Factors Affecting Female Migration: Bangladesh Perspective

Humaira Parvin, *Australian Institute for Sustainable Develop*
Fazle Rabbi, *The University of Notre Dame Australia*

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## Contents

**Introduction**

iv  

**Editorial Advisory Board**

v  

**Editorial**

vi  

**THEME 1: INNOVATION IN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT**

1  

**REVISING METHOD OF BIDDING DECISION IN INTERNATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT CONSIDERING PAST CONTRACT DATA**

Takayuki Isaka, Wataru Yoneda, Tsuyoshi Koga and Ken Kaminishi

2  

**MAN-HOUR ESTIMATION FOR IT SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT BY AGILE METHOD**

Hiroshi Nakanishi and Shinobu Komai

15  

**STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE COST AND TIME CONTROL USING BUILDING INFORMATION MODEL (BIM); CONCEPTUAL PAPER**

Muhammad Tahir Muhammad, Nuzul Azam Haron, Aidi Hizami Alias, and Aizul Nahar Harun

23  

**LEAN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT: A TOYOTA WAY FOR ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND PARTICIPATION**

Kamal Sabri Kamarudin and Hiroshi Nakanishi

40  

**CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE: AN ASSESSMENT OF CSR FRAMEWORK FOR LEVER BROTHERS BANGLADESH**

S. M. Zobaidul Kabir and Fazle Rabbi

53  

**DEVELOPING BUILDING INFORMATION MODELLING (BIM) IMPLEMENTATION MODEL FOR PROJECT DESIGN TEAM**

Suzila Mohd, Juliana Brahim, Aryani Ahmad Latiffi, Mohamad Syazli Fathi and Aizul Nahar Harun

71
THEME 2: INNOVATION MANAGEMENT

LINKING BUSINESS STRATEGY WITH ORGANISATIONAL INNOVATION
Rosmaini Tasmin and Muhammad Shafiq

MILITARY EXPENDITURE AND STOCK MARKET CAPITALIZATION: EVIDENCE FROM AN EMERGING MARKET
Assad Ullah, Yang Qingxiang, Zahid Ali, Nadia Hidayat and Muhammad Asif Khan

THE EFFECT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING ON THE CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM OF KANO STATE ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT TRAINING INSTITUTES
Muazu Hassan Muazu and Najafi Auwalu Ibrahim

FACTORS EFFECTING FEMALE MIGRATION: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE
Humaira Parvin and Fazle Rabbi

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS (CSF) OF ERP IMPLEMENTATION: A STUDY WITH TRIZ PERCEPTION MAPPING
Lim Teck Loon, Kow Mee Yee, Akbariah Mahdzir and Nooh Abu Bakar

PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS IN MALAYSIA AUTOMOTIVE MANUFACTURING
Mohd Yusri Mohd Yusof and Hiroshi Nakanishi

THE LINKAGE OF POTENTIAL HAZARDS WITH POTENTIAL HAZARDS WITH SAFETY IMPACT: A VIEW FROM FLOATING STORAGE FACILITY IN MALAYSIA
Rosmaini Tasmin, Salehuddin Md Fadzil and Muhammad Shafiq

OVERCOMING MAINTENANCE COMPETENCY DEFICIENCY – THE AVIATION MAINTENANCE INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE AND STRUCTURED ON JOB TRAINING (S-OJT)
Liew Chee Leong and Mohammad Ali Tareq

IMPROVING METHOD OF ESTIMATION ACCURACY OF VALUE OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT BASED ON BOTH OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE DATA
Tsuyoshi Koga, Takao Eguchi, Takayuki Isaka and Ken Kaminishi
STUDY ON THE FOCUS STRATEGY OF SMALL TO MEDIUM ENTERPRISES AND START-UP COMPANIES IN THE SEMICONDUCTOR MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY – CASE STUDY OF MINIMAL FAB
Kenji Miyake and Ken Kaminishi

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA
Hartini Mohamed and Akbariah Mohd Mahdzir

WEB-BASED COMMUNICATION MODEL BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE SOFTWARE
Yan Watequilis Syaifudin, Imam Fahrur Rozi and Atiqah Nurul Asri

INNOVATION MANAGEMENT IN OIL TANKER VESSELS SAFETY
Alireza Fili and Ahmad Rahman Songip
FACTORS EFFECTING FEMALE MIGRATION: BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVES

Humaira Parvin¹, Fazle Rabbi²
¹Research Fellow, Australian Institute for Sustainable Development, Lakemba, NSW 2195, Australia
²School of Business, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney Campus, NSW 2007, Australia

Abstract
Migration plays a vital role in the world economy, and female migration constitutes a significant part of the total migration. Despite substantial contributions to the welfare of the society, international female migration is a challenging issue in many developing countries such as Bangladesh. Considering the number of total international migration, female migration ratio is still low in Bangladesh. Various factors such as socio-cultural practices, religion, education, government policy, affect this female migration adversely. Female migrants also face different challenges in every sphere of the migration process, which make the situation difficult for them. Addressing these issues is necessary for the economic development and gender empowerment aspects of Bangladesh. Concerted efforts of various government and non-government organisations can change the scenario for the international female migrants of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Female migration, Migration from Bangladesh, Trends of female migration, Remittances, Social factors, Religion, Government migration policy

INTRODUCTION

Migration is an age-old phenomenon, and from the time immemorial it is being taken place in various forms and shapes in all over the world. International labour migration is a component of the population movement in almost all countries of the Asian region, which contributes a large percentage of the world migrant workforces. There were around 244 million migrants in the world in 2015 of which 52% were male, and 48% were female (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). Similarly, since 1976 a large number of labour have migrated from Bangladesh to the other regions of the world. But in Bangladesh, the female migration has always been a less significant issue. Unlike the other labour surplus countries, female migrants hold a low percentage of the labour migrants in Bangladesh (Islam, 2012). In 2015, the proportion of female migrants was only 13%, whereas the Southern Asian average was 45% (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). There are various factors which are liable for this low rate of female migration from Bangladesh. Also, female migrants are facing various problems in their migration process, and these problems should be addressed for the betterment of the society.

This paper tries to identify the factors affecting the female migration from Bangladesh adversely after describing the current trend of female migration and government policies on it in Bangladesh. Then it shows various challenges, both internal and external, faced by the female migrants of Bangladesh. Finally, this report suggest some recommendations after analyzing the current female migration scenario of Bangladesh.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

Reviewing available data and statistics, it can be found that compared to the other countries of the world with same social, cultural and economic conditions, Bangladesh has a
very poor number of female migrants. So, the primary objective of this paper is to identify the major factors which negatively affect the female migration process of this country based on available literature.

This paper is based solely on the secondary data which are collected from the reports and articles of various government and non-government organisations. Tabular and graphical analysis are done with the collected data in order to achieve the objective of the study.

This paper focuses on the temporary international female migration from Bangladesh. As international female migration has a strong impact on the economic and social spheres of the country, this paper emphasizes on that particular subject. According to some studies, in addition to the formal channel, a considerable number of migration take place via the informal channel. Due to the lack of reliable data, discussion on those issues is out of scope of current research. In addition, discussion of some issues are eluded in this study due to discrepancies in similar data in different sources.

**PATTERN OF BANGLADESH INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**

Bangladesh has a long history of international migration since its inception in 1971. Without some exceptions, Bangladesh is having an increasing number of migrants each year. According to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) of Bangladesh, 10.9 million Bangladeshi have gone overseas from 1976 to May 2017 on short term contract work and the highest 350% increase of the migrants relative to the previous year occurred in 2007 (BMET, 2017a). At the same time, the number of overseas employment of female workers during 1991 to May 2017 is 630,157 and the year 2004 reflected the highest 378% rise of them (BMET, 2017b). Apart from this, 7 million long-term Bangladeshi emigrants are living in different countries of the world. And, the number of migrants from Bangladesh has increased from 987,900 to 1,422,800 during 2000 to 2015, while female migrants’ share has decreased from 14% to 13% during the same period (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016).

**INTERNATIONAL FEMALE MIGRATION TREND IN BANGLADESH**

Although Bangladesh is a labour surplus country and the male-female ratio in Bangladesh is 100.3:100 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2016), the number of female migrants comprise a low proportion of the total migrants. Until 2004, around 1% of Bangladeshi migrants were female, and this number has increased to about 8% in 2016. But still, women represent a small minority in contrast to the overall Bangladeshi migrant flows (BMET, 2017a).

Female migration from Bangladesh is not a very common phenomenon, and there were several restrictions on female migration till 2003. So, female migration was relatively low before 2003, and it has begun to increase after that time and has got momentum in 2004 (Islam, 2012). The following table shows the trend of female migration from Bangladesh during 1991-2010, which depicts that Bangladeshi migrant workers are predominantly male. Female migrants constitute only 148,460 among a total of 6,304,189 migrants from 1991-2010, which is less than 3 percent of the total migrants from Bangladesh.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Total Migrants</th>
<th>Female Migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>147,156</td>
<td>2,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>188,124</td>
<td>1,907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>244,508</td>
<td>1,793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>186,326</td>
<td>1,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>187,543</td>
<td>1,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>211,714</td>
<td>1,994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>231,077</td>
<td>1,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>267,667</td>
<td>939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>268,182</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>222,686</td>
<td>454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>189,060</td>
<td>659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>225,256</td>
<td>1,217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>254,190</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>272,958</td>
<td>11,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>252,702</td>
<td>13,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>381,516</td>
<td>18,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>832,609</td>
<td>18,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>875,055</td>
<td>20,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>475,278</td>
<td>22,224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>390,702</td>
<td>27,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>568,062</td>
<td>30,579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>607,798</td>
<td>37,304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>409,253</td>
<td>56,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>425,684</td>
<td>76,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>555,881</td>
<td>103,718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>757,731</td>
<td>118,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,628,718</td>
<td>574,075</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (BMET, 2017b).

If the female migration pattern by the destination countries is analysed, it can be found from the chart below that Middle Eastern countries have been the main destinations for the female migrants. Upto now, Saudi Arabia is the major destination for the female migrants of Bangladesh.
From the available data, it can be marked that the percentage of unskilled female workers are much higher than the skilled or professional migrants and among the skilled migrants, the majority of them used to migrate to the Middle Eastern countries (ADB and ILO, 2016). Among the occupation list of the female migrants, house keeping, garment, and other factory working and nursing are the predominants. Though there is a list of 149 different occupations, about 92% of the international female migrants opt for house aide jobs (Islam, 2012).
GOVERNMENT POLICY ON FEMALE MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH

In the early 1970s, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) did not have any specific policy on the international female migration. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi female workers, started to seek jobs in the global labour market, specially in the Middle-Eastern countries by their own initiatives. Besides this, during the 1980s Bangladeshi female migrants used to migrate in skilled labour category such as doctors, nurses, teachers, etc. In early 1981, restriction over semi-skilled and unskilled women workers was imposed by a Presidential Order on the ground of protecting their dignity. According to the order, except the professional and skilled labours, female migrants were not be permitted to go abroad without a legal male guardian. This restriction was imposed in response to a demand from the association of the Kuwait migrants for some incidents of repeated women abuse in Kuwait (Siddiqui, 2001). Although in 1988, little change was brought in the order, but this was not completely in favor of the female migrants (Siddiqui, 2008).

In 1997, a complete ban was imposed on semi-skilled and unskilled labour according to a government decision, which followed by an inter-ministerial meeting among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of labour and the Cabinet Division of the Bangladesh Government. This prohibition excluded only the highly skilled and professional women such as doctors, engineers, and teachers. This decision was considered to be one of the most discriminatory policy against women and received heavy criticism from different groups of the civil society such as female rights group, labour organisations, human rights workers and so on. The government rationalized this policy as a pro-active measure to protect the dignity of the women (Migration Forum Asia, 2011; Siddiqui, 2008).

In 2003, the ban was relaxed by mentioning that semi-skilled and unskilled workers of certain ages can go abroad under special permission. The GoB’s Overseas Employment Policy
of 2006 recognized the equal rights of men and women to migrate overseas for employment. These policy changes caused a shift in the numbers of women migrating for work. Before the lift of the ban, the female migration represented less than 1% of all migration (between 1991-2003). Since changes to the policy on female migration in 2003, this number has steadily increased (Migration Forum Asia, 2011).

REMITTANCE SCENERIO

In spite of having certain challenges, the Bangladeshi workers managed to keep regularity in the remittance flows of the country. This increased flows of remittance are not only improving the economic condition at the household level but also helping to boost up the national economy.

![Figure 3. Year-wise Remittances Earned from 1976 to 2016 in Million USD, Source: (BMET, 2017b).](image)

From different studies, it has been seen that despite having a poor number and getting less salary than their male colleagues, the female migrants remit more comparing to that of the male migrants of Bangladesh. On an average, the females remit 72% of their income to home countries, whereas the percentage of male remittance is 45% to 50% of their total income (Das, 2012). Furthermore, the females remit more consistently and regularly. In a survey finding by Rahman (2013), it was revealed that most of the females use the formal channel for sending remittances. According to that study, all the females who took part in the survey use formal channels without the exception of 2% females who used both formal and informal channels. At the same time, 67% of male use informal channels, 15% formal channels and 18% used both formal and informal channels for sending remittances to home. Moreover, the females spend their remittances for family consumption, education, medical purposes, while male use remittances for land purchase and small business ventures (Rahman, 2013).
FACTORS AFFECTING THE INTERNATIONAL FEMALE MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH

For more than 50 years, the international immigration issue has gained attention to the social scientists in both developed and developing nations. For years, the immigrant receiving countries has shifted their demands of the labour force from one region to another region, transforming the developed nations into multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. There have been several attempts to explain why people migrate from developing to developed countries. It is not possible to completely explain why the pattern of migration is like this. There are numerous theoretical models and approaches which explain the migration process by using various assumptions and frameworks (Ali, Mujahid, Rashid, & Shahbaz, 2015). The ‘Neo-Classical Theory’ expresses that wage differentials and employment conditions are major causes of migration and admits that these are the decisions of the individuals for income maximization. Contrast to that the ‘New Economics of Migration’ approach focusses on the larger units, typically family or household decisions, rather than individuals’ decisions as the condition for migration. While the ‘Dual Labour Theory’ and the ‘World System Theory’ emphasize on the macro level forces aggregation such as the structural requirements of modern industrial economies and natural consequences of economic globalization as the causes of migration (Massey et al., 1993). None of these theories can explain the female migration completely, rather they support the scenario partially (Oishi, 2002).

There have been numerous researches in the field of migration, and there is a general agreement among the researchers that migration is a complex process. Situations created by both the macro and micro level economic, social and catalytic factors make individual or a group of people decide to migrate. Hence, the factors may depend on a country’s geo-political location, destination countries, social structure, cultural attributes, political condition (Siddiqui, 2004). For Bangladesh, five factors have been listed as the deciding factors in the migration process of Bangladesh, which are: economic, environmental, social, demographic and political (Martin et al., 2013). Several forms of climate conditions like flood, cyclone, river erosion and so on act as important push factors for migration (Farhana, Rahman, & Rahman, 2012; Ranjan, 2016).

In 2013, the male-female workforce composition in Bangladesh was 42.5 and 18.2 million respectively. This pattern is common in both the rural and urban areas (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2016). So, ‘what makes the female workforce’s share comparatively low both in the home and abroad’ is a crucial question. Similarly, although both male and female share almost same economic, environmental and political reality, what makes the male population migrate more than their female counterpart? Different studies identified varied factors which may affect both negatively and positively the male migration, but the existing literature suggests that the social factors play the decisive role in the case of female migration. Ullah (2007) finds 12 structural factors in his study which are largely affecting the female migration. Among them, religion, education, and language capacity are the most important (Ullah, 2007). Among various factors, the followings have been much discussed issues:

Socio-Cultural Practices

Since gender attributes are largely determined by the social and cultural values, the migration decisions of the females vastly depend on them. Because of the flexible gender
role, in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, a large number of female migration occurs every year (Omelaneuk, 2005). On the contrary, the Bangladeshi patriarchal family patterns make the migration decisions to come from the male members of the family. So in this context, it is really difficult for a woman, especially who are unmarried, to go abroad to work at her own will in spite of having her every potential to do good in abroad. However, the married women enjoy a certain amount of decision making power. In a study, it was found that the majority of the female migrants are above the age of 40 and married (Rahman, 2013).

Religion

According to Ullah (2007), religion is the most vital factor which creates hindrance in the Bangladeshi women’s journey to the overseas. As the Muslim family prefers to keep their female members in ‘purdah’, very often they are reluctant to let them go outside the border (Ullah, 2007). But religion has not been an issue in female migration in other Muslim countries such as Indonesia, which has a higher percentage of female migrants. In the year 2015, Indonesia’s female migrant’s percentage was 42% of the total migrants, whereas Bangladesh had only 13% (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). This may be the result of the more conservative version of religious practices in Bangladesh. As Omelaneuk (2005) finds that the more religious or cultural restriction imposed upon the female, the less emigration occurs. For example, in the Indian state Kerala, the proportion of Muslim migrants are lowest comparing to the other sections of the society (Zachariah, Mathew, & Rajan, 2001).

Education

Education is the most vital factor on the way to women empowerment. In order to equip the women population to integrate into the development process of the country, education is one of the most important factors (Villualuz, 2000). Literacy rate among the Bangladeshi women is much lower compared to men and other countries’ females. The literacy rate is even lower in rural areas of Bangladesh. In the year 2015, the overall literacy rate for both sexes were 63.6%, where the male and female shares were 65.6% and 61.6% respectively. Among them, the literacy rate of women in the rural area was 55.1%, whereas in the urban area it was 71.2% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2016). So, it can be observed that the females of the rural areas have the lowest literacy rate. Due to the poor education, the rural women have less employment opportunity and have less knowledge of the changing world context. Moreover, for the same reason, they have limited access to the information and little knowledge of the contemporary world (Ullah, 2007). Apparently, the less educated group has fewer opportunity to migrate overseas.

Government Migration Policy

In every country of the world, government policy plays a decisive role in encouraging or discouraging the migration process. For Asian countries, this reality is much more visible, and Sri Lanka is one of the major examples of this. In 1970, the government of Sri Lanka formulated policy encouraging female migrants and took some pro-active initiatives understanding the demand of the labour markets of the Gulf countries. As a result, by 1980s, 90% of its international labour force was female in the Gulf region (Siddiqui, Migration and Gender in Asia, 2008). Contrast to that, the Bangladesh Government policy was very much
unfavourable to the female migration, which subsequently leads to the poor female workforce in the international labour markets and the present policy also has nothing encouraging for female migration.

**CHALLENGES FACED BY THE FEMALE MIGRANTS**

Women face different sorts of problems in the migration process. According to Sijapati (2015), the phases of problems can be divided into the following four categories:

**Pre-migration Stage**

*Restrictive Social and Gender Norms*

Like other Asian countries, in Bangladesh, the gender norms are very strict, and women have very limited decision-making power. This results in difficulties for women who wish to migrate resulting in lower female migration rate (UN Women, 2013). Oishi (2002) reports that countries with higher levels of female autonomy in the household have higher rates of female migration. So, women face difficulties in persuading the male members of their families. This culture affects negatively on the female migration, as most of the time the males are reluctant to let them go abroad.

*Trafficking*

Due to the limited access to information and illiteracy, women are vulnerable to the trafficking. It is often found that the females are trafficked and being sold to the brothels in both internal and external migration cases. Mostly in rural areas, females are offered lucrative jobs with high salaries by brokers or middlemen, who are usually known to their families. And, afterwards, they send the females to the bordering countries, who would end up working in the sex industries. In the South Asia, Bangladesh and Nepal are the two most vulnerable countries of origin, from where women and girls are trafficked to the bordering countries. Every year around 10,000 to 20,000 women and girls are trafficked to India, Pakistan, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates from the other South Asian countries (Rahaman, 2015).

*High Cost of Migration*

In spite of several formal instruments working in the migration process, around 55 to 60 percent recruitments take place through individual initiatives and personal connections (Siddiqui, 2004). Very often these formalities are done via sub-agents or brokers, which result in increased migration cost than usual causing several forms of harassments and distresses to the migrants (Barakat, Hossain, & Haque, 2014). Since the females have limited options to go abroad and less information, they become easy victims of these brokers and pay high migration cost.
Difficulties in Managing Migration Costs

As women in Bangladesh lack necessary access to the resources and opportunities, they face difficulties in managing high migration cost (Caritus Internationalis, 2010). For this, they borrow money from the NGOs or the ‘mahajans’ of their locality at high interests and becomes indebted for the long term. Later, the lion’s share of their earning is used to repay the debts (Sijapati, 2015).

In the Transit

Due to the lack of communication skills and education, the female migrants very often face difficulties during travelling, especially those who are not regular travellers, face harassments and hostilities at the exit and entry points (Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa, 2009). If the migrants are transported through the illegal channel, they become victims of physical exploitations by the transporters, fellow male travellers or border security guards during travel time (Jolly & Reeves, 2005).

At the Destination

Payments, Working Hours and Service Benefits

The complaints regarding payments of salary are the most common suffering for almost all the female migrants around the world. Even signing a contract does not guarantee them about timely and proper payments from their employers (Siddiqui, 2008). The domestic workers frequently suffer than the workers of the formal sectors. For the female workers, working experiences in the Middle East are the worst than the experiences of other parts of the world. According to a study, the Bangladeshi female migrants receive at least 20% less salary to that was mentioned in the contract. They are also deprived of other job benefits such as bonus increments, overtime and holidays. The complaints of the Bangladeshi garment workers working in the UAE garment sector about the irregular payments of ‘over time’ duties they perform, is much common. Long working hours is another common complaint of the female migrant workers. Heavy work for 15-20 hours in a row is not unusual among the migrant workers of both domestic and formal sectors in the Middle East (Barakat & Ahasan, 2014).

Physical, Mental and Emotional Abuses

The Middle Eastern countries, especially the Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been the popular destinations for the female workers. Around 30.28% of women workers work there as domestic workers who are at the risk of physical and mental abuses mostly including rape, confinement, poor wages or no wage. They suffer most as they have very limited scope to contact outside (Barakat & Ahasan, 2014). Virtually the conditions of those migrants are like slaves. They are reportedly beaten and sexually abused when they ask for their salaries. Other countries like Thailand and Malaysia, where a considerable number of female workers go, incidents of mental and physical abuses are also not very uncommon. In the Asian countries, where very often the females are trafficked or illegally entered anyway, they are handed over to the Police after being exploited and then kept in detained for illegal entry to the country (Ranjan, 2016).
Workplace Conditions

The skilled labours working abroad, enjoy much better conditions in the working environment, but the working and living conditions of the majority of the semi-skilled and unskilled workers are extremely poor. A section of the workers is accommodated within the factory premises. They rent their own accommodation and live with other migrants from Bangladesh. In a typical situation, a large group of people is accommodated in a small room, with little or no privacy and the extremely unhygienic environment. Most of the female garment workers complained about the environment being intolerably hot to them. Very often they are devoid of drinking water and sanitary facilities. Moreover, the conditions of their working places are often very hazardous also. They work there with minimum security measures (Siddiqui, 2004; 2008).

Re-integration

Social stigma is the main problems for returnee migrants. In spite of remarkable contributions to both the family and the social level, the returnee female migrants are not accepted very whole-heartedly by their families and societies. Most of the time they are suspected and misjudged of their sexual misconduct and other sorts of criminal activities by their families and friends. Very often they are kept detached from their children by their husbands on the ground of protecting the children from being spoiled. Some studies reveal that even the returned migrants who become a victim of sexual harassment abroad, confront violence at the hands of husbands or in-laws upon coming back home (Sijapati, 2015). Apart from this, the returnee female migrants find it almost impossible to have an easy access in the society than their male colleagues (Migration Forum Asia, 2011).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the female members comprise almost 50% of the total population of Bangladesh, still the number of female migrants does not represent the real picture of women participation. It is true that the women in Bangladesh have a very low voice not only in the family decision making process but also in everywhere. Even though it is quiet surprising that the participation of female in every sphere in Bangladesh is quiet encouraging. Even in some services such as military, police, which is traditionally considered as male service, the percentage of female participation is increasing there day by day at a good pace. In the case of overseas migration, also the female number is increasing, but not in that way as it should be. The female migration contributes to the significant development of the household, society and the nation as a whole, but still, the issue has been less addressed by the government. In order to encourage more female to migrate, proper initiatives should be taken by the government. At the same time, the society also has to play a good role in this regard.

Considering the scenario of the international female migration from Bangladesh the following recommendations are made to improve the situation.

- Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy (2006) and all other current existing laws are not enough to address the female migration issues (Migration Forum Asia, 2011). So, programs and legal amendments should be brought to address the complex issues, especially the social factors relating to the female migrants.
• Though the gender inequality has been removed from primary education with women’s enrolments at 55% compared to 45% of their male counterparts, women’s enrolments in the vocational and technical education still remain poor (Migration Forum Asia, 2011). This is a major cause for the less number of females working under skilled migrants criterion. In order to increase the skilled female migrant, the government should establish more specialized training institutes and set priority to train the female migrants in order to compete with other labour exporting countries like the Philippines, India, Indonesia, etc.

• It has been found that the female migrants face severe problems with re-integration with their families and societies. So, the government should take proper steps to establish an appropriate mechanism for re-integration of the female workers such as awareness building programs among the common people, especially in the rural areas to lessen the existing negative views towards women employment.

• Bangladesh very recently signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for sending 200,000 workers to Malaysia and Hong Kong by the year 2013, which will also include female migrants (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 2015). But it is noteworthy that there is no reservation for female quotas in these treaties. So, in order to decrease gender disparity, specific quota should be introduced for female, at least for a certain period of time.

• Since female workers face very tough conditions while working overseas, the government should initiate more MoUs, bilateral and multilateral agreements with the countries, which are the major destinations for female workers.

REFERENCE


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