



MIGRANTS REFUGEES

Migration Profile

BANGLADESH

A. Executive Summary

Bangladesh represents a real challenge for both local authorities and international institutions, since the country is extremely vulnerable to climate change and often the object of natural disasters. At the same time, Bangladesh is a destination country for hundreds of thousands of refugees coming from the neighbouring Myanmar, and has a very high urban population density.

Immigration to Bangladesh affects more than 2 million foreigners. However, this phenomenon is not as big as the national internal migration and emigration, which together involve tens of millions Bangladeshis. The most recent data and statistics are scarce and often contradictory, especially the ones regarding internal migration. Many studies and surveys consider economic and family reasons the main drive for both internal and international migration. In Bangladesh, there is also a considerable movement from the countryside into the city, where overcrowding is at the root of the greatest difficulties faced by internal migrants. In addition to overcrowded cities, even the country's peculiar geographical features make the population extremely vulnerable to natural disasters and environmental changes, producing thousands of climate displaced persons every year.

Human trafficking affects thousands of Bangladeshis, either domestically or abroad, and is especially present within the Rohingya refugee community. Prostitution in urban areas and forced marriages in the countryside are its most significant consequences, as well as child labour. However, forced labour is by far the most reported cause of human trafficking, especially with Bangladeshi emigrants.

The Bangladeshi legal framework regulating migration and addressing human trafficking is still very limited, though it continues to evolve thanks to the support of the international community.

For years, a significant number of local and international agencies, including institutions connected to the Catholic Church, have been providing assistance to the local authorities and people, as well as to refugees.

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The People's Republic of Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan until 1972. Its territory covers an area of approximately 148,000 sq. km, filled with flood plains,² extending from the foothills of the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, reaching the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna

rivers.¹ Bangladesh is surrounded almost entirely by India, with the exception of a short border section in common with Myanmar to the southeast. As of 2021, its population was estimated to be 164,700,000 inhabitants,³ of whom 90% are Shia Muslims, with small minorities of Hindus (8.5%) and Buddhists (0.6%).⁴ Catholics represent an average 0.24% of the whole population.⁵ The most relevant ethnic group is the Bengali (98.2%), but the State recognises 27 other ethnic groups known as *Adivasis* (meaning “aboriginal” in Sanskrit), who are the remaining 1.8% of the population, though other sources report higher numbers.⁶ Among these ethnic groups, the Biharis (Urdu-speaking Muslims who remained in Bangladesh after its separation from Pakistan)⁷ and the Pahari or Jumma (indigenous inhabitants of the Chittagong Hills), are often affected by migration. Of the eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh, the central region of Dhaka is the most populous and densely populated, while Chattogram (Chittagong), to the east, is the largest and second most populous area.⁸ The growth of the Bangladeshi economy is among the fastest ones in the world, with an annual rate of 6.4%, which has been steady despite the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

II. International and Internal Migration

According to UNDESA, there were 2,115,408 foreigners present in Bangladesh in mid-2020,¹⁰ just under 1.3% of the total population. Roughly 80% of these foreigners were originally from South and Southeast Asia, mainly from Myanmar (43%), Malaysia (9.4%), China (7.5%), Indonesia (7%), and Laos (4%).¹¹ Almost all the people from Myanmar are stateless refugees, mostly belonging to the Rohingya ethnic group, hosted in refugee camps across Bangladesh, especially in the Cox’s Bazar district within the Chittagong division.

Current data on internal migration is not yet available. However, based on sample surveys by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the percentage of internal migrants in 2020 was estimated at 6.9% of the population, down from previous years.¹² Yet, a labour force survey in 2017 reported a higher percentage: as much as 19.3% of the working-age population.¹³ Overall, internal migration is a phenomenon that affects between 11 and 21 million Bangladeshis.

Among the internal migrants, almost 9% of them are children up to 4 years of age, 7% are between 5 and 9 years old, as well as up to 15% of children live in urban areas. Women migrate mostly between the age of 15 and 29, a suitable age to get married, which is in fact the main reason for their migration, along with the movement of all or part of the family.¹⁴ In women, there is a peak in internal migration between the age of 15 and 19. Men, on the other hand, move more so between the age of 25 and 39, mainly for economic reasons related to work.¹⁵ Many Bangladeshis, especially males, migrate seasonally to work in agriculture.¹⁶ According to the 2017 labour force survey, job search was the cause of 58% of migration in the case of men, and 27% of migration overall, preceded only by marriage.¹⁷

Dhaka is the district with the highest number of internal migrants, accounting for almost 11% of the population.¹⁸ Inter-urban migration appears to be the most significant national phenomenon, followed by rural-to-urban migration.¹⁹ About a third of the urban population in Bangladesh lives in shanty houses in the city slums, with no direct access to safe drinking water and other basic services.²⁰ Most of them are migrants from neighbouring villages and from the countryside.²¹ Sanitary, psychosocial, and nutritional conditions are extremely precarious, and access to public services and education is limited or totally inexistent. Prostitution and drug abuse are widespread, as is the spread of diseases. For example, in 2015 internal migrants accounted for between 25% and 40% of annual HIV cases.²²

According to a 2019 UNICEF report, only 85.7% of the surveyed children lived with both of their parents.²³ Many are left behind by migrant parents, entrusting them to other relatives, on whom they depend for food, accommodation, and medical expenses, while others are taken in as domestic workers by other families.²⁴ Children who migrate with their parents are also at risk of being poorly supervised or having to work. Some care for younger siblings or carry out household chores while their parents work.²⁵ About 10% of children between the age of 5 and 17 are already employed and about one-fifth of these do not attend school.²⁶

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

Bangladesh is the sixth largest emigrant country in the world. According to UNDESA estimates, the number of Bangladeshis living abroad in mid-2021 was approximately 7,400,000 representing 4.5% of its entire population.²⁷ Most of them (just over 88%) live in other Asian countries, and more than half – mostly men – reside in the Middle East. The top destination countries for Bangladeshi are India (33.3%), Saudi Arabia (17.3%), the United Arab Emirates (14.8%), Malaysia (5.6%), and Kuwait (5.1%).²⁸ Approximately, 67% of migrants are male. Most women instead move to India, North America, and Europe, where they slightly outnumber their male counterparts.²⁹ The main districts of origin of male emigrants are Cumilla, Chattogram, and Brahmanbaria, in the Chattogram division, whereas female emigrants come mostly from the Dhaka district, as well as from the Chattogram division.³⁰

The causes of migration are mainly economic and increasingly related to climate change.³¹ Among other reasons, people migrate because of unemployment (33%), to follow a relative who is about to migrate (27%), and to have access to a community abroad (25%).³³ Cross-checking the results of several surveys carried out by IOM³² in different Bangladeshi districts, in the Dhaka and Chattogram divisions, the most attested push factors are economic reasons, followed by family issues. The choice of destination depends mainly on the presence of friends and relatives in the host country.

Job seeking is done through recruitment agencies, which charge high commissions even for low-skilled jobs.³⁴ The most common difficulties experienced by emigrants are low wages, discrimination, exploitation, and abuse by employers.³⁵

Bangladesh is one of the top ten recipients of remittances from abroad, which according to the World Bank estimate in 2020 accounted for about 6.6% of its GDP, despite the devastating effects of the pandemic.³⁶ The impact of remittances on the Bangladeshi economy is significant, helping to reduce poverty and improve the health, nutrition, housing, and education conditions of family members left behind.³⁷

IV. Forced Migrants (Internally Displaced Persons, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Climate Displaced Persons)

According to UNHCR, as of mid-2021 there were 889,775 foreign refugees in Bangladesh.³⁸ Except for 11 Somali refugees, the others were all Burmese,³⁹ mostly of the Rohingya ethnicity and almost all stateless.⁴⁰ There were also 27 asylum seekers, mainly Somalis.⁴¹

Since August 2017, the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority in Buddhist Myanmar, have been fleeing in large numbers from their country, especially from the Rakhine state into the

neighbouring Bangladeshi district of Chattogram, as a result of the conflicts and repression they had suffered.⁴² Almost all of them are hosted in refugee camps or communities spread across the Cox's Bazar district; however, 70% of them live in the very large Kutupalong camp, and half of the Rohingya refugees are children.⁴³

Living conditions in these camps are quite critical. Malnutrition, poor hygiene, poverty, and illiteracy are among the main challenges refugees face, especially the young. The high population density also exacerbates their health and safety risks, making them more vulnerable to natural disasters,⁴⁴ especially floods, landslides,⁴⁵ and fires.⁴⁶

To alleviate the pressure on the Cox's Bazar district, the government initiated a resettlement programme, building new housing on Bhasan Char, an islet (char) formed in the Bay of Bengal in 2006.⁴⁷ The island, which rises a few metres above sea level, is prone to frequent flooding, and the government's initiative has raised doubts and criticism from the international community.⁴⁸ As of December 2021, Bhasan Char hosted 16,775 refugees.⁴⁹

Bangladesh is among the countries most affected by natural disasters and climate change. Climate displacement in 2020 was estimated at approximately 345,000 persons, mainly due to floods and inundations.⁵⁰

Rising sea levels, saline intrusion, the drying up of the countryside, and coastal and river erosion are also forcing rural populations to seek new sources of livelihood in cities, further increasing population density and also the impact of natural disasters.⁵¹ The silt of the Himalayas is constantly eroded and carried towards the sea by the rivers, thus changing the coastline structure, with the destruction and creation of new islets, which often house people on the margins of the poorest population, and are subject to frequent flooding.⁵²

Sometimes, violence occurs between village groups and religious communities. In 2020, around 230 new displacements were reported in the Khulna and Chittagong divisions, while internal refugees due to conflict were estimated at approximately 427,000, dating back to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and the country's independence from present-day Pakistan in 1971.⁵³ These figures are an estimate that includes several indigenous ethnic groups in the southeastern region of the Chittagong Hills, called Jumma or Pahari, and the Urdu-speaking Muslim Bihari, most of whom live in slums in urban areas, as well as Hindus and Buddhists in different parts of the country.

In Bangladesh, there are also 1.5 million street children under the age of 14. Some are orphaned or abandoned, while others have fled natural disasters, family crises, or extreme poverty.⁵⁴ These children migrate in large numbers from rural areas to the capital city of Dhaka, and survive by begging, collecting and selling recycling materials, or performing other types of informal street work. They are exposed to many dangers, including exploitation, sexual abuse, and other trafficking issues.⁵⁵

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

Between April 2020 and March 2021, Bangladeshi authorities identified 6,866 potential victims of human trafficking, which had increased tremendously from 585 in 2019.⁵⁶

Human trafficking, especially the one related to labour exploitation, is a real scourge and affects

not only the Bengali and Rohingya population within national borders, but also many Bangladeshis who have migrated abroad.⁵⁷

During their journey, especially in the case of irregular migrants, and upon reaching destination, migrants risk harassment and exploitation. To find work abroad, Bangladeshis rely on government and private employment agencies or intermediaries,⁵⁸ frequently using both. All of these often charge high fees to find job offers and organise travel and paperwork, resulting in indebtedness, impoverishment, and thus increased vulnerability to exploitation and human trafficking for the migrant.⁵⁹

The exploitation of women and children is especially connected to prostitution and forced or arranged marriages. Women, including minors, are forced into prostitution in licensed or illegal brothels, hotels, and private facilities. Child sex trafficking is widespread. Experts estimate that 20,000 children grow up and are exploited in Bangladeshi brothels.⁶⁰ Street children are another high-risk category and are often exploited, including sexually, in exchange for food, shelter, protection, or money.

Traffickers seem to target primarily women who have fled forced marriages, and similarly exploit those born and raised in brothels, particularly daughters whose mothers are also prostitutes. It has been reported that the owners of some brothels force children to take steroids in order to look older. Moreover, widespread corruption inhibits the authorities' ability to control brothel activities.⁶¹ In addition to debt and violence, methods of coercion include exploiting drug addiction, which is widespread among poor people.⁶²

The refugee camp population, consisting mainly of women and minors,⁶³ as well as stateless people in general, is also particularly at risk. Lack of documentation, and the resulting inability to work regularly or receive formal education, dramatically increases exposure to trafficking. The Rohingya are trafficked from their camps to Bangladeshi cities, but also across the border to India, Malaysia, and Nepal, into prostitution or forced labour, often with the false promise of work or marriage. Women are sometimes picked up at night and taken back to their camps during the day, for traffickers often have access to camps thanks to the intervention of corrupt officials.

VI. National Legal Framework

The main laws regulating immigration in Bangladesh are the 1946 Foreigners Act, the 1951 Foreigners Order, the 1939 Foreigners Registration Act, and the 1966 Foreigners Registration Regulation.⁶⁴ These laws mainly focus on immigration alone.⁶⁵ The status of foreigners, including that of refugees, is subject to administrative and judicial interpretations and can therefore vary depending on the authority or profile of the foreigners involved.⁶⁶ Bangladesh does not currently have any specific legislation regarding refugee protection and asylum rights.⁶⁷

The 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (OEMA) criminalises fraudulent recruitment and prohibits the imposition of high commissions requested by recruitment agencies. However, the government is allowed to charge recruitment fees, which can put migrant workers in debt and expose them to trafficking.⁶⁸

The 2012 Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) is the main legal tool available for the criminalisation of sexual exploitation and forced labour. It was implemented by

three regulations in 2017: the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking Regulation, the National Anti-Trafficking Authority Regulation, and the Prevention of Human Trafficking Fund Regulation.⁶⁹

Bangladesh is not a member of the 1951 Geneva Convention,⁷⁰ the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons,⁷¹ the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness,⁷² or the 1967 Protocol.⁷³ It acceded to the 1962 Convention on Consent, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages, the 1950 Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking in Human Beings,⁷⁴ and the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UN TIP or Palermo Protocol I), after ratifying the 2000 Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, but not to the 2000 Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants.⁷⁵

It has also signed seven of the eight International Labour Organisation (ILO) Core Conventions, but has not adhered to the Convention that sets 18 as the minimum age for entry into employment.⁷⁶

VII. Main Actors

The most important authorities in migration management are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Ministry of Finance (MoF).⁷⁷ The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the MFA, the MoF, and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism are the key actors in managing the migration of Bangladeshi workers. The Technical Training Centres (TTCs) of the Board of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) and the District Manpower Offices (DEMOs), along with the Government employment agency Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL), are the other agencies involved in emigration procedures. Private recruitment agencies, associations, medical centres, NGOs, and civil society bodies also play crucial roles.⁷⁸ The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) supervises and monitors the work of licensed employment agencies, with the aim of limiting irregular migration and recruitment.⁷⁹

In 2020, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) proposed the government to review its competencies, by simplifying and integrating into the institutional framework the internal migration issues, for which there is still no relevant Ministry. The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Co-operatives has been proposed to fill in this role.⁸⁰

International Organisations

There are many international organisations with offices and projects that are very active in Bangladesh. The involvement of UN agencies dates back to the war of independence from Pakistan, when UNHCR intervened to help Bangladeshi refugees in India with the support of other agencies, including UNICEF, the World Food Programme, FAO, the World Health Organisation, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. These organisations are still working there on behalf of both the local population and the new Burmese refugees hosted in the Cox's Bazar district.

The European Union and several of its agencies also operate or fund projects on the ground,⁸¹ as well as for Bangladeshis who are currently living abroad.⁸²

Other Organisations

There are many NGOs, cooperatives, and micro-credit institutions working on behalf of migrants and refugees. These include MISEREOR, the Catholic Church's episcopal aid organisation in Germany, *Andheri Hilfe*, Refugee Action-UK, and the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), which researches and combats human trafficking.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB) encompasses two archdioceses and six dioceses, with more than 250 priests. In most of the parishes of the Archdiocese of Chattogram, there are health centres, pharmacies, and homes for the needy.⁸³ Since February 2021, the implementation of the *Talitha Kum* network to combat human trafficking has begun.

The CBCB's Justice and Peace Commission has established shelters in Dhaka with access to clean water, showers, health, and nutritional care, as well as informal education and psychosocial support for street children. A night shelter provides street girls, who are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation at night, with a safe place to stay. The shelter also offers professional care for children with disabilities. Children over the age of 14 can attend vocational and skills training courses, enabling them to enter the labour market and become self-sufficient. The Commission also works to reunite children who have been separated from their families.

Caritas Bangladesh⁸⁴ runs shelters for migrant street children, providing safe places where they can access clean water, nutritional support, informal education, and health services.⁸⁵ It is the main partner of other Catholic organisations involved in projects helping displaced persons, refugees, and other needy people.

The Salesian Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate (SMMI) combat gender-based violence and human trafficking, providing assistance and protection to thousands of migrant women in slums and brothels in major Bangladeshi cities.⁸⁶

The Daughters of Our Lady of Missions (RNDM), with schools, shelters, and orphanages in all Bangladeshi districts, are especially involved in the education and pastoral care of children and young women, especially the *Adibashi* (indigenous) from ethnic minorities.⁸⁷

ICMC collaborates with UNICEF by providing experts in child and refugee protection.^{88 89}

The missionaries of the *Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII* have been present in the Khulna division since 1999, with three schools, four family houses, and other structures created by independent guests who live near the community with their families. These institutions take in disabled people, orphans, children, and women who are left alone or in poor family conditions. The community also runs a soup kitchen, an outpatient clinic for free medical check-ups with a small pharmacy, and a centre for the disabled with four physiotherapists and about sixty disabled patients.⁹⁰

Since 2018, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) has been collaborating with Caritas Bangladesh in the establishment and management of Children Friendly Spaces (CFS) in Cox's Bazar. Here, children can find a safe haven and psychological and social support, as well as the opportunity to learn, express themselves, and enjoy their childhood. On a normal day, each centre accommodates up to 250 children. There are currently six CFS in operation, and the plan is to open five more of them.⁹¹

Jesuits also run a Multipurpose Centre for Children and Adolescents (MCAC), where Rohingya women find a safe location and can engage in training and volunteering activities.

The Order of Malta, through Malteser International, works in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar and in neighbouring local communities, which face high levels of poverty. The main focus is on health, hygiene, and nutrition. It also provides medical assistance in three health centres, especially to pregnant women and new-born babies, and psychosocial support. It offers health and hygiene training in the camps and improves sanitation facilities in schools and community clinics. Similarly, it provides emergency aid in the event of natural disasters such as floods, working to strengthen local agencies.⁹²

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) works with Helen Keller International (HKI) and Caritas Bangladesh, along with five local partners, on a programme to reduce malnutrition in the poorest districts and prevent natural disasters in the most vulnerable areas. In collaboration with Caritas Australia and the Australian NGO Cooperation Programme, CRS is working to implement Phase II of the Sustainable Food and Livelihood Security (SuFoL) project that supports vulnerable communities in the Barisal and Dinajpur districts to achieve sustainable food security.

Other Catholic organisations present in Bangladesh are the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (RGS), who are particularly committed to fighting human trafficking and violence against women, and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), present with 31 missionaries in Dhaka and in two parishes in the hills of Chittagong, ministering in the poorest and most challenging areas of the country, where several ethnic minorities live in small villages that are often very isolated and lacking the most basic services. Finally, the Luigine Sisters have been active in Bangladesh since 1956, and are committed to assisting the most vulnerable through education and training programmes for the poorest.

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