

Migrating - Crisis of opportunities feeds Bangladesh's human trafficking problem

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*Many migrants seeking better employment opportunities abroad fall victim to human trafficking.
Photo: IOM/Francesco Malavolta/Tasneem Tayeb*

We all aspire to “a better future”. While the idea of a better future and what it entails varies from people to people, dreamer to dreamer, what remains constant is the aspiration. It is in search of this future that hundreds and thousands of people seek jobs abroad every year from Bangladesh. And it is this dream that human traffickers exploit to entrap people in the guise of labour migration to profitable work destinations.

According to a report published on the website of Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), an average of around 590,000 people migrate out of Bangladesh every year seeking better employment opportunities abroad. And many of them fall victim to human trafficking. These individuals are often forced into bonded labour, sex slavery, domestic servitude, or are exploited for organ trafficking. In an extreme and alarmingly increasing trend, the victims of trafficking are also often held hostage in foreign lands while their families are forced to pay for their release. Mass graves of Bangladeshi and Rohingya nationals found in Malaysia and Thailand are a tragic reminder of the grim fate our people encounter at the hands of ruthless traffickers.

While the government has taken various measures to curb human trafficking—such as enacting the Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act 2012, setting up seven special tribunals to fast-track trial of human trafficking cases, and cracking down on individuals and agencies involved in smuggling and trafficking—these measures are mostly focused on addressing the symptoms rather than the causes that are forcing people to migrate for a better life.

People's decision to migrate is aided by various factors. For the affluent, the prospect of better education, better standards of living, and better facilities are the determinant factors. For those living on the fringes of society, the causes are much more diverse and desperate. Even if we narrow down the causes to the socio-economic triggers, four key areas come to the fore.

“If we look at the profile of the people who are migrating, we'll see that they are basically the youth,” said noted economist and chairperson of Brac, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, while discussing this issue at length with this writer. “It's not the older group. It's the youth who are going abroad in search of livelihood. It's a youth desperation issue,” he said. And why is that? “There might be particular family-specific reasons. But as a group, there are two bundles of factors at work for them. One is the prospect of finding productive employment within the country. According to official statistics, within the age group of 15-29—which we call the youth segment—nearly 30 percent is not

in education or training or employment. Which means, there is a lack of opportunity both in terms of employment and skills development. So there is a big void there, a crisis of opportunities facing the youth. And this crisis presents a big existential threat for them, leading them to migrate out of desperation.”

The second bundle of factors, according to Rahman, relates to the overall governance environment and governance or political norms in the country. “The party-affiliation-based local government elections that we now see have served to destroy the social fabric of villages. Earlier, despite the political competition, there used to be a kind of a social environment that was maintained, which is not there now. Before, political conflict was confined to the higher level. Now a kind of an oppressive political environment has trickled down to the very base of the society, including in the villages. In this kind of environment, most of the youth who are desperate feel powerless while trying to find opportunities. These young people are willing to work hard but they are helpless against the reality that, here, merit is not appropriately rewarded nor are rules followed.”

And the third factor is the deteriorating employment elasticity of growth. Dr Rahman referred to the statistics of Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES)—a nationally representative survey used to measure monetary poverty that is conducted every five years—which suggests that between 2010 and 2016, the overall employment elasticity of growth has gone down. It means that one percent growth in 2016 could not generate as many employment opportunities as it did in 2010. And this has also exacerbated the desperation of the jobless. With Covid-19 taking a toll on the nation’s economy and pushing people out of jobs, people now have become even more vulnerable to the lures of clandestine trafficking rackets.

In addition to these, women’s lack of access to education and skills development opportunities is another factor that leads to their migration abroad. Most of the women who are forced to go abroad take up menial jobs, for example as domestic help. In a report published last year, a local newspaper citing the data of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) suggested that more than 8.4 lakh female workers went abroad since 1992; of them, 98 percent migrated to Middle Eastern countries as domestic help. And a good number of them fell victim to physical torture and abuse. Dead bodies of 473 women returned to Bangladesh between 2016 and September this year. Many of them had committed suicide.

Despite the increasing cases of abuse of our female migrant workers abroad and the risks of human trafficking, women and girls still take the risks out of desperation to support themselves and their families. The ones that are lucky find decent employment. The ones that are not fall prey to the traps set by traffickers, and are often sold into prostitution and servitude.

While talking to a local newspaper, Sumaiya Islam, executive director of Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra, suggested that education for migrant workers should be improved and the standard of their training should be enhanced to international standards to make work abroad safer for them.

Apart from this, child marriage (I wrote a column last year detailing how early marriage is making our girls more vulnerable to trafficking), social stigma, and lack of empowerment are added factors which make women and girls more prone to trafficking.

These social and economic factors must be rooted out, and only then can we eliminate the causes that enable human trafficking. While the academic and skills development curricula need to be made more comprehensive to empower the youth with knowledge and skills to earn a better living, the country’s economic planners need to work on creating more sustainable employment opportunities at home to accommodate the job needs of people—boys and girls, men and women. Such job opportunities must be available to everyone, not just those who are associated with the politically

influential. The ministries of women and children affairs, education and social welfare can work together to promote education for girls, eliminate child marriage and remove the social barriers women face in their search for livelihood opportunities.

It is through these initiatives that some of the key economic and social triggers of human trafficking can be eliminated. We also need to ensure that individuals seeking employment abroad go through formal channels to avoid being exploited by trafficking rings. Addressing these will not end the problem of human trafficking in its entirety—human trafficking is, after all, made up of a much more complex set of factors. But it is certainly a good place to start.

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P.S.

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<https://www.southasianrights.org/crisis-of-opportunities-feeds-bangladeshs-human-trafficking-problem/>

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