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Examining the social issues and challenges encountered by Bangladeshi foreign labors

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on how the earnings of Bangladeshi foreign labor impacted the economic development of Bangladesh. The purpose of this research was to raise awareness of the problems faced by Bangladeshi laborers on short-term work visas in various foreign countries and to explore how society can address this significant social issue to eradicate the problems among the deprived poor people of the society. In this study, the researcher used a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative methods. The main problem was the social challenges faced by Bangladeshi labor workers. This issue was important to address because it was necessary to advocate for the rights of the deprived people of Bangladesh. This study focused on the issues faced by Bangladeshi workers in foreign nations, such as Gulf countries and emerging Asian countries like Malaysia. Bangladeshi policymakers, economists, lawyers, and human rights activists found this study useful for their professions. This research employed a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research.

Keywords: Bangladesh, foreign labor, International NGO's, remittance, economy, social problems

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INTRODUCTION

If labor migration from Bangladesh is analyzed, a particular study shows that from 1990 onwards, there has been a steady increase in migrant workers going to foreign countries on short-term employment visas (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, 2020). Siddiqui & Abrar (2001) indicate in their study that the majority of

laborers who go to work in foreign countries are semi-skilled and unskilled workers. This is supported by Chowdhury et al. (2021), who found that over 40% of migrant workers are classified as semi-skilled (20%) and less skilled (28%), while only 0.27% are professional workers. When calculating the earnings of these foreign laborers, the study shows that from 1998 to 1999, Bangladesh received 22% of its total foreign remittances from these workers, contributing to one-third of the country's total remittance earnings.

A recent study has shown that Bangladeshi migrant workers make a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of their country, amounting to approximately USD 15 billion annually (Karim et al., 2020). Bangladesh government statistics indicate an increase in the number of Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad. It is reported that workers have taken on nearly 16.1 million short-term work contracts in 164 countries from 1976 to 2023. In contrast, the pandemic in 2020 caused many Bangladeshi migrant workers to lose their jobs, leading to increased hunger and poverty (Jamil & Dutta, 2021). Such large remittance earnings significantly contribute to the country's economic development. Therefore, protecting the immigration rights of these laborers is crucial.

A recent study indicates that Bangladesh has earned \$20 billion in remittances from foreign labor (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 2021), ranking third after India and Pakistan. This is a substantial amount, and migrant workers distribute such earnings among their relatives. These funds play a crucial role, as many of the recipients use the money as microfinancing to start small businesses or cover necessities. To gain access to migration opportunities in Gulf and emerging Asian countries (Moniruzzaman & Roberts, 2018), another study illustrates that Bangladeshi workers often face significant challenges. For example, potential migrant workers from extremely poor households sometimes borrow from local loan sharks to finance their migration. Even after securing jobs abroad, much of their income goes toward repaying these debts. The study highlights that this practice conflicts with the country's sustainable development, as migrant workers are unable to use their earnings to improve their own lives. Instead, this situation stresses their families, who remain strained under the weight of the loans.

Studies have shown that many migrants are largely illiterate, which leaves them lacking basic skills such as obtaining passports, securing basic training certificates from BMET, purchasing flight tickets, and sometimes getting lost in transit or at the airport. These are significant social problems that migrants face during the migration process. Upon reaching their work destinations, they often encounter additional issues, such as inhumane working conditions. Some companies provide insufficient food, lack adequate sleep time, and deprive workers of their basic physiological needs.

This paper will also address solutions for creating a social platform between laborers and employers, allowing workers to exercise their basic human rights when those rights are violated. The Labor Act 2006 is the most recognized law in Bangladesh for protecting labor rights. This law covers all aspects of laborers' basic human rights and aligns with the principles of the International Labor Standards. The act addresses various social issues faced by laborers, such as requirements for employment, standard working hours and leave, the operation of trade unions and their relationship with industrial activities, workplace safety, social security protection, and other factors. The ILO helps monitor foreign companies to ensure they follow this law in safeguarding workers' rights. Although international NGOs are making significant efforts, it is not possible to guarantee that every laborer's rights are upheld. There is a need to identify the gaps that these NGOs are unable to address and understand why they are unable to fully resolve these issues. This research aims to provide effective solutions for protecting foreign laborers' rights (Chowdhury et al., 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Economic Problem Faced

In recent years, the number of Bangladeshi laborers migrating to foreign nations for work has significantly increased (Choudhury, 2023). Studies show that this surge began after 1990, with 225,000 Bangladeshi workers migrating annually for short-term work, primarily to Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and especially the UAE. They are also migrating to emerging Asian countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. This flow of foreign workers has brought substantial benefits to Bangladesh, particularly through the high volume of foreign remittances, which play a crucial role in the development of Bangladesh's economy.

When examining the rural situation in Bangladesh, it becomes evident that foreign laborers have been sending remittances to their family members. Studies show that these remittances are often the primary or sole source of income for many families living in rural villages. Some rural families have used the remittances to buy land, which is considered a safe investment that they believe will benefit their children in the long run. The investment in village land has also proven profitable, as many people have used the land for agricultural purposes, generating significant profits.

However, not all laborers were able to send enough money for such investments. Some migrant workers sent smaller amounts, which their families used to meet basic needs. In these cases, remittances were spent on necessities like constructing tin or mud houses to provide shelter. Other essential expenses included sending children to school, while in some instances, the remittance was so low that it could only cover minimal food

purchases, such as rice and lentils, just to survive. Some rural families also saved remittance money to finance the migration of another relative for short-term labor abroad. Thus, research from various academic articles demonstrates that foreign remittances have been highly beneficial for the families of migrant workers in rural areas, as well as for the overall economy of Bangladesh.

A significant issue arises when sending foreign remittances. The financial institutions in the countries where Bangladeshi laborers work often charge high fees and taxes for transferring money back to Bangladesh. As a result, many workers turn to illegal channels, such as the *hundi* system, out of desperation. The *hundi* system offers an informal way to send earnings home, but it often leads to exploitation.

One common problem is that *hundi* operators provide false information, claiming that the Bangladeshi currency is falling against the foreign currency where the laborer is working. This misinformation allows the *hundi* operator to overcharge the laborer, who, in desperation, falls victim to these traps and ends up paying a high fee just to send money home.

Another issue arises when *hundi* operators build trust with migrant workers early on. Once a laborer regularly uses their services, the operator may suddenly demand higher fees. If the laborer refuses, the operator threatens to report the illegal transaction to the authorities. In many cases, the *hundi* operators are not prosecuted, as local law enforcement is often bribed to ignore these illegal activities. Unfortunately, the laborers, fearing deportation or job loss, feel forced to comply with the *hundi* operator's demands and pay exorbitant fees. This situation leaves migrant workers vulnerable, as they struggle to provide for their families while facing exploitation from both illegal channels and corrupt authorities.

The *hundi* system also creates a significant problem for Bangladesh's economy, as it makes it difficult for economists to accurately measure foreign remittance inflows. As a result, many bank officers and economists in Bangladesh have noted that the country's reported foreign remittances are lower than expected, given the scale of international labor migration.

To address this issue, the government of Bangladesh has instructed all domestic banks to establish stronger relationships with foreign financial institutions, enabling laborers to legally transfer their earnings. Many Bangladeshi banks have successfully developed partnerships with foreign financial institutions, convincing them to reduce or eliminate taxes on remittance transactions. This has led to some improvements in the lives of migrant workers.

However, not all international financial institutions have accepted the request from Bangladeshi banks. Some continue to impose high taxes on remittance transactions, which negatively impacts the workers. Studies show that the majority of these institutions have refused to lower their fees, and in many cases, the taxes remain so high that migrant laborers are left struggling to provide for their families.

Bangladesh is generally a labor-surplus country. Annually, it exports an average of 225,000 workers (1990-1999), and over 25% of the country's foreign exchange earnings come from Bangladeshi migrant workers. The earnings of these migrant workers have significantly contributed to the development of microfinance institutions (MFIs) in Bangladesh.

Microfinance institutions are increasingly popular among low-income people in Bangladesh. These institutions function as both savings and credit facilities for the poor. They are present in approximately 80% of the rural areas of Bangladesh (World Bank, 1996). MFIs have been successful in attracting 20% of Bangladesh's population to take out loans for small businesses. The primary beneficiaries of these loans are individuals from the lower strata of the population.

One of the key features of microfinance institutions (MFIs) is their ability to provide credit to the poor without requiring collateral. MFIs also serve as savings mechanisms for low-income individuals. Additionally, the workers of these institutions often provide door-to-door services, establishing contact through a snowballing mechanism within grassroots communities. As a result, MFIs have gained significant popularity in rural villages.

When Bangladeshi migrants wish to send money legally to Bangladesh, they must navigate strict banking procedures in the foreign country, including handling service charges, postal fees, and extensive paperwork. The transfer process can also be time-consuming. Due to these complications, many people turn to *hundi* operators.

The Bangladeshi government is making efforts to persuade foreign banks to reduce fees and simplify the remittance process for migrants. While some foreign banks in certain regions have agreed to lower charges, many others have not. Consequently, many Bangladeshi workers resort to illegal *hundi* systems to send money home.

Underpinning Theory

In this research, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory is used to define the dependent variable, which is the problems faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory used to understand human motivational factors. The theory is represented as a pyramid with five levels of needs. According to Maslow, individuals must satisfy the needs at the lower levels of the pyramid before moving on to the higher levels. The stages of needs, from bottom to top, are physiological needs, safety needs, social belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization.

The model can be categorized into two types of needs: deficiency needs and growth needs. The first four

levels (physiological, safety, social belongingness, and esteem) are considered deficiency needs, which arise from a lack or deprivation of basic necessities. This deprivation creates a strong motivation to meet these needs. For example, if a person is deprived of food for a period (McLeod, 2018), the immediate motivation is to satisfy their hunger. The top level, self-actualization, is categorized as a growth need, representing the need for personal development and fulfillment. Maslow's theory asserts that individuals must fulfill their lower-level needs before they can address higher-level needs for growth and self-fulfillment.

Physiological Needs include the basic biological requirements essential for human survival, such as air, clothing, food, shelter, and water. Without meeting these fundamental needs, biological survival is at risk. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs considers this stage the most critical because survival must be ensured before addressing higher-level needs.

Safety Needs involve the motivation for security and protection. This includes the need for safety, freedom from fear, and the presence of law and order in one's life. It focuses on the desire to live in a secure environment where one is protected from harm.

Love and Belongingness Needs emerge once physiological and safety needs are satisfied. At this stage, individuals seek a sense of belonging and love from their social environment. This encompasses forming relationships, experiencing affection, and being part of a community. Examples include friendships, trust, intimacy, and acceptance, as well as bonds with colleagues, friends, and family.

Esteem Needs are divided into two categories. The first is esteem for oneself, which involves achieving personal goals, mastering skills, and gaining independence. The second category is esteem from others, which includes the desire for recognition, respect, status, and prestige from society. People are motivated to engage in activities that earn them these external honors.

Self-Actualization Needs represent the motivation to realize one's full potential and pursue personal growth. Maslow described this stage as "a desire to become everything one is capable of becoming," reflecting the pursuit of self-fulfillment and the realization of one's abilities and talents.

When analyzing the dependent variable of the research in relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, the struggles and difficulties faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers become clearer. Focusing on the bottom stage of the pyramid, known as physiological needs, it becomes evident that migrant workers often lack basic necessities for survival while working for foreign companies. Essential needs such as food, clothing, and shelter are frequently unmet.

For instance, during the construction of the FIFA 2022 World Cup stadiums in Qatar, Bangladeshi migrant workers were sometimes deprived of food if they made minor errors. This situation led to numerous deaths, as workers had to continue their tasks in the extreme heat of Qatar without adequate nourishment. Additionally, inadequate sleep further exacerbated the problem, as workers were often deprived of the necessary seven hours of rest. Similar brutal treatment has been reported not only in Qatar but also in other Gulf countries, resulting in severe workplace injuries. Thus, it is clear that Bangladeshi workers desperately need basic physiological necessities, as outlined by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, to survive while performing their laborious tasks.

Next in Maslow's Hierarchy is the safety need, which comes after physiological needs. Comparing this theory to the safety needs of Bangladeshi workers, it becomes evident that many workers do not feel secure in their workplaces. They often work under constant fear of making even minor errors, knowing that such mistakes could lead to severe consequences. The working environment for these migrant laborers is frequently unsafe. For example, many workers in Gulf nations are required to work on tall skyscrapers, which poses significant risks due to their height. In the early stages of construction, they often lack large, stable surfaces to work on and must navigate narrow concrete paths while carrying heavy construction materials like bricks and steel rods. This hazardous working condition has resulted in numerous deaths, as workers frequently fall due to loss of balance.

Another significant safety issue faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers pertains to the renewal of their work contracts. Studies reveal that many Bangladeshi workers in Middle Eastern countries are classified as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). SIEs are typically employed on either short-term or long-term contracts. However, the renewal of these contracts is often not guaranteed by the recruiting foreign companies (Alom, Patwari & Khan, 2019).

In such situations, SIEs frequently feel unable to voice their concerns or contest the non-renewal of their contracts due to fear of termination or deportation back to Bangladesh. This lack of job security represents a major safety problem for Bangladeshi workers. Despite labor laws that theoretically protect their rights, in many Gulf nations, workers are unable to effectively exercise these rights. Therefore, when discussing safety issues, it is evident that workers often lack adequate protection and job security.

An important issue related to social belongingness and love is the support system established by the Bangladeshi government in 1990. The government created the Wage Earners Welfare Fund Association, a social organization designed to ensure the welfare of migrant workers. This fund, contributed to by migrant workers through subscription payments, provides crucial support during times of need.

The fund is utilized to assist workers and their families during emergencies, such as transferring deceased workers' bodies from foreign countries to Bangladesh or financing medical treatment for seriously ill workers abroad. This system exemplifies Maslow's social belongingness and love needs. By contributing to this fund,

migrant workers experience a strong sense of social belonging and mutual support. It fosters a sense of community and care among workers, as they support each other in times of crisis. This initiative helps fulfill their need for social connection and affection, motivating them to contribute to the fund and strengthen their bonds with fellow workers.

Social dialogue is a method for resolving problems between employers and workers through communication. This process often involves collective bargaining, where employees negotiate as a group to address workplace issues and secure their rights. Institutions that facilitate social dialogue include trade unions and trade associations.

Trade unions focus on resolving issues related to fair wages and working conditions for migrant workers. They advocate for workers' rights and aim to improve their working conditions. Trade associations, on the other hand, work to build a sense of solidarity among migrant workers. They organize events and cultural programs, such as cultural shows, music, dance, and poetry, which help workers connect and support each other. These activities fulfill Maslow's need for social belongingness and love by allowing migrant workers to bond and enjoy shared cultural experiences.

Despite the challenges of working abroad, Bangladeshi migrant workers have made significant achievements. According to a 2019 IOM report, Bangladesh ranks 6th among migrant-sending countries and 9th among top remittance-receiving countries. For many workers from Bangladesh, migrating abroad provides valuable job opportunities and exposure to advanced technological and economic practices. Additionally, their ability to send remittances back home earns them respect in their rural communities, contributing to their esteem needs as outlined in Maslow's theory.

Bangladesh Government's Migrant Worker Protection Initiatives

According to a report by Imam and Munier (2020), there are currently only 71 technical training centers in Bangladesh that provide essential technical knowledge and training to migrant workers before they leave for jobs abroad. However, this number is insufficient given the large volume of workers. Each center trains around 40–50 students per batch, while approximately 700,000 workers migrate annually for labor work (ILO, 2015). This disparity means that many workers miss out on crucial training, which negatively impacts their ability to perform in foreign countries. In response, the government is planning to build 40 more training centers, and BMET's director, Shamsul Alam, has also submitted a proposal to the government to establish an additional 100 centers to meet demand (ILO, 2015).

Regarding health services, these are often included in workers' contractual agreements to ensure access to healthcare. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the government has introduced a policy known as "Health for All." This policy grants Bangladeshi workers the right to access health services in major cities, although the workers are required to bear the cost themselves. In many Gulf nations, the companies employing migrant workers also offer annual health checkups as part of their commitment to worker welfare.

Initiatives by the UN

The United Nations Human Rights Organization is a branch dedicated to safeguarding the rights of all migrant workers and preventing racial discrimination. It aims to facilitate social dialogue between workers and employers to address workplace issues, eliminate forced labor, and ensure equal pay for different genders. The organization advocates for decent working conditions free from violence, timely wage payments, and proper shelter and housing for migrant workers. Additionally, it works to ensure access to comprehensive healthcare, including immunizations, and seeks to improve the overall well-being of migrant workers and their families.

This organization strives to establish a system of justice and social protection for workers, aiming to prevent job-related injuries and accidents. It promotes constant communication through technology to maintain psychological well-being and ensures that healthcare services are accessible without language barriers. The organization also seeks to integrate migrant workers into national immunization schemes, including COVID-19 vaccination programs, without fear of deportation or interference from immigration authorities.

Furthermore, the organization advocates for fair recruitment practices, ensuring that recruitment agencies adhere to ILO guidelines and do not exploit migrant workers. It emphasizes the need for a transparent and fair recruitment system, addressing the high costs often imposed by recruitment agencies and middlemen.

According to a report from IOM, Bangladeshi migrant workers face high recruitment costs compared to other countries. The cost for male migrants can reach up to 700,000 takas, while for female migrants, it can be around 95,000 taka (IOM, 2018). This financial burden is compounded by discrepancies between the expected salary and the actual earnings, which often fall short of expectations (IOM, 2018). Many migrants rely on middlemen, who, despite lacking official licenses or legal rights, exploit their trust due to the migrants' lack of education and knowledge about legitimate recruitment agencies. This reliance on middlemen, who often have personal experience working abroad, results in significant financial strain and exploitation for many Bangladeshi migrants.

Problems Faced by Female Housemaid

Domestic migrant workers, particularly Bangladeshi female housemaids, often face significant challenges due to their isolated living conditions and lack of social support in foreign countries (Chy et al., 2023). These workers usually have limited interaction with colleagues and face communication barriers if they cannot speak the local language. Many Bangladeshi female housemaids are illiterate and struggle to learn the foreign language, which exacerbates their sense of isolation and depression. Without strong social networks or labor unions, they have limited avenues to address grievances or report issues due to fear of deportation.

Despite these challenges, Bangladeshi female migrant workers contribute significantly to their families' economies. They often become the primary breadwinners, sending a larger percentage of their earnings home compared to male migrants. Studies indicate that female housemaids typically remit 70 to 80 percent of their income, reflecting their strong dedication to supporting their families.

Some Bangladeshi housemaids work under the Kafala system, prevalent in Gulf countries. This system allows women to be recruited without upfront costs, but it also places significant power in the hands of employers or sponsors, often leading to exploitation. The Kafala system restricts workers' ability to change employers and can result in severe human rights violations, including physical abuse and forced labor.

The lack of labor laws protecting domestic workers in many Gulf nations exacerbates these issues. In response, the Bangladeshi government and international organizations like the UN have taken steps to protect migrant workers' rights. This includes bilateral agreements between Bangladesh and host countries and the establishment of principles to safeguard female housemaids from abuse.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that in 2013, there were 150 million migrant workers globally, with approximately 44 percent being women. Notably, around 83 percent of domestic workers worldwide are women, many of whom are migrants. The demand for female domestic workers in developed countries, driven by an aging population and improved healthcare, has led to increased migration from poorer countries. This phenomenon, known as the "Global Care Chain," is further fueled by poverty, gender discrimination, and limited job opportunities in the home countries (Petroziello, 2013; ILO, 2010).

Contract Substitution Problem

Contract substitution is an illegal practice that significantly violates migrant workers' rights. This practice occurs when an employer makes an employee sign a new contract upon arrival in the foreign country, which typically stipulates lower wages and worse living conditions compared to the original contract. The new contract often involves different, lower-status jobs than those outlined in the initial agreement.

For instance, workers who initially signed contracts for factory jobs might end up working in plantations, as seen in Malaysia. In Saudi Arabia, workers who signed contracts for roles such as cooks or security guards may find themselves in agricultural positions instead. This not only impacts their financial well-being but also their physical health.

Many workers sign contracts for less physically demanding jobs, such as in factories or as guards, but are instead assigned to more labor-intensive roles like agriculture. This discrepancy can be particularly challenging for those not physically suited for such work, causing significant health issues as they work long hours in harsh conditions, often under the blazing sun.

The financial strain is also considerable. If workers had known they would be assigned to physically demanding jobs, they could have paid a lower recruitment fee. The unexpected shift in job type can lead to severe stress and health problems, and some workers may even flee their jobs. Those who flee face the additional burden of becoming undocumented workers, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse (Siddiqui, 2005).

Medical Problems Faced by Bangladeshi Migrant Labors

A study on Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia reveals significant issues regarding access to healthcare. Many employees report that their companies do not provide voluntary healthcare services, forcing them to cover medical expenses out of their own incomes. According to the study, 87% of Bangladeshi workers have experienced a lack of healthcare services even in emergency situations (Karim & Diah, 2015). Additionally, their work contracts often do not guarantee medical care, and hospitals may refuse treatment due to illegal work permits or expired visas.

Workers often bring their own medications or, in severe cases, remain untreated while continuing to work despite illness. Private hospitals frequently deny treatment, directing workers to public hospitals where they face intimidation from staff who question their occupation and legal status. This intimidation discourages them from seeking necessary medical care.

Reports from *The New Nation* highlight various health issues among Bangladeshi migrant workers. Those in construction face overcrowded, hot, and humid conditions, risking skin diseases, hepatitis, diarrhea, and tuberculosis, along with poor sanitation. Workers on farms are at risk for eye defects, tuberculosis, and chronic physical pain. Those in mining are prone to lung function problems, diabetes, hypertension, and musculoskeletal

issues, while those in food processing face risks such as worm infestation. Common health problems across sectors include respiratory and heart diseases, stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, peptic ulcers, vomiting, and diarrhea, primarily due to environmental hazards in foreign countries (The News Nation, 2023).

Impact of Coronavirus on Bangladeshi Labor Migrants

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected Bangladeshi migrant workers, both abroad and upon their return home. Many workers, having returned from high-risk countries like Italy, China, and the Middle East, inadvertently spread the virus to their rural communities. This unfortunate scenario led to severe stigmatization, as workers were not only grappling with the physical impacts of the disease but also faced rejection from their own families and neighbors. They experienced emotional distress due to being avoided by loved ones, including their children and spouses.

Abroad, many Bangladeshi workers struggled with inadequate access to healthcare, often due to their non-citizen status. In the early stages of the pandemic, they faced delays and discrimination in obtaining treatment and vaccinations. Limited financial resources exacerbated their difficulties, as many workers could not afford medical care or were denied treatment.

The pandemic's disruption also affected workers stranded overseas with expired visas. These individuals faced poor housing conditions and lacked access to basic necessities such as regular meals. The restriction of international flights from South Asia and Africa further compounded their problems, resulting in significant financial losses and harassment from relatives for not being able to return home.

The combined impact of these issues has had a profound effect on the psychological and emotional well-being of Bangladeshi migrant workers. They have endured a range of hardships, including financial losses, social rejection, and inadequate healthcare, all of which continue to impact their lives long after the pandemic's initial crisis has abated (Kamal, 2020; Imam & Munier, 2020; Trask, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on Bangladeshi migrant workers, amplifying their struggles both abroad and upon their return to Bangladesh. Many workers, who had invested significant portions of their lives—often spending 5-20 years abroad in strenuous labor—faced severe hardships as a result of the pandemic. The crisis was marked by a staggering number of deaths among Bangladeshi migrant workers, with over 843 reported fatalities across 19 countries, predominantly in Italy, the UK, the US, and Saudi Arabia (Noman & Siddiqui, 2020; Siddiqui, 2020).

Upon returning to Bangladesh, these workers encountered even more severe challenges. The pandemic exacerbated their plight, leaving over 87% of returning workers unemployed and struggling to find work. This situation was compounded by the fact that many had invested considerable amounts of money to migrate, with the expectation that their overseas earnings would improve their economic situation. However, the pandemic-induced recession thwarted these hopes, as the workers found themselves unable to secure even low-income jobs back home. This harsh reality underscores the failure of migration to break the cycle of poverty for many laborers, highlighting the profound impact of the pandemic on their financial stability and overall well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi migrant workers, particularly in developed nations where economic recessions have led to widespread job losses. As businesses across the globe face financial difficulties, many companies have resorted to terminating employees to cut costs, and unfortunately, Bangladeshi migrant workers often face disproportionate job losses due to existing biases and discrimination against them. Despite having valid work visas and contracts, these workers have been among the first to be let go, reflecting a troubling trend of discrimination based on their nationality and economic status.

The repercussions of these job losses extend beyond the workers themselves, severely impacting their families back in Bangladesh. Approximately 30 million people rely on the remittances sent by these migrant workers, and the disruption in remittance flows due to job losses has led to significant hardship. Families are facing severe economic challenges, including unemployment, financial instability from the high costs associated with migration, and difficulty in meeting basic needs such as food and healthcare. The pandemic has thus intensified the already precarious situation of Bangladeshi migrant workers and their families, highlighting the broader socio-economic impact of global crises on vulnerable populations.

The dependents primarily consist of the migrant workers' children, who use this remittance to fund their basic necessities, such as food and education. Due to the reduction in foreign remittance from Bangladeshi labor workers caused by the pandemic, many healthy children who were attending school for a better future have turned to child labor just to survive. Child labor is a significant injustice in today's society, and the decrease in remittance has forced many children to abandon their education in order to meet their basic needs.

A majority of the dependents are also elderly people living in rural areas of Bangladesh. These elderly individuals relied on the remittance from foreign workers to survive. The pandemic has resulted in insufficient or no remittance, leaving them unable to afford essential healthcare. Consequently, many elderly people have died during the pandemic due to contracting the coronavirus and lacking the necessary funds for crucial medical care from their relatives, such as sons, daughters, nephews, and nieces.

The Bangladeshi government has taken several measures to support returning labor workers. For instance, it has allocated a budget of 200 million taka (UNDP, 2020) for workers stranded abroad due to the pandemic and flight cancellations. To ensure these funds reach the stranded workers safely, the government has designed various missions. Additionally, the government has funded microfinancing schemes to support returning laborers. Under these schemes, returning Bangladeshi workers can obtain loans of up to 500,000 taka at a 4% interest rate (UNDP, 2020) from Probashi Kallyan Bank to invest in small businesses. This state-owned financial institution is crucial for providing financial support to Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Furthermore, the government is arranging an additional microfinancing business loan scheme of five billion taka for returning migrant workers. However, a significant issue is that some government officials in charge of these missions have engaged in corruption, diverting the funds meant for these troubled individuals into their own pockets.

Another significant challenge faced by returning Bangladeshi migrant workers is their lack of knowledge about current business trends and job skills required for employment or starting a business. They also face barriers in accessing formal credit schemes designed by the government. Many of these workers encounter difficulties due to the absence of advisory panels at credit-providing institutions to assist them in starting new businesses. Additionally, navigating complex paperwork at banking institutions poses a challenge for many returnees, as a significant number of them are illiterate due to limited educational opportunities in their youth. As a result, many returning Bangladeshi migrant workers were unable to meet their basic necessities during the pandemic.

The United Nations also took steps to support Bangladeshi labor workers abroad during the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, the UNDP established a call center in Saudi Arabia called 'Probash Bondhu' to provide telecommunication medical advice services to 2.2 million Bangladeshi labor workers (UNDP, 2020) in Saudi Arabia. The IOM further assisted by developing a technological database system to track and assess the needs of returnee laborers during the pandemic. This system allowed staff from international NGOs to identify and address the emergency needs of returning workers effectively.

Conceptual Framework

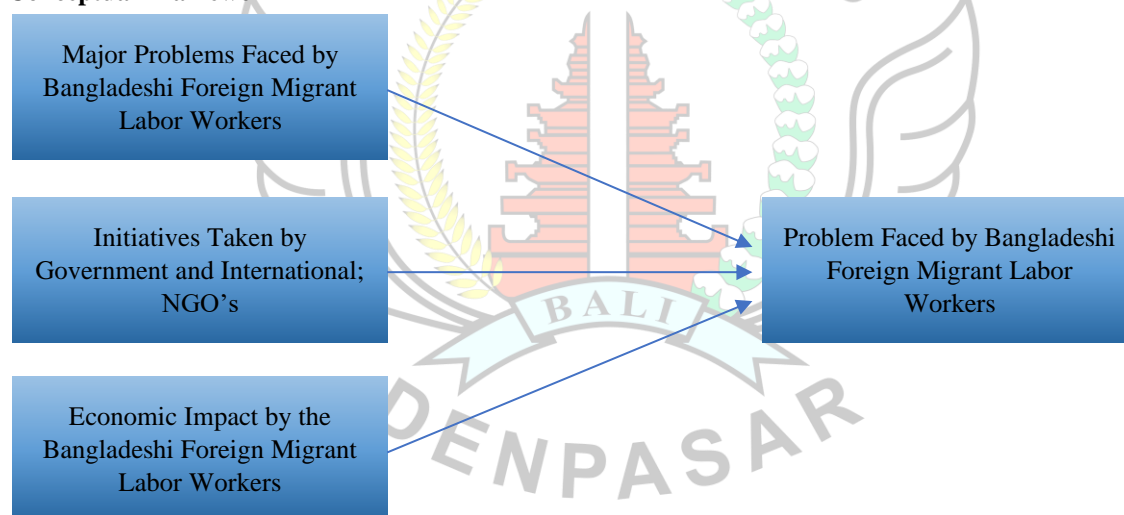


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Qualitative research involves analyzing various forms of data, including observations, texts, audio, and video recordings, to derive meaningful insights. Specifically, the researcher utilized phenomenological research to understand phenomena through individuals' experiences and perceptions within specific social contexts. Data were collected through video and audio interviews and by observing migrant workers' behavior in their work environment. To ensure an unbiased understanding of participants' experiences, the researcher used the bracketing method, which involves setting aside personal biases and assumptions during data collection and analysis.

Data collection took place at Berjaya Shopping Mall in Malaysia, a convenient location where many Bangladeshi migrant workers are employed as cleaners, guards, and shopkeepers. The researcher also obtained contact information of former migrant workers from current workers at the mall to conduct interviews via video calls, ensuring participants' comfort. The study focused on Bangladeshi migrant workers currently employed

overseas and those who have previously worked abroad. Given the large number of individuals in this population, a representative sample was selected to provide insights into the broader population.

Due to the vast number of Bangladeshi migrant workers, non-probability sampling, specifically the snowball sampling technique, was employed to select a sample of 10 individuals. This technique involved starting with interviews of workers at Berjaya Mall and obtaining referrals to other Bangladeshi workers. The snowball method facilitated the creation of a network of interviewees, yielding rich data on the experiences and perceptions of migrant workers. It also allowed contact with workers' relatives and friends who had previously worked in Gulf nations or emerging Asian countries.

The dependent variable in this study is the daily hardships and struggles endured by Bangladeshi migrant workers. Independent variables include actions and plans by international NGOs and Bangladeshi government officials to protect migrant workers' human rights, the main difficulties faced by these workers in their daily work life, and the positive economic impact of remittances sent by Bangladeshi migrant workers on the national economy.

The primary instruments used in this study were in-person interviews at Berjaya Shopping Mall and mobile phone interviews (audio and video calls). Additionally, a laptop was used for writing the research report, and NVivo software was employed for qualitative data analysis, inputting data from interviews to derive findings and outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Coding for Files

The following table provides a summary of coding references and the number of codes applied across different audio files analyzed in this study. Each file represents a unique segment of the data, and the coding references indicate the instances where specific themes or categories were identified. The table also details the number of distinct codes assigned to each file, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the information extracted. This summary helps to visualize the distribution and frequency of codes applied during the analysis, offering insight into the recurring patterns and themes present in the dataset.

TABLE 1. Coding References and Codes Summary

Files	Number of coding references	Number of codes coding
Files\Audio 1	1	1
Files\Audio 2	6	3
Files\Audio 3	3	2
Files\Audio 4	4	2
Files\Audio 5	4	3
Files\Audio 6	6	2
Files\Audio 7	2	2
Files\Audio 8	5	2
Files\Audio 9	5	2
Files\Audio 10	4	3

Table 2 provides a detailed overview of the coding references and descriptions related to the problems faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers as identified through interviews. The table categorizes the issues into three main areas: problems caused by foreign companies, the government, and recruiting agents. Each category is accompanied by a description that summarizes the content of the interviews and highlights the key challenges encountered by the workers. The table also specifies the number of files in which these issues were discussed and the total number of references coded for each category, offering a clear representation of the data distribution and the frequency of these problems across the dataset.

TABLE 2. Coding References and Codes Summary

Name	Description	Files	References
Problems caused by foreign companies	These interviews of the researcher with the existing and former Bangladeshi migrant workers discuss the problems faced by laborers when they worked in overseas	8	19

	foreign companies		
Problems caused by the government	These interviews conducted by the researcher with the current and ex-Bangladeshi foreign laborers discuss the troubles faced by these poor people through local and foreign government	8	14
Problems caused by the recruiting agents	These interviews of the researcher with the former and ex-Bangladeshi migrant workforce talk about the problems faced by these innocent people while going to work in foreign nations by recruiting agents	6	7

The codebook for this research includes data from 10 interviews and several focus group discussions, categorized into three main nodes: "Problems Caused by Foreign Companies," "Problems Caused by the Government," and "Problems Caused by Recruiting Agents." Each node is described with details on the number of audio files from which the data was extracted and the number of references or paragraphs where each issue appears. The node "Problems Caused by Foreign Companies" covers challenges faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers due to the practices of foreign companies. The node "Problems Caused by the Government" addresses difficulties and shortcomings in the support and policies provided by the Bangladeshi government. Lastly, "Problems Caused by Recruiting Agents" highlights issues arising from the actions of recruiting agents involved in sending Bangladeshi workers abroad.

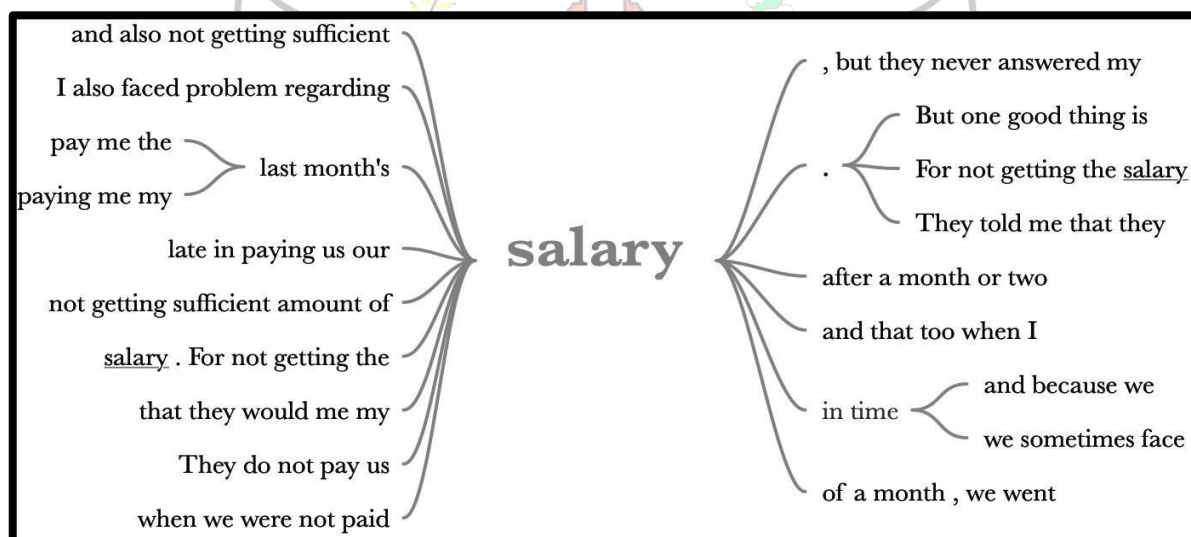


FIGURE 2. Interview Results of Salary Issues

Through qualitative interviews, it becomes evident that Bangladeshi labor workers face significant issues related to their salaries. Many workers receive less than the amount stipulated in their contracts, with some being paid only a quarter of their agreed salary. In more severe cases, workers have reported not receiving payment for one or two months, with employers offering excuses to justify these salary cuts. There are also instances where workers are compelled to work without receiving any wages at all.

These findings align with research by Rahman et al. (2014), which discovered that 57% of Bangladeshi migrant workers surveyed chose to leave their initial jobs due to inadequate salaries and unhealthy, risky work environments. Similarly, Sarker (2016) found that Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia are frequently forced into exploitation, including delayed or unpaid salaries. Roy and Verdun (2019) noted that Bangladeshi workers in Italy often experience low incomes, particularly in jobs dependent on tourism, coupled with long working hours and minimal free time. In such conditions, migrant workers have little choice but to endure harsh working conditions to support themselves and send remittances back home.



FIGURE 3. Interview Results of Work Issues

Through the qualitative interviews, it is evident that Bangladeshi laborers abroad endure extreme working conditions. Many workers reported starting their shifts early in the morning and working late into the night. They also frequently work under the intense heat of the sun, with no breaks for basic needs such as going to the toilet or drinking water. Some workers described their experiences as feeling like slavery, due to the constant, close supervision and lack of rest.

This finding is corroborated by Sarker (2016), who observed that Bangladeshi migrant workers are often exploited by their employers, facing threats like having their passports withheld, living in overcrowded conditions, and being forced to sleep outside. The participants also reported severe mental and physical pain due to the strenuous nature of their work, which led to chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension. As a result of these harsh conditions, some workers even returned to Bangladesh before their work visas expired.



FIGURE 4. Interview Results of Agency Issues

The qualitative interviews reveal significant issues with recruiting agencies affecting Bangladeshi migrant workers. For example, many agencies engage in the illegal practice of contract substitution. Initially, workers sign contracts in Bangladesh that promise high-status positions and attractive salaries. However, upon arrival abroad, they are required to sign new contracts under duress, which detail strenuous jobs with much lower salaries, deviating drastically from the original agreements.

Another serious problem is the exorbitant fees charged by recruiting agencies, often exceeding what the foreign employers require. These fees are so high that some workers are forced to sell valuable possessions to cover the costs. Azad's study (2019) supports these findings, indicating that migrant workers frequently pay substantial recruitment fees and often receive fraudulent contracts. Many workers also find themselves without the promised salaries or job positions upon arrival at their destinations.

Additionally, some agencies send workers abroad without securing employment, leaving them in difficult situations. The most alarming issue reported in the interviews is that workers, even when left without work or pay, are afraid to report their situations to local authorities due to fear of retaliation from the recruiting agency. This fear and anxiety prevent them from seeking help and exacerbate their suffering.



FIGURE 5. Interview Results of Health Issues

The interviews reveal several critical issues faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers, particularly regarding health and mental well-being. One participant, who had diabetes before leaving Bangladesh, was issued a fraudulent fitness certificate by a Bangladeshi medical center. This false documentation was presented to both the Bangladeshi and foreign authorities, leading to the worker being deemed fit for work despite his pre-existing condition. As a result of his health problems, this worker had to return to Bangladesh before his visa expired.

The interviews also highlight the severe mental health impact on migrant workers, which often leaves lasting trauma. This issue is particularly evident when speaking with female housemaids and a recruiting agency owner. The negative effects on mental health are described as so profound that recovery is often elusive. The recruiting agency owner attempts to mitigate this by bringing female housemaids back to Bangladesh, hoping that time with their families will aid in their psychological and emotional recovery.

Additionally, the interviews reveal that many workers develop health issues such as pre-hypertension due to the physically demanding nature of their jobs. The relentless work schedules, from early morning until late at night without adequate rest, contribute to various health problems. Tragically, many workers suffering from these health issues are unable to access basic medical treatment, as neither the foreign companies nor the local governments provide the necessary care.

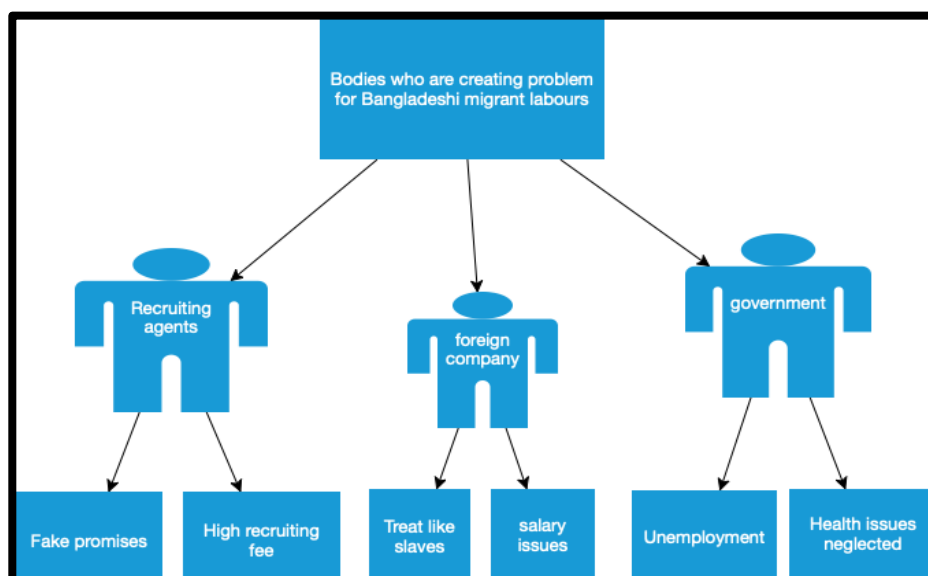


FIGURE 6. Challenges Faced by Bangladeshi Migrant Laborers: Key Contributing Bodies and Issues

The diagram reveals that Bangladeshi migrant workers face significant suffering due to three main entities. Recruiting agents often make false promises about high salaries and white-collar jobs, only to later offer low-paying, strenuous positions. They also charge recruitment fees that far exceed standard rates, placing a heavy financial burden on workers. Foreign companies exacerbate the situation by treating workers poorly, subjecting them to gruelling hours from dawn till midnight with minimal rest and inadequate salaries. This exploitative treatment causes considerable physical and emotional distress. Government authorities also play a role in this suffering. They permit workers to enter foreign countries with work visas but fail to address issues of unemployment or job termination effectively. Additionally, they often neglect to provide basic medical treatments, leaving workers to suffer without adequate support.

Discussion

In the initial phase of the qualitative research, the researcher conducted video interviews with three Bangladeshi migrants working as shopkeepers at Berjaya Time Square. Two of these shopkeepers agreed to participate and highlighted significant issues with recruiting agents. They reported that many Bangladeshi migrant workers sent to Malaysia by these agents struggle to find employment and, even when they do, the salaries are insufficient for survival. Those without jobs face severe hardships, including a lack of proper meals due to financial constraints and limited resources.

One shopkeeper declined a video interview out of fear that participating might expose him to the recruiting agents, who could pose a threat to his safety. As a result, the researcher agreed to conduct an audio interview to protect his identity. The snowball sampling method, used to find additional participants, proved challenging as many workers at Berjaya Time Square were reluctant to participate due to fears of exposure and potential repercussions from the agents.

Despite these challenges, the researcher managed to obtain contacts for Bangladeshi migrants who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia and a recruiting agent. Following this, the researcher interviewed a female Bangladeshi migrant housemaid who had worked in Saudi Arabia. She reported difficulties with communication and felt isolated and sad due to the emotional and physical toll of working long hours from early morning until late at night, along with experiencing mistreatment from the household members.

From the interviews, several key issues affecting Bangladeshi migrant workers, particularly female housemaids, emerged. The major problem highlighted by the female housemaid was her experience of isolation and neglect while working in a household where her well-being was largely ignored. Unlike male workers who benefit from labor unions that facilitate collective bargaining, female housemaids lack such support, which exacerbates their difficulties. She advocated for the formation of labor unions for female housemaids by international NGOs to address these challenges.

In response, a recruiting agency owner acknowledged that while his agency strives to address issues faced by female housemaids—such as language barriers, loneliness, and occasional physical abuse—there are limitations. He noted that although the agency attempts to relocate housemaids experiencing difficulties, severe

cases of physical abuse can cause lasting emotional trauma, sometimes necessitating the return of the housemaid to Bangladesh, which incurs significant costs for the agency.

Interviews with male Bangladeshi workers who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia revealed further issues. They reported significant discrepancies between promised and actual salaries, lack of medical services despite contractual agreements, and the challenge of accessing medical care due to busy networks. Workers also described harsh working conditions, including long hours with minimal breaks, which contributed to their feeling exploited. One participant recounted returning to Bangladesh prematurely due to health issues exacerbated by the demanding work schedule.

Another participant, who worked in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic, shared his distress over not receiving any salary or vaccine, resulting in his return to Bangladesh to attend his father's funeral. This experience highlighted a critical lack of concern from foreign governments and companies regarding the health and well-being of migrant workers. Overall, the findings underscore that neither foreign governments nor companies adequately address the health, employment, and basic needs of Bangladeshi migrant workers, leaving them to endure significant hardships.

In the research article, the researcher referenced an academic article by the international NGO UNDP, which reported the establishment of a telecommunication healthcare service called 'Probash Bondhu' in Saudi Arabia. According to UNDP (2020), this service was intended to provide Bangladeshi migrant workers in Saudi Arabia with easy access to healthcare through mobile calls.

However, the findings from the researcher's qualitative interviews reveal a stark contrast to the official claims. One former Bangladeshi worker, who had been employed as a construction laborer in Saudi Arabia, reported attempting to use the 'Probash Bondhu' service when he experienced severe breathlessness due to overworking. Despite multiple attempts over two hours, he found the line continuously busy and was unable to access medical advice. His colleagues faced similar issues, with the healthcare line often inaccessible. According to the interviewee, access to this service was extremely limited, and receiving medical advice was a rare occurrence.

These findings suggest a significant gap between the promised healthcare access and the reality experienced by migrant workers. The researcher's investigation indicates that the 'Probash Bondhu' service, as reported, fails to adequately support workers in need of medical assistance, highlighting a discrepancy between the service's intended and actual effectiveness.

The researcher identified several significant gaps through qualitative interviews that challenge previously reported findings and theoretical information. The UNDP's 'Probash Bondhu' healthcare service, which was supposedly accessible to Bangladeshi migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, was found to be largely inaccessible, with the service line often busy and only sporadically reachable. This discrepancy highlights a gap between the promised and actual service quality.

Additionally, the research uncovered inconsistencies in the reported effectiveness of training programs for migrant workers. Dr. Siddiqui and Dr. Farabi's 2021 study suggested that 40 to 50 workers received training per batch. However, interviews revealed that the actual number is closer to 20, and the study did not address the widespread bribery in training centers, nor did it reflect the much lower number of new training centers established in the past two years compared to the projections.

Furthermore, the World Bank reported that microfinancing institutions cover nearly 80% of rural Bangladesh and provide easy access to loans for poor people. Contradicting this, the researcher found that a returned migrant worker, despite having foreign work experience, was unable to secure a loan from 'Probashi Kollan' bank to start a small agricultural business. This gap underscores a disparity between theoretical access to microfinance and the actual experiences of individuals seeking financial support.

The researcher's findings reveal significant discrepancies between reported guidelines and actual conditions faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers. According to the United Nations guidelines, disputes between migrant workers and foreign companies should be resolved through social dialogue or UN intervention, with assurances against discrimination. However, interviews with former workers in Saudi Arabia revealed a starkly different reality. Migrant workers who attempted to protest against unjust treatment faced threats of imprisonment or deportation. Additionally, efforts to resolve salary disputes through social dialogue were thwarted when trade union leaders, bribed by company management, discouraged protests, leaving workers without their due wages.

Further contradicting claims from Dr. Siddiqui and Dr. Farabi's article, which stated that the Saudi government's 'Health for All' policy ensures easy access to basic healthcare and annual health check-ups for migrant workers, the research uncovered that in practice, neither the Saudi government nor companies provided adequate healthcare services. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some migrant workers who were willing to pay for the vaccine out of pocket were still denied access, highlighting a significant gap between policy and implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

The researcher's investigation sheds light on the severe hardships faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers, revealing a stark contrast between documented guidelines and the actual experiences of these workers. The research highlights significant issues within the practices of Bangladeshi government bodies, international NGOs, and recruiting agencies, pointing to a gap between policy promises and practical implementation.

The findings suggest that the Bangladeshi government often fails to uphold its commitments to migrant workers, engaging in unethical practices such as accepting bribes and making unfulfilled promises. The researcher calls for immediate reforms to ensure that these commitments are honored and that funds are properly allocated to assist workers in need.

International NGOs, while initiating commendable strategies, often fall short in their execution. The researcher urges these organizations to address identified gaps in their research and enhance their effectiveness in implementing support measures. Improved coordination and resource allocation are essential to making a tangible difference in the lives of these workers.

Recruiting agencies are also implicated in exploiting migrant workers by charging excessive fees and exercising undue control over their lives. The researcher emphasizes the need for increased accountability and ethical behavior among these agencies, hoping to foster a more humane approach in their operations.

Despite the challenges faced in conducting this research, including time constraints and limited resources, the researcher successfully illuminated critical issues and provided valuable recommendations. Future researchers are encouraged to undertake comprehensive studies with a focus on both qualitative and quantitative methods, ensuring thorough investigation and representation of migrant workers from various countries.

In conclusion, the research underscores the urgent need for systemic changes and greater responsibility from all parties involved. It is a call to action for governments, NGOs, and recruiting agencies to address the injustices faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers and to strive for a more equitable and supportive environment for these vulnerable individuals.

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