



Photo: OKUP

Policy Brief

Developing an Institutional Referral Mechanism: A way forward for sustainable reintegration of returnee migrant workers in Bangladesh

DECEMBER 2021 | OKUP, a grassroots migrant organization

1 Relevance

Labor migration by nature is temporary and short-term. Sustainable reintegration of returnee migrant workers is critically important to ensure the long-term financial benefits of labor migration as well as the individual, family, and community mental and physical well being during and after return. The Government of Bangladesh recognizes the importance of reintegration of returnee migrant workers, and thus adopted provisions for social and economic reintegration in all major migration governance law and policy documents. The Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (OEP) 2016 mandated the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Social Welfare, and Ministry of Labor & Employment to collaborate with the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) allocate an increased budget and develop a social protection policy and framework for the welfare of returnee migrant workers. The Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013 and the Wage Earners' Welfare Act 2018 also have provisions for undertaking social and economic reintegration of returnee migrant workers and their families. The 8th Five Year Plan (July 2020-June 2025) emphasizes the need for support for reintegration of returnee migrant workers.

The Government of Bangladesh has established the Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), Probashi Kallayan Bank (PKB) and the Bureau for Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) Arbitration Cell to provide support and assistance to returnee migrant workers for reintegration. The migrant organizations, CSOs, and development partners implement various projects for the reintegration of returnee migrant workers. At present, these initiatives are fragmented and lack institutional coordination and collaboration in referrals for support and services.

This policy brief outlines recommendations for establishing a comprehensive and institutional referral system for the returnee migrant workers to access the necessary support and services for sustainable reintegration. The brief is based on the findings of a study¹ from a reintegration project entitled "Recovery and Reintegration Support for Bangladeshi Returnee Migrant Workers", implemented by OKUP and Caritas Bangladesh through a consortium led by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), a UK-based non-governmental organization. The project is funded by GFEMS and Norad.

1. "The analysis on referral mechanisms available to labor migrants returning to Bangladesh" conducted by DEVCOM, September 2021

2 Brief Introduction of the Project “Recovery and Reintegration Support for Bangladeshi Returnee Migrant Workers” and Study

The “Recovery and Reintegration Support for Bangladeshi Returnee Migrant Workers” is a 28-month project starting in April 2020 and aims to provide a holistic package of support to returnee migrants, including the most vulnerable and survivors of abuse and exploitation, on their return to Bangladesh, allowing them to recover, reintegrate and thrive. The project is funded by Norad, through a partnership with the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), and is implemented by CAFOD, Oribashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) and Caritas Bangladesh.

The project provides immediate and longer-term support to returnee migrants in 9 districts of Bangladesh. This includes airport pickup, shelter home support, counselling (both short and long

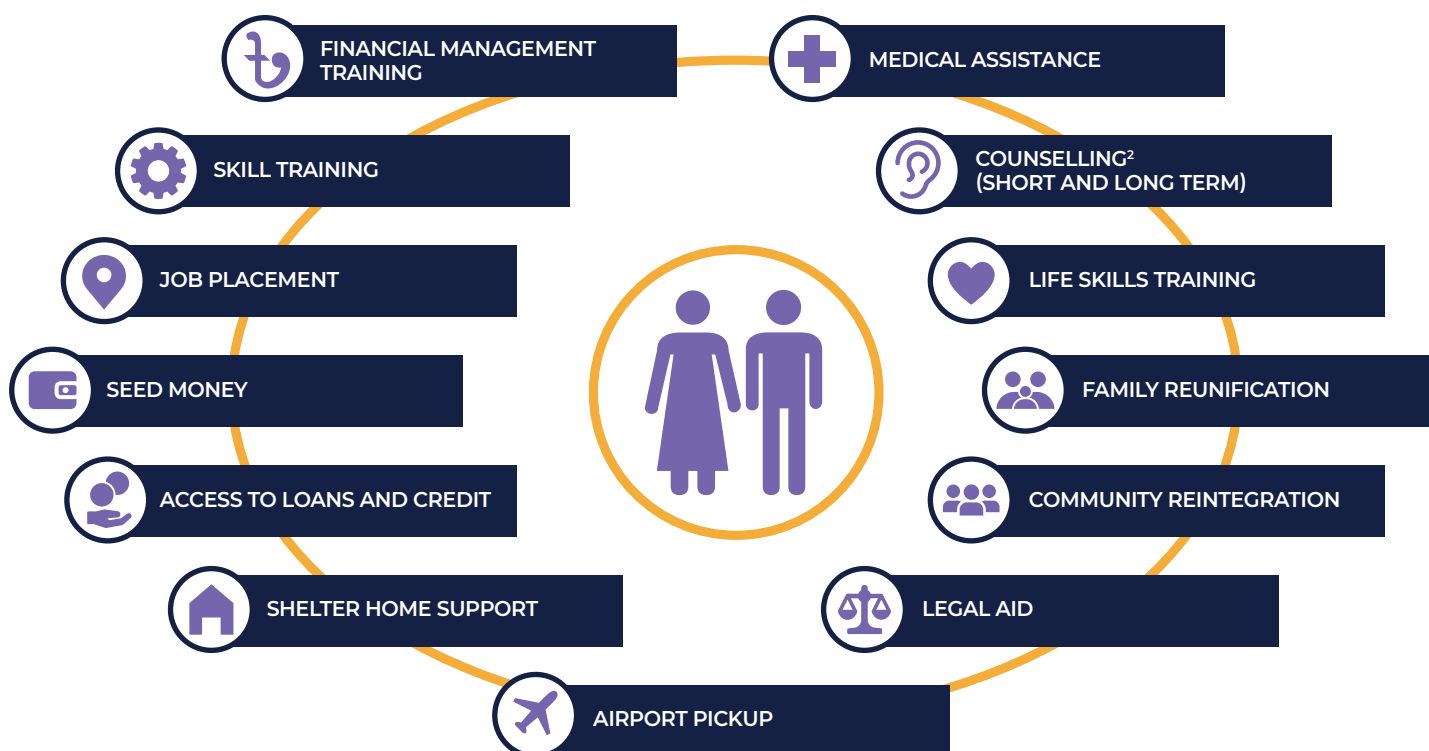
term), medical treatment, legal aid, life skills training, small business and vocational training, and small seed funding. The project advocates for a holistic and needs-based approach to reintegration, improvements in the national reintegration programs and the referral mechanism of returnee migrant workers.

As part of this project an independent study on existing referral mechanisms, gaps and challenges was undertaken by DEVCOM in September 2021. This included 23 in depth interviews with government officials and key stakeholders, interviews and focus groups with returnee migrants and analysis of the project’s database of over 900 returnees. Findings from this study are reflected in this policy brief.

3 Migrants workers’ reintegration needs — support and services

The needs of returnees are diverse. Some return with good skills but little savings while some return with savings but no skills or qualifications. Others return empty-handed or with unpaid debt, physical illness or mental stress and trauma.

MIGRANTS NEEDS



2. The referral study undertaken by the consortium (OKUP, Caritas Bangladesh and CAFOD) and conducted by DEVCOM in August-September 2021 highlights the importance of ensuring short-term support for social reintegration in the family and society as a priority. The study stressed that social reintegration, in terms of mental and physical wellbeing of the returnee migrant workers, is the first necessary condition for ensuring their sustainable reintegration.

✓ CASE STUDY 1: Asmani's story

"I went to Lebanon in 2012 as a domestic worker. I was not paid regularly and could not support my family which made me worried. So, I escaped from the house and searched for alternative work. I met a Bangladeshi man, we married and had a son. Then, due to the economic crisis in Lebanon, our income was falling sharply. While pregnant with our second child, I returned to Bangladesh with my son. My husband remained in Lebanon. My family rejected me and my son as I had married without their permission. Even at my in-law's house, I faced mental torture and I had a miscarriage. I needed urgent medical support as my bleeding did not stop. I was completely broken. I tried to commit suicide twice before I met OKUP who helped me get treatment free of cost from a hospital. They discussed many issues with me when I was staying at their safe home. I participated in OKUP's training which gave me space to meet other returnees, share suffering and taught me how to build a new life. At the training, they also helped me create a livelihood plan. After that I received training on fish farming and started this at a small scale at my house. Now, I know how to handle any obstacle and move on."

Asmani (pseudo name), 35

4 Existing support and services for reintegration of returnees

The MoEWOE through the WEWB provides repatriation support to the migrant workers with critical illness, injuries, and/or disabilities. They provide a financial grant to critically ill returnees. The WEWB also provides ambulance service to the migrant workers, usually free of cost or with a minimum charge, based on the severity of illness and financial situation. The government has established the Probashi Kallayan Bank (PKB) to provide loans for migration costs and economic reintegration. In the context of Covid-19, the PKB initiated a low-interest special loan package for the migrant workers who were forced to return due to job loss, furloughs etc. PKB also have a loan for regular migrants and families of current migrants. The BMET has established an Arbitration Cell for filing complaints by the migrant workers for redressal. The aggrieved migrant workers can also file a case in the judicial court against the perpetrators in the recruitment

process. In 2021, the MoEWOE through the WEWB has undertaken a reintegration project which will provide cash incentives and referral services to returnee migrant workers by establishing 30 Welfare Centers at the district level.

In addition, several migrants' organizations, NGOs, and CSOs undertake projects providing reintegration support and services based on their strategy and funding availability. Their psychosocial and economic reintegration includes immediate food, transport service from the airport to home, safe-home services, health care referrals, psycho-social counselling, legal aid, and livelihood support. Additionally, they refer returnees to government services with WEWB or BMET, or to the government or other institutions for skill-based training. Some organizations also provide seed money for returnee migrants livelihood development.

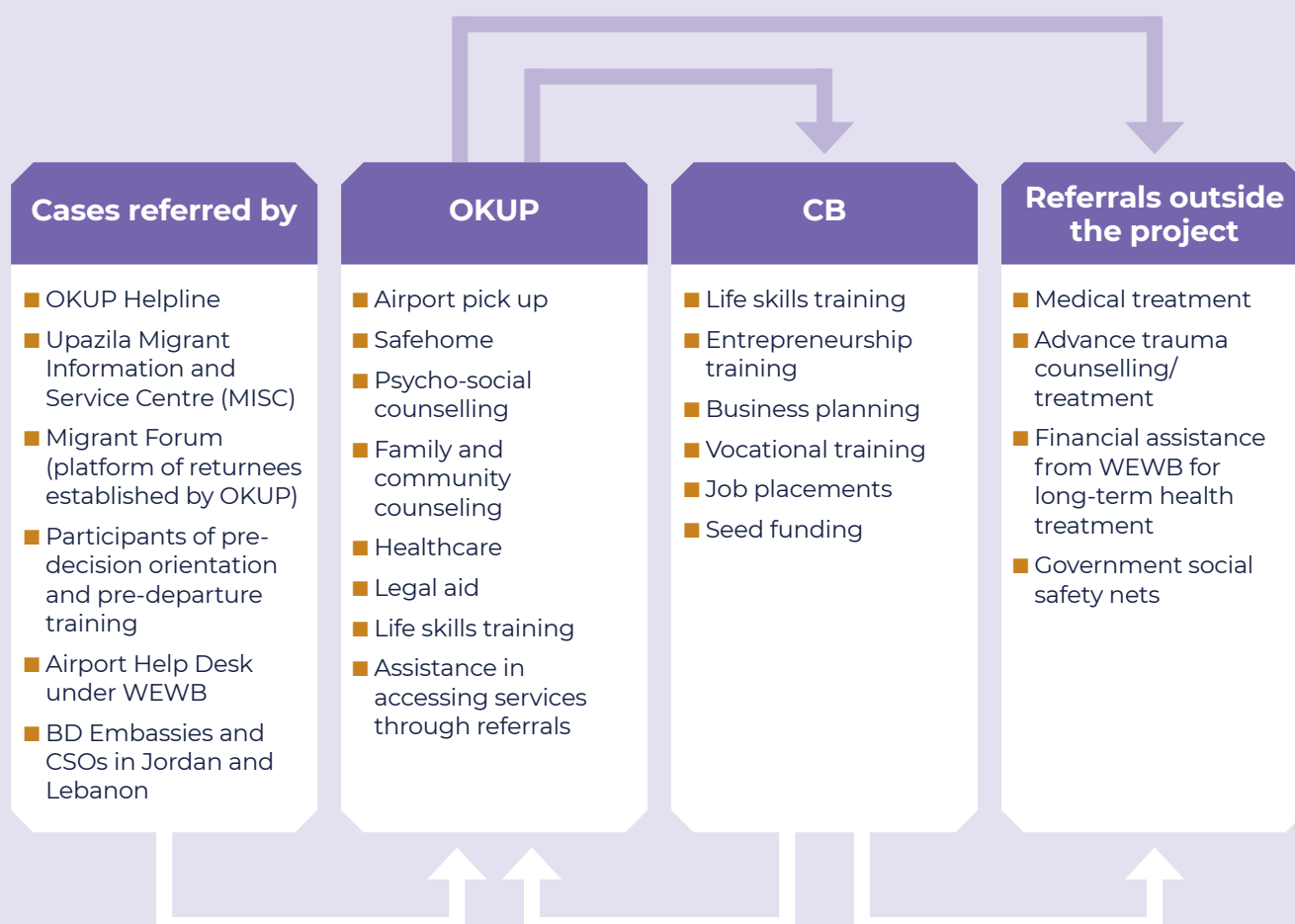
Good practice 1

One-Stop Crisis Center (OCC) – a coordinated response to prevent violence against women by the Government of Bangladesh

The *One-Stop Crisis Center (OCC)* is established under the Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women undertaken by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) to provide all required services in one place. It has been established in the divisional level hospitals through the allocation of 10 free beds. The OCC provides health care, police assistance, DNA test assistance, legal aid, psychological counselling, and safe-home services to survivors of violence.

Good practice 2

Holistic approach to reintegration through the Recovery and Reintegration Support for Bangladeshi Returnee Migrant Workers (funded by GFEMS and Norad)



OKUP Approaches for Sustainable Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers

Based on its strong community-level engagement, OKUP has integrated dignified and sustainable reintegration of returnees socially and economically. OKUP's reintegration approach ensures mental and physical wellbeing, social stability, and sustainable livelihoods. OKUP provides tailor-made support for social and economic reintegration. The social reintegration support ranges from airport pick-up, safe-home assistance, psycho-social counseling, physical and mental health care services, legal aid, and life skills training. Economic reintegration is based on skill matching of returnees with local opportunities by providing direct assistance mainly in livelihood planning, accessing training, loans and job placement. The reintegration supports are provided either under available projects and/or through referral assistance to relevant government, NGOs and private sector organizations.

5 Gaps and challenges in reintegration of returnee migrant workers

■ Lack of a comprehensive reintegration policy and framework

The existing laws and policies have provisions for reintegration support of returnee migrant workers such as the allocation of increased budget and establishment of inter-ministerial collaboration, but these laws and policies have no details to address the diverse needs of the returnee migrant workers. A comprehensive reintegration policy and framework outlining key strategies and services as well as an explicit collaboration mechanism for government and private services is crucial. More detailed provisions addressing the diverse needs of returnee migrants workers is also needed.

■ Lack of tailor-made specific support and services

The migrant workers who return with critical illness and mental trauma need immediate psychological counseling, access to safe homes, and healthcare. They often find financial assistance as well as legal support essential for redressing their grievances. Some migrants may also need skills upgrading, job placement support, entrepreneurship development training and services in accessing loans and other financial schemes to lift themselves out of indebtedness and poverty on return. A needs-based tailored approach is vital.

■ Lack of an existing institutional referral system

The lack of coordination, cooperation and collaboration among government departments, the non-government organizations and the private sector makes it difficult to institutionalize a referral system that would match the needs of migrant workers. Additionally, it would be impossible for any one organization to address the diverse needs of the returnee migrant workers. To maximize migrants' access to benefits, a formal, institutionalized referral system is needed.

■ Limitations of the civil society and non-government organizations' interventions

The migrant organizations, CSOs and NGOs who provide reintegration support to the returnee migrant workers have limited resources and limited geographical coverage and are unable to meet the

overall needs of migrant workers. Due to lack of a functioning referral and monitoring mechanism, service delivery actors are often (1) unable to provide necessary support to migrants and (2) unable to ensure access to services. They are also restricted to short term projects due to donor funding and have set participant selection criteria which can exclude some returnees. Service providers from civil society should be enlisted to provide specific services within a comprehensive referral mechanism with donors providing long-term funding to support these organizations.

■ Gender-specific challenges

The patriarchal social norms and attitudes often create challenges for the social and economic reintegration of women migrant workers. Rights violations, abuse and exploitation overseas result in early return and often lead to poor acceptance in the family and society. Intra-household tensions regarding control of resources and power in decision making intensifies their vulnerability. Social expectations often limit women's mobility and decreases their opportunity to join the local labor force, often leaving them to shoulder the burden of unpaid care work. The referral guideline and mechanism must factor in these challenges to ensure equal access to services.



Photo: OKUP

Economic reintegration support must be gender sensitive and be tailored to the needs and skills of individuals.

6 Key Recommendations

The social reintegration of returnee migrant workers in their family and society is critically important for their sustainable economic reintegration. The gender-specific context and challenges must be considered for responding to women migrants' reintegration needs. Our recommendations are:

- The MoEWOE should develop a reintegration policy with detailed provisions relating to strategies and approaches to address migrant workers' needs and necessities for sustainable reintegration with a special focus on women returnee migrant workers.
- The MoEWOE should establish an institutional referral system by setting up a platform through the participation of the relevant government departments (i.e., MoH, MoSW, MoWCA, MoF, and Bangladesh Embassies and Labor Wings in destination countries), as well as NGOs and the private sector. To effectively roll out the institutional referral system, the following three actions are required:
 - Develop a **"referral guideline"** to be followed by all the concerned service providers to ensure quality and successful reintegration;
 - Provide **capacity building training** especially to the concerned government officials (especially those under the RAISE Project³) who are engaged in delivery of referral assistance to the migrant workers;
 - Enlist **the interested service provider organizations** amongst government departments, NGOs, and the private sector through a set of criteria for the improvement of institutional referrals.
- The relevant government departments should undertake policy and programmatic initiatives for the improvement of its support and services (easily accessible and affordable) for returnee migrant workers in the government hospitals, justice system, skills training, and financial institutions.
- Donors and development partners should increase funds for the migrant organizations and CSOs for wider coverage of their projects and institutionalize the referral system. The Government of Bangladesh should also increase development funds for the reintegration of returnee migrant workers.

3. The RAISE project, funded by the World Bank, will support up to 200,000 returnee migrants to reintegrate into Bangladesh or re-migrate safely. The project will provide cash grants, counselling, and referrals, and aim to improve the national referral system.

This project is funded by GFEMS and Norad



This project is implemented by OKUP, CAFOD and Caritas Bangladesh



Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program
(OKUP)

www.okup.org.bd



The Catholic Agency for Overseas
Development (CAFOD)

www.cafod.org.uk



Caritas Bangladesh

www.caritasbd.org

This publication was produced with the financial support of GFEMS and Norad. Its contents are the sole responsibility of OKUP and do not necessarily reflect the views of GFEMS or Norad.