



International
Labour
Organization

Fair recruitment initiative

Working paper no. 2: Executive summary

For a fee: The business of recruiting Bangladeshi women for domestic work in Jordan and Lebanon

The Fair Recruitment Initiative aims to foster fair recruitment practices, prevent human trafficking and reduce the costs of labour migration. This multi-stakeholder initiative is being implemented by the ILO in close collaboration with governments, employers' and workers' representative organizations, the private sector and other key partners. It has a four-pronged approach with social dialogue at the centre. The four main objectives are i) to enhance global knowledge on national and international recruitment practices and regulation, ii) to strengthen laws, policies and enforcement mechanisms, iii) to promote fair business practices, and iv) to empower workers who have suffered abuse in recruitment to lodge complaints and provide them with access to remedies.

To contribute to the first objective, the ILO is publishing a series of Working Papers to advance and share knowledge on policies, laws, current practice and challenges related to the recruitment of workers within and across countries. The purpose is to stimulate discussion and share emerging practices so as to foster fair recruitment.

This paper examines the recruitment of women from South Asia for domestic work in the Middle East, with a focus on Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon. While considerable attention has been devoted to the abusive working and living conditions in which many migrant domestic workers find themselves, until now, little research has focused on the role of the individuals and businesses that recruit and place these workers. "For a Fee" analyses the business model and competitive strategies used by labour recruiters to generate profit and to minimize the risks involved in finding, processing and placing Bangladeshi women into jobs in Jordan and Lebanon. By illuminating how and why recruiters do what they do, the study aims to inform policies and interventions to better protect migrant domestic workers and eliminate abusive recruitment and employment practices.

Along with the rapid increase in international labour mobility, more and more women and young girls from poorer countries are finding jobs cooking, cleaning, caring and performing other tasks in wealthier country households. The Middle East has become an important migration destination for women, with demand rising significantly over the past 20 years. This increase has been accompanied by alarming cases of exploitation and abuse ranging from low pay and poor employment conditions to severe violations of the workers' human and labour rights. Jordan and Lebanon host tens of thousands of women migrant domestic workers; Bangladeshis currently comprise the largest nationality group among them in both countries.

At the same time, increasingly powerful migration systems have grown in size and profitability since the mid-1990s. This system is comprised of a complex web of private sector actors, including labour recruiters and their sub-agents, pre-departure and skills training centres, transport companies and travel agencies, medical screening centres, insurance companies and visa consultancies, among many others. All these businesses seek to generate profit from the recruitment of workers from one country and their placement into jobs in another.

A team of researchers coordinated by the author of the report conducted 141 interviews with labour recruiters, sub-agents, government officials, trade union and civil society representatives and international organisation staff in the three countries (Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon). Additional interviews were conducted with 15 Bangladeshi women who had returned from domestic work in Jordan and Lebanon, and an extensive desk review supplemented and validated the empirical data.

In Jordan and Lebanon, domestic worker recruitment constitutes the bulk of all private employment agency work in both countries. The recruiters are micro-enterprises which specialise in the international recruitment and placement of migrant domestic workers, and do not recruit nationals. Given the complexity of the process, most potential employers of migrant domestic workers prefer to use the services of a professional recruiter, rather than trying to do the hiring themselves. Once placed, the workers are employed by the householder and not by the agency.

Many factors influence the business model of labour recruiters in Jordan and Lebanon, but profitability and risk are two key concerns. Recruiters generate their income from the fees they charge to their clients (the employer) for each domestic worker placed. Clients do not pay the fees up front but make a small deposit (which can be as little as \$100) to 'place their order'. Recruiters' profits accrue from the difference between the fee received from the client and the costs incurred during the recruitment process.

Recruiters face a number of risks which, if they materialise, can lead to significant financial loss. They devise risk management strategies to try to cope with those risks which are at least somewhat within their control. The most common and costly risk is what respondents referred to as 'the running away problem'. Recruiters interviewed generally attributed running away to the domestic worker seeking a better paid job elsewhere, including 'freelance' work in the informal sector, rather than to abusive employer behaviour. Regardless of the reason, this can prove very costly for recruiters, as they are obliged by law to offer their clients a replacement worker at no extra cost, if the first worker leaves within the first three months of the contract period.

Recruiters in Bangladesh operate as subcontractors to recruiters in Jordan and Lebanon. They generally have no contact with the final employer or, in some cases, the domestic worker herself. Their subcontracting status is core to their business model. As in Jordan and Lebanon, they are largely micro-enterprises employing between five and seven workers. Multinational private recruitment agencies, although present in Bangladesh, do not engage in cross-border recruitment.

Bangladeshi recruiters also devise a range of competitive strategies in order to be profitable. They primarily advertise their businesses through the Bangladesh embassies in Jordan and Lebanon, providing their contact details to local recruiters. They may also pay an agent – either living in Jordan and Lebanon or who visits periodically – to generate new 'job orders' for them, offering new Bangladeshi candidates. Therefore, the success of a Bangladeshi recruitment business depends on its ability to generate a constant supply of new recruits to secure and maintain contracts with Jordanian and Lebanese recruiters. In order to do this, they secure the services of a network of sub-agents who are able to identify and recruit potential women migrants from rural villages, and get them ready for overseas employment. The greatest risk to Bangladeshi recruiters also results from the three-month guarantee. They, in turn, must make the same guarantee to secure contracts with recruiters in Jordan and Lebanon, and bear the cost of replacing a worker free-of-charge if she quits early.

The migrant domestic workers lack many of the basic labour law protections enjoyed by nationals. They become part of a highly dispersed and largely invisible workforce that faces significant obstacles to organising, demand improvements in working conditions or registering complaints about abusive recruitment practices. In the absence of explicit and targeted support from external sources such as NGOs or trade unions, the workers are essentially without agency throughout the recruitment process, and at the mercy of the many service-providers to whom they turn for assistance – and pay fees – to find a job and prepare themselves for migration.

In this context, it is critical that private recruiters operate in a manner that protects the human rights of workers and upholds international labour standards. Labour recruiters operating between South Asia and the Middle East should regularly examine, collectively and critically, the human rights impact of their business models. Equally, it is important to stress the roles and responsibilities of other key actors in the recruitment system, including governments which set the industry's regulatory landscape and employers who shape demand for migrant domestic workers. Concrete action must be taken by all parties in order to ensure that labour markets involving private labour recruiters can be maintained and regulated, while fully protecting the rights of workers.