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Organization

# Gender and migration from Bangladesh



Mainstreaming migration into  
the national development  
plans from a gender perspective

ILO Country Office for Bangladesh



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# **Gender and migration from Bangladesh**

Mainstreaming migration into  
the national development plans  
from a gender perspective

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Printed in Bangladesh

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# Foreword

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In 2002, as per Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) records, women workers constituted 0.54 per cent of the total number of Bangladeshi workers who migrated overseas in that year. In 2012, this percentage was up to 6.14, and by the middle of 2013 the percentage stood at 13. In fact, this rise in the number of women workers migrating was even evident when the global financial crisis struck. While the overall number of Bangladeshi workers migrating was negatively affected as a result of the financial crisis, the percentage of women workers among the migrant pool continued to steadily rise. This gradual change did not take place automatically. The role played by Zafar Ahmed Khan (PhD), who was the Secretary to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment when this study was completed; Begum Shamsun Nahar, who is the Director-General of the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training; and Hazarat Ali, who is the Additional Secretary to the Ministry, in supporting women workers' decisions to migrate for employment in the international economy is evident. It took their will, tremendous effort, and collaboration with the stakeholders to support women workers.

Bangladeshi women and men workers have demonstrated strength and zeal to be contributing members of the domestic and international labour market, and this study shows that their public institutions responded with positive actions to support them. Women workers are recognized as an important part of the economy in the Perspective Plan (2010-2021) and the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-15). The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment and its subsidiary bodies have adopted a flexible approach to meeting migrant women workers' needs based on their family situations. The current efforts are geared towards skilling women workers before they migrate. This study brings out both the positive and negative elements of these initiatives and of efforts to help women find employment in sectors suitable to their skills.

The efforts of the Government of Bangladesh to bring improvement in laws, policies, and rules are also noted in this study. This is to ensure that the gaps that have been identified in this study are presented to stakeholders to serve as a guide in their future initiatives.

This study is a result of collaboration between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and its member States, Bangladesh and Switzerland. As stated in the Swiss Working Paper titled "Swiss position on gender equality in the post-2015 agenda", updated in January 2014, gender inequalities are a major obstacle to sustainable development, economic growth, and poverty eradication throughout the globe. Such inequalities reduce the chances of women to be able to meaningfully participate in social, political,



and economic life. Switzerland promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and advocates for this as a transversal issue, with gender-specific targets and indicators in all relevant development goals, including migration and skills development. Switzerland hopes that by including gender as a transversal theme, women will be provided with equal economic opportunity, freedom from violence in all forms, and equal participation and leadership opportunities.

The Swiss position and Bangladesh's National Women's Development Policy, 2011, have unity of purpose. Such coherence among the member States is useful for addressing specific equality issues through cooperation and mutual learning. This is also in line with the ILO's strategy of ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into all technical cooperation activities promoting decent work.

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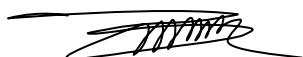
This study was conducted as a joint initiative of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) under the ILO executed project "Promoting Decent Work through Improved Migration Policy and its Application in Bangladesh". It was made possible by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) through their financial assistance.

MEWOE and the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) gratefully acknowledge contributions of the Honourable Minister of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Engineer Khandker Mosharraf Hossain (MP), and the then Secretary to the Ministry, Zafar Ahmed Khan (PhD), in giving serious attention to gender equality in policy programmes and research.

We express sincerest gratitude to the research team leader Abul Barkat (PhD) and team member Manzuma Ahsan (MSS) of the Human Development Research Centre (HDRC) for conducting this study. They were well-supported by the rest of the staff of the HDRC, who must also be thanked for the good work. We acknowledge the role that Nisha, the Chief Technical Advisor of the ILO played in backstopping and task-managing this research. Thanks to Md. Nurul Islam (PhD), Director of Training Standard and Planning at the BMET, for providing documents and generously sharing his understanding of the issue.

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# Summary

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## **Key issues**

Bangladesh has seen the increasing movement of its people into the international labour market over the years. This expanding migratory movement of workers from Bangladesh exhibits the growth of temporary short-term contract migration, and Bangladeshi women are emerging as major participants in migration. Poverty, along with the growing disparity in the living standards of people in Bangladesh, has let migrant women workers to gravitate towards the irresistible magnetism of countries with an abundance of jobs openings and better prospects of life.

In addition, labour market demands and the phenomenon of global care chains offer a good illustration of how the demand for domestic workers and care-service providers in industrialized countries is met through the international migration of women from developing countries. Therefore, as part of a journey towards break free from traditional reproductive roles, Bangladeshi women have edged forward and headed towards these overseas occupations in higher numbers. A look at overseas employment and remittances reveals a picture of how migrant workers have proved effective in the acceleration and expansion of the economic development of Bangladesh, but the truth is that the actual and potential benefits and prospects of migration for work, especially the degree to which women's migration affects the national economy and the livelihoods of migrants and their households, still remains an unexplored area.

The present study is an attempt to promote women's right to migrate for employment from Bangladesh and to mainstream the issue in development planning from a gender perspective.

## **Challenges**

The explanations for international migration are diverse, complex, and interlinked. International migrant workers are exposed to a multitude of problematic situations affecting the migration process from its embryonic stage until return to the country of origin. Though both men and migrant women workers are confronted with myriads of vulnerabilities, the undeniable truth is that the position of migrant women workers, compared to that of men, is more vulnerable. The reason why women often find themselves in situations of vulnerability is attributable to the fact that gender-based discrimination and violence are perpetrated against them. Therefore, migrant women workers are in danger of getting exposed to confiscation of travel documents, withholding and nonpayment of salary or salary reduction, harsh working conditions, lack of freedom of movement and communication, etc. in certain countries. In addition, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse in the course of their working life appears to be a very common and distressing reality of female migration.



The present study aims to present all the dimensions and challenges of labour migration faced by women in Bangladesh. The status and dynamics of migrant women workers in terms of their remittance flows to Bangladesh, the position they hold in countries of destination, the particular sectors in which they are employed, and the skills they hold have been investigated in this research endeavor. In addition, the various dimensions of their migration experience, including the earlier stages, the pros and cons of overseas life, and their status and scope upon return have also been discussed. Also, the economic and social impact of labour migration of Bangladeshi women on their households has been sought out for an understanding of changes migration brought to their lives.

Beyond the above another important, challenging area regarding labour migration by women workers from Bangladesh is discussed in the study, namely the policies and legal regimes concerning migrant women workers. This study examines the existing guidelines and gaps, and the feasibility of initiatives intended to reduce those gaps.

It has been observed that Bangladeshi migrant women workers face many problems at every stage of their migration – from initial decision-making to the phases of returning back home. The consequences of such problems have an adverse on migrant women workers. Recognizing this, Bangladesh should acknowledge the reality of women’s participation in international labour migration processes and their contribution to national development. Governance of women migration movements should be improved and supported by the formulation and reformation of effective laws and policies. Adequate information and suggestions should be made available, so that potential migrant women workers can make an informed choice, workers currently working overseas can be protected and their rights observed, and returning women can be assisted with reintegration initiatives.

In addition, an effort has been made in the study to sum up the ideas related to “mainstreaming migration”, with an emphasis on women migration, in the light of the Government of Bangladesh’s Vision 2021 perspective plan and the Sixth Five Year Plan, as these are currently the major national development plans. These two plans have targeted labour migration, including addressing a few of the challenges related to the migration issue and offering related strategies for action to boost the development of Bangladesh. The present study also discusses some of the challenges which go in line with these two development plans. However, “meeting the challenges” is itself a challenge to be overcome.

Another challenging area that has been observed in the present study is the lack of research on gender, international labour market, and development in Bangladesh. Research needs to be carried out on a regular basis in order to help convince policy-makers of the centrality of gender equality concerns. For example, there is currently only limited sex-disaggregated data on migration flows (particularly with regard to irregular migrants), little research has been done on the gender implications of remittances, and inadequate research on the different contributions and priorities of migrant women and men in Bangladesh. More research studies should be done, especially on the use of remittances at the household level. The government, along with other stakeholders involved in labour migration, should come forward with the initiatives to do more policy-based research on the issues to foster the potential positive impacts of migration on women and gender relations.

### **Policy recommendations**

The present study has put forth some recommendations for the migration process, policy reformations, and reintegration strategies aimed at improving the migration experience of Bangladeshi migrant women workers.



**Regarding migrant women workers in the migration process:**

- (a) The government and other stakeholders need to follow the International Labour Organization (ILO) Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration in the overall migration process. All stakeholders must provide pre-departure information on rights and risks to migrant women workers and potential migrant women workers. Information needs to be provided in a location that is accessible to both women and men. The training of women in various job sectors is also necessary.
- (b) Government migration policies should enable free movement for migrant women through regular channels and ensure their safety so that women are not forced into irregular and potentially dangerous channels. Development cooperation agencies would need to work towards this end and seek to achieve policy coherence.
- (c) The government needs to support Bangladeshi workers migrating to other countries, including specific policies on recruitment agencies and illegal sub-agents, to reduce abuse of potential migrant workers, abuses that include unreasonable fees and harassment during transit. These measures should regulate recruitment agencies and comply with minimum standards as outlined in the ILO's Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181).
- (d) The government needs to ensure that all migrant women workers can have access to basic services (including education, health, and housing), sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response should be specially stressed in this regard.
- (e) Missions in destination countries should establish resource centres so that all overseas migrant workers – and migrant women in particular – can access information on how to secure their rights, access social protection services, and get recourse to justice if they are being abused. If the development of a resource centre is not possible at each Mission, the government should designate a trained protection officer with a legal background, in addition to the labour attaché, to respond to the immediate needs of Bangladeshi workers who may be facing physical and/or sexual abuse, with a particular focus on migrant women workers.
- (f) The government should sign bilateral agreements with destination countries on migrant women workers' rights generally, and provide coverage for women entering categories of work where they might be more likely to be exposed abuses of their rights (e.g., domestic work). Following the signing of such bilateral agreements with destination countries, awareness campaigns and other promotional activities aimed at disseminating concepts regarding the safe migration of women need to be launched by Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE).
- (g) All the stakeholders need to ensure that women and men migrant workers have awareness of and access to services related to HIV and reproductive health services. Confidential, sensitive, and gender responsive HIV and STI prevention and response support services should be developed for all migrant workers, including potential and returning migrant workers.
- (h) The government should provide information accessible to both women and men migrants on the real costs attached to remittances through various channels. NGOs and migrant organizations need to create low cost and useful modes of money transfer which do not exclude women or irregular migrants.
- (i) The government, non-government organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations should support family members left behind. Diversification of income-generating activities may be needed in the face of the unpredictability of remittances.



- (j) The government should increase allocation in the national budget to the overseas employment sector and support the efforts to improve migration management in Bangladesh.

**Regarding policy reformation related to labour migration by women:**

- (a) The ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration should be the guideline for formulating or reforming any policies related to overseas migration for work. Also, a gender analysis needs to be undertaken to devise a strategy to mainstream gender into all work on migration policies.
- (b) Labour migration and national development strategies undertaken through the Five Year Plans should be strengthened. The steps outlined in these plans ask for more attention to resource poor areas of Bangladesh. These steps need to be undertaken.
- (c) Civil society organizations need to continue campaigning about the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) and other related international instruments (e.g., the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW], the Beijing Platform for Action, and United Nations [UN] Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security) that can serve as strong tools for protecting the rights of migrant workers, and migrant women workers in particular.
- (d) Development cooperation agencies should support national capacity-building – of both governmental and research institutes – aimed at generating gender-disaggregated research and policy analyses to enable the development of evidence-based policies for migration and arenas affected by migration, such as urban planning and access to services.
- (e) The need for skilled labour in overseas countries is increasing day by day, and in the context of this ever-increasing need, vocational training activities should be expanded for women. In addition, to create more employment opportunities, the language and soft skills of potential migrants also need to be improved. With this in mind, skills development training programmes for women workers should focused on the skills in demand in the overseas labour market.
- (f) Policy advocacy at the national and international levels needs to be strengthened to include the mainstreaming of HIV initiatives among both men and migrant women workers. Collaboration among NGOs, self-help groups, and people living with HIV networks within Bangladesh is also necessary.
- (g) Migration policies worldwide should enable family reunions for migrant workers employed in all categories of work. Short-term visits should also be facilitated for family members. International organizations should also consider this point in international treaties connected to labour migration.
- (h) During policy formulation on labour migration by women, researchers and activists should carry out a gender-based analyses of upcoming policies and input their findings into the policy-making process. Key questions to ask are: How would these policies affect women and men? What are their different needs and priorities? How can policies challenge, rather than entrench, gender inequalities and foster the positive potentials of migration for women's empowerment?
- (i) In order to assess the need for labour in overseas labour markets, evidence should include data on gender and more detailed information on specific labour market sectors to understand gender distribution. Needs assessments should not overlook domestic work and private care-related services, so that admission policies would better reflect the actual need overseas. Such measures would also help reduce the number of migrant women workers working in irregular employment situations.



### **Regarding re-integration strategies for returning women migrant worker**

- (a) A collaborative approach between the government and the private sector for enterprise and cooperative development among returning migrant women can contribute to empowerment of returning migrant women workers.
- (b) Reintegration programmes may need awareness campaigns and information dissemination to engage returning migrant women workers in small business endeavours, agro-based farming (like poultry, livestock, fish culture, improved cultivation), small transport vehicles, small shops, etc.
- (c) The most effective and most needed service for returning migrant women workers is counseling on how to invest and utilize their remittance savings. Microfinance Institutions, which are emerging as actors in savings mobilization and credit disbursement at the grassroots level in Bangladesh, can be incorporated into this process.
- (d) Encourage and undertake public-private partnerships to enable the private sector to play a role in the professional re-integration of migrant workers, in particular to provide business support services and mentoring to women entrepreneurs.
- (e) Reintegration programmes implemented by State agencies and NGOs can include a variety of services and strategies to smooth the process of returning, such as: (i) providing employment support and/or counseling; (ii) facilitating the transfer of pensions and other social benefits obtained abroad; (iii) making grants or low-risk loans available for business ventures; (iv) offering additional training or access to further education; and (v) addressing social, family, or other problems.
- (f) In designing the appropriate strategy for reintegration programmes, district-wise and destination country-wise migration scenarios should be analyzed. Some specific information would be practicable for designing useful programmes. This background or base level information may be collected to draw: (i) the socio-economic profiles of migrant workers; (ii) patterns of remittance sending; (iii) use of remittance and its impact on standards of living; (iv) migration cost and the repayment of any loans; and (v) needs for reintegration through training, counseling, and technical or financial assistance.
- (g) Suggested steps for implementing reintegration programme activities include: (i) developing integration packages and setting up a database of such packages; (ii) setting up an information and service portal to cater to the social and professional needs of migrant workers; (iii) outreach and communication to facilitate continuous and good quality delivery of reintegration services; (iv) registration of returning migrants requiring social and professional reintegration assistance; (v) assisting the workers to identify the re-integration package that interests them; and (vi) supporting the workers through the reintegration process.

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# List of acronyms and abbreviations

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BDT	Bangladeshi taka [currency]
BIAM	Bangladesh Institute of Administration and Management
BMET	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
DEMO	District Employment and Manpower Office
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FY	Fiscal Year
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMG	Global Migration Group
HDRC	Human Development Research Centre
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICRMW	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.
ILO	International Labour Organization
Saudi Arabia	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment
NGO	Non-government organization
NSDC	National Skills Development Council
NSDP	National Skill Development Policy
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TTC	Technical Training Centre
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations

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# Statement from the Secretary

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In the last decade, the number of migrant women workers going overseas for employment has steadily risen. Bangladeshi women have been overcoming numerous socio-cultural and other barriers to be active in paid employment, especially, overseas employment.

Our experience with women workers who would like to migrate for overseas employment shows that they actively negotiate several barriers in the pre-decision and pre-departure stages. As is evident from this study, they have demonstrated their will and ability to manage many hurdles while they are overseas. We also have examples of women workers who have successfully negotiated their participation in society and economy upon return.

I am confident that the findings and recommendations put forward in this study report would be taken forward by the stakeholders concerned. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment looks forward to continued technical cooperation from the International Labour Organization (ILO) for addressing, in particular, the gender dimensions of labour migration and, in general, for *Promoting Decent Work through Improved Migration Policy and its Application in Bangladesh*.



**Dr Zafar Ahmed Khan**

Secretary

Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas

Employment

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh



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# Introduction, study objectives, and methodology

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## 1.1 Background

Under a project titled “Promoting Decent Work through Improved Migration Policy and its Application in Bangladesh” (initiated by the ILO and other stakeholders), the Human Development Research Centre (HDRC) carried out five studies under the broad heading – “Studies on international migration and economic development issues in Bangladesh”. Among these five studies, this one is “Gender and migration from Bangladesh: Mainstreaming migration into the national development plans from a gender perspective”.

The study title entails the theme of “migration and development” and the possible priorities and methods of mainstreaming the issue into a national plan from a gender perspective. Therefore, gender and its relationship with migration and with development is the core idea of the present study.

### Box 1.1: The ILO definition of “migration for employment”

A migrant worker as per the ILO is defined under Article 11(1) of the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97): “The term ‘migrant worker’ or ‘migrant for employment’ means a person who migrates from one country to another with a view to being employed otherwise than on his or her own account.” The scope of Convention No. 97 excludes frontier workers, the short-term entry of members of the liberal professions and artists, and seafarers (Article 11(2)). Under the Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143), the definition of the term “migrant worker” excludes two further categories of workers in addition to those mentioned in Convention No. 97: “persons coming specifically for purposes of training or education” and “persons admitted temporarily to a country at the request of their employer to undertake specific duties or assignments for a limited and defined period of time, and who are required to leave that country on the completion of their duties or assignments” (Article 11).



While ILO Conventions provide a definition of “migration for employment” (Box 1.1), the Global Migration Group (GMG) in their Handbook drew attention to the fact that universal definitions of the terms “migration” and “development” do not exist (GMG, 2010, p. 10). GMG described international migration as “movements of many kinds, such as people leaving their country of origin as economic migrants, refugees and family members of migrants” (GMG, 2010, p. 10). In addition, the handbook, describes development as “a process of improving the overall quality of life of a group of people, and in particular expanding the range of opportunities open to them” (GMG, 2010, p.10). This definition is broader than some traditional notions of development that are primarily concerned with economic growth or the incomes of individuals and families. By focusing on quality of life and opportunities, the GMG descriptions provide a “human development” perspective that may serve as a bridge between “migration” and “development”. Human development through migration can be achieved, as noted by the UN Development Programme (UNDP, 2009, p. 3), if restrictions on migration are lifted and migrant workers are treated with dignity.

### Box 1.2: Migration, development, and human rights

- ✓ All persons, irrespective of their nationality and immigration status, are entitled to enjoy protection of their human and labour rights.
- ✓ A rights-based policy gives migrants an opportunity to be economically productive and to enrich their social lives.
- ✓ Equal protection of human rights for migrants and citizens enhances social cohesion and integration.
- ✓ Enjoyment of human rights enhances the capacity of migrants to contribute to their home and host societies.
- ✓ Migrants’ contributions to their country of origin can enhance the ability of people left behind to access their rights (e.g., remittances sent back that are used for education).
- ✓ Protection of human rights may reduce pressure to emigrate, as the violation of rights can create situations of poverty, poor governance, conflict, etc., all of which can provoke movement.
- ✓ Enforcement of labour standards in destination countries may curb the demand for irregular migrant workers, who are at particular risk of human rights violations.

Source: GMG, 2010, p. 11.

Therefore, following this, human development means “pursuing all avenues to improve a person’s opportunities and freedoms” (GMG, 2010, p. 10) – which would include the encouragement of safe migration for all migrant workers looking to better their situation. Therefore, as gender equality is a fundamental human right and because it also makes good economic sense to foster safe, lucrative migration opportunities for women (who make up half of Bangladesh’s human capital), a human development approach to migration that considers gender perspectives should be incorporated into national development plans. Such an approach can have profound benefits not just for women workers themselves but also for their families, their communities, and the national economy of Bangladesh (See Box 1.2 for more about the interplay of migration, development, and human rights).

The nature of migration’s developmental effects is far from being set in stone. In fact, the effects vary greatly depending on the context in which they take place. While evidence suggests migration can be a powerful driver of development both for migrants and their households and eventually the nation, migration policies and programs in general are still too underdeveloped to harness this potential. This is certainly true with regard to the incorporation of gender perspectives into migration policies and programmes.



Labour migration has become a reality for people in Bangladesh and will remain so in the future. More than 8 million migrant workers have left the country since official records on labour migration started in 1976. While the total number of migrants was about 6,000 in 1976; there has been phenomenal growth since that year. Today, around 8 million Bangladeshi migrants are believed to be living abroad.<sup>1</sup> Although the labour migration process is traditionally male dominated in Bangladesh, increasing need in the service sectors in many developed countries has encouraged Bangladeshi women migrate for employment in greater numbers. For example, in the Middle East, migrant women workers from Bangladesh continue to occupy a major share in the domestic service sector. Official figures show that more than 20,843 Bangladeshi women travelled abroad in search of employment in 2008 (IOM & UNIFEM, 2009). However, this figure does not reflect the overall number of undocumented Bangladeshi migrant women workers working in South Asia and the Middle East, which is believed to be much higher.

With Bangladeshi women increasingly looking abroad for employment opportunities, the importance of recognizing the gender aspects of “migration and development” and the need to finding ways of mainstreaming this issue into national plans is clear. Labour migration by women is going to have an impact on development in Bangladesh, but it does not make sense to incorporate migration by women into development planning unless those initiatives contribute to advocating and protecting the rights of the women and bridging gender equality gaps in the socio-economic arena.

## 1.2 Specific objectives

1. Creating an understanding of the potential macro and micro gains and losses from international migration, including those arising from the return of migrant workers.
2. Advocating for the development of gender-sensitive and need-based national development plans for using migration as a transforming social phenomenon to improve the position of women in families and society and to efficiently address gender equity in migration to empower women, especially in rural areas.
3. Promoting the development of labour and social protection policies and mechanisms for potential and current migrant women workers.
4. Advocating for evidence-based reform in the legislative and policy frameworks to identify and eliminates prohibitions and constraints to women’s employability in specific occupational areas and to their migration, and to promote social protection of migrant workers and their families.

## 1.3 Methodology

The study mostly used secondary data and information. In addition, primary data and information were collected through interviews and focus group discussions using separate diagnostic tools for different groups of respondents.<sup>2</sup> Quantitative data and qualitative information have been triangulated as per the needs of the study objectives. All research ethics and the anonymity of respondents/participants were ensured during primary data collection. In most cases, monetary values from previous years have been inflation-adjusted to February 2013 using the Consumer Price Index produced by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh Bank estimation in BMET website, <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=28> [accessed 19 July 2013].

<sup>2</sup> Diagnostic tools based on consultations.



**Major strategies, tools, and techniques used under this study are as follows:**

**National workshop:** After stocktaking and in-depth review of the relevant literatures<sup>3</sup>, a day-long workshop was organized where various inputs came from the key stakeholders. This workshop took place on 6 February 2013 at the BIAM Auditorium in Dhaka. The workshop was arranged at the initial phase of the study to formulate some guiding principles and an operational strategy to implement the study.

**Use of secondary data and information:** As the study did not have scope for wide-scale data collection or a large sample survey for primary data collection, it mostly used secondary data and information for analysis. Data from relevant official national databases and information from other widely accepted reports/articles were used for analysis and estimation.

**In-depth interviews with the migrant workers currently employed overseas:** In-depth interviews were also conducted with migrant workers currently employed overseas (either by telephone or in person with workers in Bangladesh on leave). A total of seven migrant women workers currently employed overseas were interviewed in this process. The respondents who spoke by telephone were selected through personal contacts of the researchers, information from NGOs who work on migration issues, and information from journalists who cover migration related issues. The respondents were employed in Saudi Arabia and Italy. The interviews were conducted between February and April 2013.

**Focus group discussion (FGD) with the returning migrant workers:** A FGD was organized with returning migrant women workers in Munshiganj on 18 April 2013. In that FGD, 15 returning migrant women workers who had worked in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates participated. The average length of their stay in abroad was 5.2 years, with a range of stays between two and 11 years.

**Key informant interviews:** A number of key informant interviews were conducted under the study. The major key informants interviewed were from the following groups: Migrant women workers (both currently working overseas and returning), NGOs working on migration issues, journalists, academics/researchers, and experts. The key informant interviews were conducted between January and June 2013.

**Survey:** A small survey (not a statistically representative sample survey) was conducted with two groups of people – returning migrant workers and members of households with a migrant worker currently employed overseas (hereafter referred to as “migrant household members”) – in order to develop an understanding of the current status and to supplement/validate the data and information contained in secondary sources. In-depth interviews with returning migrant workers and migrant household members were conducted in 14 districts across Bangladesh (Barisal, Bogra, Faridpur, Khulna, Kurigram, Kushtia, Moulavibazar, Munshiganj, Noakhali, Pabna, Patuakhali, Rangamti, Rangpur, and Tangail). In each of these 14 districts, an average of five returning migrants and five migrant household members were interviewed. A total of 67 returning migrants and 69 migrant household members were interviewed in March and April 2013. The number of sample districts was derived simply to cover 20 per cent of the districts of Bangladesh. The districts were selected using probability proportionate to number of households in districts of Bangladesh. Districts were selected from all seven of the Divisions of Bangladesh. Due to resource constraints, the number of sample households was not derived to ensure a statistical representative group of respondents. The sample selection was purposive.

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<sup>3</sup> Newspaper news, television programmes, web-based news portals were also used.

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# Gender mainstreaming migration in Bangladesh: Planning and policy

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International migration is not a new phenomenon. History is full of accounts about trade relations between different countries around the world going back centuries. Thus, the phenomenon of migration has enhanced international connectivity and accelerated the flow of information, capital, and people.

Migration literature for a very long time was biased with regard to women, as they were considered to be passive agents in migration. The impact of international migration on women, both those migrating and those left behind has been a sorely neglected issue in international migration research (Boyd, 2003, as cited in Dhar, 2007). But the issue of gender and migration has more recently been the subject of increasing scholarly efforts, which has in turn had an impact of migration policy planning in Bangladesh.

## **2.1 Mainstreaming migration in the light of Outline Perspective Plan 2010–2021 and the Sixth Five Year Plan**

While exploring the mainstreaming of migration into Bangladesh's national development plans from a gender perspective, it is important to analyze how labour migration promotes or hinders economic development in Bangladesh at the local and national levels and what results it brings to women and men. In this regard, the Sixth Five Year Plan, 2011-2015 and the Outline Perspective Plan of Bangladesh, 2010-2021 are two of the most influential planning tools to further gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Outline Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021 was developed by the Planning Commission of the Government of Bangladesh on the basis of the Constitution of Bangladesh. The Plan's drafting was done in consultation at the national, divisional, and district levels with people from different walks of life, including workers' organizations, civil society, administrators and policy makers, public and private enterprises, and other interest groups. Many socio-economic goals are set in the document. One is "Promoting Human Development", wherein planning population growth and utilizing the citizenry as human resources has been emphasized. This goal is connected to implementing further action on formation and training of skills among the labour force for national and international employment (Government of Bangladesh, 2010).



Moreover, other targets of the Perspective Plan, such as “Vision for Education, Training, and Skills Development”, seek certain gender-specific outcomes (Government of Bangladesh, 2010). One is the need for an inclusive and gender-sensitive technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes to provide both men and women the skills needed to meet labour market demand, which has obvious links to the labour migration. As the Perspective Plan puts it, the aim is to “give women their rightful share in skills development training both at home and abroad, and to improve professional excellence” (Government of Bangladesh, 2010, p. 7). In addition, another target with bearing on labour migration is related to strengthening the trade-related supply side capacities of Bangladesh. Certain industries, such as the readymade garment industry, have emerged as major suppliers of global brands. Such sectors would benefit significantly from a skilled labour force, and therefore, hold good potential to promote professional reintegration of returning migrant workers. Monitoring the return patterns and profiles of returning migrant women workers and development of attractive social and professional reintegration programmes would contribute to the realization of the overarching target to increase exports from Bangladesh to about 38 per cent of GDP by 2021.

Furthermore, the Perspective Plan also notes that the “Bangladesh economy is more integrated with the global market today than ever before” (Government of Bangladesh, 2010, p. 42). The Perspective Plan attributes this situation to “rapid growth in trade, massive out-migration of labour, and remittance inflows” (Government of Bangladesh, 2010, p. 42). Annual remittance flows stand at nearly US\$14.2 billion (as of December 2012)<sup>4</sup>. Remittances have become a resource of considerable importance and have emerged as a very prominent source of foreign exchange. The Perspective Plan therefore focuses on the challenges related to migration and targets some strategies to meet those challenges and let the development process surge ahead.

Like the Outline Perspective Plan of Bangladesh in 2010-2021, another important document is the Sixth Five Year Plan. This Plan follows the essence of Article 15 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, which proclaims that “the country should follow the path of a planned economy for realizing its development objectives”. Recognizing that development is a long-term process, the Five Year Plan is cast in the context of a long-term development vision defined by the government’s Vision 2021 and the Perspective Plan. The Sixth Plan came into operation in July 2010 and is designed to be implemented by two successive five year plans spanning the period FY2011–FY2020.

A number of core targets have been identified to monitor the progress of the Sixth Five Year Plan. These targets have been set according to the vision and objectives of the Perspective Plan as well as the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals. The achievement of these targets by the end of the Sixth Plan should likely put Bangladesh on course to realize most of the objectives of the Vision 2021 and Millennium Development Goals. These targets fall into seven broad categories:

- (i) Income and poverty;
- (ii) Human Resource Development;
- (iii) Water and sanitation;
- (iv) Energy and infrastructure;
- (v) Gender equality and empowerment;
- (vi) Environment sustainability; and

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<sup>4</sup> Figure derived from Bangladesh Bank estimation in BMET website, <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=37> [accessed 19 July 2013].



(vii) Information and Communications Technology (ICT) (Government of Bangladesh, 2011).

Among the targets within the “Income and poverty” section, the Sixth Plan presents the goal of increasing the number of skilled migrant workers emigrating from Bangladesh. At present, the Plan notes, only 35 per cent of Bangladeshi migrants are skilled workers, and the government intends to raise that proportion to 50 per cent of migrants (Government of Bangladesh, 2011). Consequently, training strategies and policies to enhance skills development among migrant workers are prioritized in the Plan. In addition to skills development, the strategies for poverty reduction given in the Sixth Five Year Plan also point to a few strategies that have a direct impact on the migration of women. These strategies include: promoting migration from poorer areas; supporting returning migrant workers through schemes for enterprise development; promoting women’s participation in the labour force; identifying new international labour markets; and enhancing access to micro-finance (Government of Bangladesh, 2011, pp. 149–150).

The Sixth Plan recognizes that employment abroad and the associated remittances have played a major development role in Bangladesh. Increased migration of workers to traditional Gulf countries and to newer destinations in East Asia, Europe, and North America has contributed to this growth. Initiatives aimed at promoting the transfer of remittances through formal banking channels have all contributed to the solid growth in remittance flows. And this increase in remittance, in turn, has worked to reduce poverty in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the Sixth Plan also aims to create new opportunities for international migration. The Plan notes that the flow of remittance earnings is low to certain less-developed regions of the country and therefore introduces some measures aimed at promoting labour migration from those lagging regions. The targets put forward by the Plan in this respect are:

- (i) to establish TVET institutions for specific skills based on a careful review of overseas demand;
- (ii) to promote special financing schemes to support prospective migrants from those regions;
- (iii) to give special attention to promoting migration on a large scale among workers from underprivileged areas; and
- (iv) to provide logistic support and technical advice to potential migrant workers by creating foreign employment exchanges in the lagging districts in cooperation with the private sector (Government of Bangladesh, 2011).

Being the major national development plans, these two plans have well recognized the need to focus on labour migration. Thus, many challenges have been identified and strategies for action have been taken to meet those challenges. The present study has also mentioned below some of the challenges which go in line with these two plans.





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## Migrant women workers of Bangladesh: Status and dynamics

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Migration for employment can advance gender equality and women's empowerment through the opportunities it opens for greater independence, self-confidence and status (UNIFEM, 2006).

Migration has become one of the primary concerns of many countries across the world. In the context of the existing potential of labour markets abroad and the constraints to local employment opportunity, overseas employment is now considered to be an obvious development alternative for the economic emancipation and empowerment of Bangladesh. Md. Nurul Islam, the Director of Training Standards and Planning at the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) has written that "International migration of manpower has in recent years emerged as the most important issue in the development discourse in Bangladesh" (Islam, 2009, p. 2). He goes on to note that remittances make up a larger share of Bangladesh's development budget than foreign aid.

Overseas employment is Bangladesh's second-largest source of income with 2009 total remittances estimated at US\$10 billion (UN Women, 2013a). Presently, about 8 million Bangladeshi migrants have gone abroad to work in 143 countries around the world, with yearly migration from Bangladesh standing at about 600,000 to 700,000 (Government of Bangladesh, 2012).

Women constitute half of the population of Bangladesh and have a huge potential to contribute towards the economic development of the country. Sometimes women are unable to accrue enough economic stability at home; so migration may be a useful means for economic emancipation for their families. Migration is gradually being considered as a development alternative at the grassroots level for women workers, particularly those who are illiterate and lacking skills.



### 3.1 Flow of migrant women workers

**Table 3.1 Annual outflow of migrant workers from Bangladesh and annual remittance totals (1976 to June 2013)**

Year	Number of migrant workers <sup>5</sup>			% of women among the total number of workers migrated	Migrant workers' remittance (US\$ million)
	Total	Men	Women		
1976	6 087	6 087	-	-	23.71
1977	15 725	15 725	-	-	82.79
1978	22 809	22 809	-	-	106.90
1979	24 495	24 495	-	-	172.06
1980	30 073	30 073	-	-	301.33
1981	55 787	55 787	-	-	304.88
1982	62 762	62 762	-	-	490.77
1983	59 220	59 220	-	-	627.51
1984	56 714	56 714	-	-	500.00
1985	77 694	77 694	-	-	500.00
1986	68 658	68 658	-	-	576.20
1987	74 017	74 017	-	-	747.60
1988	68 121	68 658	-	-	763.90
1989	101 724	101 724	-	-	757.84
1990	103 814	103 814	-	-	781.54
1991	147 131	144 942	2 189	1.49	769.30
1992	188 124	186 217	1 907	1.01	901.97
1993	244 508	242 715	1 793	0.73	1 009.09
1994	186 326	184 331	1 995	1.07	1 153.54
1995	187 543	185 931	1 612	0.86	1 201.52
1996	211 714	209 720	1 994	0.94	1 355.34
1997	231 077	229 315	1 762	0.76	1 525.03
1998	267 667	266 728	939	0.35	1 599.24
1999	268 182	267 816	366	0.14	1 806.63
2000	222 686	222 232	454	0.20	1 954.95
2001	188 965	188 306	659	0.35	2 071.03
2002	225 256	224 040	1 216	0.54	2 847.79
2003	254 190	251 837	2 353	0.93	3 177.63
2004	272 958	261 699	11 259	4.12	3 565.31
2005	252 702	239 132	13 570	5.37	4 249.87
2006	381 516	363 471	18 045	4.73	5 484.08
2007	832 609	813 515	19 094	2.29	6 562.71
2008	875 055	854 213	20 842	2.38	8 979.00
2009	475 278	453 054	22 224	4.68	10 717.73
2010	390 702	362 996	27 706	7.09	11 004.73
2011	568 062	537 483	30 579	5.38	12 168.09
2012	607 798	570 494	37 304	6.14	14 163.99
2013 *	208 340	181 289	27 051	13.0	7 050.95

\*up to June 2013.

Source: Bangladesh Bank estimation in BMET website, <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=37> and <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=32> [accessed 19 July 2013].

<sup>5</sup> The numbers of migrant workers listed in Table 3.1 only account for outbound flows in a given year. There is no estimation of returning workers' numbers.



Just as women's economic contributions to their families and communities have become increasingly significant, so too has presence of women in migration flows. This is reflected in the increasing percentages of Bangladeshi women in annual outward migration flows.

Data from the BMET show that from 1976 until June 2013 the total number of Bangladeshis who have journeyed abroad for employment stands at 8,516,089 (See Table 3.1). Women started to go abroad as a part of the official international labour migration process in 1991; and as of June 2013, a total of 246,913 women have migrated overseas for work.

But from 1981 to 1998, the Government of Bangladesh repeatedly banned or restricted the outflow of less-skilled women, which resulted in migrant women workers making up just 1 per cent of the total flow of registered migrants up through 2003. With the lifting of the bans and restrictions in 2003, the official flow of women migration increased, reaching 6 per cent of the total flow in 2005 (Table 3.1). The number of women migrating has continued to increase, with the 2012 figure being nearly 16 times greater than what was seen in 2003. For 2013, women are also catching up in terms of the ratio of men migrant workers to migrant women workers. In the first half of 2013, 13 per cent of all outbound migrants were women, well above the average one per cent figure that characterized migration a decade earlier.

The official figure of 246,913 migrant women workers having emigrated between 1991 and June 2013 is almost certainly much lower than actual number of Bangladeshi women who have gone abroad for work. At a recent workshop of experts held in Dhaka<sup>6</sup>, participants estimated that only 40 per cent of migrant women workers migrate through recruitment agencies, while the remaining 60 per cent head abroad with the help of relatives and friends who reside in destination countries. Even so, the data in Table 3.2 suggests that to date, Bangladeshi women have accounted for just a small fraction of labour migration from Bangladesh – just 2.9 per cent of all migrants who emigrated via official channels.

All the above facts and figures give us a solid starting point for addressing the degree to which labour migration from Bangladesh is gendered, particularly with regard to the issues of restrictions on women's migration for employment and the migration of Bangladeshi women for employment in feminized trades. Household poverty is pushing Bangladeshi women to seek employment in a global care economy marked by demand for caregivers for both young and aging populations. Independent migration by Bangladeshi women, at present, cannot be construed to be a sign of their empowerment as a social being, nor can it be taken as an outcome of their economic empowerment. Most Bangladeshi women, like Bangladeshi men, are migrating to the Middle East, where family reunion is not permitted. Most women, like men, are migrating to support their families, not necessarily to seek a career in an occupation of their choice. The issue of women's agency in the complex migration process and the qualitative impact migration for employment may have on their human development are issues for further exploration. From a quantitative perspective, the number of women migrating might be increasing every year, but women still represent a small minority of total outbound migrants. Therefore, labour migration from Bangladesh is far from being feminized. Having said this, it is important that women be supported through gender equity measures such as vocational and technical education, exploration of employment in non-traditional jobs, and enhanced resources and outreach in countries of destination in order to promote voluntary migration for employment of choice and to prevent involuntary migration due to harsh realities at home.

<sup>6</sup> The Workshop titled "Building Knowledge-base and Promoting Rights of the Bangladeshi Workers on the Move" was organized by ILO and HDRC and held in Dhaka on 6 February 2013.



### 3.2 Remittances sent by migrant women workers

The flow of migrant remittances to Bangladesh has consistently increased over the last 30 years. While total remittances to Bangladesh were only US\$24 million in 1976, remittances sent by migrants through official channels in 2012 reached nearly US\$14.2 billion (see Table 3.1). Bangladesh was the 10<sup>th</sup> largest recipient of remittances among the developing countries in terms of average amount remitted per migrant for the period 1990 to 2005. In 2012, as per The World Bank, Bangladesh ranked seventh, along with Pakistan, among all remittance-recipient countries in terms of total amount of remittances received (World Bank, 2013).

Remittances received from Bangladeshi migrants have also grown at an average rate of 17 per cent per year since 2001. Remittance surged by over 32 per cent in 2008 (compared to the previous year) and reached nearly US\$9 billion. This amount was said to be nine times higher than total foreign direct investment (FDI) (729 million) and five times that of official development assistance (ODA). By 2011, total remittance had grown to US\$12.17 billion, which is equivalent to 13.1 per cent of GDP, six times greater than ODA, and 12 times the value of the annual FDI in Bangladesh.

There are gender differences in remittance patterns. Men generally remit more than women because they earn more, but women tend to send back a greater portion of their earnings (Jolly & Reeves, 2005; Yinger, 2006). Remittances sent home by women workers can be a means for changing gender relations, as they offer the possibility of women who remit gaining respect as earners and providers. However, there is no guarantee that this respect is forthcoming and the expectation that women will remit more may place a burden on female migrant workers (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

Even so, many of the key informants interviewed for this study stated that remittances are tremendously important to migrant families, and that this is particularly true for those families who have a female member working abroad. Remittances can provide the families of migrant workers with a steady stream of foreign capital, and migrant women workers tend to prefer investment of remittances in the education and health of children and other family members. Remittance also increases their social status, as social status is often displayed through material wealth. Official government figures do not break down remittance by the sex, but key informants stated that remittance from Bangladeshi women workers constitutes a considerable amount.

A number of migrant workers currently employed overseas and returning migrants interviewed for this study spoke about sending remittances to their families back in Bangladesh. It should be noted that none of those interviewed provided pay slips or other definite evidence of their wages or the amount they remitted, but it was still possible to derive a general picture of their actions. On average a Bangladeshi migrant worker annually remits 115,178.42 Bangladeshi taka (BDT). Male migrant workers on average remit BDT115,864.89 while migrant women workers on average remit only BDT75,018.91. It has been estimated that from 1976 through 2012 a total of US\$107.76 billion was remitted by migrant workers to Bangladesh through official channels. Drawing on these figures, it may be said that Bangladeshi migrant women workers send less remittances than their male compatriots. The reason behind the women workers' per capita remittance being lower in comparison that of men is that migrant women workers are typically paid less than male migrant workers. Experts at a recent workshop<sup>7</sup> argued that the discrepancy in male migrant wages versus female migrant wages is in a ratio of approximately 100:70.

<sup>7</sup> Workshop on Building Knowledge-base and Promoting Rights of the Bangladeshi Workers on the Move, organized by the ILO and HDRC and held in Dhaka on 6 February 2013.



**Table 3.2: Data from Janata Bank Ltd. (UAE)**

Official number	Total	1 050 011.00
	Men	1 000 000.00
	Women	50 011.00
Estimated actual number	Total	1 251 000.00
	Men	1 200 000.00
	Women	51 000.00
	% of woman among total migrant workers	4.08
Official amount of remittance sent in 2011-12 (in crore* BDT)	Total	19 038.11
	Men	18 486.00
	Women	552.11
	% of remittance sent by woman migrant workers	2.90

Source: Adapted from Barkat (et al.), 2014.  
\* A crore is unit equivalent to 10 million.

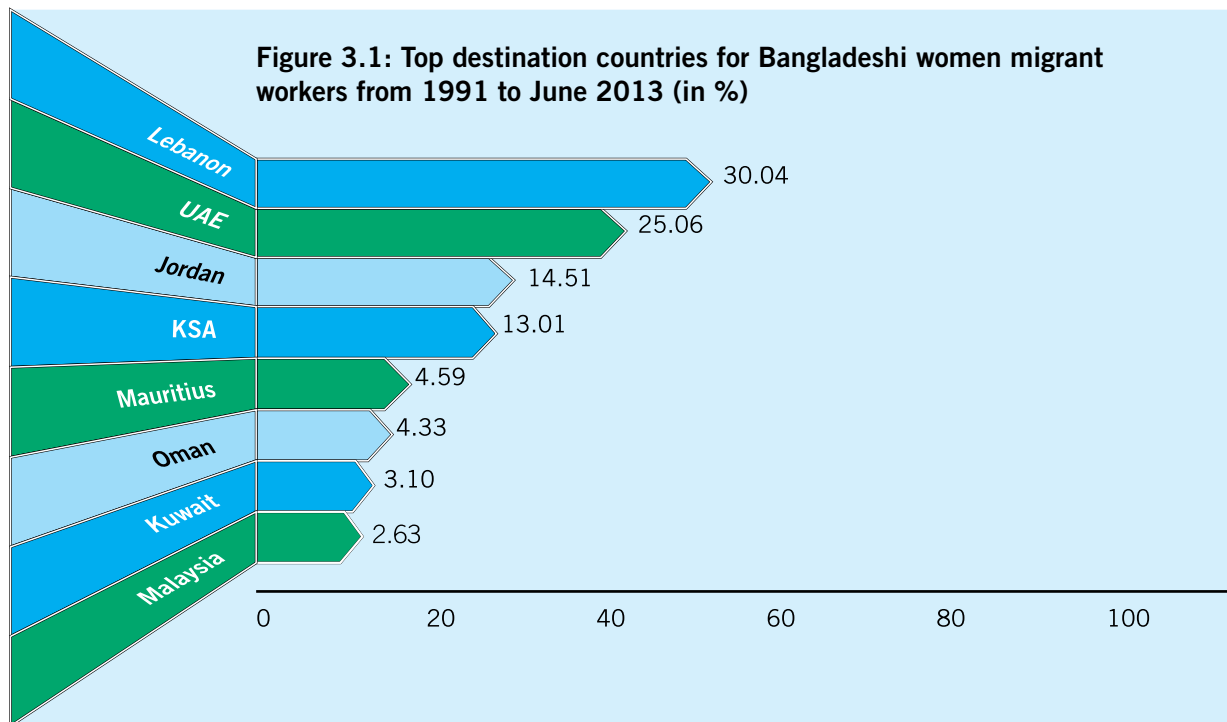
This breakdown of remittance by sex has been further validated by data provided by branches of Janata Bank Ltd. in the United Arab Emirates and Italy (see Tables 3.2 and 3.3). The bank's data also shows that migrant women workers remitted less compared to their male counterparts. In the United Arab Emirates, the estimated actual number of migrant women workers is 51,000 (Table 3.2), which constitutes 4.08 per cent of all Bangladeshi migrant workers in the country (1,251,000). But despite making up just over 4 per cent of the Bangladeshi migrant worker population, migrant women workers sent home just 2.90 per cent of all remittances from the United Arab Emirates in the 2011 to 12 fiscal year.

**Table 3.3: Data from Janata Bank Ltd. (Italy)**

Official number	Total	50 413.00
	Men	50 000.00
	Women	423.00
Estimated actual number	Total	90 500.00
	Men	90 000.00
	Women	500.00
	% of woman among total migrant workers	0.55
Official amount of remittance sent in 2011 to 12 (in crore* BDT)	Total	1 914.88
	Men	1 908.19
	Women	6.69
	% of remittance sent by woman migrant workers	0.35

Source: Adapted from Barkat (et al.), 2014.  
\* A crore is a unit equivalent to 10 million.

Likewise, in Italy the estimated actual number of migrant women workers is only 500 (just 0.55 per cent of an estimated total 90,500 migrant workers). Yet these women remitted only 0.35 per cent of all remittances from Italy in the 2011–12 fiscal year (Table 3.3). In both countries, remittance percentages were lower than one would expect given the number of Bangladeshi women in the migrant workforce, which lends credence to the claims regarding men migrant workers being paid more than migrant women workers for similar work.



Source: BMET

But even though women may remit less than men, one common point has been observed from the interview responses given by key informants and returning migrant workers (both men and woman): migrant women workers send home a larger portion of their income than men migrant workers (though they could not outline the exact proportion). And the proportion of remittance sent by Bangladeshi women workers to total remittance is on an increasing trend. Interview subjects also stated that migrant women workers are more likely than men migrant workers to save money rather than spending it, and this saving behavior is further strengthened by the socio-religious structures of some destination countries where women are not allowed to socialize as freely as men.

But other responses by returning migrant women workers demonstrate how challenging it is to disaggregate remittance data by sex. A number of returning migrant women workers stated that, in many instances, remittance from multiple women would be collected by one individual who is typically a man; and that this person takes the responsibility to remit the money. Consequently, it would appear that a man is remitting this money back to Bangladesh, when really these are monies earned and remitted by women workers.

Apart from financial remittances, migrant women and men also send or take home 'social remittances' in the form of new skills, attitudes, and knowledge that can lead to new gender norms" (Yinger, 2006, p. 5). These social remittances might enable women to boost socioeconomic development in their locality, improving their health status, and also developing the situation of their children as well as families. But in the case of Bangladeshi women, an opposite effect has been observed from the accounts provided by returning migrant women. These women stated that they learned many new things in relation to home maintenance, childcare, and also some new small business ideas while working abroad. But they cannot apply those ideas upon return because they find themselves bound by socio-religious strictures that they must follow as Bangladeshi women. In addition, the women sometimes find themselves restricted by duties imposed upon them by their families. Therefore, returning migrant women workers are developing skills while abroad by often cannot make use of their social remittances in a practical manner in Bangladesh.



### 3.3 Major countries of destination

Recent data made available by the BMET<sup>8</sup> show that 246,913 Bangladeshi migrant women workers have gone abroad for employment from 1991 to June 2013. Figure 3.1 shows the top destination countries for Bangladeshi migrant women workers between 1991 and the end of June 2013. It has been observed that Lebanon has been the top most choice for migrant women workers during this period; followed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Mauritius, Oman, Kuwait, and Malaysia. For the in-depth interviews of the present study, the women who were interviewed were returning migrant workers from Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain.

According to the most recent BMET data, in the first half of 2013, 27,051 Bangladeshi women have gone abroad as migrant workers. Among the many destination countries for Bangladeshi workers, four countries have been observed to draw higher numbers of women (see Table 3.4). Interestingly, it has been found that, at least so far this year, Jordan has overtaken Lebanon as a top choice for Bangladeshi migrant women workers.

Countries	Total number of women
Jordan	11 716
Lebanon	5 590
United Arab Emirates	5 526
Oman	2 807

Source: BMET estimation of “Overseas employment of female workers in 2013” (up to June), <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=21> [accessed 19 July 2013].

Recently, an agreement has been signed with the recruiting agency association of Hong Kong, China, whereby Bangladeshi women will be recruited for employment as domestic workers (Government of Bangladesh, 2012). The implementation of the agreement will involve private recruiting agents as well as the BMET and bureau’s technical training centres.

As noted above, migration from Bangladesh is not equitably distributed in all the districts across the country. Some districts in Bangladesh are more likely to produce migrant workers. Dhaka, Manikganj, Faridpur, Comilla, Narsingdi, Narayanganj, Gazipur are the dominant districts from which women workers tend to migrate.

### 3.4 Sectors/areas of employment

Demand for women workers in overseas job markets surfaced in the 1980s. While globally women might account for 49 per cent of all migrant workers, their employment opportunities in overseas labour markets are mainly confined to some specific occupations like domestic work, garment & other factory workers, and nurses.

Globally it is the case that most women who migrate find work in less-skilled occupations, for instance as domestic or care workers, or in manufacturing (especially garments), and to a lesser extent in agriculture. In manufacturing, male migrants often join higher management while women are concentrated at lower

<sup>8</sup> BMET estimation of “Overseas employment of female workers from 1991-2013” <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=32> [accessed 19 July 2013].



levels (Piper, 2005, as cited in Jolly & Reeves, 2005). While the majority of migrant women workers fill the less-skilled jobs upon entry, there are a large number of skilled migrant women workers, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and social work (Jolly and Reeves, 2005).

According to BMET data, Bangladeshi migrant women workers took up 149 different types of occupations between 2004 and 2010 (Islam, 2009). Some of these occupations attracted migrant women workers in large numbers. In that period, women were mainly employed as domestic workers (11,996), cleaners (7,210), readymade garment machine operators (7,168), and child-carers (1,998). In the in-depth interviews conducted for this study, all of the returning migrant women workers spoken to were employed as domestic workers while abroad. Additionally, the women interviewed who are currently working overseas were employed as cleaners, child-carers, sales attendants in shops, beauty parlour or salon workers, and caregivers.

### 3.5 Skills and skill-acquisition mechanisms

Focus group discussions suggest that there exists a sizeable demand for women workers in some trades like nursing, care-giving jobs, sales, cooking, and also in electronics factories. Almost 92 per cent of women workers who go abroad are migrating as domestic workers. They usually come from rural and suburban areas with poor economic backgrounds. Many lack functional literacy and are given token training in how to carry out household chores in a foreign environment. Women who migrate using their family's social networks often migrate without any training or orientation. In general, there is a tendency to see domestic work or home-based care-giving as something that comes naturally to women rather than as an occupation requiring orientation, skills training, and certification. Given that domestic work or home-based care jobs isolate workers and make them dependent on employers for both working and living conditions, the importance of basic language skills, training in specific job skills, socio-cultural orientation to the destination country, and information about labour laws, immigration laws, available support networks, and services are critical pre-departure requirements.

While there is no restriction on women enrolling in any technical or vocational education programmes offered by the BMET's technical training centres or those offered by other public and private sector entities, women are grossly underrepresented in these programmes. In the absence of concerted campaigns to mobilize women to participate in these programmes and the lack outreach to families to support women in their training and work choices, traditional social norms and gender roles prevail. There are also no examples of bilateral cooperation for creating migration corridors for women that ensure adequate time for imparting functional literacy, skilling, and internationally competitive certification for women before they migrate. Consequently, women continue to take up poorly paid domestic and caregiver work, and have less access to productive resources, training, and career development opportunities.

In an ILO/HDRC workshop<sup>9</sup>, experts tended to think that, because majority of women migrating from Bangladesh are less-skilled, the issue of *brain drain*<sup>10</sup> does not apply with regard to migration of women from Bangladesh. Rather, the participants felt that Bangladesh benefits when these women come back with skills acquired overseas.

<sup>9</sup> Workshop on Building Knowledge-base and Promoting Rights of the Bangladeshi Workers on the Move, organized by the ILO and HDRC and held in Dhaka on 6 February 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Skilled migration is often referred to as "brain drain" and is one of the major concerns policymakers have about migration. The worry tends to be that brain drain reduces a country's stock of skilled people, which in turn harms the provision of public services, as well as depriving the private sector of an important resource. The relationship between brain drain, skills and development is complex. Brain drain does appear in some circumstances to be damaging to development, while in some cases it may even be a driver of development.





**Table 3.5: Overseas employment by skill level (1976 to 2012)**

Skill level	Total numbers of migrant workers
Professional	183 727
Skilled	2 619 280
Semi-skilled	1 161 009
Less-skilled	4 343 733

Source: Bangladesh Bank estimation on BMET website, <http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=16> (accessed 19 July 2013).

The BMET classifies migrants into four categories: professional, skilled, semi-skilled, and less-skilled. Professional workers include doctors, engineers, teachers, and nurses. Skilled workers include manufacturing or garment workers, drivers, computer operators, and electricians. Semi-skilled workers include tailors and masons. And less-skilled workers include housemaids, agricultural workers, hotel workers, and such basic labourers as cleaners, cart loaders, and cotton pickers. However, to date, no data has been collected on the exact number of migrant women workers who fall into each skill category.

Presently, about 52 per cent of all Bangladeshi migrant workers fall into the less-skilled category (Table 3.5). On a practical level, these workers do not possess any specific skill to perform a particular form of industrial or service sector related work. Women workers are likely to be concentrated in the less-skilled category.

**Box 3.1: Skills training of migrant women workers in the TTCs**

Migrant women workers are trained in the housekeeping trade in a 21-day training workshop. To meet overseas demand for women domestic workers, 14 TTCs are providing the training for potential migrant workers. Potential migrants are trained in the use of electrical appliances used in houses overseas; in the culture, laws and regulations, language, etiquette, and manners of the destination country; and safety and security. Through this training, it is hoped that migrant women workers will take up the skills, attitude, and capability to perform their job and to protect themselves from problems in the workplace

Source: Government of Bangladesh, 2012.

In order to address this issue, a 21-day training programme has been made mandatory for women workers looking to be employed in the housekeeping trade overseas. The BMET along with some Technical Training Centres (TTCs) provide this training to potential migrant women workers in their “pre-departure phase” (See Box 3.1). Though this system of skill acquisition helps potential migrant women better perform their jobs, work remains to be done to get the training and certification provided by the programme to be recognized by employers in destination countries.

In a recent ILO/HDRC workshop<sup>11</sup>, experts strongly declared that the skills of migrant women workers need to be strengthened. A need to plan and implement long-term strategies for promoting technical and vocational education among women in non-traditional areas was also stressed. It was pointed out that such efforts are crucial for the success of the National Skill Development Policy (NSDP). Experts, as well as migrant workers themselves, felt that unless women and men workers are trained in a variety of jobs using the latest technologies, remittances will not keep flowing in. If destination countries place migration bans on Bangladeshi workers due to lack of training, not only will remittance flows be affected, but the

<sup>11</sup> Workshop on Building Knowledge-base and Promoting Rights of the Bangladeshi Workers on the Move, organized by the ILO and HDRC and held in Dhaka on 6 February 2013.



affected workers will have to face the prospect of unemployment in a local Bangladeshi economy that does not have adequate quality jobs available. In such a scenario, women are likely to be worst off as their skills sets would be limited to performing household chores.

The experts at the ILO/HDRC workshop also mentioned that Bangladeshi skills certificates are frequently not recognized by overseas employers and recruiters. Application of the NSDP is also important because it introduces a national technical and vocational qualifications framework that may facilitate international competency, comparisons across countries of origin and destination. The experts further stressed that migrant worker training programmes should be demand-driven. Training should utilize standardize curriculums for skills, technologies, and trades that are in demand in overseas labour markets, rather than sticking with outmoded programmes that may have once been relevant but now offer little in the way of skills that workers actually need. Language, life-skills, and the culture of destination countries are also important things to learn through training. Most Bangladeshi migrant women workers are currently less-skilled, but an increasing number are getting the training needed to be considered semi-skilled. If more workers can be trained in relevant skills, and have those skills recognized through proper certification, then Bangladesh's negotiation and bargaining power is improved, and thereby national development can be advanced.

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## The **lives** of Bangladeshi migrant women workers

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Labour migration has increasingly become a livelihood strategy for women and men. Due to lack of opportunities for full employment and decent work in many developing countries, both men and women tend to migrate to developed societies. Thus, changing labour markets globally have increased both opportunities and pressures for women and men to migrate internationally in larger numbers.

Most of the world's migrants, estimated to be at 214 million in 2010, are migrant workers and their families (GMG, 2010). Thus, global migration is largely an employment and labour market issue. Migrant labour, of which women constitute about 50 per cent globally, is now a structural feature of labour markets in Asia (Gibb, 2009). Women of all ages and statuses around the world migrate for employment, but the majority of migrant women workers globally are unmarried (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012).

The increasing feminization of international migration in general, and gradual parity in migration from South Asia in particular, has generated new issues and presents new challenges relating to institutions, processes, and outcomes associated with women migration (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012). In the process of migration, there appear to be social costs in the form of family disruption, especially with regard to children left behind. These social costs differ in many contexts depending on whether a father or mother is the one migrating. There are also potential social costs related to single women migrating, particularly as migrant women workers risk exposure to gender-based violence and access to sexual and reproductive health is not always guaranteed. As a result, many policies related to the migration of women have focused on protections and restrictions, actions that have had the unintended consequence of increasing undocumented and irregular migration of women, which only makes it more likely for these women to be placed in vulnerable situations (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012).



## 4.1 Women's migration from Bangladesh: Who, why, and why not

Women migration from Bangladesh is mostly of two types: (a) migration for employment; and (b) family reunion, specifically with spouses who have secured work abroad.

### Box 4.1: Causes of the migration of women workers from Bangladesh

**The root causes of migration are as follows:**

- demand for cheap labour;
- relatively better earning facility in the countries of destination;
- increased participation of women in the labour force in both countries of origin and employment;
- poverty and insecurity of livelihoods in the country;
- desire for a better living standard

One main reason of migration is that, for both men and women, overseas employment can reduce poverty. The Bangladeshi people have used migration as a poverty-alleviation strategy for many decades (Buchenau, 2008). Key informants interviewed for this study agreed that migration is a poverty-driven process for Bangladeshi migrant women workers (See Box 4.1). Culturally, women would not or would be less likely to migrate if they or their families were not in a dire situation. And while poverty may drive women to migrate through regular, documented channels, it also leaves potential migrants who do not have ability to pay the high recruitment and migration cost; or are below 25 years of age more vulnerable to traffickers and smugglers.

Gender discrimination and cultural norms at the household level and in Bangladeshi society in general compel some women to migrate through particular channels, and in other instances push women to stay put and not migrate despite them desiring to do so. How this happens varies according to the different contexts the women find themselves in. In some instances, for example, a woman's parents may see it as a duty for their daughter to migrate and send money home to support the family, and therefore encourage her to migrate, regardless of her feelings on the matter. The situation may be different for women who are married and have to look after young children and/or elderly household members

Regarding the migration process during the "pre-departure phase", all of the returning migrants who were interviewed for this study or participated in the FGD said they utilized the assistance of illegal intermediaries or sub-agents when they made the decision to migrate. For most of them, their connection to the intermediaries was made through a third party (e.g., cousins, neighbors, landlords, acquaintances, etc.). For all of them, the entire pre-migration process as well as transportation arrangements were handled by these illegal sub-agents. Majority of the respondents were recruited for Kafeels (sponsors) in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries on a visa that is locally called a "house maid visa". It is a visa allocated for domestic workers. After reaching the destination country, their employers picked them up at the airport, using a photocopy of their passport to identify them, and then took them directly to their workplace.

Some of the migrant women workers currently working abroad who were interviewed via telephone did not go through illegal intermediaries to migrate but rather utilized the assistance of a relation already living in the destination country. By using a person well known to them, these women felt that they would be less likely to be cheated and that they would be better able to get their money back or seek redress in the event that there was a problem. The women who migrated through the assistance of an overseas relative were also better informed about life and work abroad. These workers also had opened bank



accounts before going abroad, which they may have done because they had been informed about the process of sending remittances.

Regarding migration cost, BDT65,000 to BDT110,000 (average BDT87,500.00) was required for the migrant women workers. Some of the migrant women workers currently working overseas told the research team that they managed to migrate for an amount between BDT10,000 to BDT30,000 only. These individuals are mostly cases in which migration arrangements were handled by close relations living abroad, rather than by illegal sub-agents. To secure the amounts needed to migrate, a number of the women borrowed from money lenders charging high interest rates; some sold land/house; some mortgaged land; and some used other sources like selling ornaments, getting assistance from relatives, selling of livestock, etc. Most of the women are still repaying the debts and are in a dire situation, as domestic work and even readymade garment industry work are typically not well paid.

## 4.2 Working abroad: Pros and cons

Living away from home and from one's own motherland makes for new experiences every day for every migrant worker – some positive and others negative. An obvious “pro” for many migrant workers may be seen in terms of receiving a relatively better wage than one might back home. And consequently a migrant has the ability to assist their own family back in Bangladesh through the sending of remittances.

And certainly is the positive prospect of better wages that largely drives migration from Bangladesh, but the rest of many migrant workers' lives abroad can sometimes be characterized as one of marginalization. Migrant women workers in particular often have to deal with lower labour force participation, low-status occupations and jobs, poor working conditions, and low earnings (Jolly & Reeves, 2010). The intensive work performed by migrant workers in destination countries, the desire to earn as much as possible, and their refusal to spend earnings on their own health also leads to many problems (UN Women, 2012).

### Box 4.2: Domestic migrant women workers and sexual abuse

Sexual abuses committed against domestic workers are mostly perpetrated by employers (sponsors) as well as their sons or other men visiting the workplace. Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable because domestic work involves individualized work conditions, isolation from other workers, the least likelihood of establishing networks, an absence of social protection, and frequently a lack of legal recognition as work, leading to lack of legal protection to the worker.

Source: Siddiqui, 2008.

Domestic workers, in particular, are at risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses (see Box 4.2), including rape, confinement, underpayment or non-payment of wages, as well as a range of other abuses, since their living and working conditions are entirely dependent on the personal relationship between the worker and the employer. In one study of 150 Bangladeshi returning migrant women, 70 (47 per cent) had their passport taken from them and withheld while abroad (Siddiqui, 2001). To make the situation worse, workers in Gulf countries are often tied to their employers by the kafala (sponsorship) system, which allows very little scope to end abusive working conditions, as workers lose their ability to stay in country the moment their employer terminates their employment and therefore risk becoming undocumented migrants (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012). Box 4.3 provides a case study of a Bangladeshi woman migrant worker who experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the home of her employer in Saudi Arabia.



### Box 4.3: Case study: Confronting abusive behaviour Minu (pseudonym), aged 38, domestic worker in Saudi Arabia

When Minu decided to go abroad for a better livelihood, she got acquainted with a broker through her uncle. She was told to pay BDT50,000 to that person for the whole migration process (including passport and medical). A bit later, she was told to provide an extra BDT3,000.00 for doing “other stuff”. But soon they discovered that the broker was a fraud. They told him to return the money, but in return the “broker” threatened Ms Minu and her family. The money still is not been recovered.

After facing much trouble, Minu managed to go to Saudi Arabia via Dubai. Her employer came to airport to take her to his home. She had to do all the household chores, including the chores of his two daughters’ homes. If she refused any task, she was scolded and restricted from eating. She did not receive any payment in her first four months on the job. The most outrageous incident that happened to Minu was the abusive behaviour of her employer’s son. The son used to touch her body all the time, and whenever he found her alone he would try to give her unwanted hugs. She was even propositioned by the son to have sex with him. But as Minu rejected his advances, she confronted much more troubles. She was continuously harassed at night as the son would pour water from underneath the door onto the ground where she slept. She was also often hit by water thrown from a window by the son. She complained about this to her employer but was scolded in return.

One day when she again faced abuses from his son, she screamed and he was caught red-handed. He then got more vicious and started torturing her in new ways (for example, giving her clothes to wash over and over again, intentionally dirtying linen so she would have to clean them, etc.). One day, a bit of egg shell accidentally found its way into an omelet prepared by Minu. The son burned her hand on an iron grill as a punishment. His father took Minu to a doctor to get her wounds treated. She then told her employer, “I do not have enough food at home, because I am poor. I came here to earn a living. But I can’t lose my virtue in return. Please send me back home.” After 18 months of unbearable pain, and after losing two months’ salary for leaving her employment before the end of the contract, Minu came home to Bangladesh in March 2012 with nothing but the air-ticket. She does not want to go abroad for employment anymore.

Domestic workers, in general, have to eat and live with their employers. Some migrants confront beatings and hunger, as they were kept without food for days on end. Some migrant women workers were locked in a room and not allowed to contact home over the telephone. In addition, many lacked proficiency in communication skills as they dealt with a new language, putting them at a further disadvantage in the workplace. Domestic workers also complained of suffering from back pain, colds, headaches, gastric pains, and fevers.

For those Bangladeshi migrant women workers who take on jobs as garment workers or other manufacturing sectors, there are other positives and negatives. As a positive, some overseas employers organize accommodation for their factory workers. But there is little else in the way of overt positives for many Bangladeshi women who work in factories overseas. Negative aspects of such employment include irregular payment of salaries; long working hours; verbal, physical, and sexual abuse in the workplace. Bangladeshi women factory workers in the Middle East, mostly garment workers, have reported verbal abuse by supervisors and fellow workers. Problems regarding payment of wage are among the most pervasive ones for migrant women workers in most destination countries.

The paying of wages lower than promised is one of the most frequent breaches of agreement faced by both men and migrant women workers. On an average, the wage that migrant women workers received was 20 per cent lower than the contract wage (Siddiqui, 2001). Even signing a formal contract does not guarantee protection (Siddiqui, 2008). Payment of monetary benefits like overtime and bonuses are not particularly relevant for women workers who work outside industrial sectors.

According to Md. Nural Islam, the Director of Training Standards and Planning, BMET, the average wages of Bangladeshi migrant women workers ranges from US\$100 to US\$200 for housekeeping workers. For cleaning workers, this amount varies from US\$100 to US\$150. In other professions, like garment workers, nurses and some other categories of employment, wages vary from country to country. But he claims that the wages received by women are as good as those that male workers receive (Islam, 2011).



This last assessment is not held by all- a key informant from a migrant workers' association interviewed for this study stated that gender-based wage discrimination is a real issue. In the same trade, for the same job, wage differences exist. An example on the current prevailing wage rate in Jordan can make the picture clearer. A Bangladeshi women who would emigrate there to work in a readymade garment factory, in a low-skill job, is likely to get US\$150 per month; whereas a Bangladeshi man (with the same job, same work hours, in the same factory) is likely to get US\$200.

Working hours is another major aspect of working conditions. Long or overstretched working hours is an experience commonly shared by Asian migrant women by and large. Although it is a problem in the case of both domestic workers and factory workers, the degree is much sharper for the former than the later. Heavy workloads ranging from 15 to 20 hours a day is common among women migrant domestic workers (Siddiqui, 2008). Studies on Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates show that, on average, women migrant domestic workers work more than 100 hours per week, which is more than double the standard 40/48 hours per week (ILO, 2004, as cited in Siddiqui, 2008).

Even among migrant women workers from Bangladesh, domestic workers are the most vulnerable group with regard to working hours. Most of them who were employed in the Gulf, worked 15 to 18 hours a day. This figure is increases further during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, as the adults of the household do not go to bed before taking their *Sehris*<sup>12</sup>.

#### Box 4.4: Attitude of employers towards Bangladeshi domestic workers

The attitude of the employers towards the Bangladeshi migrant women workers was, in a word, discourteous, according to former domestic workers who had returned to Bangladesh. Employers demanded the women to do their work without asking for anything politely. And the employers used to call the domestic workers "*miskin*", or beggar in Arabic. Employers would overburden the Bangladeshi women with work and discriminated against them in everything (including salary) compared to Indonesian or Filipino women. Domestic workers were even beaten for very trivial mistakes. The Bangladeshi women were not allowed to contact any of their fellow Bangladeshi workers living nearby, and they faced big problems with understanding Arabic, as most of them had no training in the language. They faced problems with accommodation and food, and also had no idea about the Bangladeshi Mission from which they could seek assistance.

Source: Findings from the in-depth interviews and FGD with returning migrant women workers.

Weekly holidays and leave are necessary for refreshing one's work performance. But migrant women workers do not get them on a regular basis, even though they are entitled to. Domestic workers working in Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates reported that their freedom of movement was controlled. This included control over receiving and/or sending correspondence, and social isolation from other domestic workers or friends. Box 4.4 recalls the attitudes taken by overseas employers to Bangladeshi domestic workers, and the burden this placed on those workers.

Domestic workers also typically have to pay for their own health care, which is often an expensive endeavor given their limited earnings. But even if they can afford treatment, their access to health care is not ensured, as some employers might not allow them to seek such facility when it is required (Siddiqui, 2008).

Most Bangladeshi workers who work in the Middle East, whether employed in factories or homes, initially had problems adjusting to Middle Eastern food. Some domestic workers had other problems as well, like not being given enough food or being served old, stale food. But some had abundant access to food and there were some employers who bought items that enabled the migrant workers to cook their own food (Siddiqui, 2008). Access to clean drinking water appears to not be a problem among Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East.

<sup>12</sup> An Islamic term referring to the meal consumed early in the morning by muslims before fasting during daylight hours during Ramadan.



Bangladeshi women working in factories in the Middle East found the factories to be intolerably hot. Bangladesh has a more moderate climate than most Gulf states and therefore Bangladeshi workers struggled to work in these elevated temperatures. Moreover, access to fire exits in some factories were inconvenient.

Furthermore, in some destination countries, particularly in the Middle East, the domestic sector is not covered by labour laws despite domestic work being recognized as a labour market activity under the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). As a result, most destination countries offer limited protection to women migrant domestic workers. The reality of many of these countries involves the existence of laws that are discriminatory in terms of gender, race, and citizenship; insufficient legal recognition of migrant workers; a lack of legal protection; inadequate access to legal support; and ineffective enforcement of law. Box 4.5 presents a case study of a Bangladeshi woman who found herself caught in a combination of adverse effects related to her being undocumented and without the legal status of a worker because she was employed as a domestic worker in the United Arab Emirates.

**Box 4.5: Case study: Undocumented worker and informal work  
Sahina (pseudonym), aged 30, domestic worker in Dubai**

Sahina had been married for only five months when her spouse died. She decided to leave the marital household and go back to live with her parents. Since she didn't want to remain dependent on her parents, she started looking for employment opportunities, and in the process, learnt about overseas employment. The local illegal sub-agent presented overseas employment as a life-changing experience. Sahina also heard about better the living standards and livelihoods of migrant-sending households from her neighbours and friends. She did not know the difference between a licensed recruitment agent and an illegal sub-agent or between regular migration and irregular movement. The illegal sub-agent demanded a sum of BDT110,000 to cover the full cost of recruitment and migration. Sahina's mother borrowed money from relatives to help her daughter migrate. Sahina went to Dubai on a tourist visa valid for three months. Sahina was picked up by her employer at the airport. She received a regular salary for the first four months. Once her tourist visa expired, however, her employer stopped paying her. In the following months, Sahina worked without payment and without a break. She faced regular scolding and sometimes beatings by her employer. Sahina finally managed to run away from her employer's home to a place where a Bangladeshi acquaintance worked. The acquaintance's employer was a lawyer who advised Sahina on her legal status as a migrant and as a worker in the country. Sahina felt that her irregular migration to the country affected her ability to seek justice and her status as a domestic worker denied her even the basic protection that is due to all in a workplace. Feeling like a criminal, she asked the lawyer, "Please hand me over to police, so they send me back to my country." The police were called and Sahina was arrested. In the meantime, her employer accused her of theft. After much negotiation, Sahina was freed and came back to Bangladesh in February 2010. Sahina and her parents are still paying off the debt they took on to pay for her migration. Sahina does not intend to migrate again.

In the in-depth interviews with returning migrants, respondents noted that a major problem they faced was a discrepancy between what that were told prior to departure to departure about the work they would have to perform and the reality that faced them in the destination country. For example, a number of migrants were told prior to departure that they would be caring for a child, but after starting their employment, they found out that they had to do all the household chores, that there was not just one child to care for but three or five children, and sometimes they had to work in the employer's relatives' homes too. And on top of that, they were given a smaller salary than what they had been promised prior to departure. Some of them received 300 Saudi riyal instead of 500, which was clearly a breach of contract.

But the respondents also mentioned that some of their fellow migrant workers, though only a small minority, had lucked into being able to live and work in minimal comfort, a scenario that seemed like a dream for the others. Box 4.6 provides a case study of Bangladeshi woman worker who had a successful migration experience, but it should be noted that even hers required some maneuvering to ensure that she got paid appropriately.





**Box 4.6: Case study: A successful overseas life**  
**Asma (pseudonym), aged 45, domestic worker in Bahrain**

Asma migrated abroad through the assistance of her cousin-. The cousin lived in Lebanon and took all the responsibility to sort out the migration process for Asma. The cousin told Asma to spend only BDT1,000 on a passport and after 22 days she got it in hand. She also managed to get the visa for Lebanon, but she and her family did not have enough savings to pay for all the other costs necessary to migrate there. But because of her cousin's help and advice, Asma was well-aware of the migration process. So, she sold her homestead land and house, managed to raise BDT75,000, which was enough for migration to Bahrain. In Bahrain, Asma was received by her employer's spouse and daughter. They took her to their home.

It was very hard for Asma to do the daily household chores, as she could not understand the language. She was not paid during the first 10 months of her work. She sought help from acquaintances and managed to contact a Bangladeshi tailor who worked nearby. Together, they negotiated with her employer. The compatriot helped her get her wages from her employer, which she then sent to her family at home. She told her employer, "I have little children at home. If I don't send money, they will be finished." From that point her employer let her send money back home every month.

Asma kept on working very industriously, and a warm relationship was built between Asma and her employer's family. This way, after passing six and a half years in Bahrain, her employer managed to secure her a return visa to Bahrain, along with an air-ticket for her, and granted her three months of leave. Following this, she was allowed to come to Bangladesh every two years with a three-month leave, and within four years, through her employer, she managed to take her elder son to Bahrain. Her younger son followed a bit later. Reunited in Bahrain, Asma and her sons improved their lot by working all together while abroad and managed to build houses and buy lands in Bangladesh. After passing 16 successful years overseas, Asma returned to her home on May 2011. Her elder son is still working in Bahrain. She is now passing her enriched life in Bangladesh.

### 4.3 Life as returning migrants: Status and scope

Within the paradigm of short-term migration, migrant workers return to their country of origin after completion of the tenure of their agreement. Usually this tenure is three years. They come back with skills and experience, which they can then utilize in the domestic employment market.

However, Bangladeshi migrant women workers face problems upon returning home, often through social stigmatization. In some places, because of their exposure to outside influences, returning migrant women are considered in need of moral rehabilitation (UNIFEM & ILO, 2010). This being the case, returning migrant women workers are often in need of overall socio-economic support. There are very few approaches towards effective social and economic reintegration of returning migrants – particularly for women – being offered by the Government and the private or NGO sectors. This issue of reintegration should be considered as important in making international migration a success. It has been found that the planning related to reintegration and the utilization of the remittance they earned is very much disorganized among returning migrant women workers.

Migrant women workers spoken with in in-depth interviews and an FGD told the research team that after they had returned to Bangladesh they found themselves in place of low status within their community. Though they had gone abroad in part to take on employable skills, some were still homemakers, precisely what they had been before going abroad. Some others worked in the mills, or as tailors, as a match-maker, or run small shops. Many found that the skills they learned abroad are of no use in their community, as most were engaged as domestic workers and there was no call for that kind of work in their locality. Many of the women could not manage to bring back enough money to start a business, with some of them having had to return without having received their full salary. Many were still repaying the loans they took out to go abroad in the first place.



The returning women workers interviewed by the research team were clearly not aware of how to best utilize their remittance through savings and investment. As a result, many found themselves in similar economic conditions as they were before migration, and some were worse off than before they left. Regarding the future plans for improvement of the condition of their families, most of the respondents wished to purchase land and to live a solvent life. Some were interested in starting a business. A few wished to provide better education to their children.

The literature on migrant reintegration suggests that family-based projects in agriculture are a suitable area for returning migrants to be involved in. Other possible investment avenues for utilizing remittance are financing the sending of other family members abroad; construction of an improved home, etc. The preferred usage in the literature is in entrepreneurial activity aimed at making productive use of remittances rather than using them for consumption, but it is acknowledged that only a minority of migrates utilize their overseas earnings in this way. It should be noted, however, that the lack of investment of remittances in productive ventures is not always because of a lack of willingness of the part of individuals or families, but also due to lack of viable investment opportunities. Literature on the subject also indicate a variety of uses of the remittance sent by migrant women workers for the following expenses: a) repayment of loans taken out to pay for the migration cost and for education; b) family maintenance; c) medical treatment; d) business investment and land purchase; and e) savings (Rahman, 2012).

In the in-depth interviews conducted for this study, the returning women were asked to opine about or suggest possible ways by which they can be helped to improve their lives in Bangladesh. Suggestions were also sought from them as to how to improve the situation of the migrant women workers currently working overseas and how to better the situation of potential migrants (See Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1: Opinions/suggestions of returning migrant women workers concerning the development of migrant women workers from Bangladesh**

For migrant women workers currently working overseas	For potential migrant women workers	For returning migrant women workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Migrant women workers must know English.</li> <li>■ There should be a common help-line number through which the workers can contact the authorities if they are having trouble.</li> <li>■ There should be a provision enabling them regular contact with their families back at home.</li> <li>■ Women workers must be allowed to contact other Bangladeshi workers in their locality/region.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Government should take the responsibility of managing the migration process.</li> <li>■ These women must learn the native language of their workplace before they depart.</li> <li>■ They must take the training for the particular work for which they are going abroad.</li> <li>■ They must learn all the pertinent information about the migration process and they must secure a legal, valid contract</li> <li>■ They must be provided with a legally valid type of visa and work-permit that enable them to live and work as a documented worker.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Government should arrange job facilities for returning migrant women workers.</li> <li>■ These women must be aided with financial assistance so that they can repay their debts.</li> <li>■ All the stakeholder organizations should provide job openings for these women.</li> </ul>

Source: Findings from in-depth interviews and FGD with returning migrant women workers.

All of the above stresses the point that effective measures must be taken to reintegrate returning migrant women workers into their communities in such way that they can secure the benefits necessary for improving their livelihoods. And these measures should be implemented through timely and effectual policies and inter-ministerial and intra-ministerial networks devoted to the issue of Bangladeshi labour migration.

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# Impacts of women's labour migration

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Gender is an integral part of the migration process. The impacts of migration for women and men depend on many factors, all of which have gender implications. Such factors include: the type of migration<sup>13</sup>; the policies and attitudes of origin and destination countries; and gender relations within the migrant's household. Gender has an effect on how migrants adapt to their new country, the extent of contact they have with their country of origin, and the possibility of return and successful reintegration (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

## 5.1 Economic impacts

A person's economic power, labour opportunities, and perceived rewards influence their incentive and capacity to migrate. Migration may be the only option for women in the face of family poverty, or the best option for personal or family betterment. The goal behind migration is often to send remittances back home to provide for one's family or to create a fund that can be used for personal advancement.

However, gender-segregated labour markets in destination countries offer different opportunities and rewards to women and men migrants. Employment overseas may offer women an opportunity to feel empowered, to gain new skills that can improve employment prospects upon return, and the possibility of gaining respect and status due to the remittances they are able to send back home. Much depends, however, on the conditions and remuneration of work.

<sup>13</sup> That is, whether it is temporary or permanent; irregular or regular; for labour or the result of a natural disaster or conflict; independent or as a dependent spouse (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).



In in-depth interviews and FGD conducted for this study, most of the respondents stated that they could not realize a positive “economic impact” in any real sense while they were working abroad, and this was true both in terms of remittance and their quality of life within the destination country. Many women had to work continuously in their jobs as domestic workers, and consequently they had no opportunity to leave the employer’s household to spend any of their earnings on items they needed or wanted. In addition, many were either paid less than what their contract called for or were not paid in a timely manner. As a result, they were either not able to remit sufficient funds to their families or their remitting was irregular and unreliable. Most therefore were unable to assess the extent to which their overseas employment was having an impact on their financial situation until they returned to Bangladesh. As stated in the previous chapter, many of the women found that they were still in debt and had not learned new skills while abroad that were desirable in their local job market.

## 5.2 Social impacts

One of the major social costs relating to international labour migration is the separation of migrants from their families. Migration is usually thought of in financial or demographic terms, but this issue of separation comes through as one of the greatest costs of migration for both the migrants and origin communities (Jolly & Reeves, 2005). In migration, social costs refer to “outcomes with negative impacts on stakeholders” (UN Women, 2013b, p. 2). These costs can have impacts at the level of migrants and their families, but if unaddressed they can turn into “meso level” issues that affect migrant origin communities. In addition, social costs can have macro level effects on institutions and organizations that have a stake in international labour migration, be it recruitment agencies or government bodies. Social costs can sometimes be quantifiable, but the subjective experiences of migrant workers and their families cannot be adequately catalogued in charts and tables. As such, one has to explore and interpret the narratives of migrants to assess the social costs paid for employment overseas (UN Women, 2013b).

Some women migrate to escape unhappy personal and social situations, including bad marriages, harassment, violence, and lack of employment opportunities for themselves and their spouses. Such treatment and situations placed these women in a socially disadvantaged group, and they saw migration primarily as a quest for independence and a means of realizing self-sufficiency.

But while migration abroad may enable women to escape from troubling social and personal situations in their country of origin, it comes with social trials and costs of its own. For one thing, women trying to escape from desperate personal situations may be more likely to fall victim to human trafficking. Reliable data is in short supply, but there is some suggestion that Bangladeshi women are particularly likely to be trafficked or otherwise migrate through irregular channels (Ahmad, 2001).

This puts migrant women particularly at risk of terrible outcomes during the actual transit from the home country to destination country. In general, migrant women workers face specific risks -- particularly if they have been illegally recruited: the actual journey to the country of destination could be in appalling conditions; they may be subjected to sexual or physical violence by transporters, fellow male travelers, or border guards; and some may face imprisonment or other forms of punishment because of false documentation (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

As mentioned in previous chapters, Bangladeshi migrant women are often employed as domestic workers, a job that frequently keeps them confined to the home of their employer. As a result they can become isolated and cut off from other Bangladeshis, if any happen to live in the area. In addition,



language barriers are a problem, which frequently means that communication with the employer and the employer's family is difficult, creating a further sense of isolation. This can all be compounded by the separation from one's family back in Bangladesh, and the possibility that contact with one's family will be restricted or non-existent. In addition, a number of migrant women workers who spoke to the study team said that their employers looked down upon them severely (some women were even called "beggars"), which showcases the deterioration of social status that many migrant women workers can experience in destination countries. These are all powerful social costs paid by many Bangladeshi women who find employment overseas, and this does not even take into account the dreadful reality that many migrant women workers face the threat of physical or sexual abuse while working abroad.

One of the major discourses around women's migration for employment covers the issue of family disintegration and the negative impacts of migrant mothers' absence during the growing up years of their child. Existing literature suggests this issue affects migrant women workers' duration of stay overseas. Although returning home earlier than planned and without much thinking about future employment may reduce the benefits of migration, women are more likely than men to return home before the end of their contract duration if there is a family-related crisis or if their marriage is under strain (Villalba, 2002, as cited in Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

Furthermore, the views and concerns that elderly household members have about women's migration and women living away from the family also affect women's ability to live and work abroad peacefully. The elders within a household tend to be cautious about migration, as they themselves may have been cheated while trying to migrate. Often, the desire to migrate and prospects of a job and a better life lead to intergenerational conflict within the household. During the FGDs, some women shared that, in the households of migrant women workers, there are young women and men who feel confident to mortgage property or borrow money for recruitment and migration costs. Their confidence comes from the fact that their households have women who are currently working abroad and who are more likely than men to pay back the loans. Not all women want their remittances to be used for the repayment of loans that they have not taken, but most of them agree to take on this additional responsibility because not doing so would amount to disobedience and may lead to disintegration of the family. Given current social practices and the subordinate position of women in the social hierarchy, women fear that loss of family support may lead to social isolation and insecurity.

In interviews and an FGD with the research team, returning migrant women workers said that after returning home from their employment abroad most could feel that a social distance had grown between themselves and the other people in their neighbourhoods. They said that this was not a direct "face-to-face" realization, in which neighbours overtly snubbed or confronted them, but many rumors began circulating through the community behind their backs. It is a common misconception in Bangladesh that Bangladeshi women who go abroad for work generally take up employment in socially unacceptable or illegal jobs (often sex work). The women who spoke to the research team stated that they have been caught up in this fallacy and faced negative social consequences in their communities as a result.

Migration can bring gains and losses and entails complex, often contradictory class positioning. Through the migration process, a woman migrant might experience social upward mobility vis-à-vis their place of origin through the acquisition of skills and the remitting of money earned overseas. But it generally comes at the price of downward social standing in the host country, and possibly a measure of suspicion and hostility upon return home.



### 5.3 Impact at the household level

The households of migrant workers are also greatly impacted by the migration of women abroad. Migration flows, and the remittances that often follow, can have a variety of impacts on those left behind in the home country. The impact on those left behind extends beyond remittance monies to the areas of education, health, entrepreneurial activities, and even the political realm (Yang, 2009). Migrant households tend to improve in terms of utilizing remittance transfers from overseas, which may result in higher incomes for the households and consequently more resources for spending on household members.

The gender relations and hierarchies within the household context do affect the decision making process when it comes to migration by women. When it comes to migration, the interests of women and men do not necessarily coincide, and a clash of interests may affect the decisions about who will migrate, for how long, and to what country (Jolly & Reeves, 2005). Women may have little influence on migration decisions in the household. Even in situations where women migrate alone, their decision to migrate is likely a product of, or even determined by, the household's livelihood strategy and remittance expectations. Expectations with regard to remittance and the amount of pressure placed on migrants to remit vary according to the migrant's gender, age, and position in the family (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

Even so, migration may challenge traditional gender roles inside migrant households, and offer women a chance to serve as breadwinners for their families. When women migrate internationally, they still carry the burden of looking after a family, and their absence is a subject of social critique. Sometimes, women's absence does lead to changes in traditional gender roles within the household, as sometimes fathers will look after their children while their wife earns money overseas. However, this is not a norm. Often, the burden of care falls on other women household members, including on those who are too old to look after others and those who are too young to take on adult responsibilities. In such a situation, the impact of a woman's migration on her household is not positive because of the stereotypical gender role allocations in the household. While there hasn't been research to analyze the impact of adult male household members' unwillingness to take on care and domestic work responsibility, discussions held with migrant women workers for this research suggest that it overburdens the elderly and affects their health. If a young daughter has to step in to take on her mother's unpaid work at her home, the daughter's education and professional growth potential are compromised. Since both the elderly and the young are not well placed to carry out domestic and care tasks, the migrant women workers felt that their young children suffered from poor health more frequently than the children who had both parents around to look after them.

All of the migrant women workers who participated in the in-depth interviews and FGD conducted for this study migrated overseas unaccompanied by family, regardless of their marital status. In almost all cases, the dismal poverty and hardship faced by their households was the main reason of their migration. For some women the decision to migrate was initially made by their parents but they had agreed, while others went abroad based on their own choice.

Since the migrant women workers themselves were absent from the family home and they lacked the authority that is socially bestowed on men, their remittances were usually utilized by their families. Those migrants who are married told researchers that their remittances were used by their husbands and children; and the remittances of unmarried women were used by their parents or elder siblings. Due to a lack of opportunities, as well as lack of information on available avenues for investment, the migrant women workers were largely unable to keep control over their remittances. However, some of the women said they have since developed their own mechanisms for saving money to fund their next migration abroad.

# Policies and legal instruments on women's labour migration

According to Jolly and Reeves (2005, p. 3), “Theory, policy, and practice that link gender equality concerns with migration from a development perspective are rare.” This is largely due to the misapprehension among many that men are the ones who migrate and women remain home as dependents. This misconception has persisted despite the fact that nearly as many women as men have migrated for employment for several decades, but migrant women are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore as more and more take on income-generating roles (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

## 6.1 Existing policies and legal regimes on migrant women workers in Bangladesh

Women's migration from Bangladesh in the past has been largely governed by lower level legal instruments such as “presidential orders” and “government orders” rather than by economic and human development-oriented policy considerations. Between 1981 and 2007, migration by women was restricted on the ground that women are more vulnerable than men, and the restrictions on their movement across borders for employment were presented as protection measures. In 1997, nearly all labour migration by women was banned. This was roundly condemned by various sections of civil society: women's organizations, labour organizations, professional groups, chambers of commerce, think tanks. They argued that this harsh restriction on women's migration was unconstitutional and discriminatory against women, and claimed that it would contribute to the trafficking of women (Siddiqui, 2001, as cited in Siddiqui, 2008). In the end, the government listened to these objections and lifted the ban on the migration of non-professional women in 2003, but it maintained a ban on migration of unmarried women below 35 years of age for domestic work in Saudi Arabia. In 2007, this restriction was lessened, and since that the restriction has been limited to women below 25 years of age who wish to migrate for domestic work in the Middle East.

The impact of this policy change was experienced straight away. Outbound migration of migrant women workers in 2004 was five times greater than the previous year (see Table 3.2). Women constituted less than 1 per cent of the annual labour flow between 1991 and 2003. By 2006, 5 per cent of the total annual out-migrant flow from Bangladesh was women. Total annual outbound migration of women has more than tripled since 2004.



But as a way to address some of the concerns that led to the 1997 ban, a pre-departure briefing module was initiated by the government to prepare migrants for life overseas. Prospective migrant workers are required to participate in this module which teaches them about the rules and regulations that they are supposed to abide by in their respective destination countries. With specific regard to migration by women workers, this module also teaches prospective domestic workers how to perform the household tasks that they will be expected to do as part of their employment overseas.

One area that has attracted great concern is the vulnerability of migrant workers to contracting HIV. Migration may lead to higher incidence of HIV for those migrating and those left behind.<sup>14</sup> In response to this, the National Policy for HIV, promulgated in 1998, made the provision of mandatory HIV testing as an employment requirement for migrants. The National HIV Communication Strategy 2005-10 identified migrant workers as a priority group for HIV prevention.<sup>15</sup> The need to involve migrant workers in policy dialogues and formulation was recognized. However, in the National Woman Development Policy 2011 there is no constructive focus directly connected to women's labour migration.

In addition, to attain international recognition of the skills possessed by Bangladeshi migrant and prospective migrant workers, a National Skill Development Policy (NSDP) was approved by the Government of Bangladesh in January 2012. A National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework has also been adopted. The National Skills Development Council (NSDC) has developed specific and concrete actions and activities aimed at increasing female participation in TVET through a comprehensive and holistic intermix of social, economic, institutional, and systemic transformational measures (NSDC Secretariat & ILO-TVET Reform Project, 2012). The NSDC is also designing and piloting inclusive skills development for women in some areas of Bangladesh. Both the public and private sectors are involved in the pilot test and promote replication across the TVET sector and ensure sustainability of reform (ILO, 2012).

One element of the legal regime that is helpful to migrant workers and prospective migrant workers is the Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012, which has improved the position of Bangladesh in the US Trafficking in Persons Report 2012 compared to previous years (The Daily Star, 2012). This Act is helpful in protecting migrant workers (especially women) from being subjected to trafficking (particularly fraudulent recruitment) by both local recruiting agencies in Bangladesh and overseas brokers in destination countries.

The Perspective Plan (2010-2021) and the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-15) also point to international labour migration as a priority area. For a more detailed picture of how labour migration fits into these policy initiatives please see Section 2.1 above.

Furthermore, most recently an initiative has been undertaken by the MEWOE with the technical assistance of the ILO to formulate the Overseas Employment and Migrant Workers Act, 2013 (passed by Parliament in October 2013) and a draft of the proposed Overseas Employment Policy. The Act and the proposed policy incorporate the principles of the ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration, other international labour standards, CEDAW, and the ICRMW. If the policy is approved and adopted, together with the Act, it would enable the government to revise the existing Rules on labour migration, formulate new Rules, and set up mechanisms to better protect the rights of women and men workers who migrate from Bangladesh as well as their families who are left behind.

14 It has been estimated by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University that 51 per cent of the 219 confirmed HIV cases in 2002 were from among returning migrant workers. According to International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, 47 of the 259 cases of people living with HIV during the period 2002-2004 were infected during migration (UNDP, 2009b).

15 The other groups were – sex workers, drug users, men having sex with men, and mobile populations (border crossing people, transport workers, factory and other mobile workers, prisoners, uniformed forces, and street children) (UNDP, 2009b).





## 6.2 Gaps in and feasibility of international instruments and Bangladesh policies and legal regime

Though initiatives have been taken to construct efficient policies and legal regimes to protect the rights of migrant women workers, there are still gaps and failings in those policies and legal instruments. These gaps can be observed in both the international instruments (see Table 6.1) and also at the national level.

**Table 6.1: Gaps in international conventions related to migrant women workers**

International Conventions	Gaps	Remedial actions
ILO Conventions	ILO Conventions provide safeguards and standards for the labour market. Conventions No. 97 and No. 143 are particularly significant for migrant workers, but their provisions do not explicitly recognize sexual harassment and sexual violence during the migration process and at the workplace.	Recommendations should be adopted by the Member States to ensure safe migration and prevent sexual exploitation of women workers, including migrant women workers, at the workplace. There is also a need for a clear Recommendation on women's reproductive rights and issues related to sexual, physical, and mental health as may arise from a lack of safety at the workplace.
ICRMW	Although it recognizes migrant women workers, the Convention does not address gender-specific needs in any way, such as specific protections that should be afforded to women in their roles as domestic workers or sex workers (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).	The recommendations made to the State parties through General Comment No. 1 <sup>2</sup> and 2 <sup>3</sup> of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW) need to be adopted by the Member States.
	There is skepticism that this Convention will ever have a significant impact, due to the lack of ratification by destination countries in particular (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).	UN agencies should advocate and promote lobbying for ratification of the ICRMW.
	It sets out the human rights of all migrant workers irrespective of their legal status. Yet Part IV prescribes the rights that are applicable only to those who have regular status and does not advise how the human rights of undocumented migrant workers may be secured.	Being contradictory in nature, these two provisions should be read and interpreted within the scope of the General Comment No. 2 of the CMW. Being contradictory in nature, these two provisions should be read and interpreted within the scope of the General Comment No. 2 of the CMW. Socio-economic and political rights of migrant workers, with particular attention to single women workers, should be stressed through formulation and adoption of General Comments by the CMW as has been done for domestic workers and migrant workers in irregular situations and their families.
	Part VI contains provisions that could be of relevance to migrant women, but it is not clearly related to the socio-economic and political rights of women, particularly, single women workers.	

Regarding the policies and legal regimes in Bangladesh related to migrant women workers, current policies do not account for underlying societal causes of gender inequity and inequality. The entrenched patriarchy of Bangladeshi society “constrains employment choices, stigmatizes migrant women workers,



and serves to place women in precarious and exploitative situations throughout the migration process” (Migrant Forum in Asia, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, there are a diverse array of gaps and feasibility issues in Bangladesh national policy with regard to women’s migration, as depicted in Table 6.2.

**Table 6.2: Gaps in and feasibility of Bangladeshi policies and legal regime related to migrant women workers**

Subjects	Gaps	Remedial actions
Recognition of women empowerment	The concept of women’s empowerment in terms of participation in the international labour market is unclear in policy documents.	The new Overseas Employment Policy should have specific considerations for migrant women workers and support the National Woman Development Policy 2011.
Recognition of women’s labour migration	There exists a problem with proper recognition of the existence and contribution of labour migration by women.	Review and redesign of the existing policies are needed to mitigate the impact of this crisis.
Knowledge of formal labour migration channels	Migrant women workers do not know the regular channels of migration for employment.	Massive awareness-raising and publicity campaigns by MEWOE are needed to promote legal migration channels among potential migrant women workers.
Training	Many potential migrants lack training in the skills required for overseas jobs. Skill training is an essential step towards improving the country’s overseas employment sector, enabling Bangladesh to better compete against other labour origin countries.	Skills training has been initiated by the BMET and TTCs. TTCs should be in every district and the number of such Centres needs to be increased.
Grading and monitoring of recruiting agents	There is no specific grading mechanism to systematically classify recruitment agents that recruit for particular countries of destination, and therefore no systematic mechanism to efficiently monitor these agents.	A national database is required to solve this problem. Also the related laws need to be reviewed; along with close monitoring and supervision of the manner in which recruiting agencies provide information to potential migrants about the jobs they are filling, including skill requirements, accommodation, working conditions, benefits, and duties.
Means of migration cost	Usually potential migrant women workers sell land or borrow money at high interest to go abroad.	The government banks, and other stakeholders can come forward with initiatives to provide loans with low interest rates. Probashi Kalyan Bank has already started this scheme, but a structured mechanism is needed to govern the operational features of the fund.
International labour market dynamics for women’s labour	Migrant women workers face problems in choosing the country of destination. This happens because of the lack of analysis on international labour market dynamics and any mechanism to clue potential migrant women workers into this information.	A sustainable market research mechanism to closely monitor international labour market dynamics is needed to create a functional market for Bangladeshi migrant women workers.
Health information in pre-departure module	Relevant health information is not adequately provided to women in the pre-departure module. Additionally, women receive limited orientation on sexually transmitted infections and HIV.	Steps should be taken by the BMET and the TTCs to instruct potential migrant women workers in the most up-to-date information and precautions on HIV in the pre-departure training module.



**Table 6.2: Gaps in and feasibility of Bangladeshi policies and legal regime related to migrant women workers**

Subjects	Gaps	Remedial actions
Vulnerabilities of women	Women suffer from various forms of mistreatment and abuse, not only in the process of migration but also during their stay in the destination country. Many become victims of sexual harassment, physical abuse, or are denied basic rights by their employers and co-workers.	<p>Special clauses and articles should be made for migrant women workers in the relevant Laws/Acts on migration, and particularly in the proposed Overseas Employment and Migration Workers Rights Bill 2013. Experts can be appointed to support women who may require assistance or justice in the case of sexual harassment.</p> <p>The government can set up reception centres at the embassies in destination countries for migrant workers. Migrant women workers who have suffered abuses can appeal to these centres and then be under the observation of the government of Bangladesh. Also a national database of complaints and the redress provided is needed.</p>
System of remitting money	Many migrant women still remit money through irregular channels (such as hundi) or carry their earnings home with them rather than making use of more secure, regular remittance channels.	Establish a technology-based system of effective practices for remitting money. Non-bank institutions with ICT-based networks can be launched for this purpose.
Knowledge of government bodies	Very few potential migrant women workers know about the MEWOE and BMET and their activities.	MEWOE and BMET should engage in nationwide publicity, with a focus on rural areas, using forms of media that can easily reach rural and remote target groups.
Violation of BMET pre-departure briefing policy	Sometimes the compulsory BMET pre-departure briefing policy is ignored because of weak monitoring mechanisms, the inability to reprimand defaulting recruitment agents, and loopholes in existing laws.	BMET pre-departure briefing policy should be decentralized to the DEMOs. In terms of regular monitoring, the tracking down of recruiting agents that do not send potential workers to the pre-departure briefing and penalizing them is essential. Rules need to be revised to ensure that they provide robust and regular monitoring of the everyday conduct of recruitment agents.
Reintegration programme for returning migrants	There is a need for a comprehensive reintegration programme for returning migrants, especially to ensure that they properly utilize their acquired skills and remittance.	The government as well as the private sector has a vital role to play in this regard. A structured mechanism is needed to facilitate prospective investment proposals from returning migrants.



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# Conclusion and recommendations

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In Chapter 6 regarding the policies and legal regimes on labour migration by women, this paper presented a number of gaps and feasibility issues related to management of the migration process, particular with regard to the migration of women. With these gaps and the associated remedial actions in mind, overall recommendations are presented hereafter to foster a clearer understanding of the women's labour migration in Bangladesh and possible ways to mainstream the migration of women into development plans.

The recommendations are divided on the basis of the labour migration process, policy reformation, and reintegration strategies. The possible functions that stakeholders (i.e., government, international organizations, recruiting agencies, NGOs and civil society, academics and researchers, etc.) can perform have also been incorporated along with the points.

## **7.1 Regarding migrant women workers in the migration process:**

- (a) The government and other stakeholders need to follow the International Labour Organization (ILO) Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration in the overall migration process. All stakeholders must provide pre-departure information on rights and risks to migrant women workers and potential migrant women workers. Information needs to be provided in a location that is accessible to both women and men. The training of women in various job sectors is also necessary.
- (b) Government migration policies should enable free movement for migrant women through regular channels and ensure their safety so that women are not forced into irregular and potentially dangerous channels. Development cooperation agencies would need to work towards this end and seek to achieve policy coherence.
- (c) The government needs to support Bangladeshi workers migrating to other countries, including specific policies on recruitment agencies, sub-agents, and other related businesses to reduce abuse of potential migrant workers, abuses that include unreasonable fees and harassment during transit. These measures should regulate recruitment agencies and comply with minimum standards as outlined in the ILO's Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181).



- (d) The government needs to ensure that all migrant women workers can have access to basic services, (including education, health, and housing that they are entitled to as citizens of Bangladesh. These services should be offered through the Bangladeshi foreign missions. Particular attention should be given to preventive and protection services to address gender-based violence, including sexual violence.
- (e) Missions in destination countries should establish resource centres so that all overseas migrant workers – and migrant women in particular – can access information on how to secure their rights, access social protection services, and get recourse to justice if they are being abused. If the development of a resource centre is not possible at each Mission, the government should designate a trained protection officer with a legal background, in addition to the labour attaché, to respond to the immediate needs of Bangladeshi workers who may be facing physical and/or sexual abuse, with a particular focus on migrant women workers.
- (f) The government should sign bilateral agreements with destination countries on migrant women workers' rights generally, and provide coverage for women entering categories of work where they might be more likely to be exposed abuses of their rights (e.g., domestic work). Following the signing of such bilateral agreements with destination countries, awareness campaigns and other promotional activities aimed at disseminating concepts regarding the safe migration of women need to be launched by Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE).
- (g) The government should provide information accessible to both women and men migrants on the real costs attached to remittances through various channels. NGOs and migrant organizations need to create low cost and useful modes of money transfer which do not exclude women or irregular migrants.
- (h) The government, non-government organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations should support family members left behind. Diversification of income-generating activities may be needed in the face of the unpredictability of remittances.
- (i) The government should increase allocation in the national budget to the overseas employment sector and support the efforts to improve migration management in Bangladesh.

## **7.2 Regarding policy reformation related to women's labour migration:**

- (a) The ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration should be the guideline for formulating or reforming any policies related to overseas migration for work. Also, a gender analysis needs to be undertaken to devise a strategy to mainstream gender into all work on migration policies.
- (b) Labour migration and national development planning relationship needs to be strengthened. There is need for deeper analysis of how labour migration contributes to Bangladesh and a thorough examination of other alternative employment generation strategies that the country could pursue in order to be prepared for international labour market shocks. The Sixth Five Year Plan's strategies for promoting labour migration also require more concerted action so labour migration benefits resource poor areas of Bangladesh.
- (c) Civil society organizations need to continue campaigning about the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) and other related international instruments (e.g., the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of



Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security) that can serve as strong tools for protecting the rights of migrant workers, and migrant women workers in particular.

- (d) Development cooperation agencies should support national capacity-building – of both governmental and research institutes – aimed at generating gender-disaggregated research and policy analyses to enable the development of evidence-based policies for migration and arenas affected by migration, such as urban planning and access to services.
- (e) The need for skilled labour in overseas countries is increasing day by day, and in the context of this ever-increasing need, vocational training activities should be expanded for women. In addition, to create more employment opportunities, the language and life-skills of potential migrants also need to be improved. With this in mind, skills development training programmes for women workers should be adapted to respond to the needs of the overseas labour market.
- (f) Policy advocacy at the national and international levels needs to be strengthened to include the mainstreaming of HIV awareness and response services in pre-departure and Bangladeshi foreign mission activities. Awareness about reproductive health, including family planning and sexually transmitted diseases, among both men and migrant women workers must be promoted. Collaboration with NGOs, self-help groups, and networks of people living with HIV in Bangladesh and in the countries of destination is necessary for the purposes of awareness raising and extension of service delivery.
- (g) Migration policies worldwide should enable family reunions for migrant workers employed in all categories of work. Short-term visits should also be facilitated for family members. International organizations should also consider this point in international treaties connected to labour migration.
- (h) During policy formulation on labour migration by women, researchers and activists should carry out a gender-based analyses of upcoming policies and input their findings into the policy-making process. Key questions to ask are: How would these policies affect women and men? What are their different needs and priorities? How can policies challenge, rather than entrench, gender inequalities and foster the positive potentials of migration for women’s empowerment?
- (i) In order to assess the need for labour in overseas labour markets, evidence should include data on gender and more detailed information on specific labour market sectors to understand gender distribution. Needs assessments should not overlook domestic work and private care-related services, so that admission policies would better reflect the actual need overseas. Such measures would also help reduce the number of migrant women workers working in irregular employment situations.

### **7.3 Regarding reintegration strategies for returning migrant women workers**

- (a) With government and private sector support, empowerment of returning migrant women workers may be possible by ensuring social and economic reintegration through: i) liaisons with organizations assisting with the set up small and medium enterprises; ii) arrangement of loans from banks for financing small and medium enterprise; iii) promotion of cooperative enterprises that serve their members’ needs and are rooted in their communities; iv) arrangement of re-migration for employment of choice; and v) skilling women in a range of trades through training and apprenticeships based on the skills in demand in the labour market.



- (b) Reintegration programmes may need awareness campaigns and information dissemination to engage returning migrant women workers in small business endeavours, agro-based farming (like poultry, livestock, fish culture, improved cultivation), small transport vehicles, small shops, etc.
- (c) The most effective and most needed service for returning migrant women workers is counseling on how to invest and utilize their remittance savings. Microfinance Institutions, which are emerging as actors in savings mobilization and credit disbursement at the grassroots level in Bangladesh, can be incorporated into this process.
- (d) Stipend programmes for meritorious returned migrant women workers can be initiated as an incentive from the government's funds. The government can play a key role in promoting returned migrant women workers who demonstrate talent for enterprise development or technical education or training. Encourage and undertake public-private partnerships to enable the private sector to play a role in professional re-integration of migrant workers; in particular, to provide business support services, recognition of prior learning and employment, and mentoring to women entrepreneurs.
- (e) Reintegration programmes implemented by State agencies and NGOs can include a variety of services and strategies to smooth the process of returning, such as: (i) providing employment support and/or counseling; (ii) facilitating the transfer of pensions and other social benefits obtained abroad; (iii) making grants or low-risk loans available for business ventures; (iv) offering additional training or access to further education; and (v) addressing social, family, or other problems.
- (f) In designing the appropriate strategy for reintegration programmes, district-wise and destination country-wise migration scenarios should be analyzed. Some specific information would be practicable for designing useful programmes. This background or base level information may be collected to draw: (i) the socio-economic profiles of migrant workers; (ii) patterns of remittance sending; (iii) use of remittance and its impact on standards of living; (iv) migration cost and the repayment of any loans; and (v) needs for reintegration through training, counseling, and technical or financial assistance.

It can be hoped that this three-pronged collection of recommendations can ensure the rights of Bangladeshi migrant women workers, thereby enabling them to lead better lives while they work in destination countries and also when they return home.

Migration is an important livelihood strategy for both women and men and makes a vital contribution to the economies of developing countries. Migration for employment is crucial for the poor and mostly low-skilled women of Bangladesh. The population size of Bangladesh is an asset in terms of its ability to supply labour to overseas labour markets. But if both women and men – and the Bangladesh economy – are to benefit from the empowering and development potential of migration, a shift to a human rights-based approach in the development of labour migration from a gendered perspective is needed.



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## List of key respondents interviewed in-depth

### Returned migrant women workers

Sl.	Name	Country of last stay	Last occupation abroad	Current occupation
1.	Saleha	Dubai	Domestic worker	Mill worker
2.	Lutfa	Dubai	Domestic worker	Tailor
3.	Bilkis	Dubai	Domestic worker	Homemaker
4.	Sonia	Oman	Domestic worker	Homemaker
5.	Fatema	Bahrain	Domestic worker	Homemaker
6.	Nila	Bahrain	Domestic worker	Matrimonial match-maker
7.	Shirin	Lebanon	Domestic worker	Unemployed
8.	Najma	Lebanon	Domestic worker	Unemployed
9.	Mina	Saudi Arabia	Domestic worker	Small business-owner
10.	Honufa	Dubai	Domestic worker	Homemaker
11.	Beuti	Oman	Domestic worker	Small business-owner
12.	Pinki	Saudi Arabia	Domestic worker	Homemaker
13.	Laila	Lebanon	Domestic worker	Homemaker
14.	Shorifa	Lebanon	Domestic worker	Worker
15.	ShahedaAkter	UAE	Domestic worker	Homemaker

### Migrant women workers currently employed overseas (Telephonic Interview)

1. Ms Farzana Ruma, Cleaner, Saudi Arabia.
2. Ms Flora Jesmin, Babysitter, Italy.
3. Ms Mukta Chowdhury, Sales attendant, Italy.
4. Ms Akhi Khanom, Beauty parlour worker, Italy.
5. Ms Fatema Khatun, Care giver for an elderly person, Italy.
6. A domestic worker in Saudi Arabia (unwilling to disclose her identity).
7. A domestic worker in Saudi Arabia (unwilling to disclose her identity).

## List of key informants and organizations

### **Organizations working on migration related issues (in alphabetic order)**

1. Masud Parvez (Secretary General, Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees-WARBE).
2. Md. Omar Faruque Chowdhury (Executive Director, Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Programme-OKUP).
3. Sumaiya Islam (Director, Bangladesh Ovibashi Mohila Sramik Association-BOMSA).
4. Syed Mahbub Elahi (Chairman, Ovibashi Karmi Kallyan Foundation-OKKAF).

### **Experts (in alphabetic order)**

1. Asjadul Kibria (Business Editor, The Daily Prothom Alo).
2. Kawser Ahmed (Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh).
3. Md. Masud Biswas (General Manager, Foreign Exchange Policy Department, Bangladesh Bank).
4. Md. Mostafizur Rahman Sarder (Deputy General Manager, Research Department, Bangladesh Bank).
5. Md. Nurul Islam, PhD (Director-Training Standard and Planning, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training-BMET).
6. Muhammad Shahriar Iqbal (Assistant Director, Foreign Exchange Policy Department)
7. Md. Sher Ali (Senior Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Establishment, Government of Bangladesh) .
8. Shamim Ahmed Chowdhury Noman (EC Member, Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies-BAIRA).

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# Gender and migration from Bangladesh

## Mainstreaming migration into the national development plans from a gender perspective

The study aims to present various dimensions and challenges of labour migration by women in Bangladesh. The status and dynamics of women migrant workers in terms of their remittance flows to Bangladesh, the position they hold in countries of destination, the particular occupations in which they are employed, and the skills they hold have been investigated in this research endeavour. In addition, the various dimensions of their migration experience, including the earlier stages, the pros and cons of overseas life, and their status and scope of reintegration upon return have also been discussed.



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