

Labour migration and modern slavery victimisation: Bangladesh as a case study

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), there are roughly 170 million migrant workers in the world, representing nearly 5 per cent of the global labour force.¹ Crossing national borders in search for work or better employment opportunities is in fact one of the key drivers of the growth in international migration.² Migrant workers contribute to the economic development of their host societies, while their countries of origin benefit from the remittances they send back home and the skills acquired during their migration experience.

However, as we noted in a previous issue brief, [Addressing vulnerability to modern slavery in a growing tide of migration](#), these large migratory flows – mostly of low- and unskilled workers – seem to be progressively associated with upsurges in the incidence of modern slavery. The characteristics of labour migrants, the predominance of temporary migration cycles and the prevalence of questionable or directly fraudulent practices in the overseas labour recruitment industry expose labour migrants to modern slavery and human trafficking both in origin and destination countries. The growing number of displaced people in the world who are forced to seek income generation and employment opportunities overseas as a result of conflict and environmental degradation further exacerbates existing risks to modern slavery.³

In this issue brief, we examine the connection between labour migration and modern slavery, focusing on Bangladesh as a case study. Bangladesh has traditionally been one of the major labour-sending countries of the world, and the seventh largest remittance-receiving nation.⁴ At the same time, Bangladesh is an internationally relevant source country for modern slavery and human trafficking: according to UNODC, Bangladeshis are among the most commonly detected victims of trafficking globally.⁵ It is also one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, being recurrently struck by natural disasters that leave thousands of women and men

Key Findings and Recommendations

- The search for employment and income opportunities abroad is one of the key drivers of international migratory flows.
- Migrant workers contribute to the economic development of both their origin and destination countries.
- Bangladesh is one of the major labour-sending countries of the world, and one of the largest remittance-receiving nations worldwide.
- At the same time, the country is an internationally relevant source of modern slavery and human trafficking victims.
- Economic marginalisation, high migration costs, excessive recruitment fees charged by illegal brokers and the resulting high levels of indebtedness faced by workers heightens their vulnerability to modern slavery.
- Limited access to safe migratory routes further puts Bangladeshi migrant workers at significant risk of exploitation.
- The Bangladesh government has taken important steps to enhance the protection of its migrant workers. However several gaps remain in the Bangladeshi Overseas Labour Recruitment system, which undermine its ability to adequately safeguard migrant workers.
- Additional measures must be taken to lower the costs of temporary international migration and strengthen the oversight and supervision of recruiters and intermediaries.
- While G2G recruitment programmes have the potential to limit the abuses faced by these workers overseas, they are not a panacea. Human and labour rights must occupy a central role in these agreements so that their economic benefits do not come at the expense of the protection of transnational workers.

desperate to escape their dismal living conditions at home.⁶ Hence, Bangladesh makes for an excellent case study to understand the key challenges faced by vulnerable workers in the process of migration but also to discuss opportunities for action aimed at enhancing the protection of their basic human and labour rights.

In what follows, we survey the existing literature and empirical evidence highlighting the importance of labour migration to the economy of Bangladesh and examining the main structural factors that render Bangladeshi migrants vulnerable to exploitation. We then review policy approaches adopted by governments, international organisations and civil society actors in order to tackle migration-related modern slavery. We conclude by pointing to future steps policy-makers, practitioners and other relevant stakeholders could undertake to more effectively fight modern slavery among Bangladeshi migrants as well as among similarly placed populations from other labour-sending countries.

Migration and modern slavery in Bangladesh: a look at the key factors behind this relationship

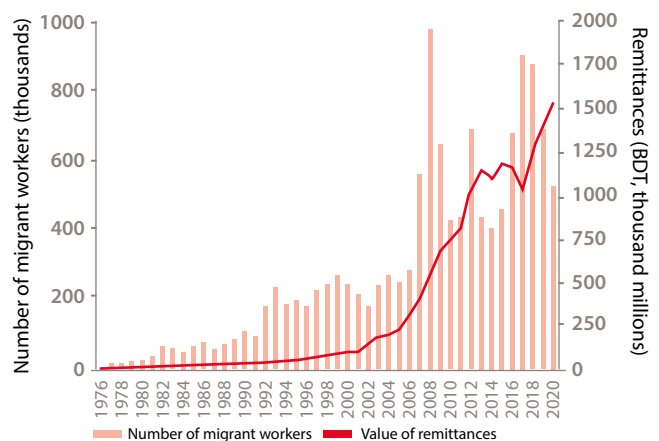
International labour migration is a structural phenomenon in Bangladesh. It is estimated that almost 8 million Bangladeshis work abroad, with more than half a million moving temporarily every year to look for jobs overseas and almost a quarter of Bangladesh's total migrants migrating for work temporarily.^{7,i} Most of these labour migrants are low- and semi-skilled men working on fixed contracts, although there is a growing population of female labour migrants, most of whom are engaged overseas as domestic workers.

These international labour migration flows play an important part in the Bangladesh economy, employing roughly 10% of its male national labour force and offering the opportunity for unskilled labourers (and the beneficiaries of their remittances) to escape poverty and unemployment. Overseas workers earn almost double the income of the average resident household, and the remittances sent back home by these migrants account for more than 8% of the country's GDP.ⁱⁱ These remittances are a fundamental determinant of the economic development of Bangladesh, helping to reduce the country's poverty rate, to enhance households' incomes, living-standards and savings, and to increase their financial stability.⁸ The positive impact of labour migration

on families' accumulation of social, cultural and economic resources shapes young Bangladeshis' aspirations and their attitudes towards migration, which many see as a necessary means to live a better life.⁹

However, there is ample evidence that Bangladeshi overseas migrants are forced to pay exorbitant recruitment fees and are victims of coercion and deception by middlemen and brokers, that they reach their destination with high levels of debt bondage, and that they face dire or exploitative working conditions upon arrival.¹⁰ As a result, many migrant workers return to Bangladesh empty-handed and with huge debt burdens.¹¹

Evolution of Bangladeshi migrant workers and remittances



Notes: BDT denotes Bangladeshi Takas.
Source: Shoma (2021).

Economic need, low wages and limited opportunities for employment are the most important factors "pushing" Bangladeshis to leave their homes in search for better opportunities abroad.¹² Although Bangladesh has made noticeable progress in improving welfare and drastically reduced its poverty rate over the last 30 years, the pace of job creation and poverty reduction has slowed in the last decade.¹³ As a result, many people – especially those without education or relevant qualifications - remain in poverty and lack employment and income-generating opportunities. For these individuals, the promise of better jobs and higher salaries abroad is a key driver of migration.

Besides playing a major role in explaining why most people migrate (whether legally or not), economic marginalisation is also strongly correlated with modern slavery victimisation.¹⁴ Migrants leaving areas characterised by extreme poverty, high unemployment and lack of economic opportunities are disproportionately

i This figure does not include undocumented migrants; hence, the total number of Bangladeshi migrants is likely much higher.

ii Remittances are the second-largest source of foreign currency for Bangladesh after exports of ready-made garments.

at risk of exploitation, as they are more prone to take risks in the migration process - e.g., crossing borders without the necessary clearances, training, orientation, employment contracts and insurances.¹⁵ This puts these migrants in danger of being victims of modern slavery and human trafficking.

The economic vulnerability is even more marked for female migrants, who are typically less educated than their male counterparts (most of them have no education at all) and are frequently head of their households, all of which exacerbates their desperation.¹⁶ Most Bangladeshi female migrants work in domestic service and housekeeping (usually in Saudi Arabia or other Middle Eastern countries), and – unlike men - the vast majority of them never sign written job contracts. Reports of physical and at times sexual abuse – in addition to forced labour and abusive conditions – are common among Bangladeshi women employed as domestic workers abroad.ⁱⁱⁱ

Migrants from more economically disadvantaged areas are also typically low-skilled and less educated, and thus tend to be less well informed about overseas migration and about the employment options and conditions in their host societies. This is especially relevant given that the migration recruitment process in Bangladesh is quite cumbersome and bureaucratic, involving several institutions, offices and training centres located in different parts of the country. For less educated workers, particularly those in rural Bangladesh, the process can be rather convoluted. A survey of returning migrants conducted by the Population Council in 2022 revealed that the vast majority of them were unaware of the required documentation (e.g., training certificates, medical check-ups, work permits, visas, etc.) and procedures required for migrating. Many migrants are additionally unable to interpret clauses, conditions, and loopholes in their contracts due to a lack of relevant knowledge or an inability to interpret the complex language used, and often lack the legally valid documents to emigrate to a destination country.

Reliance on illegal brokers or sub-agents

As a result, these migrants have little alternative than to rely on illegal brokers or sub-agents (dalals) who typically

live in their communities and have prior experience with migration as well as connections to help them navigate the process. These middlemen also frequently act as agents of many of the (almost 900) private recruitment agencies that function under the control of the government authorities - operating as local intermediaries between these agencies typically based in Dhaka and workers in other (especially remote) areas of the country.^{iv} Data from the ILO indicates that 13 per cent of Bangladeshis migrate directly through private recruitment agencies, while 53% resort to “free agent” dalals. In any case, it is estimated that dalals – either acting independently or on behalf of recruitment agencies – are the first point of contact of roughly 80% of potential labour migrants.¹⁷

Although some dalals play an important and valuable service matching the demand and supply of labour, reports of brokers actively deceiving migrant workers - about the nature of the job for which they are recruited, the living and working conditions at their destination, the travel arrangements or their legal status in the host society - are common. A survey administered by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) among Bangladeshis emigrating to the Gulf Cooperation Countries – which are major destinations for Bangladeshi migrant workers - indicated that more than 40% of them had been deceived by these middlemen, and another 24% reported deception by employers. In the same direction, the ILO found that almost 70 per cent of Bangladeshi migrant workers who had employment contracts found that their work was not as stipulated in them, or were deprived of the remuneration specified in those contracts.

Extant research also provides evidence of many Bangladeshi migrants who are enticed with favourable working contracts at recruitment, only to face exploitative labour conditions after they reach their destination – often as a result of “visa trading.”^v Once there, unscrupulous recruiters and employers resort to coercive strategies - including passport confiscation and physical threats or violence - to restrict their mobility.

Vulnerability introduced by Indebtedness

Another fundamental factor that exacerbates migrants’

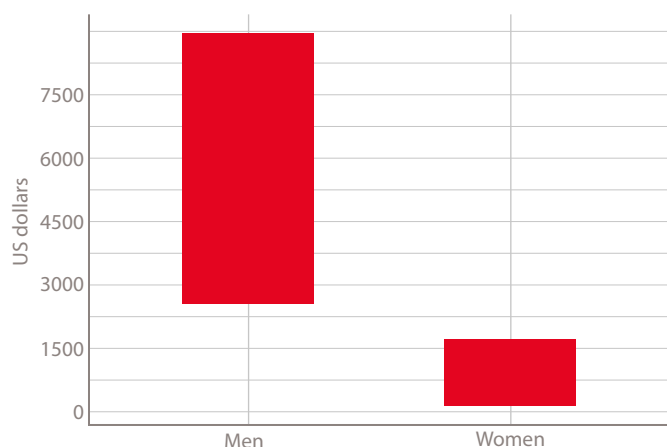
ⁱⁱⁱ Evidence from the lived experiences of returned Bangladeshi migrant women collected by the grassroots organisation OKUP in 2021 indicates that 88 per cent of them were not provided with a written job contract or with appropriate translation. Sixty per cent of the women interviewed reported having been victims of physical abuse and torture.

^{iv} “Free agent” intermediaries, i.e., dalals with no ties to recruitment agencies, typically lead workers towards undocumented migration channels. However, even dalals who act as representatives of recruitment agencies are illegal.

^v Visa trading refers to a situation in which a migrant is sponsored for a specific position but, upon her arrival in the destination country, the worker performs a substantially different job. This happens because the sponsor has unofficially sold the worker’s visa to another party, whom the worker now unofficially answers to.

risk of ending in exploitative situations is the extremely high cost of the migration process, which involves not only formal expenses such as passport fees, air tickets, travel and insurance, but also fees to brokers, middlemen and recruitment agencies. According to the World Bank, migrants from Bangladesh have to pay some of the highest costs in the world to migrate.¹⁸ Although the government has attempted to address this issue by setting a maximum cost for certain destination countries, in practice migrants often pay the entire cost of migration to the dalals. This allows these middlemen to misguide and overcharge the workers, who are almost always unaware of the migration process and the itemised costs involved in it, and hardly ever ask for receipts. It is estimated that almost 80% of total recruitment and migration costs is pocketed by the dalals.¹⁹

Average migration costs for Bangladeshi workers^{vi}



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Ainul et al. (2022).

The high cost of migration can preclude the poorest Bangladeshis from migrating, thus undermining the poverty reduction impact of remittances for the country's economy.^{20,vii} Moreover, these high costs determine that even those individuals who do manage to migrate are typically forced to borrow money to fund their trip: it is estimated that more than two thirds of them take out loans – from relatives, financial institutions, NGOs, etc. – to pay their recruitment and migration costs, with almost a third borrowing from unregulated money lenders that

charge exorbitant interest rates.^{21,viii} In other cases, these expenses are advanced to workers by employers, and recovered through wage deductions during the period of employment. The high indebtedness faced by these workers puts them at risk of becoming victims of modern slavery: since failure to repay these loans or advances can have severe economic, reputational and even physical repercussions for them and their families, these migrants may be forced to accept exploitative labour conditions in order to be able to honour their debts and are often unable to freely leave their job until the debt is paid in full.²² Some employers have also been known to use the debt to entrap workers, fabricating or inflating additional debts due as a result of their employment. Even among workers who migrated legally, debt bondage forces them to overstay their visa or change work illegally in order to earn higher salaries needed to repay their debt.²³

Additionally, low-skilled migrant workers usually lack the social capital needed to find formal, well-paid jobs. Survey data from the World Bank indicates that more than half of Bangladeshi workers emigrate without acquaintances or contacts in their destination countries.²⁴ The lack of such networks deprives migrants from relevant information – e.g., on safe avenues for migration, on the credibility (or lack thereof) of certain dalals, on data on housing and the job market in the destination country, etc. – and tends to increase the financial costs of migration.²⁵ Hence, as mentioned in our recent issue brief, [Climate- and conflict-induced migration and modern slavery: challenges and opportunities for action](#), this lack of support systems heightens existing risks to modern slavery: isolated from their families and social networks, fearing arrest, deportation or termination and obliged to repay their debts, labour migrants are less likely to complain or report abuses in their workplace.

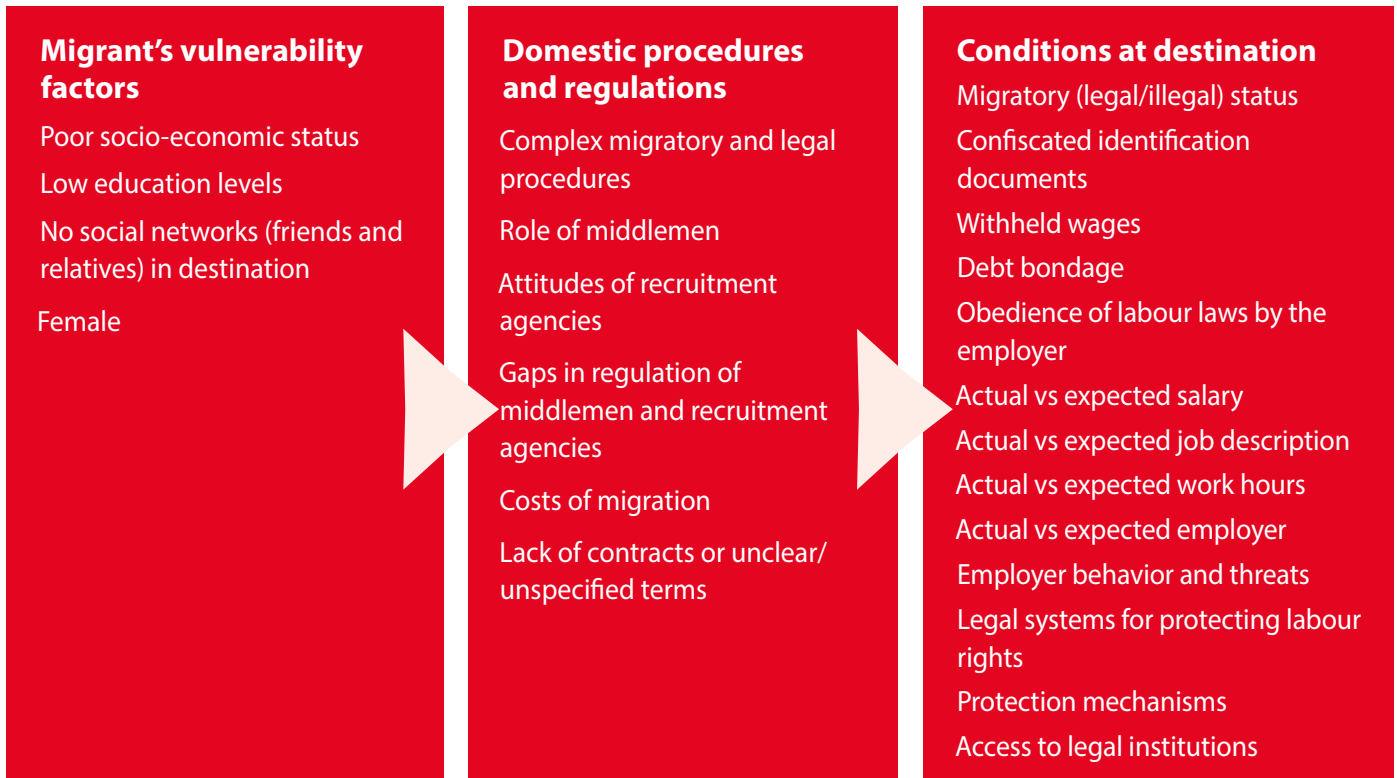
Addressing Bangladeshi migrants' vulnerability to modern slavery: Policy responses

Major policy interventions are required to tackle the risk of modern slavery victimisation associated with the prevailing system of overseas labour recruitment in Bangladesh. A concerted effort from government officials, international

^{vi} Costs are lower for Bangladeshi women, most of whom emigrate to work as housemaids, because their employers often pay for the tickets, visa and agency fees. It is worth noting that while women migrating to work as domestic help are supposed to be recruited with “zero fees”, the vast majority of them still need to incur migration costs.

^{vii} That is, while we noted above that Bangladeshi migrant workers tend to be un- or low-skilled, those living in extreme poverty – US\$ 1.90 per day, on a purchasing power parity basis – are typically unable to finance the high costs of migration.

^{viii} The Bangladesh government and financial sector have established initiatives aimed at helping migrant workers fund their costs, including state-owned banks — Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) and Agrani Bank Ltd (ABL) — operating expatriates' loan schemes. However, a 2019 Bank of Bangladesh survey shows that prospective migrant workers' access to finance from the formal banking sector remains limited, and thus many of them resort to unregulated lenders. The interest rates charged by these money lenders can reach up to 120 per cent annually, compared to 9-11% charged by ABL and PKB.



Source: Adapted from Ahmed et al. (2019).

and non-governmental organisations, civil society actors, businesses and other relevant stakeholders is needed to establish safe migration channels allowing Bangladeshi workers to access economic opportunities abroad while minimising their exposure to exploitation.

Some important steps in this direction have already been taken both by the Bangladesh government and by other stakeholders (e.g., non-governmental organisations, civil society actors and private firms). We next review some of these initiatives, as well as some examples of good practice taken from other major labour-sending countries.

Domestic legislation

The Bangladesh government has introduced various regulatory bodies and legal initiatives – such as the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013, the Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016, and the Wage Earners’ Welfare Board Act 2018 – as well as policy measures designed to regulate, supervise and monitor the overseas labour migration process, improve the governance of the recruitment system, and protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers. It also established a formal process to redress migration-related complaints through “arbitration cells” under the Bureau of Manpower and Employment (BMET). Among other services, these complaint receiving cells provide assistance in the safe return of migrant workers if there is evidence they have been abused, as well

as earnings compensation for cheated migrant workers through arbitration with recruiting agencies.

Despite the advances in migration laws and policies, several challenges and gaps remain in the Bangladeshi Overseas Labour Recruitment system, which undermine its ability to adequately safeguard migrant workers. Some of the main shortcomings of existing policies and programmes are:

- the lack of clear direction on accountability and implementation of these policies;
- the absence of detailed mechanisms for monitoring recruiting agencies (with laws and policies covering dalals simply non-existent);
- the lack of specific penalties for abuses inflicted on workers by intermediaries, recruitment agencies or employers;
- the vague definition of criteria for availing compensation and pursuing lawsuits;
- and the exclusion of workers who migrated through informal channels and/or work in the informal sector from any protective measure.²⁶

According to the Population Council, Bangladesh’s labour migration policies fall particularly short of addressing the concerns of precisely the most vulnerable – i.e., the poorest, the informal, the distressed, and female – migrant workers.

In this respect, it is interesting to compare the legislation in Bangladesh vis-à-vis the Philippines, a leading country of origin for migrant labour.^{ix} The Philippines has a comprehensive legal and institutional framework in place to protect overseas Filipino workers addressing all phases of labour migration. The government identifies labour market niches abroad and arranges an orderly supply of labour through supervised recruitment by foreign employers, recruiting agencies, and foreign governments based on bilateral agreements, and offers programmes and services to workers before, during and after their migration. Private, Philippines-based recruiting agencies must obtain a license from the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), and must enter into legally enforceable work contracts with workers seeking employment abroad. The POEA approves these contracts, monitors malpractices, and prosecutes violators of recruitment standards.²⁷ It provides information on its website about licensed private recruiters, job vacancies abroad, and the locations of consulates in destination countries. It also provides advice and warnings to those intending to migrate through recruiters involved in unethical labour migration practices.

A particularly relevant measure within the Filipino legal framework is the adoption of the joint and solidary liability of local recruitment agencies and foreign employers for money claims and violations of overseas employment contracts, which ensures that migrant workers can prosecute their just claims even after they have returned to the Philippines. “Joint and solidary liability” means that both the local recruitment agency and the foreign employer/agency can be held individually liable for the entire amount of claim or obligation due to the overseas Filipino worker. This joint and solidary liability provision must be incorporated in the contract for overseas employment as a condition for its approval, and recruiters must post a bond to provide remedies for workers in case of violation of their rights. In case of violations of such rights, migrant workers may file a complaint before the Filipino National Labour Relations Commission suing for actual damages (e.g., unpaid salaries/ wages, reimbursement of placement fees and other expenses), moral and exemplary damages, and attorney’s fees.²⁸

The Philippines’ regulatory framework is arguably the most comprehensive of any country of origin,²⁹ providing better protection to Filipino overseas workers in comparison to those from these other countries and addressing some

of the shortcomings of the Bangladeshi Overseas Labour Recruitment system – i.e., the lack of specific penalties for abuses inflicted on workers by recruitment agencies and employers and the vague definition of criteria for availing compensation and pursuing lawsuits. However, there are still difficulties in its enforcement. For instance, the legal process is quite tedious, and can take more than five years if the recruitment agency contests the worker’s claim. Also, the foreign employer is rarely held accountable for the violation of migrant workers’ rights: in practice, abusive foreign employers are at most disqualified from recruiting Filipino workers in the future.³⁰

Additionally, despite the Philippine government’s efforts to regulate recruitment fees, enforcement of these regulations remains weak. While fees are formally capped at the equivalent of one-month salary for Filipino migrant workers not employed in domestic service,^x recruitment agencies use loopholes in the law to pass recruitment costs onto workers beyond that cap by over-charging them for mandatory training, medical and accommodation costs.³¹ According to estimates from the FAIR Hiring Initiative, these costs can range from 370 to 1,300 US dollars. Although these fees are on average lower than those paid by Bangladeshi migrant workers, the fact that recruitment agencies frequently work in tandem with lenders that charge high-interest rates on loans still render Filipino overseas workers vulnerable to indebtedness.³²

Government-to-Government recruitment arrangements

Besides adopting comprehensive national laws and policies on labour migration, the Bangladesh government has signed bilateral treaties and memoranda of understanding with several labour-receiving countries – e.g., Malaysia, South Korea, and several Gulf Countries - to safeguard migrants’ rights at their destination. These agreements seek to provide protection and enhance employment opportunities for Bangladeshi workers in their host societies, regulating the recruitment process in both signatory countries and establishing joint working groups to address migration issues bilaterally through government-to-government (G2G) channels.

An example of these bilateral agreements was the Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G programme, which facilitated the legal migration of 36,000 Bangladeshi men to Malaysia to work in the palm-oil sector. The programme started in 2013 and by 2018, after roughly 10,000 selected workers had

^{ix} According to the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, more than 2 million Filipino workers migrate overseas each year, most of them to work in construction, transportation and – in the case of women – domestic work.

^x As in Bangladesh, household service workers – who account for roughly half of all Filipino workers overseas - are formally exempt from recruitment or placement fees. In practice, however, Filipino domestic workers pay as much in fees as other categories of workers.

migrated, the World Bank carried out a study comparing the experience of migrants in the programme with that of migrants leaving through private channels.^{xi} The study concluded that the G2G programme made migration significantly more affordable and lowered debt burden: the average migration costs dropped by more than 15% among the beneficiaries, borrowing was reduced by 16 percentage points, and the average debt amount declined by 72 per cent. Additionally, the programme provided workers with better orientation, training and social protection before migrating, and made migration more accessible for workers without social network contacts abroad. Altogether, the World Bank estimates that programme participants tripled their income, their total household income also doubled due to the greater remittance income sent home, and per capita consumption increased by 22 per cent, all of which contributed to the reduction in poverty rates. Selected workers also invested in learning the Malay language and skills training.³³

Differences in selected outcome between G2G and non-G2G migrants

Outcome	Differences between G2G and non-G2G migrants
Migration costs (in BDT)	- 343
Workers who need to borrow money to fund migration costs (%)	-16.1
Amount borrowed (in BDT)	-136
Interest rate paid (%)	-5.96
Workers with a contract (%)	15.4
Workers with any type of insurance (%)	13.33
Duration of emigration (in months)	16.0
Wait time for work (in weeks)	-1.42

Notes: The table reports the difference in selected outcomes between participants of the Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G programme and those workers who migrated through private channels. BDT denotes Bangladeshi Takas. Source: Own elaboration based on data from Shrestha, Mobarak, and Sharif (2019a).

The Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G programme underscores the important role that the Bangladesh government can play in enhancing workers' ability to access job opportunities abroad, lowering the costs of migration and creating a level playing field to allow poorer workers and those with less social capital to benefit from such opportunities. At the same time, the fate of this G2G programme highlights that while authorities must lead the process, the involvement of

and cooperation with other stakeholders is critical as well: the programme eventually ground to a halt, mainly due to the Bangladesh government's failure to involve private recruiters to match workers with Malaysian jobs.³⁴

This is a problem affecting many government-to-government programmes, not only the Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G. In fact, concerns that bilateral G2G arrangements which exclude private recruiters may not be efficient in meeting employers' needs – and thus may fail to secure jobs for migrant workers – has led to the proliferation of G2G recruitment modalities that include private recruiters either in the countries of origin or in both the source and destination countries (see figure below).

Basic Typology of Bilateral G2G Agreements

Type 1: G2G agreements that eliminate private actors from the recruitment process, establishing recruitment through public employment services e.g., South Korea's Employment Permit System; MOU original version of the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program

Type 2: G2G agreements that set out guidelines and monitoring processes for private recruitment agencies operating in countries of origin - e.g., MOUs between the Philippines and Canadian select provinces

Type 3: G2G agreements that set out guidelines and monitoring processes for private recruitment agencies operating in countries of origin and destination e.g., MOUs between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, Thailand and Cambodia, Philippines and Lebanon, India and Saudi Arabia

Source: Open Working Group on Labour Migration & Recruitment (2016).

Bangladesh has engaged in these new modalities. For instance, in 2015 the Bangladesh-Malaysia G2G was replaced by an updated G2G-Plus programme in which the private sector – 10 Bangladeshi firms - handled recruitment and the government only provided regulatory oversight. In the same year, a MOU was concluded between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia which leaves worker recruitment in the hands of private agencies in both countries.

However, migrants' rights advocates have raised concerns that the increasingly dominant role of private actors in G2G agreements may undermine the safeguarding of

xi Two thirds of private-channel migrants in the comparison group were intermediated through middlemen and recruitment companies, a quarter were recruited through their social networks (e.g., relatives or friends abroad), and the remainder followed other channels - including responding directly to job advertisements.

migrant workers' rights,^{xii} and called for governments to incorporate robust enforcement mechanisms and monitoring procedures relating to recruitment activities in G2G programmes.³⁵

More generally, an issue with G2G programmes is that Bangladesh has relatively little bargaining power to negotiate the conditions of these agreements out of fear of losing overseas labour markets that – as we noted before – are important sources of income and remittances for the Bangladesh economy. Hence, the extent to which these agreements can effectively protect Bangladeshi migrants from modern slavery and labour exploitation ultimately depends on the receiving countries' stance towards labour rights and worker welfare.³⁶ This again is a more general problem with G2G programmes faced not only by Bangladesh, but by most countries of origin. Government authorities in these countries have dual and conflicting responsibilities: to maximise access to the job market of destination countries for their workers, and to protect the rights of their workers abroad. With so many origin countries competing for worker quotas in the destination nations, complying with the conditions imposed by the latter often takes precedence over the protection of migrants' rights.³⁷ Hence, origin countries can do very little in practice if employers and recruiting agents in the countries of destination violate migrant workers' rights.^{xiii}

In sum, while G2G recruitment programmes have the potential to improve government accountability with respect to migrant workers' rights and to limit the abuses faced by these workers overseas, they are not a panacea. Clear steps need to be taken to ensure that human and labour rights occupy a central role in these bilateral agreements so that their economic benefits do not come at the expense of the protection of transnational workers.

Non-governmental initiatives

Alongside these government-led initiatives, international and non-governmental organisations, civil society actors and private firms have also launched programmatic interventions aimed at reducing the risk of exploitation among Bangladeshi labour migrants. For instance, the International Labour Organisation ran the “Work in

Freedom” programme targeting 36,000 women and girls in Bangladesh with the goal of supporting prospective migrants in their decision to migrate and to help prevent the incidence of exploitation among female migrant workers. The underlying idea behind the programme, which ran between 2013 and 2018, was that trafficking and modern slavery victimisation could be prevented by pre-departure community activities such as training on the value of women's work, on the costs and benefits of migration, safe and informed migration, women's and worker's rights, and skills capacity building.^{xiv} Unfortunately, the programme evaluation revealed quite disappointing results: the interventions (training) were found not to be well targeted, participants found the guidance irrelevant to their lives or incorrect, and largely unable to address their expectations or concerns. As a result, the outcomes of fostering female empowerment and enhancing their knowledge about safe migration strategies were not achieved.³⁸

A more promising initiative is currently being led by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), in partnership with ELEVATE, a firm specialised in ESG, sustainability and supply chain services. This collaboration is aimed at developing and piloting SafeStep, a mobile application to provide Bangladeshi workers with tools to make informed decisions about migration; among other features, the application allows workers to calculate the costs and benefits of migration to aid them in their decision-making process. The first version of the application is designed for Bangladeshi workers considering migrating to Gulf Cooperation Council countries, although a rigorous evaluation of its effectiveness is still pending.³⁹

The international experience shows that the effectiveness of this type of non-governmental initiatives is maximised when international and non-governmental organisations partner with official authorities to tackle the abusive practices experienced by migrant workers. An example of such partnerships is the cooperation between the International Organization for Migration, the Fair Employment Foundation, GFEMS and the government of the Philippines, which, through a series of training, capacity-building, awareness-raising and advocacy activities, boosted the Philippines' ability to implement policies and systems to ensure safe migration and employment

^{xii} In the case of Bangladesh, the G2G-Plus programme was subject to criticisms due to exorbitant recruitment fees, the lack of transparency of the process, and the insurmountable bottlenecks created by putting only a few private agencies in charge of handling the recruitment, which made it impossible to process the high volume of migrants interested in the programme; as a result Malaysia banned the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers in 2018. Bangladesh also had to shut down dozens of recruiting agencies hiring people to work in Saudi Arabia after allegations of sexual abuse and torture at the hands of employers in the Gulf kingdom.

^{xiii} Some labour-sending countries have tried to address these issues through their consulates or embassies in destination economies. For instance, Indian workers in Kuwait are provided with free legal advice on labour disputes, terms of contracts with employers and withholding of wages by employers through the Indian Embassy. In the same direction, Sri Lankan consulates in destination countries register recruiting agencies and companies that recruit Sri Lankan workers, and only those registered are authorised to enter into contracts with workers.

^{xiv} This was part of a broader intervention carried out simultaneously in other South Asian (India and Nepal) and Middle Eastern (India, Jordan and Lebanon) countries.

experiences among Filipino migrant workers. This collaboration was critical for the inclusion of specific provisions and definitions for fair and ethical recruitment in the Filipino national legal framework in 2021.⁴⁰

Moving Forward

Labour migration is an inextricable part of our globalised economy. In the case of Bangladesh, the remittances sent home by migrant workers have had a positive impact upon household-level poverty alleviation across the country, and returning migrant workers have great potential to help develop the country's economy due to the skills and experience acquired overseas.

However, the high costs of recruitment and migration faced by migrants in many labour-sending countries like Bangladesh – linked to the gaps in the regulation of the overseas recruitment sector and the proliferation of illegal intermediaries – exacerbate workers' vulnerability to modern slavery victimisation, forced labour, sexual exploitation, or debt bondage. The reputational and economic costs this entails also undermines the positive impact of international migration on origin countries, leading to the loss of access to overseas labour markets and a reduction in valuable remittance income.

To help labour-sending countries capitalise on the economic benefits associated with temporary international labour migration while safeguarding the human and labour rights of migrant workers, governments must play a fundamental role in the migration process. As we noted above, the Bangladesh government has already taken steps in this area, not only introducing important legislative reforms but also strengthening the activities of organisations like the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment and the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training to more effectively deal with labour recruitment and migration issues, implementing several documentation mechanisms for labour migration purposes and even including information about regular forms of migration in the education curriculum and textbooks.⁴¹

Nonetheless, further measures are needed to lower the costs of temporary international migration and strengthen the oversight and supervision of recruiting agents and intermediaries, which are key factors behind the situations of forced labour, debt bondage and other forms of exploitation suffered by Bangladeshi migrant workers. Possible measures in this direction include:

- simplifying the migration processes in order to lower the informational barriers that drive many migrants to resort to dalals;

- holding recruiters and private employers legally and financially accountable for violations of overseas employment contracts, establishing clear penalties for such violations and legal pathways to ensure that migrant workers can prosecute their claims (e.g. drawing on the example from the Philippines);
- developing safe migration corridors through bilateral G2G agreements that target occupations in destination countries where the demand is growing, involving private actors but clearly laying out and regulating their role;
- strengthening relevant government agencies like the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited to enable them to manage recruitment for those overseas jobs where the probability of labour rights and human rights violations are highest;
- establishing bilateral negotiations with the governments of destination countries, reorganising/strengthening the role of Bangladeshi labour attachés/missions in these countries, and implementing institutional mechanisms through which recruiting agents from Bangladesh can directly communicate with overseas employers in order to curb the role of illegal intermediaries abroad; and
- facilitating migrants' access to formal credit/lending and introducing other affordable financing options – e.g., allowing migrants to pay the costs of the migration process from their earnings abroad.

In order to maximise the chance of success of these and other initiatives, the governments of labour-sending countries like Bangladesh should seek the support of international bodies - e.g., ILO, IOM - and civil society organisations to bring technical support for addressing issues of recruitment, contract standards, labour mobility modalities, protection of workers, social security of migrant workers, and reintegration of returning migrant workers. The involvement of intergovernmental agencies acting as intermediaries between origin and destination countries can also help balance their interests and address one of the main shortcomings mentioned above regarding G2G agreements – namely that labour-sending countries have little bargaining power to negotiate the conditions of these agreements.

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Labour migration and modern slavery victimisation: Bangladesh as a case study

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Nicole Munns International Systemic Change Director

Gabriel Katz International Systemic Change Research Associate

Suite 139,
210 Upper Richmond Road,
London SW15 6NP

hello@justiceandcare.org
+44 (0)203 959 2580
www.justiceandcare.org



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