

## Where do Bangladeshi migrants get their information and how does it impact their migration experiences?

### Findings from Migrant Needs Assessment Study in Bangladesh

Maegan Hindow

#### Executive Summary

Bangladesh has experienced important migration trends in recent years: while it is an established country of origin for labour migrants globally, particularly for Gulf countries, it is also increasingly relevant for trends to Europe. In the last few years in particular, Bangladesh has become a relevant country of origin for irregular migration to the EU, with detections of irregular presence and entry increasing significantly in 2015, and remaining high as compared to previous years. Considering the considerable risks undertaken by irregular migrants, particularly those transiting the Central Mediterranean route, knowledge of their information gaps and needs is particularly relevant for stakeholders engaging potential Bangladeshi migrants before, during and after their migration journey. ICMPD's Migration Needs Assessment research study<sup>1</sup> thus examined the information needs of prospective Bangladeshi migrants and returnees, across six districts: Dhaka, Narayanganj, Cumilla, Rajshahi, Satkhira and Narshingdi.

- The study finds economic and environmental factors as important drivers for emigration from Bangladesh. While most Bangladeshi migration is to the Middle East, Asia and Europe are also increasingly relevant for migrants as desired destinations.
- Information needs differ for men and women and between urban and rural areas, with women and rural communities particularly vulnerable to deception based on lack of accurate information.
- Pre-departure, migrants highlighting needed more information on contract and accommodation, as well as access to remedy while abroad. Information provided related to financial literacy and investment of remittances would further support migrants' engagement while abroad.
- Migrants place trust in information received from family and friends, but also expressed trust in public institutions and other institutions such as NGOs and Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs), particularly those established at the local level.

---

<sup>1</sup>This study was based on desk research, interviews and focus group discussions with potential migrants and returnees, as well as interviews with stakeholders such as government officials, international organisations, NGOs, academia, training institutions, etc. from September-October 2020. More on the study and methodology in CWCS & PCSL 2021.

- Lack of access to information pre-migration has had a clear impact on experiences post-arrival, ranging from problems with contracts and receiving wages, to experiences of exploitation and abuse.
- Returnee needs highlighted the need for psychosocial services upon return, as well as support in reinsertion to the labour market and reintegration into their communities of origin.

## Current Context

For Bangladesh, labour migration is significant on the global scale: the country ranks sixth among countries of origin worldwide for labour migrants. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh experienced mass return migration of Bangladeshi labour migrants abroad. Continued restrictions on travel and shifts in labour demand has meant that emigration has not yet rebounded to previous rates. In response to these returns, the government has enacted a wide range of measures to support migrant return and reintegration.

Concurrently, irregular migration of Bangladeshi migrants to the EU has spiked in recent years, in particular along the Central Mediterranean route: in 2021, Bangladeshi nationals were the third highest nationality detected on this route, and first among non-North African nationalities. This trend seems to be connected to the onward migration of migrants in Libya, due to the difficult situation there.

## Key Findings

### Migration drivers and destinations

Potential migrants tend to come from districts that are **historically high (e)migration areas**, as well as areas experiencing high levels of **poverty and prone to natural disasters** (e.g. flooding, riverbank erosion, etc.). Economic factors are prevalent and a well-established driver for emigration trends. However, in the Bangladeshi case this finding also suggests the importance on the one hand of migrant networks, to support further migration (chain migration), as well as **environmental factors**, an important and growing issue for Bangladesh in particular.

In terms of age and gender, (potential) migrants tend to be **male** (although female migration has grown over past decades) and **young**, between the ages of 20 and 30.

In terms of destination countries, **Middle Eastern** (especially Gulf) states are the traditional host countries for labour migrants from Bangladesh and rank highly among desired destination countries (or former host countries, for returnees). However, other countries in Asia, as well as Europe, were also highlighted by potential migrants as their (desired) destination.

### Gender and rural/urban divide impact access to information

Women, and particularly rural women, seem to depend strongly on *dalals* (informal migration agents or smugglers) for their information on migration opportunities. Mobility restrictions placed on women (often by their families or communities), on the one hand, as well as lack of literacy and access to internet in rural areas, on the other, further compounds access issues faced by these communities. Moreover, private recruitment agencies are based in Dhaka, meaning that recruitment activities outside of Dhaka make use of local *dalals*, adding to the dependence on these informal actors. This **information imbalance leads to risks of exploitation, fraud and trafficking** among populations without access to accurate and independent information.

### Trust feeds into selection of sources of information

Migrants cited **friends and family** as important and reliable sources in their decision-making process, more so than television and social media sources. Potential migrants did express trust in information received from **public institutions and other official institutions** such as NGOs and MRCs. Yet at the same time, many migrants (and a majority of women interviewed) had only received information from informal sources (*dalals* in particular). This mismatch demonstrates a clear gap in information provision, as well as an opportunity for future work in this area.

Stakeholders emphasised the **potential of more local institutions** as trusted sources of information, also at the local level, such as social workers or local NGO women's organisations, as well as *union parishads* or councils (local administrative offices). As institutions with regular

Map of Bangladesh showing the selected study districts



Source: Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), 2020

interactions with potential migrants and returnees, such actors are trusted to provide migrants and returnees with relevant information related to migration and other needs.

### **Information needs speak to real risks and challenges abroad**

While most male potential migrants felt they had sufficient information for their migration journey, women felt they still needed more information. This gap in information needed was confirmed by returnee migrants as well: nearly all returnees interviewed attested to having received insufficient information prior to their departure.

In terms of what information was needed, migrants focused on needing to know more about the **nature of the work and wages**. For Bangladeshi men, often working in low-paid and labour-intensive professions such as in the services and construction sectors, they wanted more information on: the contract, working hours and wages, access to rights and citizenship, access to on-the-job-training, accommodation, and what kind of challenges they might face while in the country. For women, often employed in the domestic work sector and increasingly the garment sector, they wanted more information on: food, living conditions, contract and wages, whether job training was provided, the country's language, and where to access assistance in cases of maltreatment or danger. These **information needs speak to the type of work they may undertake**, and their need for reliable knowledge on it, as well as the related risks inherent to that work, including of abuse and exploitation.

The results of the research with returnees in fact reflects these information needs and risks. Male returnees cited inconsistencies in their contracts related to salary, allowance and working hours, confiscation of passports and restriction of movement, and language barriers. For women, they highlighted experiences of insufficient wages, inappropriate living conditions, language barriers, as well as physical and mental abuse and exploitation. Returnees also noted lack of access to institutional structures abroad for support in resolving the problems they faced; rather, they relied on themselves alone, or support of family and friends in-country or home in Bangladesh.

### **Returnee needs are complex and multifaceted**

As noted above, returnees cited a wide range of challenges they faced in countries of destination, strongly related to **lack of information prior to emigration, as well as lack of access to support systems and remedy abroad**. For that reason, upon return, returnee needs can be quite complex and multifaceted. Among those engaged in this research, male returnees tended to emphasise financial reasons (low salaries) or loss of employment (particularly related to the COVID-19 pandemic) as the main reasons behind their return, while

women tended to stress the physical and mental impacts of being abroad (as well as abuse experienced) as primary reasons. Remittances were primarily used to cover family expenses, including education, but also were used for a wide variety of other purposes, including debt repayment (especially for debts incurred for the migration journey), property investments, dowry, care for elderly family members, and medical treatment. Following return, despite the skills migrants developed while abroad, **many returnees remained unemployed**, or worked in low-skilled and low-income employment.

Understandably then, stakeholders recommended that returnee services focus on **psychosocial counselling and referral services, capacity building in terms of entrepreneurship and financial management, and information provision on employment opportunities**. Given the high numbers of COVID-related returns to Bangladesh, the government has undertaken a number of measures to address many of these issues, including offering low-interest loans for returnee skill development or entrepreneurship, as well as measures to accredit skills acquired abroad.

### **Institutional challenges**

Bangladeshi institutions and other stakeholders face their own challenges in effectively addressing the needs of migrants before, during and following their migration journey. For stakeholders themselves, the **mismatch in terms of which institutions are mandated to respond to which populations** (e.g. migrants pre-departure, returnees, irregular migrants vs those going through legal channels, etc.), and **lack of coordination of efforts** as related to these different but overlapping mandates can be a challenge to implementing coordinated information provision to migrants. Additionally, stakeholders called for a **returnee database**, to better document returnee skills and needs, and thus to improve remigration and reintegration-related measures for them. Indeed, work on such a database has launched in response to the dire need for it given the mass COVID-induced returns to Bangladesh in 2020.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- Economic and environmental factors will continue to be important drivers for migration from Bangladesh. Responses to returnees have already made headway in supporting economic reintegration of returnees, and such policies could be considered relevant also for potential migrants. Moreover, policy measures addressing disaster-induced displacement, both internally and cross-border, should be considered as part of comprehensive approaches in addressing potential migrants.

- The link between lack of access to accurate information pre-departure and experiences of exploitation and abuse is well established. Thus, policy measures addressing improved information provision to migrants pre-migration could be expanded to include more concrete guidance in the areas of rights and obligations, access to remedy and support while abroad, and language and job training services available.
- Similarly, migrants thus face clear challenges post-return, related to their experiences abroad. Services supporting their reintegration – already a clear priority in the COVID era – should be emphasised, particularly related to psychosocial support, insertion in the labour market and financial literacy.
- Training programmes and measures to improve migrants’ financial literacy to support investments while abroad, entrepreneurship among the community and following return should ideally already be offered to migrants pre-departure.
- Bangladesh already has an established support system abroad through Labour Wing Officers established abroad. Thus, while this structure is established, it could be expanded and/or bolstered to better support and respond to the challenges migrants face abroad, as noted by returnees. This network could also be used to connect migrants abroad with services supporting financial literacy and investments while abroad.
- Information gaps are particularly stark for women and those in rural areas, and contribute to their vulnerability to fraud, exploitation, trafficking and other deceptive practices. Thus, targeted measures and information outreach to these communities should be prioritised within information campaigns to potential migrants, and potentially also through existing outreach in these communities.
- Information outreach activities should make use of trusted local institutional actors in place – MRCs, *union parishads* (local councils in rural areas), migrant or women’s associations and others. As potential migrants place trust in these actors, they could be capitalised on to disseminate important information to potential migrants, and particularly among communities vulnerable to abuse.

Bangladesh continues to be an important country of origin, with whom European countries foresee increased cooperation across the areas of legal migration, irregular migration and return. From the perspective of potential Bangladeshi migrants, Europe remains an important potential destination, in addition to the usual routes to the Middle East and within Asia.

Nonetheless, their access to accurate information on migration opportunities, realities post-arrival, and where to access support before, during and after they undertake a migration journey remains weak, particularly among women and rural communities. Thus, efforts to support in these areas would likely make a positive impact on the lived realities of potential and current migrants, as well as among returnees.

## Sources

Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) & Pathways Consulting Services Ltd. (PCSL) (2022). Information Needs of Potential Migrants and Returnees in Bangladesh. ICMPD: Vienna.

[Download](#)

ICMPD (2022). New Trends on Return and Remigration in the COVID Era: Evidence from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Vienna: ICMPD.

ICMPD (2022). Migration Outlook Silk Routes 2022 South and West Asia: Five migration issues to look out for in 2022. Vienna: ICMPD.

---

## Contact Information

For more information, please contact:

### **Maegan Hendow**

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)

Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor

1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: [maegan.hendow@icmpd.org](mailto:maegan.hendow@icmpd.org)

ICMPD 2022. All rights reserved. Short sections, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted in the original language without explicit permission, provided that the source is acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author alone.