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Center for Migration Studies (CMS) Policy Brief- 3



Gender Dynamics of Experiences, Challenges and Empowerment Factors of International Female Migrant Workers

On the 6th of March in 2023, the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) of the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG) at North South University organized a national seminar on “Internal and International Migration: Policies and Practices for the Women Workers”. Based on the research findings presented by Ms. Tata Zafar, a faculty member at the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University, it has become clear that though there are specific laws and policies to protect the rights of migrant workers in general, there is a lack of gender-specific policies to address the difficulties that women migrant workers face and to protect and ensure their rights regarding those issues. Bangladeshi women migrant workers still suffer from precarious work conditions and exploitative circumstances, specifically in the Gulf countries. This brief explores the exploitation experienced by Bangladeshi women migrant workers, focusing on the patterns and limitations resulting from the lack of gender-focused policies and the gaps between policies and practices related to international migration of female workers. It also highlights the need to address the challenges of the implementation of policies in order to protect the rights of Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad.

Introduction

Bangladesh has grown to be one of the world's top exporters of migrant labor, a trend that started in the 1970s in response to the demand for labor in massive construction projects in the Middle Eastern nations. Every year, a large number of Bangladeshis leave the country in pursuit of work abroad where they may make more money and raise their level of living. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)'s report (2023), on an average, 656,016 Bangladeshi workers traveled overseas per year for both long- and short-term jobs between 2015 and 2022. The growth in migrant flows caused the labor force in several industries become more diverse in terms of gender. A startling 1,095,014 women employees moved legally abroad between 2001 and 2022 (BMET, 2023). The main labor market for women migrant workers from Bangladesh is in the Gulf countries. The top destination for women migrant workers from Bangladesh in 2018 was Saudi Arabia, where 72.48% of all women migrant workers found work. The second-highest percentage of women migrant workers were employed in Oman (10.85%), followed by the employment of such labor force in Jordan (8.95%), Qatar (3.14%), the United Arab Emirates (2.39%), Lebanon (1.89%), and Mauritius (0.44%) (BMET, 2023).

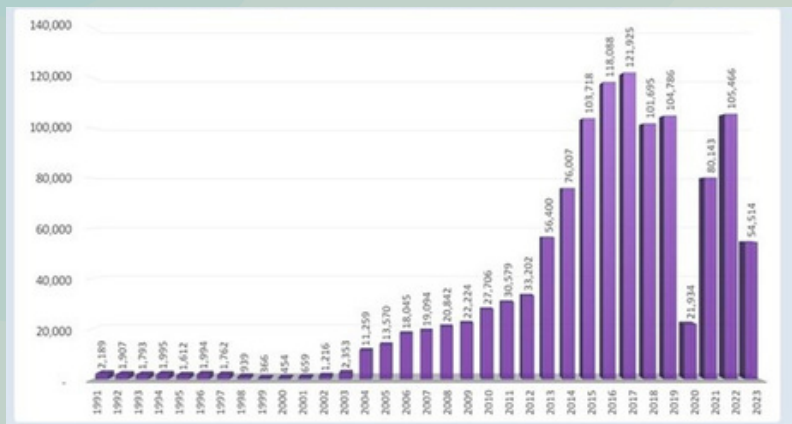


Figure 1 – Year-wise Overseas Employment of Female workers from 1991-2023 (Up to August)
(Source: *BMET, 2023*)

Over the decades, Bangladeshi women migrants have faced various forms of exploitation, specifically in the Gulf countries, seeking economic opportunities by emigrating to nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (Rahman, 2011). Due to exploitations such as coerced work, physical abuse, and trafficking, some even lose their lives (Siddiqui, 2021). Women in the Gulf countries are more vulnerable to exploitation due to the discriminatory nature of migratory work. They often find themselves in low-paying positions, isolated, and subjected to long working hours and inadequate living conditions. The absence of legal support and security worsens the abuse suffered by these women (IOM, 2015). A key factor contributing to the exploitation is the kafala system, a sponsorship system that ties the legal status of workers to employers. Under this system, employers hold significant control over migrant workers, leading to vulnerability, discrimination, and harassment (Nahar & Akond, 2017). However, addressing the kafala system alone is not enough to combat the situation. Comprehensive measures are needed to ensure the safety and well-being of Bangladeshi women in the Gulf nations. These include providing legal support and security, improving working conditions and labor rights, and implementing gender-focused policies and regulatory compliance. Therefore, this policy brief shares the plight of Bangladeshi female international migrants in the Gulf countries and demands immediate action for ensuring their protection.

Methods

The study was based on data collection from both primary and secondary sources to examine the challenges faced by Bangladeshi women who migrated overseas. Primary data was obtained through two focus group discussions (FGDs) consisting of 12 women in each group. In-depth interviews were also conducted with six returnee women migrant workers to have real insights on their experiences and exploitations. Secondary data was gathered by reviewing existing literature that scrutinized various forms of exploitation and abuse faced by women migrant workers and the existing laws/policies to protect the rights of women migrant workers.

Main Research Findings

The sexual and physical exploitation of Bangladeshi migrant women employed as domestic workers in the Gulf nations found in the study are very common factors for the plight of women migrant workers in these countries. Since these women remain in houses with no or less contact with their fellow migrant workers, they become isolated and vulnerable which lead to abusive, cruel and repressive working conditions while they look for better economic prospects. Many endure grueling workdays with little leisure, earn low pay, and experience verbal and physical abuse. They become even more vulnerable due to their isolation and lack of legal protection in other countries, which keeps them in unsafe situations with little options for justice. In order to address these problems, Bangladesh and the Gulf nations must cooperate with each other to enact stringent labor laws, ensure their implementation, and set up support systems to secure these women's rights and protect them from abuse.

Most of the extreme levels of abusive experiences are faced by household workers. There are horrific narrations of their experiences such as:

“I had to start work at 4:00 a.m. in the morning. I had to start at exactly that time. I would get about three to four hours of sleep. I would be constantly washing or ironing clothes and if they were not satisfied with the work, I would have to wash and iron them again. My fingers smashed and bled because of the work pressure.”

“The household I worked for in Saudi Arabia had 14 members. The first few days went well, but they eventually started harassing me. Several adult members of that family tried to coerce me into sexual relationships, but I did not agree. As a result, they started to torture me in various ways.”

Abuse, Exploitation, and Harassments faced by Women Migrant Workers

Bangladeshi migrant women in Jordan and Saudi Arabia often suffer from widespread abuse, exploitation, and harassment. They become victims of sexual abuse and harassment and fear of job loss that prevent them from reporting these incidents. Employers subject them to excessive workloads, deny breaks, and do not compensate them for extra hours of labor. Living conditions are often deplorable, with inadequate access to basic facilities and

healthcare, resulting in health problems. Discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, and specifically gender is prevalent, leaving these women at a disadvantaged position compared to their male counterparts in their own and other countries. Balancing responsibilities at their own homes adds to their challenges, forcing them to make difficult choices for the sake of their families.

“The daily production target was so huge that I could not even get any time to go to the toilet. We were not given any money for extra hours of labor that we did almost every day.”

The returnee migrant worker participants of the study from Jordan were mostly factory workers who faced different kinds of exploitation. The majority of the narrations were similar to statements like:

“I was a victim of sexual abuse and was harassed by the supervisor/manager but I could not even complain due to a fear of losing my job. I was frequently scolded rudely for not cooperating with them in this regard.”

Women’s Health Issues

When interviewing the returnee women who worked in the factories, as caregivers for old women, and as domestic workers in households, they all had similar complaints regarding their health being compromised due to extensive workload. They underwent physical and mental pressure from working long hours without breaks, which caused tiredness and fatigue. The frequency of health issues among these women was made worse by their lack of access to quality healthcare as well as their polluted working environments. Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are found common among these workers due to inadequate toilet breaks and poor sanitation facilities. Additionally, the lack of proper treatment for severe diseases like kidney and liver diseases exacerbated their conditions, sometimes resulting in forced deportations. The physical toll, coupled with the emotional stress of being far from home, posed significant health challenges for these migrant women.

“During my menstrual cycle, I often feel exhausted from working nonstop and have once fainted due to anemia. With the overwhelming workload to meet the demands of unreachable daily targets, we are not allowed toilet breaks which has then caused me to have repeated urinary tract infections.”

Participants have disclosed repeated Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) for using the same sanitary pad for longer hours to avoid going to the toilet. In addition, unhygienic conditions of the toilet caused severe UTIs for which mostly they were treated with paracetamol. One of the victims shared that the unavailability of proper treatment for UTI got her diagnosed with a uterus infection for which she was forcefully deported back to Bangladesh without treatment. Many suffer from other adverse diseases like liver or kidney diseases and psychological trauma from sexual abuse which often go- unreported and untreated.

Language Barrier and Lack of Prior Training

Due to language hurdles and lack of training, Bangladeshi migrant women in the Gulf countries frequently encounter serious difficulties. As they strive to comprehend and be understood in a foreign language, communication becomes a significant obstacle. Miscommunication caused annoyance, and difficulty in completing their tasks successfully result from this problem. Additionally, their inadequate language proficiency makes it difficult for them to obtain accurate information, do everyday duties, and ask for assistance when necessary. They are also at a disadvantage due to their lack of past experience with the equipment and knowledge of the specific job requirements, which makes it challenging for them to reach work goals and satisfy employer expectations. Inadequate training and linguistic hurdles compound the already difficult challenges that these women encounter in their host nations. All the interviewed participants complained that they were not given any language training which caused considerable problems in their workplaces.

“I could not communicate properly because of the language barrier and often had difficulties understanding my employer’s instructions which would then make my employer mad and they would scold us and sometimes beat some of us.”

Some participants reported that men were in an advantageous position as they were allowed to go outside and roam around, go to the shops, and mix with local people. This opportunity enhanced their language acquisition quicker than women as a result. Women were in a disadvantageous position in this case since for security reasons they were not allowed to go out of their hostel.

Leave policy in practice

Women regardless of their job overseas have their strings attached back in Bangladesh, it could be either their children, husband, or older parents. Having a string behind would of course need women to go back to their homes in case of emergency but they would often be given the ultimatum of either leaving the country forever or never asking for a leave until a couple of years have passed by.

“I got a call back from home as my son was severely sick. So, I asked my employer to give me a break for a month and I promised that I would return to work after that. My employer denied my request for a leave. Consequently, I had to quit my job and return home with no remuneration... What’s the point of working if I don’t get any leave during my children’s terminal illness? Who will look after the children except for the mother?”

Lack of gender focused policy

Existing regulations for female migration lack provisions addressing the challenges female migrants encounter in their workplaces. Moreover, there are currently no policies offering specific protection for women facing abuse and harassment, leaving female migrant workers vulnerable to oppression and assaults. Additionally, the absence of women-focused laws or policies neglects their unique health issues arising from work conditions and heavy workloads. Furthermore, no policy or mechanism is in place to protect women from being confined to forced gender stereotypical roles.

Recommendations

1. Gender-focused and gender-sensitive policies should be implemented, recognizing the specific challenges faced by male and female migrant workers. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) should develop and enforce policies that consider the unique needs, challenges, and contributions of men and women and ensuring a meaningful impact on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.
2. Proper gender-specific health related policies should be created and implemented.
3. Gender-specific pre-departure training courses for women should be offered which will inform them about their legal rights and existing policies and their right to information and available support services during any abuse or exploitation.
4. A basic language course for migrant workers must be arranged before their departure. Language interpreters for migrant workers sent overseas should be offered by the government: Language barriers can create communication challenges and limit the ability of workers to understand their rights, express concerns, or seek help. By offering interpreters, the government ensures that migrant workers can effectively communicate and navigate their working and living conditions, improving their overall well-being and reducing vulnerability to exploitation.
5. Adequate number of one-stop service centres should be established where women migrants can seek help during crisis situation specifically while working as house maids in the Gulf countries. There must be people in these centres who should be able to rescue them from abusive situations. Easily accessible legal aid services should be developed for Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Gulf to report abuse, take legal action, and seek justice.
6. Monitoring and inspections should be increased to prevent exploitation and ensure safety: Monitoring and inspections in Gulf countries should be enhanced to protect women migrants from exploitation and unsafe working conditions.
7. Proper rehabilitation initiatives should be taken to rehabilitate abused women workers after their return.
8. Centers/cells should be established to provide social and psychological support to returnee abused and traumatized male and female workers.
9. More empirical research studies should be encouraged and findings should be shared with the Ministry of Welfare of Overseas Employment to bridge policy implementation gaps in protecting Bangladeshi female migrant workers.



Ms. Zafar conducting a focus group discussion (FGD) with returnee migrant workers from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran at the SIPG. NSU



“The best solution lies in the coordination between the Government of Bangladesh, Civil Society, and the academicians like you who can fill the existing gap.” - Ms. Aroma Dutta MP, Honorable Member of the Parliament, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, at the national seminar on **“Internal and International Migration: Policies and Practices for the Women Workers”** organized by CMS of SIPG, NSU

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