

Gender and migration from Bangladesh



Key issues

Bangladesh has seen increasing overseas movement of its people, especially in short-term contract migration in the international labour market. As part of this process, Bangladeshi women have been heading overseas for employment in ever greater numbers, driven by poverty and growing disparity in living standards.

Flow of migrant women workers:

Bangladeshi people started their journey as labour migrants in 1976 and a total of 8,516,089 people have gone abroad as migrant workers through official channels as of June 2013. Labour migration for Bangladeshi women started in 1991, and until June 2013 around 246,913 women (2.9 per cent of the total) have gone abroad as labour migrants. These figures indicate that Bangladeshi migrant women workers still constitute a very small portion of the whole labour migration process from Bangladesh. As such, it can be said that the “feminization of migration” has not happened in Bangladesh in a true sense.

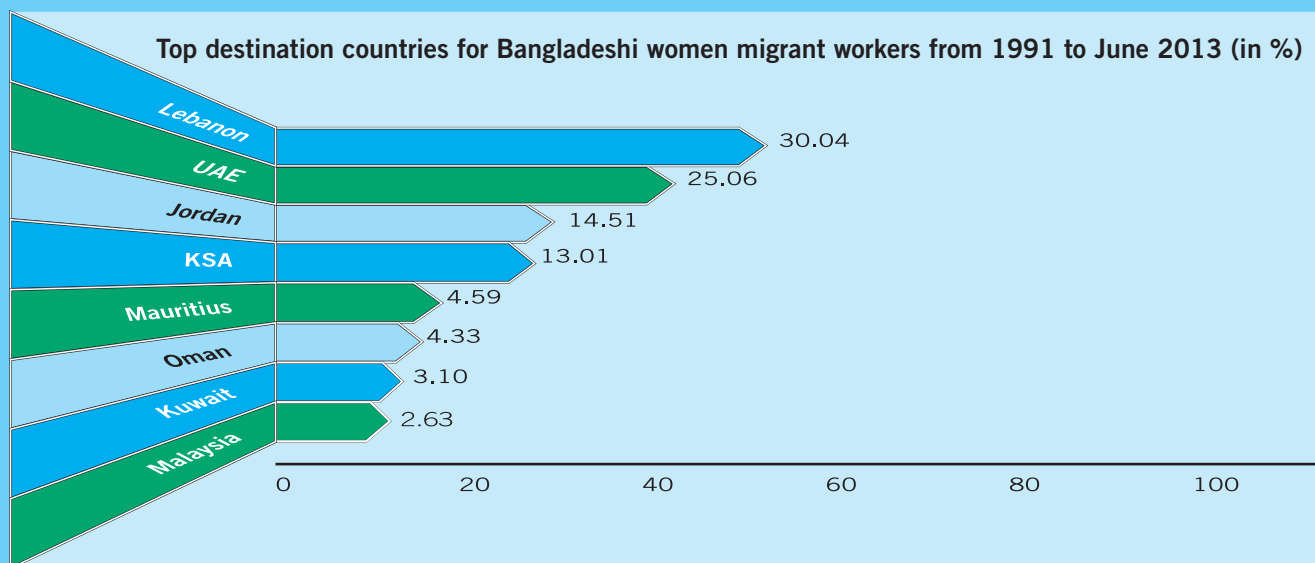
Annual outflow of Bangladeshi migrant women workers from 1991 to June 2013

Year	Total number of workers migrated	Number of women workers migrated	% of women among the total number of workers migrated
1991	147 131	2 189	1.49
1992	188 124	1 907	1.01
1993	244 508	1 793	0.73
1994	186 326	1 995	1.07
1995	187 543	1 612	0.86
1996	211 714	1 994	0.94
1997	231 077	1 762	0.76
1998	267 667	939	0.35
1999	268 182	366	0.14
2000	222 686	454	0.20
2001	188 965	659	0.35
2002	225 256	1 216	0.54
2003	254 190	2 353	0.93
2004	272 958	11 259	4.12
2005	252 702	13 570	5.37
2006	381 516	18 045	4.73
2007	832 609	19 094	2.29
2008	875 055	20 842	2.38
2009	475 278	22 224	4.68
2010	390 702	27 706	7.09
2011	568 062	30 579	5.38
2012	607 798	37 304	6.14
2013	208 340	27 051	13.0

Source: Bangladesh Bank estimation in BMET website (Retrieved from: <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].



Remittances sent by migrant women workers: Since 1991, more than 200,000 women workers have gone abroad for employment purpose. Majority of them have been sending remittances to their families. But determining the amount remitted by women migrants is difficult, as the remittance data kept by Bangladesh Bank is not disaggregated by sex. Between 1976 and 2012 a total of US\$108 billion was remitted by migrant workers to Bangladesh through official channels. A survey conducted for a study on Bangladeshi workers' remittances indicates that there exists a discrepancy between the wages paid to men and migrant women workers for doing the same job, which is approximately a ratio of 100 (men):70 (women). Therefore, men remit more than women because they earn more. But it is notable that women tend to remit a larger portion of their earnings and total remittance by women has been increasing over time.



Major countries of destination: The top destination countries for migrant women workers from Bangladesh for between 1991 and June 2013 are shown in the figure above. But migration trends have changed over the years, and some countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia [KSA]) are not as prominent as a destination. In the first half of 2013 the top four destination countries for Bangladeshi women workers were Jordan, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. Moreover, officials of the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) have stated that many Bangladeshi women may get jobs as domestic workers in Hong Kong (China).

Sectors/trades of employment: Most Bangladeshi migrant women workers find work in less-skilled occupations, such as domestic work, care-giving, or in manufacturing (especially garments). At present, women's employment opportunities in the overseas labour market are mostly limited to some specific occupations like: domestic worker, cleaner, readymade garment factory workers, child-carer, sales attendant, and beauty parlour or salon worker.

Challenges

- Both men and migrant women workers get confronted with myriads of vulnerabilities, yet the position of women migrants, compared to that of men, is more vulnerable due to socio-cultural practices, traditional gender role divisions and gender discrimination in laws affecting labour force.
- Migrant women workers often get exposed to confiscation of travel documents, the withholding and nonpayment of salary or salary reduction, harsher isolated working conditions, and lack of freedom of movement and communication.
- Some migrant women workers encounter verbal, physical, and sexual abuses in course of their working life.
- Weakness in governance of female migration movements.
- Lack of formulation and reformation of effective laws and policies.
- Lack of adequate information about employment and career choices to make an informed choice about migration for work, human and labour rights, and lack of assistance for social and professional reintegration upon return.
- Lack of research on the female labour force, migration, and development. Research need to be done on a regular basis to help convince policymakers of the centrality of gender equality concerns.



Skills and skill acquisition mechanisms: Presently about 52 per cent of all Bangladeshi migrant workers are classified as less-skilled. The proportion of migrant women workers who are less-skilled is more than 90 per cent. For this reason, experts have given stress to the need to build technical and vocational skills among women by strengthening and implementing the National Skill Development Policy (NSDP). Also, demand driven training programmes should be initiated through which training on language, life-skills, and technological adaptations can be provided to potential migrant women workers.

Life of migrant women workers abroad: Women suffer multiple disadvantages in terms of access to labour markets and seldom have same degree of freedom as men do in choosing work. Domestic workers in particular are at risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses, including confinement, underpayment or non-payment of wages; especially when they are not properly trained and/or oriented. Some migrant women workers get exposed to beating and starvation, imprisoned in the employers house, and/or not allowed to make telephone calls.

Life as returning women migrants: In most of cases, Bangladeshi returning migrant women workers are not engaged in income-earning activities. They cannot use the skills they learned as domestic workers in their locality. Many fail to bring home enough in the way of earnings to start a business of their own. Many of them are still repaying the loans they took in order to go abroad. After returning, many women also feel a social distance from their neighbours. Positive impacts of migration on women need in-depth exploration.

Recommendations

Regarding migrant women workers during the migration process:

- (a) The government and other stakeholders need to follow the ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration in the overall migration process. Stakeholders must provide pre-departure information on rights and risks, and information needs to be provided in a location that can be accessible to both women and men.
- (b) The government's migration policies should enable freer movement for migrant women through regular channels so that women are not forced into irregular and dangerous channels. Development cooperation agencies would need to work towards this end.
- (c) The government needs to initiate specific policies on recruitment agencies, sub-agents, and other related businesses as outlined in the ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No.181). This must be done to reduce the abuse of potential migrant workers, including unreasonable fees and harassment during transit.
- (d) The government needs to ensure that all women migrants can have access to basic services (including education, health, and housing) that can affect their recognized rights in destination countries. Violence against women, sexual and gender-based violence prevention policies should be specially stressed in this regard for the protection of women migrants.
- (e) Embassies in destination countries should establish resource centres so that migrants – migrant women in particular – can access information on how to obtain their rights, access services, and deal with abuses.
- (f) The government (especially the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment) should sign bilateral agreements with destination countries on women migrants' rights generally, and provide coverage for women entering types of work where they might get exposed to abuses of their rights (e.g., domestic work).
- (g) All stakeholders need to ensure that migrant workers have awareness and access to services related to reproductive health and safety and to combat HIV/AIDS and STIs with a focus on confidentiality and sensitiveness, and the ability to respond to the specific needs of women as well as men.
- (h) The government should provide information accessible to both women and men migrants on the real costs attached to remittances through different channels.
- (i) The government, NGOs, and civil society organizations should support migrant workers' family members left behind.
- (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 reformations related to women's labour migration:

- (a) The ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration should be the guideline in formulation or reformation of any labour migration policies.
- (b) Labour migration policies should follow the strategies of action that have been discussed in the current Perspective Plan and in the Sixth Five Year Plan.
- (c) Civil society organizations need to continue campaigning for the application of UN Conventions and for the ratification of ILO Conventions on labour migration and other international instruments.
- (d) Development cooperation agencies should support national capacity-building – both governmental and in research institutes – for gender-disaggregated research and policy analysis.
- (e) The need for skilled labour in overseas countries is increasing day by day, and for this reason, diverse vocational training activities should be promoted for women.
- (f) Policy advocacy at the national and international levels (including NGOs, self-help groups, and people living with HIV networks) needs to be strengthened to mainstream HIV issues among both men and migrant women workers.
- (g) Migration policies worldwide should promote family reunion for migrant workers in all categories.
- (h) During policy formulation on women labour migration, researchers and activists should carry out a gender analysis of upcoming policies and input this into the policy making process.
- (i) In order to assess the need in overseas markets for foreign labour, evidence should include data on gender and more detailed information on specific labour market sectors to understand gender distribution.

Regarding reintegration strategies for returning migrant women workers:

- (a) With government and private sector support, empowerment of returning migrant women workers may be made possible through assistance in understanding investment opportunities, making available soft-loans, community-based training, re-migration, and training in in-demand skills in growing industries.
- (b) Reintegration programmes may need awareness campaigns and information dissemination to encourage women to invest in small businesses such as poultry, livestock, fish culture, private transport service, small shops; etc.
- (c) The most effective and needed service for returning migrant women workers is counseling on how to invest and utilize their savings from remittance. Partnership with microfinance institutions should be established to address this issue.
- (d) Stipend programmes for meritorious returned migrant women workers can be initiated as an incentive from the government's funds. The government and the private sector under public-private partnerships and corporate social responsibility projects, can play a key role in promoting returned migrant women workers who demonstrate talent for enterprise development or technical education or training.
- (e) Reintegration programmes implemented by State agencies and NGOs can include a variety of services and strategies namely: employment support/counseling; transfer of pensions; finding low-risk loans; training on further education; and addressing social, family, or other problems.
- (f) In designing the appropriate strategy for reintegration programmes, district-level and destination country-wise migration scenarios should be analyzed.

