

Migrant workers

Overworked, unpaid and abused, Bangladeshi women return from Middle East



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Female Bangladeshi migrants at Dhaka airport. Prothom Alo File Photo

Thousands of Bangladeshi women migrants, most of whom were employed in Middle Eastern countries as domestic workers, have been hit hard by the impact of COVID-19. Many of them have lost their jobs and were forced to return home without wages. Several of them have also been abused during the pandemic.

Over 17,000 women migrants have already returned to Bangladesh amid the pandemic and many of them complain of forced return, deportation and non-payment of their monthly wages for several months. Many women migrant workers say that they had to work for more than 20 hours daily as the number of residents in the employers' places increased during the pandemic. Rather than being paid for the additional hours of work, many were not even paid the salaries that were agreed upon in the contracts.

The returnees said that they endured physical and mental torture, faced shortage of food and were often sexually abused by the employers or the family members.

At least 17,182 women migrant workers have come back to Bangladesh between 1 April and 3 October, according to the Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB) under the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry, Bangladesh.

Of them, 6,025 have come back home from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 3,269 from the United Arab Emirates, 1,887 from Lebanon, 1,789 from Jordan, 1,362 from Qatar and 1,241 from Oman.

COVID-19 has severely impacted millions of migrant workers in destination countries, many of whom have experienced job loss or non-payment of wages, been forced by employers to take unpaid leave or accept reduced wages, been confined in poor living conditions, and with little or no work options left, according to global migration experts.

Firoza Begum, 37, a migrant from Munshiganj in Bangladesh, was sent back to Bangladesh jobless from the KSA in July. Her 'out-pass' was issued by Bangladesh Embassy in Riyadh.

Firoza claimed that her employer did not pay her for the last five months. The unpaid dues amount to Saudi Riyal 5,000 (USD 1,300).

"Although I did the household work and met every demand of theirs, they did not pay my wages," she said. Instead, she said that she was often scoffed and tortured by the three daughters of the employer.

She had migrated to the KSA in July 2019 paying BDT 30,000 (USD 350). When she arrived at Riyadh airport, a Saudi recruitment office staff received her and sent her to the employer's home where she worked for only two months. The working conditions were not what she had expected.

She was sent back to the recruiter's office who found her work at a new employer's home. Firoza worked there for six months and everything seemed well even though she was paid only for the first month. Torture started as soon as she started asking for her wages. Finally, she ran away from her employer's home without her passport.

Firoza Begum was immediately detained by the Saudi police and put in jail for. Then COVID-19 started and Bangladesh embassy was able to issue 'out passes' for stranded workers.

Another woman migrant worker, Hashi, 28, returned to Bangladesh from the KSA empty-handed on the night of Eid-ul-Adha, one of the important religious festivals for the Muslim community, on 31 July this year.

She did not want to return in the midst of the pandemic. “Although I requested my employer to let me work, they sent me back home forcefully,” she said in an interview.

Hashi had worked for two years and three months in KSA for a monthly wage of SAR 800 (USD 200). “In the last month (July 2020) I was not paid my due wage of USD 200 by my employer,” she claimed.

She sought the assistance of Bangladesh government to help her get her last month’s unpaid wage.

“I had worked for many additional hours but was never given any additional money. Every day I had to work for 20 to 22 hours. There was not even enough time for me to sleep,” said Hashi, who hails from Barisal, the Southern district in Bangladesh.

Migrant worker Parul Akhter, 32, returned from Lebanon in August after losing her job. Her wages for the last eight months remain with the employer.

In an interview, she said that currently there is scarcity of jobs in Lebanon due to many other reasons including the spread of Corona virus.

She had suffered a lot, she said. Not only did she have to work for her employer, she also had to work in the homes of their relatives. “Finally after all that, I was not paid by them,” she said.

Parul, from Narsingdi district, migrated to Lebanon eight years ago paying BDT 45,000 (USD\$530). Her monthly wage, when it was paid, was US\$ 150.

“Over the last two years, I have not been paid regular wages. Since January of this year the employer asked me to work at his relative’s home. I got no wage during these eight months. Sometimes there was no food to eat,” she said.

Parul worked under a single Kafeel as she was not allowed to change her sponsor. She claims that her total unpaid wages would come to US\$ 4,000.

“Whenever I asked for wages, I would be tortured physically,” she said, adding that her repatriation was facilitated by Bangladesh embassy in Beirut.

When asked for official comment about the situation of women migrant workers, Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry’s secretary Dr Ahmed Munir Saleheen said that the government has taken some steps to help all migrants, including women workers, who were coming back home during the pandemic.

He said that the government has already allocated BDT 700 crore (USD 82.35 million) for supporting the returnee migrant workers. “The rehabilitation loans launched by the government, would be equally applicable for male and female returnee migrants.”

Asked about wage theft, Dr Ahmed Munirus Saleheen, the top official of the ministry, said that they would soon start communicating with the employers through Bangladesh missions at destinations to discuss and realize the unpaid wages of the migrants.

Wage theft — non-payment for overtime, denying workers their last pay check after he or she leaves a job, not paying for all of the hours worked, not paying minimum wages — is a trend that often goes unreported.

Since 1991, one million women migrants, 98 per cent of them domestic workers, have left Bangladesh for overseas destinations, according to Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET).

The remaining 2 per cent women migrants were mostly employed in the apparel factories abroad, BMET officials said. Bangladeshi garment workers have also been affected by COVID-19 as many of them returned home jobless amid pandemic.



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Dr Abrar, executive director, RMMRU

About 1000 garment workers of Bangladesh were recently sent back home from Jordan.

On June 30, Taposi Khatun, a 22-year-old Bangladeshi apparel worker, returned from Jordan by special flight.

She was employed in Sydney Apparel factory in Jordan as an operator. Without extending renewal of work permit, the management sent her back home.

“Amid corona pandemic, the management terminated my job along with many other workers,” said Taposi who comes from Sonatola of Bogra district.

She said that she was very upset about losing her job at this time as her monthly earning of BDT 30,000 (USD 350) stopped totally.

Migration researchers and migrants’ rights activists said that they have frequently found the cases of wage-theft committed by the employers, forcing the women domestic and apparel workers from destinations amid the COVID pandemic.

They said that women migrants mostly employed as the domestic workers were worst victims of the wage theft, as they were traditionally kept out of the labour laws in the Middle East.

The experts suggest documenting complaints of migrants to advocate for realising unpaid dues of migrant workers as many of them have been repatriated arbitrarily.

When approached, migration specialist Dr CR Abrar, who taught International Relations in Dhaka University, said that migrant workers were facing a crisis amid the COVID pandemic situation.

As many migrant workers are coming back home, it is incumbent on the government to examine if they are returning voluntarily or are being forced to leave destination countries in violation of their contracts, he said.

He suggested that no repatriation should be facilitated by Bangladesh unless all the lawful claims such as wage, end-service benefit and other entitlements are cleared before repatriation.

“Bangladeshi workers have gone to work abroad following international rules and regulations. So they cannot be arbitrarily deported or deprived of their due wages. They should be duly compensated if their jobs are terminated arbitrarily.” said Dr Abrar, also executive director of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU)

According to a RMMRU study conducted on the basis of interviewing 50 male migrants who returned from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Malaysia because of the pandemic.

Those who returned from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar alleged that they had unpaid dues ranging from BDT 9,500 (USD 112) to BDT 5 lakh (USD 5,890), according to finding of the study.

Some 39 out of the 50 respondents said they were picked up by police during the pandemic and later repatriated.

EWOE ministry officials observed that it would be difficult for the government to realise the unpaid dues of the migrant workers who were employed in the informal sector.

As many Bangladeshi workers have gone abroad with "so called free visa" for their jobs overseas, realising the compensation for such workers would be very hard for government.

The COVID-19 pandemic which began in Wuhan, China, has now spread all over the world. In the Middle East, the first case was confirmed in UAE on 29 January. On 26 March, Saudi authorities announced a total lockdown of Riyadh, Makkah and Madinah and a nation-wide curfew. As cases started showing up, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait also implemented curfews and restriction from 26 March.

About 80 per cent of the total 12 million Bangladeshi male and female migrants workers are employed in Middle East and North African countries, said Bangladesh officials. As all flights are suspended since March due to the corona pandemic, around 300,000 prospective migrants have been stranded in Bangladesh. Among them at least 30,000 are women as per the estimate of recruitment agencies. They are passing their days in frustration as their employment plans have been disrupted.

Bangladeshi Ovibashi Mohila Sromik Association (BOMSA) said that they are receiving over 30 phone calls every day from the female migrant workers in Bangladesh and abroad and providing counseling services to them via phone. Among the callers are regular and irregular (forcefully sent back) returnees, potential migrants and their families all of whom have been economically impacted by COVID-19.

Family members said the employer tortured her physically and sexually since she joined work. The family contacted the recruiting agency, but the agency did not take any steps to bring Kulsum back.

Analyzing 400-450 call records from March to September, BOMSA said some female workers were stuck in their employer's houses in Saudi Arabia. In some cases, their employers did not provide enough food to the workers let alone their due salaries.

Some of the migrant worker's family members have said that the migrant workers have not received any salary and can't pay back their loans or support their family.

Farida Yeasmin, BOMSA Director of Programmes, said that they have received many complaints from the women migrants at destinations, including non-payment of wages, abuse and physical torture.

"We will soon raise the issues of wages-theft and other problems of the female migrants with officials of the concerned ministries and the recruiting agencies in Bangladesh," said Farida Yeasmin who is also a senior lawyer at Bangladesh Supreme Court.

Tortured to Death

Kulsum, a 14-year-old girl from Brahmanbaria, died in King Faisal Hospital of Saudi Arabia on 9 August after she had been tortured by her employer.

The body of Kulsum arrived at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on 11 September. She was buried at Nurpur village of Nasirnagar upazila in Brahmanbaria on the following day.

Kulsum had gone to Saudi Arabia through a local middleman Razzak Mia after spending Tk 30,000. MH Trade International was the agency that had arranged the documentation for Kulsum 17 months ago.

Family members said the employer tortured her physically and sexually since she joined work. The family contacted the recruiting agency, but the agency did not take any steps to bring Kulsum back.

The family also alleged that the employer and his son broke Kulsum's knee, back and leg four months ago, and after a few days ago left her on the street after damaging one of her eyes. Later, Saudi police rescued her and admitted her to King Faisal Hospital.

On 17 August, Kulsum's father Shahidul Islam applied to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) for her dead body and eight months wages.

In their statement, Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration (BCSM), a platform of 19 organizations, raised many questions on untimely death of migrants. They demanded justice for Kulsum through proper investigation.

According to a study released by IOM in August, 70 per cent of returnee migrants to Bangladesh struggle to find employment. A total of 29 per cent of respondents of the study indicated that they had returned to Bangladesh because they were asked to leave the country they were in, and 23 per cent reported that they were worried about COVID-19 and wished to return to their families.

At the time of the interviews, a total of 55 per cent of the respondents who had returned from abroad had accumulated unpaid debt.

Shirin Lira, Programme Lead for Labour Migration project PROKAS, supported by UKAID, said that COVID 19 pandemic has an immense impact on migrating women. Thousands of women who had completed their pre-departure training, manpower procedure, medical test, some had even bought their tickets, could not fly as all migration-related activities have been postponed indefinitely, due to COVID-19 .

“They are also experiencing uncertainty of future employment, family pressure, financial loss and social stigma,” she said.

Shirin also said that the government should make the recruiting agencies accountable to get back their wages.

She said that the government needs to have dialogue and negotiation with the governments of destination countries so that they also shoulder some responsibilities. “Wider collaboration among stakeholders and strong partnership both in Bangladesh and in destination countries can mitigate the problems that women migrants are facing currently due to the pandemic.”

Seeking justice for wage theft

Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), Lawyers Beyond Borders (LBB) Network, Cross Regional Centre for Migrants and Refugees (CCRM), South Asia Trade Union Council (SARTUC), and Solidarity Center (SC) have called for establishing a “Transitional Justice Mechanism” to address the plight of millions of migrant workers who have been repatriated or are awaiting repatriation as a result of pandemic-related job loss.

In a joint statement they said that huge volume of cases of wage theft and other outstanding claims have been heightened at this time and migrant workers’ access to justice should be the priority of governments.

They said that cases could be received directly from migrants themselves or through entities providing support or legal representation to migrants. “All pre-existing case documentations should be referred to the Claims Commissions for resolution. The International Claims Commission could be administered jointly by ILO and IOM together with other relevant stakeholders.”

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