

Our migrant workers deserve better protection



According to an Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program report from last year, 88 percent of the 262 female migrant workers they surveyed were not provided with a written job contract.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42

into the real beneficiaries of this business, even though it is clear that corrupt government officials are also involved in giving approval to the migration process.

Experts have also argued that regularising the middlemen or sub-agents who recruit migrant workers and elevating them from their role as “brokers” is the ultimate solution

to this problem. This can be done by registering them at the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), or at district employment and manpower offices.

The capacity of embassies and their staff to provide crucial services to migrant workers must be strengthened as well, and ease of access must be ensured. In Digital Bangladesh, is it too much to expect migrant workers to have access to an online portal

that will support them through their immigration journey, and act as their first port of call for help when required?

Finally, the government must also acknowledge the fact that migrant workers face abuse and exploitation (and in worst cases, death) abroad, and that they and their families require support when they return home. Investigations must be opened into every single migrant death and abuse, and the authorities must put pressure on the

host country to provide details of the circumstances. Psychosocial support for workers who have faced violence is a crucial factor here, especially female workers who have been sexually abused.

Support must also be given to returning migrant workers to ensure they have work at home, or are able to go abroad again. Training and upskilling of workers is a crucial factor here, since the more skilled they are, the less likely

they are to be exploited in irregular, low-skilled jobs. While the government initiative of a loan fund worth Tk 1,290 crore last year to help returning migrant workers (among others) is appreciated, accessibility of such funds remains an obstacle for many.

However, it is also true that destination countries can often hold unfair leverage – if a labour-exporting country demands better protections for their workers, they can simply threaten to take their business elsewhere. The lack of recognition of migrant workforces’ contributions in the host country’s economic development, and the absence of a rights-based regime for workers, definitely increase their vulnerability. This is especially true in the Gulf States, where studies have shown a lack of labour laws that protect workers, and a general apathy towards implementing structural reforms.

Hence, it is high time for countries who have a high number of migrant workers to come together to collectively articulate their demands for workers’ rights and protections in regional and global forums and processes. There is strength in numbers, and as the change in the kafala system of recruitment in Saudi Arabia demonstrates, it is possible to continuously campaign for change and see it happen, despite the huge resistance it initially faces.

Experts have said that pressure must be put on destination countries to commit to commissioning independent investigations into the death of each migrant worker, and to provide primary and emergency healthcare for low-paid migrant workers free of charge, regardless of their immigration status. Bangladeshi embassies can play a role in creating access to such healthcare as well.

All of these steps, however, have to be precluded by one important condition – the acknowledgement and understanding, from all concerned, that migrant workers are human beings who have rights, and who deserve decent work and living wages; they are not just economic units that contribute to our forex reserves and growth trajectory.

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