

The Invisible Workers: Bangladeshi women in Oman

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The presentation shared some of the findings of an ethnographic study conducted in Oman in 2020 (prior to the lockdown caused by the pandemic) that documents the working and living conditions of Bangladeshi women migrant workers. The title of the talk reflects the difficulties of the undertaking: a research whose object is largely 'invisible'. Reaching out to Bangladeshi women in Oman has been an immense challenge. In Muscat and Salalah, where field work was conducted, Bangladeshi women are hardly found on the streets or in shops. Those who go out generally wear the black burqa with the *nikab*, making their identification as Bangladeshi impossible. Locating and accessing women working in Omani homes has been a major difficulty.

Oman has been an important destination for Bangladeshi male migrant workers coming in 3rd position and being acknowledged in government records from 1976. A few women came as family dependents, but, as workers, their numbers significantly increased from 2013 onwards. Prior to the pandemic, women were estimated at 10 percent of some 750,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Early migrant men mostly came from Chattogram, and a majority of workers originate from this district still today. The 35 women interviewed in the study came from 18 districts. Not only are their origins widely dispersed but none of them came from Chattogram. These findings are consistent with statements frequently heard from men, such as: "We don't allow our women to work in Chattogram. How could we allow them to work abroad?" or, "I would rather beg than send my wife abroad". Although Bangladeshi male workers hold strong views regarding migrant women's working conditions in Omani homes, most of them have no direct knowledge of their circumstances.

The 35 Bangladeshi women interviewed were found in 11 types of occupations, including 13 live-in and 11 live-out maids, 2 cleaners and 1 medical doctor. The occupations listed are not indicative of their numerical importance. The research method did not aim to 'achieve' numbers, anyway. Rather, an open approach was taken that permitted questioning conventional categories and the gender connotations of 'worker'. For examples, 'wives' were included in the list who did not identify as 'workers', even when they had an income-generating activity. The list of women's occupations shows the Bangladeshi 'community' in Oman to be more complex than generally assumed and to be crisscrossed with strong class, gender and geographical divisions.

“We are cheap to employ, we can work hard, and we don’t mind staying inside the house. This is why Omani appreciate us”, explained a veteran migrant woman employed as a maid. Bangladeshi maids in Oman typically work in large extended families. The pay is low, and the work is heavy. Yet, many women renewed their contract as their salaries were regularly increased. The Bangladesh embassy in Oman fixed the minimum monthly salary at 90 OMR. Several women and some men were found to be paid less.

Bangladeshi live-in maids employed in Omani homes are deemed ready and willing to accept confinement. As ‘good Muslim’ women, they should not require outings and days off. They are deemed to possess a ‘quality’ that women of other nationalities do not have to the same degree. Religion as an argument for workers’ entitlement (or lack of) is regularly invoked. The study focused on the limited social life maids deploy around garbage bins where they gather, share news, exchange phone numbers, hand over cash and sometimes initiate love relationships. Live-out maids sharing their live with a *habibi* is found in Oman but the practice is more hidden and less common than in Lebanon and Jordan.

Research findings do not back the victim narratives held by NGOs and human rights activists showing instead the multiple ways in which women negotiate their employment, cope and deal with patriarchal norms prevailing in both, the Bangladeshi and the Omani society. I argue that the life women led prior to migration and the ‘normal’ violence suffered at home, provide an essential perspective to understand the threshold of the acceptable and the intolerable abroad. Empowerment and freedom are complex matters measurable in small degrees while the sentiments they inspire have an incommensurable quality. This is why taking the time to listen to women and hearing what migration procured them is so important.

Few ethnographic studies have been conducted on the working and living conditions of migrant women in Oman, and none on Bangladeshi. This exploratory study may contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of this population. I recognize its limitations. Field work was short and accessing largely invisible women workers was a major difficulty. Nonetheless, as it is, it fills a void. Women migrant workers have been largely ignored, and/or wrongly portrayed by their compatriots who do not approve of their country’s women’s migration and are perturbed by what they suspect, or imagine, but often do not know firsthand. The rationality, or irrationality, of their fears also deserves attention.

The study was conducted under the ILO Work in Freedom project. It follows upon two field studies conducted on Bangladeshi women migrant workers in Lebanon and in Jordan. The 3 studies have been enriched by the excellent field investigations and numerous case histories collected in Bangladesh on migrant women by members of the Drishti Research Team.