

Global Compact for Migration Review: Youth Consultations

BANGLADESH Report

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Introduction

Bangladesh is the sixth largest origin country for international migrants in the world, with 7.8 million Bangladeshi migrants living abroad as of 2019 (UNDESA, 2019). Over 2.2 million young adults join the job market in Bangladesh each year (IOM, 2017), but the domestic labour market is unable to employ all of these individuals. Instead, many migrate internationally to secure employment and send remittances home, which are used to repay loans and to support migrant families (*ibid.*). Remittances are an important part of the Bangladeshi economy and make up an equivalent of 5.4 per cent of the national GDP (IOM, 2018).

As a result of the importance of international migration to Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi government has prioritized migration as a development strategy in their Seventh Five-Year Plan. Additionally, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment continues to support safe migration and migration best practices through the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). BMET assists migrants in the regular migration process, promotes workers' rights and facilitates training prior to migration (BMET, 2018).

The majority of Bangladeshi nationals are living abroad in Saudi Arabia and India (UNDESA, 2019). In 2019, Saudi Arabia was the largest destination country for new Bangladeshi migrants (BMET, 2019). Only two per cent of migrants are considered "professional", and 48 per cent are considered low skilled (IOM, 2017; BMET, 2019). Many migrants work in construction or hazardous jobs in countries of destination (IOM, 2017; IOM, 2020).

Bangladeshi women joined the international migrant labour pool in 1991, and they increased in number after 2004, when government restrictions on female migrants decreased (IOM, 2017). Women often migrate to countries in the Middle East, where they are employed as domestic workers.

Migration from Bangladesh is facilitated by either the government or by private recruitment agencies in Bangladesh; the government of Bangladesh facilitates the migration process at a lower cost than what is charged by private recruitment agencies (IOM, 2017). Intermediaries and sub-agents help to connect the larger private recruitment agencies to migrants at local levels (IOM, 2020). Like the government, private recruitment agencies also provide skills training prior to migration (*ibid.*).

Each year, more than 400,000 workers leave Bangladesh for overseas employment. Problems faced by Bangladeshi migrants include:

1. High fees for migration charged by recruitment agencies, especially for low skilled jobs;
2. Low wages,
3. Lack of information on migration opportunities and risks;
4. Discrimination, exploitation and abuse while overseas;
5. Insufficient services to protect the rights of workers.

The dire impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have put Bangladeshi migrant workers and their dependents in a socially vulnerable and economically difficult situation. Migrant workers from Bangladesh in other countries are facing adverse impacts such as unemployment, short working hours, isolation, poor quality of living, social discrimination and psychosocial pressure while their dependents at home are facing financial crisis due to the limited or reduced cash flow from their working relatives. A significant number of migrant workers have been sent back to Bangladesh and many are in constant fear of being sent back due to the impacts of COVID-19 in their host countries. Thus, COVID-19 intensifies numerous socio-economic crises such as joblessness, consumption of reserve funds by family members, and the shrinking of the country's remittance inflow. In this situation, the most urgent and important need is to give financial security and social safety to the workers abroad and to those who have returned to Bangladesh. Apart from diplomatic endeavors to maintain the status quo of policy, the government of Bangladesh may take initiatives to provide financial support to these workers as a short-term strategy to overcome hardships during the pandemic and design a comprehensive plan with a detailed database of all migrant workers to create a need-based and skilled workforce as a long-term solution. These strategies can mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 at present and address migration related problems in future.

Overview of The Consultation Process

About 150 youth from about 10 organizations working in various fields of migration on an individual or institutional basis participated in our Consultation Process. A working team of 12 volunteers from Youth for Policy organized 3 consultation workshops. In the 1st consultation session, the participants were introduced to the GCM and its objectives, moderated by migration experts from CSOs. The agenda included providing participants a macro perspective of the GCM, the scenario of Bangladeshi migrant workers, and discussing the existing support services for them.

In the 2nd consultation, the participants prioritized the GCM objectives for Bangladesh from the Thematic Perspective. Afterwards, a comprehensive report was developed by the working team to represent these on the final consultation with the CSOs group and policy makers.

Finally, the 3rd Consultation was arranged with the collaboration of the CSOs in the presence of policy makers. Both youth and CSO groups presented their priorities. There was an open discussion on Policy Perspective and youth shared their key recommendations for 4 objectives that were focused on the APAC region.

Objective 2: Minimise the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin

Key Issues

1. Lack of investment in human capital;
2. Insufficient investment for sustainable development at the local level;
3. Lack of correlation between Humanitarian and Developmental Actors;
4. Inadequate integrated preparation to deal with the suffering of the people caused by various disasters.

One of the driving factors for migration in Bangladesh is economic hardship. In a country with a growing population, the job market is shrinking. People don't get jobs after completing graduation. Youth can't be entrepreneurs because they don't have capital. A study by BIDA, a government development research institute, found that 33.2% of educated youth are completely unemployed. This means that many people are not getting jobs even after completing higher education. As a result, many young people are choosing migration because they need money. According to an IOM study in 2019, 99.7% of people opted for migration because of economic hardship. This means that most people are migrating due to a lack of money. In addition, the number of people choosing to migrate for higher education or for family reasons is negligible.

During the COVID-19 period, many people have lost their jobs in Bangladesh, many employment opportunities have been reduced, and the salaries and allowances of many who survived have also been reduced. As a result, many young people are thinking of choosing migration as an earning source. According to the Bangladesh Planning Commission, poverty and extreme poverty have increased in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. Last April, a survey of low-income citizens across the country - by the non-governmental development organization BRAC - found that income had fallen by 75% during the pandemic. 69% of the poor have come down to extremely poor. The CPD, a leading private research firm, says the rate of extreme poverty has reached 35% during COVID-19. Another organization, SANEM, says the rate is more than 40%.

Key Recommendations

1. Youth call on the government to **prioritize investment in human capital.**
2. Youth call on the government to **create employment opportunities by adopting long term development plans at the local/marginal level;**
3. Youth call on institutions to **establish correlations between Humanitarian and Developmental Actors;**
4. Youth call on the government and private sector to **invest in education, as well as various types of training, and investment and support opportunities for young entrepreneurs;**

5. Youth call on the government to **further promote the implementation of the 2030 SDGs**. Both structural and quality development should be taken into consideration.

Objective 15: Provide access to basic services for migrants

Key Issues

1. Lack of easily accessible service points for migrants at the local level;
2. No health insurance for migrants;
3. Significant discrimination in service availability.

There is no separate independent institution to ensure the basic services of migrants in Bangladesh. Although the government provides various facilities for the migrants, it is less likely to reach the marginal level. Migrant workers who have left their homes, families and relatives are in even greater trouble than the people in the country who are in crisis due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), 12,899,283 workers migrated abroad for employment from 1976 to 2019. Migrant workers from Bangladesh are mainly short-term contract workers in various privately owned companies, therefore, many of them have returned home at the end of the contract. However, since we do not have a process for storing information on returning migrant workers, it is difficult to say exactly how many workers are currently working abroad. The majority of migrant workers are in the Gulf and other Arab countries, and the remaining 20 percent are in Southeast Asia and other countries. All these countries are affected by COVID-19. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers have lost their jobs and become unemployed due to the severe lockdown in these countries. They are now unable to provide money for their relatives in the country as they have no income. The families of migrant workers with limited income are suffering. Families living above the poverty line are also being excluded from disaster and emergency assistance.

There are millions of migrant workers from Bangladesh who do not have any valid documents. There are many with expired visas, invalid residence permits, or lacking permits. Despite the assurances of some basic needs and assistance for the workers with legal documents in this pandemic, the lives of the illegal migrant workers have become miserable due to various misfortunes, frustrations, humiliations, and harassment. Many of them have been sent back to their country of origin since the beginning of the pandemic, some are still waiting for their return. A tragic chapter in labor migration is the unnatural death of workers abroad. According to the Brac Migration program, 3838 dead bodies of migrant workers were sent back to Bangladesh up until November of 2019. In 2005, the number was only 1248, and in 2018 3,793 bodies were sent back to Bangladesh, of these, only 5 percent died of natural causes. The rest are victims of stroke, heart disease, accident, murder, or suicide. In the case of the death of migrants, the concerned country investigates and issues a death certificate. The Bangladesh government

does not verify the cause of death of any Bangladeshi workers abroad. The embassies of Bangladesh abroad have not taken any initiative to investigate this unusual death. While abnormal deaths have been on the rise year after year, there is a lack of action and accountability to prevent and compensate for accidental deaths in the workplace. The families are being blamed for the deaths, which in many cases is denied by their families.

The Wage Earners Welfare Board has been formed to provide basic facilities to migrant workers in Bangladesh. The functions of the 2017 Wage Earners Welfare Board Act include: providing necessary assistance to migrant workers due to war, natural disasters or any other emergency; social and economic protection and rehabilitation of returning migrant workers; to rescue, repatriate and, if necessary, provide legal and medical assistance to any migrant worker working abroad who has been tortured, injured in an accident, ill or endangered for any other reason; bringing the bodies of expatriates to the country and, if necessary, providing financial assistance for burial or burial; assistance in recovery of arrears due to death and occupational reasons of migrant workers who die abroad, assistance in recovery of arrears of salary, insurance and service benefits and financial assistance to dependents; and adoption and implementation of various projects for the overall welfare of the expatriates. The board has a legal obligation to take special measures for the welfare of women migrant workers. The Board pledges to adopt and implement appropriate projects for the social and economic rehabilitation and rehabilitation of returning women migrant workers.

However, they are not doing their job properly. Although there is a lot of money in the Wage Earners Welfare Board and the Workers' Welfare Foundation, it is not being spent on workers' welfare.

Key Recommendations

1. Youth call on the government to establish one stop service point at local level;
2. Youth call on governments and private sectors to **establish contracts that ensure migrants receive healthcare or health insurance provisions;**
3. Youth call on the government to **establish or support independent institutions at national and local level to ensure access to basic services for migrants;**
4. Youth call on governments to **implement policies that facilitate equitable and integrated education for the children of immigrants;**
5. Youth call on the government to **enhance monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure implementation of existing laws and policies.**

Objective 17: Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration

Key Issues

1. Migrants are often subjected to discrimination, persecution, or racism in the destination country;
2. There is no mechanism at the national or regional level to deal with allegations of violence against women;
3. Migrants are often forcibly subject to violence.

In many cases, the rights of migrants are not protected, despite the Labor Rights Act. There are inequalities in various fields like salary-allowance, working hours, work environment, facilities etc. However, these inequalities are more evident in the case of female migrants.

According to the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), a total of 916,463 women workers migrated from Bangladesh from 1991 to February 2020. The recent incidents of many women returning home after being harassed and the images of such harassment through various news outlets have discouraged many potential women workers from going abroad. Analysis of media data shows that in 2019, about 3,000 women workers returned to the country after being subjected to various forms of torture. Many of them returned from abroad as corpses. Many women workers have been seen returning to the country with wounds of physical abuse. Our female migrant workers, almost all of whom are employed as domestic workers, have been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As domestic violence has increased in the lockdown, so has the level of violence against women domestic workers. A large portion of migrant women workers are widows or divorced women, with some helpless family members in the country. They also need emergency assistance.

The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families is one of 9 UN Core Human Rights Conventions. It's a United Nations multilateral treaty that governs the protection of migrant workers and families. It signed on 18 December 1990, it entered into force on 1 July 2003 after the threshold of 20 ratifying States was reached in March 2003.

Migrant workers are significantly contributing to the economic development of both Bangladesh as well as their countries of destination. Therefore, it is the responsibility of both the employing and the sending country to protect the rights and interests of migrant workers as well as to establish and manage welfare initiatives for them. The Charter places a set of responsibilities on the sending and receiving states of migrant workers for the introduction of a safe and equitable migration system, human rights of all migrant workers and their family members, and overall welfare and development. The basic human rights enshrined in the Charter apply to all types of workers, including irregular and undocumented

migrant workers. The document also addresses the right to other emergency assistance, including medical care in the event of an emergency or any humanitarian catastrophe.

Surprisingly, almost all of the 55 states that send migrant workers have ratified the charter. However, this excludes all receiving states, all of which have abstained from ratification, thus avoiding the obligation to adhere to its guidelines. Bangladesh is a major source of migrant workers. While Bangladesh, as a party to the Charter, seeks to fulfill its responsibilities, the rights of the workers will not be realized in the real sense of the word if they are not fulfilled. Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Qatar, Oman, Singapore and South Korea, the countries that employ the most workers from Bangladesh, have not ratified the charter. As a result, no strong legal or institutional framework has been developed in these countries for the protection of migrant workers. In this situation, Bangladesh needs to discuss this issue in various UN forums and put pressure on the countries that receive migrant workers by highlighting the torture, misery and human rights violations of Bangladeshi workers, so that they protect international labor standards and protect the rights of migrant workers in their respective countries.

Only then will our migrant workers be able to take recourse to the courts of law if their labor rights are violated in those countries, and be able to raise voice to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Key Recommendations

1. Political leaders, community leaders, and service providers must all work together to protect the rights of the migrants and eliminate inequality;
2. The issues of violence against women need to be considered seriously and justice should be ensured through mechanisms at the national or regional level;
3. The migrant community should be trained properly to become more aware and empowered to prevent violence;
4. Independent institutions should be established at national and local level to ensure basic services to migrants.

Objective 18: Invest in skills development and facilitate the mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competence

Key Issues

1. Lack of skills;
2. Migrants are not familiar with digital skills;
3. Lack of mechanisms to certify or recognize skills that are acquired informally.

The demand for unskilled workers in the international labor market is declining day by day. In the reality of the international labor market, Bangladeshi workers are relatively inefficient. In many professions, our staff has not been able to achieve the desired level of efficiency. Therefore, there is less employment of Bangladeshis in better and higher income professions. As a result, Bangladesh needs to find new labor markets, such as focusing on exporting skilled manpower. In this case, there is no alternative to proper training.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that the government is working on a plan to send an average of one thousand workers a year from each upazila. In the current world reality, the value of educated and skilled people is increasing. Although not all workplaces are open to all, skilled manpower can create employment opportunities in their respective fields. So we have to build manpower to keep pace with the developing world. We also need to look at changing labor market demand and efficiency. Besides, new markets have to be found for manpower export.

Migrants have sent a record amount of remittances during the COVID-19 period. New employment opportunities have emerged in the agriculture and health sectors.

If we want to find a post-COVID-19 labor market, we have to make the existing expatriate labor training centers in the country oriented to modern agriculture and health workers. Curricula need to be reformed with the aim of giving utmost importance to vocational training. If we can increase efficiency, we will have no difficulty in finding new markets in front of us.

Key Recommendations

1. Youth call on governments and private stakeholders to **invest in Skill Development Centers at the local level** for comprehensive skills development (including the provision of training and accreditation);
2. Youth call on regional and global governance and private sector mechanisms to **establish a global skills acquisition framework and guidelines**, disaggregated by industry;
3. Youth encourage the government to **establish a national analytics hub** to track skills acquisition and trends amongst the local workforce- particularly amongst groups with potential to migrate;
4. Youth call on the government and private sector to **develop mechanisms to recognize informally acquired skills**;
5. Youth call on the government and private sectors to **actively invest in private-public collaborative institutions** to work on skills development;
6. Youth call on the government to **establish a strong mechanism for the exchange of skilled human resources through regional and global bilateral, multilateral agreements**.

To conclude, the government of Bangladesh, within its capacity, has allocated funds for the reintegration of returning migrants through training and engagement in economic activities. However, these initiatives often falter at the implementation stage. In addition to government policies, NGOs and multilateral institutions such as the IOM have begun coordinating on plans to prevent migrant workers from

floundering, and these efforts could continue. Financial institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, and Islamic Development Bank could also supplement the efforts financially. The fate of Bangladesh’s migrant workers has profound implications not only for their host countries, but also their communities of origin, so responsibility for their wellbeing should be shared widely.

References and Acknowledgements

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