

## Lifestyle of Bangladeshi Workers in Maldives

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*The study has been conducted to see the condition of Bangladeshi workers living in Maldives. Objectives were to assess their perception of their own health and safety, to see whether any demographic variable affected their wish to relocate to Maldives and to find the facilities they want to improve their lives. The Problem Statement is to look at the lifestyle and work conditions of Bangladeshi workers in Maldives. The reason for the study is that when the researchers looked into it there was no such significant study done even though 150,000 Bangladesh workers live in Maldives, which has a total population of 350,000. Hypothesis is not applicable in this research because this is a baseline study with no previous similar study. Focus group discussions were conducted among 100 workers in groups from four islands of Hulhumale, Male, Vilingili and Maafushi. There were five questions asking about where they come from, how they survive on the islands, what they generally do for livelihoods, how much money they send home and living conditions. 90% of the respondents have come from Comilla and Tangail district. Their profession ranged from water sports instructors to shopkeepers to resort and restaurant executives to boatmen and fishermen. They are present in all professions. 87% were male. Females generally tend to be housekeepers and a good number was seen in Vilingili Island where most of the Male white collar executives live in. The age range was 20 to 45 years. Less than 50% were illiterate (35% were university graduates). Average monthly income of this group is Tk 25000 (1 Maldivian Rufiya= Bangladeshi Tk 5). Interestingly 43.43% respondents are satisfied with their situation. Dissatisfaction was blamed on unable to marry local girls due to new law of depositing in the Maldivian government account, money equivalent to Tk 50000 and promiscuous nature or bringing family due to money constraints. 87% stated that their work permit either expired or they were there illegally after coming on a visit visa. 78% don't know about health and safety issues while out of those who know about health and safety issues, 24% know that they can complain to Bangladesh Embassy of any wrongdoing. Highest paid workers can send upto Tk 60,000 to Bangladesh. These workers stay mostly in resorts where if storms strike there is no food or water for days. Bangladeshis can do business under Maldivian native's name and it was seen that Bangladeshi products thrive in Male market places. The study concluded that in recent years Bangladeshi workers are happier than before in Maldives. Of the 350,000 strong Maldivian population, 150,000 are Bangladeshi workers. Even though it costs 7000 rufiya (1 MVR= BDT 5) to rent a one room flat in Male where upto 10 people stay in cramped conditions, due to the exchange rate, many workers want to stay in Maldives for their work-life, before coming back to Bangladesh to settle for business.*

**Field of Research:** Occupational, Health and Safety.

### 1. Introduction

As of late 2015, Bangladesh has sent over 9.5 million overseas workers abroad with employments that contributed significantly to the socio-economic advancement of the nation. This population has been working in approximately 160 countries starting from Middle East to the Far East and also Europe to North America. Bangladesh encourages documented overseas employment. International labour migration has been an integral part of Bangladesh's economic and social

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development since the 1980s. It creates employment, ensures stability in foreign exchange reserve and in the context of 7th five-year plan of the country, it offers additional avenues to the government to attain its long term developmental goals. Wage earners contribute almost 15% in our gross domestic product (GDP) through sending hard earned remittance to Bangladesh. Skill is an inseparable quality of migrant worker as earnings of them largely depends on their skill. Earnings of skilled workers are greater than unskilled workers all over the world. That's why skill of migrant workers is very much crucial. Skill usually requires certain environmental stimuli and situations to assess the level of skill being shown and used. But matter of regret is that skills of Bangladeshi migrant workers are not at the satisfactory level. Due to poor skill, earnings are very poor for Bangladeshi migrant workers in comparison with average income of other countries migrant worker. According to International Labour Organisation (ILO), each year, more than 400,000 workers leave Bangladesh for overseas employment. Problems faced by Bangladeshi migrants include: high fees for migration charged by recruitment agencies, especially for low skilled jobs; low wages, lack of information on migration opportunities and risks; discrimination, exploitation and abuse while overseas; and insufficient services to protect the rights of workers.

In Bangladesh, the impact of international migration on national economy is an established fact to researchers, policy makers and donor bodies, but the truth about their lifestyle in uncommon countries like Maldives is still relatively unknown. The study has been undertaken after a visit to Maldives by the authors. It was unexpected that such a huge number of Bangladeshi workers would be encountered on the way to the hotel from Airport to Hulhumale. This was the main reason the study was conducted.

The key objective of this paper is to understand about lifestyle of Bangladeshi workers living in Maldives. The specific objectives are:

- To assess their perception of their own health and safety.
- To see whether any demographic variable affected their wish to relocate to Maldives.
- To find the facilities they want to improve their lives.

The research focused on various issues on the Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Maldives and the various aspects of their Health, Hygiene and Safety and family matters. The focus was on how the socio-economic conditions of the workers affected their workplace and their work.

The paper is mainly organized in sections. It starts with an abstract of the entire paper followed by introduction of the topic. Then a literature review is given to let the readers know about the existing literature. Then the research methodology has been discussed followed by the analysis and interpretation of the data. This is followed by conclusions. Lastly, limitations of the study and references have been provided.

## 2. Literature Review

In a paper on Bangladeshi Migrant Men Working in Singapore's Construction Industry (Baey and Yeoh 2015), Bangladeshi migrants and their families continue to utilize labour migration as a strategy for income generation to improve standards of living and gain socioeconomic mobility. The majority planned to work for at least five to ten years in Singapore, and men's top three

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reasons for migration were: paying for basic needs (47.8 per cent); accruing savings (15.6 per cent); and starting a business (13.2 per cent). The research conducted for Bangladeshi workers living in the Maldives shows a similar pattern. The final goal for the Maldivian workers is to ultimately return home and start a business.

The lifestyle needs of the Bangladeshi workers in Maldives are also indicated in (Ali, Uddin and Kamrujjaman 2015). When talking about lifestyle, one crucial point that springs up is health care. According to (Low, Tong and Binns 2015), workers may not have equal access to healthcare as citizens of the country they are working in. This has been evident in the current research as well.

Literature review shows that a number of factors are concerned with the socioeconomic status of the readymade garment workers of Bangladesh herself. It was identified that the standard of living, education, transportation, housing and accommodation, recreation, social status, income, and job security as the most socio-economic factors influenced by the involvement with the readymade garment companies of Bangladesh. A research addressed the Socio-Economic Factors of Readymade Garments Workers in Bangladesh and the satisfaction of towards the jobs of female RMG workers which is concerned with the amount of savings, duration of maternity leave, medical allowance system, bonus structure, job environment, accommodation, education, etc. It was found that the socio-economic factors of garment workers like wages, working hours, working right and fringe benefits influenced the job satisfaction. In another study, people identified standard of living and the wages are the factors concerned with RMG workers. It was identified that the factors related to socio-economic status of the garment workers are health care and disease, education, social security, attachment with labor union, overtime, savings/deposits, job security, working hours and the fringe benefits. The working conditions in this vital sector are also very poor. Bangladesh's RMG factories fall short on 'social compliance. They identified that standard of living and the deposit in bank are the important factors related to the social status of the garment workers. Few researchers found the factors such as, health care and disease, hygiene, and working hours that are important factors for the development of socio-economic status of the workers. A study focuses on: Garments workers are concerned with long working hours or double consecutive shifts, personally unsafe work environment, poor working conditions, wage and gender discrimination. Indeed, employers treat the RMG workers as slaves, exploiting workers to increase their profit margins and keep their industry competitive in the face of increasing international competition. A group of researchers identified that health care and disease, education, attachment with labor union are important for the workers while, the researchers found that social status, overtime, savings/deposits, working hours, working rights and fringe benefits are the important factors for the women garment workers. It identified wages is the main factor for the workers. They found that the factors such as, health care and disease, transportation, housing, accommodation, and income distribution are the important factors for the women garment workers in Bangladesh. The research showed that the socio-economic factors such as, food, water and sanitation, health care and disease, transportation, housing and accommodation, labor standard, wages, and job security are very much important to the garment workers of Bangladesh. It was identified that the food, water and sanitation, health care and disease, transportation, housing and accommodation and hygiene are the important factors for the workers for their socio-economic lives. The socio-economic factors of RMG workers identified through literature review.

In an article titled 'How an Indian Ocean Paradise Was Lost' in The Wall Street Journal it was found that: Home to 350,000 people on less than 300 square kilometers of land, Maldives is steeped in contradictions. Hotel tycoons reign over their island resorts like feudal lords. Workers

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from Bangladesh and elsewhere earn less than \$70 a month after having been promised much higher salaries, but employers confiscate their passports so they are unable to leave. The archipelago's Sharia-compliant constitution punishes extramarital sex with public flogging, so quick marriages and divorces have become common. The earning of the Bangladeshi workers are not synonymous with the current research.

'The migration of workers across international boundaries in search of economic opportunity has enormous implications for development. It can have significant positive impacts on household poverty and economic growth through improved income opportunities, knowledge transfers and increased integration in the global economy.' (World Bank 2006).

Maldives has its fair share of female workers from Bangladesh. According to an ILO report (Ahmed, 2010), about half of all migrant workers are now women. Female labour migration is concentrated in occupations associated with traditional gender roles but in the Gulf region they are concentrated mostly in domestic works as in Maldives. Women migrant workers, especially those in irregular situation, reportedly face serious handicaps and deprivation in terms of low remuneration, heavy workloads, lack of freedom of movement and even physical abuse. However, stories of atrocities against female migrants are often exaggerated as a knee jerk reaction to echo popular perception about vulnerability of women workers in foreign lands. Excepting a small percentage of female migrants, who encountered abuses and sexual harassment, most of the female migrants, as learnt from BMET sources, are reasonably comfortable with their jobs abroad as evidenced by their repeat visits to the same work place abroad in large numbers. According to this study, at the district level, Comilla stands out as the leading supplier of overseas Bangladeshi workers with 15%, followed by Chittagong (13%) and Tangail (8%).

According to a report in a Bangladeshi national daily from 2015 (Mohsin, 2015), a Bangladeshi worker was murdered for refusing to serve free coffee to a gang of unruly Maldivian youths. Another Bangladeshi worker was found dead with a cloth wound round his neck in Thoddo Island. Two more Bangladeshis were stabbed near the fish market. Lives for the Bangladesh migrant workers have become precarious and easily expendable. These series of murders and stabbing sent shockwaves in Bangladesh. These are warning signals of the lack of safety and security of vulnerable Bangladeshi labourers. The archipelago of Maldives, renowned for its natural beauty and spectacular over water bungalows on lagoons, has enchanting tourist resorts. But behind these luxurious villas lies a tragic tale of sweat and blood of numerous workers, mostly Bangladeshis.

They build these villas in hazardous circumstances. Their work is the most difficult and precarious. There are an estimated 75,000 Bangladeshi workers in Maldives involved in dangerous activities. The Bangladeshi workers pay as much as \$2,500 to come to the Maldives. Dubious agents in Bangladesh paint a rosy scenario of Maldives. Subsequently workers find themselves in a situation for which they are unprepared. Most arrive with work permits and passports, but are abandoned by their sponsors.

Assured of highly paid jobs, they ultimately end up as construction workers with no certainty of salary. Living in inhuman, cramped quarters without their passports and funds they are left to fend for themselves. Questionable immigration officers and Bangladeshi brokers work in collusion to bring innocent people from Bangladesh. They are forced to work over 14 hours with little food and less security. It was found by a writer, when she was a High Commissioner that on average one

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Bangladeshi worker died every week. Prolonged negotiation resulted in a few hundred dollars for the families of the deceased. Sometimes even that was not forthcoming. Migrant workers, who were left stranded on the roads of the capital had only pieces of papers with mobile numbers of their agents. No one answered the mobile numbers. It was a massive hoax.

Unpaid and overworked, over 500 workers once surrounded the Bangladesh Mission. Ragged, skinny with emaciated faces they were an awful sight. The employers were requested to come to the high commission. Blatant in their talk and ruthless in their behaviour, they refused to pay the salaries or return the passports of the workers. After concerted efforts and with the assistance of former President Nasheed, some passports were recouped and salaries paid. Furthermore, increasing xenophobia, drug addicted Maldivians and gang violence has made the lives of workers bizarre and horrifying. The Bangladeshi expatriates had decided to stage a peaceful protest. The Bangladesh High Commission has installed a 24-hour helpline, but the Maldives government must collaborate to rectify the situation. Thousands of migrant workers employed in resorts have then been ordered to leave Maldives if they stage their planned protest against violence and discrimination. The Controller of Immigration proclaimed that protest by migrant workers “would breach the terms of their work permits and those who protested would have their visas cancelled without further warning.”

Once a poor country, Maldives acquired wealth through tourism and fish exports. Male the capital, comparable to a slum, is where one third of the Maldivians live. They need to be better educated with appreciation of the contribution of expatriate labourers who keep their economy alive. Instead, innocent workers are stabbed and killed. Their families in Bangladesh are devastated with indelible tragedy -- death of husbands, brothers, and sons. While there are several foreign professional workers such as doctors, accountants and teachers, the increase in xenophobia is mainly directed towards unskilled workers (Zafar, 2007). The happiness of the Bangladeshi workers in Maldives in the overall Literature Review does not match with the findings of this report.

### 3. Methodology

This research focused on both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used for this research purposes. Focus group discussions were conducted among 100 workers in groups from four islands of Hulhumale, Male, Vilingili and Maafushi. There were five questions asking about where they come from, how they survive on the islands, what they generally do for livelihoods, how much money they send home and living conditions. MS Excel was used for the purpose of analysis of data.

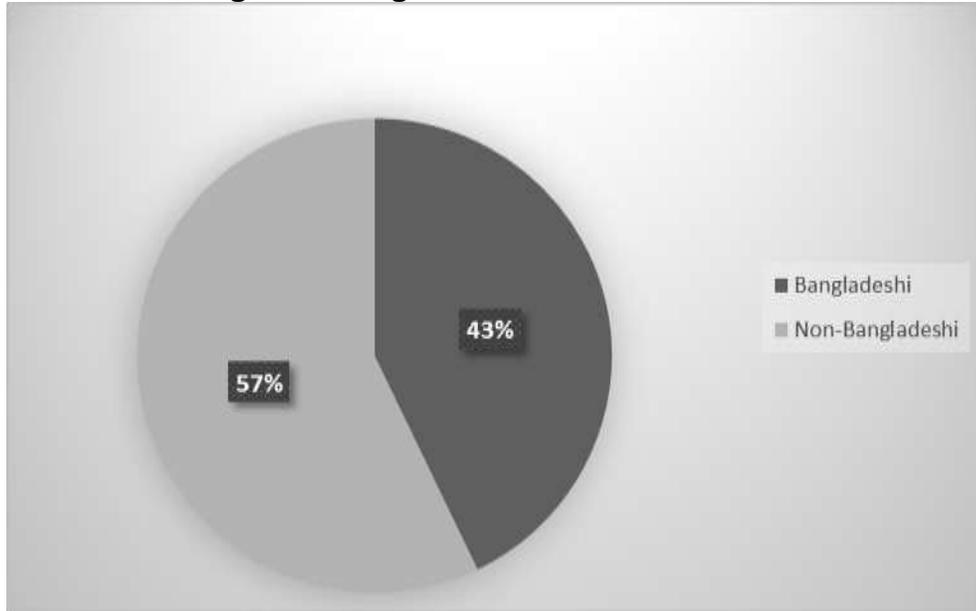
The secondary sources of data include different books, journals, articles, dissertation; annual reports and websites of International Labour Organization (ILO), annual reports of Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment of Bangladesh, , and different websites relevant to the topics.

The study conducted also used some other methods of research. Among this was included observation technique and questionnaire. The Bangladeshi Workers who worked in various hotels, resorts, transportation systems and other public offices were closely observed over a considerable period of time and then the reports' findings were written. Besides short open ended questionnaires were circulated among the participants on a convenient sampling basis. After receiving the feedback the data was compiled and the results were interpreted.

#### 4. Analysis and Interpretation

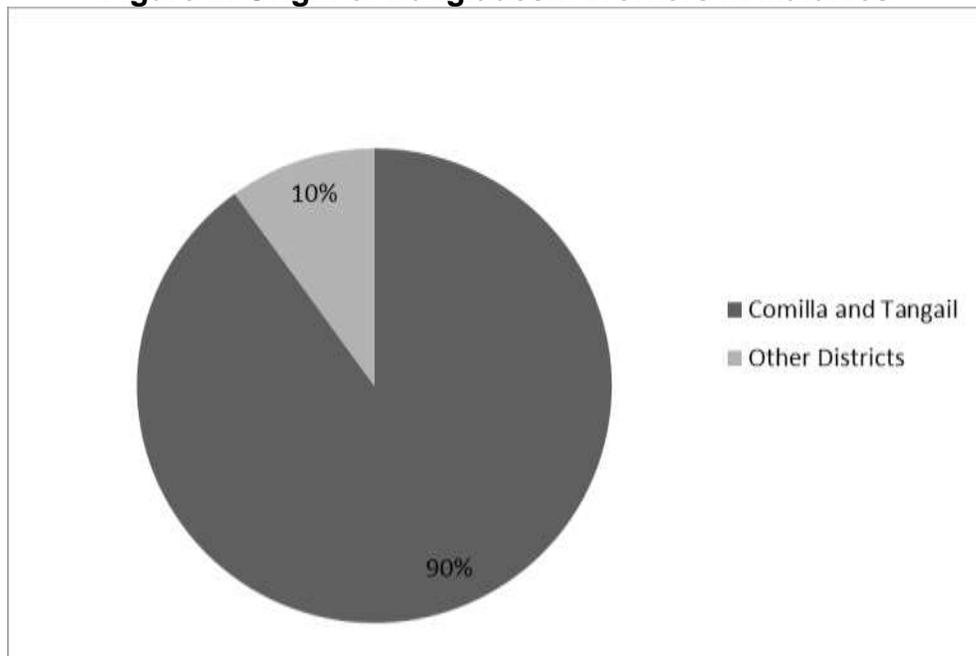
Based on the study the following analysis and findings are presented:

**Figure 1: Origin of Workers in Maldives**



43% of the workers currently living in Maldives is of Bangladeshi origin.

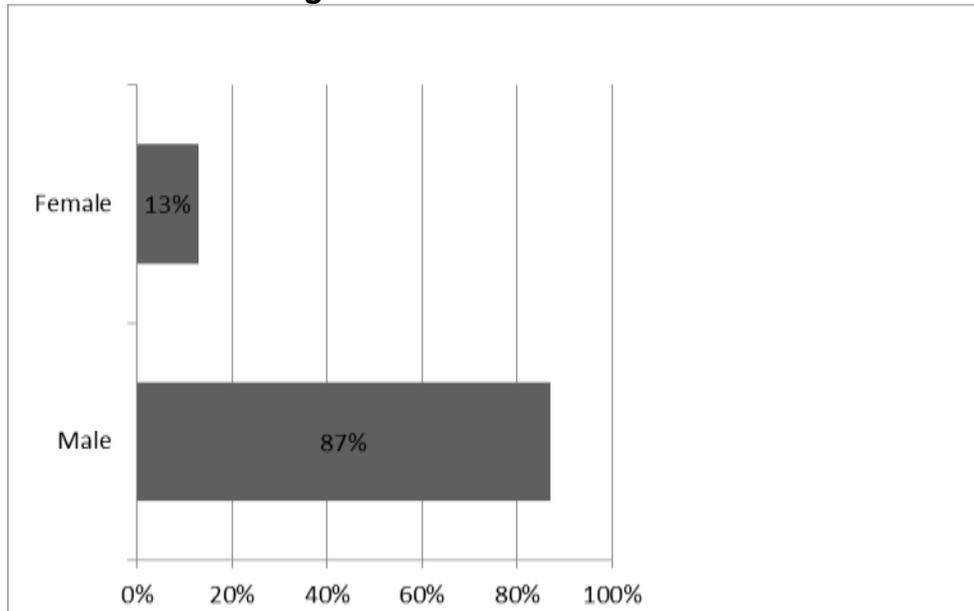
**Figure 2: Origin of Bangladeshi Workers in Maldives**



90% of the respondents have come from Comilla and Tangail district. Their profession ranged from water sports instructors to shopkeepers to resort and restaurant executives to boatmen and fishermen. They are present in all professions.

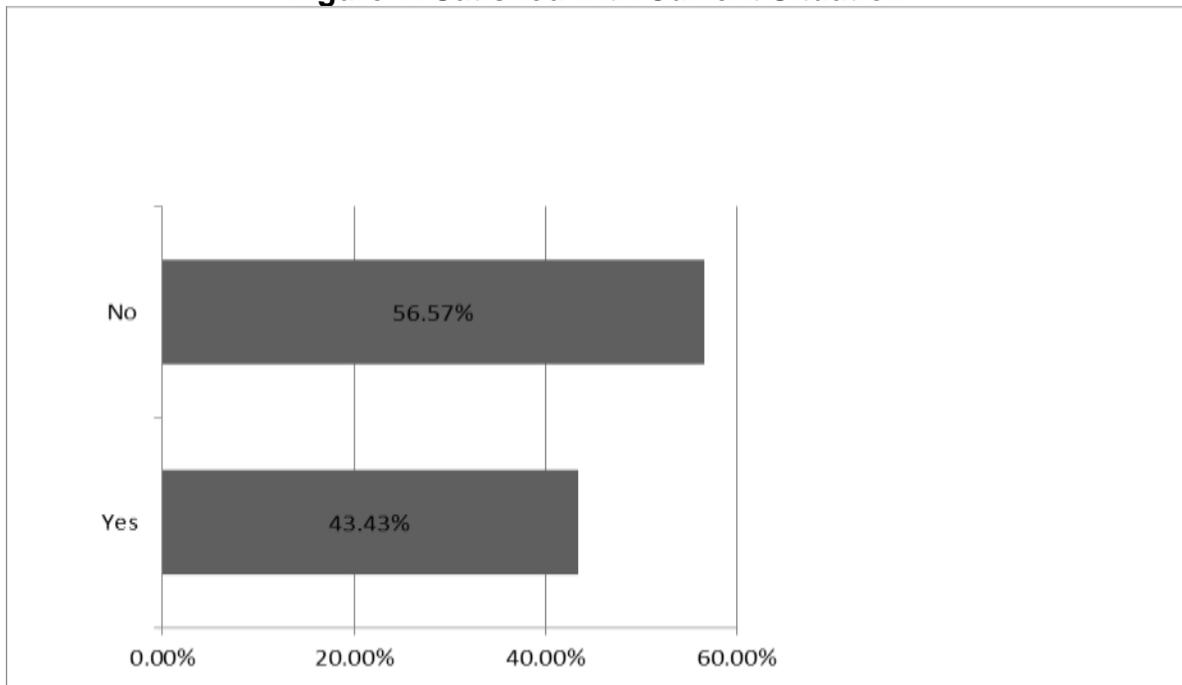
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Figure 3: Gender Distribution



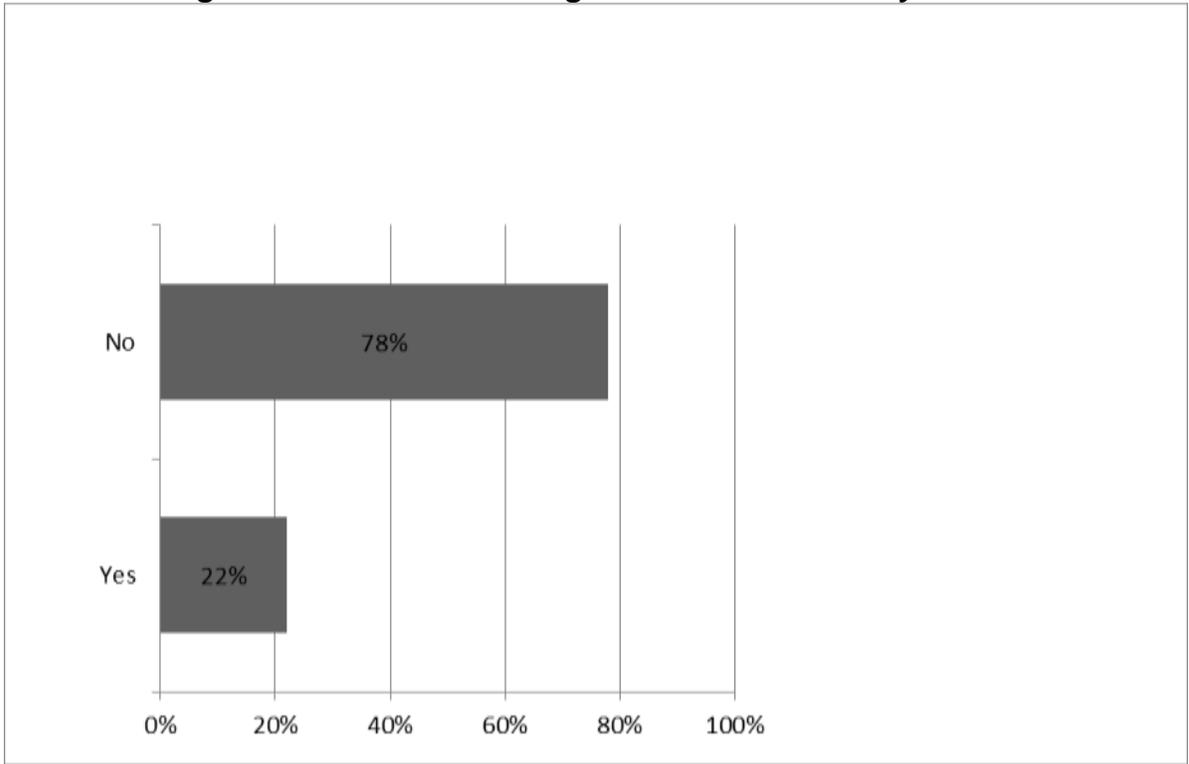
87% were male. Females generally tend to be housekeepers and a good number was seen in Vilingili Island where most of the Male white collar executives live in. The age range was 20 to 45 years. Less than 50% were illiterate (35% were university graduates). Average monthly income of this group is Tk 25000 (1 Maldivian Rufiya= Bangladeshi Tk 5).

Figure 4: Satisfied with Current Situation



Interestingly 43.43% respondents are satisfied with their situation. Dissatisfaction was blamed on unable to marry local girls due to new law of depositing in the Maldivian government account, money equivalent to Tk 50000 and promiscuous nature or bringing family due to money constraints.

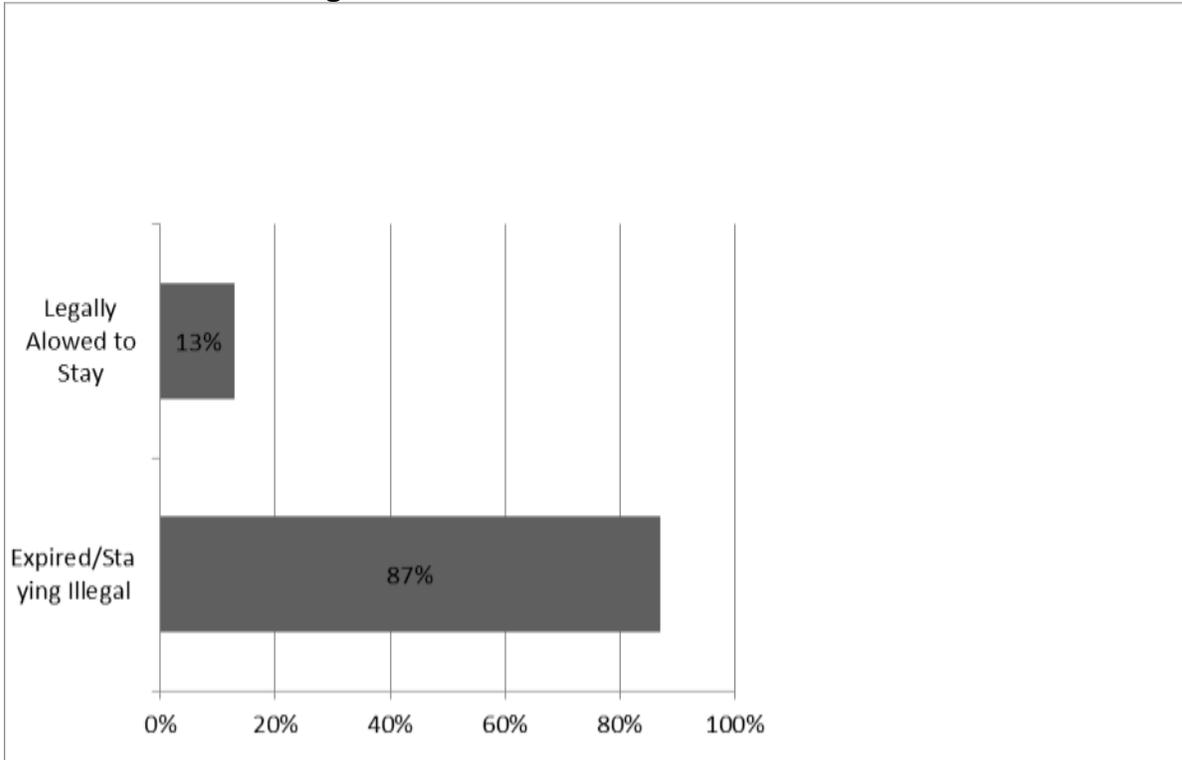
Figure 5: Posses Knowledge of Health and Safety Issues



78% don't know about health and safety issues while out of those who know about health and safety issues.

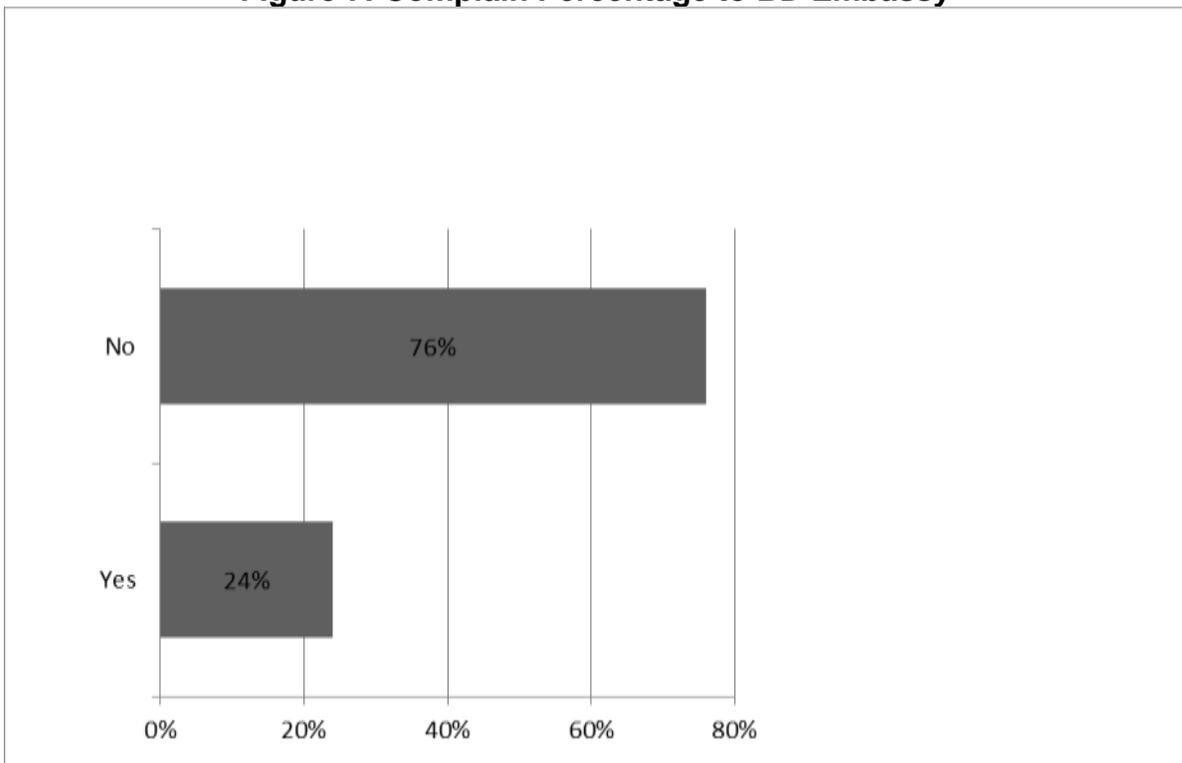
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Figure 6: Current Status of Work Permit



87% stated that their work permit either expired or they were there illegally after coming on a visit visa.

Figure 7: Complain Percentage to BD Embassy



24% know that they can complain to Bangladesh Embassy of any wrongdoing.

### 5. Conclusion

Maldives is a country thriving on tourism. Most of the workers from Bangladesh are working in different sectors of tourism like water sports, hospitality industry etc. Proper hospitality management training will help the workers thrive fully in the country. Another noticeable point regarding Maldives compared to other countries taking manpower from Bangladesh is Maldives provides on-arrival tourist visas for Bangladeshis. As a result, many semi-skilled Bangladeshis with aim of working abroad travelling to Maldives tend to stay back due to exchange rate of the MVR to BDT. As Maldives is a country of islands and people of the two nations look similar, it is hard to differentiate the people living illegally. With time the Bangladeshis tend to mingle with the locals. Bangladesh government can work closely with Maldivian government to make Bangladeshi workers work legally in Maldives. When legality is ensured, the life-style of the Bangladeshi workers will automatically become favorable. Some articles from different Bangladeshi dailies have pointed out that many a times injustice is done towards Bangladeshi working youths in the Maldives by unruly Maldivian youths sometimes in the form of murder. As legality of the Bangladeshi youths is questionable in many cases, justice is not met and the victim's family back in Bangladesh suffers a lot as in most cases the Bangladeshi worker is the sole bread earner of the family. It is noticeable that Maldives does benefit a lot from the workers of Bangladesh as they constitute almost 42% of the total population of Maldives. For a better lifestyle of the Bangladeshi workers, legality and more acceptance of their contribution is required.

With time the economic, political and geographical conditions of Maldives has been changing and so is the lifestyle of the workers is also changing. Hence, the study needs to take into account the longitudinal aspects of the Bangladeshi workers in Maldives. The study needs to be done for a period of many years. It should also make a comparison of Bangladeshi workers from other country with those in Maldives.

The study finally concludes that in recent years Bangladeshi workers are happier than before in Maldives. Of the 350,000 strong Maldivian population, 150,000 are Bangladeshi workers. Even though it costs 7000 rufiya (1 MVR= BDT 5) to rent a one room flat in Male where up to 10 people stay in cramped conditions, due to the exchange rate, many workers want to stay in Maldives for their work-life, before coming back to Bangladesh to settle for business.

### 6. Limitations

The study is a cross-sectional study on the Lifestyle of Bangladeshi Workers in Maldives. The study was conducted in July 2015. With time the economic, political and geographical conditions of the country has been changing. Along with these changes, the lifestyle of the workers is also changing. Hence, the study needs to take into account the longitudinal aspects of the Bangladeshi workers in Maldives. The study can be conducted for a period of many years to see how the various factors influences the lifestyle of Bangladeshi workers. The study needs to make a comparison among other Bangladeshi workers who are working in other countries with similar socio-economic backgrounds to Maldives. It will help understand the specific reasons behind the observations that are found in this article. The study needs to take into account the world dynamics and adjust the results accordingly.

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