

Decent work and migration: The path towards sustainable remittance growth

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Twenty-eight-year-old Ahmed Jamal, from Barishal, was working as a labourer in Oman since 2018. He was forced to return to Bangladesh during the pandemic. As a result, he lost his primary source of income along with the hefty recruitment fee he had paid to secure the job initially.

"Upon arriving in Oman, my passport was seized by my employer. I was forced to work longer hours than what had been initially been agreed and was only able to sleep for three to four hours a day. At the same time, I was only paid half the salary I was promised," said Jamal.

Jamal's story isn't an outlier. It is the story of many migrant workers who travel to foreign countries with the hope of making a decent living. Instead, they become victims of their employers and middlemen.

Covid-19 further exacerbated the situation of Bangladeshi migrant workers, with many workers being forced to return amidst the height of the pandemic.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed exactly how and to what level



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wage thefts are occurring and how the migrant workers are being sent back without proper guidelines. We have to hold these countries accountable for the injustice suffered by the migrant workers, and for that, establishing decent work standards can act as a tool to ensure this accountability," said Dr Tasneem Siddiqui, Professor of Political Science at the University of Dhaka and founding chair of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

The International Labour

Organization (ILO) defines "decent work" as productive work where workers can generate adequate income. Additionally, the rights of workers are protected and there is sufficient social protection to prevent the exploitation of workers. Decent work also ensures that workers are not only working as a means to an end, but are given the scope to develop their skill and potential so they can also contribute to the development of society.

"The four pillars of decent work include the right to work, right at work, social protection, and social dialogue. We have seen that while these migrant workers have the right to work, they had no rights at work. Social protection was not ensured as they encountered wage thefts, and were not provided with provident funds or health benefits. When we have legal proceedings for these migrant workers, it should be done based on decent work," added Dr Siddiqui.

Shariful Hasan, Head of Migration Programme at BRAC, said, "One of the ways in which we can ensure decent work is by focusing on making our migrant workers more skilled. If we send fewer skilled migrant

workers instead of a large number of unskilled workers, then the volume of remittance will increase. That is why the government should make skills training mandatory for migrant workers. This will also lower the fees migrant workers have to pay, as skilled workers are more in demand. The government should also facilitate training centres alongside making the training mandatory."

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To do so, it would require the government to commit more resources to the migration sector. A core component would be strict monitoring of private recruitment agencies and crackdown on middlemen who use illegal channels. Migrant workers should also be provided with proper support from Bangladeshi missions in the destination countries to minimise the risk of exploitation and passport and phone seizure.

The cost of migration should also be reduced and low-interest credit facilities should be made available so that migration is more accessible. Bangladesh should set up an advisory committee to properly monitor the migration process and reduce fraudulent activities by private recruitment agents. The government should also disseminate information on the safe migration process to raise awareness amongst prospective migrants.

Social protection measures such as health and insurance should be specified in the contracts of the workers, and they should be adequately briefed about the benefits they are entitled to during the pre-departure training.

The challenges faced by female migrant workers can be significantly worse. In April 2019, 14-year-old Umme Kulsum from Brahmanbaria, right after completing class seven, was sent to Saudi Arabia as a migrant worker. Her documents falsely showed her age as 26. After migration, she sent money regularly to her family for seven months. One day, she informed her family members that her owner had

injured her hands, legs and shoulder. On August 20, 2020, her family came to know that Kulsum was no more.

These stories come out frequently in our media. The role of foreign remittance has significantly been necessary to uplift Bangladesh onto the threshold of middle-income countries. Here, the strength of female migrant workers is now at almost 10 percent of the total migrant workforce, although they receive lower payments than men.

In the last five years, 487 dead bodies of women migrant workers were brought back to Bangladesh. Among the deceased, 86 had committed suicide, 167 died from a stroke, 71 died in accidents, and 115 were reported as normal deaths. The entire scenario cannot be understood since there is a lack of data regarding the condition of migrant women in destination countries and returnee women migrants in Bangladesh.

The situation, however, isn't so precarious according to the high officials of the Government; they tend to believe that the percentage of persecuted migrant women is meagre. However, an enquiry led by the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in 2019 revealed the destitute conditions of returnee women workers from Saudi Arabia. It found that around 35 percent of returnees had experienced physical torture or sexual abuse and 44 percent were not paid their salary regularly. This highlights the gravity of the situation.

The real problem behind the setback of female migrants in destination countries, however, is that before migration, they don't get a proper training program, which is highly required for them. As of now, they are provided with only one month of training, which has been insufficient to face a completely new situation in an unknown country.

Remittance has been a core component in Bangladesh's development, and as we continue on our developmental path, with the goal of achieving the SDGs on the horizon, it will continue to serve as an important factor. That is why we must ensure that we do not leave behind those who give their blood and sweat to bring this prized remittance to the country, and to do so we must ensure that in the coming years, decent work is ensured for all migrant workers.

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