

Why women migrant workers are compelled to come back

Since 2015, hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi women have gone to the Middle East, mostly Saudi Arabia, in search of a livelihood. Nearly five thousand of them have so far returned, with many alleging torture and serious abuse. Shariful Hasan, the head of BRAC's migration programme, which has helped many of these returnees, talks to The Daily Star's Nazmul Ahasan over the issue.

How severe was the exploitation of those women migrant workers you have interviewed?

Everyone knows how restrictive the state of freedom—especially that of women—is in Saudi Arabia. So, you can only imagine how vulnerable a foreign worker could become in such a society. It was because of such vulnerability that countries like the Philippines and Indonesia stopped sending their women workers to the country. In fact, Bangladesh sought to cash in on the vacuum created by the absence of Filipino and Indonesian workers.

From the human rights perspective, the treatment received by thousands of Bangladeshi female workers at the hands of their employers constitutes a grave violation of their rights. Can a human being work for 17–18 hours tirelessly without any day-off—that too at very low wages?

The *kafala* system—under which migrant workers in domestic and construction sectors are regulated across the Middle East—is incompatible with modern human rights laws. Under the system, every worker is virtually subjugated by his or her respective employer. This system allows the employers to take away their labourers' passports or even withhold wages, creating easy opportunities for employers to exploit workers. In fact, Bangladeshi workers often refer to their employers as *malik* or owner. Many Bangladeshi women workers reported having been treated by their employers as bonded workers.

In such a restrictive culture, women are particularly more vulnerable to exploitation—both economic and sexual.

But the Saudi authorities claim that the workers' failure to adapt to the Saudi culture is the foremost reason for the returns. How true are these claims?

Our workers have always been able to adapt to a different culture and even harsh conditions around the world. They sacrifice so much to go abroad to change their lives. Bangladeshi women workers in Hong Kong or Japan are not subjected to such a system and enjoy relatively better treatment and benefit. So, if it was our women who were inherently unable to adapt to a foreign culture, why does no one return from these countries?

So, I do not believe that the problem is with our workers. And under the international laws and human rights convention, it is not up to the labourers to adapt to their employers' cultural restrictions; on the contrary, employers are obliged to facilitate and ensure employers' fundamental rights. One deserves to be treated with basic human decency and dignity regardless of the culture he or she is living in.

It's not a cultural issue altogether. Among two hundred thousand women who had gone to the country, only five thousand returned. It is actually individual sponsors or employers who are at fault.

What about other Middle Eastern countries?

As domestic workers, Bangladeshi women mainly go to Hong Kong, Lebanon and Jordan, apart from Saudi Arabia. Normally, the problem is prevalent in the Middle East and is particularly acute in one country. That is because, perhaps, it is the most conservative state in the Middle East. In the region, Qatar does a lot better: The country has taken steps to reform its laws governing expatriate



Shariful Hasan

labourers, recently joined two core UN human rights treaties, and allows international organisations such as the International Labor Organisation (ILO) to operate.

BRAC's migration programme led by you helped those Bangladeshi women return home. How or in what ways did you help these distressed women?

In most cases, we are contacted by relatives of those workers. The father or husband of a worker may seek help from one of our hundreds of field offices scattered across the country—mostly in rural areas. In return, the field office contacts us. We then try to collect the worker's details such as address, contact number, passport number, etc. When these details are in our hand, we approach the

expatriate welfare ministry to intervene. The ministry then contacts the Bangladeshi embassy in Saudi Arabia which seeks to rescue the worker.

In other cases, many women flee their employers' home after having endured abuse and violence. They somehow contact the embassy and take shelter in the embassy's safe home while the details of their return are sorted out. In these cases, we try to facilitate their return by contacting the relevant government authorities and providing them with useful information.

We also pick them up at the airport and give them immediate shelter, food and counsel.

Many of the returnees have reportedly faced harsh social stigma and even been abandoned by their families. Why would a family reject one of its members in such a time of distress?

In our society, there are many who would blame a girl for the sufferings she might have endured. In most cases, these women did not go to Saudi Arabia willingly. They were asked by their husbands or parents to go abroad to change the financial situation of their family. As long as they send money, everyone back home is happy. When she has to return having suffered sexually or physically, there's a tendency among many to blame her. Almost all returnees have had a problem in any phase of the reintegration process in the society.

Does your programme help these women, too?

Yes. The first thing we do is bring psychiatrists and counsellors to deal with the mental trauma that these women have undergone. We also try to persuade the

families of these women to take them back. Overall, we conduct campaigns to change the societal attitude towards these returnees.

However, the economic fallout that these women face immediately in the wake of their return is the most challenging problem. When a woman returns and is not accepted by her family, where would she go and how would she live? In our capacity, we talked to the Leather goods & Footwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association and managed to get financial help and jobs for a number of these women.

I believe we need a national policy as to how we can help these women reintegrate into the mainstream society.

What could the government do in protecting women workers' rights abroad and helping those who returned?

I don't believe there's any deficiency in willingness from the government to address the issue. The problem lies elsewhere. Our faulty recruitment system largely depends on unscrupulous middlemen. If we could make the system more transparent such as calling for open applications, the dependence on middlemen would dramatically fall, as would the entire cost for potential workers. Then we could train and prepare them for the jobs, help them cope with cultural and language barriers, and make them aware of their rights and ways of seeking remedies—the scenario will be totally different if we could do this.

The reality, however, is that there's a culture of denial: our policymakers do not even recognise the problem. Some simply deny that there's a problem, while others underestimate the severity of the crisis. If we do not recognise the problem in the first place, how would we solve it?

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How can we retain the benefits of globalisation?



THE ASIAN CONVERGENCE
KOICHI HAMADA

In the last few years, for many people and their leaders, globalisation has become a scourge to be purged in favour of greater protectionism and unilateralism. This represents a sharp departure from the recent past, when globalisation was widely regarded as a positive force.

What changed, and why? Key components of globalisation include greater cross-border mobility of goods, labour, and capital, each of which promises significant overall benefits for economies. Free trade enables countries to capitalise on their comparative advantages, boosting all participants' economic performance and prospects.

Migration can inject diversity and dynamism into, say, an aging society, while helping to reduce poverty in source countries, such as through remittances. And foreign direct investment (FDI) can create employment, spur research and development, generate tax revenues, and enhance competition.

The problem is that these benefits are not necessarily broadly shared. For example, migration can put wage



pressure on lower-skill workers in destination countries. By enabling companies to move operations to lower-wage markets, the elimination of trade barriers can have a similar effect. Even cross-border investment has its downsides, as domestic players may struggle to compete with foreigners.

Such factors have contributed to rising inequality in many countries. In the United States, for example, lower-skill workers in the Rust Belt—the manufacturing region stretching from Michigan to eastern Pennsylvania—have faced decades of

stagnant wages, while high-skill workers in finance and technology—Wall Street and Silicon Valley—have enjoyed soaring compensation. While economic openness boosts economies as a whole, there is an obvious need to ensure that the benefits are more equitably distributed or, at least, that some groups are not inordinately hurt by it.

Many economists argue that the key to success on this front is to adopt redistributive policies, typically via the tax system. But such policies are very difficult, if not impossible,

politically. That lesson has been learned by many a progressive politician, including US Senator Bernie Sanders, who tried and failed to secure the Democratic nomination for the 2016 US presidential election on a platform that focused on addressing people's frustrations with the increasingly unequal status quo, largely through redistribution.

More politically effective, but economically and socially damaging, is the approach of populists like US President Donald Trump, who offer simplistic explanations that play on voters' fears and frustrations (for example, by blaming immigrants or countries with trade surpluses) while pretending that there are easy fixes

(say, erecting walls and import barriers).

Trump blamed the struggles of Rust Belt workers on international competition. But that is only part of the story: technological displacement has played a larger role, though this has often been ignored, not least because it is harder to demonise. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has pursued extreme and morally unconscionable anti-immigration policies, such as the recently reversed policy of separating migrant children from their families at the southern border with Mexico.

Similarly, in many European countries, the backlash against globalisation has translated into virulent opposition to migration, not to mention increased resistance to European integration. Voters in Austria, Hungary, and Italy have elected politicians who campaigned explicitly against immigration. In the United Kingdom, the 2016 Brexit referendum partly reflected a rejection of the free movement of people within the European Union.

By encouraging unilateralism, and to some extent even authoritarianism, the backlash against globalisation threatens not only to prevent countries from reaping the economic benefits of openness, but also to undermine the structures of international cooperation that have supported nearly three-quarters of a century of relative peace

since World War II.

Reversing this trend will require, of course, the unequivocal rejection of policies that flout democratic values and repudiation of the leaders who advocate and implement them. But it will also demand efforts to address globalisation's real negative effects—beginning with an excessively unequal income distribution. Here, measures like a carbon price or a "Tobin tax" on international financial transactions could help. In my country, Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration may need to consider direct wage hikes.

Today's globalised world is far from perfect. But protectionist and isolationist policies will only make things worse, especially if they are used as an excuse to deny basic human rights to immigrants, among others. Balanced policies aimed at reaping the benefits of openness—and ensuring that those benefits are broadly shared—may not be the most politically expedient option today; but they would do economies and societies a lot of good tomorrow.

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(Exclusive to The Daily Star)

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QUOTABLE Quote



GEORGE WASHINGTON
(1732-1799)

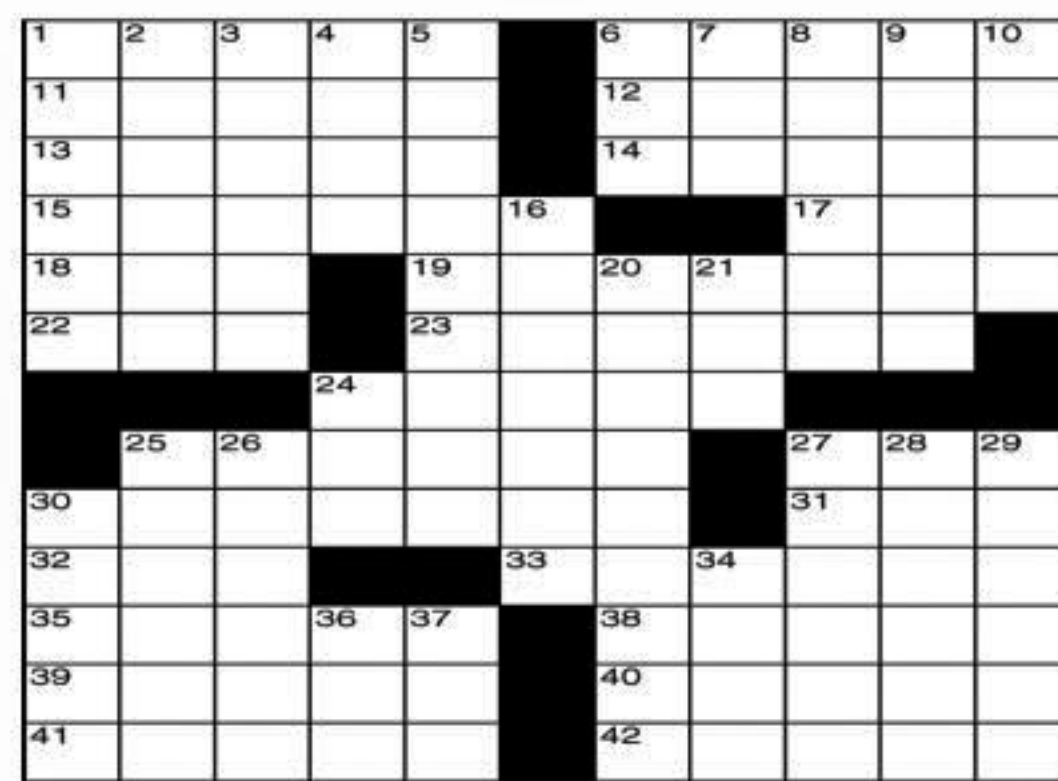
The first president of the United States

If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Narrow cuts
 - 6 Knowing
 - 11 Mystic deck
 - 12 Was partial
 - 13 Make amends
 - 14 Hackneyed
 - 15 Musical handi-cap
 - 17 Martini base
 - 18 Compass dir.
 - 19 Inlaid art
 - 22 Turf
 - 23 Math comparisons
 - 24 Programming pro
 - 25 Roma's land
 - 27 Spinning toy
 - 30 Complication
 - 31 Arles article
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 - 2 Barrio resident
 - 3 Freed of wrinkles
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 - 5 Flatten
 - 6 Braying beast
 - 7 Funny fellow
 - 8 Slow tempo
 - 9 Mementos
 - 10 Perfect places
 - 16 Band aides
- 32 Steal from
- 33 Thinly scattered
- 35 Humble
- 38 Up to
- 39 Hindu mystics
- 40 "Q & A" star
- 41 Train stations
- 42 Kicked, in a way
- 20 Victorian sci-fi genre
- 21 Broadcast
- 24 Truck part
- 25 Asimov classic
- 26 Caribbean island
- 27 Slow mover
- 28 Like some training
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- 36 Quick taste
- 37 Mountain road feature

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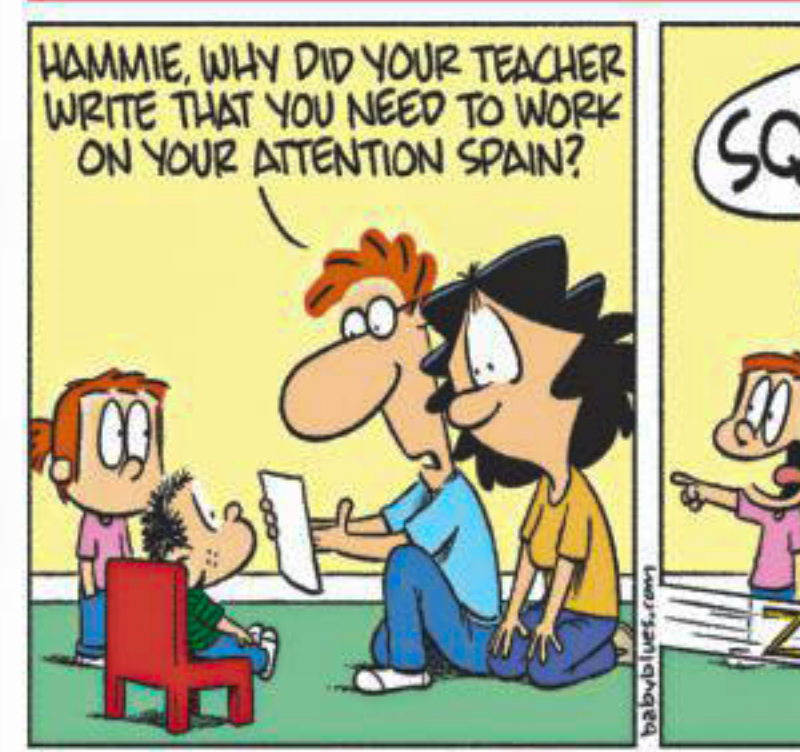
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