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# Return and Re-migration Challenges for Bangladeshi Female Migrants in the Middle East during the COVID Pandemic

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**Abstract:** Every year many Bangladeshi females migrate overseas to work as domestic workers in the Middle Eastern houses and few females migrate to other job sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many female migrants returned home voluntarily and involuntarily. While involuntary return created various forms of stress and hardship, pandemic-induced complexities and restrictions made it difficult for the returnee female migrants to re-migrate. This paper aims to empirically explore the return and re-migration journey of Bangladeshi female migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Empirical evidence was collected through in-depth interviewing of 25 female returnee migrants and five key informants. The findings confirm the knowledge gap regarding the multi-layered recruitment process, presence, and domination of various actors in the female migrants' migration journey, and unclear laws and policies as the most critical challenges that made re-migration difficult for the female returnee migrants. The COVID-19 pandemic created numerous difficulties like visa expiration, cancellation of flights, vaccination problems, financial difficulties for quarantine, and passport renewal issues. All these difficulties contributed to precarious conditions through intensifying the stress in work life and social life and thus augmented Bangladeshi female migrants' sufferings upon their return from the Middle Eastern countries. The new knowledge offered by this paper calls for effective policy actions and labour protection for the returnee female migrants during a pandemic situation.

**Keywords:** migration; re-migration; female migrant; COVID-19; Bangladesh.

## 1. Introduction

Research on overseas migration of workers from South Asian countries clearly supports that in developing countries, people mostly migrate for livelihood reasons, and they go for short-term employment mostly in the Middle Eastern countries. Although, in the past, very few female workers used to migrate for short-term employment, in recent years this number has increased. However, in many cases, they become victims of forced return from their workplace. Despite uncertainties and tortures in their workplace, they often think of re-migration, as there is a lack of employment and reintegration facilities for returnee migrants in countries like Bangladesh. Therefore, along with migration, re-migration is a coping strategy for the short-term international migrant workers to run their livelihood.

This paper discusses various reasons for re-migration and obstacles of returnee female migrants of Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. It analyses deep-rooted causes behind their re-migration challenges, apart from COVID-19 induced difficulties and restrictions. This paper finds out the contexts and circumstances that necessitate re-migration for the Bangladeshi female returnee migrants. In doing this, the paper argues that various forms of difficulties and uncertainties fueled by the COVID-

19 pandemic created precarious conditions and thus augmented Bangladeshi female migrants' sufferings upon their return from the Middle Eastern countries. The new knowledge offered by this paper calls for effective policy actions and labour protection for the returnee female migrants during a pandemic situation.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study followed a qualitative research method. Primary data was collected through telephone interviewing of 25 female returnee migrants and five key informants. Two separate sets of semi-structured questionnaires were built to conduct the interviews. Data was collected from August to October 2021. The interview timing was from 11:00 am to 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm Bangladesh time, depending of the availability of the participants, and the duration of the interviews was between 20 minutes and 70 minutes. The age of the participants varied from 24 to 50 years. Although most of them did not have institutional education, some of them completed primary education. Among 25 respondents, three were garments workers and all others worked as domestic workers or cleaners overseas. The female migrants were from Dhaka, Savar, Manikganj, Narayanganj, Rupganj, Keraniganj, Narsingdi, Kishoreganj, Comilla, Munshiganj, Faridpur, Barisal, Nabiganj, Fenchuganj, and Sylhet. Among the returnee migrants, eight returned from Lebanon, seven from Saudi Arabia, five from Oman, four from Jordan, and one from the United Arab Emirates. 22 of the female migrants were from rural areas and only three of them were from urban areas. To select and reach out to the participants for data collection, purposive and snowball sampling methods were used. Female migrants who returned to Bangladesh from the Middle East during the COVID-19 pandemic between January 2020 to August 2021 were interviewed. Moreover, five key informant interviews were conducted with migration experts from the "Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET)", "Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA)", "BRAC Migration Programme", "Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK)" and "Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants (WARBE) Development Foundation", who have substantially contributed in Bangladesh's migration sector for a long time and have a deeper understanding about the migration phenomenon, particularly in Bangladesh context. Moreover, various research reports and publications on the migration of Bangladeshi workers served as secondary data sources for the study.

## 3. Findings and Analysis

It is very prominent in the findings that although some female workers migrated overseas multiple times, they did not have proper knowledge on the process and cost of migration. They relied on intermediaries or local agents for processing their overseas migration and many of them became victims of fraudulence and exploitation. Very few female returnee migrants were aware of the fact that female workers' migration from Bangladesh to the Middle Eastern countries was declared as free. It was also revealed that often the local agents were their close family members or relatives, but female migrants were charged a fee for processing their migration. Along with other problems, female migrants were vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to their lack of knowledge on pandemic-related obstacles, they experienced severe difficulties and hardships to reintegrate into society, re-migrate, and return to their workplaces.

### 3.1 Reasons for Re-migration Decision

The re-migration decision of Bangladeshi female returnee migrants was mainly economic. As most of the female returnee migrants were divorced, single mothers, widowed, or their husbands married other women, they wished to be self-sufficient and thus create a safe and secure future for their children who could later become responsible to run their family. Other than that, lack of income opportunities, no savings from their previous migration, lack of loan facilities and expertise to start a small business and lack of reintegration facilities helped them take the decision to re-migrate. Among the 25 participants, three had started their re-migration process, while eight wanted to re-migrate but had not started their process yet as they could not decide their desired country for re-migration. Moreover, four reported that they would return to their previous employer where they used to work before returning to Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two said that they did not wish to re-migrate, but they would consider it due to harsher economic reasons. On the other hand, eight migrants stated that they would not like to re-migrate in the future.

Out of the 25 participants, 13 reported that they were the sole income person for their family and the rest reported that there were other earning persons in their family, but the earnings were not adequate to run their family. Most of them stated that if they could get a job with a decent salary or get some loan facilities to start a business over here in Bangladesh, they would wish to stay in here with their family. While some female returnees did not wish to borrow a loan as they feared a financial loss in business and inability to repay the loans, their first choice was a paid job but for this group, re-migration was a choice only in case of unavailability of a suitable paid job. Moreover, some returnees noted that their family members wanted them to re-migrate for the improvement of their income although they did not wish to migrate again. Similarly, there were a few instances where the family members did not want them to re-migrate anyway.

#### 3.1.1 Unavailability of Work for Female Returnees in Bangladesh

Bangladeshi female workers generally migrate overseas as unskilled domestic workers and cleaners for houses and hospitals in

the Middle Eastern countries. Most of them worked in Bangladesh either as a domestic worker or in other unskilled job sectors or as homemakers before migrating overseas. Upon their return, it became difficult for them to find employment in Bangladesh as the job sector for the unskilled workforce was limited for the returnee migrants. With a deep frustration, five said that they had tried to get employment in Bangladesh but could not get a suitable job. Five other returnees mentioned that they had not tried to get employment after returning. Six returnees said that they were either expecting to start a small business or small-scale cattle farming to make a livelihood. However, one of them said that she had got a job as a domestic worker in her village. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, getting a job in the domestic sector was difficult as no one allowed domestic workers due to the risks of spreading virus from humans. On the other hand, three returnee migrants who worked as garments workers at overseas garments manufacturing companies said that after their return, they got an employment offer from the garments companies where they used to work before migrating to the Middle East. Therefore, the job opportunities for migrant domestic workers were quite scarce in comparison with the female migrants from other job sectors.

However, as the interviewed migrants were mostly from rural areas, domestic work or other unskilled work was limited in those areas. A returnee woman from Saudi Arabia said she came to visit her mother and could not return to her work during the pandemic. Her economic condition improved a little after migration, but the COVID-19 pandemic made her fall into the vicious cycle<sup>1</sup> of poverty.

She said:

*"I tried to get employed in Bangladesh but due to the pandemic, no one wants to hire a domestic worker. I do not have the savings to start a business here. I must return to my workplace as soon as possible to earn some money which is not possible in Bangladesh for illiterate people like me. Now I do not have money to mitigate my hunger and even if someone buys me some rice, it would be a great help."*

As per the participants' responses, having some skills or education is important to get a job in Bangladesh. According to another migrant's response, to get a job in Bangladesh, it is required to have good connections with powerful people, and she does not have that. Moreover, two of the respondents reported that no one was hiring them because of their old age.

### 3.1.2 Lack of Savings

After years of working abroad, most of the female returnee migrants did not have any savings to start a small business in Bangladesh. Many of them were indebted. In order to repay those loans, they were planning to re-migrate. Among 25 respondents, 21 reiterated this point and out of them, only two had little savings. Five had little savings in the past but spent all the money during the COVID-19 pandemic to run their livelihood as they had no viable income source. A female migrant returned from Lebanon as her employer was unable to pay her during the pandemic. She was thinking of re-migrating due to economic obstacles, although she had not decided on the destination yet.

According to her response:

*"I migrated by taking a loan with compound interest. With my earnings I could have managed to build a big house, but my children spent the money recklessly without thinking about the future. Later, I was tricked by a fraud. I paid BDT150,000 in advance for my husband's migration purpose but my husband could not migrate. For that, I lost all my savings and now I am indebted to people. Now I have no options but to re-migrate. If I had some savings, I would have bought a cow and a calf.... Now I have nothing to run my livelihood and I made a loan of BDT100,000 in the last nine months. I am in a miserable condition now"*.

Bangladeshi female migrants remit a substantial proportion of their earnings to their families and cannot save for future purposes. Sometimes they become a victim of fraudulence, wage theft, and lose their money. They have the responsibility to repay their family's loans and bear their family expenses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of them returned to Bangladesh and lost income sources. To fulfill their dire economic needs many of them considered re-migration.

### 3.1.3 Lack of Reintegration Facilities in Bangladesh

Almost all the female returnee migrants covered by this study reported that they would like to stay in Bangladesh if they had an income source. The lack of proper reintegration facilities made them consider re-migration. Among all the respondents, one said that she wanted to re-migrate as she thought she could earn better by re-migrating only. Two of the respondents said that they were afraid of taking loans as they do not have any knowledge regarding starting and running a business. One of the migrants from Saudi Arabia who would return to her previous employer said:

*"If I take a loan and cannot repay, they will put me in jail which will be a shame on me. If I can work somewhere, I will do it, otherwise not. If I had savings of my own to start a small business, I would have considered not going abroad. Many people got incentives from the government during lockdown, but we did not get anything, not even some rice or financial assistance."*

Findings show that female migrants who received financial incentive or loan facilities from the government or NGOs during the pandemic were able to repay their debts partially. Moreover, some female migrants invested some of the received money in

<sup>1</sup> A chain of negative events, in which one difficulty creates several more.

buying sewing machines or cattle farming and had little earnings during the pandemic lockdown in absence of other earning resources. However, due to social barriers, shyness and lack of awareness migrants often find it difficult to look for a job or seek help from the government, NGOs, or local authorities upon their return. Most of them did not get any social protection from the government or NGOs to overcome their vulnerability. While some of them said that sometimes they attended meetings and programmes of NGOs regarding safe migration and got a little sum of money which was a great help for them. Some also said that as they came from abroad it was perceived as shameful for them to ask for help.

Upon return, many Bangladeshi migrants live in uncertainty regarding re-integrating socially and economically. In the case of social reintegration, the sufferings are more for the female migrants than for male migrants. The reason behind this is the conservative patriarchal social structure where females are considered to stay at home and preserve their family prestige. Four of the interviewed female migrants said that they were in fear of social stigma and two of them said they did not visit anywhere after returning from abroad as they knew that people might behave differently as they were migrants. Moreover, one of the migrants said that people often consider female migration bad in her village. She commented that:

*“In my village, usually women do not migrate, and people consider me a bad woman for that. I had no other option except for overseas migration, as I had no money to feed my family and meet my family expenses. Men are migrating frequently, but no one considers them bad. I did not tell anyone before my migration as I was indebted to people and going overseas for work is not considered good.”*

Although all female migrants did not face social discrimination after their return, working in the Middle East is often not considered respectable for females. Many times, the harassment of female migrants starts at the airport when they return home. Often, they do not get welcoming behaviour from the immigration officers. People do not behave nicely with them as people think these workers are victims of sexual abuse. Such a mindset of people when they return home is a huge obstacle to the social reintegration of the female migrants.

Regarding the economic reintegration, a migration expert said, reintegrating into society and starting some economic activities for their livelihood in Bangladesh is sometimes challenging for the female returnee migrants. The migration expert said:

*“Probashi Kallayan Bank (PKB) provides some loans after the return of a migrant. However, the process of availing this loan requires many formalities. These make things difficult for the migrants to avail themselves of the loan and the amount is not adequate. If they have some savings of their own and they borrow some loans from PKB, they can start a small business in Bangladesh. In most cases, they are unaware of the loan facilities and even if they heard about it, the long processing and documentation process discouraged them. That is why many female returnees want to re-migrate. It is very common that if someone has experience of migrating, he or she would like to re-migrate upon return. The reason behind this is, that their fear of overseas migration lessens by that time, and they decide for re-migration if they are physically well enough to migrate again. Some female returnee migrants do not migrate as their families might discourage them from migration.”*

It was found that female migrants migrated with a hope for better income and get rid of their vulnerable economic situation. Female migrants in Bangladesh face many obstacles after they return to their home country. Social reintegration, economic reintegration, and psychosocial counseling all are important when they come back home. It is important for them to get proper assistance during their stay overseas. After their return they should give proper counseling to make them mentally well by building confidence and providing guidance and economic support to start a small business. Apart from that, it is needed to ensure that no one points a finger at them. However, these are largely unavailable for them.

### 3.1.4 Reintegration Problem and Re-migration Decision of Female Migrants

According to International Organization for Migration (IOM), globally, the number of remittances sent by female migrants is almost the same as male migrants' remittances and they send a higher proportion of their income on a regular basis than men (IOM et al., 2007 as cited in IOM, n.d.). It raises the question of why the highest proportion of income-sending female migrants do not get reintegration facilities when they return. From the findings of this study, it is evident that they do not have control over their remittances and the money they remit is utilised for their families' consumption, children's education, and future purposes. The IOM (n.d.) report stated that female migrants and especially single female migrants might get extra pressure from their extended family side to send a bigger portion of their earnings to support them. Because of such pressure and their responsibility back home, female migrants may accept difficult working and living conditions overseas. Rashid (2016) in her paper developed “poststructuralist theorisation of gender as an act of performance to describe the ways in which male and female in patriarchal society occupy different fluid subject positions as remitters, receivers, providers and managers of remittances in the course of remittance practices” (p.3). She demonstrated analysis of gender and remittance behaviour in the villages of Bangladesh, where migration has been a common phenomenon in relation to the earning source.

Furthermore, returnee migrants do not get job facilities as they are mostly unskilled migrant workers. Along with job scarcity in rural areas, social barriers stop them from finding employment in their home country. The challenges for the female migrant workers for re-integrating socially and economically are much more than the male migrants. Females do not get support from their family to do the same job in their home country that they used to do overseas and thus cannot use their skills (CEDAW, n.d.). Apart from that, during any crisis, female and vulnerable groups in society face the most challenges. Regarding the world economic

catastrophe of 2008, the major effect of that economic disaster on females and girls have been reported by UNAIDS (2012) and the obstacles it created all over the world for the equality of gender (Ansar et al, 2021). As these females are from the grassroots, they do not have information about the facilities that the government is providing for the returnee migrants and in many cases, the female migrants do not have proper documents that are needed to apply for a loan. A report revealed that some of the returnee female migrants did not get any government relief, as they do not hold any Voter ID card or any other ID proof for the location they are residing in (UN Women, 2020).

Along with that, the migration decision of a person depends on various push and pull factors. In general, the push and pull factors might be the same for male and females but females in our society predominantly face more vulnerability and have fewer earning opportunities. Considering the situation of the respondents of this study, most of them were unemployed or rearing poultry and livestock in their home before migrating and some were working as domestic workers. In this context, Belanger and Rahman (2013) quoted “economic ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors are the important driving forces for international labour migration and especially temporary labour migration in Asia” (Haque, 2005; Stahl, 2003, p.357). Besides, migrants have earned some respect in their society as they have worked overseas and most of the migrants want to do a respectable job or small business in Bangladesh because of their social position. Re-migration can provide economic support and create a social status itself for the migrants.

### 3.2 Re-migration Challenges for the Female Migrants

The foremost challenge female migrants face in Bangladesh, when they decide to migrate overseas for work, is the information gap. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the female migrants trying to re-migrate or return to their previous workplace said that they were facing various hassles related to passport renewal, visa processing, vaccination, fee payment, and other difficulties, which made their re-migration difficult. Most of them said that those difficulties were created by the pandemic and if the pandemic were not there, they might have re-migrated sooner.

#### 3.2.1 Money and Information Gap

While the COVID-19 pandemic created many obstacles for the returnee female migrants, the intermediaries took advantage of the situation, particularly from the migrants who did not have adequate knowledge regarding migration procedures. Many migrants were asked by the *dala*<sup>2</sup> to pay some advance money and the total amount was unknown to them. Five participants said that their re-migration processing was delayed due to their economic hardships.

A returnee migrant from Lebanon who was re-migrating to Saudi Arabia said that her brother-in-law was the agent, and he was doing all the processing for her. She said:

*“I have to pay money to my brother, as nobody will take me without money. If no money were needed for migration, I would have migrated earlier. I will pay him after I migrate and I still do not know when I will be asked for money, it might be before migration or after. My processing is completed but I do not know how much I have to pay.”*

Female migrants often become the victim of fraudulence through their close relatives and family members due to the lack of assistance and information. There were instances that even if female migrants knew that they could migrate for free, but intermediaries were showing additional costs like medical fee, fingerprint and additional costs and thus taking money from the female migrant workers. A migration expert explained this:

*“Female migrants do not need to pay for migration. If a woman migrates to Saudi Arabia, her recruiting agency gets \$2000 from her Saudi employer. Even the local agents or dalals are paid by the recruiting agencies to recruit a migrant but in some cases, dalals take money from the migrant women as well. In most cases, local agents are their family members or close relatives. In that case, migrants do not wish to complain and in many cases, the money taken from them is not a big amount, so they do not complain. If anyone takes money from a female migrant worker, she can complain to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). Often the money that is taken from the female migrant workers are transferred unofficially and thus it remains undocumented. In absence of proof, it becomes difficult to take legal actions.”*

Information gap related to migration is a huge backdrop. Some of the migrants said that previously they did not know that female migrants do not need money for their migration but now they are aware of that. Some of them said that they attended some meetings in their village organized by NGOs, which made them aware of safe migration. One of the returnee migrants from Lebanon who was in an irregular status in Lebanon said that she had visited the local WARBE office for her re-migration and she would like to take help from them after deciding on re-migration.

#### 3.2.2 Renewal of Passport

Many female migrants had returned home during COVID-19 after facing different harsh circumstances abroad. Among them, some faced passport-related difficulties, and their re-migration or return to their workplaces was delayed. For example, they did not

<sup>2</sup> Sub-agent/local agent/middleman/intermediary

receive their renewed passport for several months, they could not renew passport due to economic difficulties, they could not present proper identity documents for renewing their passport, and in some cases the passport office was shut down during lockdown etc.

A returnee migrant from Oman who worked there for two years and before that worked in Saudi Arabia for two years did not have the capacity to renew her passport. Her financial situation got worse during the pandemic, and she was in trouble returning to her workplace. She said that her employer sent her money for passport renewal, but she had to use that money for consumption purposes during the pandemic in the face of the financial crisis. Moreover, some said that they applied for passport renewal months before through the help of a *dalal* but did not receive their passport till date due to COVID-19 induced lockdown and shutdown of offices.

A migrant returnee from Lebanon, who worked there for 11 years in total and eight years in an irregular status, came back with government assistance in the hope of migrating to a new place with a valid visa. She was told that she could not make a new passport and re-migrate at this age. Apart from that, intermediaries were taking advantage of the pandemic situation.

A woman migrant commented on this:

*“I renewed my passport during the pandemic. Normally it takes BDT7,000 to BDT8,000 but at that time I had to pay BDT32,000, otherwise, the officer would not put endorse the seal on my passport. I had to organise the seal through giving them money.”*

The above statements clearly show how the intermediaries were taking advantage of the pandemic and unnecessarily charging the female migrants. Other than that, from the observation of activities outside the passport office<sup>3</sup> and talking with some migrants it was found that most of them applied for their passport renewal through an intermediary. A migrant said that she came to receive her passport, which she applied for renewal on an urgent basis (express delivery)<sup>4</sup> but received it after few weeks (regular delivery). She said she had provided BDT12,000 for the passport renewal for 10 years validity, but her passport receipt showed that the intermediary registered her passport for five years validity for BDT4,065. She reported that she did not know anything as her brother did everything and later, she said her brother was the *dalal*. Therefore, the victimisation of female migrants starts with their own family members and relatives.

### 3.2.3 Vaccination

Female migrants did not have proper information on vaccination along with misinformation regarding the after-effects of vaccination. Findings from field data show that some female migrants were asked for money to register and get the vaccine shots. Along with that, authorities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were asking for specific vaccination<sup>5</sup>, and without that Saudi government imposed seven days of quarantine restrictions on migrants with their own cost, which is BDT70,000-80,000. Later, the Bangladesh government announced that they would pay BDT20,000-25,000 as the financial support for the workers going to Saudi Arabia.<sup>6</sup> However, as females faced information constraints, in most cases, they were not aware of this and faced several difficulties. Along with other difficulties, taking vaccine shots was a huge struggle for them.

A migrant reported:

*“I could not return to my workplace due to the vaccine issue. Earlier I did not know where to go for registration and how to get it. I heard that it takes a huge amount of money to register and get the vaccination card. Without a vaccine, I have to stay in quarantine which is costly. That is why my employer did not take me back earlier. Now I am vaccinated and will return soon. I had to give BDT360 to get my vaccination certificate.”*

A respondent returning to her previous employer said that her flight date was in a few days, but she could not get her second dose of vaccine as her first dose was given in Saudi Arabia before coming to Bangladesh. She was told that she would not be able to take her second dose of the vaccine here in Bangladesh. As she did not have the financial ability to stay in a hotel for quarantine, she was worried about the financial crisis, and she was not sure if she could not get on the flight and migrate. Moreover, she did not know where she could go for reliable information and help regarding this.

Apart from that, long waiting queues outside the vaccination centres and the unavailability of the desired vaccine were an important issue. The same respondent outside the passport office said that she was not jabbed and would take the vaccine before her departure. She said that expatriates were allowed take both vaccine shots within an interval of two days but in reality, the second dose is given after a month or two (depending on the vaccine) of the first dose. She said that a close relative of hers had taken vaccination this way and she would do the same to cut down the hassles of going to the capital city Dhaka, as specific centres were providing specific vaccination for the migrant workers. Her experience shows that in the near future some disastrous consequences of health hazards might occur due to misinformation regarding vaccination.

<sup>3</sup> District passport office, Habiganj, Bangladesh

<sup>4</sup> e-Passport with 48 pages and 10 years validity-Regular delivery: TK 5,750; Express delivery: TK 8,050

<sup>5</sup> Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Johnson and Johnson

<sup>6</sup> Govt. to pay quarantine rent for Saudi Arabia-bound workers. (2021b, May 29). *Dhaka Tribune*.

### 3.2.4 COVID-19 Related Other Restrictions

There were cases of visa expiration due to delays in flights and shutdown of all offices during the pandemic and people could not do their processing for migration. Moreover, less demand for work overseas, the shutdown of flights, price hike of tickets, and COVID-19 negative test reports under 24 hours created a difficult situation for the migrants. Moreover, Gulf Countries had made it mandatory for COVID negative results to be done, not before six hours of departure from a PCR test to enter the country.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the unavailability of a PCR test lab at the airport, not enough testing lab compared to the demand, and sometimes delay in test reports made it difficult for the migrant workers to fulfill the requirements. Apart from that, some female migrants were told by their employer to bear their own costs if they had an intention to return home, which made the migrants fall under a huge economic burden.

### 3.2.5 Sufferings of Female Migrants

According to a report by ILO (2016), female workers from poor countries and their low educational quality intrinsically related to the lack access to accurate information regarding the overall migration process which puts migrants at risks of deception by unscrupulous recruitment agents and traffickers. Silver (2009) argued that due to the legal gaps in labour code, female transnational workers have fewer rights. In most cases, female workers do not know their employer's information, wages, and other information regarding their migration. According to Rashid and Ashraf (2018), there are more than 1200 licensed private recruiting agencies and only 35 percent of the work visas are processed through them, and more than 60 percent visas are processed by relatives, friends, or family members of migrants. As the *dalals* or intermediaries are not officially documented, the scope of fraudulence is higher and female migrants seldom take action against them. Existing laws and regulatory frameworks offer a provision for legal action against the recruiting agencies if any fraudulence is proved against them. However, there is no such provision for their sub-agents, and they are unregistered agents of recruiting agencies. Although it was proposed several times to bring the sub-agents under registration and rule, it never became successful.<sup>8</sup>

By taking advantage of the pandemic, female migrants were exploited more in the face of the imposed conditions by their employers and intermediaries. The migration governance is centralized and there are authoritative and administrative shortcomings in DEMO offices and other authorities involved who are working at the rural level. This clearly shows the reason for the vulnerability of migrants (Ansar et al, 2021). To achieve the goals of SDG regarding safe migration and favourable workplace and migration, the implementation of policies and dissemination of proper information on every aspect is important.

Along with law and policy implementation lacking, migrant female workers' identity as a "female" made them easy to exploit. In Bangladesh, due to social barriers and various discrimination on gender roles, the road to overseas migration is harder for females than males. For these reasons, female migrants face various struggles in their migration processing, pre-departure stage, working period, and even after returning to their home country (CEDAW, n.d). COVID-19 has shown their obstacles from a different angle. Although many steps were taken by the government of Bangladesh regarding vaccination, quarantine, and other measures, female migrants were still unaware regarding these procedures. As a result, the intermediaries took advantage of the situation.

## 3.3 Re-migration Difficulties Apart from COVID-19 Induced Crisis

Workplace experiences were a huge challenge for female migrants to make decisions regarding re-migration. While most of the female migrants said they had to re-migrate due to their economic obstacles, some of the female migrants reported that they would not want to migrate again.

### 3.3.1 Traumatic Experiences and Deciding Not to Re-Migrate

While migration is a livelihood choice, some of the female migrants said that they would not re-migrate because of their previous migration experience. Two of them said they would not re-migrate even if they were given fifty-thousand taka, which shows their strong will against migration. Five of 25 respondents said that they would not re-migrate as they had faced harassment and torture at their workplaces. On the other hand, some of the returnees said that they would not re-migrate again but if they get an opportunity to work under a good employer, they might reconsider it. Moreover, some said that they would go if they could work on a free visa, which is living on their own and working on an hourly basis in people's houses as a domestic worker or in the hospitals as a cleaner. It is also prevalent that female migrants were considering not to stay in an employer's house due to safety concerns. Moreover, some female migrants said that on a free visa they could work on an hourly basis and get wages on a day-to-day basis, so there were very few chances of wage theft.

A female migrant who returned home from Saudi Arabia within three months of her migration in the face of excessive work pressure and torture said that she migrated through a *dalal* from her nearby village and paid BDT25,000 for her migration processing. She was told that she must work for three people, but after reaching, she alone worked for 15 to 20 people in a house and due to excessive work pressure, she could not even get time to eat. She did not receive any training prior to her migration and had no idea

<sup>7</sup> Hasan, J. M. A. R. (2021, September 6). Migrants going abroad: Their pleas finally heard. *The Daily Star*.

<sup>8</sup> Ara, A. (2021, September 11). Recruiting agencies show reluctance to register manpower intermediaries. *The Financial Express*.

regarding where to go for help overseas. She said:

*“No one can work all the time. My arms and feet were attacked by fungi through continuously working in water. I could not take rest and I was COVID positive and was so sick that my face swelled. They took my mobile sim card so that I cannot contact my home. My husband filed a case at the embassy with the help of Bangladesh police. When the embassy sent the police for me, my employer said I was insane and they put me in jail. After staying there for 18 days in a miserable environment, my husband sent BDT80,000 to get me back to Bangladesh. I worked there for three months but did not get any salary.”*

It was very common in the findings that many female migrants faced severe work pressure and improper eating arrangement that made them physically exhausted. Moreover, receiving less wages than promised by the intermediary or wage theft was a very common phenomenon. Some reported that they had to spend all their savings to return to Bangladesh at their own cost. Moreover, many female migrants said that they had to eat by stealing at their employer's house as they only got to eat the leftovers. There were also responses that female migrant workers were severely tortured, and sexually assaulted. A female returnee reported that her employer burnt her lips. It is prevalent that difficulties related to migration processing and workplace harassment and torture are lower in other job sectors than in the domestic work sector. All three of the interviewed returnee female garments workers said they used to work in Jordan and migrated through the help of Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), about which they learned from their known people. All three of them were satisfied with their pay and living arrangements while working overseas. Two of them returned because of their family issues and one of them returned after one year of migration due to excessive work pressure. They had no intention of re-migration. Although she did not face any torture or harassment, the work pressure was traumatic for her.

Regarding the vulnerability of female migrant workers, here is an opinion of one of the migration experts:

*“Before migration, during migration, and after return, female migrants go through a vulnerable situation. Domestic workers cannot run away from their employers' houses and hence there are huge chances to make them victims of harassment, as they are females. Middle Eastern countries practised slavery before and till now they think that they can do whatever they wish to do with domestic workers. In such cases, female migrants are more vulnerable than male workers. Female domestic workers are more vulnerable than any other migrants in other sectors. Female migrants contribute to the remittance economy more than male migrants do. They do not spend money for other purposes as male migrants do and their vulnerability is higher as well.”*

Female migrants stay in vulnerable situations in different stages of migration and the vulnerability of a female domestic worker is higher than other job sectors as they live in the employer's house. In many instances, they do not have access to the outer world, and they do not know where to seek assistance if they face torture. Apart from the nature of their job as a domestic worker, there are other regulatory reasons behind their suffering.

Another migration expert gave her opinion on this:

*“Females who are willing to migrate should be provided with proper grooming before migration. Government should come into proper negotiation with the host country that if any of the female migrants' face harassment, we will stop sending workers. However, the government is afraid to put their strong voice regarding this. They think that such negotiations might result in harm for the expatriates in the host countries and they might send them back to Bangladesh. Government should increase their bargaining power in technical and diplomatic manners to protect the female migrants. During the signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the Government of Bangladesh should truly ensure the protection of female migrant workers.”*

It is prevalent that many female migrant domestic workers do not complete the month-long mandatory training before migrating overseas and sometimes *dalals* make fake certificates of completion for that training. As a result, the female migrants do not understand the language, food culture, and work when they arrive in host countries, and eventually they face torture. Moreover, lack of monitoring and poor-quality infrastructure and resources of training centres, lack of manpower in the labour wings, lack of access to the embassy, and lack of legal cell support make a female migrant worker vulnerable. Along with that, lack of monitoring, negotiation, and policy implementation gaps regarding the protection of migrant workers make the migrants more vulnerable in the host countries. The governments that are strict regarding the protection of the rights of their migrants and particularly female migrants are in better conditions than Bangladeshi migrants.

### 3.3.2 Female Migrants as a Victim of Exploitation

Various studies on Bangladeshi female migrants had shown that many female migrant workers had been successful in their migration and their migration had brought a positive economic change in their lives (Siddiqui, 2001; CEDAW, n.d). However, there were many instances of failed migration and along with other problems, pandemic-induced problems had made the situation worse. Ansar et al (2021) had shown that the vulnerabilities of female migrants in their workplaces is not a new phenomenon and the stories of their sufferings, return, and wage theft during the COVID-19 pandemic have unveiled the gap in the migration governance system to address and respond to an emergency. They had argued that the already existing fault-lines in the recruitment, employment systems and living conditions of workers in overseas employment had been augmented by COVID-19.

It is evident from the findings of this study that proper migration governance for safe migration at the grassroots level was



unavailable. Some of the female migrants were privileged to receive some support from NGOs regarding fraudulence and a few awareness sessions on safe migration, but the majority did not receive any support or assistance. There are some recruiting agents, sub-agents who send migrants overseas by making fake passports, job contracts and BMET clearance certificates (ILO, 2014). Although there have been various difficulties faced by the female migrant workers in in host countries and the left-behind members of migrant households, there has been a lack of international and national policies regarding responding to migrants' concerns during a pandemic and more specifically, gender-responsive policies to identify and solve these (UN Women, 2020b; CARE, 2020 as cited in Ansar et al 2021). Due to a lack of proper monitoring and legal support, female migrant workers' vulnerabilities had increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-induced difficulties will eventually solve, and many female migrants will engage in overseas employment but if the faulty recruitment system is not fixed through proper implementation of the existing laws and policies, Bangladesh will have to witness more such difficulties in the near future.

#### 4. Conclusion

International labour migration is a better livelihood opportunity for the poor people of Bangladesh who contribute to the economy to a large extent through sending remittances after migration and contributing to the GDP of Bangladesh. The findings of this study offered new knowledge for understanding the sufferings of the Bangladeshi female returnee migrants and policy gaps in addressing them. This study finds that female migrant returnees were considering re-migration as a dire need in the face of economic obstacles. Lack of unskilled jobs, lower salaries, no savings, and lack of loan facilities have compelled them to decide to re-migrate amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had made their re-migration or return to their workplace really difficult. Moreover, the information gap made them more vulnerable to various forms of fraudulence. They were facing challenges related to vaccination, quarantine, passport renewal, price hike of tickets, and other pandemic-induced problems along with economic obstacles. Along with the imposed COVID-19 related restrictions from the host countries, the intermediaries and in some cases the employers imposed some harsh conditions and thus made re-migration or return even more challenging for the female migrant workers. Moreover, while re-migration was a challenge for the female migrants, some female migrants refused to re-migrate due to their traumatic previous migration experiences. Lack of support regarding complaint mechanisms, and lack of protection in workplaces compelled them to decide not to migrate again. The study therefore calls for effective actions from policy circles such as implementation of the migration policies and widespread support service from government offices to promote safe migration. The lack of government collaboration with NGOs may make the situation worse and thus the local agents or brokers may take advantage of the situation.

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