

**RETURN AND REINTEGRATION EXPERIENCE OF BANGLADESHI  
DOMESTIC MIGRANT WORKERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By

Akib Haider Chowdhury  
20162005

A thesis submitted to BRAC Institute of Governance and Development in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MDS

MDS  
Brac University  
December 2021

© 2021. Akib Haider Chowdhury  
All rights reserved.

## **Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

**Student's Full Name & Signature:**



---

**Akib Haider Chowdhury**  
20162005

## Approval

The thesis/project titled “[Thesis/Project Title]” submitted by

1. Akib Haider Chowdhury (20162005)

of Spring, 2020 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of MDS on [Date-of-Defense].

### Examining Committee:

Supervisor:  
(Member)



---

**Dr. Selim Reza**  
Head of Academic Programs  
BIGD, Brac University

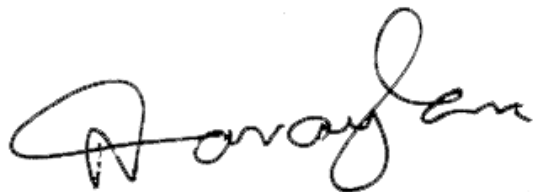
Program Coordinator:  
(Member)



---

**Mohammad Sirajul Islam**  
Coordinator (Academic & Training Programs)  
BIGD, Brac University

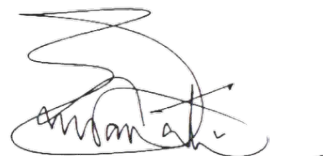
External Expert Examiner:  
(Member)



---

**Dr. Narayan C. Das**  
Associate Professor &  
Sr. Research Fellow,  
BIGD, Brac University

Departmental Head:  
(Chair)



---

**Dr. Imran Matin**  
Executive Director  
BIGD, Brac University

## **Ethics Statement**

I had gathered consent from the participants prior to their participation and have ensured that their privacy is maintained and that they were treated with fairness and impartiality. In order to maintain confidentiality and to ensure anonymity, the names of the 20 migrant women that have participated in the interviews for this thesis have been altered. It is extremely important to ensure anonymity of the participants so that they do not get targeted afterwards and that no backlash is resulted from the revelations of the interviews. This is because many of the comments from the participants may be critical of the policies and procedures undertaken by government and ngo representatives and it may hamper their ability to receive aid in addition to jeopardizing their safety.

## **Abstract**

Many Bangladeshi female domestic migrant workers working abroad returned home during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many causes for the return of these migrant domestic women workers. Short-term and long-term challenges that these returnee women faces are still not thoroughly examined. This thesis is an attempt to examine how these migrant workers experienced their return and what were the key challenges in reintegrating them in Bangladesh. Empirical data has been collected from a total of 20 female migrant returnees through a structured questionnaire which included a total of 4 research questions that explored the main causes for their return, immediate and long-term challenges, types of reintegration measures introduced by the government, and the kind of assistance provided by NGO's. In addition to these, a total of 4 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) comprising of experts from this field were conducted. Empirical evidence shows that the causes for their return included the end of contracts, non-renewal of visas, business closures, violence and sexual assault etc. The immediate challenges that women returnees face is the need for psychosocial support in addition to challenges at the airport and complex documentation process. NGOs engaged in advocacy work, provision of psychosocial support, awareness raising campaigns etc. In terms of social acceptance, most of the returnee women have experienced various forms of mental abuse. The thesis argues that there are not enough policies in place to tackle these problems.

## **Acknowledgement**

For my thesis research, I focused on the **“Return and Reintegration Experience of Bangladeshi Domestic Migrant Workers during COVID-19 Pandemic”** to make a humble attempt at understanding the many causes for the return of our migrant domestic women workers. I tried to explore the kinds of challenges that the returnees’ women face upon their first steps at the Bangladesh airport and how they face significant long-term challenges in terms of economic and social reintegration. For this paper, I have consulted a handful of experts that were able to shed light on my conversations with returnee migrant women and enabled me to identify the major lapses in the existing methods of reintegration. I was also able to understand the integral role played by Non- Governmental Organisations to try and make up for these gaps. Additionally, I am extremely grateful to the kind assistance provided by Sumaiya Islam Khan, BNSK for agreeing to participate as a respondent and also, for arranging the interviews with returnee migrant women. I am also thankful to Mr. Ali Haider Chowdhury, Former Secretary General, BAIRA for linking me with Dr. Farida Yeasmin, RMMRU. Last but not least, I am eternally grateful to Dr. Selim Reza sir for his continued guidance and courage to push me to complete this paper. During the start of the program, I did not think it was possible for me to be able to complete a research paper

# Table of Contents

<b>Declaration</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Approval</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Ethics Statement</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Abstract/ Executive Summary</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Acronyms</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Migrant Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Objectives</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Structured Interviews.....	14
3.2 Key Informant Interviews.....	15
3.3 Data Collection.....	17
3.4 Data Analysis.....	17
3.5 Timeline.....	18
3.6 Research Ethics.....	18
3.7 Resources.....	19

<b>Chapter 4 Findings</b>	<b>20</b>
4.1 Causes for return of Migrant Women in the context of the COVID Pandemic	20
4.2 The woes of the returnee migrant women .....	21
4.3 Role of the NGO's.....	24
Chapter 5 Challenges.....	27
Chapter 6 Conclusion.....	29
<b>References</b>	<b>31</b>

## List of Acronyms

BOMSA	Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association
BNSK	Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra
BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
WEWB	Wage Earners Welfare Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
CBO	Community Based Organisation
OKUP	



## **Glossary**

**Thesis:** An extended research paper that is part of the final exam process for a graduate degree. The document may also be classified as a project or collection of extended essays.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Migrant workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the start of the pandemic, many economies have suffered from the effects of economic recessions due to global shocks on the labor market. Bangladesh is a country with one of the highest rates of outward migration and in 2018, 13.2 percent of the total migrant workforce from Bangladesh were women. ILO statistics predicted that by April, 2020 the various forms of precautions imposed on movement would affect 2.7 billion workers (ILO;2020). The pandemic has further exacerbated the inequalities faced by vulnerable groups such as individuals belonging to older populations and women (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020; Pouliakas and Branka 2020). It is essential to gain an understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted women's employment in the domestic work sector for migrant workers. Migrant domestic workers, primarily women, greatly lack social protection and have nothing to fall back on in case they lose their jobs. Returning migrant workers are also burdened by a plethora of challenges in the form of limited job opportunities, social stigma, unpaid debts, and overall lack of government support to aid in their successful repatriation. Many of these returnee workers are then forced to return to their old and "default" roles of becoming home makers and this loss of income also leads to suffering of their family members that were dependent on their incomes. During the month of March 2021, the Wage Earner's Welfare Board (WEWB) started the initiative to provide support and incentives to female migrant workers and approximately 70 returnee women migrants had received a cheque worth 20,000 as financial stimulus. The Government's efforts to provide financial stimulus to returnee migrants has continued since. At the first stage, these women supposedly receive 5,000 taka (Director

General WEWB, 2020) and upon returning to their homes, they have to file applications and provide proper documentation to claim the total of 20,000 taka. However, I cannot help but imagine what of those women who had migrated through informal challenges? Do they have to go through extra burdens to claim this aid or should I presume the worst and assume that they are left out of this programme.

The Expatriates Welfare Minister had commented that this amount/cash support can be invested in successful and profitable ventures, which is rather optimistic because given the state of the economy, the ongoing pandemic and the social structures that prevent women from investing in businesses, that statement is rather myopic and the 20,000 financial stimulus (Dhaka Tribune, 2021) is an unsustainable solution to aid these women and ensure that they have access to some form of employment that generates a steady income. Another problem is that not only is there an absence of initiative to develop the skills of these women, but to assume that the government is willing to implement skill development initiatives in this pandemic given the varied restrictions on movement would also require that one is truly optimistic of the Government's effort to help reintegrate these women. Finally, we must also keep in mind that almost all of these women are returning empty handed. Most of what they have earned had to be sent back as remittance to dependent family members residing in Bangladesh. Many of them face social stigma and are exposed to domestic violence and are further discouraged by their households from proceeding to look for alternative means of work. There are also reports that these women also endure psycho-social trauma that go unreported and for almost all of the above, these women have to rely on support from Nonprofit organizations for any form of consolation. We must take into consideration that most of these returnees belong to the unskilled category of migrants and possess no real skill/expertise. A majority of these women workers are unable to utilise their skills for earning an income because of the lack of proper support systems that enable them to make use of their hard-earned experience. The relevant

ministries do not follow up to ensure whether these women were able to successfully invest this money after completing the arduous paperwork. There are no third-party agencies that provide these women with the required consultancy to ensure that they are able to effectively make the most of this amount.

## **1.2 Objectives**

I have explored the extent of the gaps in Bangladesh government's efforts to help returnee women domestic workers repatriate and reintegrate and whether they are truly collaborating with NGOs to mitigate these gaps. I have incorporated this objective as part my thesis to identify existing gaps in the existing frameworks and to understand how other stakeholders are playing a role to support the government in its attempt to reintegrate migrant workers back into society in these especially difficult times.

I collected most of my information through KIIs and secondary research of existing policies in place. All of my KIIs were with stakeholders from prominent national NGOs that focus on returnee migrant workers. For secondary research, I have used sources in the form of newspaper articles, policy frameworks and any other research. Through conducting this research, I hope to put together a picture of the experience of returnee migrant workers, particularly female workers, starting from their return journey from the country of employment to the very end until they have reached their homes and are hoping to be able to restart their lives in Bangladesh. My research questions will generate knowledge on the returnee migrant worker's experience and their coping strategies. Through the surveys, I was able to capture areas in the returnee migrant's experience that may be overlooked by the existing frameworks and thus lead to some form of recommendation that may improve the process of reintegration as a whole.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

In order to fulfil the above-mentioned objectives, I have addressed the following questions:

1. What are the causes of the return of female domestic migrant workers during the pandemic?
2. What are the challenges they face?
3. Are there any reintegration measures?
4. What is role of the NGO's in the reintegration process?

In the next chapter, I will review various literature on the subject of returnee domestic migrant workers, reintegration measures and the effect of the pandemic on the informal sector etc. The selection of the literature includes news articles, research papers and studies to draw out a foundation for my thesis and to help identify areas that have been overlooked or if there are aspects that I can contribute to through the course of my work.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Skill training and education play a great role in terms of determining the quality of work and also to ensure safer migration for most women (Bhuyan, 2020). It made me realise that most of the women in Bangladesh that sought employment in countries like Saudi Arab were not equipped with the right set of skills or education to bargain for dignified working conditions. They were poor, vulnerable and oblivious to the kind of harsh working conditions they could face. Because most of these women are unskilled, they are unable to secure any form of formal employment once they are deported back to Bangladesh. They lack the safety net that will serve as a backup for them to survive.

Additionally, the government is yet to take on the initiative to certify returnee domestic workers based on their skills and this lack of formal accreditation is also another issue that prevents returnee women from securing employment (OKUP, 2020). A study<sup>1</sup> was conducted by OKUP across 5 upazilas of Bangladesh and included 250 returnee migrant workers between November and December of 2019 and it displayed that a majority of these workers were unable to show that about 90 percent of the workers were unable to use their skills to generate a steady source of income. One case story highlighted the woes of a returnee woman worker who was not accepted by her husband on her return after narrowly escaping from her abusive employer in Saudi Arab with broken legs. Only 23% of the returnee migrants could earn enough money but 77% were unable to do so (OKUP, 2020). OKUP's chairman had commented on the need for a special body that could provide returnee migrant workers with the necessary cooperation required to enable them to use their skills and remittances and as I had also mentioned earlier in my introduction, this further strengthens the notion that there is a need for a body to provide

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://okup.org.bd/socialnews/90pc-returnee-workers-cannot-use-job-skills-to-earn-livelihood/>

these women with the necessary guidance and follow up to ensure that they are able to sustainably invest their skills, savings and the cash support received from the Government to generate a sustainable source of income instead of having to fall back to being homemakers and or resorting to informal work such as day laborers. Based on the recommendation of Okup's chairman to form a special body for cooperation, it would be worth seeing if this was taken into consideration by the Bangladesh government and if so, whether this existing body is able to effectively serve its cause.

It's also important to consider that the effect of the pandemic is worsening inequalities in the informal sector. (Schwettmann, 2020). Women with low skills and low paid jobs have lower rates of employment reengagement due to the absence of an appropriate mechanism and the excess of discrimination that they face. Women that are laid off are at a risk of not having their permits renewed and the possibility of this is higher for women with low skills. Women that are at a risk of deportation are further exposed to exploitation by their employers who will often sexually abuse them, revoke their passports and prevent them from communicating with their families. As a result, these women undergo suffering in the form of physical, psychological abuse and trauma which is often left unaddressed and does not receive the proper care required to help them heal once they are finally able to escape. The government does not include the necessary amount of psychosocial support required to help these women as part of their reintegration schemes. It is important to understand if the government adapted an inclusive approach to shaping these response mechanisms because it is essential that women in migration are consulted to understand their needs and suffering and how exactly can it be systematically minimized. One area that was overlooked in this study was the plight of returnee migrant workers that travelled through means of informal/ illegal channels because women that have migrated to countries through informal channels are unable to access protection, services and rights. It is also worth including in my research the extent to which these undocumented women

are excluded from receiving support from the Government upon their return because without a legal contract, they are unable to apply stimulus support and have to experience a lot of paper work which further complicates matters for them.

Many returnee women were longer accepted by their families after returning to Bangladesh. **(Ridhi Sahai, 2021)**The Journal of Modern Slavery produced a paper titled “COVID-19 and Modern Slavery”<sup>2</sup> and in this paper a segment quotes a study conducted by BRAC’s Migration program which points out that 29% of returnees stated that they were no longer accepted by their relatives and neighbors and were note treated the same way prior to their departure.

Additionally, a large part of returnee women are ill-treated by their communities and family members. (USAID, 2020). A quoted from a USAID-WINROCK survey<sup>3</sup> that 48% or returnee migrant women were treated worse by members of their communities and their families. The KIIs that support these two surveys indicate that victim blaming was common in the households of these returnee women because they were blamed for the decline of the economic condition of their families due to the loss of income and many of these women are accused of migrating to the gulf as sex workers and deserve the abuse. Which is yet another reason that desperately requires for these women to be able to be protected and provided with the necessary support required to transition back into their lives and secure formal employment on their return.

Because large numbers of domestic migrant workers were repatriated in large numbers, the Government of Bangladesh created a fund worth 700 crores to specifically support returnee migrant workers. This fund included a stimulus package consisting of loans, access to training centers to revise their skills or to develop new ones and also, seed money to jump start

---

2

[https://slavefreetoday.org/journal\\_of\\_modern\\_slavery/v6i2a05\\_ShatteredDreamsBangladeshiMigrantWorkerduringGlobalPandemic.pdf](https://slavefreetoday.org/journal_of_modern_slavery/v6i2a05_ShatteredDreamsBangladeshiMigrantWorkerduringGlobalPandemic.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh\\_migrant-study-.pdf](https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh_migrant-study-.pdf)



employment-generating activities in Bangladesh. But, did these loans also include consultancy services that ensured that these funds were highly invested to yield sustainable returns and enable these new borrowers to successfully return these loans is a question worth looking into. Securing these loans also required project proposals, high rate of interest, eligibility criteria and a complicated application process of interest that may not be easy for most of these returnee women domestic workers to process. Additionally, how many of these women were able to successfully access services from these skill development training centers? Were they able to use these services to actually generate income?

Additionally, the first study conducted by BRAC, is able to effectively capture the psychological trauma due to the forms of ostracization faced by female returnee workers and that is something to take note of while reviewing the existing policies in place. This gives me concrete evidence a significant portion of returnee migrant women are no longer accepted by their families and this makes life miserable for them. It will be worth exploring if the existing government frameworks and the work of NGOs take psychological trauma into consideration when shaping their policies and interventions.

It is also important to have separate policies for both returnee men and women (Sheed, 2020). A study titled “Promoting Sustainable Economic and Social Reintegration of Returnee Migrants: Bangladesh Perspective”<sup>4</sup> talks about the role of the BMET in reintegration of Women. It stresses on the need for developing separate policies for returnee men and women because the negative impacts are not uniform in the extent to which it affects both genders in

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amity.edu/UserFiles/Journal/9.pdf>

addition to the need for developing a database of returnees especially for women. Additionally, the study emphasises on the need for introducing referral services to returnees and to establish a formal understanding with both national and private banks for the provision of soft loans and to enable easier access to finance so that these women can overcome financial constraints and already existing debts. The study quotes an IOM survey that found that savings earned by women was used for their consumption, health care and education expenses of their family members. They had also used a chunk of their savings to clear off any loans.

The IOM study also stresses on the fact that economic reintegration in the home country is a major problem for the returnee migrants especially because there is an absence of adequate policies and frameworks to support these returnees and the ones that are already in place by non-governmental organisations, government institutions, BMET and BAIRA, are not able to effectively ensure reintegration of migrant workers.

The study also further highlights that BMET, despite being the lead agency in the labor migration process for Bangladesh, is virtually ineffective at playing an important role to assist the reintegration process. They do not have a system to keep records of the flow of returnee migrant workers which means that we do not have accurate records that might be highly essential in determining the exact requirements for designing assistance in the form of stimulus package, loan disbursements, training centers etc. Returning migrant workers are also not included in briefing sessions or at the Technical Training Centers that are under BMET operation. Additionally, it was noteworthy that the Bangladesh Association for International Recruitment Agency (BAIRA) did not consider reintegration of the returnee migrant workers as a high priority. Henceforth, there is room to scrutinise Government's efforts for a) Addressing the limitations of the BMET and b) being unable to regulate the lack of BAIRA's involvement in the reintegration process.

BMET's study highlights the gendered experiences of returnee male and female workers and hence it is worth taking a look at the government's reintegration strategy from a gender lens to explore whether they have separate steps in place to tackle the dual experiences of both genders.

The study also points to a glaring issue regarding the lack of record keeping of returnee migrant workers and hence, the existing policies may not be accurately scaled to serve the needs of all workers. However, one area overlooked by this study was the percentage of individuals choosing to migrate through illegal/informal means; it would have been worth incorporating this into the study.

Lastly, it is important to consider that women returnees are unable to manage their livelihoods upon returning back to the country. (**Nawaz, 2019**) a paper produced by the "Horizon journal of Reintegration Challenges of Migrants in Bangladesh: A Study on Forced Returnee Women Migrants from Saudi Arabia" (*Nawaz, Tonny 2019*)<sup>5</sup> strengthens the notion women returnees are unable to manage their livelihoods upon their return and tell us the stories of women that even though did manage to earn, have also lost everything after the start of the pandemic. Most of these returnees do not understand the mechanisms in place to support them and yet again point fingers at the lack of a well-coordinated approach to reintegrate returnee women. As I had mentioned that lack of skill and formal experience is an issue for most of these women, this study highlights that securing new jobs is especially difficult for women that belong to the unskilled category and that they are unable to use their experiences properly after their return. The study mentions that 85% of women have stated that they face difficulties in being able to sustain their families' basic needs and as a result, experience immense psychological stress in addition to the challenges in social reintegration.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://horizon-jhssr.com/view-issue.php?id=10>

This study also supports the findings of BRAC's study and also provides with statistical evidence that a very significant portion of returnee women are facing difficulties in sustaining their basic needs, which is also another form of psychological trauma that leads to broken families, ostracization and other means of abuse.

Based on a rigorous review and critical analysis of the readings mentioned above, I found that there are some great pieces of academic work that point out the need to have separate policies for both men and women, the need to form more effective means of data tracking, the trauma and harrowing experiences that women face upon their return, the possible role of skill development centres and fiscal stimulus and aid, the need for an inclusive means of designing policies and frameworks and of course, the work of Non-governmental organisations that serve to fill in some of the gaps. Through means of the interviews and the surveys that I will conduct to a) follow up on the work and guidelines provided by the above secondary sources, and b) use the interviews and survey to identify further areas in the experience of returnee migrant workers that may have been overlooked by existing studies. The above studies have also helped to identify key stakeholders, in addition to providing me with the areas of my interest while shaping my questions for the interviews and the surveys that I hope to conduct through means of this research.

In the next chapter, I will explain the methodology that I have adapted to conduct the data collection process for this thesis.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

This thesis is built on qualitative data only. This form of research is extremely essential as it enables us to understand the “how” and “why” questions and allows us to gather a deep understanding of human experiences, its context and the phenomenon that induces it. Research that is qualitative in nature makes it possible to explore ideas that cannot be limited to just numerical information in the form of statistics and dates. In order to understand the human experience, it is necessary for the researcher to explore the realities lived by our subjects to gather a truly deeper understanding of the various nuances of everyday-life. Since my research was aimed at exploring the “experiences” of returnee migrant women, I conducted both **qualitative** research in the form of in-depth interviews of female returnee domestic migrant workers and 4 KIIs of experts in the field of migration including representatives of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RRMRU), BOMSA, Representatives of Bangladesh Association of Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), representatives from BRAC’s migration programme and BNSK. I have also conducted interviews with 20 returnee migrant workers. My secondary desk research included a review of existing literature on thematic areas that might aid my research. All KII’s were completed within September 2021. Findings from these KII’s helped to fine-tune my interview questions for migrant workers and I was able to complete all of 20 structured interviews within October 2021.

### **3.1 Structured Interviews**

Since my research is mostly quantitative in nature, I have decided to use structured interviews of the returnee migrant workers. This is because through asking the same sequence of questions, I hope to draw a pattern from the responses of the interview participants to see if all of their experiences upon returning to Bangladesh are the same. Structured interviews will also allow me to include open-ended questions if necessary for further probing.

I have conducted structured interviews of **20 returnee female migrant workers** using a combination of questions centred around 4 of my research questions. These questions included components of their experiences starting from their country of employment, to their experience at both airports, the extent of support they have received immediately upon their return, whether government representatives in their home districts followed up with their promises, were they able to readily access the assistance, the nature of complications they had faced, their expectations and how the system of reintegration can be improved, and lastly their aspirations of reintegrating back into society.

For the selection process of these workers, I have consulted Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK) to help with the selection process for these 20-returnee female migrant workers. BNSK focuses specifically on the reintegration of returnee migrant workers. All of the selected returnee migrant returnees were former domestic workers in the gulf countries and were between the ages of 25-40. The representative from BNSK had arranged for all of the participants to gather at the Bangladesh Korea Technical Training Centre on the morning of 10<sup>th</sup> of October. They were all seated in one room. The BNSK representative had introduced me to them and sat with me the entire time to ensure that none of the questions were misinterpreted. She was kind enough to rephrase whenever I had struggled to explain any of the questions. They were all informed of my intentions and did not express any discomfort when I mentioned that the interviews would be recorded. I began to conduct the interviews one

by one while the other participants were seated around the same room. Each of the interviews were between 8-10 minutes long and were conducted in Bangla. After I had finished conducting the interviews, I had transcribed the audio into text and then repeatedly read the text to draw a pattern from all of the responses and eventually, I was able to drag and drop these patterns under each of my research questions.

### **3.2 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)**

Key informant interviews (KIIs) are qualitative in-depth interviews with people who are informed about what is going on in the community/about the research matter. Oftentimes these interviews include participants that are either academics, experts or have a sound first-hand knowledge of the subject matter. These interviews add great value to any research as they complement extremely well with findings from larger sizes in the form of IDI's or structured interviews.

For the KIIs, I relied on open-ended interview methods, guided by my research questions to explore the key areas of my thesis. I set up interviews based on the availability of these individuals and conducted the interviews through phone conversations.

I conducted a total of **five KIIs** of key individuals who have been working in Bangladesh's migration sector. I had learned about all of their contributions when I had started to list out the most prominent organisations involved in the field of migration. The Individuals from Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA), Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit(RRMURU), Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra BNSK and BRAC's Migration Programme were chosen for the KII's are long-standing experts in the field of Migration under various capacities and have greatly contributed to the findings for my paper. These individuals were

representatives of Ngo's that were directly involved with capacity building, front line response, advocacy and legal aid services for returnee migrant women.

The structured questions that I used will include aspects of the a) existing frameworks, b) possible lapses in these policies, c) insights on how these policies could have been different d) reintegration challenges, e) work of non-government organisations, and f) the experience of migrant workers from their view.



### **3.3 Data collection**

For the data collection process, a representative of BNSK was kind enough to arrange for two returnee migrant women to participate in my interviews. All of the participants gathered at Bangladesh Korea Technical Training Center (BKTTTC) and I conducted the interviews one at a time. A representative from BNSK was with me the entire time to guide the conversations and to work as a bridge between myself and the interviewee in case I was not able to explain any of the questions. The entire process took about 6 hours to complete and each of the interviews lasted for about 9 minutes. All of the participants were returnees from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, etc. I had used my phone to record all of the conversations.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

My approach to analysing the data involved transcribing all of the recordings at first. This made it easy for me to read through all of the recordings of the 20 participants and made it possible for me to draw a pattern from all of the responses. I used the recordings of the KII's to draw a relation with the responses from the 20 participants. Another important aspect of data analysis was to look for statements from the respondents - I cut out certain parts of the transcriptions and read them over and over again until I was able to create linkages with the comments from the Key informants.

### **3.5 Timeline**

By August 2021, I had finished conducting all of the secondary research to get an understanding of the topic and also to start working on the literature review section for my research. Within September 2021, I had managed to secure time with all of my KII participants through both phone conversations and face to face interviews. During the interview with a representative from BNSK, I found another contact from the Bangladesh Korea Technical Training Center who had arranged 20 returnee female domestic workers to participate in the structured interviews. I had finished conducting all 20 interviews on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021. I had finished incorporating all of the information that I had gathered over the last few months and compiled my final draft on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2021.

### **3.6 Research Ethics**

I had gathered consent from the participants prior to their participation and have ensured that their privacy is maintained and that they were treated with fairness and impartiality. In order to maintain confidentiality and to ensure anonymity, the names of the 20 migrant women have been altered. It is extremely important to ensure anonymity of the participants so that they do not be targeted afterwards and that no backlash is resulted from the revelations of the interviews. This is because many of the comments from the participants may be critical of the policies and procedures undertaken by government and ngo representatives and it may affect their ability to receive aid in addition to jeopardizing their safety.

### **3.7 Resources**

The only resources involved included costs of travel to the Bangladesh Korea Technical Training Center and snacks for the participants. In order to avoid any form of bias and to avoid allegations of coercion, the snacks were handed out after all of the interviews were conducted.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **4.1 What are the causes of the return of female domestic migrant workers during the pandemic?**

Before I dive into the depth of the findings for this thesis, it is important for us to take note of the types of women that choose to migrate overseas with the hope of securing a better means of earning a living. Shariful Hasan from BRAC's migration programme indicated that women that are vulnerable, divorced, lack financial resources, have many dependent family members and have no means of securing a source of earning in the country, generally choose this difficult path.

Since 2008, the migrant market has been closed from Saudi Arabia after other countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal etc. stopped the export of migrant women workers. The Saudi Government said unless the Bangladeshi government would agree to send women workers, they would completely stop accepting workers from Bangladesh, a request which Bangladesh eventually succumbed to in 2015.

Through the course of this research, it was identified that women generally return for three reasons. The first and foremost, change of environment - language, lifestyle differences of the employers, that is completely different to the lives of our migrant women. This makes it extremely difficult for them to adapt.

Lack of wages, unfair workload and other poor working conditions come in second. Third, abuse in its many harrowing forms. What makes women particularly vulnerable to all forms of abuse is the near absence of a protection mechanism. All of these three drivers that led to the forcible return of domestic workers was further exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Sumaiya Islam Khan, BNSK, mentioned during her interview that a large group of women were involved with outsourcing work, which means that even though they were undocumented and resided in countries such as Lebanon, they were able to engage in domestic work for multiple households. Because of the general panic brought forth by the pandemic, these women were no longer able to visit multiple households. As a result, they were no longer able to secure rent and financial support to meet their basic needs.

Many women were also unable to contact their families and this created a sense of isolation and panic. Many of their family members also had to relocate to other areas because of the complications brought forth by the pandemic which also added to their worries and forced them to seek ways to immediately return to Bangladesh. Additionally, many of their employers had also shifted to other areas and left them without any food or essential supplies. And also, individuals that had tested positive did not receive treatment in many cases. They were also not receiving their salaries on time.

*"I was in quarantine for 14 days but still, people were scared when they saw us. The police came to look for me and I fled to my relatives' house for fear that people would say things about me in case I get arrested. People around my household would also spread rumors about me."*

*– Paira Begum (Not her real name)*

Imprisoned/safe houses - women had to return, end of the agreement. A minuscule amount had to return out of fear of being infected. Contracts were also terminated, payments seized and many workers were overworked.

## **4.2 What are the challenges they face?**

Over 1 lakh women migrants have returned to Bangladesh - ILO reports. Their dependents also struggled in the process because of the cutbacks in their salaries. Migrant workers did not have access to aid like individuals residing in other parts of Bangladesh. Upon returning, these women face immense complications and challenges. In certain cases, newspapers will print out photos and mention names of returnee migrant women with the intention of sharing their harrowing experiences with the general public. However, members of their families, particularly their husbands and in-laws, are unable to accept them. This was indicated by all of the Key Informants in addition to many of the 20 participants from the interviews. Additionally, the general panic caused by the pandemic led to a rise in negative attitudes towards the migrant workers because people thought they were bringing in the virus.

*"I returned to the country in March 2020 during Corona. As soon as I landed in Bangladesh, a policeman came to the airport and took away my name, but no one contacted me afterwards. I was the only girl on that flight." - Safia Begum*

Most of the returnees face psychological issues induced by the traumatic events that they had to endure. These traumatic events include both physical and mental abuse in addition to the shock of having to forcibly return to Bangladesh. Many of them were concerned about the loss of livelihoods and how they would be able to reintegrate back into society. *"In the case of women, social and psychosocial issues are much more prominent. Men are able to adapt economically but women have to face various allegations that make it much more difficult for*

*them to integrate” - Shariful Hasan, BRAC Migration Programme. They are not accepted by their families and societies.*

*"I could not stay in my house because of all the things people were saying about me. I am not even married yet. I was at home for about three days and then I was forced to come to Dhaka and stay at my friend's house with my relatives. I do not have a father or an older brother to look after me and I have to take care of myself. I do not receive any marriage proposals because I worked abroad and people say all sorts of nasty things about me." - Maryam Begum*

Returnee migrant women are also facing a financial crisis as they no longer have access to a sustainable income source or a job that pays enough to sustain their basic expenses. *“We are seeking work overseas with the hopes of earning 20 - 25 thousand taka but there if I worked at a garments factory, I would only earn 8000 taka.” - Nazma, a returnee from Lebanon. Additionally, there is no systematic process to help these women find an alternative source of income. Many of the respondents have indicated that they have received zero support upon their return. “No one from the embassy contacted me after I got off the plane, and I did not notice anyone waiting for me. I have not received any job or rehabilitation assistance from the government. None of the local NGO's have contacted me.” – Arifa Begum*

The KII’s indicated that they had received 5000 taka upon returning to Bangladesh and that another round of financial assistance would be provided after the provision of proper documents. However, almost all of the participants have indicated that they did not receive any financial assistance after their arrival. This could mean that a majority of the returnee women were not covered by the government’s feeble attempts of providing financial stimulus to returnee women.

In terms of accessibility, there were various complications. The lack of appropriate identification papers made it difficult for them to access these forms of assistance. Many of

these women had the potential to migrate again but vaccination complications and the lack of a database makes it difficult to design an intervention that might allow for this to be possible.

*“I was not assured of any kind of cooperation from the government and did not get any kind of job or financial or emotional support and I did not contact the government myself because I believed I would not get any help if I went to them. Besides, I didn't know anything about the process for seeking assistance.” - Saleha Islam*

There was some mention of loan assistance programs but according to Farida Yeasmin, BOMSA, the problem is that these workers are afraid of having to return these loans. They have to provide proof of land and other assets, primarily in the case of loans above 3 lakh, which they do not have. Additionally, almost no one is interested in standing in as a guarantor.

#### **4.3 Are there any reintegration measures?**

From the 20 interviews conducted, not one single person mentioned that they had received any form of assistance from the government. When they had arrived at the airport, there were no government representatives present to provide them with immediate trauma support. A majority of the women mentioned that their personal information was also not recorded for future reference or for provision of aid in the future. Upon returning to their home towns, no government representative had reached out to any of the participants to include them into any form of reintegration intervention. One of the KII participants, Advocate Farida Yeasmin, had mentioned that the government did not update the database after December 2020; this indicates that no concrete data was being taken into account to shape the required reintegration measures required to tackle any of the problems of these returnee migrants. For further evidence, I had referred to a USAID – Winrock study<sup>6</sup> which states that 94% of respondents did not have the means to support themselves financially and 60% could not manage to consume enough food

---

<sup>6</sup> [https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh\\_migrant-study-.pdf](https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh_migrant-study-.pdf)



to meet the basic daily amount but then 86% of the participants of this study claimed that they did not receive any form of support since their return. The participants of my study also indicated that they were currently unemployed at the time of the interviews which also indicates that no formal policies were in place to ensure that returnee women domestic workers would be able to secure some form of employment to ensure a sustainable income. A few of the participants had indicated that they were either shunned by society or that their family members were not able to fully accept them. No government campaigns were launched to promote awareness on this subject and to ensure that these women are able to fully integrate back into society. Almost all of the participants had indicated that they were interested to migrate for work again or that they were interested to seek work here but not one single participant had indicated if any government representatives had reached out to capitalize their existing skills, promote further capacity development of these women, or offer some form of employment support to find them work.

#### **4.4 What is role of the NGO's in the reintegration process?**

The Ngo's had to address the woes of 3 types of migrant workers: groups that were still residing in the countries of employment, workers that were returning and finally, workers that were potential migrant workers. Essentially, NGO's form a bridge between the government and returnee migrant workers. All forms of government processes are bureaucratic in nature and returnee workers are seldom able to navigate through these complications and this is where NGo's are playing a key role to help make the reintegration process easier for them. NGO's are also engage in widespread advocacy work to ensure basic rights, fair wages, humanitarian assistance, training provision for capacity development etc.

NGO's like BOMSA tried to create linkages with shelters and embassies to ease the plight of returnee women in addition to engaging in heavy advocacy work. *"We wrote a letter to the PM and United Nations to ensure assistance to ensure appropriate reintegration services for returnee women"* - Sumaiya Islam, BNSK.

Webinars were conducted to hold discourse and identify issues faced by migrant workers, in addition, to collecting information from various countries on the ending of Akama and visa related issues and complications and distributing the information through social media platforms so that it could be easily accessible to returnee women.

NGO's like BRAC placed a volunteer pool in the Hazrat Shahjalal Int'l Airport to provide immediate need-based support to returnees' women. BRAC's volunteers also made a database of the returnees in addition to installing signboards, leaflets and other IEC materials to disseminate information regarding services of the project.

Organisations such as RRMURU, OKUP, WARBI, BTSM platform, Migrant forum Asia also continued their efforts to engage in advocacy work to ensure wage pay for forcibly returned migrant women. A lack of a beneficiary list during the initial stages made it difficult for NGO's to engage in all forms of relief work.

*"The government is yet to update the returnee database after 2020 December."* - Advocate Farida Yeasmin,

In most cases, NGO's like BRAC were highly effective in terms of providing immediate support to returnee migrant women. The government did not manage to place trauma/relief desks at the airport during the first few months of the pandemic even though this was highly crucial for returnee women that were distressed from having to return to Bangladesh due to various causes. They have also worked to link the returnees with BRAC's other development programmes. Their volunteer pool of 5 members were placed directly at the Hazrat Shahjalal

Int'l airport provided other forms of support such as treatment, counselling in addition to referrals to other district level services. BRAC's volunteers had also made a database of returnee migrant workers. So, in this case, the Ngo's were effectively filling in the for the lapses of the government. All of the agencies/organisations that were interviewed were coordinating with the government in some way or the other. They were not operating independently. NGO's like BNSK, for example continued to engage in various forms of activism that drew the attention of international actors and the government. But it may be difficult to actually assess whether they were truly effective as a whole. In most cases, many returnee women are yet to be successfully reintegrated into society and perhaps the typical activism in which they engaged in did not manage to make too many waves. Ngo's like BRAC have the resources and the reach to aid these distressed individuals and they are still continuing to do so effectively. From the findings I was not really able to uncover major strides made by the Ngo's other than the activities conducted by BRAC's migration programme but this may also be result of the lack of resources and capacities of the local NGO's. However, it is for certain that BRAC's migration programme have served as the ideal 'first responders' in this situation. NGO's like BOMSA that focus solely on the policy and advocacy components of women migration, did not prove to be effective in terms of bargaining with the government to improve their reintegration policies.

## Chapter 5

### Challenges

One of the main challenges for the data collection process was that all of the participants were waiting in one room and I was not able to secure an isolated space for all of the participants while conducting the interviews. As a result, many of the responses were similar as they listen to their peers during the interviews. This was a factor that I was not able to anticipate initially. Another issue was that some of the participants had returned to Bangladesh before the pandemic had started and this meant that the quality of all 20 of the interviews conducted was not adequate enough to fit the context of my thesis.

I had planned to complete the data collection process by the end of September but due to scheduling issues, it was not possible to secure interviews and gain access to all of the KII' participants within that time frame. All of the participants had packed schedules and this made it difficult to secure face to face interviews. Some of the participants were not comfortable with the idea of meeting in person and had only agreed to participating through phone calls. It was difficult to extract responses over the phone because of the challenges in terms of the flow of the conversation. I had to present a question and then record their responses and this did not allow for a free-flowing conversation through which I could have possibly gathered more information. In person meetings would have been particularly helpful because the participants would have been more relaxed and I would have more room to ask additional supplementary questions. In some cases, the phone network was an issue as two of the participants were out of Dhaka at the time of the phone call and it was difficult to gather audible responses due to the poor connection.

While conducting the desk reviews, I couldn't find a document that clearly stated the exact reintegration measures proposed by the government and the main challenge here is that these documents were not updated at regular intervals which means there is the risk that the data that I had read was dated and did not fit the current context of the status quo at the time of finalising this paper.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had crippled the global economy and naturally it had also taken a toll on the informal sector. Women that had migrated from Bangladesh to countries in the gulf for a better future have fallen through the cracks as they have been forced to return. Even though the government has promised to undertake plenty of initiatives to successfully reintegrate them into the economy, it seems that many of these women are not receiving the kind of support that was promised. Ngo's and other local actors have made attempts to counter these short comings but they also lack the resources and the capacities to adequately tackle this situation.

Ideally, upon return, the appropriate psychosocial relief mechanisms have to be in place so that vulnerable women upon returning do not have to be exposed to mental breakdowns and other psychosomatic issues. This is highly essential because returnee women are particularly disoriented because of many reasons. They are unsure about the kind of assistance they'll receive, women that have been traumatized by physical or sexual abuse are distraught and need immediate relief within the first 24-72 hours -booth at the airport in the form of emergency support. Medical assistance for victims of physical abuse, pregnant women etc. are also highly necessary.

As of yet, there are no referral systems that are interlinked with the database for returnee migrant women. This is especially required because many of these women will no longer have access to employment and do not have the means to provide for their families. A referral system would have ensured that their skills and experience would be linked with existing opportunities within the various small and medium enterprises of our country.

Additionally, regular follow up visits should be made to check the progress of these women so that they do not fall back into poverty.

One of the biggest flaws of the Government's approach for successful reintegration is that the official records of returnee migrant workers are not updated on a regular basis and this makes it immensely challenging to provide any form of support on their arrival in addition to following up with their progress afterwards. The lack of an updated database prevents all relevant actors, be it the government or local NGO's from adapting a systemic approach to their interventions because there are no up-to date records regarding their location, previous employment, training or existing skills. We have learned from Advocate Farida Yeasmin, Director BOMSA, that the returnee database has not been updated since the end of 2020. This goes to show the lacklustre efforts of the government to adopt a systematic approach to the reintegration of returnee migrant women. Ngo's like BRAC's migration program is trying to fill up these gaps and are continuing to update the database of returnee women.

*“They will have to be reeducated, retrained, engaged in the microeconomy through work for SME's or local industries so that they are able to lead a dignified life. Additionally, it must also be taken into consideration that many of these women have the potential for migrating again to a different country”.* - Ali Haider Chowdhury, Former Secretary-General, BAIRA

All forms of interventions in this regard will have to take into account that many of these women lack the education to access basic services and are unable to fill up most forms of rudimentary paperwork. As of yet, the government is not even close to being successful in terms of managing to reintegrate most of these women. Even though there is a lot happening on paper, its implementation is still a far cry from what was promised. Even in case of Ngo's, there are not too many front-line responders that have the capacity to coordinate with the government. Even though BRAC is managed to provide psychosocial support and other

services at the airport, they are still donor driven and will have to operate on a finite number of resources which is why it is essential for all actors to coordinate amongst themselves.

## References

- i. Nawaz, F. And Tonny, T.A. (2019). Reintegration Challenges of Migrants in Bangladesh: A Study on Forced Returnee Women Migrants from Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, 1(1), pp. 49-58
- ii. Sahai, R., Bansal, V., Sikder, M.J.U., Kysia, K. and Shen, S. (2021). Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic. *Journal of Modern Slavery*, 6(2), pp. 106-132
- iii. Gottardo, C. and Cymment, P. (2020). How COVID-19 affects Women in Migration. *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*. Retrieved from <https://www.fes.de/en/iez/international-week-of-justice/article-in-gerechtigkeitswoche/how-covid-19-effects-women-in-migration-1-1>
- iv. Bhuyan, M.O.U. (2020). Women migrants from Bangladesh need skills, returnees need support. *New Age*. Retrieved from <https://www.newagebd.net/article/101414/women-migrants-from-bangladesh-need-skills-returnees-need-support>
- v. Cleland, J. A. C. (2017, June 29). The qualitative orientation in medical education research. PMC US National Library of Medicine. Retrieved May 19, 2021, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5465434/>
- vi. Shamim, I. S., & Holiday, J. H. (2018). COUNTRY OVERVIEW: Women and Migration in Bangladesh. UN Women. Retrieved October 2021, from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/03/women-and-migration-in-bangladesh>
- vii. Tithi, N. T. (2021, December 19). Returnee female migrants need help to bounce back in life. *The Daily Star*. Retrieved December 19, 2021, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/returnee-female-migrants-need-help-bounce-back-life-2207916>
- viii. Nawaz, F. N., & Tonny, T. A. T. (2019). Reintegration Challenges of Migrants in Bangladesh: A Study on Forced Returnee Women Migrants from Saudi Arabia. *Horizon*. <https://horizon-jhssr.com/view-issue.php?id=10>