

A Place to Mend Broken Souls

RMMRU Support Centre for the Battered Returned Female Migrants

Summary and Key Messages

COVID-19 situation has compelled 4,36,530 male and female migrant workers of Bangladesh to return from various countries. 21,000 of them were female. A section of the female workers faced degrading and dehumanizing work conditions and passed days in great stress. RMMRU has been providing residential and other assistance to these female migrants through its Obhibashi Sheba Kendro - Migrant Services Centre (OSK) at Dakshinkhan in collaboration with the Expatriates' Welfare Desk. While running the OSK, Dakshinkhan, some policy issues have emerged. Important among those are, need for professional training in managing the support centres, further development of expertise of service providers in respect to psychosocial stress management, access to financial assistance from the public sources to CSOs to manage such support centres, creation of other options for reintegration along with family reintegration. All these initiatives require collaborative approach between the Government and CSOs.



A returnee migrant woman at the Dakshinkhan Support Centre of RMMRU

Introduction

For more than a decade RMMRU has been collaborating with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in providing services to those female migrants who have returned from different destinations under distressed situations. While providing services to these women RMMRU realised that a residential support centre is required for those female migrants who do not have a place to return or may not be able to reintegrate with their families without psycho-social assistance. In 2019, RMMRU established a support centre in Dakshinkhan.

Since then, it has hosted around 53 distressed women along with a few of their family members. Overarching goal of establishment of the support centre is to ensure successful reintegration of the female migrants with their families. The specific aim of the support centre is to:

- Provide temporary shelter to vulnerable women returnees;
- Cater emergency needs of the returned female migrants;
- Allow female distressed migrants to receive medical assistance;
- Provide mental health and psychosocial support to distressed female migrants;
- Equip family members to help the distressed returnees' reintegration in the family;

In the following three stories of reintegration of distressed female returnee migrants supported by the centre are presented. The stories themselves highlight the areas where programmes should be developed to accommodate the services required by the female migrants who returned in distressed situations. We will begin with Maleka's story, followed by Papiya and Rohima's experiences. For obvious reasons, their names has been changed and the locations are not shared.

Maleka gets back her sanity

Maleka (26) arrived at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport from Saudi Arabia in unstable physical and mental conditions. Parul Akhter, Programme Officer of OSK, Dakshinkhan rushed to the airport when she was informed by the Expatriates' Welfare Desk on August 12, 2020 that a woman has arrived who needed emergency assistance. During the first meeting Parul felt that Maleka appeared to have lost her sanity. She was very aggressive, ran around and attempted hitting any man who was looking at her. Soon, Parul realised that Maleka must be taken to a place where she along with others could calm her down. Along with the Expatriates' Welfare Desk officer, Parul was able to convince her to come to RMMRU's OSK at Dakshinkhan. Maleka was hysterical and appeared to be hallucinating. Subsequently, she was taken to the National Psychiatric Hospital, but the doctor primarily declined to treat her without any legal guardian. RMMRU with officials of Expatriates' Welfare Desk convinced the doctor to give her treatment as an emergency case. When RMMRU was able to contact



Maleka was convinced to go to the Dakshinkhan Support Centre from the airport after hour-long conversation with the representative of RMMRU support centre

Maleka's family on August 14, 2020, her household members expressed the concern if she was a victim of rape or any other form of sexual abuse. RMMRU counselled the family members and advised them to continue the psychological treatment of Maleka. It also advised them to secure counselor's help.

“I thought my mother is dead.”

Papiya Jahan (39) migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2018 with the aim of changing her fortune. She was recruited as a domestic support. She was in regular contact with her family for the first three months, but the communication suddenly stopped, and her family never heard from her for next three years. On December 7, 2020; RMMRU received a phone call



After three years of no communication, Papiya met her son Shahjahan at the RMMRU Support Centre



from the Expatriates' Welfare Desk at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport and received Papiya who had just returned. They took her to the OSK, Dakshinkhan on the same day. Papiya was traumatised and could not provide any information about her family, address nor anything about her passport. She was helpless and begging to return home. Repeatedly she was raving about things like, "My little son is crying, bring some food for him." RMMRU and the Expatriates' Welfare Desk jointly tried to find her family members and fortunately within a day they succeeded contacting her family. Her eldest son Shahjahan (not real name) came to RMMRU's support centre and met his mother after three long years. RMMRU also took them to counselling session of mental health doctor at the National Psychiatric Hospital bearing the cost of treatment. It ensured Papiya being handed over to her family with proper formalities on December 09, 2020, along with the cost of travel to her village. Later, RMMRU learnt about indescribable physical and mental torture that Papiya endured in the hands of her employers in Saudi Arabia. She was also victim of wage theft. She thought she could never meet her children again and now; she does not want to go anywhere leaving her family behind.

"I called my mother many times but couldn't communicate in any way. We thought she was dead. I couldn't believe I can have her back in my life alive."

-Shahjahan (Papia's Son).

"Don't leave me, my dearest husband, they will harm me."

Mentally shattered Rohima (31) spent 2 days in Dakshinkhan support centre of RMMRU. She was violent towards Rifa Rizwan, the field facilitator of OSK, Dakshinkhan. However, she began to treat another male RMMRU staff member as her husband and would only listen to his instruction. She would prefer to stay in front of that staff member's desk all day long.

At 3 am on May 20, 2021, Rifa was called by Expatriates' Welfare Desk of the Dhaka Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. On arrival there she found Rohima screaming in the hall of the airport, crying and not letting anybody come near her. She had just landed in Bangladesh from Saudi Arabia

where she stayed for last two years. There was fear in her eyes. The Expatriates' Welfare Desk authorities at the airport could not calm Rohima down, neither could find anyone to receive her from her family. Her passport and other documents did not contain any contact information of her near ones. It took long hours of struggle and patience to calm Rohima down for a while. Finally, she was handed over to Rifa for transfer to OSK of RMMRU.



Rohima met her son after 2 years

Rohima was reluctant to come to the support centre of RMMRU as she could not trust anyone. After having an hour-long conversation and exchange of comforting words, she agreed to come to OSK but had a defensive attitude towards Rifa Rizwan. During the first night stay, she threw tantrums and became uncontrollable. She even attempted to attack a female staff member as she suspected that the latter was having an affair with her husband (who was not even in the scene). Her signs were similar to being schizophrenic. Next morning, RMMRU took Rohima to the psychiatrist who attended and prescribed medication. A male staff member stayed overnight at the OSK to tackle any possible violent situation.

Meanwhile, RMMRU took measures to trace Rohima's family members using online database and local communication. After one and a half day, RMMRU was finally able to locate her son. When Rohima's son arrived on May 22, 2021, she recognised him instantly and there was a sense of relief, stability, and assurance in her eyes. RMMRU also counseled Rohima's son, helped him to understand his mother's current mental condition and the traumas she had endured and advised him to handle her delicately as well.

The above cases of Maleka, Papiya and Rohima give an idea about the challenges that RMMRU staff members face and their commitment in delivering psychosocial and shelter support to such vulnerable returned women. Until now 61 returned migrants including 15 males and 6 children secured services at the OSK, Dakshinkhan of RMMRU who were mentally traumatised and physically exhausted. Some preferred maintain silence and did not show interest to engage in any conversation, others were aggressive and non-cooperative.

The returned women migrants were received in helpless condition, and they were worried about their future. Most of the times these emotionally and physically battered female migrants could not communicate properly and often could not remember their addresses. While serving in the destination countries, the women migrants endure a lot of



RMMRU arranged transportation for Ms. Rohima and her son to return home

hardship and some face torture and abuse. After landing in the home country, they become withdrawn and do not want to engage with emergency service providers. They tend not to trust anyone. However, to address this situation, RMMRU in collaboration with the Expatriates' Welfare Desk at the airport accepted these women victims and provide them with counselling support, admit them to the hospital and monitor their mental health with proper care besides giving them temporary shelter at the OSK as well.

Lessons learnt

- In a typical situation distressed female returned migrants hallucinate and do not trust anyone. They do not want to cooperate with RMMRU staff out of distrust. Some of them become very defensive.
- Sometimes they may become source of in physical insecurity of the RMMRU project staffs.

- Finding out families and relatives of the distressed female returned migrants is a major challenge that RMMRU faces after hosting them. In extreme cases they are not in a situation to provide Expatriates' Welfare Desk or RMMRU with their addresses.
- Some of the returned female migrants do not possess their passports.
- For social stigma and misconception, some of the migrant households show less interest to welcome the returned female migrants back in their family.
- Women who return with children endure utmost uncertainty as they are apprehensive how they would be treated by their families.

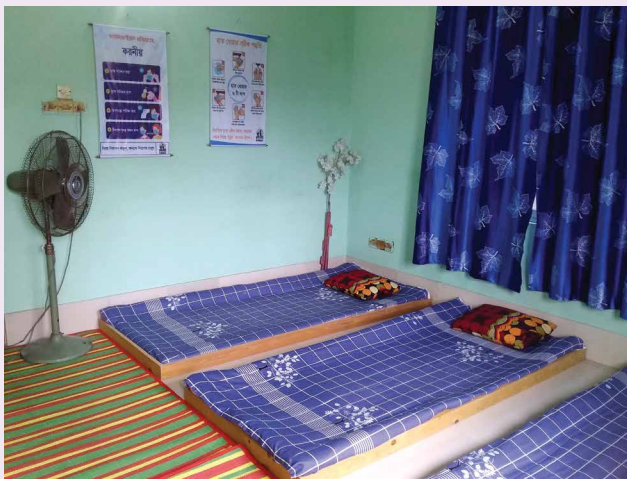
Requirements of an efficient support centre

- The support centre requires staffs with degree on psychosocial stress management or they should receive training on handling such sensitive cases.
- The support centre should be designed with great care. It should ensure that mentally traumatised migrant do not get access to utensils or gadgets that can be used in committing violence.
- Various techniques should be available at the support centre to calm the distressed female migrants.

Policy suggestions

- Expatriates' Welfare Desk should have especially trained staff to attend distressed female migrants.
- Posters should be hung behind the Expatriates' Welfare Desk that assure the distressed female that the officials are compassionate about their sufferings and people and institutions are there to assist them.
- Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry needs to develop memorandum of understanding with hospitals close to the airport so that they provide medical help to distressed returnee female migrants without waiting for their legal guardians.
- All possible opportunities of reintegration need to be discussed and offered to the female migrants.
- If the victims of sexual abuse want to be rehabilitated in new places with new identity, the government should consider setting up such opportunities.
- Wage Earners' Welfare Board needs to develop collaborative programme with the civil society organisations. Resource needs to be allocated to the CSOs to manage support of migrant support centres in a more formal manner.





Minimal furniture such as platform bed and stand fan are at the Dakshinkhan Support Centre of RMMRU



Staff members of Dakkhinkhan Support Centre, RMMRU adopt techniques to be freindly with the distressed migrants to calm her



Dakkhinkhan Support Centre of RMMRU has different entertaining mediums for the distressed women migrants so that one can get relief through having relaxing time

Quotes



“When I joined RMMRU, I thought it will be like any other 9 to 5 job. Soon I realized I can be called at any time, any day, any moment! Initially I used to get upset when I received phone calls at the middle of the night. Like a detective we have to find the families of some of the distressed female migrants. However, when we see the family reuniting with the long-lost female migrant for the first time, the happiness in their eyes make me realise I have done something worthwhile in life.”

*-Rajib Ghush
Programme Officer
Dakshinkhan Support Center of RMMRU*



“The first time when I stayed at night with a distressed returnee female migrant, I was extremely scared. Although she was in a separate room, she wanted to hurt anyone who was near. After a few days when I could successfully calm her down, took her to hospital, ensured medical help and locate her family, I overcome all my fear.”

*-Rifa Rizwan
Field Facilitator
Dakshinkhan Support Center of RMMRU*

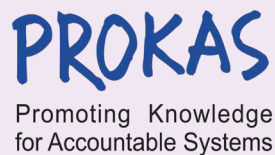




RMMRU staff Member handed over the returned women migrants to her relatives

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Other policy briefs of RMMRU are available on www.rmmru.org

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