

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST FEMALE MIGRANT WORKERS FROM BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This research has explored gender-based violence against female migrant workers from Bangladesh. This exploratory study comprises both primary and secondary data collected through KIIs and a review of the literature. The research has mainly reviewed secondary literature including news articles, organizational reports, official statistics, journal articles, and books to respond to the research problem. Moreover, it has interviewed some key informants chosen from among the people who deal with the issues of female migrant workers with different capacities. The research has found serious violations of human rights in the form of gender-based abuse. Housemaids are the main victims of such abuses, and Middle Eastern countries are the hot spots of this phenomenon. Many female migrant workers lose the minimum human dignity, lose the inviolability of their bodies, and get victimized in the forms of both sexual and physical abuse. Their dream of economic uplift of their family gets shattered when their payment is delayed or confiscated by force or due to some critical conditions of the contract that those workers have no idea about. Some of them not only lose all their dreams but also lose their mind from the traumatic experience there. Both the primary and secondary data repeatedly confirmed these aspects of human rights violations of the country's women migrant workers. The woes of the mothers and sisters of this country not only disgrace the face of this country but also compromise the economic opportunity of the global labour market. Therefore, the policymakers must focus on the protection and promotion of their human rights for the sake of both their human dignity as well as the economic advancement of the country. All the cases of human rights violations must be reported well immediately, and the government bodies, especially the embassy offices in respective countries, must be sensible and capable of both protecting the citizens and ensuring remedies. Besides, the diplomatic priorities of the government must comprise the interests of female migrant workers since their protection is both morally and economically important for the government.

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Introduction

Migration often makes people susceptible to human rights violations and female migrant workers find themselves in a double-bound risk for being women and migrants (McAuliffe, 2017). Migrant workers' status of human rights is often compromised in the face of multifaceted challenges that cause 'rampant abuse and exploitation' (Wickramasekara, 2008). This conflicting relationship between migration and human rights creates a significant concern in today's world, where human migration has risen in a greater pace making the number of migrants 281 million across the world in 2020, up from 173 million in 2000. In 2019, there were 169 million migrant workers, up from 164 million in 2017 (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Women constitute a significantly large portion of total migrant workers. Among all migrant workers worldwide in 2019, 70 million or approximately 41.5 percent were female (ILO, 2021).

A significant number of these migrant workers originate from Asia Pacific countries and Bangladesh is one of the significant labour-sending nations. For Bangladesh, the "Demand for women workers in overseas job markets surfaced in the 1980s" (Barkat & Ahsan, 2014). It started sending women workers in 1991, almost one and a half decades after the launching of labour export. The trend of women workers' migration has been in the rise in number for approximately three decades now. Middle Eastern countries are the main destination of Bangladeshi female migrant workers. Since 1991, five Middle Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Lebanon and Oman) have employed more than 90% of total women workers migrated from Bangladesh. This simple geographical information has significance because most Middle Eastern countries are still run by monarchs who have not institutionalised human rights. Besides, the people of Middle Eastern societies still hold some very conservative beliefs that allow them to consider domestic workers as their slaves, a relation that permits sexual engagement and leads to both physical and sexual violence.

Domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries are at great risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses including rape and confinement. Other kinds of human rights violations have also been reported on many occasions where the women workers employed in different sectors encountered underpayment or non-payment of wages, unhealthy living and working conditions etc. (Barkat & Ahsan, 2014).

Saudi Arabia is particularly in spotlight regarding the abuse of domestic workers. In 2017, “the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) received 17 allegations online from Bangladeshi migrants in Saudi Arabia, of which 12 were from women” (Bari, 2018). Thirty Bangladeshi housemaids returned in May 2018 who reported severe physical abuse and rape (Hasanat, 2018). Amnesty International observes that “the Saudi Arabian law does not give effective legal protection to female migrant workers or home-maids” (Shashi, 2018).

The objective of this study is to explore the patterns of gender-based violence against female migrant workers from Bangladesh. Based on the accepted definitions of gender-based violence, it explores the forms of physical, psychological and sexual abuses along with financial discrimination these workers experience in their workplaces. Analysing qualitative data from both literature and expert interviews, the study has found the prevalence of violence in all these dimensions. More importantly, evidence from the ground indicates failure of some critical institutions in the system responsible for facilitating migrant workers and upholding their rights.

Literature Review

There is an avalanche of literature on migration, the gendered issues of migration, and the human rights issues of migration. Some of them have discussed the causes and consequences of migration, factors that push or pull the people to be migrated, migration and its impact on development cycles, characters and diverse policy issues of the migration. This research has reviewed some works of literature that shed light on the abuses of female migrant workers employed in foreign countries.

Though some researchers investigated the rights of migrant women workers in a global context (e.g., Malhotra *et al.*, 2013), the majority of the works of research in this field are regionally concentrated. Brochmann (1993) researched the status of women in Sri Lanka but extended the scope to compare with Gulf countries as well. Comparing both the host regions, the author found women migrant domestic workers suffering from maltreatment. Lan (2006) presents a comparative scenario of female migrant workers in Asia-pacific and Middle East and reveals a grim picture at later regions where slave like practices lead to some worst forms of physical and sexual abuses against them. The author shows how transnational maid trade end up being a system of exploitation. Manseau (2007) specifically focuses on female domestic workers in the Middle East and discusses domestic and international responses to the abuse they face there. It concludes that a standard working contract, such as that in use in Jordan at that time, provides a promising

solution. Some works focusing exclusively on UAE found the sexual enslavement of women and migrant workers in the country (Degorge, 2006; Sönmez *et al.*, 2011). Some literatures specifically focus on female migrant workers from Bangladesh and find the same grim scenario of different forms of gender-based abuse in workplace abroad, especially in the Middle East, and even worse situation of troubled reintegration process after returning home (Barkat & Ahsan, 2014; Chy *et al.*, 2021; Nawaz & Tonny, 2020; Chanda, 2013; Islam, 2013).

The literature reviewed here shows the prevalence of studies on the rights of migrant workers, whereas many of those have focused on women migrant workers. However, the academic works on gender-based abuses of Bangladeshi female migrant workers are rare. Recently, the trend of women workers' return from the Middle East after abuse and exploitation has produced many news reports and raised an immense need for in-depth study in this field.

Rationale of the Study

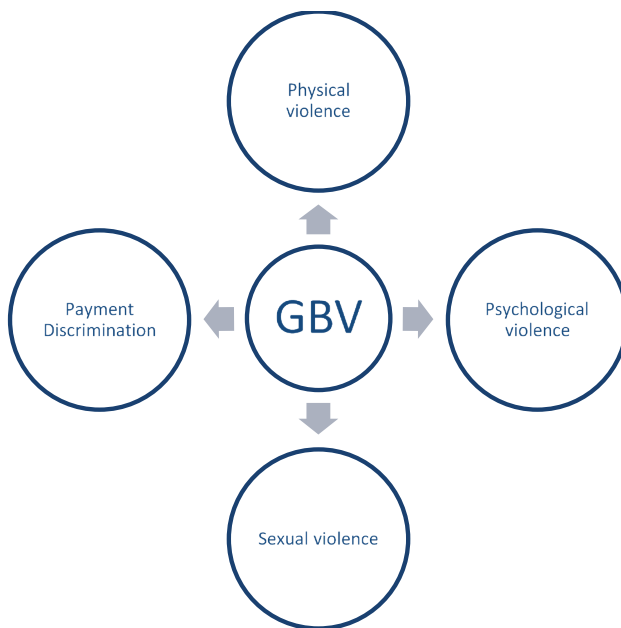
It is a constitutional obligation for the Government of Bangladesh to uphold the equal rights of all its citizens including women both at home and workplace. Formulation of several policies and acts demonstrates the government's legal commitment to ensure the rights of women as well as migrant workers (e.g., Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013, Human Trafficking Act 2012, Overseas Employment and Migrant Rules 2017, and Migrant Welfare Board Act 2018). In spite of having all these legal obligations, to date, female migrant workers are being deprived of their rights and dignity at home and abroad. Therefore, the existing lacuna of research on the situation of gender-based violence against female migrant workers needs to be addressed. Fostering such studies will guide the government to the effective path to meet its legal commitment toward fulfilling basic human rights standards for protecting women workers. It will also contribute to sustaining their contribution to the economy of the nation.

Conceptual Framework

UNHCR's "Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence" defines gender-based violence (GBV) as "acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty" (UNHCR, 2020, p.5). The document goes on to include an 'economic' dimension as well. ILO's report of 2022, titled "Experiences of violence and harassment at work: A global first survey", also identifies three forms of workplace violence; physical, psychological and sexual (ILO, 2022,

p.11). “Psychological violence involves causing fear by intimidation”, whereas “Physical violence involves hurting or trying to hurt” (UN Women, n.d.), and sexual violence involves “unwanted sexual touching, comments, pictures, emails or sexual requests” (ILO, 2022). On the other hand, the economic dimension of GBV is revealed in the form of discrimination in recruitment, promotion, payment, and sex-based work allocation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014). Among these, only discrimination in payment is relevant in the case of female migrant workers from Bangladesh, since most of them are destined for domestic work where femininity is the prioritised gender criteria of recruitment and promotion does not exist in the structure. Thus, we have four dimensions of gender-based violence in the workplace of female migrant workers from Bangladesh. These are physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence and discrimination in payment.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors’ development based on literature on gender-based violence (UNHCR, 2020; ILO, 2022; UN Women, n.d.; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014)

All these dimensions have been explored in this article in the context of female migrant workers from Bangladesh.

Methodology

To answer the research questions intuitively an in-depth study is required. Ehigie and Ehigie (2005) stated that in-depth studies catch the untold or hidden experiences of agents. Therefore, this study follows qualitative method as technique of the research.

Data Collection Methods

Though this research is based mainly on secondary data, it has also used primary data to a significant extent. The main sources of secondary data include journal articles, newspapers, organizational reports, and books. The researchers conducted four KIIs (Key informant interviews) of different professionals- human rights specialists, NGO workers, and journalists. These respondents were asked about the violation of rights, causal factors, challenges, experiences, and the future of the migrant workers of the country.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study applies content analysis as the data analysis process. The principal purpose of this process is to figure out the elicited meaning of the data and to draw a realistic conclusion of a study (Bengtsson, 2016). Conceptual framework is the key to both the data collection and analysis in this research. The contents related to the variables of the given conceptual framework have been extracted from both the secondary materials and the KII transcripts. Since this is not quantitative research, coding has not been applied to those data. However, collected data have been organized as per the given variables and they are cross-checked for similarity and contradictions. The arguments have been formulated based on the best available facts organized from collected data.

Findings and Discussion

Though the constitution of Bangladesh holds the mandate to uphold the rights and dignity of the women through creating an environment where women are equally treated, female migrant workers have been experiencing a violation of their rights to various extents. Although such violation is not a common phenomenon for all legally migrated women, this study has found plenty of evidence on how some of them are deprived of their rights in their work-place abroad and the factors that cause or catalyse this.

Physical Violence

The female migrant workers from Bangladesh have been facing physical violence that hurt them at their workplaces. Though female migrant workers have the right to be protected from any form of physical abuse, regrettably, they face it in Middle Eastern countries. Violence against housemaids includes physical attacks ranging from slapping to murder. Priesner (2012) finds a significant variance in employers' treatment of domestic workers. While 60% of the respondents seem to have been "generally treated with respect", 16% were verbally abused (with 6% saying they were verbally abused often), and 23% were beaten up (with 13% beaten up often) by their employer. Islam (n. d.) found out 23.78% physical and 25.4% verbal harassment cases from a survey conducted on 185 returnee women migrant workers.

Whereas male family members are the main perpetrators in sexual abuse, Halabi (2008) found female employer as the main perpetrator in physical abuse. Therefore, women workers are at risk of physical violence from both their male and female employers. A woman from Rangpur went to Saudi Arabia on June 25, 2015, to change her miserable economic condition after her husband's death. The owner of the house where she used to work as well as the men from outside tortured her physically. Their brutality went so far that they set her on fire when she tried to protect herself from their abusive acts (Rahman, 2016).

Comparatively long working hours make the women vulnerable to more physical violence. Rehana's employer's family went to a picnic and she had to work from early morning to the evening. After that, she said, "My madam asked me to gather leaves outside the tent they were in. I was not feeling well and so I said I would do it later. At this, she became furious, took an iron rod and beat me up with it. I broke my wrists and fainted" (Palma, 2018). This is how long working hours make the worker less productive and increase her vulnerability to physical violence even more.

Female migrants often end up at the safe home having escaped from the employers' place in the face of torture. According to an official of the expatriates' welfare ministry, last year a total of 2,906 women migrant workers- victims of different types of abuses along with physical torture- took shelter at a safe home run by the Bangladesh High Commission in Riyadh (Palma, 2018). Many female migrant workers return bearing the physical evidence of ruthless torture. A few returned women showed broken hands and legs, cushioned body, and mental instability. Some women took the path of suicide in the face of intolerable torture (Chaity, 2017).

Psychological Violence

Psychological wellbeing of the female migrant workers is in serious jeopardy in different ways. Leisure is an important means for any person to get some time for psychological rejuvenation. Many female migrant workers from Bangladesh have complained about having no leisure time to energize themselves for performing their duties. Their work continues from very early morning to the late night where they have to remain active most of the time without enough time for taking rest (Chaity, 2017; Islam, 2018; Palma, 2018). Sometimes, the employers beat them if they seek leisure or time for rest. In many cases, restless work makes the women psychologically unstable and reduces their productivity and concentration to the work. It worsens the condition by exposing women workers to more violence due to the failure to satisfy the expectation of the employer (Chaity, 2017).

Confinement in the household is another stressor of workers' mental health. Bangladeshi domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries are strictly confined to the four walls of the employer's household. Islam (2013) finds that these workers are not allowed to go outside for socialization or recreation and even the employers, in many cases, do not allow them to talk to the people or other neighbouring co-workers. If they have any relatives in the host country, they get permission to meet them once a week or a month only for a few hours. They can go outside once a month to have treatment and send money to their family.

Different studies also show that many employers put a restriction on any kind of virtual communication of the workers. Islam (2013) shows that some employers do not allow the workers to contact home over the telephone. Brown and Saunders (2004) characterize the domestic workers as "virtual prisoners in workshops and household, and they are not given permission to contact with a home back in the country". Islam (2013) measured the freedom of communication with the relative and home over the telephone where half of the respondent workers answered that they could contact home within 3-15 days. About 27 percent contacted in 1-2 months. The remaining 23 percent of the employees were not given permission to contact the family at all.

Sexual Violence

Sexual abuse is very common among the complaints of female migrant workers who are basically working as housemaids. Bangladeshi housemaids face physical and sexual assault in Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and Qatar (Hasan, 2016). Every month, on an average 200

domestic workers of Bangladesh who mainly work as housemaids return home from Saudi Arabia as victims of sexual abuse. They also complained of sexual abuse by employers (Bhuyan, 2018). Another report shows that an estimated one thousand (1000) Bangladeshi women migrants returned home from Saudi Arabia. “Almost all of them were subjected to abuses - sexual, physical and non-payment of wages” (Palma, 2018). Working on Bangladeshi women migrant workers’ condition, Islam (2013) shows that about fifty-five percent of the female migrant workers from Bangladesh were sexually abused in the destination countries.

According to BRAC’s head of migration, Mr Shariful Hasan, BRAC has received 600 complaints from female migrants who were sexually abused and faced other problems in the KSA in the last four months (Personal Communication, October 08, 2018). One of the returnee migrant workers became an activist for the detrimental conditions. She now chairs the *Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association* (BOMSA). The association received at least twenty complaints from female migrant workers every month. She said that “They (women migrant workers) mainly complained about abuses, overwork, denial of wages and food problem” (Bhuyan, 2018). She asked the Bangladeshi authorities and parents or relatives of the senders to stop sending housemaids on ‘relative visas’ as they suffer more sexual and physical abuses (Bhuyan, 2018).

Usually, the head of the family or the direct employer is the main perpetrator in the sexual abuse and exploitation of women migrant workers. But, in some cases, all the male members of the employer’s family perpetrate this to their housemaids. Many of the victims shared their experiences of being sexually abused by both the father and the son. A woman migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia this year shared her experience of sexual abuse by more than one male family member (Pias, 2018). One of the migrant workers from Jashore who returned from Saudi Arabia said that she suffered severe “torture and sexual oppression from the landlord, his son and son’s friends” (Hasan, 2016).

Case 2
Psychological Impact of Sexual Violence

A Grass-widow migrated from Satkhira to Saudi Arabia to provide financial support to her family members. But unfortunately, she came back to Bangladesh with a mental disorder caused by psychological abuse of foreign employer. Her salary was not more than 20, 000 (Twenty thousand) BDT there. She had to bear five family members with this salary. She went abroad with the help of a broker where she had to bear only the conveyance cost from Satkhira to Dhaka. Suddenly, she stopped contacting her family three months before her illness. She was admitted to National Institute of Mental Health and Hospital on her sudden return as she lost her mental soundness (Hossain, 2018).

Sexual abuse causes not only physical injury but also psychological trauma to the victims. A 23-year-old girl who returned to Bangladesh in February 2018, reported that she was sexually abused by the employer's son. She said that the employer's wife offered her to marry her second son for the contract period. They insisted her in many ways when she refused to that proposal. Being unable to have her consent, they tortured her ruthlessly (Ara, 2018). Not only the employers but also the partners in work take advantage of the women migrant workers. Incidents of rape by co-workers have also been reported about migrant domestic workers from Bangladesh (UNDP, 2008). Sometimes, the female migrant workers face the sexual abuse by the authority who has the responsibility to protect them. The Daily Star (2018) covers the story of a woman who migrated to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker but ended up in the safe home of Bangladesh high commission after suffering from abuse only to be victim of further sexual abuse by an employee of the facility.

Pregnancy is an obvious outcome for many victims of sexual abuse in Middle Eastern countries where abortion is illegal. Mr Shakirul Islam Shakil, the executive director of Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) said, "I know at least one returnee, who gave birth to a child following rape by the employer in Saudi Arabia. She (the victim) now can't be united to her family because of social repercussion" (Palma, 2018).

Gender-based Discrimination in Payment

Paying female workers less salary compared to that of the male co-workers in the same job is another gender-based discrimination. Bangladeshi female migrant workers complained about facing this kind of discrimination in the Middle East.

Islam (n. d.) found that about two-fifths of the respondents reported receiving less salary compared to their male co-workers on the job. More than one-third of them have experienced delays in getting their salary. Another study conducted by the same researcher in 2015 shows that female migrant workers are economically exploited by recruiting agencies and other service providers. Mr Shariful Hasan, Head of Migration at BRAC, acknowledged this discrimination's prevalence. He said that where a male worker gets 1000 Saudi Riyal, a female worker gets 800 Riyal, though the work is the same (Personal Communication, October 08, 2018).

Besides, discrimination against female migrant workers differs from country to country. This difference is related to the different country perspectives, the different skill levels of workers, and the different sectors the women workers are recruited to. For instance, the women workers who migrate to Jordan to work in the garment sector get enough privileges and good working conditions. In contrast, women migrants sent to Saudi Arabia as housemaids are most likely to face discrimination and hassles. They feel the loss of confidence to work and experience the vulnerabilities. So, the work environments in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and in Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Qatar are different (S. Hasan, Personal Communication, October 08, 2018; M. N. Islam, Personal Communication, October 02, 2018).

Conclusion

Human rights and labour rights have long been the focus of a plethora of research across the world, especially after the rise of liberalism in the 20th century. Workers of Bangladesh, like many other least-developed countries, enrich the story of human rights violations. The current research is one of the many works confirming the same result with the abuse and exploration of some detailed patterns in the context of expatriate women workers from Bangladesh. It is a disgrace to acknowledge that the extent of sexual and physical abuse prevalent in the experience of Bangladesh female migrant workers indicates the failure of the civilized world. Bangladeshi women, especially housemaids, are abused by their employers like the slaves of the medieval age with the granted sexual privilege of masters. Some case studies show the abuse of housemaids literally as sex slaves. It is concerning to see the normalized acceptance of sexual abuse by family members of the employer. The government of Bangladesh cannot deny such structurally rooted monstrosities where it is sending the daughters of the land. Besides the distorted value system of employers, staff of the offices who deal with expatriates also misuse their privileges and workers' vulnerabilities and abuse them sexually. Evidence of physical abuse

also shows that some employers have no respect for the physical integrity of the employees. Female members of the employer's family are found to be the active perpetrators of physical violence. Both physical and sexual abuses leave a deep scar of psychological trauma along with physical disabilities. Moreover, it is a dream-shattering fact for the women who break the glass wall of their invisible homestead limit in a desperate attempt to change their family's economic condition only to find themselves in an environment of forced work with a very limited economic opportunity.

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