

Contents

Preface	xi
Chapter One: Bangladesh	1
Introduction	1
Part I	4
1 Existing Data on Migration	4
1.1 Statistics on Total Migration	4
1.2 Skill Level of Migrant Workers	6
1.3 Country of Destination	6
1.4 Flow of Remittance	7
1.5 Statistics on Women's Migration	7
1.6 Data on Female Migration from Survey of Recruiting Agencies	10
1.7 Skill Composition of Female Migrant Workers	11
1.8 Country of Destination	13
2 Governmental, Non-Governmental and Private Institutions	15
2.1 Institutions of Recruitment	16
2.1.1 Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training	16
2.1.2 The Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL)	17
2.1.3 Private Recruiting Agencies	18
2.2 Civil Society Organizations	19
2.2.1 Mainstream NGOs	19
2.2.2 Women's Activist Groups	20
2.2.3 Human Rights Organizations	21
2.2.4 Migrant Workers Associations and the Trade Unions	25
2.2.5 Research Organizations	27
3 National and International Laws and Their Observance	28
3.1 National Legislation on Labour Migration	28
3.1.1 Ban and Restrictions on Women's Migration	30
3.2 International Labour Standards	31
3.2.1 The UN Migration Convention, 1990	31
3.2.2 ILO Instruments on Migrant Workers	32
Part II	35
4 Migration Dynamics	35
4.1 Methodology	35
4.2 General Information	37
4.3 Factors Contributing to Women's Migration	43
4.3.1 Economic Factors	43
4.3.2 Political Factors	44

4.3.3	Social Factors	45
4.3.4	Catalytic Factors	46
4.4	Procedural Aspects of Migration	50
4.4.1	Agents of Migration	50
5	Conditions of Employment in the Host Country	53
5.1	Conditions of Work	53
5.1.1	Length of Contract	53
5.1.2	Hours of Work	56
5.1.3	Holidays	56
5.1.4	Method of Communication	58
5.1.5	How Remittances are Sent	59
5.2	Problems Faced Abroad	59
5.2.1	Food Related Problems	60
5.2.2	Health Problems	61
5.2.3	Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse	61
5.2.4	Breach of Contract	62
5.2.5	Restriction of Movement	62
5.3	Access to Bangladeshi Missions Abroad	63
6	Economic Impact of Migration	65
6.1	Employment Opportunities	66
6.2	Use of Remittance	68
6.3	Assets Lost and Gained	72
7	Impact of Migration on Women Migrants and Their Family Members	75
7.1	Impact of Migration on Children	75
7.2	Impact of Migration on Male Household Members	78
7.3	Impact of Migration on Elderly Women	83
7.4	Impact of Migration on Migrant Women	83
8	Conclusions and Recommendations	88
8.1	Conclusions	
8.2	Recommendations	

Chapter Two: Sri Lanka	99
Introduction	99
Part I	104
1 Existing Data On Migration	104
1.1 Migration Statistics	105
1.2 Statistics on Female Migration	107
1.3 Skill Composition	108
1.3.1 SLBFE Database	108
2 Governmental, Non-Governmental and Private Institutions	108
2.1 Management of the Migration Process	110
2.2 Non-governmental Organizations	111
3 National and International Laws and Their Observance	112
3.1 National Policy on Labour Migration	112
3.2 Specific Measures to Address Female Migration	116
3.3 International Laws	117
Part II	119
4 Migration Dynamics	119
4.1 Economic, Social and Demographic Factors	119
4.1.1 Economic Profile	119
4.1.2 Social and Demographic Profile	120
4.2 Process of Recruitment	121
4.2.1 Training	122
4.2.2 Source of Finance	123
5 Conditions of Employment in the Host Country	123
5.1 Demand for Migrant Labour	123
5.1.1 Role of Agents	124
5.1.2 The Regulatory Framework	124
5.1.3 Alternative Arrangements	125
5.2 Problems Encountered By Female Domestic Workers	126
5.2.1 Working Conditions	126
5.2.2 Remuneration	128
5.2.3 Communication	128
5.2.4 Ill-health, Mistreatment and Abuse	128

6 Economic Impact of Migration	130
6.1 Household Income	130
6.2 Acquisition of Assets	131
6.3 Investments and Savings	132
7 Social Impact of Migration	134
7.1 Assessment of the Outcome of Migration	134
7.2 Impact of Migration on Women	135
7.2.1 Changes in Decision Making	135
7.2.2 Division of Labour	139
7.3 Impact of Migration on Family Members	142
7.3.1 Impact on the Quality of Life	142
7.3.2 Workload of Family Members	143
7.3.3 Family Stability	144
7.4 Changes in Gender Roles and Values	145
7.4.1 Women as Providers	145
7.4.2 Perceptions of Female Migration	147
8 Conclusions and Recommendations	149
8.1 Predictors of Success	149
8.2 Female Empowerment	151
8.3 Recommendations	153

List of Tables - Chapter One (Bangladesh)

Table 1.1	Total number of persons having officially migrated by year, skill composition and remittance sent during 1976 – 99	5
Table 1.2	Extent of women’s migration in comparison to total flow (1991-98)	9
Table 1.3	Migration of women through the recruiting agencies over time	11
Table 1.4	Distribution of female migrants sent by recruiting agencies by profession	12-13
Table 1.5	Country of destination of women migrants who went through recruiting agencies	14
Table 1.6	Total number of nurses by country of Destination	15
Table 2.1	Mode of recruitment by year	16-17
Table 3.1	Minimum wage of migrant workers per month	29-30
Table 4.1	Number of women migrant workers by source of information	36
Table 4.2	Distribution of returnee and non-returnee female migrants by area	37
Table 4.3	Age distribution of female migrant workers by area	38
Table 4.4	Religious faith of female migrants	38
Table 4.5	Marital status of female migrants by area	39
Table 4.6	Family size of female migrants by area	39
Table 4.7	Year of migration of 200 women migrant Workers	39
Table 4.8	Country of destination by area	41
Table 4.9	Destination of 200 female migrants by type of work	41
Table 4.10	Education level of female migrant workers by type of work and area	42
Table 4.11	Information sources for migration by area (150 returnees)	49
Table 4.12	Agents of migration by area (150 returnees)	51
Table 4.13	Sources of financing for migration (rural/urban)	51
Table 4.14	Total cost of migration by source in value terms	53
Table 5.1	Contract years of female migrants	54
Table 5.2	Duration of stay and completion of first contract (200 cases)	54
Table 5.3	Causes of return before completion of contract	55
Table 5.4	Hours of work	57
Table 5.5	Method of communication with the family	58
Table 5.6	Various problems faced by 150 returnees in the host country	60
Table 5.7	Difference between contract wage and wage received abroad	62
Table 5.8	Support received from Bangladeshi missions abroad (150 returnees)	63
Table 6.1	Type and level of employment before and during migration period	66
Table 6.2	Work situation before and after migration	67

Table 6.3	Monthly income of female migrants before and during migration period (in Taka)	68	
Table 6.4	Female migrant workers' income as percentage of family income before and during migration (200 cases)	68	
Table 6.5	Remittance use by group	68-69	
Table 6.6	Status of loan repayment by area of origin	70	
Table 6.7	Assets lost and gained (in no. of cases)	72	
Table 6.8	Additional gains from migration (150 returnees)	72	
Table 6.9	Meeting of expectation by categories (no. of respondents)		73
Table 6.10	Baggage items (150 returnees)	73-74	
Table 6.11	No. of respondents who can sustain their improved economic status by type of work	74	
Table 7.1	No. of female migrants staying overseas for more than 5 year by marital status	82	
Table 7.2	Response of 150 returnees about future migration desire and action	86	
Table 7.3	Ownership of land bought through remittance (37 cases)	88	

List of Tables - Chapter Two (Sri Lanka)

Table 1.0	The sample distribution	102	
Table 1.1	Disparities between statistics of migration through registered agencies and estimates of migration from all sources for selected years	104	
Table 1.2	Number of labour migrants by sex from 1986 to 1998	106	
Table 1.3	Labour migration to selected countries in 1997 (through the SLBFE and registered agencies)	107	
Table 1.4	Skill composition of migrants	109	
Table 4.1	Sources of information on migration	121-122	
Table 5.1	Problems faced by migrants (responses from female and male returnees)	127-128	
Table 6.1	Distribution of households in income groups	131	
Table 6.2	Average earnings	131	
Table 6.3	Increase in asset ownership linked to migrant earnings	132	
Table 6.4	Average cumulative cash savings per person	133	
Table 7.1	Distribution of migrant households by 'outcome' of migration	135	
Table 7.2	Decision making in male migrant household (before and during migration)	136-137	
Table 7.3	Decision making in female migrant households (before, during and after migration)	137	
Table 7.4	Distribution of female household tasks during and after migration	139-140	
Table 7.5	Tasks performed by husbands and wives before and after female migration	141	
Table 7.6	Perception of female migration's impact on		

Preface

The rapid growth of international migration in the 1990s, along with the changes in the nature of international migration, has made it an increasingly important and often politically sensitive issue in many parts of the world.

In some regions, notably Asia, the trend over the last decade has been the “feminization” of labour migration, particularly temporary migration. A large number of migrants today are women, traveling beyond the borders of their countries to escape from poverty or to improve the socioeconomic situation of their families. The current pattern is that women workers often migrate alone as single persons, unaccompanied by family members, rather than as dependents of their husbands which was previously the case.

Female migrants are at greatest risk of suffering human rights abuses since they work mostly in the unregulated sector of the economy such as domestic service, not covered by protective labour legislation or policy measures. However, as most women have obligations with their families back home, they work under those conditions and in many cases succeed in improving the socioeconomic situation of their families and their own position at home and in the community at large.

While some recent studies on the subject have addressed the issue of female labor migration, much still needs to be done to understand the impact of women’s migration on the families left behind and on their own empowerment both at home and abroad.

To fill this gap, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) commissioned two case studies in 1999 focussing on the Asian region, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The main objective of the case studies was to examine the impact of temporary female labor migration on the families left behind and on their own traditional roles and status. Initiatives of both governments and civil society organizations were examined in these studies in terms of the policies and programmes put in place to protect the rights and improve the situation of migrant women in these countries.

After the completion of the fieldwork, INSTRAW and IOM convened a Meeting of experts on female labor migration in Geneva. Experts from various developing countries were invited to review the preliminary findings of these two studies and to make recommendations for action. The report of the Meeting was published by INSTRAW and IOM in April 2000 and is available from both organizations. It contains proposals for action by states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. The present publication contains the two case studies, the findings of the surveys and the authors’ conclusions.

INSTRAW and IOM hope that this publication will not only alert governments and civil society to the situation of temporary female labor migration in developing countries and to the specific problems faced by women, but it will also contribute to the initiation of relevant action through the implementation of programmes and policy measures to improve the current situation.

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