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1,160 Gulf Returnees: They lost Tk 1.8 lakh each in wage, perks amid Covid

Says rights body report



Staff Correspondent

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At least 1,160 Bangladeshi returnee migrants each incurred an average loss of about \$2,119, or Tk 1.8 lakh, in wages and other entitlements in six Gulf countries amid the pandemic, according to a new survey report.

Of the returnees, 67.7 percent said they did not receive due wages after February, 2020, says the report of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM).

The highest amount of loss a returnee migrant incurred was \$7,063 and the lowest was \$35, it says.

Findings of the report "Addressing Systemic Challenges of Wage Theft: Bangladeshi Covid-19 Returnees from the Gulf" were shared during a virtual ceremony yesterday organised by Migrant Forum in Asia, a regional migrant rights platform.

Titled "South Asian Perspectives on Wage Theft and Access to Justice", the event also saw sharing of similar study findings from India and Nepal.

Disclosing the report on Bangladesh, BCSM Chair Prof CR Abrar said the amount lost by Bangladeshi returnees is "quite a staggering sum".

Covid-19 had taken a huge toll on the respondents, most of whom were gainfully employed during the pre-pandemic period, said Prof Abrar, also executive director of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

He said the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers exposed the "systemic weakness" of the protection structure of migrant workers.

"Here, as we said, countries of destination, countries of origin, and private sectors in both countries -- everyone is culpable," he said, adding that the issue has to be addressed.

Seven BCSM member organisations, including RMMRU, conducted the survey in 45 districts between March 25 and May 6 this year.

The Bangladeshi migrants, 14.7 percent of whom are female, returned from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

Aged between 20 and 49, they stayed in the countries of destination for more than five years. They were employed in various sectors, including construction, domestic staff, hospitality, and services.

The BCSM report says 83.9 percent returnees had valid contracts.

As reasons for return, 63 percent respondents said they were forced to return or stay back in Bangladesh at the instruction of their employers, with 28.5 percent having come back on vacation and then got stranded.

When asked whether they had registered a complaint regarding wage theft, 92 percent of respondents said they did not, according to the report.

As reasons, they cited lack of information about where to file the complaint, finding "no reason" to believe that recovery was possible, and fearing retaliation from employers, it says.

The report recommended that all dues of migrant workers be cleared before repatriation.

In case of inability of the employers to clear such dues before the return of the workers, documents should be issued by the employers that can be presented in courts for settlement, it says.

Addressing the event, Andalib Elias, director general (multilateral economic affairs) of the foreign ministry, said lack of manpower in the Bangladesh missions abroad is a major challenge in providing required services to migrant workers.

However, the present government is fully aware and conscious of the problems, he said, adding, "We are taking all necessary steps that is possible in our periphery to address this issue."



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