



Survey analysis: Monitoring recruitment of Bangladeshi migrant workers

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Executive summary

Bangladesh is one of South Asia's major countries of origin that sends migrant workers to the Gulf, Arab states and Malaysia. Every year, more than 670,000 workers leave Bangladesh for overseas employment. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan and Malaysia are the major destination countries for Bangladeshi workers. Despite the Bangladesh government's attempts to regulate the recruitment process to make it fairer, many of the basic problems have yet to be resolved.

This report provides information regarding employment and recruitment agencies based on reviews submitted to Recruitment Advisor by 835 Bangladeshi workers who have used the agencies to get jobs abroad.

An important part in facilitating the hiring of Bangladeshi workers for employment abroad is supposed to be played by recruiting agencies in Bangladesh. These organisations function as intermediaries for foreign employers and Bangladeshi job seekers, offering a range of services like hiring, placement, processing visas, and pre-departure training to the workers. However, both workers and recruitment companies are reliant on sub-agents or brokers who act as intermediaries in the recruitment process. According to the survey, 78 per cent of respondents, learned about their jobs through sub-agents or brokers who then acted as the go-between between workers and recruitment companies throughout the recruitment process.

Of the 835 returnee migrant workers, only 39 per cent had received pre-

departure/employment orientation. On the other hand, 61 per cent of workers were not offered any pre-departure/employment orientation. The workers who did not get any pre-departure/employment orientation faced numerous problems in their destination countries, especially those hired as domestic workers.

Migrant workers are required to pay expensive recruitment fees and other expenses. According to the survey, 732 workers said they had to pay recruitment fees and related costs, although this differs for those hired as domestic workers. The survey found that 103 migrant women workers who went to Middle East and Gulf countries as domestic workers did not pay recruitment fees or any related costs.

An employment contract does not guarantee that migrant workers are treated justly and decently at work. Having an employment contract is essential to maintain fair and secure working conditions for all workers. According to the study, 53 per cent of respondents received the job contract letter. The percentage of migrant workers who received the contract document in Bengali was only 19 per cent and 35 per cent received the contract in English. Many workers stated that the rights outlined in the contract were not extended to them in practice.

Migrant workers are not allowed to keep their passports and personal documents. The survey shows that 822 out of 835 workers had their passports kept by their employers. The key element in many situations of forced labour is coercion, that is, forcing people to work when they do not freely consent. While the employer may be holding the workers' identity documents for safekeeping, migrant workers could be coerced through such an action. In such cases, the workers must have access to

their documents at all times, and there should be no constraints on their ability to leave the enterprise at will.

Migrant workers are misled about their employment, wages, and additional benefits.

The study reveals that while the majority of workers did obtain the jobs and expected salary that had been outlined during the recruitment process, 12.3 per cent of workers found upon arrival that they did not receive the job or the projected salary they had agreed to.

Few Bangladeshi migrant workers are aware of labour unions and the protections they offer. According to the survey, only 12 per cent of reviewers were given the option to join a union, while 14 per cent of respondents had the right to join a union withdrawn from them.

To ensure safe migration, governments and other stakeholders should work to provide adequate protection and support to migrant workers. This includes providing access to legal channels for migration, protecting migrant workers from exploitation and abuse, and ensuring that they have access to basic services, such as health care, education, and social protection.

Safe migration for sustainable development can help to promote economic growth, reduce poverty, and enhance social and cultural diversity in both the country of origin and the destination. However, it requires a coordinated and collaborative effort from governments, civil society organisations, and the private sector to ensure that migration is safe and orderly and contributes to sustainable development.

Introduction

Migration happens for many reasons and immigration for political or higher education is a routine matter. Many people move countries to live with their immigrant family members. Yet migrant workers are individuals who leave their home country in search of employment possibilities in other nations. Bangladesh is one of the largest exporters of migrant workers in the world. Millions of people leave the country each year to seek employment abroad. Bangladeshi migrant workers have been migrating to the Middle East since 1976 to provide labour. Official projections¹ indicate that between 1976 and 2022, 14.8m Bangladeshis migrated abroad as migrant workers, among them one million female workers.

Typically, large numbers of Bangladeshis leave the country for the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Maldives. Also, Bangladeshis migrated as labourers to various countries including Mauritius, Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, Brunei, Italy, the UK and USA. According to the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Foreign Employment, Bangladeshis have worked in 168 countries of the world. Among them, 34.24 per cent migrated to Saudi Arabia, 17.62 per cent to UAE, 11.57 per cent to Oman, 7.75 per cent to Malaysia, 6.30 per cent to Qatar and 6.02 per cent to Singapore. Bangladesh is the world's sixth largest source of migrant workers.

Most Bangladeshi migrant workers are employed in low-skilled and manual jobs in

¹ Overseas Employment of Women from 1991 to 2023, Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, Government of Bangladesh

the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and other regions. Many of them work in construction, domestic service, and agriculture, while others work in manufacturing, hospitality, and transportation. Women workers in particular go to many nations, notably the Middle East, to work as domestic workers. These migrant workers contribute significantly to the economy of Bangladesh by sending remittances, which

account for a sizeable portion of the nation's foreign exchange revenues. The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) estimates that US\$22.7 billion in remittances were sent to the country in 2022, signifying 6.2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Thus, the impact of migration on both the original and destination countries can be significant.

Challenges for migrant workers from Bangladesh

Bangladeshi migrant workers face various problems during migration. One of these is the additional cost of labour migration. According to the calculation², the cost of immigration in Bangladesh is much higher than in its neighbouring countries, i.e., India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan. The majority of migrant labourers from Bangladesh use sub-agents or brokers and their migration expenses are higher because of fees charged by these sub-agents. In this situation, there is a considerable risk that workers will incur debt due to increased expenses and could end up trapped in debt bondage and forced labour. Many Bangladeshi migrant workers face numerous challenges and difficulties, including exploitation, abuse, and poor working conditions. They often work in low-wage jobs with long hours and minimal legal protections, and many are subjected to discrimination and harassment. Here are some of the most familiar challenges faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers:

1. A lack of information and awareness on safe migration and the necessary process of migration is still persistent, so aspiring migrant workers must rely on sub-agents or multiple layers of intermediaries during the migration process.
2. Buying and selling a work visa has been problematic in Bangladesh for a long time and has become a profitable business for the agencies and individuals who work as intermediaries.
3. Bangladeshi migrant workers are charged exorbitant fees by recruiters, even for low-skilled jobs. These excessive costs exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants at their destination, as they are often highly indebted and must remain in employment in the host country despite the adversities they face³.
4. Most of the recruitment agencies and their services are limited to the capital city, Dhaka and do not have

² Immigration has many problems, cost control being the biggest, Prothom Alo, 20 May 2019

³ International Development Association Program Document For A Proposed Development Policy Credit In The Amount Of SDR 180.9 Million (US\$250 Million Equivalent) To The People's Republic Of Bangladesh For The First Programmatic Jobs Development Policy Credit, November 10, 2018, World Bank

branches in other parts of the country. Both recruitment agencies and aspiring migrant workers are therefore dependent on informal sub-agents to connect them to one another. This dependency creates potential for abuse.

5. Recruitment processes usually occur in villages or small towns and are carried out verbally in most cases. The local sub-agents or intermediaries do not provide receipts for any payments made by the workers, and this results in very little recourse for the migrant workers in the event of disputes, as there is no evidence of transactions or assurances exchanged.
6. Fake contracts and contract substitution are common problems faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers and

because they have a debt to repay, often to loan sharks back home, workers are obliged to continue their employment despite contract violations.

7. Once they arrive in the destination country, workers' passports will usually be taken by recruiters or kept by employers. This act constrains the worker further from being able to leave an exploitative or abusive employment situation freely.
8. Migrant workers are also at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking due to their limited knowledge and a lack of information regarding the recruitment and migration process.

Overall, migrant workers face a range of challenges and are three times more likely to be in forced labour than other workers.

ITUC Recruitment Advisor in Bangladesh

To tackle the challenges mentioned above, with the support of the ILO GOALS project, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and its affiliates in Bangladesh under the umbrella of the ITUC Bangladesh Council launched the Recruitment Advisor website in Bangladesh on 30 December 2021. The website offers migrant workers easy access to information about recruitment agencies and workers' rights when looking for a job abroad. The website also allows migrant workers to share their experiences and review recruitment agencies they have used to get jobs abroad.

The Recruitment Advisor project in Bangladesh has carried out outreach activities to migrant worker returnees in five districts, Dhaka, Manikganj, Munshiganj, Jashore and Faridpur and asked them to share their recruitment experience and review recruitment agencies that they have used to get jobs abroad. In total 835 reviews were collected from 327 men and 508 women in those five districts. Domestic workers comprised 58.93 per cent of the respondents (Annexe 1. Jobs categories).

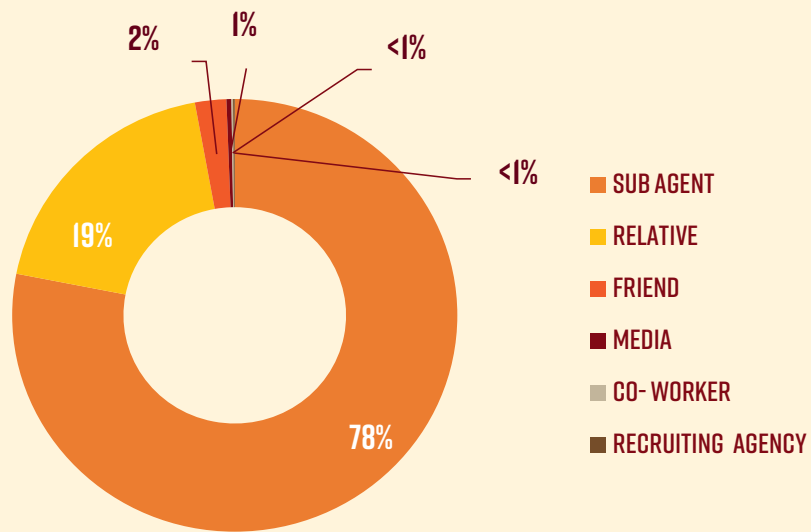
This report provides an analysis of the responses from migrant workers to the Recruitment Advisor review questionnaire (Annexe 2: Recruitment Advisor questionnaire in English).

SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE JOB ABROAD

Many Bangladeshi migrant workers are recruited by unscrupulous labour brokers, including sub-agents at the village level, who charge exorbitant fees and deceive workers about the nature of their employment. This has led to widespread cases of debt bondage

and forced labour among Bangladeshi migrant workers. The chart below is based on results from the survey and depicts the heavy reliance of migrant workers on informal sub-agents. The survey revealed that 78 per cent of workers heard about their job through an intermediary agent.

Chart 1: Source of job information for migrant workers

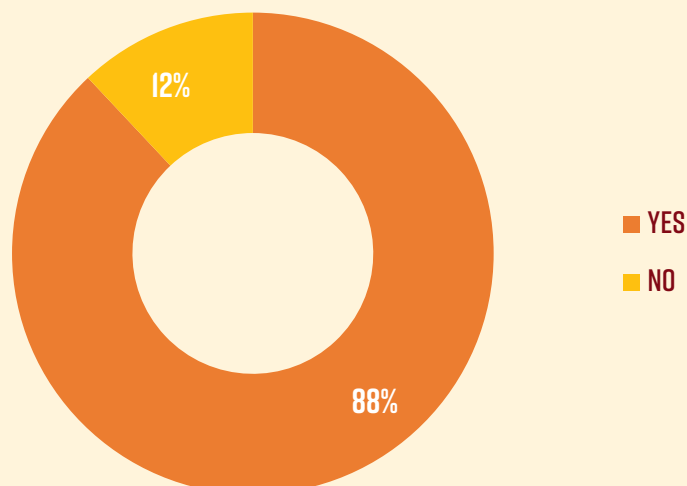


PAYMENT OF RECRUITMENT FEES AND RELATED COSTS

Migrant workers are required to pay expensive recruitment fees and other expenses. According to the survey, 732 workers said they had to pay

recruitment fees and related costs while 103 migrant women workers who went to Middle East countries as domestic workers did not pay recruitment fees or any related costs. Workers

Chart 2: Migrant workers required to pay recruitment fees



also added more information and further details about the recruitment fees and costs. Out of the 732 workers, 270 men and 194 women said that the paid fees and costs were expensive. Some 57 men and 211 women also said that the fees and costs were affordable. The highest figures paid by men workers reached 1,200,000

BDT (US\$11,200) and up to 300,000 BDT (US\$2,800) paid by women workers. Workers who commented on affordable fees and costs stated that they paid on average 50,000 BDT (US\$450) for women workers and 150,000 BDT (US\$1350) for men.

Chart 3a: Male migrant workers' cost of recruitment fees

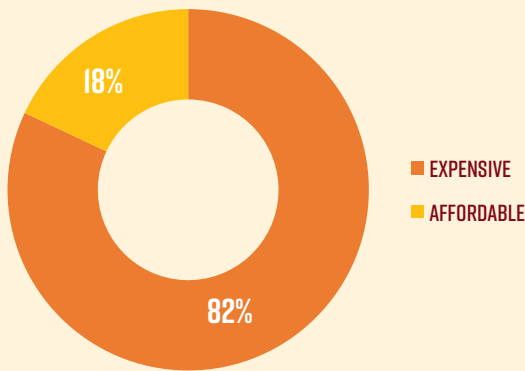
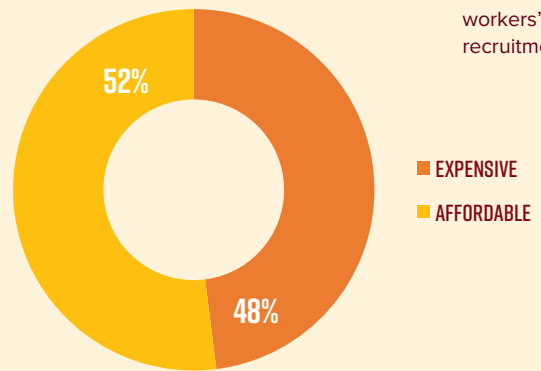


Chart 3b: Female migrant workers' cost of recruitment fees



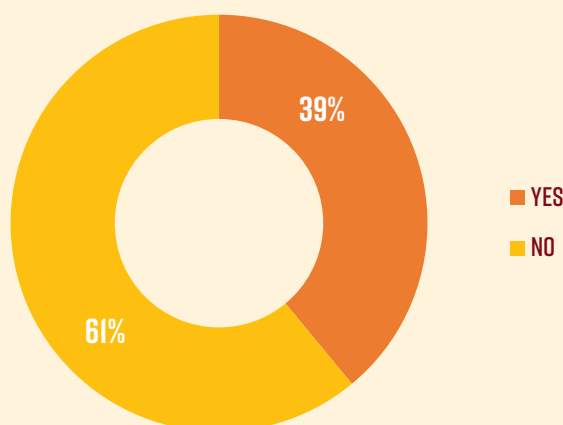
PRE-DEPARTURE/EMPLOYMENT ORIENTATION FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

Overall, pre-departure/employment orientation can help migrant workers make informed decisions and prepare for a successful migration experience. It can also reduce the risks of exploitation, abuse, and other forms of mistreatment. It ensures a smoother and safer transition to their new workplace.

However, the study shows that among the 835 returnee migrant workers, only

325 workers or 39 per cent received pre-departure/employment orientation. On the other hand, a large number of workers (510 workers or 61 per cent) did not receive pre-departure/employment orientation. The workers who did not receive pre-departure orientation before leaving their home countries faced various problems in their destination countries, especially those hired as domestic workers.

Chart 4: Migrant workers received pre-departure/employment orientation

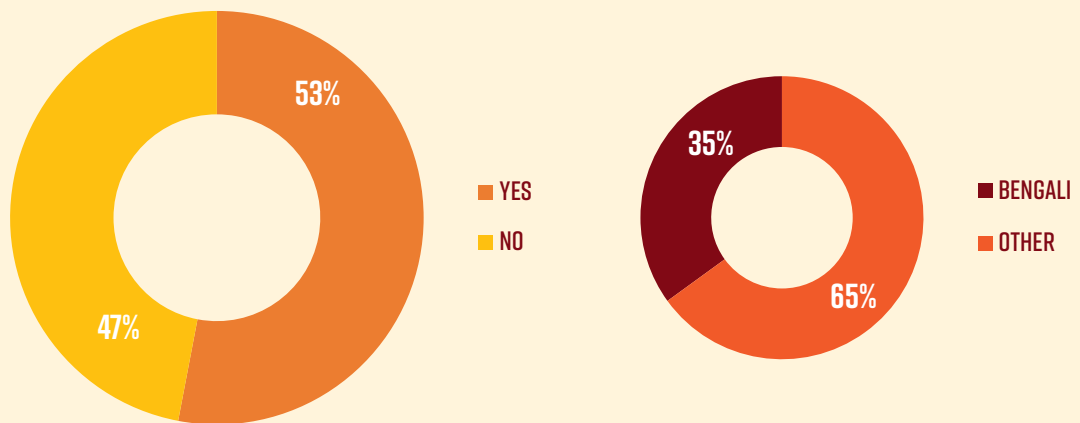


EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT

Having an employment contract is essential to maintain fair and secure working conditions for all workers. According to the study, 53 per cent of respondents received a contract. The percentage of migrant workers who

received the contract document in Bengali was only 19 per cent and 34 per cent received the contract in English. Many workers stated that the rights outlined in the contract were not extended to them in practice.

Chart 5: Employment contract received by migrant workers and the language of the contract

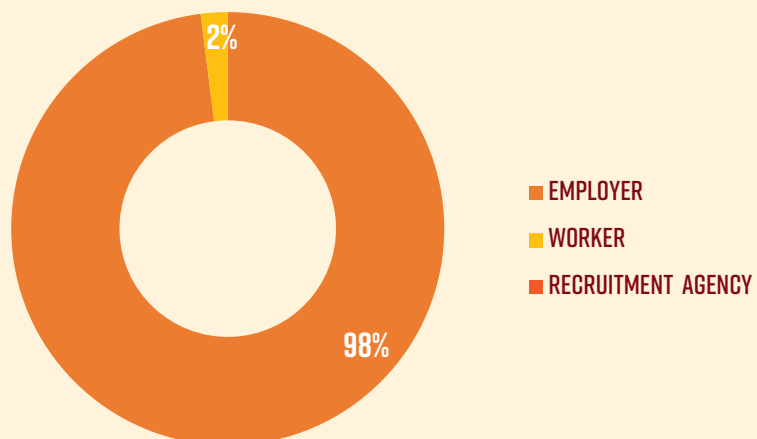


MIGRANT WORKERS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO KEEP THEIR PASSPORTS AND PERSONAL DOCUMENTS

The survey shows that 822 out of 835 workers had their passports kept by their employers. The key element in many situations of forced labour is coercion – forcing people to work when they do not freely consent. Migrant workers may be coerced through their passports

or identity documents being withheld. The employer may be holding the workers’ identity documents for safekeeping. In such cases, the workers must have access to the documents at all times, and there should be no constraints on the ability of the worker to leave the enterprise.

Chart 6: The passport and personal documents of workers were kept by the employer, recruitment agency, or worker

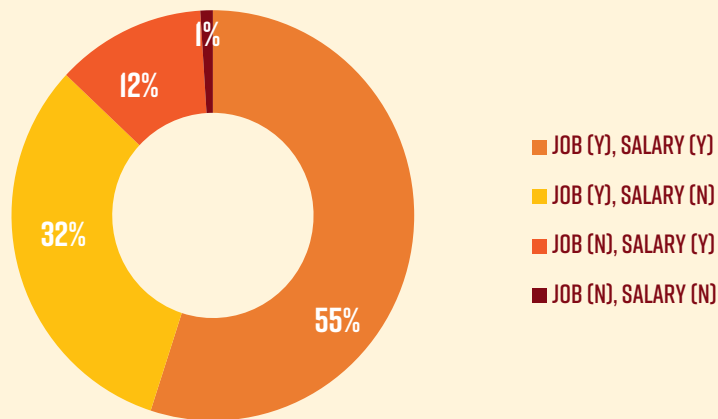


MIGRANT WORKERS RECEIVED PROMISED JOBS AND SALARY

Migrant workers are still misled about their employment, wages, and additional benefits. We asked workers if they received the job and salary that was promised. The survey shows that 455 workers who participated in the Recruitment Advisor survey received the promised job and salary. 266 workers received the promised job but not with the salary as projected in the

offer. In addition, 103 workers or 12.3 per cent of respondents obtained neither offered jobs nor the expected salary in their destination countries. Also, one per cent of respondents did not receive the promised job but received the promised salary. Based on the ILO Migrant Pay Gap report, Bangladeshi migrant workers receive lower salaries than workers from other South Asian countries.⁴

Chart 7: Promised job and promised salary

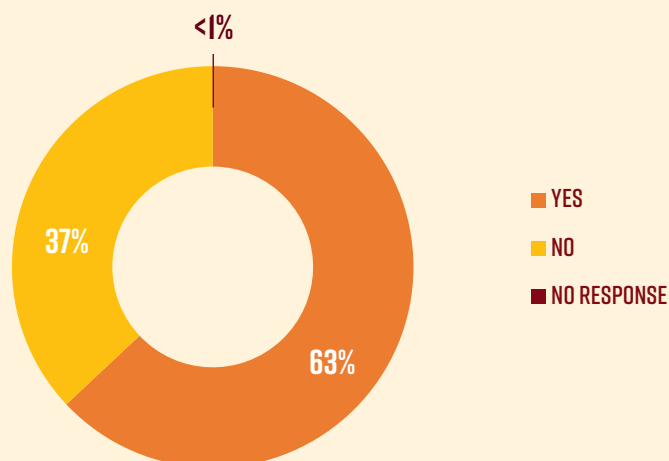


WORKERS' RIGHT TO RESIGN FROM EMPLOYMENT FREELY WITH REASONABLE NOTICE

The kafala system that restricts migrant workers from resigning, changing employers or returning home is common practice in the Middle East. The

Recruitment Advisor survey asked workers if they could resign freely with reasonable notice and 63 per cent of respondents answered YES while 37 per cent responded NO.

Chart 8: Workers could resign from employment freely with reasonable notice



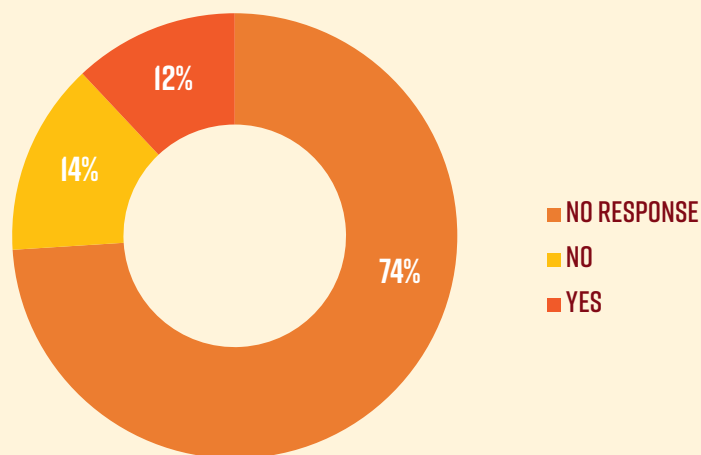
⁴ The migrant pay gap: Understanding wage differences between migrants and nationals, the ILO, 14 December 2020 Understanding wage differences between migrants and nationals, the ILO, 14 December 2020

ACCESS TO TRADE UNIONS OR WORKERS' ASSOCIATIONS

Joining a trade union is a right for workers and provides a means for them to organise, negotiate for better working conditions, and protect their rights. However, migrant workers face additional challenges in exercising their trade union rights in destination countries, such as language barriers, fear of retaliation or deportation, and

lack of legal recognition, including being excluded from legal protection in some Middle East countries. According to the survey, only 104 workers had the option to join a trade union, while 114 workers stated that they were prohibited from joining a trade union. The remaining 617 workers did not know about trade unions or worked in sectors that lacked union representation.

Chart 9: Access to trade unions

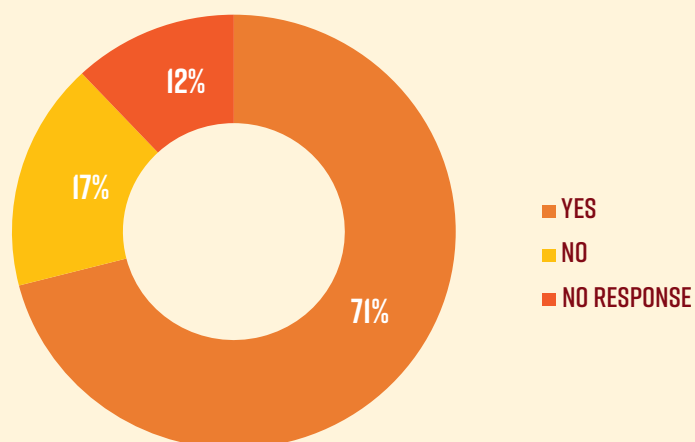


WORKERS WOULD OR WOULDN'T USE THE SAME AGENCY FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

Reviewers in this study were asked whether they would use the same agency again to find employment abroad. An overwhelming 71 per cent of reviewers shared that they would use the same employment agencies in the future. This is surprising because, as this study has found, many respondents

reported a wide range of unpleasant experiences with recruitment agencies, such as overcharging, prolonged duration of salary deduction, and general irresponsibility. Only 17 per cent of respondents would not use the same agency. Further qualitative research is necessary to uncover the reasons that underpin their evaluations.

Chart 10: Workers would or would not use the same agency again

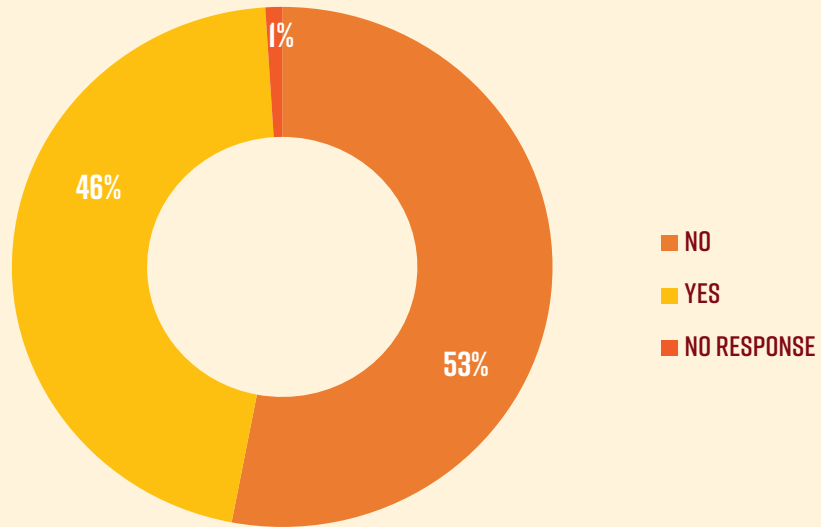


RETURNING TO THE SAME EMPLOYER FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

Additionally, on being asked whether they would return to the same employers, 443 workers or 53 per cent of respondents expressed their

reluctance to do so and 46 per cent of respondents shared they would return to the same employers for their future jobs.

Chart 11: Workers would or would not return to the same employer again

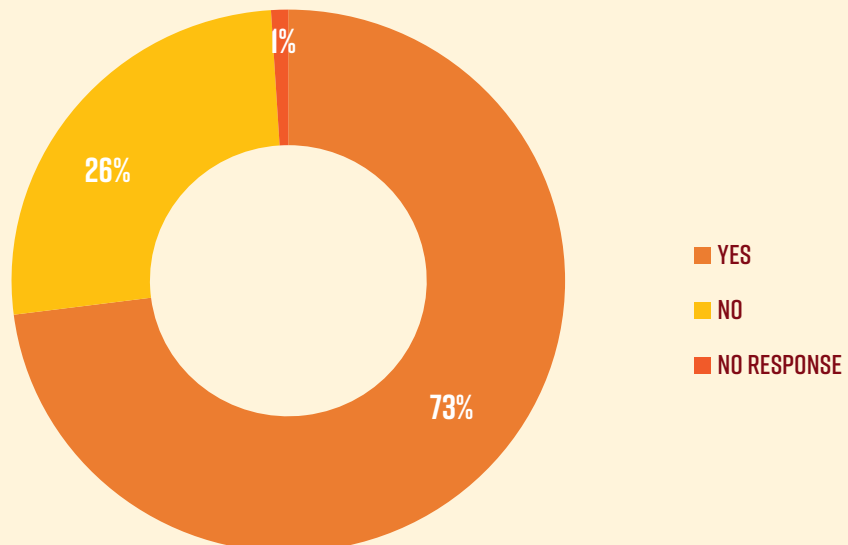


RETURNING TO THE SAME COUNTRY FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

The survey shows that 73 per cent of workers would return to the same

country despite being reluctant to return to the same employer.

Chart 12: Workers would or would not return to the same country again



Conclusion

The recruitment problem for Bangladeshi migrant workers is complex and it requires significant government intervention to continue improving and reforming recruitment regulations and policy with a human rights-based approach. In addition, the government must also increase efforts in monitoring the implementation of the policies, as well as the implementation of bilateral labour migration agreements with the government of destination countries.

The Bangladesh government has taken steps to protect the rights of its migrant workers, including signing bilateral agreements with destination countries and establishing a Migrant Welfare Desk to support and assist workers and their families. However, more needs to be done to ensure that Bangladeshi migrant workers can migrate safely and work under fair and decent conditions.

Collaboration among different stakeholders involved in the recruitment process is key to advancing fair recruitment in Bangladesh. The government must include and consult all social partners in the discussion of recruitment regulation, including by involving them in the development of bilateral agreements and their negotiation.

Public awareness about safe migration remains a challenge, even though the media coverage of migrant recruitment and specific cases has increased in recent years through online news portals and social media. However,

Bangladeshi people who are trapped in poverty and the desperate search for jobs are still often deceived by the false promises of brokers and other individuals, who in numerous cases are closely related to them.

Unions, together with civil society organisations, play a significant role as watchdogs and can support workers who were deceived by unscrupulous recruiters to file complaints. Through outreach activities to communities in villages and online social media campaigns on fair recruitment, trade unions in Bangladesh have started to put more attention and effort into the issue of migrant worker recruitment. Unions must also start building relationships with unions in destination countries to collaborate in protecting and organising Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Implementing the Employer Pays Principle is the best way to ensure fair recruitment and decent work for Bangladeshi migrant workers. The government needs to ensure workers are charged zero recruitment fees and that employers pay all recruitment costs. This would fulfil ILO General Principles and Operational Guidelines on Fair Recruitment.

Migrant workers should be treated with respect and dignity, and their rights as workers should be protected. They should have access to information about their rights, including their right to fair wages, safe and healthy working conditions, and the right to form and join trade unions.

To ensure safe migration, governments and other stakeholders should work to provide adequate protection and support to migrant workers. This includes providing access

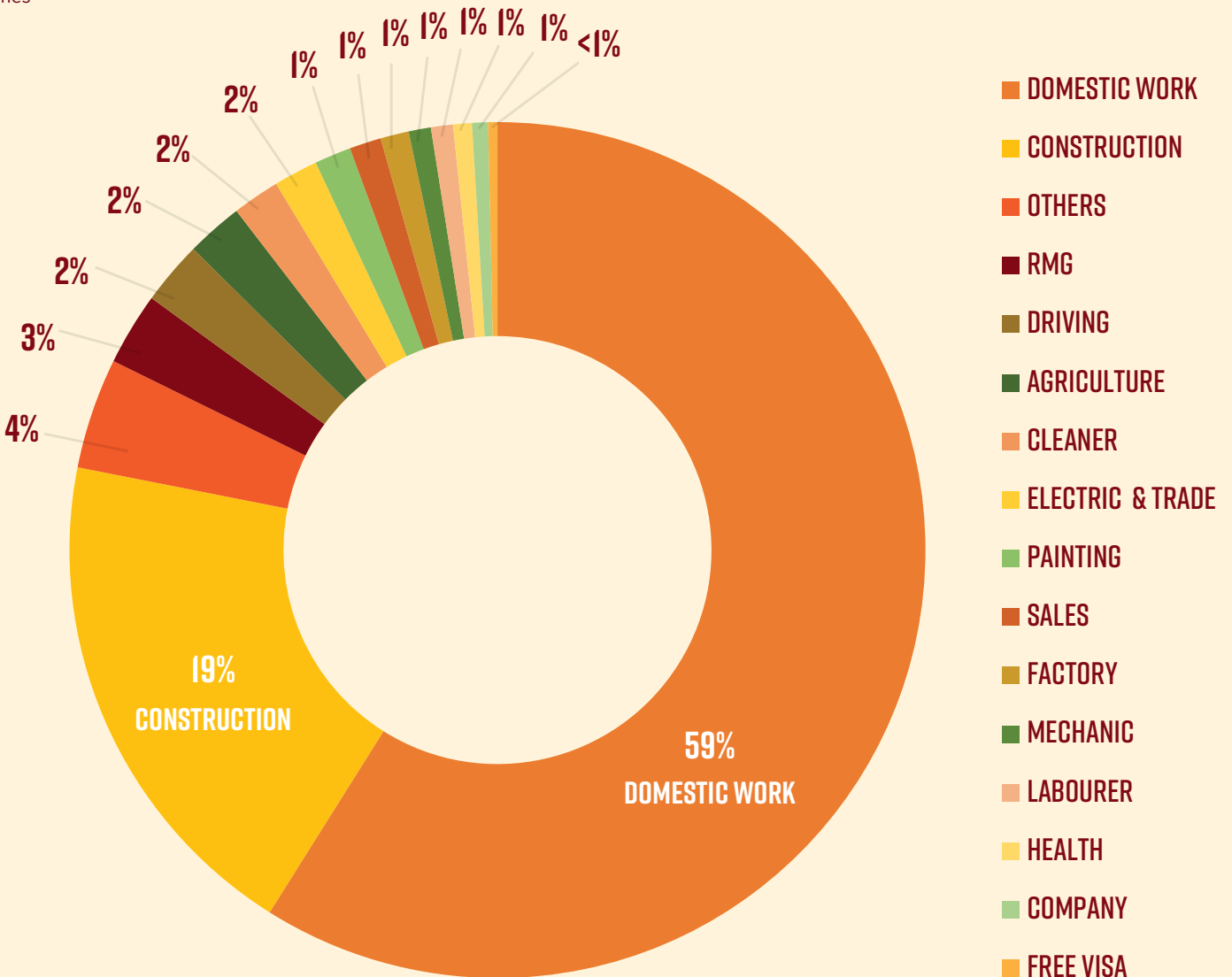
to legal channels for migration, protecting migrant workers from exploitation and abuse, and ensuring that they have access to basic services such as health care, education, and social protection.

Safe migration for sustainable development can help to promote economic growth, reduce

poverty, and enhance social and cultural diversity in both countries of origin and destination. However, it requires a coordinated and collaborative effort from governments, civil society organisations, and the private sector to ensure that migration is safe and orderly and contributes to sustainable development.

Annexe 1

Chart: Job categories



Annexe 2 Review questionnaire – English

Recruitment details

I used the agency's service in the year

Write the year

Heard about the job from

- None -

Recruitment Fees & Related Costs

I paid the following costs during the recruitment process

- Recruitment Fees 
 Insurance costs 
 Equipment costs 
 Travel & lodging costs 
 Costs for special skills training 
 Medical costs 
 Costs for orientation 
 Administrative costs 
 Costs for skills & qualification test 
 Other

Pre-employment Orientation

I received the following information during the pre-employment orientation

- Information about my rights and obligations
 Information about what to do if I have a complaint
 Other
- Information about useful contacts & services at destination

Employment Contract

I received contract before starting employment * No Yes

The employment contract was in a language I can understand * No Yes

The employment contract contained clear information about

- Salary
 Job description
 Other
- Job location
 Working time
- Leave days
 Accommodation
- Health care coverage

Working Conditions

My agency sent me to work in

Write the company name

My passport and other personal documents were taken by

- My recruitment agency
 My employer
 Other

I received the job I was promised * No Yes

I received the salary I was promised * No Yes

I could resign from employment freely with reasonable notice * No Yes

There was a union of workers association I could join * No Yes

Worker's evaluation

I would use the same agency again * No Yes

I would return to the same employer * No Yes

I would return to/stay in the same country for my future job * No Yes

Others

Gender

- None -

Age

- None -

Sectors

- Agriculture
 Construction
 Other
- Domestic Work
 Fishery
- Garment Textile
 Health Service

Comment

Please tell other workers how your recruitment was, write your opinion at least in one sentence (e.g. fair/unfair, free of charge/expensive, reliable/unreliable)

If you have an activity code, please insert it here

Enter your code here

Enter your email to follow your review and to link it to your account or the one you'll create

- I agree with the terms and conditions of the website

Post review

SEPTEMBER 2023

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