

From 2000 to 2022, 103 Bangladeshi migrant workers died in Singapore



INFOGRAPH: ZARIF FAIZ

BANGLADESHI MIGRANT DEATHS IN SINGAPORE

# Stronger labour laws and basic human rights still elusive

The Migrant Worker Death Map is a visual, geographical representation of migrant worker deaths that have been reported in Singapore over the last two decades. View our website in full here: [www.migrantdeathmap.sg](http://www.migrantdeathmap.sg)

MIGRANT DEATH MAP TEAM, FROM SINGAPORE

From afar, Singapore glimmers with wealth and prosperity, but beneath the surface lies a dark truth: the exploitation of its migrant workers. Among the most vulnerable are young Bangladeshi men, who make up the largest demographic within migrant worker deaths. The dream of a better life in Singapore is often far from the reality that awaits them, as they find themselves mired in harsh working conditions, massive debt, and a lack of support structures.

At Migrant Death Map, we documented all reported migrant worker deaths from January 1, 2000 to August 3, 2022 in Singapore, using data found in local newspapers and the Ministry of Manpower's Workplace Safety and Health Reports, and investigated the key issues surrounding these deaths. This project was born out of inspiration, necessity, disbelief, and the desire to commit the names and lives of migrant workers to our nation's collective memory.

There are multiple, intersecting factors that cause migrant deaths in Singapore. Workplace fatalities are the leading cause of death, accounting for 66 percent of all migrant worker deaths in our dataset. According to the Singapore Ministry of Manpower's own data, 37 workers died and 12,766 were injured in 2021. This means that a worker died at

had no safety features installed. Salim Miah died in 2017 after being hit and crushed by a dislodged metal plate. According to a media report, he had been "left to his own devices" working in an excavator pit that contained "no system to ensure that approved construction methods were used." In each case, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) found that the employers had failed to provide safe working conditions for their employees. Unfortunately, we archive many more deaths like these in our datasheet and map.

Despite the way it is perceived by the rest of the world, Singapore is very much lacking in terms of safety infrastructures in place for migrant workers. Importantly, we must recognise that workplace safety is not limited to construction sites and shipyards. Factors such as a worker's healthcare, mental health, and transportation all play a part in creating a safe working environment. Take the issue of transport, for example, which has been a point of contention and lobbying in Singapore for over a decade. Migrant workers travel to and from their worksites on the back of lorries – an outdated practice that continues to be normalised and justified for the migrant worker population alone. In 2009, it was reported that "an average of four workers a week never reached their destinations in one

workers in Singapore is another major issue. While some NGOs provide assistance, the Singaporean government and the Bangladesh embassy provide little support to these vulnerable individuals. As a result, many workers feel isolated and helpless when they face problems such as unpaid wages, abuse by employers or medical emergencies. The support provided by NGOs can also be superficial and not address the root causes of these issues.

We have all heard someone say, after learning about a death, that "things are worse in the Middle East," or "Singapore is better than where they come from." That kind of thinking is part of the narrative we should try and change.

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A death is a death, and false comparisons are not helpful. Countries like Singapore cannot keep pointing fingers at other countries – it must step up and take accountability as one of the richest nations in the world. Anything less would be morally bankrupt. Many are not aware that some Middle Eastern countries have already outlawed practices that are still present in Singapore, such as the lorry transportation of migrant workers.

From a policy perspective, there are obvious changes that need to be made. The Singaporean government and employers must take responsibility for the safety and well-being of their workers. Moreover, labour laws must be strengthened in order to end exploitative practices and ensure workers' rights. The Bangladesh High Commission in Singapore must also be better advocates for their citizens, and stop turning a blind eye to unethical practices. Curiously, the high commission charges a fee (Tk 950) for IPA Attestations to workers applying to come to Singapore. This is an unnecessary procedure which amounts to a significant amount of money in BDT. These collections must be stopped immediately as they do not guarantee that a worker can get a job in Singapore, and so serve no useful purpose. The Singapore government also collects a "foreign worker levy," of which there is no publicly available information on what the money is used for. Why has the Bangladesh High Commission never publicly questioned this?

It should be made clear that we are not trying to discourage people from coming to Singapore for work. But there does need to be greater awareness on the realities of migrant work in Singapore, so that we can call upon the relevant powers that be to instate stronger labour laws and basic human rights for all workers. Everyone deserves dignified work.

# What should women wear?

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In May 2022, a young woman, who lives in Dhaka city, was verbally and physically assaulted at a train station in Narsingdi while waiting for a Dhaka-bound train. The assault was initiated by a local elderly lady who accused her of wearing "indecent clothes." Later, a few other men, waiting at the station, joined the elderly lady.

The video of this assault was recorded and posted on social media that led to protests and critical reactions among citizens and women's rights organisations. Subsequently, a case was filed and the accused were arrested. The accused later sought bail at the High Court, which was challenged by the lawyer of the victim who argued that a woman has the right to wear clothes as she pleases and cannot be harassed for this. In response, the High Court observed, "Do people not have the right to preserve their heritage, culture, and tradition? Is clothing not part of the culture? The socioeconomic status of society one is in should also be considered. Dhaka has one kind of environment and rural areas have their own" (*The Daily Star*, August 2022).

Many human rights organisations protested the High Court's statement; for instance, Ain O Salish Kendra issued a statement saying "it goes against women's equality, constitutional rights, internationally recognised human rights standards, and the current government's policies regarding women empowerment." In contrast, groups of students at the

did not vary much based on where they lived – urban or rural. Younger people tend to agree more compared to the older, although the differences are not very pronounced. Similarly, people's opinions differed very little across income status, but views started to change at a higher income level. For instance, 40 percent of the respondents earning Tk 5,000-30,000 per month said yes to the statement, but it came down to 30 percent (a significant drop) when their income level reached Tk 50,000 and above. The same trend can be observed across educational levels – about 40 percent of people with no or primary education to higher secondary level responded yes to the statement, but such positive opinion went down to 36 percent (a moderate decline) for higher education (graduates and above) cohort.

As noted earlier, about 60 percent of the respondents were not in favour of women wearing clothes to their liking. They were asked what specific types of dresses they found objectionable. Western clothes top the list (53 percent), followed by indecent clothes (41 percent). Among those who disliked Western clothes, there are more females (57 percent) compared to males (44 percent). When asked what they meant by "indecent," the majority mentioned sleeveless tops and kameezes, while other categories of objectionable clothes include shorts, fitted/body hugging, and see-through/transparent. Only one percent mentioned that they find un-Islamic clothing (such as not wearing a burqa or hijab) unacceptable. People against *deshi* or sub-continental clothes also constituted a mere one percent of the respondents.

More respondents belonging to the lowest monthly income group said they did not like indecent clothing, while more respondents in the highest income group said they did not like Western attire. Differences in responses across educational



ILLUSTRATION: SADATUDDIN AHMED EMIL

Islamic University in Kushtia, Dhaka University and North South University arranged human chains, holding placards with slogans like "Culture against social norms and values are unacceptable," "Stop public nuisance in the name of right to dress" and endorsed the High Court's observations (*The Daily Star*, August 2022).

To what extent do such contentious opinions on the Narsingdi event represent the prevailing collective norms and values of our society in relation to women's rights to wear clothes as they please? Thanks to a recent nationally representative survey (sample size 10,218; survey conducted in November-December 2022), now perhaps we can reflect on the question in an informed and systematic manner, rather than speculating on it or trying to answer it based on anecdotes. The survey asked if people agree with the statement "I believe women can wear dresses as they please."

About 40 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement and the rest disagreed. However, there is a gender difference: only 32 percent of the men respondents agreed compared to 49 percent of the women. People's perceptions

are not very pronounced, but it appears that highly educated respondents (graduates and above) reported more disliking towards "indecent dresses" compared to others.

What meta-level social dynamics can we discern from our findings? Two features stand out: firstly, societal norms, as they relate to women's choice of clothing, tend to be generally diffused in the society and not sharply clustering around economic class, gender, education, location, and demographic factors. Is this due to increasingly generalised accessibility to media, both electronic and social, which is flattening the normative landscape? Secondly, what is deemed as objectionable seem to be predominantly informed by ethnic-cultural identity (anti-Western) which is also secular, i.e. hardly based on religious values. Other findings indicate that women, across economic classes, tend to be anti-Western, and such a value also seems to slightly cluster around people with high income. These are some of the normative "puzzles" that we cannot attempt to deal with in the short spaces of an op-ed.



Migrant workers outside the Punggol S-11 workers' dormitory in Singapore. PHOTO: REUTERS

their workplace every 10 days, and 35 workers were injured at work every day. Many of these fatalities involved Bangladeshi men.

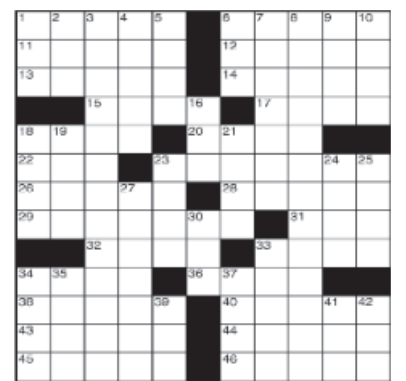
While there is a risk involved in manual labour, the lack of safety faced by migrant workers at their workplaces are not inherent to the nature of their work, but symptoms of an exploitative labour regime where lives are staked for capitalistic gain. Many of these accidents are preventable, and involve employer negligence. Shafiqul Samad died in 2006 after being punctured in the head by a mobile scaffolding unit, which was not properly attached to its frame. Aminul Islam Ali Hossain died in 2008 from extensive burns – the result of a flash fire caused by equipment leaks that had not been repaired. Khorim died in 2014 after being crushed by a steel gate that

piece." Why must we accept this as status quo? Many workers dream of a better life in Singapore, but this often comes at a steep cost. The debt that workers incur in order to pay recruitment agents can take years to pay off, and the high cost of living in Singapore makes it even more difficult to make ends meet. The harsh working conditions, lack of healthcare subsidies and limited insurance coverage, lack of nutrition and balance in catered food, and substandard living accommodations further compound their difficulties. Many workers also incur "health" debts, as they are compelled to delay seeking medical treatment until they return to Bangladesh. This often results in missed diagnoses and serious health complications.

The lack of support structures for migrant

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 Coil inventor  
6 Pale  
11 Knight wear  
12 Handle  
13 Drain cover  
14 Theater units  
15 Trick  
17 Ask for divine help  
18 Newspaper section  
20 Needs to  
22 Slight, in slang  
23 Libya neighbor  
26 Allergy sound  
28 As a follower  
29 Like a bright night  
31 Need to pay  
32 Trapper's item  
33 Health resorts  
34 Band boosters  
36 Trade  
38 Runs into  
40 Bumbling  
43 Snowy wader  
44 Shake accessory  
45 Hoarse  
46 Cannot avoid
- DOWN**  
1 Price place  
2 Misstep  
3 They get their money's worth  
4 Water flower  
5 God of war  
6 Braying animal  
7 Enters via osmosis  
8 Frightening events  
9 Blues singer  
10 Prone to pry  
16 Outback bird  
18 First fellow  
19 "Little Caesar" role  
21 Foot or fathom  
23 Bridge fee  
24 Hawkeye's home  
25 Fills with wonder  
27 Ballroom dance  
30 "– a deal!"  
33 Dancer's boss  
34 From the U.S.  
35 Really large  
37 Desire  
39 Sow site  
41 Tritite  
42 Binary base



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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