

# TOWARDS BUILDING A MODERN ECONOMY



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## Protecting migrants' welfare

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issues that violate their basic needs and rights; face gender-based violence; and so forth. Many a time migrant workers are found roaming around the airport, uncertain of their journey. While some of them manage to fly to their destinations, some are taken advantage of by deceitful people.

Upon their arrival, their problems are intensified as they barely understand the language and are not accustomed with "different" food. The informal agreement of employment allows the employers in the destination countries to harass them. Workers regularly complain about non-payment, underpayment, and delayed payment. There are several cases where after arriving in the host country, the earlier agreement is substituted by a new agreement which has low wages, substandard accommodation, no provisions for food and other lower fringe benefits. In case of an accident leading to the worker's death, it takes years to get compensation by the next of kin due to complex legal procedures of the host countries. Sometimes workers are repatriated after becoming handicapped temporarily or permanently due to accidents without getting proper treatment or compensation. Workers are also denied air tickets at the time of exit and often, their sponsors in the destination country do not adhere to the terms and conditions of employment.

Lack of awareness about labour rights at the countries of destinations creates an environment of ill treatment of migrant workers by their employers. Poor living standards, inadequate health security, and

hazardous nature of work endanger the health of migrant workers. They suffer from sickness, depression and gradual decrease in employability. In recent years the number of migrant workers returning deceased kept rising; in 2014, around 3,335 Bangladeshi workers returned deceased, and in 2015 the number reached 3,375. However, the actual number of the deceased could be higher than these figures since the sources in Bangladesh missions abroad have disclosed that at least one-third of the migrants who die are buried abroad. Furthermore, lack of exposure to career development measures means that migrant workers fail to sustain employability and most of the time get engaged in the low-income sectors only.

Female migrant workers in particular go through multidimensional issues in the destination countries. They have to work for unlimited hours in the household in exchange of very low pay. They are sometimes victims of sexual harassment. In January 2018, a number of female domestic workers who were abused returned home from Saudi Arabia and a number of them were in a safe home in Riyadh waiting to be repatriated. In 2017 Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights and legal aid organisation, received a number of applications from family members which indicates the horrible situation many female migrants are in. ASK managed to help some of these female migrants with the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, human rights organisations, and the high commission/embassy in the host countries. Most of them have fallen



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PHOTO: KARIM SAHIB/AFP

victim to human trafficking and have endured torture beyond description at the hands of their employers.

Some of them are "fortunate" since they were able to escape the torture, humiliation, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and modern-day slavery-like conditions. But there are hundreds whose

stories are unknown to us, who may have found that they were cheated but could not find a way out. ASK also received some applications where the family members said they had not been in contact for years with their female relatives abroad. In order to advocate for the rights of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in the destination countries, it is

imperative that we first understand and acknowledge the various difficulties that Bangladeshi workers face abroad.

### PROTECTION OF MIGRANT WORKERS' RIGHTS

Most of the reports on migration in Bangladesh focus on the economic gains of the country while some proudly utter the total number of overseas migrant workers. Merely pushing them out of the borders can neither be an indicator of success nor a sustainable solution. However, various policies and legislations are in place to protect and uphold migrant workers' rights as global citizens instead of treating them as commodities of the migration process. It is crucial to create awareness on this particular aspect of migration. There is a lack of clear procedural guidelines in the case of overseas migration. However, to ensure the protection of migrants' rights and their awareness, effective and timely measures should be taken.

We strongly believe that evidence of even one tortured migrant in sending and/or receiving countries is a crime and severe violation of human rights that any state should be concerned about.

One of the key priorities ought to be signing of bilateral accord or memorandum of understanding (MoU) with labour-receiving countries with clear directions on employment conditions (working hours, rest and recreation, wages, overtime, leave, healthcare services, freedom of movement) and legal support for the workers; those who are already facing some of

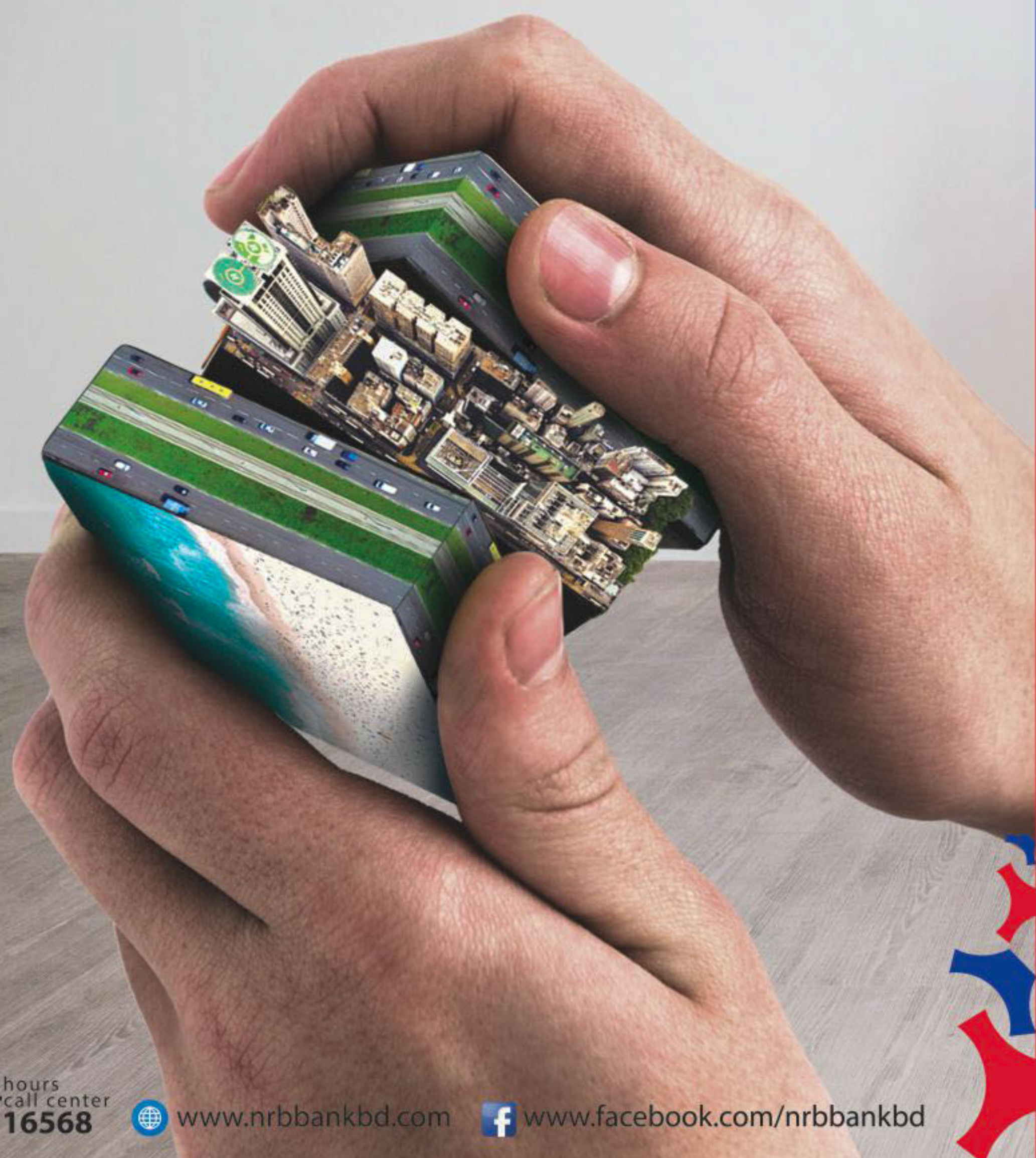
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