

LABOUR MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH 2020 ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES



Tasneem Siddiqui



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Sattar Bhaban (4th Floor)

179, Shahid Syed Nazrul Islam Sharani

Bijoyagar, Dhaka-1000

Telephone : +880-2-9360338

E-mail : info@rmmru.org

Website: www.rmmru.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/rmmru

The Patterns and Trends of Labour Migration from Bangladesh in 2020:

Achievements and Challenges

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 pandemic migrant workers are enduring multi-dimensional problems. Many migrants and members of their families fell into deep crisis. Those who came on holidays got stranded and could not return. Some could not migrate even after paying the cost of migration and completing all formalities. In different destination countries Bangladeshi migrants are experiencing higher rate of COVID-19 infection compared to the nationals of countries of destination, loss of job, food insecurity, detention, forced return etc. This year's migration trend report focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of Bangladeshi migrant workers.

It is divided into seven sections. Section 1 presents statistics of migration flows and patterns highlighting COVID-19-situation while Section 2 focuses on the important initiatives and issues at the national and international levels. Section 3 reviews the activities of the service providing agencies. Bangladesh's role in the international arena is discussed in section 4. Section 5 focuses on the role of the civil society while Section 6 presents issue of Rohingya and Section 7 offers new knowledge acquired and some recommendations for the sector.

1. Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020

1.1 Flow of Migrants

A total of 2,17,669 Bangladeshi migrant workers went to different countries of the world including the Gulf, other Arab and South-East Asian countries in 2020. Among them 181,218 workers migrated from January to March of this year.¹

Due to the lockdown migration from Bangladesh came to a standstill from April to June 2020. Since July to December 2020 only 36,413² migrants were able to migrate to take up overseas employment. This year (2020), the flow of migration has decreased by about 69 percent in comparison to the previous year as a result of COVID-19. If Bangladesh was not affected by the pandemic there was a possibility that migration would increase by 3.52 percent if migration trend was maintained like the first 3 months of 2020. Near about 100,000 new workers who completed all procedures before COVID-19, could not migrate due to outbreak of the pandemic.

In the aftermath of COVID-19 the focus is on the return rather than the flow of out-migration. According to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in 2020 a total of 408,000 migrant workers had returned to the country.³ The rate of losing jobs and returning home has increased in the last 4 months (September to December) of the year. On an average about 2,000 workers are returning every day. On August 27, the ministry informed around 85,790 migrant workers returned from 26 countries for various reasons including losing jobs from April 1 to August 27.⁴ This indicates in the last four months, the rate of return of migrants had almost quadrupled compared to the previous five months. During the previous years on an average around 50,000 workers returned to Bangladesh.

¹BMET Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

² Ibid

³ Statistics of return migrants from 1st April to 31 December 2020, Welfare Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka

⁴Somoynews , 27 August 2020 (<https://www.somoynews.tv/pages/details/232330/>)

Return migration in 2020 is eight times higher than the previous years. Along with COVID-19, migrants are also deported by some labour receiving countries because of decline of oil price in the world market and shut down of tourism industry, services and construction sectors.

1.2 Female Migration

A total of 21,934 female workers migrated from Bangladesh for work in 2020.⁵ In 2019 the total number of female workers who migrated from Bangladesh stood at 104,786. Female migration also did not take place from April to June and from July to December only 3,121 female workers migrated. Female migration from Bangladesh reduced by 79 percent compared to the previous year.

More than 46,000 female migrants returned from April 1 to 17 December 2020.⁶ Of them 20,238 have returned from Saudi Arabia, 10,461 returned from the United Arab Emirates, 4,328 from Qatar, 2,916 returned from Oman, 2,803 from Lebanon, and 1,876 from Jordan during this time.⁷ In case of female migrants as well, majority of the return took place from September to December.

1.3 Countries of Destination

From July 1 to December labour migration resumed in a very limited scale. As seen in the above, in 2020 a total of 217,669 male and female workers migrated from Bangladesh for taking up foreign employment. This includes both those who had gone before the outbreak of COVID-19 and during the last few months of the year. This does not include those who were stranded and later returned to their work places when situation improved. Saudi Arabia was largest destination of Bangladeshi workers. The figure stood at 161,726 which is about 74.30 percent of the total flow of migrants. The second-largest flow was to Oman with 21,071 migrants going to that country. It was 9.68 percent of the total flow. Singapore was the third-largest destination country for Bangladeshi workers receiving 10,085 (4.63 percent) migrants. Jordan was in the 4th position with 3,769 workers going to that country (1.73 percent). Qatar was ranked fifth with a total of 3,608 migrants going to that country comprising 1.65 percent of the total number of out-bound migrants. During COVID-19 like any other year Saudi Arabia has been the major destination for female migrants. About 58 percent of the female (12,735) went to Saudi Arabia during this period, 3,661 female migrated to Jordan 3,358 female migrated to Oman.⁸ At the end of the year a number of Bangladeshis also migrated to some non-traditional countries such Uzbekistan and Albania.⁹

1.4 Source Area

The largest outflow of international migrants in 2020 was from Cumilla district. It accounted for 11.18 percent (24,338) of the total flow. 6.65 percent migrated from Brahmanbaria (14,476). Chattogram was the third largest migrant sending district with 5.26 percent (11,460) of the total flow. 4.28 percent workers migrated from Chanpdur (9,333) and 4.05 percent (8,835) migrated from Tangail. In 2020 there was a little change in the hill districts in terms of international migration. Only 0.04 percent (93) workers migrated from Rangamati.

⁵ Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

⁶ Figure of from April 1 to November 30 from different countries

⁷ ProbashBarta, December 14 2020 at <http://probashbarta.com/2020/12/14/>

⁸ Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

⁹ <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-starts-sending-workers-abroad-after-months-of-uncertainty-1606531269>

Bandarbanand and Khagrachari were in a better position as source areas than last year.¹⁰ International migration from North Bengal was also very low. During this period only 0.06 percent (130) migrated from Panchagarh and 0.07 percent (153) from Lalmonirhat.

1.5 Remittances

World Bank forecasted that remittance to Bangladesh could fall to US\$1,400 crore in 2020. This meant that remittance flow during this year would be 25 percent less than the last year.¹¹ However, such drop in the flow of remittances did not take place. Remittances received in 2020 were even more than the previous year or the year before. Bangladeshi migrants have remitted US\$21.74 billion in 2020.¹² It was 18.60 percent higher than that of 2019 (US\$18.33 billion). The satisfactory flow of remittance was important contributory factor in macro-economic stability of the country. In 2020, the total reserve of Bangladesh Bank stood at US\$43.95 billion which stood at US\$38.50 billion in the last year.¹³

Like the previous years, the largest amount of remittances came from Saudi Arabia. Bangladesh received \$5.127 billion from the country which was 23.59 percent of the total flow. It was followed by the United States. 13.56 percent (\$2.948 billion) came from this country. Next was United Arab Emirates. 11.53 percent (\$2.506 billion) came from UAE. 7.98 percent (\$1.734 billion) of the remittances came from Malaysia and 7.58 percent (\$1.649 billion) from the United Kingdom and 7.20 percent (\$1.565 billion) from Kuwait. According to Bangladesh Bank, the largest share of remittance (29.17 percent) was received by Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited followed by Agrani Bank (11.39 percent), Dutch Bangla Bank (9.29 percent), Sonali Bank (6.61 percent) and Janata Bank (4.23 percent)¹⁴

The flow of remittances declined from February to April, but since then the flow continued to rise. There are many reasons behind the increase in remittances. Firstly, from July 1, 2019 the government has been offering 2 percent incentive to encourage migrants to send remittance through formal channel. Migrants are receiving an additional BDT 2 BDT or every BDT 100 while remitting to the country. The government allocated BDT 3,060 crore for this purpose in the budget of 2019-20 fiscal year. In addition, some of the banks have been offering 1 percent more on top of government incentives to attract remittance through them.

Secondly, in an ideal situation work permit for the labour migrants should be free of cost. But in reality, for a long time work visas are sold by the employers and the recruiting agencies purchased those at high cost. Sharma and Zaman (2009) found that as early as in 2009 average cost of individual visa was \$2,300. Then the recruiting agencies sold those visas to the migrant workers at a higher cost. The recruiting agencies have to purchase these visas unofficially as outward remittance for visa purchase, a practice that is now approved by the government of Bangladesh. Therefore, the recruiting agencies of Bangladesh and also their counterparts in the countries of destination secure the services of hundi operators. Hundi operators on the other hand, collect the remittances of the migrants in destination and pay the migrant families in origin in local currency of Bangladesh. In a regular year 700,000 visas are purchased. A recent study of BBS shows that currently the migrant pay around US\$5000 for each visa in order to migrate abroad. For each visa the recruiting agencies and their intermediaries in destination countries have to pay around US\$3,000 on an average and the

¹⁰ Ibid

¹² <https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/wageremittance.php>

¹³ <https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/intreserve.php>

¹⁴ https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/bop/bop_remittance.php

rest of the money is shared by recruiting agencies and other intermediaries. This year around 2,17,669 workers have migrated. Therefore, around 482,331 visas were not needed to be purchased. This resource was not required by the recruiting agencies as they did not need to purchase visas. Therefore, US\$1,446,993,000 was not required from the hundi operators¹⁵. The recruiting agencies in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi sub-agents in destination countries did not need the money to pay for the work permit.

This year business and commerce was much less than usual. In a regular year, in order to avoid paying taxes a large section of the business houses under invoice for the imports they do. They pay a large portion of the cost of raw materials in the countries from where they purchase by taking money from the hundi operators. This year as import was less, the business houses also had less demand for the resources from hundi operators. In Bangladesh a good amount of the gold are smuggled. The gold smugglers are completely dependent on hundi operators for conducting their payment. This year there was hardly any demand for gold jewelries. Therefore, they also did not need to take support from the hundi operation. All these resources therefore were available for the formal sources of remittance transfer.

It was seen that a large number of migrants had to return to Bangladesh because of COVID-19. Those who had returned or those who were likely to return had sent their savings back to the country because there are restrictions on hand-carrying money for more than a certain amount. A section of the migrants, who may not have to return, but felt insecure and transferred their savings to Bangladesh as well. Migrants also sent money to help the families during COVID-19 crisis, cyclone Ampan and the severe flood that affected Bangladesh during monsoon.

The above discussion only highlights that increased flow of remittances does not mean that migrants are doing faring well in destination countries. The increase in remittances was due to many complex factors. Remittances are always cumulative. Those who migrate this year, usually they start remitting regularly from the next year. Since migration flow was significantly less this year, remittance flow for the next year could be lower.

2. Important Incidents in the Migration Sector

2.1 COVID-19 and health risks of the Migrant Workers

Migrant workers remain at a high risk and become major sufferers of any pandemic situation. During the Great Depression of 1930, the Oil Crisis of 1973, the Asian Crisis of 1996 and 1999, or the 2009-10 economic crisis, it was the migrant workers who suffered the most. They were also most at risk in this year's COVID-19 crisis. In the first four months of the pandemic 70,000 Bangladeshi migrants in 186 countries have been infected with the COVID-19 virus. During that period, 1360 migrants lost their lives in COVID-19. As of December 28, more than 2,330 Bangladeshis had died in COVID-19 while living abroad. In Saudi Arabia alone, 979 migrants have died. The death toll of Bangladeshis is much higher in comparison with the migrants of other countries. As of July, 327 migrants died in the United Arab Emirates. 122 of them are Bangladeshi citizens. 382 migrants died in Kuwait. 70 of them were Bangladeshis.¹⁶ As of December 16, the number of migrant workers in Singapore was 152,000 which was 47 percent of the total number of migrant workers living in this country. In other words, in the last nine months of 2021, half of the migrants in Singapore were infected with the COVID-19 virus. The virus infected about 23,000 Bangladeshis in

¹⁵17,000 who could not migrate X \$3,000¹⁵ cost of visa purchase = \$1,551,000,000

¹⁶ <https://www.banglanews24.com/international/news/bd/799305.details>

that country. In other words, 40 percent of the COVID-19 victims are Bangladeshi migrant workers. However, due to timely treatment and other safety measures, only two deaths were reported. The Maldives has a large number of Bangladeshi workers in the tourism sector, most of whom are irregular. Although one thousand Bangladeshi migrants were infected, no one lost their lives.¹⁷

2.2 COVID-19 and Health Care for Migrant Workers

International labour standard or conditions of decent work entails that during any crisis situation be it natural disaster or health, the responsibility of ensuring healthcare lies with the destination countries. The governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Singapore did announce equal treatment of migrant workers and the nationals in respective to accessing services regarding COVID-19 test. The access is ensured irrespective of the legal status of the migrants. Except Singapore accessing such services were not straight forward. RMMRU (2020) study finds only 46 percent of those who were forcibly returned during the COVID-19 period were tested in the countries of destination before they arrived in Bangladesh. The rest returned without tests. Irregular immigrants did not go to the test even though they showed signs of COVID-19 due to the fear of being caught.

2.3 Forced deportation

Although the figure pertaining to migrant workers going abroad every year is maintained by BMET, the data on return migrants is not available. Due to COVID-19, the health ministry in collaboration with immigration and civil aviation has generated data on the number of returnees. It shows that, from April 1 to November 30, 8053 migrants returned to Bangladesh.¹⁸ 7685 of them are male and 368 are female.¹⁹

2.4 Identifying Migrant Workers as a Security Threat

During any disaster, there is a tendency to identify migrants as a security threat both in origin and destination countries. Migrants were returned from many destination countries as they were considered as a security threat. Unfortunately, during Covid 19, a section of Bangladeshi migrants fell victims to securitisation upon return to the country. They were targeted by different actors including the media, government authorities and local population. They were considered as health security threat to the community. During the initial period of COVID-19, an unintended outcome of government announcements to control the spread of the pandemic resulted in identification of migrants as the source of infection. Government decided to monitor strict implementation of quarantine by placing red flags in their residences. This also generated an anti-migrant psyche in rural areas. Later, migration rights organizations, in a joint venture with the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, international donors and others, used TV, radio, mobile and other means to try to dispel prejudices against returning migrants.

¹⁷ Prothom Alo Desk, সিঙ্গাপুরে করোনায় আক্রান্ত অভিবাসী শ্রমিক দেড় লাখ, December 16, 2020
<https://www.prothomalo.com/world/asia/সিঙ্গাপুরে করোনায় আক্রান্ত অভিবাসী শ্রমিক দেড় লাখ>

¹⁸ Data taken from Ministry of Expatriate's Welfare and Overseas Employment's Report published on International Migration Day, 2020.

¹⁹ Data taken from BMET Official Website
<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=30>

2.5 Arrest of Returned Migrants

Arrest and detention of a number of forcibly returned migrants by the Ministry of Home Affairs of Bangladesh can be treated as a unique example of securitisation by the origin country. 107 migrants who returned to Bangladesh from Vietnam were arrested on 16 August 2020. These returnee migrants were first taken to formal quarantine centers. After they completed their 14 days of quarantine, 61 of them were arrested under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of Bangladesh. These migrants went to Vietnam for employment following all the legal procedures. They received the clearance for departure from the the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training. Upon arriving in Vietnam they found themselves in slave-like work condition. Many of them were either not given any work or employed occasionally. In order to receive assistance from the Bangladesh embassy in Vietnam, these migrants conducted demonstration in front of the embassy demanded embassy intervention on their behalf with the employer. What that failed they demanded repatriation. After repatriation they were arrested on the charge of “conspiring against the government and the state”, “disruption of public order” and “tarnishing the image of the country”. Along with those who returned from Vietnam, a number of migrants from Gulf and other Arab countries were also arrested. Altogether the number of arrested migrants stood at 219. It is the civil society bodies who secured their release after the government dropped charges against them following intervention of higher judiciary.

2.6 COVID-19 and Labour Market

Since October 2020, 2,484 new migrants have joined the workforce in different countries. Bangladesh has recently received demand for 91 skilled plumbers, welders, masons, and electricians from Romania. The cost of migration to Romania has been set at around BDT 165,000. Remuneration can range from US\$615 to \$1400 depending on skills and experience of the workers. The Bangladesh government is trying to send workers to Cambodia, Poland, China, Croatia, and Seychelles as well. Earlier this year, Qatar increased the quota for Bangladeshi workers, but the issue is still pending because of the COVID-19 situation. In December, Tan See Leng, the Manpower Minister of Singapore of announced that the country would give priority to Bangladeshi workers in the coming year. Singapore will launch its own overseas training centres in Bangladesh and recruit skilled workers. The country will also recruit health workers from Bangladesh. To expedite the health related immigration formalities the Singaporean authorities will establish fast-track health screening booth in the airport.

2.7 Remigration of stranded Bangladeshis to join Work

Due to COVID-19, 1.5 million Bangladeshis who came on holidays from Saudi Arabia could not go back. Migrant workers from other countries were also stranded in the country. However, since October, those who came for holidays started returning to their workplaces. Till October 2020, 284,000 migrant workers had returned. This is 26% higher than the number of migrants returning at the same time last year.

2.8 New legislative and policy initiatives in Bangladesh

2.8.1 8th Five-Year Plan and migration

The 8th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) of the Government of Bangladesh has already been approved by the National Economic Council. This year’s plan was formulated keeping in mind the impact of COVID-19- in the next 5 years. The 8th Five-Year Plan was drafted with

the goal of recovering from the atrocities caused by COVID-19-, accelerating GDP growth and creating employment opportunities.²⁰ Creation of new jobs, sending the returnee migrants abroad to rejoin their workplaces and addressing the short-term unemployment caused by COVID-19 were considered as the biggest challenge throughout the first year of the 8th Five-Year Plan. In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed the need for a universal healthcare system. The previous Five-Year plan was prepared with a view to ensuring the appointments of qualified healthcare workers and better access to healthcare facilities. The main objectives of the 8th Five-Year Plan are to achieve the goals of the SDGs with a view to ensuring the implementation of Vision 2041, to eradicate extreme poverty from the country by 2031, and to achieve the status of upper middle income country. Besides, a big part of this plan involves the recovery of human health, employment, and economic activities from the effects of COVID-19. In Bangladesh, vocational education is separated from mainstream education. In order to prepare skilled human resource, for both local and international market studies recommended for creating a single education stream where vocational trainings are integrated. The Seventh Five-Year Plan had set a target of creating 12.9 million job opportunities, of which 10.9 million were to be created in the country while the other 2 million will be overseas jobs.

COVID-19 and natural disaster like Amphan have put tremendous pressure on the agricultural sector. Employment can be created in this sector for those who have abruptly returned. Due to the lack of demand during the COVID-19 period, the industries especially the small scale ones suffered deeply. The steps identified in the 8th Five-Year Plan to replenish the industry need to include ways to encourage migrants who had returned home due to COVID-19 to be involved in this sector. Also migrants should be considered as a target group for financial incentives. Studies conducted by RMMRU in 2015 and 2019 show that the financial literacy of migrant families is much higher than that of non-migrant families. The measures recommended regarding banking activities and loan projects for financial inclusion in the 8th Five-Year Plan should include migrant families in the country as important target groups.

2.8.2 Loan Scheme for Migrants

The Wage Earners Welfare Board has started a special incentive scheme of BDT 200 crore for the reintegration of returning migrants. Under this scheme the returnee migrants or their family members will be able to take loans from BDT. 100,000 to 500,000 at a maximum interest rate of 4 percent.²¹ An online registration system (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/returnMigrant>) has been developed to collect information of returnee migrants as well as to provide short training projects based on job experiences abroad. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has provided a budgetary allocation of BDT 500 crore (US \$58,823,529) to further support the reintegration programme of distressed returned migrants. The Bangladesh Bank has taken an initiative under which it will provide loan to migrants who had been forced to return due to COVID-19. It will provide loans of up to BDT 500,000 without any proof of sending remittance through formal channel. In order to receive higher amount the returned migrants will have to demonstrate that they have sent remittances or invested in different Wage Earners' Schemes.

²⁰Saifuddin Saif, 8th 5-year plan: Quick recovery from pandemic shocks gets top priority, 28 September, 2020 <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/8th-5-year-plan-quick-recovery-pandemic-shocks-gets-top-priority-138880>

²¹<https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/first-page/358899/>

The BCSM members wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh requesting her to set up a fund under the COVID-19 support programme for endangered migrants and their family members. Exactly 20 days later, on May 14, 2020, the Prime Minister announced an allocation of BDT 500 crore to assist early returnees and allocated it in the 2021 budget.

The disbursement of loans at 9 per cent interest for male workers and 7 per cent interest for female workers has also started from the BDT 250 crore received from that fund. These loans will be provided for small business establishments. Migrants will be able to take this loan in several sectors including agriculture, small and cottage industries.²²

2.8.3 Regularisation of Middlemen

The process of regularisation of middleman is a significant initiative in the field of migration in 2020. RMMRU has been advocating since 2001 to bring the middlemen under formal regulation to reduce the cost of migration as well as the fraudulent practices from recruitment. A RMMRU study shows (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2019), 17 types of services are provided by the middlemen. But their roles are not recognised in the Migration Act- 2013. In 2018, the civil society organisations convinced the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment to place the demand before the Prime Minister. In 2019, the Prime Minister called for providing identity cards to the migrants. In October 8, BMET formed a committee to prepare a draft outline.

2. 8.4 Changes to the Kafala system in Qatar and Saudi Arabia

Qatar has finally abolished Kafala system in 2020. Once the Kafala system is reformed migrants will be able to change their employer if the employer breaches the contract. In addition, in case of minimum wage rules, employers must take responsibility for housing and food. The country has also decided to set a minimum wage of one thousand Qatari riyals (\$275 US dollar) for migrant workers. However, employers can file criminal charges against "escapee" workers. The decision of reforming the Kafala system has been published in the official gazette. It will take at least 6 months to come into action.²³ On 14 May 2018, Saudi cabinet took the decision to abolish the kafala system. It will be implemented by June 2021. Instead of individual kaafils, the Ministry of Labour will sponsor the migrants. Canceling this system will improve the contractual relationship between employers and migrant workers²⁴.

3. Service providers

3.1 District Employment and Manpower Office (DEMO)

42 DEMO offices are currently functioning under the BMET to provide services to migrant workers at the grassroots level. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment has taken steps to set up DEMO offices in all 64 districts and eight divisions. This year the government approved setting up of 22 DEMOs. There are 4 divisional DEMOs functioning. BMET has been gradually decentralising some of its functions to the DEMOs. The fingerprint collection system has been introduced in all existing 42 DEMO offices and the Smart Card distribution facilities have been put in place in 6 DEMO offices.

3.2 Technical Training Center (TTC)

²²<https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/>

²³<https://bangla.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/08/31/26885/>

²⁴<https://www.ittefaq.com.bd/national/194741/>

Currently training in 76 trades is provided through 64 Technical Training Centers (TTCs) including 6 Institutes of Marine Technology (IMT) and 3 internee training centers under the BMET. Construction work of 40 TTCs at the upazila level is in the final stage, there are plans to build 100 more TTCs at the upazila level. In order to provide training of international standard, TTC is imparting training following NTVQF system in 15 trades. There are language courses in 42 TTCs. Courses on the Japanese language is provided in 29 TTCs, English in 11 TTCs and Korean language in 20 TTCs. BMET also provides 7-course training through 6 technical training centers under the City & Guilds. At present, 42 TTCs provide housekeeping training and the training period has been increased to 30 days instead of 21 days.

38 trades have been identified for retraining COVID-19 returnees. COVID-19 BMET trainings will be of two streams one for the reintegration of returnee migrants and other for aspirant migrants. The reintegration training will be of two types. One for those who want to remigrate and the other for those who would like to stay in Bangladesh and pursue new livelihood through taking loan from the Probashi Kallyan Bank.

3.3 Wage Earners Welfare Fund

A number of significant tasks have been accomplished by Wage Earners Welfare Board during the COVID-19 period. About 6,000 workers, who returned to the country from April 29 to May 31, have been provided with immediate assistance of BDT 5,000 each as conveyance from airport to home²⁵. It also repatriated 207 female migrants from the deportation centre of Saudi Arabia by paying airfare. Similarly, 95 workers from Lebanon and 105 workers stranded in Vietnam were also brought back using this fund. Besides, BDT 422,873 has been paid as goodwill assistance of Maldives government according to the directives of Prime Minister from this fund.²⁶

Loan assistance of BDT 200 crore has been earmarked for Probashi Kallyan Bank for returnee migrants. Wage Earners Welfare Board has an ongoing programme of providing BDT. 300,000 (US\$3,530) to the family members of migrants who died while working abroad²⁷. In normal circumstances, those who had gone through formal channel qualified for this support. After the outbreak of COVID-19 the Board extended the support to migrants who died in irregular status as well.

A project has been formulated by the Wage Earners Welfare Board for the reintegration of returnee migrants with World Bank funding to enhance the skills of expatriate workers and strengthen welfare services for migrant workers. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment has distributed medicines, relief and emergency items worth around BDT 11 crore among the migrant workers through the Labour Welfare Wing of Bangladesh Mission Abroad during the COVID-19 period. It is pertinent to mention that the funds of the WEWB are mainly constituted by compulsory subscription of the migrant workers.²⁸

Up to July 2020, BMET has provided pre-departure briefings to a total of 11,736 workers. In 2020, a total of 2,884 dead bodies have been brought back to the country. This is figure does not include those who died in COVID-19 as they were buried in the destination countries. A

²⁵The amount spent in this respect is BDT. 2.97 crore (\$349,400)

²⁶ <https://www.banglatribune.com/national/news/635183/>

²⁷ <https://www.rtvonline.com/bangladesh/98626/>

²⁸ <https://www.banglatribune.com/national/news/635183/>

total of BDT 100.94 million was spent on bringing back bodies of deceased workers from destination countries and facilitating their burial. As of November 2020 the families of 783 dead migrants were paid BDT 474.29 million as death compensation. In 2020, 4,720 people were given financial grants amounting to BDT140.12 million. In addition, BDT 21.46 million was provided to 231 sick migrants. Upto November 2020, children of 2,368 migrant workers were paid BDT40.25 crore.²⁹

To provide shelter to female migrant workers who faced torture, harassment, insecurity and other similar problems, five safe homes are managed in 3 countries. 3 of which are situated in Saudi Arabia and 1 each in Oman and Lebanon. All these homes were run with resources from WEFW.

3.4 Labour Attache

The Wage Earners Welfare Board under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment has distributed medicines, relief and emergency items worth around BDT 11 crore among the migrant workers through the labour wings of Bangladesh missions abroad during the COVID-19-period.

3.5 Probashi Kallyan Bank

In 2020, Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) has provided loans of BDT 50.18 crore to a total of 2,845 people. Out of them, 2,777 have been granted migration loan of BDT 49.12 crore during the period. In this period, the bank recovered BDT 64.04 crore from migrants. On the other hand, the reintegration loan was only provided to 68 people (BDT 1.06 crore). The PKB has recovered BDT. 0.12 crore from reintegration loans. From April to June 2020, no loan was disbursed from this bank due to COVID-19-situation. This year a special rehabilitation loan for returnee migrants is being provided by this bank. In 2020, 616 migrants were provided BDT 12.19 crore at 4 percent simple interest.

Initially it failed to attract migrants as the guideline was complicated. Later in 18 September, the government issued a new guideline after making several amendments. The previous guideline mentioned that if migrants wanted to get a loan they had to submit one year's income and expenditure details. This obligation was later removed. Migrant still face difficulties in filling out the forms.

To receive the loan, the applicant must be a permanent resident of the area covered by the bank branch and the applicant should be more than 18 years of age. The migrants can take loan upto BDT 500,000 under this scheme. The loan is issued for one to five years period depending on the sector of income. They are required to submit attested photocopy of passport with exit and arrival stamped pages along with attested photocopy of BMET's smart card or ID card of the working country or proof of legal departure or employment contract abroad or proof of legal remittance sending document. At the same time, a certificate from the concerned DEMO to the effect of ' Distressed Migrant Workers' has to be submitted. The loan applicant has to submit an affidavit on a non-judicial stamp stating that he is not a defaulter in paying loan taken earlier. A defaulter will not get this loan from any other bank, financial, or private institution. In case of receiving loan up to BDT 200,000 there is a need to submit security money (jamanot). However, if the amount is greater than that, one and a half times the security money (jamanot) has to be paid and the applicant can be able to apply for

²⁹Wage Earners Welfare Board Website
(http://www.wewb.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/wewb.portal.gov.bd/monthly_report/)

this loan after launching a business or project initially. The property guaranteed for the security of the applicant must be in his own name or in his father's name. The policy stipulates that at least one person capable of repaying the loan should be the guarantor, in which case the applicant's father, mother, husband or wife, brother, sister or close relative would also be considered as a guarantor. Even if the loan is given at 4 percent simple interest, in case of term loan, in case of default installment and in case of cash credit loan, 2 percent interest may be charged for timely adjustment failure as per the terms of the grant.

3.6 BOESL

From 1986 to November 2020, BOESL has sent a total of 105,513 workers abroad (BOESL Report 2020). A total of 8,525 migrant workers have been sent to Jordan, Japan, South Korea, Mauritius and Seychelles through BOESL till March of the fiscal year 2019-2020. During that period BOESL earned BDT 20.77 crore out of which the profit was BDT 14.80 crore. On the other hand, in the financial year 2018-2019, BOESL earned 19.05 crore out of which the profit was 17.06 crore.

3.7 Complaints

BMET accepts online and direct complaints of migrants who fall victim to fraud and cheating. In 2020 BMET received 905 complaints through both of these channels. Of these, 405 were lodged by female migrants and 500 by male migrants. In 2019, a total of 1,977 complaints were lodged with BMET, of which 945 were posted by male workers and 1,032 by female workers. During this period, 481 cases (251 female and 230 male) were resolved. An amount of BDT 2.40 crore was paid as compensation to the victims by BMET. Among them BDT 0.17 crore were paid to female workers and BDT 2.22 crore to male migrant workers.

3.8 Recruiting Agency

In 2020 there were 1302 licensed recruiting agencies in Bangladesh. Among those agencies 588 send women workers to Saudi Arabia. The Ministry has suspended the license of 161 recruiting agencies after investigating various allegations.³⁰ The decisions were taken following launching of inquiries after the return of a large number of migrant workers from Saudi Arabia, especially female migrant workers.

In order to support the recruiting agencies to overcome the challenges of COVID-19, 50 percent of the security money of license was given to the license holders for 1 year which need to return again to the government. This was to help them pay rent and maintain other charges for the time being.³¹

In April 4, RMMRU proposed BAIRA to set up a fund to provide one-time assistance to distressed migrant families. It also suggested to the ministry of EWoE that BAIRA should provide a list of those migrants who have completed payment but could not go abroad because of COVID-19 to the Ministry of EWOE.

³⁰ <http://www.bmet.org.bd>

³¹ <https://www.newsgarden24.com/news-view/4671?n>

4. International law and protection of migrants during COVID-19

4.1 COVID-19 and Global Compact for Migration

The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) was enacted with the goal of safe and orderly migration. Bangladesh along with 163 other countries adopted the Compact. The member states pledged to provide services to the migrants through achieving the goals of the GCM in the time of COVID-19 or any other pandemic. It has taken the leadership role in establishing global cooperation on migration including the GCM. Bangladesh has made progress in the implementation of the GCM goals at the national level. It is also implementing the frameworks related to it such as Migration Governance Framework (MGOF), Migration Crisis Operational Framework (MCOF), and Migration Governance Index (MGI).³² The active role of Bangladesh in the GCM process has also been recognised by the United Nations Network on Migration (UNNM).³³ But this year the implementation of the GCM goals has faced a major hurdle due to the COVID-19.

It is immensely important for migrants to get accurate information at all times during the COVID-19 period.³⁴ However, incorrect and fabricated information about COVID-19 are also spread on the social media. This phenomenon has been termed as “infodemic” by the United Nations. This problem also became evident in Bangladeshi social media as well. These can easily create confusion among the migrants, which is why it is important to ensure the flow of correct information. In fact Goal 3 of the GCM calls to ensure this as well.

Goal 7 of the GCM was enacted in order to reduce the weaknesses of the migration process. One of the objectives of the GCM is to ensure human rights to the migrants in their own countries or destination countries in accordance with the international law. Even article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the right to food, clothing, shelter and medical treatment. But in times of pandemic, when it is not entirely possible to ensure these basic rights of migrants, it has become even more difficult to achieve the GCM's 7th goal.

COVID-19 has created a preying ground for deceitful people who have set up traps in the name of labour migration. These people are taking advantage of the misery caused by the layoffs of a large number of migrants due to COVID-19. As a result, in the name of labour migration, many are falling victims to human trafficking. It is possible to prevent human trafficking by taking steps to implement Goals 9 and 10 of the GCM.

GCM's goal 15 ensures the inclusion of migrants in primary services. The inclusion of the health needs of migrants in national and local healthcare policies and plans is one of its agendas. Also, promoting both the physical and mental health of migrants, taking into account the priorities of the WHO framework and the recommendations of the guiding policy is also a part of it. This goal of the GCM may be considered as the most relevant in the COVID-19 period- but the pandemic also appears to be a huge obstacle to achieving this goal. During the lockdown and quarantine, the health risks of migrants living in crowded camps, informal settlements and combined shelters became more evident. This risk is the highest among the irregular migrants who have been forced to relocate, be homeless, or be

³²Policy brief on Impact of COVID-19 on GCM implementation in Bangladesh
https://bangladesh.iom.int/sites/bangladesh/files/publication/Policy%20Brief_GCM_COVID19_Feb%202021.pdf

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

held in detention centres for a long period.³⁵ Keeping the GCM's goal 15 in mind, the international organisations can sit for discussion with countries that have violated the civility.

Goal 17 is designed to eliminate all forms of discrimination, condemnation, racism, violence and retaliation against migrants. Moreover, it also calls for the equal treatment of all. But in reality, when they lost their jobs abroad and returned to their homeland to escape the inhuman conditions caused by COVID-19, their own countrymen refused to accept them. The migrants were discriminated against the most due to the lack of proper government planning and spread of misinformation among people.

Strengthening international cooperation and global partnership for safe, orderly and regular migration is the 23rd and most important goal of the GCM, without which other goals will be difficult to put into practice. Therefore, it is important to build international cooperation and unity among the sending and receiving countries for proper implementation of GCM.

4.2 The role of Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) initiative during the time of COVID-19

The Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) initiative was taken by the United States and Philippines to bring the attention of the international community to the plight of migrants affected by the 2011 Libyan civil war, the devastating floods in Thailand, and Hurricane Sandy in 2012.³⁶ This discussion raised the issue of how some states are often failing to provide humanitarian support and protection to migrants. In continuation of these discussions, a number of guidelines for the protection of migrants in countries affected by conflicts and natural disasters were formulated in 2016, which are now known as the MICIC Guidelines.³⁷

Although MICIC guideline was designed to address the troubles of migrants in conflict and natural disasters, it is still relevant in the case of COVID-19-in 2020. The guideline states that it is the responsibility of the receiving country to provide services to the affected migrants in the event of crisis. Also, there is no scope of discriminating between registered and unregistered migrants. During any crisis including the COVID-19 pandemic, discriminatory support system, language barriers, migration status, limitations on mobility, limited local knowledge, distrust of local authorities, xenophobia, and inequality act as adversities for migrants.³⁸ The MICIC Guidelines serve as a set of instructions to reduce the adverse effects of COVID-19-on society by keeping migrants at the centre of effective and equitable response and recovery initiatives.³⁹ Within months of the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, many countries have made joint efforts to ensure universal access to healthcare for migrants.⁴⁰ But in this effort, the application of the MICIC guidelines was unfortunately absent.

³⁵Coming Out Stronger from COVID-19: Policy Options on Migrant Health and Immigration, 5 October, 2020. <https://development.asia/policy-brief/coming-out-stronger-covid-19-policy-options-migrant-health-and-immigration>

³⁶Labovitz J, Protection of Migrants in Crisis is More Relevant Than Ever in the Face of COVID-19, 7 August, 2020 <https://micicinitiative.iom.int/news/protection-migrants-crisis-more-relevant-ever-face-covid-19>

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

4.3 Forced repatriation and the response of international organisations

There have been many instances in which instead of providing migrants with healthcare, employment and wage benefits during the COVID-19 period, Gulf, other Arab and South East Asian countries took advantage of their vulnerabilities by forcing them to repatriate. This was especially noticeable in case of unregistered and irregular workers. Under the pretext of general amnesty, they even started to deport migrant workers who were in prison. At that time, several international organisations requested the concerned destination countries not to send the migrant workers back to the country of origin during the pandemic. Notable among these is the statement by the UN Network on Migration in which various international organisations such as the ILO, IOM, WHO, UNHCR, and OHCHR all in unison called for a halt to the forced repatriation of migrants during COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹ In a joint statement issued on May 14 2020, they expressed concern over the forced repatriation of migrant workers by various countries. The main reason for this was stated to be the protection of the health and human rights of migrants. It further stated that the pandemic could not be tackled unless human rights were ensured. It added that such a forced return could pose a risk to migrants, government employees, health workers and social workers.

5. Civil Society Initiatives

The civil society organisations of Bangladesh have played a significant role in upholding the rights of Bangladeshi migrants during the COVID-19 crisis. They strongly demanded budgetary allocation from the government to support the migrants and their left-behind households to overcome the hardship caused by the pandemic. Individually many of these organisations conducted various types of programmes to support the migrants at the same time they also worked together under the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM). The civil society organisations called for the creation of fund to ensure social and economic protection of both the migrants and their families. In order to offset negative sentiments towards the migrants these organizations presented the positive narratives about migrants to ensure proper treatment of the forcibly returned migrants amid COVID-19 and emergency relief to the migrant families. They also engaged in massive online and offline awareness activities on COVID-19, campaigns for safe return of those migrants who were stranded in the countries of destination and raised the demand for providing skills training to the forcibly returned migrants etc.

Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM)

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) has played an important role as the leading platform of civil society organizations at the local, national and international levels in 2020.

BCSM appealed to the Prime Minister to allocate resources for the distressed migrants and left-behind members of their families. It also requested to increase the incentive to keep the flow of remittances steady and gear up the administration to reduce the scope of trafficking in post COVID-19 situation. BCSM members also suggested the PM to present the concerns of migrants in various multilateral forums, to bring change in education policy to capture the future labour market; and to take initiative to create a positive mindset about the migrants ensuring that they are treated with dignity.

⁴¹Forced returns of migrants must be suspended in times of COVID-19, Statement by the United Nations Network on Migration, 14 May, 2020
<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/forced-returns-migrants-must-be-suspended-times-covid-19>

Eighteen news media covered BCSM appeal to the Hon'ble Prime Minister for two days. BCSM Secretariat has followed it up with the advisors of Hon'ble Prime Minister, Caucus members, influential political leaders and civil society and advocated for immediate interventions of the government to protect the migrants amid COVID-19. The Prime Minister declared a stimulus package of BDT 500 crore, soon after the appeal of BCSM.⁴²

BCSM submitted a memorandum to the Secretary General of the United Nations highlighting the plight of the Bangladeshi migrants amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It appealed to the Secretary General for ensuring appropriate accommodation for migrants in which they could live safely in accordance with the WHO guidelines. It requested the Secretary General to use his good offices to advise the destination countries not to pursue arbitrary return of the migrants, clear due wages during involuntary return, declare remittance transfer as an essential service, take the responsibility of vulnerable workers at the crisis time, invite other countries to take similar measures; particularly to ensure the food security to those members of diaspora who were in distress, and champion the cause of vulnerable migrants affected by COVID-19. The appeals were also presented to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, the UN and other bodies.

Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants, Migrant Forum Asia and Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) organised a one minute silence for the migrant workers who lost their lives due to COVID-19. The one minute silence was observed by organizations and networks from Bangladesh, countries from Asia and other continents of the world.⁴³

BCSM and RMMRU have jointly conducted research on the situation of forcibly returned and current migrant households in 21 districts. The findings were shared with the policy makers and news media through organising a webinar, chaired by the Minister of MoEWOE. The webinar reached 2,400 migrants and migration stakeholders and was covered in 10 news media.⁴⁴

BCSM articulated the demand for immediate and unconditional release of 255 Bangladeshi migrants who returned from Vietnam and different Gulf countries and were charged under section 54 for committing anti-government and anti-state activities.⁴⁵

BCSM expressed deep concern on the killing of 26 Bangladeshis in Libya. It recommended ensuring repatriation of Bangladeshis who have been apprehended and detained in camps, press Libyan government to bring the perpetrators to justice, establish a system of rigorous scrutiny of those who depart for North African countries with travel visa by the Ministry of Home affairs, expedite prosecution under the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012 and conduct immediate investigation of the cases of deceased, locate and prosecute the dalals, travel agencies and unscrupulous recruiting agencies involved under the Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act, 2013.⁴⁶

BCSM member organizations urged the Deputy Commissioners of top 10 labour sending districts in Bangladesh to take initiative to create positive narratives in the society towards the migrants and incorporate the migrant families in the emergency relief services.

⁴²<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM-in-Bangla.pdf>
<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM-in-English.pdf>

⁴³<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Poster.jpg>

⁴⁴<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/programs/covid-19-coronavirus/>

⁴⁵http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Detainee-Migrants_BCSM-statement-Bangla.pdf

⁴⁶<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Libya-Killing-BCSM-Press-Release-Bangla.pdf>
<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Libya-Killing-BCSM-press-release-in-English.pdf>

BCSM demanded a fair investigation in case of death of Kulsum, a 14 year old female migrant who died in Saudi Arabia, due to inhuman torture. It also recommended Saudi government to take actions against the perpetrators and legal action against the the recruiting agency and the government who are responsible for allowing an adolescent girl to go as a migrant.⁴⁷

RMMRU has organised six webinars under the e-symposium series titled ‘Build Back Better’ to protect the rights of the migrants amid the pandemic. 40 electronic and print media has covered news on the outcomes and recommendations drawn from the webinars. In addition, RMMRU has been vocal in writing opinion pieces in national dailies throughout the crisis situation staying beside the migrant community.

A committee was formed the Ministry of EWOE on 8 October 2020 to incorporate the middlemen into the legal framework in accordance with the directive of the Prime Minister which was the outcome of persistent advocacy of RMMRU along with other civil society organizations. RMMRU has prescribed two possible models to regularize the middlemen to the government.

After the completion of their quarantine period, 219 migrant workers from three Middle East countries were put in jail upon their return to Bangladesh. They were imprisoned under Section 54 on the charges of "conspiracy against the government and the state", "disruption of public order" and "tarnishing the image of the country". This detention order was for more than 15 days without any specific charges. At that time, RMMRU facilitated the filing of a case on behalf by a repatriated worker in the High Court with the assistance of Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua and human rights researcher Rezaur Rahman Lenin. In light of this, the High Court bench, on October 1, 2020, asked the concerned investigating officer and the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate of Dhaka to explain their actions. As a consequence, the prosecution withdrew their cases against all 219 migrants before the hearing on November 5, 2020. The High Court's rule against this illegal detention will serve as a milestone in protecting the rights of migrant workers all over the country. A similar case has been filed against alleged repatriated migrants from Vietnam as well.

WARBE Development Foundation has taken awareness initiatives and provided emergency relief throughout Bangladesh associating with **Bangladesh Ovibashi Odhikar Forum**. WARBE DF also facilitated the election of the Committee of the Parliamentarian Caucus on Migration and Development.

BOMSA had taken advocacy initiative to incorporate specific provision in the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act, 2013 on mentioning the safety and security of the female migrants in the employment contract. The organization has also provided emergency food and relief support in its working areas.

OKUP has conducted a number of outreach campaigns, awareness campaigns on COVID-19 reaching 74,403 people in 6 districts and contributed to policy advocacy in the national level as well.

BRAC has provided counseling support to 111 returned migrants this year. In addition, it has contributed to provide skill trainings to 1,416 migrants, emergency support at the airport to 6,322 migrants. Numerous initiatives have been taken to stop human trafficking from and within Bangladesh.

BNSK has supplied emergency food, relief, masks and safety equipments in its working areas. Besides, it has recovered around BDT 500,000 from mediation conducted in the

⁴⁷<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/BCSM-Press-Release-about-Kulsum.pdf>

locality. BNSK has undertaken massive online and offline awareness campaigns to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration.

Awaj Foundation has provided legal support to the migrants who experienced fraud and those who were forcibly returned to Bangladesh by their employers. It has also assisted the migrants suffering from sickness and helped to take government loans.

BASTOB has conducted 23 pre-decision and pre-departure trainings and recovered BDT 1,000,000 through resolving migration related disputes as well. It has also distributed food and relief amid COVID-19 in its working areas.

YPSA has distributed masks, hand sanitisers and emergency relief and disseminated COVID-19 related awareness messages in its working areas. It has also contributed to resolve migration related disputes through District Legal Aid Office.

6. Rohingya Refugees

Despite serious efforts of the government of Bangladesh Myanmar failed to create enabling conditions for the refugees to return. Therefore not even a single refugee could be repatriated. On January 23, in the case brought by The Gambia against Myanmar, the International Court of Justice had ordered immediate measures to prevent genocide of the Rohingyas in that country. In mid September in an important development in the international accountability process two Myanmar soldiers who had confessed to participating in Rohingya genocide were in custody of the International Criminal Court at the Hague.

In the domestic front the COVID-19 situation has further exacerbated the plight of the Rohingya refugees in camps. The prompt effort of the local administration in enforcing a total shut down has slowed the spread of the virus. However, the congested nature of the dwellings in camps has made it virtually impossible for the refugees to maintain social distancing. There is general reticence to use protective gears. The negative perception associated with the virus contributes to a general reluctance to visit clinics for test or treatment, particularly for fever and other COVID-19 like symptoms. The situation becomes more complex with brewing discontent and tension among the host community that refugees will spread the virus. The emphasis on COVID-19] appears to have overshadowed other critical health needs, such as routine immunization, mental health services, maternal/child health services, etc. Diphtheria cases are being reported. These types of epidemics, especially of preventable illness, can in turn erode trust in health services and create a feedback loop where healthcare is not sought or services are not utilized. Poor quality of services including non-availability of medicines, language barriers and long hours of waiting also discourage service seekers from accessing health care facilities. Therefore, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of services and for decisive action to restore regular medical services through adequate mobilisation of resources.

The year also marked by a welcome change in Bangladesh government's policy allowing education and skills training for Rohingya children. The learning programme based on Burmese national curriculum in the Rohingya camps has initially targeted 10,000 Rohingya students from Grades 6 to 9. This may be the beginning to address existing gaps in refugee access to education and skill development opportunities and will eventually lead to "access to appropriate, accredited and quality education" to all children of the area, including those of Rohingya refugees. UNICEF sources inform that there are 400,000 school-age Rohingya children between 3 to 18 years of age. There is an urgent need to gear up efforts with

adequate mobilization of resources by the international community so that Rohingya children are not deprived further in their pursuit to realise their innate potentials.

On December 3, 1642 inmates of existing camps were brought to the Bhashan Char. The relocation was done despite the call for an independent assessment to evaluate the safety and sustainability of life on Bhashan Char by national and international actors. In line with its earlier commitment the government needs to ensure that relocation will be voluntary and refugees would enjoy freedom of movement, access to basic rights, services and livelihood opportunities.

7. New knowledge on Migration

According to a joint research conducted by Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) and Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), for 57% migrant families, remittance is the only source of income. The research shows that, at present 61% families are not receiving remittance at all. There is a difference between those who are receiving remittance based on gender. Families of 31% male migrant workers are receiving remittance while families of 69% female migrant workers receive remittance. But the amount of remittance flow is lower than before. While in the past they used to receive BDT 45,000 every three months before, now they only get BDT 30,000. These families are either meeting their daily needs by taking loans or they are depending on the income of a second person. However, they have reduced their household expenditure from BDT 17,000 to BDT 7,700. These families should have been provided with a one-time emergency fund for helping them out.

A research by IOM shows that, in the current year 70% of migrants who returned during the months from February to June are spending days without work and 55% migrants have become indebted after returning. 64% migrants had to suffer in availing correct information on COVID-19 or medical services before returning. Research by RMMRU-MJF shows that, social discrimination against women and gender based violence has increased due to COVID-19. They have to face economic pressure, declining health condition, social dishonour, and insecurity as well. Research by UN Women shows, existing pandemic has clearly unveiled domestic and gender based violence happening worldwide and has created obstacles in the way of security, movements, and availing basic services for women.

Recommendations

1. Bangladesh government should consider raising the demand in multilateral forums for enacting mandatory migrant protection policies in case of emergency in every sending and receiving country. Natural disasters, economic crisis, health disasters and all kinds of crises should be part of this policy.
2. In order to achieve SDG 3, the services for migrants should be included in the health policies of the destination countries.
3. Bangladesh government should lobby in UN and other forums so that destination countries refrain from forcibly repatriate migrant workers to the countries of origin during times of crisis.
4. A thorough analysis needs to be conducted as to why the safety of migrants is not being ensured through international protection mechanism.

5. There has to be concerted effort to ensure making the MICIC Guidelines applicable to migrants during pandemic situations.
6. There has to be concerted effort to raise the demand of return of wages and other remunerations left behind by those who were forcibly repatriated.
7. The government should ensure creating a database for returnee migrants as follow up to the exercise that was pursued to collect data during the COVID-19 period.
8. The government should include special measures for migrants in the concerned sectors of the 8th Five-Year Plan.
9. The government should take special measure to combat the rise of human trafficking in times of emergency.
10. The government should set up one-stop assistance service to the affected migrant families in times of disaster.
11. The government should consider involving the NGOs in implementation of the its rehabilitation loan scheme for migrants. It should also take measures to integrate business advisory services, skill enhancement and book keeping trainings along with extending loan facilities to returnee migrants for their rehabilitation.



Social Cost of Migration: the Left-behind Children

