Saudi executions and the unseen costs of migration



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The recent execution of two Bangladeshi nationals in the holy city of Makkah, Saudi Arabia, has raised disturbing questions about justice, diplomatic protection, and the treatment of migrant workers. The circumstances surrounding the case, including the judicial proceedings and the extent of consular assistance provided, if any, require greater transparency, particularly as authorities in Bangladesh still remain in the dark about how the events unfolded. The fact that the incident became widely known only after the executions were completed makes questions of accountability and consular protection even more urgent. Beyond its failure to protect its own citizens, Bangladesh has, ironically, resorted to advising migrants to take it as "a lesson" and abide by the host country's laws and regulations.

The public debate should not end with procedural failures on either side, however. It should also confront a question largely absent from Bangladesh's migration discourse: what happens to the personal lives of those who leave home to sustain the country's economy? The right to family life, emotional connection, and intimacy remains one of the least acknowledged dimensions of labour migration.

Arguably, the problem here is not simply the unequal treatment of people in public spaces; it is the unequal recognition of their private lives. Labour migration, at both individual and communal levels, entails the movement of people, their bodies, and their cultures. Embedded within these movements are emotions, feelings, and affective experiences that often go unnoticed or are suppressed under a hegemonic, authoritative and colonial gaze. Migrant workers are subjected to extreme levels of social control. Moving abroad as a guest worker separates spouses, disrupts intimate lives, reorganises relationships, and places emotional well-being under the constraints of employment contracts, immigration rules, and economic necessity. Migrants are often celebrated as remittance warriors and partners in national development, while their loneliness and emotional and intimate needs remain largely invisible.

The controversy surrounding the sanctity of Makkah where the alleged crime was committed has also exposed a broader contradiction. A sacred space is not sustained merely through the regulation of public conduct or the preservation of religious symbols. Its moral significance must also be measured by how human beings are treated within it. Questions about the relationship between religious sanctity, state authority, and public morality are legitimate. But they must not obscure the more fundamental question of whether justice, dignity, and equal protection are extended to migrant workers.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a highly visible transformation under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. International entertainment, investment in sports, and ambitious urban development projects have become prominent features of its modernisation agenda. Yet this spectacle of global openness sits uneasily alongside longstanding concerns about migrant workers' vulnerability, restrictions on their autonomy, and barriers to effective remedies for abuse. Modernisation cannot be measured only by international investment, celebrity appearances, or architectural ambition. It must also be judged by the dignity and rights afforded to those whose labour sustains it.



FILE PHOTO: **RASHED SHUMON**

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For many Bangladeshi men employed in the Gulf, years of separation from spouses and children are treated as an ordinary price of earning a livelihood. But prolonged separation is not merely an incidental inconvenience. It can strain relationships, intensify loneliness, and affect psychological well-being. Women migrant workers face another set of vulnerabilities, particularly those employed in private households, where isolation, employer control, and limited access to assistance can make abuse difficult to report. The suffering of domestic workers who return home traumatised, injured or even dead demands far greater attention.

Intimacy, in this context, is not merely a private matter. It is shaped by public policy: who can bring a spouse, who can reunite with children, who can leave an abusive workplace, and who can seek help without risking employment or residency.

In many Gulf countries, the migrantisation of justice, sacredness, and law and order reveals how these principles are experienced unevenly across social and economic hierarchies. Even as the ongoing US war on Iran reshapes the region, it is migrant workers who remain on the front lines of its human costs, many of them Bangladeshis whose vulnerabilities rarely, if ever, figure in geopolitical calculations. For migrant workers, particularly those in the lowest tiers of the labour market, access to dignity, protection, and justice is shaped by their precarious status. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is building new urban spaces to accommodate global investors and affluent professionals, projecting an image of openness and modernity. The question, therefore, is not simply how Saudi Arabia is modernising, but for whom this modernity is being built and whose lives remain excluded from its promises.

Intimacy and family life are not private luxuries; they are fundamental dimensions of human dignity that migration regimes routinely turn into matters of privilege. West Germany's experience with guest workers from Turkey, Italy, Spain and Portugal after the Second World War illustrates how the assumption of temporary labour can collide with the enduring social and emotional realities of migration. Family reunification gradually became part of the response to this contradiction, albeit unevenly and amid political contestation. Across the Gulf, however, the intimate lives of low-wage migrant workers remain largely peripheral to policy discussions. The reluctance of governments and civil society to engage with these questions reflects a deeper problem: intimacy becomes politically inconvenient when acknowledging it would require recognising migrants as more than a disposable workforce.

Bangladesh, too, must examine its own complicity in this arrangement. Successive governments have depended on remittances while too often approaching migrant protection through recruitment management, emergency repatriation, and diplomatic appeals after a crisis. The state cannot claim to value its citizens abroad while treating their private lives as beyond the scope of public responsibility.

The execution of the two Bangladeshis demands scrutiny of the justice system and the protection available to citizens abroad. But it should also prompt a wider reckoning. Migrant workers are neither saints whose personal needs disappear at the border nor remittance machines whose sacrifices can be indefinitely normalised. They are people entitled to dignity in both public and private life.

If Bangladesh is serious about protecting its citizens overseas, it must ask not only whether they receive justice when accused of a crime, but also whether they can live with dignity while earning their livelihoods. The right to family and intimacy must become part of that conversation. Anything less leaves the most personal costs of migration outside the boundaries of public concern.

Reform NGO funding to help grassroots organisations survive

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During economic hardship, social crises, and natural disasters, local NGOs and volunteer groups often become part of the first line of response. Yet many of these organisations are now confronting a crisis of their own.

A few months ago, we conducted fieldwork on the financial constraints facing NGOs in Bangladesh as part of our research. This allowed us to visit national and local NGO offices, meet their staff, and speak with them formally and informally. We discussed their projects, prospects, institutional weaknesses and, perhaps most importantly, how they see their future.

What we encountered was unsettling. Financial vulnerability is becoming increasingly visible across the development sector, particularly following the halt of USAID-funded activities. But this raises a more fundamental question. If an organisation is struggling for its own survival, how effectively can it contribute to the long-term wellbeing and resilience of the communities it serves? There is another question that deserves equal attention: are all NGOs bearing the consequences of this crisis in the same way? The answer appears to be no. This is why smaller, locally rooted NGOs need separate consideration.

The problem is not simply that foreign funding is declining, as similar shifts in the funding environment can produce markedly different consequences for different organisations. Donor dependency becomes particularly precarious when an NGO has few alternative sources of income, limited financial reserves, and little room to absorb a funding shock. Smaller organisations often face all three constraints. One local NGO we encountered, for example, reported receiving around 70 percent of its funding from international sources. Recent funding instability had already compelled it to reduce staff.

Large national NGOs are comparatively better positioned. Many have multiple international partnerships, established revenue-generating activities and substantial microcredit operations. Their scale, institutional reputation and visibility also matter. A donor looking for an organisation capable of implementing a large project will naturally be drawn towards institutions with established systems, experienced staff, and a proven record of managing major grants. A small local NGO, meanwhile, may understand the community better, know the local institutions, and possess years of practical experience, but still struggle to reach those who control funding. Limited manpower, modest fundraising capacity, fewer resources to hire consultants, and low institutional visibility all constrain its ability to compete.

The funding crisis, therefore, is not only about how much development finance is available, but also about who can access that money, who remains excluded, and why the disparity is becoming more pronounced. One comment during our fieldwork captured this frustration particularly well: "We know the locality and community better, but we do not know how to satisfy the donor." This indicates that quality of work and proximity to communities do not necessarily translate into access to funding.

The 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan placed considerable emphasis on country ownership and reducing excessive dependence on external assistance. More than a decade later, however, domestic financing avenues for many Bangladeshi NGOs remain narrow. Microcredit and social enterprise are among the few established options. But they bring another dilemma. When an NGO becomes increasingly dependent on lending or commercial activities for survival, the boundary between a development organisation and a business can begin to blur. The concern is not that NGOs should never generate income. The question is how far they can move towards commercial activities without compromising their social mission or eroding their reputation, credibility, and public trust.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding and local philanthropy offer other possibilities, but our field conversations revealed considerable dissatisfaction with both. CSR programmes tend to favour organisations that can provide greater visibility, branding, and media exposure. A small NGO working with vulnerable, remote communities in coastal Bagerhat or rural Sylhet may create meaningful and enduring change without being able to offer any of these.

Bangladesh has a deep, socially embedded tradition of giving for both religious and secular purposes. But much of this charity remains personal, family-based, direct, and informal. Existing research suggests that local donations account for less than one percent of NGO funding. The resources exist within society, but only a fraction of them find their way into organised local development initiatives. This disconnect is pushing NGOs to experiment. Some are seeking collaborative projects and government funding. Others are developing social enterprises or other revenue-generating activities. A few are even considering commercial bank loans to establish or expand microcredit operations. That creates an unusual situation: an organisation established for social welfare borrows commercially and then lends that money to its clients at a higher interest rate to sustain itself.

There is another looming concern. When Bangladesh graduates from the LDC category, access to some forms of international development assistance may gradually become more constrained as donor priorities would shift towards poorer and more vulnerable countries. The impact may not be immediate, nor will all funding necessarily decline. But for smaller NGOs already struggling with a fragile funding base, even a modest contraction could deepen their vulnerability. These are organisations that emerged from within communities and have spent years working with persons with disabilities, disadvantaged children, poor households, widows, and communities vulnerable to environmental shocks. Some are now curtailing programmes, closing offices, and letting staff go. Organisations that once spoke about expanding their work are increasingly worrying about survival alone.

Thousands of stories of social transformation began with small groups of people working within their own communities, often with limited resources and even less visibility. The task now is not simply to protect the brands of development, but to enable community organisations to emerge as credible, resilient, and enduring institutions in their own right.



Students attend class in a floating school on a boat run by the NGO Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha in the Bhangura area of Pabna, Bangladesh, on September 25, 2025. FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**