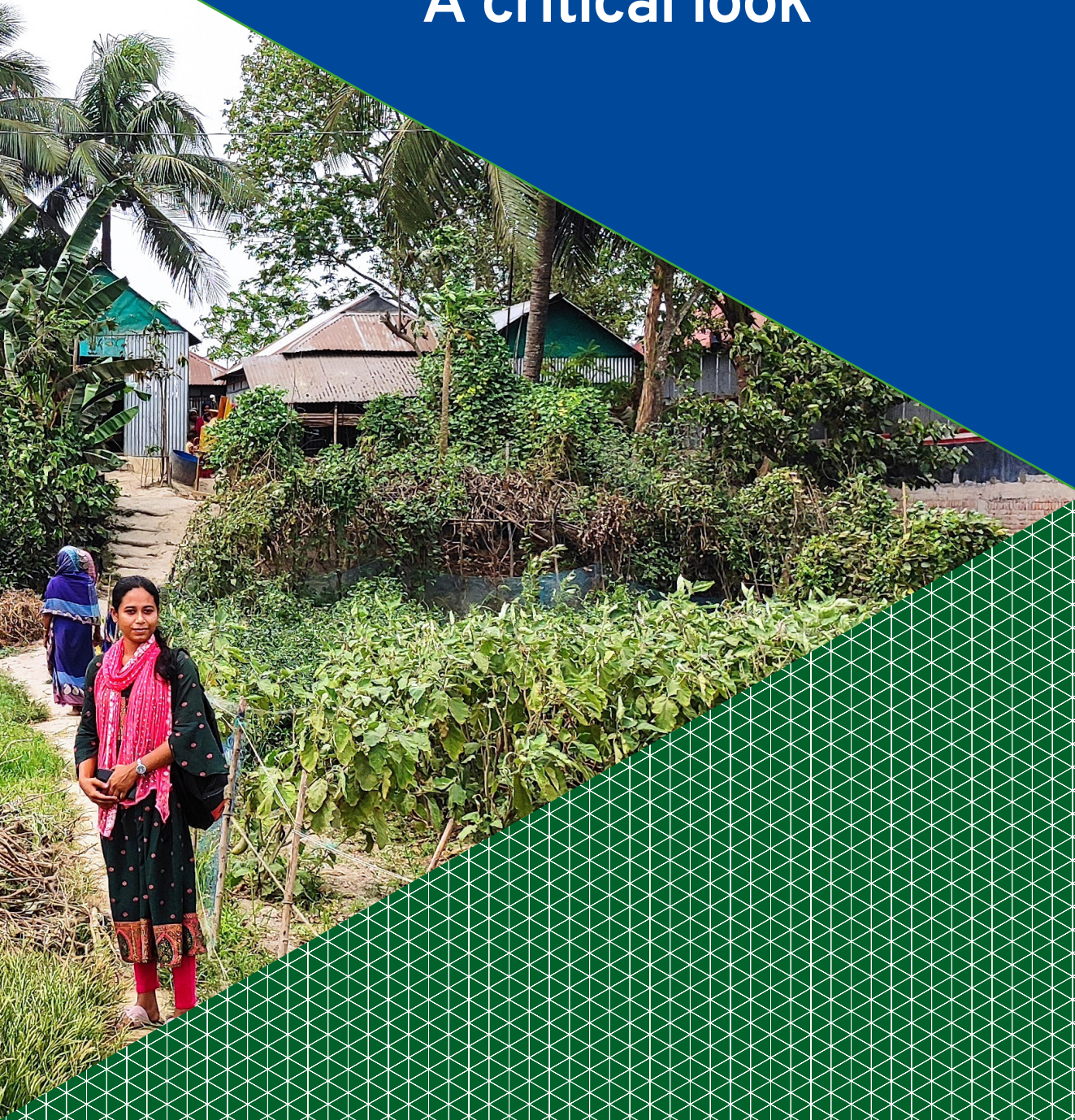




International
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Media representation of women migrant workers: A critical look



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► Media representation of women migrant workers: A critical look

Nazneen Ahmed

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Nazneen Ahmed



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► Foreword

This study reviews how overseas women migrant workers are characterized in print and electronic media in accordance with gender, class and geographic stereotypes. It critically assesses how women's multiple roles as workers, earners, investors, mothers and daughters, etc. are overshadowed by simplistic narratives focusing on exploitation and victimhood.

The study is based on migration-related news published in four widely circulated national English and Bangla dailies and reports aired on three television channels in Bangladesh. It is an in-depth analysis of the news articles and videos published and diffused between 2015–2021. The findings depict a majoritarian bias focusing on individual cases stories and illustrating highly abusive women's labour migration experiences to attract readership and viewership. Yet, reporting on how women's labour migration also emancipates them in the context of work, family and social lives was found to be rare, thus leaving and cultivating a common perception conflating all women's migration with abuse. Considering that such narratives reinforce the false perception that the solution to such abuse is to ban women's migration, the analysis concludes that while human rights violations faced by migrant workers must be addressed, coverage exclusively focusing on abuses is socially disempowering to women and more

nuanced reporting on women's labour migration is very important.

Media narratives play an important role in shaping perceptions on issues such as women's work and migration. Accurate reporting that depicts nuanced and multifaceted realities is challenging in a media environment that increasingly favours clear and simple punchlines. And yet, biased reporting that makes sweeping generalizations based on a few cases, reporting that sensationalizes the abuse of migrant women and entrenches an image of victimhood is also highly detrimental as it undermines women's agency in migration and work seeking, strengthening negative stereotypes of working women.

The purpose of this study is to analyse media reporting and identify whether and how such biases emerge. It highlights the type of responsible reporting that is necessary to ensure a more realistic depiction of migrating and working women.

To further explore the range of migrant women experiences, we highly recommend that this study is read together with *Rebels, victims, agents of change: The singular histories of women migrant workers, Migration and gender in Bangladesh: An irregular landscape* and other Work in Freedom publications.

Igor Bosc
Chief Technical Adviser
Work in Freedom Programme

► Executive summary

The overseas migration of women from Bangladesh was low until a bilateral agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia hereafter), allowing women to migrate free of cost, was signed in 2015. Different studies have noted that lower migration costs and higher salaries gave women a comparative advantage over men, though women migrants have faced immense reputational harm. A significant factor contributing to the discussion around women's migration is the reportage in the media (newspapers, television, etc.). These reports mainly cover negative experiences and present them such that the stories of abuse render the task of reassuring the families of migrants in home countries more arduous while concurrently frightening (and disempowering) potential candidates.

This study examines how overseas female migrants are stereotyped in print and electronic media and how they are characterized by gender, class and geographical origin. It describes how women's multiple roles (as workers, earners, investors, mothers, daughters, etc.) are presented in the media and how mostly exploitation and abuse are the experiences highlighted. It explores the possible impacts of such reporting on current and potential migrant women and suggest ways to produce a more balanced account of the challenges of such migration without hampering opportunities.

The research studied migration-related news published in widely circulated national dailies and reports aired on television channels in Bangladesh. Migration-related news published in four newspapers (two Bangla and two English dailies) from January 2015 to February 2021 were reviewed after consulting their online archives. Information was also collected from reports aired on three television channels. The study was complemented by interviews with senior journalists and activists while relevant secondary data, research studies and regulations were also consulted.

The study found that 496 migration-related news articles were published from 2015 to 2021 in the four newspapers. Of those, 147 articles focused on women: 21 were positive, 99 were negative,

and 26 highlighted both positive and negative aspects. Journalists are often inclined to highlight the negative aspects as victims are more vocal, and such news attract readers' attention. Very few success stories about migrant women who are still abroad or have recently returned were found. The positive news reported was mostly about the opening up a new destination for migrants or an increase in opportunities for legal migrant workers.

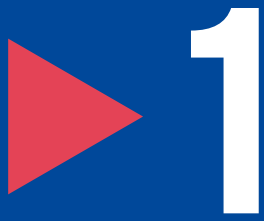
The analysis confirmed that negative news regarding women's migration were more harmful than helpful to women seeking opportunities for a better life by migrating. Women have limited opportunities to participate in the labour force in Bangladesh. The bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia has given unskilled women a chance to migrate free of cost. This is a welcome opportunity for many women to earn more and improve not only their but the living conditions of their families as well. Thus, while recognizing that problems do exist, we need to consider how women's labour migration could be presented in a more balanced way in the media. Some reports suggest preventing women from migrating to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers. Others advocate exporting only skilled workers such as nurses and trained caregivers. Skilled migration is desirable for better remittance earnings as there are better opportunities for them. However, the work opportunities for unskilled workers are minimal. Those who go abroad to work as domestic workers cannot be transformed into nurses or professional caregivers overnight.

The study also questions the way abuse is reported. The language used often suggests that the abuse suffered by a few women applies to a much larger population, while the evidence at hand does not support such generalization. Some challenges that migrant women face, which are termed abuse, may have been something they encounter at home anyway, and this is seldom pointed out.

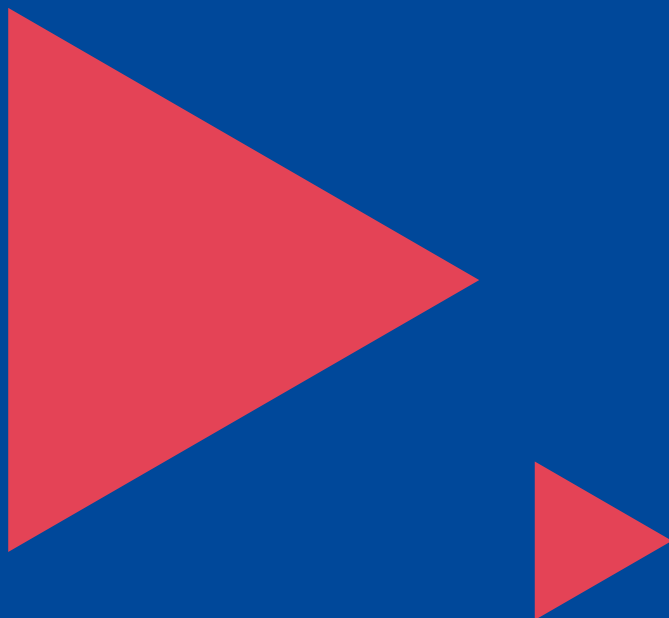
Migration cannot always be blamed for all the miseries women suffer as domestic workers. The print and electronic media need to devise a strategy to report news more responsibly and

ensure that they do not further damage the reputations and perceptions of migrant women. They should avoid using strong words only to catch readers' attention, and the media should also highlight the positive outcomes of women

labour migration. Further, in addition to writing about negative issues in the media, the media houses can also directly communicate these issues to the government.



Introduction



Official statistics on the international migration of women from Bangladesh date back to 1991, though similar statistics on total migration (without gender disaggregation) can be found since 1976.¹ Women's migration fluctuated between 1991 and 2003 but then saw steady growth until the coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19) broke out in 2020 (for more information on the number of women migrants, see Appendix 1). The number of outbound women workers rose from 2,189 in 1991 to 121,925 in 2017, then went down to 101,695 in 2018 and again rose slightly to 104,786 in 2019. The share of women's labour migration was less than 1 per cent of the total migration till 2003. Since then, the percentage has increased significantly but has gone through an uneven growth path.

According to Blanchet and Biswas (2020),² the volatility in women's migration could be associated with multiple degrees of restrictions on women migration imposed by the Government of Bangladesh at different points in time. Their study further noted that the official records do not represent the actual number of Bangladeshi women who migrated for work because a good number of them migrated via unofficial channels, such as through friends and family members living or working in the destination country. Moreover, women's unofficial cross-border mobility has often been regarded as synonymous with sex trafficking rather than as migration. However, a more positive image of women's overseas migration has gradually developed in tandem with successive relaxations of bans on women's overseas employment (Blanchet and Biswas 2020).

In 2015, a bilateral agreement was signed with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia hereafter) that leveraged women's migration to a large extent, with the Bangladeshi government committing to send 200,000 women domestic workers to Saudi Arabia in two years and allowing women to migrate free of any cost.³

This agreement has widened the existing gaps between migration costs for men and women and had encouraged more women to migrate (Blanchet and Biswas 2020).⁴ Lower costs for migration and higher salaries, indicating a rising demand for domestic workers, gave women a comparative advantage over men, though women have faced immense reputational harm. However, the opportunity cost was a significant reputational harm to women in their own communities. A significant factor contributing to the image of women's migration is the reporting in the media (through newspaper, television, etc.). These reports mainly cover negative experiences and discuss stories of abuse in a way that makes the task of reassuring the family at home all the more arduous while frightening (and disempowering) potential candidates.

The representation of women migrant workers in media reporting is of critical importance. The exploitation and harmful practices that some migrant women suffer abroad may be emphasized to convince the government to ensure better protection for these workers. While such a purpose is legitimate, the strategies normally adopted may harm migrant women rather than help them. As has been argued by Blanchet and Biswas (2020), the intense focus of media on "protection" may fail to recognize the agency that migrant women deploy in the choices they make, the risks they take, and how they manage them.

The media reports often use extreme words that communicate a dreadful picture of migration overall, while the stories may only represent a small proportion of the migrants. However, migrant women should be treated as adults and not as minor children. While migration is not without risks, studies have shown that most migrants found benefits abroad that made their migration worthwhile. In addition, overseas migration opportunities have enabled many women to participate in the remunerative labour market in contrast to limited opportunities in Bangladesh.

1 Official statistics have been provided by the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Government of Bangladesh.

2 Blanchet and Biswas (2020) studied migration from the context of gender by conducting a survey in five districts of Bangladesh: Barguna and Patuakhali (relatively new districts to migration) and Manikganj, Narayanganj and Brahmanbaria (which have a long history of migration). The study covered 8,437 migrant workers in 125 villages of these five districts.

3 Migrating "free of cost" entailed that the employers pay for all costs – visa, airfare, costs for medical examinations, etc.

4 The facts and analysis for this section of the current study is drawn mostly from Blanchet and Biswas (2020) if not otherwise mentioned.

Rahman et al. (2014) also noted that overseas migration mostly leads to the economic upscaling of migrants. However, some do face difficulties due to lack of qualifications, language barriers, cultural differences, deception by employers, workplace accidents for gaps in building safety, low standards of living, difficulty with socialization, among other things. The analysis by Blanchet and Biswas (2020) found that migrant women, including those who had been victims of fraud and abuse, did not appreciate the media coverage. They felt these reports tarnished their image and weakened their claim that women could migrate with dignity. They noted that all migrant women were not subjected to “torture”, but that journalists were only interested in these stories. Thus, we need a deeper understanding of the attitude of the media towards female migration and the reasons behind the negative reports. Also, we need to find ways to address the challenges migrant women face beyond such

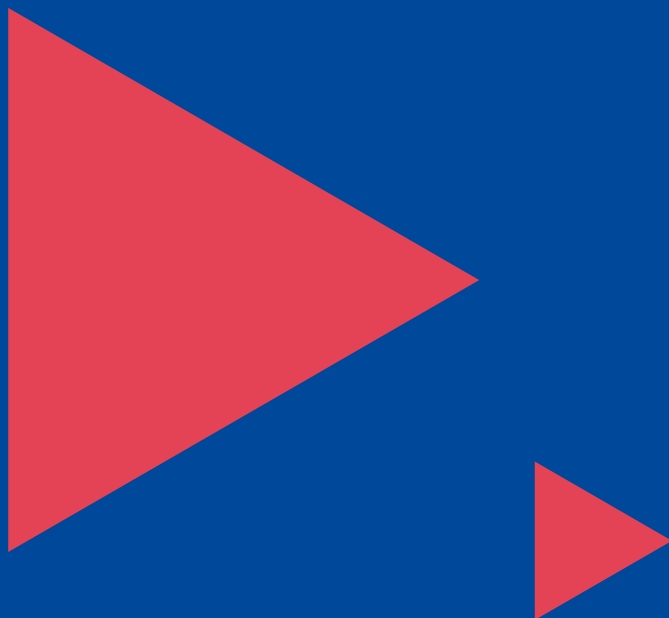
exposure of them in the media, which does not really solve their challenges.

The present study analyses how overseas women migrants are characterized and stereotyped in the print and electronic media and how they are characterized by gender, class and geographical origin. The study also describes how women’s multiple roles (as workers, earners, investors, mothers, daughters, etc.) are presented and how exploitation and abuse are highlighted. The study explores the possible impacts of such reports on current migrants and potential future migrants. The study also describes possible ways to balance reporting the challenges of women’s migration without hampering the opportunities that such migration offers.

The current study is based on migration-related news published in widely circulated

▶ 2

Methodology and data



national dailies and reports aired on television channels in Bangladesh. More specifically, the study consulted migration-related news published in four newspapers (two Bangla and two English dailies) and aired on three television channels. The consulted Bangla newspapers are the *Prothom Alo* and *Samakal*, while the English newspapers include *The Daily Star* and *The Financial Express*. These newspapers were selected based on their years of publications and volume of circulation.⁵ The research team explored all the selected daily newspapers from January 2015 to February 2021 (all of them have online archives) and searched for news on overseas migration from Bangladesh. Any news on overseas migration was documented and analysed under different criteria, such as date, title, type (whether the news is published as editorial, sub-editorial, opinion, article etc.), and the focus of the news (whether it was highlighting the positive or negative aspects of migration).

In the case of positive news, the study recorded the type of commendations claimed. Similarly, for negative news, the study documented the nature of complaints, size of the news, keywords used to describe positive or negative consequences of migration, and recommendations (if any) for the well-being of the migrants. A detailed list of analysis criteria is provided in Appendix 2.

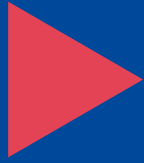
The time frame of the study was chosen in order to cover women's migration after the bilateral agreement was signed between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in February 2015, which opened a vast window for women's migration as domestic workers.

The three TV channels consulted for migration-related news are Ekattor TV, Channel i and Somoy News. These channels were chosen as they started operations before the signing of the bilateral agreement. In the case of the television channels, it was not possible to search for daily programmes, or news on migration, because those are not archived according to the topics covered. Instead, migration-related news and talk shows were searched for using keywords (like female migration, remittances, challenges of migration, economic and social impacts of migration, etc.) for the period covered for newspapers. News or programmes found through these searches were documented according to the nature of the information provided.

Every piece of news (from the print or electronic media) identified was thoroughly analysed to understand the nature of the representation of women migrant workers in the media (print and electronic). Though the study explores the media representation of women migrant workers, data on male migrants was also analysed to get a comparative picture of the gender differences in presenting news. Several senior journalists and activists were also interviewed, and relevant secondary data, research studies and regulations were consulted.

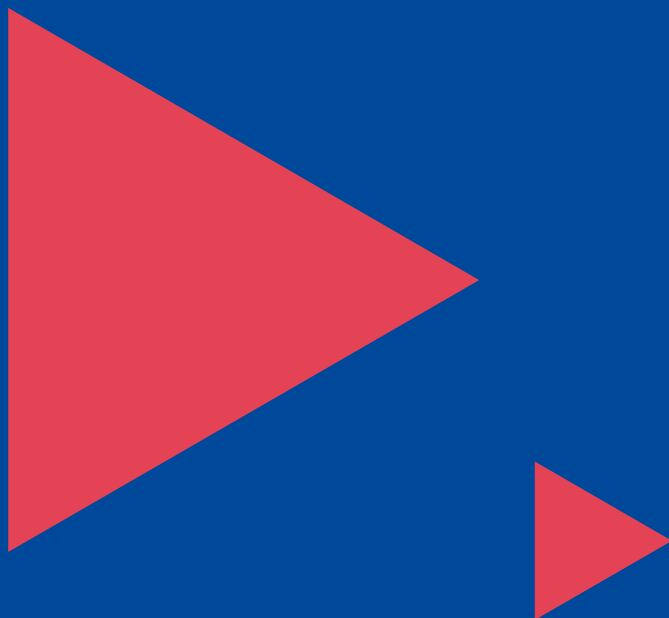
Before analysing the findings from the news and interviews, it is necessary to get an overview of the landscape of overseas migration from Bangladesh to better understand the relevance and directions of the influence of various media reports.

5 The list is provided by the Press Information Department of the Government of Bangladesh (<http://www.pressinform.gov.bd/>).



3

**An overview of overseas
migration from Bangladesh**

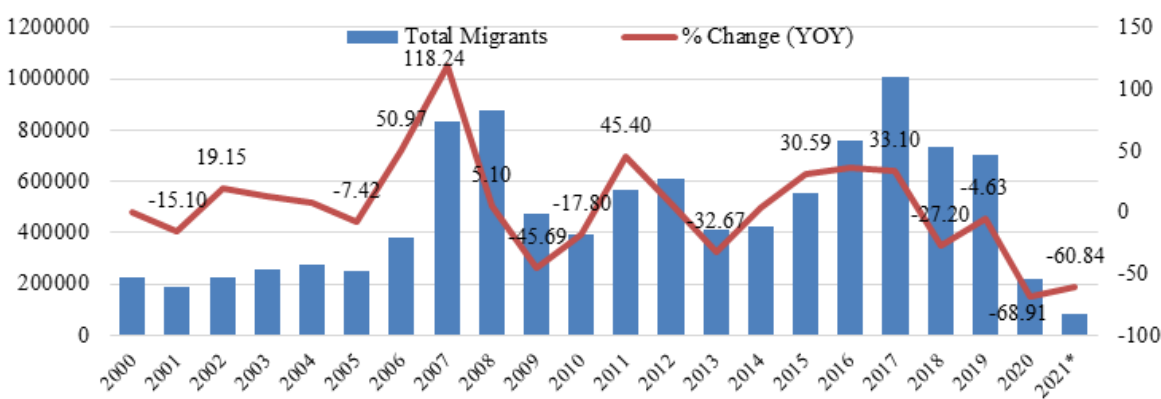


The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are the most common migration destinations for Bangladeshi workers, both men and women. People migrate with the hope of improving their livelihoods, but the situation is not free of challenges. However, migration and its management have been problematic for stakeholders due to shortcomings in transparency, policy and legal bindings (Huda 2019). The number of migrants fluctuates in different years, but there is an overall rise in the number between 2000 to 2017 (see Appendix 1). There is also a decline in the number during the following years, and a sharp decline is noticed in 2020 due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. While more than one million people migrated in 2017, the number came down to

only 200,000 in 2020. The trend is also visible in figure 1.

We notice a rise in women’s migration after the bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia was signed in 2015 (table 1; figure 2). Between 2015 to 2019, more than 100,000 women migrated from Bangladesh (table 2), comprising 12–18 per cent of the total migrants. We will see later that compared to the number of women migrating every year, the number of women covered in various negative reports is minuscule. While it is true that even one life matters, however, the opposite is also true, that media reports should not hamper opportunities for livelihood improvement for thousands of women by covering only negative reports on

►Figure 1. Trends in overseas migration from Bangladesh (2000–2021)



Source: Author’s analysis based on Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) data

► Table 1. Migration from Bangladesh and women’s share in total migration since the signing of the bilateral agreement with Saudi Arabia

Year	Female	Male	Total	Share of women in total (%)
2014	76 007	349 677	425 684	17.86
2015	103 718	452 163	555 881	18.66
2016	118 088	639 643	757 731	15.58
2017	121 925	886 600	1 008 525	12.09
2018	101 695	632 486	734 181	13.85
2019	104 786	595 373	700 159	14.97
2020	21 934	195 735	217 669	10.08
2021	11 051	74 191	85 242	12.96

*Up to February 2021
Source: BMET (February 2021).

a few. Instead, the challenges faced by some migrants should be described in contrast with primarily positive outcomes of migration.

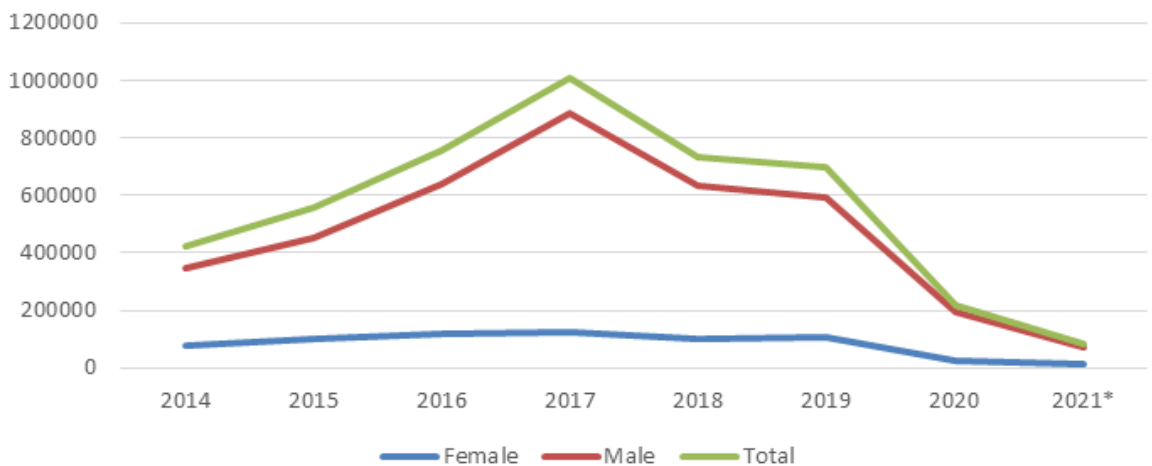
Though women’s migration from Bangladesh increased between 2015 and 2019 compared to men’s migration, the number of women migrants is still meagre. Figure 2 demonstrates the trend.

Workers from Bangladesh mostly migrate to Middle Eastern countries, mainly Saudi Arabia

(57 per cent of total migration in 2019). At the same time, a small proportion also migrates to Singapore, Malaysia and other countries (see table 2).

A survey conducted in five districts of Bangladesh by Blanchet and Biswas (2020) found that the most common destination for Bangladeshi women is Saudi Arabia, followed by Jordan Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The dominance of the countries of the

►Figure 2. Trends in gender-disaggregated migration from Bangladesh (2014–2021)*



*Up to February 2021
Source: BMET (February 2021).

► Table 2. Share of different destination countries in total migration (in per cent)

Destination	Year						
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Saudi Arabia	2.50	10.48	18.99	54.66	35.05	56.99	74.30
UAE	5.69	4.55	1.07	0.41	0.44	0.47	0.50
Oman	24.84	23.36	24.84	8.83	9.88	10.38	9.68
Qatar	20.57	22.30	15.89	8.13	10.43	7.18	1.66
Lebanon	3.91	3.44	1.99	0.83	0.82	0.69	0.22
Jordan	4.78	3.97	3.04	2.03	1.32	2.91	1.73
Kuwait	0.73	3.14	4.91	4.92	3.76	1.76	0.80
Singapore	12.86	9.99	7.22	4.01	5.64	7.12	4.63
Malaysia	1.21	5.48	5.30	9.89	23.96	0.08	0.06
Others*	22.91	13.28	16.75	6.29	8.70	12.43	6.42
Total (number)	425 684	555 881	757 731	1 008 525	734 181	700 159	217 669

Source: BMET

Middle East due to their demand for workers is noticeable. Saudi Arabia has been the leading destination because of widely available visas. The cost is theoretically free, and there is a high demand for domestic workers, a job which does not require specialized skills and provides a relatively good salary. The number of women officially migrating to Malaysia, Singapore, the UK, Italy, Cyprus, Mauritius, and countries other than GGC countries is comparatively insignificant. The reasons for this range from the absence of bilateral agreements, visa regimes and other legal restrictions related to the regulation of migration and labour to a lack of training and educational qualifications to ask for support from the government.

Another critical aspect to consider is the scope of opportunity or work. Not all countries have the same type of opportunities for migrant workers, be it men or women. Again, there are specialized demands for workers of a specific gender, for instance, women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, male construction workers in Malaysia, etc. As has been noted in Blanchet and Biswas (2020), women migrate at a lower rate than males and to fewer countries. This is because the migrating women are mostly unskilled and, therefore, can migrate to countries with a demand for such workers, such as the nations of the Middle East. The migration of

women to Europe, South East Asia, and the Oceanic region is low as regulatory rigidities, social and cultural obstacles together with higher skill needs discourage women to migrate in these regions. In 2019 (a typical year before the COVID-19 outbreak), 60 per cent of the women who migrated from Bangladesh went to Saudi Arabia. This surge is possibly due to the bilateral agreement (table 3) and the high demand for women domestic workers.

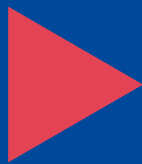
Women who migrate as domestic workers have different experiences. This is true for all migrants. A book edited by Tasneem Siddiqui, *Untold Stories of Migrants: Dreams and Realities* (2017), presents different stories of migrant workers and speaks of some accounts that demonstrate a considerable uplifting of livelihood status, while others had bitter experiences.

Therefore, media reports that cover only stories of deprivation and abuse may depict only a limited and selective number of cases and give an overall negative picture of migration which may be misleading. By presenting both the success and challenges women have seen abroad, the media may play a more responsible role. This study aims to analyse how the media can play an important role in shaping healthy women’s migration from Bangladesh.

► Table 3. Share of destination countries for women migrants, 2019 (in per cent)

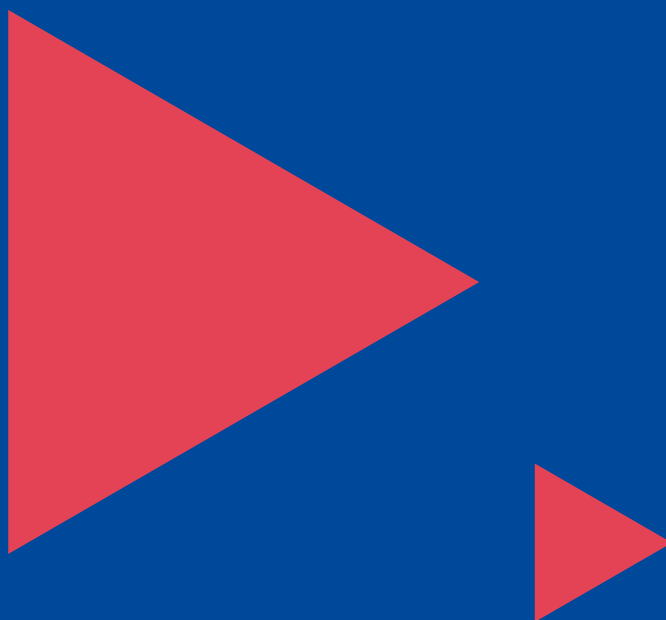
Destination	Number of female migrants	Share of different destination countries in female migration (%)
Saudi Arabia	62 578	59.72
UAE	2 483	2.37
Oman	12 226	11.67
Qatar	3 741	3.57
Lebanon	1 611	1.54
Jordan	19 706	18.81
Kuwait	758	0.72
Singapore	106	0.10
Malaysia	22	0.02
Others	1 555	1.48
Total	104 786	100

Source: Author’s analysis based on BMET data (2021)



4

Experiences with women's migration from Bangladesh: Learning from literature



The migration of women has been covered in various types of literatures including academic studies, reports by NGOs, project reports by development partners, etc. Here, we have analyzed mostly academic literature to understand the reasons behind women's migration from Bangladesh, the obstacles they face, and the things that may facilitate their migration.

A large array of literature has identified that migration for women workers in Bangladesh is often driven by poverty. Due to cultural stigmas, women are likely to migrate when they cannot ensure a better life for themselves and their families in their homeland. However, in some cases, their parents encourage and may force women to migrate for work and send money home to support the family, presenting it as a duty. Due to industrialization and urbanization, more opportunities have evolved for women, and they are more confident about taking jobs outside their villages, though the equation is not as straightforward for all cases. How much women respond to work opportunities depends on their social and familial realities. Therefore, the creation of new employment opportunities does not always result in greater labour force participation for women or migration. However, for the women who were able to enter the labour market, their jobs have given them financial independence, leading to the desire for better living standards. With a rise in the demand for women workers in various countries, women have started migrating abroad for work, giving them relatively better earning opportunities than in Bangladesh.

Barkat and Ahsan (2014) noted that poverty, vulnerabilities and lack of job opportunities are the main reasons behind the increasing trend of overseas migration of Bangladeshi women workers. Sultana and Fatima (2017) also found that women want to migrate for better employment opportunities due to low salaries and a lack of employment opportunities at home. They mainly target migrating to the Gulf States as they do not have the skills to be domestic helpers or caregivers in developed countries and there are also legal obstacles in migrating to other places.

Blanchet and Biswas (2020) found that two thirds of the surveyed migrant women are illiterate or had not studied beyond the primary level. Men in the same category are 45 percent. The survey

has also found that married women constitute 67.5 per cent of the total women who migrated as opposed to a combined total of 32.5 per cent representing single, divorced, widowed and separated women. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, where male family members are usually the only breadwinners, poverty has compelled mostly married women to migrate to generate income for better livelihoods.

Meanwhile, unmarried, single women may have the drive to lead a better life and break the chain of living under unwanted male governance, which is often impossible while residing in their homeland. Before migration, some women worked in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector; some worked as housemaids; and some did not have prior work experience. Migration gave them the freedom they could not get at home. Moreover, becoming an earning member in the family improved their status and respect.

Migration for women in Bangladesh is also relatively cheaper than that for men as women can migrate free of cost to some countries, and this encourages families to support female members to migrate for work. Blanchet and Biswas (2020) have provided a detailed analysis of the gap between the migration costs for men and women migrants. According to their survey, the gap has been widening since 2015. They found that 14 per cent of the surveyed women migrants migrated without paying anything, and for Saudi Arabia, this percentage is one third. In the case of men migrants with similar conditions, free migration is noted only in cases of 0.1 per cent of the cases.

In an era of globalization, international labour migration has been considered a significant source of economic growth in many countries, and it also creates employment opportunities for many women (Blanchet and Biswas 2020; Barkat and Ahsan 2014). However, there are many discussions around the benefits and challenges. Some studies have found that the female labour force, specifically low-skilled women migrants, are at risk of physical, sexual and mental abuse (Barkat and Ahsan 2014) after migrating to another country. However, women with better information, skills and greater awareness can avoid abuse and benefit from migration.

Women can also seek help from institutional support systems protecting the migrant workers, such as the agencies through which they migrate, government authorities including the embassies,

and some non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These institutions also work towards not only assuring the rights of migrant workers but also the rehabilitation of the returnee migrant workers who experience exploitation in the destination countries. However, we must understand that some NGOs working with returnee migrants receive funds from donors supporting the rehabilitation of tortured or abused migrants. Therefore, there is a possibility that these NGOs have an incentive to create big negative stories out of minor issues.

John (2015) has explored the long-term impacts of international labour migration. The study shows that migrant workers achieve a better livelihood as their income rises due to overseas migration. However, Weishaar (2008) claimed that migrant workers face difficulties in communication, unfamiliarity with the new culture of the destination country, work-related stress, mental stress, and social stress. A study by Mazumdar et al. (2013) covered the types and patterns of female labour migration in the Indian context. They claimed that migration increases the irresistible male bias in the labour market for industry and services. Like Bangladesh, the reasons for migration provided by the majority of Indian women labour migrants include poverty, debt, a decline in income, lack of local employment, etc. Mazumdar et al. (2013) also found that 78 per cent of rural and 59 per cent of urban migrant workers worked as unskilled physical labour. Thus, migration in India has led to relatively limited diversification of women's occupations.

According to Sultana and Fatima (2017), the demand for low-skilled labour in developed countries, especially for women workers, has created ample employment opportunities. However, a lack of education constrains women from Bangladesh from taking up these opportunities and therefore, enhancing and deploying training and skills development programmes before migration may help them succeed. However, as has been noted above, there are other factors that determine successful migration, such as regulatory requirements in the destination country, how women are socially appraised and mediated in their home communities, etc.

Blanchet (2020) has discussed the living condition of women Bangladeshi migrant workers in Oman and noted that women make up 10 per cent of

Oman's overall Bangladeshi migrant population. These women have improved their economic conditions. The study interviewed 35 female migrant workers from Bangladesh in Oman, and most of them were working as domestic workers (13 were live-in workers and 11 were live-out). These women did not complain about additional work other than their works as domestic workers. Many had extended their contract several times, which indicated their satisfaction with their jobs. Though the starting salary in Oman is among the lowest in the Middle East, it increased regularly and doubled in six to seven years.

The women migrants who work as live-in domestic workers face restrictions on outings and taking days off every week. Therefore, their social lives, other than their relations with employers and their associated social networks, mostly revolve around garbage bins where they chat with other women and men, exchange phone numbers and even develop romantic relationships.

While it is true that women migrants face workload burdens and some movement restrictions, but most did not face abuse, which is the story commonly told about women migrants in Oman. Some men migrants in Oman often describe the living conditions for women as miserable. Blanchet (2020) found that these men had no connections with women migrant workers there. Those opinions were only their perceptions, which were apparently not correct. The study found that several of the 35 interviewed women had benefitted from their migration to Oman.

Blanchet (2019) narrated the story of a 28-year-old migrant worker named Aisha working in Jordan. She was from the Shariatpur district in Bangladesh, and due to the poverty of her family, she migrated to Jordan at the age of 13 to work in a garment factory in Ramtha. After she left the factory, she worked as a live-out domestic worker and was able to increase her income. Aisha did not have any complaints against her employers, but she complained against Bangladeshi men who offered support but wanted to use her for their own unethical purposes. Therefore, Aisha maintained a distance from these men. She suffered much because of the attitudes of those men. According to her, the destination country is not the cause of migrant women's misery; sometimes, the people

of her own country make the migration process challenging.

According to a study by Siddiqui (2008), women working in various industries suffered from intolerable heat and lower wages than the promised amount, while the women engaged in domestic work had to work long periods, and they did not have monetary benefits like a bonus for overtime. Moreover, in Kuwait, the UAE, Lebanon and Bahrain, domestic migrant workers claim that their freedom of movement is controlled (Siddiqui 2016). However, a recent study by Siddiqui et al. (2017) noted that though there are some negative consequences of female labour migration, it would not be wise to restrict female labour movements. Despite many challenges, the amount of female labour migration from Bangladesh has still increased tremendously.

The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) launched an online complaint system in 2009, and in December 2017, 647 complaints had been lodged, and of them, 453 had been settled (Siddiqui et al. 2017). In addition, civil society and NGOs have also come forward to address the violence against the female migrant labour force by creating awareness programs and reaching out to women migrants to hear their complaints (Siddiqui et al. 2017). These activities are effective in lowering the exploitation and abuse of the women's labour force. However, sometimes, as mentioned previously, such initiatives may portray minor anomalies as big ones to increase the importance of their work.

Huda (2019) conducted 30 case studies on migrant women to understand the state of violation of their rights as migrants. The study claims that violence can take place for several reasons. The types of irregularities that migrant workers face include being overworked, physical harassment, sexual harassment, lower payment, irregular payment, absence of medical treatment, inability to contact their homes, etc. The main reasons behind such irregularities include fraud about the contract, exploitation and the intrusion of intermediaries. The study opined that women migrants have some rights while protecting themselves from violence. However, most women are unaware of these rights and, therefore, faced difficulties, worked long hours, suffered mental and emotional problems, and were victims of physical torture

and harassment (Huda 2019). However, this is not true for all female migrants. Huda (2019) recommends that the media should also narrate success stories of women migrants together with the vulnerability they face abroad.

Siddiqui (2017) describes the lives and work of 150 Bangladeshi migrants. Their stories are full of escapades and accomplishments. Some stories represent tales of migrant workers breaking out of poverty, while some other represent social mobility; however, some migrants experience deception, fraud, inhumane activities, and some have also died. With special regard to women migrant workers, some stories narrate that women work hard and send their earnings home. They become the breadwinners of their families and provide for the education of their children (Siddiqui 2017). But not all these are success stories. Some women have also experienced physical and mental torture and have had to endure sexual harassment (Siddiqui 2017).

From the findings of the literature discussed here, the following issues regarding women's migration emerge.

- ▶ The main reasons for women's migration include poverty, lack of employment opportunities in the home country, debt, accidental events in their families, a decline in family income, natural disasters, income loss, etc. Moreover, the relatively lower costs of female migration (in some cases, free migration opportunities) and rising demand for women workers in some destination countries have led to an increase in female migration.
- ▶ Two thirds of the women who migrate are married, while the remaining one third comprises single, divorced, widowed, and separated women. Married women from poor households migrate to generate income for their families. Unmarried single women mostly migrate to earn more for a better life and be free from patriarchal control.
- ▶ Women migrating from Bangladesh are primarily low-skilled and therefore, they mainly migrate to the countries in the Gulf region, where there is demand for low-cost, low-skilled workers.
- ▶ Findings from various studies reveal that overseas migration is beneficial for

most women migrants as they can earn more than with their opportunities in Bangladesh. With the higher income, they can improve both theirs and their families' livelihoods. Many migrants have also renewed their employment contracts, indicating that they may have benefitted from their experience.

- ▶ Though some studies noted in this section found cases of abuse that women have suffered, the positive outcomes of migration should be considered too.
- ▶ Women could avoid abuse if they were more aware of the risks, had better information about their rights, or if the institutional arrangements to support them were more efficient, etc. Moreover, many women also think they can handle negative situation and all is not bad abroad. They would have faced similar problems, even worse ones, at home.
- ▶ Most migrant women do not welcome the various adverse reports about migration in the media, mainly because their reputation is hurt by the lack of positive reporting.
- ▶ As migration has enabled many women to improve their livelihood and their families, more efforts should be made to make

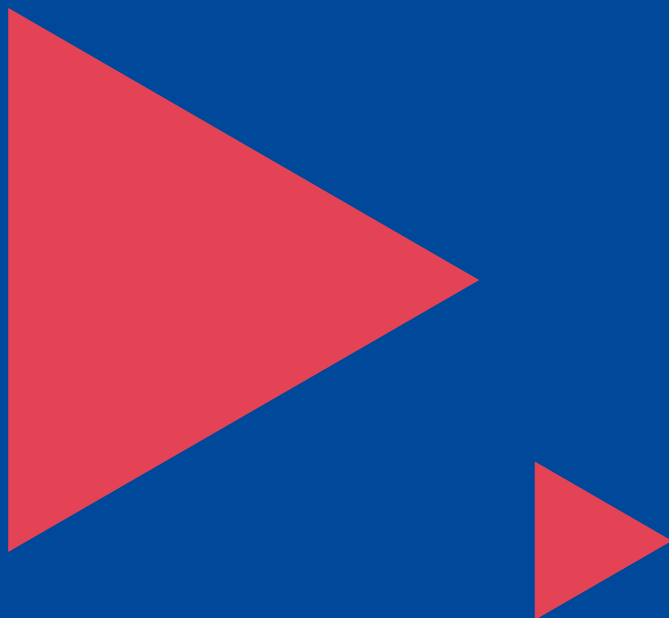
female migration more rewarding in terms of social status. The dominance of negative news in the media about the abuse of migrant women provides a very narrow picture, damages the reputation of current migrants and discourages potential future migrants.

A comparison of the findings from the reviewed literature on women's migration and their representation in the media reveals a gap in the analysis of the impact of migration. The media has been a strong voice in publishing and broadcasting the problems that women migrant workers face, the harassment they go through, and what happens after they return. However, there is not much discussion in the media about the substantial economic benefits of migration as described in Blanchet and Biswas (2020), Blanchet (2019) and others. Too few news stories highlight how migration has positively impacted the lives of women migrants and their families.

In addition, most reports usually only consider the discouraging impact that negative media reports can have on current and potential migrants. The media can play an active role in the advocacy to increase the awareness of prospective migrant workers by providing information on their rights and the available

▶ 5

National acts and policies related to labour migration in Bangladesh



institutional support to help them avoid abusive situations.

There are several acts and regulations in place to support safe and efficient migration from Bangladesh. The most relevant are the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act, 2013, the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012, the Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016, and the Bilateral Agreement signed between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in 2015. The main features of these laws are described here briefly to suggest how the media could look into the provisions of various regulations and concentrate on promoting their correct implementation, or they could highlight their weaknesses and report on how to make the rules more effective to protect the rights of migrant workers.

5.1. Overseas Employment and Migrants Act, 2013

The Act aims to promote overseas employment opportunities and establish a secure, safe and fair migration system. Moreover, it also seeks to ensure and protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers and their families. According to the Act, delegated government authorities will control activities concerning the recruitment and emigration of workers from Bangladesh for overseas employment. The BMET has the authority to register migrant workers and migration clearance.

The Act mentions the information to be included in an employment contract. For example, the contract must state the worker's wage, accommodation facilities, duration of employment, compensation amount in the event of their death or injury, cost of immigration to and from the foreign country. The Act allows the government to prescribe a ceiling on migration costs. It also suggests establishing a Labour Welfare Wing to protect the rights of migrant workers. Further, it notes that migrant workers have the right to all the information concerning migration; they should be able to return home if they want and have access to several financial and welfare programmes.

The Act lays out the penalties for various issues, including sending migrant workers overseas

unlawfully, charging excess fees, publishing unauthorized advertisements and arranging departures through places other than the specified places.

5.2. Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012

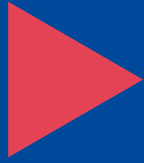
This Act aims to prevent and suppress human trafficking and protect victims and their rights to safe migration. It describes penalties for the organizing the offense of human trafficking, for instigating, conspiring, or attempting to commit a crime, for forced or bonded labour and services, for kidnapping, stealing, and confining with intent to commit the offense of human trafficking, for filing false cases, for threatening the victim, for soliciting for prostitution, for establishing and maintaining a brothel and so on.

5.3. Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy, 2016

The purpose of this policy is to protect immigrant workers, and its main objective is to enable Bangladeshi migrant workers to avail existing opportunities and help them face challenges. It also aims to take steps necessary to increase overseas employment and ensure the welfare for potential workers. This policy has replaced the Overseas Employment Policy, 2006. Some of the key principles of this policy are:

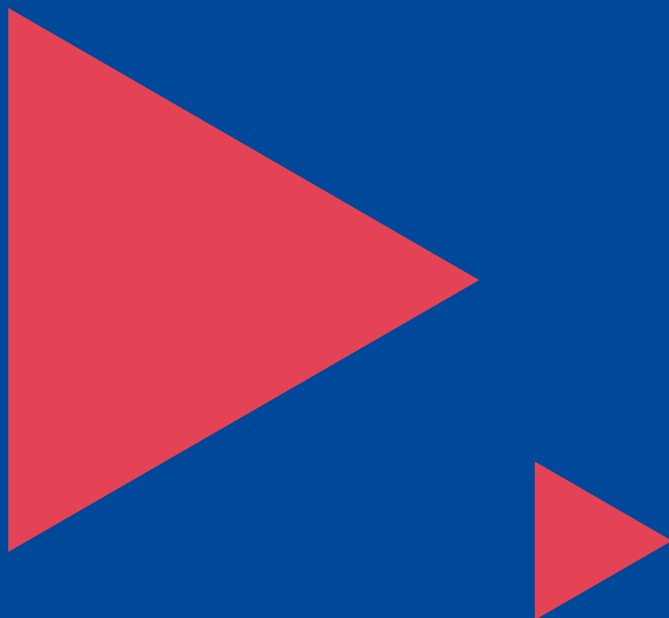
- a) assuring safe labour migration by upholding fundamental human rights
- b) maintaining conformity with gender sensitivity
- c) guaranteeing the right to free choice of employment
- d) extending all possible support to protect workers
- e) ensuring welfare facilities for migrant workers

In addition, this policy emphasizes equal treatment towards male and female labour migrants by assuring a safe working environment.



6

Analysis of media reports portraying women's migration



6.1. Basic characteristics of media (print and television) reporting

As has been noted in the previous chapters, reporting in four dailies (two Bangla and two English language) and three TV channels was studied in depth to explore how the Bangladeshi media represents women migrants. The time period covered was January 2015 to February 2021. The dailies covered were *Prothom Alo*, *The Daily Star*, *The Financial Express*, and *Samakal*. The TV channels covered were Channel i, Ekattor TV and Somoy News.

The four newspapers published a total of 496 news items on migration-related issues from January 2015 to February 2021. Of these, 103 news items were published in 2020 and were related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods of migrants (table 4). As we wanted to explore how migrant workers' issues are covered in non-crisis times, we analysed news items on migration apart from those on COVID-19 (as they were all negative news). Thus, a total of 393 news items were analysed.

Out of the 393 migration-related news items published from 2015 to February 2021 (January and February), 251 were negative, 71 were positive, and the remaining were a mix of both (table 5). Negative news refers to those items that provide information on different types of abuse on workers, irregularities, accidents, etc. Positive news relates to news on job opportunities abroad, livelihood improvements by migrants, etc. Thus, 63.87 per cent of the published news items were negative, while 18 per cent were positive. During this period, the highest number of news on migration was

► Table 4. Number of news items by year

Year	Number of news items published
2015	58
2016	44
2017	48
2018	72
2019	81
2020	52
2020 (COVID-19)	103
2021 (Feb)	38
Grand total	496

Source: Authors' analysis

published in *The Daily Star* (138 items), of which 61.51 per cent were negative. *Samakal* published the lowest number (75 items). However, the share of negative news is the highest (69.33 per cent). Clearly, newspapers have a bias and publish mostly negative news on migration.

Forty-five migration-related news items aired on Channel i, Ekattor TV and Somoy News from 2015 to 2021 were analysed. These were located using a keyword search, and it is possible that other news related to migration was also aired. Of these, 82 per cent were negative, while only 4 per cent were positive (table 6). There was some mixed news that covered both positive and negative aspects. However, these were only 13.33 per cent. Thus, a clear bias in the electronic media, of highlighting the negative outcomes of women labour migration, was observed.

► Table 5. Number and share of different types of news among migration-related (published between 2015 to February 2021 but excluding COVID-19-related news)

Newspaper	Type of news				Share of different types of news (%)			
	Positive	Negative	Both (Neutral)	Grand total	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	(%) Both (Neutral)	Grand total (%)
The Daily Star	28	85	25	138	20.29	61.59	18.12	100
The Financial Express	12	54	19	85	14.12	63.53	22.35	100
Prothom Alo	19	60	16	95	20	63.16	16.84	100
Samakal	12	52	11	75	16	69.33	14.67	100
Grand Total	71	251	71	393	18.07	63.87	18.07	100

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 6. Types and share of different types of TV news (aired between 2015 and 2021)

TV Channels	Type of TV News				Type of TV News (%)			
	Positive	Negative	Both (Neutral)	Grand total	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	(%) Both (Neutral)	Grand total (%)
Channel i	0	6	2	8	0	75	25	100
Ekattor TV	0	10	3	13	0	76.92	23.08	100
Somoy TV	2	21	1	24	8.33	87.50	4.17	100
Grand Total	2	37	6	45	4.44	82.22	13.33	100

Source: Authors' analysis

Gender disaggregation of the analysed print news shows that the majority of the news items cover both women and men migrants (table 7). However, if the news covering men migrants or women migrants is compared separately, the number of items on men migrants' issues is more than the number of items on women migrants. This is to be expected as the number of men migrating every year is seven to nine times higher than women. Given this context, the proportion of news on women migrants is relatively higher.

It can be further noted that the news covering only women migrants is mainly negative (table 8). Of 71 news items covering only women migrants, 56 highlight negative news, 11 are positive news and 4 are neutral. Thus, 78.87 per cent of the news on female migrants is negative, while the share of negative news among all news on only men migrants is 67.57 per cent. The findings of the different studies discussed in Chapter 4 noted that most women migrants succeeded in improving their income and livelihood status through migration. However, the newspaper

reports imply that women's migration mostly brings negative impacts, which is misleading.

Much of the print news was about Bangladeshi migrants in a particular country. We found 246 such news items. Of these, the majority (41.87 per cent) were about migrants to Saudi Arabia (table 9). After Saudi Arabia, migrants to Malaysia received the most attention (19.11 per cent of the news items).

Migration-related news items are published primarily as general items written by the reporters of the respective newspapers (57.76 per cent). Around 20 per cent of the items on migration have been published as editorials or sub-editorials (table 10) and another 20 per cent as opinions or substantive articles. Most of the migration-related news items are published in the general news section, pointing to an intention to reach all types of readers, while publishing them in the editorial section points to the opinions of various writers on the topic. In the first case, there is a possibility that the general populace will assume some negative realities of migration to be true for all migrants. It

► Table 7. Gender disaggregation of migration-related print news

Newspaper	Gender disaggregation of news (number)				Share of gender disaggregated news (%)			
	Male	Female	News covering both male and female	Grand Total	Male (%)	Female (%)	News covering both male and female (%)	Grand Total (%)
The Daily Star	37	32	69	138	26.81	23.19	50	100
The Financial Express	33	6	46	85	38.82	7.06	54.12	100
Prothom Alo	42	19	34	95	44.21	20	35.79	100
Samakal	36	14	25	75	48	18.67	33.33	100
Grand Total	148	71	174	393	37.66	18.07	44.27	100

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 8. Gender disaggregated intensity of negative news items in total news

Gender/Types of news	Positive	Negative	Neutral news	Total number of news	Share of negative news items among total news (%)
Male	21	100	27	148	67.57
Female	11	56	4	71	78.87
News covering both men and women	39	95	40	174	54.60
Total number of news	71	251	71	393	63.87

Source: Authors’ analysis

► Table 9. Print news according to destination country

Destination Country	No. of news items	No. of news items (%)
Saudi Arabia	103	41.87
Malaysia	47	19.11
Middle East countries	19	7.72
Libya	15	6.10
Qatar	13	5.28
UAE	7	2.85
Thailand	7	2.85
Singapore	6	2.44
Oman	5	2.03
Lebanon	4	1.63
Iraq	4	1.63
Brunei	3	1.22
Jordan	3	1.22
Bahrain	2	0.81
Kuwait	2	0.81
Japan	1	0.41
Vietnam	1	0.41
Yemen	1	0.41
Italy	1	0.41
Sudan	1	0.41
South Africa	1	0.41
Grand Total	246	100

Source: Authors’ analysis

may also create larger social impacts and rigidity towards migration

News of greater importance is usually published on the front page or on the back page. However, most of the migration-related news is published on the inside pages. Only 26 per cent of these news items are posted either on the front page

or the back page (table 11). It was also observed that most of the news (48.09 per cent) is medium in size, while 7.12 per cent of news is very long, 25.95 per cent is long, and 18.83 per cent is short (table 12). Thus, news on migration often gets high importance in size (long and very long news) and attracts the readers’ attention.

► Table 10. Place of migration-related news in the newspapers

Newspaper	Type of document					Type of document (%)				
	Editorial/ Sub- editorial	News	Opinion/ Article	Others	Grand total	Editorial/ Sub- Editorial (%)	News (%)	Opinion/ Article (%)	Others (%)	Grand Total (%)
The Daily Star	25	84	21	8	138	18.12	60.87	15.22	5.80	100
The Financial Express	40	28	16	1	85	47.06	32.94	18.82	1.18	100
Prothom Alo	8	70	17	0	95	8.42	73.68	17.89	0.00	100
Samakal	4	45	23	3	75	5.33	60.00	30.67	4.00	100
Grand total	77	227	77	12	393	19.59	57.76	19.59	3.05	100

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 11. Position of the news in the newspaper

Newspaper	Number of news according to position in the newspaper				Share of news according to position in the newspaper (%)			
	Front page	Back page	Other page	Grand total	Front page (%)	Back page (%)	Other page (%)	Grand total (%)
The Daily Star	32	27	79	138	23.19	19.57	57.25	100
The Financial Express	9	17	59	85	10.59	20.00	69.41	100
Prothom Alo	5	4	86	95	5.26	4.21	90.53	100
Samakal	8	6	61	75	10.67	8.00	81.33	100
Grand total	54	54	285	393	13.74	13.74	72.52	100

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 12. Size of the news in the newspaper

Newspaper	Number of news according to size					Share of news according to size (%)				
	Short	Medium	Long story	Very long	Grand total	Short (%)	Medium (%)	Long story (%)	Very long (%)	Grand total (%)
The Daily Star	26	74	28	10	138	18.84	53.62	20.29	7.25	100
The Financial Express	22	43	16	4	85	25.88	50.59	18.82	4.71	100
Prothom Alo	13	40	30	12	95	13.68	42.11	31.58	12.63	100
Samakal	13	32	28	2	75	17.33	42.67	37.33	2.67	100
Grand total	74	189	102	28	393	18.83	48.09	25.95	7.12	100

Source: Authors' analysis

It was observed (in table 8) that 71 news items were positive, and some of these items covered more than one topic. In total, the 71 printed news items covered a total of 119 topics (table 13). The issues that were reported as positive news included items on the increased earnings of migrant workers, improved standards of living, new labour market participation (employment

opportunities), the contribution of migrants to the education of their children and siblings, investment in assets, better employment opportunities, and possibilities for higher earnings. Some reports noted that the reason for migrants going abroad to work was to find better jobs and lives for their families. However, there is not much analysis in these reports regarding the

extent to which unemployment problems have been addressed through migration. In most of the positive topics, 74 per cent are under the “Other” category, meaning they are very scattered.

If we look at the negative news, we can summarize that most complaints are of

non-specified exploitation (table 14). However, newspapers use various terms (explained below) that indicate heavy abuse. The abuse most explicitly mentioned in the news includes physical abuse or torture, lower wages, mental abuse, sexual harassment, rape, document confiscation, employment mismatch, etc.

► **Table 13. Topics covered by positive news reports**

Type of commendation	No. of topics in positive news	Share of different topics in total positive topics
Increased earnings	4	3.36
Improved standards of living	3	2.52
New labour market participation for migrants (employment opportunities)	14	11.76
Contribution of migrants in the education of children and siblings	1	0.84
Investment in assets	2	1.68
Better employment opportunities and possibilities of higher earnings	7	5.88
Others	88	73.95
Grand total	119	100

Source: Authors’ analysis

► **Table 14. Types of complaints reported in newspapers**

Type of complaints (different combinations as noted in the news)	No. of news under specified negative topics	Share of different topics in total negative topics
Non-specified exploitation	131	43.1
Physical abuse/torture	50	16.4
Lower wages than promised	23	7.6
Physical abuse/torture, mental abuse, sexual harassment/rape	18	5.9
Document confiscation	17	5.6
Employment mismatch	12	3.9
Sexual harassment/rape	11	3.6
Physical abuse/torture, payment, sexual harassment/rape, document confiscation (all together)	10	3.3
Payment and employment mismatch	9	3.0
Physical abuse/torture, mental abuse and payment	8	2.6
Physical abuse/torture and mental abuse and sexual harassment/rape	6	2.0
Mental abuse	3	1.0
Physical abuse/torture and payment	3	1.0
Employment mismatch and document confiscation	3	1.0
Grand Total	304	100

Source: Authors’ analysis

6.2. The focus of newspaper reports

It was observed that news related to abuse, death or harassment of migrants gets more attention in the print media. This news becomes a front-page or back-page story, and it is covered in editorials and post editorials. In contrast, the positive news on migration receives less attention, covered mostly in the middle pages and as short news. Nearly 79 per cent of the news on women migrants is negative, which can give the wrong impression, that migration has a mostly adverse impact on women. Further, the words chosen to describe the intensity of the irregularities are usually quite strong. A few articles talk about the ways that the negative consequences faced by migrants can be overcome or the main reasons behind those consequences. However, many articles present them in a way suggesting that Bangladeshi women migrants engaging in domestic work abroad all face abuse.

Some news headlines present a very dark picture of migration. For example, headlines are often overly dramatic: *"Malaysiar panbagane moddho jugiyo dasotto"* (Middle-age slavery in betel leaf garden in Malaysia); *"Moddho pracche nirmom nirjatoner shikar Bangladeshi meyera"* (Bangladeshi women face heartless brutality in the Middle East); *"Nirjatoner khoto niye firilen aro 42 nari"* (Forty-two more women come back with marks of violence/abuse); *"From Riyadh with tales of heartbreak"*; *"Women back from Riyadh tell tales of misery"*; *"Bivishika niye Libya theke firilen tara"* (They came back with trauma from Libya); *"Morjada o neaybichar bonchito ovibashi shromikera"* (Migrant workers deprived of honour and justice); *"Shromik roptanir ame narider kothay pathaschi"* (Where are we sending our women in the name of manpower export).

Some news refers to the irregularities faced by women but in a tone that either dismisses the abuse or proposes solutions. For example, the headlines often read: *"Opoprochare Saudi te jete nari kormider onagroho"* (Due to rumours and fake news, female workers do not want to go to Saudi Arabia); *"Protecting migrants workers' rights"*; *"Skills level of female migrant workers need to be upgraded"*; *"Bring middlemen under a legal structure"*; *"Migrant workers to benefit from skills certificates"*; *"Free visa and harassment of migrant workers"*.

6.3. Focus of news reports on TV

We have observed that the TV reports on migrant workers cover mostly negative issues (85 per cent). News reports on TV highlight issues like women migrants returning to Bangladesh, with 30 per cent of them being pregnant. They describe these workers as being sexually harassed in their workplace. If 100,000 workers go abroad each year, then the statement that 30 per cent return pregnant would be a huge number. This kind of news does not mention the absolute number they are referring to and therefore, the report is misleading.

Some reports comment on particular irregularities, but most sound like general statements applicable to all migrants. For example, one report mentions that Bangladeshi migrants are harassed in every place in Malaysia. They are exploited in the workplace, at the immigration centre and at the airport. Migrant workers do not receive the wages they have been promised in their contracts. These statements are very general, and while they may effectively apply to particular cases, they wrongly portray the majority. Some reports even suggest never sending women workers to Saudi Arabia. Box 1 presents some highlights from the news stories aired on the TV channels studied.

Box 2 presents some comments from migrants included in the TV reports. Note the intensity of the statements highlighted.

We may think of the possible implications of such statements which are not critically reviewed. A woman migrant in Saudi Arabia noted that *"Jara dosh daye, tara beshi kharap. Tara nijeder dosh, tai tara kharap bole"* (Those who complain are the worst ones – they are bad and that is why they complain)."

6.4. Language used to describe abuse

The analysis in this study took note of the various terms used to describe abuse. The keywords describing abuse in different years are presented in table 15.

► **Box 1. Highlights of news stories aired on TV channels on migration issues**

- The torture and abuse of women migrants has not stopped in Saudi Arabia. The victim said the embassy also did not help them return.
- Thirty-four women migrant workers have returned from Saudi Arabia, and most of them were tortured and exploited in their workplaces.
- Bangladeshi migrant workers are being exploited in Malaysia. They do not have proper homes, food and health facilities. Sometimes, they work at salaries lower than in Bangladesh.
- Migrant workers are regularly harassed, even if they have all their papers.
- The government is working on developing a database for migrant workers to minimize brokers' involvement.
- Every year, a huge number of migrant workers return to Bangladesh, most of them from Saudi Arabia. Nazma Begum is one of them, but she returned in a coffin.
- Bangladeshi workers are working outside during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are in danger at this moment.
- Bangladeshi migrant workers are facing a hard time in Malaysia due to COVID-19.
- Bangladeshi women migrant workers are being exploited during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them are domestic workers and have not received their salaries.
- Workers in Lebanon are unable to pay \$400 to return to Bangladesh during the pandemic, and officials at the Bangladesh High Commission have harassed them.
- Women migrants were sold overseas, and they were brutally tortured after being sold.
- On a talk show, the guest talked about the justice and safety of women migrants in Saudi Arabia and suggested that we need to find new destinations for women who want to migrate.
- Fatema is a victim telling the story of her Saudi life where she was brutally tortured and physically abused.
- Migrant female workers were being exploited in Saudi Arabia, and the abuse still continues.
- Agencies and brokers in Libya killed 26 Bangladeshi migrants.

► **Box 2. Comments from migrants included in TV reports**

- "After being tortured, I escaped, and I now live in this rehabilitation centre. Now I am begging. Please – I want to return home." – Statement from a woman migrant worker at a rehabilitation centre in Saudi Arabia.
- "I cannot explain how my employer tortured me. Please do not ask me." – Statement from a returnee woman migrant.
- "If I failed to work properly, they (employer) tortured me. I could not bear that torture." – Statement from a returnee woman migrant.
- "Please save me. If I stay here, I'm afraid I might be killed by my employer." – Statement from a video clip a migrant woman sent to her family asking for help.
- "Amake bathroom e niye marto jeno, CCTV te na dekha jay. (I was tortured in the bathroom so that it could not be observed on the CCTV)." – Statement from a woman worker in Saudi Arabia

► **Table 15. Keywords used in newspaper reports to describe the suffering of migrants (different years)**

2015 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical and mental torture Sexual and verbal abuse Gang rape Leg injuries Deny payment 	2016 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low wages Dashotto (slavery) Nirmom achoron (harsh treatment) Pongu (disability) Torture, death Cheating Physical assault Inhumane working conditions Abuse, maltreatment Modern-day slavery 	2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prostitution, forced labour, gross labour exploitation Low wages, indebtedness Excessive work Irregular payment/ non-payment Misery Jouno nirjaton (sexually harassed) Torture Modern-day slavery Sex labour Bhoyonkor nirjaton (horrific abuse) Forced labour Bipod (danger)
2018 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ill-fated (bhaggohin) Miserable conditions Sexually abused Illegal payment Helpless, traumatized Victim to brutalities Humiliation Broken legs, burnt bodies Illegal auction Sex trade (jouno bebsha) Risk of arrest Suicide Brutal, inhumane arrests and detention Drowned Dalal Jouno nirjaton (sexual harassment) Shorir puriye dewa, (burn the body) Gaye agun dhoriye dewa (burn the body) Khabar na dewa (no food served) Mathai gorom pani dhele dewa (pour hot water on the head) 	2019 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detention Cruel realities Bonchona, durbhog (deprivation, harassment) Do not get salary regularly Jouno nirjaton (sexual abuse) Lash hoye firche (came home as a dead body) Vanga pa (broken leg) Mental torture Tortured women Inhuman treatment (omanobik achoron) Social cost of migration Suicide Extremely strenuous workload Kafil (sold to another employer) 	2020-21 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Food crisis Returned empty-handed Gruesome torture Victim of physical and sexual abuse Near slavery Tortured and killed Vulnerable, tortured Gang rape, suicide Commercial sex trade Death would have been better Social pressure

► **Box 3. Keywords in comments broadcast on different TV news/talk shows**

- Mere dustbin e fele dibo* (I will kill you and throw you in the dustbin.)
- Amk lathi diye pitato.* (I was beaten with a stick.)
- Saudi te meyeder visa bondho kore dan.* (Stop giving visa to women intending to go to Saudi Arabia.)
- Gheti te dhore amder shob taka rekhe diyeche.* (They [employer] forcefully took away my salary.)
- Jar paye shikol thake she ki kore valo thake?* (How can those who have chains around their legs live a better life?)
- Amar shamir sathe jokhon kotha boli tokhon amar mathay bari mare.* (When I would to talk to my husband, they used to beat me on the head.)
- Firte hoyeche coffin bondho hoye.* (The person came back in a coffin.)
- Malik r tar polapan shoabi e mare.* (The employer and his children, all of them beat me.)
- Embassy te ovijog korle agencyra aro beshi mare.* (If one complains to the embassy, the agency people beat us even more.)
- Amake iron diye puray dite gesilo ami dhore felsi* (He [the employer] wanted to burn me with an iron, but I grabbed his hands to stop him.)

While only a small proportion of migrants faced such abuse, the words used to describe these incidents indicate that everything is falling apart. In Bangladeshi society, terms like sexual harassment (*jouno nirjaton*), sex trade (*joino bebsha*), gang rape, etc., generate substantial social stigma against migrant women and discourage migration. Even within Bangladesh, a victim of rape is socially rejected and dishonoured. Therefore, the words used to describe any abuse commonly lead to the conclusion that all women working as domestic workers abroad are abused or are not “good women” (*bhalo meye*) anymore.

This perception hampers the social reputation of migrant women at home. It becomes difficult for them to explain that of nearly 100,000 women migrating every year, only a tiny proportion faces such abuse. As a result of such media reporting, many prospective women migrants are afraid. The migrant women who faced some of the negative issues described in those reports may have endured a life full of misery when they were home. Though this does not justify the abuse, we need to consider the issues that should be flagged and the ways in which to flag them. The irregularities associated with migration must be highlighted by the media but not in a more problematic way. We need to communicate loopholes so that unnecessary panic is not created and opportunities for women to participate in the broader labour market are not closed.

6.5. Main features of the media portrayal of female migrants

Of 496 migration-related news articles (including COVID-19 related articles) published from 2015 to 2021 in four newspapers, 147 articles focused on women, and only 21 articles were positive; 99 were negative, and 26 had both positive and negative aspects. This paper does not suggest that more positive news should be published in response to negative news; rather, media reports need to contextualize migration-related information better in terms of the facts that define the individual and collective nature of women's labour migration. They need to ask what the ultimate goal of these reports is; what could be the direct and indirect consequences of negative reports; and how those could impact women's empowerment and livelihood issues. Also, the media need to explore alternative ways to address the root causes of various

negative occurrences. Positive news items on migrant women were featured less on the front (3) or back page (1) and mostly appeared on the inside pages, being of short or medium sizes, and therefore were less likely to get noticed by readers. Only four positive news stories were of a large size.

The news primarily focused on income and employment. The positive news items were about sharing information about countries willing to take women as migrant workers or the increasing number of women working abroad. However, very few news articles talked about training opportunities or presented the success stories of migrant women who had improved their financial and social status. There was also a lack of coverage highlighting the government's effort to support and protect women migrant workers. An article from a leading Bangla newspaper stated that women migrant workers send 90 per cent of their income back home while men migrant workers send only 50 per cent. Such information may encourage families to support their female members to migrate as workers.

In absolute numbers, negative news items were featured more regularly on the front page (8) or back page (14) as compared to positive news. The situation is the same for both English and Bangla newspapers. Such prominent placement attracts the immediate attention of readers.

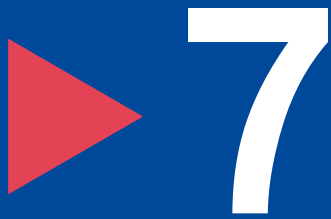
The title of the news in Bangla newspapers has more negative undertones, such as “বনি খরচও সৌদিতে আগ্রহী নন নারী গৃহকর্মী” (Women do not want to migrate even without cost), “ন্যায়বচার পাক নরীয়াততি অভাবসীরা” (Abused migrant women should get justice), “পূর্বাসে নরীয়াততি সেই নারীকে নচিহনে না স্বামী” (Female migrant harassed abroad is not accepted by her husband), “পূর্ণ বাঁ চাতে দেশে ফরিতে চান সৌদিতে থাকা ৩৫ নারী” (35 female workers in Saudi Arabia want to return home to save their lives), “শারীরিক সম্পর্কে রাজি না হওয়ায় ৩ দিন খতে দেয়নি” (left to starve for three days as she did not give consent for physical relationship).

Though some of these stories have had a positive outcome for female migrant workers and may not represent the entire migrant population, the headlines may discourage and create hesitation among them to migrate. Meanwhile, the English newspapers use more neutral headlines, such as “Why women migrant workers are compelled to come back”; “Migration of female workers: Focusing on language learning, skills training”.

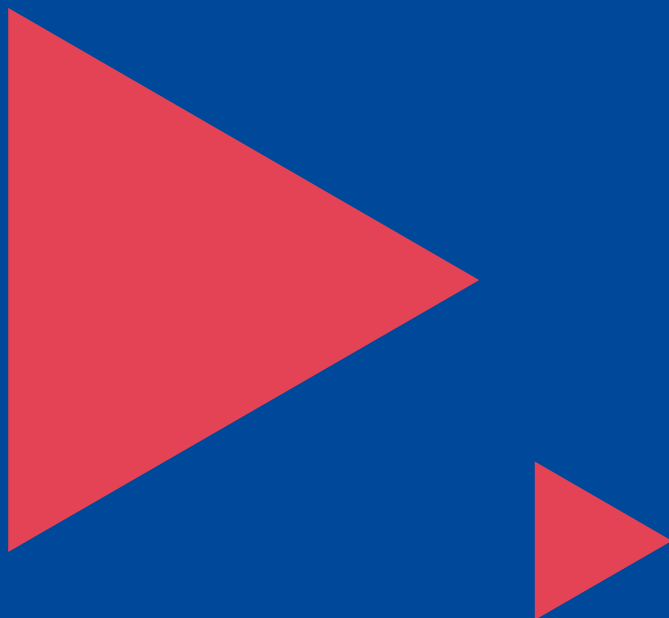
However, they also use headlines that may be extremely negative, such as: "Women migrant workers' children fail to attend classes regularly", "No country for Bangladeshi women", "Gruesome torture and death of child migrant worker", "Bangladeshis among migrant workers exploited in UAE-HRW," "Returnee domestic workers from KSA speak of torture". News related to physical torture, delays in payment and sexual harassment constitutes a majority of published news.

Usually, news that may shock or surprise readers is published rather than everyday occurrences. The headlines, as well as the contents of the

article, could use more matter-of-fact language rather than using extreme or misleading words such as "gruesome torture", "gang rape", "sex slave", "নরীষাততি নারী" (abused/ harassed women), "নারী কর্মী পাঠালহে লাভ" (profit ensured if female workers are sent). It should be noted that using neutral or safer words by no means would decrease the severity of the importance of the issues raised, but it may protect women from being demeaned. It would serve the purpose of flagging an irregularity without humiliating, shaming or belittling migrant women and discouraging prospective future migrants.



The thought process behind
print and TV media's focus
on migration-related topics
or editorial lines



Journalists are often inclined to cover negative news as those victims are more vocal, and the news grabs readers' attention. As a result, very few success stories are covered as mentioned previously. The positive news is mostly about opening a new destination for migration or increasing the number of legal migrant workers' opportunities, rather than success stories of workers who are still abroad or came back home recently. Stories of successful migrants who come home after finishing their stay abroad rarely get attention in seminars or conferences. Since success stories of the reintegration of returnee migrant workers are not as well covered as negative incidents in the destination country, it may look from the outside that all migrant workers are subject to violence and torture in various ways.

The current research team interviewed three senior newspaper journalists (including two editors) and two media journalists (including a TV news editor) to understand how newspapers and TV channels decide on their strategies regarding news in general and whether the same strategy is followed to cover migration-related news. We also interviewed two development practitioners/activists working on migration. Their responses are summarized in this section.

According to one of the development practitioners interviewed, most women migrants were able to improve their situations by migrating abroad. It should be noted that the women who migrate as domestic workers did not have many opportunities to earn in their home country. Even if they were involved in income-generating activities, those were either not as remunerative as the prospect of earning abroad, or the hardships in their livelihoods were too many. Intermediaries play a significant role in the migration process of these women. As the migration of women to Saudi Arabia is free of cost, many households feel encouraged to send women abroad to improve their economic status. There are, of course, some adverse outcomes, or exploitation, due to migration. However, less than 5 per cent of women migrants face such a situation, and it mainly occurs due to weak work agreements.

Moreover, migrant women have little knowledge about their rights and facilities. When the negative news on some migrants is printed or broadcast, it hampers the familial and social reputations of all migrants. Those who are doing

well and earning properly also face social stigma. Therefore, this development practitioner thought that the media should be sensitized to produce reports that encourage more gender-responsive migration rather than discourage it. They felt that more human resources are required in Bangladeshi embassies abroad. If women's migration as domestic workers is stopped, the amount of trafficking will increase as many women want to explore opportunities in the overseas labour market.

The other development practitioner opined that women who migrate should have the courage to face various migration-related challenges. They must understand their rights and learn how to speak without fear. In many cases, migrant women face problems because they lack information and cannot adjust to change. For example, they feel unhappy as they cannot communicate in the new language, the food habits are different, etc. Sometimes, women return before the end of their contracts as they fail to adjust to the framework of contemporary society and new norms. Often, women with small children return before the end of their contracts.

In many cases, mental abuse depends on how migrant women interpret their circumstances. Sometimes, they complain about sexual harassment so that they can return home before completing the contract. However, the recruitment agencies do not want them to do this. In some cases, journalists directly ask the women why they returned and whether they were harassed in the foreign country. When such direct questions are asked, the women often answer in the affirmative to justify their return.

This development practitioner mentioned that the people who looked down upon returnee migrants sometimes spread false allegations against them (migrants), talking about incidents that have never happened. These people have not gone abroad and are unaware of the socio-cultural circumstances of the destination countries. In most Arab families, women do not meet or appear in front of the male members of a household, let alone face abuse. In such families, migrant workers usually work with women members of the household. Domestic workers can also seek help from the agencies who sent them if they face problems; if they do not like an employer, they can change within three months of their arrival under the bilateral agreement.

In many cases, employers call the agency if their employees are unhappy. In the first three months, most workers are on a tourist visa. The women have to choose a permanent job within these three months. If they want to return, the recruiting agency provides them with food and shelter but charges them for it. If the migrant worker finds a new home, she takes the cost of the shelter paid to the agency from the new employer.

This development practitioner also noted that the media mainly focuses on returnee migrants, especially those who return before completing their contracts. The number of such returnee migrants is meagre compared to the number of outbound migrants. From his experience, the development practitioner shared that, in different *upazilas* (administrative regions) of the Brahmanbaria district, migrant women have been able to pay back their loans, improve their livelihood, and purchase land and other assets. They could achieve all these with their earnings from two years of working abroad because the contract is usually for two years. The earnings of the women have given them status in the family and have empowered them. Some of them have such good relationships with their employers that, in some cases, employers keep in touch with them even after a woman has returned home.

Editors and senior journalists in the print media mentioned that one of the main goals of newspaper stories is to serve the people by identifying flaws, weaknesses, loopholes in different aspects of their country, economy and society. Migration is no exception. Media houses sometimes feel that when everything is normal, there is nothing to report about. Instead, they like to point out or highlight shortcomings. Therefore, there is more news on the weaknesses and challenges of migration, which we are calling negative news.

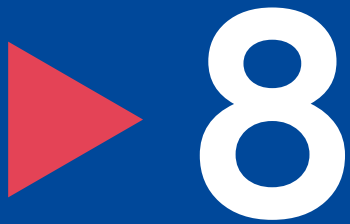
One senior journalist considered it their responsibility to investigate issues that various administrations neglect. Their main concern is to see whether the report is true or false, whether there is enough evidence or not. However, they agree that sometimes reports in print and electronically broadcasted news may negatively affect a group of people and harm their reputation. Usually, journalists do not have

any clear mandate on this and do not consider the social impacts of reporting migration-related information. They only follow certain norms in the case of printing or broadcasting pictures. Most reporters working on migration-related irregularities do not consider the overall context of migration, the positive outcomes of migration, the number of women migrating every year, and their impacts on their families and livelihood status. They do not always have the most up-to-date information at hand either. The primary goal is to attract readers and increase circulation and, at the same time, sensitize the respective authorities regarding negative migration issues.

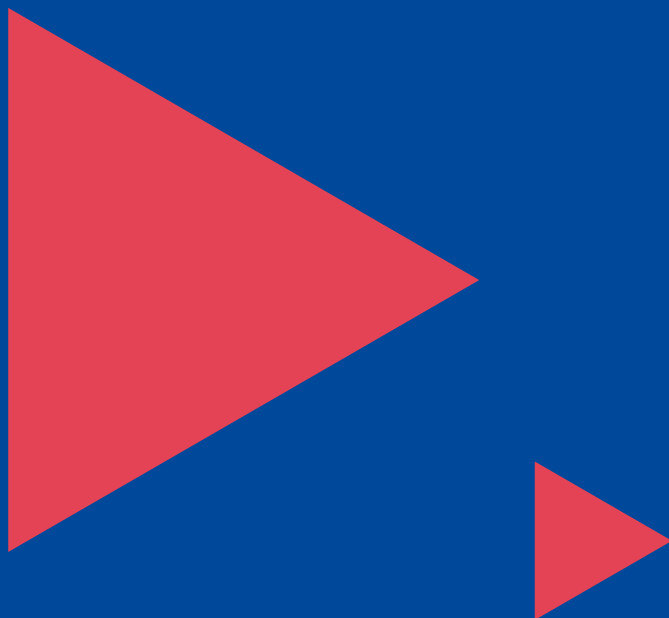
Journalists usually collect migration-related information from returnee migrants, NGOs working on migration-related issues, research reports published by different organizations, and international news agencies. They get information on returnee migrants from their sources at various entry points like airports or land ports. They also obtain information from the respective ministries in the country. Big media houses have local representatives, who also communicate news about returnee migrants.

The question then arises whether some NGOs utilize the media to overhype the occurrence or severity of abuse without highlighting the positive impacts of women's labour migration as they survive on the funds received to support distressed migrants, combatting trafficking, etc. Therefore, the more dismal the picture depicted in the news, the more necessary become the services of these organizations.

Most of the journalists interviewed for this study denied this connection except one who said that theoretically, this was a possibility, but it would be tough to prove. He thought that organizations working on migration-related issues should develop regular research reports to provide information to journalists who may then have access to news on the overall situation. Except for remittances, journalists do not have much information on the positive outcomes of migration. Moreover, the Government of Bangladesh should improve its database on migrants. The interviewed journalists also suggested that the government should have funds to train journalists regularly regarding regulations and laws on migration and remittances.



Discussion and way forward



This study attempted to understand how women migrant workers from Bangladesh are featured in both the print and electronic media. The study also intended to explore the reasons behind why there is more negative than positive news about these migrants in the media. Moreover, the negative news is portrayed in such a way that migrating as a domestic worker appears to be a dangerous, horrible, stressful and socially degrading job. Because of such media reporting, migrant women, in general, face various problems at home as they get a bad reputation (that all women who migrate as domestic workers are raped/tortured, left to starve, etc.). In addition, prospective migrants face obstacles from home and society.

Thus, a news item using harsh words creates panic among prospective migrants, despite the fact that many studies (such as Blanchet and Biswas (2020), Siddiqui (2017)) have noted many positive outcomes in many migrant households. The media claim that they are flagging various anomalies to ensure safe migration. But ultimately, this leads to women refraining from taking the opportunity to participate in the labour market and being empowered. News providers do not usually compare the situation of the migrants before and after migrating. They highlight the abuse only – they do not look into the causes of such abuse and the steps that could be taken to prevent these adverse outcomes.

There are limitations, but we need to think about how we would project or present the negative consequences of migration. Some reports suggest prohibiting women from migrating to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers; they advocate exporting skilled workers, such as nurses and trained caregivers. While skilled migration is good for better remittances, work opportunities for unskilled workers are minimal. Those who go abroad to work as domestic workers cannot always be transformed into nurses or professional caregivers even with training.

The study focused on the period following a bilateral agreement signed between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in 2015. The study explored how the media has pictured women migrating since then, analysing all migration-related news published in four widely circulated national dailies (two English and two Bangla). It consulted programmes and news on migration-related issues on three TV channels. In addition, several

senior print and electronic media journalists and few development practitioners were interviewed.

The study findings suggest that both the print and electronic media have published more news on the migration-related abuse of women migrants than on their achievements and successes. The positive news mainly glorified new employment opportunities and the impact of remittances. However, the news items present primarily the negative consequences of women's migration, giving the wrong signal to society at large.

Existing studies consulted for the current research and the interviews conducted revealed that negative news regarding women's migration sometimes does more harm than helping women have a better life. Women already have limited opportunities to participate in the labour force in Bangladesh: the bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia has given unskilled women a chance to migrate free of cost, and this is a good opportunity for those women to earn more and access a better life.

If we compare the number of migrant women who returned due to abuse to the number of women who migrate every year and complete their contracts, the number is tiny. This does not mean that media should not flag concerns over irregularities and abuse; indeed, we are not arguing that there is no abuse. But the fact remains that journalists often tend to go to NGOs and activists to investigate and get information on negative news, sometimes not expressing the true situation of the particular woman whose story they are portraying. Journalists must do their research. The findings on migration-related irregularities should be considered in the broader perspective of a society where women face more misery if they do not have economic empowerment. The media needs to highlight the success stories; specifically, they need to highlight women's situations before migrating and what their situations are as a result of migration.

We must understand that without a local *dalal* (an agent), recruitment for most women is not possible. A study by Drishti Research Centre shows that *dalals* receive anywhere from 30,000 to 40,000 Bangladeshi takas from recruiting agencies for each woman they recruit. We have to improve the mechanism and ensure that *dalals* keep their promises. Migrants should be encouraged (through awareness programmes)

to go abroad only through registered agents. The licenses of agents should not be renewed if there are any complaints against them and their activities should be regularly audited.

The study also suggests that there should be some alternative method of reporting abuse. Often, it appears that the reports use dramatic language, which works better to attract readers but harms the reputation of the migrant women who did not suffer such abuse. Moreover, some challenges faced by migrant women, which are termed as abuse, may have taken place in their home country anyway. Some challenges they face are caused by their poor knowledge about realities in a new country.

Therefore, we should not blame migration for the miseries migrant women suffer as domestic workers. The print and electronic media should devise a strategy for reporting news regarding irregularities in migration. They should avoid using strong words and should highlight the positive outcomes of women's migration. In addition to writing about negative issues in the media, the media houses should also directly communicate those issues to the government.

In short, the following issues need to be taken care of by the media before reporting on international migration:

1. Contextualizing individual cases in the larger context of overall women's labour migration;
2. Referencing employment opportunities and conditions in the home country for women migrants;
3. Referring to the fact that foreign employment offers income opportunities known to lift women and their families out of poverty;
4. Prioritizing references to rigorous academic literature (academic peer-reviewed articles), literature from the international agencies such as those from the United Nations, treating information from NGO sources with caution (especially taking note of the special focus of an organization); and
5. Having access to the rules and regulations related to migration to the destination country concerned.

► Appendices

►Appendix 1. Gender disaggregated data on overseas migration from Bangladesh

Year	Number of women	Number of men	Total migrants	Women (%)
1991	2 189	144 967	147 156	1.49
1992	1 907	186 217	188 124	1.01
1993	1 793	242 715	244 508	0.73
1994	1 995	184 331	186 326	1.07
1995	1 612	185 931	187 543	0.86
1996	1 994	209 720	211 714	0.94
1997	1 762	229 315	231 077	0.76
1998	939	266 728	267 667	0.35
1999	366	267 816	268 182	0.14
2000	454	222 232	222 686	0.20
2001	659	188 401	189 060	0.35
2002	1 216	224 040	225 256	0.54
2003	2 353	251 837	254 190	0.93
2004	11 259	261 699	272 958	4.12
2005	13 570	239 132	252 702	5.37
2006	18 045	363 471	381 516	4.73
2007	19 094	813 515	832 609	2.29
2008	20 842	854 213	875 055	2.38
2009	22 224	453 054	475 278	4.68
2010	27 706	362 996	390 702	7.09
2011	30 579	537 483	568 062	5.38
2012	37 304	570 494	607 798	6.14
2013	56 400	352 853	409 253	13.78
2014	76 007	349 677	425 684	17.86
2015	103 718	452 163	555 881	18.66
2016	118 088	639 643	757 731	15.58
2017	121 925	886 600	1 008 525	12.09
2018	101 695	632 486	734 181	13.85
2019	104 786	595 373	700 159	14.97
2020	21 934	195 735	21 7669	10.08
2021*	11 051	74 191	85 242	12.96

Source: BMET (February 2021)

► Appendix 2: Criteria to analyse media reports

- Date
- Title of the news
- Source (name of the media)
- Author (if any)
- Type of document" (Editorial/sub-editorial, News, opinion/article, others)
- News about female or male or both
- Destination country
- Positive/negative news or both together
- Type of commendation (increase in income, improvement in standards of living, employment generation, education of children and siblings, investment in health, others)
- Type of complaint (physical abuse/torture, mental abuse, payment, employment mismatch, sexual harassment/rape, document confiscation, non-specified exploitation)
- District of origin
- Position of the news: front page, back page, other pages
- Size of the news: short, medium, long story (one quarter of a page), very long (half page or more)
- Summary
- Recommendations
- Opinion
- Keywords
- Website of the paper

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