



Center for Migration Studies (CMS) Policy Brief- 5



Examining Social Remittances of Returnee Migrant Workers in Bangladesh

This policy brief is based on a mixed-method research project titled "Examining Social Remittances of Returnee Migrant Workers in Bangladesh," conducted by Dr. Samiksha Koirala, Dr. Harisur Rahman, Dr. Hasan Muhammad Baniamin, and Dr. Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder from the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) at the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University, Dhaka. Spanning from September 2023 to January 2024, the study involved surveying 400 returnee migrant workers from five districts of Bangladesh. The study was funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Introduction

The study investigates social remittances - the flow of ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital flow via migration of returnee Bangladeshi migrant workers from the Middle East and the Gulf region. Most of the studies on the area of social remittances and labor migration are primarily about the role of social capital (Nannestad et al., 2008; Kracke & Klug, 2021) in facilitating migration. However, the role of social remittances in reintegration has not been studied sufficiently, with a few exceptions (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2014; Prayitno et al., 2014). In this context, this study aims to fill this crucial research gap by examining the various aspects of social remittances brought back by migrant workers and their impact on individuals and the communities around them. Further, this research aims to uncover the potential contributions of social remittances to socioeconomic development, human rights, and women's empowerment, among other significant outcomes.

Understanding the types of social remittances and their impact is essential for several reasons, particularly because it is crucial for designing effective labor migration-related policies and programs. It will also foster entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, enabling policymakers to identify strategies to harness and leverage this valuable asset for sustainable development in rural areas. Additionally, the recommendations from the study could be beneficial for the utilization of social remittances, ultimately contributing to the proper reintegration of migrant workers upon their return to their home country.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of the study are to:

- Understand social remittances in the context of Bangladesh
- Examine the impact of social remittances on individuals and their communities
- Explore the potential barriers hindering the utilization of social remittances of labor migrants

Research Methods and Limitations

The study employed a mixed-methods approach incorporating a survey of 400 returnee migrants and 10 in-depth interviews of returnee migrant workers, along with a few Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of government officials and migration experts in Bangladesh. All participants of the study were from the Middle East and the Gulf region. Of these participants, 35.7% worked in Saudi Arabia, 21.9% in the UAE, 12.7% in Oman, and the remainder in other countries. The participants have been selected from the database of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and its partners working on the Reintegration of Migrant Workers in Bangladesh Project.

One of the limitations of the study was fewer number of women respondents (only 7%), as the number of female migrant workers was limited in the database. Despite this limitation, we have ensured that more than one-third of the participants in the qualitative part were women.

Key Findings

The findings of the study indicate that the concept of social remittances is largely underexplored. Some of the key findings encompass changes in political and cultural awareness, enhanced soft skills, shifts in gender roles, and the dynamics of social networks and religiosity post-migration. The study also notes the development of hard skills, albeit with limited training opportunities abroad. Despite acquiring valuable skills and experiences, returnee migrants face challenges in applying these skills within the local labor market, suggesting a need for targeted interventions to bridge this gap.

The study suggests that migration experiences have the potential to enhance social inclusivity and engagement, pointing towards the opportunity for leveraging returnee migrants as agents of social change. It calls for comprehensive support mechanisms to aid the financial, societal, and personal growth of returnee migrants, emphasizing the importance of policy interventions for effective reintegration. Some of the key findings of the study are:

Key Findings (Continues)

- A significant surge was observed in returnee migrants' news consumption patterns as they were regularly following political news and current events, increasing from 51.2% to 89.4% after their time abroad. This shift suggests that the experience of living abroad may have contributed to an increased enthusiasm toward political awareness upon returning home.
- The majority of the participants shared a heightened sense of understanding and appreciation for foreign cultures following their migration experiences.
- The majority of the migrant workers did not receive any vocational training before going abroad (86.8%) as well as during their stay abroad (87.6%), highlighting the lack of training opportunities both in Bangladesh as well as in foreign countries.
- Despite the limited training opportunities both before going abroad and during their stay, the respondents' international exposure may have contributed to the development of a range of hard and soft skills.
- Migrant workers reported acquiring strong skills in managing time, being more empathetic, speaking foreign languages, being able to solve problems, and communicating more effectively after their return.
- Participants identified limited opportunities to apply specific skills in Bangladesh as the primary barrier to utilizing skills acquired abroad, followed by social barriers.
- On average, respondents felt a noticeable but not overwhelmingly substantial increase in their social interactions upon returning home, stating the need for more programs focusing on social reintegration.
- A significant increment in conscientiousness (traits like dependability, reliability, and punctuality) suggests that the international experiences and exposures during the respondents' time abroad made them more organized, responsible, and dependable.
- The majority of the migrant workers (6 out of 10) working abroad were associated with better mental well-being due to regular income and the ability to support their families financially. However, upon returning, they stated that factors like the loss of family members and changes in family dynamics increased mental pressure, leading to questions about the purpose of their efforts abroad, indicating a need to focus on the mental well-being of the returnee migrant workers.
- Female migrant workers found it challenging to reintegrate into society upon returning home, yet interestingly, they all experienced a boost in empowerment during their time abroad.

Existing Relevant Policies of the Government of Bangladesh

In the case of Bangladesh, some groundwork has already been initiated, particularly focusing on the effective and dignified reintegration of returnee migrants. However, to our knowledge, no direct policies or programs address the various aspects of social remittances. The majority of efforts in the area of migration are directed toward the effective utilization of financial remittances, which undoubtedly hold significant importance. However, this singular focus also neglects the potential of migrant workers, overshadowing their valuable soft skills and other aspects of social remittances.

The Government of Bangladesh enacted the Overseas Employment Policy, which was drafted in 2006 to ensure that the overseas labor migration from Bangladesh is regularized and organized and the welfare of the migrant laborers is ensured. This policy was amended with The Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016, which Provides six policy directions: ensure safe migration; protect migrant workers and their family members; ensure the welfare of migrant workers and their access to facilities; regulate the migration of female workers; associate migration with national development and establish proper planning for labor migration.

Likewise, the National Reintegration Policy for Migrants (drafted in 2022 but still in the drafting stage) extends the government's commitment to the returnee migrants, with its focus being their smooth reintegration into Bangladeshi society. Some of the objectives of the policy include sustainable employment generation and the development of entrepreneurial opportunities and skill acquisition for the returnee migrants, as well as ensuring the physical and psychosocial well-being of the families of the migrants. It also provides a separate chapter on female workers and recommends establishing a special unit for women migrants and promoting skills development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, here we present some recommendations for the effective utilization of social remittances and to address the challenges faced by labor migrants upon their return to Bangladesh:

- Acknowledge and incorporate the concept of social remittances into the National Reintegration Policy for Migrants in Bangladesh to enhance its impact.
- Create an updated database on the returnee migrants and their skills. This database should be accessible to local and foreign employers searching for skilled workers.
- Develop targeted interventions to help migrants effectively utilize their acquired skills upon their return. This could include training programs and workshops to enhance skill utilization in the local labor market.
- Map out social remittances brought back by returning migrants to categorize facilitation responsibilities between the government and development partners.
- Encourage the involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working on migration-related issues in establishing a peer group of returnee migrant workers to provide mutual support, share experiences, and inform policy development for more effective and inclusive migration strategies.
- Prioritize mental well-being support for returnee migrant workers, addressing challenges such as the loss of family members and changes in family dynamics through counseling services or support groups.
- Recognize and prepare the dataset of soft skills (such as time management, openness, dependability, leadership, problem-solving, and team building) acquired by migrant workers abroad and involve them in reintegration activities as per their skill set.
- Develop a sustainable business model in a public-private partnership involving the private sector in valuing and utilizing the skills and experiences of returnee migrants, ensuring their recruitment or access to loans for self-employment or small business.
- Develop initiatives to support the reintegration of female migrant workers into society, recognizing their unique challenges and experiences while fostering empowerment and inclusion.
- Engage with news media and social media to cover the significant impacts of social remittances of returnee migrants.
- Establish a social media platform where all returnee migrants could share their migration experience upon returning from abroad. This could help the aspirants and new migrants learn from others.
- Conduct comparative studies across different regions to provide insights into best practices and lessons learned, guiding more tailored and effective approaches to managing migration and supporting migrants.
- Implement targeted educational programs specifically tailored to migrant workers of all genders to create awareness among them about gender equality and women's rights.

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