

INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY



FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

There is a major gap in rendering support to migrant workers in the destination countries.

Challenges that our migrant workers face



Dr CR Abrar is an academic and executive director of the migration think tank Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

CR ABRAR

On December 18, the global community acknowledges and celebrates the contributions of millions of migrants worldwide. Through their hard work and under challenging circumstances, migrant workers of Bangladesh not only bring a big difference to their own households, but also to the economies and societies of their countries of origin and destination. There is also a growing recognition of the migrant workers' contribution to the attainment of the sustainable development goals.

Bangladeshi migrant workers require a range of services and support at both the origin and destination ends. Successive governments have framed policies and laws and established institutional frameworks to cater to the multifaceted needs of our migrant workers. However, despite the progress made over the last few decades, a lot more still needs to be done. For one, there is a major gap in rendering support to these workers in the destination countries. The capacity of extending such support is largely conditioned by policies in the destination countries concerned. Resource mobilisation for the offices of labour attached to those countries is another major constraint.

Lack of information about availability of work in destination countries and securing work visas are perhaps the most daunting issues an aspiring migrant worker faces in Bangladesh. The information dissemination initiatives of the government and non-government sectors on safe and regular migration—though important—have thus far remained largely inadequate. Likewise, at the destination end, the migrated workers have little knowledge about their rights, duties, and entitlements. Left to the whims of their *kafeel* (sponsors), Bangladeshi migrant workers are mostly unaware about where and how they can seek redress for the failings of their recruiters and employers. The limited capacity of Bangladesh missions and the absence of civil society institutions in most destination countries make the workers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Among the South Asian countries, migrant workers from Bangladesh have to bear the highest migration cost. There is a huge gap between the state-set cost of migration and the amount that workers actually have to pay an agent for facilitating their migration. Visa trading at the destination end, propensity to earn more profit by the syndicates of unscrupulous commanding recruiting agencies with access to corridors of power, prevalence of a series of intermediaries at home and abroad, and the near-absence

of oversight mechanism by the state have all contributed to the high migration costs in the country. Needless to say, high migration costs negatively impact migrant workers' well-being.

Bangladeshi workers dominate the low-skilled category in most labour markets in the Gulf as well as Southeast Asian countries. Lack of skills and education not only subjects them to low pay, but it also makes them vulnerable to ill treatment and abuse. To upgrade the skills of the workforce in

There is a major gap in migrant workers' access to justice, both in countries of origin and destination. While procuring their work visas, aspirant workers are often subjected to fraudulent practices by recruiting agents and their informal intermediaries. In many instances, they are provided false information on jobs, wages, and other entitlements.

general, including the migrant workers, Bangladesh has invested large sums of resources in establishing technical training centres in different parts of the country over the last decade or so. It is time investments were made to upgrade the capacity of the trainers and introduce courses that are in demand in destination countries. The burgeoning demands for care providers, medical technicians, nurses, and also for workers in hospitality and tourism sectors (which require soft skills) call for out-of-the-box planning for skills development.

There is a major gap in migrant workers' access to justice, both in countries of origin and destination. While procuring their work visas, aspirant workers are often subjected to fraudulent practices by recruiting agents and their informal intermediaries. In many instances, they are provided false information on jobs, wages, and other entitlements that are not reflected in reality. Despite being subjected to deceit, our migrant workers have little scope to seek legal recourse. At the destination end, many workers endure a lot of hardship, including non-placement against jobs promised, non-payment and irregular payment of wages, and physical and verbal abuse. The workers' inability to understand the local language and to secure services of interpreters

and legal counsels, as well as non-availability of legal aid support, deprive them of their right to access justice.

Healthcare of migrant workers in destination countries is one of the most neglected areas in policy discourse. Over the last couple of years, three Vital Signs reports on the healthcare provisions, death of migrant workers, and impact of climate change on migrant workers in the Gulf region shed important light on the deficits that exist. Migrant workers' lack of access to non-emergency healthcare services was identified as a major problem. Another shortcoming is an increased privatisation of the healthcare system in the Gulf states and employers' lack of interest and accountability in procuring and renewing appropriate medical insurance for their workers. The higher temperatures caused by climate change have adversely impacted and will further impact migrant workers who work in open spaces, such as in construction and plantation sectors. The generally challenging work and living conditions of migrant workers often take a toll on their health, leading to many untimely deaths. The causes of migrants' deaths are also not always duly recorded, leading to loss of compensations for the deceased workers' families.

Return and reintegration of migrant workers are yet another area for policy intervention. During the post-Covid period, the reintegration strategies framed in Bangladesh largely focused on extending loans to returnee migrants. While such schemes are critical for returnee workers who wish to engage in entrepreneurial activities, a reintegration strategy must also encompass those who may not be interested in business ventures, those who have specialised skills, those who have returned empty-handed, and those who have endured trauma and abuse.

Over the years, the civil society in Bangladesh has rendered invaluable support to policy and legislative formulation processes pertaining to labour migration. They have also had major engagement with migrants and their families on information dissemination for safe migration, remittance transfer and utilisation, financial literacy, and access to justice including alternative dispute settlement. Academia has played a critical role in generating new knowledge based on lived experiences of labour migrants, both on the origin and destination ends. There is a strong case to meaningfully and substantively incorporate the perspective of civil society in policy planning and implementation. Most importantly, the voices of migrant workers are critical for deciding on sound and effective policies.

In 2023, International Migrants Day is being observed as Bangladesh is going through a grave foreign reserve dip. Perhaps now is the time for this nation to commit to addressing the complex array of problems that our migrant workforce encounters both here and abroad.

We must honour our migrant workers, so others follow suit



Shariful Hasan is associate director of the BRAC Migration Programme and Youth Platform and also a columnist.

SHARIFUL HASAN

Amdadul Haque from Narsingdi was determined to change his family's financial condition. He went to Singapore last week, believing that he could fulfil this dream by migrating abroad.

Like Amdadul, hundreds of migrant workers have left Bangladesh this year in hopes for the same. These overseas employees have achieved a remarkable milestone. A staggering 1.25 million workers have reportedly been sent abroad in 2023, exceeding last year's record of 1.14 million. The top destinations for Bangladeshis in 2023, like last year, are Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Singapore, and Kuwait.

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment,

and "G" for garment workers. Though these three categories of people make up Bangladesh's biggest driving force, their rights are regularly exploited. We acknowledge the remittance but not the migrant workers who earn them. Instead, they face trouble throughout the migration process.

According to the World Bank and the IOM, the cost of labour migration from Bangladesh is the highest in the world, but the income of Bangladeshi migrants is the lowest. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducted a large-scale survey on the cost of migration from Bangladesh in 2020, revealing that our workers spend around Tk 4.71 lakh each to go abroad. The report says that Bangladeshi workers need nearly 18 months to recover their migration costs. Though the government has fixed the

in some cases.

It is also a common allegation of migrant workers that whenever they visit the Bangladeshi mission in their destination country in times of difficulty, they often face neglect. And, upon returning home after long periods of time, they also face harassment at the airport in Dhaka.

Many of our migrant workers also return empty-handed, especially female workers who are tortured and sexually abused while living abroad in utter despair.

A positive is that under the Recovery and Advancement of Informal Sector (RAISE) project, 30 welfare centres have been launched in 30 districts of the country, with the aim of reintegrating migrant workers who have returned from abroad. But the best initiative in 2023 for migrants has been the Probash scheme under the Universal Pension Scheme. Any expatriate Bangladeshi can participate in the Probash scheme by paying Tk 5,000, Tk 7,500 or Tk 10,000 in foreign currency as monthly instalments for at least 10 years. If a migrant pays Tk 10,000 monthly for 42 years, they will get a monthly pension of Tk 3,44,655. If they pay instalments for 30 years, they will get a monthly pension of Tk 1,24,660.

The government has also



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

more than 12 million Bangladeshis are currently working abroad. These workers are the torchbearers for the country as it goes through a foreign exchange reserve crisis.

In 1971, Bangladesh was one of the poorest countries in the world. But over the last decade, we became the fastest growing economy in Asia and the Pacific. And remittance from migrant workers played a vital role in this achievement. According to the World Migration Report 2022 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Bangladesh is the sixth-largest labour-sending country and the seventh-largest in terms of earning remittance. In the last fiscal year, our migrants sent home almost \$22 billion, which is six times higher than the country's total foreign aid or foreign direct investment.

In the last five decades, migrant workers have sent back a total of \$296 billion in remittances. It is because of this remittance that Bangladesh is no longer considered a poor country and is not dependent on foreign aid.

In my opinion, Bangladesh is a country of "EFG," where "E" stands for expatriate workers, "F" for farmers,

migration cost to 14 countries at a maximum of Tk 1.66 lakh, jobseekers have to pay three to six times higher.

This mismatch is due to the migration process being driven by middlemen who charge hefty amounts for their services. Visa trading is also a common practice, wherein middlemen are involved in the illegal selling and buying of work visas, ultimately adding to the cost of migration. In this regard, the government needs to be vocal about employers' pay models for recruitment. If an organisation in a destination country is in need of an employee, it should also bear the employer's responsibility to bear the recruitment costs.

However, high migration costs are not the only problem. Being issued a passport, getting a visa, and acquiring medical test results are all problematic, and the services are not the easiest to access. And after facing all these barriers, when a migrant finally reaches their destination, they are often exploited through a low salary or no salary, inhuman workload, dire living situations, exploitation, abuse, and even death

introduced a new insurance scheme for expatriates with more facilities. A Bangladeshi migrant worker is now eligible for insurance coverage of Tk 10 lakh—up from Tk 4 lakh—for workplace death and permanent disabilities. For partial permanent disabilities, the amount varies between 10 percent and 50 percent of the insurance coverage.

While the government has indeed taken various positive initiatives in the field of migration, there is still a long way to go. Skilling up workers before they migrate is still a challenge. Additionally, options for more destination countries must be explored. We also need a system wherein the whole recruitment process is transparent. Overall, good governance is required in the migration sector.

We must understand that migrants are not money-making machines; they are human beings who deserve dignity and better care. We need to advocate the rights and dignity of migrant workers every day. If we do not respect our own citizens, no one abroad will. If we honour them today, other countries will be bound to care for them as well.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Explain away
- 6 Tennis star Rafael
- 11 Conjure up
- 12 "Hello" singer
- 13 Flat
- 14 Sacred song
- 15 Shortly
- 17 Dove sound
- 18 Poetic "always"
- 19 Took a load off
- 22 Parched
- 23 Tidies up
- 24 Unwise undertaking
- 25 Go by
- 27 Research site
- 30 Outburst of violence
- 31 Potential

embryos

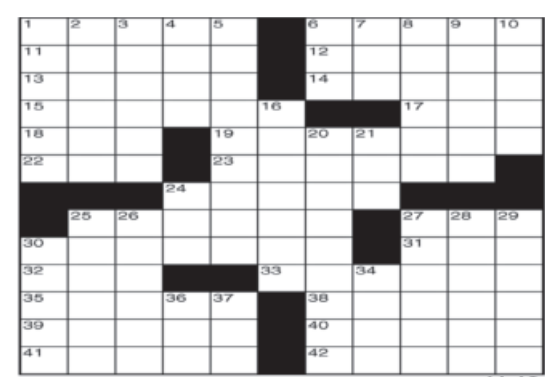
- 32 Put away
- 33 Starfleet weapon
- 35 Competitor
- 38 Not hidden
- 39 Carrot's kin
- 40 Racket
- 41 Minimum amount
- 42 Door sign

7 Spots

- 8 Man of the church
- 9 Permits
- 10 Cleaner scent
- 16 Evokes
- 20 Caller's need
- 21 Calendar box
- 24 Remote
- 25 Galahad's mother
- 26 Baltic nation
- 27 Blow one's top
- 28 Reluctant
- 29 Trade
- 30 Wild
- 34 River to the Severn
- 36 Cart puller
- 37 Rent out

DOWN

- 1 Depended
- 2 Less bumpy
- 3 Flaubert's "Madame—"
- 4 Hawaiian strings
- 5 Observatory feature
- 6 Catch some z's



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.