

## Socio-economic Conditions of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined socio-economic condition of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. The study consists of 215 sample Bangladeshi migrant workers of the various sectors located in five largest urban growth poles in Peninsular Malaysia and judgment sampling technique was used to select this sample. This study found that 71% of Bangladeshi migrant workers draw salary between RM800 to RM 1200 and 58% of them are the only bread winner in their family back home. The results also depicted that 57% of the respondents left their initial job in Malaysia due to lower salary, employers' misconduct, poor housing, unhealthy and risky working environment. More than half of the respondents reported that their visa renewal fee is high compare to their salary. Our literature reviews revealed that Bangladeshi migrant workers are not only contributing to their economy back home but also providing a valuable service to the socio-economic development of Malaysia by working in the sectors that the main stream society in Malaysia is not yet ready to work. Hence, this migrant community should not be treated as temporary visitors rather should be treated as indispensable and contributing factor of the social and economic development of Malaysia. There should be initiative from both government of Malaysia and Bangladesh to inspect their health; safety; welfare and other related issues of the workplace and take necessary actions in this regard.

**KEY WORDS:** Socio-economic conditions, Bangladeshi migrant workers, migrant workers' contributions to home and host country, employers' misconduct, risky working environment

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### INTRODUCTION

Millions of people across the world migrate each year from one place to another place for better life. Some of them manage to improve their living conditions after migration. While some of them suffer even more than their own country due to mismatch in their qualification to the host countries, language, culture, dishonest manpower agents, accident in workplace, poor housing, acceptance by the people of receiving countries and others[1-4]. Migrant workers not only change their destiny but also improve the living condition of their families back home [3, 5-7]. Thus, migrant workers income became one of the key drivers of economic development for remittance receiving countries [8-13]. Remittances work as the most powerful means to develop the socioeconomic condition of the migrant workers family back home [2, 5, 8, 9, 14]. Therefore, migrant workers' rights became a very important factor for both home and host governments. This encourages researcher to examine the socioeconomic conditions of migrant workers in different countries. As such this research has focused on Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia since stories about Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia- illegal, returning home after being tortured physically and financially by dishonest manpower agents, accident in workplace, poor housing and social crime- appear frequently in the daily news[1, 2, 15-18].

Bangladesh is one of the biggest exporters of migrant workers in south Asia[19, 20]. Approximately 5.4 million Bangladeshi are currently working in more than 100 countries[21]. Bangladesh became one of the top 10 foreign remittance recipient countries in the world[22, 23]. Malaysia however, became one of the major employers of Bangladeshi workers[24]. In last 10 years (2003-2013), about 0.443, 661 million Bangladeshi workers came to Malaysia for work. Till 2012, \$847.49 million of remittances are sent to Bangladesh from Malaysia (Bangladesh Bank, 2013). Bangladeshi migrant workers' remittances represent 13% of the country GDP (\$10.7 billion in 2010). But surprisingly about 55 to 60 per cent of Bangladeshi migrant workers are recruited through individual initiatives and social connections. Furthermore, majority of them cannot speak either English or Malay when they come to Malaysia for the first time. Limited or no experience of the assigned works further complicates their socio-economic life. Perhaps, therefore, they are vulnerable to exploitation and lack of protection in each phase of migration cycle- recruitment, employment and others (RMMRU, 2011). Bangladeshi migrant workers' cost-benefits analysis shows that they spend at least RM 100-200 million per month for medical, food, clothing and others in Malaysia which

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contribute to the total consumption of Malaysia. The contributions by Bangladeshi migrant workers to Malaysia are significant. Therefore, a deeper understanding about Bangladeshi migrant workers socio-economic life in Malaysia may significantly help both governments to take actions to improve their quality of life which will assist them to provide better service to Malaysia, and greater contribution to their economy back home. Prior studies on this area mainly focused on the migrant workers' remittances, contribution to the home country and segregation of countries based on number of migrant workers and remittance [5, 6, 8, 9, 11-14, 19-21, 25-28]. Thus, more research is clearly needed. This study is different from previous studies in three folds. First, this study focuses on migrant workers' socioeconomic life in the host country. This is significant because living conditions of workers determine their productivity and provided service quality. In addition, better living conditions retain reputation of the host country to their supplier country. Second, this study identifies the determinants of migrant workers job changing in Malaysia. This will be a very important finding for the employers of Malaysia. Third, it provides discussion about the importance of taking care of the migrant workers for both host and home country governments. To take a step further, this study investigates several research issues relating to the socio-economic conditions of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. The aim is to: (a) identify their age, marital status, religious, educational background, earning per month from present job owner, monthly expenditures and savings capacity of workers, (b) investigate whether the respondents have improved their economic condition back home, (c) know the reasons for shifting from the previous job of the respondents if there is any. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on Bangladeshi migrant workers. Section 3 details the data and methods used in this study. Section 4 provides the results, discussion, and conclusion.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Contribution of Bangladeshi workers to Malaysian economy**

Malaysia has experienced stable and robust economic growth with significant reliance on foreign workers. There are many important sectors such as construction and plantation where there were acute shortages of Malaysian workers. Besides, Malaysian main stream society is not yet ready to work in those sectors which shot the demand of foreign workers in Malaysia. Moreover, small business owners cannot afford to hire local people because they demand higher salary and more workplace facilities compare to migrant workers. Migrant workers are one of the factors that contribute to the Malaysian export oriented companies to be competitive in world market as it makes the labor cost cheap. Bangladeshi foreign workers provide many economic benefits that perhaps outweigh the drawbacks of their presence in the Malaysian labor market. First, they significantly contribute to the alleviation of labor shortage in Malaysian labor market and economic growth. The temporary migrant workers fill the excess labor demand in the sectors that are going through a rapid structural transformation and losing their competitiveness in the world market. Usually, firms that participate in the huge competitive markets prefer migrant workers due to the greater flexibility in their employment and wage. Second, migrant workers work as a buffer to reduce the impact of the business cycles on the Malaysian economy through accelerating growth during economic booming and maintaining low rate of unemployment during recessions and restraining wage inflation during high growth through coming off excess foreign workers.

### **Contribution of Bangladeshi workers to Bangladesh economy**

The remittances send by Bangladeshi migrant workers from Malaysia play a vital role in micro and macro level the country for instance; it helps to develop their families' living standard. This remittance constitute the largest amount of the total international capital flow to Bangladesh [6]. Previous studies also documented that remittances accelerate the school going numbers of child among the family that consist of migrant workers [27]. In addition, remittances help a family in multi-dimensional ways e.g. changing financial condition, paying debt, increase in savings etc. Usually, most of the remittances send by the migrant workers are used for daily expenditure, clothing, and housing. A recent study [29] has found remittance sent from Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh create significant changes in food consumption, and educational opportunities. [30] found by interviewing one-hundred families that 20.45% of remittances are used for food, clothing, and health, 16.43% for investment in land, 15.02% for building or repairing houses, 15.02% for repayment of loan, and 10.55%, for other purposes like business investment, social ceremonies, savings etc. To emphasize their macro level contributions we can look into the most recent financial crisis and its consequences. For example, the most severe problem in recent financial crisis faced by the world is unemployment. According ILO, one in three workers in the labor force is currently either unemployed or poor where 75 million young people around the world are unemployed. But the scenario of Bangladesh shows a complete different story, where the political instability is hampering the economic growth of this country not the crisis. However, remittance flow to the family members contributes not only the family itself but also the national income.

International migration helps Bangladesh economy in two ways [3]. Firstly, it helps to stable unemployment rate, and increases the inflow of remittances which inexpensive source of much needed foreign exchange. [31] found that each additional migrant worker brings in \$816 remittances annually.

### **Life of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia**

Majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia are engaged in 3D (dirty, demeaning and dangerous) type of works since most of them are considered as unskilled and inexperienced for high profile jobs. Systematic leakage has led to miserable conditions for some Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly for the illegal workers [32]. In contrast, a big portion of them are getting handsome amount of salary and better life. Even though, majority of them got hollow promises back in their home country. It is also claimed that Bangladeshi workers are getting less salary than the local and Indonesian migrant workers by doing the same type of work [33]. However, the overall life satisfaction of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia has improved significantly over last two years due to the legalizing of illegal workers. Bangladeshi migrant workers face various problems in their workplace in Malaysia due to new languages, types of work that they are doing for first time in life, culture, ways of doing work (e.g., usages of new technologies), and many more. As a result, many of them feel uncomfortable doing the work that they assigned to do. There are several reasons for Bangladeshi migrant workers to leave their initial job. First, more than half of the migrant workers are not able to understand the contracts of their work due to lack of understanding in either English or Malay language. Therefore, it becomes easy for scrupulous agents to promise them high wages than they actually received. Sometimes, they are forced to work over normal working time without proper payments [34]. Second, the working and living conditions are very poor. For instance, it is very common among the Bangladeshi migrant workers to have a small apartment with large number of residents. Furthermore, some of the employers deduct their salary for the days they are absent due to their sickness and workplace injuries. Lastly, inexperience of current job is playing a vital role to leave the job.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The target population of the study is the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. The survey for this study was conducted in 2012 with interview form. Five cities (Shah Alam, Ulut Langat, Putra Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor Baru) were selected for collecting the primary data and the study took 215 Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia as sample. The interview form covers various aspects relating to the socio-economic conditions of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. Since there is no formal list available for the Bangladeshi migrant workers in those five cities, judgment sampling technique was applied to select the sample. This study also used secondary source which includes the various studies conducted on Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. The collected data were edited; analyzed; and interpreted in line with the research objectives. It should be mentioned here that the researchers contacted (3) Bangladeshi workers from three cities of Malaysia after taking a preliminary interview. These Bangladeshi workers were given clear ideas about the research issues regarding which they were asked to collect data. The reason behind contacting three workers first and follow them to further collect information from the sample Bangladeshi migrant workers is that they will then fill free and will be able to communicate properly to provide the required information regarding the research issues.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

Table 1 below reports the demographic profile of the respondents in addition to some other questions related to their earnings and working experience. Majority of the respondents (93, 43.3%) are between 26 to 35 years old followed by 33.5% in the age group from 12 to 25 years old, 22.8% above 35 years old and 0.5% is below 20 years old. In addition, most of these expatriates are either married (51.6%) or still single (47.9%). All the respondents are Muslims. Most of the respondents (87%) were concentrated in Shah Alam and Kuala Lumpur the rest are scatter in other areas. This is because most of business and factories are concentrated in these two areas. Majority of them 66.5% lived in accommodation provided by the employer while 23.7% rented houses and 9.3 were provided accommodation where they worked. In term of education big chunk of them 88.8% have education up to higher secondary while 7% have diplomas. With regards to the question whether there is a change in family condition back home 60% agreed that there is a change while 11.6% did not coming to Malaysia helped his family back home. Most of the respondents 58% are the only bread winner in the family while 40% indicate that they have other family members who are earning income. Most of the expatriate surveyed have 4 and more dependents while only 8.4% have less than 3 dependents. With regards to the respondents spending behavior a question about what items they spend their earning on majority indicated that they send their money back home to their families while the rest spend

some percentage on medical, food and clothing etc. Part of their spending in Malaysia involves food and livelihood which take RM200-RM400 from 81% of the respondents followed by 16.3% who spend RM400-RM600 per month. For spending on clothing, medical and visa renewal 68% of the respondents spend between RM200 to more than RM600 monthly on these items. About 97% of the respondents send between RM200 to more than RM600 monthly to their families overseas. In terms of savings, about 65% cannot save any earning in Malaysia which is in line with the earlier results that most of their earning are sent overseas to their families. Those who manage to save might have confused what they keep and spent for daily matters as savings. Around 24% indicated that they save between RM200 to more than RM600 monthly. In terms of job stability, majority 86% has been in their current job of the time of the survey between 2 to 5 years. The salary range of these expatriates falls mostly (71%) between RM800 and RM 1200, few (10%) below RM700, about 13% between RM1300 and RM1600 and 6.5% are falls in a group higher than RM1600. Monthly payment method is dominant (92%) way to pay the salary while others modes of paying are hourly basis, based on project or in lump-sum. Majority (87%) of the respondents indicated that they have gained experience from their current jobs. Quite a number of respondents (57%) left their jobs looking for better opportunity due to lower salary in the current jobs which might support the relative free labor market in Malaysia which lead to the responses to the last question which more than half of the respondents are satisfied with their jobs while the rest are not satisfied with their current jobs. Interestingly few refrained from answering this question in either direction which might be interpreted as fear of retribution from their employers.

**Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia**

Title of the question	N =215	%	Title of the question	N = 215	%
<b>Age</b>			<b>Monthly Expenditure (Food and Livelihood)</b>		
<b>Below 20 years</b>	1	0.5	Free/Provided by Owner	2	.93
<b>21-25 years</b>	72	33.5	RM200-RM400	175	81.4
<b>26-35 years</b>	93	43.3	RM400-RM600	35	16.3
<b>Above 35 years</b>	49	22.8	More than RM600	3	1.40
<b>Marital Status</b>			<b>Other Expenditure (Cloth, Medical, Extending Visa etc.)</b>		
<b>Married</b>	111	51.6	Free/Provided by Owner	20	9.30
<b>Single</b>	103	47.9	RM200-RM400	87	40.5
<b>Divorced</b>	1	.47	RM400-RM600	17	7.91
<b>Religion</b>			More than RM600	42	19.5
<b>Islam</b>	215	100	<b>Sending for Family</b>		
<b>Place Name</b>			Not at all	2	.93
<b>Shah Alam</b>	150	69.8	RM200-RM400	22	10.2
<b>Ulut Langat</b>	2	.93	RM400-RM600	56	26
<b>Putra Jaya</b>	2	.93	More than RM600	66	30.70
<b>KL</b>	37	17.2	Sometimes	66	30.70
<b>JB</b>	1	.47	<b>Savings</b>		
<b>Place of Living</b>			Not at all	140	65.12
<b>Hostel</b>	144	67	RM200-RM400	30	13.95
<b>Rented House</b>	51	23.7	RM400-RM600	5	2.33
<b>Working Place</b>	20	9.3	More than RM600	17	7.91
<b>Academic Qualification</b>			Sometimes	13	6.05
<b>Primary- Grade Eight</b>	96	44.7	<b>Duration of Current Job</b>		
<b>Secondary</b>	55	25.6	<1 years	12	5.58
<b>Higher-Secondary</b>	40	18.6	2-5 years	185	86.05
<b>Honours</b>	4	1.86	>5 years	18	8.37
<b>Vocational/Diploma</b>	15	6.98	<b>Salary for Current Job</b>		
<b>None at all</b>	5	2.33	<RM700	21	9.77
<b>Is there any change in your family condition after coming Malaysia</b>					
<b>Not Applicable</b>	25	11.6	RM800-RM1200	153	71.16
<b>Yes</b>	129	60	RM1300-RM1600	27	12.56
<b>No</b>	61	28.6	>RM1600	14	6.51
<b>Any other family earnings</b>			<b>Mode of payment</b>		
<b>Not applicable</b>	6	2.79	Per Hour basis	11	5.12
<b>Yes</b>	85	39.5	Monthly	197	91.63
<b>No</b>	124	57.7	Based on Project	3	1.40
<b>Number of dependents in family</b>			Lump sum	3	1.40
<b>&lt;3</b>	18	8.37	Daily	1	.47
<b>4-5</b>	88	40.9	<b>Experience on Current Job</b>		

6-7	68	31.6	Yes	187	86.51
>8	41	19.1	No	28	13.02
<b>Significant expenditure after coming Malaysia (Except food, residence and dress)</b>					
			<b>Reasons, if change the current job</b>		
Medical	14	6.51	Less Salary	122	56.74
Expenditure in Bangladesh	181	84.2	Employers' misconduct	24	11.16
Travel Expense	1	.47	Poor and risky workplace	9	4.19
Others	18	8.37	Above all	1	.47
In Malaysia	1	.47	Others	1	.47
<b>Are you satisfied in your current job</b>					
				Yes	119
				No	89
				No Comment	6
					2.79

## CONCLUSION

The study found majority of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia are young and almost 50% of them are unmarried. The study also found a significant (88%) number of Bangladeshi migrant workers have completed their higher secondary while 7% have diplomas. The study shows that majority of them lived in accommodation provided by the employer for example, rented apartment or position in workplace. It can be said that the Bangladeshi migrant workers live relatively less healthy physical environment because either many of them share a small apartment or live in a place where they work. The study revealed that a significant portion of Bangladeshi migrant workers are the only bread winner in the family and they could contribute to improve their economic condition back home after migrating in Malaysia. It also shows that most of them have 4 and more dependents while only 8.4% have less than 3 dependents. The study also revealed that though the Bangladeshi migrant workers could develop their family life styles back home regarding food, living and clothing but they couldn't have better life styles for themselves in Malaysia due to the types of work they are involved in and flexibilities that they receive from the employers. Majority (71%) of them earns between RM800 and RM 1200 while few of them earn between RM1300 and RM1600. The researchers found that majority (65%) cannot save any earning in Malaysia which is in line with the earlier results that most of their earning are sent overseas to their families. Majority of the respondents (81%) mentioned that they send their money back home to their families while the rest spend on medical, food, clothing and others which take up to RM200-RM400. The study showed that Majority (87%) of the respondents have gained experience from their current jobs. However, more than half of the respondents reported that their visa renewal fee is high compare to their salary. The results also show that 57% of the respondents left their previous jobs due to lower salary, employers' misconduct, poor housing, unhealthy and risky working environment. Though prior studies on migrant workers in Malaysia revealed that majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia are engaged in 3D (dirty, demeaning and dangerous) type of works and systematic leakage has led to miserable conditions for many of them, particularly for the illegal workers [32]. But, a big portion of them are getting handsome amount of salary and better life. Even though, majority of them got hollow promises back in their home country. Previous studies also documented some severe working condition facing by some Bangladeshi migrant workers for instance, forced long hours working, payment less than promised. Bangladeshi migrant workers also claim that by doing the same type of work and working hours they are getting less salary than the local workers and Indonesian migrant workers [33]. But, it can be said that the overall socio-economic conditions of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia has improved significantly over last two years due to the legalizing of illegal workers. From our extensive literature reviews, we can configure that Bangladeshi migrant workers are playing a vital role in alleviating labor shortage in Malaysian labor market and economic growth. Besides, they are working as a buffer to reduce the impact of the business cycles on the Malaysian economy through accelerating growth during economic booming and maintaining low rate of unemployment during recessions and restraining wage inflation during high growth through coming off excess foreign workers. So, it can be said that Bangladeshi migrant workers are not only contributing to their economy back home but also providing a valuable service to the socio-economic development of Malaysia by working in various sectors in which the main stream society in Malaysia is not yet ready to work. So, this migrant community should not be treated as temporary visitors rather should be treated as indispensable and contributing factor of the social and economic development of Malaysia. There should be initiative from both government of Malaysia and Bangladesh to inspect their health; safety; welfare and other related issues of the workplace and take necessary actions in this regard. This study opens the scope for future research on various issues relating to the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. Some of these are comparative study between Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia and other major receiving country; job satisfaction of Bangladeshi migrant workers

working in different sectors in Malaysia; a socio-economic comparative study between Bangladeshi migrant workers and other migrant workers in Malaysia like Indonesia.

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