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Center for Migration Studies (CMS)

Policy Brief 4

Dynamics of Irregular Migration from Bangladesh to Europe



This policy brief is based on a seminar titled "*Migration, Mobility, and Development in a Globalized World*". At the seminar, the current state of irregular migration from Bangladesh to Europe and potential plans for promoting safe migration were discussed based on the findings of an empirical research conducted by Dr. Jalal Uddin Sikder and Dr. Selim Reza, faculty members of the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University. Dr. Selim Reza presented the research findings in a keynote speech. The seminar was organized by the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) of the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG), North South University on 17 December 2023. It was attended by academics, practitioners, and policymakers.

BACKGROUND

Humans have been migrating in search of improved employment opportunities and a better lifestyle since the earliest times. Recently, globalization has become a key factor in facilitating migration within the country and across borders. Migrants are now known as the "*agents of globalization*" (Castles & Miller, 2009). Over the years, migration has contributed significantly to the economic growth and development of poor households. The remittances sent by the migrants have had significant impact on the development process in their countries. However, migration has also created a new problem as a group of people who opt for irregular ways to cross borders has emerged recently. This involves criminalization at every stage of the migration process. Despite the risk of losing their own lives, people migrate illegally to improve their socio-economic conditions and to avoid war, domestic political violence, and the adverse effects of climate change. These migrants are also at a high risk of experiencing human trafficking, violations of human rights, and other forms of exploitation such as kidnapping, physical and sexual abuse, slavery, and death. Some of the migrants may still be vulnerable to trafficking even after reaching their destination and may face exploitation due to language barriers, a lack of opportunities to integrate into the new society, diminished bargaining power with employers, a lack of awareness, and a lack of willingness to seek legal and social services. In this context, irregular migration has, therefore, become a huge concern for Bangladesh. According to the data published by the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) of IOM (2021), around 4,510 irregular Bangladeshi migrants arrived in Europe by sea and land in 2020. While some died during the journey, others were imprisoned, enslaved, or forced to work for indecent wages in destination countries.

METHODS

Both primary and secondary data were collected in this research. The primary data were gathered between August 2021 and July 2022 through a survey conducted on 100 returnee migrants, along with in-depth interviews of 20 returnee migrants and five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from five districts of Bangladesh: Dhaka (Keraniganj), Tangail, Cumilla, Narsingdi, and Shariatpur. Secondary data was gathered from the briefings and research reports produced by civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and research organizations including Frontex, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), European Union (EU), International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Migration Policy Institute (MPI), Migration Policy Centre (MPC), Hugo Observatory, and also from daily newspapers.

With support from the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), the BRAC Migration Programme, and the WARBE Development Foundation, snowball sampling techniques were used to find the participants. Standard ethical guidelines were followed to collect and process the data. Thematic analysis methods were used to analyze the data.

BACKGROUND OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Male respondents aged between 21 and 64 years comprised the majority of the sample. The average age of the migrants when they first started their journey to Europe was 28.42 years. However, some migrants were between the ages of 17 and 20 years when they made their initial attempt to enter Europe. Hence, they spent the most productive years of their lives gambling on their life chances by choosing the most unauthorized routes for migration. Almost all of them (94 percent) were unmarried, and only a few (4 percent) came from nuclear families. More than two thirds of the respondents (75 percent) completed their studies up to class VIII while the rest completed or enrolled in secondary, higher secondary, or tertiary level of education. They entered Europe illegally by air, sea, or land through the arduous routes that crossed various parts of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa.

MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

It was found that the respondents had no specific reason behind their illegal migration to Europe. Despite being completely aware of the risks and uncertainties of illegal migration, they migrated to improve their socioeconomic situation. They believed that the prosperous countries in Europe would offer them an excellent opportunity to have a bright future. The glamorous lure of better living and work opportunities, the presence of already established immigrant communities in Europe, and the image of the country were important considerations while choosing the destination countries.

Prospects for better living conditions, asylum, and citizenship in Europe

In general, better and more attractive living conditions and job prospects often work as the main drivers of irregular migration from Bangladesh to Europe. A common misconception among Bangladeshi aspirant migrants who are entering Europe illegally is that there are ample opportunities in Europe that could offer an excellent and bright future. The migrants were willing to take any kind of risks for the welfare of their families.

Almost a quarter of the respondents (22 percent) claimed that the appeal of better living conditions worked as the main driver for their migration. Surprisingly, they were fully aware of the dangers of illegal migration, as more than half (62 percent) of the migrants' households had family members who entered Europe in illegal ways. The existing large Bangladeshi migrant community in Europe also acted as a major influencing factor when choosing destination countries.

Along with improved economic conditions, a chance to obtain asylum and legal status due to the EU's open-door policy also contributed to irregular migration from Bangladesh to Europe.

Many of them assumed that European countries would not send them back, even after illegal immigration, due to their generous humanitarian policies which would allow them to accept unauthorized immigrants and grant them asylum.

Ambiguous rewards of education, socio-economic realities, and family influence

Despite being highly educated, many young people find that there are limited job opportunities in Bangladesh. More than half of the migrants (52 percent) were unhappy with the current economic situation, and a small proportion of them (7 percent) were dissatisfied with the political situation in Bangladesh. Along with dissatisfaction and frustration with their career prospects, political, and economic conditions, the influence of family members and the community often pushed them to seek better opportunities abroad.

“People who are risking their lives to go to Europe might have gotten the wrong impression from the Bangladeshi community who made it to Europe that it's worth going under any circumstances.”

-Dr. Bernd Spanier

Deputy Head

Delegation of the European
Union Bangladesh

“Majority of the migrants have relatives living abroad. This is how diaspora in the country of destination can influence the decision of going abroad.”

-Dr. Ahmed Munirus Salehin

Senior secretary

Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare
and Overseas Employment,
Government of the People's
Republic of Bangladesh

Pursuit of adventure

The illusion of a modern lifestyle connected to the perceived beauty of Europe and the desire to experience independence, personal growth, adulthood, and exploration of new horizons often inspire the young people in Bangladesh to take risks by migrating to Europe through illegal means. Another widespread misconception is that once somebody establishes himself in Europe, he can easily move to any other country within Europe without any hassle. Thus, the ambition to become a global citizen often acts as a significant factor in influencing irregular migration to Europe.

“Since our childhood, we have heard about our village’s successful migration to Italy in this manner. So we decided to take the opportunity and embark on this dangerous adventure.”

-Two 21-year-old migrants from Shariatpur district, Bangladesh

Social media’s role in migration decisions

Along with the social conditions of migrants, social media also plays an important factor in motivating young people to migrate from Bangladesh to Europe. More than half (58 percent) of the respondents who had returned home, upon an attempt to enter Europe, attributed their aspiration for irregular migration to social media influence. Social media has also brought smugglers and aspirant migrants together. Human smugglers often present a false and misleading “*idealized*” version of Europe through travel vlogs, first-person narratives, videos, and testimonies of successful migration. Digital technologies also make the exchange of cash, information, and goods easier for smugglers which help the processing of irregular migration quickly.

Policy recommendations

- There are multiple reasons behind irregular migration. The migrants usually negotiate and manage all kinds of obstacles and challenges to improve their life chances. Therefore, while implementing any kind of policy, policymakers should consider multidimensional factors responsible for irregular migration. Also, policymakers need to come up with effective policy initiatives to resolve the root structural causes of irregular migration.
- Due to different socio-economic reasons, uncertainty, and frustrations, many Bangladeshi young people are desperate to leave the country. They also believe that the young age is the perfect time to take risks. Therefore, policymakers should work on rights-based approaches to ensure safe migration for young people. This will help reduce vulnerability and thus support us to emerge as a country that ensures safe migration.

- The aspirant migrants who are entering Europe by irregular means are often prone to physical, mental, and even sexual abuse by the traffickers. They are also vulnerable to the loss of wealth and their own lives throughout their journey. Bangladeshi embassies can play an active role in protecting them from the dire consequences. Thus, the foreign embassies in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi embassies abroad should work together to provide better services to the migrants stranded in Europe.

“The whole idea of decoupling migration and migrants with the rest of the phenomena including inequality, market demand, and geopolitics is a futile effort.”

-Md Shahidul Haque

Professor

South Asian Institute of Policy
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- Policymakers should prioritize enhancing the skills of aspirant migrants. New and advanced training programs should be conducted for both aspirant migrants as well as regular Bangladeshi workers. Throughout Europe, there is a high demand for skilled workers as the working-class population in Europe is growing old. Hence, the European market is experiencing a shortage in labor supply. Since Europe has become a popular destination for potential migrants, policymakers should take it as an opportunity to encourage safe and legal migration to Europe. The government should, therefore, come up with bilateral and multilateral agreements to fulfil the market demand of Europe with skilled Bangladeshi workers.
- Migration is not always the best choice to improve the economic situation. Hence, potential migrants should be aware of the risks and challenges associated with the migration process. In the age of globalization, young people should be protected for better migration, mobility, and development for a better country. Therefore, further research should be conducted on the dangers and consequences of illegal migration to Europe from a multidisciplinary perspective.
- The aspirant migrants become vulnerable to human smuggling and trafficking because of the lack of regulations during the migration process. Therefore, to protect the migrants, the government must take necessary steps to monitor and track down the smugglers. Along with monitoring and tracing, strict laws should be imposed to prevent smuggling and trafficking. If proven guilty, the government should ensure that the smugglers and traffickers are brought under the proper legal authority.

“From policy perspective, I think we should focus on some other issues of irregular migration, like the criminalization of migration”

-Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid

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