# How we can give our women migrants a real edge

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MOHIBBULLAH AL MARUF

Moksuda Begum left Narayanganj with a dream and a promise. A widow raising her two children, Moksuda had been told she would earn Tk 22,000 a month as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. But upon arriving there, she found something very different: waking up at 4am, she worked continuously until midnight while her wages went to an agent in Riyadh instead of into her own pocket. She endured this for months before finally reaching out to the Bangladesh embassy.

Her story, reported by *The Business Standard* in late 2025, is far from an isolated case. BRAC Migration Programme data from 2025 shows that more than 470,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers returned home over the past six years after facing exploitation or abuse. At least 67,199 of those who returned were women who reported physical or sexual violence; many returning, traumatised and stigmatised, to a reintegration system ill-equipped to help them.

In 2024, only about 61,158 women officially migrated for work from Bangladesh, and by the end of 2025, the figure stood at 62,353, according to the Overseas Employment Platform (OEP) under the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). This marks a 41-percent decline from the 2022 total of 105,466. Bangladesh's gender gap in migration is among the most pronounced in Asia, and it is not a matter of culture alone. It reflects deliberate policy choices and structural failures that have long treated women as a risk category rather than an economic asset.

In 2024, women accounted for just 6.03 percent of Bangladesh's officially deployed migrant workforce. A 2025 report by the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), International Labour Organization (ILO), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights that, by contrast, women comprised 68 percent of migrants from Indonesia, 52 percent from the Philippines, and 41 percent from Cambodia. Even Pakistan, with socioeconomic conditions not too dissimilar to that of Bangladesh, recorded a more balanced share across several corridors. This disparity also reflects a broader global pattern: an ILO policy brief notes that some 70.8 crore women were outside the global labour force in 2023 due to care responsibilities, an exclusion that Bangladesh's migration system reflects and reinforces.

For much of its history, Bangladesh managed female migration through fairly restrictive policies. Women seeking to work abroad in domestic service faced age minimums, mandatory spousal consent, and periodic destination bans imposed after high-profile abuse cases. These were consistently framed in terms of protection. In reality, these measures pushed desperate women into irregular channels that offered no safeguards at all.

According to BMET, Saudi Arabia is the single largest destination for Bangladeshi women migrant workers. However, there has been a sharp decline in the figures since 2016. Shifting official policies, changes in destination-country demand, and a self-reinforced negative public narrative around Bangladeshi female domestic workers all played a role.

BRAC Migration Programme and *The Business Standard's* 2025 report identified a critical structural flaw: Bangladeshi women who migrate are overwhelmingly sent as domestic workers into private households, with about a month's housekeeping training, limited pre-departure orientation, and near-total isolation once abroad. Researchers explained the problem plainly: Bangladesh hardly diversified beyond domestic work for women, while countries like the Philippines now send women into hotels, care facilities, and skilled professional roles. In Bangladesh, women from rural areas, often with limited education, are sent abroad without adequate preparation. This contributes to increased abuse rates. A negative narrative also sets in and that narrative ends up discouraging both skilled women from migrating and employers from considering Bangladeshi women for higher-level roles.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

**'In Bangladesh, women from remote rural areas, often with limited education, are sent abroad without adequate preparation. This often contributes to increased abuse rates.'**

Bangladesh's mandatory 30-day housekeeping training for domestic workers covers basic household tasks and some cultural orientation. It rarely addresses recognition of labour rights violations, how to contact an embassy safely, elder care protocols, or financial literacy, whereas the Philippines' nationally accredited Domestic Work NC II Certificate covers practical skills, rights education, and financial planning as minimum requirements.

The Bangladesh Labour Act (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 marked a significant legislative milestone by formally recognising domestic workers as workers under law, following Bangladesh's ratification of three key ILO conventions related to occupational safety, health, and freedom from workplace violence. The country also became the first in Asia to ratify all 11 fundamental ILO instruments.

A February 2026 analysis in the *Dhaka Tribune* highlighted that Bangladesh is still in the process of developing a comprehensive national database on domestic workers, including their contact numbers, wages, and vulnerabilities. While this gap presents challenges for evidence-based policymaking and effective monitoring, there are emerging signs of progress.

The OEP system of BMET is now systematically preserving trainee data across genders, offering a strong foundation for building an integrated and responsive database in the near future. Strengthening such systems, alongside expanding the capacity of labour inspection, can significantly enhance accountability and ensure that legal recognition translates to meaningful protection for workers.

Ageing populations across the Gulf, East Asia, and Europe are generating sustained demand for skilled care workers. The Philippines has built its female migrant workforce around this opportunity: Filipina care workers earn more, remit more, and carry far less recruitment debt than their Bangladeshi counterparts. But with its large young female population and established bilateral ties with major destination countries, Bangladesh is well placed to compete in the global care economy, if it builds the necessary training infrastructure, credential pathways, bilateral protections, social support systems, etc. None of this requires starting from scratch. It requires adapting what already works in Manila, Colombo, and Kathmandu, and doing so with urgency.

The BNP-led government's stated commitment to sending one crore workers abroad within five years will fall short of its potential unless women are an equal part of that vision, not as a category to be managed, but as skilled workers to be championed.

Moksuda Begum eventually came home. She lost months of wages, her savings, and a year she cannot reclaim. Her willingness to try, to cross an ocean alone, to endure what no one should, for the chance to feed her children—is precisely the kind of human capital Bangladesh keeps failing to protect. Recognising this, the way forward lies in strengthening pathways for skilled, safe, and lawful migration, ensuring that such courage is met with systems that safeguard dignity, rights, and opportunity.

# *Can playing a historic speech justify repeated bail denials?*

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ARAFAT RAHAMAN

About a month and a half has passed since the arrest and detention of leftist student leader Sheikh Tasnim Afroz Emi. Emi, former vice-president of the Shamsunnahar Hall union at Dhaka University and a central vice-presidential candidate in the 2025 Ducsu election, along with two members of the banned Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), was sent to jail on March 7, reportedly for attempting to play Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech.

It began with Md Asif Ahmed Shoikot, former employment affairs secretary of BCL's Shahidullah Hall unit at Dhaka University, who was arrested by Shahbag police for playing the speech on a loudspeaker on the afternoon of March 7. Later that night, Emi and several others tried to play the same speech in front of the National Museum in protest against Shoikot's arrest, when they were accosted by two DUCSU representatives and handed over to the police. A case was filed against the three under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009.

The filing of this case under such a law raises a question that remains unanswered to this day: how did the public playing of a historic speech become an issue under anti-terror legislation, one of the harshest laws on the books? That question has grown more urgent since Emi and the others were denied bail for the third time on April 8.

If the police's account of how the incident of March 7, 2026 unfolded is accurate, the first public justification offered was not terrorism, extortion, assault, or the revival of a banned organisation. It was the playing of a historic speech. Following Shoikot's detention, the Shahbag station's officer-in-charge reportedly said the speech was prohibited. But since when did the speech, or the act of playing it, become prohibited? If no such prohibition exists, why did the police act and speak as though it did?

Broader allegations and a heavier legal framing appeared later in the FIR of the case, which states that Emi and the other detainees attempted to resume the activities of a banned organisation, obstructed police from performing their duties, and tried to free Shoikot from custody. But this was not what the public heard at first, nor can playing a nationally significant speech be akin to resuming the activities of a banned organisation. Article 39 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of thought and conscience and, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law, freedom of speech and expression. Therefore, the state must explain how the law that was invoked was violated based on the facts presented so far. State actors, including the police, cannot impose a prohibition on a speech unless a law is enacted to that effect.

Moreover, the March 7 speech is not the private property of any political party. UNESCO recognised its significance because it is part of the history of Bangladesh's birth. The state cannot treat its public playing as inherently suspicious simply because the politics surrounding it have become inconvenient. If, on the other hand, the alleged offences involve obstruction, unlawful mobilisation, or attempts to revive a banned organisation, the state must prove these claims and prosecute the suspects under appropriate legal provisions.

This is why the use of the Anti-Terrorism Act in this case seems so difficult to justify. The law was designed to address terrorism, organised violence, and acts that seriously endanger public safety. Once such charges are levelled, they significantly restrict personal liberty and make bail more difficult to obtain. While we have seen some high-profile detainees secure bail under the act in recent months, no such judicial discretion has been exercised in this case, once again raising concerns about the law's potential for abuse as well as its uneven application.

While on the topic of bail, another recent case becomes relevant to this discussion. While not identical in facts or legal framing, it illustrates that bail remains a cornerstone of the criminal justice system, even in cases involving grave allegations. This is the case of Masum Khalasi, one of the accused in the killing of Dipu Chandra Das on December 18 in Bhaluka. On April 13, the Mymensingh jail gate opened for Masum, who was among those accused of chasing Dipu in a mob over allegations of "hurting religious sentiments", forcing him to resign from his job, murdering him, and burning his body.

Police and court records show that Masum was among 12 defendants who gave confessional statements under Section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), admitting participation in the murder and the disposal of the body. Less than four months after his arrest, he was granted one year's interim bail on a Tk 2,000 bond, prompting anger as well as creating a stark contrast that underscores how inconsistently the principle of bail is being applied across cases. The point here is not to equate Dipu Das's case with Emi's. They are not comparable. Rather, the point is to underscore that bail exists as an attainable legal option, even in cases involving the gravest of crimes. That reality makes the questionable anti-terror framing in Emi's case even harder to ignore.

Given these realities, it has become critical that the authorities clearly state what law, if any, renders the public playing of the March 7 speech a punishable offence; explain how the acts that were alleged fall within the scope of anti-terror legislation; and allow the detainees the right to seek bail. If a murder suspect can avail of this fundamental aspect of a fair criminal justice system, then, in the public's eyes, three students—particularly one who is not a member of a banned organisation—should not be denied bail.

If the state has a case against Emi, it should prove it in court. If there are compelling reasons to keep her in detention, those should be clearly articulated. But the repeated denial of bail—that too over simply playing a speech, and under one of the harshest laws in the country—risks evoking the memories of a time when such draconian laws were frequently used to suppress dissent and freedom of expression. This is not expected in post-uprising Bangladesh.

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BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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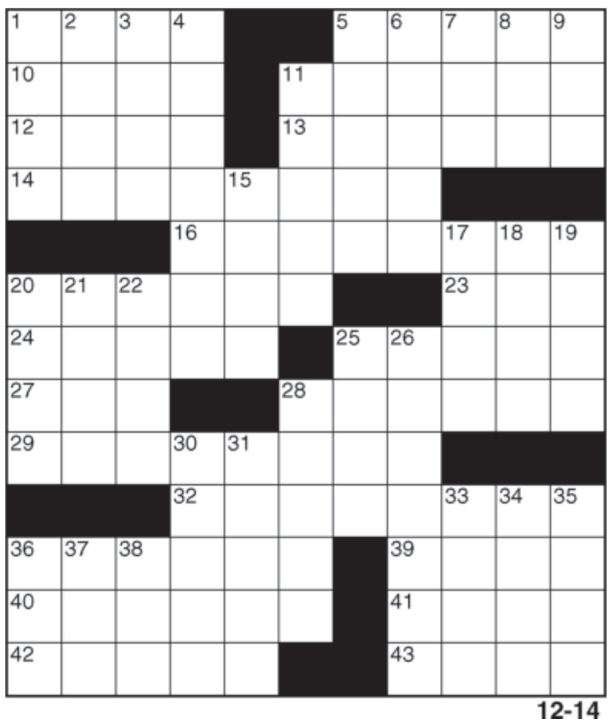

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## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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