



Safe and Fair Migration from the Perspective of Women Migrant Garments Workers (WMGW) in Bangladesh



A Feminist Participatory Action Research Project



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

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This research report is part of a multi-country Feminist Participatory Research Project implemented by The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) in partnership with colleagues in South, South East and West Asia. GAATW gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Women's Fund Asia to carry out this project.

GAATW and the Research Partners stand by the process and findings from the researches. Views and Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of Women's Fund Asia.

Acknowledgements

KarmojibiNari started its journey twenty-eight years ago on International Labour day, 1 May 1991. The organisation is still marching on the road of women's rights and equality. Over the years KN organised formal and informal sector workers, especially women workers. KN strengthened their leadership capacity and advocated with the relevant authorities to harmonise the existing regulations, amend and/or enact new ones and for effective implementation of the laws for the wellbeing of workers.

KarmojibiNari has conducted numerous researches on the rights of formal and informal sector workers. The present report is an outcome of a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) project supported by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW). This is a unique type of research in Bangladesh and for KN. Thus, our first thanks go to GAATW for providing us with this opportunity and for their continuous technical and content support throughout the project.

We also thank our Government representatives for taking the time to share valuable opinions and information with us. We further recognise our colleagues from the KN field team who collected the information from different FGDs and interviews. As the concept FPAR is very new to us, we received assistance from several academics who helped us clarify the concept and we thank them for their help.

But most of all, we are grateful to the women migrant workers and their relatives who participated in the research and shared their invaluable lived experiences with migration and work. Without them, this study would not be possible.

This report is based on information from various sources. If there is any misunderstanding, we apologise for that. We hope that the information presented here will be useful to activists, government officials, students, and most of all, to Bangladeshi women migrant workers.

The Research Team of KarmojibiNari¹

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About GAATW's Feminist Participatory Action Research Project on Safe and Fair Migration in Asia

In 2018-2019, the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS), in collaboration with eleven organisations across nine countries in Asia carried out a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) focusing on 'Safe and Fair Migration: A feminist perspective on women's rights to mobility and work'.

In our study, FPAR is used as a framework and approach to capturing women migrants' complex realities and perspectives on labor and migration. What distinguishes FPAR from conventional research is that it is deliberately women-centered and participant driven, the knowledge comes from the women (community) and owned by them, and based on their lived experiences, the research participants propose solutions so the research results become a tool to collectively organize advocacy actions. Therefore, this is an outcome of deconstructing the dominant understanding of safe migration and fair migration and reshaping the concepts from a feminist perspective. We believe our approach of building knowledge from ground up and creating evidence base will add value in addressing the structural causes of power disparities that affect women's migration and mobility.

Our research community ranges across South, Southeast, and West Asia offering views from both countries of origin and destination, as well as adding the perspective of internal migration from rural to urban areas. Three distinguished sectors of work are covered in this study including domestic work, garment industry, and entertainment work.

The lead researcher groups who facilitated discussions with women migrants include Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self Employed Women's Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), Women Forum for Women in Nepal (Nepal), and an independent researcher based in Jordan.

"Two people will shout as much as they can. But ten people are louder than two."

Borrowing from one of our FPAR research participants' words, we hope each piece of our collective study will help amplify women migrant workers' voice to bring about structural change for a safe and fair migration that works for women.

GAATW-IS gratefully acknowledges the support of Women's Fund Asia in conducting this research project. A consolidated regional report and the country research briefs are available on the GAATW (www.gaatw.org) website.

FOREWORD TO THE 'SAFE AND FAIR' RESEARCH SERIES

In the past several decades neoliberal globalisation, increasing inequality between and within countries, conflict, climate change and environmental degradation have prompted unprecedented levels of migration. We are seeing a major trend towards increasing internal migration and urbanisation within countries – by 2050, the global population living in urban areas is expected to reach 66 per cent. Meanwhile there are around 250 million international migrants worldwide, of whom half are women. In some destination countries, demographic, labour market and economic changes (the privatisation of public services, aging societies, women's increasing participation in the workforce) have created a demand for care and service sector work, with an expectation that this demand will be filled by low-wage female workers, in the domestic, care, manufacturing and entertainment sectors. In origin countries, climate change, economic restructuring and industrialisation have led to the loss of traditional livelihoods, agricultural decline, environmental degradation, wage stagnation and a growth in precarious work – resulting in gross inequalities, and creating push factors for women to seek alternative income generating activities, including through migrating for work.

While these structural changes play a huge role in shaping “push and pull factors” for migration, it needs to be acknowledged that women are not merely passive agents in their migration, but that for many, migration is a way of asserting agency and finding freedom from patriarchal societal norms. Many women choose to migrate in order to see the world and gain new experiences, find economic opportunities, to be able to support families and to exercise autonomy and social independence. Despite the many risks and the challenges in accessing information about migration processes and opportunities, women continue to migrate all over the world, including from marginalised communities and rural villages. However, there is a lack of recognition of migration as a right, and of women workers as independent economic actors. States' labour migration policies are broadly missing a human rights and gender-transformative approach to migration and work.

Activists on the left have long critiqued the exploitative nature of some cross-border labour migration schemes that employ workers on poverty wages in substandard conditions, while outsourcing the costs of social reproduction to countries of origin. In the past 20 years, feminists, including GAATW, have tried to bring attention to the particular discrimination and risks created for women migrants by laws and policies governing, and failing to govern, labour migration. Although such initiatives have tried to stress women's perspectives, the conversation about migration has sometimes backfired and produced unintended consequences. Governments of origin and destination countries have in some instances responded not by making migration protective of human rights, but by curbing it through restrictions on women's mobility on the basis of age, marital status, pregnancy and maternal status, and category of work, especially for low-wage workers, and increasing border controls. Much of this is done with the supposed aim of 'protecting' women from trafficking and exploitation; however, what these protectionist restrictions have done is open up a market for clandestine and debt-financed migration, creating or exacerbating the very vulnerability, violence, and exploitation they were intended to prevent. While non-governmental

organisations (NGOs) have tried to bring issues of human rights to the table, they have, perhaps unintentionally, contributed to the repressive government agendas. Some anti-trafficking NGOs perpetuate narratives and images of migrant women as victims, and infantilising women by portraying them as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection. As a feminist alliance, GAATW sees its role as supporting the empowerment of migrant women to move and work safely and with dignity. This feminist participatory action research project is our collective effort to deconstruct and reshape a narrative of labour migration that is safe and fair for women workers, especially those in the most marginalised segments of society. We hope that this study serves as evidence to fight for the rights of migrant workers and amplify women's voices in the local, regional, and international migration agenda.

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The readymade garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh that was established in the 1980s has grown to such an extent that Bangladesh is today the second largest exporter of readymade garments in the world after China. Around 83.5% of the country's total export earning comes from garments sector.² The more than 4,500 garment factories operating in big cities like Dhaka and Chittagong have created job opportunities and resulted in an exodus of rural women to the cities. Around four million people are now working in garments factories. In 2011, it was estimated that almost 85% of workers are women.³ However, a study conducted in 2016 by Center for Policy dialogue (CPD) revealed that the participation of women in the garment sector has declined to 60.8% mainly due to automation of garments factories. The garment factory owners think that the women workers are not able to operate modern machines properly.⁴ As factories advance their technology, women garment workers who are mostly involved in the manual work are being replaced by machines.⁵

While women outnumber men in the RMG sector, they are also less educated, and hence rarely promoted to become supervisors,⁶ and male workers receive higher wages, even for the same job positions.⁷ Once believed to be a women-friendly industry – because it opened up a rare opportunity for women to enter the formal labour market – the garment industry is now turning its back on women. With ever increasing global competition in the garment supply chains, race to the bottom strategies have been normalised. Under this scenario, women are denied a living wage, decent work, occupational safety and social protection, among others. In addition, with increased automation in factories, there are now more opportunities for men in the RMG sector.

There is an increased trend, however, of Bangladeshi women seeking jobs outside the country, especially in Jordan. In countries like Jordan, the garment sector is expanding and there is a huge demand for skilled and unskilled women garment workers, which presents an opportunity for women from Bangladesh, especially those who are already familiar with the work in the RMG sector. According to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, 48,890 women garments workers migrated to Jordan through government channels⁸ between 2010 and June 2018 but the total number is likely to be higher, considering migrants who went abroad through brokers. As such, the recent years have seen a change in the pattern of migration as cross-border migration has added to the rural to urban migration.

² Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, 'Trade Information', retrieved 20 June 2019, <http://www.bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/tradeinformation>.

³ War on Want, *Stitched Up: women workers in Bangladeshi garments sector*, War on Want, London, 2011, p. 2.

⁴ Daily Star, 'Women losing more jobs to automation: CPD study', *Daily Star*, 4 March 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/women-losing-more-jobs-automation-cpd-study-1543222>.

⁵ Z Islam, 'Are machines taking over the jobs of female garment workers?', *Daily Star*, 18 May 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/labour-rights/are-machines-taking-over-the-jobs-female-garment-workers-1577764>.

⁶ Center for Policy Dialogue reports that only about 0.5 per cent of managers in RMG enterprises are female.

⁷ N Islam and A S B Chowdhuri, 'Socio-Economic Factors of Readymade Garments Workers in Bangladesh', *D.U. Journal of Marketing*, no. 15, 2012.

⁸ Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Annual Report 2017-2018.

Now the fundamental question is to what extent is migration safe and fair for the migrants? Exploitation, discrimination and abuse are still commonly faced by women migrant workers both in factories in Bangladesh and overseas.

Major sources of exploitation in the migration process are the illegal practices adopted by brokers or social networks who send women overseas by making false promises of lucrative job opportunities. Women's lack of correct information makes them easy victims of brokers and leads them into a trap of deception and indebtedness, followed by exploitation and abuse in the migration journey as well as at the work place. As a result, many NGOs and government bodies have placed emphasis on the 'lack of information that leads to unsafe migration'. They advocate information dissemination and have initiated programmes to raise the awareness of migrants. However, this belief that 'information will save the women' has not always worked as expected. A domestic worker who went to Saudi Arabia with a clearance from BMET (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training) - a state institution expected to promote a channel of 'safe migration' and to ensure workers' rights and safety throughout the migration journey - was detained and deported to Bangladesh after five months of non-payment of salary.⁹ Her case should not be overlooked as mere 'misfortune' or regarded as an 'accidental case' but should be seen as a clear sign of loopholes in the labour migration governance. While access to information about recruitment processes is important according to a number of studies,¹⁰ there are fundamental concerns that need to be highlighted. Safe migration cannot be achieved only by information. More proactive efforts and action should be taken by the state to ensure women workers' rights are fulfilled throughout the process of migration and recruitment within Bangladesh and in the destination countries.

Under the present emigration system, individual migrants are responsible for the management of risk in ways that allow the state to avoid accountability, reproduces unequal power relations and ignores the structural dimension of power.

Therefore, this study explores the experiences of female migrant workers before leaving and the reality they faced in workplace in the destination countries. The findings of this study will contribute to defining issues for policy advocacy both at national and global level.

Hence the purpose of this study was threefold: first, to allow women migrant workers in the garment sector to voice their experiences of migration; second, based on their migration experiences, to identify the gaps between safe/fair migration and the complex realities of the present migration regime which will inform whether the current migration initiatives are effective or not in Bangladesh; and third, to come up with an evidence-based advocacy programme to improve women migrant workers' experience.

⁹ O U Bhuyan, 'Returnee woman migrants abused abroad struggle to lead normal life', *New Age*, 26 December 2018, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/59903/returnee-woman-migrants-abused-abroad-struggle-to-lead-normal-life>.

¹⁰ ILO, *Recruitment experiences of South Asian migrant workers in Jordan's garment industry*, ILO, Geneva, 2018.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S LABOUR AND MIGRATION IN BANGLADESH

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh emerged in the early 1980s following political turmoil and the decline of the jute industry, which left the country in economic hardship. The adoption of trade liberalisation policies made way for setting up export processing zones that were given investment incentives such as tax exemptions, 100% foreign ownership, duty-free imports, and low minimum wages¹¹ and resulted in Bangladesh becoming an ideal location for garment production.¹² The garment industry has grown to play a significant role in the Bangladesh economy, contributing to 13.10% of the country's GDP in 2015.¹³ In August 2018, the garment industry accounted for over 80% of the exports, worth BDT 230.71 billion.¹⁴ Of the RMG exports from Bangladesh, 85% go to two major markets – the European Union and the United States of America.¹⁵ Bangladesh has over 3,000 garment factories employing over 4 million people, majority of them women, with some sources suggesting that factory jobs may be one of the few socially acceptable ways for uneducated or low-educated women to earn a living.¹⁶

Lack of education and skills results in many young women entering city centres to seek work in garment factories or domestic work. Due to ingrained patriarchal norms, women are less able to speak up and respond to abusive male managers than their male counterparts.¹⁷ This makes women more desirable employees as they are more likely to accept bad working conditions. This may also be because they are under pressure to earn a living if they have children. The man may walk away from the family but women find it difficult to walk away from responsibility for their children.

The feminisation of Bangladesh's RMG industry has been a topic of debate among scholars, policy makers, and stakeholders regarding its impact on gender in/equality. One source notes that, 'capitalist interests along with patriarchal norms and values influence the use of women as a cheap, flexible and docile labor to earn the maximum profits at the minimum possible cost.'¹⁸ While contributing income to the household has shown to increase women's bargaining power within their family,¹⁹ the feminization of employment in the RMG sector has had other consequences, and not made positive changes at all with regards to gender

¹¹ Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority, Labour Issues: Money Wages Structure of the EPZ Workers, 2018, retrieved from <http://bepza.gov.bd/pages/details/labour-issues>.

¹² A Anwary, 'Feminised Workforce in Transnational Production: Bangladesh ready-made garment industry, *History and Sociology of South Asia*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 174-191.

¹³ Emerging Credit Rating Ltd., *RMG Industry of Bangladesh*, ECRL, 2016.

¹⁴ Trading Economics, 'Bangladesh Exports', <https://tradingeconomics.com/bangladesh/exports>.

¹⁵ S Islam *et al.*, 'Ready-Made Garments Sector of Bangladesh: Its Contribution and Challenges towards Development', <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309702078/download>.

¹⁶ See N Ahmed, 'Sustaining Ready-made Garment Exports from Bangladesh', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2009, 597-618.

¹⁷ M M Rashid, 'Rural-Urban Female Migration in Bangladesh: Need for Information Support and Institutional Responses', *GJHSS*, vol. 13, issue 5, 2013.

¹⁸ S Islam, 'Feminization of Employment and Gender Inequality of Bangladesh Labor Market: The Case of Garment Industries', *Developing Country Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2016, pp. 157-168, p. 157.

¹⁹ F Ahmed, A Greenleaf and A Sacks, 'The Paradox of Export Growth in Areas of Weak Governance: The Case of the Ready Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh', *World Development*, vol. 56, 2014, pp. 258–271.

relations.²⁰ The exploitative nature of the industry results in employers targeting women based on their need for and willingness to work, the low cost of employing them and the ease with which they may be retrenched.²¹ Women endure poor working conditions and have limited space for bargaining with employers.

In 2013, following the collapse of Rana Plaza,²² legislative reforms were introduced which aimed to improve working conditions for garment workers with many retailers and consumers demanding safer working conditions. However, there has been limited progress in achieving commitments.²³ Retailers were unwilling to pay higher manufacturing prices leading to factory owners (at some points) losing money on orders. Several retailers moved their factories to India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia due to concerns regarding safety, higher wages, and political unrest.²⁴ In 2014 the minimum wage increased from BDT 3,000 to BDT 5,300 (USD 67) per month, and in 2018 it became BDT 8,000 (USD 95). This salary is considered as more dignifying compared to other informal jobs available for women. However, women workers on average are paid half the salary of their male counterparts because they are rarely represented in higher-level positions and are seen as unable to hold supervisor and management positions.²⁵ Most women are not interested in promotion because they have to give more time and they feel uncomfortable with the positions.

There are approximately 120 registered garment trade unions, with the largest being the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) where women make up the majority of the members. Factories in EPZ restrict employees from joining trade unions and it has been documented that workers are fired for joining unions.²⁶ Furthermore, legislation guaranteeing social insurance provisions such as maternity leave, free medical examinations in cases of workplace accidents, and compensation is not usually implemented.²⁷ The reluctance of RMG factory owners to invest in training and development facilities leaves limited room for workers to build skills and the monotony of repetitive work results in low motivation in the workplace.²⁸

POLICY AND REGULATORY CONTEXT RELATED TO LABOUR MIGRATION

People in the Bengal delta region have been mobile for centuries. Bangladesh witnessed international labour migration during the colonial times when the United Kingdom faced labour shortages after the Second World War, and pulled labour migrants from Bangladesh, among other Commonwealth states.²⁹ One of the earliest out-migration streams centred on

²⁰ Islam, 2016.

²¹ Anwary, 2017.

²² On 24 April 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which housed five garment factories, killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500. The Rana plaza disaster was among the worst industrial accidents on record, which awoke the world to the poor labour conditions faced by workers in the ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh.

²³ U Barua and M A Ansary, 'Workplace safety in Bangladesh ready-made garment sector: 3 years after the Rana Plaza collapse', *International Journal of Occupational Safety and Ergonomics*, vol. 23, issue 4, 2017, pp. 578-583.

²⁴ S Quadir, 'Rising wages squeeze Bangladesh garment makers as factories await upgrades', *Reuters*, 14 April 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/bangladesh-garments-idUSL4N0MT12K20140413>.

²⁵ Islam, 2016

²⁶ Clean Clothes Campaign, *Factsheet Bangladesh*, <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/factsheets/bangladesh-factsheet-2-2015.pdf>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ S Islam, *et al.*

²⁹ B Eetzold and B Mallick, 'International Migration from Bangladesh', *BPB*, 30 November 2015, <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/216104/international-migration-from-bangladesh>.

male workers, whereas women mostly accompanied their husbands and fathers. This was in part due to the British colonial system that restricted female migration.³⁰ Skilled female workers started migrating in 1980 when the Bangladeshi government allowed professional workers such as doctors, nurses, and teachers to work abroad. Migration restrictions on semi-skilled and less skilled women workers remained until 2000. Government policies on migration have since relaxed restrictions on women: in 2003, women workers over the age of 35 years were allowed to migrate; in 2006, the minimum age was reduced to 25 years, and eventually the restriction was lifted for all occupational categories except domestic workers.³¹

Legal Barriers on Women's Mobility and Migration and the history of policy change

- Women's migration from Bangladesh in the past has been governed by legal instruments such as presidential orders and government orders rather than by economic and human development-oriented policy considerations. As a result, women suffer frequently from mistreatment, abuse, exploitation both at home and in the destination country. Cross-country migration policy is much more focused on economic development of the country through remittances sent by the migrant workers, as remittance is the main source of foreign currency reserve of Bangladesh.
- Because of exploitation, especially of women migrant workers, in 1997 nearly all labour migration by women was banned. But government lifted the ban on the migration of non-professional women like nurses (not as a domestic worker) in 2003 under pressure from civil society, women's organisations, labour organisations and think tanks which argued that this restriction on women migration was unconstitutional and discriminatory against women.
- The ban was maintained on migration of unmarried women below 35 years of age going for domestic work in Saudi Arabia. In 2007, this restriction was relaxed to allow women of 25 years of age to migrate for domestic work in the Middle East including Saudi Arabia.
- In 2010, the government-owned recruitment agency BOESL started sending garment workers to Jordan with a minimum service charge which is BDT 12,000 for skilled garment workers and if any company takes more than 200 workers, BDT10,000 for each worker.
- Under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), a National Labour Migration Forum was established in 2018 where different stakeholders are involved and work to make the migration process smooth. In 2013, the government of Bangladesh passed the *Overseas Employment and Migrants Act*. Under this law, migrant workers can lodge criminal cases for deception or fraud against recruiting, visa, and travel agencies as well as employers. In civil cases, they can seek compensation from these actors.

³⁰ H Sultana and A Fatima, 'Factors Influencing Migration of Female Workers: A case of Bangladesh', *IZA Journal of Development and Migration*, vol. 7, issue 4, 2017.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Chronological development of migration laws and institutions regulating labour migration from Bangladesh	
1976	Establishment of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)
1982	A new Emigration Ordinance replaced the 1922 Emigration Act
1990	Establishment of Welfare Fund for Migrant Workers
1998	Signature of the UN International Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
2002	Government starts to grant licenses to agencies for recruiting overseas employment
2003	Government relaxes restrictions on female labour migration
2011	Establishment of Migrant Welfare Bank (ProbashiKallyan Bank)
2012	Memorandum of Understanding between Bangladesh and Malaysia on sending and receiving workers
2013	Enactment of the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013

While international labour migration has a long history, there is larger scale internal migration in Bangladesh. Almost two-thirds of migration occurs from rural to urban areas, according to Bangladesh Employers' Federation's report in 2015.³²

UN DESA reported that there are 7.5 million emigrants from Bangladesh,³³ constituting 5 percent of the total population.³⁴ The top destination countries of Bangladeshi migrant workers include India, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, United Kingdom, United States, and Malaysia.³⁵ Many Bangladeshi women migrate to the Gulf countries for domestic work and to the garment factories. Majority of the migrant workers enter destination countries through informal sources, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.³⁶

The push and pull factors influencing rural-urban migration and international migration are 'complex and interrelated'.³⁷ Studies show that the overall lack of opportunities and low development is increasingly associated with labour migration.³⁸ Bangladesh has limited land area and scarcity of land is compounded by the effects of population growth and loss of land due to climate change.³⁹ Natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and riverbank erosion in a rural economy like Bangladesh that is highly dependent on agriculture have a tremendous impact on livelihoods and food security, exacerbating conditions that influence migration.⁴⁰ Landless people in rural Bangladesh are increasingly moving to cities and forming overcrowded urban slums. Therefore, it is unsurprising that people dependent on the agrarian economy are moving to urban centres and overseas.⁴¹

³² ILO, *Preliminary assessment of impact of labour migration from South Asia on the South Asian employers*, ILO, Bangkok, 2015, p. 3.

³³ Migration Data Portal, 'Bangladesh', https://migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=50&focus=profile&i=stock_abs_&t=2017&sm49=145.

³⁴ Knomad, 'Migration', <https://www.knomad.org/data/migration/emigration?tid%5B71%5D=71>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Sultana and Fatima.

³⁷ Rashid, 2013, p. 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ N Adri, 'Climate-induced' Rural-Urban Migration in Bangladesh: Experience of Migrants in Dhaka City, PhD Thesis, University of London, 2014, https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/24608643/Thesis_Neelopal.pdf

⁴¹ Rashid, 2013.

As economic and social conditions are reported as the main factors pushing people out of South Asian countries, Bangladesh shares these features.⁴² Women in the migrant workforce worldwide are primarily engaged in the informal sector or low-paid work. These jobs are characterised by a lack of protection policies, which even so remain largely unknown to the migrant women workers. Degrees of abuse faced by migrant workers varies tremendously; some receive less pay or are required to work extensive hours, while others face verbal or physical violence and abuse.⁴³

Existing policy gaps and barriers due to which women lack protection

- Women potential migrant workers lack correct information about regular migration channels for employment because information is not disseminated widely as it should be and there is a lack of awareness raising and publicity campaign by MoEWOE.
- In case of limited TTCs (Technical Training Centres), potential migrants lack training in the skills that are required for overseas jobs.
- There is no specific grading mechanism to classify recruitment agents according to their capacities to recruit workers for particular countries of destination and the monitoring system of recruitment is not effective.
- There is no monitoring agency to assess the international labour market dynamics and to guide women potential migrant workers to choose their destination based on market prospects.
- Health information provided to women in the pre-departure module is not adequate or relevant to the problems they presently face, as for instance there is limited orientation on sexually transmitted infections and HIV, which are important concerns for migrant women.
- Because women migrant workers face problems not only as workers but also as women, as a consequence of sexual harassment, physical abuse and because they are denied basic rights by employers, there need to be special provisions made for them in the law to make it possible for them to receive assistance and justice.
- There are no specific directions for ministries including the Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, and Commerce to ensure proper welfare, facilities and safety for female migrant workers.
- Domestic work is not recognised as labour or as an occupation and domestic workers are not entitled to the benefits available under the labour law. Domestic worker protection and welfare policy does not provide any specific direction to entitle them to salaries and other allowances as full-time workers or to a safe space to sleep while they are off-duty. They are also not entitled to four months of maternity leave, and to a ceiling on working hours.

⁴² Bangladesh Employers Federation, *Preliminary Assessment of Impact of Labour Migration from South Asia on the South Asian Employers*, 2015.

⁴³ Sultana and Fatima.

MIGRATION THROUGH INFORMAL CHANNELS

There are no accurate statistics available on how many women garments workers migrate abroad through informal channels, which is usually through a broker who is referred to as *dalal*. It was found that many of the FGD participants in this study migrated through informal channels incurring significantly higher monetary costs compared to those going through the regular channels. In most of the cases, they or their family arranged money for migration expenditure informally at high interest rates. Though there are more than 500 licensed agencies specialising in recruiting female workers, nearly all of them are based far from the rural areas where most potential migrants live. Potential migrants rely on a network of unregulated, unauthorised *dalals*, who identify potential migrants and assist them to migrate. In the rural areas where most of the women come from, people do not trust city dwellers. If they see a neighbour building a new, large house with a salary from overseas, they think they can do the same if they find an overseas job and seek out a *dalal*. This continues no matter how many stories they hear about women who are cheated.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Many studies have explored the conditions of women garment workers in Bangladesh but the conditions of migrant women in garments factories overseas have not been studied adequately. The trend of overseas migration of women garment workers is relatively recent. From this point of view, this research is significant.

This research tried to explore how the WMGW perceive 'safe and fair migration' based on their experiences. At the same time, the research tried to understand the conditions of migration that the WMGW termed unsafe and unfair.

Objective of the research:

- To understand the views and experience of Women Migrant Garments Workers regarding safe, unsafe and fair, unfair migration.
- To find out the gaps in current migration initiatives in Bangladesh (according to government, international agencies, NGOs)
- To initiate advocacy actions for improving labour migration regimes and women migrant garment workers' situation.

Research participants:

The researchers conducted interviews with five groups of people: Potential Women Migrant Garment Worker (PWMGW), Returnee Women Migrant Garment Worker (RWMGW), Re-migrant Women Migrant Garment Worker (RmWMGW), Women garment workers who are living in abroad (WMGWA) and relevant Government officials.

METHODOLOGY

KN conducted this research using mainly qualitative methods. Though Bangladesh is home to thousands of garments factories, KN picked Mirpur as the study area for this research as there is a concentration of woman garments workers there. The area was chosen also because KN has a wide network in Mirpur, which facilitated this research.

Based on the outcomes of two community meetings, one pilot Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and a meeting with the FPAR experts, KN concluded that the necessary data can be collected by conducting five FGD, 15 in-depth interviews, five Key Informant Interviews and three case studies. The respondents of this study were Women Migrant Garments Workers (WMGW) who were divided into three categories: a) First-time aspiring migrants, b) Returnee WMGW and c) Return migrants who aspire to go back.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD): KN conducted two FGDs with potential WMGW with thirteen participants in total; two FGDs with ten returnee WMGW in each; and one FGD with five returnees who wish to migrate again. Therefore, 28 respondents took part in the FGDs.

In-depth interview: KN conducted in-depth individual interviews with 15 garments workers. Among them, five were potential WMGW, six were returnee WMGW, two were returnees who wished to migrate again, and two were current migrants.

Key Informant Interview: Four persons were interviewed as key informants. The Director General of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) of the Government of Bangladesh in order to gather information relevant to government initiatives and policy regime for safe and fair migration for women. The director of Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services limited BOESL was interviewed to collect information on the scenario of women garments workers' migration as well on the recruitment procedures through government and private recruitment agencies. The joint secretary of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) was interviewed. The Principal of Bangladesh German Technical Training Center was interviewed to collect information on the selection process for the garments workers who wish to go abroad. KIIs were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire.

Case Study: Three case studies of women migrants were prepared, of which two were selected from the 15 respondents of in-depth interviews and one was of a worker who died. One case study depicted the story of successful WMGW who returned home, and the second case study illustrated the expectations of a potential WMGW who intended to migrate abroad. The third case study was of a returnee WMGW who failed to continue working abroad because of a serious illness. This woman died after returning home. This case study was prepared collecting information from other garments workers knew her.

Data Analysis: All the information was divided into different information categories using Qualitative Coding System.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

IN-COUNTRY MIGRATION

Driving factors of rural to urban migration in Bangladesh

During the FGDs, women highlighted several reasons as responsible for in-country migration from rural areas to cities. They admitted that they did not leave their home willingly, but were compelled to migrate when they saw that their families could not afford three meals a day, clothing, or other expenses. Migration seemed to them like the only option to make money to improve their lives. In many cases, the whole family migrated to cities. Once they arrived in the city, male members took occupations such as rickshaw pulling, day labouring, or a small business, but the opportunities for female family members were more limited. Women can mainly start working in garments factories as unskilled labour or as a domestic work in the home of city dwellers. Migrating families relied mostly on farming for their livelihood before they moved to the cities.

A few women had migrated to Dhaka with their families when they were children. They could not say exactly why their families migrated, but later when they were grown-ups, they heard from their parents that they migrated to Dhaka because of complete lack of economic opportunities, and neighbours had told them that there was work in Dhaka.

As a riverine country, river erosion is one of the major push factors for migration to cities. Many of the FGD participants mentioned that they became destitute, losing their houses and cultivable land due to river erosion, and were forced to migrate to the cities where they took shelter in the slums.

Some of the FGD participants migrated to Dhaka for other reasons. One reason was family conflict in which their family's property was captured by their relatives through forgery. This is a common scenario in Bangladesh, and victims cannot get remedy, as the people who take others' property are usually politically influential. There were also specific reasons for why women migrated, such as domestic violence and torture by husbands and in-laws.

Overview of conditions of work in RMG factories in Bangladesh

Historically the participation of Bangladeshi rural women in wage employment was not high; in fact, it was lower than other South Asian countries. In rural areas, women are mainly involved in home gardening, poultry, livestock rearing, and household works. Young women and girls usually assist their mothers in this work. These young girls are usually not able to continue their education due to poverty.

The FGD participants of this research are working in RMG sector, so they have had prior experiences with wage work. A few of the respondents had worked as domestic workers. FGD findings also revealed that most of the women entered into garment factories to reduce the economic burden of their households. However, poverty alone cannot explain adequately why women workers predominantly engage in the garment sector. Many of them considered working in a garment factory as a salaried job and thus much better than working as a domestic worker. Besides, the women can enjoy a lot of freedom both financially and socially, as they can earn by themselves and earning is higher than as a domestic worker. Finally, the

garment owners prefer to engage women in the factory as they can be exploited easily. They work at lower wage and do not unite to raise their voices.

FGD participants shared difference experiences working in garment factories in the country. Most of them were dissatisfied with the salary. Though the government has fixed the pay scale of garments workers of different positions, workers are not very happy with that as they think that the wage is still lower considering the high living cost in Dhaka and its adjacent areas. The factory owners claim that they have proposed a 20 per cent hike in minimum wage adjusting inflation, but this is not factually correct. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) at the end of FY14 was 195.08, which increased to 245.22 at the end of FY18, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). This means that if someone purchased something at BDT 100 in FY14, she had to pay BDT 125.70 for purchasing the same item in FY18. Thus, inflation rate is 25.70 per cent in the past five years. Thus, the proposed 20 per cent hike is actually a proposal to cut down the real income of the workers by 5.70 per cent.⁴⁴

The FGD participants shared that they were not satisfied at all with their salary. It was very difficult to maintain family with such a salary and saving was almost impossible. Some of the participants complained that the pressure of work is very high in the factory. Sometimes they were denied to payment for overtime. It is worth mentioning that Bangladeshi garment workers receive the lowest wage among garment workers across the globe.⁴⁵ Some factories even pay less than the minimum wage.

Some of the respondents said that abusive words to the women workers and physical assault are common in the garment factories, but they could not lodge any allegation against the abuser or even share it with anyone. They think that, if they bring allegation to the authorities, they would be fired from the job or forced to resign.

Most the FGD respondent did not have any clear understanding of labour laws in Bangladesh. Only one respondent said that if a female garment worker got pregnant, she is entitled to paid maternity leave for four months. There are also laws that if any worker is fired, she is entitled to receive salary of three months. The other garment workers admitted that they have no idea of labour laws and labour rights.

CROSS-BORDER MIGRATION

Before migrating

Most the migrant garments workers were not able to study beyond primary level education (grade five) and many are illiterate. They had interest to study but failed due to poverty.

'I was reading at class seven but my family was not able to buy books for me. I was always punished for not showing my homework. So I decided to work in a garment factory but my brother beat me a lot for this decision.' - A woman potential migrant garment worker

The fathers and brothers of these women were involved in petty trading or worked as peddler or driver. Their mothers worked as domestic workers, some worked as day labourers,

⁴⁴ A Kibria, 'RMG sector: Minimum wage conundrum', *Financial Express*, 25 July 2018, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/rmg-sector-minimum-wage-conundrum-1532534075>.

⁴⁵ I H Ovi, 'Apparel workers in Bangladesh still the lowest paid by global standards', *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 November 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2018/11/12/apparel-workers-in-bangladesh-still-the-lowest-paid-by-global-standards>.

peddlers or in a garments factory. Most of the respondents got married after starting to work in the garment factory on their own choice. Marriage through family arrangement was very rare. In many cases, conjugal life did not last long. Some of the women were divorced, and some were compelled to flee the family because of domestic violence.

'My husband beat me a lot, didn't give me money for food and other necessities. I migrated abroad so that I can purchase a piece of land to build a house and can live with my child in a better way'. - A re-migrant woman garment worker

'I don't want my child to be a garment worker. I want him to live a more secure life than us. My elder sister went to Mauritius and returned, now she is trying to migrate to Jordan and I am trying to go with her. I am processing for passport and want to get training before leaving the country. I will follow my sister.' - A woman potential migrant garment worker

These are the main deciding factors for women to migrate abroad. We also found that they were the first generation who migrated considering that they would earn and save more money. So the main three causes of migration are demand for cheap labour, better earning opportunities in the destination country and desire for better living standard.

'I migrated abroad through a manpower broker (dalal). I paid him BDT 120,000. My husband borrowed this money from a moneylender at high interest. I didn't know that very little amount is required for migration through a proper channel'- A re-migrant woman garment worker

'My husband tried to go Malaysia through a dalal, but failed and it cost us a big amount of money. I want to go abroad to return back the loan.' - A woman potential migrant garment worker

The study found that regular or official/ government channels for the women migrant garment workers are only available for going to Jordan. The women workers also found it much flexible to go to Jordan. They mentioned that the opportunities regarding living environment, safety and the contracts are clearer in Jordan.

'One of my village relatives is working now in Jordan in a garment factory as an operator. I came to know from her that the company gives her 20,000 as salary and food and accommodation is free. If I go, there I can save my full salary.' – A woman potential migrant garment worker

'My brother-in-law lives in Mauritius. He told me that Mauritius is not good for women. Most of the girls have to engage with illegal tasks. So, I decided to go to Jordan through a proper channel.' - A woman potential migrant garment worker.

In Bangladesh women are now the second generation who are working in the garment sector. Considering the living standards, women garment workers are now more aware about their future and the future of their children. They want to save money for their old age. They want to treat themselves as an experienced worker and want to migrate abroad as skilled workers.

'I've decided to go abroad as a skilled worker in the garment sector. I have 11-12 years of experience in this sector. I heard about the pre-departure training services from the government but don't know the actual process.' - A woman potential migrant garment worker

'I went through BOESL to Jordan. I had to make my passport illegally through a dalal, because there is a mistake in my national ID card. I had paid around 10,000 for that reason. I got training but there was no language training which made me face some difficulties there.' - A returnee WMGW

'I heard that my salary would be from 25 to 30,000 taka but I got less than 20,000. There, I also had to do much more hard work than my country. I could not save money because of wrong information.' - A returnee WMGW

According to the respondents, the main source of receiving information is through informal means. Most of the WMGW are not aware about the legal recruitment agency of the Bangladesh Government and they do not know where to receive proper information. KarmojibiNari has an Information centre (Women Café) in Mirpur area of Dhaka. Some WMGW come to the KarmojibiNari's information centre to learn the right information about migration. After gathering the right information, they also share it with their colleagues in the factory and others in the community.

Unjust and unfair practices in the destination country

According to the FGD participants, life in the foreign country is full of hardship. They had to live there for a long period of time, leaving their families back home. They had difficulties eating foreign food, which tasted different. Most of the women coped by cooking their own food.

Women expressed suspicion about the food they received from the factory that some sort of drug was mixed with it which was responsible for the irregular menstruation that some of the women had experienced. They said they had no evidence but speculated that the employer sought to tamper with their reproductive health. They suspected that some medicine was mixed with the food to suppress their sexual desire; employers do not want women workers to have relationships or engage in sexual activity.

'In Jordan I could not eat the provided food; I think they mix medicine with food which is not good for our health; if I take their food, my menstruation time length increased'. – A returnee WMGW

Accommodation was modest; there was a big room for 12 women. Some respondents mentioned that there were many insects in the room, which bite them at night, and they could not sleep well. They complained to the factory authority and received insect repellent but it did not work well.

Most of them mentioned that the workload in foreign garments factory was huge. If someone became sick, she was forced to continue working while taking medicine.

'When I suffered from severe typhoid, I lost my appetite and could not eat properly, not even talk. The factory manager didn't arrange any treatment but rather sent me to my dormitory. Seeing my condition, some of my male co-workers protested and the manager arranged treatment for me, but the cost of my treatment was taken from my salary.' - A returnee WMGW

Regarding workplace violation, many of the respondent said that the managers treated them badly. The targets were unrealistically high and they had to work until late at night. Sometimes they did not get their actual benefit and salaries. Supervisors were rude like in Bangladesh.

'The main problem is the production pressure. They give us fixed time for refreshments, even for using the toilet. We continue our work until late at night if the target is not reached. If we failed, the managers would call us to their room and use bad language to us.' - A-returnee WMGW

On the other hand, women also shared some of the positive aspects of working as garment factory worker abroad. The main advantage was the higher salary than in Bangladesh. The WMGWs who worked in Jordan mentioned that they were happy with the wage and overtime payment. As they did not have to pay for food and accommodation, they were able to save most of their wage. They could earn BDT 20,000 to 30,000 per month including overtime pay.

'I think there are lot of freedoms when abroad. There is no one there to see and judge what I do. It is better to live abroad than being tortured by my husband at home.' - A returnee WMGW

Migrant women's resistance

Some of the garment workers who migrated to Jordan shared that they were involved in a protest against the factory management, including employer and supervisors, even though they had not protested while they were working in garment factories in Bangladesh. They told us how they mobilised because of not receiving overtime payment. They were forced to work until 9 to 10 at night but denied overtime pay. So, they stopped working and started protesting. The factory management did not do anything at first but they took pictures of the protest. Later they identified the workers who were involved in the protest from these photos. Then they sent those workers back home empty handed and put a red seal in their passport so that they cannot go to abroad again.

Another case involved the death of 10 to 15 female workers due to a fire in a factory. Female workers led another protest. They demanded to see the bodies so that they can identify the women who died and where they came from so they can arrange to send the bodies to their

homes. But the factory managers did not care about their demands. The protest did not succeed and they did not know what happened later. No further details were found about the female workers who died.

'When I was in a factory in Jordan, a few of my colleagues, both male and female, were protesting because we didn't receive overtime pay. The managers took photos of that protest and later identified the leaders and send them back to their countries with a red seal in their passport. Most of them were female. Still, the protest was successful because after that we at least received our overtime.'- A returnee WMGW

Sexual harassment

Using abusive words while speaking to the female garments workers was also fairly common in garments factory abroad. FGD participants also mentioned that there are gangsters there like in Bangladesh. They shared that these hoodlums sometimes kidnap women from the street. In Mauritius,⁴⁶ they kidnapped a female migrant garment worker from the factory and took her to a nearby clubhouse, where they gang raped her. The FGD participants did not know where that woman had migrated from. One Bangladeshi woman (not FGD participant) noticed this incidence, and the rapist saw her too. Later those criminals demanded that the factory owner to hand her over to them. The owner refused and sent that woman back to Bangladesh. There was another incident when a factory employee handed over one Bangladeshi woman to the hoodlums. When the female workers learnt about this, they protested and asked the owner to bring her back. They stopped working for one week. In the end, they made owner bring the woman back.

Interference in women's private life and violation of sexual and reproductive health and rights

According to the respondents, some Bangladeshi women garments workers had relationship with foreign men, mainly from India and Sri Lanka. Sometimes these women became pregnant, and if the garments authority somehow came to know, they would send the woman back home, putting a red seal in her passport. The red seal usually signifies that the person had violated her contract and with that, she cannot migrate again. It was not clear from the FGD whether the ban was for life or for a certain period of time. But the participants mentioned that the red seal was put in the passport so that the woman cannot migrate to that country again. Therefore, we assume that the ban is for life.

'I know an incident- one Bangladeshi woman who had a relationship with a guy from India or Sri Lanka and she became pregnant. The manager sent the woman back to the country putting a red seal in her passport. So that she cannot migrate again - this was very inhuman.'- A returnee WMGW

⁴⁶ There is no official channel for Bangladeshi migrants to go to Mauritius.

'Some of my roommates used to bring their boyfriend in our room, which was not restricted; I was feeling uncomfortable in that time'. - A returnee WMGW

Many shared their thought that it is unfair that the employers intervene in their private life. At the same time, some of the participants mentioned that the contracts clearly stated that they were not allowed to marry and get pregnant during the contract period. It shows that the patriarchal society never respects women's private life and they do not have sexual and reproductive health rights.

We see this as problematic also because women are the only ones who are sanctioned while men's behaviour is accepted as normal. The regulation to deport women when they are found to be pregnant clearly shows how patriarchal society tries to control women's body and their choices.

What does 'safe migration' mean to WMGW?

WMGW could not provide a direct answer regarding safe and fair migration. Rather, some admitted that their dreams had come true because of migration. They did not have to face any major difficulties, had been able to save a significant amount of money, and lived a peaceful life. Some said they had completed three contracts and wanted to go again. They mentioned that migration would be safe and fair when they can return home safely after the end of their contract.

Some of the women mentioned about their bad experiences regarding accommodation and food, and others spoke about the long working hours. Other expectations included easily accessible job-related training, tolerable workload, etc. In other words, the main demands for safe and fair migration of women garments workers are good working and living environment, no harassment at the workplace and fair wage.

Failures

Some FGD respondents mentioned that they would have liked to live a happy life with family members. They migrated with a dream to educate their children or build a house in the village but they failed to materialise their dreams. They were not able to complete the contract and returned home because their loved ones in the family fell severely ill. They had to cover their airfare from their own savings as the contract was not completed. Many of the migrants returned home almost empty-handed. Whatever money they brought back, they spent it paying back the loan or their husbands wasted the money. One respondent also mentioned that she had to return home after one year as she suffered from hepatitis. Her treatment costs were deducted from her salary.

Dreams of potential WMGW

FGD participants shared that most of the women garments workers are encouraged to migrate abroad having heard about better income despite the hardship. Potential WMGW have seen their migrant friends purchase land, build a home and arrange better education for their children, which tempted them to migrate.

'I wish I could purchase an apartment for my parents. If I go to abroad with work, I could earn a lot money, and I would be able to make my dream true.' A potential WMGW

Some respondents mentioned that their parents did not have any objection regarding their migration and that they want their daughter to have a happy life after migrating abroad. Other potential WMGW mentioned that their parents had gone through great hardship in raising them. They want to bring some happiness to their parents. Some want to save money for their own marriage.

Social stigma towards WMGW

Despite the fact that women migrant garment workers are significantly improving their family's wellbeing by sending remittances, their work is not recognised or respected. Some respondents mentioned that their husbands thought that working in a garment factory abroad is not good for women. Husbands of the migrants and even society think that it is very difficult for women migrants to remain with a 'good character'. Women who are working in garments factories are not honoured by the people of their own village. In the rural social context, it is very difficult for a woman to migrate abroad alone. It is often believed that the women who migrate abroad may engage in sexual relations with others, which is not acceptable to their family and society. Interviewees also shared a case where a close relative denied the relationship with a respondent who was working abroad. According to FGD participants, it was not rare that young men would refuse to marry a woman who worked in garment factories abroad.

A number of women shared their disappointment and frustration when they were treated badly by their family once they could not send money any more. Many women are forced to migrate because of a lack of jobs and to improve the financial wellbeing of their family. They also have to endure much hardship during their stay in the foreign country. However, their families do not respect their hard work and suffering.

'One of my friends told me not to go abroad, rather advised me to stay in Dhaka and the salary will be increased. My neighbours said, good girls never want to go abroad, you are not good as you want to go abroad.' A potential WMGW

CASE STUDY

Migrate to another country for a dignified life

Rehana⁴⁷ lives in Dhaka near a garment factory area. She studied up to class five and her brothers and sisters did not have any education due to poverty in her family.

She grew up struggling with poverty. *'Some days we managed to eat one meal a day but other days we went without food. There was such time that we just had boiled water from cooked rice from a neighbour's house. We did not have any rice.'* Her mother had to work

⁴⁷ The name is not actual

in a construction site as a helper of mason or did home-based work. Her younger siblings also worked in other people's houses as house helpers or in shops in the market from the age of twelve.

Rehana started working in the Adiba garments as a helper receiving BDT 1,200 when she was only 15 years old. She did not do her job well and because of that, her supervisors used abusive, vulgar words and physically harassed her. Gradually she became better at her job. After one and half years, she was promoted as an operator. In the meantime, her siblings also started working in garments factories.

At the age of 19, she married. Her husband also worked in garment factories as an 'In Charge'. Rehana gave all her income to her parents after marriage and spent her money as she wished. Her husband had no objection.

After five to six months after marriage, she came to know that her husband had another wife and she ended the relationship. Then she found out she was pregnant. *'I wanted to terminate the baby and went to a doctor but it was too late as I was already 4/5 months pregnant. So I had the baby. After that I had no contact or communication with my husband.'*

Rehana explained, *'Somehow the factory managers knew that that I was pregnant. They refused to give me salary for 1-2 days when I was absent after I found out about my pregnancy. They asked me to sign a blank sheet of paper. I asked them why. Then it turned out it was a resignation letter. I refused to sign until at one point, I had no other option but to sign the paper if I wanted to get my salary. So I did. Which means that they sacked me when they found out I'm pregnant. I went to Banani and lodged a case against the management through which I received 6,000 taka as compensation.'*

Rehana worked at three garments factories in Bangladesh and had seven years of experience, before she went abroad in 2009. She worked as an operator and her salary was 4,000 taka with overtime. She kept 300 taka for her expenses and the rest of the money she gave to her family. She could not save any money, as her salary was too low. She heard that she could earn more if she worked in a garment factory abroad. Therefore, she decided to work abroad to improve the economic situation of her family. She went to the Mauritius in 2011.

Rehana first heard about working abroad from her neighbour. She went with the help of a *dalal* who also made her passport. She paid 10,000 taka for the passport and gave the *dalal* 60,000 taka to process her migration papers. Along with other shopping and necessary expenses, her total expenses came up to 85,000 taka for migrating to Mauritius. There, she got the kind of work and amount of payment as the *dalal* had promised. But she regrets that in this process she had to mortgage her father's house and she also did not take any training for work as a migrant garment worker. Next time she wants to go abroad by following the government interview process. Because she came to know that going abroad through the government channels costs only 17-18,000 taka.

She worked as an operator with a three-years contract in CMT Garment factory. Satisfied with her work, the factory management extended her contract to another five years in a supervisor role. Rehana was also satisfied with the work in Mauritius and she completed her eight years of work there.

Rehana is now back in Bangladesh but she prefers to work abroad. She feels good about working abroad. Besides, she wants to earn more money so she can build a house in Dhaka. Before she went to abroad, Rehana dreamt of building a house for her whole family and giving her son good education. She said, *'I was able to fulfil many of my dreams through migrating and working abroad. I wish to remigrate so the rest of my dreams will also be fulfilled.'*

Rehana stressed the language barrier was one of the biggest challenges abroad. Although one will slowly start understanding a new language, it takes time. That is why she thinks language training should be one of the most prioritised trainings for migrant workers.

While working and living in Mauritius, Rehana did not feel emotionally stable as she could not communicate closely with her family and she had nobody in the foreign country. At the same time, she felt more freedom in Mauritius than in Bangladesh.

Rehana shared one horrible incident she experienced while in Mauritius. *'Like in our country, in Mauritius there are many hooligans/thugs. By the side kitchen of our house, there was a club run by the thugs. The boys of that club often brought girls and physically abused them. One time, the boys of that club took one of our girls working in the factory by riding a car with the help of staff of the garment factory. We protested against the factory management that this kind of incident should not be condoned and we demanded that they rescue the girls immediately and punish the culprits. We went on a strike for a week. In the end, we managed to bring back the girls. Through this protest we also demanded the factory management that we will no longer tolerate work without pay. If we work overtime, they should pay us. Because of this protest, we were able to receive the overtime dues from the employers. However, the management had identified who took part in the protest and later they returned them to their countries because of taking part in the protest. A lot of Bangladeshi girls were also deported. And many of them got beaten up mercilessly by the factory managers. They picked up the girls in the microbus by dragging them on the road and holding their hairs. This was a horrible memory for me even I am disappointed by this type of behaviour. It reminded me of the situation in Bangladesh.'*

As for the working environment in Mauritius, she thinks it was mostly good. It was clean and organised. Except the lack of fans, other things were fine. During the work they were sweating profusely; the sweat would roll down their back and their dresses would get wet. Everybody would be complimented if the work was well done. The work was almost the same as in Bangladesh. The wage was higher than what she received in Bangladesh. She did not face much trouble or difficulty. If the workers missed the daily target, they would not receive a bonus. If anyone fell sick, she would be admitted in the hospital as soon as possible. Owners appointed doctors. If the doctor prescribed sick leave then the owners would approve how many days they could take. There were many bugs where she lived. They had pesticide but it did not work. The factory meals were not not good. They put medicine with food. The food smelled odd and even the beef meat tasted sour. They did not know which medicine they used and why. The workers informed the management about this and asked them not to add any medicine to the food. But nothing changed.

Rehana thinks it is possible to live better abroad if they provided good food and if there are no bugs, as well as better bathroom facilities. *'I am successful because I could adjust myself'*.

Now, Rehana wants to migrate to Jordan with garment work visa. But she does not want to stay abroad for a long time. She wants to remain three years in Jordan and return home, build a house and open a tailoring shop.

Rehana, 30 years old and married

Rehana's case study is an example the life of women of this socio-economic context; it is a story of happiness, sadness, deprivation and so on. Her story does not depict the worst-case scenario. However, it also does not mean that her migration was successful because of good migration governance. Many women migrant workers have to 'adjust' themselves to avoid unsafe and unfair migration. This is not enough.

First. The neglected lower-class family girl Rehana lacked both food and education. She had to take the burden of her family from a very young age. As her mother was also a worker, Rehana had the chance to work at a garment factory.

Second. In her working life, the usual verbal and sexual harassment she faced seemed normal to her. She did not think of these as a violation but simply moved on. Rehana mentions how horrible it was to see her fellow workers deported after joining the protest. But she still thinks her work environment was mostly good. She may think the deportation is an isolated case, which does not affect the work environment, and she might not see the incidence as an interconnected issue for migrant workers' safety and fairness. But it actually is.

Third. She also faced deprivation in her marriage. Even after marrying of her own free will, she was cheated by her husband. Having a child only increased her problems as she had to take full responsibility for raising the child. On the other hand, she did not receive any maternity benefit. But Rehana protested as much as she could to gain her rights.

Fourth. Her life as a migrant worker also proved to be challenging due to cheating middlemen and the same extra work and hardship of food and lodging. The only bright side was the increase of wage.

It may seem like Rehana's story is a success story, as she was successful in her migration journey. She improved her economic situation. But the torture and deprivation she had to face in every step of her life and the fight she had to put on in face of the harsh reality is very clear. Most women have to face these harsh realities. Some are strong enough to put up a fight and keep moving on but some give up. Should the success story of one Rehana cover up the dark chapter of the lives of other women? Or should the world and society try to make this road to success easier and more rights-protective?

RESPONSES ACCORDING TO DUTY BEARERS

According to BOESL, migrant garments workers are safer than migrant domestic workers. Migrant women garments workers live in common space in a group. One challenge is that the women who want to migrate as garment workers do not have basic education, which is

essential to receive training. Illiterate or less educated (below grade eight) women do not have the capacity to receive skill training required to work in the garments sector abroad. Though it was not found in the BOESL recruitment advertisement that interested garment workers must have 8th grade education. BOESL as government recruitment agency ensures safe and low-cost migration. Brokers cannot be involved in the migration process facilitated by BOESL. Women who migrate to Jordan through BOESL are 100% safe. BOESL and BMET officials visited some garments factories in Jordan and found the WMGW were working safely. They said, '*We have strong law regarding punishment of illegal recruitment agencies and brokers*'. Therefore, workers should know the proper way to complain about any abuse or harassment and if government came to know about it, they have the mechanism to address it and take necessary actions.

Regarding awareness, we always disseminate information about the migration process and give trainings according to migrants' needs, said BMET personnel. They agreed that it is necessary for migrants to receive information through proper channels, and that NGOs can support the government in this. They also stressed the importance of skill development programmes.

All respondents argued that women migrant garment workers are safer than the domestic workers because they are going abroad to a company where the rules and regulations are known to all and they have clear job responsibilities. But our workers are not that skilled, so this sometimes creates problems.

Most of the respondents discourage migration through brokers. They are trying to develop a central database so that they can identify the potential WMGW at the sub district or district level. Once this system is operational, they think that migration through illegal brokers will stop. However, this is a long-term process. Regarding the punishment of brokers, BOESL said that they receive many allegations that women garments workers migrate through brokers, and are maltreated by the employer. But then who should be punished? According to the law, the employer should be punished, but the government cannot reach them. In response to advocacy for improving the labour laws of destination countries, respondents said that this is not in their remit. They denied that WMGWs are abused in the destination countries. If there is any incidence, they can contact the labour attaché in the Bangladeshi consulate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM WMGW

- The Bangladeshi government should equip migrants with practical language and communication skills by arranging a language and culture class well before departure.
- Proper initiatives should be taken to enhance the skills required for the respective job in destination countries.
- Destination countries should arrange awareness session for migrant workers about their labour laws.
- Reduce the workload to a bearable limit
- Accommodation should be for 5 to 6 women in a room, instead of 10 to 12.

- Make counselling available for female workers.
- Make separate dormitory for men and women. Men's access to women's dormitory should be restricted.
- Garment managers should arrange proper medical treatment free of charge.
- Provide need-based skills training for different occupations and tailor the curriculum that is locally appropriate in the destination country.
- Consult the women workers in setting and agreeing the production targets that are attainable within working hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KARMOJIBINARI

- The appropriate information related to safe and fair migration should reach the people at community level. The government should develop and implement an efficient mechanism for this.
- Information and Communication technologies (ICT) which is accessible and affordable for women should be used as much as possible to share information regarding safe and fair migration.
- At the sub-district level, a migration information centre should be introduced so that prospective migrants can access information and verify job contracts in their own community.
- Labour Attachés in the Bangladesh Consulate in destination countries should be much more proactive in handling cases of harassment and abuse of WMGW.
- Bangladeshi Consulates can arrange an orientation session for WMGW on labour law and introduce workers' rights in the destination countries as well as referral mechanism where workers can reach out for help.
- Bangladeshi Consulates in destination countries should have a database of every migrant and maintain regular contact with them. A special unit can be introduced to provide legal support for migrant workers.
- The Bangladeshi government should sign a bilateral agreement, which makes it mandatory for the employer to provide orientation for migrant workers on labour laws, as well as workers' rights that they are entitled to in the destination countries.

REFLECTION OF THE RESEARCHERS ON DOING FPAR

The FPAR we conducted is unique in Bangladesh. We found it a bit challenging as the concept of FPAR was not very familiar to us. Finding out suitable respondents and getting their time to collect necessary information was another challenge we encountered.

We were pleased to be involved in such research for the first time and we will continue using FPAR in the future. We were able to reach many distressed women and learn about their lives and livelihoods, as well as their expectations and ambitions. It was also a great opportunity for us to know the story of migrants who successfully fulfilled their dreams against all odds; at same time, we were saddened to learn about the shattered dreams of many other women. We came across some women who did not have any dreams and even lost their will to live.

Based on the information received from the respondents, we realised that they are not well aware of the rules and regulations for working abroad. At the same time, almost 90% of respondent did not know that women garments workers could migrate abroad for better jobs at low cost and without any hassle if the migration is facilitated by the government. They did not even know where to go to receive proper information. We also think that information-providing centres related to overseas migration are of limited use because they cannot reach the potential migrants. We believe that safe and fair migration will not be ensured if we fail to raise awareness among the women workers at the grassroots level. Considering this, we would highly appreciate it if GAATW can create an opportunity to spread this information at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

The garments industry is one of the most significant economic sectors in Bangladesh, driven in large part by rural women workers. This action research shows that women workers move to urban areas due to various hardships. The workplace itself is not safe for them both socially and economically. After working hard all day long their wages keep them well below the poverty line.

Places like Jordan and Mauritius have created an opportunity for women workers to achieve a brighter and more secure life. Regardless of the many obstacles, they have decided to migrate to foreign countries. It is evident that face harassment every step of the way. In their migration journey, they face obstacles starting from issuing their passports, to getting the right contracts, wages and correct information. Even after ensuring the main income for their families, they still lack dignified treatment in their families.

In spite of the challenges, many Bangladeshi women garments workers are deciding to migrate abroad to work in the garment sector for better wages. However, most of them do not know what “safe and fair migration” mean. They do not know the laws and policy regimes governing international migration. Many of the WMGWs do not know about migrating through government channels. A significant number of WMGWs migrated through informal channels, which cost them a lot of money.

Many of the WMGWs do not have the required skills, often cannot meet the target, and are subjected to verbal abuse from the supervisors of the factory. Many of the WMGWs reported sexual harassment in the factory and even outside of factory. They also reported heavy workloads. In many cases, factory management was reluctant to provide treatment for sick WMGW. According to their responses, WMGW do not have any access to legal aid in cases of harassment. The consulate of Bangladesh in the destination country does not provide assistance to the WMGW when needed. The Bangladeshi government hardly takes any measures even after learning about the harassment faced by WMGW. Yet government officials did not admit that there are any loopholes there in the system. They indirectly place the responsibility on the worker to be properly informed.

At the same time, it is clear that information alone cannot make migration safe and fair. We believe that fair and safe migration will not be ensured if we fail to find and remedy the

loopholes in the migration and labour process. It is also necessary to change peoples' mindset towards women migrant garment workers. Considering the women migrant garment workers' safety in the destination country, the government should take the necessary action to ensure a more active Bangladeshi consulate in the destination country.

ANNEX:

List of Community Meeting Respondents:

SL No	Name and Designation	Address	Contact	Remarks
1	Mukta Operator	Penwin Group	01754183244	
2	Morium Operator	New Daina	01879378279	
3	MunniAkter Operator	Maa Fashion	01795974531	
4	Taslina Operator	Hamim Fashion	01704055009	
5	Rokeya Operator	Uniform	01957128089	
6	Jhorna Operator	Opex	01930771190	
7	Dolly Operator	Chittagong Fashion	01927708130	
8	Shamoly Operator	SB Fashion	01998083008	
9	Sharmin Operator	Vision Garments		
10	Sabina Yeasmin Operator	Vision Garments		
11	Rashida Operator	Vision Garments		
12	Sheuly Operator	Tamanna		
13	Rina Operator	Penwin		
14	Alo Begum Operator	Apex Lanjari	01941082226	
15	Rashida Operator	Apex Textile	01879606963	
16	LavlyYeasmin Operator	Apex Textile	01799754593	
17	KanizFatema Jr. Packer	Apex Textile	01840867872	
18	Mst Rubina Khatun Operator	Apex Textile	01725205861	
19	Shahanaj Quality	Apex Textile	01780512045	
20	Mst Rubina Senior Operator	Apex Textile	01743054016	
21	Mukta Operator	Apex Textile	01797944370	
22	Golapi Operator	Apex Textile		

23	Topi Operator	Apex Textile	01751367261	
24	Rabeya Asistant	Apex Spring		
25	Rabeya Helper	Apex Textile		
26	Aleya Operator	Apex Lanjari	01798984465	

List of FGD Respondents:

SL No	Name and Designation	Address	Contact	Remarks
1	Koly Operator	Penwin Group		Potential Women Migrant Garment Workers
2	Mony Helper	Penwin Group		
3	Nupur Operator	Penwin Group		
4	Morzina Operator	Penwin Group		
5	Shahida Helper	Penwin Group		
6	Nupur Operator	SRT MBM	01816875999	
7	Hosneara Helper	SRT Fashion Ltd	01733834364	
8	Nazma Operator	SRT Fashion Ltd	01993407707	
9	Morzina Operator	SRT Fashion Ltd	01787541918	
10	Modina Operator	SRT Fashion Ltd	01922655225	
11	Bithe Operator	Tamanna Complex	01953722465	
12	Rubina Operator	Centex Fashion	01969338414	
13	Sabina Yeasmin Operator	AJ Fashion		
14	Rabeya Operator	Vision Garments		Returnee Women Migrant Garment Workers
15	Hasina Operator		01912358248	
16	Halima Operator	MBM Garments	01933423981	
17	Khadija Operator	Lord Star	01789478899	
18	Sheuly Operator	Tamanna Complex		
19	Bibi Kulsum		01725330198	

20	Nasima		01635062156	Re-migrant Women Garment Workers
21	Feroza		01949763541	
22	Zosna			
23	Bhanu Operator	Renaissance	01797006917	
24	Nasima		01734212512	
25	Rajia		01874992832	
26	Rabeya			
27	Sumi Akter		01867216781	
28	Shahinur		01969342508	

List of In-Depth interview Respondents:

SL No	Name and Designation	Address	Contact	Remarks
1	Priya Akter Operator	opex	01904712691	Potential WMGW
2	Runa Operator	AJ Fashion	01824344174	
3	Kulsum Operator	Zara Jeans	01756703924	
4	Laizu Operator	Penwin Group	01721408358	
5	Shirin Operator	Jeans Manufacturing co.Ltd	01950887383	
6	Zannat Operator	Centex	01932354284	Returnee WMGW
7	Mahinur Operator	opex		
8	Shuma			
9	Rozina			
10	Nasima			
11	Hasna		01749328538	
12	Ruma		01642616734	Re-migrant WMGW
13	Rubi		01835054754	

14	Rokeya	Rambo Garments, Jordan		Migrant Workers
15	Sabina	Rambo Garments, Jordan		

List of KII Respondents:

SL No	Name and Designation	Address	Contact	Remarks
1	Md. Selim Reza Director General	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET)		
2	Md. selimMollah Director General	Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Ltd(BOESL)	01711221632	
3	Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury Noman Join General Secretary	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agency (BAIRA)	01919857286	
4	Rina Akhter Jahan principle	Bangladesh German Technical Training Center	01714822316	

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