

Title

Uneven Geography of Remittances among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh has become one of the major sources of migrants in the world. According to data from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), Government of Bangladesh, from 1976 to 2015, 9.6 million Bangladeshis went abroad as short-term labour migrants, with over 90 per cent based in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Between 200,000 and 250,000 Bangladeshis leave the country each year to seek overseas employment opportunities. Migration, therefore, is a key livelihood strategy of many Bangladeshi households, and remittances are one of the main ways in which migration can influence the social and economic changes in the migrants' places of origin. Remittances play a critical role for the Bangladeshi economy generally but a vital role for those in precarious economy circumstances. The amount of international remittances Bangladesh receives annually has increased dramatically over the last decade, totally some US\$15 billion in 2015. This source of funding has facilitated the import of capital goods and raw materials for industrial development, bolstered Bangladesh's annual Gross Domestic Products (GDP), and contributed to the national savings and development budget. Researchers also note that remittances are a key factor in contributing to poverty reduction in Bangladesh.

For the majority of migrant households remittance is a crucial source of livelihoods, radically changing the life circumstances of family members. With remittance income households are assured they have access to three meals a day. Three meals a day is an indicator of the highest chance of living a good life and have stronger social resilience than those who have one or two meals per day. Remittances are an important feature of the financial means for investment in human capital, such as education, as well as for housing and land purchase. Family members of the migrants use a sizeable portion of their remittances to generate income and employment and thus play an important role in sustaining the small local businesses and producers. In other words, migration and remittances provide a lifeline to a large number of Bangladeshi households.

From the discussion thus far, one may be tempted to present an overwhelmingly positive narrative of the social impact of remittances, and conclude that all participants—both individual migrants and migrant households—benefit equally from the migration and/or relocation experience and the resources that it generates. This paper adopts a more cautious interpretation of the impacts of remittances on migrant households. Drawing on data from a recently completed ethnographic study of 36 migrant households across three rural villages in Bangladesh, the paper argues that social and economic benefits of remittances are not equally distributed among all migrant households. Some households benefited more than others in generating income and benefits from remittances. However, examination of those migrant households that failed to benefit (or benefitted least) from remittance income attributes this failure to a range of factors, some specific to the individual households, and others external.

Internal difficulties moderating the impacts of remittances on migrant households include whether the remittance was supplementary income or constituted the totality of household, the impact of illnesses on income earners, the accumulation of household debt and impact of natural disaster. Those migrant households with minimal resources to draw on found themselves allocating remittances to meeting basic necessities and living from hand-to-mouth, so to speak. External factors impacting on remittance income relate primarily to the circumstances of migrant in the destination place, such finding migrant work and ensuring their job entitlement. In a small way, the paper highlights that whatever benefits that migrant remittances bring to households, migrant workers can pay a heavy price for the remittance income. As Wickramasekara (2006)¹ notes:

Exploitation and abuse of migrant workers continues unabated ... Despite the positive experiences of some migrant workers, a significant number face undue hardships and abuse in the form of low wages, poor working conditions, virtual absence of social protection, denial of freedom of association and workers' rights, discrimination and xenophobia, as well as social exclusion. Women migrant workers, trafficked persons and migrant workers in irregular status are among the most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. (Wickramasekara, 2006: 8-9)

Some migrants experience extensive problems in the place of destinations finding work and retaining their employment. The instability of migrant work and income imposed additional financial burdens on the migrant households that now needed even more money to repay the costs of migration. Therefore, the poorest of the poor – those bereft of all resources – remain trapped in their poverty notwithstanding their receipt of remittances. Nevertheless, the research findings of the present paper argue that both the social interactions of migrants and all stages of the remittance process need to be better understood.

¹ Wickramasekara, P. 2006. "Globalisation, International Labour Migration and the Rights of Migrant Workers." Presented at the Paper presented at the International Symposium on a Culture of Peace 2006: "Intercultural Understanding and Human Rights Education", 25-27 October 2006, Seoul, Republic of Korea.