

Role of NGO's in Ensuring Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Women Migrant Workers: A case study

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Abstract

Bangladesh is a densely populated country with its small land. Currently there are more than three million people who are fully unemployed and about twenty million people are partly employed in Bangladesh. Migration Sector has now been highly considered as a way to reduce unemployment from the country. Migration is contributing to our economy in two ways, by decreasing the rate of unemployment and by supplying remittances which contribute to our GDP growth. Therefore, ensuring Safe Migration for the Bangladeshi Migrant workers is now a time demand. Not only men but also women migrant workers are contributing toward migration sector by sending remittances on a regular basis. It is very unfortunate that in many cases migrant workers face various problems at home, transit and abroad. At present, NGOs in Bangladesh are playing a very crucial role to ensure safe migration for Bangladeshi migrant workers. BRAC is notable amongst them. The general aim of the paper is to identify the type of services that are being provided by BRAC Migration Programme to women migrant workers and to know the strategy of BRAC Migration Programme as it is contributing in ensuring safe migration for migrant workers in Bangladesh. Safe Migration refers to the successful migration which gives a sustainable base of livelihood for a migrant worker. Generally there are three basic steps in safe migration process. These are pre-departure, post-arrival, return and re-integration. The specific objective of the paper is to explore the role of BRAC Migration Programme in all these three stages of safe migration for Bangladeshi women migrant workers. This paper follows case oriented qualitative research approach and the data relevant to the study has been collected from both the primary and secondary sources.

Key Words: NGO, Safe Migration, Women Migrant

Introduction

Migration² sector is one of the largest income sources of Bangladesh. Near about eight million people from Bangladesh are working in different countries of the world (GoB, 2013). The present government of Bangladesh has already planned to achieve middle income country by 2021³ where Migration sector

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² Overseas migration in which people from Bangladesh goes abroad for employment

³ vision of GoB to be achieved by the year 2021

has now been highly considered as a way to do so. According to BMET⁴, a total of 343,824 migrant workers have migrated abroad for jobs in the first seven months of 2015 where 56,389 were women migrant workers. At present migrant workers are now being provoked and paying attention to go abroad as an alternative livelihood options and the number of migrant workers is increasing each year though they are facing a lot of problems at home and abroad in every stages of Safe Migration⁵. Most of the cases they suffered a lot both physically and mentally but get little legal support abroad. They become vulnerable due to less understanding of their job they ought to do at the destination country. They usually bound to sign unknowingly with the fraud recruiting agent and get little support after arrival. It is evident that women migrant workers suffered more due to unknowingness to attend the employer in the post-arrival stage. Ensuring safe migration for these workers is now a big challenge of Bangladesh. Most of the cases women migrants have been migrated to KSA⁶, UAE⁷, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Lebanon, Jordan, Oman, Hong Kong and Singapore (BMET, 2015). In the last twenty years Government of Bangladesh (hereafter GoB) is promoting safe migration where NGO intervention is also important. As charitable and voluntary organization a number of NGOs are now playing an important role in ensuring safe migration for Bangladeshi migrant workers whereas BRAC⁸ is one of them. BRAC started its Migration Programme in 2006 and working for ensuring Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Migrant workers. Now question may raise that, how and to what extent BRAC is contributing towards ensuring Safe Migration for women migrant workers in Bangladesh? The present study aims to explore the role of BRAC Migration Programme in pre-departure, post-arrival and reintegration all these three stages of Safe Migration to answer the stated question. Related literature was reviewed by the researcher for finding research gap. There are a few literature found on the roles of NGO's on safe migration issue. Though there are several study has been done regarding the problems faced by women migrant workers in every stages of migration cycle, there is still a lack on NGO's role to alleviate those problems. The current study is a little endeavor for doing so hoping that future study will be provoked in this line. Jolly and Reeves's study found that historically migration was a major development opportunity and it is also true at present time (World Commission, 2004). They also revealed that NGOs and voluntary associations are engaged in supporting and alleviating problems faced by migrant workers in general and women migrant workers in specific (Piper and Yamanaka, 2003). The positive outcome of their study included that NGOs are able to make networks of migrant workers within the destination countries with other

⁴ Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training

⁵ Safe Migration refers to the successful migration which gives a sustainable base of livelihood for a migrant worker. Generally there are three basic steps in safe migration process. These are pre-departure, post-arrival, return and reintegration stage.

⁶ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

⁷ United Arab Emirates

⁸ Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, is the world largest and number one notable NGO of Bangladesh

social organizations and can make force on government to adopt policy change.

Objectives of the Research

The main aim of the paper is to identify the type of services that are being provided by BRAC Migration Programme to women migrant workers and to know the strategy of BRAC as it is working for ensuring safe migration for Bangladeshi migrant workers in Bangladesh. The specific objectives of the paper are as follows:

- To explore the role of BRAC Migration Programme in Pre-departure stage of Safe Migration for women migrant workers
- To explore the role of BRAC Migration Programme in Post Arrival stage of Safe Migration for women migrant workers
- To explore the role of BRAC Migration Programme in Reintegration stage of Safe Migration for women migrant workers

Methodology of the Study

Research methodology is a combination of method used in a study, types of data, tools and techniques of data collection, sampling method and data processing and analyzing. The present study uses case study method. “Case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1994:1) The cause of using Case study is “case studies involve measuring and studying what is there and how it got there” (Aminuzzaman, 1991:43). The study uses both the primary and secondary data. The data uses in the study were qualitative and for collecting primary data BRAC Migration Programme’s beneficiaries were contacted directly as respondents. For this purpose interview technique was used by the researcher because “it is a verbal technique for obtaining data from the primary source” and “Interview is a very systematic method by which a person enters deeply into the life of even a stranger and can bring out needed information and data for the research purpose” (Aminuzzaman, 1991:82). Observation technique was also used by the researcher. The study uses purposive sampling technique as in this technique, definite unites are selected purposively by the researcher. Faridpur⁹ district was selected as it is a migrants’ prone district of Bangladesh. A total of 30 samples were interviewed. For fulfilling the research objectives, both the potential and returnee women migrant workers were selected to be interviewed based on researcher’s judgment. The data relevant to the study have been also collected from secondary sources like books, journals, daily newspapers, online newspapers, documents, published reports and website of BRAC Migration Programme.

Safe Migration and NGOs: A Theoretical Note

Generally the word ‘migration’ denotes a movement of people from one place to another. Migration can be of two kinds. When people move within countries

⁹ Faridpur is a central district of Bangladesh under Dhaka division. In 2015, a total of 14,188 people were migrated abroad from Faridpur.

it is called internal migration and when people migrate from their country of origin to another country is called overseas or international migration. The present study is about the second type of migration. People may migrate for social, economic, political or environmental cause. There are some factors behind migration namely push factors and pull factors. Push factors encourages people to leave the place where they live as such poverty, unemployment, natural disaster etc. On the other hand pull factors attract people to move another place such as better living standard, employment opportunity etc. When a migrant worker migrates to another country safely, works there for certain time period and come back to his/her country of origin by ensuring a better and sustainable livelihood is called Safe Migration. Safe migration is a step by step process including taking decision to migrate, migration preparation, journey to destination country, during migration, return to country of origin and reintegration. All these steps can be categorized into three phase's namely a) pre-departure stage which includes taking decision to migrate and migration preparation b) post-arrival stage which includes journey to destination country, during migration and c) reintegration stage includes return to country of origin and reintegration as depicted the figure below:



Figure 1: Safe Migration Process

(Source: <http://migration.brac.net/programme-approach>)

Migration sector is regarded as the most important revenue source of Bangladesh. Every year more than 500,000 people depart abroad for work from Bangladesh and more than eight million people have been already migrated to abroad from Bangladesh. Migrant workers are not only contributing to their families rather they are contributing for national economy of Bangladesh. “Though they are contributing a lot, this is very unfortunate that these migrant workers are facing lots of problems in pre-departure, post-arrival, return and re-integration stages of safe migration. In case of women migration these problems are equally true or in fact that time those will be twice” (Jolly & Reeves, 2005). “Migration can provide a vital source of income for migrant women and their families, and earn them greater autonomy, self-confidence and social status. Before departure, women can be faced with gender-biased procedures and corrupt agents. In fact, gender discrimination, poverty and violence, can provide the impetus for women to migrate or enable women to be trafficked in the first place. During transit and

at their destination women can be faced with verbal, physical and sexual abuse, poor housing and encampments, sex-segregated labour markets, low wages, long working hours, insecure contracts and precarious legal status. And upon return to the source country they may be faced with broken families, illness and poverty” (Jolly & Reeves, 2005:1) Ghosh’s study (cited in Piper 2005) mentioned that as a welfare and social professional women migrant workers are frequently obliged to admit the job as subordinate and low paid employment. Though migration is a multidimensional phenomenon with both the positive impacts on women migrant workers like it expands the opportunity of doing productive work at the same time it may create opportunity of harassment negatively. “The most widespread problems with domestic work are the low pay and long working hours, the inferior positions of domestic workers and highly personalized relationships with employers which make it difficult for workers to receive their agreed pay or get time off. The health and safety situation in the home is not satisfactory, and if they are ill they do not get paid and may even lose their jobs. Psychological, physical and sexual abuses are common” (Piper, 2005). In the pre-departure period gender discriminatory practices and attitudes in the country of origin plays a significant role. “Women’s employment opportunities, educational levels, health care and other services in their home communities are often less well advanced or provided for than in the case of men. In addition, there is often no, or only insufficient, safety nets for women who are single beyond an age at which it is expected of them to get married; for single mothers; and women who are divorced, separated or widowed”(Piper, 2005). In case of sending and receiving remittances gender discrimination is also prevailing. Piper (cited in UN, 2004) also argued that in case of remittance women are sending more than men whereas women migrant’s age, marital status are the considerable issues. Ghosh (2009:29) argued that, ‘these various difficulties faced by women migrants may be compounded by institutional constraints. Local trade unions typically do not concern themselves with migrant workers’. She also argued that, ‘usually the only substitute for such union protection is the through the NGOs that are focused on providing services and protection to migrants’. Ghosh (2009:43) mentioned that, ‘in rural Bangladesh, some NGOs have monitored the return to the villages of women who got work in the garment factories and domestic service sectors in Dhaka’. She also argued that in ensuring safe migration for women workers, government should initiate appropriate programme in consultation with concerned NGOs regarding migration issue.

BRAC’s Programme: A brief Note on the BRAC Migration Programme

In 2006 BRAC started its Safe Migration Facilitation Center established at the district level of Bangladesh for providing migration related support to the migrant workers and their family members. They mainly used to provide information on safe migration process. At the present time, they also provide legal aid support to deceived migrants. They used to provide counseling support to returnee migrant workers and also provide rescue support to the vulnerable migrant works at destination countries. Now BRAC migration Programme has expanded its operation to 124 Upazilas of the 33 district of

Bangladesh with a view to ensuring safe migration for Bangladeshi migrant workers and coverage population is about 1.8 million. BRAC Migration Programme has more than five projects based on internal and overseas migration and is working also as a leading organization for migration and the chairperson of NAMR, B¹⁰ and internationally BRAC Migration Programme is involved with CARAM Asia¹¹. The overall goal of the programme is to ensure improved livelihood of Bangladeshi migrant workers and their family members through human rights promotion and protection whereas the main objective of the programme is to ensure safe migration of Bangladeshi migrant workers through awareness building and education. Since its inception BRAC Migration Programme has expanded its operation by developing Migration volunteer¹² resource pool at local level and building partnership with 80 CBOs¹³ in Bangladesh and establishing reintegration and referral services for returnee migrant workers (<http://migration.brac.net/>). BRAC practices a three tiered intervention model to ensure safe migration as depicted below:

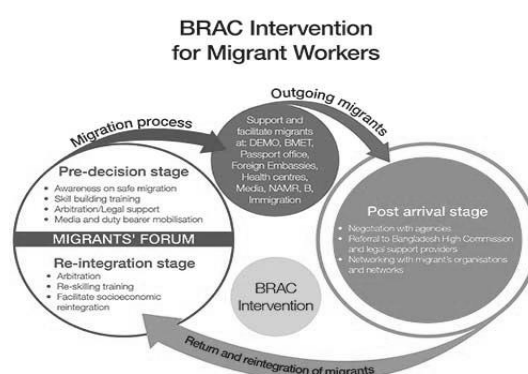


Figure 2: BRAC's Intervention for Migrant workers
(Source: <http://migration.brac.net/programme-approach>)

Role of BRAC in ensuring safe migration:

a) Role of BRAC Migration Programme in Pre-departure stage of Safe Migration:

It has been observed that in the pre-departure stage, potential migrant workers face many problems such as lack of awareness and knowledge on safe migration issue. Due to lack of knowledge on migration, they are trapped by the middlemen in the community. Middlemen push the potential migrant workers spending more money to be migrated abroad for work. Some of the respondents said that insufficient financial support by GoB for migrant workers at grass roots level makes potential migrant workers de-motivated to go abroad for work. Potential women migrants said that most of the time they can't arrange money to go abroad for work and remain silent. On the other hand family does not motivate to go abroad to a woman rather than man comparatively because of the patriarchy is prevailing in all over Bangladesh.

¹⁰ National Alliance for Migrant Rights, Bangladesh

¹¹ Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility in Asia

¹² Community people works voluntarily for migrant workers of their locality

¹³ Community Based Organizations

For addressing these problems, BRAC Migration Programme has two types of activities as such; awareness building services and another is social participatory activities. It arranges *Gana natak* or IPT¹⁴ shows, *pala gan*¹⁵, video show, and court yard meeting, pre-decision orientation workshop and quiz competition for college students on safe migration issue at local level. Basically these have been done by Communication Workers¹⁶ and Volunteers of BRAC Migration Programme. The activities at this level are contributing for building awareness and education on safe migration process and motivating potential workers to go abroad for work. Asia Khatun (22), a returnee women migrant worker as case focuses:

“I was interested to go Saudi Arabia but I was confused and did not know what I should do for going there. Someday I took part in a pre-decision orientation workshop arranged by BRAC Migration Programme where I learned the process of collecting passport and visa, process of opening bank account and the registration process at District Employment and Manpower Office and finally I knew all the procedure of going abroad by attending there and then I had decided to go Saudi Arabia”

In the pre-departure stage of migration, BRAC Migration Programme is providing many services to the potential migrant workers. Community meeting is one of the best examples for creating awareness and giving information on safe migration to the migrant workers specifically for potential migrant workers. BRAC Migration Programme arranges awareness campaign which is also a major intervention area. BRAC Migration Programme realizes that, all intervention will be wasted without making the migrant workers aware. Not only the migrant workers but their family members also needed to be informed about safe migration process. For this reason BRAC Migration Programme arranges awareness campaign for women migrant workers and their family members. BRAC Migration Programme is providing pre-departure orientation to the potential migrant workers. Ayesha Begum (26), another returnee women migrant worker as case focuses:

“I was very much interested to go abroad and my family members were interested too that is why I searched someone who could be helpful for me in this regard. Someday, a man from my village said that he know the way and he can easily send me Malaysia and cost will be 50,000 taka only. I was delighted and within few days my family gave him total money he required without any evidence. It had been many years the man was out of contact. Several times we tried to contact him but failed. One day I watched a ‘gana natak’ at our village arranged by BRAC migration programme and understood that, the man was actually a middleman and I was cheated by him. Then I was determined that I will go abroad by maintaining all legal procedure. Actually I was not aware before”.

¹⁴ Interactive Popular theater

¹⁵ Musical show arranged by local artist for increasing awareness on safe migration process

¹⁶ Field level staffs of BRAC Migration Programme

In the court yard meeting, not only the potential migrant workers but their family members also invited to attend the meeting. Communication workers of BRAC Migration Programme carry out the meeting with some specific agenda on migration for about one to two hours. BRAC Migration Programme also conducts meeting on safe migration related information especially on migrant's rights and migrant health issues viz. HIV/AIDS. In the pre-departure stage, BRAC Migration Programme is not supporting only in taking decision to go abroad but also support for visa-checking, opening bank account and to collect migrants' loan from BRAC itself and from other sources, viz. Expatriate Welfare Bank. BRAC Migration Programme also disseminates IEC¹⁷ and BCC¹⁸ materials such as poster, leaflet, brochure, sticker etc. on safe migration issue for building awareness and knowledge on safe migration.

The study found that, in the pre-departure stage of safe migration, women's participation in pre-departure orientation session is not satisfactory due to women's engagement in reproductive household activities in our society. The study also found that, the probability of getting information on safe migration for women is lower than man. Most of the cases, women are not allowed to participate by their family in the awareness campaign arranged by NGOs for potential women migrant workers. The study interestingly found that, religious superstition and social stigma facing by returnee women migrant workers sometime discourage potential women to go abroad for work. The study also found that, potential women migrants do not know the proper channel of getting financial support from Government and NGOs indeed.

b) Role of BRAC Migration Programme in Post-arrival stage of Safe Migration:

Some returnee migrant workers said that without learning the language of the destination country they faced problems abroad. They couldn't communicate with their employer properly due to language barrier. They also said that, due to lack of orientation of the destination country migrant workers can't adjust with the food habit and culture of the country that's why they suffer a lot in the post arrival stage of migration. Most of the returnee migrants said that, when migrant workers arrived at the destination country without taking life skills training they can't enjoy their work properly. Sometimes they don't get the security of their work and residence abroad. It has been informed by the returnee women migrants that they do not get right based support at right time. As domestic worker they usually worked for long time with low qualitative accommodation facilities and did not get proper support from Bangladeshi missions abroad. Before departure migrant workers should know how to use advanced machineries otherwise they fail to stay at abroad because they will have to handle advanced technology for their day to day work in abroad. It has been found that, due to the absence of strong legal agreement between Bangladesh and the destination country, migrant workers do not get proper rights based treatment when necessary. Providing services to the migrant workers in this stage is very crucial rather than pre-departure stage. It is merely not possible to contact with the migrant workers directly during their staying at

¹⁷ Information Education and Communication

¹⁸ Behavioral Change Communication

destination country. Rubina Akter (30), a returnee migrant worker as case focuses:

“After passing one year in Singapore I was bound to come back home because of some problems I was facing there. When I back, I was so frustrated about my future. Actually it is not all in all to go abroad for work only; we will have to stay there to be a successful migrant worker. One day I participated in a ‘court yeard’ meeting arranged by BRAC migration Programme at my village where I informed about safe migration process. First time I had no orientation on post arrival stage of safe migration. I did not adjust with a new environment and culture of the destination country. I had no information about job contract and legal way to go abroad. That is why I was forced to back. Now, I know how to go abroad and I have decided to go Singapore again. A brother of my village is a volunteer of BRAC migration Programme is helping me in every step”.

For this stage of safe migration BRAC extended its support to migrant workers facing problems at the destination countries. It supports migrant workers in communicating with their family members and with the Bangladeshi mission abroad. When a migrant worker contacted with the staff of BRAC Migration Programme from abroad, they tries to provide necessary support over phone and refer to government agencies if necessary. It has been providing support for receiving dead body transportation cost from GoB if migrant worker dies in abroad and provides support for claiming death benefits for the family of deceased migrant workers in abroad. The present study found that, in case of sending remittance to their country of origin, Bangladeshi women migrant workers sometimes fails to maintain proper channel due to the remittance sending system which is not well known to them. Sometimes Bangladeshi missions are being failed to trace the vulnerable migrant workers, especially women due to irregular migration.

c) *Role of BRAC Migration Programme in Re-integration stage of Safe Migration:*

In the reintegration stage migrant workers face problems too. In some cases, especially returnee women migrant workers have been boycotted even from their family and society as well. They are being stigmatized socially after coming back home. When a returnee woman migrant worker fails to earn better monetary return she faces humiliation and when she back home successfully, people treat her as a bad woman supposing that she might earn by an evil way. Returnee migrants also claim that in case of economic reintegration migrant workers don't get proper financial support by which they can make a business plan after coming from abroad. Establishment of reintegration and referral services for returnee migrant workers is a major concern of BRAC Migration programme. It has been working for promoting and protecting rights of returnee migrant workers, particularly women and vulnerable men. Well and good reintegration is called the pre-condition for empowering women migrant workers. After coming back they want to be established in society as independent women by doing business. For this reason they need fund and technical support. Due to lack of proper support,

their condition becomes deteriorated rather than before going abroad. BRAC Migration Programme gives support and suggestions to start again to the returnee migrant workers. BRAC Migration Programme believes and works for policy advocacy with government officials, recruiting agencies and local elites in this regard. In case of remittance management and reintegration, BRAC Migration Programme support migrant workers by giving information and training. In ensuring safe and sustainable migration, reintegration stage is most important for a migrant worker. BRAC Migration Programme is working for developing networks and building capacity of government, NGOs and private sector groups in order to provide an effective and efficient socioeconomic reintegration support to returnee migrant workers. For the returnee migrant workers BRAC Migration Programme is going to start its operation by providing entrepreneurship training, SME¹⁹ training and remittance management orientation etc. for socioeconomic reintegration of the returnee migrant workers in Bangladesh. Reintegration part is still very crucial for migrant workers in our country. In this case, combination of GoB and NGO's intervention is a must need. In case of professional training for potential migrants, there are some endeavors for giving language and professional training from government side to the potential migrant workers whereas BRAC intervention is also important. Though TTCs²⁰ arranges professional training for potential migrant workers, it is BRAC Migration Programme refers and motivates migrants to take part in the training of TTCs. BRAC Migration Programme emphasizes proactive policy making and implementation for ensuring safe migration for Bangladeshi women migrant workers. The major finding of the study is, BRAC Migration Programme is playing a pivotal role and in partnership with Government can provide better services to reduce the vulnerability of women migrant workers in Bangladesh. The study also found that, BRAC Migration Programme is playing significant role in pre-departure stage and does a few in reintegration stage of safe migration rather than post arrival stage. It has been observed that, social reintegration support is not enough yet for returnee women migrant workers in Bangladesh. There may be a lack of national planning of the rehabilitation for the returnee migrant workers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

At the present time, migrant workers are contributing a lot to the economy of Bangladesh. Therefore, it is high time we provided better services to migrant workers form every sector viz. GoB, NGOs and private sector as well. It can be undoubtedly said that, role of BRAC Migration Programme is noteworthy in every stages of safe migration process. Now it is the time to have a good coordination among the mentioned three sectors for ensuring safe migration for Bangladeshi migrant workers. NGOs should take initiatives regarding appropriate participation of women in training, briefing and awareness campaign organized for them. NGOs should provide information on safe migration from an easily accessible location for both men and women. GoB, NGOs and other organizations should support returnee women migrant

¹⁹ Small and Medium Enterprises

²⁰ Technical Training Centre

workers to readjust with their families as well as society and facilitate returnee migrant workers both socially and financially for ensuring safe migration for Bangladeshi women migrant workers.

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