



Meeting Report
of the Regional Exchange on Migration and Human Trafficking: Strengthening Migrant Protection –
Addressing the Challenges of Bangladeshi Workers and Combating Human Trafficking

Date: April 15, 2025

The Third Community of practice meeting titled “Strengthening Migrant Protection – Addressing the Challenges of Bangladeshi Workers and Combating Human Trafficking” brought 24 stakeholders from Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo, and Serbia. The meeting aimed to explore shared challenges and opportunities related to labor migration, particularly in the context of Bangladeshi workers employed abroad, and to identify effective responses to human trafficking by drawing on the extensive experience of colleagues from [the BRAC Migration Programme](#) and representatives from Bangladesh. Representatives came from 13 organizations, including BRAC, Atina, EHO, CRPC, La Strada North Macedonia, the Swiss Embassy/SDC, ADRA, MSF, Grupa 484, Schüler Helfen Leben, PVPT, CWS, and InfoPark.

Like many countries in the region, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia are experiencing significant labor shortages in key sectors, particularly in construction, agriculture, and the hospitality industry. This creates a growing need to attract foreign workers while ensuring that these individuals' rights, safety, and dignity are fully protected. The event served as a platform for sharing best practices, challenges, and innovative solutions in ethical recruitment, safe migration, and the reintegration of returnees. Bangladesh plays a significant role in global labor migration, which is why two NGOs, BRAC from Bangladesh and NGO Atina from Serbia, have established a partnership to monitor the latest trends in labor migration.

The session included contributions from [Al Amin Noyon](#), a participant from Bangladesh with lived experience related to human trafficking and recipient of the UNDP 'Changemaker' award in 2021 and the U.S. Department of State's TIP Hero award in 2024, and from Shariful Islam Hasan from BRAC, one of the largest development organizations globally. In addition to colleague Al Amin, another value was brought by the presence of another 2024 TIP Hero, [Marijana Savić, director of NGO Atina](#). She and Al Amin met during the award ceremony in June 2024, and this meeting is the result of their collaboration and joint efforts to improve the position of human trafficking victims in Serbia, Bangladesh, and globally.

Shariful Islam Hasan, Head of BRAC's Migration Programme, shared critical insights from BRAC's extensive work with Bangladeshi migrants globally.

Key Findings

In 2023, labor migration from Bangladesh remained substantial, with over one million Bangladeshi workers migrating abroad—an average of 115 individuals leaving the country every hour, resulting in more than 1 million people migrating annually. Approximately 80,000 to 90,000 Bangladeshis also return home annually. Common destinations include countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Singapore, and Malaysia. Migration is also occurring toward North Africa and Europe, primarily through Libya. BRAC's research has identified 18 migration and trafficking routes from Bangladesh to Europe. The most common pass-through key transit countries, such as the UAE, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, ultimately lead to destinations like Italy and Greece. From there, many migrants continue to countries like France and Germany.

Despite the volume of migration, numerous challenges persist. Migration from Bangladesh is often driven by poverty. Many migrants possess low skill levels, which heightens their vulnerability to exploitation. Additionally, high recruitment costs usually result in debt bondage. The recruitment process continues to rely heavily on informal brokers and intermediaries, leaving migrants susceptible to various forms of abuse. Once abroad, they frequently face poor working and living conditions, social



isolation, anxiety, and limited support networks. Language and cultural barriers further complicate their experiences, while access to justice or grievance mechanisms remains scarce.

Bangladesh is identified as both a source and a transit country for human trafficking, especially labor trafficking and forced prostitution, with trafficking routes spanning cross-border movements to India and through complex routes towards Europe via the Mediterranean, Libya, and the Balkans. The primary forms of trafficking include internal trafficking (though this is reportedly declining), cross-border trafficking—especially to India—labor trafficking, and sexual exploitation, which disproportionately affects girls aged 16 to 20. Human trafficking is increasingly facilitated by social media platforms, false job offers, and well-organized criminal networks operating in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Libya, and Turkey.

The country has also emerged as a significant source of irregular migration to Europe, particularly through the Mediterranean and Balkan routes. Migrants often take perilous journeys, following routes such as Dhaka → Dubai → Turkey → Libya → Italy, or Dhaka → UAE → Egypt → Libya → Europe. These journeys can cost between €10,000 and €20,000, and Libya has become a key departure point, where trafficking networks openly operate through social media platforms. Upon arrival in Europe, many migrants seek asylum, although not all qualify as political refugees.

A significant share of Bangladeshi migrants attempting to reach Europe travel irregularly, often paying large sums to intermediaries and traffickers who subject them to exploitation, captivity, physical torture, and sometimes death, particularly in unstable regions like Libya.

Reintegration of Returnees

To address the challenges faced by returning migrants, BRAC has developed comprehensive reintegration programmes in collaboration with several international partners, including the European Union (via the Kotrasa Project), FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), the UK Home Office, and the Swiss Government. This reintegration model is structured around three core components: psychosocial support, which includes mental health and trauma care; economic reintegration, offering skills training, employment opportunities, and financial assistance; and social reintegration, focused on rebuilding community and family ties. Support begins at the moment of arrival at the airport and continues through long-term follow-up services.

Legal Framework and Governance

There is an urgent need for improved legal frameworks, enforcement, and coordinated international efforts to combat trafficking and irregular migration, as current prosecution and protection mechanisms are often ineffective or slow.

Bangladesh has established a broad legal definition of trafficking that includes failed labor migration schemes even when deception is not involved. However, despite this robust legal framework, significant implementation gaps remain. As a result, Bangladesh continues to be ranked on Tier 2 of the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, indicating that, while notable efforts have been made, they still fall short of fully meeting the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

Shariful highlighted that Bangladesh shares the largest land border in the region with India, and that 32 of the country's 64 districts are border districts, 30 of which are adjacent to India. This contributes to significant migration flows to India and beyond. In addition to outward migration, Bangladesh also receives refugees, particularly from Myanmar, due to ongoing persecution.

BRAC implements its programs across Asia and Africa, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania. Their migration programs include safe migration initiatives, irregular migration, anti-trafficking efforts, and the reintegration of returnees. BRAC has agreements with countries like Japan and Singapore to support safe labor migration by informing potential migrants about labor laws and market conditions.



Trafficking routes and challenges

Sustained cooperation between origin and destination countries, increased funding, and comprehensive support systems for migrants and returnees are essential to improve protection and combat human trafficking effectively, and secure travel procedures.

One of the key issues discussed was the widespread lack of understanding among Bangladeshi migrants about the difference between smuggling and human trafficking. Many individuals, particularly those who respond to offers via online advertisements or local agents, believe they travel voluntarily for work. However, despite experiencing severe abuse and exploitation, they often do not recognize themselves as victims of trafficking. Shariful shared that traffickers commonly operate from countries such as Libya, Turkey, and Dubai, and they frequently deceive migrants with false promises of jobs. In Libya, many migrants have been detained in camps, tortured, and even killed. What makes prosecution extremely difficult is the fact that many of these trafficking and smuggling networks operate across borders and openly promote their services through social media platforms.

Additionally, many migrants travel on tourist visas, making it harder to trace recruitment and exploitation networks. Post-COVID, the Eastern Balkan route has grown in importance for migrants travelling in Europe, with traffickers increasingly active. Local traffickers in Bangladesh coordinate with international traffickers, especially in Dubai, Libya, and Turkey, to send groups abroad, often under pretenses or illegal means. Skilled migrants are less vulnerable to trafficking compared to unskilled workers, who tend to take higher risks and incur higher debts.

Return migration is significant, with 80,000 to 90,000 Bangladeshis returning annually, mostly from deportation centers in Malaysia, the Middle East, and increasingly from Europe. BRAC provides comprehensive support to returnees, including immediate assistance such as food, family reunification, and psychological, economic, and social reintegration. These components are viewed as interdependent and critical to successful reintegration.

Shariful presented data from a project implemented in cooperation with Frontex, through which BRAC supported 738 returnees from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, and Denmark. Romania has recently become one of the top European countries from which Bangladeshi migrants are returning, followed by Italy and Cyprus.

The presentation prompted rich discussion among participants. A surge in Bangladeshi workers seeking labor visas for Serbia has been observed, and Marijana Savić from the NGO Atina has expressed concern about the rapid increase in the number of labor visas issued to Bangladeshi citizens in Serbia since 2023. She shared that BRAC's data helped identify many fictitious recruitment agencies that provide fraudulent contracts and visas. As a result, many Bangladeshi workers are denied entry at Serbia's Nikola Tesla airport and returned to countries like Qatar. The migrants often pay substantial sums in advance, ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 US dollars, which raises serious concerns about trafficking and exploitation.

Al Amin Noyon, speaking as a trafficking survivor, emphasized the importance of cross-border cooperation and the value of partnerships in protecting vulnerable migrants. He reiterated BRAC's willingness to support local organizations in identifying and assisting victims from Bangladesh. According to Shariful, BRAC has already supported three returnees from Bosnia and Serbia and is open to expanding cooperation. Data sharing and coordination are key to improving reintegration and anti-trafficking efforts.

Sofia de Ponti, a volunteer in Serbia and social worker in Italy, raised questions about how recruitment is organized and the roles of intermediaries known as "Da Lal". Shariful responded that traffickers often start locally in Bangladeshi villages and then connect migrants to larger trafficking operations based in foreign countries. He noted a disturbing trend since COVID-19, where stranded migrants in countries like Dubai are persuaded to move onward illegally to Europe via Iran and Turkey.

The meeting concluded with gratitude for the valuable insights and a mutual commitment to deepen collaboration in preventing trafficking and improving support to migrants in the Western Balkans.



Participants agreed to organize a follow-up session to continue this vital knowledge exchange and strategies.

NGO Atina's team is sharing five crucial recommendations from the meeting report:

1. Strengthen the regulation of recruitment by eliminating informal brokers and enforcing ethical recruitment practices to reduce exploitation and debt bondage among Bangladeshi migrant workers.
2. Enhance cross-border cooperation by fostering data sharing and joint actions between origin and destination countries to disrupt trafficking networks and improve victim support.
3. Expand reintegration support by scaling up psychosocial, economic, and social reintegration services for returnees, starting from airport arrival and continuing long-term.
4. Raise awareness on trafficking by launching targeted education campaigns to help migrants distinguish between smuggling and trafficking, particularly those vulnerable to online scams and false job offers.
5. Improve legal enforcement by closing implementation gaps in anti-trafficking laws and accelerating prosecution efforts, especially against transnational trafficking networks operating via Libya, Turkey, and Dubai.

This event has been organized as part of the project "Women at the Crossroads: Strengthening the Response to Modern Slavery, Smuggling, and Gender-Based Violence Among Migrants in Serbia," which is being implemented by the NGO Atina with the support of the British Embassy in Belgrade.