

Challenges and Prospects of Bangladeshi Workers in Overseas Employment: A Case Study of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Singapore

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Abstract

Labor Migration takes place as an essential part of the global economy. World Bank ranked Bangladesh as eighth in the world for remittance inflow based on the information of 2015. About 10 million overseas workers have been employed in various parts of the world. According to BMET, 95% of the overseas employment takes place in 10 countries only. Singapore is the popular destination country of Bangladeshi workers. The study reveals that Bangladeshi migrants have faced many problems as high migration cost, low skilled jobs, low wages, no job guarantee and so on. These problems are creating barriers in safe orderly migration process. Though minimize the problems GOs and NGOs have taken numerous interventions at locally. The study recommended that to minimize the problems of destination countries a bilateral discussion is inevitable with destination countries, recruiter, the government, CSO, NGO's and migrant workers.

Keywords: *Bangladeshi Migrants, Labor Migration, Singapore and Remittance.*

Introduction

The number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly in recent years, reaching 258 million in 2017, up from 220 million in 2010, and 173 million in 2000. Over 60 percent of all international migrants live in Asia or Europe (IOM, 2017). Bangladesh is a labor surplus country and sending huge labor in the global labor market. Bangladesh is one of the providers of skilled,

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semi-skilled and unskilled workers abroad. In last year alone, about 1.2 million Bangladeshi workers had gone abroad for employment purposes (MoEWOE, 2018). In July-September 2017, most workers migrated to KSA and its percentages is 51.0%, followed by Malaysia is 16.10 %, Oman is 7.10%, Qatar is 5.80%, Kuwait is 5.70%, Singapore is 5.20%, Jordan is 2.40 %, Lebanon is 0.7%, Bahrain is 0.60%, UAE is 0.40%, and other countries is 5.0% (BBS, 2017). Singapore is the sixth positioned destination country for Bangladeshi migrants. Singapore is officially the Republic of Singapore, is a sovereign city-state and island country in Southeast Asia. The country performed a miracle by transforming its status as one of the poorest countries in the 1960s to being among one of the most advanced countries today. This visionary leader pursued a class-based migration policy to welcome immigrants of different skill levels since the 1960s. We can broadly identify two waves of immigration into Singapore: pre-independence migration, which was principally for permanent settlement, and post-independence migration, which is largely for temporary work.² Singapore relies heavily on foreign labor, particularly in the low wage sectors. It has one of the highest foreign to local labor ratios in the world, only behind the Gulf States. About sixty nine percent of low-wage manual jobs in Singapore are done by work permit holders, the lowest wage category of work passes. In 2016, foreigners numbered almost 1.4 million or 38 percent of Singapore's total workforce, with 27 percent or almost 993,000 hired on work permits. The highest concentration of migrant workers is in construction at approximately 75 percent. In December 2016, 315,500 migrant's workers on work permits were employed in the construction industry (TWC2, 2017). Specific numbers of those working in the Marine sector are unavailable. Singapore's construction and marine sectors like other industries are restricted, which determine the nationalities allowed to work in each particular industry. Although the Singapore Government does not release a breakdown of nationalities in the foreign workforce, the construction industry appears to be employing majority of workers from Bangladesh, China, and India.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore> (visited on October 2, 2018)

In January 2016, the High Commission of Bangladesh estimated that of the more than 160,000 Bangladeshi nationals in Singapore, over 90 percent work in the construction and marine industries (TWC2, 2017). This paper has discussed the procedure and facts of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to identify the procedure and facts of labor migration in Singapore. This paper has three strategic objectives as;

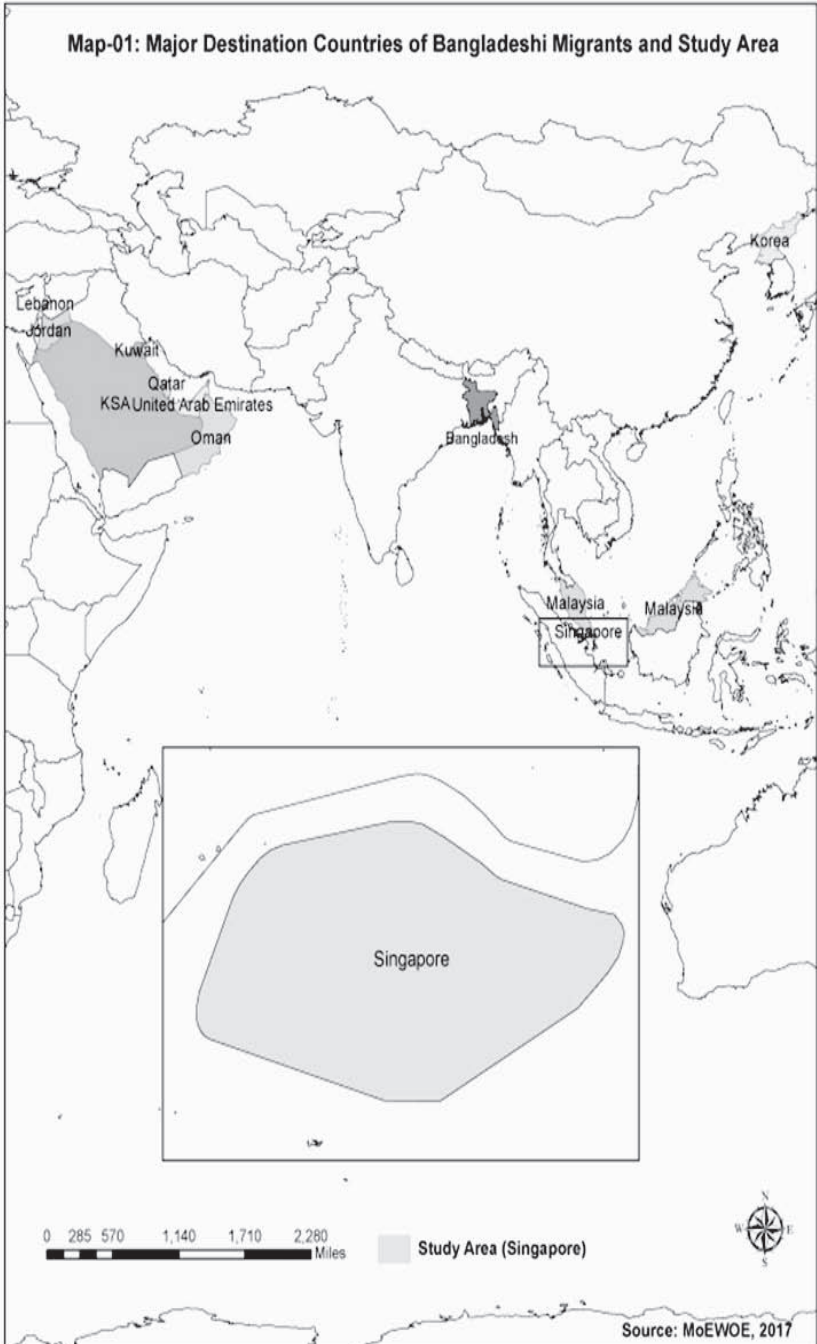
- To figure out the labor migration scenario in Singapore;
- To figure out the Bangladeshi workers' conditions in Singapore; and
- To draw some possible solutions to commonly faced problems of Bangladeshi Migrants in Singapore. In addition to that, the nature of problems is similar in the case of overall Bangladeshi workers in all destination countries.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were adopted for conducting this study. Basically, data were collected from primary sources through field survey and secondary data sources were used for triangulation of data. The main tool of this study is qualitative survey which comprised of Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KII), Case Studies and Observation methods. In that research, three FGD and four KII have been conducted with relevant stakeholders as Bangladesh High Commission Officials in Singapore, Singaporean Recruiters, Journalist, Singaporean NGO, and Bangladeshi Migrants in Singapore.

Findings and Discussion

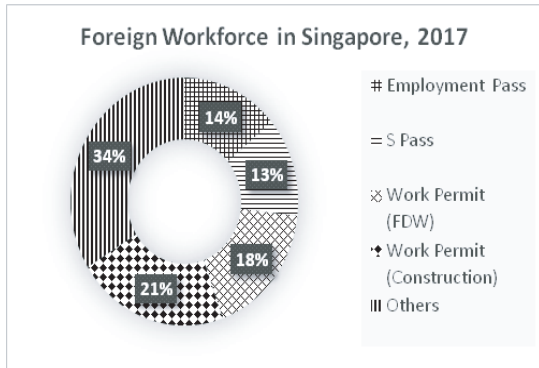
This portion has discussed the labor migration process in Singapore, faced challenges of Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore. Finally, have drawn the possible solutions of faced problems of Bangladeshi Migrants in Singapore and other destination countries.



Labor Migration Scenario in Singapore

The research have figured out there are three types of pass are in employment of foreign employees in Singapore. Work pass types includes as Employment Pass³, the S-Pass⁴, and the Work Permit⁵. There is no minimum salary for Work Permit holders. Work Permits may be renewed every one or two years. The migrant workers under Work Permit earn as low wages as S\$350 and S\$1500 per month, where Bangladeshi workers generally earn significantly lower salaries than their Chinese counterparts. The Work Permit holders are not entitled to bring their families to Singapore and face restrictions in marrying Singaporeans.

Singapore utilize the sponsorship employment system, also known as the *Kafala Sytem*,⁶ which makes a migrant's employment in Singapore contingent on sponsorship by a prospective employer.



While sponsorship systems are present in many countries of Middle East, by this system, workers do not have the rights to change jobs or employers without the sponsor's consent. In FGD we have revealed that in Singapore *"employers may cancel a worker's work permit and repatriate him at any time unless the worker has made or intends to make a salary or injury claim"*.

³. for professionals and executives who earn at least S\$ 3600 a month

⁴. for mid-skilled technical staff who earn at least S\$2,200 a month

⁵. for those primarily engaged in manual labor and domestic work

⁶. The recruitment of migrant workers to Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries is governed by the kafala system or sponsorship system. Under this system, a migrant has to be sponsored by a GCC citizen. The kafeel or sponsor (which may be the employer or distinct from the employer), assumes full economic and legal responsibility for the migrant worker during the contract period. A kafeel may be an individual, a placement agency, or a company. The system works such that the migrant worker can only work for a kafeel for a specific period. Kafeels often hold the worker's passport and other travel documents. The kafala system has given birth to the so-called visa trading. Visa trading involves the sale of a work visa.

Discretion over the validity of such claims rest with Ministry of Manpower (MOM). Employers are required to post S\$5,000 security bond before a Work Permit holder is allowed to enter Singapore. While this employer liability is discharged when a migrant worker returns home, the security bond is liable to be forfeited, if a migrant worker is not repatriated when required to leave or if the migrant worker absconds and remains illegally in Singapore. Employers must pay a monthly levy for each work permit holder they employ. Currently, the foreign worker levy ranges from S\$300 to S\$950 a month for each construction worker and S\$300 to S\$400 for each worker in the marine sector. According to KII it was informed that, migrant workers have claimed that their employees recover these cost through deduction from their salaries and through kickbacks. Inthe Singapore, salary and inquiry issues of migrant workers are regulated by a threefold legislation and their related regulations and policies; The Employment Act (EA), The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) and The Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA).

Bangladeshi Workers Scenario in Singapore

Through FGD and KII, research has identified the following issues which have brought the testimony of Bangladeshi workers'conditions in Singapore as;



In KII, the recruiter if Singapore said that the recruiting system of Bangladesh is manual and traditional. This system is making opportunity for miscreants to deceive aspirant migrants and it is another reason for increasing cost of migration cost.

In FGD it was revealed that the training centers in Bangladesh act as a sub agent in the Singapore Migration

Process. These centers are making the situation worse. They have admitted the student (aspirant migrant) in advance and more as well taken extra money. After completing the training they did not take final evaluation examination. During that time, they have taken mock test as well and collected extra fee from students. In that process, students have passed 1.5 to 2 years. After passing the examination they have to wait more than 1 to 2 years. In the meantime, aspirant migrants are giving bribe/kickbacks to the authority of training center for collecting IPA (In Principal Approval). In that process, an aspirant migrant has to give extra 1.5 to 2 lacs BDT before getting IPA. This is another reason on high migration cost in Singapore for Bangladeshi workers.

The IPA (In Principal Approval) has clearly mentioned the 1-2 years job duration but their law has provision on terminating employer on a short notice. The employer doesn't guarantee any single day job in Singapore.

In the observation method, it was figured out that nearly all Bangladeshi migrants of Singapore are now working as a Middleman. Bangladeshi agents/middleman are doing harms of Bangladeshi migrants. They have given extra time or money to recruiter for IPA. Afterwards they sale this IPA to his neighbor or relatives at a high cost. In that process migrants spend money on collecting IPA. Then they sold it at a high price, making financial benefits. In that way, the migration cost is increasing rapidly.

The study has observed that Bangladeshi workers' migration cost is higher than any other migrants in Singapore. It comes with a high investment but lowest output. A Bangladeshi migrant has to invest at least 3.5 to 5 lakh for coming to Singapore. In contrast, they receive only 14-20 Singaporean Dollar per day. Migrants' monthly cost is between S\$350-400 (Dormitory fee 200 Dollar, Mobile Cost 50 Dollar, Food 100 Dollar and Cloth and others 50 Dollar). So it is unrealistic to

expect them to reimburse the investment within 2 years even after 5 years.

The study has observed that the amount of wages of Bangladeshi workers is decreasing day by day in Singapore. For instance in twenty years ago the Bangladeshi Migrants started working with S\$19 per day but now it is decrease by S\$14 per day.

The study has figured out that Bangladeshi Migrants are working in construction sites and shipyards. A Migrant has to take three month long training in Singapore before working in shipyards. Construction workers may switch their job if company permitted but marine sector workers could not switch their job. If he terminates the contract, then he might have to go back to Bangladesh.

The study also figured out that Bangladeshi worker are not aware of their rights and they are comparatively low skilled of their counterparts. For that reason they get low wages. Singapore Government has continued to improve employee protections and clarify employer responsibilities. Many times victims have made verbal complaints on against their employers. They could not show any evidence or documents. In that context, the commission couldn't provide support to victim migrants. Even though they are reluctant to share the name of recruitment agencies and their details.

Alike, research has observed that Bangladesh Commission in Singapore has limit of power. For instance they have no attestation authority. If they have attestation authority, then have an option in negotiating increasing the benefits and rights of migrants with recruiter or employment agency.

Case Study

Bangladeshi workers faced mixed problems in Singapore. According to our observation and informal discussion with migrants and various

stakeholders we have identified some major problems as high migration cost, low and unpaid wages, harsh working environments, poor living conditions, indebtedness, sudden termination of employment, abandonment by employers, physical, psychological abuse, and forceful repatriation. As part of the study, we made several in-depth interviews form Bangladeshi migrants. Here we describe the story of one Imamul:

Imamul aged 32, due to limited work options in his village Habigang. Imamul felt an urgency to go abroad for work in search of a better, more prosperous life for himself and his family. But instead of tapping into a financial lifeline, he unwittingly found himself mired in debt bondage and deception and exploitation. Before he migrated to Singapore to help support his family. Imamul was already saddled with excessive debt to pay hefty and illegal recruitment fees and panic of irregular work in Singapore. A childhood friend he trusted, Altaf, a former construction worker in Singapore for a decade, had caught wind of Imamul's desire to go abroad. Posing as an agent, he promised Imamul a job that 26 S\$ per day as a construction site electric work. At first Altaf asked Imamul to pay 1527 S\$ (100000 BDT) in recruitment fees. In that context Imamul admitted on his Training Center as Named Naniyang Training Center, Kamar Para, Dhaka. In that training center he had learnt nothing. Just learning some basic communication of English. The trainer said that this enough. He was paid the amount. Within few days Altaf again asked to Imamul to pay extra more 1832 S\$ (1,20,000 BDT). In that situation, Imamul made a calculation that if he can stay in 02 years then the amount of money will reimburse. Afterwards, Imamul was agreed and pay out total 3359 S\$ (220,000 BDT). In that amid of time Imamul get IPA. This IPA was mentioned the wages is only 20S\$ in per day. In that context Imamul made a bargaining with Altaf and the agents of Training Center, Mr. Prince. The agents said the wage can increase in Singapore so do not worried on matter of wage. Imamul made the money transaction

through Bank and cash. After few days agency again asked 1527 S\$ (100,000 BDT) to Imamul. Imamul was frustrated and broken on demanding the new portion of money. He cannot find any solution or alteration. If he refuse the demand then the full money will lost. In that context, Imamul has requested his elder brother to sell his new Autorickshaw (CNG). Imamul brother cannot refused his appeal and sold his CNG in 2.4 lak BDT. Finally, Imamul paid total 320,000 BDT on Singapore purpose. After arrived in Singapore on December 2017, he saw the work agreement is only six month. In that context, Imamul trying to adjust his and starting work. But after one month the employer starting irregular work. In February' 2018 he only did 06 days wok. Though in his work agreement no work no pay. So, he becoming disappointed and frustrated. Because he have to pay 13000 BDT per month to Bank of his loan installment. He borrowed from the local Bank on paying the migration cost to Training Center. The confidence of Imamul was vanished at February 2018. Because on end of February the employer declared all employee have to go home leave in forced. But Imamul not want to go home leave. He scared within the vacant of home leave the employer will cancel his IPA. Then he never come to Singapore. And his all invested money will grab or loss. As well how he reimburse the borrowed money. In that context, Imamul and his co colleagues decided they will make a complain to Ministry of Manpower (MOM). In accordingly, they make a complain to MoM and MoM received their complain. Instantly, the employer trying to sit Imamul's and find out who is their leader. Imamul and his co colleagues are united they shared all are leaders. So the employer could not break the unity of Imamul's colleagues. Now Imamul and his colleagues are passing an uncertain life in Singapore. Imamaul's demand is if employers are sent back them to Bangladesh, then he demand to pay at least his invested money. Or give them a transfer letter. By transfer letter he will collect another job in Singapore.

Suggestions and Possible Solutions

The research has figured out the possible solutions of problems faced by migrants in Singapore as well as in other destination countries. All suggestions and possible solutions came from the FGD, KII and field observation. The portions have been described on four dimensions as;

Migrants Level

Aspirant migrants should be thinking well before coming to abroad. They must calculate the benefits in contrast to investment.

Migrants should be properly educated on working environment, conditions and benefits before coming to Singapore or any other destination country.

Migrants should preserve the receipts of any transaction on overseas process.

In regards, grievance mechanism worker should make complain in high commission with necessary evidence.

Recruiting Agency Level (RA's)

Recruiting agency (RA) should be responsive, accountable, and patriotic. They have to fix the minimal service fee (as not more than 50,000 BDT, like Indian agencies do).

There is a huge opportunity for Bangladeshi female workers in Singapore. Now only 350 Bangladeshi female migrants are working as housekeepers in Singapore (High Commission, Singapore). If we can strengthen the communication capability of female migrant workers, then we can ship out Bangladeshi female workers to Singapore. In that regard, RA should be hunting potential marketplace for Bangladeshi worker.

RA should follow the rate of cost which is fixed by government. For instance, Government has fixed the migration cost of Singapore at 262,270 BDT.

RA proposed to ship maid workers in Hong Kong besides Singapore in "zero migration cost". In that process deduct the

departure cost from the salary of two or three month after arrival.

After the period, she will receive full salary.

Employment agency will explore the potential labor market abroad. RA will develop a smart training module, guideline, fix the smart salary and work agreement with negotiation of respected Ministry, Recruiter, NGO and Aspirant Migrant.

NGO/CSO Level

Increase more awareness increasing activity on safe labor migration. Because the public has not enough information about the kind of services available. In that regards NGOs can play a vital role in informing the community on safe labor migration issue.

The Grievance Management Committee (GMC)⁷ model can replicate this in areas where the majority of migrants are coming from in Bangladesh. Then the marginalized community will get benefit as well as creating access to justice in locally. GMC can align with arbitration committer in roots.

Bangladeshi NGOs and Singapore NGOs should be working together on protecting the rights of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore. In addition to exchanging knowledge to each other, NGO's can develop an internal referral mechanism on keeping the interest of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore intact.

Government/High Commission/Embassy Level

Bangladesh High Commission in Singapore has provision on attestation authority. This provision may preserve the rights of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore.

The government has to promote business migrant, academic migrant and professional migrants, besides labor migrants. Also, it should take initiative on creating job opportunity locally.

⁷ GMC is a group of local social leaders which consists of 12-15 members. Most of the are members of UP. Project has increased their capacity through numerous training. Now they settling the overseas related complain in locally through social mediation

The government should take a bilateral discussion with the employers of Singapore on increasing the wages of Bangladeshi workers.

It should establish an Online Immigration System and develop a comprehensive biometric system for aspirant migrant. And direct link of this database should be established with Ministry of Manpower (MoM), Singapore. This process might reduce the cost of migration.

The government should monitor the training center activities in Bangladesh. As well as that it has to increase the capability and performance of Training Center.

The apps of PeopleGo⁸ could demonstrate in BMET, which may be incorporated in pre departure training.

Incorporate a QR code in SMART card.

Bangladesh government should negotiate with Singapore Recruiter on providing transfer letter to Bangladeshi workers, in case job is not available or irregular.

Conclusion

In today's increasingly interconnected world, international migration has become a reality that touches nearly all corners of the globe. Modern transportation has made it easier, cheaper, and faster for people to move in search for jobs, opportunities, education, and quality of life. In 2016, migrants from developing countries sent home an estimated US \$413 billion in remittances. Remittances constitute a significant source of household income that improves the livelihoods of families and communities through investments in education, health, sanitation, housing, and infrastructure.⁹ Despite these significant benefits of migration, some migrants remain among the

⁸ PeopleGo is a Mobile Virtual Community Touchpoint, partnering the Ministry of Manpower, for Migrant Workers in Singapore. This mobile application promotes communications between the Ministry, workers and the employers. With the PeopleGo mobile application, migrant workers in Singapore will have access to the latest news and happenings in Singapore, online e-Courses and Up-Skilling contents, a complete integrated social media platform and useful e-Services at their fingertips.

⁹ Calculations based on World Bank (2017)

most vulnerable members of society. Some work for less pay, for longer hours, and in worse conditions than native-born workers, some migrants endure human rights violations, abuse and discrimination (ADB, 2016). About 10 million Bangladeshis are now working in different countries across the world. Importance of overseas employment for the Bangladesh economy is clearly evident. Recognizing the contributions of the expatriate to the economy, we must give top most priority to the interest of expatriates as sustainable working source, particular for women, skilled workforce, matching skill demands with the destination country, low migration cost, safeguarding the rights of workers, strengthening the power of embassy/high commission, bilateral discussion with destination country, automation in recruitment process and strengthening the governance of migration. By these efforts we can assure safe orderly regular migration which contributes to the SDG target 10.7 and, as a result, Bangladesh moves forward towards becoming a middle-income country.

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