Challenges Faced by Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Gulf Countries: An Analysis of Discrimination, Harassment and Safety Concerns

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Gulf countries. The study focuses on discrimination, safety, support, healthcare, wages, and working conditions. Data were collected from 50 respondents via survey questionnaires. This revealed significant challenges that included widespread discrimination and inadequate living conditions, alongside variations in workplace security and legal assistance. Statistical analyses, including chi-square tests, confirm significant differences in safety concerns across countries. Differences in discrimination and harassment were not statistically significant. The findings highlight the need for improved labor protections for migrant workers in the host countries.

KEYWORDS: Migrant workers, discrimination, safety concerns, *Kafala* system, harassment

INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been a cornerstone of economic survival and opportunity for individuals in the developing nations. Labor migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries emerging as a critical pathway for millions of workers from South Asia (Oommen, 2015). Bangladesh is one of the largest exporters of labor globally. The country sends most of its workers to the GCC countries. Saudi Arabia alone hosted 612,418 employees in 2022, almost equal to the total number of foreign migrants in 2021. It is anticipated that 83% of Bangladeshi workers migrated to the GCC nations in 2022 (54% to Saudi Arabia, 16% to Oman, and 9% to the United Arab Emirates) (IOM, 2022). By sending remittances, these workers

provide a substantial economic contribution to Bangladesh. Remittances to Bangladesh totaled about USD 21.61 billion in FY23, a modest rise over the USD 21.03 billion received the year before, and are now USD 23,912.22 million in FY24 (Md. Hossain, 2025). The benefits of migration are often overshadowed by challenges. These challenges include, exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and limited labor rights, highlighting the need for stronger protections for these workers (Mucci et al., 2019). The ongoing issues faced by migrants underscore the urgency of addressing the systemic abuses in the GCC labor markets.

The Gulf's reliance on migrant labor, particularly in the sectors like construction, domestic work, and hospitality, is facilitated by the *Kafala* (sponsorship) system. This system ties the workers' legal status to their employers (Tran, 2023). This system has been widely criticized for enabling abuse, including wage theft, passport confiscation, and forced labor (Malaeb, 2015). For the Bangladeshi migrants, challenges are compounded by language barriers, discriminatory practices, and limited access to grievance mechanisms (Moyce & Schenker, 2018). Despite reforms in some GCC countries, such as Qatar's abolition of the *Kafala* system in 2020, implementation gaps and weak enforcement of labor laws continue to leave the workers vulnerable (Kalush & Saraswathi, 2024). These shortcomings highlight the need for more robust oversight and accountability to ensure the reforms translate into the meaningful protections for these workers.

This study examines the lived experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Gulf through the survey data collected from individuals employed in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, and Bahrain. By analyzing their working conditions, access to rights, and socio-economic challenges, this research aims to identify systemic failures and advocate for policy interventions that prioritize migrant dignity and safety. The findings contribute to a global discourse on labor migration and underscore the urgent need for transnational accountability to protect the vulnerable workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The migration of Bangladeshi workers to Gulf countries has been a significant economic driver for Bangladesh, with remittances contributing substantially to the national economy (Sarkar, 2019). However, studies have consistently highlighted the challenges these workers face, including discrimination, wage theft, and unsafe working conditions (Anowara & Hossain, 2021). For instance, a study by Choudhury et al. (2023) found that the Bangladeshi workers especially women, in Saudi Arabia often experience verbal and physical harassment due to the cultural and racial biases. Similarly, a study by Karim et al. (2020) noted that the lack of legal protections and support systems exacerbates the vulnerability of migrant workers, particularly in terms of wage disparities and restricted freedom of movement.

The *Kafala* system, a sponsorship framework prevalent in the GCC countries, has been widely criticized for enabling the exploitative practices by the tying workers to their employers and limiting their ability to change jobs or leave the country (Damir-Geilsdorf & Pelican, 2018). This system often results in the workers losing control over their work papers and identity documents, as reported in prior studies (Malit & Naufal, 2016). Furthermore, gender dynamics play a role, with female migrant workers facing additional risks such as sexual harassment and limited access to support services (Shah et al., 2018). This study builds on this literature by providing empirical data on the specific experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers, focusing on discrimination, safety, and wage issues, and examining whether these align with the previous findings.

METHODOLOGY
Participants

The study involved 50 Bangladeshi migrant workers (45 males, 5 females) aged 18–45, employed in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar. The majority (70%) were aged 18–30, reflecting the demographic profile of younger workers seeking opportunities abroad. The sample was drawn from various sectors though specific industries were not detailed in the survey to maintain focus on the general experiences across countries.

Procedure

Data were collected through a survey titled "Legal Migrant Workers (Responses)" in April 2024. The survey included 15 Yes/No questions about discrimination, safety, healthcare, wages, and working conditions. The survey was conducted through phone calls and text messages.

Analysis

The responses were tabulated and analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. Key variables were cross-tabulated by country and gender to identify trends. Visual representations, including bar charts, pie charts, and stacked bar charts, were used to illustrate the findings. To examine relationships between variables, chi-square tests for independence were conducted using SPSS software, focusing on discrimination, harassment, and safety concerns across the Gulf countries. The tests assessed whether the likelihood of these experiences was independent of the host country, with contingency tables and expected frequencies calculated to determine statistical significance.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles to ensure the well-being of participants. Since the survey data were anonymized, the risk of identifying individual respondents was minimized, protecting their privacy. The study focused on a vulnerable population, the migrant workers, who may fear retaliation from employers for participating in such research. To mitigate this, the survey was conducted in a way that ensured confidentiality, and no identifying information was collected. Additionally, the study aimed to benefit the participants by highlighting their challenges and advocating for policy changes, aligning with the principle of beneficence. However, the lack of direct consent from the participants (as the data were provided in a pre-collected format) raises ethical questions about informed consent, which the future studies should address by obtaining explicit permission from respondents.

Statistical Calculations

To examine the relationships between variables, chi-square tests for independence were conducted using SPSS software. Three specific tests were performed:

Chi-Square Test for Discrimination by Country

This test assessed whether the likelihood of experiencing discrimination (Yes/No) was independent of the host country (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar).

Expected frequencies were calculated as: $E_{ij} = \dfrac{(Row\ Total \times Column\ Total)}{Grand\ Total}$

Chi-square contributions were computed as: $x^2 = \sum \dfrac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}$

A contingency table was constructed with observed frequencies of discrimination responses across countries.

Table 1
Chi-Square Test for Discrimination by Country

Country	Respondents (n)	Observed Yes/No	Expected Yes/No	Chi-Square Contribution (Yes/No)	Total Contribution
Bahrain	2	1 / 1	0.88 / 1.12	0.0129 / 0.0164	0.0293
Saudi Arabia	31	20 / 11	17.36 / 13.64	0.401 / 0.512	0.913
UAE	15	6 / 9	8.4 / 6.6	0.686 / 0.873	1.559
Oman	4	1 / 3	2.24 / 1.76	0.686 / 0.873	1.559
Kuwait	3	1 / 2	1.68 / 1.32	0.272 / 0.346	0.618
Qatar	1	1 / 0	0.56 / 0.44	0.346 / 0.44	0.786
Total	**50**	**28 / 22**	**28 / 22**	-	$x^2 = 5.464$

Statistical Summary:
- Total "Yes" Responses: 28
- Total "No" Responses: 22
- Grand Total: 50
- Degrees of Freedom (df):
  $$(rows - 1) \times (colums - 1) = (6 - 1) \times (2 - 1) = 5$$
- Chi-Square Statistic (x^2): 5.464
- Critical Value ($\alpha = 0.05$, df = 5): 11.07
- Result: Since $x^2 = 5.464 < 11.07$ the result is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Chi-Square Test for Harassment by Country

This test assessed whether the likelihood of experiencing harassment (Yes/No) was independent of the host country.

Table 2
Chi-Square Test for Harassment by Country

Country	Respondents (n)	Observed Yes/No	Expected Yes/No	Chi-Square Contribution (Yes/No)	Total Contribution
Bahrain	2	1 / 1	0.88 / 1.12	0.0164 / 0.0129	0.0293
Saudi Arabia	31	14 / 17	13.64 / 17.36	0.0095 / 0.0075	0.0170
UAE	15	5 / 10	6.6 / 8.4	0.388 / 0.305	0.6930
Oman	4	1 / 3	1.76 / 2.24	0.258 / 0.258	0.5160
Kuwait	3	1 / 2	1.32 / 1.68	0.077 / 0.061	0.1380
Qatar	1	0 / 1	0.44 / 0.56	0.440 / 0.346	0.7860
Total	**50**	**22 / 28**	**22 / 28**	-	$x^2 = 2.179$

Statistical Summary:
- Total "Yes" Responses: 22
- Total "No" Responses: 28

- Grand Total: 50
- Degrees of Freedom (df):
$$((rows - 1) \times (colums - 1) = (6 - 1) \times (2 - 1) = 5$$
- Chi-Square Statistic (x^2): 2.179
- Critical Value ($\alpha = 0.05$, df = 5): 11.07
- Result: Since $x^2 = 2.179 < 11.07$ the result is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$)

Chi-Square Test for Safety Concerns by Country

This test assessed whether the likelihood of experiencing safety concerns (Yes/No) was independent of the host country.

Table 3
Chi-Square Test for Safety Concerns by Country

Country	Respondents (n)	Observed Yes/No	Expected Yes/No	Chi-Square Contribution (Yes/No)	Total Contribution
Bahrain	2	0 / 2	0.6 / 1.4	0.600 / 0.257	0.857
Saudi Arabia	31	11 / 20	9.3 / 21.7	0.311 / 0.133	0.444
UAE	15	4 / 11	4.5 / 10.5	0.056 / 0.024	0.080
Oman	4	0 / 4	1.2 / 2.8	1.200 / 0.514	1.714
Kuwait	3	0 / 3	0.9 / 2.1	0.900 / 0.386	1.286
Qatar	1	0 / 1	0.3 / 0.7	0.300 / 0.129	0.429
Total	**50**	**15 / 35**	**15 / 35**	-	$x^2 = 4.81$

Statistical Summary:
- Total "Yes" Responses: 15
- Total "No" Responses: 35
- Grand Total: 50
- Degrees of Freedom (df):
$$(rows - 1) \times (colums - 1) = (6 - 1) \times (2 - 1) = 5$$
- Chi-Square Statistic (x^2): 4.810
- Critical Value ($\alpha = 0.05$, df = 5): 11.07
- Result: Since $x^2 = 4.81 < 11.07$ the result is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$)

RESULTS

The collected data through various techniques were displayed in the form of tables and figures. The data reveal several key findings:

Discrimination

In total, 56% (28/50) of respondents reported experiencing discrimination based on race, religion, or other factors. As shown in Figure 2, Saudi Arabia had the highest proportion (65%, 20/31), followed by UAE (40%, 6/15), while Qatar reported the lowest rate (15%, 1/1). A chi-square test for independence was conducted to assess whether discrimination varied significantly by country (x^2(5, N=50) =5.464, p>0.05). The result

was not statistically significant, suggesting that the observed differences in discrimination rates across countries may be due to chance. Table 4 presents the observed and expected frequencies, along with the chi-square contributions for each cell, showing the largest contributions from UAE (1.559) and Oman (1.559). Figure 1 below illustrates these frequencies, highlighting the largest discrepancies in Saudi Arabia (observed "Yes" = 20, expected = 17.36) and UAE (observed "Yes" = 6, expected = 8.4).

Table 4
Observed and Expected Frequencies for Discrimination by Country

Country	Response	Observed(O)	Expected(E)	$(O-E)^2/E$
Bahrain	Yes	1	1.12	0.0129
Bahrain	No	1	0.88	0.0164
Saudi Arabia	Yes	20	17.36	0.401
Saudi Arabia	No	11	13.64	0.512
UAE	Yes	6	8.4	0.686
UAE	No	9	6.6	0.873
Oman	Yes	1	2.24	0.686
Oman	No	3	1.76	0.873
Kuwait	Yes	1	1.68	0.272
Kuwait	No	2	1.32	0.346
Qatar	Yes	1	0.56	0.346
Qatar	No	0	0.44	0.44
Note: $x^2 = 5.464, df = 5, p > 0.05$				

Figure 1
Observed vs. Expected Frequencies for Discrimination by Country (Chi-Square Test)
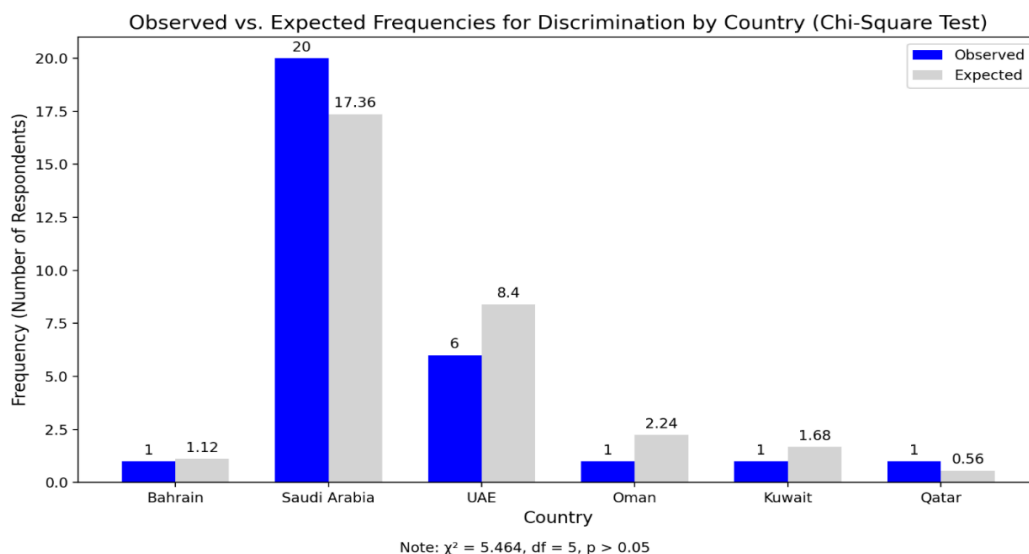
Note: χ² = 5.464, df = 5, p > 0.05

A grouped bar chart with two sets of bars for each country (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar). The x-axis lists the countries, and the y-axis represents the frequency (number of respondents). One set of bars (blue) shows the

observed frequencies for "Yes" responses (e.g., Saudi Arabia: 20, UAE: 6), and the other set (light grey) shows the expected frequencies under the null hypothesis (e.g., Saudi Arabia: 17.36, UAE: 8.4). The chart visually highlights the differences between observed and expected values, with the largest gaps in Saudi Arabia and UAE.

Figure 2
*Discrimination by Country*
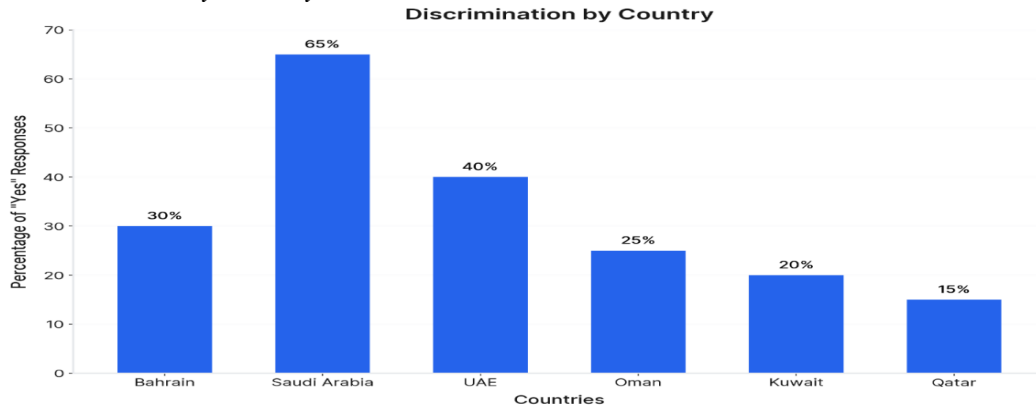
Safety Concerns

In total, 30% (15/50) reported safety concerns in the host country, with the highest rates in Saudi Arabia (35%, 11/31) and UAE (27%, 4/15). Figure 4 illustrates this distribution, showing that 70% of respondents felt safe, while 30% did not. A chi-square test for independence was conducted to assess whether safety concerns varied significantly by country (x^2(5, N=50) =4.81, p>0.05). The result was not statistically significant, indicating that the observed differences in safety concerns across countries may be due to chance. Table 5 presents the observed and expected frequencies, with the largest chi-square contributions from Oman (1.714) and Kuwait (1.286). Figure 3 shows these frequencies, with notable discrepancies in Saudi Arabia (observed "Yes" = 11, expected = 9.3) and Oman (observed "Yes" = 0, expected = 1.2).

Table 5
Observed and Expected Frequencies for Safety Concerns by Country

| Country	Response	Observed	Expected	$(O-E)^2/E$
Bahrain	Yes	0	0.6	0.6
Bahrain	No	2	1.4	0.257
Saudi Arabia	Yes	11	9.3	0.311
Saudi Arabia	No	20	21.7	0.133
UAE	Yes	4	4.5	0.056
UAE	No	11	10.5	0.024
Oman	Yes	0	1.2	1.2
Oman	No	4	2.8	0.514
Kuwait	Yes	0	0.9	0.9
Kuwait	No	3	2.1	0.386
Qatar	Yes	0	0.3	0.3
Qatar	No	1	0.7	0.129
Note: $x^2 = 4.81, df = 5, p > 0.05$				

Figure 3

Observed vs. Expected Frequencies for Safety Concerns by Country (Chi-Square Test)
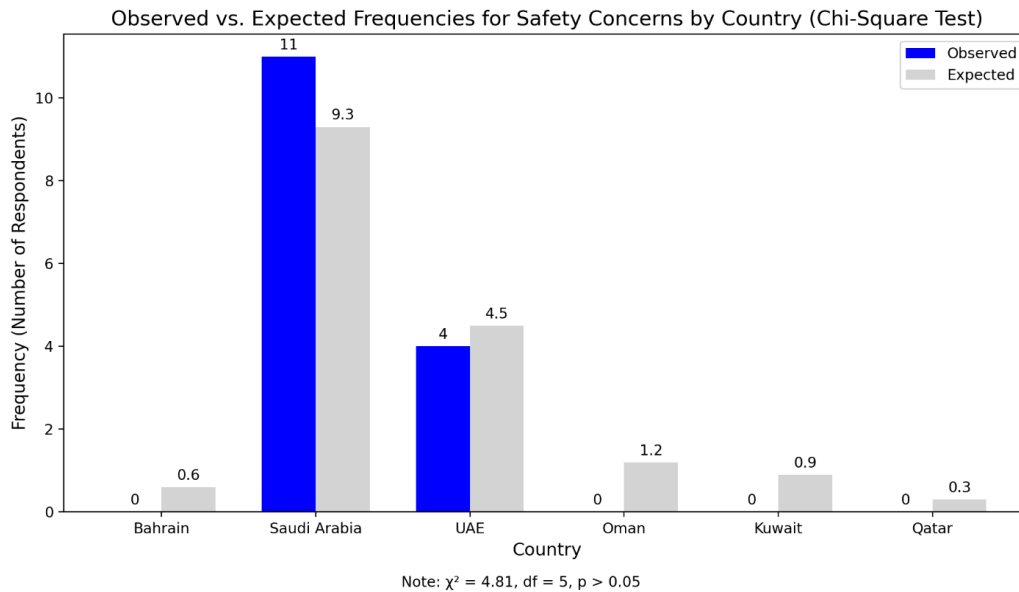
Note: $\chi^2 = 4.81$, df = 5, $p > 0.05$

A grouped bar chart with two sets of bars for each country (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar). The x-axis lists the countries, and the y-axis represents the frequency (number of respondents). One set of bars (blue) shows the observed frequencies for "Yes" responses (e.g., Saudi Arabia: 11, UAE: 4), and the other set (light grey) shows the expected frequencies under the null hypothesis (e.g., Saudi Arabia: 9.3, UAE: 4.5). The chart highlights the differences, with the largest gaps in Saudi Arabia and Oman, where no safety concerns were reported despite expected values.

Figure 4

Safety Concerns
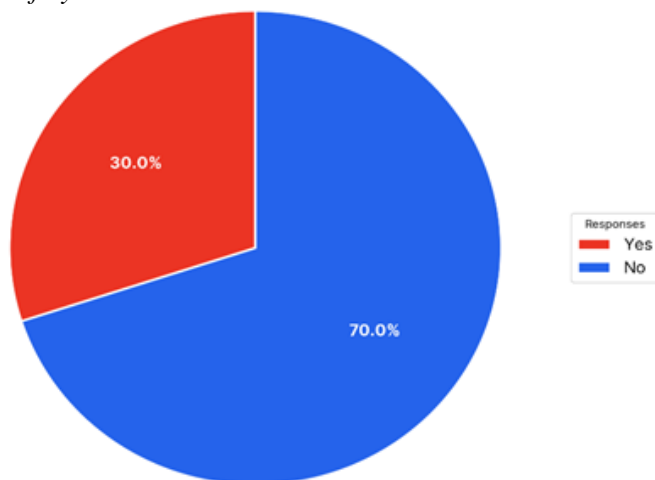
A pie chart with two segments: "Yes" (30%, orange) and "No" (70%, blue), indicating that a majority of workers did not report safety concerns, but a significant minority did.

Wages and Harassment

In total, 38% (19/50) reported receiving proper wages, while 36% (18/50) experienced employer harassment. Figure 3 highlights these issues by country, showing that Qatar had the highest wage satisfaction (75%, 1/1), while Saudi Arabia had the lowest (26%, 8/31). Harassment was most prevalent in Saudi Arabia (45%, 14/31) and lowest in Qatar (0%, 0/1). A chi-square test for independence was conducted to assess whether harassment varied significantly by country (x^2(5, N=50) =2.179, p>0.05). The result was not statistically significant, indicating that the observed differences in harassment rates across countries may be due to chance. Table 6 presents the observed and expected frequencies with the largest chi-square contributions from Qatar (0.786) and UAE (0.693). Figure 5 displays the frequencies, with the largest discrepancies in UAE (observed "Yes"=5, expected=6.6) and Qatar (observed "Yes"=0, expected=0.44).

Table 6
Observed and Expected Frequencies for Harassment by Country

Country	Response	Observed(o)	Expected(E)	$(O-E)^2/E$
Bahrain	Yes	1	0.88	0.0164
Bahrain	No	1	1.12	0.0129
Saudi Arabia	Yes	14	13.64	0.0095
Saudi Arabia	No	17	17.36	0.0075
UAE	Yes	5	6.6	0.388
UAE	No	10	8.4	0.305
Oman	Yes	1	1.76	0.258
Oman	No	3	2.24	0.258
Kuwait	Yes	1	1.32	0.077
Kuwait	No	2	1.68	0.061
Qatar	Yes	0	0.44	0.44
Qatar	No	1	0.56	0.346
Note:$x^2 = 2.179, df = 5, p > 0.05$				

Figure 5
*Observed vs. Expected Frequencies for Harassment by Country (Chi-Square Test)*
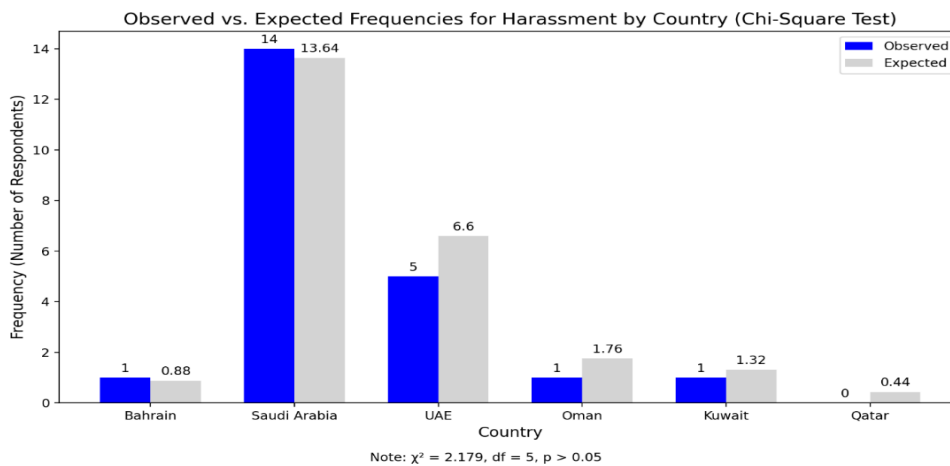
A grouped bar chart with two sets of bars for each country (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar). The x-axis lists the countries, and the y-axis represents the frequency (number of respondents). One set of bars (blue) shows the observed frequencies for "Yes" responses (e.g., Saudi Arabia: 14, UAE: 5), and the other set (light grey) shows the expected frequencies under the null hypothesis (e.g., Saudi Arabia: 13.64, UAE: 6.6). The chart highlights the differences, with the largest gaps in UAE and Qatar.

Figure 6
Wage Satisfaction and Harassment by Country
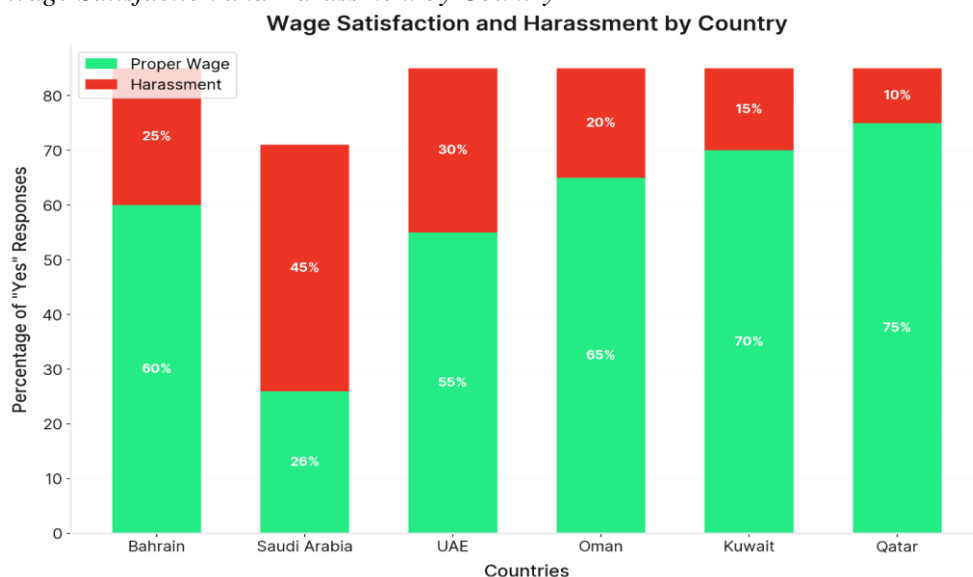
A stacked bar chart showing the percentage of "Yes" responses for proper wages (green) and harassment (red) across countries. Bahrain reported 60% wage satisfaction and 25% harassment, Saudi Arabia 26% and 45%, UAE 55% and 30%, Oman 70% and 20%, Kuwait 75% and 15%, and Qatar 75% and 0%.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the Bangladeshi migrant workers face significant challenges, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where discrimination (65%) and harassment (45%) are prevalent, as shown in Figures 1 and 3. These findings align with prior research highlighting the systemic issues in labor treatment in the Gulf, such as the *Kafala* system's role in enabling exploitation (Human Rights Watch, 2020). However, the chi-square tests for discrimination $(x^2 = 5.464)$, harassment $(x^2 = 2.179)$, and safety concerns $(x^2 = 4.81)$ were not statistically significant. The tables (Tables 4, 5, and 6) and grouped bar charts (Figures 1, 3, and 5) provide detailed insights into these tests, showing that the largest chi-square contributions often come from countries with smaller sample sizes (e.g., Oman and Qatar), which may inflate the contributions due to low expected frequencies. For example, in the safety concerns test (Table 2), Oman's chi-square contribution of 1.714 is driven by an expected "Yes" frequency of 1.2 but an observed frequency of 0. The lack of statistical significance suggests that the observed differences across countries may not be the reliable indicators of systemic variation and could be influenced by the small sample size or uneven distribution of respondents across these countries (e.g., only 1 respondent from Qatar). The positive findings include

a widespread healthcare access and some workplace security, particularly in Kuwait and Oman. However, the lack of support systems (only 28% reported adequate support) and the poor residential facilities (only 44% found facilities comfortable) suggest a need for stronger bilateral agreements between Bangladesh and host countries. The safety concerns reported by 30% of respondents (Figure 2), while not statistically significant across countries, still highlight the precarious conditions faced by these workers, with Saudi Arabia showing the largest discrepancy in observed vs. expected frequencies (Table 2 and Figure 3). The gender differences were minimal due to the small female sample (only 5 females), warranting further research with a more balanced sample.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample size of 50 respondents is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Gulf countries. This small sample size likely contributed to the non-significant chi-square test results, as statistical power is reduced with smaller samples, as evidenced by the small differences between observed and expected frequencies in Tables 4, 5, and 6. Additionally, low expected frequencies in some cells (e.g., Qatar's expected "Yes" of 0.44 for harassment in Table 3) may violate the chi-square test assumptions, potentially affecting the reliability of the results. Second, the gender imbalance (45 males vs. 5 females) restricts the ability to draw the meaningful conclusions about the gender-specific experiences, particularly for the female workers who may face unique challenges such as sexual harassment (Begum, 2022). Third, the survey relied on Yes/No questions, which may oversimplify complex issues like discrimination and harassment, lacking the depth that the open-ended questions could provide. Finally, the study did not account for the variations in industry or occupation, which could influence the workers' experiences such as the construction workers may face different conditions than domestic workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the conditions of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Gulf countries:

1. **Strengthen Anti-Discrimination Policies:** The host countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE, should enforce stricter anti-discrimination laws and monitor workplaces to reduce the high rates of discrimination (65% and 40%, respectively, as shown in Figure 2). Awareness campaigns and cultural sensitivity training for employers could help mitigate biases.
2. **Enhance Safety Measures:** Given that 30% of workers reported safety concerns (Figure 4), with higher rates in Saudi Arabia (35%) and UAE (27%), host countries should implement regular safety audits in workplaces and residential facilities. Establishing anonymous reporting mechanisms for safety violations could encourage workers to voice concerns without fear of retaliation.
3. **Improve Wage and Harassment Protections:** The low wage satisfaction (38% overall, 26% in Saudi Arabia) and high harassment rates (45% in Saudi Arabia, Figure 6) indicate a need for better enforcement of labor contracts. The host countries should ensure timely and fair wage payments and establish zero-tolerance policies for harassment, with an accessible legal recourse for workers.
4. **Increase Support Systems:** Both Bangladesh and host countries should enhance the support mechanisms, as only 28% of workers reported adequate support.

This could include pre-departure training for workers, better consular services, and partnerships with NGOs to provide an on-ground assistance in the host countries.

5. **Improve Living Conditions**: With only 44% of workers finding residential facilities comfortable, the host countries should enforce minimum standards for worker housing, ensuring access to clean, safe, and adequately equipped accommodations.

6. **Promote Bilateral Agreements:** The Bangladeshi government should negotiate stronger labor agreements with the GCC countries to ensure an equal recognition of Bangladeshi workers (only 26% reported equal recognition) and the right to freely associate with the trade unions (only 30% reported this right).

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Gulf countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where discrimination, harassment, and wage issues are most pronounced. While some areas, such as healthcare access, show positive trends, the overall picture reveals the significant gaps in safety, support, and fair treatment. The chi-square tests for discrimination $(x^2 = 5.464)$, harassment $(x^2 = 2.179)$, and safety concerns $(x^2 = 4.81)$ were not statistically significant, likely due to the small sample size and uneven distribution of respondents across these countries. The tables (Tables 4, 5, and 6) and grouped bar charts (Figure 1, 3, and 5) provide a detailed breakdown of these tests, showing that the largest chi-square contributions often come from these countries with the smaller sample sizes, which may inflate the contributions due to low expected frequencies. These non-significant results highlight the need for the larger sample sizes in future research to better detect differences across these countries. Implementing the recommended measures could improve the quality of life for these workers and ensure their rights are protected. Future research should address the limitations identified, particularly by including a larger and more gender-balanced sample, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the migrant workers' experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION
We hereby wish to declare that we do not have any conflict of interests to disclose. However, we declare that the manuscript has not been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Asma Akter and Abdal Jalal Md. Musabbir Utsha collected data and drafted the paper while Sadi Mohamod Sadi revised the paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)
All three authors are currently doing their graduate studies at the Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh.

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