

Event Report

National Level Multi-Stakeholder Consultation on “Inclusion of Migrant Women’s Rights and Safety in the Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016”

Organized By: WARBE Development Foundation with the support of The Asia Foundation.

Date: 28 May, 2025 (Wednesday)

Venue: Conference Room, Women's Voluntary Association (WVA), Dhaka



Overview: The national consultation aimed to convene civil society organizations, policymakers, and stakeholders to advocate for the integration of female migrant workers' rights and safety into the ongoing reform of the **Expatriates and Overseas Employment Policy 2016**. Grounded in evidence and inclusive dialogue, the event sought to highlight the gender-specific challenges faced by women throughout the migration cycle, such as the lack of information, limited occupational choices, abuse, wage theft, and weak reintegration support. The consultation was designed to inform the government's policy reform agenda and promote strategic, gender-responsive implementation mechanisms. This effort aligns with the broader goals of the PERI initiative under the B-CAPP program, emphasizing responsive and inclusive governance that protects vulnerable populations, particularly female migrant workers.

Objectives:

- Review gaps in the **Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016**, affecting migrant women's safety, rights, and dignity.
- Engage diverse stakeholders in inclusive, solution-focused dialogue.
- Recommend clear, gender-responsive provisions to be incorporated in the revised policy framework.
- Build consensus for stronger protections for female migrant workers through inclusive policies and practical safeguarding mechanisms

Event Proceedings:

The event began with registration at 10:30 AM, followed by a welcome speech from Ms. Jasiya Khatoon, Director of WARBE Development Foundation. She opened with a candid reflection:



“While the 2016 Overseas Employment Policy acknowledges women’s migration, it lacks the depth to address the real risks women face. Since protecting female migrant workers is key to fair migration and inclusive progress, we should bring out practical recommendations to be included in the revision.” She went on to thank The Asia Foundation for supporting both the event and WARBE’s ongoing governance initiative in the migration sector under the PERI Programme. She then shared the agenda for the

consultation meeting and also took on the role of moderator during the panel discussion session.

Presentation:

Following the opening speech, Asif Munier, Migration and Refugee Affairs Specialist, delivered an in-depth presentation titled “*Review of Policy Position on Women’s Migration*” in the context of the ongoing revision of the Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016. As nearly a decade has passed since its enactment, he highlighted the urgent need for revisiting the policy due to evolving global and national dynamics in the migration sector.

In his presentation, Mr. Munier outlined:

- **The Purpose of the Policy Review:** To gather stakeholder input for proposing revisions, and to incorporate changes reflecting current realities of migration. He emphasized that the review should align with recent global and national commitments, evolving good practices, and the socio-economic reintegration of returnee migrants, particularly women.
- **Current Activities Underway:** The review process includes stakeholder consultations, evaluation of current implementation mechanisms, and the identification of areas needing policy upgrades. He stressed the importance of including regional and international good practices and ensuring time-sensitive changes to the policy framework.
- **The Six Core Policy Directives Relevant to Women Migrants:**
 1. Ensuring safe labour migration.
 2. Protecting the rights of migrant workers and their families.
 3. Guaranteeing welfare services for migrant workers.
 4. Addressing labour migration of women specifically.
 5. Mainstreaming migration into national development.
 6. Strengthening governance of labour migration.

He placed special emphasis on the section related to women's labour migration, urging participants to critically assess how far these directives have been implemented and to offer forward-looking recommendations.

To stimulate reflection and discussion, Mr. Munier posed the following three key questions to the attendees:

1. How many of the existing regulations concerning women’s migration have actually been implemented?
2. What measures can be taken to make the implementation of these regulations more impactful and practical?



3. Which critical issues concerning women migrants have been left out and should now be included in the revised policy?

He concluded by inviting structured feedback from participants through thematic tables organized around the different policy directives, encouraging collaborative input for the forthcoming policy revision process.

Panel Discussion:



The panel discussion started with a condemning speech from **Ms. Sheepa Hafiza**, Chair, Film 4 Peace Foundation, where she underscored the state's critical responsibility in reviewing and revising existing migration policies. While the migration sector has been the subject of discussion for a long while, she emphasized that progress has largely stalled due to weak implementation and a lack of targeted focus on the unique challenges faced by female migrant workers. ***"There hasn't been much progress—the sector has been stuck in the same loop for the 20 years I've been working in it."*** She noted that the current policy of

Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016 is overly broad, with generalized regulations that fail to capture the specific vulnerabilities of female migrants, including their physical, mental, and socio-economic challenges. Ms. Hafiza called for a more nuanced, issue-specific approach that differentiates the experiences of women from those of male migrants. She urged both the government and civil society organizations to be more proactive. She also emphasized, ***"Before making recommendations, I urge everyone to first identify the specific challenges faced by female migrants, not just the general or common issues with male migrants. If we truly want to uproot injustice, disparity, and systemic neglect in this sector, we must start by seeing women's realities for what they are."*** Finally, she advocated for a comprehensive review of all policy points to ensure that rights and protections are extended not only to female migrant workers but also to the families they leave behind, calling for an inclusive framework that addresses deep-rooted disparities, injustice, and systemic gaps in the migration sector.

Ms. Sunzida Sultana, Additional Executive Director of Kormojibi Nari, pointed out that female migrants are often deprived of essential information, such as destination-country trends, their rights, employment options, etc., and the resources that are more commonly available to male migrants. Outdated training infrastructure, especially in Technical Training Centers (TTCs), further compounds the problem. Female migrants often find themselves unable to use outdated machinery during training, only to face



advanced tools in actual workplaces abroad. This disconnection underscores the need for improved training, including language and financial literacy, tailored to women's realities in both the home and destination countries. She further stressed that returnee female migrants, particularly those who come back pregnant or with children, require immediate access to safe homes, healthcare, and psychosocial support services that are currently lacking or inaccessible. ***“Female migrants face layered challenges—physical, mental, and economic—that go unaddressed in both policy and practice. Many return home pregnant or deeply traumatized, yet there's no structured support for them.”*** There are rarely female officers to assist the female migrants, who can express their issues more explicitly and without hesitation. Ms. Sultana called for the establishment of a dedicated wing within relevant ministries and institutions for migrants, with special focus on female migrants. Although such provisions are mentioned in existing policies, she noted with concern that no meaningful progress has been made in over a decade. She also criticized the vague equal pay regulations, noting that the working sectors of male and female migrants are very different. Bangladeshi female migrants earn significantly less than their male counterparts and even less than migrants from neighboring countries such as Sri Lanka, Vietnam, or Thailand. Lastly, she emphasized how women's voices and agency are still routinely overlooked. ***“Families in this patriarchal society don't allow women to attend the trainings in the sub-districts, let alone the central district ones. But when it comes to sending them abroad for a job, the families don't have any problem with sending the woman who has never even gone to the next town by herself. This is a major reason why the female migrants are still unskilled.”*** With that, she advocated for longer soft skills training programs, giving women adequate time and information to make informed migration decisions. ***“We can only call it women's empowerment when women are aware of their voice and agency, when they own it, and when they use these to make decisions.”***

Ms. Wahida Banu, Executive Director of Aparajeyo Bangladesh, highlighted the disconnect between policy creation and effective implementation, noting that while Bangladesh is proactive in signing treaties and drafting laws, tangible progress remains elusive due to misaligned and underfunded efforts. ***“We have enough policies, treaties, and institutions for the development of the migration sector, but without political will and proper budget allocation, they are empty promises.”*** She emphasized that female migrants face heightened vulnerabilities, including pregnancy, abortion, and sexual violence, which mirror the broader risks faced by women workers across sectors. Ms. Banu stressed the need for clarity on actions against exploitative middlemen, specifying their punishments. She also urged for better promotion of existing information desks, which remain largely inaccessible to female migrants. She



advocated for enhanced training programs, focusing on soft skills, functional skills, and communication, to help female migrants navigate the challenges of working abroad. Additionally, she highlighted the often-overlooked needs of migrants' families and left-behind members, especially women in those families, calling for referral services and support systems tailored to their well-being. For migration governance to be truly effective, she argued, there must be strong political commitment, adequate budget allocation, and well-regulated mechanisms. Finally, she proposed action-based research to assess the realities of left-behind families, particularly women and children, to generate evidence-based recommendations for improving policies and ensuring government accountability.

Mr. Suhrawardy Hussain, Deputy Director of WARBE Development Foundation, delivered a detailed set of forward-looking policy recommendations centered on making migration governance more gender-responsive and inclusive. He began by emphasizing that current discussions around female migration often focus narrowly on livelihood and empowerment. While important, these dimensions must be complemented by a stronger emphasis on ensuring respect, dignity, and social inclusion for female migrants in both public and institutional contexts. Recognizing the steady increase in the number of women migrating for work, he advocated for the creation of a separate law or policy framework dedicated specifically to female migrants. He pointed out that existing regulations under the 2016 policy are too generalized, lacking specificity to address the distinct challenges faced by women. For example, abused or distressed female migrants often fall through the cracks of support systems, as existing laws do not make clear how they can access comprehensive services through labor rights mechanisms.



He recommended that bilateral labor agreements be reformed or newly established with a special focus on the rights, safety, and service access of female migrants. With changing global labor markets—especially in the European Union—he noted that there is a growing demand for female workers across diverse sectors, and Bangladesh must prepare accordingly with targeted strategies. To protect women before, during, and after migration, he proposed a number of service-specific interventions:

- Special health checkups and medical regulations tailored for female migrants, including those who are pregnant or recovering from trauma.
- Emergency support services at airports, embassies, and BMET offices, where women in distress can access help immediately.
- Dedicated dormitory facilities for female migrants awaiting departure or in transition.

- Female-staffed service cells at DEMO, BMET, and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare to ensure safe, gender-sensitive environments for consultation and complaint resolution.
- One-stop service centers specifically for female migrants, integrating counseling, documentation support, training, and referrals.

Mr. Suhrawardy also called for the appointment of female representatives to advocate for and support female migrants, noting that current policies lack any such provision. This representation, he argued, is essential for women's voices to be reflected meaningfully in migration governance. On the financial side, he urged Probashi Kallyan Bank and other migrant-serving financial institutions to design specialized products and services for female migrants, including entrepreneurship programs and savings schemes. He stressed that these efforts must be backed by dedicated budget allocations for female migration programs, rather than being subsumed under general migration funding. He concluded with an appeal to broaden the stakeholder landscape. He argued that ministries such as the Social Welfare and Information Ministries must be actively engaged in migration policymaking and implementation, given their roles in community outreach, awareness, and family support. He concluded by stressing the need to hold private institutions, especially BAIRA, accountable under the policy framework, noting their significant influence and contribution to the migration process and the lack of explicit regulatory mechanisms currently in place.

Open Floor Discussion:

During the open floor session, representatives from civil society organizations, national and international NGOs, trade unions, BAIRA, and migrant workers actively contributed their perspectives and recommendations for the ongoing reform of the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016.

Mr. Abul Hosen, Bangladesh Labour Federation highlighted the recent publication by the *Women Reform Commission*, drawing attention to Chapter 13 of the report which specifically addresses the safety and social protection of female migrants. It was emphasized that this state-authored document should be reviewed carefully to identify overlaps and discrepancies with existing policies, and to integrate its recommendations into the revised framework.



Mr. Mrinmoy Mohajan from Winrock International stressed the importance of challenging prevailing stereotypes about women migrants. She noted that societal norms continue to restrict



women to traditionally gendered roles such as sewing or beauty services. She emphasized the need to bridge the existing gap in the migration demand and supply

chain by improving institutional readiness. Despite the involvement of over 14 ministries and stakeholders, current training modules—such as the three-day sessions at DEMO—remain insufficient. Migrants are only exposed to advanced tools and smart appliances once they reach their destination countries. She urged the inclusion of institutional capacity-building in the National Action Plan and recommended active engagement from the private sector, which contributes significantly to employment, skills development, and financing.

Ms. Syeda Azizunnahar from the **Bangladesh Labour Federation** called for the integration of national labor development strategies with labor migration policy. She suggested that job contracts be made more comprehensive and protective, especially for women. Registration processes should be transparent and digitally updated to ensure data accuracy. She stressed that protection mechanisms for female migrants must be clearly outlined for both host and origin countries. Furthermore, merely increasing the number of women service providers is not sufficient—roles and responsibilities must be defined. She also raised critical questions on information dissemination for illiterate women and advocated for multimedia-based communication (e.g., visuals, infographics). The role of middlemen should also be addressed and formalized under regulatory oversight.



Ms. Munni Akter, a returnee migrant worker and community ambassador, shared her personal experience, stating: “We don’t want to return abroad—we want to become entrepreneurs here.”



She expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to work as a community leader but stressed the need for localized training and support for sustainable reintegration. She urged stakeholders to provide tangible resources—not charity—to empower returnee women to escape cycles of vulnerability. She condemned the coercive tactics of recruitment agencies and sub-agents, citing instances of extortion, forced migration, and even temporary trafficking. She noted that many women remain unaware that migration can be

cost-free and recommended the inclusion of this information in policy guidelines. She emphasized the need to institutionalize effective economic and social reintegration mechanisms for returnee migrants. Additionally, she raised concerns about the migrant loan process, describing it as overly complex and burdensome,



with loan amounts that are insufficient to meet migrants' needs.

Ms. Amena Akter from **Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Programme (OKUP)**, with a decade of grassroots experience, highlighted the continued invisibility of female migrants' sufferings. He stressed the need to define and implement penalties for sub-agents who exploit migrant women. Many female migrants, he noted, are unaware of basic legal documentation such as passports, which impedes their access to justice. The absence of female staff in embassies and institutions like DEMO further discourages women from reporting sexual abuse or harassment. He emphasized, "Policies must reflect the lived realities of victims; it's not enough to draft laws without listening to their stories."

Mr. Nafij Intiaj Hassan from the **Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association**



critiqued the discriminatory tone in the policy language, which labels female migrants as "illiterate" or "low-literate." She questioned why educated women are systematically excluded from migration pathways. The lack of female staff in DEMO offices and airports, combined with the absence of affordable legal aid abroad, exacerbates women's vulnerabilities. She called for stronger negotiations by the government with destination countries and demanded the establishment of a separate, well-staffed women's wing at BMET. She also

raised concerns about unaddressed issues such as abandonment by spouses, financial exploitation by family members, and ineffective grievance redress systems.

Md. Khaled Hossain from the **Centre for Community Development Assistance (CCDA)** underscored the gap between government efforts to promote women's migration and the societal stigma that migrant women face. She called for the policy to acknowledge and address community-level challenges, including social reintegration and destigmatization.



Ms. Aklima Akter Akhi from the **Bangladesh Mukto Sramik Federation** stressed the importance of amplifying the voices of current female migrants abroad. She recommended developing diaspora networks to share authentic migration experiences with prospective migrants, especially those from rural areas. These peer-to-peer exchanges can help bridge the

information gap and create a more informed, empowered group of women migrants.

Mr. Asif Munier, *Migration Expert and Independent Consultant*, highlighted that while the 2016 Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy mentions the formation of two key platforms—the Steering Committee and the National Labour Migration Forum—there is no clear provision for the representation of migrant workers within them. In contrast, the Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act of 2018 does explicitly mention representation of migrant workers, including one male and one female representative to be nominated by the Ministry. However, implementation remains absent, and concerns persist about the risk of tokenism in such nominations. As the 2018 Act is also under review, he stressed the importance of robust advocacy to ensure genuine and meaningful participation of migrants.

Mr. Munier called for consistent inclusion of migrant voices, particularly women, not just during one-off events but through regular and institutional mechanisms. He noted that while the women's section of the 2016 Policy mentions gender-sensitive budgeting, such considerations should be integrated across the overall budget from the point of allocation. He also pointed out that many essential policy elements—such as the 11 key points regarding women's issues—could have been placed more strategically in the policy's preamble or other core sections. Critiquing the structure of the policy, he argued that 30–40% of it is devoted to the political history of Bangladesh and migration since 1975, which adds length without offering practical value. He urged simplification of the document and stronger alignment with actionable items.



Ms. Medha Saha from **Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra** shared insights based on direct



interaction with women migrant workers. She highlighted the emotional and financial abuse many women face, especially after sending remittances home. In many cases, their husbands misuse the money or remarry in their absence, leaving women without social security or family support. She called for legal reforms to address these issues and emphasized the need to consider the welfare of the families left behind, particularly children. Female children, in particular, often face neglect and rejection

from their extended families, leading to psychological trauma for both the children and their migrant mothers.



Mr. Hasan Imam pointed out that the National Reintegration Policy is still awaiting final approval and recommended that it be referenced in the 2016 Policy revision. He noted that the current policy is too lengthy and written in complex language, discouraging public engagement. Along with Ms. Sheepa Hafiza, he questioned the effectiveness of the standalone women's section, stating that its 11 points largely apply to male workers as well. This, he argued, risks marginalizing women's unique concerns. He stressed that two key areas—safety and security in destination countries and women's health—are often overlooked, especially in pre-departure orientation. Based on his three decades of experience, he recommended renaming and refining the section to focus on these critical issues, while integrating women's concerns throughout the policy to ensure it is genuinely gender-sensitive.

Ms. Marium Mahzabin from **The Asia Foundation** critiqued the tone and language of the



policy, arguing that it fails to reflect the real experiences of women migrants. Instead, it seems to be written with an idealized version of a woman in mind—one that does not exist. She stressed the need to address women's systematic vulnerabilities and move beyond merely labeling them as “workers.” She emphasized that the rights of women migrants often fall short of basic worker rights and that the policy lacks a focus on the right to integrity. Rather than focusing solely on remedial measures, she urged a preventive and rights-based approach that upholds the dignity of

migrant women in bilateral negotiations.

Mr. Nazmul Ahsan from the **Bangladesh Ovibashi Adhikar Forum** proposed the formation of a pre-migration evaluation board. He recommended that no woman should be allowed to migrate without an interview before this board, which would assess her preparedness in terms of safety, integration, and capacity to work in the destination country. He suggested that the board include representatives from both government ministries and civil society organizations to ensure balanced and informed decision-making.



Closing Plenary:



Ms. Wahida Banu, Executive Director of Aparajeyo Bangladesh, emphasized the need for a holistic

approach to migration policies that ensure women's rights are recognized and upheld as part of broader human rights standards. She noted that women should not be seen solely through a gendered lens but as individuals entitled to all fundamental rights. She highlighted the significant challenges female migrants face when seeking legal redress, pointing out that many are forced to withdraw their complaints due to pressure from opposing parties, including recruiting agencies and sub-agents. This results in a lack of justice for many women. She called for a revision of the legal framework to make it more gender-sensitive and accessible to women.

Ms. Sheepa Hafiza, Chair of the Film 4 Peace Foundation, proposed the development of a checklist to assess the actual allocation and utilization of funds designated for women under gender-responsive budgeting claims. She also underscored the crucial role of the media in shaping public perception, particularly in countering the negative portrayal of Bangladeshi migrants. Regarding institutional reforms, she addressed the suggestion of establishing a dedicated migration board and posed critical questions about its timing and function. She cautioned that if such a board intervenes only in the middle or later stages of the migration process, it may be too late for effective support, as decisions to migrate are often already finalized and financially committed at that point.



In his closing remarks, **Mr. Syed Saiful Haque**, Chairman of WARBE Development Foundation, expressed gratitude to the moderator, panelists, and participants. He extended



special thanks to The Asia Foundation for its continued support, not only for supporting this consultation but also for backing WARBE's broader governance initiative in migration sector under the PERI Programme. He emphasized that The Asia Foundation's commitment has enabled WARBE to amplify the voices of migrants, facilitate policy dialogues, and advocate for more inclusive and rights-based migration frameworks. He referenced several international treaties, with a particular focus on the UN

Convention on migrant rights, sharing his experience in promoting its awareness in Bangladesh. He criticized past policies, including a controversial 2012 agreement that implied gender-based quotas in overseas employment. Mr. Haque questioned the government's prioritization of domestic workers in migration strategies and challenged the role of the 2,700 recruiting agencies operating in the country, asking what concrete support they provide to migrant workers.

He raised concerns about the use of the 'Musaned' website for processing migrant workers and alleged that a significant sum USD 2,500 per migrant is allocated to recruiting agencies supposedly for training female migrants, yet there is little transparency or accountability regarding the actual provision of such training. He criticized the government's annual target of sending 1 million migrant workers abroad according to the 8th five year plan, asserting that migration policies should prioritize the quality of opportunities, training, and protections for migrants, not just quantity.



Mr. Haque called on civil society organizations, activists, and trade unions to actively engage in holding authorities accountable. He emphasized the need to enhance migrant representation in policy forums and advocated for clear mechanisms to ensure accountability and appropriate sanctions for government officials involved in migration governance. He concluded by thanking all participants for their valuable contributions and reaffirmed the collective responsibility to push for meaningful reform in the migration sector.

Recommendations:

- Revise the legal framework to better support female migrants seeking justice, particularly in cases involving recruiting agencies and sub-agents. Specific penalties for exploitative practices by sub-agents and informal middlemen must be introduced and enforced.
- Ensure that the *Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act 2018* and the 2016 Policy provide **clear and implemented representation** of both male and female migrants in governance platforms such as the Steering Committee and National Labour Migration Forum—avoiding tokenism.
- Establish a **pre-migration evaluation board** involving civil society and government representatives. No woman should migrate without an interview assessing her preparedness, safety awareness, and capacity to adapt in the destination country.
- This board should also ensure proper documentation, verification, and orientation, especially for first-time and rural women migrants.
- Redraft the 2016 Policy using accessible language, eliminating excessive political history, and focusing on **actionable, gender-sensitive content**.
- Incorporate the **Reintegration Policy** currently awaiting approval by cross-referencing and aligning its key provisions within the revised 2016 framework.
- Introduce **dedicated female-staffed service cells** at DEMO, BMET, and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare to facilitate gender-sensitive service delivery and complaint resolution.
- Establish a **separate wing for women** at BMET and other relevant institutions to reflect their unique needs and rights, including physical safety, reproductive health, and mental well-being.

- Shift from gender-sensitive to **gender-responsive budgeting** by allocating specific budgets from the outset to female migration programs.
- Simplify the **loan procedure** for migrants, ensure transparency, and increase the ceiling of available loans to meet real financial needs.
- Design **custom financial products** for women, such as entrepreneurship loans, savings schemes, and reintegration support through Probashi Kallyan Bank and related institutions.
- Extend pre-departure training to include **soft skills, digital and financial literacy, and health awareness**, especially around sexual and reproductive rights.
- Modernize training facilities (e.g., TTCs) and ensure tools match destination country standards.
- Institutionalize **economic and social reintegration mechanisms**, including dedicated dormitories, medical screening for returnees, and psychosocial support for those returning with trauma or children.
- Make **comprehensive job contracts mandatory**, clearly detailing facilities, benefits, grievance redress mechanisms, and workers' rights in both origin and host countries.
- Introduce **monitoring mechanisms** to ensure recruiting agencies and employers comply with contract terms.
- Hold **recruiting agencies accountable** under strict regulatory oversight—particularly regarding misuse of funds designated for female migrant training (e.g., USD 2,500 per worker, as discussed).
- Launch multimedia awareness campaigns (including infographics, videos, and local dialect audio content) to inform illiterate or low-literate female migrants of their rights and services.
- Support **diaspora networks** and peer-to-peer learning platforms to bridge the information gap and share real-time, authentic experiences with aspiring migrants.
- Guarantee regular and meaningful **representation of migrant women** in all migration policy bodies and platforms, not just symbolic inclusion.
- Encourage participatory consultation mechanisms that include returnee voices and community ambassadors at both the national and sub-national levels.
- Develop action-based research and support systems for **families left behind**, particularly focusing on abandoned or vulnerable children.
- Address issues such as **spousal misuse of remittances**, forced marriage, and the social reintegration of children, especially daughters, through legal protections and social programs.
- Link migration policy reform with **national development and social welfare strategies**, recognizing migration as a development issue, not just a labor issue.
- Include ministries such as **Social Welfare and Information** in migration governance frameworks to ensure holistic service delivery and awareness-building.

