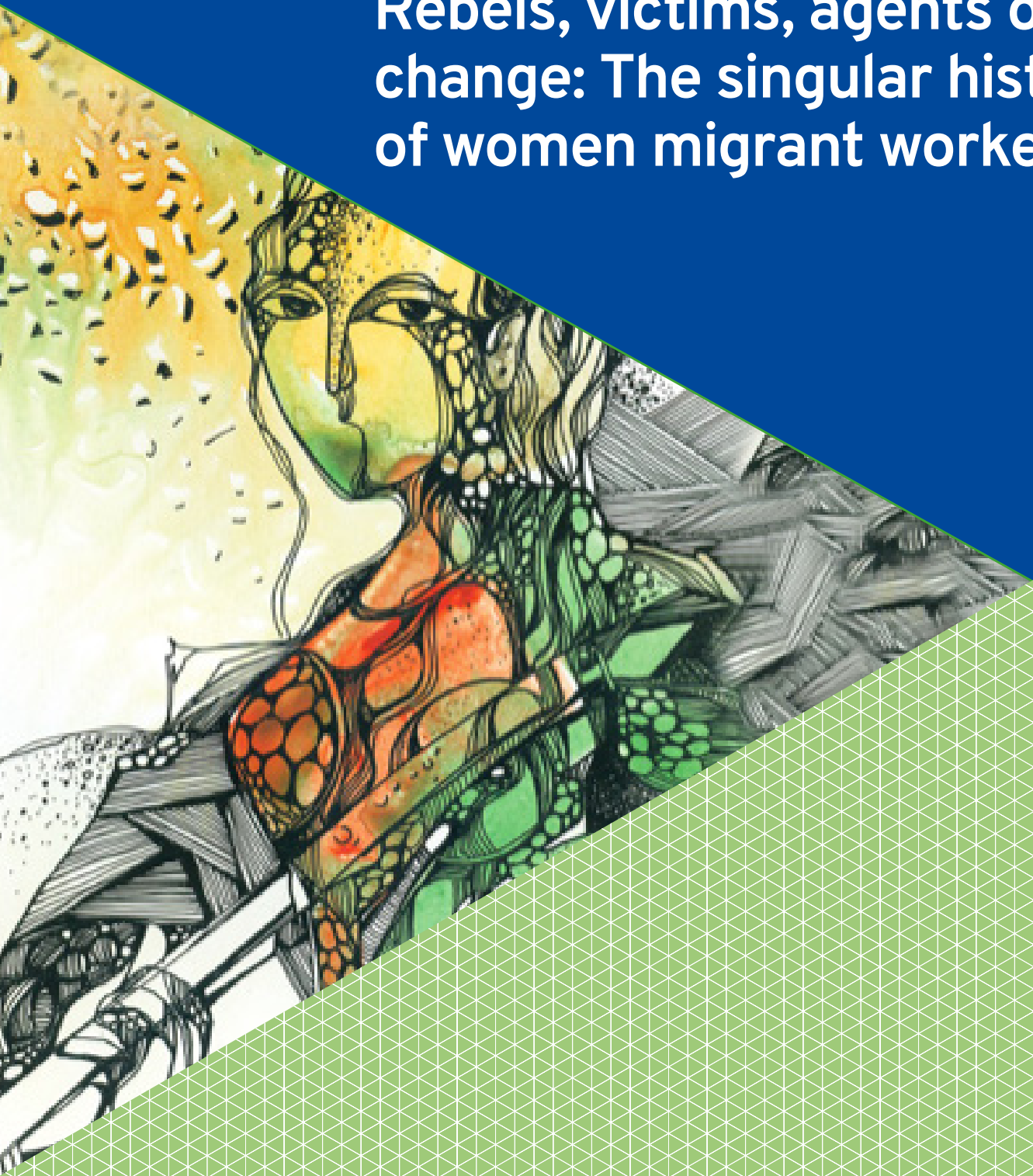




International  
Labour  
Organization

# Rebels, victims, agents of change: The singular histories of women migrant workers



Copyright © International Labour Organization 2022  
First published 2022

Publications of the International Labour Office enjoy copyright under Protocol 2 of the Universal Copyright Convention. Nevertheless, short excerpts from them may be reproduced without authorization, on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation, application should be made to ILO Publications (Rights and Licensing), International Labour Office, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland, or by email: [rights@ilo.org](mailto:rights@ilo.org). The International Labour Office welcomes such applications.

Libraries, institutions and other users registered with a reproduction rights organization may make copies in accordance with the licences issued to them for this purpose. Visit [www.ifro.org](http://www.ifro.org) to find the reproduction rights organization in your country.

---

ISBN: 9789220362389 (Print)  
ISBN: 9789220362396 (Web PDF)

---

The designations employed in ILO publications, which are in conformity with United Nations practice, and the presentation of material therein do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the International Labour Office concerning the legal status of any country, area or territory or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers.

The responsibility for opinions expressed in signed articles, studies and other contributions rests solely with their authors, and publication does not constitute an endorsement by the International Labour Office of the opinions expressed in them.

Reference to names of firms and commercial products and processes does not imply their endorsement by the International Labour Office, and any failure to mention a particular firm, commercial product or process is not a sign of disapproval.

Information on ILO publications and digital products can be found at: [www.ilo.org/publns](http://www.ilo.org/publns).

Cover photo © Tushar Mahbub.

# ▶ **Rebels, victims, agents of change: The singular histories of women migrant workers**

**Thérèse Blanchet**

**Anisa Zaman**

**Hannan Biswas**

Drishti Research Centre and (DRC)

Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID)



# Contents

---

Acknowledgements .....	7
Glossary .....	9
List of tables and figures .....	11
Foreword .....	13
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>17</b>
1.1 Purpose of the research .....	18
1.2 Research methods, key concepts, and analytical tools.....	19
1.3 Presentation of the report.....	22
<b>2. Who are the migrant women? .....</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 Age .....	24
2.2 Educational level.....	25
2.3 Marital status.....	26
<b>3. Work migration and adolescent girls.....</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1 Benefits to the natal family.....	30
3.2 Convincing a recalcitrant father: Sabika .....	31
3.3 Short marriage and return to parents: Ruma.....	31
3.4 Becoming an adult in Lebanon: Sonia .....	32
3.5 Endorsing the role of family head: Sharmeen .....	34
3.6 Raped and made to marry her rapist. Migration plan postponed: Shereen .....	37
3.7 'Dance' visas for Dubai.....	39
<b>4. Destinations, number of migrations per migrant and types of visas.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>5. Reasons to migrate .....</b>	<b>47</b>
5.1 Material and cultural imperatives .....	49
5.2 Consent to migrate.....	49
5.3 Severe judgment on husbands as family providers .....	51
5.4 Migration to reimburse a husband's debt:.....	51
<b>6. Long term migration and reset of objectives .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>7. Rebel, misfit, or agent of change? .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>8. Garment factory workers .....</b>	<b>69</b>
8.1 Duration of work abroad.....	70
8.2 Across multiple borders, a positive assessment: Shilpi .....	70
8.3 No room of one's own upon return: anger and resentment: Ameri.....	72
8.4 Khursheda: a precursor .....	74
<b>9. Migrant wives and polygamous husbands .....</b>	<b>77</b>
9.1 Storm in the triangle: Aisha, Poppy and Aminul.....	78
9.2 Migration to avenge a husband: Hasna .....	80

9.3	Migrant wives as providers, husband as moral guardian .....	82
9.4	Male dalals taking a female recruit as additional wife .....	83
<b>10.</b>	<b>Economic benefits: tentative assessment.....</b>	<b>87</b>
10.1	Low cost of women labour migration.....	88
10.2	Earnings.....	89
10.3	Savings and bank accounts: .....	90
10.4	Older women who never opened a bank account.....	91
10.5	Having a bank account and not using it.....	92
10.6	Resorting to secrecy to open a bank account.....	93
10.7	Bank accounts offer no guarantee that savings will be safeguarded .....	93
10.8	How migrant women disposed of their income .....	94
<b>11.</b>	<b>Review of problematic issues faced by domestic workers at destination .....</b>	<b>99</b>
11.1	Food .....	100
11.2	Workload and resting time .....	103
11.3	Use of mobile phone .....	104
11.4	Sexual abuse and trafficking:.....	105
<b>12</b>	<b>Conclusion and recommendations .....</b>	<b>109</b>
12.1	Migrant women as rebels .....	110
12.2	Migrant women as victims.....	111
12.3	Migrant women as agents of change .....	112
12.4	Recommendations .....	113
	Appendix .....	115
	References .....	117

## ► Acknowledgements

---

This research paper is part of a series of studies conducted by the Drishti Research Centre (DRC) under the Work in Freedom (WIF) programme, a regional project of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID).

Our deeply felt appreciation to Igor Bosc, Chief Technical Advisor of the WIF programme, for his keen interest and encouragement. Thank you to the WIF team in Delhi, Neha Wadhawan and Binod Shankar for their attentive support. Dr M. A. Razzaque, Chairman, and Dr. Abu Eusuf, Executive Director of Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID) hosted the study administratively, shared interest in the research findings and were always available for collaboration.

The research rests on fieldwork spread over two-and-a-half years to which many contributed. Anisa Zaman and Hannan Biswas, senior members of the DRC, played a major role from beginning to end. Anisa conducted the greatest part of the fieldwork while Hannan, in addition to field work, took over the administrative charge and much of the direction during

Thérèse prolonged absence due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A younger generation of researchers: Abzal Hosen, Afsana Aktar and Nilufa Yasmeen brought fresh and valuable observations. Litton, Mehedi Munir, Khairunessa, Mahmudul Hasan and Nupur as local assistants helped in all kinds of ways.

This research would have been impossible without the benevolent participation of the migrant women and their families who shared their stories and patiently answered our questions. I thank them for their trust, their hospitality and above all their humanity. May this study accurately convey their truths. I acknowledge the responsibility we have, collectively as researchers, to highlight their hard work, their struggles, and their achievements and to ensure that their contributions as workers be justly and fully recognized.

I take responsibility for the translation of case histories, the final analysis, and the writing of the report. Choices had to be made and some of the collected data could not be treated. I regret the omissions and I apologize for possible errors and misunderstandings.

**Thérèse Blanchet**  
Dhaka, 12 March 2022





## ► Glossary

---

### Bangla words

<i>Adhunik</i>	Modern, trendy
<i>Ami Bengali, amar bhat, mach dorkar.</i>	I am Bengali. I need rice and fish.
<i>Bakshish</i>	Tip, extra payment
<i>Bandha/bondi</i>	Tied/unfree
<i>Bandha kajer meye</i>	Live-in domestic worker
<i>Beton</i>	Salary
<i>Bideshi bhut take dhorse</i>	A woman determined to migrate, presumably possessed by a spirit (bhut), who will not let go in spite of family opposition
<i>Bidhormi</i>	An infidel, one who breaks social and religious rules
<i>Biye</i>	A woman's first marriage as opposed to subsequent marriages treated as nikah. In Islamic law, the marriage contract is called nikah.
<i>Biye dawa</i>	To give a daughter in marriage
<i>Biyer shami</i>	A woman's first husband
<i>Boka</i>	Simple, naïve
<i>Boro lok</i>	'Big' people, rich people
<i>Boyati gan</i>	A type of folk song
<i>Chalak</i>	Aware, clever
<i>Chaya</i>	Shade
<i>Dadon</i>	Advance payment made to a worker engaged for a season in a brick field
<i>Dalal</i>	An informal intermediary, who acts as a bridge between the recruiting agency and aspiring migrant
<i>Dhormo</i>	Religion, sacred duty
<i>Ek ghore rakha</i>	Excommunicated, ostracized
<i>Ghorer bou</i>	Wife
<i>Gushti</i>	Lineage
<i>Gutso-gram</i>	A government resettlement for landless families. Recently, the Government of Bangladesh developed many "ashrayan" projects for the same purpose.
<i>Jati</i>	Identity, caste
<i>Kanyadan</i>	The gift of a daughter to another line in marriage
<i>Kharup magui chara, keo bideshe jai?</i>	Who else goes abroad but depraved women?
<i>Meyera ghorer jinnish</i>	Women belong in the home.
<i>Man-shonman</i>	Honour, respect, rank
<i>Niker shami</i>	A woman's second or subsequent husband
<i>Nirjaton</i>	Bad treatment. This may refer to beatings, harassment, oppression, torture, sexual abuse and rape. Non-specific term leaving interpretation opened. The worst can be imagined.
<i>Noshto meye</i>	A woman who has lost her virtue; the victim of a rape; prostitute
<i>Samaj</i>	Society, moral society

<i>Samajic niom</i>	Social and religious rules
<i>Shadhin</i>	Free, independent
<i>Shalish</i>	Local arbitration; a social system for the informal adjudication of minor disputes, both civil and criminal, by local notables.
<i>Seheri</i>	Food eaten before daybreak and the start of the fast during Ramadan
<i>Shirni</i>	Sweets
<i>Shomitis</i>	
<i>Sotitto</i>	Purity, chastity, honour
<b>Arabic words</b>	
<i>Aqama</i>	Work permit under the kafala system practised in Middle Eastern countries granted by the State to a kafeel or employer. The latter could be a private individual (domestic work) or a company (garment factory work).
<i>Habibi</i>	An intimate friend or “temporary” husband. The term refers to a relationship formed by migrant workers abroad. The couple shares living space and current costs but remits money to their respective families at home.
<i>Kafeel</i>	An employer; the sponsor of a migrant worker in the Middle East
<i>Khadamma</i>	A woman domestic worker, housemaid

## ► List of tables and figures

---

Table 1. Age at first migration by research site.....	22
Table 2. Age at first migration by destination .....	22
Table 3. Women’s occupations before migration .....	23
Table 4: Educational level by research site .....	24
Table 5. Marital status at first migration by site .....	24
Table 6: Marital status at last interview by site .....	24
Table 7. First-time migrant adolescent girls and marital status .....	28
Table 8. Number of migrations by research site .....	42
Table 9. Year of first migration and destination.....	43
Table 10. Types of visas at last migration by destination .....	43
Table 11. Types of visas at last migration by research site .....	44
Table 12. Reasons to migrate (multiple answers recorded) .....	46
Table 13. Destination of last migration and mean cost (all types of visas) .....	86
Table 14. No-cost migration by destination and number of times migrated (in per cent) .....	87
Table 15. Duration of migration, total income, mean income, and number of women not paid their due salary .....	87
Table 16. Control over income in four migration sites .....	88
Table 17. Level of education and bank account holders.....	89
Table 18. Marital status and bank account holders.....	89
Table 19. Number of migrations and bank account holders .....	89
Table 19. Costs covered with migrant women’s remittances (multiple answers recorded) .....	92
Table 20. Reported income loss .....	93
Table 21. Assets under husband and in-laws’ control by research site (multiple answers recorded)	93
Table 22. Investments and assets under migrant women’s control by marital status and research site (multiple answers recorded) .....	95
<b>Appendix 1</b>	
Table 1. Migration from Bangladesh and women’s share in total migration: 2000–2021 .....	113
<b>Figures</b>	
Figure 1. Sex-disaggregated data on labour migration from Bangladesh (2000–2021) .....	114



## ► Foreword

---

Despite significant public commentary, press coverage and civil society reports on migrant women in Bangladesh, very little is known about their own motivations and perspectives. Public narratives on migrant women usually present them as uneducated victims needing to be protected or educated in some way or another. Individual incidents of abuse are often used to characterize women's experience abroad, while their wider experience before, during and after migration is not known.

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to shed light on how women view their migration and work abroad. The findings challenge conventional narratives on labour migration of women and bring out important perspectives that invaluablely inform policymaking. This study is part of a wider series of other publications of the Work in Freedom Programme, including: *Migration and gender in Bangladesh: An irregular landscape*, *The invisible workers: Bangladeshi women in Oman* and others.

**Igor Bosc**

Chief Technical Adviser  
Work in Freedom programme  
Regional Office for Arab States



## ► Executive summary

---

The study analyses the case histories of 211 migrant women collected from five unions in five districts of Bangladesh, namely Brahmanbaria, Manikganj, Narayanganj, Patuakhali and Barguna. The qualitative research undertaken follows a survey that measured the patterns of cross-border labour migration, the incidences, histories and sex ratio of the migrants in these five contrasted unions. The survey found that women represented 15.7 per cent of the migrant population, ranging from 5.1 per cent in Brahmanbaria to 27.5 per cent in Barguna. The cases analyzed in this paper represents about 16 per cent of the migrant women identified in the survey.

Aiming to constitute a cohort as representative as possible, no particular emphasis was laid on women having experienced abuse, required assistance or achieved high success. The migrant women were identified in their communities, and those women who could be interviewed personally as they visited home or had completed their migration were prioritized. Most migrations were recent: 49 per cent of the women had migrated between 2016 and 2020. There were also veteran migrants with multiple migrations, the oldest occurring in 1996. Of the cohort, 16.5 per cent had migrated three or more times. Destinations were the countries of the Middle East, except two women who had migrated to Mauritius. At the last migration, 75 per cent of the women left on domestic worker visas, 15 per cent on garment factory visas, and the others on company, tourist and family visas. Whatever the type of visa, their purpose is to earn. Adolescent girls going to Dubai as nightclub dancers migrated with tourist visas.

The percentage of girls aged between 13 and 20 years at the onset of their first migration constitute 30.8 per cent of the cohort, a remarkably high percentage that contravenes the official rules about the minimum age for migration. In 2015, the minimum age for women's labour migration was established at 25. Never married or already divorced or separated, these adolescent girls migrated from their parents' homes and sent their remittances to their natal families. None of them had a personal

bank account. Most fathers expressed shame at a reversal of roles and promised to have their daughters married at the earliest, a pious wish not in their interest. The daughters, though, often preferred continuing to work abroad and did not envy their married friends serving their in-laws in their villages.

A little less than half of the migrant women of the cohort were married. The reasons for migration generally placed emphasis on family responsibilities, with the women's agency being expressed through the fulfilment of duties. Nonetheless, a desire for independence and personal happiness can be read in some case studies. "Light" motives such as flying on an airplane, buying jewellery and looking smart were mentioned mostly by adolescent girls. Women also migrated to pay off debts accumulated after a husband or son had a failed migration. Such migrations exploit not only the large difference in migration costs between women and men but also the women's sense of duty towards their families. These migrant women are paid back with words of praise, but they gather no personal wealth and are unable to pursue projects of their own. A sense of wifely duty is stronger in families with middle-class aspirations.

Spreading over two-and-a-half years, the research stands witness to history in the making. Households were visited several times, and informants interviewed at intervals with successive narratives constructing increasingly complex stories. One story relates how within the nine months between her return from one country and departure to another, one woman, unable to accept the restrictions imposed on her, stopped being a dutiful daughter, and took far-reaching decisions that changed the course of her life.

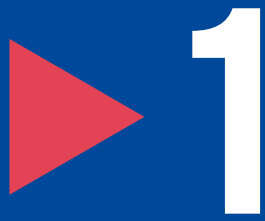
The report covers many issues including income, control over income and bank accounts. Quantitative data alternates with long quotes from the migrant women, family members, dalals and others. Translated from Bangla to English, these narratives not only provide facts but also express feelings and sentiments, which

are essential to the comprehension of migrant women's lives.

The research ends by teasing out the epithets in the title: rebels, victims, agents of change. Several women became rebels at some stage of their journey as they fought back, took risks and defied authority. The rebellion could follow an awareness of being victimized or not. Rebellious women made brave choices and challenged "traditions" in a way that would have been unthinkable had they stayed at home.

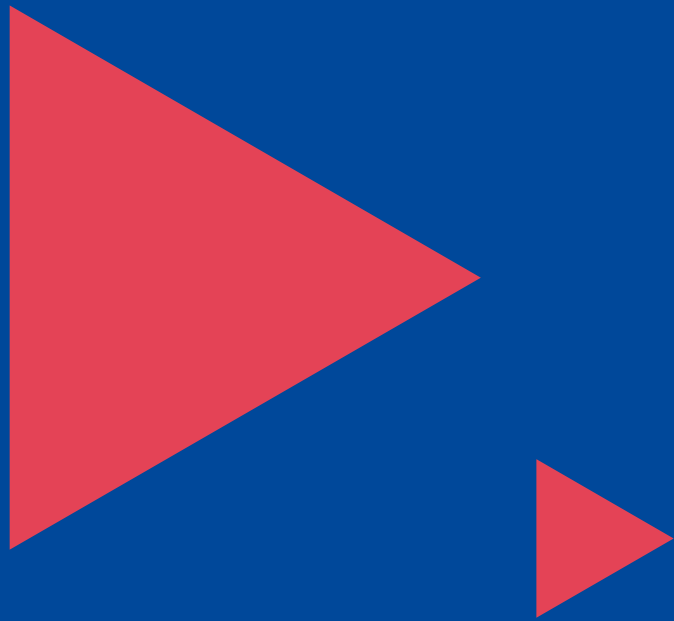
Victimhood and victimization are discussed from different angles: women who narrated a credible story of victimization, women who postured as victims expecting assistance, and women who categorically rejected the victim ethos. Most women in the cohort are situated in the third category. Finally, as agents of change, migrant women can act and take decisions within their natal and marital families, and within the conjugal pair (or triangle in the case of polygamous marriages). However, in other theatres, they stumble upon patriarchal institutions that they are powerless to change.





# Introduction

---



“The issue of female migration is intriguing. Why do women continue to migrate as domestic workers despite repeated incidences of rape, torture and even murder?”<sup>1</sup> Thus wrote a respected academic, expressing a view that is widely shared and broadcasted in Bangladeshi media. However, the question must be asked: who are the women migrating for humble jobs, notwithstanding the bad news they hear? How can one explain why many are willing to sign up, extend their contracts and repeat the experience two, three or more times? Are migrant women so desperate or ill-informed? Do they not know the risks? Or is the problem with (mis)representation and faulty reporting? The facts about women’s labour migration clearly require credible investigation, and the negative reporting also needs critical scrutiny. The economic benefits of women labour migration can hardly be denied. What are the risks then, and who defines them?

Women’s labour migration can be a divisive issue within families, even in communities where cross-border mobility is common.

*I studied in a madrasa, and I am a Muslim from birth. I have always known that women are made for the home and not for the outside world. My bad luck is to live in Chonpara. I cannot escape that shame.*

These are the words of a former madrasa student in his twenties who strongly objected to his illiterate mother migrating, and she had to give in to her “knowledgeable” son. However, later, when her married daughter confessed to major problems in her marriage, the mother discreetly arranged for her to migrate. The son could extend his authority over his wife who kept strict purdah, but he failed to control his mother and his (by then) divorced sister. Battles raged within the family. The mother, siding with her daughter, was eventually forced out of the family home. In a study conducted in 2009 (Blanchet 2009), it was found that fathers and brothers seldom sent their daughters and sisters to work abroad while the mothers, sisters and other female family members commonly facilitated labour migration for their female relatives. Beyond a clear socioeconomic demarcation, gender differences in the attractiveness of women’s labour migration for jobs such as domestic work is interesting to (re)consider.

The present study is based on the analysis of 211 case histories that document the personal and family circumstances that led girls and women in Bangladesh to migrate. They describe work experiences in various destinations, under different types of contracts, incomes and control over income, and overall outcomes of migration for the migrant and her family. These case histories place the migrant at the centre of the story. Rebels, victims, agents of change, the words aligned in the title, indicate the focus of the study while calling for a fresh perspective to challenge common assumptions and stereotypes.

The data were collected between November 2018 and July 2021. They capture the aftermath of the bilateral agreement signed between the Government of Bangladesh and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2015 through which 200,000 domestic workers were to be sent from Bangladesh over two years, and the migrant women would bear no costs of migration.

This agreement marked the opening of a new era with repercussions spreading to other countries of the Middle East as shown in our research. The Government of Bangladesh removed bottlenecks and positively encouraged women to migrate as domestic workers while other sectors, such as garment factory work, were already favoured. As a result, women’s labour migration increased in absolute terms and as a proportion of the migrant population. This is shown in table 1 in Appendix 1, and variations in labour flows necessarily reflect fluctuating markets and government policies. To these elements should be added gender regimes which impact government policies and which, in return, are impacted when more women enter the labour market and when gender roles are thus modified. The resulting social change is not appreciated by all, as shown in several case histories.

### 1.1. Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to provide in-depth qualitative data on migrant women, free of a priori judgment, and to follow up their migratory journeys as closely as possible without embellishment or pathos, recognizing their agency, choices and constraints. The sobering

<sup>1</sup> Dr Imran Matin, The Business Standard, 21 Nov. 2021.

title given to a discussion paper titled *Neither heroines, nor victims* (Gioli, Mahajan and Gurung 2018) published by UN Women on Nepali migrant women could be endorsed. It recognizes a toiling humanity where successes and failures punctuate life, and one seldom comes without the other.

Historically, men's individual border labour migration has been normalized and naturalized, women's migration being seen as exceptional. Embedded in family roles, women were (and still are) defined as belonging to the home (*meyera ghorer jinnish*). Deemed damaging to family honour, their moving away from home and across borders called for excuses such as poverty, widowhood, abandonment or family crisis. By contrast, men's presence in the home has been secondary, with their primary roles as earners and providers normally taking them away, including across borders if need be. Men's migration has caused no decentring and no moral panic. Even today, reports on labour migration need not mention the sex of the migrant because it is "naturally" assumed that they are men.

One purpose of this research is to revisit these gender constructions as well as the social ranking system that associates honour and class with a specific gender order. The authors wish to explore the tension between dominant gender ideologies and the reality of labour markets. By focusing on migrant women as workers and as earners while fulfilling (or not) their family obligations and by highlighting the wealth they produce and the consequences this has for them and their dependents, the distorting effects of various ideological constructions may be exposed. Thus, lower middle-class families that value honour construct the migration of their women as exceptional and temporary even as it lasts, hoping to restore a more honourable distribution of gender roles in the future, regardless of the conditions of labour markets.

Contesting ideological constructions standing as cultural hegemony is part of the political battle, and the authors situate their research in this line of thought. History cannot be reduced to only the economic. Women's labour migration may destabilize families and communities,

provoke resentment, anger, envy, and jealousy among those who defend hegemonic forms of masculinity, resulting in the smearing of migrant women's reputations, such as seeing them as women of bad virtue especially when they earn well. Women's labour migration could also open new horizons with revolutionary outcomes. But for this to happen, a new "cultural front" must be opened, and hegemonic representations of migrant women as immoral or miserably poor with no other choice but to migrate should be critically reviewed.<sup>2</sup> This is what we propose to do here.

## 1.2. Research methods, key concepts and analytical tools

This qualitative research is based on fieldwork which follows a survey that measured the incidences of women's and men's labour migration in five unions of five districts of Bangladesh: namely Brahmanbaria, Manikganj, Narayanganj, Patuakhali and Barguna (Blanchet and Biswas 2021). Granting that international labour migration is unequally spread out in the national territory and that men and women's participation adds more variations, the survey was designed to capture a range of configurations. The five unions within the five districts were selected for their contrasting features. The following criteria were considered:

- the importance of cross border migration in the local economy,
- the sex distribution of the migrants,
- the jobs available to women and men locally,
- the degree of tolerance towards female mobility in general, and
- the history of migration in these locations.

A population of 8,437 migrant workers was recorded in 125 villages, of which 15.7 per cent were women. While the sex ratio is close to the national average for the last five years, significant differences were found between unions, such as women representing 27.5 per cent in Arpangashia (Barguna) and 5.1 per cent in Majlishpur (Brahmanbaria).

The qualitative study is based on a cohort of 211 migrant girls and women from the five

<sup>2</sup> In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci has exposed the power of ideology, values and beliefs in reproducing class relationships and in concealing its contradictions. See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (2017)

surveyed districts, representing 16 per cent of those identified in the survey. In the qualitative study, 62.3 per cent of the migrants could be interviewed in face-to-face encounters against 3.9 per cent in the survey. Finding migrant women at home as they visited on holiday or when they returned to stay demanded time and patience, but the effort was worthwhile. Migrant women were far more explicit and generous in providing details than their family members, resulting in more reliable and significantly richer data. Several visits to the same household permitted the researchers to talk to different informants and to the same informant at different times, which complexified case histories. While the survey provided a snapshot, the qualitative research, which spreads over two-and-a-half years, observed and recorded history in the making.

The following sections clarify some key categories, concepts and analytical tools applied in the research.

#### *Women migrant workers*

This category includes any woman who has migrated abroad to work and to earn. Here, two clarifications are necessary. First, the word “woman” is used as a generic term without specifying the age, despite the fact that a good number of migrants were adolescent girls during their first migration. The particularities of these migrations are discussed in Chapter 3. Second, the category “worker” includes at least one occupation not officially recognized as such. Girls who migrate to Dubai on tourist visas to work in nightclubs are included in the study along domestic and garment factory workers as they qualify for the definitions given here.

#### *Selection of case histories and constitution of the sample*

In a study aiming to characterize a population, the sampling method is of critical importance. While no sample is ever perfect, it is important to be transparent about the way it is constituted. The 211 migrant women forming the cohort were identified while circulating in the communities of the five unions named in the previous section. They were not found in a shelter home or at an airport, and no selection was made on the basis that the women had experienced abuse or required assistance. This does not mean that researchers were indifferent and did not help the women seeking help to the limit of their

capacities, but there was no search for “victims”. The approach taken here differs from the way in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with budgets earmarked to assist migrant women who have suffered abuse, identify a target population, highlight problems and reach conclusions.

The survey identified “pockets” or clusters from where women had migrated for longer and in larger numbers than elsewhere. For practical reasons and because the field was so rich, more fieldwork was conducted in these pockets. In Chonpara (Narayanganj), for example, one finds families originating from different districts but sharing a history of landlessness and poverty. Women are habituated to going out of their homes to work and earn. Another pocket is Sayasta (Manikgonj), which has a history of poor road communications and agricultural land that regularly floods, resulting in hardship and food insecurity. These two pockets are characterized by early migration and greater social acceptance of women’s cross-border labour migration. In these two sites, the availability of returnees and the complexity of their stories influenced the selection of cases. In Majlishpur (Brahmanbaria), where the number of female migrants is low and the migration more recent, all migrant households where a female migrant worker could be found were included. The same applied in Barguna/Patuakhali.

The 211 case histories are of unequal length and richness, but they were all found to be plausible and consistent. The narratives that appeared doubtful, or that repeated standard, depersonalized versions of events, were rejected for their lack of credibility in the eyes of the researchers.

In terms of numbers, 55 (26.2 per cent) case histories were recorded from the Majlishpur union, Brahmanbaria district; 63 (29.9 per cent) from the Sayasta union, Singair Upazila, Manikganj district; 47 (22.3 per cent) from the Chonpara/Kayetpara union, Rupganj Upazila, Narayanganj district; 22 (10.4 per cent) from the Chotobighai union, Patuakhali district; and 26 (12.3 per cent) from the Arpangashia union, Barguna district. To simplify the presentation, Barguna and Patuakhali districts have been merged, reducing the number of sites to four.

### *Case history as a research format*

Case histories place the migrant woman at the centre of the story while including family members, neighbours and other actors with their respective versions. Some information, such as age, educational level, marital status, family composition, rank in the family, age at first migration, motivation to migrate, migration history, outcomes, etc. were collected systematically to facilitate the analysis of quantifiable data. The format allows an openness with the possibility to expand on certain themes and complement the initial narrative(s) on successive visits. The data can be used and reused as the interviews are dated and the name of the researcher who collected each interview is recorded.

Other methods were necessary to situate the migrant household in the wider social environment and to obtain an understanding of mechanisms, for example, of the dispensation of justice at the local *shalish*, in tracing recruitment networks or in following migration policies at the national level.

### *Language, culture and geography*

Fieldwork was conducted in Bangla, with researchers and informants sharing the same language and Bengali culture, even if they belonged to different social classes and originated from different districts. The translation of case histories from Bangla to English was done via oral communications (via Skype during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdowns) between the researchers and the principal investigator. This was a time-consuming exercise, during which questions were raised, gaps and inconsistencies identified, and some analysis initiated. Migration entails journeying across cultures and borders and yet, this research is very much anchored in Bangladesh's territory.

During the interviews, migrant women described their environments in destination countries, and these were extremely varied. A garment factory in Jordan, a dance bar in Dubai, or the home of an employer in Saudi Arabia or Lebanon have little in common. For live-in domestic workers, which is the most common occupation in the cohort, knowledge of the geography in the destination was often rudimentary. Many women ignored the name of the city, town, or village where they resided, or they described the place in

references that were difficult to follow. Domestic workers know the interiors of homes, and some of them are keen observers of the lifestyles of their employer's families, knowledge that serves them well and is also valuable for this study. The researchers discovered unfamiliar environments through the migrants' eyes, which were virtually impossible to discover through sociological or other literature.

The principal researcher had conducted fieldwork in Lebanon, Jordan and Oman between 2018 and 2020, and this was useful to understand some aspects of the work culture, geography, and working of the *kafala* system in these countries. Two women met in Jordan and in Oman were later followed after returning to Bangladesh (see Chapter 7).

### *History in the making*

Where several visits were made to a migrant household and several interviews conducted with different actors, the research often captured a complex history in the making. In times of crisis, when different proponents provided different versions of events, argued with different logics, and emotion reached a crescendo, clashing interests were witnessed first-hand. Chapter 7 describes such dramatic events unfolding over a period of nine months between a woman's arrival from Jordan and her departure for Saudi Arabia. Other sections describe other major crises, for example, when a wife rushed home after hearing that her husband had taken a second wife (section 9.1). On such occasions, women shared their intimate thoughts and struggles and sometimes their divided loyalties. Rebels were more likely to be revealed in these situations of conflict.

Long migration trajectories are often marked by a succession of events, good and bad employers, reversal of fortune, and changing family circumstances. Short migration could be only the beginning of a long road, raising the question of how to make a "final" assessment on the overall success or failure of migration. Capturing history in the making questions research that presents a flat picture, simple truths, definite answers and confidently pronounces the end of the story when the end chapter has not been enacted and therefore cannot be written.

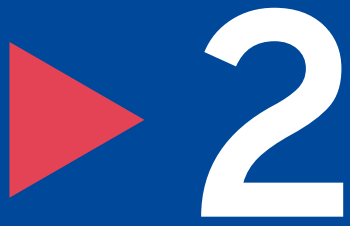
### 1.3. Presentation of the report

The report comprises 12 chapters of unequal lengths where tables alternate with case histories. Abundant use has been made of narratives attributed to individuals with pseudonyms as names have been changed. The authors hope the numerous names – 45 women and 6 men – will not confuse the reader.

Chapter 2 introduces the 211 case histories on which the report is based, giving the age, educational level and marital status of the migrant women. Chapter 3 discusses the labour migration of adolescent girls. It introduces several of the themes of the study and could be read as a chapter on its own. The study found that nearly one third (30.8 per cent) of the migrants were aged between 13 and 20 years at the onset of their first migration. Chapter 4 presents tables on destinations, number of migrations per women and types of visas. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the alleged reasons for women to migrate and how these may change over the course of a migration career. Movement and complexity over time are illustrated through several case histories. Chapter 7 is a rich account

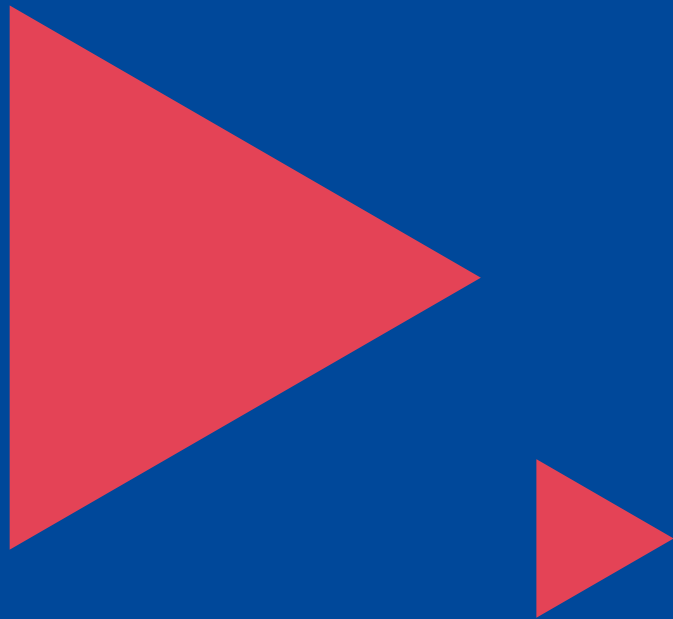
of the dramatic events unfolding during the nine months separating a woman's return from Jordan and her departure for Saudi Arabia, her claim for freedoms and the noisy clash that ensued. Garment factory workers who represent 15 per cent of the cohort are discussed in Chapter 8.

The polygamous husbands of migrant women, a problem with which several women battled, are exposed in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 assesses the economic benefits and losses of migration with tables. It includes a detailed overview of bank accounts, the reasons for which women open or do not open a bank account and the security it offers. Chapter 11 discusses the recurrent problems that domestic workers face in the employer's home, including inadequate food, restrictions on the use of a mobile phone, delayed salaries, and sexual and other abuse. It briefly describes three women with domestic visas who were reportedly sent to a brothel and how they were rescued. Such problem regularly highlighted in the media here represent less than 2 per cent of the cohort. Chapter 12 concludes and ends with recommendations.



## Who are the migrant women?

---





## 2.1. Age

Tables 1 and 2 provide a breakdown of the age of the migrants in the cohort when they first migrated by research site and by destination. One is immediately struck by the large number of migrants who were adolescents. Girls aged between 13 and 17 years of age make up nearly 20 per cent, and girls between 18 and 20 years represent nearly 11 per cent of the migrants. Table 1 shows significant differences between research sites, with Manikganj and Brahmanbaria having the highest percentages of first-time migrants between the ages of 13–17 at 27 and 28.6 per cent respectively. If one considers first-time migrants between the ages of 13–20 years, they represent 46 per cent totally, with 40 per cent for Manikganj and Brahmanbaria. These figures may be compared with Narayanganj and Patuakhali-Barguna where the 13–17 age group accounts for 10.6 and 8.7 per cent respectively, and the 13–20 age group accounts 15 per cent in both sites.

Such differences between sites may be explained by the proximity of labour markets offering jobs to adolescent girls who then delay migration. Narayanganj has many garment factories, while Patuakhali-Barguna has a pattern of family migration to urban centres (Dhaka, Chattogram) which gives adolescent girls access to garment factories. Where such work is available, migration abroad tends to occur at a later age. Other factors may include the presence of recruiters (*dalals*) who actively target needy families with adolescent girls in some locations and the variable attitudes towards adolescent girls' work participation outside the home.

In relation to the total number of “women” migrating to a particular country, table 2 shows that Jordan is the destination of choice with the highest number of girls migrating between the ages of 13–20 for the first time, followed by Lebanon and Saudi Arabia; the percentages are 36.8, 33.3 and 23.3 per cent respectively.

► **Table 1. Age at first migration by research site**

Age range (in years)	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	%
13–17	15	18	5	4	42	19.9
18–20	7	11	2	3	23	10.9
21–25	15	22	20	12	69	32.7
26–30	9	6	7	11	33	15.6
31–35	6	3	10	11	30	14.2
36–40	1	3	2	1	7	3.3
41–45	2	0	1	3	6	2.8
46 and above	0	0	0	1	1	0.5
<b>Total</b>	55	63	47	46	211	100.0
<b>%</b>	26.1	29.9	22.3	21.8	100.0	

Source: Authors' analysis.

► **Table 2. Age at first migration by destination**

Destination	13–20 yrs	21–25 yrs	26–30 yrs	31–35 yrs	36–40 yrs	41 yrs and above	Total	%
Saudi Arabia	14	21	10	11	1	3	60	28.4
Jordan	21	19	6	11	0	0	57	27.0
Lebanon	12	17	4	1	1	1	36	17.1
UAE/Dubai	13	6	3	3	2	1	28	13.3
Oman	2	1	8	4	2	1	18	8.5
Kuwait	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	1.9



Destination	13–20 yrs	21–25 yrs	26–30 yrs	31–35 yrs	36–40 yrs	41 yrs and above	Total	%
Bahrain	2	2	0	0	0	0	4	1.9
Qatar	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0.9
Mauritius	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0.9
<b>Total</b>	65	69	33	30	7	7	211	100.0
%	30.8	32.7	15.6	14.2	3.3	3.3		100.0

Source: Authors' analysis.

Table 3 shows the migrants' occupations prior to migration and confirms the importance of factory work among the Narayanganj and Patuakhali–Barguna migrants. After the age

of 30, we see few women being enterprising enough to attempt a first migration in Manikganj, but a significant number do so from Patuakhali–Barguna.

► **Table 3. Women's occupations before migration**

Occupations	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	%
Housewife/Homemaker	28	29	5	13	75	35.5
Garment /Textile worker	4	6	28	22	60	28.4
Unemployed	8	10	2	2	22	10.4
Domestic worker	7	5	1	4	17	8.1
Student	5	5	1	1	12	5.7
Other (small) factory worker	0	0	7	0	7	3.3
Home based tailor	1	3	1	0	5	2.4
Day labour	0	2	1	1	4	1.9
Farmer on own land or on leased land	0	3	0	1	4	1.9
Employed on rural road construction project	0	0	0	1	1	0.5
Vegetable street vendor	0	0	1	0	1	0.5
Small shop owner	1	0	0	1	2	0.9
Kindergarten teacher/ Tutor	1	0	0	0	1	0.5
<b>Total</b>	55	63	47	46	211	100.0

Source: Authors' analysis.

## 2.2. Educational level

The low level of education recorded among migrant girls and women is in keeping with findings from previous studies and is no surprise. Table 4 shows that a quarter of the migrants

never attended school, while 52.6 per cent did not go beyond Class 5. The younger generation is more likely to have studied up to Class 5, while the unschooled are mostly older women.

► Table 4: Educational level by research site

Education Level	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	%
No schooling	13	21	12	8	52	24.6
Up to primary	29	29	26	27	111	52.6
Class 6–8	8	10	6	5	29	13.7
Class 9–10	5	2	2	4	13	6.2
SSC	0	1	1	2	4	1.9
HSC	0	0	0	0	0	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Authors' analysis.

### 2.3. Marital status

Women's labour migration bears a complex and dynamic relationship with marital status that will be illustrated below. Here we present marital status at the first migration (table 5) and marital

status at the last interview (table 6). The number of years between these two moments in time differs highly among migrants, ranging from a few months to 22 years.

► Table 5. Marital status at first migration by site

Marital Status	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	%
Married	20	32	25	19	96	45.5
Unmarried	14	18	5	6	43	20.4
Divorced	12	8	6	8	34	16.1
Separated	3	2	8	4	17	8.1
Uncertain	4	1	2	3	10	4.7
Widow	2	2	0	5	9	4.3
Abandoned	0	0	1	1	2	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Authors' analysis.

► Table 6: Marital status at last interview by site

	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	%
Married	18	37	23	21	99	46.9
Unmarried	12	8	5	5	30	14.2
Widow	3	2	0	3	8	3.8
Divorced	13	7	10	10	40	19.0
Separated	4	7	6	1	18	8.5
Hanging and abandoned	5	2	3	6	16	7.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>100.0</b>

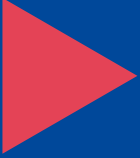
Source: Authors' analysis.

The relatively high number of unmarried girls in table 5 reflects the importance of adolescent girls among migrants. Their percentage reduces from 20.4 at the first migration to 14.2 per cent at the last interview. The slight increase in the percentage of married women, from 45.5 to 46.9 per cent, is likely to come from this source. On the other hand, the number of divorced and separated women and those with uncertain marriage outcomes increases, suggesting that women's labour migration, on the whole, is more likely to unsettle than to consolidate marriages. Married women migrate for different reasons. It could be to cope with the poverty of the household, to get away from a problematic husband, or for other reasons that will be discussed later in the paper. However, from the tables 1–5, interesting differences between migration sites can be observed. The most conservative area where women's labour migration is frowned upon (Brahmanbaria) has

the lowest percentage of migrants who are married, whereas the more tolerant environment (Manikganj) has the highest proportion.

The survey conducted in 2020 in the same sites recorded a much higher percentage of women migrant workers who were married: 63 per cent compared to about 46 per cent in this qualitative study, marking a difference of 17 points. How can we explain such large difference? The survey collected data over a large population, and family members were often interviewed in the absence of the migrant. Considering that divorce, separation or abandonment are not matters of pride, family members are likely to under-report them. The qualitative study is more in-depth, covers more issues, is spread out over a longer period and, most importantly, the migrant women themselves were interviewed in two thirds of the cases.

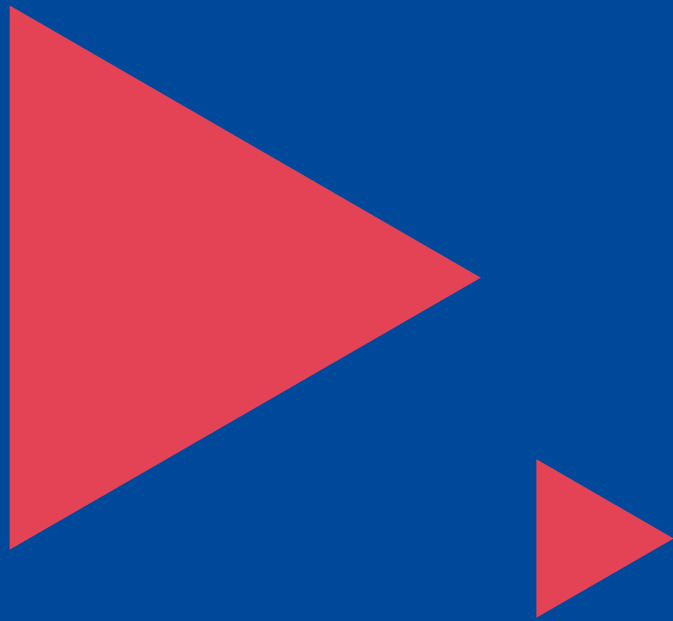




# 3

## Work migration and adolescent girls

---



The numerical importance and the specificity of adolescent girls' migration deserve specific attention.<sup>3</sup> Age is difficult to determine with exactitude. Yet, a substantial number of "women" were undoubtedly very young when they first migrated to Oman, Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Dubai. Taslima was a student in Class 8 when she left for Jordan in 2013. When asked how old she was, she replied, "Ask my mother." The mother gave a range – 14–15 years – as is often the case. One could write either of these numbers but considering her school level, the field worker wrote that she was 14 years old. If the actual age of the migrant girl is somewhat imprecise, her passport gave her age as 25, which is the minimum age legally required for women domestic workers in the bilateral agreement signed between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia in 2015. Despite allowing a degree of imprecision in the recorded ages, the percentage of underage girls among first-time women migrants remains very high, with the age group 13–20 years constituting 30.8 per cent of the cohort. The youngest age recorded at a first migration was 13 years.

### 3.1. Benefits to the natal family

The younger a daughter is when she migrates, the more she is likely to be unmarried and the more likely it is for her natal family to benefit from her income. Marriage is likely to end this income. The obligation for parents to give a daughter in marriage (*biye dawa*) is binding even when parents have difficulties covering marriage costs. The prospect of a daughter earning abroad lightens this burden and may justify her migration.

Table 5 showed the marital status of first-time migrants by site, and Brahmanbaria and Manikganj have the largest percentage of unmarried (never married) girls, nearly all of whom were adolescent girls.

The relationship between being young and unmarried is made more explicit in table 7. One can see that in the age group 13–17, three fourths of the girls never married. In the age group 18–20 years, a few girls remained unmarried, but of the 19 ever-married girls, 8 were divorced, separated, abandoned, or their marriage was hanging with an uncertain outcome. These girls had returned to their parents, and they had all migrated from their parental homes.

Living off an unmarried daughter's income is a matter of shame for most parents, especially the fathers. Met casually, one father, Mogor Ali, denied that three of his unmarried daughters worked abroad and talked about his son instead (whose migration had failed while the daughters' migrations were an economic success). To find out about the migration of unmarried daughters required more probing. We shall come back to this issue.

Next, five case histories are discussed, illustrating the different scenarios for adolescent girls who have migrated or who intend to migrate for domestic work. In these cases, a generational shift is observed with adolescent girls manifesting ambitions of accomplishment through migration, even as parents entertain more "traditional" views on the need to arrange their marriages while, at the same time, benefiting from their remittances with some

► Table 7. First-time migrant adolescent girls and marital status

Age range (in years)	Unmarried (never married)							Total
	Married	Divorced	Separated	Abandoned	Uncertain	Widow		
13–17	5	32	2	2	-	-	1	42
18–20	11	4	4	1	1	2	-	23
13–20	16	36	6	3	1	2	1	63
Total		55	63	47	46	211		100

Source: Authors' analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Nicoletta Del Franco is one of the few researchers who studied adolescent girls' work migration in Bangladesh. Although her focus is mostly on internal migration, with Bengali girls working in the garment industry and Garo girls working in beauty parlors, her analysis of agency, mobility and life choices raises questions relevant to the present study. See Grabska, de Regt and Del Franco (2019) *Time to look at girls: migrants in Bangladesh and Ethiopia* - Allegra.

uneasiness. The last case concerns a girl who was preparing to migrate but could not proceed as she was the victim of rape and to restore family honour, her family married her to her rapist. The in-laws gained the free labour of a wife with the right to confine her, and her migration plans were postponed. Finally, the cases of three adolescent girls who migrated to Dubai with tourist visas to work in dance bars are discussed. Taken together, these case histories illustrate some of the complex questions raised about adolescent labour migration while introducing more general themes addressed later in the study, such as reasons to migrate, control over income and investment in productive assets.

### 3.2. Convincing a recalcitrant father: Sakiba

Sakiba<sup>4</sup> is from a village in Majlিশpur (Brahmanbaria) located in the *haor*, a lowland that remains flooded for a good part of the year. She was 15 years old when she migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2018. Being the eldest of six siblings, five sisters and a brother, she wanted to do something to help her poor father. After visiting her aunt in Bijoy Nagar (a neighbouring subdistrict) and hearing about girls migrating abroad, she wanted to do the same. Her mother, interviewed in 2021, three years after Sakiba's departure for Saudi Arabia, narrated the story. Sakiba argued with her father, who first sternly opposed the idea of migration:

*You took me out of school because you could not afford the cost. You did the same with my younger sister. We can hardly feed ourselves. You should allow me to go abroad and earn.*

The Bijoy Nagar aunt was called to convince the parents. She told the father:

*Your situation can only get worse if you carry on like this. There is no cost to be borne for the girl's migration, only the cost of the passport. If Sakiba goes through my relative, she will not even have to pay for the passport. He will see to everything. This is a real chance. Don't let it go. Now, you don't have the money to arrange for her to be married. You stopped her schooling, and she is doing nothing sitting at home. There is no benefit in this. You should send her abroad. With her earning,*

*you can live better, and you can also save for her marriage.*

Sakiba's father objected saying that people would speak badly of him for living off his daughter's earnings. The aunt retorted that he should tell people he knew nothing about the decision and that his daughter had arranged everything with her aunt, informing only her mother. And this was the course followed. The *dalai* collected Sakiba for her night flight to Dhaka after the father left home early one morning. Sakiba was the first girl to migrate from her village.

The mother said that Sakiba would stay another year, and they would arrange for her to be married when she came home. She conceded that the family had a much better standard of living since Sakiba had migrated. Her two younger sisters were back at school, and Sakiba covered these costs and much more. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the family could manage without her income. The parents of unmarried migrant girls commonly declare their intention to arrange a marriage soon after the girls return, recalling that they have not forsaken their duty.

Present at the interview, the father did not hide his embarrassment. Interestingly, his initial objection had referred to the damage his daughter's migration would cause to his reputation and not to the risks such young girl would be exposed to. While not all 15 year olds are deemed capable of coping with the challenges of cross-border migration, in this case, Sakiba's mother, the aunt and Sakiba herself felt confident that she had that ability. Soon after Sakiba left, the father opened a bank account in his name, and this is where Sakiba sends her income, outwardly safeguarding his role as family provider. No one else in the family ever held a bank account. Sakiba received a monthly salary of 800 Saudi Arabian riyals (18,000 Bangladeshi takas) for the first two years and 1,000 riyals (22,600 takas) thereafter. There was no cost for her migration. The benefits to this poor family have been considerable.

### 3.3. A short marriage and return to parents: Ruma

Families are well aware that the day a daughter is married, any decision to migrate will not be theirs, and that should she migrate, the income

4 All the names used in this report are pseudonyms.

will go to her in-laws. But early marriages are often volatile and the outcome uncertain. Ruma migrated to Jordan at the age of 14. When she returned home two years later, her parents arranged for her to be married. The mother explained:

*We thought she would stay with her husband and would not migrate again. But within two months of her marriage, Ruma contacted the dalal and left for Saudi Arabia. She did not like her husband, who was an addict and did not work. She sent her money to me as she did the first time. I reimbursed the loan I took for her marriage (50,000 takas as dowry and 50,000 takas for the wedding reception). Ruma told me not to give any money to her husband. He used to come and ask for money, but I did not let him have any.*

Ruma divorced her husband after she returned from her second migration. The parents had fulfilled their duty and the pressure on them reduced, while the money they spent for Ruma's wedding was more than compensated by the earnings from her second migration. Ruma is now a young divorcee. With the possibility to work and earn still open, parents readily welcome a married daughter whose marriage is in difficulty, while young wives leave a husband they do not appreciate more quickly. If the status of a divorcee has a negative bearing at home, it has none on the labour market abroad.

### 3.4. Becoming an adult in Lebanon: Sonia

Sonia was sent to Lebanon in 2011 at the age of 14. Her elder sister Parul joined her later, and both lived together in Al Basta, a neighbourhood of Beirut. Parul visited Bangladesh in 2018 and she narrated Sonia's story. Their father was also interviewed several times.

Sonia's elder sister, Parul (interviewed on 24 October 2018) said:

*My sister Sonia is three years younger than me, and she has been in Lebanon for seven years. She is staying illegally, working part-time for several households and earning very well. She was married at the age of 13 to a boy from our village. That boy is in Oman now. Her husband sent her to Lebanon on a domestic worker visa, but the employer was not good. He made dirty propositions to her, she got scared and she ran away. She really*

*fell into trouble then. She stayed here and there with different people. At one point, a Bangladeshi boy living near Sabra gave her shelter. That boy stayed with us when I first went to Lebanon. Later, with the help of a Madam in Al Basta, we moved to a little room that costs \$200. We do not pay that amount because Sonia cleans her house in exchange for the room.*

*Madam is a very good person. She is a college teacher and a widow. She has two sons, one working in Abu Dhabi and the other in the USA. There is no shame in saying that Sonia lived with a boy. She was in a difficult situation, and he helped her. Sonia is still friends with him but presently, there is no man living with us. My sister is not interested in visiting home. She says she will stay in Lebanon as long as she can. She could return home if there was an amnesty. Otherwise, she would have to pay a large fine. But even if there was an amnesty, I am not sure she would come back. She enjoys life there ... I can say my sister brought prosperity to my parents. She paid 500,000 takas to build two houses and 300,000 takas to lease the land that my father cultivates. She paid for my mother's heart operation ... I think my sister Sonia is very clever and more intelligent than me. Working abroad has opened her eyes and broadened her mind.*

Sonia's father (interviewed on 3 February 2019) said:

*I am not a rich man. I worked hard and I arranged good marriages for my two daughters. I never thought of sending them abroad and living off their earnings... Sonia left when she was very young. I did not send her... She had not been married even a year when her husband and in-laws sent her abroad on a domestic worker visa. However, she did not go to a good home. Sonia did not understand the language, and she was too young. They maltreated her and within four months, she ran away. For more than a year, we had no news of her. I contacted people we knew in Lebanon, but they could not tell us where she was. Then, one day, she phoned someone in the village, and we renewed contact. My daughter had a very hard time. After running away, she sought shelter with different people. After hearing her story, I did not want her to ever return to her in-laws.*



*They are greedy people... they just wanted to benefit from her income. I gave my daughter in marriage, and it was their responsibility to look after her. But they failed to do so. I sent a divorce form to Sonia, and she signed it. The husband has not signed it yet (the people in the village do not know that the couple is divorced).*

*After running away from her employer, a Bangladeshi boy helped her. I told her she could marry him if she wanted, but she said she was not thinking of marriage. She likes living in Lebanon and wants to stay there for as long as she can ... my daughter is a good singer [the father himself sings "Boyati gan"]. On her days off, she enjoys herself. She tells us not to worry about her ... when Sonia returns, I will arrange her marriage with a good party. I have saved money in the bank for her.*

In the father's eyes, the in-laws' decision to send a young wife abroad was immoral. He had performed the *kanyadan*,<sup>5</sup> and they were bound to protect the gift they had received. Even though he has benefited from his daughter's migration, he has no feeling of shame and puts all blame on the in-laws. Interestingly, he did not question giving his 13-year-old daughter in marriage to a man 10 years older, a migrant worker who took six months leave to marry before returning abroad. The father said there was nothing unusual about such marriages in his locality.

It may be recalled that Bangladesh ratified the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, after which NGOs and the media conducted vigorous campaigns to redefine the term "child" and to combat early marriage. The father could not have ignored these messages even if, in 2010, a judicial pursuit was unlikely. In Bangladesh, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017, that fixed the legal age of marriage at 18 for girls and 21 for boys, imposes penalties for early marriage but

allows "exceptions" and "special circumstances" rendering the enforcement of the law largely ineffective.<sup>6</sup> The ingenuity with which loopholes are exploited to continue marrying underage girls bears comparison with the methods developed to bypass the minimum age for women labour migration which, in 2011, was 35 years.

As the present study shows, sending girls who are considerably below the regulatory age abroad has been widely practiced. It goes unnoticed until tragic accidents occur. Such a case took place in 2020, when Umme Kulsum, a 14-year-old girl from Nasirnagar (Brahmanbaria) was sent to Saudi Arabia on a domestic worker visa and her dead body was repatriated 18 months later. The girl died in hospital following injuries she had suffered at the hands of her employer.<sup>7</sup> The shocking event, widely commented on in the media, caused an outcry, and an inquiry followed. An accusation of trafficking was filed against the agency that sent her for "knowingly sending a minor girl to be exploited."

Since the girl was sent on a domestic worker visa, the accusation is compounded with the girl being a minor (below the age 18) and domestic work as exploitative issues. We shall not debate whether this tragic event qualifies as a case of "trafficking". While the Saudi employer is undoubtedly the first culprit, the list of those who made the migration of the 14-year-old girl possible implicates more than the agency. It would be useful to unpack a system that enables such migration for monetary gains and does not stop at the denunciation of "modern-day slavery" as done by the media.

In Sonia's case, her husband and the in-laws did not reap monetary benefits for sending a 14-year-old girl abroad as it spelled the end of the marriage – even if the husband has not signed the divorce letter. The day Sonia returns, the in-laws declared they would file a complaint against

5 It should be specified here that the gift of a daughter to another line (*kanyadan*) had – and still has – a sacred dimension among Bengalis. More explicit among Hindus, the notion is not absent among Muslims. Although Islam allows divorce and remarriage, different words are used to refer to a woman's first husband (*biyer shami*) and subsequent unions (*niker shami*). It is said that a woman has only one *biyer shami*. Considering the instability of marriage in modern-day Bangladesh, and among migrant workers in particular, the sacrality and irreversibility of *biye* (as opposed to *nikah* which is regulated by a contract that may be terminated) may have weakened, but the difference is still alive and is recalled in some of the migrant women stories. We shall come back on the commitment – and frustrations – of the *biyer bou*.

6 <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/review-effectiveness-new-legal-regime-prevent-child-marriages-bangladesh-call-law>

7 <https://www.thedailystar.net/editorial/news/gruesome-torture-and-death-child-migrant-worker-1964653>

Sonia's father for appropriating remittances they were entitled to since the girl had been "given" in marriage and had left from their home. How such an issue would be handled at the local arbitration (*shalish*) level would be interesting to follow.

Sonia's sister was quite explicit about the reason Sonia ran away from her first employer. She was clearly referring to sexual harassment. The employer could not force her, she said, as Sonia escaped. One can only imagine how the girl survived thereafter. Girls who run away usually hide and change their name to make sure the employer will not find them. This could explain why family efforts to trace her were unsuccessful.

Finally, the remarkable ease with which the father, relatives and neighbours accepted the relationship Sonia shared with the boy who gave her shelter deserves comment. The word "*Habibi*" was not used even if the relationship fits the label. *Habibi* relationships have been described among migrant women in Lebanon, Jordan and Oman (Blanchet 2019, 2020). Such couples live together and share current expenses, while both partners work and send remittances to their respective families. The relationship generally is not announced to their families back home, but it is an open secret among the migrants.

*Habibi* relationships are more egalitarian than marriages. Women who officially marry abroad generally hand over their income to their husband and stop helping their natal families. As documented in this study, the in-laws' acceptance of the wife largely depends on the generosity she manifests towards them. Sonia was not interested in marriage. She made her natal family her main beneficiary. The boy who was once her companion is now a good friend, showing that *habibi* arrangements may be terminated at the partners' convenience.

In 2018, when the first interviews were taken, Sonia appeared a successful migrant. This was before Lebanon fell into repetitive and endless crisis. In March 2021, at the last interview held with the parents, Sonia still had a few faithful customers and earned enough to cover her needs but could not send any money home.

In summation, Sonia has been off government radars for several years. Nonetheless, through her remittances over the years, she has positively contributed to the Bangladeshi economy, her father made wise investments, and her family

at home lives in greater comfort. On a personal level, she has learned to cope with uncertainty, managing the pitfalls and the opportunities of living abroad as an undocumented migrant worker for 11 years. According to her family, Sonia flourished in Lebanon and partly turned her back on Bangladesh, a country she has no wish to return to but that she will have to re-enter one day. The ups and downs of Sonia's long migratory journey leads one to interrogate who is to judge the success of a migration, at what stage and according to which criteria? Clearly, there are no simple answers.

### 3.5. Endorsing the role of family head: Sharmeen

Sharmeen migrated to Saudi Arabia at the age of 16 and returned two-and-a-half years later. Bright, articulate and good-looking, Sharmeen's style of dressing is "modern" and clearly stands out in her conservative community in Majlispur, Brahmanbaria. She was interviewed two months after her return in October 2020 and five months later again as she was preparing to go back to her former employer. Her mother and younger sister were also interviewed. At the first meeting, Sharmeen was angry. The considerable amount of money she sent home had vanished. How could her family be so careless? Her mother (interviewed 27 October 2020) explained:

*Sharmeen has an older brother, a younger sister and two more brothers. A few women migrated from this village, but many more did so from Nasirnagar where I come from. I contacted a family that sent two of their daughters abroad ... what could we do? My husband [a rickshaw puller] was in poor health. We have no land, and we were struggling. We had arranged Sharmeen's marriage, but she walked away from the husband within a few days, filing for divorce without informing us. The money borrowed for her marriage was lost. When I suggested migration, Sharmeen at first did not agree to go, but later she accepted it. She earned very well abroad, but we were unable to save that money.*

The 900,000 takas declared as Sharmeen's earnings appear somewhat exaggerated as her monthly salary was 1,000 riyals the first 6 months and 1,200 riyals for the next 24 months, adding to about 750,000 takas. Even with the smaller amount, it can be said that Sharmeen earned

very well. The mother described how the money was spent:

*My eldest son had an affair with a migrant man's wife and the family of the wronged husband filed a court case against him. We had to spend 250,000 takas to get him out of trouble. After this, village people did not believe that my son would stay away from the married women, so we arranged his marriage with another village girl. That wife gave birth, but she still lives at her parents. My son used to work in the brick fields, but now he does not work and just wastes his time. I cannot bring his wife home as it would be one more mouth to feed. But I cannot leave her too long at her father's home either because they could file a case against us.*

*Another drama occurred when Sharmeen's younger sister went to Dhaka to get her passport made [the family had planned to send her abroad as well]. At the passport office, she met someone, and she never returned ... We looked for her and found her with the man who works at the passport office. The police arrested them both, and they were sent to Brahmanbaria Jail. This is a serious case for the man who may be accused of trafficking a minor girl. In the end, both families agreed to a compromise. They were married in the police station OC office and the kabin was fixed at 400,000 takas [a high amount that the husband will have to pay if he divorces his wife]. We lost the income my second daughter could have earned had she migrated. On the other hand, we were relieved that she married an educated boy with a job. We spent 100,000 takas to solve this problem. Sharmeen's sister is now the mother of a child. More money was spent on the house we put up and the operation I had ... In the end, we purchased a motorized rickshaw that my 14-year-old son drives.*

The motorized rickshaw is the only income-producing asset acquired with Sharmeen's money. Sharmeen (interviewed 27 October 2020) presented her own version of her migration.

*At first, hearing all the stories of abuse, I was afraid to migrate. But my family was in great difficulty. With my few years of schooling [Class 6], I knew there was not much I could do here ... I have good brains, why not try migrating. I was confident in my ability to stick it out ... Mother spent 30,000 takas*

*for my marriage, but nothing was spent for my migration. The dalal covered the cost of the passport and training. Not only that, I demanded an advance of 50,000 takas because my mother needed an operation, and he gave it to me. In Saudi Arabia, I was in Dammam. I stayed a month in the first household. But there was too many children and too much work. I asked the agency for another home. They sent me to a rural area. The family had chicken and goats. The toilet was outside. The house was filthy. There was no lock on the door of my room. The following day, I asked to be taken back to the agency. Finally, I met my third employer. There were many candidates at the agency, and he selected me... I said I will go with you but before I must be paid for the work I did in the first household. The agency people asked why the employer had not paid me. I said I did not know about this. What I knew is that I worked hard and unless I get paid, I will not go anywhere... no other woman had talked to them that way.*

*The third employer gave me the money ... He had a wife and four children, but I did not work for them. I worked for his mother who lived on the ground floor with three unmarried sons while my employer lived on the second floor... My boss' father lived elsewhere with his second wife. He was elderly and could not walk by himself. Yet, he had married a girl my age. In that country, women do not want a husband. They want a house, a car, and money ... I learned to cook their food very quickly. My boss' children used to come downstairs and create havoc ... I performed what was my work, but I made it clear that I would not do what I was not supposed to do. They were satisfied with my work. A few days after I started work, I got very sick and was hospitalized for eight days. Their hospitals may be "hi-fi", but the healthcare is not ... The food was bad, yet I forced myself to eat to regain my strength. I had to stick it out. After two attempts, I finally got a good family, and I could not spoil that chance ... Life abroad is not easy. One must understand quickly what the employer wants. Many women say they were not paid, or they struggled with the food. The real problem is that they did not work to the satisfaction of the employer. Abroad, everything is different, and it is for us to adjust. Older women do*

*not adjust as easily as girls my age. The most important is to learn the language and do it fast. Otherwise, you cannot understand what they want from you. It took me a month to understand sufficiently to be able to do my work. I am not thinking of marrying. My parents know this. I would have stayed with the husband they gave me if I had wanted a married life. As soon as the border re-opens, I will return abroad.*

After her return, Sharmeen was busy solving her family's numerous problems. First, she insisted that her brother brought his wife and the child he had fathered home, that he stuck to a job and took every opportunity to earn and became a responsible man, reminding him that, as a son, it was his duty to support the family. Second, she rescued her younger sister from a marriage that had turned disastrous. The girl had married a good-for-nothing, who was also violent. Sharmeen told her there was no need to stay with such a husband. The sister confirmed that the parents stood by her because of Sharmeen's support. The sister wanted to migrate, but Sharmeen told her to wait until her child was a bit older and in the meanwhile, the family could look after her. Sharmeen said she would help her sister migrate, but she would not pay for her elder brother's migration as "the cost is very high, and there is no assurance he will succeed." Sharmeen opened a bank account in her name, emphasizing that she would not repeat the mistake she made at her first migration.

Sharmeen (interviewed on 29 March 2021) said:

*I sent all my income to my mother, and she spent it all. This time, I will keep my money and give my family some only when I agree to cover the cost of something. My family is landless. My plan is to save money to buy a piece of land and build a house. My father and my two brothers should meet our current costs ... I am not the son of the family, but I take decisions for my brothers and sister. They listen to me. They have no choice. This house was put up with my money. Without my help, they would have no place to stay, and the family would have split up by now.*

Five months after the first interview, Sharmeen was preparing to return to her former employer in Saudi Arabia. She had wanted to go to Dubai but could not get a visa. Her former employer agreed to take her back at the same salary, having turned down her demand for an increase,

but she was reassured about going back to a familiar environment. About the rumours circulating about her "modern" ways, she did not mince her words.

*I learn fast, I worked efficiently, and I earned very well abroad. I did not engage in bad [immoral] work. For this, one needs not go abroad. People speak badly of me here because we are Muslim, and Muslims think that women should live in purdah. They think women were born to sacrifice themselves. They think women should stay under men's guardianship, they cannot accept that women can work abroad just like men. Now, there are changes everywhere. Even in Saudi Arabia, women are working. People here will never accept me. Why should I pay attention to them?*

This exceptionally outspoken young woman manifested an independent spirit early. She walked away from a husband she did not like and arranged her own divorce at age 16. Later in Dammam, she availed the right to refuse two employers and required a third to pay the one-month salary she considered her due, she let it be known that she would perform her duty but would not accept work outside its scope, and she confidently turned down the sexual advances of a son of the family. Sharmeen was fortunate to find a good employer at last, but she also worked hard to maintain her good luck.

Interestingly, she believes that girls her age adapt more easily to a foreign environment and learn faster than older women. Opening a bank account in her name before her second migration and warning her family that from that point on, she would control her income and only cover the costs that she approves of are exceptional among girls her age. Sharmeen is committed to providing for the family and does not aim to accumulate wealth for her own benefit. At 19, she is acting as head of the family bypassing her father (who is in poor health), her elder brother (who behaved irresponsibly) and her mother (who proved to be a weak manager). From her position of strength, she rescued her younger sister from a bad marriage and assigned tasks to everyone.

As a result of her exceptional qualities and her good earnings abroad, Sharmeen turned around rights of seniority and traditional gender roles. The money she sent may have vanished, but not the moral right to teach family members lessons



and request that they act more responsibly in the future. Sharmeen is likely to remain family head, at least for some time, as her future migration holds the promise of more income. In her community, she is clearly seen as a rebel.

### 3.6. Raped and made to marry her rapist: Shereen's migration plan postponed

Shereen, a 16-year-old girl, was to migrate to Saudi Arabia, but this was first delayed because of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The *dalal* who sent her elder sister abroad promised she would not have to wait for long, but an event occurred that changed the course of her life and indefinitely postponed the migration plan.

Shereen's mother (interviewed on 26 October 2020) said:

*For those of us living in Gutsogram [a government resettlement for landless people] preserving our honour is difficult. One month ago, a boy from Amirpara came in a boat and spoiled [raped] my daughter. After this, we had no choice but to arrange her marriage with that boy. At first, he and his family refused. So, I sought the help of a member of the local council, who is also my relative [belonging to the same lineage]. The member told the boy and his parents that unless they accept marrying my Shereen, a court case would be filed, and the boy would be sent to jail. The boy said he could go to jail for one month, he did not care. The member put pressure on his uncle and told him that unless he got the boy to agree to the marriage, a case would be filed against him also. The uncle felt he had no choice. He convinced the boy and his father. A shalish [village arbitration] was held with a few people. The decision was taken to offer a dowry for 50,000 takas [to save face and make the marriage appear normal]. The money was rapidly raised, and 45,000 takas was given on that day.*

*The marriage took place immediately afterward and a meal was served to the guests. On that evening, they took my Shereen away and they locked her up. She has been unable to visit us. They beat her up ... I am waiting to see when she can come to us. I will send her to Saudi Arabia as soon as possible... I did not agree to the marriage to establish a family. It seemed the only way to save our*

*honour... I could not have her younger sister married unless our honour gets restored. As soon as Shereen comes to me, I will send the divorce papers. What we spent for the dowry and the marriage reception can easily be recouped if she can be sent abroad.*

On 28 November 2020, Shereen visited her mother's home to attend her brother's wedding. She looked depressed and there were signs of beatings (*nirjaton*) on her body, said her mother. The mother's plan was not working as she wished. On 30 March 2021, Shereen visited her mother again, who commented that the in-laws kept Shereen in such a way that she could not do anything for her. Shereen's husband was not good, but the in-laws did not want a divorce. They got a maid for free, said the mother. Why would they consent to a divorce? She feared that if they got Shereen divorced and if they sent her abroad, the boy's family would retaliate and make their life impossible. Six months after the rape and the marriage forced upon Shereen, the researcher was finally able to interview her.

*My husband's irresponsible behaviour has not changed. My father-in-law provides what I need, and my mother-in-law keeps a close eye on me. She will not allow me to stay here for long. She dropped me in the morning and will pick me up in the afternoon. She tells me: You are my son's wife now. Forget what happened before. We have our honour, and you must not do anything that harms our position ... My husband has different moods. Sometimes, he is very keen, sometimes he does not care. He does not think of me. He lives with his addiction ... When he comes to me, he is aggressive and rough ... I do not want to become pregnant, but I do not know how I can prevent it. My mother-in-law would find out if I used contraceptives ... I still want to go abroad but my passport is with the dalal. My in-laws forbade him to send me abroad, and they threatened him. My mother wanted my passport, but he refused to give it to her, and a new passport is not so easily obtained. The dalal told Mother to be patient and wait for another six months.*

The loss of reputation following the rape, for Shereen and her family was inevitable, as there was a witness, and the mother felt compelled to obtain reparation. The elected member of the local council called upon to solve the problem belonged to the same lineage as Shereen and

restoring honour was also his concern. In a separate interview (held earlier and unrelated to this affair), the man, who is in his sixties, had strongly disapproved of women's labour migration. The way he handled Shereen's case gave him the opportunity to stop her departure as well as restore moral order as he sees it. In his eyes, making a rapist marry his victim and forcing the victim to accept the rapist as husband appear to be minor issues. The solution he imposed demonstrated his power over another lineage as well as restored the honour of his lineage. In village politics, such issues matter.

Shereen's in-laws at first had refused the marriage but an addicted son who does not work is not an attractive prospect on the marriage market; keeping Shereen on as a wife served them rather well. Shereen's family is comparatively much poorer. Her father had placed Shereen at the age of five along with her nine-year-old sister as domestic workers with a family in Dhaka. The two sisters first worked for their food, later receiving a salary that their father collected until the girls were old enough to demand to be paid directly. They could then remit their income to their mother. Both sisters worked for the same family until their mother brought them home to send them abroad as domestic workers. Shereen had arrived from Dhaka three days before the rape. By village standards, the 16-year-old was well-dressed, looked pretty and appeared "modern".

In this story, Shereen has lost on every front. Forced to marry her rapist, she had to forego the migration project. She was expected to rally to the need to repair the family honour and her consent to the marriage was never sought. Married and kept under close watch by her mother-in-law, she is now made to toil for the in-laws and must suffer the occasional visits of a rough husband "who has not changed". The mother-in-law tells her to forget what happened and to protect "their" honour, which appears a formidably arrogant demand. Bearing a child would further complicate Shereen's migration plan, and yet, she has no access to contraceptives. Her in-laws threatened the *dalal* holding her passport, forbidding him to proceed with her migration. The adolescent girl is their daughter-in-law, she is their property, and they claim absolute right over her. At the last meeting, Shereen still expressed her desire to migrate, but she is a prisoner and does not know how to escape.

Girls returned from abroad commonly compare the life they led as domestic workers serving their employers with that of their married friends at home. Josna migrated to Saudi Arabia at age 14 and returned two-and-a-half years later. She admits that work abroad was heavy, but she was able to cope and is proud of what she earned. She explained:

*In the village, friends of my age are all married. I do not envy them. At their in-laws' home, they do the same work I did abroad as a maid, but they do it as a wife under the authority of their mother-in-law. On top of this, they must satisfy the husband. I do not envy them. I have no wish to marry, and I shall migrate again soon.*

Migration abroad could well come as a (relative) liberation to Shereen if her present ordeal comes to an end. Those who regard girls/women's labour migration as "modern-day slavery" ought to pay attention to practices akin to enslavement prevailing at home.

### 3.7. "Dance" visas for Dubai

While most adolescent girls migrated, or intended to migrate, as domestic workers, a few went abroad with "dance" visas, an occupation deserving some attention even though numbers are very small. The four girls who left on such a visa were between 15 and 17 years of age at their first migration and they all came from Chonpara, a pocket of Narayanganj district which has been a reservoir for the recruitment of female migrant workers over several years. "Dance" visas here refer to an occupation and the promise of a relatively high income in a short period of time. The workers enter Dubai on visitor visas valid for three months and which are renewable once, or twice. In Chonpara, many families would not allow their daughters to leave for such occupation and many young candidates also refuse the option. The girls who left had disturbed family backgrounds. Also, a dance teacher who promised high income, a joyful environment and reward for their dancing skills played an important role in motivating them. What else the job may entail was not made explicit.

Girls leaving with "dance" visas are not considered labour migrants by the Government of Bangladesh and are not entered in the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) register. NGOs and the media mostly ignore

this activity except when a scandal occurs. Candidates are then readily depicted as victims of trafficking. In Chonpara, their status is somewhat ambiguous although few would say these girls are “trafficked”. The three case histories throw light on the points of view of the young workers, their families and their immediate environment. The purpose is to understand from within how such migration occurs and what are the outcomes.

### Minara

Minara is reportedly one of a batch of 20 girls who left Chonpara in 2018 on “dance” visas. In June 2021, she was completing her second migration in Dubai and was expected to return within a month. Her mother-in-law and her grandmother said she left on a dance visa, but her mother talked of a business visa and the landlady argued that she had left with a domestic worker visa.

Investigations on dance visas have become difficult. In 2015–16, in the same location, it had been somewhat easier to record departures with dance visas as the occupation entailed was not necessarily associated with “bad” (immoral) work. This was before the much-publicized arrest of Azam Khan, the owner of several Dubai hotels with dance clubs where two of our respondents had worked. Azam Khan and eight other men were arrested in Bangladesh in July 2020 and accused of trafficking girls. The High Court granted them bail on 19 July 2021 on the grounds that out of 60–70 supposedly trafficked girls, only two had filed a case accusing them of trafficking but none of the others had done so. The bail petition was later stayed by the Supreme Court. We shall not comment here on the legal aspects of the case – let it only be said that these arrests in Bangladesh as well as criminal investigations conducted in Dubai made the occupation more suspicious. This is in a context where the closures due to COVID-19 had badly affected the entertainment sector.

Minara studied in a madrasa in Mirpur, while her mother worked in a garment factory and her father never worked much. Minara has two brothers who followed their father’s path and live separately. She stopped going to school when her mother returned to Chonpara. At the age of 14, she had a relationship with a 17-year-old boy. They married and Minara soon became pregnant. The man did not earn, took drugs and

did not support his young wife, and conflicts soon erupted. Minara’s mother sheltered her pregnant daughter but did not accept the marriage. As soon as the baby was born, it was handed over to the boy’s family. Minara was 16 years old when she first left for Dubai on a “dance” visa. She sent all her income to her mother who then gave up her factory job. The mother had separated from the father and kept her distance from him and from her two sons describing them as *nostho* (spoiled), which is to say that the only thing they did was take drugs and get involved in petty crime. The mother and daughter constituted a separate household. Minara stayed home for one year and left for a second migration in 2020. The mother denied she played a role in Minara’s migration and said she did not remember the name of the *dalal* who sent her abroad, clearly remaining on her guard, and Minara could not be met and interviewed.

### Rumi

Rumi was first interviewed in November 2018, two weeks after her return from Dubai where she spent seven months. She said she would have stayed longer as she had a valid visa, but her mother was ill, and her father called her back. Rumi explained that when she first arrived in Dubai (April 2018), the club was closed because of an investigation.

*One girl from the previous batch had made a complaint. We were all given the CID phone number in case we needed to contact them. After the CID investigation, the club reopened for some time, but it closed again for the month of Ramadan. During that time, we did not work, and I did not earn anything. I was very happy when the club reopened. Work started at 9 p.m. and went on till 4 a.m. We were then taken to our villa. We lost track of day and night. There were 14 of us in one batch. All girls were Bangladeshi but from different places. At first, I did not have a SIM card for my phone, and I had no money. I ate the food they gave us. After the club reopened, I got tips from customers and the guards bought me whatever I wanted.*

Rumi distinguished her salary (*beton*) from *bakhshish*.

*If a customer offered us anything, for example a golden chain, it had to be done very discreetly. If the supervisor saw that we had received such a gift, we could keep only*

*a small fraction of its value, as with the mala which determines what you earn. It was a happy place where we had a good time. I did not feel depressed. I would have stayed longer, but my parents pressed me to return. I keep in touch with my friends. They tell me I should come back. At the club, your income depends on the collection of malas (garlands). The cost of one mala is 50 dirhams [1,000 takas]. One part of this is given to the dancer. Girls who are good-looking and good dancers get more malas. If one gets 300 malas in a month, one earns 50,000 takas.*

*I always got this much [when the club was opened]. The last two months, I got over 500 malas and should have been paid 80,000 takas but I did not get this amount. Father had received 15,000 takas as an advance, but when I came to collect my last salary, they deducted 50,000 takas, although we never got this amount as advance. I protested but they said this is what they had paid us. A chain of dalals were involved in my recruitment and that is why I received so little. In addition, they deducted 20,000 takas. When I went to Dhaka Airport, I was stopped because I looked too young. My "malik" came, paid the airport police 20,000 takas and I was allowed to go. I worked very well the last month, and I should have been paid 80,000 takas, but I only received 10,000 takas.*

In November 2018, Rumi intended to return to Dubai and suggested taking her younger sister along. Her main concern was to avoid the intermediaries who took such a large cut from her income as they had cheated her. Two-and-a-half years later (May 2021), Rumi was interviewed again, holding a baby in her arms. She had gained weight and lost some of her shine. She explained that before she left for Dubai, she was already married to a boy employed at the thread factory where she worked. His family was not willing to accept her unless she brought a large dowry, so Rumi had migrated out of revenge. One thing is clear: Rumi sent her Dubai income to her father and appears to associate her well-being to her father's household.

Rumi revealed some interesting information. For example, 20,000 takas was paid to the airport police [in 2018] to allow the 16-year-old to leave for Dubai on a tourist visa, an amount later deducted from her income. We also get an idea of the profit the club reaped from the young

dancers. If a girl got paid 50,000 takas after receiving 300 malas from customers, considering the cost of a mala at 1,000 takas, dancers received one sixth of the money they generated for the club. Finally, we hear that the police in Dubai had closed the club, around April 2018, to investigate a complaint made by one (or more) dancer(s). This was two years before Azam Khan and his men were charged in Bangladesh. In other words, the Bangladeshi justice system was slower to act on the potential crime committed.

Rumi had no communication problems in Dubai as the staff and most customers at the club were Bangladeshi. She lived in a "happy" bubble where she lost track of day and night. At the first meeting, Rumi was still basking in the euphoria of the club and the money she earned. Her father was embarrassed and said Rumi would not return, and her younger sister would not go either. At the second meeting, Rumi had become a mother and seemed more of a realist. Still, she had renewed her passport and was considering migrating again with a "dance" visa along with a few friends.

### *Manisha*

Manisha is an interesting case. At her first interview in November 2018, the 16-year-old looked radiant. One of her ex-customers at the club had become enamoured with her, and he was from Chattogram (Bangladesh). He had paid the club owner for her "rescue", sent her back to her parents' home in Bangladesh and married her, claiming to have saved a girl from the clutches of "traffickers". In Dubai, Manisha had found a husband and was expecting his child. The husband was about 30 years older than her, and Manisha knew nothing about his family situation. She did not intend to live in Chattogram anyway. The husband sent her money every month to cover her living costs. Her description of the conditions at the club mostly confirms Rumi's account. Both girls worked in different clubs belonging to the same owner, Azam Khan.

*I was in Dubai for seven months. I went through a dalal called Romel and came back two months ago... [My husband] has a business in Dubai that he manages with his brothers. He used to visit the Grand Club, where I worked. He liked me very much. The rule there is that if a girl gets 300 malas in one month, she gets paid 60,000 takas. After*



*he met me, my husband made sure no one else would buy malas for me, and he paid for them all. He did this for four months and the business he ran with his brothers really suffered. The brothers came to the club and asked for me. The manager said I had left. For a few days, I did not appear on the dance floor. Meanwhile, my husband visited his mother in Bangladesh to get money for my release and came back with 150,000 takas. This way, I left the club. He purchased my plane ticket, and I came back home. Then, he married me in front of elders. The last time he visited, to make sure I would not return, he took away my passport. Where I worked, most girls were very young, like me. The club owner has two clubs in Dubai, the Fortune and the Grand. He is Bangladeshi and all the staff were from Bangladesh. The club opened from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. Most customers were from Chattogram, Cumilla, Noakhali. There were also some Indians and Pakistanis, and rarely, there would be one or two Emiratis. At the club, malas sold for 50 dirhams and for 100 dirhams [1,000 to 2,000 takas]. We lived some distance away from the club, 15 girls in a room. At the club, some customers go crazy. They spend all their earnings on girls and have nothing left to send home. Guests could take me out provided they bought a specific number of malas ... My dalal [in Bangladesh] was Romel, the dance teacher who arranged everything, but he cheated me. Out of the 50,000 takas I was entitled to as advance before departure, he took 40,000 takas and left us with only 10,000.*

Manisha's paternal grandmother said that Manisha was the youngest among the girls leaving on a dance visa. Although she feared for her, she was unable to stop her. In fact, there was no one to refuse to the girl. Her mother was in Jordan and her father had never taken responsibility for the family. Later, the mother said:

*Manisha made the plan with her friends, and I could not stop her. She left together with 20 Chonpara girls,, all between 15 and 20 years old. What could I do? One Romel from Narayanganj used to come to Chonpara to teach dance, and he is the one who motivated them.*

The role of dance teachers in recruiting girls for Dubai dance clubs has been exposed as an

integral part of the system used by Azam Khan and his associates. The dance teacher who recruited Manisha no longer visits Chonpara and (in 2021) kept a low profile. However, his business was highly profitable while it lasted.

In May 2021, two-and-a-half years after the first interview with Manisha, the relationship with her husband had soured and Manisha was in a different mood. The husband had taken her to his home (in Chattogram) but Manisha was not allowed to enter his home.

*Abdul [the husband] told me while in Dubai that his wife had died, then he said she had left him. He told me different lies at different times ... Over there [in the husband's village], all the men are migrant workers. They have high incomes and that is why they marry two or three wives ... Abdul now suspects me all the time. For the last one year, he has sent very little money ... He pays the shop owner where I buy milk for the baby, but a large bill has been left unpaid. He thinks I have relationships with other boys. He has taken the phone number of many people here and he checks on me*

In June 2021, Manisha intended to return to Dubai. She expected that the bars would reopen and followed the situation closely. She had motivated other girls to migrate on dance visas too. Two of her recruits were ex-garment factory workers whose marriages had collapsed. She had obtained a new passport and, this time, she intended to bypass the intermediaries, but times were difficult. "The few who left already are not doing well," she said. Manisha still feared her husband, Abdul, who threatened to throw acid in her face if she returned to Dubai. She intended to send him a divorce letter before leaving. Her mother and her grandmother believed the staff at the club would protect her from the husband's jealousy.

To sum up, the husband's rescue operation from the clutches of "traffickers" that had received much publicity two years earlier had no long-term effect. Manisha's mother and grandmother made a different reading of the so-called rescue operation.

*Her husband said the girls at the club were trafficked ... but all of this was made up. The truth is Manisha could not earn as much as the other girls because he did not allow her to dance for/with other men. That is why*

*she is in this situation now. She did not have benefits.*

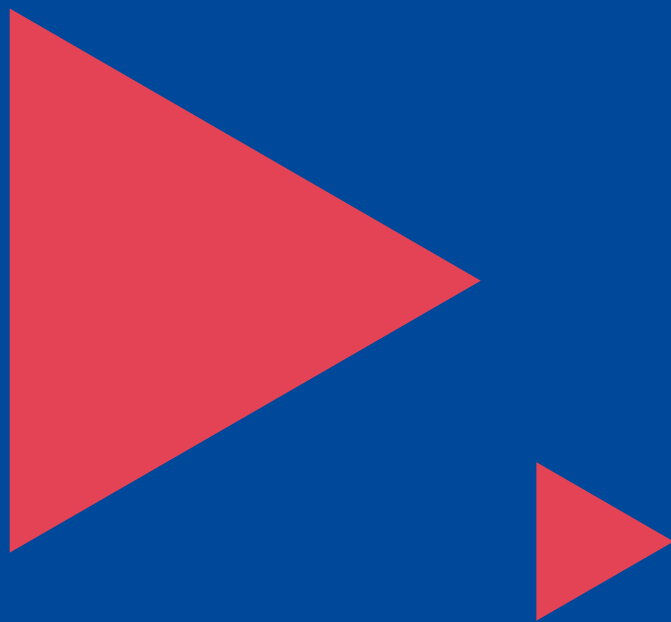
Manisha can rely on her family where a remarkable solidarity prevails among women of different generations, while the men are largely absent. Manisha's mother worked in a garment factory for many years while Manisha's father simply roamed about. Her mother finally migrated to Jordan to repay a family debt and to escape her husband's violence. She sent her remittances to her mother and upon her return, she divorced her husband. Manisha's

elder sister, who is divorced, presently works in Saudi Arabia. She sends her remittances to her maternal grandmother, with whom Manisha also took shelter when her husband Abdul reduced the money he sent home. While Manisha is busy organizing her next migration, her mother and grandmother take care of her daughter. Women survive by closing ranks. Their strength also rests on their hard work and on their income mostly from local garment factories and labour migration.

# ▶ 4

**Destinations, number of migrations per migrant and types of visas**

---



The 211 migrant women who make up the study cohort had engaged in 334 migrations. It should be specified that migration to a specific country may last three months just as it may stretch to over several years. Fieldwork conducted in Jordan and Lebanon identified several migrant men and women who had worked and stayed illegally in these countries for 10 years or more. In the present study cohort, a woman explained how she had managed to stay illegally in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for 19 years. Her story will be discussed in the coming sections. Such workers refrain from visiting their homes unless they are ready to put an end to their work migration and, of course, they must avoid involuntary deportation.

Long-time migrants play an important role in as they bring in other migrants and contribute to the extension of networks even though they appear only once in government records. There are also workers legally employed under the same employer who renew their contract several times. Whether they visit home or not, being under the same employer and returning with a valid *aqama* (work contract) still counts as one migration. Until recently, Lebanon had the largest number of long-time Bangladeshi women migrants, some equipped with “free” visas and with others being undocumented. Jordan came second, and Saudi Arabia stands at the other end of the spectrum in this respect. Staying illegally appears more difficult than elsewhere, and women holding “free” visas were not found in this cohort. In Saudi Arabia, women on the street are reportedly quickly spotted and taken to the police station. It is also the country where the turnover of workers is the highest, with many women preferring to return home after the

completion of their two-year contracts before seeking a new employer in the same country or elsewhere.

Table 8 shows the number of migrations women undertook by research site. As expected, the older sites of migration have a higher number of multiple migrants. The 10 women (4.8 per cent) who migrated to 4 countries are all from Manikganj and the 25 women who migrated to 3 countries (11.8 per cent) are mostly from the same site. Most of the women in the cohort (63 per cent) migrated to a single country and here the locations where women’s labour migration is the most recent, namely Brahmanbaria and Patuakhali–Barguna, top the list.

Table 9 shows the women migrants’ first country of migration. One can see the popularity of specific destinations at specific times, for example, Lebanon between 2006 and 2015 or Jordan between 2011 and 2020. Before 2016, the number of women migrating to Saudi Arabia was negligible. A marked increase in the overall number of women’s labour migrations occurred in 2011 with a surge from 2016 onwards, largely reflecting the impact of the bilateral agreement signed between the governments of Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Between 2016 and 2020, 53.4 per cent of overall departures from Bangladesh were to Saudi Arabia. The movements reduced from March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the slowdown carried over to the first half of 2021. This is also when fieldwork for the present research was winding down. Half of the women in the present cohort migrated in the 2016–20 period. These trends are consistent with BMET data collected for a much larger population.

► **Table 8. Number of migrations by research site**

No of Migrations	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali/ Barguna	Total	%
1	39	21	35	38	133	63.0
2	14	15	6	8	43	20.4
3	2	17	6	0	25	11.8
4	0	10	0	0	10	4.7
<b>Total</b>	55	63	47	46	211	100.0

Source: Authors’ analysis.

► **Table 9. Year of first migration and destination**

Year of migration	Saudi Arabia	Jordan	UAE/ Dubai	Lebanon	Oman	Kuwait	Bahrain	Qatar	Mauritius	Total	%
Up to 2000	0	2	2	1	0	1	2	0	0	8	3.8
2001-05	0	0	4	3	0	1	2	0	0	10	4.7
2006-10	0	2	6	13	1	1	0	0	2	25	11.8
2011-15	5	26	4	18	10	0	0	1	0	64	30.3
2016-20	55	26	12	1	7	1		1		103	48.8
2021	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.5
<b>Total</b>	60	57	28	36	18	4	4	2	2	211	100.0
<b>%</b>	28.4	27.0	13.3	17.1	8.5	1.9	1.9	0.9	0.9	100	

Source: Authors' analysis.

Table 10 indicates the types of visas for each destination, and table 11 shows the types of visas by research sites considering the last destination when several migrations occurred. We reproduce here the names of visas commonly used when recruiters make deals with their recruits. As pointed out earlier, these names may not correspond with the official names of the visas but refer instead to an occupation or a work arrangement fetching a specific price depending on the benefits anticipated.

For example, dancers receive an advance payment and enter Dubai on visitor visas

valid for 3 months, which are renewable two to three times. "Free" visa holders travel with normal domestic worker visas purchased at a higher price as sponsors lend their identity for profit and the intermediaries involved in the arrangement also take their margin. Women leaving on a family visa purchase the title as the wife of a migrant man who is not their husband to provide a cover for work, and women entering the UAE on tourist visas expect to obtain a work permit after finding work. One should add that the promises recruiters make when selling a visa are not always fulfilled.

► **Table 10. Types of visas at last migration by destination**

Destination	Domestic visa	Company visa	Garment/factory visa	Free visa	Dance visa	Family visa	Tourist visa	Total	%
Saudi Arabia	103	7	0	0	0	0	0	110	52.1
Jordan	19	0	28	1	0	0	0	48	22.7
Lebanon	10	0	0	2	0	0	0	12	5.7
Oman	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	4.7
UAE	9	0	1	2	4	0	3	19	9.0
Qatar	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2.8
Bahrain	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.5
Kuwait	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0.9
Mauritius	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	3	1.4
<b>Total</b>	158	8	32	5	4	1	3	211	100.0
<b>%</b>	74.9	3.8	15.2	2.4	1.9	0.5	1.4	100.0	

Source: Authors' analysis.

► Table 11. Types of visas at last migration by research site

Visa type	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	%
Domestic	53	51	24	30	158	74.9
Company	1	6	1	0	8	3.8
Factory	1	1	15	15	32	15.2
“Free”	0	2	2	1	5	2.4
“Dance”	0	0	4	0	4	1.9
Family	0	1	0	0	1	0.5
Tourist	0	2	1	0	3	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Authors' analysis.

At their last migration, nearly 75 per cent of the women in the cohort left on domestic worker visas. The concentration is particularly high for Brahmanbaria, a site characterized by a high incidence of male migration and comparatively low and recent female migration. Saudi Arabia is the destination offering the largest number of domestic worker visas with only two women migrating on company visas to work in schools or hospitals. As indicated earlier, since women's freedom of movement in public spaces is more restricted in Saudi Arabia than in other countries of the Middle East, the “free” visa system, whereby women offer their services to several households and find their own living arrangements, appears to be rare in Saudi Arabia. A separate study specifically on Saudi Arabia will be completed later. The few women migrating with “dance” and tourist visas are found only in the UAE.

Garment factory visas make up 15.2 per cent of the work titles. Here, migrants from Narayanganj and Patuakhali-Barguna clearly dominate the cohort, bearing out a correlation with the occupations they held prior to migration as seen in table 3. Jordan is the main destination for garment factory workers. Of the three women who worked in Mauritius, two were garment factory workers and one worked at a fish plant.

Manikganj and Narayanganj, the two sites from where women's migration started the earliest, have a greater variety of visas. Four women from Narayanganj who were followed in an earlier research paper, but are not included in the present cohort, migrated to Hong Kong. One can say that, collectively, more knowledge circulates about opportunities abroad and a greater choice is offered in older sites of migration even if migrant women everywhere depend on market conditions at a particular time.

# ▶ 5

## Reasons to migrate

---

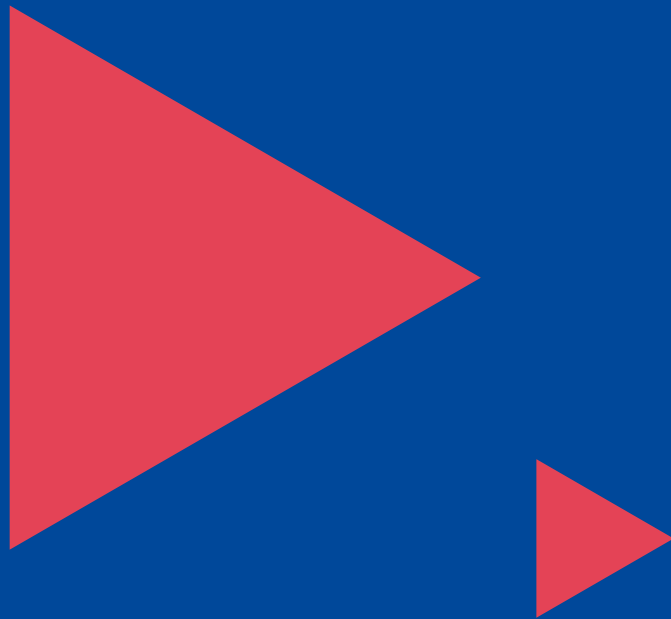


Table 12 lists the reasons for migration as described by informants and as interpreted by the members of the research team. Up to three reasons were given for each migrant woman. It may be recalled that 62.3 per cent of the migrants were interviewed personally, and

these encounters provided critical information that parents, in-laws, husbands, siblings, children or other informants were not aware of, may not deem important, or may not wish to reveal. Table 12 integrates these personal reasons for which women migrate.

► Table 12. Reasons to migrate (multiple answers recorded)

	Brahman- baria	Manik- ganj	Narayan- ganj	Patuakhail + Barguna	Total
<b>Husband earns inadequately</b>					
Works but does not earn enough to support the family	13	16	5	9	43
Is not a good person (does not work, does not earn or earns but wastes money or spend it on himself)	3	8	8	1	20
Addicted (yaba, ganja, alcohol, gambling)	3	2	9	2	16
Handicapped or sick	1	3	3	2	9
<b>Husband's behaviour unacceptable to the wife</b>					
Took a second wife/got involved in extra marital affairs	8	3	7	3	21
Violent, jealous	0	6	2	1	9
<b>Reasons specific to wives/mothers</b>					
To pay back loans incurred following husband/son's failed migration	0	8	0	4	12
To pay back loans incurred for household expenses	6	4	7	5	22
To secure the future of children	18	26	21	18	83
To pay for daughters' marriage costs and establish sons	9	14	7	12	42
<b>Reasons specific to wives in polygamous marriages</b>					
To purchase land, build house. To assert economic independence from co-wives while remaining under the umbrella of marriage	6	2	2	3	13
<b>Reasons specific to unmarried daughters, or women not tied into wedlock</b>					
Migration in replacement of sons in families without sons or with sons too young to migrate	6	6	4	1	17
To cover own dowry/marriage costs	10	9	1	5	25
To avoid family pressure for a second marriage	2	2	6	1	11
To gather money for brother's future migration	5	7	1	5	18
To provide for poor parents, pay for their medical treatment, etc.	17	14	5	7	43
To fulfill a dream: fly on an airplane, get a good income, buy jewellery, look/become smart, gain importance	6	3	3	0	12
<b>Reasons specific to widowed, divorced, separated, abandoned women (WDSA):</b>					
No husband to provide and an absolute necessity to earn. Migration is the best option	13	11	5	14	43
<b>Reasons specific to women who were job holders before migration:</b>					
To earn more than in Bangladesh. To save and invest in a large project	5	4	21	18	48



	Brahman- baria	Manik- ganj	Narayan- ganj	Patuakhail + Barguna	Total
<b>Reasons applying to all categories of women</b>					
Cost of women's labour migration lower than for men	2	8	1	5	16
Advantageous economic returns expected	7	10	12	11	40
Inspired by successful migrant women	9	6	5	7	27
Dalal enticed /convinced, motivated and facilitated migration	9	3	0	5	17
Husband pushed and facilitated migration for own interest	2	8	0	2	12
<b>Total</b>					<b>619</b>

Source. RAPID/DRC-WiF ILO Migration Research 2021

One must admit that table 12 presents a rather simplified picture, excluding the diversity of points of view, the complexity of situations and the changing motivations over time as family responsibilities, marital status and interests move elsewhere. For example, a woman may migrate for the first time because her husband is addicted, violent and a poor provider. She later divorces or separates from her husband, a decision that migration facilitates. On her second or third migration, she migrates to provide for her children, build a house or pursue other projects. Table 12 does not capture the complexities of migratory journeys that are better portrayed through case histories. It should, however, be taken as a useful repertoire.

### 5.1. Material and cultural imperatives

The reasons to migrate listed in table 12 present a mix of material and cultural imperatives. Taken together, they make up a template of gender and family norms, mostly by default. For example, when wives migrate because husbands fail to provide, reference is made to a social order, both naturalized and idealized, whereby husbands are defined as family providers. Interestingly, this "natural" order is rarely evoked where women work in garment factories, as in Chonpara (Narayanganj). In this site, many wives do not rely on their husbands to provide, and their mothers did not rely on their fathers either, a pattern transmitted from one generation to the next. Here, a husband's addiction to substances is most often reported as the main reason to migrate. Other differences between sites are noticeable. For example, migration to provide for poor parents is the most reported reason for Brahmanbaria and Manikghonj, reflecting the large number of adolescent girls migrating from

these two sites. Hardly surprising, the motive most often reported in all sites is migration to secure the future of their children (83 cases).

The reasons to migrate generally put forward family responsibilities, with the women's agency being expressed through the fulfilment of duties. Nonetheless, a desire for independence and personal fulfilment can be read in some entries, for example, in migrating to avoid pressure to marry for the second time (12 cases), migrating to earn more, save and invest in a large project (48 cases), or migrating to purchase land or put up a house separate from co-wives for women in polygamous marriages (13 cases). "Light" motives, such as flying in an airplane, buying jewellery, looking smart, etc., were mentioned mostly by adolescent girls.

### 5.2. Consent to migrate

Women and girls migrating against their wishes are not clearly identified in this table. However, two entries, one on *dalals* who enticed and motivated migration (17 cases) and another on husbands who pressurized their wives and organized their migration for their own benefit (12 cases), could raise issues about consent. Nur Banu accused her husband of pressing her to migrate for his own benefit in collusion with the *dalal*. The accusation came after she migrated, the husband pocketed her income and took another wife. Hearing that her husband had remarried, the woman did not complete her contract, returned home quickly and called a *shalish*. It was proposed that she pays the husband 100,000 takas for him to divorce the second wife. Nur Banu, mother of three children, refused the offer considering that such a husband was not worth keeping, let alone at

a price. She divorced him and quickly migrated again. Interestingly, the question about consent came up while she was married. As a divorcee, Nur Banu freely and unhesitatingly opted for migration. Unfreedom is here associated with marriage rather than migration.

In theory, no woman or girl who does not consent undertakes migration. However, how consent is achieved or procured is a relevant question. In the case we just have discussed, the wife's consent was premised on conditions that the husband violated. She objected, not to migration per se, but to the husband's behaviour in her absence. Migration gave her the ability to divorce him and open a new chapter in her life. The woman told her story after achieving two successful migrations permitting her to purchase land and obtain a house jointly with her divorced daughter, who was also earning as a migrant. Migrant women lacking agency and control over their income and being victimized by their husbands are regularly evoked in the media and elsewhere. As seen in this case, the victimization scenario may characterize one episode but not the whole story. A good part of this report deals with women's struggles to assert control. While the final chapter is impossible to write, aligning several episodes provides a complex and often a more positive picture.

The hold some *dalals* exert over their recruits is another particularly worrisome problem in the case of adolescent girls. Earlier, a reference was made to *dalals* in Majlishpur who specialized in this type of recruitment: seeking to identify poor, distressed or strongly indebted families with adolescent daughters. They patiently convince parents, usually the mothers, that their daughters are not too young to be sent abroad. Rima, a 15-year-old girl whose mother was struggling with a large debt incurred when Rima's eldest brother migrated to the Maldives six years earlier is a good example. When the *dalal* proposed that Rima migrates, the mother was hesitant, finding her daughter too young for such an experience but the 40-year-old *dalal* reassured her. He would prepare the girl and make her "grow up" quickly. Rima did not oppose the plan – she "consented".

The *dalal* took her on outings several times under different pretexts. In other circumstances,

the mother would not have accepted such compromise, but she was obnubilated by the *dalal's* promises. Rima migrated and returned empty-handed after 19 months, the family debt only having further increased. Rima was not explicit about abuse, but she had harsh words towards the man who used her. To express her disgust, she used his name rather than calling him "Uncle" as proper etiquette would require. The latter had moved elsewhere leaving no address at which he could be contacted. The methods such *dalals* deploy and the ascendancy they exert over their recruits inevitably shape the "consent" they elicit. Comparison can be made here with the dance teachers who convinced adolescent girls to sign up for work in a Dubai club while skimming off the advance payment the girls' families were entitled to.

Domination and ascendancy are also problems found in the recruitment of adult women. When Fatima, a 30-year-old woman, expressed her determination to go to Oman after spending a few hours with the recruiter, her family was astonished as they knew the fragile state of her mind. She nonetheless migrated, but she soon got sick, her mental health affected. She had to be repatriated.<sup>8</sup> The family said the recruiter had bewitched her. It is often said that a woman determined to migrate in spite of family opposition has been possessed by a spirit (*bideshi bhut take dhorse*). The obsession is such that she cannot hear "reason". Consent is a complicated matter. Polygamous *dalals* who marry their poor recruits and appropriate their income, which is another type of entrapment, are discussed in the following sections. Women's lives unfold within multiple relationships of power and domination, within and outside the household, and it is within these contexts that "consent" must be assessed.

Paying attention to those who resist the pressure to migrate, those who do not "consent", is also important. Hamida had already migrated to Saudi Arabia to repay her husband's debt after he had a failed migration experience, but she will not migrate again. The husband has a son from a previous marriage, and they have a daughter together. In a society where boys carry on the line and inherit the greater part of family wealth, Hamida and her husband do not share the same interests. She said:

8 This case was closely followed by Hannan Biswas in Bangladesh and Thérèse Blanchet in Oman as she conducted fieldwork.

*From Saudi Arabia, I sent my husband 500,000 takas. With this money, he paid back the loan. He could refurbish the shop he runs in front of our house, buy an easy bike and rent a pond for fish farming. My husband is now telling me, "Our house is not good. You should go abroad again so that we can build a new one. But I say no. I will not go... I could go abroad again, but not for his house. His house will be for his son, but my daughter will be married and will not benefit ... I now want to give time to my small daughter. My husband does not agree. We fight about this... My husband always wants more. I will not go abroad. I am strong and I will resist.*

In another story, we see how a family considers one candidate suitable for migration while another is not. Roxana is a divorcee with a long experience of migration. Although she has two brothers, she is her parents' main source of support. Recently, her younger brother, married with two children, returned from Saudi Arabia after having failed to earn. With his family, he came back to live with their parents, weighing heavily on Roxana's resources. Roxana asked her sister-in-law why she was not migrating, but the other woman said she did not feel brave enough. Earlier, several cases were reviewed where the migration of daughters-in-law was accepted after their husband's failed migration.

In each case, guardians underlined that the woman volunteered to go, and no one forced her. Roxana said her parents will not pressurize their son's wife to migrate as it is a matter of honour (*man-shonman*) for them. The brother does not want his wife to migrate either. Relying on his divorced sister's income is less hurtful to his male ego than sending his wife abroad. While personal qualities matter, a woman's structural position in the family also shapes her "consent". A divorced daughter's migration does not threaten family honour the way a daughter-in-law does. Here "consent" does not concern only the individual woman but implicates the entire family as well.

Married women migrating without their husbands' consent is a common occurrence. Such women are highly motivated and determined. Not only do they consent to migrate, but they take risks to achieve their purpose. Finally, it should be made clear that consent to migrate does not mean consent to do any kind of work. In the following sections, we will review the cases of women who consented to migrate but refused

the work imposed on them in the destination country.

### 5.3. Severe judgment on husbands as family providers

Taken together, the reasons given for the migration of married women present a severe judgment on husbands as providers. Out of a batch of married women (96 at first migration and 99 at last interview), 43 reported that their husbands did not earn enough to support the family. This could be for several reasons, such as lack of work or low income but also because the husband was addicted to substances or to gambling (16 cases); the husband was not working and not earning or earning but wasting money on himself (20 cases); or the husband was sick or handicapped (9 cases). Women migrate for non-economic reasons as well, such as to get away from a husband whose behaviour they find unbearable, or from one who has taken another wife or is womanizing (21 cases), or who is being jealous or violent (9 cases), reasons which are not mutually exclusive.

### 5.4. Migration to reimburse a husband's debt

Women migrating to repay a large family debt incurred when a husband, a son or a brother was sent abroad appears in a remarkably high number of cases. In this section, we will discuss wives who migrated to repay a debt contracted by their husband. Three stories will be presented. The first is from Majlispur (Brahmanbaria), where the husband was a *sardar* (or manager) at a brick field. He gave his recruits an advance payment before the start of the season, but they ran away with the money and a large debt accumulated, compelling his wife to migrate. The second story is from Sayasta (Manikganj) where a husband twice migrated to Singapore with borrowed money but failed to earn anything. Selling land and borrowing from relatives did not suffice to expunge the large debt, and his wife migrated.

With women's migration costing less than men's – after 2015, it could even be free – and their income being quite reliable, their migration offered a relief that could not be achieved otherwise. These are "distress migrations" of a kind, the wives acting as family saviours. They earn praise but do not achieve ownership of any assets. The third story is from Chonpara

(Narayanganj) where the wife's salary from a garment factory did not suffice to repay accumulated debts as the husband was an addict and did not work. She migrated to Jordan, repaid the debt and created her own savings. Upon her return, she did not receive praise but insults. She finally divorced the husband.

### Chompa

Chompa lives in Gutsogram, Majlishpur (Brahmanbaria) where landless people were given plots to build a home. She never went to school, and her husband believed men alone should provide for the family; however, a crisis occurred that changed his outlook. Chompa migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2017 at the age of 24, leaving behind 3 young children aged 3, 5 and 7 years. Her husband explained:

*I used to work in the brick field for six months of the year and did whatever work I could get the rest of the year: fisher, boatman, day labourer. But for two years in a row, I acted as the sardar at the brick field and lost a huge sum of money. My recruits ran away with the advance payment (dadon), and I had to find other people to do the work. I had to borrow 500,000 takas. Moneylenders wanted their money back, and they even grabbed me on the road. I could not go out. I could not stay home. No work meant no food. My creditors captured me a few times, and my mother-in-law had to pay for my release. She suggested that my wife went abroad. My position was such that I could neither agree nor disagree ... My mother-in-law covered all costs ... after my wife left, I opened a bank account ... thanks god, she found a good employer."*

Chompa made a video call to her mother during the interview and the researcher could speak to her.

*It is early in the morning here. I have some time as the whole family is asleep. My employer is in the police. They have 11 children. Madam is a good person, but the work is heavy. They live at night and sleep during the day. For us khadamma [domestic workers], work is night and day ... My salary is 1,000 riyals. I send all my income to my husband. I have no bank account ... Here, the youngest child is 1 and the oldest about 16. They all attend school except the youngest two... I am the only khadamma. I seldom*

*have time to rest. Madam cooks the food. One Bangladeshi driver takes the children to school, does the shopping ... I speak to him, but we do not interact much... I never thought I would migrate. But I had to go ... my children are very small. I think of them a lot. My mother-in-law is good to them, and my mother keeps an eye ... I hope to visit home in another two years.*

Chompa will then have completed more than five years abroad. Her mother who lives nearby confirmed that she keeps an eye on her daughter's household. The husband has not been idle either. After clearing his debts, he invested his wife's remittances with good returns. He mortgaged the land that he cultivates and engages in moneylending, reversing the equation he once occupied. Chompa's earnings "saved" her husband, restored his honour and brought a level of prosperity to their household. For the time being, she does not question her husband being the sole owner of the assets procured through her income as she believes he is making good use of her remittances. Chompa's labour abroad earned her moral credit and gave her husband material wealth. In this sense, her migration has not altered traditional gender roles. We shall come back to this question. One neighbour recently returned from Oman empty-handed commented on Chompa's household.

*Everything changed after his wife migrated. They are doing very well. How can one be against women's migration? Women are more successful than men. With the high cost of men's migration and the kind of salary men get, they cannot do well.*

### Parul

Parul was introduced in Chapter 3 as she related her younger sister Sonia's migration to Lebanon at the age of 14. It may be recalled that the interview with Parul was held in November 2018 when she was visiting home after three years. Subsequently, regular visits were paid to her natal and marital families, the last one being in March 2021. Parul's own story is also remarkable. This mother of two sons migrated to Lebanon in 2015 at the age of 24 to pay off a debt her husband had accumulated to finance two migrations to Singapore. Although her family maintained that women should not migrate, the need was such that the family felt there was no



alternative. Parul (interviewed November 2018) explained:

*The first time my husband migrated to Singapore, he stayed one year. The second time, he stayed six months. He earned nothing. To the contrary, he was left with a debt of 800,000 takas. In 2015, we still owed 450,000 takas. We had already sold the land we got from my in-laws. My husband did not look upon women's migration favourably. He did not want to send me abroad but when I left, we were drowning in debt. He could not object. My sister was already in Lebanon, and she got me a "free" visa and she finds jobs for me. Some employers pay us US\$4 per hour, others US\$5. Many give us food as well. I earn US\$350–370 a month and keep US\$100 to cover transport, telephone and other costs. I am very careful with money. I send my money to my father-in-law or to my father depending on the opportunity. Even more than my children, I am concerned with the repayment of this debt. So far, I have remitted 400,000 takas. There is still 60,000 takas to be paid. I also spent 100,000 takas for my husband to set up a shop.*

Parul led a frugal life, kept nothing for herself and hoped for a better future. At the time (2018), she earned reasonably well. She explained that none of her husband's three sisters had migrated, but the situation was reversed for the women who married into the family. She and her elder sister-in-law worked abroad, and both migrated to pay off the debts incurred by their husbands. Parul did not mince her words about the ambitions of the two brothers.

*Both my husband and my brother-in-law wanted to be "big people" [boro lok] but they could not realize their dreams. They wasted their father's wealth. Here, both men and women have migrated, but the women work harder, and they know how to save. They have done more for their families than the men. Still, society looks down upon women's migration. Women earning creates a kind of shame. I find this truly unjust and revolting.*

Parul had already returned to Lebanon when her husband was interviewed in July 2019. He had closed the little shop she had paid for as it made no profit. Parul's husband said:

*I closed my shop in February 2019. People purchased on credit, and I made a loss of*

*200,000 takas. I have been unemployed since. I finished paying back my loan last month. The loan was obtained against my mother's land, and it was also due to her being a member of BRAC. It took almost four years to repay. The monthly repayment was 28,000 takas. My wife sent 20,000 takas and my elder brother gave 8,000 takas. My wife used to send money to her father. How humiliating this is for a husband. My friends saw that my wife did not think highly about me. Since February, she has been sending money directly to me ... I am pleased we are now free from debt, but I feel ashamed that I had to depend on my wife. My father stopped speaking with me. He was annoyed that my brother also had to pay to reimburse the loan. I feel lonely and helpless. My mother looks after the children and after me ... How long will I live like this without a wife?*

The shame expressed by this educated young man who depended on his wife's earnings after failing to make his own migration a success and accumulating a large debt speaks volumes about a hurt male ego. It also illustrates a migration economy well-documented in Bangladesh: the high costs of male migration for which candidates sell their land, borrow from NGOs and involve close family members. The reasons for this state of affairs, including the multiplication of intermediaries and corrupt practices, are often evoked and the culprits denounced, but consequences on gender roles within migrant households are seldom highlighted.

In an interview held in 2019, Parul's father-in-law explained how his sons' wives had brought prosperity to his household:

*I once worked for Proshika [a left wing NGO] – that changed the way I looked at women and increased the respect I had for them. When my daughters-in-law migrated, I did not share the views of most men. I did not think women's work was any less important than men. But I am annoyed at my son [Parul's husband]. He went abroad and covered the entire cost by borrowing money through the family. Everyone contributed. We were all burdened with this problem. The prosperity that was achieved in our family is through the income of our [sons'] wives. My eldest son's wife has been abroad for 16 years, we are totally indebted to her. She was in Dubai for seven years and went twice to*

*Lebanon. Presently, she is in Saudi Arabia. She went abroad at a time when we were in great difficulties.*

*Twenty-five years ago, my eldest son went to Dubai and failed to earn. When he came back, he worked with a Cumilla dalal. That man was a crook. My son recruited candidates, and the dalal ran away with the money. At one stage, my son owed people 500,000 takas. We did not have a lot of wealth and could not reimburse people by selling land. This is when my son's wife decided to go abroad. We were not happy with the decision. How could we send our wife [ghorer bou] abroad? My two sons were healthy, well-educated boys and yet, they were unsuccessful migrants. Not only unsuccessful but they led our family into crisis. Their wives are the ones who saved us.*

How long though can wives save their in-laws' household? In January 2021, Parul's brother-in-law, the eldest son engaged in politics and had finally won a seat at the local election, and he had also married another woman. Hearing this, Parul's sister-in-law, the first wife stopped sending them money.

Parul's husband returned to Singapore to try his luck for a third time. He left one year after closing the shop. The cost of the third migration was 550,000 takas. Parul provided 250,000 takas, her father gave 100,000 takas and Parul's mother-in-law contributed 100,000 takas, borrowing again from an NGO's microcredit scheme. Parul's husband raised the rest by selling equipment purchased for the shop and by borrowing in his own name. Some questions arise here: how does one explain Parul's husband's attempt at a third migration or make sense of such obstinacy considering past failures that have cost his family so much?

This case is far from exceptional. *Dalals* sell a dream that young men seeking escape discomfort at home are ready to buy while families feel compelled to do all they can to help a son stand on his own feet – in other words, to be a man. Once again, Parul sent her hard-earned savings home with the warning that this would be the last time. We did not meet Parul, but she is unlikely to have approved of her husband's third migration. Still, she did not dare refuse her support while her father was dragged into the same (mis)adventure. Family members providing a loan are the last to be reimbursed, and a wife has no leverage to demand that

her husband returns what she gave because between husband and wife, there is no lending. Parul's husband could not earn much at first as the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down activities in Singapore. In March 2021, the situation had somewhat improved.

The husband's repeated migrations financed with borrowed money perpetuate a vicious circle. For Parul, the endless pressure to pay back loans incurred for her husband's migrations left nothing for her to pursue ambitions of her own because her money has been sucked away. With her income in Lebanon having considerably dwindled following the multiple crises that hit Lebanese economy, Parul is delaying her return home. The same applies to her sister-in-law. After so many years abroad, what home is there to return to? The next case provides an example of a woman opting out and divorcing her husband of 24 years.

### *Shabnaz*

When she migrated to Jordan in 2015, Shabnaz was about 32 years old. This was her first migration and she stayed four years without returning for a visit. Her story was heard 13 months after her return as she was interviewed in relation to her daughter Manisha, whose case history was presented in Chapter 3. Unlike the two previous cases, Shabnaz did not migrate with her husband's blessing. She secretly prepared her departure fearing violence from the husband till the last moment. Shabnaz said:

*The day before I left for Jordan, my husband beat me. I had left my handbag containing my documents with a neighbour as I feared he would destroy them. He used to say, "Who goes abroad but depraved women?" [Kharup magui chara, keo bideshe jai?] My husband never provided adequately for me and the children. That is the reason I joined a garment factory when the children were young. When I got my salary, our quarrels began. He would grab a good part of my income and after repaying instalments on our loans, very little was left. My husband was addicted to ganja and heroin. Now, he is on yaba and heroin. In fact, he did not give up anything. What can I say about my marriage? My husband was a handsome footballer, and we fell in love. I was very young then. Soon after my first menstruation, a child was born and three more followed, one after the other. At first, my*

*husband worked a little but then his addiction got worse.*

*While in Jordan, I decided I would not go back to him. I sent my income to my mother, and she repaid our debts. Upon return, I went to stay with her. My husband went to a member of the local council with my mother-in-law, and they demanded that I return to them. There was a shalish, and I was made to go back to my husband as we were not divorced. Soon, my husband wanted to know what I had done with my money, and he began beating me. I returned to my mother. Again, he went to the member and another shalish was held. The member imposed a fine of 20,000 takas on me [for not sharing my income with my husband]. After this, I sent him a divorce letter. That made him even more angry. He continued to be violent and to demand that I give him money. In Jordan, I worked for an elderly woman who had 11 children. She lived with her handicapped daughter. Both mother and daughter were incontinent. It was a lot of work. One of her sons, who was better off than the others, paid my salary and provided what I needed. My salary was 15,000 takas for the first two years and 18,000 takas for the last two.*

Although Shabnaz had previously worked in a garment factory, she left for Jordan on a domestic worker visa, which was easier to manage given how secretly the arrangements needed to be made. She never went to school and describes herself as *boka* (simple, naïve). Working at the factory, she became more *chalak* (aware, clever). She had a bank account in her name before migrating and so did her mother, also a former garment factory worker. Although

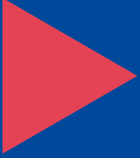
she failed to control her income, Shabnaz was aware of financial matters.

The dramatic episodes of Shabnaz' return that eventually led her to divorce her husband of 24 years deserve comment. On what grounds can a local arbitration council impose the return of a migrant wife to her (addict) husband along with the payment of a fine to the latter? Shabnaz said she complied at first as she was not divorced. The husband then felt entitled to an account of how she had used her income and more violence ensued before she finally divorced him. One may ask why she did not do so earlier, but the complex network of relationships and multiple dramas that occurred in this family may provide an explanation. The years Shabnaz spent in Jordan undoubtedly provided space to reconsider her situation and reposition herself. Also, she could pay off the debts that had held her captive for so many years.

The manner of handling such conflicts in local arbitration raises fundamental questions. What rights does a husband have over his wife's income? And if such rights are recognized, are they annulled when the husband fails to provide? Local arbitrations reiterate prevalent social norms, but decisions often depend on local politics and the strength mastered by the respective parties, including the ability to bribe arbitrators. Shabnaz and her mother did not pay those who delivered the judgment, but they believe the husband did. The *shalish* constitutes a parallel system of justice valued for its proximity, low costs and quick resolution of conflicts. Case histories often mention recourse to a *shalish*. The scope of the present study does not permit a fuller discussion of this important institution.



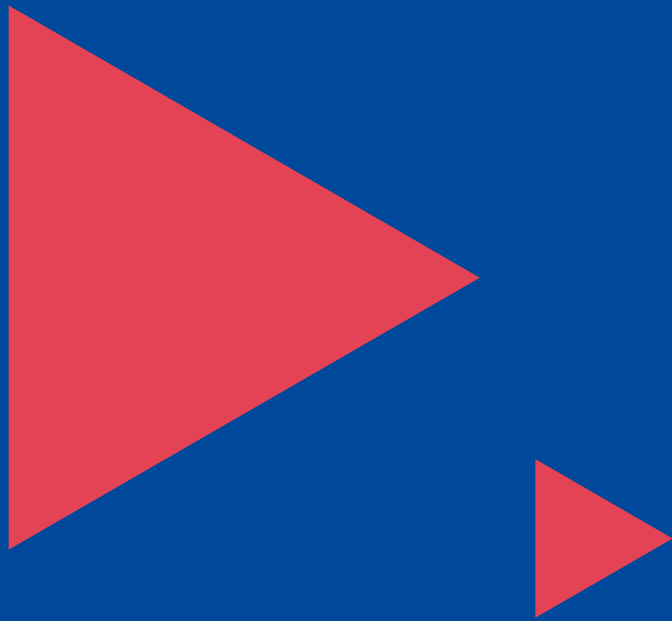




# 6

## Long-term migration and resetting of objectives

---



This chapter focuses on long-term migrations that comprise several episodes with contrasting experiences abroad, transformations in the family, turnabouts and changed objectives. If the initial purpose of migration was to improve family well-being, changing circumstances often raise new questions regarding objectives and the repartition and ownership of assets, and different attitudes appear in the management of income. Two case stories in the following sections illustrate how migrant women reacted to changes at home and in their private lives and how they reset their objectives, forging their own place but in very different ways.

#### Rowshonara

Rowshonara is a 49-year-old woman from Manikganj. She first migrated to Bahrain in 1996, which is the earliest migration recorded in the present study. She later worked in Kuwait, Dubai and Lebanon, ending her migration career in 2017. Over a span of 21 years, she worked abroad for 17 years.

At her first migration, she was 23 years old and the mother of an 8-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son. Her husband and her in-laws encouraged her to migrate. They had no agricultural land, their house was in disrepair, and they believed that Rowshonara could improve their condition. Her father chipped in to pay the migration cost of 40,000 takas, showing his approval. However, Rowshonara did not complete her contract in Bahrain, returning after 18 months. She rested for three months and migrated to Kuwait where she stayed for four years. In terms of income, food, lodging and opportunities to travel, the Kuwait job is the one she appreciated the most. Again, Rowshonara rested for four months and left for Dubai. Her husband, by that time, had become a well-known *dalal*, his business being fed by the visas sent to him by Rowshonara and other sources.

For the first seven years, Rowshonara sent her entire earnings to her husband and to her father-in-law. Events then occurred that plunged the family into a profound crisis that led her to pause and to reconsider a division of responsibilities. She said:

*While I was in Dubai, my husband took another wife, and she had a son. This woman was from Bogura. My husband did not bring her to our home. He kept her in Singair. I had sent him most of my income from Bahrain*

*and Kuwait. From Dubai, he got my income for the first 18 months, but when I heard he had married again, I stopped sending him money. Upon my return from Dubai, I went to my father's home. My father and my brother were very angry. They wanted me to divorce him, but I did not want to be separated from my children. My in-laws also wanted me back ... There were many shalish ... I came back after my husband divorced his second wife.*

Rowshonara had the backing of her family, and her parents-in-laws did not want to part with a daughter-in-law who had been devoted to them. Considerable pressure was applied on the husband to divorce the second wife, who returned to her family against monetary compensation that Rowshonara paid. The husband now occasionally provides for the son, but Rowshonara does not include him as a legitimate inheritor of the family wealth. She is still bitter about the money her husband wasted on other women. She said:

*My husband married one woman but had affairs with many. He spent for them and here accounts were not kept ... He is not a good man. Now, his children are married ... He cannot behave as he did before ... We could have done very well if he had not squandered money as he did. If he had not been so stupid and had wasted only the money he earned and not my earnings as well.*

Rowshonara stayed home for three years after these events. She migrated again at the age of 35, this time to Lebanon where she stayed for 8 years but unlike the past, she returned home every two years and kept a close eye on assets. She paid for the migration of her 22-year-old daughter to Lebanon. Because of her own experience, she also made sure that her daughter's income would not be appropriated by someone else, and she purchased land in her daughter's name. Later, she provided the funds to bring her son-in-law to Lebanon with a "free" visa. Rowshonara retired from migration after sending her only son to Qatar. She summed up her achievements:

*The homestead land is registered in my name. I compensated my brothers-in-law for their part in the property, and pressure was put on my husband to hand over his portion to me. I purchased two bighas of agricultural land in my name, paid 30,000 takas to take my daughter to Lebanon and 150,000 takas when*

*her husband joined her with a “free” visa. This money was reimbursed later when my son was sent to Qatar.*

Rowshonara was interviewed in June 2021. At 47, she was not considering migrating again, although the family had suffered from the slowing down of activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic and another series of mishaps. Crops grown on the land she owns could feed the family but procured little cash. Her husband’s work as a recruiter had come to a standstill, and her daughter and son-in-law in Lebanon earned just enough to survive. Finally, her only son who migrated to Qatar in 2017 came home on a visit in November 2020 to be reunited with a wife he married over the phone. He was unable to return on time because of the COVID-19 restrictions. His visa expired, and the 350,000 takas invested in his migration were lost. She explained:

*Our son was abroad for three years. His salary was not very good, about 20,000–25,000 takas. We did not incur a loss but could not save anything either... One-and-a-half months ago (April 2021), we sent his wife to Saudi Arabia ... She had worked in Saudi Arabia before her wedding, and she agreed without hesitation ... this is not what we had planned. The idea was that my son’s wife would contribute to housework. She would give birth to children and look after the family. But we had to send her abroad. She is in Dammam now, and her salary is 1,200 riyals. Already, she has sent one month’s salary. The plan is to send our son abroad on her income.*

Sending a son’s wife abroad to rescue the family is the scenario being replayed here, but Rowshonara is in a different role. In 2018, she had sent her only son abroad regardless of the (high) cost and had counted on his income to support the household. How stubborn the belief that a migrant son will provide is. Economists have spoken of financial illiteracy to explain how families send a son or a husband abroad and consent to pay high sums of money that do not match with the modest income likely to be earned. Rowshonara did not have to borrow money to send her son to Qatar as her son-in-law returned the favour that she had granted him earlier, and the family savings covered the rest. Yet, his migration produced no savings. By comparison, her 22-year-old daughter-in-law, who migrated to Saudi Arabia in April 2021,

is already earning more than her son on a monthly basis, and her migration was free. Yet, Rowshonara continues to place high hopes on her only son and to see the wife’s migration as instrumental and temporary. In the long run, her aim is to restore “normality”, that is middle-class standards, as she sees it.

Economists reading financial illiteracy in such behaviour may need to change their explanatory framework. The authors suggest that the honour and prestige derived from upholding a specific gender order offers a better understanding. Rowshonara’s family has climbed the social ladder largely as a result of her earnings as a migrant worker. The rank now occupied requires not sending a son’s wife abroad. Her (unpaid) labour is called for at home believes Rowshonara. In other words, by subscribing to the view that a daughter-in-law’s migration is temporary and secondary, Rowshonara adheres to a moral order prevailing in “honourable” families.

At different times, Rowshonara held different views regarding the management of remittances, and her present behaviour is at odds with what she has stood for in other circumstances. She had first given her entire income to her husband and to her father-in-law but after a major crisis, she opened her own bank account, managed her own affairs, supervised family spending and acquired property in her name. She also behaved quite differently with her daughter and her daughter-in-law. While she helped the first to purchase land in her own name, the latter’s salary is now being saved to cover the cost of her son’s future migration. Mothers with sons backing patriarchal values and prioritizing their sons in everything has been seen elsewhere. In the end, Rowshonara is fulfilling the conventional role of the mother-in-law. Whether Rowshonara’s wish will be realized remains to be seen. The daughter-in-law was abroad and could not be interviewed.

The next case history shows how and in what circumstances a migrant woman decided that holding onto an unreasonable husband was not worth the pain. While women like Rowshonara fought hard to restore their positions in their marital homes and succeeded in evicting a co-wife, paying the price, others rapidly opted for separation and divorce. This is Roxana’s case.

### Roxana

Roxana has two brothers, one older and one younger than her. She was mentioned in Chapter 5 in relation to the burden she was made to bear as her younger brother returned to their parental home with wife and children after failing to earn as a migrant in Saudi Arabia. She had to provide for them, while her sister-in-law did not feel brave enough to go out and earn. Roxana first migrated to Dubai at the age of 16. Her elder brother was already working in Saudi Arabia, and her younger brother was then too young to migrate. She said:

*I did not study much, and we learned little at school. The teacher did not always turn up... I went abroad very young. I wanted to see foreign countries, and I saw that women who worked abroad looked beautiful, had money and returned with nice things. I wanted to see for myself what life abroad was like. My elder brother did not approve, but I convinced my father. It was not too difficult. I went to a dalal. There is no shortage of them here. I said I want to go abroad, and he spoke to my father.*

Roxana, a curious adolescent girl, took the initiative of her first migration. She has been a keen observer of the environments she experienced with different employers. When interviewed in 2021, she was 30 years old and had already worked in Dubai, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia, a country she was preparing to rejoin with a new employer. In Qatar, she worked for a rich family whose daughters moved between London and Doha, and in Oman she worked for a poor widow who kept goats in the desert. Her descriptions of these contrasted employers' households are a boon for a researcher. In addition, her ability to cope with such varied positions also demonstrates her extraordinary ability to adapt and a resilience that extends to her personal life.

After her third migration, Roxana married a man of her choice she got to know through phone conversations while she worked in Oman. Several live-in domestic workers pointed out the importance of relationships developed through their mobile phone, and how crucial these could be in their lonely and secluded lives. Such contacts permit them to entertain love relationships and elaborate marriage plans that escape family scrutiny. The outcome is often

disappointing. Roxana's own experience of marriage has been catastrophic.

*In 2017, I married someone I was in love with and was in a relationship with. I got to know him while I was in Oman as we talked on the phone. He was from Cumilla and after our marriage, he came to live here [Sayasta]. He used to say that if we had married earlier, the money I gave to my parents would have been his. He demanded 700,000 takas for his own migration. He said, "Surely you have this kind of money, or you can manage to get it as both your brothers work abroad."*

With what sense of entitlement could a husband make such request to a wife as though she had to compensate him for what she earned before they met, as if his possession of her could extend to her past life? Roxana was cautious. She gave the husband 150,000 takas, insisting that it was not a dowry, but a contribution to establish a family (*shongshar*). In the end, Roxana had to pay an additional 80,000 takas as the husband took out bank loans that she had to repay after he disappeared.

*When my husband saw that he would not get 700,000 takas from me, he disappeared. He did not keep in touch with me. I understood he did not care about me. He only wanted my money. So, I did not look for him anymore.*

Roxana had married a swindler who left her with a baby boy. It was a bitter experience but marriage, the obligatory passage in a woman's life, was done, and a child was born from a legitimate relationship, endowing Roxana with the status of a mother. These were her gains. As she had unmasked the swindler, she felt the damage was limited. Roxana could not recover the money lost, but she rapidly healed from the experience and exerted the freedom she had to migrate again. She said:

*Two years after my wedding, I left my eight-month-old son with my mother and left for Saudi Arabia. There was no cost. The dalal even said he would give me 20,000 takas. In the end, he gave me 7,000 takas. I was sent to Mecca. My salary was 1,000 riyals (22,000 takas). I had a two-year contract, but I came back four months early as I had health problems.*

As already mentioned, her younger brother then rejoined the parental home having failed to earn in Saudi Arabia. She continued:

*Look, in my family, my brothers also worked abroad but it is I, the daughter, who takes responsibility for our parents. I am not an exception. You will find this in many families.*

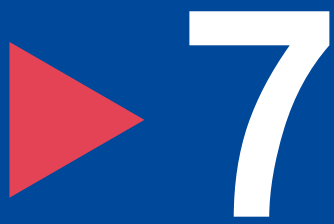
Roxana had considered working nearer home after her husband disappeared, but she preferred migrating for the following reasons. She said:

*For a higher income, and for my own satisfaction, I prefer working abroad. Abroad, I am completely alone, responsible for everything. I must adjust to the environment whether I like it or not. Having to cope on one's own gives you strength. That is how one grows autonomous and self-dependent.*

Roxana spent 13 years abroad and two years in a stormy marriage at home. After becoming a mother and finding out that her husband

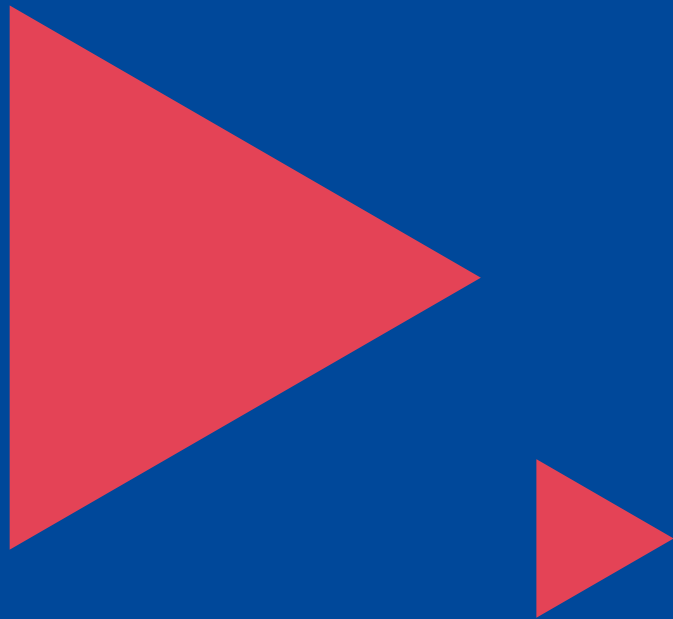
had vanished, leaving only debts, she reset her objectives and resumed her migration journey. Roxana has never endorsed the ethos of a victim, regardless of her disastrous marriage and the heavy burden she bore at the time of the interview because she was providing for seven people and her savings were running out. She positively valued the space that labour migration offered, the testing of her strengths, the ability to exert her talents, and the process of individuation that would not have been possible had she followed a more conventional path. Income, while important, is not the only criteria explaining her choices. Grabbing the opportunities that migration offers, this bright and remarkably strong woman in her own way is also a pathbreaker even if her ability to change her society is limited.





Rebel, misfit or agent  
of change?

---



Women migrants who spent several years abroad have developed autonomy and discovered new freedoms, and they may find it difficult to adjust when they return home. This is the case for men as well, but families generally allow them more leeway. To what extent can social rules be stretched to accommodate women returnees? When conflicts occur, how are these resolved and what are the consequences? These questions are addressed in this chapter through a particularly rich and well-documented case history.

### Samia

Samia was 34 years old and the mother of 2 children when she returned to her natal family after an absence of 8 years. She had already worked abroad for a total of 14 years. The pressure to resolve pending problems, take decisions and select her next destination soon followed being welcomed home and the emotional reunion with her children. Samia was extremely busy in the nine months separating her arrival from Jordan and her departure for Saudi Arabia. During this time, dramatic events occurred that she had not anticipated, which changed the course of her life. Determined to decide how she would lead her existence, Samia made choices that were intolerable to her family and a clash ensued, with consequences that are still difficult to measure.

Of the authors, Thérèse first met Samia in Amman in February 2019 as she was preparing to return home, taking advantage of the amnesty that the Jordanian government had declared for undocumented migrants. By sheer coincidence, another member of the team, Anisa, had interviewed Samia's mother in their village at about the same time. After Samia came home, she discovered that the "Madam" she had met in Amman worked with Anisa, and a relationship of trust rapidly developed. In Amman, Samia's openness and frank speech set her apart from others. With her fashionable haircut and her "modern" dressing, it was difficult to imagine her in a village context. A lively conversation was held in the room she shared with her roommate, and Samia explained the circumstances in which she ran away from her Jordanian employer after two years, how she had managed to find work afterward, who helped her, how much she earned, and many other details of her life afterwards. She did not hesitate to provide her true name (and not the pseudonym she

had used after absconding) and her address in Bangladesh.

Comparing Samia's narratives with her mother's accounts tested our research methods. The approximate truths, the small and large omissions, mostly from the mother, became obvious. In the end, the clash between mother and daughter further shattered the illusion that members of a same family may share the same truths. Samia's position also changed over the months we met her. In the beginning, her family's needs were her priority while, at the end, her personal life took over. The case history is exemplary in illustrating the complexity of migrant women's journeys and the scrutiny required in establishing "facts" and in constituting the "data" on which to base research.

Samia's family background and the chronology of events should be described first. Samia has an elder brother and two younger sisters. The daughter of a small agriculturalist, she never went to school because her family did not value educating girls and the poor means of transport at the time made reaching school difficult. Married at the age of 14 into a family of similar background, Samia gave birth to a daughter at 16 and a son two years later. At 19, she migrated to Lebanon. Influenced by the successful migrant women they came across around them, she and her husband took the decision together. To cover the migration cost of 50,000 takas, 30,000 takas was borrowed from her husband's uncle, and the savings that Samia and her husband had gathered covered the rest.

After five months in Lebanon, Samia heard that her husband had taken a second wife. The following month, she stopped sending him money, considering that he had been adequately compensated for the costs he had incurred. The children did not accept the stepmother and nor did she accept them. In any case, the husband stopped caring and providing for the children, who stayed with Samia's family. Samia worked in Lebanon for five years without returning home. While in Lebanon, she also paid for her sister to migrate.

After Lebanon, Samia came home for five months, and she divorced the husband with whom she no longer had a relationship. In 2010, she migrated to Dubai at a cost of 40,000 takas, staying 10 months as "it was not a good household". She spent one month's salary for her



return airfare. Samia pointed out that the nine months for which she received a salary more than covered the cost of her migration, and the financial outcome was overall positive.

Samia's earnings from Lebanon and Dubai paid for her elder brother's migration to Dubai. The investment (350,000 takas) was a total loss as he was arrested by the police after 18 months of having failed to earn. The *dalal* who sent Samia's brother then arranged Samia's migration to Jordan free of cost to compensate for the brother's experience. In the meantime, the third sister migrated to Dubai where she stayed four years, earning very well. All three migrant sisters sent their income to their mother, a strong woman who managed family affairs in tandem with Samia's elder brother. The father seldom raised his voice. The mother explained:

*All my children worked abroad. My son was in Dubai for one-and-a-half years, then he got deported. It was a total loss ... my second daughter was in Lebanon for 11 years. She returned two years ago, and we arranged her wedding. My youngest daughter was in Dubai, and we just arranged her wedding. My daughters have done a lot for us. Because of this, they complain to me sometimes. They say that we spent their money and left nothing for them. We arranged their marriage and that is all. I tell them: did I spend your income alone? Did I not raise you, feed you? I spent for all of you. I cannot give you the accounts.*

The mother claimed to have spent "for all" while sticking to a tradition that enshrines a fundamental inequality between the brother and the sisters. The two younger sisters were married with good dowries, after which they were not allowed to make any claims on their natal family, no matter how large their contribution had been prior to their marriage. The second sister mildly protested at her mother's stinginess when her request for 60,000 takas was turned down, the mother arguing that a married daughter belongs to her husband, and it is for him to see to her needs. In her sacrificial stance (for the good of all), the mother could hardly be faulted even if the "no accounting" clearly favoured the son.

Samia had hardly set foot in her village when she complained about the restrictions. Ten days after her return, she exclaimed:

*The air is stifling here. One cannot breathe. The earliest I can, I will migrate again ...*

*Abroad, one can move about and live freely. Abroad, I learned to walk with my head high, speak and behave with confidence. That is why I like living abroad. Now, I must arrange my daughter's marriage. I cannot leave before that is done. My son is not studying, and I must find a job for him. I will sort out these two things and then I can go. After I fulfil my responsibilities towards my children, I will be able to think of myself. Now, my children come first, and I am busy with these tasks. This is the way I feel now. I told my family they must prepare for this.*

Samia's village is familiar with returnee migrants. People are aware that migrant men and migrant women take liberties abroad. These are not necessarily condemned, provided such behaviour is not carried over to the village. Samia understood this and in the beginning, she was careful. A male friend from Lebanon called her every day, and when her phone broke down, Samia commented that it was just as well since she should not have these conversations in front of her children. She tried to abide by the norms but easily forgot them. Years abroad had altered the spontaneity of her reactions. Besides, intellectually, she no longer took for granted what others accepted. Her family saw this and accepted her difference up to a point, not realizing how far Samia's claims for independence would go.

As mentioned earlier, the disparities between Samia and her mother's narratives tested our research methods and questioned the data generally. For example, the mother stated that she had sent Samia abroad the first time, but Samia said the decision was taken with her husband. Her natal family had played no role and had not contributed to the cost. The mother explained that Samia suffered under her Jordanian employer and after running away, she did not always get work and could not send money regularly. Samia's account dedramatized the "running away". She did not pose as a victim and denied that her earnings had diminished after leaving her first employer. On the contrary, she stated that she earned more than before. The mother saying that Samia did not send remittances regularly particularly infuriated Samia who explained:

*In Jordan, I was with my employer for two years. Madam was a good person, but her husband was no good. They had three sons.*

*The eldest was a lawyer. He was divorced and had a girlfriend, who was also a lawyer, and he lived with his parents. The sons behaved well with me. Madam bought me food and gave me what I wanted. She knew that her husband was after me. She used to tell me that I should just ignore him, and nothing would happen. But after two years, I told Madam, I did not want to stay. The salary was low, and her husband's looks disturbed me. I got my salary and I left. I took a taxi and went to a man I knew. I soon found a good Madam in Jofah, who helped me find more customers. I took jobs on a weekly basis and used to get paid 100 Jordanian dinars (11,000 takas) a week. Before I ran away, my salary was 18,000 takas a month. After I left, I earned 40,000–45,000 takas a month. At a minimum, I always got 30,000 takas. The room I rented cost me 7,000 takas (60 dinars). While living at these temporary employers, I did not pay for food, shampoo or soap. I liked this weekly rhythm which left me with free time on the weekend.*

To control Samia's children's demands, their grandmother kept telling them that Samia's remittances were irregular, to which the children retorted that their mother provided for them, and they were not objects of charity. For the grandmother, the children had become out of control, and Samia was pressed to make new arrangements for them. Sonia's daughter (Jorna) was taken out of school at the age of 14, and this was another point of contention. The girl enjoyed school and she resented this decision. Samia's mother and her elder brother justified the move on the ground that Jorna was too "forward" and that keeping her in school would jeopardize her future. Jorna's marriage was to be arranged and Samia was also admonished. It was now the mother's behaviour that hampered the daughter's marriage prospects. Arranging a marriage called for the display of virtuous women, and Samia was forgetting the most basic rules of her *samaj* (society).

Samia's mother kept complaining about her inability to control Samia's children. In this regard, it must be recognized that the task for grandmothers who have the responsibility of bringing up grandchildren in the absence of their migrant mothers is not easy. An older generation of women bears a considerable weight for which they are inadequately supported and compensated. We have seen that Samia's

children's father quickly washed his hands off them and ceased to take any responsibility after taking a second wife. Fathers are remarkably absent and irresponsible towards their children in such circumstances. So little is expected of them that they are hardly mentioned in grievances.

Five months after coming back home, Samia was doing her best to fulfil her numerous responsibilities. She was close to her daughter and particularly attentive to her preference in the choice of a husband.

*We abandoned the idea of marrying Jorna to the party I told you about. We did not know but we later found the boy was an addict. Besides, from the beginning, Jorna was not keen on him. She has another boy in mind that she likes. I found out about her feelings. The boy is presently in the Maldives and should come back in six months. When he returns, we will propose marriage. I discussed the matter with my family. They all think he is a good match. My son is not doing anything. I worry about him. I cannot send him abroad. He is too young for this. I purchased an easy bike, but he did not use it, so I sold it. I sold the tractor I purchased for my brother for 60,000 takas and bought a new one for 125,000 takas.*

Since her return, Samia had been considering different options for her next migration. At one stage, it was proposed that she goes to Saudi Arabia on a family visa, meaning as someone else's wife, and that she engages in domestic work for several households as she did in Lebanon. But what other "duties" would be required on such a visa made her suspicious, finding it too risky. She also considered going to Dubai on a "free visa", but the cost was too high. She finally opted for migration to Saudi Arabia on a company visa to work in a hospital, appreciating the relative freedom such a job offered. After the freedom she had known in Jordan, she had no appetite for the confinement of a live-in maid (*bandha kajer meye*). Finally, something happened that made Samia want to leave very quickly on any available visa.

*I had a major conflict with my family regarding my own life. I developed a relationship with a boy after my return. We love each other. He used to work as a carpenter in our neighbour's home. He is Hindu, married and has two children. We*

*really love each other and would like to live together. He can convert to Islam and marry me. His wife will automatically be divorced upon him converting.*

Given the context of the village, Samia must have known that her family would never accept her plan to marry her Hindu lover. They effectively objected and proposed arranging a marriage with a Muslim man of their choice instead. She explained:

*My mother and brother tell me, "You did as you wished while you were abroad but now you have a daughter to give in marriage. If you marry a Hindu man, how can you arrange her wedding? We understand that you may want to marry. We can look for a good match for you, someone of our jati." They don't understand anything. I fell in love with that man and not with any other. And when one is in love, does it matter that the lover is Hindu or Muslim. I can see that if I marry this man, I will not be able to live here. My own family will not allow it. I intend to look for land in Singair and build a house there.*

The threat was serious. Not only was Samia flaunting all social rules by being in an intimate relationship with a Hindu man and being openly seen with him on the back of his motorbike, but she also proposed marrying him, thus creating lasting ties. Beyond the scandal, such marriage would also dry up a source of income that her family had enjoyed for many years. In the month of October, Samia secretly married her lover who officially became a Muslim. Considering that the man was already married to a Hindu woman, the legality of the procedure may be questionable. Putting the legal question aside, Samia's situation became untenable. Her family, more exactly, the mother-son tandem, applied pressure on Samia to divorce this husband which Samia could not accept. The confrontation grew increasingly fierce and violent. The events that followed were described a year later in the absence of Samia, who migrated to Saudi Arabia in December 2019 on a domestic worker visa. It was reported that Samia, her brother and her mother came to blows. The mother said:

*My daughter tried to kill me. We were ostracized because of her. She made us pariahs in our own community. I shall never forget nor forgive.*

The mother was reportedly injured with a scissor that Samia held in her hand (those telling the story were outside the room). At the sight of blood gushing out from her mother's finger, Samia got frightened and fled the village. She sought shelter with her new husband. The first wife was present and refused to let her in the house. The husband intervened and they quarrelled. Overwhelmed, the Hindu wife ran to the police station. When the police found out that the husband had converted to Islam and was duly "married" to his second wife, they declared that the law of the country had not been broken, and there was little they could do apart from calling the Hindu family. The husband's brothers arrived on the scene, disowned the brother who had betrayed his lineage and religion (*gushti, jati, dhormo*), took the first wife and her children away, and severed links with Samia's husband. She had gained a husband, but he had lost his community (*samaj*). In fact, both were without *samaj* at this stage.

In Samia's village, her family was excommunicated for failing to control a daughter who openly flaunted social and religious rules (*samajic niom*). Samia was declared *bidhormi*. Her brother was forbidden to use the road with his tractor, and the family was barred from social events. The excommunication (*ek ghore rakha*) was lifted 10 months later after the family paid a symbolic fine (5,000 takas) and offered a sweet dish (*shirni*) to members of the community to absolve themselves, which is the traditional way to end such conflicts. Samia was then in Saudi Arabia.

Behind the mechanism of excommunication and the religious discourse, there are politics and money. A relative who observed the dramatic events from a neighbouring village argued that Samia's mother was caught at her own game. Had she sided with her daughter, had she accepted her marriage, gossip would have died eventually, and social condemnation would not have gone this far. But instead of taming the fire, she exacerbated it.

Samia never completed the two tasks foremost on her agenda at the beginning of her stay. She could not arrange her daughter's wedding, which was finalized after her departure with a boy her brother selected. Being excommunicated, the family could not hold a reception, and a smaller event was organized at Samia's sister's home. Samia could not find a job for her son either.

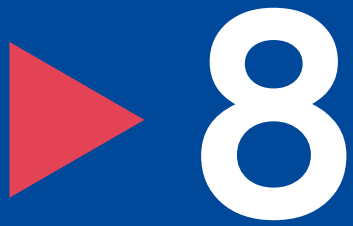
One year after she left for Saudi Arabia, a tenuous line of communication between Samia and her family was opened through one of her sisters' mother-in-law who also worked in Saudi Arabia. The latter interceded on Samia's behalf with little success. Samia recognized her responsibility towards her son and said she would send money for him but would only do so the day her mother accepted her husband. Her relationship with her daughter, now married and the mother of a child, had grown distant. The gift Samia had sent after the girl gave birth was sent back by the son-in-law. In this confrontation of wills between mother and daughter, in this clash between relatives, village factions and communities, there were no winners.

The field investigation ended here, leaving many questions pending about Samia and, more generally, about the transformation in outlook resulting from years spent abroad. As mentioned, Samia lived abroad for 14 years, with 6 years in Lebanon and 8 years in Jordan. These were long absences as she did not return for a visit in the middle of each stay. In Jordan, as a live-out domestic worker, Samia enjoyed relative freedom. She did not share her life with a *habibi* (temporary husband) as some women did, but she could have done so. Interestingly, while narrating her life abroad, Samia decidedly rejected the label "victim" contradicting her mother who depicted her as such in specific situations.

At the age of 34, Samia claimed the right to a life of her own and to some happiness. She did not even hide the love affair she had with a Hindu man who later became her husband. Her family believed that life abroad had contaminated her thinking, and that she had become a misfit. She refused to comply with

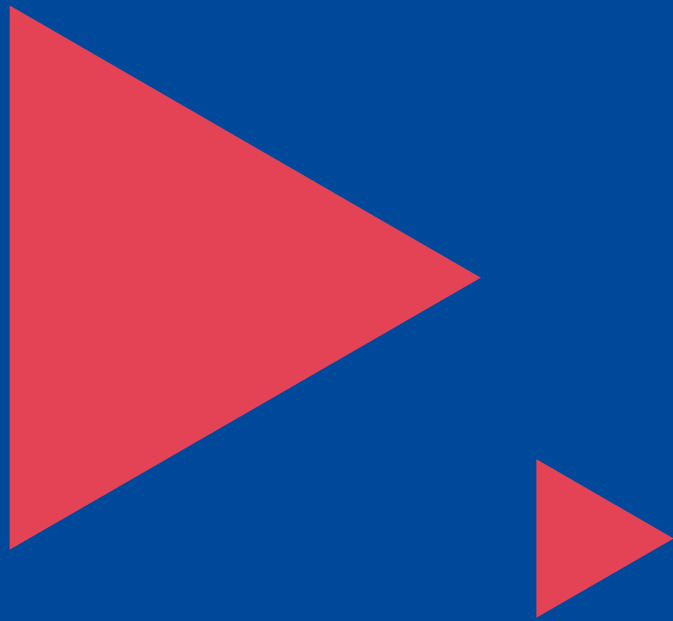
the rules of her community and clashed with her mother and brother, who were keen to preserve the economic assets that Samia had procured for them. Samia is not the only veteran migrant woman who finds village life stifling and unbearable upon return, although her stubborn pursuit of "freedoms" and the dramatic events unfolding in her case are exceptional. And thus, Samia, a responsible mother, a generous sister and a dutiful daughter who regularly sent remittances to her family was declared a pariah.

In assessing the outcomes of migration, the focus is generally put on remittances and other contributions to the economy, such as the learning of skills that could enrich the recipient country. But migrant workers are not only economic agents. They return home with the baggage of experiences, ideas, attitudes and habits, which are highly variable depending on the destination country, the work they did and the environment in which they lived. As observed elsewhere, in field work conducted in Oman, in Lebanon and in Jordan (Blanchet 2021), situations in destination countries may differ considerably. For example, in Lebanon and Jordan (Blanchet 2019), two countries where women can move freely in public space, a relatively large number of women escape the constraints of domestic workers under the *kafala* system by either absconding from the *kafeel* or operating under a "free" visa. As live-out domestic workers, they earn well and enjoy relative freedom, which was the case for Samia. The freedoms these migrant women have conquered are not necessarily welcome or applicable when they return home. Could Samia be considered an agent of social change? The question is raised to broaden the debate and it does not call for a ready answer.



# Garment factory workers

---





In the study cohort, 32 women migrated on garment factory visas. All except one first went to Jordan with two women later migrating to Mauritius. As indicated earlier, nearly all the women leaving with garment factory visas originate from two of the four sites studied, namely Narayanganj and Barguna–Patuakhali, and most had worked in Bangladesh garment factories before. A few were without experience and had left after paying a *dalal*. Shaheda from Chonpara (Narayanganj) is one of them. She migrated in September 2017 at the age of 34.

*I went to Jordan with the help of a dalal. I never worked in a garment factory before, nor did I have to take any training. I did not go for the interview. The dalal handled everything. I gave him 30,000 takas. The cost of the passport, 7,000 takas, was additional. For the medical exam, there was no cost. I am a poor woman, so the dalal did not take much money. I worked for the Classics Company in Al Hasan. For three months, I learned the job. There are no targets then – the target starts after that period. Everything was good except the salary that was very low.*

Another woman working for a company in the Al Dulyl Industrial Park confirmed the recruitment of workers without previous experience.

*I got the interview at High Tech with BOESEL and left within a month. I did not have to pay anything. Those who went through a dalal paid 50,000–60,000 takas. In our company, some very young girls were hired without interviews. They had no experience in garment factories and went through a dalal. These girls have problems. The company tests them for three to four months. Those who learn quickly can pass the test. Others who cannot work the machine but have some education and understand numbers are given a job in checking and packeting. Those who cannot be employed are returned.*

### 8.1. Duration of work abroad

The age range for women migrating for garment factory work is less spread out than with domestic workers with fewer very young girls and fewer older women. After completing the initial three-year contract, most workers sign for a second contract and quite a few extend them beyond six years. The case histories mention workers strikes and companies changing hands or closing down, leading migrant women to quit,

change sectors or continue making garments but outside an export processing zone (EPZ), thus becoming illegal migrant workers.

Four women returned before completing their contract. One had a health problem and needed more time to heal than the factory would allow. She recovered at home and returned to the same factory. The other three women were forced to quit as they lost the caretaker of their children. Shaheda, the woman who left without training had to come back after one year as her husband had a cerebral accident.

*My husband had a brain stroke. The children had stopped going to school. The situation was desperate. My eldest son told me, “What good will be the money you earn when we are all dead?” How could I stay? I regretfully took the decision to come back.*

Shaheda could recover her costs and repay an outstanding debt, but she made no profits and returned to her previous low-paid occupation selling chicken carcasses.

In another case, the husband, who looked after two daughters aged 13 and 11, fell from a tree injuring his spine. He became paralyzed from the waist down and was confined to a wheelchair. His wife in Jordan borrowed 90,000 takas from her roommates for emergency healthcare and had to work another three months to pay back the loan before returning home to look after her husband. The couple’s dream of a better life was shattered, leaving their two young daughters as potential family earners. In the other case, the worker’s mother fell ill and could no longer look after her grandchild. Migrant women’s inability to complete a contract is often attributed to abuse at the workplace. As these cases show, there could be other causes.

In the next sections, we shall present three case histories that are rich in their descriptions of garment factory work in different environments. As with domestic workers, we present the women’s narratives where work migration is inextricably linked with personal life and family circumstances.

### 8.2. Across multiple borders, a positive assessment: Shilpi

Shilpi was 37 years old when she was first interviewed in November 2018. She had just returned from Mauritius where she spent nine years working in a garment factory. She had

previously worked five years in Jordan and five years in Bangladesh in the same sector. For more than half her life, Shilpi had been a garment factory worker. She did not intend to go back as she had sufficient savings, and her health was not so good. She told us her story.

*I was 12 years old when my father died. My mother had six young children – I am the eldest – and she came to live with her parents here in Chonpara. Three years later, I was married to a man from Vikrampur. I took a job in a garment factory and lived in Narayanganj with my husband up to the point I migrated. I stopped work to give birth. My son was two years old when I left for Jordan.*

This was in 2003. To cover the cost of her migration (59,000 takas), Shilpi had some savings, her husband chipped in, and they borrowed the rest. For five years, Shilpi sent her income to her husband, who retained a small portion for household expenses and saved the rest for her. Upon her return, Shilpi was able to buy a plot of land in her name in Chonpara, build a house and rent it out. She lived with her husband in Narayanganj and gave birth to a second son. When the child was five months old, her husband brought home a second wife. Shilpi moved back to her maternal family in Chonpara and left for Mauritius, entrusting her young child to her mother, while the eldest son stayed with his paternal grandmother. Shilpi never officially divorced, but she led her life independently of her husband, taking responsibility for her siblings. She commented:

*I left angry with men and never tried to marry again. In Mauritius, my income served to support my family more than myself. I spent 100,000 takas to bring my sister-in-law to Mauritius where she worked in a fishery plant. She stayed seven years and earned very well. I paid for my younger sister to join a garment factory, and she is still in Mauritius. I helped my other brothers and sisters and their children in so many ways.*

Shilpi compared the work environments in the three countries she has known and said:

*The work pressure was greater in Jordan than in Bangladesh, but it was even more so in Mauritius. If one did not meet the target, the supervisor could yell at you, throw insults and even cut your overtime. In Jordan, they*

*could get angry but did not cut overtime. The management in Jordan was more humane. I felt Jordanians were more respectful and kind. In Mauritius, people are very tough. In Jordan, my factory was called Petra Needles. It was near High Tech Garments in the Al Dulyl Industrial Park. My salary was US\$145. With overtime, I could clear US\$180–220. The factory provided housing, food and medical care. It was a small factory with 1,000–1,200 workers. There were Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Chinese and Bangladeshi nationals. We were about 200 workers from Bangladesh. In the residence, nationalities were mixed. The company changed hands twice while I worked there. The last time it happened, I did not want to stay, and I came back home.*

In Mauritius, Shilpi's salary peaked around 2014 and it plummeted afterwards. She said:

*In the beginning, my salary was 8,000 Mauritian rupees and with overtime I earned 9,000–12,000 rupees. By the fifth year, I could make 15,000 rupees. The last year, I no longer got overtime, and my income reduced to 8,000 rupees. When I left, I received 25,000 rupees from the government pension scheme.*

Shilpi's income over 14 years is substantial, and she was not cheated of her savings, and she could purchase land.

*The first five years I worked abroad, I was able to save nearly all my income for myself. When I left for Jordan, my in-laws were very supportive, and I was not as dependent on my family. My husband and my in-laws did not object to my purchasing land in my name. While in Mauritius, I had my own bank account but could not send money home directly. I had to send it via Western Union to a specific person. For six years, I sent money to my cousin, and she returned it to me. I was able to buy a plot of land for 1,000,000 takas. For the last three years, I sent money to my brother, and he deposited it into my bank account. I used to phone the bank to check if the deposit had been made.*

In both Jordan and Mauritius, Shilpi worked in a multicultural environment that was more open and permissive than the society she came from. She accepted the freedoms that others took but did not engage in a romance herself. Her comments on life abroad are interesting:

*Mauritius is more free than Jordan. If a man and a woman went out together, no one asked questions. In Jordan, if the same thing happened, the man's aqama would be checked but not the woman. Women alone wearing burqa were not disturbed but if you went out, they would want to know where you are going, but this was not the case in Mauritius. Many women stayed outside with a man. This was not for business. It was difficult to stay alone, and many preferred to live with someone. There is nothing wrong with this, provided one did not get pregnant. I saw many women facing such problems. In Mauritius, it is not so difficult to get an abortion, something that was much more problematic in Jordan.*

After she returned, Shilpi's husband wanted to renew their relationship – they were not yet divorced – but she was not interested. However, she wanted to renew contact with her eldest son, now 17 years old, and contribute to his future. She had ambitions for her youngest son and intended to spend on his education. She also planned to build a house on the land she owned and rent it out as a source of income. Shilpi ended the interview with a very positive appreciation of her years abroad, saying:

*My family regards me highly and listens to me. I earned that consideration because of the years I spent abroad. I think that migration gives women a lot in terms of respect, economic security, and well-being. All this could not have been achieved if I had stayed home.*

### 8.3. No room of one's own upon return: Ameri's anger and resentment

Shilpi and Ameri both entered a garment factory after they were married but, unlike Shilpi, Ameri had no control over her income. Researchers and casual observers of garment factory workers confirm such situations to be widespread, with husbands and in-laws assuming that they have rights over a wife's income. One researcher estimated that among the garment workers he had studied, more than half of the married women handed all, or a major part, of their income to their husbands.<sup>9</sup>

Ameri, like Shilpi, worked a few years before becoming a mother, and a similar event prompted her migration: her husband brought home a second wife soon after she gave birth. Neither could accept the pain and the humiliation. Both decided to migrate and never resumed marital life. Entrusting their young children to their mothers, both women migrated to Jordan, but the similarities end here. While Shilpi achieved economic independence and always had family support, Ameri could not save as much and her return to her family was full of bad surprises. Her mother had died before she came home, and her brothers did not allow her to occupy the room she had equipped and furnished or take away what she had paid for. Ameri explained:

*I am one of three sisters and two brothers. I was married at the age 19 into a Gazipur family and joined a garment factory six months after my wedding. My sisters-in-law were already working at the factory, and they encouraged me to join. My son was born four-and-a-half years later. Less than two months after his birth, my husband took another wife. The relationship with that woman started while I was pregnant. It was very painful but given my circumstances, I could not protest. My father had died two years earlier, and my in-laws believed I had to put up with this. Otherwise, they told me I could leave.*

Ameri was deeply hurt. Back at the factory, she heard that two of her friends were leaving for Jordan and she decided to follow the same route. She said:

*I contacted a dalal who took care of everything, got my passport and took me to the BOESL [Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited]. I gave him 60,000 takas in total. I sold my jewellery for 38,000 takas, saved 12,000 from my salary and borrowed 10,000 takas. I did all of this without informing my husband. When my son was seven months old, I announced that I was visiting my family and took my son with me. This was one week before my departure date. I left the child with mother.*

Ameri opened a bank account before leaving for Jordan. One year later, she divorced the husband who came once to claim the child, but Ameri's

<sup>9</sup> Hannan Biswas in a personal communication.



family refused to hand the boy over. In Jordan, Ameri worked for Classics Factory in the Al Hasan Qualified Industrial Zone (QIZ). She completed a three-year contract and signed up for another term without returning home. In 2016, following a crisis, she quit Classics and the QIZ and joined another garment factory in Marka, becoming an illegal worker. She said:

*At Classics, the workers had launched a strike following which many had their employment terminated. After this, the management became very strict. They behaved badly with the staff, and one of my friends lost his job. He did not return to Bangladesh but found work in Marka where he earned more. I was influenced by him and joined the same factory. We shared the same lodging for two years... For the first three years at Classics, I earned 117 dinars, which increased to 130 dinars. In Marka, I earned 150 dinars from the start, and it went up 185 dinars. In addition, I had a sewing machine in my room and made salwar kameezes for Bangladeshi clients. I sent my money to my own account and gave something to my brother for my son and our mother. I also purchased a TV, fridge, bed, steel cupboard, and sent money to repair our house.*

*I earned more once I became illegal, but my income was irregular. The factory had about 450 workers. Half of them were undocumented. A majority were Bangladeshi, but there were Indian and Nepali workers as well. When inspectors came, the manager was informed in advance, and we were asked to leave. The last two years, I could clear 40,000–50,000 takas a month. By comparison, at Classics, the last two years, I earned 20,000–22,000 takas.*

Ameri returned from Jordan, benefiting from the amnesty the Jordanian government declared for illegal workers. She had been away for eight years and, as mentioned earlier, her mother had died one year before her return. Ameri was grateful to her brothers and their wives for the good care they had taken of her son, but conflict soon erupted. She was not allowed to settle in her natal home, and her brothers claimed for themselves what Ameri had purchased over the years. For the second time in her life, Ameri felt a deep sense of injustice. Her in-laws had used her income over several years, and now it was her brothers. She explained:

*I cannot stay in my mother's house. I am living with my uncle. We had a shalish. The next Friday, my brothers will give me the land I am entitled to from our father's property. At first, my brothers did not want to give me anything. Then, my two sisters insisted that they also get their share of the inheritance. We sisters agreed that I can build a house on our common share for the time being and I will compensate them later... I cannot afford to buy land with my savings ... Can I return abroad? Who will look after my son if I do? When mother was alive, I did not worry so much. Now, I am in a difficult situation. My sisters tell me I should join a garment factory here but maybe I am too old. And if I work here, how much can I earn? My brothers tell me, "Why do you need a room of your own? Why don't you stay like a guest? You should go back abroad and ensure your security for the future. Don't fight with us." If my brothers speak like this, it is not because they love me – it is to keep me under their control. By looking after my son, they will be entitled to my hard-earned money.*

At a subsequent meeting, Ameri had decided not to build a house on the piece of land the brothers reluctantly ceded to their sisters. Her savings were not enough to build a house, to bring up her son and to sustain herself as well. She later joined a garment factory in the Savar EPZ, taking her nine-year-old son with her and choosing to live away from her brothers.

Upon her return from Jordan, Ameri expressed a pent-up anger over the accumulated injustices she had suffered, first in her in-laws' home and later in her natal family. In between, she had spent eight years in Jordan, which sharpened her awareness and sense of entitlement to the wealth she produced. When her in-laws had disposed of her salary, Ameri did not protest much. She said her father's death had weakened her position in her in-laws' home, and even when the husband brought home a new wife less than two months after she became a mother, Ameri initially put up with it until she could find a way out. Her present difficulties had revived these past losses and humiliations. How can she accept that her brothers occupy the house that she repaired and equipped with her remittances and regard her as a temporary guest?

Ameri strongly contested a "culture" in which a divorced daughter returning to her natal family

has no more rights than a guest. Her son, in this tug of war, further complicated matters. At every step, Ameri had to fight to enforce rights that were structurally unequal to begin with, such as sisters inheriting half of their brothers' share. But even this unequal share was not easily granted. The community leader who held the *shalish* put pressure on the brothers to give their sisters the share they were entitled to according to the law. Here, Ameri and her sisters put up a united front in this exhausting fight, but she still feels a deep sense of injustice. The victimization she most suffered from was not inflicted by employers abroad, but at home, in her own society.

#### 8.4. Khursheda: A trailblazer

Khursheda's story confounded our analytical model. Among the women who migrated on a factory visa, she was an exception on three counts. First, she migrated to the EPZ in Sharjah and not to Jordan in the year 2000. Second, she is the only woman in the cohort who migrated on a garment factory visa from the Brahmanbaria district. Third, although she left with a factory visa, she did not work in the sector for very long, staying undocumented for 19 years while earning in other kinds of activities. In her locality, Khursheda stands as a towering figure who initiated a new era. She was the first woman to migrate.

The 45-year-old woman was interviewed as she visited her village after an absence of nearly 20 years. Well-known as a pioneer and famous for her success, she became somewhat of a legend, which overshadowed her humble background. Khursheda is the second child of a family of six, including four brothers and two sisters. She left her village at the age of nine to serve as a domestic worker in Dhaka, and she never attended school. At the age of 11, the woman from her village who brought her to the city placed her in a garment factory. Khursheda remembers hiding when labour inspectors announced a visit. Married at the age of 13 – it was felt she needed a guardian as she was good-looking – Khursheda carried on working at the factory, stopping briefly only to give birth to three children. Her in-laws were better off than her natal family but her husband's heroin addiction destroyed the relative security she enjoyed for a while. She explained:

*When my youngest daughter was one year old, my husband had become a heroin addict.*

*He lost his shop and sold everything – even our children's clothes – and I struggled to feed our children. Beside my factory job, I worked at an agency that sent women to work in garment factories in Mauritius. I prepared them to face their interviews with recruiters. I left through that agency. I was supposed to go to Mauritius, but the visas were stopped, and I was sent to Sharjah. My father did not approve of my going abroad. At that time, people in our village did not accept women working in garment factories, let alone migrating abroad. "If you go abroad, you will kill me," said my father. I replied, "If I do not go, my children will die."*

*When people heard I had left, my father could not leave the house for six months. One of my sisters-in-law sold her gold chain and used some of her savings to collect 35,000 takas to cover my migration costs. When the visa came, I did not even have time to go home and say goodbye. I left my daughters, aged six, four and two years, with my mother.*

Her experience in Sharjah was disappointing at first. Khursheda was paid half the salary she had been promised and, after six months, the factory closed down. As preparations were made to send workers back to their respective countries, Khursheda ran away. She said:

*I did not want to return to Bangladesh. It had been so difficult to go abroad in the first place. One week before the date when I would be sent back, I fled with a small bag containing a change of clothes and eight riyals. I did not understand the language and I knew nothing of the country. I just walked and walked, found a building under construction with Bangladeshi workers and stayed there. I purchased water and some bread. After three days, one man asked me what I was doing. I said I was waiting for someone. On the fourth day, the Bangladeshi man understood that I had ran away and said: "If someone sees me talking to you, I could get into trouble. But if you walk up to the third street, you will find Bangladeshi women. They go to different jobs. Talk to them, they can help you."*

Khursheda explained that she entered a house where many women lived and was received with suspicion until an older woman suggested that she be allowed to stay. She said:

*They did not push me out, but they wanted to hear my story. Then, they allowed me to stay ... I went with them and learned how they worked and the layout of the street. I learned useful words. There were other houses where women without papers stayed. One day, we were invited to such a house. The police came and carried out a raid. Many girls were caught, others ran away, and I was one of them. The next day, we went to see what the girls had left behind. I looked for money and for notebooks where women keep the phone numbers of their clients. In those days, we had no mobile phones. I found two notebooks with phone numbers, and I called them. Sometimes, I understood, and sometimes I could not make sense of what they said.*

Khursheda developed a good relationship with a woman schoolteacher, spent time at her home, learned the work. After some time, the latter recommended her to her colleagues. Slowly, she got more work and increased her income. To send money home, Khursheda tried to find people she could trust from her area. At one stage, she worked for a woman who had a beauty parlour and she received generous tips from clients. She could then rent her own place, open a beauty parlour in one room and host (undocumented) women in another room. For these activities, she needed the support of local people, and she said did her best to cultivate good relationships.

Khursheda is proud to say that she brought all her siblings to Sharjah and three of them are still living in the UAE. She admits to bringing about 50 people in all to Sharjah. Her niece rounds up the number to 100, adding that she recruited mostly men. Most recruits entered the country with tourist visas valid for three months, during which time an employer was found.

*I kept them for three months and looked for a kafeel who could employ them. The visa could be increased by one month if I failed within that time. They stayed with me, I fed them and covered their costs. I entertained good relationships with some local people, and they helped me find jobs. For the [tourist]*

*visas, I kept a good links with the Bangladesh embassy, and they helped me.*

In her village, Khursheda is known as a widow but in Sharjah, she has a “husband”, a man from Cumilla with whom she conducts the recruitment business. Her partner is a documented migrant, and they live as a family with a child that Khursheda adopted. The child was born of an Indonesian mother who sought shelter at her home, gave birth and left the baby behind. A couple with a child gives a respectable front to the recruitment business they now conduct. Khursheda is attached to the boy she brought up. Now 11 years old, he has no birth certificate and no nationality. A DNA test would only prove that Khursheda is not the mother and would further complicate matters. Khursheda is ready to pay a large sum of money to solve the problem and have the boy recognized as her son.<sup>10</sup> She has already paid a handsome amount to regularize her status and believes that money can solve most problems in the UAE. Khursheda, who visited Bangladesh after nearly two decades, felt somewhat lost and was eager to return to Sharjah which she did two months after the interview.

Her family was first shunned by the community who did not accept women’s migration but judging from her three daughters who completed their college educations and could make “good” marriages, the social promotion achieved is unquestionable. None of her daughters migrated abroad. There was no need believed Khursheda.

However, as a mere visitor, she did not feel at home in Bangladesh anymore. She said:

*I have been abroad so many years. I doubt if I can adjust to life back here now. I think the UAE is my place. The Bangladesh that I left and the Bangladesh that I see now are not the same. I do not like these fundamentalists. I learned three things abroad: to be brave, to be patient and not to despise anyone.*

This chapter dealt with three women who left Bangladesh on garment factory visas and presented very different scenarios. The first worked in the same sector in Jordan and

10 Similar situations were documented in Jordan and in Lebanon and no doubt, they exist in other Gulf countries too. Should a migrant woman become pregnant out of wedlock – whether it result from rape or freely consented intercourse – she is at fault. Abortion being illegal, one solution is to find a hiding place until delivery. Children born in these circumstances are innocent victims, and adoptive mothers such as Khursheda could be the object of criminal pursuit.

Mauritius while maintaining her legal status; the second walked out of her factory in a Jordanian QIZ but continued working in the garment sector, staying undocumented; and finally, the third worked in a garment factory in Sharjah for only a few months before absconding, carving out her own path, and engaging in other activities with remarkable economic success while remaining undocumented for 19 years.

Having chosen the type of visa on which women left Bangladesh as the criterion, which is also how governments at source and at destinations measure migration flows, the findings show a

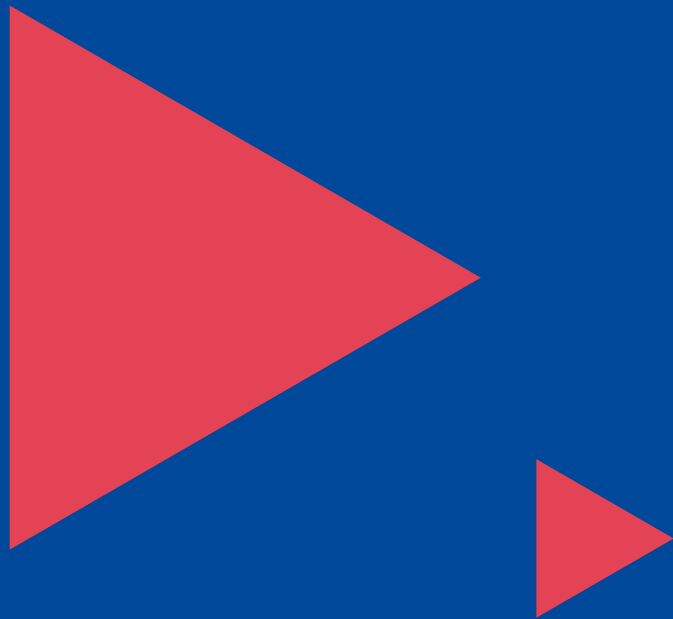
very mixed picture. These three case histories serve to remind us that the official visa category may be the entry point at destination, but it does not determine the migratory journey. Only one out of three migrant women followed a legal course, two continued working in the garment sector and one engaged in unrelated activities for nearly two decades. To capture these complex journeys, to get an idea of the nature and contours of the “grey” zones, additional research is clearly needed as official records alone could be misleading.



# 9

## Migrant wives and polygamous husbands

---



The relationship between women's labour migration and men's polygamy is too important a topic to leave out of this discussion. According to various estimates, polygamy qualifies between 1 and 10 per cent of marriages in Bangladesh. One must admit that measuring polygamous unions is tricky given the fact that these marriages are often unstable, surrounded by secrecy and do not enhance the protagonists' social status. The present study did not attempt to measure the number of migrant wives whose husbands took a second wife, but the occurrence is sufficiently frequent to be recognized as a problem.

In Bangladesh, simultaneous polygamy for Muslim men is legal under certain conditions, one being the consent of the previous wife or wives. The law regulating the practice goes back to 1967, before Bangladesh even existed. Reforming the law would appear a necessity, but the issue is politically delicate, given the recognition of polygamy in the Koran and the position of Islamic scholars on the practice. The present law is not applied either. In the cases covered in this study, the first wife was usually not informed about the second marriage, and therefore did not, and could not, give her consent to the husband taking another wife. In no case did not having fulfilled the legal requirements result in the marriage being declared void.

The following scenarios were documented.

- (1) The wife works abroad and sends her remittances to the husband or in-laws. The husband remarries in her absence without informing her. Most wives stop sending money home upon hearing the news. Such a situation can plunge families in great turmoil – the longer the duration of the marriage, the larger the contribution the migrant wife made to her marital home, the deeper the crisis. Having no legal guarantee that her past contribution will be recognized, the resolution to such conflicts largely depends on the support the wife can garner from her natal family, her adult children, and sometimes her in-laws as seen with Rowshonara in Chapter 6.
- (2) In a different sequential order, the husband takes a second wife, and the first wife who did not migrate before takes this path to escape an intolerable situation. Most women who migrate in this scenario gain economic power

and divorce the husband or impose a lasting separation.

- (3) The wife accommodates her husband's polygamy while running a separate household. Provided the husband is not too demanding, the "umbrella" that marriage affords is found preferable to the status of a divorcee. This solution is more common among older women with grown up children.
- (4) A woman or girl who knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or forcibly, marries a polygamist man is generally younger and of a lower socioeconomic strata. She could be in the thrall of a seducer as well. Marriage legitimates the appropriation of her body and her income. Appropriating a wife's income could be called a legitimate theft.

The various scenarios that play out with polygamous husbands will be illustrated through the following five case histories

### 9.1. Storm in a triangle: Aisha, Poppy and Aminul

In this stormy triangle, both wives are migrant workers. Aminul has been married to Aisha for 27 years, and the couple has three children. He later married Poppy, a 28-year-old widow with 2 children. On hearing that her husband was about to take a second wife, Aisha left her Dubai employer in a rush, hoping to stop the marriage, but she failed to do so. Aminul lived with Poppy in a small house some distance away from the main family home. In bad faith, he pitted one wife against the other, arguing that Poppy had sent him money when he was sick while Aisha ignored his needs. He explained:

*I married Poppy because she saved my life. Two-and-a-half years ago, she migrated to Saudi Arabia and sent me 300,000 takas. I had an accident two months after she left. I hurt my shoulder and could not work. Rehabilitation was needed for a long time. With Poppy's money, I could pay for my treatment, provide for the family and contribute to my son's migration.*

Aminul told Aisha he would divorce Poppy as soon as she returned abroad but six months later, he had still not done so. Aisha's life was crumbling – she had been married to Aminul at the age of 12. Mocking the little consideration she received, she exclaimed:



*They needed someone to cook the rice. So, they brought me as a wife.*

Aminul's mother was a migrant herself, and Aisha was indeed needed to cook rice at home. Aminul, the family only son, was then 17 years old. At the age of 22, after giving birth to three children, Aisha migrated to Sharjah. Her migrant sister offered her the position she was holding, and she could migrate free of cost. The 'no-cost' migration interested Aisha's mother-in-law, who encouraged her to accept. The latter would end her own migration and take care of the children. This was in 2002. For 12 years, Aisha worked in Sharjah for the same employer and sent her entire income to her mother-in-law. She had no bank account of her own and opened one only in 2015 after a family crisis. There were many episodes in Aisha's married life that would be too long to relate but, according to neighbours, Aminul had extra-marital affairs in the past, for which Aisha was made to foot the bill. However, it had never gone this far. The 42-year-old woman was devastated, and she screamed her pain:

*What do I have that I can call my own? Right now, his parents are elderly, and they need me to look after them. But when they die, he could well divorce me. Then, I will be their khadamma. I cannot accept this.*

Aisha was not asked her consent, let alone informed before Aminul took a second wife. As others have observed, the law regulating polygamy is only worth the paper it is printed on. Aminul's motivations for marrying Poppy – younger, more attractive than Aisha in his eyes, and sending him money as well – are easy to see. But why should Poppy have married Aminul, knowing that she was unlikely to be accepted in his family? When interviewed, Poppy explained that she had married Aminul two years before migrating to Saudi Arabia and therefore, she had sent remittances to "her" husband. If this is the case, Aminul kept this secret and lied to his family for a few years. Poppy's family background provides some light on her motivation for the marriage.

*My parents did not approve of this marriage [to Aminul]. I told them, "When I was 14 years old, you arranged for me to marry an already married, older man. I am not a child anymore and I can decide for myself." My parents were very poor then, and my uncle brought me here from Kushtia, with my younger sister, and gave us in marriage. We*

*were both married to elderly men who had wives and children and were poor. I had my first child three years later, and my husband sent me to Lebanon when the child was three. For four-and-a-half years, I stayed with the same employer. The cost of my migration – 65,000 takas – was gradually deducted from my monthly salary of 12,000 takas. I never had a bank account of my own. I sent my income to my husband, and he spent it on his health and for the household. I came back, and another child was born. This child is now not quite five years old. My first husband died three years ago. He had no land, no wealth, and I really struggled then. I worked in people's home as a day labourer. There were many men interested in having a relationship with me.*

Aminul was obviously one of those men, and he married her. Considering the 300,000 takas that Poppy – a poor woman – sent to Aminul from Saudi Arabia, should one consider that she bought herself a husband? What is clear is that in the jungle-like environment Poppy experienced as a young widow, taking a husband shielded her from other predators. The belief that a husband may not only "protect" a wife but also contain her sexuality is widely held. Single, working women regularly complain of the difficulties they face in moving around undisturbed, as though "free" women are for the taking.

Men like Aminul who womanize and live off not only one, but two migrant wives' incomes are not well-regarded in the community. But who will control them? Aminul's mother played a major role in this conflict and in siding with her capricious son, as mothers often do, she worsened the crisis. Her motherly love made her blind conceded the neighbours who observed the drama unfolding.

Aisha was waiting for her eldest son, working in Saudi Arabia at that time, to return and find a solution to the crisis. Her father-in-law had suggested giving his land to his two grandsons, thus by passing and punishing his unruly son. The inheritance would still pass through the male line according to "tradition". But this would not render justice to Aisha who wanted the land to be registered in her name in recognition of her massive contributions to the household. Aisha looked for an NGO that could help her defend her rights but did not find any. Meanwhile, the situation further deteriorated. At the researchers'

last visit, it was heard that Aminul had physically attacked Aisha and tried to strangle her. A woman neighbour had intervened just in time and rescued Aisha.

Again, these events were captured as they happened, and the final chapter has not been written. As it stood, the story shows how existing institutions are inadequate in protecting the rights of migrant wives who send their remittances to their husbands and in-laws in good faith for several years. No one denied that Aisha had considerably enriched her marital home, but the wealth acquired was not in her name. The deep sense of injustice she felt is understandable and justified. This is a violence occurring at the core of the patriarchal family at home and not at the hands of the employer abroad. Aisha's long-time employers in Sharjah sympathize with her plight and are ready to re-employ her should she chose to migrate again. Aisha may have no choice but to continue working but at the age of 42, she would have liked to end her migration career.

The next story deals with a poor girl forcibly taken as a second wife who resorted to migration to gain access into her in-laws' home.

## 9.2. Hasna: Migration to get revenge on a husband

Hasna had returned from Jordan on her fourth migration 10 days before our first interview with her in May 2019, benefitting from the amnesty granted to illegal migrants by the Jordanian government. Her husband had torn up her passport as she had left without his permission. Hasna explained that she decided to migrate after hearing that her husband who had migrated to Malaysia was not earning. Their land had been mortgaged to cover the cost of his migration. The atmosphere was tense, and Hasna asked the researcher to come back another day. Without her husband around, she would be free to speak.

At a subsequent meeting, Hasna recounted her story. She explained that out of the 16 years she had been married, 12 years had been spent abroad as a migrant worker. The scene witnessed during the previous meeting was only the latest episode in a stormy marriage. At the age of 14, Hasna was working as a helper on a building site when Zahid, a married man more than twice her age, saw her and wanted her, and he eventually tricked her into marrying him. Later, he refused

to introduce her to his family. Hasna found this demeaning and was determined to enter her husband's home. Animated by a sense of revenge, she achieved her purpose. Hasna is the third of five sisters, and her father died when she was eight years old. Hasna narrated her story:

*After my father died, we were very poor. My mother gave my youngest sister up for adoption, and we lost touch with her. None of us could go to school, and we have been working since we were very young. I was a helper on a construction site when Zahid [the husband] saw me. He liked me and wanted to marry me, but I was not interested. He asked my mother, and she refused as well. So, he lured me into town with a lie, kept me in a house and married me. I was not given a choice. He then rented a place for me. If I was his wedded wife, why wasn't he taking me to his home? He refused when I asked him to. He said his parents would not accept me, and 18 months went by like this. I was really angry.*

Unless she gained acceptance as a wife in her in-laws' home, Hasna would be no better than a kept woman. She was pregnant when she arranged to migrate to Lebanon without informing her husband. She gave birth, entrusted the baby to her mother and left for Lebanon where she stayed for five years without coming home while keeping in touch with her husband.

*I wanted to teach him a lesson. He could not play around with me, like I was a toy. In Lebanon, the salary was US\$125 the first year, and then it was progressively increased. The last two years I was paid US\$200. I sent none of that money to him ... When I came back, he told me that I could move to his home. I agreed but told him that I would build my own house. I built a house and gave him a bit of money as capital to start a business. I also gave some money to my mother and kept the rest. It took me six months to do these things. Then I left for Dubai.*

Hasna stayed in Dubai for 18 months before returning after a fight with her employer. She spent five months at home and then left for Jordan where she worked for three years. She had achieved her objective by then – she had been admitted in her husband's home and lived in her own house, built with her own income. Hasna also gave birth to a second child. This



could have been the end of her migrations if her husband had not created a new crisis. She said:

*My husband went crazy. He wanted to go abroad at any price. He gave a dalal 200,000 takas, and that dalal disappeared with the money. He went to another dalal, who proposed migration to Malaysia for 400,000 takas. He sold the house [that Hasna had paid for] and gave the ownership papers of his land as a guarantee for a loan. Ten months after he left for Malaysia, he had not earned anything and was in a bad situation. When I heard this, I left for Jordan without informing him. For me, there was no cost. The salary was US\$200. After six months, I left the kafeel telling him that the salary was not enough. A girl I knew in Joffah arranged work for me. Every month, I earned 40,000–50,000 takas.*

Hasna earned very well in Jordan especially after she left her *kafeel* and took part-time jobs outside. Upon her return, she repaid her husband's loan and got the land ownership documents back. In this position of strength, she asked her husband to register the land in her name. The senior wife protested, saying her children would be landless. As a compromise, two-and-a-half decimals<sup>11</sup> were given to the first wife, and three-and-a-half decimals were registered in Hasna's name. However, Hasna did not recover the house her husband had sold. Yet, this is an extraordinary turn of events. The poor girl who would not be admitted as a wife in her in-laws home became the owner of their land, "gracefully" leaving a smaller part to her co-wife. Outwardly, peace was restored, but Hasna explained that she cannot afford to drop her guard:

*He keeps trying to get me to spend on his projects. I give him a little, then I say I have no more. Zahid would like me to send his son abroad. I told him it was not a good idea. I reminded him that he went abroad twice, and he failed twice, and that's how I argue with him – I buy time. I am Zahid's second wife – I like him, and he likes me. That is what he is showing. What I think is that Zahid likes my money. He wants to control what I have – I put up with a lot after my marriage. I gave a good amount of money for this family. It was*

*a cold calculation on my part to secure my position. Zahid can speak nicely, but I do not trust him. Even to this day, my in-laws look down upon me. They believe that I forced my way into their family, and that I destroyed their peace. They all side with my co-wife. But Zahid is the one who spoiled my life.*

In the past, Hasna has often taken decisions without informing her husband, and she continues to do so. Six months after he tore up her passport, she had a new one made. She is not afraid because she knows that she can rely on her mother and her sisters' support:

*Here [in her husband's home], I cannot communicate with anyone. Zahid checks my phone. I go to my mother's place to arrange whatever I need to do. I cannot speak to my sister and her husband [who are in Jordan] from here. I speak to them when I go to my mother's. I arranged to get a new passport through my mother. My plan is to leave for Jordan in the next six months. This time also, I will leave without informing Zahid. We are four sisters. One is not with us, but the others share a strong bond. We could give our lives for each other.*

This women-centred family constitutes an interesting exception in a patriarchal landscape. All the sisters have been, or still are, migrant workers and the family is no longer poor. Families without sons, and in this case without a male head, have been associated with poverty in the past but women's labour migration changed their situation. Hasna sums up the position she achieved:

*I have my own bank account, and I keep my own money. I have been working since a young age and have never been dependent on anyone. This is the difference from my co-wife. She is entirely dependent on Zahid, but I only depend on myself. I do not regard him as a master. But in this society, one needs a husband for the *chaya* (shade, protection) it procures. Zahid tries to control me, but he knows he will not succeed. His family does not regard me well. But they cannot object to the fact that I am his wife, and that I am the owner of this land.*

11 A decimal is equal to 40.47 square metres.

Hasna, the junior wife, has been a migrant worker for the greater part of her married life while the senior wife has never migrated. Both wives present highly contrasted characters, the first being stubborn, rebellious, disobedient and a good earner, the latter being economically dependent, traditional and more legitimate in the eyes of the family. Their value and rank are measured accordingly. Hasna's successful migrations have not entirely erased the degrading situation of the 14-year-old girl working on a building site "on the road", but such an experience has contributed to her formidable fighting spirit. Hasna cannot afford to be seen as a loser. She warned, "Do not tell my family that I had to spend a month in jail before getting repatriated from Jordan".

The next case describes co-wives who are both migrant workers and provide for their respective families while the husband only provides for himself

### 9.3. Migrant wives as providers, husbands as moral guardians

This case was recorded in the conservative Majlishpur village of Brahmanbaria. The husband, a small fish trader, took a second wife when he could hardly afford to feed the first, who has four children aged 21, 19, 16 and 11. The second wife has three children aged 17, 15 and 11. The two wives migrated one after the other without informing their husband, suspecting he would not agree to let them go. The latter eventually reconciled with their departure, appreciating the benefits accruing to the family. Anouara, the first wife was interviewed as she returned from Saudi Arabia for a three-month visit:

*Twenty years ago, when I was pregnant with my second daughter, my husband married a woman living close to the bazaar where he sold fish. She was a widow and had no children. Later, she bore him three children. I suffered with that husband – I could not feed my children properly, and I could not educate them. I borrowed money from shomitis [cooperatives] to raise chicken and somehow managed ... My co-wife is also abroad. She left after me. She runs her own household and I run mine. My husband can provide for one or the other. And if he does not provide, it is okay.*

With his modest income, the husband attended to one or the other of his two wives. Such arrangement complicates the definition of a household. Economically, the two wives manage their respective family mostly without the husband, except for the fish he occasionally brings. Formally, in the eyes of society, the wives are his dependents. While the husband provides a very thin economic cover, he remains their guardian, and it is in this role that he first objected to their migration.

In this conservative community, such is the expected posture for a husband. Anouara who has two unmarried daughters, aged 19 and 16, said she appreciated their father standing as guardian, especially in her absence. He was present at two of his daughters' weddings. His gift was his mere presence as he contributed nothing to the wedding costs, with the girls' respective mothers footing the bill. Anouara says her husband is not a bad man. At this stage, she does not expect much from him.

Anouara intended to have her second daughter married. Six families had showed interest, but they all withdrew upon hearing that the mother was a migrant worker. Ironically, the main purpose of her migration was to cover the cost of her daughters' marriages, which is particularly high in Majlishpur as a substantial dowry is usually required. Anouara earned sufficiently, but her migration now constitutes the obstacle. In this area, women's labour migration remains a blot on the family reputation.

Anouara first migrated at the age of 35, and her first destination was Oman. A distant relative had asked her to identify a good candidate for a domestic job, and Anouara decided she would be that candidate. She was the first in her extended family to migrate. The cost of migration was 50,000 takas. Her sister and brother gave her 30,000 and 20,000 takas respectively. In Oman, Anouara worked for a very large family. Not only the salary was low – in 2015, she earned 60 Omani riyals, the equivalent of about 12,000 takas – but her distant relative collected her pay after telling the employer that Anouara could not send it home herself:

*My relative and her husband played tricks on me. They said I did not know how to send money home, and they would do it for me. They delayed sending the money home. After a few months, I asked the employer to remit my salary to me and I would send it myself.*

*When I emptied the garbage one day, I met one Bangladeshi man from Cumilla, and I sought his help. I asked him to send my salary to my brother. He did so through bKash. He did not cheat me.*

Anouara was fortunate in meeting an honest man as the procedure was risky. She was also fortunate that her brother returned the money he had saved on her behalf. Before her second migration, before leaving for Saudi Arabia in 2018, Anouara opened her own bank account. This time, she left through a local *dalal*, and there was no cost. The salary (1,000 riyals) was considerably higher than in Oman. Anouara worked for two years and two months and was preparing to return to the same employer after a three-month visit home. The only *khadamma* (domestic worker) in a large household, the employer appreciated her. Her daughter later mentioned that her mother's salary had been increased to 1,150 riyals. Over the years, Anouara learned a great deal, and migration has opened her eyes. She is well-aware of the benefits of women's labour migration and praises the Bangladeshi government for instituting a no-cost policy. She said:

*By allowing us to migrate free of cost, the government has greatly helped women. Look, my son-in-law spent 450,000 takas to go to Kuwait. He works as a caretaker in a school. His salary is 30,000 takas, but he has to pay for food and lodging. He got paid properly for the first four months, then the company only gave him money for his food and his keep. For four months, he got no salary. He is now paid only 20,000 takas, and he must pay for his food. His company told him that when the school reopens, he will get paid 30,000 takas again. He has not been able to send much money home.*

The son-in-law's salary was cut as the school closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such salary cuts were not experienced by domestic workers. Anouara's co-wife could not be interviewed but judging from the marriage she arranged for her eldest daughter, she is also a successful migrant. The two migrant wives continue to provide for their respective households, while the husband, acting as guardian, keeps his income to himself.

#### 9.4. Male *dalals* taking a female recruit as additional wife

After sending their (first) wives abroad, several men became familiar with recruitment procedures and began recruiting women on a larger scale for profit. Migrant wives, as seen with Rowshonara, sent visas to their husbands, who became known as *dalals*. The recruiter's role calls for a display of knowledge, expertise and the assurance that one is trustworthy. In the performance of this role, ascendancy over vulnerable and "ignorant" women is easily exerted. Exploiting their advantage, some male *dalals* have gone further and have developed an emotional attachment with some women candidates. *Dalals* who "marry" their recruits are often older men who already have a wife and children, and for whom an additional marriage is both financially profitable and a reward to their male ego.

##### 9.4.1. Shaheed: Boosting collecting wives and telling many lies

Shaheed, a Chonpara *dalal*, boasted of having three wives who were all migrant workers. Except the first, the other two wives had once been his clients. However, the man considerably embellished his story because on further investigation, it was found that the first wife had divorced him long ago, the second wife no longer kept in touch with him, and the third wife – who called from abroad during the interview – protested that Shaheed put too much pressure on her and that she would soon stop sending him money as she had children to look after. "Love" was drying up, and to sustain his income, Shaheed would have to ensnare a new recruit, who could be tied into wedlock.

Even though these marriages may not last, they permit extracting monetary benefits from a wife for some time. We have seen that wives often stop sending money to their husbands upon hearing that the latter has entered into another marriage. To these men, remittances from a wife may flow for a limited time, but multiple marriages may still add up to a good amount.

##### 9.4.2. Akkas Ali: Compounding the income of three wives

Akkas Ali, 65-year-old man, had three migrant wives and had fathered six children, three with the first, two with the second and one with the third. Najma, the third wife – who is 35 years

younger than him – was interviewed as she was visiting from Jordan. She explained the circumstances in which she “fell in love” with her husband.

The third of six sisters, Najma struggled as a child. Her father was sick and could not feed the family. She said:

*My elder sister took me to Dubai when I was 15 years old, and I was there for three years. The salary was 12,000 takas a month, and my sister sent the money to our mother. I worked for a very large family ... We were three khadammas [domestic workers], all Bangladeshis. I was too slow for them. I did not understand, and they did not behave well with me. I did not learn Arabic, and it was a very difficult time. When I came back, I had a relationship with the father of my child. We had no elder brother at home, and he helped my mother with going to the market [normally a male job]. The relationship had been going on for one year when he proposed. I wanted him, and I was blind. My mother and my sisters did not approve of the marriage, but Akkas Ali put pressure on my mother. We were in a vulnerable situation and my mother gave in. My daughter was born a year later.*

Akkas Ali got a young wife and a future income producer. Having a child to tie up the relationship is part of the strategy. In 2011, when her daughter was three years old, Akkas sent Najma to Lebanon where she worked for three years, sending most of her income to him and a small part to her mother who looked after her daughter. In 2015, the husband-*dalal* sent his young wife to Jordan, and she continued to send part of her income to him and part to her mother. This time, the husband allowed Najma to save some of her income for herself, which she announced as a mark of generosity while admitting that her husband had no urgent need of additional income.

*My husband is solvent, he has land. He inherited a small part from his father, but most of the land he owns was purchased with his wives' money.*

An interview with Akkas Ali's first wife provided more information. She had worked in Bahrain for 16 years before ending her migration career in 2016. She lived in a house that was built on her husband's land, shared with her eldest son and

his family while her other two children were still working in Bahrain. She said:

*For the first four years of my migration, I gave all my money to my husband, but when he married a second time, I stopped. My husband became a dalal after I left. My cousin sent him a few visas, and he found his way managing these. While doing this work, he married two more women. He sent them abroad and later married them. My husband's second wife has two children who live with her parents. She is presently in Dubai. She is not divorced from him, but she has nothing to do with him. I have no relationship with him either. I am completely independent. I built this house with my money. The house where he lives was also built with my money. I just want to forget this man, but he is the father of my children. He is a very selfish person – he has used all his wives. My children are grown up now. They don't need him, but his second wife's children are still young, and he does nothing for them. He earns as a dalal and he has other sources of income, but he still takes Najma's money. The second wife does not give him anything, and that is why he ignores her.*

The woman expressed her bitterness and her disdain towards the man who, formally, is still her husband, pointing out that she never touches the food he sometimes brings from the bazaar and that her daughter-in-law cooks for him.

Najma, the third wife, plans to build a house on her father's land. Given her rank as a third wife and as the mother of a daughter, she does not expect any share of her husband's property. What does such a husband provide for Najma then? Again, using the metaphor of the “umbrella”, she said her husband “protected” her and her 10-year-old daughter, pointing out that his *gushti* (lineage) was more powerful than hers. But money had flown in one direction only – she filled his pockets.

#### 9.4.3. Mariam: Marrying her dalal in Saudi Arabia

In the very conservative village of Majlispur, Brahmanbaria, the news spread that Taher had married Mariam, the woman he had recruited as a domestic worker for his Saudi employer. Mariam was from a poor family and still unmarried at the age of 22 as her parents could not afford to pay the marriage costs. For

one year, she sent her salary of 1,000 riyals per month to her mother. Then, the remittances stopped with the news that Mariam had married her *dalal*.

Her mother said that Mariam had fallen into a trap, and relatives and neighbours shared the same opinion. How the marriage was concluded is unclear, and Mariam could not be spoken to. Interestingly, even though women's freedom to use their income and control their lives is not highly valued in this community, most villagers believe that such a marriage did not serve Mariam's interests and that she was being used. The husband was 15 years older than her, married with two wives, and had children from both wives. Mariam is locked into the marriage, and her family is suffering.

Why did Mariam accept this marriage? Did she legitimize an ongoing relationship? Did she feel the need to marry given her "advanced" age? Was she unable to say no to the man who got her the job, came from a wealthier family, had spent many years in Saudi Arabia, enjoyed a good relationship with their common employer, and was above her in so many ways? The main issue about the marriage is that Mariam's family is now deprived of her remittances. We do not know whether this was done at the husband's request or whether the employer saw this way as normal. However, the consequences for Mariam's family have been catastrophic.

*We must behave well with Mariam's mother-in-law as money now comes through her.*

Mariam's mother was in the process of building a house. To pursue the construction, she was dependent on Mariam's mother-in-law. The husband arranges for the building material needed to be delivered at the site, and Mariam's mother-in-law comes with a pile of takas to pay

the builders and settle the bills. Neighbours began to see the house as a gift from the son-in-law, and Mariam's mother feels humiliated by this enforced dependency. After all, the building is being paid for with Mariam's income to which she has a right. This confusion gives rise to contradictory narratives. Some hold that with Mariam being a married woman, her income naturally belongs to her husband, while Mariam's mother maintains that she did not give her daughter in marriage, and she was forcibly taken from her. Beyond the local debate, this story raises fundamental questions about a migrant woman's right to receive and use her income, the rights of a wife within a marriage, and the rights of parents over their (un)married daughter.

What comes through very strongly in this story is the arrogance of a "superior" class towards a family they regard as their inferiors. It bears a parallel with Shereen, the 16-year-old girl married to her rapist (see Chapter 3). She was poor and her in-laws, who were well off, could hold the young bride captive. These marriages do not erase the social gap between wife-givers and wife-takers. On the contrary, they appear to enshrine the inequality. Mariam's in-laws instrumentalized the construction of a house to demonstrate that they had the upper hand and that Mariam's family was accountable to them. In these confrontations, one can see a class war with all the proponents attempting to capture the significant wealth that migrant women procure.

To sum up, exploiting the advantages of their occupation as *dalals* and the privileges conferred to them as men who may engage in simultaneous marriages, the *dalals* who marry their recruits are generally older men, more experienced and better off. They pursue a strategy that gratifies their appetites both for a younger woman and which augments their income. Marriage legitimizes the appropriation. How does one fight what could be called a legitimate theft?

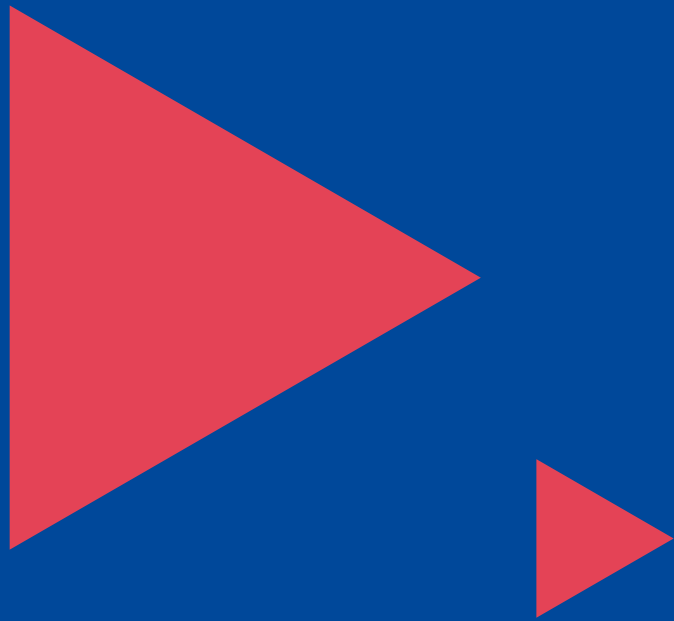




# ▶ 10

**Economic benefits:  
A tentative assessment**

---





This chapter computes the data collected on costs of migration, income, control over income, savings and bank accounts in an attempt to sum up the economic benefits women reap from their labour migration. It should be recalled that the data were collected from ongoing as well as completed migrations.

### 10.1. Low costs of women's labour migration

In the present study, 94 women, making up 44.5 per cent of the cohort, migrated free of cost. This is a considerable portion. In addition, seven women reported receiving cash payments of between 5,000 and 15,000 takas for the preparations they needed to make. Bangladesh has been known as a country where labour migration costs are among the highest in the world, a situation that is well documented and repeatedly denounced. This conclusion applies to male migrants who are the majority but, clearly, it does not apply to women. Many studies fail to conduct gender-segregated analyses on the costs of migration. This has had little consequences at the turn of the twenty-first century when women made up less than 1 per cent of the migrant workers but today, ignoring this significant minority, whose numbers in the last five years averaged around 15 per cent of all Bangladeshi migrants, provides an incomplete and biased picture.

The considerable gap in labour migration costs for men and women has been measured in an earlier study that also showed how costs of male migration kept increasing as the cost of female migration decreased (Blanchet and Biswas 2021). The present study, which focuses on women, has shown the impact that high migration costs for

men have had on families and more particularly on women, for example when wives are compelled to migrate to repay loans contracted for their husband's unsuccessful migrations.

Table 13 presents the mean costs of migration for the cohort for their last migration according to destination. Saudi Arabia is by far the cheapest destination, with 64 per cent of the women migrating free of cost. It may not be the preferred destination, but it is the one all women can afford. Seven women migrated on company visas, paying between 110,000 and 150,000 takas, bringing the mean cost to 16,477 takas. Company visa holders, except one, were all veteran migrants who opted for a more regular work schedule, time off and greater freedom, even if the net income was not necessarily higher. It must be underlined that under the present conditions, migration for domestic work is affordable to all migrant women, no matter how poor the candidate is. Should a migrant woman fail to complete her contract, additional costs may be incurred. However, no woman has been found to be saddled with a debt comparable to the huge ones that men incur.

Table 14 shows how women migrating at no cost increased with the number of migrations they undertook. At the first, second, third and subsequent migrations, the no-cost migrations represented 29.3, 55.8, and 77.1 per cent respectively. Recruiters give credit to experience, and seasoned migrants are also better equipped to negotiate the terms of their employment. Where the incidence of women labour migration is low, women are found to be paying more to migrate but everywhere, they pay considerably less than migrant men.

► **Table 13. Destination of last migration and mean cost (all types of visas)**

Destination	Number of migrants (%)	Total costs (in taka)	No cost migration	Pre-departure cash (in taka)	Mean cost (in taka)
Saudi Arabia	110 (52.1)	1 812 500	70	72 000	16 477
Jordan	48 (22.7)	1 435 250	10	0	29 901
Oman	10 (4.7)	468 000	3	0	46 800
Dubai/UAE	19 (9.0)	1 185 000	7	90 000	62 368
Lebanon	12 (5.7)	638 000	0	0	53 167
Others*	12 (5.7)	1 040 000	4	0	86 667
<b>Total</b>	<b>211 (100.0)</b>	<b>8 298 250</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>162 000</b>	<b>39 328</b>

Note: Others\* means Kuwait, Bahrain, Mauritius and Qatar.

Source: RAPID/Drishti-ILO migrant research (2021), data gathered from in-depth interviews

► **Table 14. No-cost migration by destination and number of times migrated (in per cent)**

Experience status	Type of visa	Number of migrants	Destination	Cost (in takas)	Per cent
First migration	Domestic	35	Saudi Arabia	Free	29.3
	Domestic	3	Dubai	Free	
	Dance visa	2	Dubai	Advance (30 000)	
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>40</b>			
Second migration	Domestic	22	Saudi Arabia	Free	55.8
	Domestic	1	Qatar	Free	
	Dance visa	1	Dubai	Advance (50 000)	
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>24</b>			
Third and fourth migration	Domestic	19	Saudi Arabia	Free	77.1
	Domestic	4	Jordan	Free	
	Domestic	3	Qatar	Free	
	Domestic	1	Oman	Free	
<b>Subtotal</b>		<b>27</b>			

Source: Authors' analysis.

## 10.2. Earnings

Table 15 assesses migrant women's total earnings, including tips and gifts, over the total number of years they spent abroad. Thus, a failed migration followed by two successful ones gives

the migrant a positive balance. The number of women whose salaries were not fully paid or not paid at all are recorded in a separate column. The assessment of earnings has been relatively easy to calculate for women who migrated in the

► **Table 15. Duration of migration, total income, mean income, and number of women not paid their due salary**

Duration of work abroad	Total number of migrants	Women not paid their full salary or returned empty-handed	Total income earned (in taka)	Mean income
Less than 3 months	4	3	40 000	10 000
3 to below 12 months	13	5	2 358 000	181 385
Up to 2 years	30	2	12 671 000	422 367
Up to 3 years	16	2	10 618 000	663 625
Up to 4 years	41	1	36 237 000	883 829
Up to 6 years	43	3	51 364 800	1 194 530
Up to 8 years	27	4	45 245 500	1 675 759
Up to 10 years	13	2	36 510 000	2 808 462
Up to 12 years	7	0	19 711 000	2 815 857
Up to 14 years	8	3	20 004 000	2 500 500
More than 14 years	8	0	32 790 000	4 098 750
Missing	1	0	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>26 75 49 300</b>	<b>12 68 006</b>

Source: Authors' analysis.

last four years, who are the majority (table 9). For older migrants with multiple migrations, the calculation is more complicated, and the amount shown should be read as an approximation. Imperfect as it is, the exercise has the merit to show the importance of the cumulative wealth migrant women earn over the years. In this cohort of 211 women, 3 women (1.4 per cent) did not earn anything and 25 (12 per cent) did not get their full dues. Such is the picture captured at the last interview conducted with each woman, or with a member of her family, keeping in mind that for many women the migratory journey is ongoing.

Table 16 sums up women's control over their incomes. The table presents a snapshot taken at a particular moment in time. The changes that occurred during the migratory journey – the autonomy (re)claimed or lost – are not shown here. At the last interview conducted with each woman or with a member of her family, 20.4 per cent of the cohort had no control over their income, 39.8 per cent had partial control, and 40.9 per cent had total control. Differences between the sites are interesting. For example, Manikganj and Brahmanbaria show the highest proportion of migrant women with no control, which bears a relationship with the high number of adolescent girls migrating from these two sites. As discussed earlier, these girls send their entire income to their parents. Unsurprisingly, widowed, separated and divorced women have relatively more control over their income than married women.

### 10.3. Savings and bank accounts:

Pre-departure trainings recommend that candidates for migration open two bank accounts: one for their own savings and one to cover current family expenses. The study

shows that such advice is seldom followed. Out of 211 women, only 98 women (46 per cent) had opened a bank account prior to their last migration. During their first migration, the proportion of women with bank accounts is 30.8 per cent, increasing to 41.7 per cent at the second migration. As mentioned, garment factory workers are the exception. All but one had a bank account at their last migration.

The Government of Bangladesh encourages the opening of bank accounts, and NGOs have conducted campaigns to that effect, often facilitating the process for their members. This may explain why older women, some being illiterate, have a bank account while their migrant daughters or daughters-in-law do not have one. The benefit of having a bank account to secure savings appears obvious. But how can we explain the high proportion of migrant women having no bank account?

Tables 17, 18 and 19 below show the percentage of bank account holders in relation to educational levels, marital status and number of migrations. One would expect more educated women to have bank accounts, but this holds true only for the most educated. Women without schooling have a higher percentage of bank account holders than those who had begun secondary education. In relation to marital status, unmarried girls are the least equipped, which is hardly surprising as most are adolescent girls migrating from their parents' homes and they have not been encouraged to open a bank account. Finally, the more migrations a woman engages in, the more likely she is to have a bank account. Yet, at their fourth migration, 4 out of 10 women did not have a bank account.

► Table 17. Level of education and bank account holders

Education	Total	No. of migrants having a bank account	% of migrants having bank account
No schooling	53	23	43.4
Up to primary	112	53	47.3
Classes 6–8	29	10	34.5
Classes 9–10	13	8	61.5
SSC	4	3	75.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>46.0</b>

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 18. Marital status and bank account holders

Marital status	Total	No. of migrants having a bank account	% of migrants having a bank account
Married	95	46	48.4
Unmarried	43	11	25.6
Divorced	35	21	60.0
WSA	38	20	52.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>46.0</b>

Note: WSA = Widow, separated and hanging/abandoned

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 19. Number of migrations and bank account holders

Number of migrations	No of migrants	Migrants having a bank account	% of migrants having a bank account
First	133	61	45.9
Second	43	18	41.9
Third	25	13	52.0
Fourth	10	6	60.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>46.0</b>

Source: Authors' analysis

#### 10.4. Older women who never opened a bank account

Drawing from the case histories, interesting observations can be made on why older, and often illiterate women, do not open bank accounts. We will discuss two cases: one in which an adult daughter sent her earnings to her mother and found her management of the remittances satisfactory and another where a mother sent her money to her school-going daughter and lost it all.

#### *Golapi*

A 40-year-old divorced woman who never went to school, Golapi spent 17 years working abroad in Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan, sending her all her money to her mother, who also looked after her only daughter. When asked why she never opened a bank account of her own, she replied:

*I have no brother. If my mother wastes my money, let it be.*

Being one of four sisters with no brother, Golapi believes that there is no risk of her savings being siphoned off. Indirectly, Golapi refers to mothers

being soft on sons who carry the line and giving in to their demands, but having no brother, such a risk did not exist for her. Golapi returned to her parents at the age of 21 after a brief marriage. She migrated, provided for her parents as a son is expected to do, but never claimed financial autonomy. Her mother, who manages family's affairs, has her own bank account. She purchased a small plot of land in Golapi's name and covered the costs of her daughter's marriage.

Golapi accepts this dependence. She describes herself as easily scared and unwilling to take risks. For example, in Lebanon, she has never dared to abscond as many have, even if her salary was very low. Not opening her own bank account is also a way for Golapi to respect her mother. A migrant woman of a similar age stated that she would not open a bank account while her parents were alive as it would show a lack of respect towards them.

#### Asiya

Asiya has been widowed twice. She cannot sign her name, and that is why she says she never opened a bank account. Her daughter opened a bank account when she was a student in Class 6 (about 12 years old), which is where Asiya deposited her remittance. The girl lived with her grandparents who had little control over her. On Facebook, she befriended a man and developed a relationship. With the promise of marriage, he convinced her to invest in his business and she transferred sums of money over to him, eventually emptying the bank account. At the age of 14, she married the 'lover', travelled to his home, found out he already had a wife and children and returned home, defeated. With her mother still abroad, she migrated to Dubai with the help of an aunt. Everything happened very fast, and the loss (500,000 takas) could never be recovered.

Asiya has spent 17 years abroad, worked in four countries and, at the time of the interview, she had no savings left, having already lost 500,000 takas on her dead husband's failed migration. Her daughter still worked in Dubai and fed the same bank account with her earnings. Asiya deplored her daughter's stingy attitude considering the meagre funds she received from her. In this story, the moral ascendancy a mother normally holds over her minor daughter was not effective. The banking system has different rules and another logic. The owner of a bank account

has the right to use "her" assets, and a swindler in the name of "love" took advantage of the confused understanding of the rights between mother and daughter. This event occurred about 10 years ago, raising questions on the right of a minor girl to manage her bank account unsupervised.

We have seen that other women were similarly robbed of their savings through love affairs, and they were not children. To prevent the risk of love affairs having such negative consequences, a Chonpara woman with three adult daughters recommended that they entrust their savings to her. The daughters complied, recognizing their mother's wisdom. Here, the moral ascendancy of a mother and the ownership of the bank account were aligned.

#### 10.5. Having a bank account and not using it

Most women state that they migrate for the benefit of their families. Depositing one's income into one's bank account could appear selfish and send the wrong message. Farida adopted a unique strategy to remove this suspicion.

#### Farida

Farida is a 46-year-old woman and is married with three daughters. In 2010, she migrated to Mauritius after working in a Bangladeshi garment factory for 10 years. Given her age, she could not extend her contract, and so she switched to domestic work in Dubai and later in Qatar. Farida stopped using her bank account after she migrated to Mauritius, and it went dormant. In her view, a migrant woman must send money to her husband if she wants to keep him, but to safeguard her savings, she trusted her daughters more than her husband. Her strategy was to diversify the recipients of her income to keep the family together. She said:

*If I had saved money in my own bank account, my husband could have suspected me. To maintain his trust and keep the family together, I decided to send money to his account. When my eldest daughter started working in the EPZ and opened her own bank account, I put my savings there. I also deposited money in my second daughter's bank account. This kept the family together. I always kept some money in my own hands anyway.*

### 10.6. Resorting to secrecy to open a bank account

Young women determined to control their lives open bank accounts, but they often do so secretly as though the gesture could hurt a husband, father or elder brother in their seniority, manhood and protector role.

#### *Moyna*

Moyna worked in a Bangladeshi garment factory for five years before migrating to Jordan in the same occupation. She had just renewed her contract in Jordan when her father called her home to marry as the family had identified a good match. Moyna dutifully obeyed. The candidate her parents had chosen – a migrant man intending to return abroad after the marriage – was not to her liking, and she refused to marry him. Secretly rebelling, she arranged her return to Jordan and opened a bank account in her name. She said:

*I worked all these years and never put anything aside for me. I gave everything to my parents. This time, I will open my own bank account. I have to do this secretly. My father and my brother will not approve ... I want to be self-sufficient. I am not thinking about marriage presently. I will marry when I am ready and when I meet someone with who I want to live*

The 26-year-old woman had been working and earning for 9 years. That she should resort to secrecy to open her own bank account is telling about the family's attitude towards an adult daughter's autonomy. Not to be considered "little" anymore required confronting her parents who had always seen her migration as a temporary phase, the ultimate objective being marriage.

### 10.7. Bank accounts offer no guarantee that savings will be safeguarded

A bank account offers no guarantee that the holder will be able to protect her savings. It may give more visibility to the savings a woman has all in one place. Should the husband and/or in-laws decide they need the money, the pressure may be impossible to resist.

#### *Mina*

Mina is a 28-year-old married woman with an 11-year-old son. She migrated to Kuwait at the

age of 14 because her father had died, and her family was in great need of money. She returned two years later, and her marriage was arranged through a matchmaker on the understanding that she would migrate again after the wedding to finance the husband's second migration. This was after the husband had already suffered a failed migration to Dubai, accumulating a large debt. However, an unplanned pregnancy delayed her departure. When her son was four years old, her in-laws sent her to Abu Dhabi. She said:

*For the first three months, I sent my salary to my father-in-law, but my husband stopped communicating with me. I had no news of my son. I cried and my employer showed me sympathy. He advised me not to send money home anymore. With my passport, he went to the Bangladesh embassy and arranged for a bank account to be opened in my name. From then on, I deposited my salary in my own bank account. After two years, I went on leave. My husband behaved very badly. He refused to give me access to my son. He and his family put pressure on me to hand over all my money as he was preparing to go to Bahrain. I had 370,000 takas in my bank account, and I transferred the entire amount to my in-laws. Because of these problems, I could not return to Abu Dhabi. With money, I purchased family peace, but I lost a very good employer. My husband had paid 550,000 takas for his migration. We had no money left, so I migrated to Saudi Arabia. My husband left for Bahrain six months after my departure for Saudi Arabia.*

There is more than a bank account at stake in this story. Mina was chosen as a wife with the understanding that she would migrate again and produce the funds necessary to send the family's only son abroad – she was instrumentalized from the start. By forcing her to empty her bank account on her visit from Abu Dhabi, the in-laws extracted far more than what could be claimed as dowry from her. Clearly, she "belonged" to them, and they were entitled to her income. Once again, it can be observed that in this patriarchal society, migrant women's earnings – actual or potential – add a new dimension to the fundamental inequalities that marriage institutionalizes. Mina complied and (re)negotiated her place in her in-laws' home. This intelligent and hard-working woman now receives the appreciation of her in-laws. She earned moral points, achieving



some power, even if her bank account is empty. She understands very well that her husband's migration does not make sense economically, explaining:

*My husband now sends 20,000 takas a month from Bahrain, and I used to send 22,000 takas from Saudi Arabia. But look at the difference in cost. My husband spent 550,000 takas to go to Bahrain and lost 600,000 takas with his failed migration to Dubai. In all, he spent almost 1,100,000 takas for that kind of benefit. My own migration cost [for two migrations after her wedding] was about 100,000 takas and I gave this family more than 1,000,000 takas. The family understands very well the benefits of women's labour migration. Yet, they give priority to the men. It is a matter of family honour (shonman).*

Bank accounts are an important tool for women to control their income. However, as these stories show, alone, they do not protect from forced appropriation and do not repair the inequalities intrinsic to the family.

### 10.8. How migrant women used their income

Table 16 showed that 20.4 per cent of the migrants had no control over their income, 38.9 per cent had partial control and 40.8 per cent had full control. Thus, women with partial or full control make up about 80 per cent of the sample. These women may provide for their natal family, for their marital family and/or save for themselves. Table 19 shows that regardless of the beneficiaries, women's incomes first serve to meet basic needs: 90 per cent of the women contributed to household expenses, one third

paid for healthcare, 26 per cent covered marriage costs, and 22 per cent repaid loans.

About 12 per cent reported not having been paid their full due abroad (see table 15). Loss of income through deception and other means of appropriation at home is less often highlighted than misappropriation abroad, except when the culprits are *dalals*. Yet, in this research, 40 per cent of the women reported loss of income at home. Husbands are more than twice as likely as *dalals* to waste or to misuse their wives' income. Loss of income attributed to parents, siblings or children or self is negligible by comparison.

Table 21 details how married women's incomes are spent or invested by their husbands in their in-laws' home. If the absolute numbers are accurate, the percentages in the last column are somewhat misleading as they take the entire cohort as a basis when about 15 per cent have never married, while others lived with their husband/in-laws only briefly. The high number of those who had nothing to report mostly belong to these categories.

Comparing sites is an interesting exercise. Narayanganj and Manikganj, where women's labour migration has been going on the longest, show different features. Women from Manikganj have contributed far more to their marital homes – to purchase land, build or renovate houses, support migration costs, invest in business, and much more. Contributing to the migration costs of the husband and in-laws also appears to be a peculiarity of Manikganj. No such case is reported for Narayanganj (Chonpara) and Patuakhali/Barguna, and only two cases were found in Brahmanbaria.

► Table 19. Costs covered with migrant women's remittances (multiple answers recorded)

Costs	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total answers	% of cohort
Household general expenses	47	62	40	41	190	90.0
Dowry, marriage costs	16	23	9	7	55	26.1
Healthcare	23	22	12	14	71	33.6
Loan repayment	5	25	9	8	47	22.3
No cost reported	7	1	4	4	16	7.6

Source: Authors' analysis



► Table 20. Reported income loss

Responsible for loss of income	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total	% of cohort
No loss	42	26	28	30	126	59.7
Husband	6	16	10	7	39	18.5
Husband and others*	0	6	3	0	9	4.3
Parents	1	0	0	1	2	0.9
Parents and brother and son	2	1	0	0	3	1.4
Brother/sister	1	2	2	1	6	2.8
Son/daughter	0	2	1	1	4	1.9
Dalal	2	9	2	5	18	8.5
Self	1	1	1	1	4	1.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: The category denoted by (\*) includes Husband and dalal: 4; Husband and dalal and brother: 1; Husband and parents: 2; Husband and brother: 1.

Source: Authors' analysis

► Table 21. Assets under husband and in-laws' control by research site (multiple answers recorded)

	Brahmanbaria	Manikganj	Narayanganj	Patuakhali and Barguna	Total answers	% of cohort*
Provided cash	7	21	10	11	49	23.2
Bought land for husband	0	8	1	1	10	4.7
Built/renovated house	7	18	5	13	43	20.4
Supported migration costs	2	14	0	0	16	7.6
Invested in cattle rearing	1	7	1	3	12	5.7
Mortgaged land	3	4	1	5	13	6.2
Bought jewellery	0	2	1	1	4	1.9
Paid for education costs	0	4	2	4	10	4.7
Invested in business, repaid loans, bought autorickshaw, etc.	1	13	5	6	25	11.8
Nothing shared or reported	45	26	29	26	126	59.7
	<b>66</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>308</b>	

Source: Authors' analysis

The low amount of investment by migrant women from Narayanganj (Chonpara) in their marital homes is interesting to observe. It may be explained by the fact that these families were landless, and the women engaged early in income-generating activities. For their livelihood, they relied on their work more than on their husbands, and expectations regarding marriage were low. This environment produced self-reliant

women. If restrictive patriarchal norms were the criteria chosen to classify the four sites of this study, Narayanganj would be the site where women take the most liberties in relation to "tradition" and Brahmanbaria where they take the least, with Manikganj and Patuakhali-Barguna situated somewhere in between.

Table 22 shows the investments and assets under the control of migrant women according to their marital status. At first glance, the investments are modest and cautious. Cash, savings accounts and jewellery top the list. Only 36 women were able to acquire land, the most valuable asset. Married women invest more in the construction

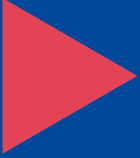
of a house than widowed, divorced or separated women. The 30 unmarried girls have few assets of their own apart from some cash and jewellery. The cash could be the savings necessary to organize their next migration. The value of these assets is not provided.

► Table 22. Investments and assets under migrant women's control by marital status and research site (multiple answers recorded)

	Married						Unmarried						WASD*															
	Brahman- baria		Manik- ganj		Narayan- ganj		Brahman- baria		Manik- ganj		Narayan- ganj		Patuakhali and Barguna		Brahman- baria		Manik- ganj		Narayan- ganj		Patuakhali and Barguna		Total		%			
Total migrants																												
Cash and bank savings	10	22	14	13	0	4	3	4	16	12	11	13	4	16	12	11	13	13	11	11	13	13	13	122	122	57.8	57.8	
Bought land	2	8	6	3	0	0	0	0	3	6	3	0	0	3	6	3	0	3	3	3	3	5	5	36	36	17.1	17.1	
Constructed new house/renovated old one	4	3	7	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	0	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	3	5	5	27	27	12.8	12.8	
Provided migration costs for brother/sister	0	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	3	3	0	0	3	3	14	14	6.64	6.64	
Invested in cattle rearing	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	3	3	0	0	1	1	10	10	4.74	4.74	
Mortgaged land	0	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	9	9	4.27	4.27	
Purchased jewellery	6	17	8	9	0	6	3	6	4	7	4	5	5	4	7	4	4	4	7	4	5	5	74	74	35.1	35.1		
Bore education expenses	5	3	5	5	0	0	0	0	7	4	3	0	0	7	4	3	0	7	4	3	3	3	35	35	16.6	16.6		
Invested in business, repaid loan, etc.	5	2	3	2	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	0	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	4	4	22	22	10.4	10.4		
Nothing reported	6	7	5	6	12	1	2	1	6	0	5	0	0	6	0	5	0	6	0	5	4	4	54	54	25.6	25.6		
	38	71	47	44	12	11	8	11	45	38	29	9	9	45	38	29	43	43	29	43	43	43	403	403				

Note: WASD =widowed, abandoned, separated, divorced  
Source: Authors' analysis

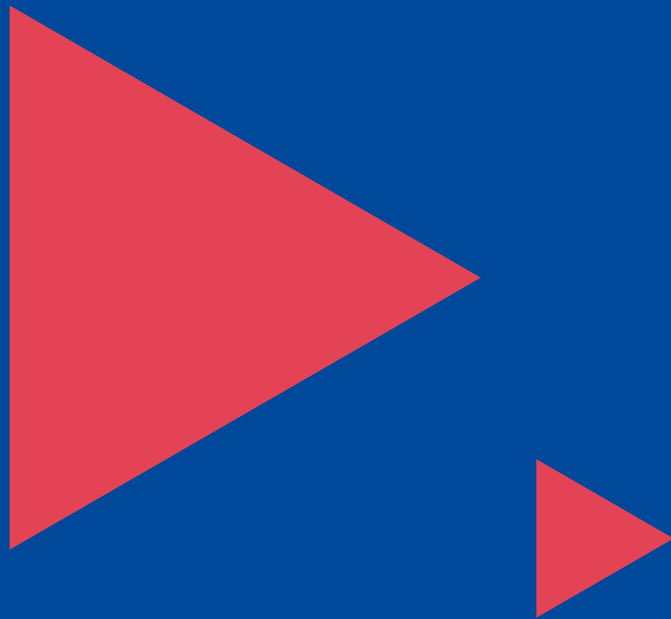




# 11

## Review of problematic issues faced by domestic workers in destination countries

---



This chapter addresses the problematic issues that domestic workers described in their life abroad. They relate to food, workload, resting time, lack of payment or delayed payment of salaries, restricted use of mobile phones, healthcare, bodily harm and sexual abuse.

The information obtained rests on what returnees volunteered to share since employers were not interviewed and no observation could be made in destinations. Human memory is often patchy. Long-term migrants generally remembered the most salient features of their lives abroad and could freeze the past into mythicized stories. Recently returned women gave more detailed accounts, even if narratives are always coloured by the narrator's state of mind at a particular moment as well as her understanding of the interviewer's purpose. For the researcher to be identified with an NGO creates the expectation that ticking the right boxes could procure some benefits, while being taken for a journalist provokes caution. On the other hand, a researcher offering no promises of benefits could be met with impatience. Nonetheless, most women appreciated the interest manifested in them and in their migration stories. "No one has ever asked me so many questions," confessed a returnee who narrated her life abroad with evident pleasure.

Family members interviewed in the absence of the migrant were mostly concerned with the timely disbursement of her salary, the time at which a conversation could be held on IMO, and her ability to cope in general. Migrant women are selective in what they share with their families, mostly providing them with reassuring news unless they face a major crisis and require assistance. Case histories where the migrant could not be interviewed (37.5 per cent of the cohort) are less in-depth, and many questions are left unanswered or unreliably answered. These gaps could be verified when several visits to a household were permitted in order to eventually meet the returnee and compare her version of events with earlier informant(s) narratives as seen in the case of Samia (Chapter 6).

### 11.1. Food

In theory, employers who can afford to hire a migrant domestic worker from abroad have the means to feed her adequately. In any case, they have a contractual and a moral obligation to

provide what is an imperative necessity. Having said this, food is culture. It is about tastes, preferences and identities. In an encounter between people of different cultures, how informed and sensitive are the actors about the likes and dislikes of "the other"? How is rank played out? Food is also language. It may express conviviality, or the opposite, condescendence. It signals differential status. Food could be used to reward or to punish, starving being the ultimate deprivation. These issues are discussed here.

Over 60 per cent of the interviewed women said that they faced no problem with food, in terms of its quantity or quality. Their answers could be regrouped in the following scenarios.

- a) My employers appreciated the Bengali food I cooked. I made small adjustments for them (by making it not as spicy), but there was no separate cooking. I could prepare food for myself the way I like.
- b) I missed rice at first, but I came to appreciate their food and discovered new dishes.
- c) I had no direct access to food and had to eat whatever was given to me.
- d) The food was monotonous, poor in nutritive values and/or detrimental to my health (too much fried food from takeaway restaurants.)
- e) Food was available but my workload was so heavy; I was too tired and I had no time to eat properly.
- f) I did not like the food I was given, but I forced myself to eat to remain strong and to be able to cope with the hard work.

For some women, food became a major problem often associated with other deprivations and mistreatments. Five cases are discussed here.

#### *Shiuli*

Shiuli, a 36-year-old, migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2019. She had a large debt to repay and tried her best to cope with a difficult situation, but she could not complete her contract and gave up after 18 months. She said:

*My biggest problem was the food they gave me. People speak of sexual abuse in Saudi Arabia, but I did not experience this kind of problem. People do not consider poor food as abuse, but it is so. They ate eggs and fruits but never gave me these kinds of food. Madam never offered me the grapes they*

*purchased for themselves – the same with oranges. The daughters were not so stingy. When their mother was asleep, they sometime gave me an egg or other food but as daughters, there is not much they could do. When I complained about food, the employer replied that they were poor, that many people were going without food during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I was lucky to get something to eat.*

It was Shiuli's second migration, and she had negotiated a good salary (1,100 riyals). For the first three months, the employer paid her on time and purchased rice, spices, and sometimes fish, for her. Shiuli was satisfied. Then it stopped. For reasons she cannot explain, food became insufficient in quantity and poor in quality. A meal could consist of tea with sugar and a bun. Her salary was also withheld. The employer who lived in Jeddah had five children.

Shiuli conceded that they were not a rich family, but it is their attitude she found most revolting. When the employer said she was lucky not to go hungry, she felt treated like a beggar who should be grateful for whatever she is given. Shiuli pointed out her right not only to sustenance, but to respect and dignity. When she could finally call the recruiting agency after eight months to complain about her situation, she asked to speak to the Bangladeshi agent who, she felt, could understand better her problem with food: "*Ami Bangali. Amar bhat, mach dorkar*" (I am Bengali, I need rice and fish). It sounds like a mantra and a declaration of identity. The agent spoke to the employer, but it brought little change.

In this story as well as in the next ones, poor food and discrimination through food were associated with other problems, such as the delayed disbursement of salary and restrictions on the use of a mobile phone. When the Bangladeshi agent asked Shiuli's employer why he did not pay her salary on time, he replied that she would leave if he did so. He was determined to keep the poor woman captive. At the time of this conversation, five months' arrears were due. Following the intervention, Shiuli received one month's salary, but four months were still withheld when she left the employer. Abuse and frustration had piled up beyond what she could bear, and Shiuli just wanted to escape the toxic environment.

How can an employer get away with such treatment of his employee? What is the value of a "contract" and who can deliver justice when

it is breached in this way? To recover her dues, Shiuli had recourse to the recruiting agency in Jeddah. What power did they have to coerce a recalcitrant employer and what was their interest in doing so? After seeking help from the agency, Shiuli resisted pressure to pay for her return ticket, insisting that the agency got it from the employer. The Bangladeshi agent kept her in his home, where she worked for her keep, delaying her return by another three months. She never found out who paid for her return ticket. After this painful experience, Shiuli resumed her former occupation, peddling clothes from door to door, and was determined never to migrate again.

#### *Rahima*

Rahima's employer was an elderly retired Saudi government official. He divorced his wife while Rahima was in his employ and the family split. Rahima followed the wife, who kept waiting for an allowance that did not come. The divorced wife had little money and relied on her sons. Meanwhile, the husband continued paying Rahima's salary of 800 riyals. There were problems with food from the start, but it got worse after the divorce.

*They ate kariz [wheat and meat cooked with spices] and chicken, but they did not give these to me. I spent two Eids with them, and they did not offer me a piece of meat even on those days. They cooked the meat, packed it in boxes, placed it in the fridge and shared it with relatives. They used to bring fruit home. They ate some and kept the rest in the fridge. Even when these were about to go rotten, they did not give me any, preferring to throw them away. I was not permitted to help myself to food. I ate roti with boiled potato and salt or tomatoes and onions. I had to remain strong to cope with the work, so I ate even if I did not like it.*

Rahima understood that Eid is a time for sharing. On that day, in her country, the poor also eat meat. She shared her employer's religion, but the practices associated with it in her employer's home were unrecognizable to her. Other behaviours were also difficult to explain. For example, the employer's divorced daughter, who had returned home, snatched the 15 riyals the employer had given Rahima as *bakshish*. There were numerous problems in this family, and Rahima suffered the consequences of its



dysfunctions. She migrated to escape poverty at home. If living abroad was worse than living at home, why should she migrate? She said:

*I would have stayed longer if I had got good employers. After that experience in Saudi Arabia, I have no wish to migrate again.*

### Salma

Salma worked in a home where the husband and wife both held jobs outside, and much of the food they ate was ordered from outside. She did not like that food (or what was left of it for her). She complained and was told that she could cook her own food, but she would have to pay for it. In other words, they would not feed her. Salma's salary was 800 riyals, when many domestic workers are paid 1,000 riyals. She occasionally cooked for her employer and the woman of the house removed the pieces of fish or meat before she could help herself. Salma admitted to sometimes "stealing" pieces of meat or fish and eating them alone in her room while Madam was asleep. Her employer was a dentist and his wife a schoolteacher. They were not poor, but they had set ideas about a maid coming from a poor country. Such "miskin" (poor, destitute) should not expect or claim food that, in their view, she does not eat in her own country. The employers knew nothing of what Salma ate in her country, but they had strong ideas about "miskin". Bangladeshi men working on farms and elsewhere have reported being victims of the same "miskin" prejudice.

### Tauhida

Tauhida used to cook for herself and the Indian driver with whatever the employer purchased in bulk once every two weeks when he visited his family. She said:

*We had to do with the food they bought for us. They did not take our suggestions. We asked for chillies, but they did not care.*

In addition to problems related to food, one person in the household imposed particularly harsh conditions on Tauhida. The employer's 23-year-old, unmarried daughter controlled Tauhida's use of her mobile phone, forbade her to speak to the Indian driver, spied on her and harassed her in all kinds of ways. She also "punished" her physically and when this occurred, no one in the house intervened, tacitly condoning the violence. The last time it happened, the beating was severe enough to

leave marks on Tauhida's body. Her husband saw these on a video call and advised her to leave immediately, alerting other Bangladeshi men he knew in the locality. After three and a half years, Tauhida decided she'd had enough and left, saying,

*Everyone knew I was leaving because of the daughter but no one said anything to her.*

How could an educated young woman take it upon herself to police the maid and administer physical punishment? Was she "crazy"? Tauhida did not use this epithet, but others did so to describe similar behaviour from a particular member of the household who made their lives unbearable.

### Shilpi

Shilpi worked in Oman, near Salalah. The female head of the household was an elderly woman, and she decided what Shilpi should eat or not eat. Shilpi could not swallow the flatbread she was given, and she asked for rice. She was also forbidden to bathe more than once a week (in Bangladesh, which does not lack water, bathing is a daily ritual). To protest these conditions, she went on a hunger strike, locking herself in her room for three days and informed her family, who were quite alarmed. The local *dalal* was asked to contact the Oman subagent for a quick intervention. When the employer was contacted, he argued that he did not know Shilpi had faced such problems. Why was he not told earlier? Shilpi said she had made her requests several times, but the elderly mother did not allow any changes to be made. The hunger strike and the chain of interventions reportedly had had positive results.

As already pointed out, food is a means of expressing a gamut of relationships and sentiments, from generosity and conviviality to stinginess and condescendence. At pre-departure trainings, women are reminded of the necessity to adapt in the employer's home, and adaptation is reportedly given more importance than their rights as workers. Clearly, adaptation should not be a one-sided affair. Hearing returnees' stories, employers also need to adapt. They ought to be reminded of their responsibility to meet the nutritional needs of their employees and pay attention to their food preferences to the extent possible.

Having said this, migrant women's abilities to adjust is variable, and some candidates

are intellectually and psychologically quite unprepared for a journey into the unknown. They clearly have no appetite for discovering a different culture. Refusing unfamiliar food could be the expression of a general suspicion and even disgust towards what is not one's own. In Lebanon, a Christian woman reported that she employed a Bangladeshi woman who stayed with her only a few days as she refused to touch "Christian" food. Such problems are rare in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where Bangladeshi Muslim women generally work in the homes of Muslim employers. The unfamiliar and the unacceptable then takes other forms, such as being fed flatbread instead of Bengali food, which is rice.

Finally, complaints about food can also be used to signal other problems. A woman working in a kitchen without air conditioning found the heat unbearable, but complained about inadequate food instead, considering it was a stronger argument to get what she wanted. Complaints about food are legitimate and can be used strategically to obtain a result or to cover other problems. In a previous field research the authors' conducted, a young woman complained about food when her problem was actually sexual harassment, which she could not reveal for fear that her husband would reject her.

If food has been a serious problem for a minority of women migrants, others came to appreciate the foods they discovered. Such openness is found mostly among women who had a good relationship with the employer and stayed several years. For Johura who worked in Lebanon for nine years, from 2008 to 2017, discovering new food was a pleasure.

*With my employer, we used to go for picnics. They cooked burned meat [barbecue]. It is very tasty. They make all kinds of salads. I liked these very much. At the beginning, I missed rice, but I got used to their food. I ate the fruits that grew in their garden. They had olive trees, and I collected the olives. They prepared them in all kinds of ways.*

Sakina spent five years in Amman. During the interview in her village, she was cooking a Jordanian dish. She said:

*I got used to their food and do not like Bengali food much anymore. My employers often attended parties. I sometimes accompanied them, and when I did not,*

*they brought food home for me. They visited distant places. They went to resorts where there were swimming pools and I played with the children.*

For Sakina, tasting new foods is associated with travel and the discovery of new places. For women who led a more confined life, attending weddings and other receptions with their mistresses was a welcome distraction. On these occasions, a wide variety of food could be enjoyed, including rice and meat. Not only was the food plentiful, but tips and small gifts were also distributed. These were exceptional moments of socialization when several *khadammas* (domestic workers) could meet and share their experiences.

## 11.2. Workload and resting time

Most domestic workers reported heavy workloads and long working hours. Such conditions are generally acceptable, provided the salary and other benefits match the hardship and their health does not falter.

Nur Banu, a 36-year-old, was introduced in Chapter 5. From Majlishpur, she rushed home after hearing her husband had taken a second wife. Nur Banu divorced him and migrated again, determined to succeed. She said:

*In Saudi Arabia, I was sent to Taif where I stayed for two years. I had very good employers. This time, I had no problem with the language. My salary was the same as in Dubai [22,000 takas or 1,000 riyals per month] but I made a lot more money. My employer's sister was half-blind, and she lived in the same building. I used to cook for her, and she paid me another 300 riyals a month. My employer's brother stayed on the third floor, and he paid me 200 riyals for cleaning his home. I also got tips and bakshish at different times. Thus, I could make about 2,000 riyals a month. I worked very hard. When I returned to my room, I could hardly stand. After two years, I really needed a vacation.*

However, such heavy work could not be sustained for too long. Nur Banu returned home and did not sign up for another contract, investing instead in her daughter's and son's migrations. She had worked to the limit of her capacity. She accepted the work as it was well paid. Earning 2,000 riyals per month is among

the highest income we have recorded for a domestic worker.

Domestic workers must adjust to the lifestyle and rhythm of the employer's household whether there are children attending school in the morning, adults sleeping till midday, guests filling the house on Fridays, or other circumstances and events. She worked for the same employer in Saudi Arabia for four-and-a-half years and left as the food regime did not suit her gastric problems. She explained how her work was never finished:

*There were 14 members in the household. My employer was a retired government officer of average means. His eldest son worked in a bank, and he was married and had four children. Another son was in the police and had two children. An unmarried daughter was a schoolteacher. They all lived together, and I was allowed to cook separately for myself, but I was so pressed with work, I just ate what they ate ... I got up early in the morning and did not know when my day would end. When my sister phoned, she used to tell me that I did not follow the conversation because I was doing two things at the same time. My sister worked for a company in Kuwait. She had a schedule, and she was free, and I was tied [bandha]. You could not compare our situations.*

*Even during Ramadan, work never stopped. We worked all night to prepare the sehri [the food eaten before daybreak and the beginning of the fast], then the household went to sleep, and we had to clean up everything. We slept for three to four hours. Our employers slept as they wished, but we did not have that option. We had to do the work. Besides this special time, cleaning a house where 14 people live was not light work. Clothes are machine-washed, but there are always some pieces that must be handwashed. Then, we had to iron these clothes.*

Nur Banu was paid 1,000 riyals the first two years and 1,200 riyals afterwards. At the third *aqama* (as her work permit was renewed for a third time), she demanded an increase, but it was refused. Finally, health problems forced her to resign, and her employer requested that she paid her own airfare, which she considered mean. She will migrate again but will not return to the same employer.

In none of the GCC destination countries are the employers of Bangladeshi domestic workers found to respect, let alone manifest an awareness of, regulations requiring that the *khadamma* be allowed a minimum rest of eight or nine hours in a row. Granting a weekly day off is also systematically ignored. When Nupur contrasted her situation as a live-in domestic worker with her sister working for a company in Kuwait, she pointed out the latter had a regular eight-hour working day, up to four hours overtime paid at a higher rate, and one day off a week. Her sister is "*shadhin*" (free) while she is "*bandha*" (tied) or "*bondi*" (unfree). In Bangla, the meaning of these words is slippery and depending on the context, "*bandha*" may indicate servitude. To make her point stronger, Nupur here underlined a radical opposition between "*shadhin*" and "*bandha*", while real situations are probably more nuanced. When the word "*bandha*" is used for live-in domestic workers in Bangladesh, it does not refer to working time but to having no time earmarked as one's own – in other words, being on call ready to serve anytime at the employer's request.

### 11.3. Use of mobile phones

A mobile phone is essential for migrant workers to communicate with their family back home and to inform the agency should a problem arise. With the physical mobility restrictions that live-in domestic workers are subject to, a mobile phone may be the only means to communicate with the outside world, keep in touch with family and friends, share concerns and frustrations with other similarly employed women, give and receive advice, and develop strategies to solve problems. Mobile phones break a migrant worker's isolation and contribute to providing a check on bad treatment.

Shilpi had her own phone and could inform her family when she went on a hunger strike. Without the device and access to the internet, her scheme to obtain a change would have failed. Shiuli had no such access and for eight months, she was unable to contact the agency and request that her withheld salary be paid and the food be improved. She believes her employer deliberately created obstacles to delay her use of a mobile phone. She said:

*I did not come with my own phone. My son arrived in Saudi Arabia one month after me, and I requested permission to meet him.*

*The employer refused. Six months after my arrival, I was finally allowed to meet him. He gave me his phone with an IMO number set in. When they [the employer] saw that I had a phone, they got annoyed. They did not want me to communicate with the outside world. I requested them to provide me with a SIM card. At first, they refused. I told Madam, "You only allow me to speak to my family for five minutes per week. I have three children at home. I need to talk to them. You must get me a SIM card. The employer then purchased one and deducted the amount from my salary. I could communicate with the office and explain my problems eight months after my arrival.*

The bilateral agreement signed between the Bangladesh and the Saudi Arabian governments explicitly recognized the right of domestic workers to use a mobile phone and the obligation for employers to provide the facility, but one can see that some employers delay or curtail this right in all kinds of ways. Cost can also be a deterrent when the women have no access to Wi-Fi and must pay for data themselves. One woman explained:

*I brought my own phone, but they did not allow me to talk to my family. There was internet, but it did not work with my phone. So, I had to buy a SIM card and pay for data. This is costly, and I could not talk often.*

Alternatively, the Wi-Fi is accessible only a few hours a day at a time that may not be suitable to have a conversation with the family back home. The "crazy" young woman who maltreated Tauhida used to cut off the Wi-Fi and when Tauhida protested, she told her to pay 100 riyals a month for access, which was excessive. These restrictions are interpreted as unnecessary harassment.

#### 11.4. Sexual abuse and trafficking

Fieldwork provided glimpses of information and exemplified the different ways in which women and girls extirpated themselves from dangerous or ambiguous situations. Sonia, who was 14 years old, ran away from her employer four months after her arrival in Lebanon. The man reportedly made dirty propositions to her, and she escaped.

Sharmeen, 17 years old, told the employer's son, who made sexual advances on her, that this was not part of her job. He did not insist. Samia, 26 years old, suffered her Jordanian employer's lewd gaze for two years. The man never got what he wanted, but his disturbing looks and the low pay convinced Samia to "run away".

Suborno spent five years with the same employer in Lebanon. She found out that the girl who preceded her in the same job had tragically died after taking poison to abort a baby. Her madam's father-in-law, an elderly widower, admitted being responsible for the pregnancy. The girl's body was repatriated to Bangladesh at the employer's cost. There was no criminal pursuit. So, what conclusion should be drawn of these stories? One veteran woman migrant said:

*A khadamma [domestic worker] is the only one who really knows what goes on in her employer's home.*

These words from a veteran migrant woman invite caution about the certitudes of outsiders. Who defines sexual abuse and how? Under what circumstances is sexual abuse revealed and denounced?<sup>12</sup>

No attempt was made here to add up instances of sexual abuse. First, the information we have is patchy and, second, adding up numbers does not address the different definitions of abuse. Finally, as pointed out earlier, documenting abuse, sexual or otherwise, was not the focus of this research, the purpose being to capture all types of experiences. As also pointed out earlier, unlike NGOs managing programmes assisting victims of maltreatment and abuse, the research team did not search for, nor did it particularly attract, women seeking assistance.

The owner of a recruiting agency in Lebanon commented, "I no longer recruit Bangladeshi girls because they run away when a man takes off his shirt. I prefer the Ethiopians." Bangladeshi girls had a reputation of excessive prudishness, reminding us that bodily language, clothing norms, and clothing styles are much cultural expressions as food and eating habits are. Learning about the other is also learning their language and understanding its meanings.

<sup>12</sup> For a clearly conceptualized introduction, see Bridget Anderson and Julia O'Connell Davidson. 2000. *Trafficking – a demand led problem? A multi-country pilot study*. Save the Children.



The computation of data on sexual abuse regularly lumps together different kinds of situations, such as solicitations that can be refused, demands that must be obliged in the home of the employer by members of the household, and commercial exploitation in establishments, such as brothels. For women caught in any of these situations, the challenges are not the same. Of course, when a moral reading is made on sexual activity out of wedlock, regardless of the set-up, the purpose, or women's acquiescence, all women who have lost their "virtue" are placed in the same category: *noshto meye*. In this understanding of "abuse", women are their bodies. Their agency is irrelevant and notions such as consent, sex work and sexual abuse are all muddled up.

Sexual abuse is a haunting obsession among those who oppose women's labour migration. At the turn of the twenty-first century, official records showed women migrant workers to account for less than 1 per cent of the migrant population, while victims of trafficking (hyphenated with sexual abuse) were regularly estimated at 200,000.<sup>13</sup> Today, public recognition, official registration and the measurement of women migrant workers have considerably improved. Yet, the wild imaginings about women being victims (of sexual abuse) persists. This widespread suspicion creates, for migrant women, the obligation to reassure the family at home and the community at large that they are safe in the employer's home, often hiding the presence of unmarried young men. In truth, migrant women have a double burden: to ward off sexual abuse and protect their reputations at home.

Among the cohort of 211 women documented in this study, four cases were documented where commercial sexual exploitation was either confirmed or strongly suspected. This is far from the common tea stall statement – where only men gather – that "80 per cent of women workers abroad are sexually abused", but cases were found. Four women had migrated to Saudi Arabia on domestic visas but were not given domestic work. We shall discuss three of these cases here, the fourth being reserved for a special report on Saudi Arabia. One woman personally described her ordeal while the other two could not be

met and family members explained how they organized a rescue after getting a distress call.

Girls who migrated to Dubai on dance visas are not included here as they did not admit to sexual abuse. None of the women who migrated on company or garment factory visas complained of sexual abuse or trafficking.

### *Mukta*

Twenty-five-year-old Mukta is divorced and has two children. This was her second migration to Saudi Arabia. Sent to a first employer, she refused to stay as the salary was too low (800 riyals for an experienced migrant). She returned to the agency and was sent to a second employer where the crisis occurred. Her aunt explained:

*It was a bad place. They wanted to cut her long hair, and she was supposed to wear tight-fitting clothes. They wanted to make her adhunik [modern]. But Mukta resisted, and she was hit. At night, she snatched a phone and hiding in the bathroom, she managed to send a message on Facebook. She put up picture of her injured finger and desolate face. She pleaded: "Brothers, please come and save me. I am in trouble."*

Mukta's mother is not on Facebook, but she heard about her daughter's appeal the following day through neighbours. She immediately summoned her son who acted as the intermediary in her recruitment and asked to be taken to the *dalal*. Four women went together and pounded his door, threatening to call the RAB (a dreaded police force) unless Mukta was immediately rescued. The following day, Mukta phoned her family. She had been brought back to the agency and was later sent to a third employer where she is still working and is reportedly satisfied.

Little information was given on the "bad" place in question, except for the attempt to cut Mukta's hair and make her wear tight-fitting clothes which she resisted. The Chonpara women understood what it meant, and Mukta's pleas were sufficient to rouse them into action. We do not know whether the video Mukta recorded on Facebook continued to circulate after the crisis was resolved.

13 Tasneem Siddiqui. 2001. *Transcending Boundaries. Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh*. The University Press Limited. Dhaka. pp 38-39

### Nila

The 22-year-old Nila, mother of two children, left for Saudi Arabia on 2 February 2019. On 25 February, she called her in-laws, demanding to be rescued. On 27 February, help was solicited from one of the researchers working on this paper. Her aunt declared:

*Nila is in trouble. They sent her to a bad place. She has been trafficked.*

Her husband, her mother-in-law and another relative went to the *dalali* (woman recruiting agent) and beat up her daughter (as one does not beat up an older woman) to press the demand that Nila be repatriated. The old woman took them to the agency located in Fakirapool. Using foul language, the agency owner insulted them and demanded 370,000 takas to help. After much argument, the price was reduced to 150,000 takas. The family would not pay this money. In the end, the agency owner requested the *dalali* to cover the price of the airline ticket and provide another candidate in replacement of Nila. She sent her niece and paid 35,000 takas. Despite having fulfilled the conditions, Nila's return was delayed another month.

The contemptuous attitude of the agency owner towards his clients is noteworthy. He referred to Nila's husband as a drug addict and to her mother as a drug dealer, the implication being that a woman like Nila has few options and should accept the work she had been given. Nila finally returned to Bangladesh on the 29 March 2019. She did not go back to her husband but joined her mother, and further follow-up was not possible.

As with Mukta's story, much information is missing. We know that Nila was in Riyadh and that she was sent to three different employers. The distressed phone call she made that pushed her family into action and led to her repatriation is factual. The agency owner could activate the necessary levers for her repatriation, ensuring he incurred no financial losses. The *dalali*, a poor woman, could have been pressurized to pay 35,000 takas in two instalments, and she effectively sent her brother's daughter to replace Nila, which raises other questions. It should be noted that recruitment for brothels is not done by a separate network but by the same agency that provides women workers for homes. The criteria for selecting women for one place or the other is not clear. Of the four women sent

to brothels, Nila and Mukta were in their early twenties and two were in their forties. Nila and Mukta were both from Chonpara (Nayaranganj), and the women there took the lead in fighting to repatriate one a daughter, the other a daughter-in-law.

One and a half years after this event, the owner of the recruiting agency that sent Nila abroad was arrested with his son in connection with a scandal: the death of Umme Kulsum, a 14-year-old girl they had sent to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker (*Daily Star* 2021).

### Monwara

Monwara is from Sayasta in Manikganj. She was 45 years old the first time she was interviewed in 2021. She had migrated to Kuwait in 1998 and to Bahrain in 2002, working abroad 13 years in all. In 2012, she sent her 17-year-old son to Dubai, but he did not succeed at migration, and a large amount of money was lost. After a long gap, Monwara decided to migrate again. She was then 43 years old, but her passport stated that she was 10 years younger. Monwara was sent directly to a brothel and her stay in Saudi Arabia lasted 21 days. She said:

*I was told I would be given housework. But I was sent to a bad place in Jeddah. The dalal was my niece's husband. I was sold. A relative did this to me.*

Monwara explained the Jeddah brothel set up:

*It was a three-floor building, and eight or nine women were working there. They were all young. I was the only woman my age. The girls were Indonesian, Filipina, Ethiopian and Indian. I was the only Bangladeshi. People came. I was not used to this work. One customer complained about me being too loose. He used my mouth instead, and I vomited. I got sick. After 10 days, I managed to run away. On the street, I asked an Arab man to take me to hospital. He took me to the police instead. The police sent me to hospital where I spent 11 days. Then, they purchased my ticket and sent me home. The dalal said that my salary would be 18,000–20,000 takas but I got nothing.*

*After I came back, I wanted to file a police case against the dalal who sent me, but the Member [elected member of the local council] told me that such a move could only damage my reputation. Instead, a local*

*shalish was held and the dalal was made to pay 15,000 takas. Nothing happened in Saudi Arabia – no case, nothing. Here, I did not want to do more. I have a married son who has children. Everyone here knows there has been a shalish regarding this affair.*

Monwara spoke about her ordeal without fear or hesitation. A *shalish* had been held and her case was already known in the community. Although much information is missing, interesting observations can be made. First, the case confirmed the existence of a private brothel, this time in Jeddah, where young women of different nationalities provide sexual services. The appointment of a 43-year-old village woman to such job, surely, was a mistake on the part of the agency. Her passport showing her to be 10 years younger could be one explanation why.

Customers complained about her aging body, and Monwara felt out of place and incompetent. The brothel management may have allowed her to run away to correct their mistake and to save on paying her. It is unclear who paid for her return ticket but the police, unlike recruiting agencies, did not take anything from her.

Back in her community, Monwara was seen as a victim and was not ostracized. She resumed her place in the family as a wife, mother and grandmother. Interestingly, in this village where people are familiar with women's labour migration, the event did not lead to single out Saudi Arabia as a bad destination or generalize on the risks of migration. Monwara's daughter and her daughter-in-law both left for Saudi Arabia a little while later.

What can we make of the justice delivered to Monwara? She explained that the Jeddah police took her to the hospital where she stayed for

11 days before driving her to the airport and sending her back to Bangladesh. Was the brothel raided? Was an investigation conducted? Were there any arrests or fines? Monwara was not informed, and we do not know. At home, Monwara demanded compensation from the local *dalal* who had sent her abroad. She did not go to the police. The local representative who held a *shalish* recommended that she accepts the meagre amount of 15,000 takas as compensation and that she stops pursuing justice as it could only damage her reputation. For how many days and how many men was Monwara obliged to serve sexually before running away? In her case, justice was certainly not served.

Monwara's ordeal fit the criteria of trafficking. Bangladesh is equipped with a strong anti-trafficking law which is seldom applied.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the law was not even evoked to pressurize the local *dalal* for a larger compensation. Once again, the role played by the local representative in the arbitration is highly debatable. It should be stated that none of the suspected or confirmed cases of commercial sexual exploitation presented here were exposed in the local or national media. Members of the research team heard about these incidents while circulating in the community.

This research is not a criminal investigation. Local knowledge and an understanding of what happened were recorded keeping in mind that victims of serious abuse may not reveal everything they suffered to protect their reputations. Moreover, they may not understand, nor trust, a legal system that appears inaccessible to them in any case. The local recruiting agent who sent them abroad is usually blamed for mishaps and it is from him (or her) that reparation is demanded.

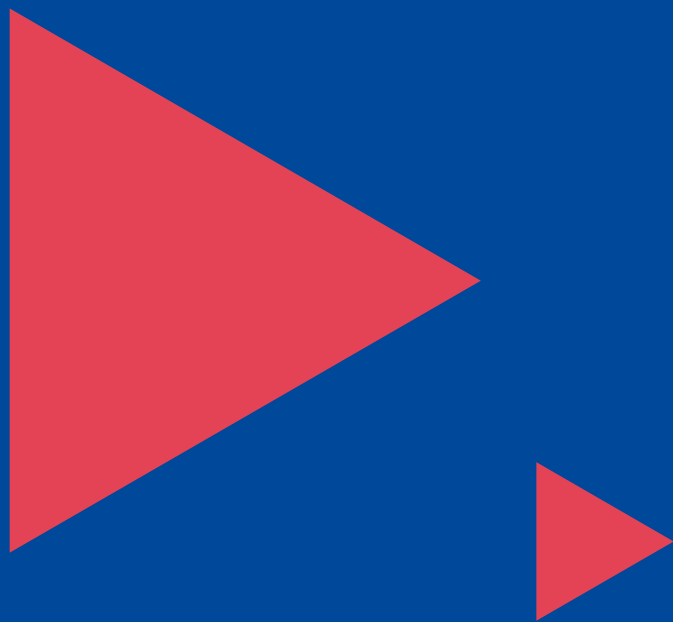
14 The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012(Act No 3 of 2012) <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/543f75664.pdf>



# ▶ 12

## Conclusion and recommendations

---



**R**ebels, victims, agents of change – this title was an invitation to reconsider a population so often misunderstood and misrepresented with fresh eyes. Seen as victims of abuse, with an obsession for sexual excess, or decried as morally suspect because they move across borders without (approved) guardians, migrant women are poorly served by the images of them commonly circulated in the media, at village tea stalls where men gather, and elsewhere. Should they earn well abroad in a relatively short period of time and expose their wealth – by building a house for example – gossip quickly spreads about their having engaged in “bad” work. How much can a migrant woman earn? If she earns more than a migrant man, her moral character is questioned.

This research demonstrates that cross-border labour migration offers women a window of opportunities. The attractiveness of low-status jobs, such as domestic work, depends on a woman’s socioeconomic position, family circumstances, location, and ability to access means of livelihood. Some women in need of income do not attempt to work in garment factories because of distance, or because their community disapproves of local mobility, which is more likely to attract attention than a discreet departure for the international airport (Brahmanbaria). Others are no longer employable in garment factories after a certain age (Narayanganj). Earnings are generally higher abroad and savings are more easily amassed. Women also migrate to escape problematic marriages, fulfil ambitions and gain greater control over their lives.

Beside the migrants, family members also benefit. Poor parents who send an unmarried daughter to work abroad improve the well-being and security of the household, even if they, and the fathers in particular, feel shame at the reversal of traditional roles and insist on the migration being only a brief interlude before marrying off the daughter.

Wives, sisters and mothers migrate to pay for the migration of male members of the family. They migrate to pay off debts accumulated because a husband or a son had a failed migration. Such migrations exploit the large difference in migration costs between women and men as well as a woman’s sense of duty towards the family. Given the burden of debt and the pressure to repay, these may amount to distress migrations. In such cases, the migrant women are paid back

with words of praise for shouldering family responsibilities, but they gather no personal wealth and are unable to pursue any dreams of their own. Wifely duty has its limits and more so in some communities than others. In Chonpara, women easily divorce husbands who do not work, laze around, womanize or engage in various addictions.

### 12.1. Migrant women as rebels

Men who rebel become kings  
Women who rebel become whores

*(Porush zid corle hoi raja,  
Nari zid corle hoi potita)*

This old Bengali proverb points out how rebellion can be a costly affair for women and how their *sotitto* (purity, chastity, honour) is readily questioned should they defy the injunctions of the family and *samaj* (society). In these case histories, we encountered women who were rebels at some stage of their journey as they fought back, took risks and defied authority. Their rebellion may follow having been victimized, or not. Whether these rebels become agents of change is another question.

Sharmeen already was a rebel when she filed for a divorce three days after her wedding at the age of 16, angering her mother who had borrowed 30,000 takas to cover the wedding costs. She migrated and earned exceptionally well. Upon her return, she took over the leadership of the family, directing her elder brother, mother and younger sister and becoming the “man” of the family. Sharmeen is highly critical of the restrictions society imposes on women, and her community regards her as a rebel. Her narrative expresses bravery, confidence and a fighting spirit. She may have been born in a poor and dysfunctional family, but her life is the antithesis of victimhood and passivity.

Samia returned to her village after an absence of eight years. She could not accept the restrictions of the village constantly relayed to her by her controlling mother. Samia married the man she was enamoured with and took brave decisions, resulting in her family being excommunicated and in her leaving quickly for one more migration. Animated by an unstoppable rebellious spirit, Samia paid a very high price.

Ameri’s rebellious spirit erupted after an accumulation of frustrations and a mounting anger at having been used and abused, first in

her marital home and then in her natal home when her brothers occupied the home built with her money and treated her as a temporary guest. She fought hard, reclaiming what she considered her due, took a job in an EPZ and settled with her son away from the family. In this case, the rebellious sister refused to migrate again for her brothers to benefit.

Nur Banu rebuked the husband who demanded that she paid him a 100,000 takas to divorce the second wife he had taken. She divorced him, migrated again, worked very hard and earned handsomely. She could buy land with both her earnings and those of her divorced migrant daughter, build a house and make a new start with a new “husband” of her choice. She narrated her story with a sense of victorious revenge.

This is not an ode to rebellion but an acknowledgement that these migrant women made choices and challenged traditions in a way that would have been unthinkable had they stayed at home. Their earning was critical in asserting their independence, but it did not suffice. The crossing of borders and the discovery of new worlds changed the way they looked at “tradition”. While rising to new challenges, they developed strength and confidence, sometimes managing new freedoms, and defying authority.

## 12.2. Migrant women as victims

“Victim”, the epithet commonly associated with migrant women, endlessly emphasized by the media and even endorsed by respected academics, has an elastic meaning. The perception of being victimized relates to one’s understanding of rights and entitlements in a specific position and environment. Therefore, thresholds can be variable. Claiming to be a victim abroad and acting upon the claim may be rewarding in some environments, but elsewhere it could be costly. For migrant returnees, the family, the *samaj* (society), the *shalish*, NGOs and the media are the locations where claims of victimization can be presented, recognized, instrumentalized and compensated or not.

The narratives in this study can be placed under three headings.

### 1. Credible stories of victimization

A clear example is Monwara, the 42-year-old woman who signed up for a domestic job in Saudi Arabia but was sent to a brothel instead.

She escaped after 10 days and returned to Bangladesh after 21 days. Her narrative appears factual, and there is no posturing. Her being victimized was recognized when the Saudi police took her to hospital and had her repatriated at no cost. She did not get justice, however. At home, the facts were recognized but the crime minimized. Her family and the member, an elected representative of the local government, had no interest in making it a big case. In the end, her status as mother and grandmother discouraged her from seeking justice beyond the local *shalish* where she obtained a meagre compensation from the *dalal*. In any case, trafficking cases fall outside the competence of the *shalish*.

Shiuli was the victim of food deprivation, delayed salary payments and various humiliations. She tried to cope with the hardships meted out by her Saudi employer but after several months, she decided to quit without claiming her final dues. The non-payment of arrears aimed at keeping her captive did not hold her back. She reclaimed her dignity, taking on the losses. In the end, she felt that staying poor at home was preferable to the treatment suffered abroad. Victim she was, but not without inner strength, and dignity.

### 2. Posturing as victim

Women who posture as victims instrumentalize their story for benefit. One example is Munni, who returned from Saudi Arabia after 5 months in poor health. She blamed the *kafeel* for not feeding her properly, which worsened a health problem she had suffered prior to migration. The *kafeel* took her back to the agency, where she languished for three months, refusing the temporary jobs being proposed and being badly treated as a result. Munni’s health deteriorated further. Three years earlier, she had been repatriated at the employer’s cost for the same health condition. Perhaps Munni should not have migrated in the first place, given her health problems.

Regardless of the merit of her second departure, what is interesting is the strategy she adopted on her return. Seeing her emaciated and penniless, one friend working for an NGO recommended that she meet a journalist to share her story. She suggested adding sexual abuse to make her case stronger, but Munni’s mother advised her against it. In the end, Munni obtained a substantial amount of money from one NGO with

a special fund for migrant women who returned sick. Her name is now famous in the community and is given to any researcher or journalist seeking to interview a migrant returnee who suffered abuse. Clearly, posturing as a victim is a performance and not all victimized women agree to play the part.

### 3. Positively rejecting the victim label

Most women did not endorse the position of victim; on the contrary, they stressed their resilience, their ability to cope, and sometimes the very good employer they had. They found the media portrayal of them infuriating. They also resented the fixation on sexual abuse while the other problems encountered abroad were overlooked. Many pointed out that the risks migrant women face abroad were grossly exaggerated while the problems women encounter at home are overlooked.

Again, identifying as a victim could be a matter of perspective. One should not forget that a number of women migrated because of the stress on their resources, some to escape abuse or to repair the bad luck of being born a daughter among daughters, in which cases, the conditions met abroad could be experienced as a welcome relief. Migrant girls compared their work situations abroad with the workload their married friends shouldered in their in-laws' homes and did not envy them. We described the case of the 16-year-old girl who was raped before she could migrate. Married to her rapist and made to serve the in-laws who strictly curtailed her movement in the name of preserving honour, she dreamt of migration as liberation.

Women who had several migration experiences were in a better position to relativize a bad experience or a bad employer amidst more positive experiences. Good or bad employers are a matter of luck they say. A succession of failed migrations could damage the ego. Momota, a divorced woman who had three failed migration experiences, blamed all her eight *kafeels* and considered herself a victim, but her family blamed her instead. Migrant women posturing as victims are often criticized by others and made responsible for their lack of success.

Summing up, women were more likely to present themselves as victims when the researchers for this paper were (mis)taken for NGO workers. Being taken as a mediaperson supposedly interested in "strong" cases created other

problems. Some women initially refused to talk to a journalist. Explaining the researcher's purpose was not always easy and could take some time but once it was understood, many women appreciated the invitation to speak and tell their story. The approach and the method practiced in this research may have produced more stories of women showing pride in their achievement and fewer women presenting themselves as victims. If a bias is read in this approach, we fully endorse it.

### 12.3. Migrant women as agents of change

To what extent are migrant women agents of change as they return home? The question can be raised for all working and earning women even if some traits are specific to migrants who cross borders without family guardians, often stay away for relatively long periods of time, and learn to adapt in a foreign environment. They may develop a degree of autonomy in relation to family and kin, amass some wealth, and develop "foreign" attitudes. In the context of the village, veteran migrant workers often stand out amongst other women for being more articulate and self-confident.

Psychological changes in the personality of migrant women can be judged negatively by some. In Sayasta (Manikganj), women have the reputation of being demanding wives, and some men prefer marrying in another district where the women are said to be more docile as they do not migrate. In Chonpara, men complained of women being quick to divorce a husband not to their liking, and younger women acting even faster than their mothers. They do not tolerate husbands who waste money, do not work or engage in addiction. They have the option to migrate and for them there is no cost. That is why they seem to hold these attitudes.

For all the changes that migrant women can bring, they stumble against core institutions that enshrine fundamental gender inequality in Bangladeshi society. Earning women are powerless to change inheritance laws in which daughters get half of a son's share. They may battle with a husband taking a second wife but cannot cancel men's right to simultaneous polygamy. Earning sisters remain guests in their natal homes as brothers carry the patriline and therefore, may appropriate the wealth that the sisters have contributed over the years.

Interestingly, families with only daughters escape some of these difficulties. A situation that used to be seen as a curse can be transformed into an advantage when daughters migrate and produce wealth.

We narrated battles that migrant women fought in their conjugal lives and within the family meeting some success. Acting as agents of change in other theatres, for example at the village *shalish* or having a voice further afield, is much more difficult. For migrant women originating from mostly poor families, gender inequalities often combine with low-class membership. National NGOs supposedly representing their interests have been disappointing in their efforts. A narrow focus on victimization, reflecting their donors priorities, pushed other migration outcomes out of sight. National mainstream media catering to middle class audiences have also failed them (Ahmed 2021). Migrant women's right to mobility, work and dignity and to enjoy the fruit of their labour has been submerged by a discourse demanding more "protection" for "vulnerable" women, a narrative heard even among left-wing feminist groups.

Are migrant women agents of change? On the surface, structural transformations are not apparent, but an underground current may be tracing its path. The future is yet to be written.

#### 12.4. Recommendations

- 1) Most of the migrant women interviewed in this study do not recognize themselves in the portraits drawn of them in the media. Many deplore the pictures of torture and the news of death spreading like wildfire. From a few documented cases, unwarranted generalizations are made for the majority. In 2018, the flow of women migrant workers dropped by 17 per cent, and one of the causes was news of abused women returning from Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> This overwhelmingly negative depiction is hard for women currently working abroad and on potential candidates likely to be repulsed by the terrifying stories. At this moment, the Government of Bangladesh is standing firm on keeping the door open for women's labour migration, but insistent negative reporting could bring a return of past restrictions on women's movement as has happened in other countries. We know that such measures have never protected women. Media coverage ought to be responsible. Well-intentioned actions may cause more harm than good.
- 2) Legal provisions could be created that protect migrant daughters and wives from being deprived and dispossessed of the wealth they have contributed to their families over the years – the house they built, the land they bought, or the appliances they financed with their incomes. At present, there is no law protecting them – patriarchal custom prevails, and their brothers and husbands appropriate it all.
- 3) The *shalish*, or local arbitration, called to resolve conflicts relating to property acquired by migrant women (or working women in general) or the claims on a wife's remittances by the husband or the in-laws should be instructed in a way that upholds the women's rights. The government should provide guidelines to that effect. Research is needed to throw more light on how institutions apparently frozen in time are (ill) suited to a modern economy and need updating. A project could be taken up on an experimental basis to ensure that working women's right to receive and use their income is fully understood and applied.
- 4) Activists and NGOs should broaden their outlook on migrant women and recognize the potential empowerment of work migration. Assisting women victims of abuse is important and necessary, but it is not enough. NGOs looking for victim-clients to spend donor funds invites some posturing, which is problematic.
- 5) In 2015, the minimum age for women migrating to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers was fixed at 25 years but breaking the law does not appear too difficult. As it is, sending a 14- or 15-year-old girl abroad is a lucrative business for those who specialize in falsifying birth certificates, passports and photos and for the immigration police who may collect bribes. Lowering the official age

15 For more information, see the 2018 RMMRU Annual Report.

- from 25 to 20 and properly enforcing the law would be preferable.
- 6) Labour costs for Bangladeshi migrant workers are regularly denounced as being the highest in the world. This is true for men but not for women. Articles on labour migration commonly ignore this difference and failing to keep up with recent data continues to make women invisible and irrelevant as migrant workers. Yet, they are an integral part of the migration economy, and their participation is unlikely to disappear, regardless of the resistance met from some quarters. Sex-segregated data on migration costs should be an integral part of reporting on the migration economy.
  - 7) While nearly all women signing up for domestic work are rightly appointed to this occupation, a small number is diverted to prostitution in private brothels without their prior knowledge. These occurrences need to be urgently investigated and those responsible for such criminal activity prosecuted. The same recruiting agencies appear to service both demands. They can be identified, and they should be prosecuted. A more proactive attitude to pursue such rogue agencies by the Bangladesh police is required. There's no need to wait for a scandal to erupt or for an accusation to be made against culprits in the destination country.
  - 8) *Dalals* have been held responsible for cheating migrant workers, and a system was set up in 2013 for candidates to register online and avoid these intermediaries. It has not been very successful for men and has totally failed for women. Not a single woman candidate covered in this study had used the online registration system. For migrant women and their families, the proximity of a local *dalal* is an advantage as he/she cannot easily disappear and can, therefore, be pressurized and even threatened when a problem arises, for example, when a woman is in danger and demands to be urgently repatriated or when a returnee demands compensation for having been cheated. One should recognize *dalals* as an integral part of the recruiting system and acknowledge the complex role they play, which can be both positive and negative. *Dalal* bashing is easy, but they should not be blamed alone for wrongdoing as they work in tandem with recruiting agencies.
  - 9) Sound policies on labour migration cannot be built on weak, faulty or out-of-date data. The same applies to media reporting. It cannot be based only on a few "strong" cases for which there is much appetite. There is a need for fine-tuned, gender-sensitive, objective and rigorous research respecting academic standards conducted in Bangladesh and at destinations if possible. It should provide a reliable reference to check 'hot' news circulating on social media and elsewhere. Quality research findings should also be well disseminated. They should be integrated into government policies and feed responsible media reporting.

## ► Appendix

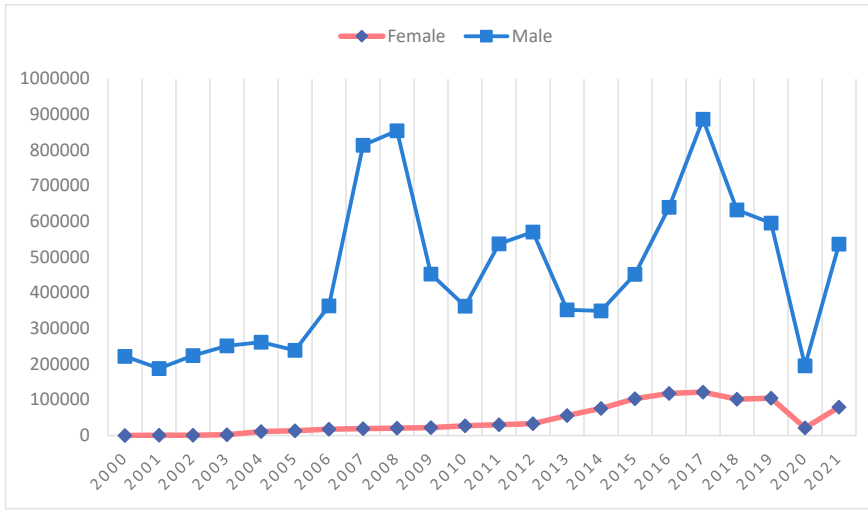
► Table 1. Migration from Bangladesh and women's share in total migration: 2000–2021

Year	Women	Men	Total	% of women
2000	454	222 232	222 686	0.2
2001	659	188 401	189 060	0.3
2002	1 216	224 040	225 256	0.5
2003	2 353	251 837	254 190	0.9
2004	11 259	261 699	272 958	4.1
2005	13 570	239 132	252 702	5.4
2006	18 045	363 471	381 516	4.7
2007	19 094	813 515	832 609	2.3
2008	20 842	854 213	875 055	2.4
2009	22 224	453 054	475 278	4.7
2010	27 706	362 996	390 702	7.1
2011	30 579	537 483	568 062	5.4
2012	33 202	570 494	607 798	5.5
2013	56 400	352 853	409 253	13.8
2014	76 007	349 677	425 684	17.9
2015	103 718	452 163	555 881	18.7
2016	118 088	639 643	757 731	15.6
2017	121 925	886 600	1 008 525	12.1
2018	101 695	632 486	734 181	13.9
2019	104 786	595 373	700 159	15.0
2020	21 934	195 735	217 669	10.1
2021	80 143	537 066	617 209	13.0

Source: Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), data up to end of 2021.



►Figure 1. Sex-disaggregated data on labour migration from Bangladesh (2000–2021)



Source: Authors'.

## ▶ References

---

- Ahmed, N. 2021. *Media Representation of Women Migrant Workers: A Critical Look*. WiF, International Labour Organization. Dhaka. July 2021.
- Anderson, B., and J. O'Connell Davidson. 2000. *Trafficking – A Demand-led Problem? A Multi-Country Pilot Study*. Save the Children, UK.
- Blanchet, T. 2009. *Migration, Wealth and Gender*. Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).
- Blanchet, T. 2019. *Exploratory Research on Women's Migratory Pathways From Bangladesh to Lebanon and Jordan*. WiF, Drishti Research Centre.
- Blanchet, T. 2021. *The Invisible Workers: Bangladeshi Women in Oman*. International Labour Organization
- Blanchet T., and H. Biswas. 2021. *Gender and Migration: An Irregular Landscape*. International Labour Organization.
- Del Franco, Nicoletta. 2012. *Negotiating Adolescence in Rural Bangladesh: A Journey through School, Love and Marriage*. New Delhi: Zubaan Books.
- Gioli, G., A. Maharjan, and M. Gurung. 2017. *Neither Heroines, Nor Victims. Women Migrant Workers and Changing Family and Community Relations in Nepal*. Progress of the World's Women 2018, UN Women.
- Grabska, K., M. de Regt, and N. Del Franco. 2019. *Adolescent Girls' Migration in the Global South: Transitions Into Adulthood*. Palgrave Mcmillan.
- Gramsci, A. 2017. *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- RMMRU (Refugee and Migratory Movement Research). 2018. *Annual Report 2018*.
- Siddiqui, T. 2001. *Transcending Boundaries: Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press.
- The Daily Star*. 2020. "Gruesome Torture and Death of Child Migrant Worker". 20 September 2020.

**For more information, please contact:**  
International Labour Organization  
Regional Office for the Arab States  
Aresco Centre - Justinien Street - Kantari  
P.O.Box 11-4088 Riad Solh 1107-2150  
Beirut – Lebanon