



A Feminist Participatory Action Research: Safe and Fair Migration of Bangladeshi women migrant workers



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

OKUP
a grassroots migrants' organization

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They started carrier with OKUP as young development workers committed to create social movement for reducing gender stereotypes and inequality from the society and promoting safe and fair migration for women.

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OKUP believes that this research is a start to build a social movement to reduce gender inequality and disparity in Bangladesh society through active engagement of women migrant workers and the community together.



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1. Introduction



1.1 Background of the research

International migration plays a vital and indispensable role in the national development of Bangladesh. Overseas migration reduces unemployment on the one hand, and the remittances from migration serve as a major pillar for national economic development. Women's overseas migration is a significant contributor to this development as they share a large market in the domestic and care work, and garment works abroad.

But unfortunately, the majority of women migrant workers face gender-based discrimination and various forms of structural and physical exploitation during the entire migration cycle. Such gender-based violence is inflicted on women in various migration processes due to the gendered recruitment and migration policies and negative social stereotypes that are prevalent both in their countries of origin and destination. Thus, even though remittances sent by these women are a driving force for their family's sustenance or the overall national development of the country, violence against them are often accepted by viewing it as a 'private affair' that prevents others from intervening or breaking the social norms or gender stereotypes. It undermines the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. In addition to this, women migrant workers' rights are often violated due to recruitment abuses and gendered policies practiced in the destination and source countries. Such violence limits women's potential to lead a free and full life and often results in unsuccessful migration as the women migrant workers are typically forced to return even before their contracts finishes.

Failure to address violence against migrant women not only entails social or economic cost, but also poses threat for a country's inclusive development. Since gender based violence is typically rooted in inequality between women and men and the social norms associated with it, it is essential that the prevailing systems of power be challenged and changed as a matter of urgency, and the blame, shame and stigma faced by women be eliminated to ensure a safe environment for the women migrant workers at home and abroad.

In such a context, this research was undertaken to understand gender-based violence that women migrant workers face in the world of work, available systems for accessing to justice in case of violence against women, and how the women view safe and fair migration from their own perspectives.



1.2 Terms, concepts and research objectives

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a phenomenon deeply rooted in power inequalities between women and men. Most of the time it is inflicted on girls and women due to social stereotypes through various discriminatory behavior and practices, which result in physical, psychological or sexual harm, assault, verbal threats, abusive behavior, bullying or mobbing with the aim of demeaning, embarrassing and humiliating them. This discrimination can also intersect with, or be reinforced by the person's, ethnicity, language, class, caste etc. Therefore, this research has used a feminist participatory action research approach to

understand gender-based violence and discrimination faced by women migrant workers in the world of work. The “World of work” here does not mean only the workplace but also includes unpaid workplaces such as the home. Patriarchal norms and discriminatory practices usually normalize such violence in workplace. To prevent such violence against women, first and foremost, it is essential to prevent the negative masculinities that perpetuate discrimination and violence, whilst empower girls to defend their rights.

Secondly, in order to prevent gender-based violence, it is crucial to strengthen justice and accountability, and the same is also true for ensuring migrant workers’ rights and ending any discriminatory practices. However, it is very challenging to ensure the full spectrum of migrants’ rights. Experiences from many NGOs show that gender-based violence among migrant workers is highly prevalent. Yet many cases are not reported and the few that are reported rarely reach the courts and lead to justice. Studies show that stigma surrounding violence against women prevents victims from reporting incidents and seeking justice, and thus gender-based violence against migrant workers remains unaddressed.

Thirdly, whereas the concept of “safe migration” usually refers to migration as a process including the entire migration (from departure to return, accessible services during every step of the work journey, in pre-departure procedures, at airport, transit and destination), the concept of “fair migration” is linked to the notion of decent work. According to ILO, fair migration “respects fundamental rights of migrant workers,” and “offer[s] them real opportunities for decent work.” Nonetheless, in reality, both concepts overlook migrants’ stories, context and power dynamics that should be unpacked from the perspective of women migrant workers.

Considering these dynamics, this Feminist Participatory Action Research primarily focuses on women migrant workers’ experience of gender-based violence in the workplace and the constraints they face in access to justice.,The specific focus of the research is to listen to the real experiences of women migrant workers’ exploitation, violence and abuse in the context of migration and work, access to legal remedies, and to hear their recommendations for safe and fair migration.



1.3 Research Methodology

The research focused on the understanding of returnee migrant workers about their life in both the countries of origin and countries of destination. The data collection was facilitated in six focus group discussions (FGDs) and eight in-depth interviews (IDI) with both groups of returnee migrant workers both domestic workers and garments workers. The researchers were trained with guiding questions for conducting focus group discussions in a participatory method. An Introductory session with the selected research participants (returnee women migrant workers) was conducted before the focus group discussions, and covered the objectives of the research, the importance of their participation in the research, and finally their consent in participation of the research. Other issues discussed included the power of systematic documentation of real-life experiences, and the role of women in driving change as part of collective activism.

A three-member research team including one facilitator, one note taker, one observer conducted the introductory session and focus group discussions as well as in-dept interviews. A total of eight

(8) women returnee migrant workers were identified among the participants of the focus group discussions on consensus of the research group for in-depth interview. Apart from conducting focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, the research team completed transcriptions, coding and compiling of data. The lead researcher in OKUP closely monitored data collection methods, facilitated data analysis consultation, and finalized the report.

The field level research team followed five principles in conducting this feminist participatory action research which are - not providing training, counseling or other services during the FGD; asking the questions in simple language; listening carefully and taking notes; ensuring the respondents about privacy and confidentiality of data; and being non-judgmental, trustworthy and neutral in attitude and expression during the focus group discussions and the interviews.



1.4 Research participants

The research followed a snowball method to identify the research participants. Initially, 67 returnee women migrant workers were identified and invited to participate in the introductory sessions. Among them, 47 women worked as domestic workers and 20 women used to work in the garment sector abroad particularly in the Middle East countries. Of those, 31 domestic workers agreed and participated in the focus group discussions. The majority of women migrated only once, some of them migrated twice and thrice. The shortest migration period was one year and the longest one was 10 years, but most of them were between two and seven years. The age of the youngest research participant was 18 years while the oldest one was 46 years. The average age of the participants was 30. Majority of them were married but several of them were divorced/separated. Among the participants, most of the women worked in the GCC countries, Jordan and Lebanon, three in Mauritius, and three in Malaysia. This is to note that among 31 participants of the focus group discussions, eight women were selected for in-depth interviews.

Sl	Areas conducted FPAR	Number of respondents in Introductory Session	Number of respondents in FGD	Number of respondents in IDI
1	Araihazar, Narayangonj	12	9	1
3	Kathalia, Narsingdi	10	7	1
4	Char Vadrashan, Faridpur	12	8	3
5	Munshigonj	13	7	2
	Total	47	31	6



1.5 Research areas

The research was conducted in five Upazilas (sub-districts) under four different districts of Dhaka Division in Bangladesh. The main selection criteria of these areas

were high incidence of women migration; a variety of social contexts (rural/urban) and available livelihood options; as well as the number of return and repatriation of women migrant workers during the past few years. The basic details¹ of research areas are as below:

- Arahazar, Narayangonj Upazila: This upazila has high numbers of migrants, both male and female, who move to the Middle East, Malaysia, Singapore and other destinations. This is a well-known upazila for large number of power loom factories which offers full time work opportunities to many of women and men of this village. Consequently, they try migrating to other countries to specifically work in the garment sector. This area is very close to Dhaka city and the living standards of the community are a bit better than other areas.
- Kathalia, Narsingdi Upazila: Although this area has a firmly established power loom industry, employment opportunities for women have traditionally been scarce due to gender-based social stigma associated with working outside the home.
- Charbhadrashan Upazila: This is a riverbed area in Faridpur district with high levels of female migration. The lack of local livelihood options as well as low migration costs for women push women and girls from this Upazila to migrate overseas as domestic workers. In addition, factors like family pressure and an urge to evade domestic violence and gender-based violence also motivate the women to migrate overseas.
- Munshiganj Upazila: This area is adjacent to Dhaka city. However, women's lack of livelihood opportunities promotes high levels of women migration from this district.



1.6 Limitations:

This is a small-scale qualitative research and therefore it should not be used to generalize about the experiences of all Bangladeshi migrant workers. Nonetheless, qualitative research can shed light on aspects of those vulnerabilities and experiences that quantitative data may fail to capture. Moreover, qualitative research is especially suited to understanding gendered aspects of migration, violence and access to justice that, again, quantitative data may overlook or highlight only partially.

This research was focused on only the women domestic migrant workers. Bangladeshi women who work in garment sector are not included in this research. GAATW conducted another research for the women workers who are engaged in garment sectors in destination countries. Though there is no official data but there are reports that Bangladeshi women who are engaged in entertainment sector in different countries in the Middle East and the South East. This research could not cover the women in the entertainment sectors. It would have been useful to compare the experiences of women in different sectors which is a limitation of this research.



1.7 Ethical considerations

The respondents were informed about the research objectives, purpose and importance of their contributions. Each respondent gave their consent to participate in the FGD/IDI and was informed about the option to withdraw from the

¹ ibid

research process at any time. All measures were taken to ensure participants' confidentiality, safety and anonymity.

The topic of violence at home and in the workplace in both the country of origin and the country of destination is sensitive and it could have made women uncomfortable. Therefore, the researchers created a friendly space with an interactive way of eliciting the responses. The FGDs took 5-6 hours each in order to ensure that women feel comfortable with speaking about their experiences.



2 Findings and analysis



2.1 Gender-based violence in the world of work

The lived experiences of the returnee women migrant workers showed that they faced gender-based violence throughout the migration cycle – from the decision making stage to the pre-departure preparation to their presence in the destination country, and even upon return. The prevailing social perception and gender stereotypes often force women to migrate overseas to escape violence, stigma and discrimination at home. The patriarchal mindset and social system endanger women migrant workers in the migration process, while the lack of protection causes many women to become victims of gross violations of rights in destination countries.

This feminist participatory action research brought out gender-based violence in all stages of migration. The research showed that though economic hardship in the family is a major cause for migration but gender stereotypes, perception, stigma, domestic violence often force women to migrate in a search of a better life or to be financially independent.



2.1.1 Pre-decision experiences: Gender stereotypes, social perception and domestic violence

The lived experiences of the returnee women migrant workers exposed how gender norms and negative social perception about women factored in women's overseas migration. Some of the women in this research mentioned that they migrated overseas to escape negative social perceptions, gender stereotypes and stigma from their family and community. One returnee woman migrant worker said her husband left her when she was three months pregnant. The reason behind her abandonment was still unknown to her. But she had to pay for this incident. The family members, close relatives, neighbours blamed her for the action of her husband. After a while, she could no longer take the incessant bullying and stigma. Therefore, in unbearable situation, she decided to migrate as a means to escape. The stories of other returnee women migrants echo the same extent of gender stereotypes and negative social perceptions which inflicted the burden of blame on them and limited their choices and opportunities at home. This is typical for a patriarchal society that, blames the women even if they are the victims of the situation. Whether such stereotypes and stigmatizations are overt or covert, direct or indirect, they often attack the mental and physical integrity of women and reinforce gender discrimination in their daily lives. Overseas migration thus becomes an alternative strategy to escape those adverse situations.

Harmful gender stereotyping also affects the enjoyment of girls' human rights by acting as a barrier for their access to education or nutritious foods. For example, many women shared their experience of stereotypes about the role of women as confined to the domestic and family sphere which underpin all obstacles to their equal access to education. One woman shared that she had to stop education for the sake of her brother's even though she wanted to complete minimum level of education. This is because her family told her to learn household work instead of studying since she would do the household work after marriage. This is not a case for one

woman, the society still believe that the boy is the future bread earner who would feed the parents and the family and thus, the social mindset is to provide priority to the boys to get access to education, nutritious food and so on.

The patriarchal social perception about women as responsible for domestic care often limit girls' access to school which affect women's potential in their later life. Lack of quality education often prevents them qualifying for any jobs. Finding no better livelihood options, many women choose to migrate as caregivers or domestic workers or other low skilled and low-paid occupations.

Domestic violence as well as unhappy marriage life also push many women to migrate overseas. Domestic violence and unhappy marriage life go hand in hand in the lives of many women. Almost all women who participated in this research had experienced domestic violence by their husbands or in-laws. Many of them shared their marriage life had become a nightmare. One returnee woman migrant worker said, 'I rarely have any good memories about my married life, all I have is memories of physical, psychological and sexual abuse by my husband'. Another woman said her husband took drugs, used to gamble, and she had to pay for that. Some women said their husband cheated on them.

The research exposed horrific stories of domestic violence against women that forced them to migrate. One woman said "my husband forced me to have an abortion during my fourth month

"My husband forced me to have an abortion when I was four months pregnant. Then he sent me abroad to earn money for him to play gambling and have drugs. He beat me every day until I agreed to migrate despite my fragile health condition".

of pregnancy and sent me abroad to earn money for his gambling and drugs. He used to beat me every day until I agreed to migrate, despite my fragile health condition". Another woman said her husband and in-laws used to beat her to demand more dowry from her parents. Her poor parents advised her to migrate abroad in order to escape from such brutal behaviour.

Domestic violence is pervasive in Bangladeshi society. There is a stereotype that women are safest at home. But most of the gender-based violence in Bangladesh occurs at home. One study² shows that two-thirds of

women in Bangladesh are victim of domestic violence. 72.7% of them never disclose their experiences to others. The study mentioned very few numbers of women seek justice either from local arbitration or police. Unfortunately, there are few examples of perpetrators being punished, which shows a culture of impunity, despite the special law against gender-based violence adopted by the Bangladeshi government.

The lived story of a returnee woman shows how impunity for domestic violence forced her to migrate in order to earn money for raising her three daughters after being abandoned by her husband, following the birth of a third girl.

"My husband married again and left me when I gave birth to a third girl child. My in-laws were forcing me to go back to my parents with three daughters. I went to the village court. They told

² "Spotlight on Violence against women in Bangladesh: Trends and Solution" - a joint research conducted by Action Aid Bangladesh and Jatiyo Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Forum

me to stay with my husband. I agreed because I had no alternatives. When I returned home, my husband and in-laws kept forcing me to return to my parents. I had no other solution than to migrate abroad for the sake of my daughters.



2.1.2 Pre-departure experiences: recruitment practices

The recruitment system is creating many adverse conditions for migrant women, especially for domestic workers. They largely depend on local sub-agents, who often mislead women about the conditions of the migration process. Almost all returnee women migrant workers who participated in the research said that sub-agents provided them with false and incomplete information regarding passports, employment contracts, medical checkups, working conditions, salaries and benefits, etc. Most of the women claimed such misleading information put them in a vulnerable situation and led to them becoming victim of abuse in destination countries.

- **Passport:**

According to government regulations, women aged between 25 to 45 are allowed to migrate overseas for domestic work. In most of the cases, the sub-agents manipulated the age of the women migrants, so that they could send underage girls, who they considered more marketable. Some women said their original addresses, and, in some cases, original names, were also changed in the passport. In addition, many sub-agents charged excessive fees for the passport preparation than those set by the government. Another major complaint of the participant women migrants was that they did not receive their passports once they had been issued. The sub-agents kept the passports in their grip until their departure, which prevented the women from checking the passport information.

- **Pre-departure training:**

The Government of Bangladesh has made 30-days pre-departure trainings mandatory for women domestic workers, which is being provided in government-run technical training centers (TTC). The training methods and curriculums are very controversial. Some women migrants said the sub-agents procured training certificates without the women ever completing the course. In many cases, the sub-agents delivered the women to the TTCs mainly in Dhaka, and put them in private hostels, where women reported not feeling safe. Many women migrants said that they were kept in makeshift houses which remained over-crowded. The toilet facilities in that places were very poor. They were provided with low quality food. Some women reported that the sub-agents and the recruiting agents often forced the unmarried girls to sleep with them during their stay for the pre-departure training.

- **Medical Checkup:**

Migrant workers go for mandatory 'health screening' for a set of diseases as per the rules of the destination countries. For the women, a pregnancy test is compulsory. The women migrant workers said that the brokers often exploited them in different forms. This included charging excessive fees, issuing false certificates after they had been diagnosed as 'unfit', or even being told not to sit for a medical screening.

- **Employment Contract:**

The women migrant workers rarely had access to their employment contracts in due time. Most of the women said they were given their contracts just before their departure. They were not informed about any of the conditions, salaries and benefits written into the contract.

- **Migration Cost:**

According to government regulations, the migration costs for women domestic workers are borne by the employers, and the women are only responsible for their passport fees. However, most of the women said they had to pay for their migration. The agents charged them different amounts.

- **Deception and/or fraud:**

Some women migrant workers claimed that the agents committed fraud with them regarding the type of visa, as well as the destination country. Some women said they were told they would be employed in an office. Instead, they found out they were sent on domestic work visas. Some women said the agent sent her abroad after the expiry of her visa. In such cases, they had to be confined either in the airport or the offices of the recruiting agencies until they were sent back after legal procedures. Some women complained that they were sent to different countries than arranged, for example ending up in Qatar instead of Jordan.



2.1.3 Onsite experiences: Gender-based violence in the workplace

Though there are many success stories of women migrant workers who were able to earn and secure a better future for their children, buy a piece of land or a house and improve their lives, many others shared stories of physical and psychological stress, violation of rights, abuses etc. This feminist participatory action research tried to document the various forms of violence and violation of rights that women migrant workers faced in their workplace in the destination countries.

The testimony of returnee women migrant workers showed that Bangladeshi domestic workers experienced a range of rights violations in destination countries, such as insufficient food, inhuman working hours, no decent living space, physical and psychological abuse, sexual exploitation, non-payment and/or underpayment of wages, etc.

- **Insufficient food**

Many women shared that their employers rarely provided adequate food on the pretext that too much food would make them fat and unable to work. One woman migrant worker said, “My employer used to buy meat for her dogs but never bought for me. She always locked her refrigerator to keep me away from food”. In addition, the differences in food habits between Arab countries and Bangladesh caused many difficulties for the workers in adjusting to the unfamiliar cuisine. Many employers underestimated and dismissed the culturally specific culinary needs of migrants, which led to a great amount of physical and mental discomfort.

“My employer used to buy meat for her dogs but never bought for me. She always locked her refrigerator to keep me away from food”

- **Inhumane working hours**

Although the employment contracts for domestic work in most Arab countries specify a maximum of 12 hours per day with a rest time in between and one day off a week, all the women domestic workers shared that they had to work 18-20 hours a day, with only 3- 4 hours left for sleeping. Their sub-agents and the recruiting agents frequently provided wrong information about the family size of the employers and expected working hours. Large family size usually meant extremely long working hours and many different tasks. Many of the women complained about been exposed to psychological abuse from their employers. For example, many employers provided with additional non-essential work with clear intension to allow no rest, even if they had finished their daily work. Some employers used to take their domestic workers to the house of their relatives to work after finishing their own house. One returnee woman migrant worker said, "I had to do thousands of chores, such as washing, cleaning, cooking, child and elderly care, carpet cleaning and so on. If I sat down for a minute after finishing my tasks, they would start thinking what to give me next."

- **Unsafe and unhygienic accommodation**

The women domestic workers were rarely provided with decent, safe and comfortable living space. Most of the women who participated in this research said they were not given any room to sleep. A majority had to sleep on the veranda, in the kitchen, or in a tiny space in front of the toilet. They hardly had any privacy. Some women said that they were provided a room but without a lock or ventilation facilities.

- **Physical abuse, sexual exploitation and other abuses:**

Bangladeshi women migrant workers experience a continuum of gender-based violence and harassment, ranging from verbal insults to severe physical abuse, rape and sexual assault, psychological abuse, bullying, etc. in the destination countries. Most of the women shared that their employers would routinely beat them for even the smallest perceived infractions. Many of them exhibited shocking levels of brutality. One woman said, "I was grilling chicken for a family party of my employer. It was around midnight and I felt sleepy. My employer burnt my arm with a hot iron while I was drowsing." Almost all returnee women migrant workers shared that they always were filled with fear of torture and kept their mouth shut.

"I was grilling chicken for a family party of my employer. It was around midnight and I felt sleepy. My employer burnt my arm with a hot iron while I was drowsing."

Many women migrant workers also became the victims of sexual assaults and rape by the members of the employers' families. Some reported that employers would invite their friends in their house and forced the women domestic workers to perform sexual favours. Almost all women in the focus group discussions claimed that the wives of the employers never acted to protect them from their husbands or any other male members of the house but would instead blame the domestic workers for making false allegations. One woman said, ".....her (madam) husband always touched by breasts whenever he saw me alone. I told my madam, but she didn't react."

Many returnee women migrant workers shared that they experienced verbal abuse from the agency office in the destination countries, and sometimes from the staff of embassies. The abusive words, coupled with rude and inhuman behaviour often caused them a lot of stress, which sometimes led to depression and low self-esteem.

- **No freedom of movement:**

The women domestic workers had almost no freedom of movement at all. Most of the women said that their employers hardly allowed them to go out even on the Eid day (the big Muslim festival), or to talk to fellow Bangladeshi workers. One returnee woman migrant worker said, “..my employer sent me to the police custody because he saw me talking with a Bangladeshi woman in front of the gate of my employer’s house.” Most of the women shared that they led a life confined to be a domestic worker. Many women migrant workers said that the male migrant workers had freedom to can out, meet with friends since they live out of their workplace. Most of the women said that the restrictions on their movement and choices made them feel more vulnerable in the destination countries.

- **Non-payment or underpayment of salary**

Few returnee women migrant workers acknowledged that they received the full salaries they were promised before migration. Some employers made deductions for expenses such as clothes, mobile bill, soap, shampoo, water, etc. Some others did not pay salaries of the first three

“I worked for eight months with my first employer. When I asked for salaries, they said they would pay for ‘Iqama’. But I was not given any Iqama even after six months. I got worried and I begged the agency to change the employer.”

months after arrival on the pretext of having to pay for the ‘Iqama’ (residence permit) while some others used to hold up their salaries during the last three or four months of their contract to offset the cost of return plane ticket. Some women claimed they were beaten every time they asked for their salaries. One woman said, “I worked for eight months with my first employer. When I asked for salaries, they said they would pay for ‘Iqama’. But I

was not given any Iqama even after six months. I got worried and I begged the agency to change the employer.”

- **Violations by staff of recruitment agencies in destination countries**

The women migrant workers who participated in the research provided testimonies that the employment agencies in destination countries often became violent and abusive to the women migrant workers rather than extending any support. Some women said they were beaten by the staff of employment agencies when they requested a change of employers due to abusive practices. Some other women said they were also beaten by the staff of the agencies if the employer returned them to the agency to be replaced. Many of them said they not only faced physical but also sexual abuse, sometimes being used as sex slaves under the control of the agencies. Some women reported that embassy staff were reluctant and non-cooperative towards women migrant workers, which often compounded the impunity for rights violations committed by employers.



2.1.3 Life of a woman migrant worker upon return

Women migrant workers often face gender-based stigma upon, regardless of whether they return with money or without money. Among the research participants, some women completed several contract periods and returned with money. Others returned with broken dreams, empty handed, suffering from physical illnesses, mental trauma, etc., having become victims of abuse and exploitation. They often found that society pointed fingers to both categories of returned women. Sometimes the family members turn their backs when migrant women return after being victims of abuse. One woman said, “Our relatives and neighbours treat us with suspicion if we came back before finishing the contract.” Another added, “Everyone receives us with great happiness if we come back with gifts in our bag, but if we return empty-handed, all we get is hurtful words and bad behaviour.”

Migrant women experience different types of violence from the family, relatives or neighbours upon return, even when they came back with money, which is often considered a sign of successful migration. Returning with a handsome amount of money often raises suspicions and leads to accusations of women having earned this money earning in unethical ways. One woman said, “My neighbours used to say that I earned money by sleeping with other men, because I came back with a good amount of money.” Another one said that she would hear bad words whenever she wore nice dresses. The women upon their return often feel pressure from their families since they are no longer sending remittances. Many women found their husbands living a happy life with a new wife with the hard-earned money they had sent from abroad. Some women described how their children had developed negative feelings about them during their long absence. Such a gendered perspectives and practices often drove the women into more precarious situations and caused them to migrate again.



2.2 Access to Justice: Experiences of Bangladeshi women domestic migrant workers



2.2.1: Women's concept of migrants' rights/ Justice

Domestic work is excluded from the provisions of labour law in most of the countries of origin and destination. The employment contracts of domestic workers usually define working hours, salaries, a weekly day off, annual paid leave, health care and other benefits. However, these provisions are hardly ever respected by employers in practice.

The women rarely had access to their contract. Most of the returned women domestic workers shared that they had hardly received any information about their rights as migrant workers in the destination country, either from the mandatory training or from their broker. They were only informed about things such as how to make “tasty food” and using appliances, etc.

Most of the women said they had received no information on the conditions of the contract, no lessons about their roles, or possible remedies in case the conditions of the contract were violated in the destination country. One returned woman said, “I didn't know the definition of rights or worker's rights in the destination country, but I understood those very well when I faced violations.” Many research participants said the discussion with the research interviewers was the first time they were hearing about it.



2.2.2 Women's experiences with seeking remedies

The returnee women migrants who participated in the research had different experiences with seeking remedies. In most cases, they either did not seek justice at all, or gave up their try at some point. The first obstacle in not accessing remedies was lack of knowledge about who to complain to, and how. The second constraint was the inability to reach out to the competent authority for help. The confiscation of passports and other documents left few opportunities for the women to go outside of the house in which they worked and make complaints either to the local police or the Bangladeshi embassies. The limited or absent access to mobile phones made it impossible for many domestic workers to call the embassy or their families for assistances when they faced difficulties.

In practice, there are no functioning legal redress mechanisms in place in most of the destination countries. The inherent power imbalance between the employer and the employee, particularly women migrant domestic workers, puts them in critically vulnerable situation. The employer can terminate the domestic worker's contract at any time, they can file false allegations to the police against them and put them in jail or have them deported. Migrant domestic workers, by contrast, have no effective legal protection. The concerned embassy is authorized to provide legal support to the its own nationals, including women domestic workers, for filing a case against a perpetrator employer. However, embassies have limited human and financial resources to assist. In addition, most of the returnee women migrants said that they hesitated to seek assistance to the embassy for legal redress since they know the embassy is hardly supportive to migrant

workers. Some women shared their negative experiences in seeking assistance from the Bangladeshi embassy. They said that the staff of some embassies had been rude to them. Instead of defending their rights and protecting them as Bangladeshi citizens abroad, they often insisted that the women return to their employer, following the employer's instructions. In some cases, embassy staff even threatened women with deportation if they would disobey employer's orders. One woman recalled, "...after a huge hassle with the employer, I got the embassy's contact number. I called them to tell them about the abuse I had suffered. Then I was shocked when they started shouting at me and told me to stay and work in the same house. If not, they would charge me the amount the employer spent for my recruitment and then send me back home."

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The other avenue that the women domestic workers mostly use to make complaints and seek redress is the office of the employment agency in the destination country. According to many returnee women migrant workers, the office of the local employment agency is like a 'torture cell'. Most of the agents in the destination countries resort to verbal and physical abuse – including beatings, taking away the women's money and belongings – in order to coerce them to return to the same employer without remedy. One domestic worker said, "If we go to the agency for resolving problems, they abuse us more than the employers do. They beat us brutally, they take all our belongings if we go to their shelter, and sometimes even threaten to kill us." Another woman shared her experiences by saying "the agency put me in their shelter. From there, they sent me to a new house for work. A couple of days later the employer sent me back to the agency. Then the agency sent me to another new house. I experienced the same fate - 'abuse for a couple of days and then throw away'. I understood the agency was making me worked and earning money in that way. Then I protested and stopped such working. I strongly asked for sending me back home. Finally, the agency did it".

One returnee woman migrant worker said, "My employer threw me out on the street in the middle of the night following severe physical abuse. He kept my bag in which I saved part of my salaries to bring with me on my return home. I fought with the employer to get back my stuffs and the money for around one year with the support of a local NGO. The authorities did not take any action against the employer. I had to return without any justice or compensation."

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Many women did not find the environment any more supportive to their plight after returning to

Bangladesh. They talked about a general apathy towards their situation, as well as inadequate grievance redress mechanisms at local level. As one of them said, “If I go to the village court, the chairman will blame me instead of helping me to get justice. “

This shows how, in addition to the verbal abuse that undermines women’s dignity, the vulnerabilities that put them in abusive situations and expose them to exploitation, the prevalent power imbalance and the patriarchal system, combined with lack of women’s agency and empowerment, are other unaddressed structural issues which stop women from seeking justice.



2.3 Safe and Fair migration: perspectives of women migrant workers

This feminist participatory action research tried to understand women's perspectives on their problems and challenges in the migration cycle and get their own views about what they perceive as 'safe and fair migration'. The focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews with the returnee women migrant workers extracted the following suggestions.

The women said the government of Bangladesh must make sure that

- Recruiting agents register their nominated sub-agents and hold them accountable for any recruitment practices that expose women migrants to abuse and exploitation at any stage of migration
- Women migrant workers have easy access to information about job opportunities in different destination countries, as well as salaries and benefits, using different government departments, institutes or online facilities
- Agreements are signed with destination countries that ensure the protection of rights for all migrant workers, with particular attention to the situation of women, and with appropriate redress mechanisms
- Returnee women migrant workers, especially those who have suffered abuse and exploitation, and those still suffering from physical and/or mental illnesses, receive proper assistance and services upon their return
- The incidence of gender-based violence is reduced among the women migrant workers at all stages of migration

The agencies must make sure that

- Written employment contracts (translated and authorised by the concerned agency) with detailed information about salary, benefits and entitlements are provided to prospective women migrant workers at the beginning of the pre-decision stage of migration, so that women can take informed decisions about their migration
- Sub-agents are formally registered with the recruiting agencies and are held accountable for their roles and responsibilities during the whole recruitment process, since informal relations between the sub-agents and recruiting agents often promote unfair and unethical recruitment practices
- Sub-agents or any other person nominated by the recruiting agencies to provide appropriate information about migration, must use the correct personal information in the passport as per the national ID card and ensure that a proper medical screening is conducted, as per government requirements
- The final candidates for migration must complete the mandatory pre-departure training at one of the government's technical training centers or the government affiliated training provider organizations

- They look after women migrants for the full duration of their contract period, and take initiatives to resolve any disputes if any between employers and the women migrant worker

The employers must ensure that

- They respect and fulfill the terms and conditions of the employment contract and provide salaries, benefits, and other entitlements including access to health treatment accordingly
- They fully respect the dignity of the women migrant workers as human beings, as women and as workers, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or nationality
- The women domestic workers are protected from any kind of abuse and harm from anybody they may be in contact with during their contract period

The embassies must ensure that

- The women migrant workers are respected by the embassy staff, including its labour wings
- The women domestic workers have easy access to the embassy, either physically or by other means, such as 24/7 hotlines or social media, for any emergency support and assistance
- The women domestic workers receive complete legal assistance to file complaints against abusive employers in the local redress system in the destination countries
- There are safe house facilities in the destination country for the women migrants who need protection and further support for redress and potential repatriation.

3. Conclusion and general recommendations

Gender-based violence is pervasive in patriarchal societies. The lived experiences of the women migrant workers showed that violence against women often pushes them to migrate abroad to escape the situation. However, the existing unaccountable and irresponsible recruitment practices increase women's vulnerability to violence in the whole migration cycle – from recruitment to placement, in the workplace in destination countries, and when they return home.

Most of the Arab Gulf countries exclude 'domestic work' from their labour laws, which severely constrains domestic workers' ability to access legal justice. On the other hand, the so called '*kafala*' or sponsorship system has given the employers complete authority over their employees. This system unduly limits the state's role in ensuring accountability of employers, as well as employees' ability to access justice in case of violations. Actions taken by governments of destination countries, local NGOs, and the Bangladesh Embassies and/or Labour wings are insufficient to address this problem. Although some organizations both in destination and origin countries are trying to help migrants file cases against their abusive employers, most of those cases end in a stalemate without any results or compensation for the affected migrant domestic workers due to complexity of cases or simply absence of institutional system in place to hold employers accountable³

The central message of this feminist participatory action research is that the government and the key stakeholders must take interventions for increasing women's empowerment and agency, creating a social movement to change prevailing patriarchal norms and mindset in the communities, and ensuring safe and fair migration and access to institutional justice and remedies both in Bangladesh and in destination countries.

The general recommendations of this research are:

- The key stakeholders must undertake community-based interventions for increasing women's empowerment and agency and reducing gender-based discrimination and violations.
- The government must establish a comprehensive system for easy access of prospective women migrants to get proper information about migration. The information should include job demands by country and by categories; salaries and benefits by country and by categories; required skills and documents; and the detail information of the employers and the authorised recruiting agents both in country and the destination countries.
- The government must ensure that the recruiting agents registered their nominated sub-agents both in Bangladesh and in the destination countries and make them equally accountable and responsible for safe and fair migration.
- The government must ensure that Bangladesh embassies in destination countries improved capacities of existing 'Labour Wing' for providing assistances and supports to the women

³ Enabling access to justice: A CSO perspectives on the challenges of realising the rights of the South Asian migrants in the Middle East, GAATW 2017

http://www.gaatw.org/publications/GAATW_Enabling%20Access%20to%20Justice_2017.pdf

migrant workers especially in case of violations for appropriate remedies, justice and compensation. The 'Labour Wing' must have appropriate resources including necessary staffs and budgets.

- The embassy must run safe house by themselves with well trained and gender-sensitive staff or set up collaboration and cooperation agreements for safe houses run by the government of destination countries and/or by local NGOs.
- The government must improve existing system for women's access to justice both at BMET arbitration and the court and ensure appropriate compensation for social and economic damages of women for unfair and unethical recruitment practices that increases abuse, exploitation and violation of rights of women migrant workers in any stage of migration cycle.



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