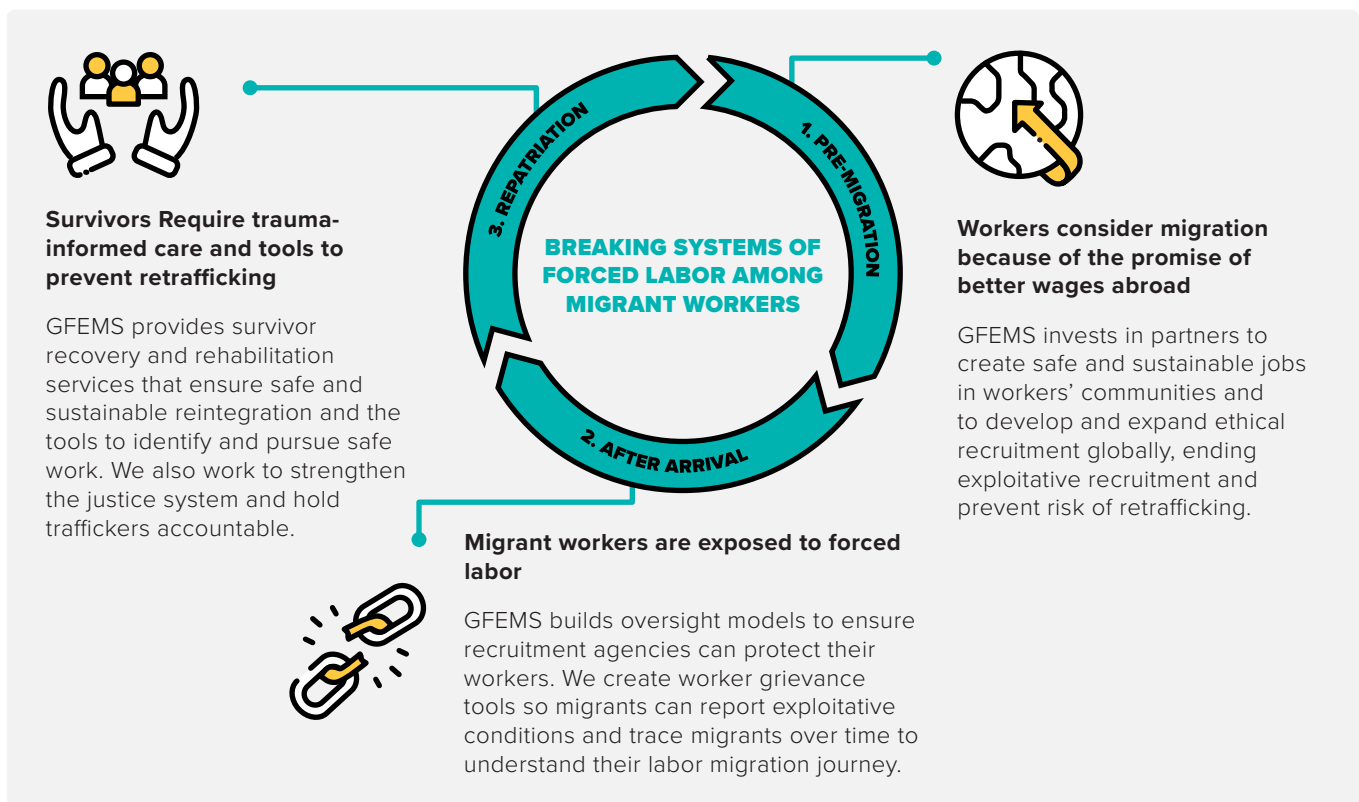


# Strengthening International Labor Migration Systems in Bangladesh to Protect Workers

Despite Bangladesh's global status as a major labor-sending country, the overseas labor recruitment and reintegration systems do not adequately safeguard Bangladeshi migrant workers. Workers who return often have been physically abused, mentally traumatized, and may struggle to reintegrate with their families and/or communities. This brief highlights learnings from [research](#) funded by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) and Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) to support better economic and social reintegration of Bangladeshi international migrants. We include recommendations for key stakeholders to strengthen international labor migration systems in Bangladesh and protect workers through each stage of the migration journey.

## Our Approach



## Context

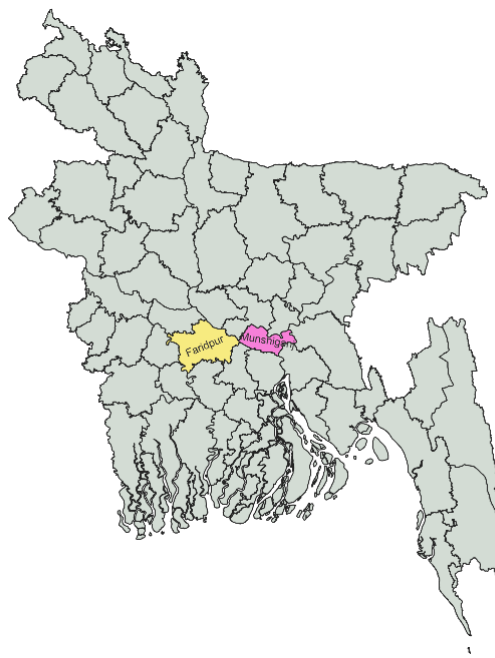
Each year, more than 400,000 Bangladeshi workers leave in search of work outside of their country.<sup>1</sup> Currently, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training's (BMET) data shows that the majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers go to the Gulf and other Arab states either as unskilled or semi-skilled temporary workers. Without access to safe migration channels, many migrants leave through unofficial channels, increasing their risks of exploitation and deportation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, IOM reported that more than 400,000 Bangladeshi migrants were forced to return home in 2020.<sup>2</sup> While men make up the majority of overseas labor migrants, Bangladeshi women are increasingly participating in international labor markets. Female migrants represent 12 percent of the total migration flow from Bangladesh, with the majority employed as domestic workers. Over the last ten years, the Government of Bangladesh has taken steps to develop legal and policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms to better regulate international migration. These

include the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016, Labour Migration Management Rules 2017, Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act 2018, and Policy Guidelines for Mandatory Insurance for Migrant Workers 2019.

Under this backdrop, GFEMS funded the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) in consortium with Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) and Caritas Bangladesh (CB) to implement [activities](#) to better support repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration services to Bangladeshi migrants and survivors. From April 1, 2020 to August 31, 2022, OKUP and CB delivered shelter, airport pickup, psychosocial counseling, medical support, legal, as well as economic and livelihood services to 1,020 returnee migrants and survivors (75% women, 25% men) in the Dhaka, Munshiganj, Gazipur, Tangail, Faridpur, Cumilla, Narsingdi, Manikganj and Narayanganj districts of Bangladesh.

## Research Overview

From 2021-2022, GFEMS funded Population Council to undertake research to gain a better understanding of the migration landscape in Bangladesh, including laws, policies, and migrant worker experiences. Population Council conducted a mixed-methods study in Faridpur and Munshiganj, two districts in central Bangladesh with a high volume of overseas labor migrants and where OKUP and Caritas were delivering economic and social reintegration activities for returning migrants. Along with a literature review, data collection included 40 IDIs with randomly selected<sup>3</sup> migrants who returned from GCC countries over the last two years and 10 (KIs) with government and non-government stakeholders working with the international labor migration system in Bangladesh. Sampled returnee migrants had been employed abroad in unskilled or low-skilled jobs, including construction, sanitation, agriculture, garment manufacturing, hospitality and food services, and domestic work. Sampling was designed for equal representation of male and female returnees, and respondents were between 20 and 45 years old.



## Key Findings

### ***A lack of economic opportunities at home is the primary driver of international migration***

Returnee migrants in the Population Council study cited low wages and limited opportunities for employment in Bangladesh as the key driver for migration.

Many viewed international migration as an opportunity to accumulate and save money that could then be invested in opening a business or buying land upon return. Interviewees reported that family, friends, and neighbors influenced their decision to migrate. Trusted community members encouraged migration as a means to achieve financial stability not just for the migrant but for the migrant's family and household.

“

*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.*

**(Male returnee)**

1 <https://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

2 <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/our-migrants-are-suffering-what-can-we-do-help-2984506>

3 Selected from 200 potential respondents provided by OKUP and Caritas.

## Migrants experiencing exploitation struggled to access support at destination

Almost all respondents experienced some form of exploitation while working abroad. The most common deceptions reported to researchers concerned fraud related to monetary transactions, documentation, and work contracts— in particular wages, work hours, and type of work in the destination country. Often, the work they were tasked with in the destination country did not align with the job they had agreed to perform.

“

*As reported by one returned migrant: “He is a dalal... 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.”*

**(Male returnee)**

## Over-reliance on middlemen significantly increases costs

Findings show that male migration costs from Bangladesh can reach as high as 500,000 to 800,000 taka (\$4,725-\$7,560 USD). Though many services are offered free of cost by the government, many migrants are unaware of these services or are otherwise unable to access them. Every returned migrant interviewed migrated internationally through the help of a *dalal*. Dalals are middlemen, often from the same community, who connect prospective migrants with employers or employment agencies at home and at destination. They are often the primary source of information for migrants looking to work internationally, thus aspiring migrants typically follow their advice and pay what is asked of them. Many migrants indicated that, due to their low literacy levels, they find it easier to turn over a seemingly complex process of obtaining a visa, training certificates, and medical screenings to someone else. Further, almost all respondents noted that they did not know of any government or private institutions that facilitate international migration. As aspiring migrants, they had limited knowledge of where or from whom 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.*

**(Male returnee)**



**ALMOST ALL RESPONDENTS REPORTED HAVING FELT THAT HAD BEEN DECEIVED BY THE DALAL.**

Respondents also cited low or unpaid wages, long working hours, excessive workloads, inadequate food, poor living conditions, and lack of medical treatment as forms of exploitation they experienced abroad.

In Bangladesh, there are laws and policies in place, such as the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012, and the Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (2016), to protect migrant workers. There are also avenues through which information on worker protections and support services are meant to be disseminated, such as mandatory Pre-departure Orientation Seminars (PDOS). These are often supplemented with awareness-raising campaigns, typically conducted by NGOs. However, respondents reported that they struggled to access support in instances of exploitation. Those who attempted to reach dalals or in-country employment agencies were met with no response. As a last resort, some respondents reported running away from their employers, seeking safety and support to return home with the embassy.

“

*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.*

**(Female Returnee)**

Respondents frequently paid whatever the dalal charged and were unaware of the itemized or actual costs of migration (e.g. passports, medical check-ups, and training certification).

“

*One female migrant reported giving 25,000 taka to a dalal for “some official purpose” but later discovered her Saudi employer had paid the money for the agency and visa fee. She noted that “Only the dalal knows how and where this amount was spent...I have no idea on this.”*

**(Female Returnee)**

Migrants often took loans from relatives, friends, and local moneylenders to cover their migration costs. Some respondents reported selling assets—land, cattle, gold—to finance their migration, while others obtained loans at high rates of interest using their assets as collateral. Most respondents reported that they were not aware of the government’s loan provisions for migrants.

### Debt exacerbates challenges upon return

Despite expectations that migration would improve financial conditions, respondents consistently noted that due to under-, non-, and irregular payment of wages, they were unable to save enough money to make a material difference in their own and their household's economic circumstances.

**Further, many respondents were still struggling to pay back the loans they had acquired to support their migration abroad.**

“

*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.*

**(Male returnee)**

### Men and women have different migration experiences

Female migration was often reported as a strategic economic decision for the household as respondents broadly confirmed that female migration is a lower cost option for the household than male migration. “No-cost” provisions for domestic workers exist in some bilateral agreements between GCC countries and Bangladesh, though they are not always enforced. Still, employers are more likely to bear migration-related expenses for women due to their high demand for domestic work. Other female respondents also cited personal reasons such as domestic violence, divorce, or a husband's remarriage for motivating their migration abroad.

“

*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.*

**(Female returnee)**

Female migrants, employed primarily as domestic workers, face additional and unique risks as workers in private homes. Amplified by the intimate and constant nature of the domestic worker-employer relationship, they experience more forms exploitation.



**INTERVIEWS WITH ALMOST EVERY FEMALE RESPONDENT INDICATED EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION IN THE DESTINATION COUNTRY.**

Indeed, even after years working abroad, respondents reported they still had outstanding loan debt. This was especially true for migrants who returned within 2-3 years of leaving.

“

*I spent 500,000 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.*

**(Male returnee)**

Respondents cited numerous instances of oral and emotional abuse; many reported experiences of physical abuse, often for petty mistakes. While men reported restrictions on their mobility during working hours, interviews with female migrants indicated much heavier restrictions on their time and activities. Many female respondents noted that they were not permitted to keep their phones with them or leave the home to meet their own acquaintances.

### Perceptions of “failed migration” hinders social reintegration, and especially for female returnees.

Numerous respondents noted that their migration had been branded a failure by family and friends. Migrants, returning without enough money or nothing to invest in entrepreneurial activities, reported being mocked or shunned. Those who returned before their contract ended and had not fully repaid their migration debt were more likely to experience social stigmatization. Women faced additional stigma as they reported becoming the subjects of gossip and targets for derogatory remarks. While those who returned early did so due to tremendous work pressure, physical abuse, or other forms of exploitation, their families and communities perceived their early return as involvement in sex work.

“

*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.*

**(Female returnee)**

## Recommendations

### 1. Support financial training, livelihood support, and seed funding especially for female returned migrants.

Female migrant workers experience discrimination and exploitation in all phases of migration, from pre-departure, while abroad, and during return. Upon return, they face challenges due to societal norms and values. Government and civil society organizations should systematically strengthen livelihood support programming, including mentoring support, to ensure that market demands are being met and that women can earn sufficient incomes to stay in Bangladesh.

### 2. Increase Migration Information and Services at Sub-District (Upazila) and District Levels:

To raise awareness at the local level, the government can

- a Establish help desks at all union council offices that are situated far from the local district employment and manpower offices
- b Enhance dissemination of information through free hotline numbers and migration resource centers at community level
- c Support BMET, technical training centers, lending institutions, and civil society organizations to improve the quality and scale of services.

These efforts should target border districts and sub-districts (upazilas), which are more vulnerable to trafficking of women and children to other countries. Local government officials should be sensitized on the needs of returnee migrant workers to facilitate system-level change.

### 3. Regulate and monitor the involvement of intermediaries in the migration process.

Many migrants were unaware of the real costs of migration and often unable to pay middleman demands without taking on debt to finance their migration. Limited knowledge on formal migration resources and channels can also be attributed to the lack of formal localized services. Government services and registered recruitment agencies operate primarily in the capital city and do not maintain local offices. Registered agencies often prefer using dalals to recruit workers. The government should take steps to regulate and monitor the involvement of intermediaries in the migration process.

### 4. Support Migrant-Leadership Especially Returned Female Migrants and Survivors:

Despite MOUs and bilateral agreements, implementation of protective provisions are difficult to monitor, particularly in the domestic work sector. Inclusion of migrant and survivor voices in negotiating and implementing agreements with destination countries can improve strategies to address gender-based vulnerabilities and better support female domestic workers abroad. This can be facilitated through continued support for migrant worker-led organizations and forums.