

The Less Known Side of the Beautiful Atolls in the Maldives

: The Actual Working Conditions of Bangladeshi Migrant Labourers

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the current living and working conditions of Bangladeshi migrant labourers in the Maldives by focusing on the less known side of the country's beautiful atolls, where foreign tourists have been increasing in recent years.

This paper is based on an analysis of previous studies, statistical data and the author's fieldwork on migrant labourers conducted in Bangladesh, the Maldives, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as other research conducted in the United States of America.

In recent years, the Maldives has been devoting an increasing amount of budget and effort to developing tourist resorts, utilizing its verdant islands in the Indian Ocean blessed with turquoise and indigo waters. Consequently, the contribution of tourism to its economic development is increasing. Furthermore, the country has been pursuing massive infrastructure projects not only on resort islands, but also on Hulhumalé, an artificial island created by reclaiming land around a lagoon. The Maldives has also been constructing the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which connects the capital Malé with the new artificial island, and has been extending the road leading to the bridge. This modernization push involving construction frenzy has increased the demand for labour. As a result, migrant labourers from other South Asian countries, mainly Bangladeshis, have been flowing in increasing numbers.

This paper finds that Bangladeshi migrant labourers in the Maldives experience approximately the same difficulties as those in the UAE. That is, many Bangladeshis fall into debt by taking long-term loans before coming to the islands and starting to work because they are forced to pay high fees to recruitment agencies in Daka in advance. They spent large sums for that purpose, and yet received no information about the occupation, the terms and conditions of their labour contract. Thus, they also had no choice but to accept conditions that are far from what is usually regarded as decent work. They also had to put up with the fact that their social status was the lowest in the destination country. Although half of them had significantly contributed to the

large-scale construction projects, manufacturing and other industries, and thereby to modernization and economic development in the Maldives, they had to endure poor working and living conditions and discrimination, and not just low wages.

Therefore, the promotion of economic development and growth that disregards the conditions in which foreign labourers are working and living, it may be said, is the dark side of the beautiful archipelagos in the Maldives.

The Maldives and Bangladesh are both South Asian developing countries, but from the perspective of migrant labourers, they occupy opposite positions in terms of wage disparity, fairness, social inequality, vulnerability, and discrimination.

Key words: Bangladesh, Bangladeshi Labour Migration, Unskilled Labour, International Labour Migration, The Maldives.

I Introduction

The Republic of Maldives (Maldives) is included in the region of South Asia along with the People's Republic of Bangladesh (Bangladesh), the Republic of India (India), the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka), the Kingdom of Nepal (Nepal), the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Pakistan), and the Kingdom of Bhutan (Bhutan). Often the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Afghanistan) is also included in that group. The United Nations Development Program classifies even the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) as South Asia in its list of developing countries (UNDP, 2020, p.394). However, the Maldives are significantly different from the above countries, especially in terms of geography. The Maldives consists of approximately 1,192 islands scattered over an area of 90,000 sq. km in the Indian Ocean southeast of Sri Lanka.⁽¹⁾

The author had the opportunity to witness the beautiful scenery and the unique form of some of the chains of islands belonging to the country from the aeroplane. The Maldives consists of islands and corals of varying shapes strewn across the blue, turquoise and indigo waters of the Indian Ocean.

The islands are classified roughly into three categories: inhabited (187), uninhabited (853), and resort islands (164).⁽²⁾ The "atolls",⁽³⁾ the definition of which traditionally denoted coral reef formations and later came to comprise lagoon-islands and circular coral islets, are divided into 21 administrative regions.⁽⁴⁾ As is clear from this classification, the main roles of islands differ. Some of the islands have other specific functions, too. For example, there are islands which are used to sort and dispose of garbage collected from all over the Maldives and islands that serve as farmland for cultivating vegetables.

However, the government has been devoting its efforts to increase the influx of tourists and develop new tourist resorts, utilizing the verdant fringe islands which are blessed with beautiful untouched nature. As a result, while the local Maldivian population has been increasing only slightly, before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis in 2019, tourist arrivals increased to as many as 1.7 million.⁽⁵⁾ Thus, the tourism industry has contributed significantly to the islands' economic development. However, when this situation is examined from a different perspective, it becomes clear that this cannot be thought of solely as a positive development but that serious problems may lie behind it.

The question arises: what is involved in the resort development, which attracts many tourists to one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world? For example, what is the current situation of the garbage island, which is a far cry from the image of Maldivian atolls as a paradise?

The author of the present paper is of the view that it is impossible to capture the essence of the situation in the country without analyzing previous studies that took into account the

existence and status of migrant labourers in the Maldives. This perspective can reveal a side of the Maldives that is different from the one that is well known—a tourist destination that attracts people from all over the world. In short, we cannot ignore the reality of migrant labourers, which has thus far been neglected, a latent problem.

Migrants from other South Asian countries, largely Bangladeshis, may have an essential role in the rapid economic development in the Maldives. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in Bangladesh has been trying to grasp an accurate picture of the number of migrant labourers from that country and the total sum of their remittances. According to the ministry's 2012 report, the Gulf Cooperative Conference (GCC) countries accounted for 80 percent of the destinations for Bangladeshi migrants from 1976 to 2011. The above ministry and Bangladesh's government assessed that there had been few Bangladeshi migrant labourers in the Maldives during that period.⁽⁶⁾ However, recently, thanks to previous academic studies, various data as well as the author's research, it has become clear that many people from South Asia, mainly from Bangladesh, are working in the islands.

This paper first aims to shed light on the actual working and living conditions of Bangladeshi migrant labourers in the Maldives. Following that, the findings of this study will be compared with the results of the past research conducted by the author. Regarding the approach, this paper focuses on the less known side of the beautiful archipelagos of atolls, which have fascinated many foreign tourists.

The present study consists of an analysis of previous studies, statistical data, and the findings from the author's research on social development and migrant labourers, which was conducted during twelve visits to Bangladesh (between 1997 and 2012), one visit to the Maldives in 2013, and three visits to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one each in 2010, 2012 and 2014. The author has also visited the United States of America (USA) ten times since 2009 to conduct research on Bangladeshi immigrants and collect materials.

II An outline: The Background of Bangladeshi labour migration

Substantial foreign aid, mainly from Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has been used to implement large-scale development in Bangladesh since its independence in 1971.⁽⁷⁾ Nevertheless, the gap between the rich and the poor in the country is widening; absolute poverty, child labour, slum dwellers and compulsory slum evictions, insufficient employment opportunity and high youth unemployment rate are some of the social issues that remain unsolved.⁽⁸⁾ The civil society in Bangladesh has played a central role in attempts to solve these problems by conducting activities based on endogenous development. The civil society has been working at the grassroots level

with people who are vulnerable; it has contributed to promoting well-being, literacy and access to quality education and income generation programmes, as well as empowering destitute people and respecting their human rights.⁽⁹⁾

On the other hand, the government has encouraged international labour migration as its response to poverty issues, and even poor people from rural areas and illiterate people have left Bangladesh. In particular, the high unemployment rate among the young, the fact that they have very limited employment opportunities has served as an excuse for the government to promote the policy of stimulating labour immigration.

Among GCC countries, the UAE had the highest number of Bangladeshi migrant labourers from 2006 to 2011,⁽¹⁰⁾ who were forced to accept long working hours. The government of Bangladesh recruited labour migrants to satisfy the demand from many UAE companies and sponsors who require cheap labour. A significant characteristic of the Bangladeshi labour supply is that most of the male workers are unskilled construction labourers, while most of the female labourers are domestic maids. In addition, most of them come from impoverished families, are not given sufficient information regarding their destination and are forced to pay large amounts of money to recruitment agencies in Daka by taking long-term loans or falling into debt before they move to the UAE.⁽¹¹⁾ Once in the UAE, even if they somehow managed to send remittances to their families regularly by enduring severe conditions for many years, they still suffered a lot because they had to live separately from their families who remained in Bangladesh.⁽¹²⁾ Furthermore, they did not possess the right to express their opinions freely, to engage in collective bargaining and labourers' solidarity and form foreign worker labour unions, although their working conditions were inappropriate.⁽¹³⁾

Nevertheless, the government of Bangladesh, as well as some academic studies, have focused only on how the remittance of Bangladeshi migrant labourers or workers contributes to the gross national income (GNI) and gross domestic product (GDP). Unfortunately, however, the policy focus on promoting economic development similar to that which has been achieved in advanced industrial countries makes it difficult to grasp the reality of migrant labourers' working conditions and the social Background of poor Bangladeshis.

Thus, the government's response is not appropriate. Previous studies have accumulated records of serious human rights violations by the *Kafala* (sponsorship) system and *Kafeel* (sponsors) in the UAE.⁽¹⁴⁾ For example, Ali (2010) and the Human Rights Watch (2006, 2009, 2014) have criticized the situation faced by migrant labourers under *Kafala* and *Kafeel* based on their field research in the UAE. There are also other critical analyses such as those by academics, and the UAE *Kafala* system and *Kafeel* are widely recognized as being beset with serious issues such as depriving migrant workers of their fundamental human rights. For that reason, the Human

Rights Watch and other non-governmental and human rights organizations have been making public statements pointing to these social issues.⁽¹⁵⁾

Among those Bangladeshis who understood the actual labour conditions in the UAE, the USA was the most popular destination for immigration. Information on the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program was widespread throughout Bangladesh, but the number of people who could actually obtain a US visa was limited. What is more, those who were able to immigrate into the USA were forced to work long hours to maintain expensive living costs, including soaring rental apartment fees.⁽¹⁶⁾

In addition to the above, Bangladeshis also work in other Asian countries as labour migrants, but their actual working and living conditions have not been understood well enough. As a consequence, poor Bangladeshi migrant labourers seem left behind in many areas of Asia and the world. In this context, the less known side of the beautiful archipelagos in the Maldives is one of the important research areas concerning poor Bangladeshi migrant labourers.

III Background of migrant labourers in the Maldives

According to Plewa, as of 2018, there was still no national academic research on international migration in the Maldives (2018, p.161). As of 2021, while there are still only a few studies concerning social issues in the Maldives, some of the papers are suggestive.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the 1980s, the then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (in power from 1978 to 2008) formulated the policy of investing in tourism for the purpose of achieving economic growth. This decision during his dictatorship required many uninhabited islands to be turned into resort islands to attract a more significant number of foreign tourists. Also worth mentioning is the fact that the contact between local residents in the Maldives and foreign tourists was strictly prohibited from the beginning of the push for tourism development. The thinking behind that was that because the Maldives are an Islamic republic, drinking alcohol, eating pork and non-halal food, as well as wearing bikinis on the beach⁽¹⁸⁾ and looking at women in overexposed clothes, was unacceptable.

Mohamed Nasheed was elected President in democratic elections held in 2008, and during his four-year mandate, adopted a new policy of constructing hotels on inhabited islands. Since then, contact between Maldivians and foreigners has become possible, but many Maldivians, as Muslims, have continued to object to the presence of foreign tourists.⁽¹⁹⁾ Above all, foreign tourists' behaviour, particularly women relaxing in swimming suits and alcohol consumption, remains unacceptable for the local Muslims.

Despite that, a lifestyle opposite the Muslim ideal has taken root at luxury resort islands with beautiful shores. Many tourists from all over the world try to enjoy a relaxing time there, away

from the hectic daily life. That was inevitable since the government chose to prioritize tourism development as a means of achieving economic growth.

As a result of that policy, many resorts were established, requiring workers who would perform various chores for tourists from overseas, such as cleaning or room service. In addition, large-scale construction projects aimed at creating uniquely exotic and luxurious resorts were conducted. Furthermore, massive projects have been implemented to architect an artificial island and build an important bridge between the capital of Malé and that island.

It refers to Hulhumalé Island, located next to Malé Island. It is an artificial island that was created by reclaiming land in the Falkolf Fushi Lagoon, a coral reef beneath the ocean surface. Consisting of the reclamation of 188 hectares, the Hulhumalé Phase I began in October 1997 and was completed in June 2002. Following this massive construction, work on physical and social infrastructure was undertaken, ending in 2004. Thus, the first official settlement to Hulhumalé Island was inaugurated on May 12, 2004, with an initial population of just over 1,000. Subsequently, over the following 15 years, the population grew exponentially, reaching more than 50,000 in 2019. In 2005, an additional 244 hectares were reclaimed, as Phase II of the project, enabling plans for the settlement of another 160,000 or more people. The island is designed to ultimately accommodate a total population of 240,000.⁽²⁰⁾

The construction frenzy did not stop at that, as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge connecting Hulhumalé with the capital Malé was planned next. That was a massive US\$200 million project that was launched in December 2015 and financed with Chinese grant aid and concessional loans.⁽²¹⁾ Also, the Malé Ring Road⁽²²⁾ was widened and redesigned in anticipation of the completion of the China-sponsored bridge.

This clearly indicates that the Maldives needed vast quantities of foreign labourers to sustain the massive infrastructure development and burgeoning tourism industry. Thus, as Bentz (2021) points out, the religious faith perspective alone is insufficient to explain the demand for Bangladeshi and other migrant workers in the past forty years in the Maldives. The main reason is that “foreign workers undoubtedly constitute a cheap and docile labour force compared to local workers.” As a result, “they are turned into submissive employees by unscrupulous employers who do not hesitate to confiscate their papers and threaten not to let them travel back home if they do not follow suit.” (ibid., p. 2).

When it comes to ‘submissive employees’, local media literally report about prisoners working on the construction of the Malé Ring Road. Although in the Maldives, convicts are routinely made available as a labour force for state-owned enterprises, this was the first time they were working in an open environment in Malé. The prison commissioner had previously stated that “obedient” convicts were selected to work on the project.⁽²³⁾

Here it is worth noting that large-scale projects carried out using foreign capital can function to divide the locals. The rapid modernization may bring negative social effects such as deep segmentation to the local people in the Maldives who wish to preserve the traditional style of life, thereby causing political turmoil and confusion. Some vested people may be able to profit. On the other hand, other groups may be affected—some surfers and peaceful activists protesting the construction of the large bridge at the grassroots level have been arrested.⁽²⁴⁾ Moreover, the destructive effect of such a large-scale development on the environment will be immeasurable.

IV Features of migrant labour in the Maldives

Table 1 shows the population of residents in the Maldives from 2014 to 2019. The total number of residents was 533,941 in 2019, of which 372,739 were Maldivians, and 161,202 were foreign residents born outside the Maldives. While the Maldivian population's annual growth rate is not high, the number of foreign residents keeps increasing significantly: it was 97,774 in 2014, but grew by 1.65 times and reached 161,202 in 2019 (See **Table 1**). Also, out of the foreign residents, the total number of migrant labourers (including workers) was 157,560, of which only 6 percent were women as of 2019.⁽²⁵⁾ This means that migrant labourers account for 97.7 percent of the foreign residents. That is, the number of migrant labourers is skyrocketing in accordance with the labour demand in the Maldives. Their numbers have doubled in the decade from 2009 (See **Table 2**) to 2019.

Tables 2 and **3** show the migrant labourers' population by industry and nationality in 2009 and 2016, respectively. A pronounced characteristic of the migrant labourers in the Maldives is that more than about 97.0 percent of them come from Asia. Another notable feature is that most of them are Bangladeshis—they occupied about half of the total Asians both in 2009 and 2016.

Table 1: Resident population in the Maldives (2014 ~ 2019)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Maldivian	339,761	346,377	353,005	359,608	366,176	372,739
Foreign Resident	97,774	108,057	119,421	131,981	145,862	161,202
Total Population	437,535	454,434	472,426	491,589	512,038	533,941

Note 1: The author compiled this table.

Note 2: This statistic has no data about the total number of foreign residents before 2013.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2020) p. 10.

Table 2: Migrant labour population by industry and nationality (2009)

	Total	Agriculture & Forestry	Fishing	Manufacturing	Electricity, Gas & Water	Construction	Education	Wholesale & Retail Trade	Hotels & Restaurants	Tourism	Transport, Storage & Communication	Financing, Insurance, Business & Real Estate	Community, Social & Personal Services
All Nationalities	70,259	519	1,151	2,367	93	28,918	2,704	4,081	1,797	11,267	1,814	6,048	9,500
Asia (Subtotal)	68,776	519	1,147	2,365	93	28,879	2,659	4,078	1,794	10,291	1,710	5,922	9,319
Bangladesh	36,448	331	531	1,430	60	19,918	51	2,175	1,044	3,573	634	2,534	4,167
India	19,556	126	178	497	14	5,755	2,384	1,226	500	2,424	553	2,071	3,828
Philippines	947	1	7	6	3	412	9	35	8	343	31	62	30
Sri Lanka	7,692	31	252	374	13	1,363	188	463	194	2,508	372	1,001	933
Other Countries	4,133	30	179	58	3	1,431	27	179	48	1,443	120	254	361
Africa (Subtotal)	175	0	2	0	0	7	27	0	0	105	5	6	23
Egypt	43	0	0	0	0	1	25	0	0	17	0	0	0
Other Countries	132	0	2	0	0	6	2	0	0	88	5	6	23
Europe (Subtotal)	1,048	0	1	1	0	29	12	3	3	767	21	102	109
Germany	233	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	201	3	18	8
Italy	279	0	1	0	0	3	1	1	0	207	2	24	40
United Kingdom	131	0	0	1	0	3	5	0	0	61	7	23	31
Other Countries	405	0	0	0	0	21	6	1	3	298	9	37	30
America (Subtotal)	148	0	0	1	0	2	5	0	0	44	65	11	20
Canada	75	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	10	55	1	7
USA	59	0	0	1	0	1	4	0	0	20	10	10	13
Other Countries	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	0	0	0
Oceania (Subtotal)	112	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	60	13	7	29
Australia	87	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	48	10	6	21
New Zealand	22	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	12	2	1	6
Other Countries	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2

Note 1: The author compiled this table.

Note 2: There were numerical errors in the source.

Source: Table 5.2: Expatriate Employment by Industry and Nationality, 2009 (http://statistics.maldives.gov.mv/yearbook2010/yearbook/5_employment/5.2.htm) in Department of National Planning, Male' Republic of Maldives (2010) (<http://statistics.maldives.gov.mv/yearbook2010/yearbook.htm>) (accessed, August 3, 2021).

Table 3: Migrant labour population by industry and nationality (2016)

	Total	Agriculture & Forestry	Construction	Education	Electricity, Gas & Water	Financial Intermediation	Fishery	Health & Social Work	Hotels & Restaurants	Manufacturing	Other Community, Social & Personal Services	Real Estate, Renting & Business Activities	Recycling	Tourism	Transport, Storage & Communication	Wholesale & Retail Trade; repair of motor vehicles & motor cycles, etc.
All Nationalities	83,136	3,157	22,500	2,778	3,649	2,679	3,097	3,386	6,309	6,041	4,791	3,542	2,838	8,708	3,997	5,664
Asia	80,566	3,093	22,347	2,698	3,586	2,618	3,036	3,308	6,242	5,975	4,503	3,474	2,778	7,435	3,885	5,588
Bangladesh	38,626	1,358	13,475	974	1,543	943	967	1,175	3,578	3,398	2,118	1,383	1,100	2,015	1,751	2,848
India	20,701	1,004	3,670	1,048	1,187	969	966	1,378	1,448	1,368	1,130	1,172	1,014	1,738	1,105	1,504
Sri Lanka	10,157	385	2,125	329	491	374	345	342	669	637	607	542	327	1,575	635	774
Philippines	2,717	41	1,731	44	45	41	96	42	51	44	99	41	41	303	56	42
Nepal	2,326	120	118	114	129	112	111	161	198	257	147	148	117	308	124	162
China	1,855	69	177	70	67	63	74	67	148	106	88	64	63	606	73	120
Indonesia	1,355	11	328	11	17	11	365	12	14	53	111	17	11	359	11	24
Thailand	1,074	75	33	77	76	75	75	88	80	81	76	76	75	32	78	77
Malaysia	450	1	419	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	14	2	1
Pakistan	354	0	100	0	1	0	0	3	24	0	57	1	0	159	7	2
Othe Countries	951	29	171	29	29	29	36	39	31	30	67	29	29	326	43	34
Africa	551	23	36	25	20	20	20	29	21	23	31	20	20	214	25	24
Europe	1813	39	96	49	40	39	38	47	43	41	233	44	38	943	74	49
America	137	2	5	6	3	2	3	2	3	2	17	4	2	75	8	3
Oceania	69	0	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	41	5	0

Note 1: The author compiled this table.

Note 2: There were numerical errors in the source.

Note 3: This is the latest data on documented migrant labour by industry and nationality by the National Bureau of Statistics in the Maldives.
Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2017) p. 114.

Also, **Table 4** shows the latest top countries in terms of the number of migrant labourers in 2019. From it, it is clear that the number of Bangladeshi migrant labourers has increased—their total number was 110,084, followed by India (20,283), Sri Lanka (11,266), Nepal (4,342), and China (3,144). Thus, we can see that Bangladeshi labourers occupy 70 percent, Indians 13 percent, and Sri Lanks 7.2 percent of the entire foreign labour force.

Table 4: Top five countries of migrant laboures by nationality (2019)

Nationality	Bangladesh	India	Sri Lanka	Nepal	China	Total
The number of people	110,084	20,283	11,266	4,342	3,144	149,119

Note 1: The author compiled this table.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2020) p. 10.

Next, broken by industry, in 2019, 43.0% of migrant labourers were engaged in the construction sector, and 16.0% worked in the tourism industry.⁽²⁶⁾ **Tables 2** and **3** clearly show that only a few were from Africa, Europe, the United States, and Oceania. Also, the most common occupation for the workers from these areas of the world is tourism. On the other hand, the labour force in the labour-intensive construction industry, which also involves dangerous manual labour, is overwhelmingly from Asia, mainly from Bangladesh (See **Table 3**).

Indeed, broken by occupation, in 2016 a third of Bangladeshi labourers in the Maldives worked at construction sites (13,475), followed by hotels and restaurants (3,578), manufacturing (3,398), community, social and personal services (2,118), and tourism (2,015) (See **Table 3**).

In addition, it should be noted that the actual total number of migrant labourers depends on whether or not undocumented workers are included in the count. That is one of the reasons the Bangladeshi government was unable to determine the number of Bangladeshi labourers in the Maldives in its report in 2012. Here are some articles that describe the situation regarding undocumented Bangladeshi workers.

The Dhaka Tribune notes that while the Maldivian government's data put the number of Bangladeshi workers at 80,000, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) had only recorded the departure of 28,000 workers since 1976.⁽²⁷⁾ At this point, *The Dhaka Tribune* had already warned about the harsh conditions faced by Bangladeshi labourers in the Maldives. In response to that, the Bangladeshi government temporarily banned labour migration to the Maldives. Simultaneously, government officials conducted onsite inspections through short visits. After that, however, the government allowed the continuation of labour migration to the Maldives without having found a fundamental solution to the problem.

Poor Bangladeshi migrants are thus at risk of being trapped in the status of illegal migrants, contrary to their will. For example, a study has found that many workers who were forced to

irregular status did not have access to accurate information regarding their stay. According to Plewa (2018), “due to geographical barriers and the consequent high cost of migration monitoring, most irregular migrants are only detected upon attempting to depart from the Maldives. Some leaving the country are unaware of their irregular status if such status was caused by an employer’s negligence to pay work visa fees” (ibid., p.165). Plewa also points out that the most common path to such illegal status is a practice called “quota trading”, in which employers who have managed to bring into the Maldives more workers than they need to subcontract them to other employers, which leaves the workers more vulnerable to exploitation.

It is believed that due to such unfair practices, there are migrant workers who have ended up being regarded as illegal immigrants despite their not having the intention to break the law. It may be said that Bangladeshi labourers have faced absurd conditions, becoming disposable workers and illegal aliens. Because of this, attention should be paid to the issue of the existence of many undocumented labourers in the Maldives. In other words, some employers there lack awareness regarding human rights and vulnerabilities of foreign workers, which leads to the abuse of their human rights.

V The actual working conditions of Bangladeshi labourers

1. Previous research

Heslop (2020) and Bentz (2021) have shed light on the current working conditions of migrant labourers in the Maldives based on their long-term field research in the country. Their common finding is that Bangladeshi labourers remain at the bottom of Maldivian society and face serious problems.

According to Heslop (2020), masseurs, front-of-house staff, middle managers, doctors and teachers are ‘skilled’ workers in the tourist sector. However, migrant labourers, mainly from Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines, work as ‘non-skilled’ labour on the Maldivian islands. Also, they work at ‘invisible’ sites on agricultural islands, in fish canning plants and export processing zones often owned by Maldivian resort tycoons. Among foreign labourers, ‘the most precarious and least respected work’, however, is construction. In this industry, predominantly Bangladeshi men are brought to the Maldives to work as ‘non-skilled’ migrant labourers for companies responsible for constructing bridges, causeways and link roads connecting atolls and islands.

Furthermore, according to Heslop (2020), who conducted his research at a dozen Maldivian islands, “Bangladeshis’ mobility is heavily restricted, they have little formal integration into the Maldivian bureaucracy, and their exploitability is compounded by almost complete exclusion from Maldivian social life” (ibid.). He analyzes these harsh working and living conditions in relation to the Kafala system in the Middle East and describes them as a variant of that system. Moreover,

in the construction sector, the working conditions of Bangladeshi people are considerably worse than those of Pakistani people, who belong to the same region of South Asia. Analyzing the main reason for this, Heslop concludes that contracts signed between the migrants' countries and companies in the Maldives are to blame for this disparity.⁽²⁸⁾

Particularly, Thilafushi Island is beset with issues concerning migrant labourers' working conditions and the environment. This artificial island was reclaimed from a coral reef 20 years ago and is located only seven kilometres away from Malé.⁽²⁹⁾ Tremendous amounts of rubbish, burnable and unburnable, such as scrap metal, plastic, bottles, food leftovers, electronic appliances, etc. are transported to it from resort islands and living areas by boat. Almost all the discarded items and rubbish produced at resort islands are collected there to maintain the attractive Maldivian landscape. The people who are tasked with sorting and disposing of the waste on this island are mainly poor Bangladeshi labourers. Bentz (2021), focusing on the harsh treatment of migrant labourers on the island states that "on the Thilafushi Island, labourers, mainly from Bangladesh, are at the very bottom of the social ladder".

2. Research

2-1. Methodology of this study

An outline of the author's research since 1997 has been given in the first section of this paper. Among the author's past studies, the primary research relevant for this section is as follows.

First, the author conducted numerous in-depth interviews, through individual home-visits of poor households, with slum dwellers and their community in Daudkandi, Kumilla district, between 2000 and 2012, and revisited the households whose family members were working as international migrant labourers. Through this research, it became clear that the family members who remained in Bangladesh often did not have an accurate grasp of the living and working conditions of their children and other relatives in destination countries.

Second, the author also interviewed Bangladeshi government officials and collected data, including lists of destinations for international labour migration at the Ministry of Expatriate' Welfare and Overseas Employment and the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL) in 2012. The author also had several interviews with staff members of two recruitment agencies in Daka, and talked with one migrant worker who had temporarily returned and his family members and relatives.

The government officers seemed to appreciate that rising migrant labourers' remittances contributed to the economic growth in Bangladesh. However, they never showed interest in the background of migrations, such as the economic and social struggles or physical and mental fatigue of migrants, and the current situation regarding international labour migration. The

author realized that research in Bangladesh alone would never suffice to learn about the actual working and living conditions of migrant labourers. Therefore, to correctly grasp the actual working conditions and background of Bangladeshi international labour migrants, research on migrant labour needed to be conducted in both Bangladesh and the destination countries. For this reason, since around 2012, in our research, there has been an emphasis on the study of the destination areas for Bangladeshi migrant labourers. As part of that effort, the Maldives was selected as one of the research areas in 2013.

The author conducted participatory fieldwork on three Maldivian islands (Malé, Hulhumalé and Villingili) and in-depth interviews on two islands (Malé and Hulhumalé). The interviewees were mainly unskilled Bangladeshi labourers. The author also interviewed persons from Sri Lanka (a supervisor of reception staff), India (a room management supervisor and two engineers), the Philippines (a concierge), and the Maldives (two members of reception staff and a room cleaner), who were working in a hotel. Among these interviewees, the Maldivian workers and Bangladeshi unskilled labourers were not college graduates. Of all the interviewees, only three were women.

As different from the author's field research in the UAE, the Maldivian employers did not monitor or ban research on migrant workers in their country. On the contrary, they were highly supportive of the author's research.

2.2. Fieldwork in the Maldives

Malé is an administrative island, the population of which officially also includes the neighbouring islands of Hulhumalé and Villingili. Of the total Maldivian population of 557,426,⁽³⁰⁾ more than 40 percent, or 233,854 inhabitants, were concentrated on this island in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020, p. 8).

The daily lives of Malé residents were idyllic before the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge was built there. From the small International Airport located in Hulhumalé artificial island⁽³¹⁾, passengers would be transferred to Malé in small boats, wearing life jackets and paying attention to the weight of their luggage. While waiting for transportation, they would have conversations with strangers, often because their boat would not arrive on time. Besides these two islands, in 2013, boat transfer existed only for one more destination - the neighbouring Villingili Island.

Put simply, in the Maldives; there was a structure in place that maintained a distance between residents and short-term sojourners (visitors) in Malé and luxurious tourist spots. For example, a visitor could not access a resort island without a prior reservation at a hotel. In other words, it was not possible to freely access resort islands for sightseeing or simply watch the scenery of the beautiful, untouched Maldivian islands from connecting ships. This arrangement seemed to demonstrate the government's ingenuity in keeping the locals separate from foreign tourists and

preserving the traditional way of life in the Muslim society of the Maldives. Alternatively, it is possible to think that by having such arrangements, the Maldivian authorities were also taking into account the preservation of the natural environment. However, the above-mentioned garbage disposal island and the labour conditions on it do not seem to indicate much concern for the environment.

Also, the Malé Island itself is a cramped area, containing a city with an inevitably high population density and no spots with the clear, turquoise blue ocean that would be suitable for tourism. Instead, the island has many residential buildings, fish and vegetable markets, mobile shops, small grocery and clothes stores, a beautiful mosque, small parks, traditional and modern-style cafés and restaurants, as well as hotels for visitors. Many migrant labourers and workers have responded to the labour demand at the island and contributed to almost all of these shops and facilities. Nearly 45 percent of the migrant workers are concentrated here⁽³²⁾ as if corresponding to the proportion that the population of Malé occupies in the overall population of the Maldives.

Due to the brevity of the author's stay, the interviews and research content are limited. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say that whenever the author was walking in Malé, even when taking cover from heavy rain, the author would find an opportunity to have an interview with Bangladeshi labourers, although mostly men.

Typical workplaces and occupations of male Bangladeshis in the Malé Island are as follows: vegetable market (vendor or assistant to a store owner), construction site (construction worker), garbage collection, grocery store (all chores, including cleaning), restaurant (waiter), tea shop (preparing tea and light meals, waiting on customers, cleaning and other chores), mobile store for selling coconuts, and tobacco, snacks, and drinking water (mobile vendor who follows the owners' instructions), used clothing store intended mainly for Bangladeshis (clerk), cleaning worker, etc.

According to some Maldivians and Bangladeshi interviewees, Bengali women are also employed as maids in local households. However, they are not allowed to go out except on Fridays. On other days they are busy with housework and childcare at employers' homes.

Furthermore, in Malé, among immigrants from South Asia, there were some supervisors. For example, in a hotel, the room cleaner was Maldivian, but his supervisor was an Indian who was a university graduate. Locals working as reception staff at the hotel were instructed by an agile woman who graduated from a university in Sri Lanka. She would order them to pay more attention to customer requests. The Maldivian workers commented that they sometimes wondered if strictly observing the schedule and being on time was difficult for them because the pace of life in the Maldives was slower and more leisurely.

Bangladeshi labourers were crowded into small rooms after grueling, long working hours.

They had to share sleeping space and, in some cases, sleep on the ground. Those of larger built slept on beds, but even then, two or more persons had to sleep in the space suitable for only one.

Some of the Bangladeshi men have obtained work in the Maldives without going through an agency. They are mostly people who look for a job after entering the country with a short-term visa. When they find work, they go back and forth between Bangladesh and the Maldives. These men were renting a dormitory jointly with other Bangladeshis.

Also worth noting is that many Bangladeshi labourers were working as construction workers on the Hulhumalé Island because a lot of construction work was required on that new, artificial island. At the same time, Bangladeshis also worked there as clerks at tools shops or as drivers transporting materials to construction sites and moving people between them. In addition, Bangladeshis worked at a small restaurant that offered Bengali dishes to Bangladeshi migrant labourers. The restaurant served primarily cold food that was not popular among the workers, but they dined there anyway since no other food was available.

Also, three Bengalis were very busy working as mobile vendors at a small store (selling snacks, drinking water and lottery) at the pier. Many people used their services because there were no other stores nearby. The mobile store's owners benefit from their long working hours and devoted work. In addition, two Bangladeshis were working at a guest house (reception and room cleaning), and one man worked as a babysitter for an infant boy whose parents were non-Maldivians.

Many Bangladeshis who obtained jobs through recruitment agencies in Daka, had been forced to pay large amounts of money although they had not been given precise information regarding their future work by the agencies prior to their arrival in the Maldives. They could not obtain accurate information even about such basic things as the name of occupation and the payment system regarding their migration. Their monthly salary ranged from a minimum of 2,500 Maldivian Rufiyaa (MRF) to a maximum of 4,500 MRF.⁽³³⁾ The most common salary was around 3,000 MRF. All unskilled Bangladeshi labourers were forced to work extended working hours with which their nominal wage was not commensurate.

That being said, the working conditions for foreign workers are different on resort islands. The author's research did not cover such islands, which is why further field research in the Maldives is necessary.

VI Conclusion

This paper focused on the actual working and living conditions of migrant labourers in the Maldives. It has shed light on the less known side of labour migration, a global social issue, from the perspectives of Bangladeshi migrant labourers. The Maldives has conducted large-scale

development utilizing verdant uninhabited islands to revitalize its tourism industry. As a result of such activities, the number of foreign tourists increased sharply before the COVID-19 epidemic, contributing to the country's economic growth. Furthermore, the country has implemented massive, rapid construction work for Hulhumalé artificial island, such as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge and the Malé Ring Road, which connect the capital of Malé and Hulhumalé Island.

Due to these projects, behind which lies the desire to achieve economic development and modernization, the demand for labour, mainly unskilled labourers in Malé and skilled workers in resort islands, has increased in the Maldives. Most of the migrant labourers were from South Asia; among them, Bangladeshis occupied the highest proportion. Half of them worked long hours in the construction sector, manufacturing and other industries as unskilled, low-wage labour to meet the demand of the construction frenzy. Most of them found work through a recruitment agency that has connections in the ministry and government in Bangladesh and faced harsh working conditions.

Also, in the Maldives, many migrant labourers have to devote themselves to maintaining the resort islands' positive image and spectacular scenery. Thus, for example, all the non-burnable and combustible waste that was collected on resort islands and inhabited islands (mainly Malé) are transported to Thilafushi Island, which was reclaimed and functions as a waste disposal site. Most of the labourers on this island who deal with harmful and dangerous waste are Bangladeshi men. Moreover, Bangladeshi women tended to be employed as housemaids, and were usually kept isolated from society.

This paper has, therefore, found difficulties similar to those the author identified in my research in the UAE. First, regarding the occupations held by Bangladeshis, men were concentrated in the construction industry, while women tended to work as domestic helpers, both of which are classified as unskilled labour. Housemaids detained in the employer's home did not have many opportunities to go out and were facing various hidden risks and unsolved issues. Bangladeshi labourers are often tasked with 'dirty' work that local people tend to avoid, such as cleaning restrooms in the UAE or collecting and sorting garbage in the Maldives.

Furthermore, poor Bangladeshi migrant labourers had to pay significant amounts of money to a recruitment agency in advance to get an opportunity to work in the Maldives. Nevertheless, they did not have the power to choose the job they would do. Also, their wages did not match the long working hours and harsh working conditions they faced as unskilled labour. They frequently suffered debt and had to pay back their loans from the wages earned, which typically shaved off a couple of years of income from their first contract. Therefore, sending even a little money to their family members during the first contract period was not easy.

Bangladeshi low-wage labourers have contributed to the economic development of Bangladesh and their destination countries through their painstaking work. They have also contributed to the modernization in the Maldives and the UAE. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi migrant labourers have been pushed to the margins, and they are neglected and isolated in the global society.

On the other hand, the governments and recruitment agencies of both the sending and receiving countries, as well as the employers in the destination countries, have accumulated benefits thanks to international labour migrations. In doing so, they have contributed to the vulnerability of migrant labourers and have, in some cases, deprived poor migrant labourers of fundamental human rights.

Consequently, this paper finds that it is generally difficult to solve serious social issues such as poverty or human rights abuse and promote empowerment and well-being through international migration of unskilled labour, such as in the Maldives.

In addition, the paper finds specific differences among migrant labourers in the Maldives and between migrants' destination countries. First, the author has found that, in some cases, educated people from South Asia act as supervisors or superiors of local Maldivian workers. However, there were no Bangladeshis among the supervisors. As for the author's research in the UAE, the situation in which UAE citizens receive guidance from immigrants could not be observed at all on a daily basis in that Arab country. UAE citizens were always on the privileged side as they occupied the important social position of *Kafeel* (sponsor).

Furthermore, there were not many surveillance cameras and supervisors in the three islands the author researched in the Maldives. Because almost all migrant workers, tourists and especially researchers were watched by many surveillance cameras and human supervisors in the UAE, our fieldwork was under constant surveillance, and our research on labour immigrants seemed to be virtually unacceptable for the hosts.

Finally, previous studies on international migrant labourers have mostly focused on grasping their working conditions, mainly in the UAE among GCC countries, and criticizing the *Kafala* and *Kafeel* system. Thus, Heslop (2020) analyzed the current situation of foreign construction labourers in the Maldives as a variant of the UAE *Kafala* system. However, there has been very little academic research concerning the actual working and living conditions of Bangladeshi and other foreign labourers in the Maldives. Therefore, this is an area in which fieldwork needs to be accumulated through fact-finding surveys in the future.

⁽¹⁾ See Godfrey (2018, p.14), and the National Bureau of Statistics (2020, p. 6).

⁽²⁾ National Bureau of Statistics, *ibid.*

- ⁽³⁾ An atoll is a series of islands formed from coral reefs, according to the definition by the Asian Development Bank (2020, p. 4). The word “atoll” originally comes from the Maldivian term *atholhu*, which referred to coral reef formations and was used for administration purposes. Later, European explorers used the word “atoll” to refer to ‘lagoon-islands’ in the Pacific, but Charles Darwin extended the definition to include “circular groups of coral islets”, similar to the original use of the term in the Indian Ocean (Godfrey, 2018, p.13).
- ⁽⁴⁾ National Bureau of Statistics (op.cit) and Godfrey (ibid).
- ⁽⁵⁾ National Bureau of Statistics (ibid., p. 20).
- ⁽⁶⁾ Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment (2012). However, in it there are no items regarding investigation of Bangladeshi labour in the Maldives, nor does the list offer any data or evidence regarding the Maldives.
- ⁽⁷⁾ Government of the Republic of Bangladesh (2019).
- ⁽⁸⁾ See Suzuki (2020: 2016).
- ⁽⁹⁾ The author’s research in Bangladesh from 1997 to 2012. Also, see Suzuki (2016).
- ⁽¹⁰⁾ The Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment (2012).
- ⁽¹¹⁾ The author’s research in Bangladesh and the UAE. Also, see Suzuki (2020).
- ⁽¹²⁾ For more details, see Suzuki (2020, pp. 53-54).
- ⁽¹³⁾ Refer to Human Rights Watch (2006, p.568) and International Campaign for Freedom in the UAE (ICF UAE) (October 16, 2017) *Migrant Workers’ Rights* (<http://icfuae.org.uk/issues/migrant-workers%E2%80%99-rights>) [accessed August 31, 2021].
- ⁽¹⁴⁾ Refer to Ali (2010), Longva (1997), Baldwin-Edwards (2005), Mahdavi (2011), and Vora (2013) regarding the issues with the Kafala system.
- ⁽¹⁵⁾ See MIGRANT-RIGHTS. ORG, *Campaign Reform the Kafala System* (<https://www.migrant-rights.org/campaign/end-the-kafala-system/>), Migration Forum in Asia (<https://mfasia.org/mfa-policy-briefs/>), and ICF UAE (op. cit) [accessed September 1, 2021].
- ⁽¹⁶⁾ The author’s research in New York City from 2009 to 2018. Also, see Suzuki (2019) and Suzuki et al. (2017).
- ⁽¹⁷⁾ See Bentz (2021).
- ⁽¹⁸⁾ Ibid., p. 2.
- ⁽¹⁹⁾ Ibid.
- ⁽²⁰⁾ Housing Development Cooperative (2017).
- ⁽²¹⁾ Maldives Independent (April 1, 2018). Also, see, Maldives Independent (December 31, 2015).
- ⁽²²⁾ See Shaahunaz (June 22, 2018) and PSM News (September 6, 2018) (<https://psmnews.mv/en/38475>) [accessed August 31, 2021] about the Malé ring road.
- ⁽²³⁾ Maldives Independent (June 18, 2018).
- ⁽²⁴⁾ Maldives Independent (March 1, 2016).
- ⁽²⁵⁾ The government of Maldives uses the term ‘expatriate employment’ for foreign employment or foreign labour (National

Bureau of Statistics, 2020, p. 10). However, in accordance with previous author's research on the Bangladeshi people's actual working conditions, this paper uses terms "migrant labour" and "migrant workers" for Bangladeshi workers, except when citing from the Maldives' statistics.

⁽²⁶⁾ Ibid., p.10.

⁽²⁷⁾ Maldives News (November 18, 2013).

⁽²⁸⁾ See Heslop (2020) for details.

⁽²⁹⁾ "There are other industries there, including boat repairs." Charles (December 8, 2011).

⁽³⁰⁾ This included the non-administrative Male Region (Thilafushi, Gulheefalhu and Hulhule) (National Bureau of Statistics, op.cit., p. 8).

⁽³¹⁾ The International Airport at Hulhumalé was built when two islands were conjoined in 1968 to enable the construction of a runway (Godfrey, op.cit., p. 51).

⁽³²⁾ Based on National Bureau of Statistics (2019).

⁽³³⁾ 1 MRF meant 6.67 yen as of November 25, 2021. Refer to the Historical Rates Tables (Historical Rates Tables - MVR | Xe) [accessed August 31, 2021].

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