



PROMOTING  
**SAFE MIGRATION**  
THROUGH  
**INNOVATION**



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# Foreword

International migration and remittances have played an important part in increasing growth and reducing poverty in Bangladesh. With a large young population and two million new entrants into the labour market each year, international migration eases the pressure on the domestic economy by absorbing up to 500,000 workers each year.

Remittances, constituting 9 per cent of GDP, have been a significant source of rural income and brought prosperity to many poverty-stricken households and communities. However, one of the persistent challenges is that more than half the migrant workers from Bangladesh are classified as less-skilled. With little education and poor access to information, the desperation to rise out of poverty can cloud basic awareness and judgment of utilising reliable services and safe channels of migration. Only 10 per cent of Bangladeshi workers migrate through formal channels. As a result, a vast majority frequently fall victim to fraudulent middlemen and exploitative employers, leading to loss of their lifetime

savings and assets; harassment; abuse and imprisonment. Migration trends have also branded Bangladesh as a source of low skilled workers, and have locked workers into low wage and less dignified jobs – coupled with the risks of work-related injuries, poor worker welfare and insufficient legal safeguards, which further aggravates migrant workers' vulnerability. The Government of Bangladesh recognises the importance of international migration for national development and has taken steps in the right direction to make international recruitment cost effective, transparent, and consistent through the regulatory and policy framework and other initiatives. It has created space for non-government actors, with their extended grassroots level reach, to implement safe migration outreach and information dissemination.

One such initiative is BRAC's Safe Migration programme. Since 2006, the programme has been advocating and building awareness to promote migrants' rights and safe migration across thirty-three districts in Bangladesh. Interventions

include a plethora of safe migration awareness activities at the grassroots level; facilitating linkage to reliable services for migration; arbitration services in case of conflict and fraudulence, and skills enhancement to enable workers to be certified and earn higher wages.

In 2013, the World Bank, with funds from the Japan Social Development Fund, partnered with BRAC on the Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Workers project to expand the Safe Migration programme to an additional twenty districts. Early learnings from the project revealed that while informal intermediaries will continue to form an inherent part of the migration process, safe migration can be enhanced through improved awareness, welfare and skills of potential migrants and their families. In line with this reality, the project has implemented a wide range of awareness activities by building capacity within the community through seventy-seven community-based organisations (CBOs). These CBOs provide pre-decision and pre-departure training to migrants;

link potential migrants' to skills service providers; and extend arbitration services to retrieve deceived migrants' funds from dishonest intermediaries. In addition, the project has emerged as a platform for potential, current and former migrant workers to share their experiences and connect with all concerned stakeholders. This wide range of activities have yielded a diverse array of local level innovations.

This publication is a collection of case studies and anecdotes documenting many of the innovations that have emerged from the project. We hope the insights shared in this book provide an illustration of the many faces of migration and help encourage more innovations that can be replicated and scaled up to promote safe migration practices across Bangladesh.

Asif Saleh

Senior Director  
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brac



# নিরাপদ অভিবাসন বিষয়ক উঠান বৈঠক

স্থান: মিজগাংস্বামী-দৌলতপুর।

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# Acknowledgement

The Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Workers (SMBW) project has gathered a wide spectrum of different experiences, insights and triumphs among diverse contexts and people in Bangladesh. Innovations have emerged from many of the project's activities. Some of these innovations have the potential to be replicable and scalable, touching the lives of millions of existing and potential migrant workers, their families and their communities. The innovations that have emerged from the SMBW project have been documented in this publication in order to preserve evidence and knowledge of what has worked to promote safe migration of Bangladeshi workers.

This important documentation that may have significant bearing on future safe migration programmes would not have been possible without the participation and support of many whose names may not all be enumerated. The time, insights and information shared by the SMBW project Field Supervisors and BRAC's implementation team, led by the Migration programme Head, Mr. Hassan Imam, programme Manager, Ms. Marina Sultana, Consultant, Quazi Sanjana Tahmina, and

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The innovations would not have been in place without financial contributions from Japan Social Development Fund (JSDF), the main donor for SMBW project and the support of the Government of Bangladesh. The World Bank, as the administrator of the JSDF grant for this project, has provided editorial support in completing the publication.

# Contents

<b>Abbreviations</b>	9
<b>Background</b>	10
<b>Innovation area 1</b>	
Support to potential migrants or their families in receiving training from BMET and/or NGOs	12
<b>1.1. Awareness</b>	13
Case 1.1.1.1. Social elites meet aspiring migrants to endorse safe migration practices - mock parliament in Sirajganj	13
Case 1.1.2. Information - the ultimate weapon of migrant workers	15
Case 1.1.3. Returnee migrants' forum to generate awareness about safe migration	16
Case 1.1.4. Community radio to raise awareness	16
<b>1.2. Equity</b>	17
Case 1.2.1. Breaking the glass ceiling on women's migration in Patiya, Chittagong	18
Case 1.2.2. Brought home following torture abroad	19
Case 1.2.3. A success story: Safe migration of a woman	20
<b>1.3. Training</b>	21
Case 1.3.1. Technical and vocational skills help equip workers for a competitive global market	21
Case 1.3.2. Skill-building of women of migrant families, through training and women's solidarity building, potentially leading to women led businesses	23
Case 1.3.3. Aspiring migrants become tech-savvy to better prepare for safe migration and find dignified jobs	23
Case 1.3.4: Starting early awareness on safe migration with school children	25
<b>Innovation area 2</b>	
Support to migrants with documentation and registration efforts or legal aid if required	26

<b>2.1. Support to deceived migrants</b>	27
Case 2.1.1: Recovering from deceit and rediscovering life once at home	27
Case 2.1.2: Retrieval of USD 44,024 (BDT 3.47 million) from middlemen, and paying back aspiring migrants who never received their visas	30
<b>Innovation area 3</b>	
Support to the families of migrant workers in managing the initial transition period after a family member migrates	32
<b>3.1. Welfare</b>	33
Case 3.1.1: Facilitating payment of USD 12,687 (BDT 1 million) to families of four deceased migrant workers in Faridpur and Mymensingh	33
Case 3.1.2: Helping deceased migrants' families to receive death benefit	34
Case 3.1.3: Enabling access to stipends for the children of migrant workers	35
<b>3.2. Connectivity</b>	36
Case 3.2.1: Connecting families back home with migrants working abroad	36
<b>3.3. Remittance Management</b>	37
Case 3.3.1: Improved remittance management to promote investment	38
<b>3.4. Engaging returnee migrants</b>	39
Case 3.4.1: Rediscovering life as an SMBW project Volunteer after being sent back home from Malaysia	39
Case 3.4.2: Finding prosperity back home after deception abroad	40



# Abbreviations

ACLAB	Alliance for Cooperation and Legal Aid Bangladesh
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BITA	Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts
BMET	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
CBO	Community-based Organisation
DEMO	District Employment and Manpower Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IO	Information Officer
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JSDF	Japan Social Development Fund
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
SMFC	Safe Migration Facilitation Centre
SMBW	Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Workers
TTC	Technical Training Centre
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UDC	Union Digital Centre
WEWF	Wage Earners' Welfare Fund

# Background

Half a million Bangladeshis migrated to various countries in 2015, adding to the 9 million Bangladeshi migrants already living abroad, many since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Remittance inflows in FY2016 alone were nearly USD 15 billion, and based on a five-year average, account for about 9 per cent of the country's GDP<sup>2</sup>. In addition, migration has helped galvanize a substantial source of employment for a labour surplus country like Bangladesh.

Migration, however, comes with its own challenges. A vast majority of the migrant workers from Bangladesh are on the lower end of the skills spectrum. Though the proportion of low-skilled workers has decreased since earlier years, the numbers are still significant. Moreover, the majority of migrant workers from Bangladesh generally have fewer years of schooling which is likely to fuel poor awareness and susceptibility to fraudulent and unfair practices by middlemen and other dishonest stakeholders, at home and abroad. The vulnerability of these migrants to exploitation and abuse is made more intense by low paid, high-risk jobs which match their low skills base, especially in the Middle East that attracts about 80 per cent of Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Social capital at home and abroad have resulted in the influx of migrant workers from Bangladesh particularly in the Middle East. Due to similarities

of religion and culture between the two regions, the Middle East is a very popular destination for Bangladeshis. Moreover, the large Bangladeshi worker community that currently lives and works in the region represents a strong network that helps new migrant workers from Bangladesh, usually friends and family, to join them. Other than the meagre 10 per cent that migrate through formal channels, a staggering 90 per cent of Bangladeshi migrants use informal channels that hinge on middlemen and personal contacts in the destination country.<sup>3</sup> As a result, social capital is a paramount factor in facilitating migration from Bangladesh and also represents, even if informal and almost powerless, the only source of welfare of migrants while they remain in the host country.

Low levels of awareness about safe migration practices for those who have little or no access to social networks is therefore associated with the vulnerability of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Additional factors adversely affecting the migration experience include inadequate access to training opportunities at the grassroots aimed to enhance skills; vulnerability to abuse/unfair practices and gender-based discrimination; and insufficient support to help migrants and their families through the transition period of migration<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> BMET, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Calculation based on data from BMET and BBS

<sup>3</sup> Selection into International Labour Migration: Findings from the Baseline Survey of BRAC's Safe Migration project, University of California at Berkeley and BRAC, 2015

<sup>4</sup> SMBW Baseline, 2015; ILO 2014

Recognising these challenges, the Safe Migration for Bangladeshi Workers (SMBW) project<sup>5</sup>, aims to improve access to accurate and reliable information at the community level for migrants and their families in 80 sub-districts to enable safe migration choices. According to the baseline findings of the project, “migrants incur substantial costs relating to information, documents, and transportation – learning about jobs in distant places, obtaining documents required to cross national borders, and travelling to the foreign job.”

An innovation grant under the project provides support to select CBOs and partner NGOs to pilot additional services and support to migrants. The innovation grant was envisaged to:

- (i) Support potential migrants or their families in receiving training from BMET and/or NGOs;
- (ii) Offer support to the families of migrant workers in managing the initial transition period after a family member first migrates but before remittances flow; and,
- (iii) Provide support to migrants with documentation and registration efforts or legal aid if required.

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<sup>5</sup> The project is funded by the Japan Social Development Fund (JPDF), administered by the World Bank and implemented by BRAC and 77 community based organizations (CBOs)/local NGOs, in consultation with the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment of Bangladesh.

The fund also aims to provide a specific allocation to sponsor outbound female migrants in undertaking a special 21-day training course at government Technical Training Centres (TTCs) geared toward female migrants.

Out of the seventy-seven CBOs/partner NGOs working in partnership with BRAC to implement the SMBW project, eight have been awarded innovation grants based on a competitive evaluation of proposals. Innovation funding to each CBO/NGO is USD 25,000 (BDT 2 million) in addition to the general CBO support of USD 1,900 (BDT 0.15 million). This covers the cost of a migration associate and a paid volunteer working in each CBO/NGO specifically on the implementation of the SMBW project.

This report illustrates some of the activities carried out especially under the innovation fund of the SMBW project, through a collection of anecdotes and stories from implementing partners and beneficiaries. The stories are organized according to the three broad innovation areas identified above: skills development and awareness, support during transition, and support with documentation and legal aid if required. The purpose of the report is to provide a glimpse of some of challenges faced by migrant workers and highlight possibilities to help overcome those challenges.



# 01 INNOVATION AREA

Support to potential migrants or their families in receiving training from BMET and/or NGOs

## 1.1. Awareness

**W**ith limited reach at the grassroots level, labour migration services in Bangladesh tend to be less accessible to aspiring migrants especially from rural areas. Moreover, the process tends to be complex, making it difficult for aspiring migrants to be aware of and understand the details. This is exacerbated by limited literacy and power relations that affect aspiring migrants, giving rise to the use of middlemen to help aspirants secure a job and complete the necessary procedures for migration. This is corroborated by findings of the baseline study<sup>6</sup>, which shows that the level of low awareness is especially greater among those migrants using middlemen, while those trying to migrate through an agency or personal networks tend to have more knowledge of the process. Many remain oblivious of the risks of illegal channels of migration and tend to plan on the basis of the belief that ‘the grass is greener on the other side’, irrespective of the means and costs that get them to the other side. While many migrants are aware of the requirements for travel documents like passport and visa, less than 10 per cent of those trying to migrate through middlemen are aware of the needs for work permit, job contract, training and BMET clearance. This

lack of awareness makes this group of already disadvantaged and poverty-stricken people more vulnerable to exploitation by middlemen and other dishonest stakeholders.

Bangladesh continues to be a labour surplus country where awareness campaigns promote migration with an emphasis on informed choices of safe migration. Given that most migrants from Bangladesh come from rural areas that are less accessible than urban areas, community-based communication campaigns that adopt below-the-line campaigns like courtyard sessions, tea stall discussions, etc., are quite effective. In addition, the SMBW project has fostered an innovative platform, that brings together aspiring migrants and social and professional elites and enables exchange of information and opinions to help bridge knowledge gaps on migration.

### **Case 1.1.1. Social elites meet aspiring migrants to endorse safe migration practices - mock parliament in Sirajganj**

Sirajganj accounted for about 0.8 per cent of the total international migration from Bangladesh in 2015 while accommodating 2 per cent of the

<sup>6</sup> Baseline study of SMBW project, 2015



population of the country. Inadequate access to information and poor level of marketable skills continue to inhibit safe international migration. Incidents of unsafe migration practices are rampant. In 2014, 400 people from multiple sub-districts of Sirajganj, including Ullahpara, chose unsafe migration routes to Malaysia and other countries. Out of 400 people, only 100 could be traced by local authorities while the rest remained lost. Families and friends of these illegal migrants refrained from asking for help in fear of being caught, even after the migrants never returned<sup>7</sup>.

Awareness levels on safe migration practices are still very low. At the same time, power relations and social hierarchies, especially in rural and sub-

urban areas, increase power distances and inhibit access of the poor and disadvantaged to the elite who are often more influential and knowledgeable. Recognising the needs for increased awareness, access to information on safe migration and the possible beneficial impact on the poor's access to information if distances were reduced, the SMBW project is working on community engagement through multiple social and cultural platforms. The project emphasizes the use of existing systems and platforms like the knowledge and local clout of the District Employment and Manpower Offices (DEMO).

The SMBW project, supported by its partner NGO, Paribartan, brought together social and professional elites and aspiring migrants in district-level 'mock parliaments' in Sirajganj. About 10 mock parliaments were held in Sirajganj, each consisting

<sup>7</sup> Online newspapers

of approximately 50 participants and an assorted panel of doctors, teachers, police officers and civil servants (UNOs), reaching a total of about 500 aspiring migrants in the district. Each panelist would deliver a speech on the issue of safe migration practices and the audience would have the opportunity to ask questions to the panel. The events helped generate significant interest and enthusiasm amongst participants by stimulating discussions on safe migration practices.

The events were held in close partnership with the DEMO in Sirajganj. Aspiring migrants were informed of the events through the SMBW project's union level workers and facilitators who mobilised community interest.

### Case 1.1.2. Information - the ultimate weapon of migrant workers

Arzina is a 25-year-old aspiring migrant from Belabo, Narsingdi. She was working for a local NGO till she had a son whose future then became her prime concern.

In April 2015, one of her neighbours, a middleman, offered her a job in Maldives as a caregiver for a monthly salary of USD 150 (BDT 12,000). He asked for USD 500 (BDT 40,000) for the visa, and out of that, the advance constituted USD 127 (BDT 10,000). He assured Arzina that she could pay up the rest upon reaching Maldives.

Arzina was about to pay the advance when luckily, she attended the SMBW project's courtyard meeting. While absorbing the information



disseminated by the volunteer, she grew suspicious of the middleman's offer. She decided to show a photocopy of her visa to the volunteer, who then suggested that she went to verify it at BRAC's office. Soon after, she found that the visa was fake.

Arzina had already left her job at the NGO as part of her preparation to go to Maldives. After she realised the middleman's fraudulence, she found another job in a ready-made garments factory in Dhaka. Her son now lives under the care of Arzina's mother while she works in the city. She said, "Thankfully I did not have to pay the middleman. Otherwise, we would have lost so much. I want to work abroad someday- but not before knowing all of the terms and conditions."

### **Case 1.1.3. Returnee migrants' forum to generate awareness about safe migration**

Asmad from Partetulia, Ullahpara, Sirajganj, is a 40-year-old returnee migrant. Back in 2006, he had a small poultry business, but it was not profitable. When he heard that the government was recruiting workers to send to Libya, he seized the opportunity with very little knowledge about migration. He sought help from a local leader and arranged a loan of USD 2,280 (BDT 180,000) to finance the migration.

Asmad began to work as a plumber in Libya. Before he left, he was promised a monthly salary of USD 317 (BDT 25,000) for 8 hours of work per day.

Instead, he ended up working 10 hours a day and was paid only USD 127 (BDT 10,000) per month. Albeit the disappointment, he continued to work because he had loans to repay. The company bore the cost of living, but Asmad could not adjust to the food and so his health suffered. At the same time, a workers' strike resulted in a lot of violence but ended with demands left unfulfilled.

Following the war in 2009 in Libya, the company moved the workers from Libya to Egypt and Sudan. Their money and possessions were taken away while crossing the border. Asmad returned home empty-handed after 26 days. It took him a very long time to get back on his feet again.

A few months ago, Paribartan, one of the CBOs of the SMBW project, carried out a survey of migrants in Asmad's village. Through this, he came to know about the forum for returnee migrants. He joined the forum with great enthusiasm so that he could help people like himself and protect them from exploitation.

### **Case 1.1.4: Community radio to raise awareness**

Community radio is an important tool for access to information at the grassroots level. It enables the government to reach out to remote communities across the country, creating awareness on important issues including youth engagement, natural disasters etc.



BRAC's partner NGO, Alliance for Cooperation and Legal Aid Bangladesh (ACLAB), works on access to information through a 20-minute-long slot on the community radio, 'Naf'. It airs three times a week and reaches communities in Teknaf in the extreme south-eastern part of Bangladesh. The programmes are conducted by local youth, usually in the local dialect for the communities' ease of understanding. The programmes include important awareness messages on safe migration, including preventing illegal migration by sea. This initiative is a spillover effect of the SMBW project since Teknaf is not within its core intervention areas.

A total of 30 listener groups have been identified. A recently completed survey by ACLAB also reveals

that there is up to 45 per cent coverage of the local communities by Radio 'Naf' programmes on safe migration. Local volunteers carry out community mobilization and stimulate interest regarding the community radio's programmes on migration.

## 1.2. Equity

**W**omen's place in livelihoods and empowerment is not only a matter of equity, but also constitutes a key economic and social building block.

Historically, women's international migration from Bangladesh has been very low and irregular. Generally, men constitute more than 85 per cent

of the entire migrant labour population from Bangladesh<sup>8</sup>. This is due to multiple sociocultural aspects that inhibit women's migration. This is aggravated by security concerns, especially for less skilled women workers migrating for menial jobs that make them vulnerable to various risks with no social capital or support network abroad. Government bans on women's migration were imposed at different stages as a measure of protection and safety. The ban, though now relieved to a large extent, slowed down women's migration over the years. In addition, some host countries have employment norms and regulations that favor employers e.g., Kafala, making women workers especially disadvantaged and defenseless in a foreign land.

While the concerns of safety and protection in case of women going abroad for humble jobs inhibit women workers' migration, strict gender roles defined by deeply entrenched social norms in many parts of Bangladesh aggravate the situation further. Women are groomed to take care of household-based activities, and depend on fathers and husbands for their financial and social wellbeing. This also affects women's confidence in making their own decisions even about mobility beyond the house. Over the years, increased literacy among girls and employment opportunities outside the house have contributed to women's empowerment. However, the issue of international migration remains a taboo in many conservative areas. Patiya in Chittagong is a case in point.

### **Case 1.2.1. Breaking the glass ceiling on women's migration in Patiya, Chittagong**

Patiya is one of the more prosperous sub-districts of Bangladesh, with less than 15 per cent of the population living in poverty. However, literacy levels continue to remain generally low, especially among women. Patriarchal social norms limit women's activities to within the household, hindering their social and economic empowerment. As a result, Patiya has seen almost no international migration of women workers.

The SMBW project promotes safe migration and acknowledges that restraining women's migration deprives Bangladesh of a significant opportunity to double its remittance inflow. Empowering women would contribute to numerous economic and social benefits at multiple levels. As Patiya is entrenched with patriarchal gender norms that adversely affect women, SMBW project, through its partner NGO, Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA) in Patiya, focuses on building solidarity among women. This is done through a community platform called 'women's circle'. The circle brings women together and informs them of their rights, stimulating general awareness on safe migration and the prevention of human trafficking. A total of 21 women's circles have been formed across seven unions in Patiya: Kharna, Haidgaon, Kelishahar, West Bhurshi, Chhanhara, Bhatikhain and Kachua. Each circle brings together about 30 women aged between 17 and 45 years. They usually belong

<sup>8</sup> IOM, 2015



to the same community and have at least one member of the family who has been involved in migration. Each circle meets fortnightly and discussions are held for an hour.

Generating social capital among women is expected to engender solidarity and collective efforts to push patriarchal boundaries that inhibit their social and economic empowerment. The SMBW project believes that by combining awareness with solidarity among women, international safe migration of women can be encouraged in Patiya. In the meantime, the increased awareness amongst women also helps in keeping the men in their families informed about safe migration.

**Case 1.2.2. Brought home following torture abroad**

Beauty is an independent woman and a natural leader. She has been a health worker and was a member of a community-based organisation in her home district of Naogaon in north-west Bangladesh. She is also the mother of 3 children.

As the combined income of Beauty and her husband, a rickshaw puller, was not enough to run the family, she began to seek employment abroad, inspired by other women in her neighbourhood who had migrated for work. She sold the only piece of land she owned and paid USD 1,078 (BDT 85,000) to a local middleman without informing anyone.

Beauty went to Jordan in June 2015 to work as a housekeeper on a monthly salary of USD 228 (BDT 18,000). She fell extremely ill soon after she started work. Her employer would not give her enough food, and whatever she was given was barely edible. To make matters worse, her employer tortured her and increased the number of her chores. She was eventually hospitalised, but her condition kept deteriorating. Beauty was later sent to the agent's office where she was tortured even further. Beauty broke into tears recounting the incident, saying, "They tried to stab me with a knife and hit me in various places. I bled profusely. Nobody came to my help as I cried in pain." This extent of humiliation devastated Beauty even more. The agent ignored her health condition, and moved her to a different house and then another. Her employers continued to abuse her.

Beauty somehow managed to call her husband back home, asking him to rescue her as soon as possible. Her husband then contacted the SMBW project and filed a complaint at the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) through BRAC.

Beauty was finally brought back home in August 2015. BMET ensured that she returned with her two months' salary of USD 457 (BDT 36,000). However, Beauty is yet to recover fully and resume a normal life.

### **Case 1.2.3. A success story: Safe migration of a woman**

Fatema is from Charamlabo in Narsingdi, a district in central Bangladesh. Her husband, a farmer, was the only earning member of the family. They have 4 children, and were constantly struggling to make ends meet. Fatema always looked for ways to help her husband, but living in a small village with conservative norms, it was considered an unsuitable option for her to work outside her home.

Fatema attended one of SMBW project's courtyard meetings in her village one day, and realised the possibility of working abroad. Fatema made good use of the information shared by the SMBW project. She made the right decisions and chose safe practices she learned about, which helped her with a successful migration process.

It took some time for Fatema to convince her husband. After some initial hesitation, Fatema's husband agreed to contact a middleman whom he came to know when his neighbour's wife went abroad for work. Fatema arranged to pay USD 1,269 (BDT 100,000) to the middleman by selling her cattle, taking loans and mortgaging her land.

Fatema went to Dubai in January 2015 to work as a housekeeper. She has a contract of four years, and a salary of USD 178 (BDT 14,000). She is happy with her employer who treats her well. She calls her family, and sends money back home through a bank.

Fatema's husband said, "I have repaid most of the loan with the money Fatema sent back. We still have to pay back USD 190 (BDT 15,000), and we also have to free up our mortgaged land. We have both decided that in the future, we will invest her income into a business."

## 1.3. Training

A vast majority of Bangladesh's migrant workers tend to be semi-skilled and unskilled. According to the ILO<sup>9</sup>, there is a recent trend of an increasing outflow of semi and unskilled labour from Bangladesh – in 2010, 40 per cent of the migrant labour was skilled. By 2012, the proportion had declined to 34 per cent. According to the same report, less skilled workers are more likely to opt for illegal and dangerous channels of migration, creating higher vulnerability to abuse and violence. They also face greater challenges than skilled workers in terms of protecting their rights in host countries.

To address these challenges, the government has undertaken steps to enhance workers' skills through technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Many of these trainings are carried out through the government's Technical Training Centres (TTCs) operating under the BMET. In addition, the government also runs skill-building programmes with support from development

partners. NGOs and private recruiting agencies continue to provide short-term training.

Identification of market-oriented skills continues to be a challenge for many skills development initiatives in Bangladesh. Usually, obtaining TTC certificates, without experience, is not sufficient for workers to find jobs overseas. This was revealed through employers' preferences in the Gulf and Malaysia, the largest sources of jobs for Bangladeshi migrant workers. Moreover, while the training provided by recruiting agencies probably is more aligned closer to market trends, as analysed by the ILO, it usually serves short-term purposes. It prepares the worker for the job at hand, rather than building long-term worker productivity and specialisation.

The SMBW project recognises this gap in skills, and works through small innovations to pilot discrete market-driven skill-building activities through partner NGOs and existing systems.

### **Case 1.3.1. Technical and vocational skills help equip workers for a competitive global market**

In Pekua, Cox's Bazar, ACLAB, SMBW project's partner NGO, helped mobilise training for 50 aspiring migrants. In batches of 10, they received training in plumbing, sewing/tailoring, housekeeping, computer and electrical work, thrice a week over a span of 3 months. These trainings were carried out by trainers with Diplomas, using BMET's approved training modules.

<sup>9</sup> Skills for the international labour market: Bangladesh country report, 2015, ILO



The training has equipped people with skills that will help them find jobs overseas, as well as dignified employment within the country. Md. Nurul Haque, an aspiring migrant with a secondary school certificate, received training on electrical wiring. While his visa approval is being processed, Nurul has taken up electrical wiring work in his sub-district. He currently earns USD 100 to USD 125 (BDT 8,000 to 10,000) per month. He believes that this extra earning will make him feel more financially secure when he goes to work in a foreign land.

Pre-departure orientation is a regular activity of the project, targeting those who have already decided to migrate. Through a defined module

developed by the SMBW project, the pre-departure training is carried out on the following topics: airport procedures in Bangladesh and in the host country, culture and laws in the host country, conditions stipulated by work permits, workplace and personal safety, compensation, employment agreements, modes of communication, food, means of remittance transfer, entertainment, etc. In Faridpur, a district in central Bangladesh, the added innovation was carrying out the orientation through the local TTC, in 8 batches. The trainees included 120 women who planned to go to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Jordan with housekeeping jobs.

### **Case 1.3.2. Skill-building of women of migrant families, through training and women’s solidarity building, potentially leading to women led businesses**

In the south-east of Bangladesh, in Bhatikhani, Chittagong, women from families that have male members living abroad as migrant workers, received training on handicrafts, vegetable growing and animal husbandry. The project’s CBO partner, BITA, helped mobilize the training. A total of 30 women were trained for 5 days through master trainers from the local TTC and the Women and Children Affairs Department. Women’s Circles (case 1.2.1) helped identify trainees for the programme. Plans are currently being made to identify natural leaders from the women’s circles to help with



market linkage for the products that the trained women produce. This is envisaged to contribute to sustainable and inclusive women-led businesses, and empower women who lead their households in the absence of their migrant husbands.

### **Case 1.3.3. Aspiring migrants become tech-savvy to better prepare for safe migration and find dignified jobs**

Common occupations in Sirajganj, a northern district of Bangladesh, are mostly based on agriculture and handicraft production. With less than half the population being literate, jobs are generally low paid with relatively high poverty levels. The sub-district of Ullahpara itself has around 27 per cent people living in poverty<sup>10</sup>. Sirajganj is also affected by annual seasonal lean periods when temporary internal migration to more prosperous areas within Bangladesh in search of work is a common phenomenon.

Recognizing the need for diversified skills, the SMBW Project is working on using existing systems to enhance aspiring migrants’ information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

The use of the internet has revolutionised access to information in remote areas. At par with that, in February 2016, the SMBW project identified the need to pilot an ICT training through the Upazila Parishad Digital Centre (UDC), a well-equipped

<sup>10</sup> Poverty map, 2010; WFP & World Bank

ICT centre in Ullahpara town, with help from its partner NGO, Paribartan. A total of 12 aspiring migrant workers received the training. The group consisted of 2 aspiring male migrants, unemployed and aged between 18 and 22 years from each of the six unions in Ullahpara where the project works in. The project paid the UDC USD 38 (BDT 3,000) per trainee. Besides enhancing the aspiring migrants' capacity in ICT and improving their access to information and services, especially on safe migration, the innovation also generated revenue for the UDC, a public-private initiative introduced by the government in every sub-district and union of the country.

The training lasted a month with daily classes. The topics included:

- Internet browsing
- MS Word
- Email
- Skype
- Photocopy
- Fax

All the topics were taught by integrating information on safe migration practices. It included online registration with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and visa checking, among others. By the end of the training, 5 of the trainees had completed their online registration with BMET on their own, and 4 had migrated safely to work in UAE, Malaysia





and Oman. Each trainee was also provided with a certificate by the UDC upon completion of training.

The ICT training has helped 12 young men enhance their ICT skills and employability. Similar initiatives are also being undertaken in Tangail, a district in central Bangladesh.

### **Case 1.3.4. Starting early awareness on safe migration with school children**

Migrant workers from Bangladesh are relatively young – more than three quarters belong to the 18 – 35 age group<sup>11</sup>. Schools are therefore an important starting point for generating awareness

on safe migration practices. The SMBW project realized this and piloted an innovation in Narsingdi, a district in central Bangladesh, where up to 8 per cent of the population works abroad. Courtyard sessions were carried out by the project in 164 schools, colleges and madrasas, in collaboration with head teachers, to promote safe migration and remittance management, with the participation of 3,726 students of grade 10. This helped reach aspiring and existing migrants among students' friends and families, and generate awareness. With more community engagement, these children may become the community champions of safe migration, informing others and ultimately, implementing safe migration choices in their own lives.

<sup>11</sup> The Homecoming – Profiling the returning migrant workers of Bangladesh, ILO, MoEWOE



02

## INNOVATION AREA

Support to migrants with documentation and registration efforts or legal aid if required

## 2.1. Support to deceived migrants

The SMBW baseline study found that agencies and middlemen often swindle both foreign employers and migrant workers. They do not supply workers based on the employers' requirements, and thus the employee ends up receiving a wage lower than anticipated. As a result, those who migrate through personal networks stand a better chance of meeting employers' job description. They are also likely to earn higher wages than those who migrate through agencies or middlemen.

Besides cheating on the wages, a key form of exploitation by middlemen is the inflated costs that they charge to aspiring migrants. Nearly 42 per cent migrants pay between USD 3,750 to USD 5,000<sup>12</sup> (BDT 300,000 to over 400,000), in addition to passport fees and related expenses, irrespective of the country of destination. Such high costs force aspiring migrants to sell off the last asset they own. Despite paying such high charges, migrants fall victim to illegal and dangerous migration channels, and are often given fake travel documents. This often results in migrants returning home, bankrupt

if they are lucky, or as helpless migrants spending years in foreign jails, untraceable by their families. The SMBW Project helps repatriated migrants who have lost everything, to regain their strength, seek justice and rediscover a dignified livelihood in their own country.

### Case 2.1.1. Recovering from deceit and rediscovering life once at home

"I'm really sorry. One of our beneficiaries has turned up wearing a lungi!", embarrassed by this unexpected comment from a representative of a community-based organization (CBO), we looked up to see a man meekly enter the room. His casual attire was the reason behind the apology. The women accompanying him were aspiring migrants, highly enthusiastic about sharing their experiences with the project, their future plans and which country they wished to migrate to. The man, however, remained quiet, uttering a word or two in a feeble voice, in the local dialect of Pekua, Cox's Bazar. The CBO representative spoke again and introduced the man as one who had spent 52 days on a boat to Malaysia, followed by 14 months in a Malaysian jail after he was arrested from Malaysian

<sup>12</sup> IOM, 2010





waters. The man's family, unable to establish any contact with him for months, sought help from local authorities, NGOs and international organisations who rescued him and helped bring him home.

His eyes looked lost. How was it possible that this man, who knew no other language than his own dialect, had never left Cox's Bazar; had no specific skills or the basic cognisance or strength to try and track his middleman acquaintance who had swindled him leaving him penniless, and physically and emotionally shattered; had set on a voyage to an entirely strange land through dangerous routes?

"Did you try to contact the middleman after you returned?" we asked. He stared at us with glazed eyes. The CBO representative tried to explain the question to him in his dialect but all we heard in response again was indistinct murmur. The CBO representative explained that the middleman was linked to powerful local networks. We had so much more to ask him – "How much money did you lose?"; "Do you want to try to go abroad again?"; "What is your name?!" But it seemed almost cruel to even remind him of the ordeal he was so desperately trying to forget.

The Project is counselling him to help him recover. Once he finds his lost confidence again, the project plans to file a general diary with the local police and link him up with legal aid so that the perpetrators can be penalized and he can be

compensated. The project also has plans to provide a form of support to the man so that he can revive his livelihood.

### **Case 2.1.2. Retrieval of USD 44,024 (BDT 3.47 million) from middlemen, and paying back aspiring migrants who never received their visas**

The SMBW project has used some of its innovation grant to help retrieve lost money belonging to aspiring migrants who had paid middlemen for visas that they never received. Some support is also being provided to carry out arbitration to help retrieve the visas promised but never delivered by middlemen.

In Mymensingh, a district in central Bangladesh, at least a third of international migration takes place through middlemen, and at least half of aspiring migrants go through recruiting agencies, according to the SMBW baseline study. This makes the city's aspiring migrants more prone to exploitation by middlemen and recruiting agencies, unless they make informed choices. Migration through personal networks is very low in Mymensingh.

The project observed that the intensity of fraud by middlemen was quite high in the district, and undertook measures to identify the victims and penalise the perpetrators. The measures included:

- Use of the innovation grant to mobilise the union committee to help retrieve USD 30,450 (BDT 2.4 million)
- Arbitration through the partner NGO, to retrieve USD 9,135 (BDT 720,000) from middlemen
- Arbitration through BRAC's Safe Migration Facilitation Centre (SMFC) to retrieve USD 634 (BDT 50,000) from a middleman

An elated Debanondo Mondal, the field supervisor of the SMFC in Mymensingh, proudly acknowledged that the local government representatives noted a significant reduction in complaints of fraud by migration middlemen in the areas where the SMBW project works. It was also a notable achievement that the project managed to bridge the gap between the people and the local administration. This was done by mobilising the union committee in the arbitration process and demonstrating the union committee's significant role in retrieving the lost money. This helped rebuild the community's trust in the local government.

In Khulna, a south-western district in Bangladesh, Zakir Hossain, participated in the SMBW project's pre-decision training. He realized that the migration channel he had chosen and already paid USD 3,806 (BDT 300,000) for was not safe or legal. Subsequently, he changed his mind and redeemed the money from the middleman with help from the project's arbitration service. Another aspiring

migrant in Khulna, Shujon Bishwash, had paid USD 4,440 (BDT 350,000) and was also waiting on his visa for a long time. The project provided him with support through arbitration, and reached a peaceful closure with his middleman who finally handed over the travel documents back to him. Shujon has now migrated to Malaysia and is in safe hands. In Dhaka, the project has facilitated the retrieval of USD 1,205 (BDT 95,000) which dishonest middlemen had fraudulently taken from three aspiring migrants. Similar initiatives of retrieving aspiring migrants' money lost to dishonest middlemen are underway also in the districts of Kushtia, in western Bangladesh, and Comilla, in eastern Bangladesh.



# 03

## INNOVATION AREA

Support to families in managing the initial transition period after a family member migrates

## 3.1. Welfare

**M**igrating to foreign lands for work, especially for less skilled migrants, is a process full of apprehension, risks and fear. Migrants are faced with fears of not reaching the host country and being unable to adjust to a new culture, new job and a new social circle if there is one at all. The sense of insecurity is high especially when all the transitions happen with their families and friends living thousands of miles away. At the same time, their concern for their families' wellbeing is an added stress. Such level of intense stress has over the years caused many migrants to suffer from cardiac diseases and in many cases, eventually death.

The government has a number of schemes to support migrant workers and their families, through the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF)<sup>13</sup>. Most migrants and their families however remain unaware of the existence of such state support regardless of their entitlement. The government's existing financial grants<sup>14</sup> include:

- Payment of USD 3,806 (BDT 300,000) to a deceased migrant worker's family (in addition to USD 444 (BDT 35,000) for burial)
- Payment of USD 1,270 (BDT 100,000) to an injured worker
- Stipends for the children of the migrant workers

The SMBW project works through CBOs that have extensive networks and form strong partnerships with the District Employment and Manpower Offices (DEMO). This has helped the project identify migrant workers and their families and link them to the schemes that they are entitled to.

### **Case 3.1.1. Facilitating payment of USD 12,687 (BDT 1 million) to families of four deceased migrant workers in Faridpur and Mymensingh**

Faridpur is a relatively poor district towards southwest Bangladesh where approximately 16 – 28 per cent of the population lives in poverty. Situated along the river Padma, Faridpur is home to many whose houses have been washed away by flood and river bank erosion. Only 9 per cent of the Faridpur workforce constitutes industrial labour while a

<sup>13</sup> WEWF: government administered single trust fund pooled from the mandatory membership contributions of migrant workers, investment and interest income on these funds, and income from other sources – source: ILO

<sup>14</sup> Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), 2015



made Mymensingh prosperous but the heyday was lost to the rise of cheaper, synthetic substitutes. Migration from Mymensingh is very low - less than 2.25 per cent of the district population.

staggering 52 per cent is employed in the informal sector mostly as casual labour<sup>15</sup>. Faridpur is a high migration area as more than 8 per cent of the district's population lives abroad, according to the project baseline.

The SMBW project identified families of three deceased migrants in Faridpur, informed them about the death payment and helped put forward their applications to the DEMO. The project's strong partnership with the DEMO helped draw significant leverage and the households received a total amount of USD 8,840 (BDT 700,000) as death benefit.

Mymensingh, a central district with nearly 50 per cent of the population living in poverty in most places, relies mostly on agriculture for livelihoods. The historical golden fiber, jute, had once

The SMBW project helped redeem USD 3,806 (BDT 300,000) for a deceased migrant worker's family in Mymensingh. This was made possible with support from local newspapers that published the news and urged the DEMO to pay.

### **Case 3.1.2. Helping deceased migrants' families to receive death benefit**

Abdul Barek was from Madaripur. He had been working in Dubai for three years as a tailor and was the only earning member of the family. He had a son and a daughter.

Working abroad in a new environment without family, friends and relatives was a challenge for Abdul, but he continued to work hard so he could send USD 190 – 317 (BDT 15,000 to 25,000) home every month. The money helped his wife Mahmuda to take care of household expenses and send the

<sup>15</sup> R8257 Understanding Urban Livelihoods, DfID

children to school. Abdul was earning just enough to run his family, and as a result, the need to save and repay loans that he had taken before leaving the country were brushed under the carpet.

Unfortunately, in December 2014, Abdul Barek had a stroke while working in Dubai. He breathed his last in a hospital in Dubai and his dead body arrived in Bangladesh a month later. Mahmuda received the cost of burial at the airport and realised that there was no more money to pay off the loans or to meet the basic expenses of her children. The pressure was mounting on Mahmuda.

Emotionally and financially shattered, Mahmuda attended a Union Council meeting where the Chairman discussed a financial grant that the Government provides to the families of deceased migrants and that the SMBW project helps migrants and their family members to apply for this benefit. Mahmuda contacted the local CBO implementing the project. The CBO helped Mahmuda submit her application to the WEFW through the SMFC. A few months later, Mahmuda received a financial grant of USD 3,788 (BDT 300,000) from the DEMO in Faridpur, upon the death of her migrant husband. Mahmuda paid off USD 1,269 (BDT 100,000) of her husband's loans and saved the remaining USD 2,525 (BDT 200,000) of the financial grant even though there were more loans to be paid off. She believes that the money she has set aside would help with her children's future and repay the remaining loans.

### Case 3.1.3. Enabling access to stipends for the children of migrant workers

Stipends for meritorious children of migrant workers, mobilised through the WEFW is an impressive policy measure introduced by the government in 2012. This facility however is little known among the families of migrant workers. The scheme provides stipends to migrant workers' children who pass the following exams with GPA 5<sup>16</sup>:

- Primary School Certificate (PSC) exams with GPA 5: USD 11.42 (BDT 900) per month; USD 19 (BDT 1,500) annually for purchase of books and other reading materials
- Junior School Certificate (JSC) exams with GPA 5: USD 12.69 (BDT 1,000) per month; USD 25.37 (BDT 2,000) annually for purchase of books and other reading materials
- Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams with GPA 5: USD 19 (BDT 1,500) per month; USD 38.06 (BDT 3,000) annually for purchase of books and other reading materials
- Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams with GPA 5: USD 25.37 (BDT 2,000) per month; USD 38.06 (BDT 3,000) annually for purchase of books and other reading materials

<sup>16</sup> The Financial Express, October 2013

Due to little awareness about the scheme, many children who are entitled to the benefits remain deprived of it. The SMBW project, through its CBO networks works to identify such children and enables their participation in the scheme through close partnership with the DEMOs that administer this stipend at the local level. In Narsingdi, the SMBW project has helped identify 39 children and linked them to the DEMO for the stipends that they are entitled to.

## 3.2. Connectivity

**A**lthough gradually increasing, the number of women migrating for work is still lower than that of men. As a result, when men leave to work abroad, their mothers and wives find it almost impossible to communicate with them as international phone calls from Bangladesh are expensive. They wait for days till they receive a call from the other end to convey the smallest of messages.

### Case 3.2.1. Connecting families back home with migrants working abroad

Chittagong is the second most important commercial centre after Dhaka. Mirsharai, a sub-district in Chittagong is relatively prosperous where only 15 per cent of the population lives in poverty, thanks to the city's industry-based employment opportunities and its key role in international trade. Despite internal job opportunities,

Chittagong accounted for 5.88 per cent of the total international labour migration from Bangladesh, the second largest contribution from amongst all districts as of 2015 (BMET).

Recognising the communication needs of migrant workers and their families, the SMBW project identified an opportunity that could be innovatively leveraged to mitigate the communication problem at the lowest cost possible. As of 2014, 74 per cent of the country's population had access to a mobile phone<sup>17</sup>. Internet penetration is closely shadowing mobile phone subscription as 90 per cent of the 60 million (38 per cent of the population) internet users access the internet through mobile phones<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, the global smart phone revolution has not left Bangladesh behind and it is estimated that in 2015, 20 per cent of mobile phone users in Bangladesh were using smart phones<sup>19</sup>.

Given the relatively lower poverty levels in Mirsharai and the remittance income of households, the ownership of smart phones is high. In many cases, migrant workers bring back smart phones as gifts to their family members. However, the use of the smart phones is kept to a minimum as households often lack knowledge about the phones' functionalities and the use of internet at least to speak to their family members abroad.

<sup>17</sup> ANALYSIS, Country overview: Bangladesh, GSMA, August 2014

<sup>18</sup> BTRC, March 2016

<sup>19</sup> Ericsson, 2015



Seven Information Officers (IO) deployed by partner NGO Shongshoptaque, carry out the SMBW project's core activities of raising awareness on safe migration across Hinguli, Shaherkhali, Khoyachhara, Hayitkandi, Jowarganj, Wahedpur, Mayani unions of Mirsarai. Besides their usual work, the IOs have begun to identify households that own a smart phone and have at least one family member working abroad. Each household is then introduced to pre-paid internet packages of 10MB, provided support to top up internet on their phones and install 'imo', a video chat app that is popular in the area. To date, the SMBW project has provided such support to 75 households, reaching mostly women. The service continues to identify new households and connect families with their relatives working abroad.

### 3.3. Remittance Management

Remittance inflow to Bangladesh constitutes 9 per cent of the GDP and has contributed to 1.5 per cent reduction in poverty. Research from early 2000s indicate that less than half of the remittances came through legal channels and most of the remittance received was spent on household consumption<sup>20</sup>. The research implied that policy measures should encourage saving and/or investment of household incomes that exceed subsistence needs. However, more recent schools of thought indicate that remittance contributes to the economy as it helps boost household consumption and is able to create a positive multiplier effect<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Siddiqui & Abrar 2001

<sup>21</sup> Mahmud, Ahmed & Karim, Dynamics of Remittance in Bangladesh: A Case Study on United Commercial Bank (UCB), 2015

Nevertheless, though the use of legal channels for sending remittance has increased since earlier years, and new instruments have emerged to augment the convenience of migrants and their families to send and receive remittances through legal channels, there continues to be a need for improved financial literacy and remittance management. The SMBW project through its innovation grants and regular community mobilisation activities, generates awareness on the services and boons of legal remittance channels. In addition, the awareness activities also encourage people to save and invest on productive assets and activities.



Halim sent remittances home to his wife, Yasmin. The money was spent on their children's education and on running the household. Some savings had accumulated and with that, Yasmin invested in the share market. She incurred a loss and opened a transportation business, which she had to shut down. In both cases, Yasmin felt that her businesses had failed because she had little knowledge about managing business and she wished there was someone to advise her on where and how she should invest her husband's hard-earned savings.

Yasmin happened to attend a courtyard meeting on remittance management, arranged by the SMBW project in her neighbourhood. The information disseminated through the meeting helped stimulate Yasmin's interest and awareness on savings and investment. Eventually, she contacted the SMBW project Volunteer running the remittance management meeting for some

### **Case 3.3.1. Improved remittance management to promote investment**

Yasmin's husband Halim was an electrician in Chapai Nawabganj in northern Bangladesh. He knew the skills he had would help him earn more abroad. With the help of a relative living abroad, he migrated first to Saudi Arabia as an electrician. He worked there for 10 years, and then moved to Qatar to work as a driver for a monthly salary of USD 507.48 (BDT 40,000). One day, Halim had an accident and a significant amount of his savings had to be spent on his treatment.

personal advice on her planned business venture. Yasmin now saves a portion of the remittance sent by Halim every month and often contacts the Volunteer for suggestions.

## 3.4. Engaging returnee migrants

**M**igrant workers who have no social network in their host countries can face difficulties with integration. Similarly, when they return to Bangladesh, their reintegration into the country, albeit familiar surroundings and proximity to family, becomes difficult. During this period, they often go through psychological and financial uncertainties in their efforts to find suitable livelihoods back in the home country.

However, migrant workers bring back a wealth of skills and experiences from destination countries which local industries could put to good use given that they often lack skilled workers. According to ILO<sup>22</sup>, more than three quarters of returnee migrants belong to the 18-35-year age group which also makes them eligible to be active members of the labour force back home. Moreover, nearly 80 per cent of these returnees belong to Chittagong and Dhaka, the two largest commercial hubs of the country.

While the potential use of such a productive resource would be of significant economic benefit to the country, the first step is helping the returnee migrants reintegrate into the social network and helping them settle down. The SMBW project works with Returnee Migrants Forum, which are local groups of returnee migrants mobilised to share their thoughts and plans with each other and provide advice and guidance to aspiring migrants, from their experience.

### Case 3.4.1. Rediscovering life as an SMBW project Volunteer after being sent back home from Malaysia

Kashem was a theatre artiste but always dreamt of going abroad. With his meagre income from the theatre, it was difficult for him to run his family and save up for his children's future. Around 2006, a middleman gave him an offer of going to Malaysia as a carpenter on a salary of USD 4.08 (MYR 18) per day. Kashem's age-old dream of going abroad lured him on and the need for collecting and verifying information on safe migration escaped him completely. Kashem took a loan and sold his land to mobilize USD 2,525 (BDT 200,000) to pay the middleman.

When he landed in Malaysia, Kashem was directly taken to an island. He neither got his promised work nor the promised salary. Instead he was sold. All his documents were confiscated. There were many Bangladeshis as well as nationals of

<sup>22</sup> The Homecoming: Profiling the returning migrant workers of Bangladesh; ILO, BILS, MoWOW, BMET, BEF; 2015

other countries with him. Kashem realised that the factory where he was supposed to work was shut down a long time ago.

Instead of carpentry, Kashem was assigned to clean a forest for construction. In fear of the employer who kept threatening workers, Kashem spent his days on limited food and water. He worked there for two and a half months and saved USD 152 (BDT 12,000). Subsequently, Kashem was sold to another employer and was assigned in a plywood factory. He was promised USD 190 (BDT 15,000), but ended up getting only USD 76 (BDT 6,000). He worked there for 7 months and saved USD 190 (BDT 15,000). Too much work pressure made Kashem sick and eventually, he was sent home by his agent.

Back home, Kashem has gone back to his work in the theatre. Now that he has learned it the hard way, he realizes the importance of information and safe migration practices, and has joined the SMBW project as a Volunteer. He runs a small snack shop and has helped his wife go to Lebanon as a housekeeper.

### **Case 3.4.2. Finding prosperity back home after deception abroad**

Sulaiman is a 55-year-old migrant worker from Ullahpara, Sirajganj, who went to Malaysia in 1994 through a local middleman. He sold his land and gave USD 825 (BDT 65,000) to the middleman.

The middleman promised him a job as a construction worker in Malaysia but instead, Sulaiman was taken to a forest in Thailand.

Sulaiman went without food for days and was not given any work. After a few days, he ended up in prison where he was physically abused by other prisoners.

After 20 days in prison, Sulaiman was released and sent back to Bangladesh through the middleman who had processed his migration. He did not get any of his money back from the middleman, but after a lot of struggle he managed to open a spice shop in his village. Gradually, the business expanded and Sulaiman is now a successful entrepreneur.

In addition, Sulaiman is a forum member of SMBW project's returnee migrants' forum solely out of the urge to ensure that aspiring migrants are aware of the dangers of illegal migration.





Partnership:

