



Solidarity with Bangladeshi Migrant Workers Struggling with Covid-19 Pandemic

Bangladesh received remittance worth \$21.75 billion in 2020 while the whole world was suffering from shrinking remittances. The remittances contribute significantly to the country's GDP and foreign currency reserve, having trickledown effects on the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. But can we really be satisfied by saying that we are doing enough for the protection and welfare of migrant workers and their families especially amidst this coronavirus pandemic?

Around 200,000 on-leave migrant workers got stuck at home due to worldwide lockdown. Some 150,000 outgoing migrant workers faced the same situation. Their visas were getting expired and thereof, their possibility to migrate was getting thin. The situation created tension among migrant workers. The increase of airfares, the mandatory quarantine and its consequences create a huge financial burden for majority of the migrant workers. The situation turned into a big crisis but there was little pro-active initiatives at the government level to support migrant workers.

Some 500,000 migrant workers returned home during this

pandemic mostly because of job loss, income reduction, or furloughs. The national media highlighted miseries of migrant workers. The CSOs have also placed strong demand for a comprehensive reintegration strategy and allocation of necessary budget for this.

Unfortunately, migrant workers rarely draw attention to the state authorities. The issue of protection and welfare is always neglected at the policy discourse. The loan is almost inaccessible to the migrant workers only because the condition of providing a 'bank guarantor' who must be a government service holder – a ridiculous condition - imposed by the PKB?

Despite late, thanks to the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) to come forward with a subsidy (25,000 taka) for each Saudi-bound migrant worker to cover their hotel costs for mandatory quarantine after arrival in Saudi Arabia imposed by the authority, reintegration incentives for corona affected returnee women migrant workers, and other ad hoc initiatives.

Being a migrant organization, OKUP always raises its concern on the issues of migrant workers. Therefore, OKUP stands in solidarity with migrant heroes and highlights the need of policy intervention.



OKUP urged the Govt. to allocate 10% of remittance for migrant workers' welfare in FY 2021-2022

OKUP issued a press release on 29 May 2021 demanding to set aside 10% of the inward remittance in the new budget for 2021-22 to ensure migrant workers' development and welfare.

The press release states that Bangladeshi migrant workers remitted USD 76,307 million during 2015-19 which is 6 times higher than FDI and 5 times higher than ODA during the same period. Despite income reduction, furloughs or job loss in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladeshi migrant workers sent USD 21,752.27 million--- the ever-highest amounts. The press release highlighted that compared to their contribution to the country, migrant workers are always neglected in the national budget. The allocation for the protection and welfare of migrant workers is unfortunately below 1% in the previous fiscal years. Therefore, OKUP demands an allocation equivalent to 10% of remittances sent by migrant workers annually for their protection and welfare.

OKUP strongly pressed its long-standing demand to **bring the most vulnerable migrant workers especially the returnee women migrants in the 'national social safety net program.'** OKUP also demands to start 'Provident Fund' scheme for guaranteeing social benefits of the migrant workers for their protection, and to increase incentives on migrants' remittances from 2% to 5%.

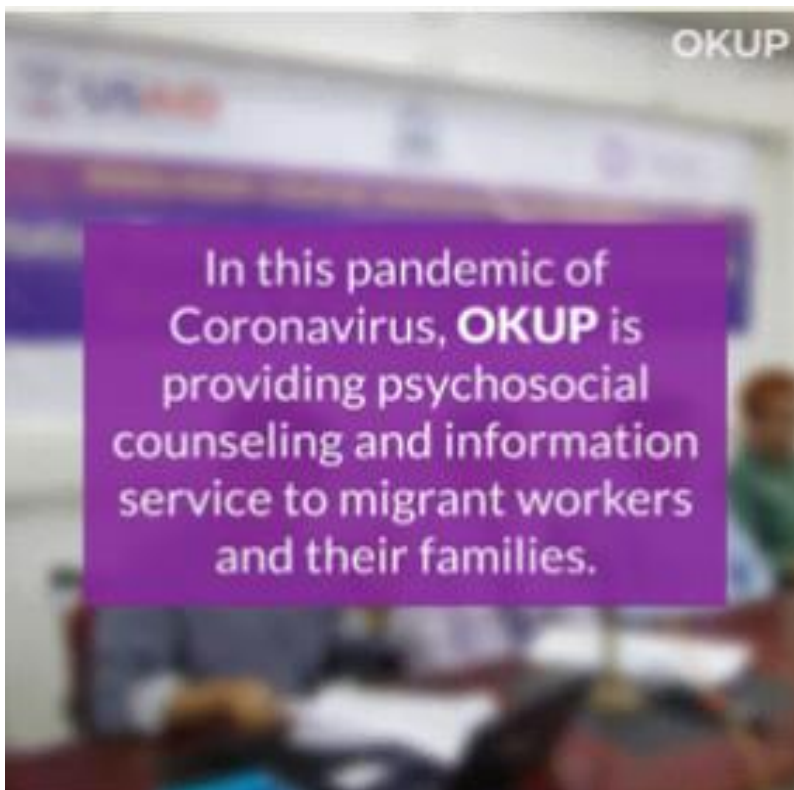


We, the grassroots migrant organization are quite disappointed to see the continuous negligence on the budget allocation for the protection and welfare of migrant workers. It seems like a hostile attitude towards the remittance heroes who contributes around 5% to the national GDP. The government must invest enough money for the protection and welfare of migrant workers. We urge the Ministry of EWOE and the Ministry of Social Welfare for taking initiatives to include the most vulnerable migrant workers especially women in government's 'national social safety net program'. The allocation for it has been increased in the proposed budget, and thus, there is scope of increasing coverage.



OKUP
a grassroots migrants' organization

OKUP Response to Battle the Covid-19 in Favor of Migrant Workers and Their Communities



OKUP undertook immediate response as soon as the Covid-19 lockdown started in Bangladesh in 2020. The first initiative was to provide psychosocial counseling to the migrant workers – stuck, outgoing, returnees, and the families left behind. Around 10,000 migrant workers and the families left behind have been provided counseling through OKUP helpline since the beginning.

Some 600,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers were provided with country specific news, notices in relating to visa, flights, health related notices, relief, emergency supports, and other information through online campaign and help line support.

OKUP conducted offline and online campaign-- **'#Stayhome'** with Covid-19 prevention awareness-- to reduce stigma against migrant workers as a carrier of 'coronavirus.'

OKUP has also been running campaign to stop stigma and increase positive perception towards migrant workers through the dissemination of audio-visual song entitled 'Ovibashi Tomay Salam' (salute to migrant workers). The song highlighted the contribution of migrant workers, exposed their sacrifices for their families, their societies and the country, and in turn expressed gratitude and respect to them by the society.

Emergency Relief Distribution to Migrant Workers, Families, and Communities



Direct cash assistance of **Tk 3,060** for **1,025 returnees** and family left behind



Food package of **Tk 3,000** for **1,177 families**

OKUP took immediate steps to negotiate with its partners, donors and well wishers to accumulate resources for emergency relief assistances to the vulnerable migrant workers and the families left behind.

Thanks to the European Union and CAFOD for allowing us revising the existing project budget and using the contingency fund for emergency relief assistance. Under the project, OKUP provided 'Cash Assistance' of 3,060 taka (amount including transfer fees) to 1,025 returnee migrant workers and the families left behind through the mobile transaction. We are also thankful to the Secours Catholique Caritas France (SCCF) for extending their assistance to provide a food package equivalent to 3,000 taka each for 1,177 vulnerable migrant families in respective project areas under the ongoing project supported by SCCF.

OKUP, in active participation of its community-based platforms – Migrant Forums, and the local stakeholders identified the most vulnerable migrant workers, families left behind, and provided the relief assistance successfully in its working areas.



Nasima, Araihasar, Narayangonj

I am a returnee migrant worker. My husband was jobless during the lockdown. The sewing job I do was closed too. We had unspeakable miseries – with no food at all. In this time, I received BDT 3,000 through mobile transaction. It was a blessing for us. I bought rice, lentils, onion, oil and other food items with the money.

Community led Responses by OKUP Migrant Forums

Migrant Forum (MF) is a platform of returnee migrant workers and the spouses of migrant workers. OKUP, over the years has established 44 Union level MFs under five sub-districts – Araihasar, Brahmanpara, Charbhadrason, Munshigonj Sadar, and Narsingdi Sadar. These MFs now play a strong role in respective communities to build resilience against unsafe migration and human trafficking. The MFs have become the centre of support and services for the returnees as community led voluntary forum. OKUP provides technical supports to the forums to enhance leadership and capacity.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, the OKUP MFs strongly stood by the returnee migrant workers, families left behind, and the communities in general.



The MFs collected **BDT 3,888,400** as contributions from the well-off members of the forums, diaspora relatives, and friends as well as well-wishers and distributed to around 3,000 migrant workers, their families as well as disadvantaged people in respective communities.



The MFs ensured government reliefs for around 1,300 migrant families. The amount of government reliefs was equivalent to **BDT 662,900**.

The MFs distributed masks, extended cooperation to the currently returnee migrant workers, helped numbers of migrant families in harvesting rice during the lockdown in response to the call of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Launching of the Audio-visual Song

'Ovibashi Tomay Salam'

OKUP launched an audio-visual song 'Ovibashi Tomay Salam' in April 2021 as part of our ongoing campaign against stigmatization of migrant workers amid coronavirus pandemic.

The returnee migrant workers, from the beginning of the pandemic, were being portrayed with negative impression. The media exposed their resentment when they were kept under the government run quarantine facilities with minimum standard of services. The media did not consider mental and physical stress of the migrant workers who returned amid emergency situation. We observed that the local administration hanged 'red flag' at the houses of the returnee migrant workers and put the migrants and their families in an embarrassing situation.

The song worded the contribution of migrant workers, their sufferings, ordeals, and sacrifices for the family and the country. The lyrics suggest to take effective measures for migrant workers. The prominent singer Hyder Husyn performed the music.

The Anti-slavery International provided supports under the current partnership with OKUP to produce the song.



OKUP Media Award 2020

OKUP organized its 3rd Media Award ceremony for the prominent journalists who demonstrated competence in reporting on the issues of 'Overseas Labour Migration and Labour Trafficking.' The Honorable Minister Imran Ahmad MP, the Ministry of EWOE, the EWOE Secretary Dr. Ahmed Munirus Saleheen, and Nazrul Islam Babu, Member of Parliament from Narayanganj-2, were present at the Award Giving Ceremony, held on 01 April 2021.

Eight journalists received awards. Of them, five are from national level and three of them are from district level. The awardees at national level were Arafat Ara (The Financial Express), Muhammad Owasim Uddin Bhuyan (Business Insider), Md. Mohiuddin (Prothom Alo), Abu Jor Ansar Uddin Ahamod (Samakal), and Alamgir Hossain (Jamuna TV). The awardees at district level were Md. Masum Billah (Amader Arahazar), Md. Shhabuddin Musa (Amar Bikrompur), and Md. Sharif Iqbal (Narsingdi Correspondence of Bangla TV).

Dissemination of Access to Justice Report 2021

OKUP's research entitled "Access to Justice for Bangladeshi Migrant Workers: Opportunities and Challenges" published and disseminated in a national consultation on March 2021. The policy brief on this research report "Access to Justice for Bangladeshi Migrant Workers: Improving the System" was also launched at the event.

The Chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on MoEWOE, Anisul Islam Mahmud, MP attended the consultation as the chief guest. The Secretary General of the Parliamentarian Caucus on Migration and Development, Mahjabeen Khaled, the government officials, representatives of CSOs, and media representatives were also present at the event.

The report highlights the importance of achieving accountable and responsible recruitment process. The report emphasizes on ending the culture of impunity and its irreparable consequences by improving justice system. The report and the policy brief is available on OKUP's website: @www.okup.org.bd



OKUP has been elected as the Convener of the Taskforce on Migration, Health, and HIV (MHH) of CARAM Asia, a regional network of organizations working on migration. OKUP has also become the Secretariat of Bangladesh Community Forum, a network of key populations group vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

OKUP has been partnered with GFEMS through a consortium project led by CAFOD for 'Recovery and Reintegration Support for Bangladeshi Returnee Migrant Workers' in April 2020; with ILO's Skill 21 project for implementation of a project entitled 'Nobo Jatra – Skills for Reintegration' in November 2020; with Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation for implementation of the SIMS (Strengthened Informative Migration System) project supported by Swiss Development Cooperation in January 2021.

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