

SPOTLIGHT

COMING HOME IN COFFINS

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If you haven't hit 45, you are ideally not supposed to worry about suffering from medical conditions such as brain strokes or heart attacks. Stroke is the leading cause of death for people above the age of 60. Likewise, statistics suggest that you are more prone to heart disease once you cross the 45-year mark. However, as far as Bangladeshi migrant workers are concerned, these numbers do not matter. Most of the workers who die due to strokes or heart attacks are between the ages of 30 and 45. And the reason behind this astoundingly premature trend is an immense amount of stress.

Here is another astounding fact. Never before has the country witnessed the return of so many dead bodies in a single year as in 2017. And this is not entirely due to the rising number of migrants going abroad.

According to government statistics, 2017 has seen the return of more than 3,200 dead bodies to the country until November, and officials expect it to cross 3,500 by December. Of these deaths, 30 percent are attributed to strokes and heart attacks, while another 45 percent died due to workplace accidents. These numbers are based on independent research conducted by organisations in Bangladesh and hence may vary slightly. The government is yet to conduct a thorough examination regarding this issue.

Saudi Arabia sends back the most number of dead bodies to Bangladesh. According to Golam Moshi, the Bangladesh Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, the situation can drastically improve if migration fees are decreased. He also points out that there are unscrupulous employers who do not provide workers with medical insurance—an aspect that employers need to cover according to the country's law. "As per Saudi rules, the medical cost of every worker in the Kingdom should be insured. But there are unscrupulous employers who don't provide the workers with insurance or provide them with insurance of the lowest-possible category," says Moshi.

"As a result, workers are scared of going to the doctors. If they have chest pains, they end up taking a pill for acidity. They have spent so much to come here. They will most definitely not go to the doctor and spend more. I believe that 50 percent of the stress can be eradicated if migration fees are lowered," he adds.

There are many studies that suggest that none of the workers from other South Asian countries have to pay as much as Bangladeshi migrants. Most of the workers who go abroad end up paying a lot more money than the amount set by the government. For instance, the official migration cost to Saudi Arabia, since 2016, is BDT 1.65 lakh. However, despite that figure, a worker ends up paying between BDT 6 to 8 lakhs due to various problems and illegal practices in the recruitment process, which have persisted for years. This isn't only the case for Bangladeshis who wish to go to Saudi—it's the same for those going to places like Malaysia and Lebanon as well.

In order to spend such a huge amount of money, migrants end up taking a lot of risks. From taking loans to selling their lands, the money is collected in various ways. This ends up taking a toll on them—psychologically and physiologically. Certain workers are also cheated abroad and are not given the salary or the kind of work that they were initially promised. Situations like these make things worse.

The other issue that migrant researchers often point out is the absence of a secondary post-mortem of the dead bodies that return to the country. The importance of having a verification process stems from the fact that workers, both male and female, have complained of being tortured. They have reported being forced to work and live in poor conditions. The extent to which these factors play a role in the deaths of the workers is an aspect that is yet to be explored.

"We have tried to tell the government a number of times to do separate post-mortems once the bodies are sent back. It is important to see if there is any other reason for the death. This process is not followed in our country," says Professor Tasneem

Siddiqui, the founding chair of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit in the University of Dhaka.

"The government needs to do research on health in those countries, and give more access to researchers to explore the issue of unnatural deaths. There can be so many reasons behind the deaths. For instance, many workers end up suffering from jaundice because they do not get clean water to drink and from there on, the situation gets worse.

"We need to send a fact-finding team over there and explore the reasons. We also need to highlight this issue on international platforms," she adds.

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh, on a similar note, says that Bangladesh is at an advantage in this scenario and that it needs to play its cards right.

"The contribution of these workers needs to be honoured. We can't say that we don't have the leverage here. Yes, our workers are getting employed there and we are getting revenue, but this can't be one-sided. There is a demand for our workers and we have to use that," he says.

Uncertainties about how their loved ones passed away haunt the workers' families. The case of 39-year-old Monir Hossain, a worker who passed away in Saudi Arabia earlier this year, is typical. According to the report sent, Monir had a stroke; however, his family members are unwilling to trust the report. The reason is that both Monir's uncle Ali Hossain and Ali's daughter had spoken to Monir on the phone, hours before he was pronounced dead.

"He spoke to me at 9 am and my daughter at 1 pm. On the phone he seemed completely fine and was asking me when he should send me money. Later that evening, we got a call from one of his roommates saying that he had passed away because of a stroke," says Hossain.

The problem here is that there is nothing more that Monir's family can do. They have to accept the report which was submitted to them. Monir's

family members are not saying that the report is false per se, but back then, they were looking for a confirmation from another source regarding the circumstances of the death—perhaps to calm their minds. But they did not have that scope.

The workers who go abroad are often the sole earners in their families. As a result, their deaths end up affecting multiple people. Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) recently interviewed 50 relatives of

migrant workers who lost their lives abroad.

42 percent of the respondents said that their school-going children experienced additional work-pressure to generate income, whereas, another 32 percent replied that their children had to engage in income-generating activities and thus were forced to leave school.

Also, 90 percent of the families had to curtail their monthly allocation for food grains and 82 percent had to stop

any kind of medical treatment they were undergoing.

One of the issues that OKUP highlights is the government's inconsistency in providing the families of the deceased with compensation. As per the current system, families of the deceased are supposed to be given BDT three lakhs as compensation and BDT 35,000 for burial purposes.

According to OKUP Chairman, Shakirul Islam, it takes up to seven to eight months for these families to

Employment and Training (BMET) and ends up working in that country under a tourist visa, he or she is considered undocumented.

There are also a number of cases when workers become undocumented despite getting permission from the BMET. Once a worker is permitted to work abroad, he or she is provided a smart card from the government. It is a card made specifically for the workers and should not be confused with the National Identification Card, which the



PHOTOS: COURTESY



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A girl cries upon witnessing the arrival of a migrant worker's coffin.

FALLOUT FROM A WORKER'S DEATH

This study by Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program took in-depth interviews with a structured questionnaire covering 50 deceased migrant workers' families from five districts - Dhaka, Narayanganj, Narsingdi, Munshiganj and Comilla. Besides, five cases reflecting variant spectrums of economic, psychological and legal impacts on families were also studied under the research.



39-year-old Monir Hossain passed away following a stroke in Saudi Arabia earlier this year.

citizens of Bangladesh receive. However, what often happens is that workers, especially those in the Gulf, end up quitting their jobs due to dissatisfaction and begin working in other companies illegally. Their documents—passports and smart cards—though are held with their initial employers. As such, when the body of the worker returns to Bangladesh without the required documents, their families are not given any compensation.

"This practice is not fair. These workers have contributed to our economy in some way or the other and their families should be compensated whether or not they have documents," opines Shakirul.

A mere glance at the trend of the number of dead bodies returning to the country paints an ominous picture. Just five years ago the number of deceased bodies returning to the country was below 3,000. Today we are on the verge of crossing the 4000-mark.

And yet, as several researchers point out, a thorough investigation regarding the matter is yet to take place. If there's no investigation, the major reasons behind their deaths will not be addressed and the toll will only continue to rise. One wonders, how many more dead bodies need to return to the country before a drastic step is taken? ■

receive payment, which ends up hurting them. The families of undocumented workers do not get paid any compensation, and have it worse.

There are different kinds of undocumented workers. If someone goes abroad to work without taking the permission of the Bureau of Manpower,