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FEMALE WORKFORCE MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH: SOURCES OF VULNERABILITY AND WAYS AHEAD

Abstract

Female workforce migration is a comparatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Like elsewhere, female workforce migration from Bangladesh has been associated with several concerns ranging from long working hours to sexual abuse. It is in this context that the paper aims to identify the sources of vulnerability of Bangladeshi female migrant workers abroad with a view to find ways ahead. The paper finds that vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi female migrant workers fall in two broad categories – internal and situational. Internal vulnerabilities originate from gender, age, and lack of capacity which includes low level of education and skill and lack of adaptive skills including food and language. These capacity related vulnerabilities, particularly the low level of education and skill reinforces their situational vulnerabilities through limiting their choice of jobs. On the other hand, situational vulnerability arises mainly from their type of jobs and destinations. The paper also finds that outright ban on female workforce migration might not solve the problem and such ban will also go against the will of the female migrants themselves. The paper suggests taking steps aimed at improving the composition of the female migrants and thereby improving their capacity and bringing in change in the type of jobs and destinations.

Keywords: Feminization of migration, Vulnerability of female migrant workers, Bangladesh female workforce migration trend, Bangladesh female workforce migration concerns.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, labour migration¹ has become an important policy priority both in developed destination countries and in less developed and developing source countries. Women are joining the migration flows in growing number, with important consequences for gender equality in countries of origin as well as in countries of destination. Migration of women, through creating or enhancing earning opportunities, contributes to their empowerment. It changes gender roles and responsibilities in the families of the female migrants. Although female migrant

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¹ In this paper the term migration refers to international migration only.

workers usually work in non-regulated sectors of the labour market and hence earn less than male migrants, they are often able to improve the economic position of their family and with it their own status, independence and decision-making power also increases within the family. This is more so for the female migrants who are the breadwinner of their family.

With more than 10 million expatriates, Bangladesh ranks fifth among the migrant origin countries and ninth among the remittance receiver countries of the world. Female workforce migration is, however, comparatively a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Till 2003, there was a ban on migration of semi-skilled and less skilled Bangladeshi female workers. Since lifting of the ban, share of women in total migration has been increasing gradually. At present, female migrant workers, most of whom work as domestic worker in the Middle East, account for 13.9 per cent of total migrants. Growth of female workforce migration is no doubt, a positive sign for women empowerment but as was the case with other countries, this increasing trend of women migration has been associated with growing concern over their safety, rights and wellbeing.

Safety of female migrants has been a concern for the country in the past few years. The issue will be of greater importance in the post Covid 19 pandemic period as the push factors of female workforce migration are likely to be strengthened in the post-Covid time. Estimations by various research organizations show that poverty situation is likely to deteriorate significantly.² Rise in incidence of poverty along with shrinking employment opportunity will not only drive more women of the country to seek livelihood abroad, it will also make them more desperate and thereby will encourage them to take more risky options.

On the demand side, despite the fact that the pandemic had compelled a good number of migrant workers of Bangladesh to return from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the major destination of Bangladeshi migrants irrespective of gender, and that there are apprehensions about deportation of a large number of migrants by the destination countries in their attempt to address their economic shocks, the demand for female migrant domestic workers is likely to continue in GCC countries. This is due to the segmented nature of their labour market,³ low

² Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) estimates an increase in national poverty rate from 24.3 per cent in 2016 to 35 per cent in 2020. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) also estimated similar impact.

³ Labour market of a country is called 'segmented labour market' when it is divided in primary labour market characterized by higher wage, better working condition, stability of employment and opportunity for improvement and secondary labour market characterized by absence of one or more of these desired features of employment. For detail about the segmented nature of labour market of the GCC countries, see, Martin Baldwin-Edwards, *Labour Immigration and Labour Markets in the GCC Countries: National Patterns and*

female participation rate in labour market and the strong social stigma prevailing in the GCC states towards the types of jobs in which the expatriates of Bangladesh, particularly the female ones are usually engaged in.

In this context, this paper aims to identify the sources of vulnerability of Bangladesh's female workforce migrants with a view to find the ways ahead. With this objective, the paper is organized as follows. Following introduction, section two describes the global perspective of female workforce migration. Section three presents the analytical framework and section four describes methodology. Section five examines the trend of female workforce migration from Bangladesh with a view to find whether it has any implication for the vulnerability of its female migrants. Section six highlights the concerns of the female migrants of Bangladesh. Section seven attempts to identify the sources of vulnerability of Bangladesh's female migrants while section eight endeavours to find the ways ahead. Section nine concludes the paper.

One distinguishing feature of the paper is that while identifying the sources of vulnerability as well as in suggesting ways ahead, besides secondary data and analysis, it also includes the migrants' perspective which is based on primary data collected through surveys and in-depth interviews.

2. Women in Migration Flow and Migration Literature: Global Perspective

The late twentieth century is characterized by many as the "age of migration". Liberalization of immigration policies by several developed countries in the 1960s, freedom of movement within the European Union in 1990s and tremendous advancement in communication and transportation infrastructure and technology contributed in significant increase in international migration in this period.⁴ Though women were increasingly participating in the migratory flow in this period, it did not translate into commensurate research attention till the 1980s. All leading migration theories of that time – neoclassical micro and macro migration theories⁵,

Trends, London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK, No. 15, March 2011; Ibrahim Mohamed Abdalla et. al., "Labour Policy and Determinants of Employment and Wages in a Developing Economy with Labour Shortage", *Labour*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, June 2010; Kevin Lang and William Dickens, "A Test of Dual Labor Market Theory", *American Economic Review*, February 1985.

⁴ Hania Zlotnik, "Trends of International Migration since 1965: What Existing Data Reveals", *International Migration*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 1999, p. 22.

⁵ See, W. Arthur Lewis, *Economic Development with Unlimited Supply of Labour*, The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies, 1954, available at http://faculty.smu.edu/tosang/pdf/Lewis_1954.pdf; accessed on 03 March 2021; Gustav Ranis and John C. H. Fei, "A Theory of Economic Development", *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4, September 1961, pp. 533-565; John R. Harris and Michael P. Todaro, "Migration, Unemployment and Development: A Two-Sector Analysis", *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1,

structuralist theories⁶, new economics theories⁷ and network theory⁸ were silent or indifferent towards female migrants. While scholars in the 1970s almost exclusively considered women to be a passive agent of migration, some scholars in the 1980s did acknowledge their bias, justifying it in the name of greater simplicity; for others, the exclusion was never addressed. Putting differently, women were ‘invisible’ in migration literature.⁹

Hania Zlotnik attributed this ‘invisibility’ of women to the widely held assumption that most migrants are male. She argued that such beliefs were rarely based on statistical evidence since then data on international migrants were not classified by sex. Based on the data released by the United Nations Population Division in 1998, she showed that already in 1960, female migrants accounted for nearly 47 per cent of total migratory flows.¹⁰ She observed that while up to 1980s, family re-union acted as a major driver of increasing female workforce migration, particularly from developing to developed countries,¹¹ there were instances where women were migrating on their own account. For example, Houstoun et. al. argued that since 1930, female migrants to the US had been outnumbering their male counterparts which cannot be explained by family reunion alone.¹²

1970, pp. 126-142; Larry A. Sjaastad, “The Costs and Returns of Human Migration”, *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. LXX, No. 5, October 1962 and Everett S. Lee, “A Theory of Migration”, *Demography*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1966, pp. 47-57.

⁶ See, Michael Burawoy, “The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material from Southern Africa and the United States”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 81, No. 5, March 1976, pp. 1050-1087; Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

⁷ See, Oded Stark and David Levhari, “On Migration and Risk in LDCs”, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 31, No. 1, October 1982, pp. 191-196; Oded Stark and David E. Bloom, “The New Economics of Labor Migration”, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2, Papers and Proceedings of the Ninety-Seventh Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association, May 1985, pp. 173-178.

⁸ See, Douglas S. Massey and Felipe García España, “The Social Process of International Migration”, *Science*, New Series, Vol. 237, No. 4816, August 1987, pp. 733-738.

⁹ See, Silvia Pedraza, “Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 17, 1991, pp. 303-325; Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler, “Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender In” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2003, pp. 812-846; Hania Zlotnik, “Trends of International Migration since 1965: What Existing Data Reveals”, *International Migration*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 1999.

¹⁰ Hania Zlotnik, “The Global Dimensions of Female Migration”, *Migration Policy Institute*, 01 March 2003, available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/global-dimensions-female-migration>, accessed on 27 January 2019.

¹¹ Hania Zlotnik, “The South-to-North Migration of Women”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 1995, p. 230.

¹² Marion F. Houstoun, Roger G. Kramer and Joan Mackin Barrett, “Female Predominance in Immigration to the United States Since 1930: A First Look”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. xviii, No. 4, 1984, p. 908.

With increasing participation of women in job market and associated changes in women's role in many societies, the progress of women emancipation process and growing number of female migrant workers, the previous perception of male dominated migration became increasingly arguable and the reduction of women as just passive agent of migration became outmoded.¹³ Thus, women started to be 'visible' in migration literature in the 1990s bringing into gender based approach in migration discussion and leading to the creation of the concept of 'feminization of migration'. While at the earlier stage of "feminization of migration", its proponents were primarily engaged in making women quantitatively visible in migration flow as well as in migration literature, later they engaged themselves in revisiting the arguments of the existing theories through a gender lens.¹⁴ Roberto Marinucci observes, "...what had extremely changed in the third millennium, more than the number of women who emigrate, was the way migratory reality is analyzed. Now, it is deeply conditioned by the gender point of view."¹⁵

Ninna Nyberg Sørensen holds that female workforce migration, as is seen today, is linked to new global economic transformations and the resulting restructuring of the labour force. In this process, she observes, new groups of migrants are emerging, including both young single women and female family breadwinners who move both independently and under the authority of older relatives.¹⁶ Thus, by the 1990s, women started migrating in far higher numbers, not only as family members but also as independent job seeker.¹⁷ In many countries of Asia and Africa, many female migrants became the primary wage earners of their families who worked abroad in the sectors like domestic service, care giving, nursing etc.¹⁸

Two things that acted as strong pull factor in the phenomenal growth of female workforce migration at the end of the previous century are: (i) women's increasing participation in labour market leading to increased demand for domestic workers and (ii) rise in ageing population in the developed world leading to demand for care-givers.¹⁹ These two factors, along with the failure of male members of

¹³ Roberto Marinucci, "Feminization of Migration?", *Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana*, Vol. 15, No. 29, 2007, p. 6.

¹⁴ Stephanie J. Nawyn, "Gender and Migration: Integrating Feminist Theory into Migration Studies", *Sociology Compass*, September 2010; Silvia Pedraza, op. cit.; Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler, op. cit.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, *Migrant Remittances, Development and Gender*, Dansk Institut For Internationale Studier Biref, July 2005, p. 2; Irena Omelaniuk, *Poverty Reduction and Migration*, World Bank, p.2.

¹⁷ Irena Omelaniuk, *ibid*

¹⁸ United Nations, *International Migration Policies 2013*, p. 28, available at http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/policy/InternationalMigrationPolicies2013/Report%20PDFs/g_Ch_1.pdf, accessed on 02 December 2018.

¹⁹ Tam O'Neil, Anjali Fleury and Marta Foresti, "Women on the Move: Migration, Gender Equality and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", *Policy Brief*, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), 04 July 2016, p. 05.

households as well as in filling the vacuum created by women's participation in labour force²⁰ and declining social welfare system in developed world gave rise to the phenomenon which have been termed by many as the "global care chain".²¹

On the supply side, poverty, lack of employment opportunity and gender discrimination in country of origin, wage differential and household strategy for augmenting household income etc. act as push factors for female migrants.²² Nana Oishi argues that besides the push factors mentioned above, social legitimacy or putting differently social attitude towards female workforce migration plays significant role.²³

A plethora of literature suggest that worldwide, women have benefited from migration in terms of income, status, autonomy, freedom and self-esteem that comes with employment abroad. As the UN World Survey puts it, migration may be an empowering experience for women. In the process of international migration, women may move away from situations where they are under traditional and patriarchal authority to situations in which they can exercise greater autonomy over their own lives".²⁴ Impact of female workforce migration on women empowerment is so significant that some female migrants even do not want to return to their country of origin. In a study on migrants of Dominican Republic, S. Grassmuck and P. R. Pessar found that while male migrants were eager to return, female migrants tended to postpone or avoid return because they realized that it would entail their retirement from work and the loss of their new-found freedoms.²⁵

Not only the female workers themselves, their countries also benefit from their migration. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) observes, "women tend to send a larger share of their income home and therefore in some countries female contributions constitute over 50 per cent of the total remittances."²⁶ Apart from foreign currency earning, origin countries also benefit from 'social remittance' which includes ideas, skills, attitudes and knowledge.²⁷

²⁰ Time-use surveys show that women in all countries spend more time on unpaid care than men, ranging from around 2 weeks more in the Nordic countries to more than 10 weeks more in Iraq, Mexico and Turkey. Source: Emma Samman et al., *Women's Work: Mothers, Children and the Global Childcare Crisis*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016.

²¹ Allison J. Petrozziello, *Gender on the Move: Working on the Migration Development Nexus from a Gender Perspective*, UN Women: Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 2013, pp. 131-136.

²² For a detailed review of literature on push factors, see, Nana Oishi, *Gender and Migration: An Integrative Approach, Working Paper*, No. 49, The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California: San Diego, March 2002.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration*, 2006, p. 02.

²⁵ Cited in Silvia Pedraza, op. cit., p. 310.

²⁶ UNFPA, *A Passage to Hope: Women and International Migration*, 2006.

²⁷ Ibid.

Female workforce migration has its challenges too. Discrimination, inadequate rights protection, policies barring women from migrating legally and safely, modern forms of slavery like sex or domestic work and trafficking are only some of them. Although these concerns are common for both male and female migrants, generally, female migrants tend to be more exposed to discrimination, exploitation and abuse.

The prime reason of women migrants' vulnerability compared to their male counterparts is the nature of labour market at destination countries which 'reproduces the gender division of labour'. While men migrants are engaged in a variety of jobs ranging from low to high-skilled jobs, female migrants are concentrated in a limited number of occupations. According to an International Labour Organization (ILO) report, about three fourth of female migrants find jobs in service sector.²⁸ Within service sector, the jobs usually offered to female migrants are domestic worker, nurse, caregiver, restaurant and hotel staff, cleaner, sales girl, entertainer, garments worker etc. ²⁹ Except for the case of nurses, skilled/highly skilled migrant women are relatively invisible. For example, in Japan, the only regular occupation available for temporary female migrants is entertainer. Another example is Canada where the Live-in Caregivers Program ensures that for a great number of women, no matter how high professional qualification they have, the only way to enter the country is as a caregiver.³⁰

Thus, most of the jobs in which the female migrants are concentrated, are mere extension of female traditional role of care giving and housework.³¹ Domestic and caregiving work are less socially valued than other types of work which is reflected in lower pay and fewer labour regulations compared with other sectors.³² These types of jobs put the female migrant in a vulnerable situation because these jobs usually fall in the category of informal economic activity and hence, in many cases are not covered or are covered partially by the labour legislation of the destination country.³³ For example, 40 per cent of countries do not offer protection for domestic workers within national labour laws.³⁴ Female workers, engaged in these jobs, are therefore exposed to violation of some basic labour rights like minimum working hour, weekly or yearly holidays, freedom of movement, freedom of communication,

²⁸ ILO, *ILO Global Estimates on Migrant Workers: Special Focus on Migrant Domestic Workers*, Department of Statistics, 2015, p. 08.

²⁹ ILO, *Preventing Discrimination, Exploitation and Abuse of Women Migrants: An Information Guide, Booklet*, No. 4, 2003, p. 10.

³⁰ Caritas, "The Female Face of Migration", 17 February 2012, p. 07.

³¹ ILO, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³² Allison J. Petrozziello, *op. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁴ UN Women, *Factsheet: Domestic Work and Migration in Asia*, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2012.

regularity of payment etc. The situation becomes more precarious in the case of domestic workers who comprise 12.7 per cent of total female migrants or more than one sixth of the female migrant workers engaged in service sector.³⁵ Due to individualized character of their job and isolated environment, they remain away from the public eye and escape official inspection.

Thus, due to the informal and isolated character of jobs, female migrants are exploited in a number of ways such as: very low wage, withholding of wage, very long working hour/ work overload, engaging in two or more jobs while paid for one, no rest day or holiday, inadequate food etc. Female migrants are also highly vulnerable to harassment, abuse and violence.³⁶

In summary, it can be said that though over the last three decades, female migrants became more visible both quantitatively and qualitatively, till today, it remained to be a mixed blessing. It has empowered women but this empowerment is still associated with formidable challenges, particularly in cases where the female migrant work in an informal sector like that of a domestic worker.

3. Vulnerability of Female Labour Migrants: Concepts and Analytical Framework

Reviewing the existing literature, Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds identified two broad approaches to vulnerability.³⁷ The first approach defines vulnerability as “the capacity to suffer that is inherent in human embodiment”. According to this view, “to be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering.” Thus, to them, vulnerability is an ontological condition of the humanity. The second approach, in contrast, considers vulnerability to be essentially relational and emphasizes on “contingent susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others”. According to the second view, “although everyone is potentially vulnerable to such threats, what makes some persons or groups especially so vulnerable is their lack of or diminished capacity to protect themselves.” This lack of or diminished capacity arises from inequalities of power, dependency, capacity and need.

³⁵ ILO, op. cit., p. 08.

³⁶ Anjali Fleury, *Understanding Women and Migration: A Literature Review, KNOMAD Working Paper*, No. 8. Washington DC: The World Bank/ Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), 2016; Nicola Piper, *Gender and Migration*. Background paper for Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), 2005; Nana Oishi, op. cit.

³⁷ C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers and S. Dodds, “What Is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?”, in C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers and S. Dodds (eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds proposes three sources of vulnerability – inherent, situational and pathogenic. Inherent vulnerability refers to sources of vulnerability that are intrinsic to the human condition such as hunger, thirst, emotional hostility, social isolation etc. Situational vulnerability is context specific and may be caused by personal, social, political, economic or environmental situations of individuals or groups. Pathogenic vulnerability, which they defined as a subset of situational vulnerability, arises when one vulnerability perpetuates another type of vulnerability.³⁸

International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines the vulnerability of migrants as the limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm where the limited capacity is the result of the unique interaction of individual, household, community, and structural characteristics and conditions.³⁹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights⁴⁰ categorizes the vulnerability of migrants in a fashion similar to Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds. According to the Principles and Practice Guidance on the Protection of the Human Rights of Migrants in Vulnerable Situation, vulnerability of migrants is of two types – situational (external) and embodied (internal). The first type of vulnerability arises from situational/external condition in origin, en route or in destination. This includes poverty, lack of access to fundamental human rights like education and discrimination in origin country, trafficking, hostile situation and poor human rights practice in destination etc. The second type is related to various aspects of a person's identity or circumstances which includes age, gender, physical or mental disability, race, colour, religion etc.

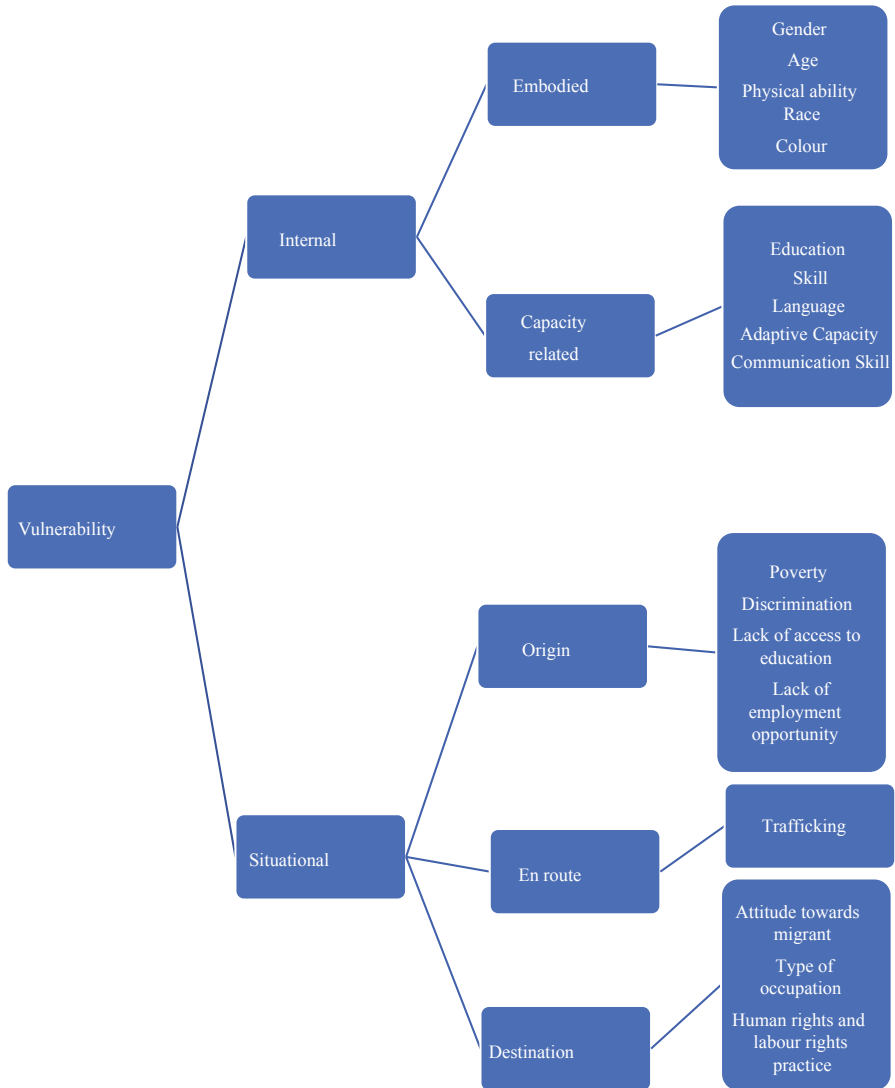
In light of the above discussion and drawing upon the global experience of female labour migration as depicted in section two, the present paper proposes the following framework of analyzing the vulnerability of female migrants which will be used to identify the sources of vulnerability of female migrants of Bangladesh.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹Key Migration Terms, available at <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#Vulnerability>, accessed on 12 December 2019.

⁴⁰ UNGA, *The Principles and Practice Guidance on the Protection of the Human Rights of Migrants in Vulnerable Situation*, January 2017, pp. 5-6.

Figure 1: Framework for Analyzing Vulnerability of Female Migrants



4. Methodology

This study uses both primary and secondary data. For secondary data, it consults various journal articles, books, research reports and other documents as well as newspaper reports. Primary data has been collected through survey and in-depth interview method.

For survey, two districts of Bangladesh were chosen purposively. Those were Narsingdi and Cumilla, the seventh and tenth highest female worker sending districts. In each sample area, the research team arrived at Technical Training Center (TTC) at a date which was the last date of the three-day pre-departure training of a batch. In the selected areas, each batch contains 100-200 aspirant migrants. As the number of participants is quite high, each of these batches is expected to be representative of aspirant migrant community of that area. From such batches, a certain number of male and female migrants were selected randomly. In case of returnee migrants, in each area, the interviewees were selected with the help of a migration based Civil Society Organization (CSO) working in that area.

A total of 30 aspirant and 15 returnee female migrants were interviewed. The survey was conducted using structured questionnaire. Besides the author has taken Key Informant Interviews (KII) of 6 government officials to have deeper insight, particularly about the role played by the government. The author has also conducted a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with 9 returnee female migrants at Narsingdi. Table 1 shows the list of respondents of survey and in-depth interviews. It can be mentioned here that these surveys and interviews were conducted under the leadership of the author as a part of “Fairer Labour Migration” programme of WARBE Development Foundation, an active migration based CSO of Bangladesh.

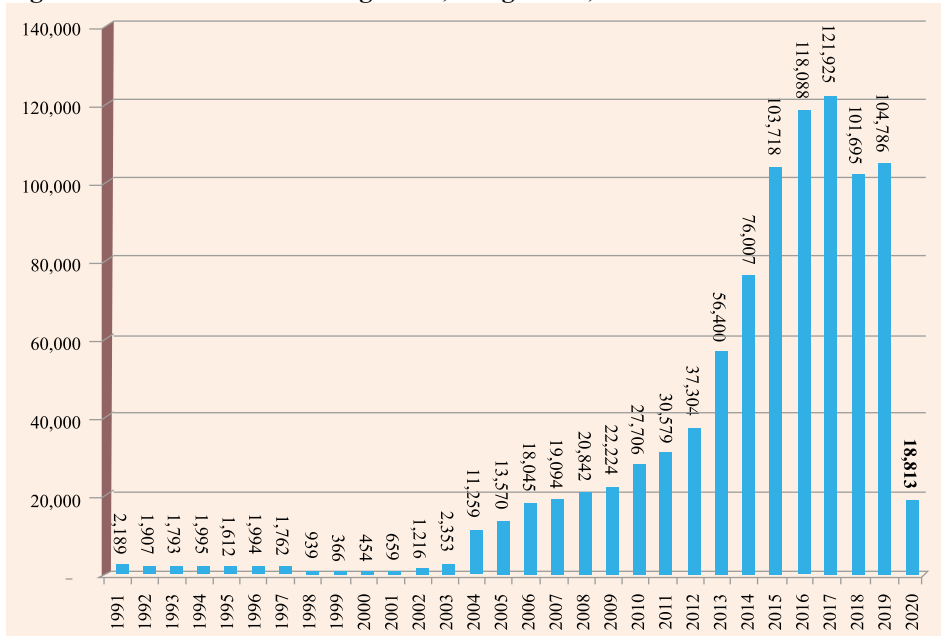
Table 1: List of Respondents

Survey		KII	
Type of Migrant	No.	Institution	No.
Aspirant (female)	30	Technical Training Center, Cumilla	1
Returnee (female)	15	Technical Training Center, Jhalkathi	1
Total female	45	DEMO, Cumilla	1
Male (aspirant and returnee)	73	BMET	2
		BOESL	1

5. Female workforce migration from Bangladesh: What the Trend Says

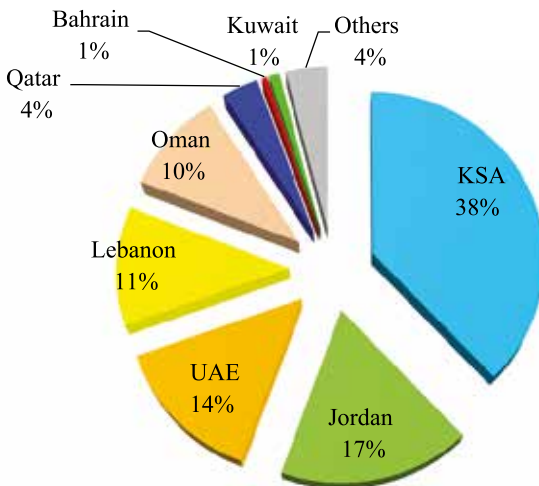
In 1981, the government of Bangladesh imposed a ban on migration of semi-skilled and unskilled women. After being revised twice in 1988 and 1997, the ban on unskilled and semi-skilled female workers was lifted in 2003. An age limit is, however, in place for unskilled and semi-skilled female workers; 25 years for domestic and Garments worker and 35 years for others. Figure 1 and 2 show the trend of female workforce migration and their composition by destination country. One can see that Bangladeshi female migrants, like their male counterparts, are highly concentrated in the Middle East which account for about 90 per cent of the country’s female migrants.

Figure 2: Female workforce migration, Bangladesh, 1991-2020⁴¹



Source: BMET, available at <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>, accessed on 10 December 2019.

Figure 3: Composition of female migrants by destination country, Bangladesh, 2020

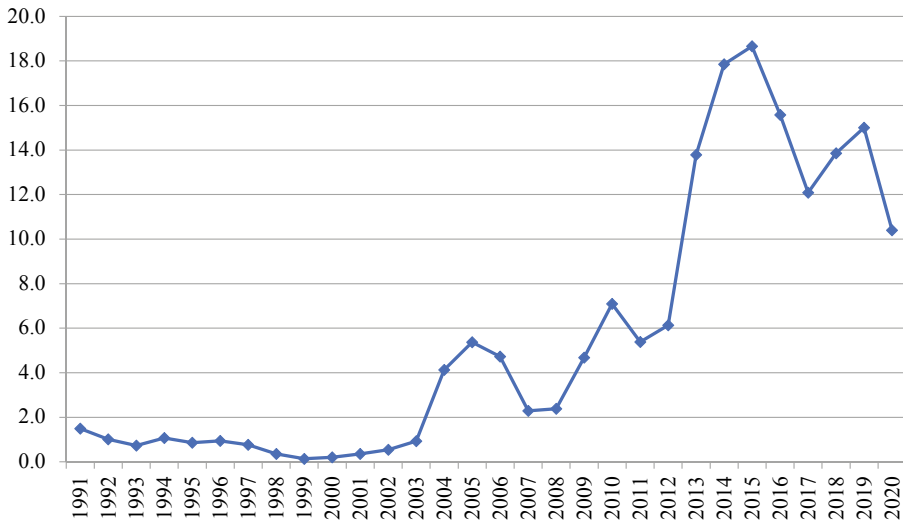


Source: BMET, available at <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>, accessed on 10 December 2019.

⁴¹ Note: Data for 2020 covers up to May 2020.

Since the lifting of ban on migration of unskilled and semi-skilled female workers in 2003, female workforce migration from Bangladesh has been gradually increasing. It attained a new height and pace in 2013 when the female share in total overseas employment jumped from 6 per cent to about 14 per cent (see Figure 3). This rise was largely driven by increased migration of Bangladeshi women to some of the Middle Eastern countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Jordan and Lebanon as domestic workers. Female workforce migration received further impetus in 2015 when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) opted for recruitment of a huge number of female domestic workers from Bangladesh. Female workforce migration from Bangladesh saw the sharpest rise in 2017 which was largely due to higher recruitment by the KSA.

Figure 4: Percentage Share of Female in Total Migration, Bangladesh, 1991-2020⁴²



Source: BMET, available at <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>, accessed on 10 December 2019.

This rise in the number of Bangladeshi domestic workers in the Middle East took place at a time when other major source countries were barring their female workers from going to the Middle East as domestic worker over the allegation of abuse and exploitation. For example, Indonesia imposed temporary ban on sending domestic workers to the Middle East during the period 2011-2013;⁴³ Kenya stopped

⁴² The year 2020 should be considered here with caution. This is because (i) data for 2020 covers up to May 2020 and (ii) due to Covid 19 pandemic, 2020 has been an unusual year for migration. The reader can note that despite the facts mentioned above, share of female in total migration is far from insignificant.

⁴³ “Indonesia to allow maids to work in Middle East again”, *Asia Times*, 01 June 2018.

sending its citizens to the Middle East in 2012 and even suspended the licenses of the recruiting firms that continued sending its citizens there;⁴⁴ Nepal put age limit for Middle East bound female workers in 2012.⁴⁵

Same applies for the boost of Bangladeshi female workforce migration to the Saudi Arabia in recent years. In 2015, Indonesia imposed a total ban for 21 countries including countries of the Middle East after the Saudi government sentenced two Indonesian domestic workers to death.⁴⁶ In that same year, the government of Kenya, to protect its female workers from being abused, made it mandatory for the female domestic workers willing to work in the Middle Eastern countries to get approval of its foreign ministry. In this context of crisis over female domestic worker that the Saudi Arabia lifted its 7 years ban on Bangladeshi labours in 2015 and proposed to recruit 400,000 Bangladeshi labours on the condition that half of them must be female domestic workers. In fact, Saudi Arabia at first proposed to take female domestic workers only but upon negotiation later agreed to take male workers as well.⁴⁷ Finally, it was agreed by both countries that female domestic worker will comprise 25 per cent of total labour sent from Bangladesh.

Responding to the demand from Saudi Arabia, a total of 20,952 Bangladeshi women migrated to the country in 2015. The number more than tripled in just one year reaching to 68,286 in 2016, and then further went up to 83,354 in 2017. Female workforce migration to Saudi Arabia, however, reduced in the following years to 73,713 in 2018 and 62,578 in 2019. In absence of specific study, it cannot be said for sure what was the reason of this decline but the hue and cry created in 2018 following the return of hundreds of female migrants from the KSA after facing horrible plight, might have played a role.⁴⁸

As noted before, the spectacular rise in Bangladesh's female workforce migration took place at a time when the Middle Eastern countries were facing a shortage of domestic workers due to restriction imposed by other female worker sending countries. While some women from these countries still emigrated through irregular channels after the placement of bans and restrictions, the total number of migrant women declined significantly. Although an official figure of irregular migrant women does not exist, many reports indicate acute labour shortages for

⁴⁴ "Kenya tackles abuse of migrant domestic workers in the Middle East", *News Deeply*, 14 December 2017.

⁴⁵ "Nepal bans women under 30 from working in Gulf states", *CNN*, 10 August 2012.

⁴⁶ "Indonesia to allow maids to work in Middle East again", *Asia Times*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ "Saudis want 4 lakh workers", *The Daily Star*, 07 January 2016.

⁴⁸ In 2020, due to the unusual situation created by Covid 19 pandemic, worldwide the scale of migration was unusually low irrespective of gender, destination and origin. Hence, the year 2020 has been excluded from the present discussion.

domestic workers in the Middle East, causing serious problems.⁴⁹ Some Arab countries turned to Ethiopia as a new source of domestic workers but Ethiopia too, banned the migration of domestic workers in 2012 because of the maltreatment of Ethiopian women in the Middle East.

It therefore, can be concluded that the recent boost in Bangladesh's female workforce migration to the Middle East has taken place in the vacuum created by withdrawal of other countries. The rise in migration of Bangladeshi women, therefore, is not necessarily a sign of strength or competitiveness of the outbound female workforce. Rather, it can be cited as another example of global trend where the labour receiving countries replace the more expensive and rights conscious labour pool with a less expensive, more docile and less rights conscious one. Similar was the case with Taiwan and Hong Kong who replaced Philippino domestic workers with those from Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.⁵⁰ Also, it seems that expansion of female workforce migration took place in Bangladesh in a hurried manner. This might have resulted in some lacuna in the preparatory stage of female workforce migration governance with probable implications for the female migrants.

6. The Concerns

Like elsewhere, female migrants of Bangladesh have been contributing in a number of ways from economic uplift of their families to bringing in changes in the mindset of community people regarding female's role in family and society to economic development of the country through bringing valuable foreign currency. But, like their global counterpart, Bangladeshi female migrants also had to face formidable challenges in their journey to economic betterment and empowerment through migration.

Bangladeshi women who migrated abroad, are mostly engaged in low paid domestic work. A study conducted by Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA) in two districts of Bangladesh in 2011 found the average salary of a female migrant to be as low as BDT 10,713. The study also found that among the sample of 200 returnee female migrants, almost 35 per cent received salary between BDT 5,000 to 8,000 and another 30 per cent received between BDT 8,000 to 12,000. Moreover, most of the respondents reported that they received salary irregularly.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Nana Oishi, "Gender and Migration Policies in Asia", in David Tittensor and Fethi Mansouri (ed.), *The Politics of Women and Migration in the Global South*, Melbourne, Australia: Palgrave Macmillan 2007, p. 40.

⁵⁰ Nicola Piper, op. cit., pp. 1296-1297.

⁵¹ BOMSA, *Situation of Women Migrants in Bangladesh*, 2013, p. 24.

As explained in the previous section, domestic workers are among the most exploited and abused workers in the world. Therefore, it was no surprise that soon after Bangladesh started sending female domestic workers to the Middle East in droves, news of their being abused and exploited began to surface in the media. It rose to a new height in 2018 when news of horrible plight of Bangladeshi female migrants working as domestic workers in the Middle East started to be published regularly in newspapers, TV channels and other media. Allegations included long working hours (which in some cases were extended to 14-18 hours a day), no rest day over the week, non-payment and irregular payment of wages, giving insufficient food (in some cases, only once a day), withholding food as punishment, verbal and physical abuse and on the extreme sexual abuse and even rape. Kafala system and the practice of taking away worker's passport by the employer make the situation worse because it prevents the workers from changing employer and runaway becomes the only solution.

Facing the abuse and exploitations, hundreds of Bangladeshi female domestic workers escaped and took shelter at the safe home run by Bangladesh Embassy in Riyadh. In 2017 alone, 2,906 female workers took shelter at the safe home in Riyadh most of whom were later sent back to Bangladesh.⁵² According to BRAC, since 2015 at least 6,500 Bangladeshi domestic workers have returned from Saudi Arabia.⁵³

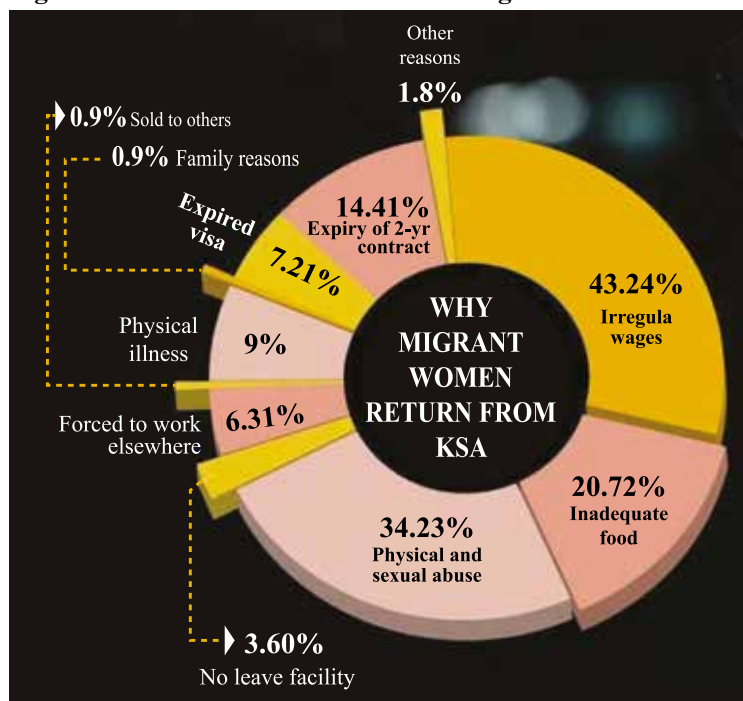
In their attempt to find out the causes of return of female migrants, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment (MEWOE) of Bangladesh investigated 111 cases of returning female workers where they found that 35 per cent of them were victims of sexual, and physical abuse, while 43 per cent received irregular wages. The report identified 11 fundamental reasons why Bangladeshi migrant women fled their workplace which included physical and sexual abuse, inadequate food, no leave, and irregular salaries.⁵⁴

⁵² "No end to women expatriate workers' plight", *The Daily Star*, 03 May 2018.

⁵³ Dreams turn into nightmare for female worker", *Prothom Alo* (English), 08 September 2018.

⁵⁴ "Bangladesh's latest challenge: Securing migrant women's rights", *Dhaka Tribune*, 30 September 2019.

Figure 5: Causes of Return of Female Migrants from the KSA



Source: “Bangladesh’s latest challenge: Securing migrant women’s rights”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 30 September 2019.

Findings of Bangladesh government closely resembles the finding of Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment in 2000 which reported that 20 per cent of the complaints received by them from female migrant workers were for harassment at work, a significant part of whom were subject to sexual harassment.

The present study also got similar result. In the survey, the respondents were asked how many of the female migrants face various problems abroad. Two third of them responded that half or more of the female migrants face various types of problems abroad. When further asked what type of problem the female migrants usually face, out of 26 respondents, 16 reported about wage related problem, 11 reported about various types of physical and mental torture, 7 reported about food problem and 4 reported language problem.

From the findings of the studies including the present one, it can be concluded that though female workforce migration has benefitted Bangladeshi women in terms of economic gain and empowerment, for many of them, this is not without costs. The findings also suggest that wage related problem is more frequent than physical torture or sexual abuse. There is, however, no scope

to undermine the gravity of the latter problem. The bottom line is both the problems deserve equal attention. Attention should also be given to food and language problem which indicate lack of adaptive capacity and preparedness for migration.

7. Sources of Vulnerability

This section attempts to identify the sources of vulnerability of Bangladesh's female migrants.

7.1 Low Profile of Female Migrants

Earlier researches suggest that compared to their male counterparts, female migrants of Bangladesh come from poorer households. Rita Afsar, in her study on four areas of Bangladesh in 2008 found that almost all the sample female migrants came from landless family while only 25 per cent of male migrants were from landless family. She also found that prior to migration, the mean family income of female migrants was only 60 per cent of mean family income of male migrants.⁵⁵ In Sri Lanka too, it was found that while male migrants are drawn from the middle and upper economic strata, nearly half of the women migrant households were near or below poverty line.⁵⁶

Lower land ownership and household income of female migrants perpetuates their weaker situation as it makes them desperate and ready to accept various maltreatments at the workplace such as long hour of work, deferment or delay of payment, inadequate food and other facilities etc. The present study also identified desperateness among the female migrants. In the survey, out of 22 respondents, 20 (returnees and aspirants) female migrants expressed the view that in their community, there is strong social stigma against female workforce migration but when asked whether they would migrate/re-migrate despite such stigma, 17 out of 24 respondents replied in positive. When further asked, should female workforce migration be banned due to the problems faced abroad? they opposed such ban on the ground that overseas employment is the source of survival for the families of many poor women. For the employers, such a pool of desperate workers is easy to exploit and deprive.

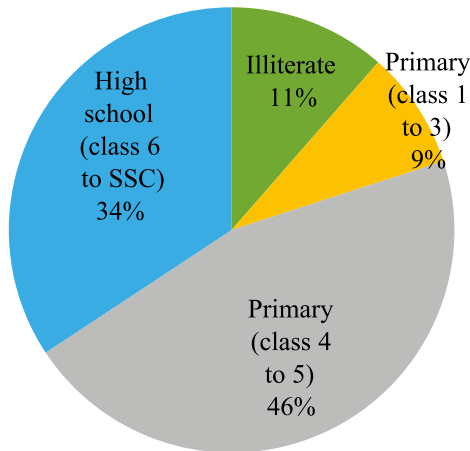
⁵⁵ Rita Afsar, *Unraveling the vicious cycle of recruitment: Labor migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf States*, Working Paper, No. 63, International Labor Organization (ILO), Geneva: ILO, 2009, p. 08.

⁵⁶ Rita Afsar, "Contextualizing Gender and Migration in South Asia: Critical Insights", *Gender, Technology and Development*, Vol. 15, Issue 3, 2011, pp. 393-394.

7.2 Low Educational Attainment

The situation becomes worse when the female migrant, desperate to earn to run her family, is also less educated or even illiterate. The present study found that 11 per cent of female migrants were illiterate, 9 per cent had 1-3 years of schooling, 46 per cent had 5 years of schooling and 34 per cent had secondary education. In contrast to 32 per cent of sample male migrants having tertiary education, none of the female migrants had that level of education.

Figure 6: Distribution of Female Migrants by Education



In her study mentioned before, Rita Afsar also found asymmetry between educational attainment of male and female migrants. None of the women migrants in her sample had obtained high school education, while about a tenth of their male counterparts had done so. Findings of the present study suggest that the situation did not change even after a decade although number of female migrants has increased significantly by this time.

Educational attainment of Bangladeshi female migrants is lower compared to other female worker sending countries like Sri Lanka and Philippines. Among Sri Lankan female migrants, 20 per cent have primary education, 45 per cent have secondary and another 25 per cent have tertiary education which means 70 per cent of the Sri Lankan female migrants have secondary or higher level of education compared to 34 per cent of Bangladeshi female migrants.⁵⁷ Female

⁵⁷ Tasneem Siddiqui, “Migration and Gender in Asia”, Background paper for United Nations Expert Group

migrants of Philippines are even more educated; 36 per cent of them are either college graduate or undergraduate.⁵⁸

Lower educational attainment makes Bangladeshi female migrants more vulnerable compared to their fellow migrants from countries by Sri Lanka and Philippines. While Philippine and Sri Lankan government express concern time to time about the safety and working condition of their female migrants working in the Middle East, the vulnerability of far less educated Bangladeshi female migrants is easily conceivable. The situation is likely to be worse for the illiterate migrants who constitute 11 per cent of the female migrants of the country. Although, three years of schooling is mandatory for female migrants of Bangladesh, it seems that being lured by and with the help of unscrupulous *dalals* and recruiting agents, many illiterate women are escaping the law knowingly or unknowingly and thereby throwing themselves in an insecure condition.

7.3 Type of Jobs

As explained in section 2, globally, the principle reason of vulnerability of female migrants is that majority of them work in informal sector with a great majority working as domestic workers or care givers. It was also discussed before that exploitation and abuse of domestic workers is a global phenomenon.

Box 1 illustrates how domestic workers are left out of existing labour laws in countries all over the world ranging from Jordan of Middle East to developed Japan to welfare state Norway. It also shows how the sufferings of the female domestic workers, mentioned in section 4, are quite justified in the eyes of the laws of many destination countries.

Meeting on International Migration and Development in Asia and the Pacific, 19 September 2008.

⁵⁸ Ranjana Kumari and Ishrat Shamim, *Gender Dimensions of International Migration from Bangladesh and India: Socio Economic Impact on Families Left Behind*, CSR, CWCS and SANEI, 2007, p. 10

Box 1: Examples of National legislation excluding domestic workers from its application

Jordan: The Labour Code 1996 states “the provisions of this Code shall apply to all workers and employers, except domestic servants, gardeners, cooks and the like.

Qatar: The Labour Act, 1962 states: “The provisions of this Act do not apply to persons employed as domestic help in private homes such as drivers, governesses, cooks, gardeners and similar workers.

Sudan: The Labour Code, 1997 cites: “domestic workers shall be excluded from the application of the provisions of this Code”.

Japan: Labour Standards Law, 1995 stipulates: This Law applies to the enterprises and places of business listed in each of the items below; provided, however, that it does not apply to any enterprise or place of business employing only relatives living with the employer as family members nor to domestic employees”.

Korea: The Labour Standards Act, 1997 states: “This Act shall not apply to any business or workplace which employs only relatives living together, and to a worker who is hired for domestic work.

Malaysia: The Employment Act, 1955 stipulates that the provisions on Rest Days, Hours of Work, Holidays and other Conditions of Service are not applicable to persons engaged as domestic servants.

United States of America: The National Labour Relations Act cites that “the term employee shall not include any individual employed as an agricultural worker, or in the domestic service of any family or person at his home”.

Norway: Working Environment Act, 1977 specifies: “The Crown shall decide whether and to what extent this Act shall be applicable to work performed in the employee’s home. The Crown may further decide that the rules of this Act shall apply, wholly or in part, to workers who carry out domestic work, care or nursing in the home or household of private employers, and may in this connection stipulate particular regulations for such employees”

Costa Rica: While an employer under the Labour Code shall not require an employee to work for more than 40 hours a week, she/he is allowed to require a 12-hour working day of a domestic helper, and 4 additional daily working hours if considered necessary.

Grenada: The Employment Act of 1999 specifies that while an agricultural worker, construction worker or industrial worker should not work more than 40 hours a week, a domestic worker is by law required to work a 60-hour working week.

Source: J.M. Ramirez-Machado, *Domestic Work, Conditions of Work and Employment: A Legal Perspective* (Geneva, ILO Conditions of Work Branch, 2000, unpublished document), cited in ILO, Information Guide, op. cit.

Table 2 shows that more than 85 per cent of Bangladeshi female migrants work as domestic worker. In light of the previous discussion, it can be said that as long as Bangladeshi female migrants are engaged in domestic service which, by nature, is individualized, isolated and out of ambit of existing labour laws in many destination countries, their vulnerability is expected to continue.

Table 2: Women migration by major occupation from 2006-2011

Occupation	Number of Female Migrant Workers
Housemaid/Housekeeping	94623
Readymade Garment Industry	11827
Cleaner	4749
General Labour/Gardener	16941
Baby Sitter	1893
Total	130033

Source: BMET Database, cited in *Situation of Women Migrants in Bangladesh*, 2011, p. 16.

7.4 Nature of Destination

The vulnerability of female migrant workers increases manifold when they work in countries with poor records of labour rights. And, this is what happened to Bangladeshi female migrant workers.

Though working condition and labour rights situation for domestic workers is comparatively better in the Southeast Asian labour receiving countries like South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia, those labour markets are so far dominated by other advanced female worker sending countries like Philippines and Indonesia. In those countries, Bangladeshi female workers lag behind others due to language and cultural barrier along with comparatively lower level of education and skill. Same applies for immigration to Western developed destination countries. The limitations of Bangladeshi female migrants leave them with the only option of the Middle East, a region with poor record of labour rights. For an idea about the labour situation of the Middle East, one example can be given. A survey by the Maid Welfare Center found that in Saudi Arabia, every day about 80 to 120 maids run away from their sponsors.⁵⁹

As high as 90 per cent of Bangladesh’s female migrants as well as 80 per cent of its male migrants work in the Middle East, particularly in the GCC countries. For two reasons, over dependence on Middle East is a major challenge

⁵⁹ “5000 maids run away in Saudi in 6 months”, *Arab Business*, 03 January 2014, available at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/5-000-maids-run-away-in-saudi-in-6-mths-552603.html>, accessed on 15 September 2020.

for Bangladesh's labour migration. First, too much dependence on the region erodes the bargaining power of Bangladesh vis-à-vis. Second, the treatment that labour migrants get in the Middle East is not very encouraging. The Kafala system puts the migrant labours in a situation which is termed by many rights groups as 'modern day slavery'.

Kafala system allows the employer to confiscate the passport and other documents of migrant worker and bars the latter from changing job or leaving country without permission of the former. The system thus fosters the condition for exploitation and abuse of migrant workers.⁶⁰ It compels the female migrants to continue the job under the repressive situation.

Kafala system has long been criticized by the Migrants Rights advocates. Amid criticism, some GCC countries have vowed to abolish or modify the system many a times but have done little so far, Bahrain being the only exception. Still, in the KSA, migrant workers need permission of the employer to leave the country.⁶¹ And, in all GCC countries, except Bahrain, migrant workers still cannot change their employer and the latter can still hold the legal documents which deprives the migrant workers from their freedom of movement and leaves them at the mercy of the employer.⁶² This explains the high rate at which female domestic workers run away from the countries of Middle East. As long as this Kafala system exists, all migrant labours irrespective of gender and country of origin are expected to remain in a vulnerable situation.

Thus, the composition of Bangladeshi female migrant workers – their financially poor background and low educational attainment, the type of job they are engaged and the nature of the destination country where they work – make them susceptible to various types of exploitation and abuses.

The Bangladesh case, thus, fits well in the framework for analyzing vulnerability of female migrants as proposed in this paper. Following the global pattern, the vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi female migrants fall in two broad categories – internal and situational. Internal vulnerabilities can further be divided in two groups – capacity related vulnerability and embodied vulnerability.

Like their global counterparts, female migrants from Bangladesh have embodied vulnerabilities which is related to gender, age, race and colour. Being

⁶⁰ Kafala contradicts with various international conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

⁶¹ National Alliance for Migrants' Rights Bangladesh, "Reforming the Kafala System for Promotion of Migrant Workers' Rights: The Momentum of the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar", *Policy Brief*, 03 March 2015.

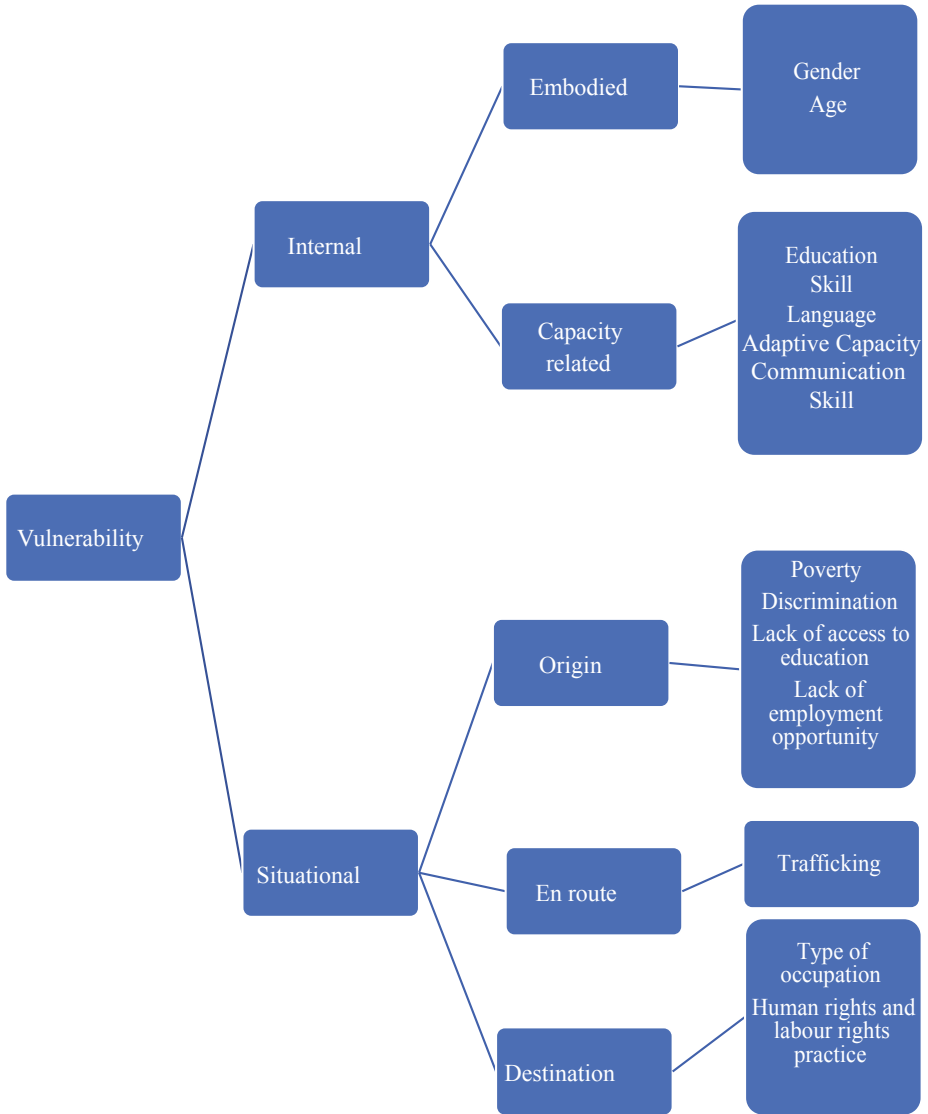
⁶² Ibid.

woman, itself makes them vulnerable, be it at home and abroad. Globally, women of reproductive age are more vulnerable compared to other age groups. Female migrants from Bangladesh, like their fellow migrants, fall in the reproductive age category and this adds to their vulnerability.

Female migrant workers from Bangladesh also suffer heavily from capacity related vulnerabilities. They are vulnerable due to low level of education and skill and lack of adaptive skills including food and language and lack of communication skill which is the outcome of their overall low level of education and skill. These capacity related vulnerabilities, particularly the low level of education and skill reinforces their situational vulnerabilities. Without skill training, most of them have no alternative but to work as domestic worker which, due to its informal setting, remains out of the purview of inspection and is not covered by laws in many countries. Their type of job in turn gives rise to situational vulnerability.

Another important source of situational vulnerability for Bangladeshi female migrants is the nature of their destination which is marked by poor women rights and labour rights practice. Last but not the least, situational vulnerabilities arise in the origin too. The poor, less educated, and unskilled women who constitute a large, desperate pool of female migrants from Bangladesh, starts their journey from a vulnerable situation which sometimes perpetuates their vulnerable situation in the later stage. Figure 2 presents the sources of vulnerabilities of the female migrants from Bangladesh in a schematic way.

Figure 7: Sources of Vulnerability of Female Migrants from Bangladesh



8. Way Ahead

8.1 *To Ban or Not to Ban*

Growing concerns about the safety of female migrants of the country working in the Middle East again brought the issue of female workforce migration under scrutiny. Amid concern over safety, question was raised whether the country should continue sending female domestic workers to the Middle East; many suggested banning female workforce migration to the Middle East, particularly as domestic workers.

But the experience of other female worker sending countries show that ban on migration might not solve the problem; rather it might make the situation worse. As long as push factor like poverty and unemployment at origin country and pull factors like huge demand of female worker in destination country and beckoning of economic fortune are active, ban on female workforce migration ends in illegal migration of women making the situation worse. Such was the experience of Nepal and Indonesia.⁶³ Another example is Vietnam where ban on female workforce migration led to rise in “marriage migration”.⁶⁴ According to many, same was the case for Bangladesh where government’s restrictive policies could not prevent women workers from migrating abroad; on the contrary, the restriction contributed to irregular migration and, to a large extent, made potential women migrants more vulnerable to poor working conditions and trafficking.⁶⁵

The present study also found strong opposition of female migrants against outright ban on female workforce migration or on migration of domestic workers. In the survey, all respondents disagreed with the idea of banning female workforce migration. When further asked why do they disagree, 17 out of 23 mentioned that going abroad is an opportunity for poor women to earn and run their families, 2 mentioned it as an opportunity for economic betterment and 4 opined that the situation abroad is not all bad. When further asked whether they support ban on migration of women as domestic workers, all respondents disagreed. 12 out of 21 respondents underscored that there was no other option for the Bangladeshi female migrants other than the job of domestic worker, 5 opined that not all domestic workers face problem, another

⁶³ Tasneem Siddiqui, op. cit., p. 9; “Nepal: Protect, Don’t Ban Young Women Migrating to Gulf”, Human Rights Watch, 14 August 2012, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/14/nepal-protect-dont-ban-young-women-migrating-gulf>, accessed on 21 December 2018.

⁶⁴ Nicola Piper, op. cit., p. 1293.

⁶⁵ Ranjana Kumari and Ishrat Shamim, op. cit., p. 27.

3 was of the opinion that female domestic workers can avoid precarious situation if they remain alert and 1 respondent stressed that the job of domestic work abroad is indeed a good job.

In the FGD, the participants showed various reasons why they do not support the idea of banning female workforce migration or migration of female domestic workers and why they themselves want to migrate/re-migrate despite the existing situation abroad and social stigma at home. They noted that at home, a domestic worker generally earns BDT 3000-6000 monthly but working in the Middle East as domestic worker brings them at least BDT 15000-20000 monthly besides free food, accommodation and airfare. The wage differential is the main attraction for going abroad. They also emphasized that not all employers abroad are bad and the domestic workers of Bangladesh also face problems such as excessive working hour, lack of weekly holiday and in some cases physical abuse.

The findings of the survey and FGD indicate that ban on female workforce migration or on migration of domestic workers perhaps would not stop the aspirant female migrants from going abroad. More importantly, the findings suggest that such a measure will be against the will of the female migrants themselves. In a previous study, Rita Afsar also had similar findings. From in-depth interviews with returnee migrants, including the most oppressed domestic workers, she found that they still cherished the goal of migrating overseas, renegotiating a “good visa” with better terms and working conditions once they have saved enough money.⁶⁶

Having said so, it also cannot be ignored that illiterate state of the female domestic workers increases their vulnerability in manifold, particularly when they work in a foreign setting characterized by poor record of labour rights. Same is true for female migrants of very young age. These are why the government has made three years of schooling mandatory and has set the minimum age for female workforce migration at 25 years. Considering the present composition of female migrants of Bangladesh, it seems that the age and educational restrictions should be there until their composition goes through a significant change.

To ensure that the educational restrictions do not lead to migration through illegal channels, the government might offer some literacy programme for those who are interested to migrate but are not literate and include a literacy test as a part of existing housekeeping training. The literacy programme can be tied with some financial incentives; for example, those completing such literacy programme might

⁶⁶ Rita Afsar, “Contextualizing Gender and Migration in South Asia: Critical Insights”, op. cit., p. 399.

be given some extra facilities in the form of concessional fees or pre-departure loan at reduced interest rate or educational benefit for their children etc. Such benefits might further encourage the aspirant migrants to go for literacy gaining instead of illegal channels. Similar incentives can be offered to encourage educational attainment and skill development among aspirant female migrants. The example of Sri Lanka, which offer skill training tied with a package of pre-departure loan can be mentioned in this connection. At the same time strict monitoring should be there so that unscrupulous *dalals* and recruiting agencies cannot send illiterate and under-aged women to the Middle East escaping the existing laws and throw them in uncertain and vulnerable situation thereby.

8.2 *What Can be Done*

If an altogether ban does not solve the problem of female workforce migration, business as usual is not a solution either. Therefore, instead of banning female workforce migration, the country should sincerely find out the ways to ensure the safety of the female workers. With this end in view, the government of Bangladesh has taken various measures to ensure the safety of female domestic workers working abroad. A Complaint Management Cell for Expatriate Female Workers has been set up at the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) to ensure security of the female migrant workers and quickly resolve the complaints. A hotline named ‘Probasbondhu Call Centre’ has been established. To prevent fraudulent practices, emigration permits for Qatar, Bahrain, Brunei, UAE and Maldives are now being issued only after the attestation of visas by relevant embassies. Government is also emphasizing on awareness and diversification as a way to reduce the vulnerability of female migrants. Therefore, it can be said that some initiatives have already been taken in right direction but there is much scope for development. For this purpose, the country may also take lessons from other pioneer female worker sending countries (see Box 2).

Box 2: Good Practice of Philippine

Overseas Filipinos Resource Centers

- In destination countries where at least 20,000 migrants work.
- Remain open 24/7 including holidays.
- Provide wide ranging services - counseling and legal services, post-arrival orientation aimed at social integration, settlement and community networking services, conciliation of employer-employee disputes arising from employer-employee relationship

Female Filipino Overseas Labour Officers

- Employed where there are large concentrations of female migrant workers such as Hong Kong, the Republic of South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Spain, Italy, Abu Dhabi and Dubai.
- Act as labour attaches, welfare officers and centre coordinators.
- Privately funded initiatives such as Filipino Associations Abroad, Bayanihan Centre in Hong Kong, Philippine Schools Overseas etc.

It is true that the composition of Bangladeshi female migrants which lie at the heart of their vulnerability, cannot be changed in the short run. But the government’s long-term policy for addressing vulnerability of female migrants must be in this direction, particularly focusing on type of jobs and level of skill. It has been observed that even in the Middle East, Bangladeshi female migrants who work in the formal sector, for example in the garments factories of Jordan do not face the exploitation and abuses as faced by the domestic workers.⁶⁷

There is ample room for improvement in the existing training for domestic workers bound to the Middle East. Existing training for Hong Kong bound domestic workers can be a point of reference in this regard. Even if Bangladeshi female migrants continue to work as domestic worker in the medium run, there is scope for bringing in change in their destination if required improvement in training can be ensured. To address the problem of homesickness, prospective female migrants should be provided three months residential training where emphasis should be on language training and food habit.

⁶⁷ Interview with Ariful Haque, Deputy General Manager (Overseas Employment), BOESL on 17 July 2019.

At present, only a small fraction of Bangladeshi female migrants works as care giver. Even though care giving is an informal job like that of domestic worker, their working condition is far better than the latter. The government needs to train more female migrants as care giver. The government, with this end in view, has already conducted a study on Japan's care market, its recommendations should be materialized.

Given the increasing flow of migrants, particularly of female migrants, Labour Wings at foreign missions, particularly in the Middle East might be made stronger through augmenting their manpower, especially focusing on female manpower. At present, the Labour Wings have no separate manpower for monitoring the condition of the expatriate labours.⁶⁸ Formation of such manpower is the demand of time, especially for female migrants if not for the male ones.⁶⁹ For female migrants, more safe houses should be established by the embassies. Existing complain mechanisms in Labour Wings and Embassies should also be made more migrant friendly and gender sensitive. For this purpose, separate training can be arranged for those working in Labour Wings.⁷⁰

The government might develop a guideline for the migrant workers which would be provided to each prospective migrant. A separate guideline might be developed for female migrants focusing on safety measures.

It is alleged that many labour migrants are not provided contract paper by their employer many of whom are later cheated in terms of type of job, salary and other benefits. To protect them from being cheated, showing signed contract paper at the time of admission to training and issuing smart card might be made mandatory.

There are a number of important human rights instruments that aim to ensure equality and safety for migrants, some for both male and female while some other are for female only. The United Nations (UN) and the ILO have various such legal instruments. Examples include International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air etc. Although many of the mentioned protocols are not signed and/or ratified by the Middle Eastern countries, Bangladesh might explore how these instruments can be used to create pressure on destination countries to ensure safety of female migrants.

⁶⁸ Interview with Yasmin Chameli, Deputy Director, BMET on 22 July 2019.

⁶⁹ Interview with Principal, Jhalkathi Technical Training Centre on 22 July 2019.

⁷⁰ Interview with Yasmin Chameli, Deputy Director, BMET on 22 July 2019.

In alliance with international organizations like the UN, International Organization for Migration (IOM), ILO and other international migration activists, Bangladesh should raise voice against Kafala system in regional and international forums. Bangladesh should also try to unite other labour sending countries in this regard. It can be mentioned here that faced with ban from various domestic worker sending countries and resultant public pressure to increase the availability of domestic workers, the Labor Undersecretaries of the GCC countries jointly established a unified contract and guidelines in November 2014. The new contract introduced the following changes:

- Daily working hours was set at eight and overtime was limited to two hours.
- Provision of decent accommodation and stipulation of the right to have days off.
- Banning employers from holding the passports of their employees and ensures the freedom of domestic helpers to move or live outside the home of their employer and travel at any time.
- Commitment by employers to provide air tickets to their foreign domestic workers at the end of the contract.

Although the new rules were not much followed by the GCC states, it is a major development which indicates that joint actions by multiple sending countries could exert some impact on the policies of the destination countries.

Last but not the least, as long as the labour sending countries themselves do not bring domestic workers under law, they would not be able to create pressure on destination countries to do so. Bangladesh has a Domestic Worker Protection and Welfare Policy, but it is yet to be enacted into law.⁷¹ The government may consider enacting the law so that it can lead the process of persuading the labour sending countries in doing the same.

9. Conclusion

Female workforce migration from Bangladesh is lot a very old phenomenon. Since lifting of the ban on migration of semi-skilled and less skilled Bangladeshi female workers in 2003, share of women in total migration has been increasing gradually. Growth of female workforce migration is no doubt, a positive sign for

⁷¹ “Call for enacting domestic workers’ law to protect children”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 20 May 2019.

women empowerment but as is the case with other countries, this increasing trend of female workforce migration has been associated with growing concern – concern over their safety, rights and wellbeing. This paper aims to identify the sources of vulnerability of Bangladesh’s female migrant workers with a view to find the ways ahead.

Global experience shows that female workforce migration has been a mixed blessing. It has empowered women but this empowerment is still associated with formidable challenges, particularly in cases where the female migrant work in an informal sector like domestic worker.

An analysis of trend reveals that the recent boost in Bangladesh’s female workforce migration to the Middle East has taken place in the vacuum created by withdrawal of other countries. The rise in migration of Bangladeshi women, therefore, is not necessarily a sign of strength or competitiveness of the outbound female workforce. Also, it seems that expansion of female workforce migration took place in Bangladesh in a hurried manner. This might have resulted in some lacuna in the preparatory stage of female workforce migration governance.

The Bangladesh case, fits well in the framework for analyzing vulnerability of female migrants as proposed in this paper. Following the global pattern, the vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi female migrants fall in two broad categories – internal and situational. Like their global counterparts, female migrants from Bangladesh have embodied vulnerabilities which is related to gender, age, race and colour. They also suffer heavily from capacity related vulnerabilities originating from low level of education and skill and lack of adaptive skills including food and language. These capacity related vulnerabilities, particularly the low level of education and skill reinforces their situational vulnerabilities. Without skill training, most of them have no alternative but to work as domestic worker which, due to its informal setting, remains out of the purview of inspection and is not covered by laws in many countries. Their type of job in turn gives rise to situational vulnerability. Another important source of situational vulnerability for Bangladeshi female migrant workers is the nature of their destination which is marked by poor women rights and labour rights practice. Their situational vulnerabilities arise in the origin too. The poor, less educated, and unskilled women who constitute a large, desperate pool of female migrants from Bangladesh, starts their journey from a vulnerable situation which sometimes perpetuates their vulnerable situation in the later stage.

Amid concern over safety, question was raised whether the country should continue sending female domestic workers to the Middle East; many suggested banning female workforce migration to the Middle East. But the experience of other

female worker sending countries show that ban does not solve the problem; rather might make the situation worse. The findings of the paper suggest that such a measure will be against the will of the female migrant workers themselves. Therefore, instead of banning female workforce migration, the country needs to take proper measures to ensure the safety of the female migrant workers.