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**Migrants'  
Rights  
are  
Human  
Rights**

**Special Issue**

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## Living with Violence: Mental Health Consequences of Women Migrant Workers

About one million Bangladeshi women work mainly in various Middle East countries at present. Being employed mostly in domestic work, these women go through poor working conditions, employment difficulties, and unjustifiably long working hours. They continuously face labor rights violations in the forms of nonpayment, and deprivation of food, sleep and day off at their workplaces. They are often subjected to physical, mental, and sexual abuse at employers' houses. Their endless cycle of experiencing violence and stress often continues even upon return. Social stigma keeps diminishing their self-esteem and the quality of life. Such stress and compromised mental health, indeed, create a long way to achieve their wellbeing.

This article is written based on the assessment of lived experiences of 172 women returnee migrant workers who received services from OKUP in 2021.

The assessment shows that 90% of the women domestic workers returned with mental stress, anxiety, depression or with critical mental trauma.

44% of the women reported that food, water, and sleep deprivation led them to unfavorable mental health consequences together with severe back pain, stomach problems, and other diseases. The loss of sleep alone put these women in a constant state of stress, troubled concentrating and fatigue, and also affected their emotional stability.

61% of the women migrant workers shared their bitter experiences of being subjected to various forms of physical attacks by their employers—slapping, beating harshly often with shoes, banging heads against the wall, kicking, pulling hair, burning skin with hot water or heated spoons etc. Instances of bullying and harassment were regular events for them. Such incidents of violence not only resulted in their wounds and injuries but also caused an emotional breakdown.

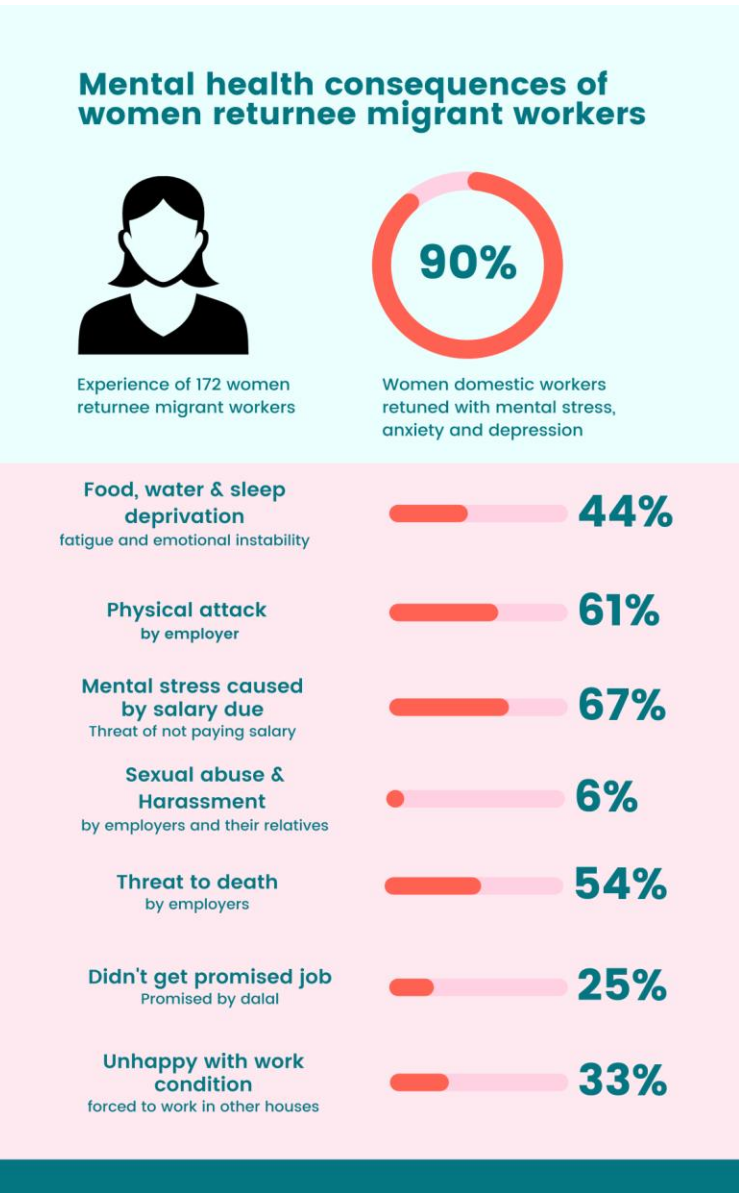
The assessment also shows that 67% of the women dealt with stress as their salaries were not regular. In case of their demands for payment, they often encountered threats of getting arrested by the police with false accusations.

The assessment also shows that incidents of sexual abuse and harassment by employers and their relatives were common to 6% of the women migrant workers. This number looks little as for many returnee women, it is difficult to disclose such traumatic experiences. The sexual violence left not only psychological scars but also caused their long-term mental health problems. A whirlwind of mixed emotions resulted in their feelings of shame and guilt, nightmares, and depression. Some women shared that they tried to take their lives by jumping from the roofs or setting fire on themselves.

More than 54% of the women reported that their employers threatened to kill and vanish their bodies so that they could be never traced out when they begged for their mercy. Terrified and alone, all they could do was just to tolerate such threats of violence and being trapped in abusive conditions until the employers changed their mind.

Most of the women returnee migrant workers reported that malpractice in the recruitment process pushed them into pervasive violence against them. More than 25% of the women had not got the same jobs as *dalals* promised them before their departure. They were forced to work despite the employers' threat to send them back. They wanted to avoid premature return which was a terrifying prospect. Another 33% of the women were also unhappy with their work conditions as they were forced to work in other houses, in addition to the employers' ones. Without getting any money for that, they were rather harassed and abused if they were unwilling to do so.

The return of the women workers led them to various levels of challenges to reintegrate with themselves, and into the families and society. Humiliation and verbal attacks by the family members were common to women if they returned being abused or empty-handed. Because of the patriarchal society of Bangladesh, women are seen with the utmost sexual objectification, and for many families, migrant women are nothing but the money-making machines. However, most of the time women just tried to adapt to the unwelcoming situations at home for the sake of maintaining their marital relationship. Emotional gap between the mother and children also caused their further pain and depression. For some women, the lack of acceptance in the family and limitations in mobility decreased their opportunity to join the labor force. Simply it made them discriminated against and dependent on the



families. Such an experience also kept them stuck in a cycle of defeat and frustration.

***The journey to regain mental wellbeing is not a sprint and not a marathon as there are ebbs and flows of emotions. However, even after enduring all mental and physical trauma alone, most of the women migrant workers fight for their survival and learn to live. They are the real brave hearts.***

Through this special article on the International Human Rights Day, we take the opportunity to share our stand for women migrant workers and showcase the impacts of violence on their mental health. At the same time, we strongly demand that the governments of Bangladesh and the destination countries must adopt proper laws and redressal mechanisms to eliminate violence against them in the world of work.



**Jesmin (24),**  
a returnee woman  
migrant worker  
from Saudi Arabia

*For my 15 months of work there, I was paid only eight months' salary. I was exposed to physical and mental violence during this period. I tried my best to absorb all their torture only because I had loan on my shoulder.*

My employer forced me to work at his relatives' houses almost every day. If they gave me a tip or food after working there, my employer took that away from me.

After several months of my arrival, I started refusing to work at other houses. One day my employer burned my hand with a heated knife. He stopped giving me any food until I agreed to work for his relatives.

I was not given a salary even after two months of my work at the employer's house. I became worried because I knew my family was waiting for my money to repay the loan installment and buy food. I could never imagine that a simple question over my payment would make him so furious that he scaled hot oil on my body. It felt like thousands of pins and nails were poking my body with a great force. My abdomen and thighs became red and got large blisters.

For my 15 months of work there, I was paid only eight months' salary. I was exposed to physical and mental violence during this period.

I never shared my miseries and sufferings with my husband over the phone.

I tried my best to absorb all their torture only because I had loan on my shoulder, and if I went back, we could not survive.

Upon my return being empty handed but with scars on my body and mind, some of my neighbors pointed fingers on me. They told my husband to check my body to find any scars of abuse and do my pregnancy test.

Listening to all rubbish all time against me, my husband became callous. He turned it off when I wanted to file a case against the subagent. It seemed to me that all violations which happened to me were because of my faults, and so why should I seek justice?

*When I went to work in Saudi Arabia, my life turned into hell. I had to complete tons of work round the clock. But my 'madam' did not give me enough food. She allowed me to eat only one time a day. She smacked me in the face if I asked for food. Sometimes she locked me in a room without any food and water. One day when I wanted to leave, she kicked me in the abdomen. It was terribly painful.*



**Rozina (36),**  
*a returnee woman  
migrant worker  
from Saudi Arabia*

My husband divorced me and then I became unwanted in the family and society. I tried hard to find a job and stand on my feet. One day a local dalal asked me if I would go abroad for housework. I accepted his offer as I wanted a job. I had no idea about the process. The local *dalal* managed everything for me.

When I went to Saudi Arabia, my life turned into hell. Each day I had to complete tons of work round the clock. But my 'madam' did not give me enough food. She allowed me to eat only one time a day. She smacked me in the face if I asked for food. She beat me up every single day for any simple excuse. She often locked me in a room without any food and water.

One day when I wanted to leave, she kicked me in the abdomen and it was terribly painful. Her son also slapped me on the ears. It was so hard that it caused my hearing damage.

Where could I go and whom could I report all those incidents? I planned to jump off the roof several times to end my life, but I could not. Often, I cried holding the hands of my 'madam' so that she became kind to me. But there was no change in her behavior.

I was going through a deep, dark depression during my entire period there.

Even when the contract period ended after three years, my employer delayed my return. She forced me to sign a paper written with that "I received my salaries duly and I have no dues" though I was not paid for several months.

I went abroad to become financially stable but returned with broken dreams and a mind to fight back. People now look down on me as if I had done a crime by going abroad.



**Rashida (35),  
a returnee woman migrant  
worker from Saudi Arabia**

*'Madam' dropped me to the recruiting office. I was beaten up there mercilessly. My fault was my resistance to stop them from groping my body. Even the Bangladeshi dalal in the recruiting office made such shameful and vulgar remarks at me that I couldn't even think of.*

At my employer's house, I used to work like a machine. I had no time to rest. If I had slept for a little longer any morning, my Madam's (employer) sons would pour cold water on me. They not only harassed me physically but also sexually. I always felt so frightened and insecure. I told my 'madam' about what incidents they did with me, but she never believed. Contrary, she threatened me that she would kill me if I ever said such things against her sons.

One day, they burned my skin with a heated knife when I resisted. I felt them groping my body like a piece of meat. Not only the sons, the brother of my Madam left no stone unturned to abuse me. One day while he was forcing me, I got a knife and threatened him to stop, instead he approached a step closer. In that moment of rage and insecurity, I shouted louder. My Madam then came there. She slapped me over the face while her sons were chuckling at me in a vulgar way.

After that incident, she dropped me to the recruiting office. I was beaten up there mercilessly. My fault was my resistance to stop them from groping my body. Even the Bangladeshi dalal in the recruiting office made such shameful and vulgar remarks at me that I could not even think of.


After two days of punishment, the agency office sent me back to them. I encountered the same heinous attacks on me regularly. My uterus started bleeding and it was for weeks, but they didn't care.

One day I tried swallowing some disinfectants to save me from all those pain and miseries. In fact, I was dying a little bit more every day. I just became a lost soul. I used to hear their voices around me. Even after that day, I took several attempts to commit suicide.

Upon my return home, I found no one behaving properly with me because I was abused. My husband does not talk to me. My eldest son left the house as he doesn't like to live with me

But where could I go?

I feel so defeated, but can anyone tell me what my fault was?



*Even after that day, I woke up again with no recollection of last night but with a sharp agonizing pain in between my legs. I understood I was going through sexual assault almost every day. I felt like I was trapped into living hell and there was no scope of my return.*

**Lucky (33),**  
*a returnee woman migrant worker from Saudi Arabia*

I started to feel my body swollen, sometimes heavy and exhausted. At first, I didn't know why. I just came from Bangladesh, a healthy young woman, to work as a domestic help. Even the medical test I had done showed that I had no complications. Of course, my work was taxing. I used to do all the household work including watering their big palm garden singlehandedly. But one morning, I was surprised to see some scars on my neck and breasts. It wasn't really looking like a bee sting or something like that. But for sure, I could tell that something bad happened to me last night.

But how couldn't I remember anything at all? Last night I completed all my chores and went to sleep. The employer's wife asked me to keep the door open so that they could call me if needed. I immediately went to her. But she was cold as always, just told me that it could be a mosquito bite or something like that. But I was not convinced. My blood ran so cold thinking that ever since I came to work here, I was not having my period. So, what if I was likely to be raped, may be almost every day, unbeknownst of my mind?

That very night, I noticed the employer's wife was adding some drugs in my food. She just told me it was a kind of energizer for keeping me fit for work. But what I felt that those were some sedatives that caused my memory to lapse. So, quietly, I threw away that food. I decided to call the recruiting agent's office the next morning and asked them to change my job. However, at one point at night, I heard the voice of the employer's sons at the other side of the wall discussing who would have sex with me first. They entered my room and were surprised to see me awake. I had no chance to fight or shout. They just had their hands over my mouth and assaulted me.

Employer's wife and his sons threatened to bury me alive as I wanted to contact the agency office. Even after that day, I woke up again with no recollection of last night but with a sharp agonizing pain in between my legs. I understood I was going through sexual assault almost every day. I felt like I was trapped into living hell and there was no scope of my return.

Now even upon returning home, I am still having a flashback of those painful memories every night. I just take sleeping pills to deal with my nightmares.