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Assessment of overseas labor migration systems in Bangladesh

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report

ASSESSMENT OF OVERSEAS LABOR MIGRATION SYSTEMS IN BANGLADESH

Sigma Ainul
Eashita Farzana Haque
KG Santhya
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OCTOBER 2022



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List of Abbreviations

ASK	Ain O Shalish Kendra
BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies
BMET	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training
BNSK	Bangladesh Nari Shramik Kendra
BOMSA	Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association
BOESL	Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEMO	District Employment and Manpower Office
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFEMS	Global Fund to End Modern Slavery
IDI	In-depth Interview
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRB	Institutional Review Board
ISCs	Industry Skills Councils
KII	Key Informant Interview
LMIS	Comprehensive Labor Market Information System
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MJF	Manusher Jonno Foundation
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRC	Migration Resource Center
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OKUP	Ovibhashi Karmi Unnayan Program
OLR	Overseas Labor Recruitment
PKB	Probashi Kallyan Bank
RMG	Readymade Garment
RMMRU	Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
TTC	Technical Training Center
UN	United Nations
UAE	United Arab Emirate
WARBE	Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees
WEWB	Wage Earners' Welfare Board
YPSA	Young Power in Social Action

Executive Summary

Bangladesh is a significant labor-sending country, with about 7.8 million Bangladeshis working abroad. Major destinations for Bangladeshi migrant workers are the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, among which Saudi Arabia has been the most common migration destination since 2016 (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training [BMET], 2018). Bangladeshi women are also increasingly participating in the international labor market. Female migrants represent 12 percent of the total migration flow from the country, with a majority of them engaged overseas as domestic workers (BMET, 2018). Migration to the GCC countries is characterized by short-term temporary migration, migration of low- and semi-skilled workers, laborers with low literacy level, debt-financed migration, and often migration through unofficial channels that creates risky migration pathways. Despite the high rate of out-migration every year, the overseas labor recruitment (OLR) industry remains complex and often leaves migrants susceptible to human trafficking, forced labor, and modern slavery. Also, owing to the predominance of a temporary migration cycle and fraudulent practices in the migration process, many migrant workers return to Bangladesh empty-handed and with huge debt burdens every year. There are large gaps in our understanding of what shapes migration decision-making, work-related choices, and experiences, returned migrants' experiences, and their economic and social reintegration upon return.

The Population Council in partnership with the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) undertook a multi-component study to better understand survivors' and stakeholders' perspectives on the kinds of policies, programs, and initiatives that could facilitate better and safer overseas labor migration for Bangladeshi migrant workers. The study also sought to throw light on their social and economic reintegration process upon return to home country.

We conducted a review of literature, using published articles, reports, government directives, and policy documents. We conducted a qualitative study with returned migrants in two districts of Bangladesh (Faridpur and Munshiganj) known for a high volume of overseas labor migrants. We note that these districts were purposively selected as the study location to serve also as an assessment of an intervention for economic and social reintegration implemented in these districts by Ovihashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) and Caritas, two non-profit organizations in Bangladesh supported by GFEMS. Finally, we organized a stakeholder consultation that provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on the study findings and brainstorm about research, program gaps, and recommendations for different stakeholders.

Key findings

Poverty, lack of job opportunities in home country, better job prospects and higher salaries abroad, and peer encouragement are the major factors that drive overseas labor migration:

Engagement in low-skilled jobs and having primary-level education characterized the profile of a majority of the interviewed returned migrants of this study. Poverty and limited economic opportunities in their home country act as the main drivers of overseas labor market migration. Thus, lack of good job opportunities and salary packages in the home country and better work prospects in destination countries with promises of higher salary packages create incentives to migrate. Family, friends, and neighbors in their origin community also encourage potential migrants to work abroad by creating aspirations for economic solvency and a better life for themselves and their families, though often the reality did not correspond with their aspirations. The dynamics of female migration were also found to be drivers of migration in addition to economic reasons. Sometimes female migration was chosen as a family strategy, because migration of the wife instead of the husband was determined by the lower cost of female migration compared with male migration. Further, female respondents' decision to migrate were

guided by challenges in family life, difficulties in marriage and those from divorce, and situations of desperation. Sometimes, they kept the decision to migrate hidden from any family member.

Lack of migration-related knowledge, dependency on a *dalal* (middleman), and high cost of migration are common challenges at the pre-migration stage:

Migrants were largely unaware of the available government or private migration services—recruiting agencies, financial solutions, and services, required documentation for migration processing, training certificates, medical check-up certification, BMET clearance card, work permit, and visa approval. Low literacy level and lack of awareness make them highly dependent on dalals for migration processing. Almost all migration decisions and migration processes were guided by information from family, friends, or local dalals and not from government offices or registered recruiting agents. Most often, recruitment that is managed through dalals bypass formal/ethical procedures, the consequences of which migrants are unable to assess prior to their departure.

Unfamiliarity with the formal/ethical migration process and involvement of agencies and intermediaries/dalals at both home and destination countries at different stages of the recruitment process, along with such practices as visa trading¹, increase the cost of migration astronomically, especially for male migrants from Bangladesh, which has the highest cost of labor migration in the world. The cost of male migration ranged from 3–7 lakh Bangladeshi taka (USD 3,500–8,000, approximately), while female migration cost ranged from 40,000–1,50,000 Bangladeshi taka (USD 400–1,500, approximately). Female migration cost is less because females mostly migrate as housemaids, for whom employers bear the cost of the ticket, visa, and agency fees. However, even though migration was made ‘free of cost’ for females through a bilateral agreement between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh, we found that Saudi-bound female respondents had to pay dalals for migration, despite the no-cost provision. Respondents paid the amount demanded by dalals and rarely negotiated with them. Dalals did not provide receipts for any services rendered and migrants were unaware that they should be given receipts. Dalals therefore deceive migrants by overcharging them. Emigrants were largely unaware of the itemized costs of migrating overseas, which reflect the lack of transparency and use of deception in the migration process as well as the increased vulnerability of overseas labor migration. Migrants commonly reported that they bore the cost of migration processing with personal and/or family savings and loans from local informal sources, such as moneylenders. They also reported that they availed micro-credit loans (intended for backing small businesses) from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), though they concealed the real purpose for the loan.

Information and training gaps, absence of formal/ethical recruitment, and dependency on and informal dealings with dalals and *kafala* system of employment in GCC countries create conditions for exploitation, where support mechanisms to protect migrant’, rights are inadequate:

Findings indicate that there is a need to address knowledge gaps, issues of non-attendance in pre-migration trainings, and upgradation in BMET training content for imparting job-specific skills and hands-on training, particularly for domestic workers, such as proper handling of modern home appliances (iron, microwave oven, etc.). Informal and unsafe recruitment coupled with

¹ Note: Visa trading—illegal buying and selling of visas. Illegally procuring visas from employers by middlemen and their sale to recruiting agencies in source countries. Visa trading refers to a situation where a migrant is sponsored for a specific work or position. Upon arrival in the destination country, the migrant worker performs a substantially different job. This is because the sponsor has unofficially ‘traded’ or ‘sold’ the worker’s visa to another sponsor, whom the worker now answers to informally. In some instances, this happens because the sponsor has no intention at all to really provide the intended and rightful job to the migrant worker as specified in the visa. Rather, the migrant worker is ‘released’ into the black market to earn a living in exchange for financially compensating the sponsor (Migrant Resource Center).

involvement of intermediaries and employment under the kafala² system led to exploitation of migrant workers at the destination country. Reports of mismatches in work type, less payment than promised verbally or in contract, extended work hours than agreed upon, no overtime payment, lack of safety or security at work, no medical treatment or leave for occupational injuries or illnesses, unpleasant accommodation, inadequate supply of food, oral and physical abuse, and confiscation of passport and documents were common among migrants at the destination country. Female migrants who worked as housemaids faced, additionally, mobility restriction, confinement, physical beating, and prohibition to interact with peers in the destination country and family at home. Female migrants, mostly engaged in domestic work, are employed under individualized work contracts, which lack any legal protection for the worker. Findings also indicate that support mechanisms against exploitation of migrants are inadequate and inaccessible for migrants.

Income deficit, lack of savings, complications with formal loans, and mismatch in skills and wages between home and destination country impede economic reintegration:

Findings indicate that returned migrants endure several economic challenges during their process of reintegration. Expiration of Iqama, visa cancellation and work discontinuation, forced and voluntary return, or returning before their term of contract ends often leave migrants in a debt trap, especially for those who returned within 2–3 years of service, as they cannot repay their loans. A sizable share of international remittance was used for repaying outstanding loans back home, and only a handful of respondents mentioned that they could use some of their hard-earned money for productive work such as building house, or buying land, or starting a business. These challenges are aggravated by financial difficulties or health issues and illness, because of which a majority of returned migrants remain unemployed. Lack of savings from abroad owing to withheld salary, unpaid salary, salary much lower than expected, and living expenses lead to insufficient capital to invest in business or productive ventures as migrants aspire to integrate economically. Furthermore, debt burden following outstanding loan repayment of migration cost and complicated procedures in availing formal loans from banks pose additional challenges for reintegration. Most of the migrants mentioned that they were not aware of the government's special loan provision for returned migrants, and the few who were aware reported complicated processes and eligibility criteria that they could not have undertaken or met. Migrants reported that they took fresh loans from NGOs for outstanding loan repayment or for small-scale investment/homestead business. They also mentioned that information on home country's labor market or employment avenues is not readily available. Further, mismatch of acquired skills from destination and required skills for home country labor market is a challenge. Many times, wage differences between home country and destination country for the same type of job demotivates migrants to engage in wage labor after their return.

Disappointment by family and stigma and bullying by the community hinder social reintegration:

Social reintegration challenges were also experienced by the respondents. In general, their inability to meet the financial demands of the family or lack of expected improvement in their family's financial position leads to despair among returned migrants and dissatisfaction among their family members. Insolvency among returned migrants is considered a failed migration attempt by the community, although the community is more sympathetic towards male returned migrants. They neither have a lower social status nor face social exclusion. Female returned migrants, on the contrary, experience stigma, exclusion, and discrimination. Many have fallen

² Note: Kafala— This is a system used to monitor [migrants](#), working primarily in the construction and domestic sectors in the GCC countries. The system ties migrant workers with an in-country sponsor, usually their employer, who is responsible for their visa and legal status. A migrant worker in the kafala system is legally bound to his/her employer. Without the Kafala's (employer's) permission, the migrant worker cannot enter or leave the country; nor transfer his/her employment. The kafala system which binds workers with individual employers or visa sponsors leaves migrants with no other option but to endure the plight of abusive working conditions, because if the sponsor terminates or revokes the sponsorship, the migrant becomes an illegal migrant immediately. The Global Policy Institute. <https://gpilondon.com/publications/the-ongoing-plight-of-migrant-domestic-workers-in-the-middle-east>

victims to bullying and defamation, because of notions of perceived sexual engagement/abuse of female migrants at the destination country. Women returned migrants also experienced break up of families after they went abroad, owing to divorce and remarriage of their husband in their absence.

Reintegration support services are needed for returned migrants:

Respondents reported that various reintegration support services availed by them under some programs have been beneficial for them. Receiving general life-skills and counseling support have had a positive impact in raising their hopes and aspirations towards sustainable reintegration. Livelihood training and seed-money support to start small-scale ventures such as homestead business, tea stall, cattle rearing, and poultry farming have contributed to their reintegration socially and economically. Apart from the life-skills and livelihood services, respondents found that health services also benefited them. However, respondents also expressed that services were limited in terms of span and financial coverage, and they needed to have more holistic support and services.

Recommendations for the government:

The government needs to develop more effective strategies to implement, monitor, and govern overseas labor migration. The existing laws, policies, and action plans need to be reviewed for better outcomes and implementation in favor of migrant workers and protection of their rights. Coordination among different government ministries, departments, and governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders should be strengthened for smooth labor migration at the various stages prior to and during migration and at the post-return stage of labor migration. Effective strategies to provide access to information and service provision at the local level as per policies need to be established. One-stop access points for information and services for the different stages of migration need to be created. Recruitment agencies need to be trained and monitored on ethical practices for safe migration and to adopt gender-sensitive practices. Special focus needs to be given to monitoring and regularizing the involvement of intermediaries in the migration process. To support social and economic reintegration of migrants a comprehensive database of migrants (for both those migrating and those returning) needs to be prepared and updated regularly. Capacity of officials need to be built to utilize age- and sex-disaggregated data in program planning. Program design and planning should contain need-based, inclusive, and gender-responsive strategies. Also, smooth, and sustainable socioeconomic reintegration needs to be ensured for returned migrants. Lastly, bilateral labor agreements with destination countries are required to prioritize protection of migrants' rights. Gender-responsive agreements should also be negotiated, implemented, and monitored with a special focus on protection of female migrants.

Recommendations for program implementers and civil society:

Program implementers and civil society need to increase advocacy and campaigns for regulated and safe migration. Programs that are targeted at grassroot level and that provide tailored assistance need to be implemented, scaled, and replicated across the country and should be based on experiences of successful programs and best practices. Collaboration with recruitment agencies, partners, and the government needs to be strengthened for a coordinated effort. Long-term sustainable programs should be leveraged for better outcomes. Implementers and civil society should work towards social integration prior to economic integration by providing a supportive environment for returned migrants—not just psychosocial support, but conceiving an inclusive, gender-responsive, age-responsive 'whole approach.' Training programs, such as pre-departure training, skills training, and financial literacy training, should be made more accessible for aspiring and returned migrants as needed.

Recommendations for researchers, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) practitioners:

Data and information on age- and sex-disaggregated data of returned migrants need to be analyzed and shared. Reviews of good practices from around the world should be disseminated among governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders for better policy and program planning on overseas labor migration. Generation of evidence by reviewing past and current intervention programs and their effectiveness should be communicated for better program designing and implementation. An approach to include migrants at the design phase should be considered for developing more participatory, effective, and sustainable program designs.

Recommendations for funding agencies:

Funding agencies should increase financing for the implementation of programs and research to generate evidence on best practices and for policy recommendations. Funding agencies can allocate more funding and take up co-created projects and programs in consultation with program implementers. Funding agencies can also work in building 'Global survivor-led-network' for multi-donor collaboration that can create scope for funding large-scale and long-term research or program implementation. Funding agencies' role can be vital to draw attention to the issue of labor exploitations experienced by overseas labor migrants among key stakeholders, development partners, and the governments of both sending and destination countries.

Chapter 1: Introduction

With about 7.8 million migrants abroad, Bangladesh ranks as the sixth largest labor-sending country with regard to international migration (UNDESA, 2019; Division, 2020). International labor migration is a priority agenda for the Bangladesh government for its current and future development strategy that aims to reduce unemployment and increase remittance flow (Bruyn & Kuddus, 2005; Akash & Akter, 2020). Bangladesh became the eighth largest remittance-receiving country in the world (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). The country's economy is highly dependent on international migrants' remittances, which constitute about seven percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) (IOM, 2019a; World Bank, 2022). A majority of the migrant workers (64 %) from Bangladesh migrate to the Gulf and Arab countries, while the remaining cohort migrate to Southeast Asia (Siddique et al., 2019). From the early 1990s, alongside male migrants, Bangladesh started to send women from its international labor migration pool. Women constitute about 12 percent of the total international migrant labor flow of the country and a majority of women from Bangladesh join the overseas labor force as domestic workers (Shamim & Holliday, 2018; Sultana & Fatima, 2017).

Amid the continuous outflow of migrant workers, the overseas recruitment system persists in being complicated—migrants are often subject to human trafficking, forced labor, and modern slavery (Sahai et al., 2021; ILO, 2020). Safe recruitment is also important for the return and reintegration of migrant workers. Without fair recruitment abroad and safe return home, sustainable reintegration is difficult to ensure. Informal operations of dalals³ heighten migration risks and open up channels for subsequent exploitations of migrants. Recruitment agencies and their intermediaries in Bangladesh often misinform prospective migrants about the migration process, costs, and work type, leaving them in difficult and abusive working conditions that they have to endure to pay off their large debts (Barkat et al., 2014; Bangladesh Bank, 2019; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2021). A large number of migrant workers receive work permits through unofficial channels. Migrant workers without proper documentation particularly are more vulnerable to exploitation (Ranjan, 2016). In addition, female migrants, chiefly engaged as domestic workers, suffer from various forms of mistreatment and abuse, not only in the process of migration, but also on their arrival in the destination country. They often become victims of sexual harassment and physical abuse and are denied basic rights by their employers, because domestic work is considered low-status work and lacks legal protection. (Sultana & Fatima, 2017; GAATW, 2019; Rashid & Ashraf, 2018a). Women also face discrimination upon return to their home country and during the process of reintegration owing to stigma attached to perceived sexual exploitation of women migrants (Tareq et al., 2021; Islam, 2019).

Although labor migration is prioritized as part of the development agenda in Bangladesh, there is a wide knowledge gap in the existing literature on migration services, needs, and scope for further improvement. There are a limited number of studies and evidence in Bangladesh that document available services to migrants under public, private, or civil society organizations at all stages of migration and also on the effectiveness of these interventions. Identifying the gaps and challenges in services offered to migrants at the various migration stages at home and abroad is thus necessary for innovation in services that target overseas labor migrants and for tailoring them to their needs (Khair, 2018; Rashid & Ashraf, 2018a).

Given the predominance of a temporary migration cycle, a large number of migrant workers return to Bangladesh every year when their contract ends or because of various other reasons (Ahmed et al., 2015). Many of them are victims of fraud and return empty-handed with huge debt burdens (Davidson, 2013). In times of crisis, when migrants' return is unplanned or forced, their

³ Dalal are middlemen who link prospective migrants with employment agencies at both home and destination, intermediaries of the countries, and migrants involved in visa-trading in destination countries. They serve as a link between prospective migrants and all authorities concerned in migration processing such as BMET, recruiting firms, and diagnostic facilities, among others (RMMRU, 2019).

reintegration process becomes further complicated (Siddiqui, 2021). As per data from the expatriate ministry, in Bangladesh, the COVID-19 pandemic alone caused the return of 408,408 migrants from 29 countries from April to September of 2020 (IOM, 2021).

In Bangladesh, policy priority is more on promoting out-migration and far less on the return and reintegration of the migrant workers (Ahmed et al., 2015; Wickramasekara, 2019; Nawaz & Tonny, 2020). The migration governance system of Bangladesh needs to be improved to address the needs of returned migrants (IOM, 2019b; Rashid & Ashraf, 2018b), particularly in view of the limited information and study on returned migrants and their reintegration journey (Rashid & Ashraf, 2018b; CAFOD, 2021). If intervention and policies need to serve and work for the well-being of returned migrants and their families, an in-depth understanding of the different circumstances in which migrants return, the challenges and diverse experiences they face, the capabilities they have, and available reintegration services is needed. Also, the new dimension of COVID-19-induced forced or voluntary return of the migrants need thorough and comprehensive qualitative understanding to better inform international migration reintegration policies during the pandemic and to identify what returned migrants need for their social and economic reintegration in their country.

Study objectives

1. To understand the implementation, effectiveness, gaps, and challenges in the current policies, programs, and systems (both pre-departure and return) in Bangladesh for safe migration and repatriation, referral, recovery, and reintegration of returned migrants and survivors of labor exploitation overseas.
2. To understand experiences of and challenges faced by overseas labor migrants prior to departure, at destination locations, and upon return to Bangladesh.
3. To understand worker perspectives on the kinds of policies, programs, and initiatives that may facilitate better and safer overseas labor migration experiences and their social and economic reintegration upon return.
4. To explore contributions of GFEMS interventions in improving programs for OLR repatriation, referral, recovery, and reintegration for male and female returned migrants; and
5. To make recommendations for different relevant stakeholders and actors that include the government, implementing partners and civil society organizations, researchers, development partners, and donors to address systems-level needs of returned migrants.

This report describes findings from the above-mentioned study. Following a description of the study design, methods, and limitations, the report gives a synthesis of literature reviewed, key policies, laws, and operations of relevant bodies to give the reader the context of overseas labor migration in Bangladesh, its relevance to safe migration, and information on important areas that need further evidence generation. In subsequent chapters, the report describes findings from the primary qualitative research with returned migrants and key informants, presented by stages of the migration process, to give a deeper understanding of migrants' experiences and challenges prior to departure, at destination locations overseas, and upon return to Bangladesh. The report then sheds light on the experiences of returned migrants' economic and social reintegration process, services received from government and other organizations, including interventions by GFEMS, and perspectives from migrants and key informants on programs and policies that may facilitate safer migration and better economic and social reintegration for migrants and their families. The report concludes with recommendations for the government, development partners and donors, NGOs and implementing organizations, civil society, recruitment agencies, and researchers.

Chapter 2: Methods

The study comprised (i) a review of literature and existing policies and programs for overseas labor migration in Bangladesh, (ii) primary data from a qualitative study with returned migrants from the GCC countries and key informants working with overseas labor migration, and (iii) a stakeholder consultation.

Desk-based review of the literature and existing policies and programs provides the broader context of labor migration from Bangladesh to the GCC countries, focusing on the process of migration, repatriation, reintegration, and referral and its associated gaps and challenges in migration governance and management. Desk reviews summarize generally accepted facts, emerging and current state of topics of research, and how the trends of overseas labor migration have changed over time. It also provides a succinct description of major policies and acts and their components and how policies have been revised to address needs of migrants over a period of time.

Primary qualitative interviews were carried out with returned migrants and key informants to obtain an in-depth understanding of the situations, challenges, needs and requirements, repatriation, and reintegration regarding overseas labor migration.

Desk-based literature and policies and program reviews meet the first study objective, and the primary qualitative interviews with the returned migrants and key informants cover the remaining objectives of the study.

2.1 Literature review

Online searches were conducted for identifying literature in both English and Bangla on migration, repatriation, reintegration, recovery, and referral systems in Bangladesh, published from 1990 (when overseas labor migration began to expand in Bangladesh) to the present. The review included reports, policy analyses, briefs, documentation of program interventions, evaluation reports, and peer-reviewed journal articles. The review was based on literature retrieved from electronic databases, such as Google, Google Scholar, and JSTOR as well as websites of government ministries, UN agencies, NGOs, and research organizations working on migration. Most of the literature included in the review was published in English. Various key words, such as 'international migration', 'human trafficking and out-migration', 'forced labor migrant' or 'human rights and labor migration', 'returned migrants' or 'return and reintegration of migrants', and 'referral mechanism', were used to find documents on migration and reintegration. It was challenging to identify the most relevant documents from the bulk of online materials at the primary phase. Also, after sorting out the relevant literature, most of them were found to be descriptive and not data driven. The literature was used to strengthen the understanding of relevant issues and to identify gaps in the evidence base globally as well as for the Bangladesh OLR landscape. Reviews of earlier studies, policy documents, and guidelines related to the Bangladesh OLR context were used to identify the relevant and important issues that needed to be studied, and these guided us in designing the tools for the study.

2.2 In-depth interviews (IDIs) and key informant interviews (KIIs)

Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews (IDIs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the migration and reintegration situation in Bangladesh. These interviews covered thematic areas, such as socioeconomic profiles of returned migrants, drivers of migration, process of migration, work conditions in destination country, reasons for and process of return, services received, and their needs and challenges in social and economic reintegration after return to Bangladesh.

2.3 Study area and sample selection

Two districts from among the districts where the GFEMS partners, Caritas and OKUP, were implementing their interventions were selected for the study area. The study was conducted in Faridpur and Munshiganj, which are situated in the central part of the country, and which are known for their high volume of overseas labor migration. Further selection of three sub-districts from each district was finalized for conducting interviews.

Table 1: Study area

District	Sub-district
Munshiganj	Munshiganj sadar, Shirajdikhan, Srinagar
Faridpur	Faridpur Sadar, Charbhadrasan, Nagarkanda

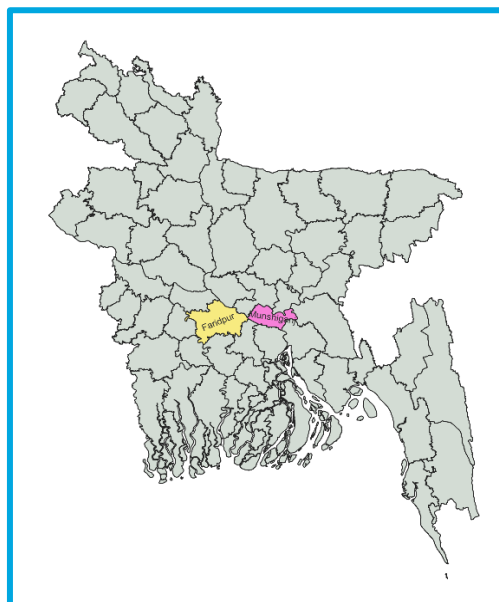


Figure 1: Study area map

We conducted IDIs with male and female returned migrants aged 20–45 who had returned to Bangladesh from the GCC countries in the last two years and who had been employed in unskilled or low-skilled work, such as in construction, domestic work, sanitation, agriculture, garment manufacturing, or hospitality and food services. We also interviewed returned migrants who had experienced labor exploitations or abuses. The Population Council reached out to OKUP and Caritas for the list of potential respondents (returned migrants) who were part of the organizations' programs. To reduce selection bias, from an initial list of more than 200 migrants who had returned in the past two years from the GCC countries, the Population Council study team randomly drew 80 samples, and from those 80 samples, research assistants contacted and interviewed 40 respondents (20 male and 20 female) based on their availability for the interview.

We also conducted KIIs with key stakeholders working on OLR and labor migration in Bangladesh. These stakeholders included national and sub-national representatives of government officials, international and national organizations working with labor migration, and partners of GFEMS (Caritas Bangladesh and OKUP). We identified potential key informants by scanning the website of the ministries and other organizations mentioned earlier and by enquiry through different networks. We selected respondents purposively for their expertise, their availability to talk to the research team, and their willingness to participate in the study. A total of 10 key informants were interviewed.

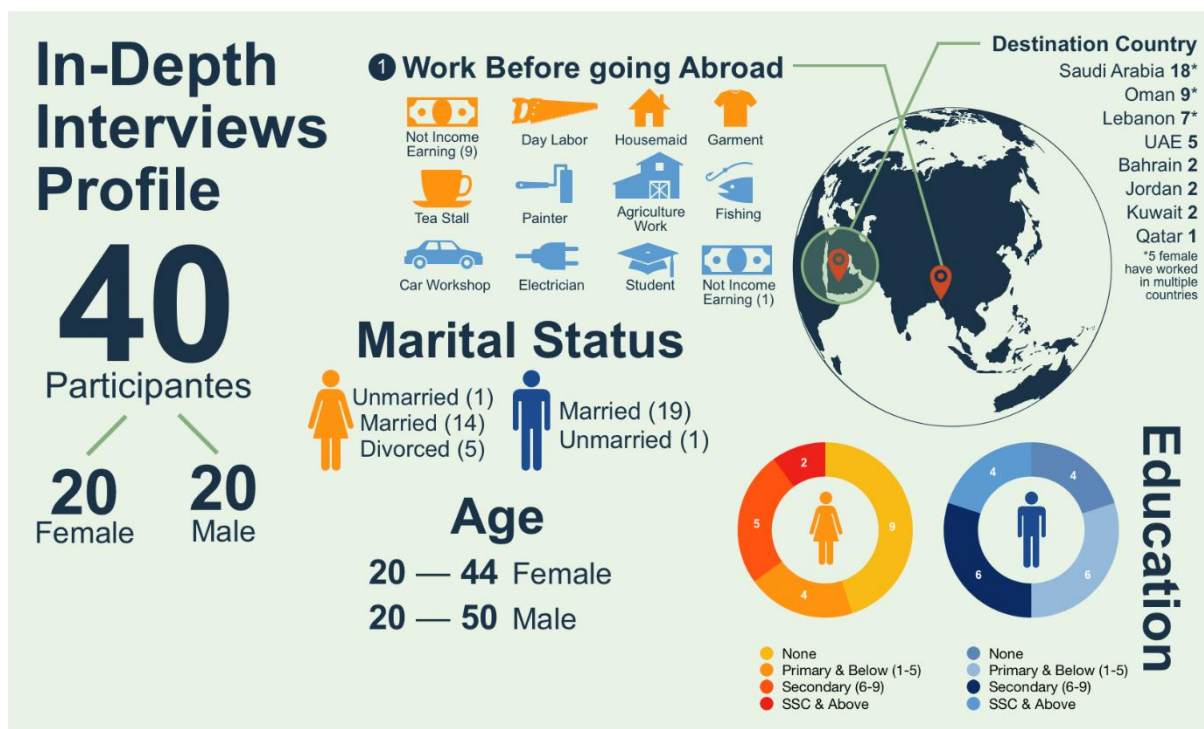


Figure 2: Profile of IDI respondents

2.4 Study tool development

Semi-structured interview guidelines were developed for IDIs and KIs. The interview guide provided main questions and additional probes to extract in-depth responses. IDI guidelines were first developed by the Population Council research team, based on literature and documents relating to OLR and the migration process that included repatriation, reintegration, and referral mechanisms in Bangladesh. The guide included questions and possible probes on topics such as reasons for migration, process of migration, work environment abroad, reason for return, process and services of reintegration as well as respondents' challenges and access to services, and the type of support and information used for migration, return, and reintegration. Long-term aspirations of returned migrants were also explored. The questionnaire was first developed in English by the research team, which included national and international staff. It was then translated into Bengali for conducting the interviews in participants' native language.

Table 2: Domain of IDI interview guideline

Domain	Topic areas	Description
Background information	Demographics and employment	Age, education, marital status, previous work, income
Migration	Migration experience	Reasons for migration, process of migration, medium, visa processing, cost of migration, source of finance, job contract
Work abroad	Work experience abroad	Type of work, environment, salary/wage, working hours, experience of exploitation
Return	Return experience	Reason for return, mental and socioeconomic condition after return

Reintegration	Reintegration support and challenges	Reintegration support received, benefits, challenges of reintegration , long-term aspiration for integration
COVID-19 impact	Impact of COVID-19 on work and life abroad and after return	Health risk, work condition and environment during COVID-19, impact on work contract, impact on life and livelihood after return
Suggestions	Migrant's suggestions on safe migration and effective reintegration	Ways towards safe migration, recommendation for sustainable and effective reintegration

Table 3: Domain of KII interview guideline

Domain	Areas
Informants' perceptions on migration and labor exploitation	Magnitude of unsafe overseas labor migration, labor exploitation and abuse during pre-migration, at destination, and after return
Importance of programs for repatriation, referral, recovery, and reintegration of returned migrants	Support under the programs, effectiveness of the support provided under the programs, challenges to implement the programs
Suggestions	Suggestions about government policies and overcoming challenges of the programs

2.5 Inclusive and collaborative research process

Considering the sensitivity of the research issues—including unsafe and unethical recruitment, workplace exploitation, experiences of forced return or deportation, and reintegration — appropriate steps were taken in designing the study tools. Inclusive, active, and collaborative mechanisms were prioritized by engaging partners (GFEMS, CAFOD, Caritas, and OKUP) and respondents (returned migrants and key informants) to review the interview guidelines and to modify the tools based on feedback received. The draft guidelines (English and Bengali) were shared with GFEMS and its partners, CAFOD, OKUP, and Caritas, for review by program staff and program participants. The guidelines were revised and finalized after two rounds of reviews and comments. The guidelines were also pilot tested on two respondents (one male and one female) with matching criteria prior to the initiation of final interviews. The KII tool was shared with the partner organizations for review and finalized based on cumulative feedback. The preliminary findings were shared through virtual meetings with GFEMS and partners (CAFOD, OKUP, Caritas).

A local level stakeholders' (including returned migrants) validation workshop was also held to validate the research findings with OLR survivors and to include their recommendations. The validation workshop was facilitated by researchers from the Population Council, and the participants were OLR migrants (5 female, 5 male), program personnel and case workers from Caritas, and one government representative. The findings of this research were translated in the local language (Bengali) and presented to OLR survivors in a learning-sharing format where findings on pre-migration process, types of exploitation at various stages of migration, work condition at the destination, return and reintegration process were presented. There was ample opportunity for survivors to share their experiences and opinions after findings were presented. Overall, the findings from the research resonate with the survivors' experience and their opinion in almost every aspect. In this way, we validated our findings and took note of additional comments. The validation workshop ended with some specific recommendations that came from the survivors regarding training content, information hubs on safe migration at the local level, strengthening the monitoring of recruiting agencies here, and activities of embassy at the destination, which were incorporated in the final report.

2.6 Research Team

The study team comprised two Population Council researchers from the Dhaka office under the guidance of one principal investigator. Population Council researchers conducted literature reviews, developed study tools, recruited and provided extensive training to the research assistants, supervised interviews, and coordinated with partner organizations and research assistants during in-field activities. The researchers also coded and analyzed data and developed the study report. A team of two female and two male research assistants were recruited for conducting the interviews with respondents.

2.7 Recruitment and training of research assistants

The Population Council research team reviewed several applications for recruitment of eligible candidates as research assistants. Five female candidates and five male candidates were selected to participate in a viva voce (assessment of a candidate through oral interview). Four of the applicants were recruited, based on their education profile, knowledge level, and work experience on qualitative data collection, transcription, and translation. Selected research assistants were graduates from public universities with previous experience in conducting qualitative research. They also had substantial experience of working at the community level.

The research assistants were provided with extensive training over the course of five days by the Population Council research team on study overview, research ethics, qualitative research and facilitation methods, conduction of interviews, study tools, and transcription. Training of research assistants specifically included conducting of interviews with respect and sensitivity, maintaining social and cultural sensitivity, and managing distress of respondents, which included referral to emergency services and counseling support from partner organizations and providing emergency contact numbers for any distress caused to the respondent during the interview. The training session concluded with mock interview sessions overseen by researchers, and the research assistants were given feedback for improving performance in the field. Upon successful completion of training, teams conducted field tests with the interview guidelines to finalize the same.

2.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval of the study was obtained from the Population Council's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Study protocol and data collection tools and processes were critically reviewed by the IRB. The study protocol identified potential risks and put in place measures to minimize risks associated with conducting interviews on respondents' experiences of unethical/ unsafe migration and workplace exploitation and abuse. Emphasis was given on assigning same-sex research assistants to ensure the comfort of respondents during interviews. Research assistants were also gender sensitive and respectful of the cultural context, which allowed for meaningful engagement between them and respondents. Research assistants were extensively trained in research ethics, including contextually grounded training on protection, psychological first aid, and trauma-informed research. Population Council had made prior arrangements with partner organizations (OKUP and Caritas) for referral to professional counselors along with necessary details and contact information. Contacts and financial provision for need-based counseling support were made in advance so that research assistants could refer respondents immediately if the need arose for any respondents. Research Assistants remained vigilant of any discussion that may trigger distress and were equipped with contact details of emergency services and counseling support for referring respondents, if need be.

Protecting and respecting confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of the respondents were prioritized and maintained throughout the interview and also during the management, coding, analyzing, and reporting of the study findings. The entire research team had appropriate training on research ethics, informed consent, and confidentiality procedures. Research assistants took written informed consent from the study participants at the very beginning of the interview, while

providing sufficient details to ensure that (i) the selection of subjects is equitable, subjects' privacy is protected, and data confidentiality is maintained; (ii) informed consent is written and explained orally in a language that study participants can understand and that is obtained without coercion or undue influence; and (iii) appropriate safeguards were in place to protect the rights and welfare of vulnerable subjects. While taking informed consent, research assistants gave the respondents information about the Population Council, objectives of the study, and procedure to disseminate and utilize the results in future (see Annex 1). Research assistants also sought permission for audio-recording of the interviews. The interviews were conducted only after receiving a consent form signed by the respondents. The recordings and transcripts did not contain information that could be linked to respondent's identity. De-identifying codes were used for transcription, analysis, and presentation of findings. All recordings were deleted from the devices after transcriptions were completed. Only researchers had access to interviews collected from the field. Names of the respondents were not used in the report to ensure confidentiality. None of the responses of participants that are reproduced in the report can be traced back to individual respondents.

2.9 Data collection and transcription

The research team initiated their work by contacting field office staff of the partner organizations of GFEMS (Caritas and OKUP) to connect with potential respondents for both IDIs and KIs. After establishing contact with potential respondents, the research team set an interview date and time convenient for the respondent. Interviews were then carried out at the time and place agreed upon, which for IDIs was most commonly at respondents' homes, open spaces near homes, and village market area when it was not busy, and for KIs, the preferred sites were office places where privacy could be maintained. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one setting that comprised one researcher and one participant. Researchers audio-recorded interviews and took short notes as required. The researchers carried out interviews with informed consent and permission. Each of the interviews took a minimum of 40 minutes and a maximum of 60 minutes. After the interviews, the audio-recordings were transcribed into Bengali for analysis and reporting. Interviews were carried out between 23 October 2021 and 4 November 2021.

2.10 Data analysis

The interview transcripts were at first read and re-read thoroughly along with the interview summaries and field notes. Transcripts were coded in excel in order to develop the primary coding frame according to the concepts and themes that emerged in the interviews. The transcripts were then reviewed to develop themes and sub-themes relating to migration and reintegration of returned migrants. Thematically coded data were recorded on a spreadsheet to create an overview of the interviews gathered. Direct quotations from original interviews were also recorded in the spreadsheet to preserve the actual terminology, expression, and connotation used by the respondents to describe and define their experiences without any deviation. Finally, the quoted responses that have been used to describe the findings were translated and presented in the report. Participants' responses are presented without disclosing their names in the report.

2.11 Study Limitations

Findings presented in this report should be interpreted with some limitations in mind. The study was designed to explore the 'how and why' from an in-depth understanding of a relevant sample of returned migrants, and therefore, does not serve as a basis for statistical generalization, but rather serves to be considered for subjective and qualitative validation. The respondents had participated in the GFEMS-funded interventions and therefore had received specific services. Thus, they could have been subject to information biases, particularly regarding the services they had received. As program participants, the interviewed migrants fall into a category defined by certain specific criteria, such as returning recently from the GCC countries

(within two years). This study may not capture the situation of migration and migrants or returned migrants in general or of those (i) who have migrated to countries outside of the GCC, (ii) who have returned earlier than two years of conducting the study, and (iii) who are not participants of the GFEMS-funded programs or participants of other programs.

Chapter 3: Review of laws, programs, and policies

3.1 GOVERNMENT BODIES AND REGULATORY AUTHORITIES FOR LABOR MIGRATION

The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) is responsible for dealing with international labor migration, through its four major departments—the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), and Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB). These bodies are responsible for providing required information, partnerships, and facilitations relating to international migration and employment. Each of the entities have a distinct management structure that caters to the needs of different services pertaining to migration and migrants.

1. Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)

BMET was established in 1976 as an attached department under the Ministry of Manpower Development and Social Welfare. With an aim to recruit and send migrant workers overseas, BMET was created following the ILO Conventions 87, 88, 96, and 97. BMET is responsible for planning and implementing strategies for proper utilization of manpower of the country locally and internationally. It is responsible for regulating and licensing recruiting agencies, collecting information on the labor market, registration of aspiring workers for local and international employment, providing clearance for aspiring migrants, and development and implementation of training programs in view of the needs of the national and international labor market. BMET provides short- and long-term training in 56 trades in 64 Technical Training Centers (TTCs). The bureau arranges for technical training, a 30-day mandatory orientation training for Middle East-bound female domestic workers, and a general three-day pre-departure training for both male and female international migrants. Currently, there are 42 District Employment and Manpower Offices (DEMOs) through which BMET is providing services to employment seekers. BMET assists migrants, especially international migrants, in the regular migration process by organizing specific pre-departure training and technical training, promoting workers' rights, and facilitating resolution of employment-related disputes. As of 2018, BMET has provided pre-departure training to 575,681 migrants and housekeeping training to 44,352 female migrants (BMET, 2018).

2. Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL)

Established in 1984, BOESL is the only state-owned overseas recruitment company in Bangladesh. The main objective is to send workers overseas at low cost through transparent channels. With a 'no profit no loss' strategy, the company aims to minimize the cost of recruitment and migration. BOESL fixes the cost of migration as per employment in different destinations and as per skill level (BOESL, 2019). Cost of migrating through BOESL is much lower than migration through private agencies (Barkat et al., 2014). BOESL explores new overseas employment markets for Bangladeshi workers and communicates with different manpower-receiving countries with a view to promote migration. BOESL projects Bangladesh as a reliable source of potential manpower by regular publicity and promotional activities. It creates opportunities for overseas employment, especially for women and poor people of the country, to eliminate poverty. BOESL also works in preventing illegal stay of workers at the destination country. After receiving authentic demand letters either through Bangladesh Missions abroad or directly from the employers, BOESL advertises for recruitment, where all necessary details are mentioned. BOESL scrutinizes *curricula vitae* (CVs) of candidates, shortlisting them based on job-

specific requirement and sharing the list of shortlisted candidates with employers for interview. BOESL also supports processing the migration. BOESL sends the selected candidates to enlisted medical centers for pre-departure medical tests. After clearing the tests, BOESL arranges for visa applications and ticketing. One representative from BOESL, assisted by the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) airport desk, is present at the airport to ensure the smooth departure of the workers. In the fiscal year of 2019–2020, BOESL ensured deployment of 8,525 migrants abroad, particularly to Jordan and South Korea (BOESL, 2019; BOESL, 2020).

3. Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB)

Wage Earners' Welfare Fund was created in 1990 for the welfare of migrant workers. Later the WEWB was established in 2013 to extend welfare services to migrant workers and their families following the 19(1) provision of Emigration Ordinance (1982) and Section 47 of the Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act (2013). The Board was made a statutory body through Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act (2018). WEWB is mandated with providing welfare support to migrants and their families. It provides pre-departure briefing to migrant workers, and guides migrants at departure and arrival through Probashi Kallyan help desk at the airport. It also provides scholarships to talented children of migrants. Its responsibilities additionally include providing legal assistance and other necessary support to distressed workers, facilitating collateral-free loans to migrants through PKB, and providing smart cards for emigration clearance. The WEWB is entrusted with such tasks as repatriation of deceased workers and arranging for employer compensation to their families; providing financial assistance to disabled and sick workers and to deceased workers' families; and supporting female workers with safe homes at destination and origin (WEWB, 2019).

4. Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB)

The government established Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) in 2010 to provide a state-run financial gateway for migrant workers. PKB was established through a parliamentary Act. PKB provides pre-departure (migration loan) and post-return (reintegration loan) loans to migrants. The bank was established to facilitate quick transfer of remittances at low cost, to finance labor migration, and fund investment loans for returned migrants and their families (PKB, 2020).

3.2 LAWS AND POLICIES FOR OVERSEAS LABOR MIGRATION IN BANGLADESH

The government has undertaken several legal and policy measures to promote, regulate, supervise, and monitor overseas labor migration processes. The policies, acts, rules, and memorandums have broadly focused on safe migration mechanisms and workers' rights and welfare in their directives and guidance. The policies and acts include directives for different ministries, institutes, and stakeholders to ensure safe, secure, and justified overseas migration and return and reintegration of migrant labor. Providing legal assistance and ensuring welfare are also included broadly in the policy directions. Fair and affordable recruitment processes have also been stressed under the policies by the government. However, policies and legal initiatives have been formulated mostly following reactions and repercussions of civil society organizations, academics, media, and migrants themselves on their experiences of exploitation and challenges at different stages of migration. Until 1982, labor migration of the country was regulated under the 'Emigration Act 1922,' an antiquated act of the British period that hardly emphasized labor rights or human rights aspects in labor migration governance. Over a period, migration policies and directives have been developed and revised. Some of the most relevant policies and their salient features are summarized below.

1. The Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (2016)

The Overseas Employment Policy of 2006, the first-ever policy on labor migration, was revised and reformulated as the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy in 2016. Even though the 2006 policy mentioned ethical recruitment, institutional support provision for migrants, protection of migrants' rights and welfare of family, and strengthening of bilateral agreements, the policy did not have a comprehensive action plan. Without a detailed action plan, implementation of the policy regulations to counter irregular migration remained ineffective. Ineffective implementation also heightened incidents of exploitation and rights violations of Bangladeshi workers. As a result, a revision of the policy was made in 2016. The policy was formulated, complementing international laws on migration and covering a rights-based framework. The policy has directions for safe migration and protection of workers' rights and their families' welfare; it highlights specific roles for ministries for migration management; it provides a separate chapter on female workers; and it also mentions directives in promoting reintegration services for returned migrants.

2. Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act (2013)

The Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act (2013) was formulated to replace the Emigration Ordinance (1982) for better enactment of laws to promote safe and fair overseas labor migration and uphold workers' rights and welfare. This Act provides a framework of governance for emigration from the country. The Act focuses on regulation of the recruitment process, regulatory provisions for submitting required credentials and documents for applying and acquiring licenses for recruiting agencies. The Act mandates that recruitment can be done only via licensed recruiting agencies and prohibits other intermediaries or agents from sending people abroad for employment. However, it grants permission for opening branch offices at the local level. The Act also has provisions for monitoring recruitment agents, grading of agencies based on performance, and conditions that may lead to cancellation of licenses. The Act has provision for establishing the Labor Welfare Wing under the Bangladesh Mission in destination countries for purposes such as inspection of workplaces and verifying employers of Bangladeshi migrants. The Act also has provisions for workers' right to information, legal aid, filing civil lawsuits, and returning home.

3. The Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act (2018)

The Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act was formulated in 2018 as a procedural law for the formation and work plan of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board—the statutory body created under the Act. The Act creates a legal framework for improved welfare services for Bangladeshi migrant workers and their families. Its policies acknowledge dignity and security of the workers and call for ensuring social protection for migrant families. The Act also calls for social and economic reintegration of returned migrants. The Wage Earners' Welfare Fund Rule (2002) that was revised as Wage Earners' Welfare Fund Rule (2021) is mostly aimed at ensuring welfare of migrants and their families. It focuses on reintegration, which is an integral part of migration governance. However, that provision is to be supervised by higher bureaucratic management with absolute power given to government authorities.

4. Emigration Rules, Recruiting Agents Conduct, and License Rules

These rules were issued under Section 19 of the Emigration Ordinance (1982), the first migration policy instrument of the country, to further regulate overseas migration. Earlier to these rules, the activities relating to migration were conducted on government executive orders without any specific rules. The Emigration and Recruiting Agents Conduct Rules aims to discipline recruitment agents and reduce irregularities in overseas labor recruitment. The rules prohibited recruiting agents from taking any fee from migrants other than charges fixed by the government. The rules

required recruitment agents to provide information and assistance to migrant workers through newspaper advertisements as well as proper briefings to migrants about work provision and conditions. Agents, for example, should safeguard the rights of the migrant workers from employers who have a past record of fraudulence and deception and should provide assistance to migrants while they are abroad.

5. The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012)

The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act was formulated in 2012 to counter human trafficking in any sector of the country. The Act ensures safe migration and protection of human-trafficking victims and securing of their rights. The Act covers workers in exploitative situations, such as domestic workers, and it includes provisions for migrants' right to fair and humane treatment. It mentions protection of migrant's rights and aims to stop the crime of transnational trafficking in women and children.

6. Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020)

Given the pressing need for including overseas labor migrants and their remittances into the national development plans for the country's economic growth, migration strategies have been prioritized, discussed, and defined in the Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020), alongside other policies and acts. The Plan recommended that migrant workers should have access to legal and social protection and legal and psychosocial counseling, and that their contracts are properly scrutinized for ensuring fair recruitment processes. The plan also recommended periodic reviewing of bilateral agreements to increase monitoring of working conditions and, thus, make any revisions as necessary.

7. Eighth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025)

The main objective of the plan was to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by implementing Vision 2041 and to achieve the status of upper middle-income country by eradicating extreme poverty by 2031. On the issue relating to migration, the Eighth Five-Year Plan took into consideration the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on employment and the overseas labor sector. The plan focused on creating new employment opportunities, sending back returned migrants, and addressing their work discontinuation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan also highlights the need for universal health system coverage for incidents during global health crises. The plan further emphasized motivating returned migrants to seek local market opportunities and providing migrants and their families with financial incentives for utilizing remittances for the economic growth of the country.

8. Bilateral agreements

The Bangladesh government has signed bilateral treaties and MoU(s) for safeguarding migrants at destination countries. Bangladesh has bilateral agreements with Kuwait and Qatar and has MoUs with Oman and UAE among the Gulf Countries (Wickramasekara & Ruhunage, 2018). Bilateral agreements between origin and destination countries can be effective in upholding workers' rights. The agreements are drawn on collaboration and shared responsibilities. These agreements are focused on enhancing employment opportunities at the destination countries, providing protection of workers and welfare for their families by the receiving and sending countries, regulating the recruitment process for fair recruitment in both countries, and establishing joint working groups to implement and resolve any migration issues bilaterally through government-to-government channels (Wickramasekara, 2015). However, even though the Government of Bangladesh has taken steps to strengthen bilateral agreements with the labor-receiving countries, the results are not satisfactory for protecting the rights of migrants

(Siddiqui, 2005; Wickramasekara & Ruhunage, 2018). Also, because MoUs are not legally binding, the success of such treaties depends on implementation and enforcement of the agreements. For sending countries like Bangladesh who have less negotiation power over receiving countries that are guided by their political economies, the effectiveness of the treaties mostly depends on the intention of the receiving countries towards labor rights and welfare (World Bank, n.d.).

9. Female-specific laws and policies

The policy changes regarding female migration are guided by vulnerabilities and experiences of exploitation of female migrant workers at destination countries. In the early 1970s, the Government of Bangladesh did not have any concrete policy to either encourage or discourage female migration. On individual or recruitment agency initiative, Bangladeshi women began to take jobs in the Middle Eastern countries (Blanchet & Biswas, 2021). Women's migration between 1981 and 2007 was restricted on the grounds that this was a protection mechanism against vulnerabilities (Shamim & Holliday, 2018; Sultana & Fatima, 2017). However, such a ban has been largely criticized by rights-based organizations and has sparked a dialogue that such action may further increase international trafficking of women. After sustained criticism from civil society organizations and other rights-based organizations and taking the potential trafficking situation into consideration, the government lifted the ban on migration of married women above the age of 35, while maintaining the ban on migration of unmarried women below the age of 35. This restriction on age limit was further relaxed for female migration. Age limit was reduced from 35 to 25 years for domestic and garment workers and 18 for other workers, while the maximum age for migration was set at 45 years. Restrictions on unmarried women have also been withdrawn. Compulsory pre-departure briefing for women was mandated to address workplace vulnerabilities specific to women (Barkat & Ahsan, 2014). The literature highlights that male migration cost is 16 times higher than female migration (BIGD, 2022), which gives an advantage to female migration in terms of migration cost. Saudi Arabia indicated that if Bangladesh were to allow female workers to migrate for housemaid work, they would consider opening up the market to male workers. In February 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, where migration of women for domestic work in Saudi Arabia was declared to be free of cost (Swift, 2018). However, the contents of the Saudi-Bangladesh MoU are not disclosed publicly, hence the scale of protection of female domestic workers under the MoU is unknown (Tanzim et al., 2021). Women's migration to the GCC countries primarily as housemaids does not fall within the purview of labor laws of most countries, which leaves them more prone to workplace exploitations and abuses, including low payment, forced labor, long working hours without rest, and insufficient supply of food (ILO, 2016; Malit & Ghafoor, 2014). The Bangladesh-Jordan memorandum provides protection and rights for Bangladeshi workers under Jordan's labor laws, and the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia memorandum for recruiting domestic workers has provisions for controlling recruitment costs and for putting in place measures against unlawful recruitment of domestic workers, to be applied in both countries (Wickramasekara & Ruhunage, 2018). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) prohibits discrimination against women and ensures protection of the rights of women, including their right to employment, fair work environment, and social protection, formulation of gender-sensitive and rights-oriented policies, removal of discriminatory policies, ensuring access to health, socioeconomic integration, and compensation mechanisms for rights violation, injuries, sickness, and demise (GAATW, 2019). The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012) protects migrant workers (especially women) from being subjected to trafficking through deception and fraudulent recruitment by local and foreign recruiting agencies and brokers. The Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (2016) has delineated regulations for female workers. The policy mentions the role of specific ministries in safeguarding female migrant workers. The policy includes a separate chapter on female migrant workers with an emphasis on establishing a separate wing for women in order to provide migration services, provide skills-building training, establish women friendly counseling services at embassies, keep a database of female migrants, and create secure banking for smooth remittance flow (Shamim & Holliday, 2018).

3.3 CONTRIBUTION OF NGOS

Several NGOs in Bangladesh work with migrant workers for promoting safe and secured migration. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), OKUP, and the Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA), for example, have programs that provide training to and engage volunteers in providing essential information to migrants to raise awareness on migration and reintegration issues. They also provide support in repatriation, family reunification, shelter, health, and legal and paralegal services. The programs facilitate financial aid and skills development to avail decent work and support reintegration upon return (BRAC, 2016; OKUP, 2019; BOMSA, n.d.). BOMSA works to ensure safe migration, especially of female migrants, through community awareness and advocacy programs at different stakeholder levels (BOMSA, n.d.). Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (BILS) also works with migrants and returned migrants through research, advocacy, networking, formulating and reforming labor- and migration-related policies and laws (BILS, n.d.). Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) works toward building resilience among returning migrants through economic reintegration and community empowerment programs (YPSA, n.d.). Caritas Bangladesh and Dhaka Ahsania Mission provide several support programs for migrants at different migration phases, such as pre-departure services and training and livelihood-training support programs for returned migrants and their families (Caritas Bangladesh, 2021; Mission, n.d.). Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK), and Bangladesh Nari Shramik Kendra (BNSK) specifically work for female migrants' rights and issues of discrimination and safe migration of labor migrants (MJF, n.d.; ASK, n.d.; BNSK, n.d.). BNSK and Awaj Foundation work on migrant workers' rights, with a particular focus on supporting women workers who migrate abroad for readymade garment (RMG) sector work. They also advocate for migrant workers' rights in regional and international platforms (Awaj Foundation, n.d.).

3.4 REINTEGRATION FOCUS IN POLICIES

The regulatory framework that governs and supervises labor migration briefly addresses rehabilitation and reintegration services for migrants. Specifically, Article 29 of the Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act (2013), Article 1.8.6 of the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (2016), Article 7 (h) of the Wage Earners' Welfare Rules (2002), and Article 9 (t) of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act (2017) have acknowledged issues concerning socioeconomic reintegration of returned migrants and that of utilizing remittances, resources, and skills of returned migrants. The Overseas Employment Policy of 2016 identified roles of concerned ministries and agencies in promoting reintegration services for returned migrants, such as supporting small enterprises, providing tax benefits, establishing cooperatives for returned migrants, and ensuring special reintegration services for migrants with health problems, occupational health hazards, or disabilities. The PKB provides collateral-free loan facilities to migrants and returned migrants so that they can begin income-generating activities (IOM, 2020). The Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees (WARBE) organizes different activities for effective reintegration of returned migrants, such as lobbying for the ratification of the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Alongside the policies and acts, migration strategies have been prioritized, discussed, and defined in several programmatic documents such as the Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) and Eighth Five-year plan (2021–2025). (Please see Annex 2)

1. Challenges and policy and program gaps in migration and reintegration

Despite reforms in the migration laws and policies over time, there are several challenges and gaps remaining in the Overseas Labor Recruitment (OLR) system in Bangladesh that compromise the welfare of migrants. When the employment policy of 2006 evolved into Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (2016) policy, it took a rights-based framework and refined it in many positive ways—it complemented international laws on migration, laying emphasis on safe migration and protection of workers' rights and their families' welfare, special regulation for female migrants, specific roles for involved ministries and directives for promoting reintegration services for returned migrants. However, there is lack of clear direction on accountability and implementation of its provisions in the policy (World Bank, n.d.). In the revised policy of 2016, pre-departure rights of the migrants are better addressed compared with the earlier employment policy of 2006, but challenges remain for upholding workers' rights at destination (Barkat et al., 2014). Workers' rights overseas are dependent on bilateral agreements where the Government of Bangladesh rarely has the power for better negotiation for fear of loss of the overseas labor market. Similarly, pre-departure welfare is better addressed, whereas welfare after return and during reintegration lacks detailed guidelines. Rights and entitlements and rescue and remedy after migration is not adequately ensured under the policy (IOM, 2020).

Challenges remain in ensuring safe migration and protecting migrants from exploitation, because the Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act (2013) lacks detailed mechanisms for monitoring the recruiting agencies and their activities and because of deficiencies in proper implementation (IOM, 2020; Islam, 2019). The Act also does not recognize protection of the rights of migrant workers who migrated through informal channels and who work in the informal sector (Islam, 2020). The Act only covers recruiting agents, but has no directive on sub-agents or dalals, which make dalals exempt from statutory provisions (IOM, 2020; Islam, 2019). The Act also falls short of specifying criteria for migrants for availing compensation and pursuing lawsuits. The right of migrants to redress in the event of contractual violations is not mentioned. The Act does not incorporate penalties for physical, sexual, and psychological violations to workers by agents, recruitment agencies, employers, or institutions (Islam, 2020). The provision of non-cognizability, non-compoundability, and bailability for any fraudulent offense makes the Act less effective (Islam, 2019).

Gaps remains in reintegration of returned migrants as policy priority was more on out-migration. Reintegration received policy focus only very recently (Wickramasekara, 2019). The existing law and policies have not defined reintegration⁴ clearly nor do they offer any detailed guidelines about reintegration strategies. The diverse needs of returned migrants require gender-responsive and comprehensive services that focus on economic, social, and psychosocial needs. Returned migrants may experience a wide variety of needs, requiring programs that address those seeking assistance on unemployment, lack of savings, business development, job matching, or issues with psychosocial trauma or difficulty reintegrating into their communities (Wickramasekara, 2019; CAFOD, 2021). Also, holistic and needs-based integration support for returned migrants and the specific roles of the stakeholders to implement the services under the framework need to be specified as identified by recent studies in this field (CAFOD, 2021; OECD, 2020).

Labor migration policies and acts fall short specially in addressing the concerns of returned migrants, the poor, the distressed, women migrants, and those requiring legal aid and support upon return. There is a lack of specific legislation, policies, and acts on returned men and women migrants that would address their specific needs. The needs of returned migrants are different from the needs of aspiring migrants, such as information on reintegration support and services for returned migrants versus available information on safe migration for aspiring migrants.

⁴ Note: Reintegration— There is no universally agreed definition of the concept of reintegration. However, reintegration can be considered as a multi-dimensional concept that includes the process of individual, family, community, social, and economic participation of a returned migrant at their country of origin. Reintegration also refers to full enjoyment of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights of a returned migrant (ILO, 2019: Effective return and reintegration of migrant workers with special focus on ASEAN Member States).

Further, they need information on loan provisions and criteria for loans, and, among both male and female migrants, the need for psychological counseling, legal services, healthcare services, and social and economic support to reintegrate in the community has to be recognized. Women returned migrants may face abuse and harassment which might require a distinct support system while reintegrating (Rashid & Ashraf, 2018a; Rashid & Ashraf, 2018b).

Studies suggest that the majority of Bangladeshi migrants seek and engage in services before they migrate, and upon their return, by searching for services on their own, but there is lack of an institutionalized return and reintegration service (Siddiqui & Abrar, 2002; ILO, n.d.). Also, currently there is neither any data on returned migrants' vulnerabilities, assets, needs, and skills nor is there any comprehensive labor market information system (LMIS) in the country where returned migrants can be reintegrated systematically (Azad, 2018a). Lack of information and institutional support for returned migrants and mismatched demand-supply dynamics in the job market are foremost impediments in reintegrating returned migrants (Ahmed et al., 2015).

Along with the government, there are NGOs and civil society organizations that are working for reintegration of returned migrants through awareness-building, economic and social reintegration services, and providing of training and legal support. However, different organizations are implementing different activities, with variations in intensity of intervention and quality of services within their limited capacity, and this requires more cooperation and coordinated effort to establish a comprehensive reintegration welfare approach for returned migrants (Rashid & Ashraf, 2018b; Rashid & Ashraf, 2018a).

Chapter 4: Voices of Stakeholders

This section captures the voices of migrants with regard to migration experiences and reintegration challenges. Qualitative interviews with returned migrants from the GCC countries contribute to an in-depth understanding of the process of migration, their condition while working abroad, their situation after returning to the country, and their integration challenges that include an understanding of the separate needs of male and female returned migrants. We acknowledge caution in interpretation of the findings, for they cannot be generalized, as the respondents of the study were selected on the criteria of their having returned from only the GCC countries and being participants in GFEMS programs, through which they might have received certain benefits under the program package. Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of overseas labor migrants on the migration process, exploitation at different stages of migration, and relationships between the various aspects concerning migration, in the context of which policy and programs can intervene. The experiences of the migrants' journey captured in this chapter is largely homogenous with those of any overseas labor migrant of Bangladesh, and they resonate with findings in the existing literature of migration, thus making the findings very relevant. The study has shed new light on returned migrants' needs and challenges for their economic and social reintegration and makes important contributions to the migration literature where there is a dearth of evidence and research studies on this topic. The perspectives of the key informants are also triangulated and corroborated with experiences shared by the returned migrants and presented alongside in this chapter.

4.1 DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

1. Secured income and aspiration for higher payment

State-level, social, economic, familial, and individual factors influence the decision to migrate. Demand and supply of sending and receiving countries create a potential incentive for migration of workers abroad. Fragile labor market conditions in the country of origin and growing labor market in the country of destination with large economies create scope for new employment opportunities for migrants. The first and foremost reason for migration is income maximization (Simpson, 2017). Respondents regardless of sex mentioned that financial crisis, joblessness, unemployment, low wage, and lack of better work opportunity in Bangladesh are the main reasons behind their aspiration to go abroad to work. Almost every respondent migrated to their destination country, assuming there would be better work opportunities and better payment, which would promote their and their family's financial condition.

My financial condition was very fragile. I saw that many people in my neighborhood made their lives better after working abroad. I also thought if they can alter their luck with hard work in foreign land, I will be able to do so— with this aspiration I went abroad. But what happened is the opposite of what I imagined (IDI-38, male).

I went to Saudi Arabia. Before migrating, I tried to engage my husband in a small business by taking a loan from an NGO. But that business went into loss. Then we started having problems in our conjugal life. It went towards separation almost. Then after consulting my in-laws, I decided to work in Dhaka at a garment factory. I rented a house in Dhaka where the other tenants were discussing going abroad. From there, I also thought of migrating and discussed it again with my in-laws. My mother-in-law and aunt were very supportive of migration. They convinced my husband for my migration, and he agreed (IDI-19, female).

I was involved in petty agricultural work on our own land before migrating abroad. I used to look after my father's land. I was not earning as such at that time. My father had 1.5 Bigha land where we produced rice. That amount of rice was enough to make ends meet...so I was encouraged from the family to go abroad to earn and as I was also unemployed, I felt motivated to find a living there (IDI-22, female).

2. Desire for more savings

Many respondents mentioned that with their home country earnings, they were not able to save a large amount of money to invest in business, or land, or assets building. While working abroad, they thought that they would be able to save and accumulate a handsome amount that could be invested later in the future.

I decided to migrate because if you earn abroad then you can save a certain amount of money. Because when you work there, your expenditure is not that much, you can save your months of earning and if you can send that to your family at home, they are able to invest that money in something productive. But here with 15,000–16,000-taka income you do not get to save and then that earning is spent on your daily expenditure. Abroad you do not get money on a daily basis in hand, so a good amount of your earnings remains saved with the employer (IDI-12, male).

3. Influence of family members and community people

While respondents stated that the main reason for migration was to improve their financial position, they also mentioned that they were encouraged to migrate in search of better earnings prospects by their kin and friends already living abroad, or because local dalals (who may be relatives of family members) find opportunities to motivate people to migrate, sometimes for the financial benefit of their relatives or as agents of visa trading.

I went to work in a garment factory in Dhaka. In Dhaka, I was staying in a house where one day, I heard other tenants (husband and wife) who were discussing going abroad for a better job and salary. Hearing from them, I also felt motivated to go abroad for work (IDI-19, female).

It was definitely my decision to go abroad. But encouragement from my entire family—my mother, brother, and everyone else—was also there. I wanted to go abroad to have a financially stable life. My cousin was already working abroad. He provided me with the visa (IDI- 25, male).

4. Special drivers of female migration

Low-migration cost for females

IDI findings suggest that the decision to send the wife abroad instead of the husband is taken jointly by the couple because of flexibility and lower cost of female migration compared with male migration in some cases.

At first my husband decided to go abroad for work. But male migration cost is much higher. Then my husband thought of sending me instead of him going there to minimize the cost. So, he encouraged me to go abroad; then we jointly took the decision for my migration. This is because the cost of female emigration is much lower. We would not have

to spend much when a female migrates. Because of the poor financial condition of the family, we took the decision to migrate (IDI-1, female).

We were in a financial crisis and in constant hardship. Also, I did not have much scope to work and earn handsome money here in the country. It is very costly for male migration that's why we couldn't afford for my husband to migrate. Female migration cost is much affordable that's why I took the decision to go abroad (IDI-10, female).

Recovery from personal and family crisis

IDI findings indicate that the decision to migrate among married female respondents in particular is often guided by life-cycle considerations. Challenges in family life and changes in marital conditions, such as, domestic violence, divorce, re-marriage of husband, children's education and securing their future, and family well-being, tend to influence decisions to migrate in search of better income opportunity abroad.

I migrated abroad in 2004 and after serving for 16 years at a stretch, I came back in March 2021. The decision to go abroad was solely mine. Because at that time my husband remarried. Thinking of securing the future of my two daughters, I decided to go abroad for work (IDI-4, female).

I took the decision to migrate because I was suffering in my personal life. My husband used to beat me up, and also, I have two children to look after. So, one day one of my friends whose brother is a dalal told me that since I am suffering so much, I can think of going abroad...I decided to go and sought her brothers' (dalal's) help for my migration (IDI-7, female).

The decision to migrate was mine. My husband is not a responsible person. One day he goes out for work, the other day he sits idle at home. I have to manage all the expenses of the house—from house rent to food cost to all other expenses of the family. It was getting very difficult for me to bear. That's why I decided to go abroad and earn money for my children and family (IDI-6, female).

Some female respondents also mentioned that they took the decision to go abroad independently and out of desperation, without discussing it with family members, because their family would not have permitted or encouraged them to migrate abroad. In such cases, they sought the help of dalals for processing their migration, without the knowledge of their family.

It was my decision. We are poor, my father doesn't have any assets which I can inherit. Our financial condition is also unstable. Also, there are no work opportunities here in the country. I can't have three meals a day, I sleep on an empty stomach. But I have two daughters... I went abroad to earn money thinking of their future. I didn't tell anyone else (IDI-8, female).

4.2 PRE-MIGRATION CHALLENGES

1. Inadequate knowledge and information on migration processes

The literature suggests that access to appropriate information can raise awareness on safe migration for potential migrants (Oosterhoff et al., 2018; BRAC, 2016; Bryant & Joudo, 2018). While information and knowledge does not necessarily rule out the risk of exploitation, they are much more vulnerable to risks and unsafe migration in the absence of adequate information, as they tend to rely on the dalal or their relatives or friends and opt for informal channels of migration (Khair, 2018).

Almost all respondents mentioned they did not have any proper knowledge and understanding of the migration process prior to their migration.

IDI findings indicate that migrants, whether male or female, lack the awareness and relevant understanding of the migration process and their rights and entitlements as migrants. This knowledge gap poses a challenge towards safe and secure migration of the potential migrants in their pre-migration stage.

I think one of the major challenges of migrating abroad is the lack of knowledge on the migration process, job conditions, work environment, etc... I feel it is important to migrate after having proper knowledge on migration and work at destination. Now, we have learnt so many things from OKUP and Caritas office on migration process and others. I feel before migration people should consult such services and take the right decision whether or not to migrate (IDI-33, male).

2. Low literacy level, lack of awareness, and dependence on the dalal

The migration process is not guided by information that aspiring migrants receive from government offices or registered recruiting agents. Rather, it is guided by family, friends, neighbors, or dalals who have prior migration experience. Almost all respondents mentioned that they did not know of any government or private institutions that send migrants abroad. They had no knowledge of places, persons, or institutions to seek official or authorized support for migration.

I had no idea of government or private recruiting agencies before going abroad. Neither did I have any knowledge on the documents and papers required for migration. I contacted the dalal and depended entirely on him for migrating abroad (IDI-30, male).

3. Dalal—The first step on the ladder of migration

All the IDI respondents, regardless of sex, mentioned going abroad through the help of dalals. Authorized formal institutional channels for migration remain unpopular among aspiring migrants, because of lack of knowledge among migrants and few migration service deliveries by the government and private entities at the local level. Another reason for dependency on the dalal is that most of the registered agencies are based in the capital city, do not have local-level offices, and prefer recruiting local sub-agents or dalals who work as a middlemen or brokers to recruit migrants against overseas employment calls.

High dependency on the dalal

Several reasons lead to dependency on the dalal. An analysis of interviews with migrants indicates that low literacy levels of migrants is the main reason for this. They find it easier to relinquish the complicated process and paperwork for migration to someone else for obtaining the required documentation, visa, mandatory training certificate, medical certificate, etc.

I didn't migrate through government or private organizations. I went abroad with the help of a dalal. And the dalal is my paternal cousin who works to send workers abroad. I only paid him the money he asked for. Except for that I didn't do anything—I had no knowledge of documents or process for migration. My dalal did everything—every paperwork that was required for my migration (IDI-4, female).

The person who helped me to go abroad was my distant relative, my brother-in-law's brother. He has taken 2,00,000 taka from me to send me abroad. I didn't need to pay otherwise. He accompanied me for a medical test, ticket, and with everything that was required (IDI-39, male).

My dalal has helped me with everything. I attended the training only; my dalal received the certificate from the office. I have done my medical certification also from him. He helped me with everything that was required to reach the airport and cross immigration. I only gave him 25,000 taka for my migration (IDI-7, female).

Dalals' role in facilitating migration

The cycle of migration starts with initial contact between aspiring migrants and local dalals from the community. They are typically friends, relatives, and returned migrants whom aspiring migrants trust and have some kind of social or familial relationship. Migrants trust dalals, because they are mostly from their locality or community or are friends or kin. They lure the migrants with lucrative service delivery offers as soon as recruiting agencies contact dalals or the dalal finds potential migrants in their community who fit the requirements of recruiting agencies.

My dalal was my neighbor. She once told me, "Sister you are facing so much hardship to meet your ends...why don't you go abroad." I told her that I don't have any contact through which I can go abroad. Then she said that her brother lives abroad and if I wish I can migrate. Her brother will be able to take me there. Both the brother and the sister work as dalals to send migrants abroad (IDI-5, female).

Informal dealings with dalals and exploitation

Almost all IDI respondents, whether male or female, mentioned that they felt deceived by the dalal during migration in matters concerning monetary transaction, documentation, work contract, provisions abroad, or fraud at the destination country with wage, work hour, work type, environment, etc.

I migrated through a dalal who happens to be one of my close relatives. But that dalal deceived me. He took 4,00,000 taka from me while he availed the visa for free actually. I paid the entire amount with a loan (IDI-26, male).

No records/receipts for services rendered by dalals

IDI respondents reported that they only realized that they had been exploited and deceived by the dalal after considerable time had passed at the destination country under an employer. This came to their notice when they asked for wage payments or could identify inconsistencies between the promised contract and actual work. Respondents mentioned that their local-level

recruitment by the dalal is done orally without any appropriate documentation and that all transactions with the dalal are done without money receipts. Since the dalals do not have an institutional identity and work without documents, the respondents reported that they cannot hold the dalal accountable for any exploitation they face in documentation, financial transactions, or work in country or abroad.

First time when I went to Saudi Arabia, my dalal deceived me with the money I gave him to make a passport. I was telling that I gave him the money, but he kept insisting that I didn't pay anything. I even asked him about the money in front of the person who took us to the passport office. Even that person told the dalal not to betray me because I am a poor person. But he didn't give the passport in the end after taking the money. Later I had to get the passport again from a recruiting agency officer. But that person also took a bribe from me for the passport. He told me since you are insolvent, I am giving you concession of 500 taka, so give me 3000 taka for your passport. Then after I got my passport (IDI-20, female).

I migrated through a dalal to Saudi Arabia. It cost me 70,000 taka to migrate. I did all the process and papers through the dalal including passport, medical check-up, training, and visa processing. My dalal took me to the passport office to get my passport. As he was taking me to the passport office, he told me if anyone at the passport office asks me whether I have paid any money to the dalal then I would have to deny. Since I was not aware of the process and documentation procedure, when officers asked me about the dalal, I said the dalal didn't take any money from me for my passport (IDI-13, female).

Kills of the study reported similarly regarding monetary transactions with dalals.

Most of the migrants are going abroad with the help of dalals. And these dalals don't have any proper identification, authorization, and documentation for their services; as a result, migrants are paying exorbitant charges for migration. There is lack of monitoring from the government of the activities of these dalals (KII-2).

4. Non-attendance in training programs is a risk to safe migration

Pre-departure trainings are important for safe migration (Siddiqui et al., 2008). Since 2007, the government has undertaken training initiatives to ensure protection of migrant workers and reduce their vulnerability when they go to work in a foreign country. A three-day pre-departure training is mandatory for migrant workers to avail migration clearance, and there is a mandatory 30-day training for Middle East-bound female workers for housekeeping work. Pre-departure training covers such topics as medium of legal migration, personal health, evaluating contract papers, weather, ritual, culture of destination country, information on the Bangladesh Mission, hotline numbers, legal remittance-sending channels, finance management, and commonly used Arabic words (BMET, 2018).

In many cases, the dalal arranges for the BMET clearance card¹ for migrants through illegal and informal channels, which make the migrants more vulnerable because they are migrating without any training or information.

A major impediment to safe and secure migration of workers is their non-attendance in training. Most of the migrants lack sufficient pre-migration training and consequently the required qualifications expected by the employer. IDI findings suggest that many of the study respondents, especially males and few females, did not take any training prior to emigrating.

Training status of study participants:

four females out of 20 and 11 males out of 20 did not attend training.

I didn't take any training before migrating. I think maybe the dalal has managed to avail training certificates for me in exchange for money. I think my dalal didn't enroll me for training because if I took the training then I would learn to become aware of rights and entitlements (IDI-5, female).

I didn't take any training before migration. I was not aware of the fact that training is required to go abroad for work. After I started working there, my employers used to say I don't have any training—that is how I came to know about training before migration (IDI-15, female).

5. Poor training outcomes

The mandatory training programs impart orientation on the destination country's language, culture, nature of work, and housekeeping training, which additionally includes use of appliances and electronic devices, rituals, food habits of destination country, etc. (BMET, 2018).

Respondents who attended training mentioned that they did not understand the language and thus could not follow instructions of the employers. They also mentioned that the training programs were not effective and sufficient to cope up with the working mechanism abroad. Many of them also reported abuse and rebuke by their employers.

Findings indicate that the respondents who attended training did not gather sufficient knowledge on foreign language, job nature, rights and entitlements, or workplace negotiation when they felt exploited.

My dalal enrolled me in a training center at Faridpur. I took a training course for one month there—they trained us on language, cooking, baking, etc... But it was difficult for me to work there. For example, in that country (Saudi Arabia) they use knives for cutting vegetables and meat, whereas here we use different utensils (Boti). It was very difficult for me. Then, I didn't have any knowledge of automated home appliances. I didn't know how to operate those machineries— how to set timer of these machines to turn off automatically after certain time— I was unable to operate those...these are for educated people not for me... my employer even used to beat me and say why you don't know how to operate these appliances, don't you have any brain, etc. (IDI-13, female).

We were provided with a book in the training. It was a booklet on language. They verbally told us about household chores there, how to do the chores, timing, etc. There was no effective practical training on anything. Training instructors didn't attend sessions regularly. I have a strong voice, so they asked me to read the language book aloud to all the participants—that's all. After that they provided us with a certificate (IDI-8, female).

KII respondents also highlighted the context in which people migrate and how they often skip the training program altogether. KII respondents reported that the decision to migrate is guided mostly by financial crisis, and thus migrants decide to go abroad suddenly and without much planning most often. They are mostly unaware and misinformed by dalals about the requirement and necessity of training to get secure work abroad. KII findings suggest that dalals also misguide migrants when they are asked to attend one or two days of training instead of completing the entire training course. The dalals avail training certificates for the migrants through underhand means.

There are training provisions under the government through TTCs and there are nongovernmental organizations that are providing training to the migrants. However, aspiring migrants are not very interested in attending training due to travel cost, training cost, distance of training centers, and lack of understanding about the need for training (KII-8).

OKUP has training facilities for aspiring migrants and returned migrants. For aspiring migrants, OKUP provides training to migrants to enhance their skills, such as people who know how to drive are provided with higher driving skills training. Alongside providing training, the organization also motivates aspiring migrants to take training for negotiating a better salary as skilled workers rather than getting a low salary for being unskilled. However, there is a general lack of interest among the migrants in taking skills-training sessions before migration which needs to be addressed (KII-1).

6. High cost of migration

Migration cost from Bangladesh is the one of the highest in the world compared with other migrant-sending countries (Barkat et al., 2014). The literature suggests that even though in 2020 (in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic), migration costs fell by seven percent and 18 percent for male and female migrants, respectively, the actual cost incurred by migrants still remained the highest in Southeast Asia (The Financial Express, 2022). Despite the government's endeavor of fixing migration costs for major destinations, the costs continue to be high—for example, the maximum cost of migration to Saudi Arabia is fixed at 1.65 lakh taka. The high cost of migration is the result of several factors associated with labor migration in both the sending and receiving countries. For male migration, high cost is incurred from illegal visa trading⁵ and the tiers of intermediaries involved in getting migrants their visas in both the destination country and Bangladesh through high charges/fees levied for processing of papers and travel documents—passport, medical certificate, training certificate, etc. (Siddiqui, 2010; Barkat et al., 2014; BBS, 2021). Even though visa trading has been declared illegal through an agreement between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in 2019, the practice is ongoing (The Business Standard, 2022). Migrants who fall victim to fraudulent practices by dalals pay exorbitant fees for services, several of which can be availed free of cost from government institutions.

The IDI findings reflect a similar pattern regarding migration cost. Findings suggest that male migrants pay a high amount for visa trading, documents processing, service charges of dalals and recruiting agencies, etc. Findings showed male migration cost can go as high as 5,00,000 to 8,00,000 taka.

My maternal cousin's brother works in Saudi Arabia; he purchased my visa from there. I was supposed to be appointed as a driver. He knew I knew driving and would not do any other work. But kafeel (employer) deceived him with my contract. The contract was written in Arabic, thus he didn't

⁵ Mentioned in footnote in page 2

understand the provisions at that time. Later after I went there the employer assigned me a goat-rearing job in the desert. After three months or so he assigned me to work at a camel-rearing farm but never assigned me to drive a car. My cousin paid four lakh taka to purchase this visa and after being deceived when I asked him about the job type, he said the employers are powerful and we can't take any steps against them. They can make a hundred false visas against one real visa and sell those to people for 2,00,000 taka. Maybe the person with the real visa went abroad six months back and then they sell the false visa to people like us. I paid my cousin 4,00,000 taka to purchase this visa and including other charges my total cost was about 5,00,000 (IDI-24, male).

My father has been working abroad for a long time. He bought a visa for me abroad. I came once for vacation in Bangladesh, but after going back my employer didn't assign me with appropriate work. I had to work illegally hiding from police for four five months...then when the government announced amnesty for illegal residents, I came back home as I did not need any cost for ticket or plane fare, and I would have the option to go back again with a new visa.... However, with my purchase of visa and including all the papers and documents needed to go abroad from Bangladesh, it cost me about 8,00,000 taka. For all the paperwork in Bangladesh, the amount was approximately 50,000 to 60,000 taka. And my visa was purchased by my father from abroad which cost 2,500 Kuwaiti dinar (approximately 7,00,000 taka) (IDI-33, male).

Few IDI respondents indicated that migrants who did not meet the eligibility criteria for overseas work, such as those who were underage, those who did not complete mandatory training, and those who did not meet the educational qualification, tend to pay more for migration processing charges because the dalals arrange false documents for them at a higher cost by bribing concerned authorities.

Dalal said an extra 8,000 was required for my passport because I was underage. I was 13 years old at the time of migration. That's why it required bribe to make my passport (IDI-3, female).

Cost varies by gendered distribution of jobs

Migration costs for females are much less than males. Cost varies for men and women mostly owing to the type of work they are assigned (Siddiqui, 2010). Since females mostly migrate with a housekeeping visa, the cost for female migration is much lower compared with male migration. This is because bans on women for domestic work in many labor-sending countries have created a shortage of domestic worker supply against demand in the Middle East and Gulf countries. Therefore, many employers started paying commissions to the recruiting agencies for female worker supply along with ticket and visa fees for their potential female employee (Siddiqui, 2010). Further, owing to the agreement between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in 2015 on the free-of-cost migration of female domestic workers (The Daily Star, 2021), the cost of females' migrating abroad as housemaids became much lower compared with male migration (Swift, 2018). While migration of females as domestic helps should incur no cost, a large share of female migrants paid between 25,000 to 1,50,000 taka to migrate (Islam, 2019).

Similarly, IDI findings of the study suggest that, except for one female respondent, all other female respondents migrating through dalals mentioned that they were charged money for their migration processing. However, after reaching their destination country, they discovered that their employer had already paid for all the migration costs in advance.

I went abroad through a female acquaintance of my husband. She took 40,000 taka from me for a visa. But after I went abroad and when I started to understand the language, I found that my Madam told me that my entire migration cost was paid by them in advance. But that woman cheated me with 40,000 taka (IDI-1, female).

Some female migrants working as housemaids who re-migrated, mentioned that the cost of first-time migration was higher than their second or third time. This is because they do not have any expenditure for passports and training cost for the second time round. Also, the employers bear the agency cost, visa cost, and ticket cost in some instances, especially for female workers recruited for household employment.

It cost 40,000 to 45,000 taka for me to go abroad for the first time. But later when I went to Saudi Arabia, my migration cost was about 25,000 taka. My Saudi employer had paid the money for the agency and visa fee. Dalal charged 25,000 taka from me for some official purpose. Only dalal knows how and where this amount was spent...I have no idea on this (IDI-10, female).

The IDI findings of the study highlighted that only one female respondent who had migrated directly through the government recruiting agency without a dalal's intervention had not incurred any migration cost.

I went abroad through government office. My brother-in-law familiarized me with this office at Paltan, Dhaka. I have contacted this office and did all the procedure as per their suggestion and under their guidance. As I have migrated through a government channel, I didn't have to pay a single penny for my migration. All my expenses including passport cost was carried by the office (IDI-9, female).

Ignorance about itemized costs

IDI findings suggest that both male and female respondents pay whatever the dalal charges, because they have little knowledge on the actual cost. Most of the respondents mentioned that they were unaware of the itemized costs of migration.

The first time when I went it cost me 30,000 taka in total which I paid to the dalal. He told me the costs will be incurred for passport fees, training certification, medical check-up, and visa fees. The second time when I went, it cost me 26,000 taka, which I again paid the dalal and he did all the processing. For both of the times I didn't know what amount of money was spent for which purpose (IDI-2, female).

Only a handful of study participants had some knowledge of itemized costs. Respondents mentioned that they paid money broadly for registration, training, passport, work permit, visa, ticket, medical examination, and service fee to the dalal at different stages of migration.

In total, I paid 3,00,000 taka for my migration. Dalal asked me for money time to time for passport, medical, training, visa, etc. But there was no receipt against any payment. He asked and I paid. Later after going abroad and after returning and joining the program I understood how much he had overcharged and deceived me with the cost (IDI-28, male).

Money is sourced from personal funds and local informal loans

IDI respondents mentioned that securing finances for the high cost of migration was a challenge for them. Mostly, finances to migrate are sourced by self or family or by taking loans from relatives, friends, and local moneylenders. They reported sourcing of funds by selling assets—land, cattle, gold—or taking loans from family or friends. Many mentioned that they obtained loans at high rates of interest and kept their assets as collateral. Most of the migrants mentioned that they were not aware of the government’s special loan provisions for migrants.

Some respondents also mentioned that they source funds for migration from NGO loans taken by them or their family members under the guise of starting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or buying cattle. They use the loan money for migration and assume that they will repay the amount from their income abroad.

My dalal asked for 50,000 taka for my passport from me to process my migration. I took a loan from an NGO applying to do a small clothing business. I didn't mention going abroad. Also, my father took a separate loan from the NGO under his credentials and then gave that money to me for migration purpose (IDI-5, female).

My dalal told me that my migration cost will be paid by the employer. I will not have to spend anything. I just have to manage 50,000 taka for now for processing but as soon as I reach the destination country, my employer will pay me the money. So, my father sold his cattle off and gave me a loan of 50,000 taka for migration. Later I paid my father back after working abroad (IDI-4, female).

4.3 CHALLENGES AT DESTINATION

Literature on migration suggests that exploitation of migrant workers is common in the GCC countries and can mostly be attributed to unethical and unsafe recruitment processes (Amnesty International, 2016; Rahman, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2016). The exploitative situation of the migrants at the destination country is also because of reluctance on the part of destination countries to improve the situation (Azad, 2019). One of the main causes of exploitation is the kafala system.⁶

IDI respondents mentioned that before migration they were not aware of the papers and documentation that ensure their safe and secure work environment abroad. Discrepancies were stark between promised work and actual work and working conditions that migrants in reality encounter. Migrants are mostly not provided with written contracts, but rather contracts and work provisions are orally communicated by dalals to migrants, as mentioned by almost all respondents.

Almost all respondents experienced hardship abroad. Low wages, long working hours, excessive workloads, inadequate food, poor living conditions, and lack of medical treatment were reported by respondents.

1. Deception in work type and promised wage

Respondents reported mismatches in what was promised or agreed upon in work type, wages (i.e., lower wages), and regular wage payments (i.e., delayed payments). Many respondents mentioned that the type of employment they got overseas was different from what was promised. Both male and female migrants reported that they received less than agreed wage, irregular salary payment, and salaries that were withheld for months.

I migrated abroad with the help of a dalal. I was told that I will get the job of electrician with a salary of 25,000 taka and extra payment for overtime work. But after moving abroad, I was assigned to different types of work in a small company. My dalal handed me over to that company and left. Then I thought that I have taken 4,00,000 taka loans and now if I leave this job and return, I would not be able to repay my loan even after selling my home and assets. So, I stayed back here in dismay (IDI-26, male).

A person from my maternal uncles' village convinced my father and procured my visa. But that person was not reliable, which we didn't know. He told us that my salary will be 35,000 takas. I myself was in disbelief that my salary would be this high. I told him that I don't speak the language, neither I am that educated, so why would they pay me this much. Then he assured me by saying, "Why if they ask you to serve food, would you not be able to do that?"...He is a dalal so he cheated me with the job of a waiter but after going there I was assigned the work of a cleaner. Salary was 17,000 but they didn't pay me regularly. Once in six months they used to pay my salary (IDI-22, male).

They didn't pay us regularly. Many months of my salary is pending with them. There were a lot of discrepancies in the salary payments. I used to say my five months of salary is withheld, but they enforced that only two months of salary is pending. When I used to cry out loud and wanted to leave the work, only then they used to pay some amount of my salary (IDI-13, female).

⁶ Mentioned in footnote in page 2

2. No overtime payments

Respondents mentioned that they were denied overtime payment most of the time. Only some male respondents mentioned getting overtime payments, but almost none of the female respondents received payment for working longer hours than agreed upon.

Dalal only mentioned type of work, hour, salary and overtime. He told me that weekly six days and daily eight hours work, and overtime would be for two hours. I was told that including overtime, my salary would come around 40,000. But they paid me 18,000 to 20,000 monthly. They used to pay one or two thousand less if we took one or two days off a month. I had to take a day or two off because my work involved heavy weight loading and unloading, which cannot be done at a stretch (IDI-29, male).

No overtime for women

The work hours for household work are not defined, but rather guided by on-demand basis, without having regular or fixed hours of work. Even in a formal sector like the garment industry, where overtime payment is promised because of piece-rate payment schemes, female respondents reported they had to work as long as 18 hours in order to fulfill the daily target and make just one-third of expected wage.

I was told that my work will be eight hours duty. But after I started working, I had to work for 13–15 hours. My daily target was 200 pants/hour. Some days, I had to work till 10 at night. They used to behave horrible if there was any outstanding work for the day—they didn't permit me to go back home until I cleared my work for the day. Sometimes, I had to take my meal at 11 or 12 at night and the next morning again have to wake up at six to go to work. You can't be late even by a minute. Rules were very strict and food at work was horrible (IDI-16, female).

3. Poor living conditions, shortage of food, and risky work conditions

Several IDI respondents reported a non-conducive working environment. Poor living conditions for both male and female workers, such as unhygienic overcrowded environment for males and inappropriate accommodation for females, were mentioned. Many respondents, both male and female, mentioned their not receiving enough meals a day, not getting the time to eat at work, and not being able to eat the kind of food they were served. Having to work for long hours or throughout the day with bare minimum food caused illnesses, as reported by a number of respondents. Respondents working in construction, factories, or technical sectors, such as electricians and mechanics, also mentioned heavy workload and risky work conditions.

I used to stay at company-provided accommodation. But the room was very dirty and unhygienic. We also used to live six or seven people to a room, but the size of the room should not accommodate more than four people. Also, for every four rooms there was only one washroom. We had to be in the queue to go to the washroom (IDI-28, male).

I suffered a lot. Do you see this wound? (Showed the scar to the researcher) My hands got severely hurt, my nails were bruised and fell off the nail bed. At a minimum at least I have a hundred to a hundred fifty wounds in my body. Safety at work was very low. There was a boy working with us, one day he fell off the construction site and had many of his bones broken. Then he was sent back home because he became incapable of working (IDI-38, male).

4. Sub-standard conditions in agency offices

Some IDI respondents mentioned that migrants are often kept in agency offices after they migrate until job placement is confirmed with the employer. When there are any medical issues with workers, employers leave them with agency offices and discontinue their job. Migrants face confinement, food shortage, abuse, and negligence most of the time in these offices.

Oftentimes it happens that employers go on vacation when a migrant arrives at their destination country. In such incidents the workers are kept in agency offices where they face exploitation with food and other things. Sometimes employers don't take workers for a month or even for three months and workers are kept in offices. They take workers in after they are back from vacation. Also, sometimes workers who cleared medical are diagnosed with illness such as diabetes or tumor at the destination country. In those cases, employers leave them with agency offices where they undergo below standard living experience (IDI-9, female).

5. No leave or medical-treatment support

IDI respondents reported their having to work throughout the week, without any day off and even when they were ill. Since respondents mostly work under 'no work no pay' condition, they are not granted payment for sick leave. Respondents also mentioned that their employers did not provide them with medical treatment for illnesses or injuries when needed.

I was told that I had to look after two children there. I was very happy as I love children. But I was assigned to their household work. It was a tremendous workload. I had to clean 6-7 washrooms every day. One time I slipped in the washroom while cleaning and my back badly got hurt, and I fainted. They took me to the room and gave me ointment and medicine and then asked me to get back to work. I had to do everything in that condition. Once I fell off the ladder while cleaning. They didn't provide me with any treatment or medicine for that (IDI-6, female).

The work pressure was exhausting. I was not habituated with this much work pressure before I left for abroad. Once, I felt sick and had to even go to hospital for treatment. I was administered with 3-4 injections and saline and other medicines at the hospital. But when I asked for leave showing the prescription, my manager told me "You have to go to work, otherwise who will do your part?" (IDI-22, male).

6. Retaining workers under obligation

IDI respondents mentioned they could barely reach out to the employers or their staff with their complaints. Respondents reported that when they tried to leave the job and return to their country, employers did not give permission and did not agree to provide them with documents to return, such as passports and work permits, which employers confiscate as a strategy to dictate terms to the employees. Some employers ask migrants to pay a large monetary penalty when respondents want to leave the job and return to their country. Employers demand a fine for termination of work contract before its expiry, if workers seek leave or work discontinuation. Inability to pay a financial penalty holds many migrants back at work even when they feel exploited at work.

I had a visa for two years. But even after facing exploitation with my employer, I couldn't change my job placement because all my passport, work permit, and documents were with them. They seized all the documents (IDI-30, male).

I used to cry a lot to return home. It was unbearable for me. When I used to ask my employer to let me go home, they said they have spent 2,00,000 taka on me. So now if I wish to go back, I have to pay them 2,00,000 taka and only after that they would let me go (IDI-6, female).

7. Exploitation of female migrant workers

Gender-based violence and harassment that range from insults to intimidation, physical abuse, and sexual assault are commonly experienced by female labor migrants. Recent studies show that female migrants suffer from different forms of violence and abuse—psychological, physical, and even sexual. in the GCC countries (Islam, 2019; Nisrane et al., 2019; Islam, 2015). Female workers mainly migrate for domestic work, which comes under individualized or kafala work conditions, and most often it lacks adequate legal recognition or legal protection for the worker (Malit & Ghafoor, 2014). Even through the GCC countries are taking initiatives to reform the kafala system, progress and implementation of the reforms are slow. Lack of ethical recruitment, safeguarding of decent work provisions, arbitration procedures, and legal aid provisions create and heighten exploitative working conditions for female migrant workers (Islam, 2019). Amid the lack of social and legal protection, female workers face exploitation, abuse, and harassment ranging from under payment, confinement, poor living and working conditions, prohibition on social networking, and complete dependence on what employers permit or not (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2012).

IDI findings suggest almost every female respondent experienced harassment and exploitation in the destination country.

Oral and emotional abuse

Respondents mentioned going through oral and emotional abuse while working as housemaids. Most mentioned that employers orally abused them by yelling at them and calling them names in Arabic.

There was no rest. They used to make me do the same work again and again, saying it was not up to the mark. After doing the same thing for 3–4 times, they didn't let me take any rest. They yelled and orally abused me on petty mistakes at work (IDI-13, female).

Physical beating

A large portion of female respondents reported that they had experienced physical beatings from the employer for petty mistakes at work.

After going abroad all positive perceptions which, I had totally changed. I didn't understand their language, I couldn't follow their instruction. My employer used to beat me when I failed to perform to their satisfaction. I was told before going that I will have to look after an elderly person, but after going there I found out that the couple had seven daughters and all of them were living in that house. I had to be on my toes all the time. Working for such a large family is not any easy task. I didn't even get enough time to sleep under such a workload. Moreover, they used to keep my salary withheld. So, I couldn't cope up with that much work pressure. So, as soon as my Iqama (contract) expired, I came back. I used to call home and cry for salvage, but they didn't even let me call at home. I fell sick from all this work and mental pressure (IDI-15, female).

Employer had 3-4 cars and I had to clean them all. They also stayed in a very big house, and I had to do cleaning of the entire house. They made me clean the dishes with a type of detergent from which I got sores in my

hands. I didn't know how to iron a dress and accidentally once I burnt a cloth, for which she burnt my hands with iron. They didn't provide me with any medical treatment. Whenever I asked for a salary, they used to beat me up. Once they kept me locked in a room for two days. They also didn't provide me with food...it was horrible (IDI-5, female).

Mobility restriction of women at work

While men did not experience mobility restriction outside of their working hours, interviews with female migrants indicate that females undergo a very restrictive life under their employer. With some exceptions, female respondents generally mentioned their not being permitted to keep their phone with them to talk to their friends and family or to go outside or meet with people they know or who belong to their native community.

I went abroad through a dalal. But after going there, I couldn't communicate with anyone, because right after I joined, they seized my mobile phone which I carried along with me from home. I even got to know of the demise of my family members long after. Only once a month maybe I was allowed to talk to my husband, but they used to yell, "Hurry up" whenever I was on the phone (IDI-19, female).

8. Lack of support mechanism for migrants in case of exploitation

There are laws and policies in place, such as the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012, the Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act (2013), and the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (2016), to protect migrant workers' rights for a safe and fair migration process. The government is also working to strengthen support for migrant workers through its Bangladeshi Mission and *Labour Attachés* (Rahman & Hassan, 2017). Information on support-seeking services is also disseminated during pre-migration training (MRC, n.d.). There are some remote support mechanisms being provided by NGOs for the migrants. NGOs provide helpline phone numbers to migrants during their pre-departure training, and they also conduct awareness-raising campaigns in the field, where support-seeking services are communicated to them (Islam, 2019). However, oftentimes, because of unsafe and unethical recruitment of labor migrants, their lack of knowledge and information on potential exploitation and support-seeking services, and absence of adequate national and bilateral mechanisms, migrants remain deprived of support during exploitation experiences.

The IDI findings also suggest that, except on rare occasions, most migrants do not receive any personal or official support at the destination country. Respondents reported that after being exploited at work on wage payments, working hours, physical beatings, or movement restriction, many have tried to seek support from the dalal or the destination country agency for alternative employment or change of employer, for filing complaints against employers, for seeking medical help or financial support, or for obtaining travel documents to return home. However, respondents reported that the dalal and agencies remained unresponsive to their complaints. They received hardly any support from recruiting agencies or dalals. As a last resort, some respondents mentioned running away from the employer and seeking refuge with their acquaintances or in the embassy for rescue and support to return home.

Even though the law was quite amiable for migrants in Oman, we could never reach there. The managers didn't let us reach any offices; they knew we could place a complaint if we get the chance. Also, these are big companies, so even if there is any complaint, they fix those unofficially among them (IDI-22, male).

9. Return

Expiry of Iqama, work discontinuation, and forced return

Respondents mentioned several reasons for their return. Most of the respondents mentioned expiry of Iqama or job contract as the reason for their return. Apart from expiry of Iqama, respondents mentioned visa expiry, visa cancellation, work discontinuation, and forced return.

Companies need to show their government that the previous person has canceled their visa and contract of work before taking/ recruiting a new person against a visa. In that way, they can hire a new person but without giving any extra charge of new recruitment. For this reason, they take our signature by deceiving us. Our employer took such a signature from us and then told us that we will be assigned to a different workplace. We were about 20–25 people. Then after keeping us without assigning any work for two months, employer said we don't have any work opportunity so we will be sent back home (IDI-37, male).

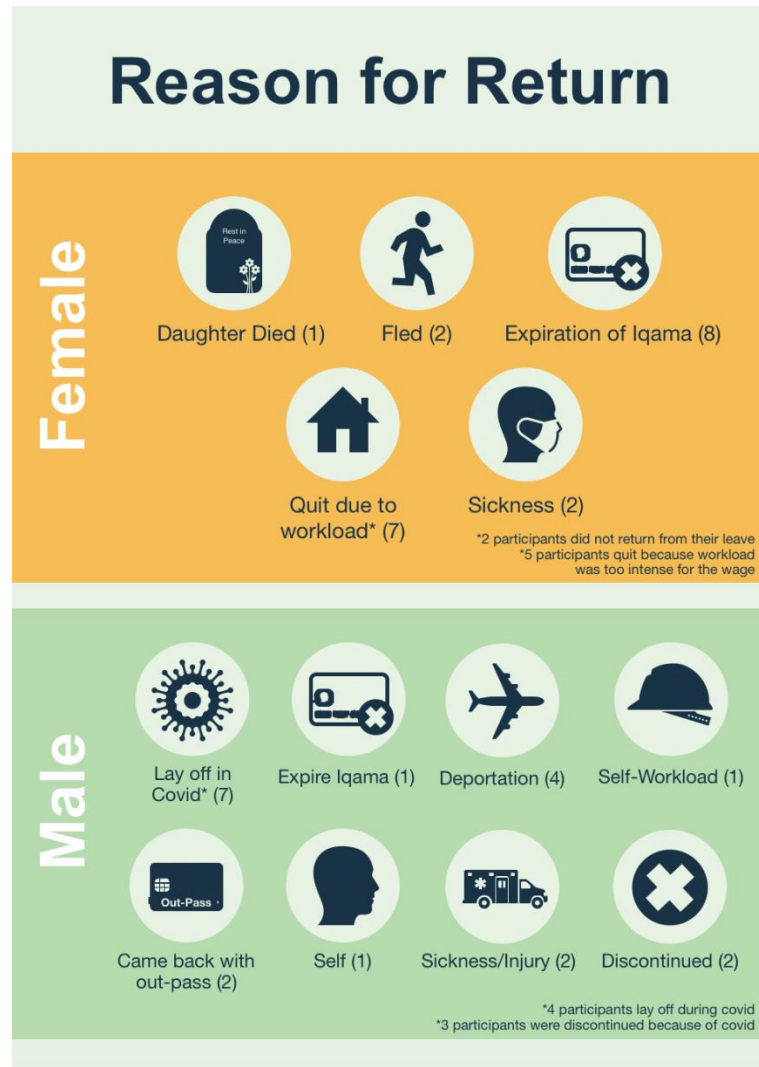


Figure 3: Reason for return of the IDI respondents

Deportation

Few respondents mentioned returning home after a jail term for illegal stay. Respondents also mentioned utilizing government amnesty/free out-pass to return after staying illegally at the destination country.

After my Iqama expired, when I requested my employer for a renewal, he charged 8,00,000 taka for that for one year of Iqama renewal. This is unbelievable. Where I couldn't even earn 2,00,000 taka, how am I supposed to pay for 4,00,000 taka for Iqama renewal? So, after that I got involved in a dispute with my employer and went to the police for rescue. I overstayed illegally for one year and a few months after the expiry of my Iqama. After I went to the police, they put me in jail for seven days. Then an official from the Bangladesh embassy came to prison to check credentials. They handed over a slip and took my signature on a document. After that, all arrangement of my ticket and everything was done under government initiative (IDI-25, male).

My Iqama expired and my employer didn't renew my contract. I overstayed illegally hiding from the police for four years. Then when the government announced out-pass I took that advantage instantly to return home. Because if I get caught by police then they will blacklist my passport and I will never be able to go back. But if I return under out-pass then I have the option to renew my passport and go abroad with a new visa (IDI-33, male).

Decision by self to return

Majority of the female respondents mentioned that they decided to return after their Iqama expired because of the unbearable workload and workplace exploitation. Some female respondents mentioned coming on holiday and never returning, while some others mentioned fleeing, taking refuge in agency offices, or contacting friends and even police for rescue and return.

The workload and abuse were unbearable. So, one day I just fled the house with two sets of clothing and took the back road of the house to reach a petrol pump. When I reached there, one Bangladeshi boy came up to me and on hearing about my distress, he called a policeman who was on duty nearby. Then I talked about my crisis to the police and then they took me to hospital for a medical test. After the medical examination they sent me to the agency office. I was kept in the agency office for five months before returning home with embassy support (IDI-18, female).

I came back because I could not send enough money back home. They didn't let me talk to my family over mobile phone. And then there was a tremendous workload. So, one day I told my employer that I want to go back so pay me my outstanding salary. My employer said you haven't completed the tenure so there is no question of your salary payment. Hearing that, I couldn't hold back my tears. My mother died, I couldn't come home, my brother died, they didn't let me have any leave. I have worked under horrible situations but still couldn't send enough money home. Then I was adamant to leave, and my employer said she would send me to the agency office. But I insisted on arranging my return directly from her house. Then after 15 days, suddenly she asked me to get ready and left me at the airport with a ticket and 10 riyals. That's how I returned (IDI-20, female).

4.4 CHALLENGES TO ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

IDI findings indicate that the challenges migrants faced after returning were worsened by financial difficulty and health issues or illness. The majority of IDI respondents mentioned that they were still unemployed.

1. Insufficient saving from work abroad

Both male and female respondents mentioned that they could not save enough money, because they were either underpaid or their salaries were withheld, employers did not pay full amount, and salary payments were irregular. Respondents also stated that the reason migrants could not save enough money when they returned was because of repayment of outstanding loans back home.

My economic condition was very fragile. I didn't have any savings when I returned. I was in despair thinking how I would repay my debt. I worked, sold out my household assets to repay the loan. It's been two years since I came back but still couldn't repay my loans (IDI-30, male).

2. No accounts kept of remittances sent home

IDI respondents noted that a major challenge for their economic reintegration was because remittances sent by them were already used up by their families at home. Some respondents mentioned that their family did not inform them about the spending, which left the respondents with inadequate finances for starting a new business or venture when they returned. Only a few respondents said that they could use some of their hard-earned money to build a home or buy land or assets.

After I returned, I was sick and very weak. I came home with 80,000 taka which I saved from working abroad. But after I returned, I didn't get any account of the money I sent my father while I was there. They couldn't give me any expense record—in which sector what amount of money was spent. My family behaved well with me as long as I didn't ask for the record of remittance, I sent to secure the future of my daughters. But whenever, I ask about the money, dispute and quarrel starts (IDI-4, female).

3. Illness deters income earning

Many of the respondents said that they returned home because of illness, which impacted their working capabilities while working abroad and which they continued to suffer from on their return. Both male and female respondents who mentioned their return due to ill-health were struggling to engage in any wage employment because of their health condition. Not only did some respondents experience inability to work owing to illness or injuries, but some also spent their entire savings on their treatment.

I was in the middle of life and death when I returned home. I got admitted in hospital and they said there is no hope with this patient. Then I had to seek treatment for ulcer in a hospital in Dhaka. I had to spend almost 5,00,000–7,00,00 taka on my treatment. I came back with some savings but that was not enough. I had to take out a loan for my treatment instead. No, I am not involved in any earning activity, I am still going through treatment and look after farming in a small piece of land that I have (IDI-31, male).

When I returned, neither my financial condition was fine nor my physical condition. I came home with savings of around 1,50,000 taka. But all money was spent on my husband, children, and for my treatment. Once while working abroad, I slipped badly during cleaning the washroom and I got severely hurt. I came back home with that back injury and had to spend a large amount of money for my treatment (IDI-6, female).

4. Burden of outstanding loan

The study found that respondents were caught in a loan burden even after years of service abroad. Returned migrants who came back within 2–3 years of service still had outstanding loan payments taken to pay for their migration cost.

I spent 5,00,000 taka to go abroad. But I came back just after two years, because my employer used to withhold my salary. So, when I returned, I had outstanding loan payment which I took to pay for my migration and which I was supposed to repay with my earnings abroad. Hence to repay that outstanding loan payment, I had taken loan again from various personal sources and from an NGO (IDI-24, male).

5. Formal credit for entrepreneurship

IDI respondents noted that upon their return, when they seek to engage in entrepreneurship, the main challenge was access to a formal credit system. Respondents said that provisions for bank loans come with complicated procedures, including requirement of rigorous documentation, such as trade license and documents of migration through legal channels, high interest rate, collateral against loan, and requirement of guarantor. Collecting all the appropriate documents is a challenge for them which demotivates them in availing loans from banks.

After I returned, I reached out to Probashi Kallyan Bank for a loan. But they told me they don't have any form for the type of business I want to engage in. They don't have any authorization for my business plan. Now they have a form for grocery shops, but I don't have the ability to set up a grocery business... So how am I supposed to do that? They have too many conditions for loans. You will need signatures of three people and they have to be government officials. It is not possible for me to avail signatures from three government officers (IDI-34, male).

Even though most respondents sought to get involved in small or medium business when they returned, some respondents were hesitant to take loans from formal sources for fear of possible loss of their potential ventures. Respondents also mentioned that they did not have suitable knowledge on business or about utilizing their money effectively. So, there is always a fear of loss or failed attempts.

BRAC offered me a loan to do something productive. But I didn't take that loan. I didn't because what if I take the loan and then couldn't use it properly. What if I incur loss in business! I don't know much about business. So, how do I pay back under such situations (IDI- 36, male).

While KII respondents highlighted the provisions set up by the government for financial support of returned migrants, they also drew attention to the challenges faced in accessing these provisions. They opined that formal loan provisions need to be revised and relaxed. For financial support to migrants, the government has taken some good initiatives such as disbursing loans through PKB. However, the processing and submission of such loan applications require formalities and documentation that are perplexing for the migrants.

Returned migrants need to be provided with loan from authentic sources with no interest or low-interest provision, so that they can start some income-generating activities on their own (KII-6).

To avail loan from Probashi Kallayn Bank, there are many provisions and conditions which are difficult for migrants to understand and communicate, hence they feel discouraged to take such loans (KII-5).

6. Change in type of work for returned migrants

The IDI findings indicate that most of the migrants went abroad without adequate job-specific training. Both male and female respondents mentioned that they acquired skills through work experience in their respective fields of work abroad. However, after returning they did not get or were not willing to engage in their previous work abroad, especially because of difference in salary and engaging in the same type of work for a much lower payment.

Key informants also stated that the issue of wage difference for the same type of work demotivates returned migrants to engage in the local labor market.

There is a demand-supply mismatch between international and local markets. For instance, when a person is offered half of what he was paid while working abroad for the same type of work, that person naturally becomes demotivated to work. Also, sometimes when a returned migrant is of older age, employers offer less salary to them—such working environment mismatch is difficult for reintegration (KII-5.)

7. Job placement

Few respondents mentioned that they were offered support for job placement after they returned home, but they did not have the required qualification and also felt reluctant to get involved in a job for family reasons.

Because wherever I want to go for work, I would need my certifications. But my certificate of passing grade 8 got burnt as our house caught fire once. Then from Caritas, I was provided with training and offered a job placement in Pran company. But I couldn't take it because my mother is ill, and I can't leave her alone to go for work (IDI-12, female).

At the very beginning I told them that I am interested in cattle rearing. That is why I didn't look for anything else! They offered me job placement to a company after providing me with job-specific training. But I can't go anywhere leaving my family here (IDI-37, male).

KII respondents also identified lack of education as a major impediment to economic reintegration of migrants. Migrants mostly lag behind in education, which makes it difficult to take up employment after they return.

Sometimes even if we want to provide job-placement support to returned migrants, we find that they don't have the required education level. They can only sign their names and nothing else. So, placing them in any job is difficult, and this situation is more pressing after COVID-19 where job market is already squeezed (KII-3).

The key informants emphasized capacity-building of returned migrants to help them get employment or be engaged in entrepreneurship. They opined that skills which migrants acquired abroad often fail to match jobs in the home country's labor market or economy.

Government has pledged to establish TTCs in every sub-district, but this is still undone. There are one or two TTCs in each district which is not enough. There should be locally available training resource centers to reach people. Also, there should be an information campaign on the available training resources. Training centers don't get applicants to attend training sessions because mostly people are not aware of the available facilities (KII-2).

4.5 CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

Respondents mentioned that they experienced challenges with social integration. In general, the social experience of returned migrants depends upon people's expectation of a migrant's financial solvency after working abroad. A number of respondents mentioned that their migration was considered a failed attempt by their family and friends or neighbors because they returned with not enough money in hand. Respondents mentioned they faced problems, especially when they were left with no options to invest in income-earning activities or secure employment or work after return. Migrants who came back home before their job tenure had expired and had to sell off their assets to repay migration cost debt were more prone to social stigmatization than others.

People used to say that you have returned after working for so long abroad and now you are saying that you don't have any money. Do you think we are fools to believe you? Now we will ask for money from you, why are you asking for money from us!! People think women go abroad and get involved in bad type of work (sex work) and earn a lot of money from there (IDI-8, female).

1. Social stigma and discrimination of female workers

Stigma and discrimination are also experienced by respondents who were compulsorily sent back or removed from work in the destination country. Social integration is more challenging for women returned migrants who had experienced (or perceived to have experienced) sexual exploitation abroad. Respondents mentioned that oftentimes they became victim of gossip, judgements, and derogatory remarks from their family, friends, or community people. Unwillingness of families to take them back in the family is mentioned by female respondents especially when they return without completing their tenure, the reasons for which were mostly tremendous work pressure, physical abuse, and exploitation. Returning from abroad without having a handsome amount of money in hand makes their position even more vulnerable in the pre-existing patriarchal societal structure of the communities.

Even though my family accepted me, I faced rejection from society and the community. People have a stereotyped perception that women who go abroad get involved in obscene work. People around used to taunt me, saying why do I fall sick abroad and return with such condition every time (IDI-1, female).

2. Jeopardized family structure

Some female respondents mentioned that their family situation had changed when they had migrated for work. Their husband had remarried or divorced when they went abroad or were not willing to take them back when they returned.

After I went abroad my husband remarried. Now when he comes to my house, he buys some groceries for us. In a week he stays five days with his other family and two days here with us (IDI-11, female).

All respondents also indicated that returned migrants are not always welcomed wholeheartedly in their community. They are most likely unfavorably perceived by their neighbors and community people, particularly by those who have never migrated abroad. Also, their roles in the family and their social network most often change when a migrant comes home after years of staying abroad. Such a situation makes it difficult for social integration of returned migrants.

The main barrier to social integration is stigma and discrimination from family and community people. This is more acute for female returned

migrants on perceived involvement in sex-work. Male migrants who don't come home with large amounts of money also face social bullying. It is necessary to sensitize community people on these issues. Involving local influential people in awareness campaigns would be better to increase community acceptance of returned migrants (KII-8).

3. Lack of savings leads to despair among migrants and disrespect from family and friends

Some respondents also mentioned that since they returned before expiry of their work permits or were sent back by force, they could not accumulate the amount of money they thought they could save after incurring living and food expenses at the destination country. Such conditions left them with a sense of despair and hopelessness. Respondents also mentioned that people have the perception that when someone returns from abroad, they have accumulated a large amount of money. Upon finding out that their financial condition is the same as before, migrants face derision from family, friends, and neighbors.

People used to say that you couldn't do anything after going abroad. You came empty handed (IDI-30, male).

My family was disappointed as I couldn't save money after working there. How could I save when they didn't even pay me my salary properly! Even my husband didn't welcome me with importance and respect. After returning I went to my sister's house instead with my children. Then my family intervened to re-join me with my husband. People around used to say what did you do after going abroad, you couldn't save anything and came back empty handed (IDI-6, female).

4. Lack of knowledge and information on government/private integration services

In spite of the high inflow of returned migrants, absence of appropriate policies to deliver information and lack of strategies to ensure that information relating to the labor market situation of the home country is disseminated among returned migrants are some major drawbacks for integration of returned migrants (Azad, 2018a, 2018b). Respondents mentioned that they had no knowledge of relevant information or potential work opportunities in the country after they returned. When asked, almost all respondents, whether male or female respondents, mentioned that they were not contacted by any government office upon their return, neither at the airport nor at any time after they went back to their community. Respondents were not aware of any provisions for returned migrants that are in place, such as reintegration schemes, loan facilities, training, seed money, or labor market.

After I returned no one from any government office or any government official at the field level contacted me (IDI-27, male).

KII respondents highlighted the lack of knowledge among returned migrants regarding available service provisions for them. They did not have appropriate knowledge on where and how their skills and savings can be utilized. There is also lack of access to information at the local level on possible employment and ventures for returned migrants.

A major challenge of the government initiatives is that there is lack of local-level service delivery points for aspiring migrants for safe migration and for returned migrants for availing integration support. For example, there are DEMO offices at the district level, but if there were sub-district-level branch offices or union-level offices, then the service delivery reach could have been much wider and effective (KII-1).

4.6 PROGRAMMATIC CHALLENGES TO REINTEGRATION

KII respondents highlighted that lack of data on returned migrants regarding their education, skills, and assets can further complicate the reintegration process. Without data on the number, capabilities, needs, and demands of migrants, it would not be possible to provide reintegration support to the migrants.

Officially it is unknown how many migrants have returned. There is no proper list of returned migrants. For example, we can say X number of people are now working abroad, but no department or airport authority can provide any such number of returned migrants. This is because when a migrant leaves the country, they need to register at the airport with their smart card but on return there is no such system. If the airport authority collected returned migrants' fingerprints, there could have been a database (KII-7).

Government has provision for registering and keeping a database on migrants. If this database could be created locally at the union level, then this would have been more effective. Union-level database of how many migrants have gone abroad and of them how many have returned, then those returned migrants could be taken under programs effectively (KII-1).

Respondents highlighted the challenges of limited institutional and organizational capacity and absence of local-level service platforms for returned migrants as major barriers to their reintegration. Not only is there an absence of institutions, but there is also limited human resource and financial budgetary constraints, which impede the reintegration process. There is a lack of institutions in the localities of migrants from where they can avail information on safe migration and appropriate and effective reintegration after they return.

There are district-level offices such as DEMO, but at the sub-district level there are no government office branches available. Sometimes it is not possible for migrants to travel to Dhaka every time for different migration-related purposes. It incurs time, cost, and other barriers. People who return with experiences of exploitation need to travel to Dhaka if they want to seek compensation or any legal support. Such centralized activities are troublesome for migrants. Migration management needs to be decentralized and should be taken to the union level to reach the community people (KII 1).

KII respondents opined that reintegration services that are available for returned migrants are very limited and cannot cover the volume of migrants that return every year. They also cannot fully provide the necessary support to every migrant as per their needs and demands. The government and civil society organizations have different reintegration support programs, ranging from shelter home support, medical treatment support, social support, economic support, and legal support under the umbrella of their different reintegration programs, but these are not enough. Owing to programmatic limitations in budget and resources, not all returned migrants can be included under the programs available on the ground.

Sometimes the returned migrants can't provide any documents of their migration and work abroad. They had left all their documents behind when they returned. For that reason, those migrants can't be included in the program. Also, sometimes, the programs specify certain time period, age, gender as inclusion criteria of the participants. So, participants who do not match the criteria naturally slip away from the program support, however most affected they are (KII- 3).

Most of the time the amount of money offered under the programs is not sufficient to reintegrate migrants economically. The amount in cash transfers varies depending on the project budget. However, none of the budgetary allocations for programs led by civil society organizations can ensure full economic integration, neither can they ensure sustainability, such as follow-up and monitoring of activities under the programs, when programs are conducted only for a limited duration.

The programs lack long-term affiliation with the participants. Programs are providing short-time support to the migrants. For example, programs are providing seed-money support until December of a year. After that, in the next six months the project timeline will expire. So, there will be no instrument for follow-up on whether this seed money is being utilized properly or not. This can only be monitored through long-term implementation of programs (KII-4).

4.7 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, mobility restrictions, border closures, and travel bans, severely impacted the lives of migrants at the destination country as well as upon their return (GFEMS, 2020). Low- and semi-skilled migrant workers, constituting a large proportion of the labor migrant workforce, faced direct consequences and marginalization, such as sudden job discontinuation, wage cuts, withholding of salaries, long working hours, compromised health and safety issues like vaccination, and lack of social protection at the destination country. A recent study showed that about 2,00,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers returned on leave but could not go back because of the COVID-19 pandemic (OKUP, 2020). Another study suggests that about 32 percent of workers residing abroad experienced work discontinuation and another 32 percent encountered irregular work at the destination country (Islam et al., 2021).

Female migrants did not face work discontinuation with the COVID-19 outbreak because their work is mostly home based. Female migrants instead faced increased workload because most family members were staying at home during the COVID-19 outbreak.

1. Economic hardship

IDI findings show that out of 20 male respondents, 11 came back because of different workplace vulnerabilities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents mentioned sudden work discontinuation, salary withholding, and no scope of returning to work for those who came home during the pandemic.

During Corona, there was no work for four months and neither was there any salary payment. Work provision was based on hourly payment with no work no pay provision. There was nothing we could do about it (IDI-21, male).

I came on vacation. I had leave allocation for six months. But now my Iqama has expired, my visa/passport has expired. So even if I want to go back now, it will cost me another six-lakh taka. I don't have the capacity to arrange for this much amount of money. So, I couldn't go back. Still, I called my employer, but he said in this situation of pandemic, they can't avail Iqama for foreign workers (IDI-32, male).

During COVID my employer didn't pay me my salary. Whenever I asked for my salary, they used to say due to Corona their business is going in loss so they can't pay me any salary (IDI-5, female).

Withholding of salary and irregular payments

Apart from work discontinuation, withholding of salary, and irregular payments, respondents' mentioned several out-of-pocket costs, such as medical tests, higher priced travel ticket, and vaccine cost that they had to bear during the Covid-19 crisis. Respondents also mentioned higher ticket prices during the pandemic for which they had to pay from their pocket, even though the ticket cost was supposed to be borne by their company.

I returned before Corona. But my employer told me that he will take me back soon with new documents. I gave him around 10,000 taka in advance for a new visa document. But after I returned all flights got canceled and the validity of the new document, which was for two months, expired. So, I had to incur loss of 10,000 taka because of Corona (IDI-24, male).

We had to take a test within 72 hours of boarding the plane. Our company discontinued our work and asked us to return, but they didn't provide us the fee for the Corona test. I spent 200 riyals from my pocket for the Corona clearance test (IDI-27, male).

Because of Corona, we faced many challenges while returning as well. We were out of work for several months with no salary payment. But the ticket price was much higher during Corona than usual. We had to spend that money from our pocket even though employer said they will arrange for the ticket (IDI-35, male).

Quarantine in destination

IDI respondents mentioned staying quarantined at the destination before taking the flight back home.

I was in quarantine for a month at the destination before boarding the plane. After quarantine they provided us with clearance certificate to travel at the airport (IDI-33, male).

Increased workload for females

Female respondents recalled the increased workload with the COVID-19 outbreak and withholding of salary by the employers.

During Corona, our salary was withheld for eight months. For this reason, I came back home. They also told us that my company will bear the cost of my ticket but ultimately, they didn't. I had to take money from home to arrange for my ticket (IDI-16, female).

My workload increased in Corona. Everyone at my employer's including me suffered from Corona. They took treatment from the doctor for Corona but never took me to the doctor. They only gave me Panadol for my Corona. They also never let me rest from work even when I was suffering from Corona. It was very difficult situation (IDI-13, female).

2. Challenges faced after return

IDI respondents mentioned that they also faced challenges at home after returning during the pandemic.

While I was staying abroad, our employer withheld our salary because of Corona. They didn't pay us for eight months. After that I asked my employer to send me home. They promised they would arrange for the ticket money but finally they didn't. I took the ticket money from home. But as I had returned, I could not enter my house for three months. No one let me inside of their houses, none of my family members or neighbors. I came home in the middle of the night, but I was forced to leave the house by dawn like a thief (IDI-16, female).

KII respondents highlighted the added challenges faced by the returned migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic because of shrinking local employment and business opportunities. Returned migrants in this period also suffered difficulties in accessing health services, given the strain on the healthcare systems during the pandemic, and also difficulties in accessing vaccination programs in the country because of limited vaccine coverage. The government, civil society organizations, and development agencies had reallocated funds to support returned migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they were not enough. KII respondents expressed that there should be separate contingency planning for migrants under such emergency

situations and also government-led and bilateral efforts for dignified return of migrants during times of crisis.

Many migrants came home after losing their job to the pandemic. They also faced situations like salary withheld, no payment of salary, etc. And now after coming home, they are not doing anything because there is a local market job crisis after COVID-19. Also, if now these people want to go back, they have to be vaccinated. But then again, not every country is recognizing every vaccine. For example, Saudi Arabia is not approving Sinopharm. So, these issues need to be addressed by the government (KII- 8).

4.8 REINTEGRATION SUPPORT RECEIVED BY THE MIGRANTS

The study interviewed migrants who had participated in the OKUP and Caritas returned migrants' reintegration program. The migrants reported that they received different types of services under the program. The interviews revealed that, within one week to seven months after return, migrants were contacted by OKUP or Caritas or they themselves contacted these organizations when they were conducting program work in the migrants' community to avail reintegration support. Under the program umbrella of OKUP, different types of service provision were available with referral to Caritas for livelihood training and seed-money distribution support. However, interviews indicate that migrants came to know about OKUP and Caritas only after they had joined the program several months after their return, and, hence, they had missed the opportunity to avail services that are needed at the initial phase of return such as airport pick-up, or shelter home, or immediate treatment support.

Reintegration services

- Airport pick-up
- Shelter home support
- Health support
- Counseling
- Legal support
- Employment support
- Life-skills training

Almost all participants mentioned receiving three-day life-skills training under OKUP. OKUP then referred them to Caritas from where they received further livelihood training and seed-money support.

1. Loan, livelihood training, and seed-money support

Almost all respondents, who were participants of OKUP and Caritas programs, mentioned receiving seed money and livelihood-training support to start small enterprises.

OKUP contacted me after a week of my return from abroad. They have provided me with instant cash support worth 3,000 taka. Then I received two training sessions from OKUP. First one was in Sonargaon, Dhaka where they provided a three-day training on how to become an entrepreneur—cattle farming, cow rearing, etc. The second one was also a three-day training where they provided training on migration cases, how to assess documents before going abroad. Later OKUP referred me to Caritas from where I received 25,000 taka and training on cattle rearing (IDI-1, female).

I heard of Caritas from one of my neighbors. I contacted the Caritas office, and they enrolled me in their program. After a week of joining the program, I was provided with livelihood training and 25,000 taka for cattle rearing (IDI-28, male).

No government or private organization contacted me after I returned. But one day, one of my uncles introduced me to a staff member of Caritas. From them I heard that they provide support services to returned migrants. Then I told him that I too am a returned migrant upon which he enrolled me in the program and provided me with counseling, livelihood training and seed-money support (IDI-38, male).

Few respondents mentioned taking NGO loan support to start a small business after they returned.

After I returned, I took a loan from an NGO to start my food cart. Later, I also received training from OKUP and Caritas and received 25,000 seed money from Caritas, with which I bought a piece of land (IDI-34, male).

2. Counseling support

IDI respondents mentioned that OKUP and Caritas offered them general counseling, which gave them hope for a better future. Many respondents mentioned feeling depressed or distressed, as most of them returned with their dream of a better life shattered after working abroad in situations of exploitation, exhausting work conditions, low/irregular salary, and lack of savings, all of which led to despair.

I was very depressed as I returned home empty-handed. Father has aged and is not able to work anymore. I hoped to save some money from working abroad which didn't happen. So, after Caritas contacted me, they provided me counseling support which helped me a lot to feel motivated. Subsequently I joined their training program and received seed-money support. I bought electrical tools with that money and now I earn money through electrical work in the area (IDI-26, male).

After I returned, one day a person from the Caritas office came to our house to enroll me in their program. But my mother scolded her and told her to go away thinking she is a trafficker. Later my father explained to my mother about Caritas work, and I enrolled in their program and received training and seed-money support. I was very depressed at that time, so I was referred to OKUP for counseling support. It was very helpful for me (IDI-13, female).

3. Airport pick-up support

Even though there is provision for airport pick-up under the programs, only one respondent mentioned receiving airport pick-up through the OKUP program, whereas others were mostly unaware of OKUP or Caritas program until they had enrolled in the program.⁷

I was desperate to return home because of work pressure and salary withheld, but my employer was not allowing me to come back. Then my mother contacted OKUP through one of my cousins to bring me back. After that OKUP processed everything for my return. Right when I landed at the airport there was a representative from OKUP who helped me with immigration formalities and also provided me with airport pick-up (transport support) to send me home. Later I also received a three-day training from OKUP (IDI-8, female).

⁷ Note: A requirement of participant selection was that returned migrants should have been in Bangladesh prior to the program start date. As such, not many of the participants received airport pick-ups, given that had they returned home before the project start date.

I had no idea about OKUP or their services for migrants. After I returned, one day a person from OKUP came to my house and told me about their activities and support services for migrants. If I had known earlier, I could have taken their airport pick-up services just after I landed. I had to spend the entire night at the airport, because no transport was available at that time. I had to spend more than double to reach home from the airport . Had I known earlier about OKUP I could have availed their free airport pick-up service (IDI-33, male).

4. Treatment support

Few respondents also mentioned their receiving treatment support from OKUP after they returned, as they had suffered long-standing illness and/or occupational injuries.

I slipped in the bathroom while working at my employer's place and my backbone was severely damaged. I came back with excessive back pain. Later when I joined the OKUP program, I told them about my health in their first training. Then they took me to their shelter-home for treatment support. I stayed at the shelter home for a day and consulted a doctor and received medicines for my back pain (IDI-6, female).

When I returned, I was almost paralyzed, I could barely walk. I took treatment from Sadar hospital which cost me about 30,000–35,000 taka. When OKUP contacted me, they asked me if I needed any treatment-related support, and after that they provided me with 1,400 taka worth of medicines that was prescribed by my doctor from Sadar hospital. I am slowly getting better now; I have started to walk step-by-step (IDI-34, male)

Chapter 5: Recommended actions

The contribution of returned migrants is not only limited to sending remittances, but it also includes social capital generated through migrant networks, flow of knowledge, technical know-how, and skills they have built that can make significant contributions towards the socioeconomic and development discourse of the country. The aim of this research study is to understand experiences of returned migrants, review policies and programs, and identify strategies to better reintegrate the returned migrant workers into the domestic economy and also for their social reintegration in an efficient manner. Effective reintegration of returned migrants into suitable jobs or entrepreneurship can be a means to utilize their skills and knowledge gained abroad, so that they can contribute towards the development of the country. The findings presented in the previous sections from the in-depth interviews with returned migrants and key informant interviews with stakeholders have identified the constraints and challenges for economic and social reintegration of returned migrant workers. The interviews also suggest several strategies to facilitate such reintegration.

This section presents research gaps and policy and programmatic recommendations informed by the study findings for different stakeholders. For successful reintegration of returned migrant workers, the government, as well as development partners, NGOs and other organizations, civil society, recruitment agencies, and researchers should make a coordinated effort. To utilize the skills of returned migrant workers and to facilitate their effective social and economic reintegration in the home country, it is vital that the government takes specific steps for timely implementation of policies and strategies. Based on a review of policies and literature along with experiences shared by the returned migrants and key informants, a number of strategies are outlined below.

5.1 GOVERNMENT

1. Access to information and service provision as per policies need to be implemented at the local level

From the interviews with the returned migrants (both male and female), it was evident that they did not have adequate knowledge and information on the migration process and about their rights and entitlements, which highlight the importance of strengthening local implementation. Improving the quality of information made available to potential migrants can have an impact on both intentions to migrate and conditions in which people move. The Overseas Employment Policy (2016) tasks line ministries for implementing the policy. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment has designated the specific roles of each of the line ministries in this collaboration, and concerned ministries include the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. However, local implementation is not adequate, and information is not reaching people at the grassroots level. Local government representatives need to be sensitized to migration issues of women and should receive standardized information on safe migration from the national level. Help desks providing comprehensive up-to-date information on the migration process should be established at all union council offices that are situated far from the local district employment and manpower offices. People would then have quick access to accurate information and would be less vulnerable to fraud perpetrated by middlemen and others. Free hotline numbers, information for MRCs (Migration resource centers), and web portal information need to be disseminated at the local level, unions, and schools so that future generations and members of families of aspiring migrants are also made aware of the migration processes and can access and spread information as well as help low literacy members of the community. Interviews with returned migrants also highlight limited awareness regarding loan-provision facility from PKB for returned

migrants and the challenges they face in availing loans owing to complicated processes, such as requirement of official documents and guarantors. Targeted awareness activities for returned migrants need to be implemented on supporting schemes, such as loan facilities, training facilities, and re-migration opportunities. Local governments, the BMET, district manpower offices, training centers, ISCs (Industry Skills Councils), and NGOs need to improve the quality of services and dissemination of such information for returned migrants at the local level.

2. Standards and activities of recruiting agencies need to be monitored

Findings show that exploitation of migrants is prevalent from the pre-migration stage onwards in terms of high cost, mismatches in work type as promised in destination countries, and role of dalals and recruitment agencies in the migration process. Deception was also common as seen in their receiving less than agreed wage, irregular salary payment, and salaries being withheld for months. Standard terms of employment need to be promoted and ensured. It is important to evaluate performance standards and undertake regular monitoring of recruiting agencies. Performance standards need to include indicators related to respecting migrant workers' rights and adherence to ethical recruitment practices. Fixing recruitment service charges in conformity with the market realities is imperative. Law enforcement agencies need to play a proactive role in enforcing these provisions. Recruitment agencies are to be controlled, audited well, and prosecuted well by the government, to reduce exploitation of migrants and to put a check on the exorbitant fees charged by recruiting agencies. Recruitment agencies need to be trained and monitored on ethical practices for safe migration and to adopt gender-sensitive practices.

3. Gender-responsive agreements need to be negotiated, implemented, and monitored to protect female migrants

Memorandums of understanding and bilateral agreements to protect migrant workers' rights in destination countries need further exploration by the Government of Bangladesh, and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. However, it is challenging to implement and monitor such agreements for domestic workers, who are at greater risk of exploitation, particularly for women in domestic work in destination countries. Furthermore, in most labor-receiving countries, domestic work is not covered under their labor law. A comprehensive approach is required to resolve these issues. This can include holding regular meetings for all stakeholders to advocate for domestic workers' rights and to establish ways to protect these rights. Where appropriate, the results of these meetings need to be shared with international agencies to enlist further technical assistance from them. Key stakeholders, including civil society organizations, need to be consulted during negotiations between the government and destination countries, and the process should be made public. The specific needs of female migrant domestic workers and their gender-based vulnerabilities need to be reflected in any agreements, in line with the provisions for rights protection and equality under CEDAW.

4. Smooth reintegration for returned migrant workers needs to be ensured

Findings from the study suggest that, except for the support of a few NGOs, returned migrants hardly availed any government services although there are provisions in place. A comprehensive reintegration framework should be developed to serve returned migrants. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment can take specific actions to ensure this in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development. The BMET should establish employment link services in its field offices to help returned migrants find work and reintegrate. Introducing and implementing recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) certification for returned migrants can be an effective strategy in this regard (Wickramasekara, 2019). In addition, the BMET and NGOs could provide returned migrants with skills training to improve their productivity and performance. There is need for a holistic approach for psychological, social and economic reintegration of the returned migrants and their families.

Targeted interventions—insurance mechanisms, social protection, and better access to health—can potentially protect migrants and their families against adversities or shocks after undesirable return of migrants. Difficulties faced by the ultra-poor households in availing the schemes and relaxing the conditions for availing PKB loans need to be addressed. A major challenge is that there is no central government authority responsible for reintegration. This needs to be clarified, with a lead agency's taking responsibility for coordination and communication among stakeholders.

5. One-stop access points for reintegration information and services need to be created

Reintegration service delivery is currently spread across several different actors at the regional level. There is no single consolidated center for information and service delivery of reintegration interventions. A one-stop-shop approach can be a vital step to coordinate and consolidate reintegration service delivery. These one-stop shops could be implemented within the MRCs.

6. A comprehensive database of returned migrants needs to be developed

The main constraint for successful reintegration of the returned migrant workers, as pointed out by the majority of the key informants, is the lack of coordination and information. To track returned migrant workers and to share their information among the relevant stakeholders, such as banks, SMEs, and employers, a comprehensive database with detailed information, including socioeconomic background, skills, education, training, and other details, such as contact number upon return and passport number should be prepared. Without data on the number, capabilities, needs, and demands of returned migrants, it would not be possible to provide reintegration support to them. Proper and good quality age- and gender-disaggregated data collection can guide programs towards effective planning and implementation. An online database system needs to be set up, and that system needs to be a part of the reintegration strategy that should include employers, training providers, assessment centers, and certification bodies. Local governments need to be engaged in mobilization of the workers to update worker profiles by setting up local-level data collection units in the District Manpower Offices.

7. Capacity of officials needs to be built to utilize age- and sex-disaggregated data in planning programs

Capacity of officials in the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment need to be built to use data in their planning and implementation. Collaboration with research organizations and think tanks are crucial for analyzing and sharing these data in comprehensible terms to officials and policy planners. Age- and sex-disaggregated data on skills, occupations, remittances, and needs and aspirations are crucial to inform policies and programs. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in collaboration with line ministries and departments, should collect and update sex-disaggregated data on labor migration and publish a periodic compendium on women and migration. Sex-disaggregated data is crucial in mainstreaming gender in labor migration and in developing and implementing relevant policies for female migrants.

5.2 BANGLADESH ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL RECRUITING AGENCIES (BAIRA)

1. Recruitment agencies need to be trained and monitored on ethical practices for safe migration and to adopt gender-sensitive practices

Findings demonstrate exploitation and deception at various stages of the migration process. BAIRA should take the lead and organize training for recruitment agencies to build a common understanding of the gender-related national and international policies and agreements and gender-sensitive practices for contract agreements, so that they can develop their own protection, safety, and remediation mechanisms for migrant workers. The needs and concerns of female migrants need to be incorporated in the training for agencies, which must include guidelines on gender sensitivity.

Agencies need to be able to provide job seekers with accurate details of working conditions in the destination country, including the nature of the work, wages, benefits, and duration of contracts.

2. Standard terms of employment need to be promoted, particularly for female migrants

BAIRA, as the chair of the Alliance of Asian Associations of Overseas Employment Service Providers can play a critical role in advocating for standard terms of employment for female domestic workers. BAIRA can be an effective platform for sharing experiences, exchanging views, and generating dialogue on the standard terms of employment. A national-level strategy can be formulated by encouraging dialogue among the government, BAIRA, and civil society organizations. This strategy could use the standard terms of employment template as a guideline to ensure the protection of domestic workers' rights.

5.3 PROGRAM IMPLEMENTERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

1. Campaigns for regulated and safe migration need to be strengthened

Program implementers and civil society organizations need to play a greater role in raising awareness, at both home and destination, particularly among female migrant workers, and advocating for safe migration as key to realizing the full benefits of migration. These organizations should help ensure regulated and safe migration by collaborating with the government, particularly with the DEMOs and union council information centers, on campaigns to encourage workers who wish to migrate to follow legal channels. In collaboration with local administrations, intensive campaign activities need to be planned with a long-term vision. If the scale and frequency of activities are increased, campaigns could have a long-lasting effect on the welfare of migrant workers. Border districts and sub-districts (*upazila*), which are more prone to trafficking of women and children to other countries, should be targeted.

2. Collaboration with recruitment agencies and government

Strengthening partnerships and collaboration among civil society organizations, recruitment agencies, and the government is crucial for the protection of the rights of migrant workers. The experience of these partners in designing capacity-building programs can be used to develop human-rights-based and gender-responsive information and dialogue sessions in the communities for female workers before they decide to migrate. These sessions need to include training on financial literacy and basic banking to help female migrants better manage their earnings. Program implementers and civil society organizations could strengthen their social and economic reintegration support for returned migrants by, for example, providing them with advice and information on managing their money and understanding the economic opportunities available to them.

3. Psychosocial support provision needs to be strengthened

For social reintegration, it is necessary to institutionalize the trauma center services in shelter homes and to sensitize staff on delivering gender-responsive psychosocial support to survivors. Civil society organizations should collaborate with the National Trauma Counseling Center of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to strengthen psychosocial support and referral services for female migrants who have experienced abuse or violence.

4. Tailored assistance and program design is needed for vulnerable returned migrants

The process of reintegration can be complex and varied among returned migrants depending on their age, sex, returning context, migration experiences, and situation at home upon return. Program implementers need to have flexibility and tailored programs to address the diverse needs of returned migrants. Counseling needs to be comprehensive with tailored attention for vulnerable groups, including those who are victims of exploitation and abuse and those with health-related needs or disabilities. Projects assisting vulnerable migrants need to place more emphasis on security concerns and other risks related to their specific vulnerabilities as well as on legal assistance, psychosocial counseling, and alternative solutions tailored to the needs of migrants both before and after their return.

5. Collaboration with the government, NGOs, and existing service structure needs to be leveraged

Reintegration programs should be linked to existing structures and schemes, be it institutional frameworks, programs run by the state, or local development initiatives, including those by the private sector, as these enhance reintegration prospects. Linking reintegration projects to existing development initiatives will thus enhance their effectiveness and, at the same time, avoid duplication of activities. Parallel structures are not only more expensive, but also can endanger the success of a project when they compete for the same resources. Cooperation with local actors, whether developmental, humanitarian, social, or financial, during the design phase of the reintegration project helps ensure that the project responds to the needs on the ground and that different activities are feasible and efficient.

5.4 RESEARCHERS AND MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING PRACTITIONERS (MEL)

1. Further research is needed to unpack the complex landscape of overseas labor migration system in Bangladesh

Several evidence gaps remain in understanding the complex overseas labor migration system in Bangladesh with regard to variation in migration cost, effect of emigration through formal versus informal channels and its relationship with labor exploitations, variation in labor recruitment practices of overseas companies and employers, kind of labor protection measures implemented at the destination countries, and the labor protection systems that can be built into the recruitment process at source and destination countries to safeguard migrants against exploitation. Firstly, and most importantly, there is a need to create a migration database to capture the trends and characteristics of labor outflows that will include different categories of migrant workers, including first-time migrants, repeat migrants, migrants who emigrate through registered recruitment agencies and those who emigrate through alternative and unregistered channels, and migrants who have returned to the country. There is need to uncover additional determinants of migration cost that is differentiated by migrant laborers and professionals, sociodemographic characteristics of emigrants, emigration process, recruitment channels, and also between the destination countries that are major recipients of migrant workers, with a view towards identifying interventions where policy can play a role. There is also no systematic data on labor exploitations experienced by overseas labor migrants. Further research is needed to know the types and volume of services needed for returned migrants.

2. Review of good practices

A review of good practices from around the world can generate useful knowledge on whether the same can be adopted for the country. Schemes that have proven successful in similar settings can guide policies and practices in Bangladesh.

3. Evidence generation by review of past and current intervention programs and their effectiveness

Research can play a vital role in generating evidence by rigorous evaluations to understand outcomes of implemented reintegration programs and build upon programs that have demonstrated reintegration success.

4. Data and information on age- and sex-disaggregated data of returned migrants need to be analyzed and shared

A national database of migrants and returned migrants needs to be established to record and analyze sex-disaggregated data on labor and migration, including data on age, labor migration history, skills, occupations, remittances, return, aspirations, and contact numbers. Policy and planning for program implementation need to be guided by facts and figures. Research organizations can play an important role in analyzing the data and suggesting recommended actions to improve strategies for reintegration. Needs of returned migrants in the 30s age group can be significantly different from returned migrants in the 50s age group, and similarly it can vary by female and male migrants. There should be an emphasis on targeted research for improving reintegration programs.

5. Participatory and trauma-informed research

An approach to include migrants at the design phase should be considered for developing more participatory, effective, and trauma-informed research that will best address the need of the migrants.

5.5 FUNDING AGENCIES

Several of the recommendations listed above require substantial financial investments where funding agencies can play their role. Funding agencies should increase investments to generate evidence on what works in improving the overseas labor migration system by investing in operation research and implementation studies to test for effective strategies for an awareness-raising model on safe migration. Funding agencies may work with the national government, district and local governments, program implementers, researchers, and MEL practitioners to create a migration data ecosystem. Funding agencies need to have a long-term vision to invest in projects that are lasting and effective. They may also advocate with and support international and bilateral agencies, such as ILO, IOM, and World Bank in generating comprehensive data on labor exploitations in various migration corridors. Investing in formative and implementation research studies that could fill current evidence gaps, as articulated in the sections on recommendations for MEL practitioners and program implementers, should be a priority for funding agencies. Funding agencies can also work in building 'Global survivor-led-network' for multi-donor collaboration that can create scope for funding large-scale and long-term research or program implementation. They can play a pivotal role in bringing to attention the issue of labor exploitations experienced by the overseas labor migrants among key stakeholders, development partners, and governments of sending and destination countries.

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Annexure

Table A: Provision of Reintegration of Returnee Migrants in Acts and Policies

Law/Act/Policy	Specific Provisions
Overseas Employment and Migrants' Act 2013	<p>Article 2.1 the act included Bangladeshi citizens who have returned to Bangladesh at the end of the tenure of employment or without having completed the tenure of employment from a foreign country under the definition of “migrant worker” or “worker”</p> <p>Article 27. Mentioned about providing legal aid services to workers who are victims of fraud</p> <p>Article 28. Mentioned about filing civil suit for compensation for migrants who faced exploitation at work</p> <p>Article 29. Mentioned about the right of detained, stranded or distressed workers to return home and their right to receive necessary assistance from Bangladesh mission abroad</p> <p>Article 30. Called upon government to launch special financial and welfare programs to support migrants and their families with facilities such as loan, tax-exemption, saving schemes and investment opportunities</p>
Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016	<p>Article 1.5 mentioned about rehabilitating poor and distressed returnee migrants</p> <p>Article 1.8 mentioned of involving trade union, civil society organizations and ensuring inter-ministerial cooperation and coordination for promoting rehabilitation and social reintegration welfare services for returned migrant workers</p> <p>Article 2.3 mentioned of developing Action plan for the rehabilitation and integration of poor and distressed returnee migrants</p> <p>Article 2.5 mentioned of establishing network with Bangladeshi diaspora for the utilization of their knowledge and expertise in reintegration programs</p>
Wage Earners' Welfare Fund Rules 2002	<p>Article 6 mentioned about welfare support for the migrants and their families</p> <p>Article 7 mentioned about adoption of projects and financing in employment and rehabilitation of migrant workers.</p>
Seventh Five-Year Plan (2016-2020)	<p>Article 2 mentioned about including Bangladeshi diaspora in national development plan</p> <p>Also mentioned about providing rehabilitation loans for the migrants in destitute and vulnerable conditions</p>
Eighth Five- Year Plan (2020-2025)	<p>Mentions about ensuring sustainable social and economic reintegration of returnee migrants through inter-ministerial and inter-agency/department “referral mechanism”</p> <p>Mentions that “Sustainable Reintegration of Migrant Workers Policy” will be adopted for returnee migrants' reintegration</p> <p>Mentions of capacity building of the DEMOs and WEWB to provide reintegration services to the returnee migrants including referral for medical, psychosocial support, skills development, economic rehabilitation and financial inclusion</p>
Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act 2017	<p>Article 9 mention about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Financing support for the welfare of migrants or their families – Repatriating bodies of deceased migrant workers' and providing financial support for their families – Repatriating workers with illness, injury or disabilities, and giving them financial and medical support – Undertaking programs for social and economic reintegration of returnee migrants <p>Article 10 specifically mention of addressing the needs of women migrants for their welfare</p>

