

A Report on National-level Multi-Stakeholder Consultation to Include Migrant Women's Rights and Welfare in the Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act 2018

Organized by: International Organization for Migration (IOM) and WARBE Development Foundation

Supported by: The Embassy of Switzerland, The Asia Foundation and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

Date: 26th October, 2025 || **Time:** 10:30 AM to 1:30 PM

Venue: Amar Ekushey Conference Room, WEWB

Background

Labour migration plays a vital role in Bangladesh's economy. Every year, millions of Bangladeshi workers go abroad and send money home, which supports their families and contributes to national growth. To protect their rights and welfare, the government



introduced the WEWB Act 2018, which provides support such as grievance redress, repatriation, insurance, and compensation for migrant workers.

While this law has created an important structure for migrant welfare, it does not fully meet the

needs of women migrant workers. Even though women migrants make a strong contribution to the economy, they often face many challenges—such as unfair recruitment, lack of pre-departure information, wage discrimination, workplace abuse, and limited access to reintegration services. Many of the welfare services under the WEWB Act do not consider the specific risks and experiences of women.

To address these issues, the WARBE Development Foundation, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and with support from the Embassy of Switzerland, The Asia Foundation, and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), organized a National Multi-Stakeholder Consultation. The event focused on including women migrants' rights, safety, and gender-responsive welfare services in the WEWB Act 2018.

This consultation is part of ongoing efforts to promote fair and inclusive migration governance in Bangladesh and supports national and international commitments such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and CEDAW.

Objectives

- **Review the WEWB Act 2018** to identify existing gaps and the lack of gender-sensitive provisions that address the specific needs of women migrant workers.
- **Engage key stakeholders** through an open and participatory discussion involving civil society groups, migrant organizations, trade unions, returnee women migrants, grassroots networks such as BOAF, legal experts, and the private sector.
- **Develop and advocate for practical recommendations** to include gender-responsive welfare measures and protection mechanisms in the revised WEWB framework.
- **Promote policy accountability** by encouraging stronger institutional commitment and coordination among relevant ministries and agencies to ensure effective implementation of gender-focused reforms.

The event was inaugurated by **Mr. Foysal Hasan Tanvir**, Consultant – Migration Policy & Processes- IOM setting the tone for a collaborative and engaging discussion.

Opening Remarks

Ms. Farzana Shahnaz, National Programme Officer – Reintegration and Labour Mobility & Social Inclusion- IOM in her welcome remarks, highlighted the government's growing attention to the reintegration of migrant workers, noting that the post-COVID experience made it clear that reintegration is just as vital as ensuring safe migration. She explained that while there are existing provisions for returnees, it is essential to view reintegration as a process that encompasses everyone, not just a specific group of migrants. She emphasized that returning migrants often need guidance not only in managing their finances but also in rebuilding their social and emotional well-being after returning home. ***“Reintegration is required for everyone—it is not only financial, it is also social and psychological,”*** she noted.

She added that an overall decentralized structure for migration operations is already there, yet stronger and more measurable results are still needed. She expressed hope that the consultation would help identify areas for improvement and possible amendments to make the WEWB Act more gender inclusive and effective.

Syed Saiful Haque, Chairman- WARBE Development Foundation, expressed his gratitude to the Ministry for its willingness to explore areas of improvement within the WEWB Act 2018. He emphasized that the revision process should be inclusive and take



into account the gender perspective to ensure that all welfare measures are meaningful and equitable. He pointed out that most of the welfare activities under WEWB are supported by the remittances sent by migrant workers, yet the benefits often remain limited in scope. To make the welfare framework more comprehensive, he urged

that it should not only focus on migrants as beneficiaries but also extend protection to trafficked women and children, saying, ***“The WEWB’s welfare vision must be inclusive. It should recognize not only migrant workers but also trafficked women and children who deserve equal protection and care.”***

Ms. Jasiya Khatoon, Director- WARBE Development Foundation, presented an in-depth analysis of the WEWB Act 2018, focusing primarily on Sections 8, 9, and 10, while highlighting the key gender gaps that need to be addressed. She emphasized the importance of ensuring that the gender-focused recommendations shared through this consultation are reflected in the upcoming amendment of the Act.

The presentation identified several major concerns, including the absence of a dedicated budget allocation for women migrants, limited access to stipends and scholarships for the children of left-behind, single, or widowed women, and the lack of support services for returnee migrant women who have lost their livelihoods or family support. She also noted the shortage of female labour attachés and gender focal points in destination countries, as well as the limited number of safe houses available for women migrants abroad. She further pointed out that there are no clear or enforceable provisions for action against perpetrators or abusive employers, leaving many women without protection or recourse. She added that specialized reintegration programs for women migrants are almost non-

existent, and that there is no emergency support desk available to assist returnee women in distress.

Recognizing that not all changes can be directly incorporated into the Act, she urged that these issues should at least be addressed in the accompanying rules and operational guidelines, stating, ***“We know everything won’t be added in the Act, but we want these reflections to be visible in the rules.”***

Special Guest and Chief Guest Remarks

Mr. Mohammad Shaheen, ndc, Joint Secretary (Planning and Development Wing)-MoEWOE, one of the special guest, acknowledged that both the WEWB Act 2018 and its accompanying regulations have certain limitations, which sometimes make it difficult to



fully express or address gender issues in detail. He noted that, in a country where half of the population is women, empowerment should not come through separate treatment but through inclusion in all mainstream development processes, saying, ***“In a country where half the population is women, empowerment should not come from differentiation—it should come from inclusion as part of the mainstream community.”***

He shared that under the RAISE Project, more than 200,000 migrants have been registered, including over 16,000 women, which is a positive sign of

participation. However, he expressed concern that the overall number of women migrants has been decreasing, emphasizing the need to diversify women’s employment fields beyond domestic work. He also agreed that the current composition of the WEWB Board does not clearly specify the number of female members or their selection criteria, and this needs to be reconsidered. He mentioned ongoing government efforts such as the promoting diaspora project, aimed at empowering returnees through financial literacy and reintegration support. During a recent visit to Narsingdi under this project, he observed that most of the trainees in financial management were women, an encouraging sign that women are gradually taking stronger roles in economic decision-making.

As the chief guest, **Mr. Md. Saiful Haque Chowdhury**, Additional Secretary- MoEWOE, remarked that the WEWB Act 2018 tends to be bureaucratic by design, but its

effectiveness depends on how efficiently the Board is formed and managed. He



emphasized that, since the Act centers on welfare, proper structure and coordination are crucial to ensure meaningful implementation, noting that, ***“If the Board is not well organized, welfare will remain only on paper.”***

He reiterated the Ministry’s commitment to achieving concrete outcomes in partnership with civil society organizations, IOM, and ILO, whose collaboration he described as vital for making welfare measures more effective.

Discussing progress in overseas missions, he shared that female and gender desks are already being established, and regular updates are

being received from the field. Currently, 21 labour attachés are deployed abroad, including five women, marking a step forward in promoting gender inclusion. He also cited examples from Indonesia and the Philippines, where gender-responsive practices have led to better support systems for women migrants—models that Bangladesh can learn from and adapt.

Open Floor Discussion

Ms. Rahnuma Salam Khan, National Project Manager- ILO, emphasized the need for stronger regulatory clarity within the WEWB framework. She noted that while the Act provides the foundation for migrant welfare, it lacks specific guidance on how the Board should operate and exercise its authority. To ensure better governance and accountability, she suggested that a separate regulation be developed to clearly define the Board’s functions, jurisdiction, and scope of activities. She added that such a regulation would not only make implementation more consistent but also strengthen coordination among relevant ministries, attachés, and welfare service providers, ultimately improving the impact of the WEWB’s initiatives for migrant workers.

Mr. Hassan Imam Shaon, Managing Director- DEVCOM Ltd. raised a number of practical and governance concerns about the WEWB Act 2018. He asked whether there is room to include civil society representatives on the Board, noting that CSO participation would help ensure migrants’ voices are heard and improve accountability.

He recommended revisiting Section 7(2) on termination without show-cause, arguing that such provisions can undermine fairness and due process. He also questioned the Board’s continued existence if it fails to carry out its core briefing and oversight duties. ***“The Board***

must be accountable. If it cannot clearly show how the fund is used, then it has no mandate to continue in its current form.”

He stressed the need to include psychosocial reintegration in the welfare framework explicitly, and to provide a clear operational design for how the Board will act, rather than relying mainly on donor support. He urged better use of the Board's own fund and greater transparency about its management, pointing out that the migrants' welfare contribution of Tk 3,500 per head is a major revenue source that must be clearly accounted for.

He also noted gaps in legal assistance provisions under Section 9, and said Section 14 should explicitly state the sources and uses of funds so that contributors can see how resources are spent.

Ms. Farzana Shahnaz, National Programme Officer- IOM, highlighted that IOM has already conducted several studies and developed recommendations related to migrant welfare and reintegration. She emphasized that these recommendations should now be reviewed and applied through a gender lens, ensuring that women migrants' specific needs and experiences are fully reflected in future reforms.

Prof. Israt Shamim, President- CWCS, emphasized the need for reintegration support tailored to migrants' specific vulnerabilities, especially for women returnees. She noted that activities and services must be need-based and practical, helping returnees rebuild



their lives with dignity. Citing examples from countries like the Philippines and Japan, she pointed out that Bangladesh can learn from their strong welfare systems and skill development programs for women migrants. She also stressed the need for more research and structured regulations to ensure effective implementation of welfare measures, saying, ***“We need a proper rule and regulation to make these good intentions work in reality.”***

Mr. Prabir Kumar Biswas, Director- BOMSA, highlighted the need to simplify the process

of repatriating deceased migrants, especially for those who were undocumented and therefore excluded from compensation or welfare support.

Ms. Mariam Proma, Project Manager- Films 4 Peace Foundation, observed that many returnee women migrants are often hesitant to seek available services, particularly psychosocial and legal support. She emphasized that awareness and trust-building are essential to ensure women feel comfortable accessing the help they need. She also recommended that greater promotion and visibility of these services be included in welfare planning to reach more returnees. As she noted, ***“Support only works when people know about it. Promoting psychosocial and legal services is as important as providing them.”***

Ms. Zohora Monsur, Deputy Director- BMET emphasized the urgent need to establish a separate support cell at airports for distressed or tormented returnee women migrants, ensuring immediate assistance upon arrival. She also highlighted the importance of providing structured support for left-behind children, many of whom face emotional and social challenges due to family separation.

She called for a dedicated regulation to guide the protection and welfare of female migrants, covering both safety and reintegration. She stressed that incidents of abuse in Middle Eastern and other destination countries must be properly tracked and that perpetrators should face consequences within those countries. She also urged the WEWB to take a stronger role in promoting available welfare services so that migrants are better informed.

Ms. Nasrin Akter Dina, General Secretary- BJSD, emphasized the importance of enhancing training opportunities for women migrants, ensuring that they are better prepared and skilled before migration. She also highlighted the need for community-based awareness campaigns, particularly courtyard sessions, to reach women at the grassroots level and help them make informed migration decisions.

Ms. Rahnema Salam Khan- ILO emphasized the need for greater inclusion, clarity, and transparency. Referring to Section 7, she noted that the committee appears mostly inter-ministerial, leaving out trade unions, civil society, and active organizations that should be represented to ensure genuine people’s participation. She suggested referring to the Labour Reform Commission and Women Reform Commission reports as they already have some recommendations in them.

Discussing Section 12, she highlighted that the phrase *“expenditure for other sectors”* is too vague and should be replaced with specific service definitions, including clear provisions for women’s welfare. She also recommended identifying the top five TAFSILI banks managing migrant funds to strengthen financial accountability. With better transparency on fund use, she noted, the ILO and partners could support improved portfolio management and oversight.

Reflecting on accountability, she added that every institution has limits in how openly it can speak, but trade unions play a vital role in voicing the truth about workers’ realities and ensuring funds serve their intended purpose. She remarked, ***“We are all bound by***

institutional language, but we still need someone to speak the bare truth, especially when it comes to how migrant funds are used.”

Mr. Mizanur Rahman, Former Executive Member- BAIRA, explained that recruiting agencies contribute to migrant welfare through the migrant clearance charge, drawn from their service fees. He noted that the number of female migrants has declined, as both migrants and recruiting agencies face increasing challenges in the Middle East. He added that government support for recruiting agencies is limited, and proposed linking RAs with Technical Training Centres (TTCs) so they can monitor the training of their registered migrants. He expressed hope that the revision of the WEWB Act would create better coordination and transparency, saying, ***“If the Act is revised properly, it will not only protect migrants but also help recruiting agencies work more responsibly and effectively.”***

Ms. Rubina Hossain, President, SEED Foundation, highlighted the need for explicit gender-specific clauses within the WEWB framework to better protect women migrants, noting that abuse often results from poor stakeholder coordination. She stressed that training should be service-oriented and called for thorough stakeholder and service mapping to identify gaps.

A returnee female migrant highlighted that returnee women migrants often lack awareness of available support services. Many face social and emotional challenges and find it difficult to reintegrate into their families after the hardships they endured abroad.

Mr. Md. Hafizur Rahman, Assistant Director- WEWB noted that the current two-month training program often demotivates migrants, as it is lengthy and covers too many subjects. Many participants struggle to adapt to new environments or different work habits at their destinations. He emphasized that Recruiting Agencies should also provide proper briefings to prepare migrants for these challenges and help them adjust more effectively. He underlined how the abuses and exploitations are happening in the destination country, but the solutions are being implemented in Bangladesh. He also highlighted the point where Saudi Arabia hasn't signed or ratified the clause, which is hindering Bangladesh from raising the issue in conversation with them.

In the way forward, **Jasiya Khatoon** outlined that the insights and suggestions shared during the session will be incorporated into the action plan and recommendations. She expressed gratitude to all participants for their valuable contributions.

Recommendations:

1. Gender-based Protection Service

- Add explicit clauses to safeguard women migrants from abuse, exploitation, and discrimination.

- Ensure women representation on the WEWB Board and appoint female labour attachés abroad.

2. Reintegration & Support Services

- Establish psychosocial, legal, and livelihood support programs for returnee women.
- Set up emergency support desks at airports and provide assistance for left-behind families.
- Prioritize children of single, widowed and left-behind women for scholarship and stipend service.

3. Training & Pre-Departure Preparation

- Make pre-departure training shorter, practical, and service-oriented.
- Require Recruiting Agencies to provide briefings and coordinate with training centers.

4. Awareness & Accessibility

- Conduct awareness campaigns to inform women migrants about welfare services.
- Promote visibility of psychosocial, legal, and financial support.

5. Governance & Accountability

- Include civil society and trade unions in the Board for oversight.
- Ensure clear operational guidelines, transparent fund management, and accountability.

6. Coordination & Monitoring

- Map stakeholders and services to identify gaps.
- Align domestic welfare measures with support available in destination countries.

7. Financial & Legal Measures

- Allocate dedicated budgets for women migrants and their dependents.
 - Simplify repatriation procedures and enforce legal accountability for abuses abroad.
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