the recruiting agencies in the training activities so that we can brief the workers about the real challenges and train them on the required psychological, technical and linguistic skills. It is also necessary to make this training completely residential so that the workers can learn to cope with the isolation and prepare themselves mentally," says Noman.

Syed Saiful Haque, Chairman of WARBE Development Foundation, says that most of these women face challenges from the pre-departure stage. "Before departing for employment, these domestic workers do not have any mental preparation for the fact that they will have to remain confined within the household. One of the most common complaints of migrants that we hear is that after migration they

CAUGHT BETWEEN DREAMS AND REALITY

do not get the payment and benefits they were promised."

They also highlight loneliness, lack of privacy, long working hours (even up to 21 hours a day), non-payment and irregular payment of wages, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse as major problems. For many, changing their food habits poses a new challenge and they suffer from hunger. Many of them are sexually abused behind closed doors and these cases go unreported.

Mina Akter's case is one such example. Like many other female migrant workers, she was not well-informed about the procedures of migration and had to pay Tk 93,000 to the middleman. She was in Lebanon for only three days when her husband received a call from her. She begged him to rescue her, as her male employer would knock on her door every night. On top of that, she did not have fixed working hours, and had to spend the whole day doing a number of chores for the whole household. After repeatedly visiting BMET, a human rights organisation and the recruiting agencies, Mina's husband made sure of her safe return.

In a report on abuses against migrant domestic workers in Oman, published by Human Rights Watch in July 2016, almost all the Bangladeshi women workers interviewed said that their passports were confiscated by their employers. They were not paid their full salaries and did not

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA
AND
MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

have fixed working hours, let alone days off. A female migrant worker narrated a traumatic tale of abuse and exploitation at the hands of almost every party involved in her migration process, starting from the recruitment agent to her employer.

"When it comes to escaping these exploitative employers, very few Bangladeshi embassies can actually help

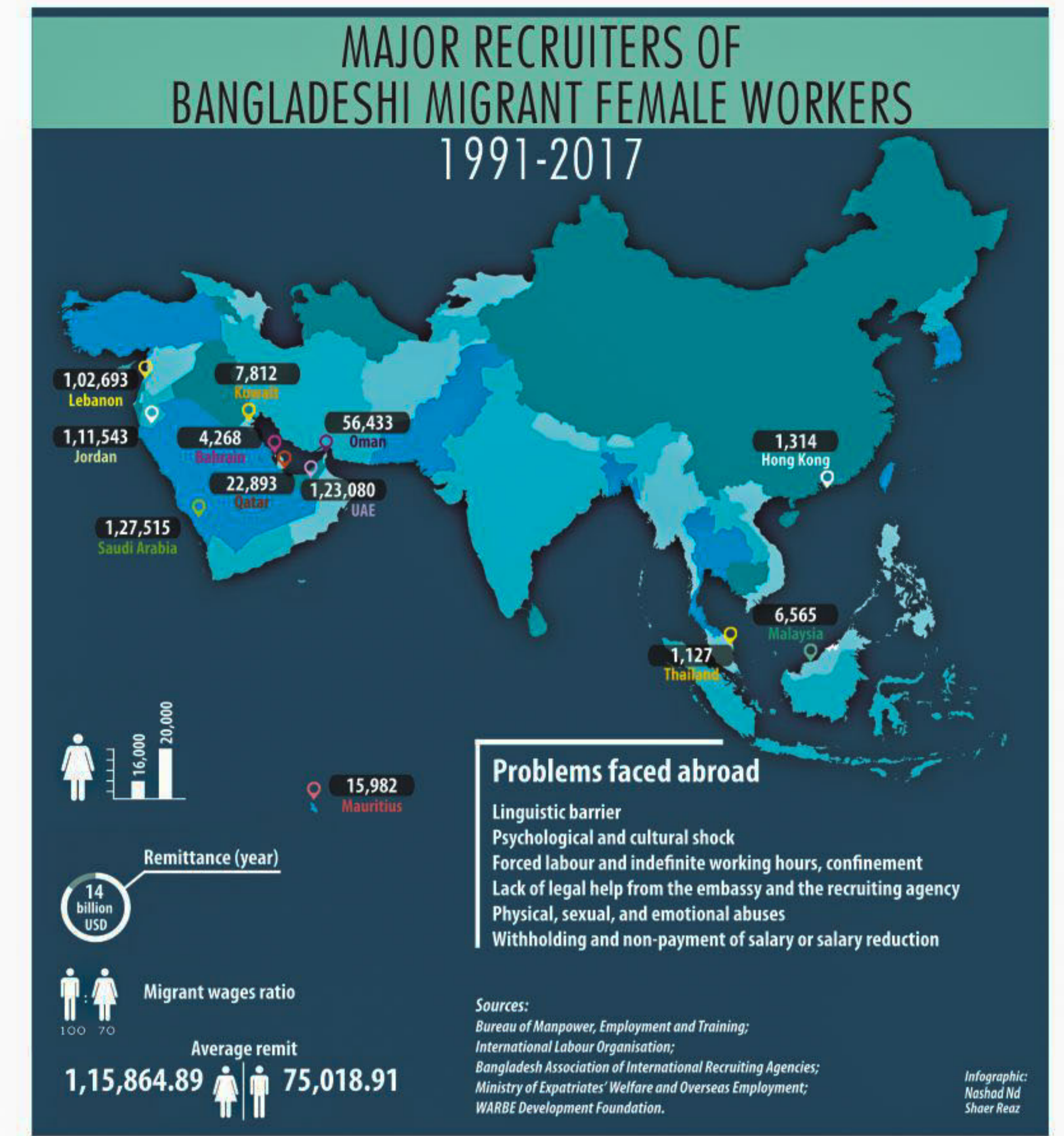
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them by offering shelter compared to the other country-of-origin embassies in the Middle East where the migrant workers can ask for refuge when they are abused. Since they don't have mobile phones with them, in most cases their family would come to us crying and pleading to help them return. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that the embassies and labour wings of the country's foreign missions have time and again showed very condescending and non-cooperative attitudes, according to most of the returnees," says Haque.

Last year around 1,03,000 female workers migrated abroad, which is 22 percent of the total migrant workers. Because of the existing ill practice of the Kafala – the sponsorship programme system, in the Gulf and workers' lack of knowledge about their rights and obligations under this system, workers are facing numerous problems, opines Tasnim Siddiqui, Chair of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

There are many countries which are considering introducing new provisions regulating the entry, exit and residency requirements for all workers in the country they migrate to. But until those substantive changes take place, all workers including women domestic workers have to work under the Kafala system – a system that reinforces the dependency and the power imbalance between employers and migrant domestic workers.

"In an ideal situation, the kafeels or the sponsors should bear all expenses, including payment of levy to the government, travel and



INFOGRAPHIC: NASHAD ND AND SHAEER REAZ

insurance costs," says Siddiqui. "But in reality, they are passed on to those women and men who want to migrate for employment through the operation of a series of agents and sub-agents, both at sending and receiving ends. As the legal status of foreign workers is controlled by the employers, the system entitles them to take away workers' passports, withhold their salary and annual leave while subjecting them to work under modern day slavery-like conditions."

According to the law of most GCC countries, a woman domestic worker can change an employer up to three times. In fact every woman domestic worker is entitled to register a complaint to competent authorities like police, ministry of interior and labour courts. However, as Siddiqui notes, "The Kafala system is particularly strict when it comes to the movement of female domestic workers. In almost all cases, these workers are not permitted to go out of the household premises."

Jabed Ahmed, additional secretary, Bangladesh Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, does not quite agree that the Kafala system exposes female workers to vulnerabilities. "Every female migrant worker is given safety and protection under the MoU signed by the respective government. However, as most of these migrant female workers unfortunately work in the domestic service section, they are vulnerable to be abused, and sometimes they become sick which may lead to early

termination of their employment. For these workers, we have established safe houses in five major recruiting countries where they get food and accommodation free of cost until they are sent back home."

In reality, however, when these female workers do not get the wage they were promised, have to work 24/7 without rest, are abused by their employers and sent to another country by their employers in violation of the contract, these poor female workers rarely find anyone by their side.

In this regard, BAIRA leaders suggested that Bangladesh's diplomatic missions in those countries can play a vital role. According to Noman, "If our diplomatic missions can be equipped with a legal wing to support the victims in the labour court, a media wing to brief the media about the violation of their rights and a welfare wing to arrange compensation and rehabilitation for the victims, then we, the recruiting agencies, will be able to better ensure workers' rights."

A huge source of income that contributes to our GDP is the remittance sent in by our migrant workers. However, given the conditions faced by several female migrant workers, Bangladesh should earnestly consider the issue of their safety and dignity and thus negotiate the terms from a strong position. We need to work diligently with both the sending and receiving states to ensure that these workers are adequately protected and respected so that they can work in decent conditions. Most importantly, instead of everything being on paper and in policy, we need to think of steps that can bring tangible benefits in the lives of female migrant workers. ■



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