

# Uncovering the Silent Deaths of MIGRANT WOMEN

**Behind each coffin lies an untold story, an unanswered question, and a denial of justice. Every life lost without clarity and accountability is not just a statistic; it is a stain on our collective conscience.**

MUJIB RAHMAN

In the shadows of booming remittance flows and the quiet resilience of Bangladesh's labour diaspora, a disturbing reality persists: numerous Bangladeshi female migrant workers, particularly those employed as domestic help in Gulf countries, are returning home in coffins. Officially labelled as suicides or natural deaths, many of these cases conceal a far darker truth.

Marina Sultana, Director of Programmes at the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), has been tracking these patterns for years. "Most Bangladeshi female migrants work as domestic workers in Gulf countries," she explains. "A worrying trend has emerged: the rising number of deaths, often obscured or misclassified on official death certificates."

Two harrowing cases reveal the gravity of the crisis. In one, a young woman's death was ruled a suicide, yet



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"We have not received any formal complaints from the families of the deceased," Shariful adds, "but if complaints are made, we are committed to conducting thorough investigations."

Yet the absence of complaints does not mean the absence of abuse. Families often lack legal support, awareness, or the courage to seek justice.

According to BRAC, based on government data, 714 women returned in coffins from Middle Eastern countries between 2016 and 2022. The yearly breakdown is as follows: 52 women in 2016; 94 in 2017; 110 in 2018; 139 in 2019; 80 in 2020; 121 in 2021; and 117 in 2022. Behind each coffin lies an untold story, an unanswered question, and a denial of justice. It is time to demand more—both from Bangladesh and from host countries. Every life lost without clarity and accountability is not just a statistic; it is a stain on our collective conscience.

"We need a well-informed migration strategy to save lives," urges Marina Sultana of RMMRU. "Food habits, language barriers, poor accommodation, long work hours, and social isolation all contribute to daily hardship, sometimes with fatal consequences. Bangladesh should take inspiration from Hong Kong by improving residential training, including modules on workers' rights, behavioural expectations, and cultural orientation."

She also highlights how both the government and returnees often hide cases of abuse due to diplomatic caution or social stigma. "But we, as human rights advocates, have the testimonies and evidence to break this silence."

Bangladesh must demand clarity, accountability, and dignity—not only for those who return but for those who never get the chance.

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her family insists otherwise. They recall speaking to her just a day before her death; she had described being scalded with hot water by her employer, an injury they believed led to her death. In another case, the cause was reported as a rooftop fall, but the family suspects foul play.

Shakirul Islam, Founder and Chairperson of Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), says families of deceased workers rarely accept the official explanations. "Many believe these deaths result from severe abuse," he says. "Some allege the victims were thrown from rooftops after enduring prolonged torture." Shakirul shares the account of a survivor who, after a brutal assault, was left bleeding without medical help. She survived, but her story underscores the isolation and vulnerability of domestic workers abroad.

The death certificates, he points

out, are often "superficial, if not misleading". They rarely reflect the abuse, psychological trauma, or dire conditions that may have contributed to these deaths.

Piyara Begum, who worked as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia for four years, recounts her ordeal: "I suffered chronic head and stomach issues, but there was no proper medical care," she says. "I received no support from any Bangladeshi official." Her health deteriorated, and when she pleaded to return home, her employer withheld four months' salary. Eventually, with the help of a local NGO, she returned home and received treatment.

Her son, too, returned from Oman—physically abused, tortured, and penniless.

Mim Akter, another returnee from Saudi Arabia, faced similar exploitation. "A dalal (middleman)

charged me 5,000 BDT. When I arrived, no one received me," she says. Forced to work long hours, her employer only provided lunch, leaving her to fend for the rest. One day, a brick fell on her chest, causing a serious injury. She paid 40,000 BDT for treatment herself. Her employer delayed her return for six months and seized assets worth nearly 300,000 BDT.

"I had to pay for my own return," Mim says. "Now I am trying to lodge a complaint through OKUP."

Shariful Islam, Deputy Director of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), says, "At least 15 million Bangladeshi migrants are actively contributing to the national economy. But the deaths of female migrant workers highlight the link between their vulnerability at home and their fate abroad." He acknowledges that stress and exploitation in the workplace may be contributing factors.



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ / THE DAILY STAR

The coffin carrying the body of Nodi, a female migrant worker, is taken for burial from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka after arriving from Saudi Arabia. The photo was taken on October 31, 2020.

## The Wedding Melodies of Rangpur

### Songs of Love, Loss, and Longing

NURUNNABISHANTO

I remember—it was late afternoon, the sun leaning westward. From a distance, a soft yet resolute melody drifted through the air. I was just a boy then, curious and drawn by the sound. I approached quietly. The women of our neighbourhood had gathered beneath the jackfruit tree on the side of our yard. A low wooden stool sat there, upon which a group of village women had seated themselves and begun to sing:

"Gao hyalani diya nachey Golapi / Kol hyalani diya nachey Golapi / Golapir-o shisher sendur roidey jholomol korey / Golapir-o naker nolok roidey jholomol korey..."

[Sway, O Golapi, sway with your hips / She sways with grace, she sways with ease / Her vermilion sparkles in the sun / Her nose ring glitters with light...]

This biye'r geet is more than mere melody; it is an invisible theatre without stage or instruments, yet rich with the prose of life. A language of survival and self-expression, it allows women to voice joy, sorrow, memory, or protest.

These songs are the heartbeat of our intangible culture—though now rare in everyday practice, they still flow like a quiet stream through the villages of Rangpur. Meanwhile, on urban stages, biye'r geet is experiencing renewed life, with digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook hosting countless performances that often blend traditional voices with both local and contemporary musical accompaniment.

At their core, these songs are layered with the emotions of departure: of leaving one's father's home for another family. In them echo the thrill and panic of transition, the beauty and ache of detachment. In a single verse, one hears longing, loss, and the unspoken fear of an uncertain future. Some voices make us laugh, some move us to tears, while others pierce through sarcasm, irony, and poetic mischief to touch parts of the heart untouched by words alone. These melodies reach beyond meaning itself; they are the music of lived experience, intimately and uniquely feminine.

Men rarely participate in these songs, as they are historically and culturally rooted in women's oral traditions. Occasionally, a man of humour or someone with a fluid gender identity may join, but the tone, language, and performance remain unequivocally female. Women compose and perform

spontaneously, drawing from memory and inherited tradition. These songs require no musical training, no formal choreography. The capacity to sing a wedding song is not taught; it is absorbed, embodied, passed from one generation to the next.

Wedding songs are dynamic and constantly evolving, with new verses crafted by altering select lines to mirror the unique circumstances and experiences of each community. The local accent, the inflection of the spoken dialect, shapes the musical phrasing. Thus, a single geet might sound different in Nilphamari than it does in the Gaibandha districts of Rangpur division.

The journey of marriage begins with matchmaking, and even that stage finds expression in song. These early songs carry not shame but a kind of humorous self-assertion: "O worthless matchmaker, why did you come? / We have no rice in the pot, what will we serve you..."

[Ore morar bayaṭa ghaṭokkona / Alche hamar baritey / Ki khaite dimō clay / Chaul nai hamar harite...]

Yet even here, there's no apology—just an honest, sometimes cheeky presentation of life's truths. The bride's party sings with dry humour; the matchmaker's side replies, sometimes in kind: "Why not? Serve some stale rice / Add a bit of fried greens / We'll eat and fill our stomachs / And make this match happen!"

[Hoy na kyane panta bahey / Sathey ekna bhujina dyao / Khaya nemo paṭ bhore / Aghoton ghatamo hamra / Biyeokona hobar porey.]

Once the negotiations conclude, the ceremonies unfold: gaaye holid, the turmeric bathing; the setting of the marowa (banana plant altar) wrapped in pieces of vibrant, colourful cloth or papers; the lighting and submerging of the phorol (clay lamp); and many more. Each ritual is accompanied by songs. In one verse, the singers hide a woman's sorrow; in the next, it is laid bare in melody:

"Raindrops fall upon the yard / It's slippery with tears / There I tried to dance, O beloved / My necklace snapped and fell..."

[Jhori pore chipo re chipo / Angina hoila mor picchila re Rosia / Sei na anginy



In the villages of Rangpur, wedding songs—biye'r geet—come alive through music, dance, and spontaneous performances, where women and community members gather to express joy, sorrow, and the timeless rhythms of rural life.

PHOTOS: COLLECTED

nachon re nachite / Chhirila golar malar re Rosia...]

The broken necklace is more than jewellery—it's a symbol of a girl's separation from childhood, from home, from identity. She knows she will not be the same after this night:

"Mother calls me her little one / Father says he won't marry me off / But how long can I live / In the shadows of youth..."

[Maaye koy mok chhoto chhoto / Bape na dey biya / Ar kotokal akimo / Joibon onchole bandiya...]

Wedding songs often repeat the same words, sung to a continuous, undulating rhythm. Their consistent pattern turns listeners into participants. In some cases, songs are sung in alternating groups—one for the bride's side, one for the groom's—creating a musical dialogue, almost like a social debate.

In every part of the wedding, song is inseparable from ritual. As the bride sits before the marowa, the women sing: "Little marowa, spread your leaves / The crows have flown to the city / O marowa, stay with us, we love you..."

[Chhoto chhoto marowa / Dhal dhal paan / Shohore melia geise kaak / Re marowa bhalobasom tok...]

Before the phorol is submerged in water, another verse rises:

"The leader goes ahead, her lamps behind / Between them goes the golden light / But with gold at hand, they chose bamboo instead / So be it, let the wedding happen!"

[Age age jay re Moroli / Pache jay tar Phoroli / Modhhey jay re sonar chailon bati / Sonar chailon thakite basher chailon byarakaishhe / Hoya jak aaj ei chailoner shadi...]

These songs have no single author, no written notation, no scores. They are born in voice, sustained in memory, and shaped by life. As the ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl reminds us, "Traditional music is not just a set of sounds, it is a symbolic act embedded in society." The biye'r geet is a living expression of collective behaviour, an intangible cultural heritage, an identity, and a deep-rooted echo of who we are.

And yet, this art form now stands tragically on the brink of disappearance. Social and religious anxieties, economic

marginalisation, and cultural neglect are slowly reducing these songs to relics fit for museums. In many wedding yards today, the air is filled not with biye'r geet but with loudspeakers blaring Hindi film songs or DJ remixes. The geet gaonnis—the women who once led these songs—have fallen into silence.

Still, when a wedding arrives, they wait to gather again, voices rising in memory and defiance. Perhaps they are the last generation. But they hope that the new generation will one day recognise that biye'r geet is not just cultural ornamentation—it is the language of women's introspection, resistance, and remembrance. Through these songs, women have articulated questions they could not otherwise ask, and answers they could only sing. To lose these songs would be to erase the unwritten autobiography of our women, their collective memories, and one of the most exquisite oral literatures of Bangladesh.

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