

# TOWARDS BUILDING A MODERN ECONOMY



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## Protecting migrants' welfare

It is high time for Bangladesh to address labour migration issues



### SHEEPA HAFIZA

Fatema, 20, the sole breadwinner of her family, migrated to Saudi Arabia in search of solvency. She purchased a ticket to her dream destination at the cost of Tk 20,000 though the actual cost was much higher. Much to her horror, her new workplace was not what she expected: She experienced attempted rape and spent several nights in a locked bathroom. She witnessed a battered Bangladeshi domestic worker being pushed out through the window after she refused to work. She soon realised that she was not the only one in such a miserable state. Her efforts of returning to Bangladesh consistently failed for a long time. However, Fatema was fortunate enough to be able to contact one of her cousins in Kushtia over the phone. She was probably one in a thousand female migrant workers who got so lucky. She also managed to reach out to Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) through Human Rights Defender Forum (HRDF). Although her miserable days of torture have now come to an end, she is barely out of the

trauma she has experienced.

Fatema is one of the million migrant workers who go to several destination countries every year with the hope of a better life. According to a recent global estimate, there are around 247 million international migrants in the world of which 48 percent are women. Source countries benefit significantly from labour migration as migrant workers' contribution to the global economy accounts for nearly USD 600 million of which USD 441 million goes to the developing countries.

The percentage of South-South migration is about 38 percent of all migration. Bangladesh is one of the top five migrant-sending countries in the world; when it comes to remittance, it is one of the top ten recipient countries. According to Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), the total number of Bangladeshi labour migrants is about 11.46 million of which Saudi Arabia alone receives 29 percent. Female workers constituted around 12 percent of the total migrants in 2017.

Migration issues started to get preference in dialogues and actions for better policy framework and international cooperation. Currently, most countries including Bangladesh are in the process to reach a consensus on safe, dignified and orderly migration. At the same time, policymakers are showing greater interest in labour migration issues and different stakeholders are advocating for the rights of migrant workers. In 2016, remittance consisted of more than seven percent of the country's GDP and was higher compared to the aggregate contribution of agricultural,

industrial and service sector which is about 6.5 percent. On top of that, a recent study by BMET suggested that remittance has significantly contributed to poverty reduction in Bangladesh and poverty ratio fell to 50 percent in 2000 from 70 percent in 1970. Besides, because of existing export potential of human resource and insufficient facilities to generate new jobs for the growing economy, migration has become one of the primary concerns and the best return on investment for

challenges in South Asia is the low female labour force participation where only 28 percent women actively participate in the labour market. About 81 percent of these women are in vulnerable forms of employment. While the benefits of labour migration are well-recognised the sector faces a range of challenges leading to increased vulnerabilities for migrants. The vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers are acute in both the country of origin and the destination country.

skills, informal or verbal agreement, and vague understanding of the culture of the destination countries. A study conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) revealed that the cost of overseas migration is higher than the government-fixed rate which often benefits the brokers at both the origin and destination countries.

The report which came out last year stated, "A migrant worker has to spend up to Tk 1.2 million from about Tk 500,000 to go to Saudi Arabia with a job whereas the government has fixed the cost at Tk 165,000. To migrate to Malaysia, Singapore and some other Middle Eastern countries, a worker has to spend up to Tk 800,000 from a minimum amount of Tk 250,000." Secondly, corruption at almost every stage of the recruitment process and fraudulent brokers remain substantially unaddressed. To afford the high cost migrant workers either sell whatever little asset they have or borrow money on lofty interest. In addition to these, procedural difficulties, delayed and very long recruitment process, and verbal and informal agreement of employment intensify the vulnerability of migrant workers. Also, most of the pre-departure training focuses on hard skills whereas soft skills are essential for their survival in the destination countries. Oftentimes, they have minimum understanding of the culture which leads to problems related to food habits, accommodation, mobility, day-to-day challenges, and so on.

During migration, the workers encounter troubles related to air travel and payment; face



SOURCE: BEMAR NEWS

Female migrant workers are at greater risk of facing multidimensional issues in the destination countries which include low pay and sexual violence.

the government of Bangladesh.

### ACUTE SITUATION OF BANGLADESHI MIGRANT WORKERS

The World Employment Social Outlook 2017 suggested that one of the major

Looking at the nature of the problems faced by overseas migrant workers, three different strands can be identified. During the pre-departure stage, most of the migrant labour face problems like relatively high cost of migration, corruption and trickery, low

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