

Migration Dynamics of Bangladesh and the Maldives Corridor

The context

The Bangladeshi workers constitute 70% of the migrant workforce in the Maldives and are vital contributors to its economic development mostly in tourism and hospitality, construction, agriculture, and fisheries sectors. A relatively small group of high skilled workers from Bangladesh are engaged in the education and health sectors. Despite the close links between migration and the economic development of the Maldives, many workers continue to encounter multilayered economic, legal, social, and health challenges. While policies and institutions are in place in both the countries of origin and destination, the challenge lies in their effective implementation. In this context, the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) undertook this research that involved interviewing migrants and other stakeholders in both countries. A high level dialogue and a bilateral conference were held in Dhaka (June, 2023) and Male' (July, 2023) respectively. In the Male' conference, both RMMRU and Public Interest Law Center (PILC) presented their respective studies. The presentations were followed by rich discussions. Parliamentarians, senior state functionaries and representative of civil society organisations and the media and that of international agencies participated in the event. The key findings of the research of the Male' conference are presented in this policy brief. The study was supported by The Asia Foundation, Dhaka under its South Asia Governance Fund (SAGF) Programme.



Bilateral conference on Bangladeshi labour migrants in the Maldives at Male'

Key findings of the research

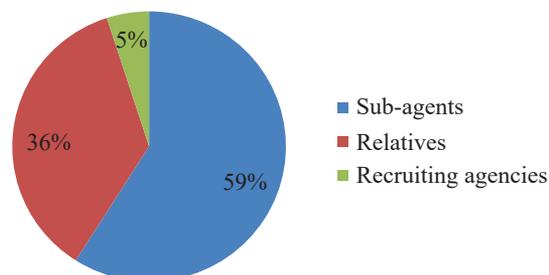
Migration dynamics

- Relatively low cost of migration and easy access to visa, peer network and socio-religious similarities act as dominant reasons for Bangladeshis to choose the Maldives as a destination.
- Sub-agents/dalals constitute the most important intermediary who facilitate migration (59%), followed by relatives (36%) and recruiting agencies (5%).
- On average it costs migrants Tk. 205,997 to migrate.
- 83% stated that it took less than three months to secure employment.

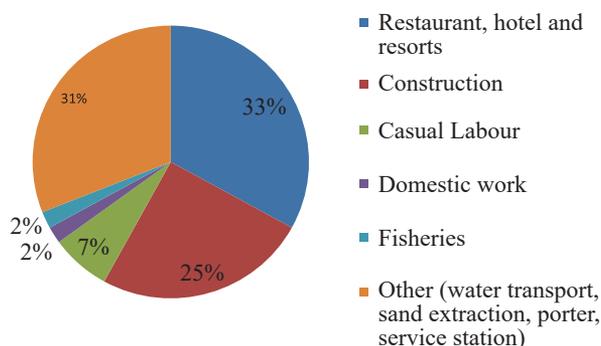
Employment and remittance transfer

- 33% respondents worked in the services sector (restaurants, hotels and resorts), 25% in construction sector, 7% as casual labour and 2% each in domestic work and fisheries with remaining 31% in a diverse range of trades (water transport, sand extraction, porter, service stations).
- The average monthly income stood at Tk. 35,147 while the average monthly income for the documented migrants is Tk. 37,066 and for the undocumented migrants Tk. 25,650.
- 53% received regular salary while 47% claimed there was a gap between what the employers promised and paid.
- 56% undocumented migrants and 36% documented workers reported having to engage in overtime work. 36% claimed they were not compensated for such overtime work.
- On average migrants remitted Tk.297,667 over the previous 12 month period and a large section did so through the informal *hundi* channel.

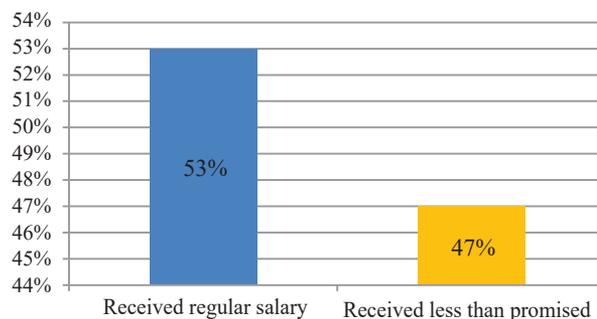
Important intermediaries who facilitate migration



Employment sectors



Receiving salary



Experiences of working and living in the Maldives

- 18% were subjected to physical or verbal abuse. It was higher for undocumented migrants (24%).
 - ◆ On average 45% experienced discrimination at the workplace; the figure for undocumented migrants was higher 52%.
 - ◆ 20% (30.2% of the undocumented) felt discriminated in public places.
 - ◆ 18% faced problem in accessing accommodation.
- As high as 35% of the earnings of undocumented migrant workers are spent on accommodation, while documented workers spend around 20%.
- Quality and hygiene appear to be major challenges of workers' housing with poor arrangements (beds, kitchens, or toilets).
- Over crowded accommodations are breeding grounds for contagious diseases. The guest houses in the atolls have a high density of undocumented workers.
- Perceptions are widespread that guest houses are used for prostitution, including child prostitution of women and girls from Bangladesh.
- As many as 16% felt securing medical services is a problem. The proportion of undocumented workers facing such problem was higher (19%) compared to the documented ones (15%).
- Passports were retained by their employers in 38% cases.
- Contrary to popular perception among the Maldivian community only 2% of Bangladeshi migrant workers joined political rallies. Some were either forced to participate by their employers or by their Maldivian peers.

Role of Missions

74% were able to secure services from the Bangladesh High Commission in Male'. However, a quarter (26%) replied in the negative. The undocumented workers face problem in availing consular and financial support due to a lack of adequate proof of residency.

Highlights of Male' bilateral conference

Recruitment practices

- There is a demand for Bangladeshi workers in the Maldives labour market but currently there is no scope for them to secure work through formal channel. This has created condition for the irregular route to thrive and concomitant exploitation of those workers. This needs to be corrected.
- The two key issues with regard to recruitment identified were: deceptive recruitment practices and debt bondage arising out of such recruitment.
- Many workers enter the country with what are touted to them by intermediaries as 'open visa'. Such visa is nothing but regular tourist visa does not entitle the bearer to secure employment in the country. In many instances workers in irregular status experience hazardous health and safety conditions.
- The workers in regular status also face many problems mostly due to the arbitrary nature of the sponsorship system that regulates recruitment, entry, placement, termination and exit from the country. There is a need to review the system.
- Maldivian law prohibits debt bondage. However, the PILC research shows the employment of workers is tied to debt in more than 75 percent cases.



- Responding to the needs of the labour market opportunities should be created for Bangladeshis to migrate to the Maldives through regular channel.

Institutional issues

- State agencies, including the immigration department, enjoy a vast degree of discretion. Such an arrangement creates opportunity for abuse of authority and corruption.
- Tripartite collaboration is required to address the question of Trafficking in Persons. Anti trafficking training for frontline officials including those serving immigration department and labour inspectors to identify and refer suspected trafficking cases will help resolve the problem.
- Not all problems can be addressed through formal bilateral channel. There has to be recognition that civil society can play an important role. A collaborative effort of civil society organisations of both countries will help address the problems.

Data

There is major gap in the availability of data on year-wise entry and exit of migrants, their current stock, and distribution based on their gender, profession, immigration status and location (islands or atolls).

Remittance

The cost of sending remittances through regular channel from the Maldives to Bangladesh is high. The workers usually have to buy US dollars with local currency from the kerb market at a higher rate than official rate and remit money through the formal channel. As a result, they face financial loss in the process.

Rights and justice issues

- Workers are not provided adequate protection as policies and legislations

continue to be built on existing prejudices and biases. There is an urgent need to identify gaps in the legislative and administrative frameworks. The issues of labour exploitation including human trafficking are a reality in the Bangladesh-Maldives corridor. This should receive due attention.

- Instances are replete in which state authorities instead of providing redress to affected parties have advised them to go back to those who treated them unfairly. Quite often the lofty constitutional principle of equality of treatment of all nationalities gets less importance to the government officials in dealing with foreign workers.
- The legal system in the Maldives is designed in such a way that along with the plaintiffs the lawyers also get exhausted in pursuing cases. After a lot of struggle even if they get a favourable decision from the tribunal, enforcing the same remains a major challenge.
- If the employer wants to terminate a worker and does not want to take responsibility then he can unilaterally report the worker missing. The immigration authorities will apprehend the worker, take him to a detention centre, and eventually deport him. The worker has little scope to present his case to the authorities.
- The laws need to be amended to hold the employer to account. Under the law employer is responsible for renewing the visa of the worker. In many cases, employers fail to do so jeopardising the legal status of the worker that should be made a criminal offence. If the employer uses his discretion of not renewing the visa then he should pay for the return ticket from the money that is kept as deposit with the concerned ministry.
- According to Anti-trafficking law of the Maldives, confiscation of passports is not legal. In one survey Maldives Red Crescent finds around 80% of the individuals did not



have their own passport. This increases the vulnerability of the migrant worker. Retention of passport of a worker by a third party (employer) denies the worker his identity and claim for being a regular worker. Moreover, absence of document of a regular worker can subject him/her being a victim of trafficking as well.

- When workers die in irregular status, it creates a major challenge for fellow workers as they cannot send the body home. Organising burial is also cumbersome and expensive process.
- Recently, the government has implemented the minimum wage and also the pay rise for the health and education sector workers but it excluded the migrant workers. There is a need for harmonisation of wages and other entitlements, standards, work hours etc.
- There is a lack of technical capacity and human resources to create awareness regarding rights and entitlements of the migrant workers.
- Bangladeshi workers face problems in accessing justice in the Maldives. Even when migrant workers are able to obtain a determination in favour of their claim, the penalties described in the legislation fall short of the adequately penalising offenders and even from deterring future potential offenders.

Changing perception of the locals

- There is a propensity among state actors to treat migrant workers with contempt. Such mindset makes them treat victims as criminals. There has to be the political will to change the situation for the workers.
- Effective communication strategy has to be developed to bring the civil society on board for the protection of rights of migrant workers. There has to be conscious fostering of the public perception that migrant workers play a pivotal role for the Maldivian economy.

Role of the media

Media has a major role in framing public perception of migrants. The latter's positive contribution should be duly acknowledged. We need to be aware about the danger of stereotyping the migrants.

Recommendations

- Maldivian authorities to consider opening the regular route for migration of workers from Bangladesh.
- Establish a well designed migration system for the Bangladesh-Maldives corridor based on sound data. Such a regime should take into account monitoring and supervision of and ensure the rights of migrant workers.
- Address problems of migrants in obtaining work permit and access to proper housing, healthcare and justice.
- Collaboration and harmonisation of policies between agencies working in Bangladesh and the Maldives and between the state agencies of the two countries
- Networking of civil society organisations of both countries working on Bangladeshi labour migrants in the Maldives.
- Develop a code of conduct for the private sector engaged in facilitating migration.
- Creation of a platform of parliamentarians, CSOs, legal professionals, academia and the private sector to identify the changing nature of Trafficking in Persons and migration and offer insights on legal protection.
- Formulate appropriate policy on the conditions of female migrants facing exploitative conditions including trafficking and prostitution.





High level dialogue at Dhaka



The Asia Foundation

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