



## Perceptions and experiences of Bangladeshi emigrants about working in abroad: A mixed-methods study

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### ABSTRACT

The typology of migration has changed with time, but it still exists from the pre-modern history to the modern world, and due to globalization, the volume has increased a lot. Around 10 million Bangladeshi emigrants work in more than 150 countries and contribute to the country's development by sending remittance. Still, the perceptions and experiences of these emigrants aren't always fulfilled. Research on the perceptions about and experiences faces in the destination of Bangladeshi emigrant are scanty. Therefore, current study is aimed at fulfilling this gap by listening to return migrants to explore the differences between their perceptions before emigration and experiences they faced abroad. A sequential mixed-methods approach was followed, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this study. One hundred nineteen quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire. A total of 15 in-depth interviews (IDIs) was conducted as part of the qualitative research of this study. Returned migrant workers from the Daudkandi Upazila under the Cumilla district were selected as respondents. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques, whereas qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings of this study showed that the perceptions and experiences of Bangladeshi emigrants were different which include: did not receive job according to the contract (22%); faced salary discrimination (29%); could not fulfill the desired time duration (61%); could not earn exhausted cost spent for going abroad (8%); and lack of help from formal agencies in the destination. Thus, the policies regarding sending labor migrants should focus on the pre-stage to the post-stage of migration, i.e., disseminate information regarding migration among the potential emigrants via mass media and social media to ensure a safer and smooth emigration process, sending skilled and professional emigrants, negotiate with the Government of destination countries for standard wages, and Bangladesh embassies in the destination should work to ensure the right and dignity of the emigrants through their strong activities as well as creating network of all Bangladeshis in abroad.

### INTRODUCTION

Migration, along with birth and death, is an important component of demography. Where birth and death have one-sided change and effect on the world's population, migration has a two-sided impact both in the country of origin and destination (Lutz & Qiang, 2002). Though the typology of migration has changed with time but it still exists from pre-modern history to the modern world, and the volume is increasing day by day for the globalization of the world (McAuliffe &

Khadria, 2020). Bangladesh is a developing country with its vast population. The GDP per capita of Bangladesh was approximately US\$1855.1 in 2019 (World Bank [WB], 2019), and the current unemployment of Bangladesh is 4.2 percent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2018). As the economic gains and current job creation lagging behind population growth, the Bangladeshi Government actively encourages international labor migration (Bangladesh Economic Review, 2012; Doherty et al., 2014). Estimated total numbers of Bangladeshi emigrants

are 10 million (The Daily Star, 2020), working in more than 150 countries and contributes with different categorized migrants in the world labor market, i.e., low-skilled, semi-skilled, skilled, and professional (Islam et al., 2010).

Migrants send us remittance by staying in another country, which is the driving force of the economy of Bangladesh (Siddiqui et al., 2019). Still, the perceptions and experiences of the emigrants are not always met. Previous research showed that Bangladeshi migrants are exploited in terms of wages (Ahmed et al., 2015; Dustmann, & Fabbri, 2005; Rubdy & McKay, 2013), no job security (Ahmed et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2014; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2005), employed for odd jobs (Islam et al., 2010), hazardous work conditions, accommodation problem (Ahmed et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2014; Kibria, 2004) etc. The medical facility of emigrants generally does not fulfill the international standards (The Asia Foundation, 2013; WB, 2012). Also, the working hour of Bangladeshi migrants is more than the international standard (8 hours) (The Asia Foundation, 2013). The skills of migrants from Bangladesh are not recognized in the global market, and due to lack of competitiveness compared to workers from other countries, they are paid lower wages compared to migrants from other South Asian countries (Ahmed et al., 2015; Barkat et al., 2014).

Research on the perceptions and experiences of Bangladeshi emigrant in their destination are scanty (Ahmed et al., 2015; Dannecker, 2005; Kibria, 2004). However, there are studies which focused on the effects of emigration on the economic development of the country (Afsar, 2009; Afsar et al., 2002; Ahmed et al., 2015; Buchenau, 2008; Kibria, 2011; Wadud, 2012) and problems emigrants facing in abroad (Afsar et al., 2002; Ahmed et al., 2015; Barkat et al., 2014; Dannecker, 2005; Islam et al., 2010; Kibria, 2011; Kibria, 2004; Rahman, 2012; Suntoo, 2012), but most of the studies identified emigrants problems are as part of their findings not by solely focusing on it, also focuses on a single country context and shows experiences of emigrants have in the destination. Still, it's also essential to find whether they migrated by having these things in mind or not.

Thus, it becomes essential to conduct studies to determine the differences between emigrants' perception of their migrant journey and their destination experiences by considering returned migrants as respondents. This current study aimed to fill this gap by listening return migrants to explore the differences between their perceptions before emigration and experiences they experienced abroad. By studying experiences of the emigrants and its differences from the perception, this study will help the Government of Bangladesh to solve these problems by formulating policy and will ensure safer labor migration in the destination country, as well as sharing the reality with all the potential emigrants, and thus reduces the sufferings of emigrants in the destination, which will also increase remittance inflow of Bangladesh.

## METHODS

This study used a sequential mixed-methods approach where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Cumilla district was selected as the study site of this study as it is the highest emigrant sending district of Bangladesh (Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training [BMET], 2018). Five different Unions (Daulotpur, Maruka, Purba Panchgachhia, Paschim Panchgachhia, and Goalmari) situate in Daudkandi Upazila, under the Cumilla district, were selected purposively. Snowball sampling procedure was followed to recruit 119 respondents for the quantitative interview of this study. Emigrants returned from abroad and living in Bangladesh since a year after his return, was the respondent inclusion criteria of this study. A pre-coded structured questionnaire was used for the quantitative interview. This study conducted 15 in-depth interviews (IDIs) among the return migrants as part of the qualitative data. The respondent selection criteria for IDI were: emigrants who stayed abroad for at least three years and traveled at least two different countries for job purposes. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used to analyze the quantitative data. Due to the small sample size and the question type being qualitative in nature, this study used descriptive statistics to analyze quantitative data. After collecting qualitative data, all the interviews

were transcribed and translated, and then the transcripts were read and reread to develop code. The qualitative data of this study were analyzed by using computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) named NVivo (version 8).

## RESULTS

### Background characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Frequency (percentage)
<b>Age</b>	
19-24	12 (10.1)
25-29	31 (26.1)
30-34	26 (21.8)
35-39	20 (16.8)
40-44	11 (9.2)
45+	19 (16.0)
<b>Education</b>	
No education	5 (4.2)
Primary	43 (36.1)
Secondary	64 (53.8)
Higher secondary	7 (5.9)
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Currently Married	103 (86.6)
Unmarried	16 (13.4)
<b>Religion</b>	
Muslim	114 (95.8)
Non-Muslim	05 (4.2)
<b>Head of the Household</b>	
Yes	70 (58.8)
No	49 (41.2)
<b>Reason of migration</b>	
For Higher income	61 (51)
Searching for job	58 (49)
<b>Emigration status in the destination</b>	
Valid	101 (84.9)
Invalid	13 (10.9)
Expired	5 (4.2)

The socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the respondents of this study were collected through the quantitative survey. The findings presented in Table 1 shows that most of the respondents (26.1%) were from middle age (25-29 years) followed by 30-34 years (21.9%), and 35-39 years (16.8%), and household head

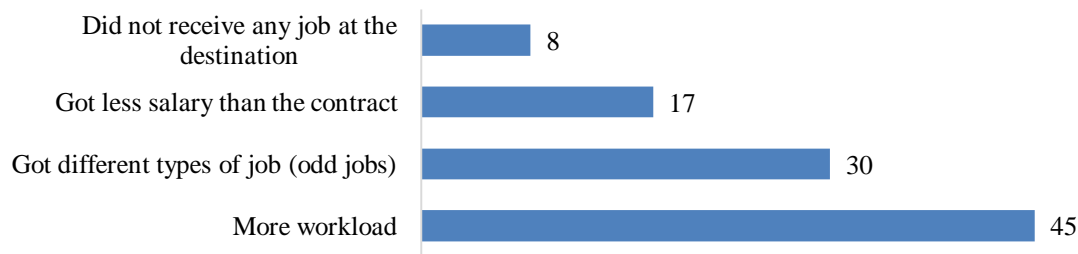
(58.8%). 53.8% respondent had completed secondary education, followed by primary (36.1%). Most of the respondents were married (86.6%) and Muslim (95.8%). Due to the low rate of international female migration, this study could not recruit any female as a respondent of this study. 33.6% of the respondents were unemployed before migration, followed by day laborer (18.4%), and farmers (17.6%). The concept that Bangladesh sent unskilled and untrained emigrants is also found in this study as 82.3% of the respondents did not have any professional skills, and 85.7% did not receive any training before going abroad. In spite of choosing destination, most of the Bangladeshi emigrants choose the middle east as destination, among them 20.2% labor went the Saudi Arabia, followed by Malaysia (17.6%), Singapore (13.4%), Qatar (12.6%), the United Arab Emirates (8.4), Mauritius, Lebanon, and Kuwait (6.7% each), Oman (4.2%), Libya (1.7%), Abu Dhabi, and the Maldives (0.8% each).

Almost half of the emigrants went abroad for searching jobs, and rest are for more income, as they find their income in Bangladesh was not enough. Among all the return migrants studied in this study, 89.1% emigrants from Bangladesh went with a valid procedure from where 84.9% come back when their permit is over or having more permit days, and 4.2% of all emigrants try to stay more after their permit become expire. Some of them have to pay more money for staying unauthorized, get less salary, faced harassment by others, caught and sent to Bangladesh by the police, and so on. The rest of 10.9% invalid emigrants are those who was migrated without maintaining legal procedures or migrated with a tourist visa and start to stay there without validity.

### Perceptions and experiences regarding job in abroad

Getting job according to the contact paper is another challenge for emigrants. In most cases, it is found that emigrants who manage visas by informal agencies do not get their desired job (Figure 1). Some people were also misguided by the formal agencies too. This study found that around 22% emigrants do not receive job according to their contract paper. However, they pay a lot of money for their migration. This rate is

unusual which deserve attention to solve this problem.



**Figure 1:** Emigrants job experiences and comparison with their contract paper/promises by the formal and informal agencies (%)

Figure 1 represents types of job discrimination emigrants faces abroad. Around 45% respondents who did not get a job according to the contract paper got a job with more workload. 30% respondent who got different kinds of jobs are basically odd jobs with heavy workload, which became difficult for them to continue, but they had to continue their job because of their high investment for visas and traveling. 8% respondent did not even get any job from their agencies or recruited person, hence had to stay unemployed for many days after reaching the destination and managed job by themselves. 30% respondent got a job with less salary as they promised before migration. This notion regarding not getting job and wages according to the contract is also found in the qualitative study. An IDI (in-depth interviews) participant stated that,

*"Before going abroad, I was told that I will work in a supermall, but I found no job was allocated for me when I reached. I was trying to reach the person who deals with my emigrational process but failed to reach him. Over the phone, he said manage work by yourself."*

Another IDI having more than ten years of experience as a labor migrant and also ran a business of sending emigrants abroad has shared his notion regarding this,

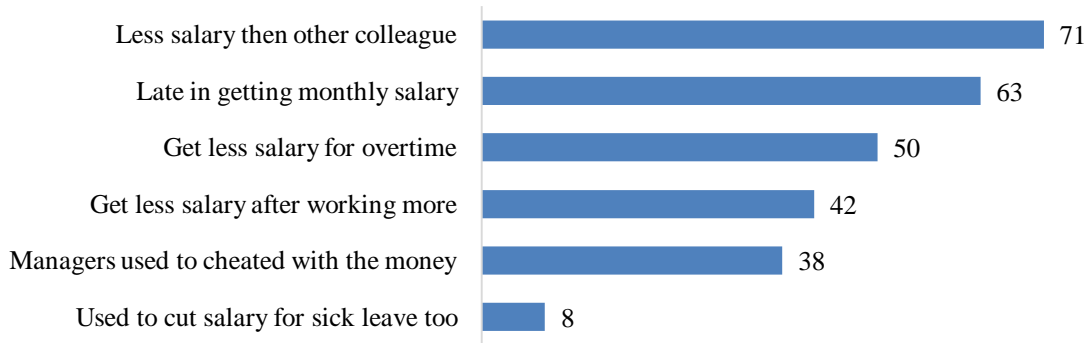
*"As for the informal agencies' tricks, most of the time emigrants fails to get the job and*

*salary they were about to provide according to the contract paper. There are some people who send emigrants in tourist visa, and emigrants who traveled with tourist visa fall in worst situation in the destination as they don't have work permit and carried a short visa validity, so they had to hide themselves and thus do odd jobs and get less salary than other emigrants."*

#### **Perceptions and experiences regarding salary in abroad**

Twenty-nine percent respondents faced salary discrimination at their job abroad. Among them the 71% respondents said they got less salary than other colleague, followed by late for getting monthly salary (63%) (Figure 2). Emigrants also face discrimination with their overtime payment, as 50% of respondents who faced discrimination replied- they were getting less wage for overtime. Whereas, 38% respondent think their managers cheated their money. An IDI respondent also expressed his notion regarding salary discrimination,

*"Being uneducated is a great curse; I realize in abroad. I couldn't communicate with my colleague and boss clearly, due to the language differences. Hence I always found I was assigned for hard work, but my salary was also lower than that of other co-workers from India and Pakistan."*



**Figure 2:** Types of salary discrimination emigrant's faces abroad (%)

### Causes of facingsalary discrimination

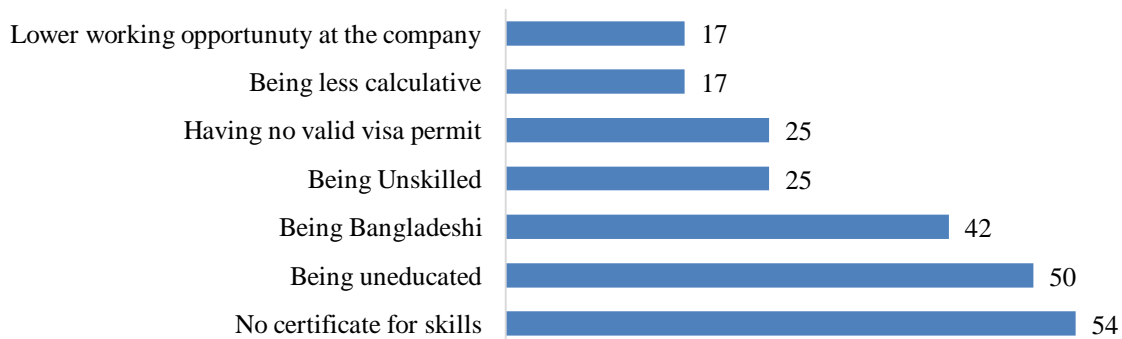
Figure 3 represents the reasons why emigrants from Bangladesh have to face salary discrimination. This question recorded multiple answers for a respondent. More than half (54%) of the emigrants had to face salary discrimination as they had no certificate for their skills, followed by their being uneducated (50%). Another exciting result of the reasons behind facing salary discrimination is some of the respondents think that they had to face salary discrimination as they were from Bangladesh (42%). The salary discrimination is also found in the qualitative study, as an IDI participants state his notion regarding salary discrimination in abroad,

*"We always get lower pay then the emigrants from other countries. One of my colleagues from Srilanka used to operate two machines, both of us used to work for same time, but the*

*Srilankan used to get more money than me. When one day, I asked my supervisor about this, he said that he has a skill certificate and experiences of working before migrate, so he got more money. I tried to convince the supervisor by saying my experiences and skills, but the supervisor said I migrated as unskilled labor, so he had nothing to do."*

Another IDI returned from Bahrain shared his experiences and observation regarding this.

*"Salary discrimination of Bangladeshi emigrants is also a common affair abroad; getting less salary than other colleagues is very common. Other types of salary discrimination emigrants facing abroad are getting less money for overtime, few overtime opportunities, late in getting salary, manager Cheated to give money, and cut off salary for absent in work even for sick leave."*



**Figure 3:** Reasons why emigrantsface salary discrimination in abroad (%)

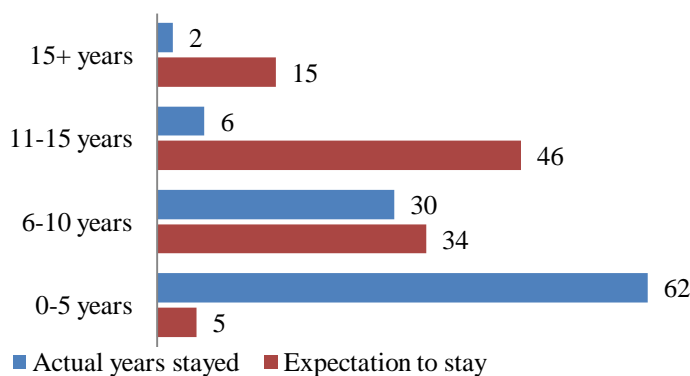
Among the respondents 17% respondent faces salary discrimination in abroad for being less calculative. The issue regarding salary discrimination is also found true in the qualitative study. An IDI shared his experiences and observation regarding this.

*"Being Bangladeshi, unskilled, and illiterate are the main causes of facing salary discrimination in abroad. If our Government could provide us training and send abroad with a skilled certificate, our salary would double. Most of us had experiences, but our skills were*

*undermined and thus considered an unskilled labor due to no skilled certificate."*

#### **Perception about and experienced time duration in abroad:**

All emigrants especially, labor migrants usually migrate with an expectation to stay for a longer period and earn, as they have to spend huge money for their visas and travel. People from Bangladesh find overseas migration costly, so they always have a desired time duration until which they want to stay in the destination country and earn more money.



**Figure 4:** Time duration emigrants wishes to stay and was able to stay in abroad (%)

Figure 4 represents the perceptions and experienced time duration in abroad by the emigrants of Bangladesh. The figure indicates that none can fulfill their desired time duration. People's perceptions about staying abroad show that most people wanted to stay more than 10 years as the data shows that 61% of the respondents had the desire to stay for more than ten years where only 8 percent can fulfill their desired time duration. On the other hand, actual years stayed in abroad showed that more respondents have to come back within a shorter time. As the data shows that 62% respondents had to come back before their fifth anniversary as emigrants, and another 30% before ten years, only 8% emigrants could stay for more than ten years. So this figure shows that most of the emigrants from Bangladesh could not fulfill their desired stay duration, which is also found in the qualitative study. An IDI participant returned from Malaysia expressed his notion in this regard.

*"Emigrants randomly can fulfill their dream; rather, they always have to fight for their survival. I went Malaysia with a dream to stay longer and earn more to save some money as business capital, but after three years, I had to come back due to lack of job opportunity."*

Another IDI participant expressed his experience in this notion too.

*"I went to Bahrain with two years' work permit, but within these two years, I was only able to repay my loans. So, I wanted to stay a few more years after the end of my contract. However, my company did not allow me to renew my work permit."*

#### **Perception and experiences regarding earning exhausted cost spend for going abroad**

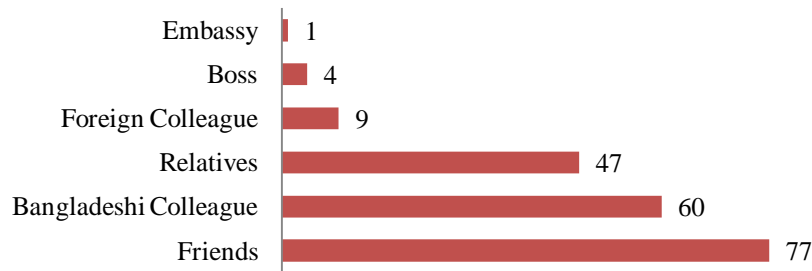
Most of the emigrants from Bangladesh migrate to make their economic situation better than earlier.

Overseas migration from Bangladesh is always costly. The data of this study shows that 91.6% of the respondent can earn their exhausted cost, but 8.4% failed to earn their exhausted cost. Findings from the quantitative study are in agreement with the findings from the qualitative interview as an IDI participant returned from UAE share his notion about this,

*"I hardly can earn my exhausted money, which I spent for the emigration. I wished if I could stay 2/3 years more, my struggle may come to an end, so I am still preparing to have another visit."*

**Emigrant's experiences about getting help in need at the time of staying abroad**

This study also tries to determine the sources from where the respondents get help while staying abroad. Seventy-seven percent respondents get help from their friends at the destination, where 24% didn't get or don't need help from friends (Figure 5). Sixty percent emigrants found colleagues from Bangladesh are helpful at the time of social and financial needs in abroad. Whereas they do not get any help from the Bangladesh embassy present abroad.



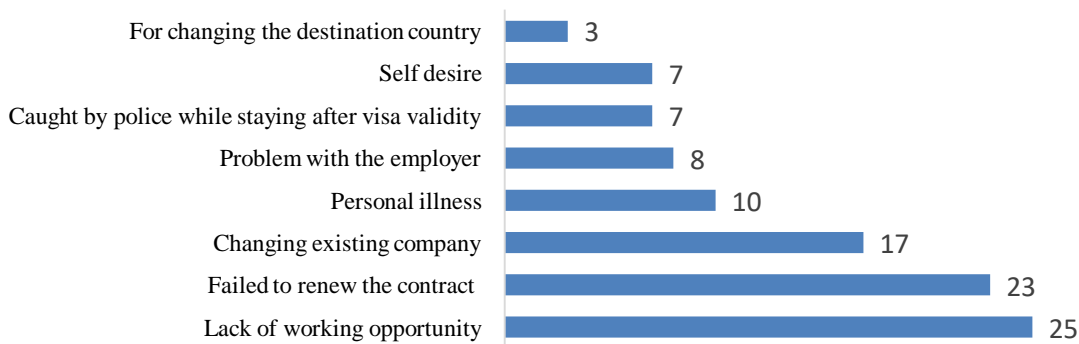
**Figure 5:** Sources from where emigrants used to get help in abroad

The participants of the qualitative study also highlight the problems found in the quantitative study.

*"In abroad you will only receive help from the people you are known. Social networks i.e., family members, friends, colleagues (only from Bangladesh) will help you. Colleague from other countries will hardly help you in need. So it's always better to stay in touch with countryman."*

**Causes of return back to Bangladesh**

All emigrants worker didn't come back by their own desire. Previously this study shows that most of the emigrants came back before reaching their desired time duration. Most emigrants want to stay for a longer time but had to come back within a short time. So all the return migrants worker are not coming back willingly (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Reasons why emigrants return to Bangladesh (%)

Figure 6 represents the causes of why the migrants come back. Data from the table shows that 25% of the emigrants came back for lack of working opportunity in the destination. Around 30% emigrants have to come back as their visa got expired and they couldn't renew it; among them, 23% came back by their own choice, and 7% tries to stay and work being illegal, caught by the police and send back to Bangladesh. Data also indicate that very few emigrants can fulfill all their needs and come back safely. Eight percent respondents had to come back because of problem with their bosses. 13.5 percent had to come back because of own illness or the illness of their family member. Data from qualitative studies also show highly relevant information to this quantitative data. An IDI participant who has 18 years of working experience abroad and travels four more countries has shared his experience.

*"The emigration fee for going abroad is high. Most people had to go abroad by loan or selling their land, but due to illness, visa expire, lack of working opportunity, self-desire to change companies and destination country are the main causes of respondents coming back. Sometimes as for a shorter period of time, most of the respondents fail to earn their expended money and fail to repay their loan."*

## DISCUSSION

Earlier studies found that the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers aren't in good condition at all; they had to faces problems regarding economic, job, social, and accommodation-related issues in abroad (Ahmed et al., 2015; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2005; Ratha et al., 2011). Thus, their perception regarding job, working condition, wages, duration of stay, and earning exhausted cost was not met.

This study has identified emigrants experiences regarding their job and work in abroad as, not getting the job according to their contract paper, unable to renew their visa, and problem with the employer. This findings about the experience of emigrants was also identified by some previous study as quarrel or bad behavior by the employer (Ahmed et al., 2015); employment scarcity; work permit cancellation (Kibria, 2004); working

uncertainty, getting less salary than the contract, heavy workload (Rahman, 2012).

Barkat et al. (2014), in their study, finds that the emigrants of Bangladesh had to work longer than international standards, faced discrimination, exploited and abused at the destination, and sent back to Bangladesh before earning their exhausted money for the visa and work permit. Which is also similar to this current study, as this study found that 8% Bangladeshi emigrants couldn't earn their exhausted money at the destination and 60% of all the emigrants have to come back before fulfilling their desired time at destination, 22% emigrants don't receive job according to their contract paper, and also 11 percent respondents visit embassy to solve their problem with the employer.

This study finds that Bangladeshi emigrants' perceptions regarding wages aren't met, as they experienced salary discrimination, high rate of visa renewal fees. It is also found that 14% emigrants got less salary than their colleagues from other South Asian countries and 10% emigrants experienced less payment for their overtime. These findings are similar with some previous studies as Ahmed et al. (2015) and Barkat et al. (2014) shows that the skills of the Bangladeshi emigrants aren't recognized at the international market and thus Bangladeshi emigrants got less wages than emigrants from other countries. At the same time, Ahmed et al. (2015) and Dustmann & Fabbri, (2005) find that emigrants from Bangladesh aren't getting expected salary which is in agreement with this study. Besides these similar findings, this current study also identified some other wage-related experiences emigrants are facing abroad, i.e., high rate for visa renewal (28%), late in getting salary (21%), and cheating by managers (19%).

This study found that most of the labor migrants from Bangladesh could not fulfill their expected time duration for staying abroad. The cost for emigration from Bangladesh is huge so emigrants always have an expectation to stay for a longer period and earn their exhausted cost. This study found that 61% respondents had the desire to stay for more than ten years where only 8 percent can fulfill their desired time duration. On the other hand, 62% emigrants had to comeback Bangladesh



before reaching their fifth anniversary as emigrants, and another 30% before reaching ten years. Though previous studies had not identify this expectation gap of the emigrants, but their findings also suggest the findings of this study, as Doherty et al., 2014; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2005; and Kibria, 2004, shows that due to lack of job security, many Bangladeshi emigrants have to come back to the country before the end of contract and without earning the money he had to spend for their visa.

This study found 77% emigrants get help from friends at the destination, whereas 66% found Bangladeshi colleagues more helpful at their social and financial needs, on the contrary they do not get help from the Bangladesh embassy present abroad. Though previous studies did not identify the sources from where respondents are getting help in abroad, but they identified the gap emigrants are facing for getting support. Ahmed et al., 2015; Barkat et al., 2014; Kibria, 2011; Rahman, 2012, at their study shows that Bangladeshi emigrants are not getting proper nurturing and support in abroad. They also identify lack of support from Bangladeshi embassies operating abroad, which support the findings of this study.

### **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

The current study has some compelling strengths as the first study to identify perceptions and experiences of Bangladeshi emigrant's about their occupation in the destination. This study interviewed the return migrants at their origin to get a proper idea about their emigration period and thus include emigrants without considering their destination so it gives a holistic picture of the current situation of our emigrants at the destination. Despite such strengths and possible precautions were ensured at every step of this primary research to make this study robust, the study has some limitations. Due to resource and time constraints and some other external challenges, i.e., no available database for return migrants, this study could interview only 119 respondents. Finding no female return migrants for the interview is also a limitation. This study isn't free from the distorting effect, as this study's geographic coverage was limited to the Cumilla

district. Finally, most of the data collected for this study was for the prior of the emigrants' life and self-reported, which was also challenging for accurate data as there may have some recall and social desirability bias.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is worth noting that our emigrants have been playing a gigantic role in socioeconomic development by sending valuable remittances, which is one of the prerequisites of developing export-import business and reserve system. The perceptions of emigrants before migration is very constructive and reasonable considering the amount of money they had to invest for the emigration. Still, the experiences they had in the destination are quite different, unrealistic, pathetic, and discriminating. All these issues emigrants' face in abroad are connected to the migration process. Hence, there is no alternative to develop strong emigrants' friendly policies, which should be started from the beginning of migration. To ensure safer and smooth emigration, the Government should disseminate information regarding emigrant's rules and regulations among the potential emigrants via mass media and social media. The Government should also concentrate on monitoring the activities of recruiting agencies at regular intervals so that they could not cheat with the emigrants. Sending skilled and professional migrants can benefit us with more remittance; hence policy should be incorporated, and programme should ensure development of professional skills and providing training to the workers and send them abroad with the recognition of skilled worker.

Standard wages in the destination mostly depend on the negotiation of the Government of the sending country, so the Government should come forward with an agenda to ensure standard wages for all Bangladeshi emigrants. Bangladesh embassies in the destination should maintain a comprehensive database about all Bangladeshi emigrants and ensure their rights. Creating network for all Bangladeshis abroad will also benefit a lot; thus Bangladesh government, with the help of embassies, should ensure strong and collaborative social networks among emigrants themselves. The Government of Bangladesh

should take collaborative efforts with international, i.e., IOM, ILO, etc., and national agencies in the destination to protect the dignity and human right of the emigrants in the destination and assist in their crisis moment. Bangladeshi embassies in foreign countries should also organize motivational programs for emigrants in different national days for keeping them active and mentally strong.

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