

Banning migration of female workers is not the solution



RECENTLY, some activists and organisations have been calling for a “ban” on migration of female workers from Bangladesh, especially to countries where there is a high probability of them facing exploitation, physical and sexual abuse, or worse. But as a migrant rights activist, I believe that imposing a ban on the migration of women is not the solution, rather it might have negative consequences affecting the overall labour migration scenario in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi women migrant workers have endured hardships and vulnerabilities since the beginning of their recruitment as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. In response, Bangladesh government, in an effort to protect women migrants, put a ban on their migration in 1981. Later, the ban rolled out in different forms of restriction till 2003. Evidence shows that such restrictions on their mobility and employment encouraged undocumented migration of women workers. Further, it made them victims of human trafficking.

Although estimates of the number of victims vary, a 2001 report said that around 200,000 Bangladeshi women and children were trafficked out of the country in the ten years between 1991 and 2000. The primary destinations of these women and children were either India or Pakistan, but the final destinations were Gulf countries. Another report published in 2003 by the AFP mentioned that every year, around 20,000 women and children became victims of human trafficking from Bangladesh to India, Pakistan and countries in the Gulf. These figures show that the ban and restrictions on official recruitment of women workers had put them at high risks of human trafficking.

In 2003, the government lifted all forms of bans and restrictions on women migrant workers, largely due to the demands of civil society organisations. After that, the government took several positive steps in 2007 to ensure the protection of women



Some female migrant workers, who returned home after having endured torture by their Saudi employers, walk out of the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

migrant workers. Among those steps are: visa attestation by Bangladesh embassy for women migrant workers; issuance of individual work permit; mandatory pre-departure training for outbound women domestic workers, etc. The government also brought down the age limit of women domestic workers from 35 to 25.

The current government adopted the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act in 2013 to ensure safe migration and protection of workers. The act has given the rights to get information for migration;

file civil lawsuits against any offence falling under the act or the conditions of the employment contract stipulated in the act; get repatriation in case of an arrest by the local authority in the destination country or being caught in a conflict situation or other difficult circumstances. The government also adopted the Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy in 2016 which guarantees establishing a rights-based protection system in all four stages of migration: pre-departure, departure, post-arrival, and upon return.

Apart from these, the migration management rules and the wage earners’ welfare policy were adopted in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Unfortunately, there has been little implementation of these laws and policies. The recruitment of Bangladeshi workers for overseas job remains quite unfair and unethical. In her maiden speech during the first meeting of the National Steering Committee on Migration, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, “There is a group of *dalals* and frauds in the country who send people

abroad for work by taking a hefty amount of money.” She instructed the responsible departments to increase vigilance so as to stop such unscrupulous activities and to raise awareness among overseas jobseekers.

In such a context, women migrant workers of Bangladesh often become the victim of abuse, exploitation and rights violations in the migration cycle. According to media reports, more than 1,000 women migrants returned home after falling victim to abuse and exploitation within the first ten months in 2019. This is a grave concern for all of us. Such abuse and exploitation have critical negative effects on both the women and their families which might result in creating social and financial burdens for the country. We demand that this trend be stopped immediately. We don’t want to see our women migrants sent back from abroad empty-handed, abused and exploited.

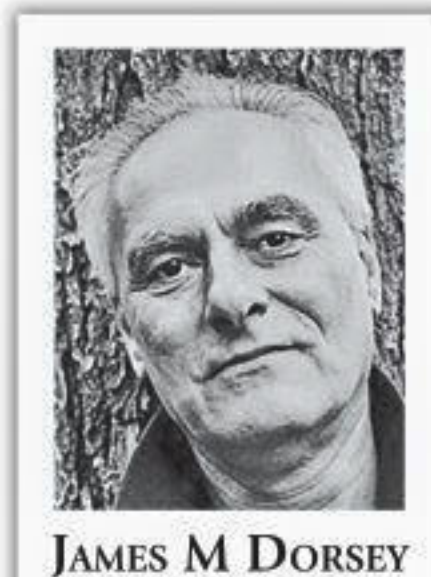
Unfortunately, there are little protection measures for the workers aboard. Only 30 officials are appointed in two “labour wings” in a huge country like Saudi Arabia, serving around 2.5 million Bangladeshi workers. Compared to other ministries, the government allocates little budget for the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment. According to the research conducted by our organisation Ovbashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), it shows that the ministry was the third-lowest recipient of all ministries in the 2018-2019 national budget. Of the total allocation of the ministry’s budget, only 0.088 percent was allocated for development programmes.

Undertaking comprehensive protection measures for the workers abroad should be a priority for the Bangladesh government. This will require increasing resources and quality of services in the labour wings, ensuring fair recruitment as well as redress. Be mindful that Bangladeshi migrant workers earn around USD 15 billion every year, which boosts our economy significantly. We expect that the concerned ministry will take immediate measures to ensure and increase the protection of migrant workers, especially female, instead of placing an ill-advised restriction or ban on their migration.

Shakirul Islam is Chairperson of OKUP, a grassroots organisation working on migration.

MIDDLE EASTERN PROTESTS

A tug of war over who has the longer breath



MASS anti-government protests in several Arab countries are turning into competitions to determine who has the longer breath, the protesters or the government.

In Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq, countries in which the leader was either forced to resign or has agreed to step down, authorities appear to be dragging their feet on handovers of power or agreed transitional power sharing arrangements in the hope that protesters—determined to hold on to their street power until a political transition process is firmly in place—either lose their momentum or are racked by internal differences.

So far, protesters are holding their ground, having learnt the lesson that their achievements are likely to be rolled back if they vacate the street before having cemented an agreement on the rules of the transitional game and process.

Algerians remain on the streets, seven months after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was forced to step down, in demand of a complete change of the political system.

Scores of recent arrests on charges that include “harming national unity” and “undermining the morale of the army” have failed to deter Algerians who refuse to accept the military’s proposed December 12 date for elections.

Lebanon enters its second months of protests with the government going through the motions but ultimately failing to respond

to demands for a technocratic government, a new non-sectarian electoral law and early elections.

An effort to replace Prime Minister Saad Hariri with another member of the elite, Mohammad Safadi, a billionaire businessman and former finance minister, was rejected by the protesters.

“We are staying here. We don’t know how long—maybe one or two months or one or two years. Maybe it will take 10 years to get the state we are dreaming of, but everything starts with a first step,” said filmmaker Perla Joe Maalouli.

Weeks after agreeing to resign in response to popular pressure, Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mehdi appears to be increasingly firm in his saddle.

Much like what prompted US President George H.W. Bush to first call in 1991 for a popular revolt against Saddam Hussein and then give the Iraqi strongman the tools to crush the uprising, Mr Mehdi is holding on to power in the absence of a credible candidate acceptable to the political elite to replace him.

Mr Mehdi’s position is strengthened by the fact that neither the United States nor Iran wants a power vacuum to emerge in Baghdad.

Backtracking on Mr Mehdi’s resignation and refraining from appointing a prime minister who credibly holds out the promise of real change is likely to harden the battle lines between the protesters and the government.

The tugs of war highlight the pitfalls protesters and governments need to manoeuvre in what amounts to a complex game with governments seeking to pacify demonstrators by seemingly entertaining their demands, yet plotting to maintain

fundamental political structures that anti-government activists want to uproot.

The risk of a tug of war is that protests turn violent, as seen in Hong Kong or in Lebanon where cars of parliamentarians were attacked as they drove this week towards the assembly.

Meeting protesters’ demands and aspirations that drive the demonstrations and figure across the Middle East and North Africa, irrespective of whether grievances have spilled into streets, is what makes economic and social reform a tricky business for the region’s autocrats. Its where what is needed

for sustainable reforms bounces up against ever more repressive security states intent on exercising increasingly tight control.

A sustainable reform requires capable and effective institutions rather than bloated, bureaucratic job banks and decentralisation with greater authorities granted to municipalities and regions.

Altering social contracts by introducing or increasing taxes, reducing subsidies for basic goods and narrowing opportunities for government employment will have to be buffered by greater transparency that provides

the public insight into how the government ensures that it benefits from the still evolving new social contract.

To many protesters, Sudan has validated protesters’ resolve to retain street power until transitional arrangements are put in place.

It took five months after the toppling of President Omar al-Bashir and a short-lived security force crackdown in which some 100 people were killed before the military, the protesters and political groups agreed and put in place a transitional power-sharing process.

The process involved the creation of a sovereign council made up of civilians and military officers that is governing the country and managing its democratic transition.

Even so, transitional experiences have yet to prove their mettle. Protesters may have learnt lessons from the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

Yet, this time round, protesters lack the broad-based international empathy that 2011 uprisings enjoyed and are up against more than domestic forces backed by conservative Gulf states. Powers like Russia and China make no bones about their rejection of protest as an expression of popular political will.

So has Iran that has much at stake in Iraq and Lebanon, countries where anti-sectarian sentiment is strong among protesters, even if the Islamic republic was born in one of the 20th century’s epic popular revolts and is confronting protests of its own against fuel price hikes.

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Demonstrators carry national flags and gesture during an anti-government protest along a highway in Jal el-Dib, Lebanon, on October 21, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMED AZAKIR

QUOTABLE Quote

FRANZ KAFKA
(1883- 1924)
German-language writer.

“Youth is happy because it has the capacity to see beauty. Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old.”

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

Across

- 1 Seize
- 5 Traverse
- 10 Math comparison
- 12 Main artery
- 13 Feature of the European Union
- 15 Relaxing retreat
- 16 Fitting
- 17 USO patrons
- 18 Bun-topping seed
- 20 “Yup” opposite
- 21 Supply with a new staff
- 22 Wallet bills
- 23 “Nonsense!”
- 25 List-ending abbr.
- 28 Green shade

Down

- 1 Disgusting
- 2 Drake or Dre
- 3 Relaxed
- 4 Storage spot
- 5 Shopping aid
- 6 Piston connector
- 7 Salem’s state
- 8 Rank indicator
- 9 Talks back to
- 11 First family of 2010
- 14 Reception, of sorts
- 19 Plentiful
- 20 Like some situations
- 24 Woolly mammal
- 25 Try
- 26 Asian capital
- 27 Go to
- 29 Ben of “Pippin”
- 30 Left
- 33 Scrumptious
- 35 Purposes
- 38 Maiden name label
- 39 Batting stat

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

T I A S S T A M P
I N T O O W N E R S
A B E L R I N G I N
R E A D I E R A V A
A D M I R A L T A R
E A T V O T E
S C O R N G E N E S
E O N S P O T
A L E G E N E R A L
L O A U P G R A D E
U N C L I P A D A M
P E R C L U S E N I N O
L E V E R S O O N

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

YOU’LL NEVER CATCH ANY FISH IN THAT LITTLE PUDDLE

I KNOW... I DIDN’T CATCH ANY YESTERDAY IN THE LAKE, EITHER

I JUST LIKE TO FISH!

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

GRUNT! SNORT! GROWL!

MORNING, MOM.

THAT WAS MOM, WASN’T IT?

BEAR! BEAR! BEAR!