



POLICY AND VULNERABILITY OF BANGLADESHI FEMALE LABOUR MIGRATION TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Syeda Ismat Ara Jahan

Faculty, Department of Political Studies

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

siajahan-pss@sust.edu

Md Mahbub Alam 

Faculty, Department of Political Studies

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

mahbub-pss@sust.edu

Mohammad After Miah

LLM student, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, United Kingdom

aftermiah@herts.ac.uk

Abstract

This study examines the intersection of migration policy and gender-based vulnerability in Bangladeshi female labour migration to the Middle East, exploring how social constructions, structural policies, and inadequate theorization of gender contribute to the precarious position of women migrant workers. The paper employs a theoretical review approach, critically analysing classical and contemporary migration theories through a feminist lens, alongside examination of existing policy frameworks and empirical literature on Bangladeshi female migration. The research reveals that women migrants face compounded vulnerabilities due to gender-biased structures embedded in social norms, policy frameworks, and migration governance. Despite legal reforms including the Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013 granting women formal freedom to migrate, implementation gaps, profit-seeking private recruiting agencies, and persistent patriarchal attitudes continue to render women vulnerable throughout pre-migration,

transit, and post-migration stages. Women remain concentrated in insecure, low-status occupations with restricted rights and face inadequate social reintegration upon return. This paper contributes to migration scholarship by systematically applying gender-sensitive theoretical frameworks to the Bangladeshi context, demonstrating how inadequate theorization of gender perpetuates policy failures and female migrant vulnerability. Emancipating female labour migration requires fundamental reconceptualization of gender in migration theory, strengthened policy enforcement mechanisms, and transformative social change recognizing women's dual economic and social contributions beyond their subordinate positioning in patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Migration Policy, Labour Migration, Gender, Middle East, Vulnerability, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

One of the most salient economic and social phenomena of recent times, gender in international labour migration, raises crucial policy issues and concerns. These concerns draw from the fact that the problems faced by migrant women are compounded by their being both women and migrants. From a gender perspective, women should have equal opportunities and treatment as men with regard to access to international labour markets. However, their status as women, as migrants or non-nationals, and as workers in gender-segregated labour markets makes international women migrant workers particularly vulnerable to various forms of discrimination, exploitation, and abuses (UN Women, 2020).

Since the inception of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in 1976, Bangladesh has been one of the highest labour-sending regions, incorporating a huge female workforce in Asia. Female labour migration, starting from around 2,189 in 1991, progressed slowly during the early 2000s and began rising gradually from 2003. In 2023 alone, over 140,000 women migrated for employment to various destinations (Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training [BMET], 2023). Though the absolute number is comparatively lower than for men, the remittance flow from female workers often holds a higher relative value, as their earnings are frequently saved due to limited personal expenses and restricted mobility in destination countries (BMET, 2024).

The policy issues involved, for both sending and receiving countries, are complicated, not only because they cover emigration and immigration policies and the employment structures and labour laws of both, but also because they involve socio-cultural attitudes and perceptions concerning the role and status of women in the family, society, and workplace. This paper argues that addressing female migrant vulnerability requires both theoretical reconceptualization

of gender in migration studies and practical policy reforms that recognize women as independent economic actors rather than dependent subjects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Perspectives on Labour Migration

Labour migration has become a trend for underdeveloped countries to ensure adequate earnings for survival. Several concepts and theories explain the flow of migration from one country to another. According to neoclassical economic theory, labour migration is the result of wage differences between two geographic locations (Harris & Todaro, 1970). These differences are related to geographic labour demand and supply. Areas with a labour deficiency but capital surplus have high relative wages, while areas with huge labour supply and capital shortage have comparatively low wages. Consequently, labour tends to flow from low-wage to high-wage regions, and Bangladesh, with its huge labour surplus and dearth of capital, is a perfect example of a source country.

Dual labour market theory analyzes migration as a core cause of pull factors from developed regions (Piore, 1979). This theory posits that the labour market consists of primary and secondary segments. The former requires high-skilled manpower, and the latter requires low-skilled workers. It identifies labour migration as a result of a pull created by developed countries to fill the "bottom rung" of their labour market—the secondary sector—due to a lack of native labourers willing to take such jobs.

The new economics of labour migration views migration as a result of decisions made by wider social entities like families and households (Stark & Bloom, 1985). According to this theory, the migration decision is taken to minimize risks to household income. In simple terms, when a family needs an extra income to support its household, it may send a member abroad. In this situation, pull factors of the destination country/countries make migration an attractive strategy for risk diversification.

Several factors play roles behind migration from Bangladesh. Huge labour surplus, inadequate job facilities, insufficient income, and the need to support households are considered the core reasons for labour migration. Lee's (1966) laws of migration, which posit push and pull factors, best fit an analysis of migration from Bangladesh.

However, female migration from Bangladesh occurs for several distinct reasons. The most decisive factors behind female labour migration are the demand for cheap labour, the scope for better earnings compared to local work, the reputation of Bangladeshi workers, ageing populations in receiving countries, the increased participation of women in the labour force in

both origin and receiving countries, poverty and livelihood insecurity, the desire for a better living standard, and other socio-economic and catalytic factors (Kabeer, 2000).

Gender in Migration Theory: A Feminist Critique

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the phrase "migrants and their families" was often a code for "male migrants and their wives and children." The women's movement, however, with its emphasis on the situation of women, caused some to question the near-invisibility of women as migrants, their presumed passivity in the migration process, and their assumed place in the home (Morokvašić, 1984). Past research on migration that included women did not cause a significant shift in thinking about who migrated, how immigration was explained, or the likely consequences. One of the central questions about women during this period was whether migration "modernized" women, emancipating them from their assumed traditional values and behaviors (Boyd & Grieco, 2003).

Developments in feminist theory contributed to a focus on *gender*, rather than an analysis based solely on the individual decisions of men and women. Gender is now seen as a core organizing principle that underlies migration and related processes, such as adaptation to a new country, continued contact with the country of origin, and the possibility of return. Most important is the view that while sex is defined as a biological outcome of chromosomal structures, gender is "socially constructed" (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In feminist theory, gender is seen as a matrix of identities, behaviors, and power relationships that are constructed by a society's culture in accordance with sex. This means that the content of gender—what constitutes the ideals, expectations, and behaviors or expressions of masculinity and femininity—varies among societies. Also, when people interact, by adhering to this content or departing from it, they either reaffirm or change what is meant by gender, thus affecting social relationships. This means that gender is not immutable but changes and, in this sense, is both socially constructed and reconstructed over time.

The feminist view of gender as a "social construction" has raised two questions fueling much research on women and migration. The first relates to patriarchy, or the hierarchies of power and control men use to dominate women. How does patriarchy, which gives men preferential access to societal resources, affect women's ability to migrate, the timing of that migration, and the final destination? The second question focuses on interpersonal relationships between men and women. How do women's relationships with family members, including spouses, change with migration? In other words, how is patriarchy altered or reconstituted after migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994)?

Since the 1960s, international migration theory has become more gender-sensitive, moving from the predominant view of female migrants as simply the wives and children of male migrants to incorporating explanations of the unique experiences of women migrants themselves (Boyd & Grieco, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative theoretical review methodology, synthesizing and critically analyzing existing literature on Bangladeshi female labour migration through a gender-sensitive analytical framework. The research draws upon three main sources: (1) classical and contemporary migration theories, (2) national policy documents including the Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013 and BMET statistical reports, and (3) empirical studies and reports from scholarly sources and international organizations including the ILO, UN Women, and Human Rights Watch.

The analytical approach applies feminist theoretical perspectives to examine how gender operates across three migration stages—pre-migration, migration transition, and post-migration—to identify structural and policy-based sources of female migrant vulnerability. This framework enables systematic examination of the interaction between social constructions of gender, formal policy mechanisms, and implementation practices in shaping women's migration experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Stages and Reality of Female Labour Migration from Bangladesh

Pre-migration Stage

Many determinants and factors shape the decision to migrate and make migration more or less possible for women. These include both systemic and macro factors. Macro factors indicate the condition of the national economy, while micro factors include gender-specific stages in a woman's life-cycle. These factors can be divided into three areas: 1) gender relations and hierarchies; 2) status and roles; and 3) structural characteristics of the sending country. Gender relations and hierarchies within the family affect the migration of women. The family defines and assigns the roles of women, which determine their relative motivation and incentive to migrate, and controls the distribution of resources and information that can support, discourage, or prevent the migration of female workers (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015).

The interaction of women's roles, status, and age within a particular socio-cultural context also affects a woman's ability to migrate overseas. According to a United Nations report on women and migration (UN DESA, 2006), the impact of women's status and roles on their

propensity to migrate must be considered at three levels: individual, familial, and societal. Individual factors include age, birth order, race/ethnicity, urban/rural origins, marital status, reproductive status, role in the family, position in the family, educational status, occupational skills/training, labor force experience, and class position. Family factors include size, age/sex composition, life-cycle stage, structure, status, and class standing. Societal factors include community norms and cultural values that determine whether or not women can migrate and, if they can, how (e.g., labor or family reunification) and with whom (alone or with family).

Certain macro characteristics of the sending country also influence gender-specific migration trends. Such characteristics interact with gender relations and the position of women in the sending society and affect decisions about who moves and when. These characteristics include: the state of the economy; the types of economies present within various communities; the level of displacement caused by economic changes; land tenure laws; labor market conditions; the ability of the economy to provide jobs; the ability of the national government to provide related infrastructure (education, job training); the geographic location and language(s); the integration of the national economy into the world economy; and the presence or absence of established migration networks.

During Migration Transition

The pre-migration stage for a woman is rigorously influenced by a variety of gender-related factors. However, a decision to leave is not the same as being *allowed* to exit one country or *enter* another. Through implementing policies, nation-states have become major actors in a gendered international migration process.

National policies of both origin and destination countries influence migration through prohibitive, selective, permissive, promotional, or expulsive rules that affect men and women migrants differently. These policies are frequently conditioned by implicit or explicit assumptions about the status and roles of men and women both within the family and in society. Some labor-exporting countries have implemented "conditions" in their policies to protect women from exploitation that effectively prevent them from engaging in labor migration. For example, before the Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013 (Government of Bangladesh, 2013), the national policy in Bangladesh restricted women from migrating freely without a male guardian (mahram), a policy ostensibly for protection but which effectively limited their independent mobility (Dannecker, 2005).

Immigration laws and regulations of the receiving country also influence migration. In some Gulf States, past and present regulations have conditioned female labour migration on specific requirements, sometimes related to family accompaniment or sectoral restrictions.

These policies can influence the ability of women and men to migrate in three ways: *Firstly*, the migration policies of many receiving countries implicitly assume a dependent status for women and an independent migrant status for men. *Secondly*, by implicitly defining immigrant women as dependent and men as independent, these policies place women in a family role rather than a market role. This can reinforce factors responsible for the social vulnerability of migrant women, especially in labor-importing countries that separate the right to work from the right to reside. *Thirdly*, traditional sex roles and stereotypical images regarding the place of women in society can influence the type of work for which migrant female labor is recruited. Women admitted as workers are generally concentrated in "female" occupations, such as domestic service or nursing (ILO, 2021).

The Post-migration Stage

Men and women are often treated differently in a receiving country. This is influenced by three factors: 1) the impact of entry status on the ability to integrate and settle; 2) patterns of incorporation into the labor market; and 3) the impact of migration on the status of women and men. Because migrant women are often viewed by the state as "dependents," their rights may become legally dependent—sometimes precariously so—on the migration and resident status of other family members. This may affect their ability to obtain rights and entitlements in their own right. Racial, birthplace, and gender-based hierarchies in destination countries are important and influence the incorporation of women and men migrants into the labor market. Women may have different experiences than men because they are frequently segregated into traditional "female" occupations. Even highly skilled immigrant workers may have different experiences based on their gender identity. The gender hierarchies that affect all women also handicap immigrant women, influencing job opportunities, work environment, and wages vis-à-vis their male counterparts (Parreñas, 2001).

The literature on female migration generally focuses on two broad aspects of status that can change relative to the migration process. The first is the position of migrant women within their families. For some women, migration may mean an increase in social mobility, economic independence, and relative autonomy. This is especially true if women's moves are accompanied by increased participation in the labor market. New economic and social responsibilities may change the distribution of power within the family, leading to greater authority and participation in household decision-making and control over the family's resources. These may also cause positive shifts in the relationship between immigrant women and their husbands and children (Gamburd, 2000).

Existing Policies and the Social Reality of Female Labour Migration

Due to existing rules, social construction, and complexity, moving through informal channels has become a common trend for female labour migrants in Bangladesh. Sometimes, migrant workers move to various destinations in both legal and irregular ways, leaving themselves vulnerable at several stages of their journey. For Bangladeshi female labour, specifically, gendered roles, gender-biased policies, and a lack of migration-care infrastructure mean that female migration often occurs in vulnerable ways. Because of information asymmetries regarding migration, cheating by illegal intermediaries, and a lack of professionally-vetted opportunities, Bangladeshi female workers bear the burden of inhuman treatment, risks, and difficulties at different stages of their migration. Compared to male migrants, and in the context of foreign vs. national spaces, exploitation at recruitment, exploitation during journey and on return home, restrictions on freedom of movement, engagement in 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) work, gender-based violence, problems in social re-integration, lack of access to information, physical, sexual, and psychological violence, and trafficking remain common scenarios for the female labour force of Bangladesh (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

A critical analysis reveals that despite progressive legal reform through the Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013, which formally removed the mahram requirement, implementation gaps persist. The governance structure sharing responsibility between the state and private recruiting agencies (PRAs) creates systemic vulnerabilities. PRAs, operating with profit maximization motives, may recruit female workers without adequate safety protocols, while state monitoring mechanisms remain insufficiently enforced. Furthermore, the absence of widespread awareness campaigns means many potential women migrants remain unaware of their legal rights and available protections.

CONCLUSION

For female migration, gender remains deeply embedded in determining who moves and how the movement occurs. From social construction to the structural policy-making process, women are found to be constrained by a gender-biased approach. Along with policy making and societal thinking, gender analysis is often biased because of the failure to adequately theorize gender in migration in terms of both men and women. The existing theories that frame female migration remain, in their application, classical or traditional, often confining women to the role of dependent home-workers. Their role in the capitalist era is still analyzed through a highly biased gender-based approach. In fact, the role of women, especially for labour migrants, is arguably more complex and vital than that of men. Their combined dedication to both social and

economic roles, as well as to the state through remittances, proves their significance. Instead, they remain vulnerable due to existing constructed thinking and structured policies in both sending and receiving countries.

To emancipate female migration, there is a need for a fundamental change in determining gender and women's role in society, starting with proper theorizing. In Bangladesh, women have become legally free to move according to the Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013. Unlike in the past, this Act makes women formally free to migrate. However, they remain vulnerable because of how migration policies are supported and implemented by the state. Governing authority for labour migration is shared by the state with private recruiting agencies (PRAs). These agencies, in maximizing profit, may collect female labour without adequate safety and security measures. There are government mechanisms, both centrally and locally, to manage migration for intending and returning migrants. However, without proper enforcement and widespread awareness campaigns, private recruiting agencies continue to make women vulnerable during pre-departure, the journey, and upon return to their origin. The re-integration of female workers is a major concern. Society readily receives the remittances from their subordinate women but does not provide them with the social recognition needed for their successful re-integration, re-interaction, and rehabilitation, unlike men, who are typically considered the honored human beings.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study identifies several critical areas requiring future investigation to advance understanding and policy development for Bangladeshi female labour migration:

First, comparative empirical research is needed examining the differential experiences of women migrating through formal versus informal channels, to identify specific intervention points for vulnerability reduction. Such research should track migrant experiences across all three migration stages and document both successful and exploitative outcomes.

Second, detailed policy implementation studies should examine how the Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013 operates in practice at district and local levels, identifying barriers to effective enforcement and variations in implementation across different regions of Bangladesh.

Third, research should investigate the role of private recruiting agencies in shaping female migration outcomes, including analysis of business models, regulatory compliance patterns, and the effectiveness of existing monitoring mechanisms. Understanding PRA behavior is essential for designing effective regulatory interventions.

Fourth, studies examining destination country policies and their gendered impacts are urgently needed, particularly focusing on Gulf Cooperation Council states where most Bangladeshi women migrants are employed. Such research should analyze how kafala (sponsorship) systems, sectoral restrictions, and labour law exclusions interact with gender to produce vulnerability.

Fifth, longitudinal research tracking returning women migrants' reintegration experiences would illuminate the social and economic challenges they face and identify factors supporting successful rehabilitation. This research should examine how gender shapes reintegration outcomes compared to male returnees.

Finally, theoretical work advancing gender-sensitive migration frameworks specific to the South Asian context would strengthen the analytical tools available for understanding and addressing female migrant vulnerability. Such theorizing must move beyond Western-centric models to capture region-specific patriarchal structures, family dynamics, and migration systems.

Addressing these research gaps will contribute to evidence-based policy making, strengthen protection mechanisms, and ultimately support the realization of women migrants' rights and well-being throughout the migration cycle.

REFERENCES

- BMET. (2024). *Overseas Employment & Remittances: Statistical Report 2023*. Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- Boyd, M., & Grieco, E. (2003). Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory. *Migration Information Source*, Migration Policy Institute.
- Dannecker, P. (2005). Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in the UAE: Gender-Differentiated Patterns of Migration. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 14(4), 435-458.
- Gamburd, M. R. (2000). *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*. Cornell University Press.
- Government of Bangladesh. (2013). *The Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013 (Act No. XLIX of 2013)*. Bangladesh Gazette.
- Harris, J. R., & Todaro, M. P. (1970). Migration, Unemployment and Development: A Two-Sector Analysis. *The American Economic Review*, 60(1), 126-142.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994). *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*. University of California Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2020). *"I Already Bought You": Abuse and Exploitation of Female Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East*. Human Rights Watch Report.
- ILO. (2021). *Making Decent Work a Reality for Migrant Domestic Workers*. International Labour Organization.
- Kabeer, N. (2000). *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*. Verso Books.
- Kofman, E., & Raghuram, P. (2015). *Gendered Migrations and Global Social Reproduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, E. S. (1966). A Theory of Migration. *Demography*, 3(1), 47-57.
- Morokvašić, M. (1984). Birds of Passage are also Women. *International Migration Review*, 18(4), 886-907.

- Parreñas, R. S. (2001). *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*. Stanford University Press.
- Piore, M. J. (1979). *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stark, O., & Bloom, D. E. (1985). The New Economics of Labor Migration. *The American Economic Review*, 75(2), 173-178.
- UN DESA. (2006). *2004 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development: Women and International Migration*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
- UN Women. (2020). *Beyond COVID-19: A Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125-151.