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Ordeals of Returnee Bangladeshi Migrant Women Domestic Workers

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Cover Page Footnote

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ordeals of returnee female domestic migrant workers of Bangladesh to find out ways help formulate policies by the government. A study has been conducted based on primary and secondary sources. It finds that all types of tortures, including physical, sexual, setting them on afire, forcibly cutting their hair, and hit and falls from rooftop, has to be faced by the women migrant workers. The Bangladeshi female migrant workers have to work for 16-18 hours in a day. They are made untimely repatriation to Bangladesh without pay blaming them for theft or such other false allegations. This study suggests enforcing proper laws and policies strictly, and proper agreements between the sending and destination countries to stop such ordeals.

I. Introduction

Migration is one of the effective livelihoods for the people of Bangladesh. The remittance, earned by the migrant workers, ultimately helps socio-economic development of the country. Migration has emerged as a vital force for ensuring sustainable development goals (SDG-10) for both home and destination countries. Alongside male migrant workers, female migrant workers are earning remittances that have double contributions to the economy. Because, women migrant workers are more earning saver and remittance senders than men. Even “women migrant workers use a safer and more secure remittance channel than men migrants. Their earnings are utilized more seriously at household levels, mostly on food, education for the children, and health care of their family members (Huda, p.8).” Now, the economy of the country significantly depends on the remittances of migrant workers. Amid the Coronavirus pandemic, remittances were on the rise, which helped restore Bangladesh's economy (The Daily Star 2021). Remittance has become the primary lifeblood of Bangladesh's Economy.

Despite the praiseworthy remittance economy of Bangladesh, it faces some threats due to improper migration policy and fraudulence committed by recruiting agencies. So, the migration of women from Bangladesh has faced several bans at the lower level of jobs since 2001. Despite facing violence and injustices, socially and economically vulnerable women want to migrate abroad for the betterment of their lives and livelihoods. “An increasing number of Bangladeshi women are going abroad to find employment as domestic help despite a growing number of reports of adverse working conditions and abuse overseas (Labiba 2018).” Some 13,312,192 migrant workers went abroad and they earned remittances of USD 24,173,832 since 1976 (BMET 2021). Bangladesh first sent women migrants abroad in 1991. Some 953,239 women workers went overseas for migration from 1991 to May 2021 (BMET 2021). Women migrants are mostly confined to some specific occupations like housekeeping trade, cleaning, and garments working in the overseas labor market. But “many women who migrate find themselves at risk of gender-based violence and exploitation (Islam 2011).” A UN Committee expressed its concern that “Bangladeshi domestic migrant workers frequently face abuse, harassment, and exploitation in the workplace, including domestic servitude, sexual harassment, physical mistreatment, and withholding of payments (IOM 2020).” Domestic workers get half of the average wages but experience long working hours and less protection than other groups of workers under national labor laws in Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen (Briggs 2014). Domestic female workers are one of the remittance earners. Still, it is found in the media frequently that they have to face poor living conditions, torture, and other humiliations in the Middle Eastern Countries. What are the present and past ordeals of returnee Bangladeshi migrant female domestic workers? What are the government's existing policies in sending women domestic workers abroad? How can Bangladesh find a solution to help formulate a new policy in sending women domestic workers abroad?

No research has been conducted to assess such ordeals of returnee women migrant domestic workers to find a solution. So, a systematic investigation into the issue has been carried out to get these answers that will ultimately help formulate a new policy in this regard. Because it is imperative to assess the state of their ordeals and way out systematically so that Bangladesh can earn more remittances, such women can play a significant role for their families and the country's economy. Keeping this objective in mind, this study has been conducted to explore the ordeals of female domestic workers and find out ways to help formulate policy by the government in this regard.

i. Objectives of the study

- To know the present and past ordeals of returnee Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers;
- To review the government's existing laws and policies in sending women domestic workers abroad;
- To find out a solution to help policy formulation to reduce human rights abuses against the migrant women workers as well as ensure their decent workplace.

ii. Review of Literature

Scholarly attention toward domestic workers has been drawn mainly from sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and demographers (Santos, 2005). The number of studies on this issue is on the rise (Moors, 2003). Women, migration, migration and globalization, economic migration, immigration and racism, human rights and development, and trade are becoming essential subjects of study in the academic arena worldwide. But “socio-legal analyses of the status of migrant domestic workers are less common. Although human rights issues or conflicts inevitably arise in many of these works, the literature has thus far focused little on the factors that influence conflicts in specific countries (Vlieger 2011).”

Jureidini and Moukarbel (2004) found exploitation and abuses against the domestic workers in their hidden place of the household. Their access to networks and social support is very limited, and they remain vulnerable to discrimination and abuses in their informal work situation. Such abuses are rampant due to the lack of regulations within the migrant-receiving countries, resulting in violations of fundamental human rights. Jureidini (2002) has researched such labor situations in Lebanon, while Najjar (2002) has researched them in Bahrain, Sabbam (2002) in UAE, and Esim & Smith (2004) in the Middle East. Human Rights Watch conducts studies on the human rights abuses against women migrant workers (HRW 2006). The International Labour Organization has coordinated a global comparison of labor conditions and their legal protections (ILO Manual 2006).

The Human Rights Watch in a report on “the abuses against female Sri Lankan domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and Lebanon” says:

“Migrant domestic workers are among the least protected workers of the labor force. They work in an unregulated and undervalued job sector and they are at high risk of abuse and exploitation. (...) They generally work excessively long working hours, get no rest days, and are paid discriminatory wages. (...) Sri Lankan women domestic workers also suffer physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, non-payment of wages, food deprivation, confiscation of their identity documents, forced confinement in the workplace, and limitations on their ability to return to their home countries when they wish to do so. In some cases, the combination of these pervasive workplace abuses creates a situation in which women workers are trapped in forced labor (HRW 2007).”

Another report by Human Rights Watch (2004) revealed details of abuses against female migrant workers working in Saudi Arabia using the interview method. It has placed a set of

comprehensive recommendations before the governments of Saudi Arabia, other labour-sending countries, and the United Nations. A study conducted by Huda (n.d.) found that “women domestic migrant workers face various types of abuses, including accusation of stealing, confinement, food withheld, overwork, payment withheld, physical, sexual and verbal abuse.” It added, “As most women are confined within the house, they are not allowed to move outside or talk to anyone.”

Another study conducted by Anbesse et al. (2009) found “a general dearth in mental health” research on non-Western migrants in non-Western Countries. The FGD method was applied to determine the experiences of female domestic workers from Ethiopia who worked in Middle Eastern countries. A comparison was made between female migrant workers who were suffering from “severe mental illness” and the workers who were well. The researchers found a significant threat to the mental health of female migrant workers with severe mental illness. They found “enforced cultural isolation, undermining cultural identity”, treating them with “exploitation, and disappointment in not achieving expectations.” The respondents said, “Self-affirmation of their cultural identity and establishing sociocultural supports helped counter other negative forces.”

Dessive (2011), in a study, examined the lives of female migrant workers who were working in the Middle Eastern countries. He conducted this study before the black Ethiopian Christian and Muslim female workers left for the receiving countries and after they returned home. The study found some channels by which they went to the receiving countries, “workplace condition, mental health, sexual exploitation and their position within Arab society.” This study explored “the types of legal and illegal work” in Ethiopia, where 12 returnee domestic workers from Middle Eastern countries were interviewed. FDG and interviews with the community members have also been conducted for the study.

Manseau (2006) in an article highlighted employment conditions, including sponsorship and its negative effects on workplaces and abuses against female domestic workers in the Middle East. The writer says the protection of domestic workers is poor culturally and legally in sending and receiving countries. Manseau emphasizes “a standard working contract” for ensuring their greater bargaining power, fair and effective access to justice, and enforcement of judicial decisions.” She recommends that Arab countries should keep watch on private companies under international law to check abuses against workers by the employers, “despite arguments to the contrary based on *Shari'a* law.”

de Regt (2006) conducted a study in Yemen between 2003 and 2005 as an academic work on behalf of ILO and Amsterdam University. Women domestic workers, agents, employers, and officials from government bodies, embassies, and NGOs were interviewed. The study set several recommendations, including consultative workshops for critical stakeholders, formulation of the national committee for enhancing coordination among the key stakeholders, the inclusion of domestic workers in the labor law, and ensuring a better monitoring system among private employment agencies.

Esim et al. (2004), in a study, examine the practices and patterns to point out the reason behind the horrifying state of women workers migrating to the Middle East. In this study, questions were raised about the benefits of outmigration for domestic workers in terms of their wages, protection, and social security. The study recommends “different strategies for addressing these deficiencies.” In a paper, Kerbage and Esim (2011) highlighted the situation of domestic

migrant workers in Arab countries using “a strong legal and governance framework.” The paper suggests the inclusion of “the access to justice for migrant workers, legislative action and adoption of Convention 189.” Preisner (2012) in a study assessed the health situation of Bangladesh migrant workers using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study “focuses on the service needs and vulnerabilities of female migrant workers at the risk of exposure to STIs/STDs and HIV/AIDS in the Middle East, including GCC countries.” The study found “poor living and working conditions upon their health.”

iii. Rationale of the study

There was no systematic study on the returnee female migrant domestic workers conducted in Bangladesh, though hundreds of such workers have been returning home from abroad since the official record of their sending started. The study findings would be helpful for government policy implications in this regard. The ordeal of the victim workers is expected to help rehabilitate them and provide them with mental or psychological support, which will ultimately help them recover from the trauma

iv. Scope of the study

The scope of this study is vast and descriptive. However, there was no scope to talk to the employers to know the situation of female domestic workers or check allegations against the employers. It would be helpful for the Bangladesh government’s policy implication if the study could review the rules and policies of other female domestic workers sending countries. However, it would be difficult for the researchers to collect such policies due to the shortage of time and budget.

v. Methodology

v.i: Method

The study was conducted based mainly on secondary data and information. It’s primarily a qualitative study. Primary data was also collected through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD). International laws, national laws and policies, and strategies and plans have been reviewed systematically to know the legal framework of migrant women domestic workers. Multiple telephone interviews for gathering experts’ observations and opinions have also been sought. Cases on the ordeals have also been collected from news media using the Google Search Engine, and four of such cases have been selected for analysis based on the gravity of the human rights violation. Besides, only one victim female domestic worker who returned from a destination country has been interviewed elaborately to know her ordeals.

An FGD has been conducted with the participation of three migration rights defenders (NGOs), two migration journalists, a returnee female domestic migrant worker, and a concerned government official. Seven persons, such as the respondents, have joined the FGD. The FGD has been conducted and recorded for translation from Bangla to English. The researcher has moderated the FGD with an Interview Guide containing three critical questions raised based on the research objectives. Media reports, study reports, and government and NGO reports have also been used to portray the ordeals of the victim workers. Telephone interviews with migration experts, recruitment agency officials, migration rights activists, and government officials

concerned have been taken to get recommendations. A descriptive report has been made based on qualitative analysis.

v.i.i Bangladesh legislation in sending female domestic workers

Table 1: Protection of migrant domestic workers under the Constitution of Bangladesh

SL	Bangladesh Constitution	Key Enforcement areas
1	Article 15	(b) “the right to work, that is the right to guaranteed employment at a reasonable wage having regard to the quantity and quality of work;” (c) “the right to reasonable rest, recreation and leisure” and (d) “the right to social security, that is to say, to public assistance in cases of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illness or disablement, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or other such cases.”
2	Article 19	(1) “The State shall endeavor to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens.” (2) “The State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between man and man and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and of opportunities to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the Republic.” (3) “The State Shall endeavor to ensure equality of opportunity and participation of women in all spheres of national life.”
3	Article 20	(1) “Work is a right, a duty and a matter of honor for every citizen who is capable of working, and everyone shall be paid for his work based on the principle “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his work.” (2) “The State shall endeavour to create conditions in which, as a general principle, persons shall not be able to enjoy unearned incomes, and in which human labour in every form, intellectual and physical, shall become a fuller expression of creative endeavour and the human personality.”
4	Article 35	(5) “No person shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment or treatment.”
5	Article 40	“Subject to any restrictions imposed by law, every citizen possessing such qualifications, if any, as may be prescribed by law about his profession, occupation, trade or business shall have the right to enter upon any lawful profession or occupation, and to conduct any lawful trade or business.”

Table 2: Convention relating to the protection of migrant female domestic workers

Name of the Conventions relating to outmigration	Ratified or not
“ILO Migration for Employment Convention (revised), 1949 (No.97)”	No
“UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951”	No
“UN Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, 1954”	No
“UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, 1961”	No

“ILO Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975”	No
“UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989”	Ratified in 1990
“UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Member of Their Families, 1990”	Ratified in 2011
“UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1967”	No
“UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979”	Ratified in 1984
“ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No.102)”	No
“ILO Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers, 2011 (No. 189)”	No
“UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols to it, 2000”	No
“ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)”	Ratified in 1972
“ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)”	Ratified in 1972

Source: IOM (2019)

The above table shows that Bangladesh has ratified only five conventions out of 15 relating to outmigration. Among them, “the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Member of Their Families, 1990” is vital to protect rights of migrant workers and their families. In this convention, “rights of migrant women workers are recognized, but this convention does not address gender-specific needs in any way, such as specific protections that should be afforded to women in their roles as domestic workers or sex workers (Jolly & Reeves 2005 cited in Barkat & Manzuma).” Bangladesh is yet to ratify “the International Labour Organization (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention, 2011.”

Table 3: Bangladesh plans, strategies, visions, and MDGs relating to female domestic workers’ outmigration

SL	Name of the Planning Tools	Key Enforcement areas	Possible outcomes
1.	The Eight Five Year Plan 2021-2025	-to expand overseas employment and remittances through government-to-government negotiations. -Safe workplaces and safe work. -- As per the plan, “The Ministry will initiate the adoption of a ‘Sustainable Reintegration of Migrant Workers Policy’ and expedite the adoption of a ‘Rules for Wage Earner’s Welfare Board Act 2018’ so that benefits of provisions for migrant workers reach them. The Ministry will adopt a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for returnee migrant reintegration, especially for female migrants.”	--“Stronger support in the workplaces against exploitation and abuse in host countries using local Bangladesh Embassies and High Commissions.” --Checking low pay, exploitation, sexual abuse, and protecting the rights of migrant workers. - The recruiting agencies’ accountability to be ensured
2.	“The Outline Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021 and 2021-2041” (Vision 2021	--Vision 2021 encourages gender equality and women’s empowerment --Vision 2041 targets reducing the cost of migration by eliminating the exploitative practices of the migration agencies.	“Vision for Education, Training, and Skills Development’ seeking gender-specific outcome” (GoB, 2010 cited in Barkat & Ahsan (2014), Giving “women their

	and Vision 2041)		rightful share in skills development training both at home and abroad, and improve professional excellence” (GoB, 2010 cited in Barkat & Ahsan (2014), which has a direct impact on women migration
4.	MDGs (10.7)	- “Orderly and safe migration.”	Facilitating “orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.” (IOM Council, 2005).
5.	“Six-point Strategy under the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment”	Sustainable and safe migration of female workers	Ensuring sustainable and secure migration of female workers.

Two planning tools the “Sixth Five Year Plan 2021-2025, and the Outline Perspective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021 and 2021-2041” – ensure ending gender disparity and women’s empowerment that can lead to women outmigration. Other plans and strategies also link to labor migration to “give women their rightful share in skills development both at home and abroad, and to improve professional excellence (GoB 2010 cited in ILO 2014).”

Table 4: National laws, rules, and policies relating to the outmigration of female domestic workers

SL	National Laws, Rules, and Policies
1.	“The Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy, 2016”
2.	“The Overseas Employment and Migrant Act, 2013”
3.	The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2012
4.	The Bangladesh Labour Policy
5.	National Skills Development Policy, 2011
6.	“The Prevention and Suspension of Human Trafficking Act, 2012”
7.	The Passport Act, 1920
8.	The Passport (Offence) Act, 1952
9.	“The Bangladesh Passport Rules, 1974”
10.	“The Emigration Rules, 2002”
11.	“The Wage Earners’ Welfare Fund Rules, 2002”
12.	The Expatriate Welfare Board Act, 2017
13.	“The Recruiting Agents’ Conduct and Licence Rules, 2002”
14.	The Travel Agency Registration Act, 2013
15.	The Travel Agency Registration Rules, 2014
16.	“The Selection of Commercially Important Persons (non-residence Bangladeshi) Rules, 2015”
17.	“The Special Privilege Policy of Expatriate Bangladeshis for Remittance, 2008”
18.	“The Medical Test Policy for Overseas Employment, 2008.”
19.	The Policy Guideline for Mandatory Insurance for Migrant Workers 2019
20.	“The Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET)”

Two laws – the Overseas Employment and migrant workers act, 2013 and the Overseas Employment Policy 2016 are being enforced in the country to protect the rights of male and female workers while promoting outmigration. Islam (n.d) summarizes the act as i) punishment for breaking the agreements, ii) recovery of migration cost from recruiting agents to repatriate migrant workers, iv ensuring trial of offenses v. punishment for fraudulence related to emigration.

The “emigration rules 2002, recruiting agents conduct and license rules 2002 and the wage earners’ welfare fund rules 2002” also ensure promotion and regulation of outmigration. Women migration was restricted between 1981 and 2007, saying that “women are more vulnerable than men” (ILO 2014). Nearly all female worker migration was banned in 1997. In 2003, the “ban on the migration of non-skilled women” was lifted, but the restriction continued on unmarried women's migration below 35 years in Saudi Arabia (ILO 2014). The government allowed women's migration for domestic work below 25 years in Middle Eastern countries in 2007 (ILO 2014).

VIII. Ordeals of migrant female domestic workers

Women migrants are facing manifold problems and human rights violations, including sexual abuses in sending and destination countries. Almost all returnee women migrant workers who participated in the research of OCUP said that sub-agents provided them with false and incomplete information regarding passports, employment contracts, medical checkups, working conditions, salaries and benefits, etc. Most of the women claimed such misleading information put them in a vulnerable situation and led to them becoming victims of abuse in destination countries. “Migrant women workers, in particular, often have to deal with lower labor force participation, low-status occupations and jobs, poor working conditions, and low earnings (Jolly & Reeves 2010, cited in ILO 2014).”

Before going abroad, “migrant women workers are trained in the housekeeping trade in a 21-day training workshop at 14 Technical Training Centers (GoB 2012 cited in ILO 2014).” The “intensive work performed by migrant workers in destination countries, the desire to earn as much as possible, and their refusal to spend earnings on their health also leads to many problems (UN Women 2012).” A study by OCUP (2019) says: “The testimony of returnee women migrant workers showed that Bangladeshi domestic workers experienced a range of rights violations in destination countries, such as insufficient food, inhuman working hours, no decent living space, physical and psychological abuse, sexual exploitation, non-payment and underpayment of wages, etc.”

The study says some returnee migrant women informed that they were beaten by the staff of employment agencies when they requested a change of employers due to abusive practices. Some other women said the staff of the agencies also beat them if the employer returned them to the agency to be replaced. Many of them said they not only faced physical but also sexual abuse, sometimes being used as sex slaves under the control of the agencies. Women migrant workers often face gender-based stigma, regardless of whether they return with money or without money. Sometimes, the family members turn their backs when migrant women return. Some suffer from physical illnesses, mental trauma, etc. (OCUP 2019).

Sexual abuse against migrant women and domestic workers occurs frequently. Siddiqui (2008) says, “Sexual abuses committed against domestic workers are mostly perpetrated by

employers (sponsors) as well as their sons or other men visiting the workplace. Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable because domestic work involves individualized work conditions, isolation from other workers, the least likelihood of establishing networks, an absence of social protection, and frequently a lack of legal recognition as work, leading to a lack of legal protection to the worker.”

viii.i Case Studies on the Victim Female Domestic Workers

Table 1: A case study on a returnee female domestic worker

Detailed story	Major findings
<p>A 40-year-old, Morseda (pseudo name), was taken to Qatar in 2019 by a recruiting agency and kept there for two months; later, she was shifted to Saudi Arabia by its staff in the name of travel. The recruiting agent staff left her in a house with an assurance of returning her to Qatar after one month. But he did not come within the timeframe. Conversely, the employer did not pay her for her household jobs. When she demanded payment after a few months, the employer told her he bought her from the recruiting agent. So, he would not provide her with any payment. She didn't get sufficient food at the Saudi employer's house.</p> <p>The employer and his son always used to torture her. She said: “I provided household services for an elderly woman till midnight. Her adult son used to force me to make Ruti (bread) for him. One day, when I refused to make bread at 3:00 pm, he beat me severely, saying that they bought me in exchange for money.”</p> <p>Later, she phoned the recruiting agent staff and told them about her ordeals, requesting him to help return to Bangladesh, but they didn't heed her request.</p> <p>They used to give her 3-4kg of rice and a chicken for a month for her monthly food. Hearing my ordeals, one of the employer's neighbors offered her some odd jobs like cleaning and washing clothes, and she did the work that helped her earn some money to bear her monthly expenses—one day, the employer's son asked her about the extra income and at one stage blamed her for stealing the money from his mother's bag. Morseda said: “After the blame, the house owner beat me and threw hot curries on me, leaving my face and hands burnt. I didn't get any treatment. They didn't even provide me with food as I couldn't cook food due to my wounded hands. I begged his elder brother for my treatment but refused to do that.”</p> <p>“Again, I informed the recruiting agent staff living in Qatar over the phone about my ordeals, but they didn't respond to rescue me. Later, I contacted an NGO on Facebook. The NGO advised me to file a case with the police station in Bangladesh,” she said, adding that her daughter lodged the case with Malibagh Police Station in Dhaka and sent the complaint to the NGO. Morseda said: “My daughter contacted the Bangladesh Embassy in Saudi Arabia and told them that of torture, sent photos of my broken hand with bandages and sought their help, but the Embassy didn't pay heed to the issue.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The monthly wage of the female domestic worker was not paid; ▪ Sufficient food was not served; ▪ Tortured by employer and his son; ▪ Working hours till midnight; ▪ Returned to home with empty hands.

<p>Morseda alleged: “Even the embassy officials don’t receive our phone calls. They didn’t try to rescue us but told us to flee the employer’s house. Why do they tell such? Though I went to Saudi from Qatar, the Saudi Embassy should have looked after our matters, but they did nothing for me.”</p> <p>A police official from Dhaka contacted the Bangladesh Embassy in Saudi Arabia and requested them to rescue her, mentioning the case statements. One the other, hearing filing of the case, the Saudi employer tortured her more, and several times took away her mobile phone set. Again, the police officer contacted the Embassy to rescue her with the phone set. Similarly, the Saudi employer tortured her on her secret part with a gas bottle one week before she left Saudi Arabia. She had to work four to five houses. “The man broke open the door in the dead of night, forced me to pass the night without sleeping, and even I couldn’t offer daily prayers,” said Mokseda.</p> <p>At last, Morseda returned to the country in 2020, two months before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, after 14 months of staying in Saudi Arabia with mental and physical torture.</p>	
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Source: The interview of this victim was conducted by the researcher on 4 August 2021.

Table 2: Case study on sexual assault on young female migrant

Detailed story	Major findings
<p>When Minu decided to go abroad for a better livelihood, she got acquainted with a broker through her uncle. She was told to pay BDT 50,000 to that person for the whole migration process (including passport and medical). A bit later, she was said to provide an extra BDT 3,000 for doing "other stuff." However, they soon discovered that the broker was a fraud. They told him to return the money, but the "broker" threatened Minu and her family. The money still is not been recovered.</p> <p>After facing much trouble, Minu managed to go to Saudi Arabia via Dubai. Her employer came to the airport to take her to his home. She had to do all the household chores, including the duties of his two daughters' homes. If she refused any task, she was scolded and restricted from eating. She received no payment in her first four months on the job. The most outrageous incident that happened to Minu was the abusive behavior of her employer's son. The son used to touch her body all the time, and whenever he found her alone, he would try to give her unwanted hugs. She was even propositioned by the son to have sex with him. As Minu rejected his advances, she confronted much more troubles. She was continuously harassed at night as the son would pour water from underneath the door onto the ground where she slept. She was also often hit by water thrown from a window by the son. She complained about this to her employer but was scolded in return.</p> <p>One day, when she again faced abuse from his son, she screamed, and he was caught red-handed. He then got more vicious and started torturing her in new ways (for example, giving her clothes to wash over and over again, intentionally dirtying linen so she would have to clean them, etc.). One day, a bit of eggshell</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Brokers cheated victims; ▪ Wages for the first four months denied; ▪ Torture and sexual assault from employer’s son; ▪ Returned to home with unbearable pain and empty hands.

<p>accidentally found its way into an omelet prepared by Minu. The son burned her hand on an iron grill as a punishment. His father took Minu to a doctor to get her wounds treated. She told her employer, "I do not have enough food at home because I am poor. I came here to earn a living. But I can't lose my virtue in return. Please send me back home." After 18 months of unbearable pain and after losing two months' salary for leaving her employment before the end of the contract, Minu came home to Bangladesh in March 2012 with nothing but the air ticket. She does not want to go abroad for employment anymore.</p>	
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Source: (ILO 2014)

IX. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The findings from the FDG have been included in the following tables.

Table 1: FGD findings on the ordeals faced by domestic migrant workers

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Expatriate Welfare Ministry, the Overseas Employment Bureau, and other related government bodies receive complaints of torture or discrimination from 3-4 percent of the female migrant workers. 3-5 percent of the victims could not make any complaints with the government bodies, which means the government bodies receive complaints from 7-8 percent of the female migrant domestic workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The employers assault female workers physically and even rape them. All types of torture, including physical and sexual, setting them on afire, forcibly cutting their hair, and hitting and falling from the rooftop, have to be faced by the women migrant workers. ▪ The female workers have to work 16-18 hours a day, though 8 hours are fixed as per the international standard. ▪ The female workers are made untimely repatriated without pay to our country, blaming them for theft or other such false allegations when any problem arises. ▪ The problems faced by the workers cannot be resolved as these happen in the destination countries.
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Table 2: FGD findings on the reasons for the ordeals

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ After going to the receiving country, the women migrant workers cannot adjust to the new situation or environment in the employer's residence. In addition, the employer does not express his/her sympathy to the newly requited household workers. The women workers prefer to follow their cultural system, which raises problems between employers and workers. ▪ They do not provide proper accommodation and even separate accommodation, which makes them more vulnerable as a woman. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The employers do not provide female migrant workers with fair wages fixed before arrival. Sometimes, the workers do not know their salary fixed by the recruiting agency and the employer. ▪ The female migrant workers cannot adjust to receiving the country's food. Even, they have not been provided with proper food, and even sufficient food. As a result, when the female workers demand fine food or adequate food, their employers beat them up.
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X. Results and Discussions

The exact number of returnee women domestic workers is still unknown. It is reported that over 10,000 female migrant workers returned home only from KSA since 2016. Migrant workers who go to various countries through regular and irregular channels face vulnerability at several stages of their journey due to lack of information regarding the migration process, cheating by recruitment agencies, and lack of professional skills and knowledge about destination countries (Islam 2008).

Islam (2008) identifies some forms of discrimination and its reasons. i) a woman compared to a man; ii) a foreigner compared to a national; iii) a low-skilled worker in an isolated work environment; iv) abuses at three stages of migration --a. Recruitment level – b. workplace c. on return to home country; v) Some critical concerns faced by women migrant workers. vi) Restrictions on freedom of movement; vii) 3D works viii) Gender-based violence ix). Problem in social reintegration and very limited opportunities for investment at home; x) lack of skills development for women; xi) Less access to education, information, and training than men; xii) Financial cheating by recruiting agents and other service providers; xiii) Non-recognition of women's work and xenophobia against women migrant workers; xiv) Violation of rights to health, safety and privacy; xv) Physical, sexual and psychological harassment; and xvi) Possibility of trafficking (Islam 2008).

Deaths at workplace: Many female migrant workers die at their workplace mainly due to torture and suicide. They committed suicide following continuous physical and mental tortures at their overseas workplace. Some 473 bodies of women had been returned to Bangladesh from the Middle East till September 2020. At least 81 of them died by suicide (The Daily Star, 2020). Of the deceased, the highest number of deaths was 175 in Saudi Arabia, while 75 died in Jordan, 66 in Lebanon, 45 in Oman, 66 in Lebanon, 45 in Oman, 27 in UEA and 20 in Kuwait.

Rape and torture: Female migrant workers face sexual abuse, sometimes being used as sex slaves under the control of employment agencies. In most cases, they pass their daily life with torment and exploitation sexually by their employers and their sons, brothers, or other relatives. The recruiting agency staff beat women workers when they requested a change of employer due to abusive practices. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, in a report sent to the parliamentary standing committee in August 2019, said it talked to about 110 female domestic returnee workers from Saudi Arabia. Thirty-five percent of them were physically and sexually abused. (The Daily Star 2020).

Insufficient food: Female migrant workers are deprived of sufficient food at their workplace. ILO (2014) in its report observes: "Domestic workers, in general, have to eat and live with their employers. Some migrants confront beatings and hunger, as they were kept without food for days on end. Some migrant women workers were locked in a room and not allowed to contact home over the telephone. In addition, many lacked communication skills as they dealt with a new language, putting them at a further disadvantage in the workplace. Domestic workers also complained of suffering from back pain, colds, headaches, gastric pains, and fevers."

Inhuman working hours: Female migrant workers pass their daily lives in atrocious conditions due to long working hours. Sometimes, they have to work from the early morning to the dead of night.

No decent living space: Poor living place is provided to the female migrant workers abroad. They have to sleep in the storeroom or kitchen of the employers' house.

No payment, underpayment of wages: Female domestic migrant workers receive false promises of salaries. Sometimes, they return home with empty hands for non-payment of wages. "According to a report of the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry prepared on 110 female returnees from Saudi Arabia, forty-four percent of the 110 female returnee workers were not paid regularly (The Daily Star 2020)."

XI. Recommendations

- Female migrant workers should be selected based on the proper screening.
- To ensure safe migration, pre-departure intensive training in skills development, self-defense, and language and culture of the destination countries should be imparted to possible female domestic workers before leaving the country.
- Counseling, health care, legal and financial aid, entrepreneurship training with bank loans, etc., should be provided to the returnee female migrant workers.
- The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare should establish a hotline with mobile phone/WhatsApp numbers so that domestic female workers can directly contact the government authorities in case of any victimization.
- A well-defined, comprehensive policy accommodating all domestic and international laws and policies should be formulated to ensure women's safe migration.

XII. Conclusion

All types of migrant workers are our human resources who earn foreign remittances. Domestic migrant workers contribute to our economy on a large scale, and the government should emphasize them by strengthening bargaining with the destination countries so that they can enjoy fundamental human rights in the workplace. Strict enforcement of existing laws and policies is needed to uphold the rights of female domestic migrant workers. Fair employment deals with the receiving countries are urgent to help enforce regulations protecting their rights at workplaces. At the same time, Bangladesh foreign missions will have to monitor the rights abuses strictly in workplaces. Even a single case of victimization against women migrant workers has to be dealt with or dissolved to ensure safe migration. This research is the tip of the iceberg. There is a scope for conducting more investigations in this arena to help protect domestic migrant workers' rights.

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Appendixes: Selected media reports on the ordeals.

The Daily Star

November 1, 2020

That grim caravan just won't stop:

473 women return home dead from Middle East in around 5 years

Shariful Hasan

It was 4:00am yesterday when the first light of dawn was still far from the Dhaka sky.

Amid the predawn silence, heart-wrenching cries pierced through the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, as just hours ago the body of 13-year old Nodi arrived from Saudi Arabia. Her family stood at the same place they saw her off but now they were receiving a coffin with her dead body inside.

Nodi was sent to the Gulf country last year as a domestic worker, but her passport falsely mentioned her age 25 -- the minimum age required for women to go Saudi Arabia.

The documents sent along with the body claimed Nodi died by suicide in August but her family claimed that she was either killed or forced to commit suicide after brutal torture.

"My daughter had been in trouble since she left for Saudi Arabia. We informed the recruiting agency repeatedly but they did not take any step. Now my daughter is gone. The documents said it was suicide but I found no scars on my daughter's neck. There were signs of torture all over her body,"

Nodi's mother Beauty Akhter said while crying. "Who do I ask for justice?" she asked. Nodi was buried in a Khilgaon graveyard after Zuhr prayers yesterday.

This tragic incident is not an isolated one. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this year, there have been complications over sending dead

Another 14-year-old, Kulsum, died on August 9 this year while undergoing treatment at the King Faisal Hospital in Saudi Arabia. Like Nodi, her passport mentioned her age to be 25.

She was badly beaten by her employer, alleged her mother Nasima Begum, adding that her legs, arms and waist were broken and one of her eyes was damaged.

DEATHS IN QUESTION

Families of the dead migrant workers and experts say every death is a mystery. Abirun Begum is a prime example. She went to Saudi Arabia in July 2017 and was found dead at the employer's house.

Her family got the news of her death 51 days later. Her family members alleged her employer brutally tortured and killed Abirun. The family never got due justice.

Similarly, Nazma went to Saudi Arabia through a local broker in December 2018. She was allegedly tortured and her dead body was sent to the country 53 days after her death.

Her family members alleged that she was promised a job in a hospital, but she was sent to a home instead. She was both tortured and sexually abused, they claimed.

Mosammat Begum went to Saudi Arabia in April 2019 through a recruiting agency and was found dead in Egypt.

According to the Bangladesh embassy in Egypt, Begum, a domestic help, died after falling from

bodies to Bangladesh. A few were however able to make it to their motherland for burial.

According to the Expatriate Welfare Desk at Shahjalal Airport, bodies of at least 63 female migrants were sent to the country from January to September this year. Of them, 22 lost their lives in Saudi Arabia alone while 14 died in Lebanon, 11 in Jordan, seven in Oman, and four in the UAE.

Between 2016 and September this year, 473 bodies of female migrants, including the 63, were sent from different countries. Of them, 175 came from the Saudi Arabia.

Of the 175, 51 of them died by suicide.

An analysis reveals that at least 81 female migrants working in different countries died by suicide in the last four years. Of them, three died in 2016, 12 in 2017, 23 in 2018, 29 in 2019 and 14 this year.

Nodi was born on December 1, 2007, according to her family and birth certificate, but the date of birth mentioned in the passport was September 3, 1993. Although her family lives in Cumilla, the passport was issued from Mymensingh.

Nodi's case is almost identical to the other horrific tales of abuse of female migrants by their employers in the Middle East.

Her tragedy began after she reached Saudi Arabia last year, according to Nodi's mother Beauty and father Dulal Sheikh.

"The employer started torturing my daughter after she reached there. Even no salary was paid," said Beauty.

Nodi's father Dulal said they informed A Rahman Lalon, the owner of recruiting agency Dhaka Export (RL-275), time and again, but Dulal was threatened in various ways instead.

the rooftop of a five-storey building on May 29, 2019.

Her husband Abdul Aziz said he learnt that someone named Begum died in Egypt, but he did not take the matter seriously as his wife was in Saudi Arabia. Later, he got a call from Egypt and was told it was his wife.

Kamaluddin Ahmed Chowdhury, a teacher of clinical psychology department of Dhaka University, told The Daily Star, "A person never commits suicide under normal circumstances. What we see in Saudi Arabia is that most women were oppressed or faced a situation in which they thought suicide was the only way out."

"In fact, those who died by suicide found no other choice," he said. The ordeals that the migrant workers, who somehow manage to survive even after the torture, are no less distressful.

In some cases, families of such victims do not want to accept them while many undergo severe mental trauma.

Runu Begum of Khulna is one of them. She returned from Saudi Arabia on October 10 after suffering from a mental condition.

She was found aimlessly wandering the airport. Airport Armed Police Battalion sent her to a non-government organisation.

The actual number of female migrant workers returning home from KSA is hard to calculate but it could surpass 10,000 in the last five years, according to embassies and various media reports.

According to a report of the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry prepared on 110 female returnees from Saudi Arabia, 35 percent of them returned after being physically

<p>By the end of August, they learned that Nodi died by suicide after giving in to the torture, he said.</p> <p>An official letter sent from the Bangladesh Embassy in Saudi Arabia to Dhaka on August 26 said that the embassy received information that Nodi had died by suicide in Medina on August 14.</p> <p>The letter sought the family's opinion about her burial in Saudi Arabia. Nodi's family did not agree.</p> <p>The embassy contacted Mansour al-Magamisi, owner of the Saudi recruiting agency, and informed him that Nodi had died by hanging herself.</p> <p>A letter sent from the Wage Earners' Welfare Board to Saudi Arabia on September 2 said the family did not give permission for her burial there and they wanted her body sent back.</p> <p>The family filed a case in this regard and Kalabagan police already arrested three people including A Rahman Lalon, the owner of the recruiting agency, on October 18.</p>	<p>and sexually abused. Forty-four percent of them were not paid regularly.</p> <p>The ministry sent the report to the parliamentary standing committee in August last year.</p> <p>Contacted, Mohammad Shamsul Alam, director general of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), said the ministry and BMET had issued a 12-point directive in December last year to ensure the safety of women workers and they are more careful about the issue.</p> <p>Shamim Ahmed Chowdhury, secretary-general of the Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), said yesterday that fingers are often pointed at the agencies for the incidents of repression or death of any worker in Saudi Arabia.</p> <p>"But the crisis will not be solved unless measures are taken against the Saudis who persecute them. A mechanism should be developed to bring an end to the problem," he said.</p>
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Dhaka Tribune

March 13, 2020

Rape, torture, and exploitation: Woes of a female migrant worker in Saudi Arabia

Manik Miazee, back from Jeddah

At midnight, one of the older brothers covered my mouth with his hand and raped me'

Parveena Begum (not her real name), a 26-year-old migrant worker, burst into tears as she described her life of torment and sexual exploitation at the hands of her employer in Saudi Arabia.

Parveena went to the kingdom around four and a half years ago with a domestic worker visa but today is an illegal migrant worker, working as a house help.

She has been raped, abused, tortured and sexually assaulted. And she misses the life she used to live in Bangladesh.

This correspondent met with her at Hafar Al Batin area near Alexander Language Schools, Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia and listened to her story.

Parveena broke down talking about her six-year-old daughter Kulsum (also not her real identity). She said she wanted to give her daughter a better life by earning some money abroad. To that end, she had taken some help from a "manpower agency" in Fakirapool, near the Panir Tank, in Dhaka.

Parveena had to spend Tk 20,000 in order to get to Saudi Arabia. When she reached King Abdulaziz International Airport, a Bangladeshi man received her and took her to an office. The next day a Saudi man came and took her to work in his house.

Parveena said she was happy to get a good job and started dreaming about how she would help her family.

She thought that she would send some money to her husband to buy a rickshaw van that he could rent out, but within a month, her dream was shattered when she came to know that her monthly salary was only SAR 1000 (approx Tk23,000), and that she would only get the entire sum after one year.

"The Saudi family had six members, including three unmarried adult males. Often they tortured me when they got drunk and sometimes made forcible sexual advances," she said through her

tears.

“I was sleeping in the store room near the kitchen. At midnight, one of the older brothers covered my mouth with his hand and raped me. I tried to resist with all my force but I failed.”

Growing up in a small village in Gouripur upazila of Mymensingh, nearly five years ago Parveena decided to go to Saudi Arabia for a better life in order to help her family out. Her husband, Siddik Ali, 45, works as a van puller for a school in Azimpur, Dhaka.

She said she did not receive any salary from the Saudi employer for more than three years. She had cried and asked for a phone to contact her family, but was refused any help.

Even before she arrived in Saudi Arabia, she had landed herself in debt. “My father borrowed Tk10,000 from local NGOs and my husband provided the rest of the money so I could come to Saudi Arabia,” she added.

“At first my agent told me that I would only need to cook for two members of a family – a husband and a wife – but later I found out that the family had six members and my duties included all kinds of household chores, including cooking, washing, cleaning and others.

“It was hard for me to understand their language. I also could not cook to their taste,” she said.

“When I left that house I thought I was a free bird.”

One day, through a stroke of luck, she found some Bangladeshis who agreed to help her. With their help, Parveena went to the Bangladesh Consulate in Jeddah and was sent to a safe house.

But the safe house was far from safe, said Parveena. Some of the consulate staff at the safe house tried to get her to work in their houses and offered her shady deals.

Dhaka Tribune reached out to Kazi Salahuddin, second secretary (labour wing), Jeddah Consulate, but he declined to comment.

When she was forced to leave the safe house, she managed work in the Bawadi area near Madinah Road for a family in a Bangladeshi neighbourhood.

Parveena said: “Now I am so happy, because I am working for a good family which has only two members and they are nice people. They are treating me like a human being and not a slave.”

Now Parveena is earning SAR 2100 (approx Tk47,600), and an additional SAR150 (approx Tk3,400) for mobile and conveyance. Every month, Parveena sends around BDT 45,000 to her family via hundi or bKash.

Responding to a question about this illegal mode of transaction, Parveena said she had no legal papers and visa. She further said that when she had legal papers, she earned SAR 1000, adding: “So why would I need papers now?”



23 October 2019

Abused Bangladeshi domestic workers struggle for justice at home

Interviews with 110 workers show 86 percent did not receive their full salaries while 14 percent were sexually abused.

About 700,000 Bangladeshis find jobs overseas every year which makes the country one of the world's top countries biggest labour-exporting countries.

Traumatized Bangladeshi women who return home after being tortured and abused working in the Middle East rarely get justice because brokers intimidate them and they cannot afford legal aid, a rights group said on Wednesday.

In interviews with 110 returnees, 86 percent did not receive their full salaries, 61 percent were physically abused, 24 percent were deprived of food and 14 percent were sexually abused, local migrant rights group Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) found.

KEEP READING

Why Bangladeshi migrants board boats from Libya to reach Europe

Migrants repatriated after 3 weeks stranded off Tunisia

Nuri Begum went to court in August seeking compensation from her broker or "dalal" after she was tortured and worked unpaid in the home of a family in Saudi Arabia for two months and then spent two months in jail before flying home to Bangladesh.

"My dalal beat me up and broke my leg when I filed a case against him," Begum told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"I was in the hospital for 15 days. I stay with a friend right now, far away from my house because (the broker) lives nearby my place.

Anisul Islam Mahmud, who chairs a parliamentary committee that monitors the work of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, said that the government needs to spend more money on migrants and "nurture" them.

“The demand for our female workers is increasing and we have to protect them ... the ministry is trying its level best, but there are loopholes. We have to work on filling up these loopholes,” he said.

About 700,000 Bangladeshis find jobs overseas every year which makes the country one of the world’s top countries biggest labour-exporting countries.

But recruitment is largely carried out by unofficial brokers, which opens the door to trafficking and exploitation.

About one in 10 migrants are women. Many are uneducated and poor and they often receive false promises of salaries of about 20,000 taka (\$237) a month by middlemen and rarely get job contracts – although this is a legal requirement, OKUP said.

Thousands of female migrant workers come home empty-handed each year, but only 318 have received compensation – averaging 9,200 taka (\$109) each – from the government’s Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training in 2018, the study found.

Some 83,000 Bangladeshi women went to work in the Middle East in 2017 – a four-fold increase in two years, following the signing of a labour agreement between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in 2015, government data shows.

An increasing number of women have also returned home, claiming mistreatment, according to the charity BRAC, which recorded 1,300 returns in 2018 and 900 so far in 2019, all of whom said they were tortured or abused.

Many of the women interviewed by OKUP said recruiting agents in the Middle East beat, throttled and starved them to force them to return to abusive employers, while their families had to pay for their flights home.

But they rarely go to court as they see the system as corrupt, do not want to be stigmatised for going public about the abuse they received and fear that their agents will pressurise them to drop cases, OKUP said.

Despite the challenges, Begum is adamant about seeing the court process through.

“After he beat me up, I am not turning back,” she said.