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# Still a Long Wait for Wage Theft Judgment

Md Mazadul Hoque



Bobita Kormokar, a returnee female migrant worker, now living at Savar area of Dhaka district, expressed her grievance regarding wage theft. She has failed to collect due wages of 28 months from her employer located at Saudi Arabia. She had no place to share her wage theft before leaving that country. Julekha, another returnee who stayed Jordan for long, had to surrender her 05 months' salary.

The employer in the United Arab Emirates insisted that Bangladeshi worker named Amit had taken leave without pay. Amit -- an inhabitant of Narsingdi district - returned to Bangladesh empty pocket. In another case, a man from Cumilla returned home without his dues amounting to Taka 6,70,120 which was to be paid by the Oman-based company. A Malaysian company dismissed Jaforullah when COVID-19 was detected in that country without paying his dues.

These incidents of wage theft was revealed at a webinar titled "Online National Dialogue on Justice for Wage Theft Campaign" held recently. WARBE Development Foundation- a welfare association for the rights of Bangladeshi emigrants- organized the program aiming to seek verdict on behalf of unpaid returnee migrant workers.

Actually, a series of wage theft cases experienced by migrant workers abroad is not new voice. Such type of heinous activity had been going on abroad since long. Currently, the wage theft had been turned into hot issue mainly for receiving thousand complaints at a time. Basically, the employers, belonging to Middle Eastern countries, launched unholy move in the aim of making hefty profit.

Besides, exploitation of workers by employers is on the rise. The stock of complaints filed by migrant works reached skyrocketing but timely judgment is rarely noticed. If the long-pending issues regarding wage theft remain unsettled, the impact might fall on remittance flow. Wage theft is term used when wages that is lawfully owed to workers gets withheld by their employers.

Thousand of wage theft cases had so far been lodged by the victims but start of trial session goes uncertain. If the migrant workers, who have faced wage theft recently, do not get speedy judgment, they never decide to rejoin their works abroad.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Bangladeshi workers employed abroad have been forced to return home seeing no alternative to survive. They mostly faced the same fate. According to the people familiar with migrant affairs, returnee migrant workers landed on their motherland leaving behind million dollars wages and service benefit.

Sadly saying, returnee migrant workers showed inability to provide immediate cash support to their dependents just after landing Bangladesh. The returnees faced untold sufferings during pandemic time while on or off jobs, I was lucky enough to hear from victims from the session being as roving guest.

Over six lakh migrant workers returned to Bangladesh after losing jobs or had failed to be paid by their employers. The deportation of migrant workers became rampant as the pandemic spread across the globe. Of the total returnee migrant workers, around 70 percent are struggling to find new employment. There is a possibility of another 2 (two) lakh workers of returning home. In my opinion, if such trend persists longer, Bangladesh -- known as an emerging economy -- might fall into a risky situation due to poor inflow of foreign remittance.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh, a fastest growing economy among south Asian countries, is set to lose million dollars remittance for wage theft reason that is being held around the world in broad daylight. The study revealed by WARBE foundation said that the wages from 2 to 9 months had not been paid. In Bangladesh, returnees on an average lost about 175,000 taka (\$2,000), according to a study by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit. To note that around 47 percent returnee migrant workers are totally out of earnings sources- the presentation said.

Some widely circulated newspapers recently made some news stories on wage theft that drew my attention. According to reports, a 37-year old Firoza Begum, a migrant from Munshiganj in Bangladesh was sent back to Bangladesh from the KSA recently. Firoza claimed that her employer did not pay her the wages of last five months.

The unpaid dues amount to Saudi Riyal 5,000 (USD 1,300). Hashi (28) returned to Bangladesh from the KSA empty-handed this year. 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 wages of USD 200 by my employer,"- she claimed. 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. She claims that her total unpaid wages would come to US\$ 4,000. According to the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) study, unpaid dues recorded ranging from BDT 9,500 (USD 112) to BDT 5 lakh (USD 5,890) who worked in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Malaysia.

A research study suggests that the households, who heavily rely on remittances, saw a sharp decline in savings of up to 62 percent. What is worrying that households' debt between April and November, 2020 increased by 31 percent. Like Bangladesh, other remittance-dependent economies in South Asia have experienced same situation. It has been reported that gulf countries did not make delay for repatriation process by establishing Covid-19 reason. It seems to me Covid-19 came as blessing for labor importing countries.

What should be noted here that gulf countries are responsible more in the respect of wage theft affairs. According the returnee workers, the employers launched inhuman drive on migrant workers. Reduction of wages and benefit coupled with torture for resigning letters obliged the workers to return Bangladesh.

It is a pride that the Bangladeshi workers are among others who continued their role in bolstering gulf countries economy. In first ever such crisis, migrant workers' contribution is being ignored. Recalling the role played by Bangladeshi workers in constructing their economy, the oil rich nations should move for payment the wages and benefit left there. There are many reasons to be proud of gulf countries if I look back. Just after being independent in 1971, middle-eastern countries began importing labour from Bangladesh.

The then government was relaxed much in view of remittance inflow from gulf countries. Still now, inflow of more 50 percent foreign remittance comes from Middle Eastern countries. We are obliged to recall their support that was provided during bad time. The reason of carrying out evil activities towards Bangladeshi workers is not clear to me.

There needs to arrange bilateral talks from government level in order to settle the payment issue. If red-marked employers deny to settle due wages and benefit to returnee migrant workers, Bangladesh government might move forward following legal procedures. Bangladesh embassy offices abroad have to find out real culprits before stepping in fetching due wages.

Those violated local law related to labour welfare issues must be brought under interrogation with supports of sending and receiving countries governments. Strict instructions regarding renewal of business license might have served to sealed employers that committed sin towards Bangladeshi works earlier. From now on , vigilance or precautionary measures must be made sure for lowering wage theft cases. Now the time is for taking up the issue of wage theft cases in trial session is timely demand.

The platform of member of parliaments styled "Parliamentarians Caucus on Migration and Development" can play an instrumental role in bringing due wages back in

Bangladesh. The Parliamentarians should immediately join the race for bringing back millions of dollar in theft wages for the benefit of Bangladesh's economy. Sooner, the better.

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