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# Lacerated minds, stolen dreams: Experiences of Bangladeshi women migrants in Saudi Arabia

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**Tanzina Choudhury** 

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

**Mohammad Morad**

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

**Francesco Dellapuppa**

Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

## Abstract

Migration movements from Bangladesh are primarily male-dominated and national policies, as well as the cultural construction in Bangladeshi society are not deemed women-friendly. However, between 1991 and 2021, a total of 921,732 Bangladeshi women have migrated to the so-called 'Middle Eastern' countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, to work as domestic workers (maids, babysitters, nurses, caregivers, etc.) and support their families left behind. These female migrant workers experience harsh working conditions and suffer violence and abuse, in Saudi Arabia, by employers and job agencies, including physical and psychological torture, beating, and sexual violence. Based on in-depth interviews with migrant female workers, who were employed in the domestic sector in Saudi Arabia, this article concludes on their labour and social experiences in the country of destination; highlighting the challenges they face there, the violation of human and social rights they suffer, as well as the coping strategies they adopt.

## Keywords

Bangladeshi female migrants, exploitation, intersectionality, migrant domestic workers, Saudi Arabia

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## Corresponding author:

Tanzina Choudhury, Department of Sociology, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, 3114, Bangladesh.

Email: [tanzinachoudhury@gmail.com](mailto:tanzinachoudhury@gmail.com)

## Introduction

We are living in the ‘age of migration’ which has been referred to as a combination of the ‘globalization of migration’, the ‘acceleration of migration’, the ‘differentiation of migration’, the ‘politicization of migration’, and the ‘feminization of migration’ (Castles and Miller, 1998). According to the United Nations (2020), there were 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, which was 220 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000. Overall in 2020, women accounted for 48% of all international migrants worldwide who migrated mainly for labour (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2020). Thus, in many cases, women have taken on migration as a livelihood strategy and have then become the breadwinners in their families (Dannecker, 2005). However, their presence in different migration movements has always varied depending on their origins, the labour market situation, and the immigration policies both in the sending and receiving countries. Compared to their male counterparts, women migrants had to face various obstacles and discrimination because of the modes of entry open to them and the nature of the jobs they obtain (Piper, 2006; Sultana and Fatima, 2017). Women migrants are mainly confined to domestic work and services, which are unregulated by the labour policy of the destination countries, that means even if women cross the borders legally, they may find themselves in exploitative, demeaning, and irregular working conditions (Dessiye and Emirie, 2018; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Satterthwaite, 2005).

Current migration movements are not limited to the South-North, but are extended to the South-South, where intra-regional migration gains special relevance (Castles and Miller, 1998). Asia poses a very interesting case by playing a key role as both sending and receiving regions of women migrant labour (Oishi, 2002, 2005). Studies demonstrate that Asian low-skilled or unskilled women migrants often move within Asia, especially towards ME<sup>1</sup> countries (Saudi Arabia (SA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, and Oman . . . ), due to fewer restrictive immigration policies and constrained socio-economic capital deemed necessary for immigration (Paul, 2011, 2015). And Bangladeshi women are no exception in this regard. Then, why does this topic need special attention? We believe this issue deserves critical attention for all migrant women from the global south in general, and Bangladeshi migrant women in particular, as they all experience different forms of exploitation and deprivations in their place of destination. Among migrant workers from various Asian countries, the work conditions and experiences of Bangladeshi women are appalling. Yet, it has not received its due attention from academia or policymakers. This article attempts to address this gap in the existing knowledge.

This article focuses on Bangladeshi women’s experiences as migrant household helps, especially, though not exclusively, in SA. We attempt to comprehend the challenges they encounter in a foreign land: Did they experience culture shock? Were they prepared to assimilate into the host society? What coping strategies did they employ to survive in the host society? How did they experience their host country? What happened to the dreams that they cherished before migrating? We will try to address these questions using the narratives of some Bangladeshi migrant women.

The article begins by providing an overview of the context and conceptual underpinnings of this study. It then goes on to highlight its methodology. The subsequent sections

present and discuss the findings and analyses about the research questions. The final part presents concluding remarks and also reflects on the implications of our research for policymakers.

## Literature review and the conceptual frameworks

### *South–South migration and the experiences of women*

Men migrate from almost all Asian countries, while for women, the main ‘sending countries’ are Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka (Kodoth, 2016; Oishi, 2002). In countries such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, migration movements are largely male-dominated, and their policies and cultural construction are not deemed women-friendly (Oishi, 2002, 2005). Studies conducted in this region show that women’s migration patterns do not respond to economic, social, or cultural causes separately, but to an integrative approach, involving the women’s agency, economic, political, and socio-cultural causes, as well as globalization as a process (Oishi, 2002).

As mentioned previously, women who migrate to Arab countries are mainly confined to housework (maids, babysitters, nurses, caregivers . . . ) (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). Due to the nature of their job, they enjoy few formal legal rights and are thereby deprived of legal and social protections (Dessiye and Emirie, 2018; Johnson, 2010; Jureidini, 2003). Furthermore, they are more susceptible to various forms of violence and exploitation during and after the migration (Sultana and Fatima, 2017), due to the nature of migration policy in the place of destinations. Research shows that in the ME countries, migrant domestic workers are more likely to face physical, sexual, and verbal violence (Jureidini, 2003; O’Neil et al., 2016; Piper, 2006; Sultana and Fatima, 2017; Zewdu, 2018). Their working condition is consistent with what Bales’ (1999) mentioned as ‘modern slavery’ that made them virtual prisoners in their employer’s house, and thereby, curtailed their ability to create new networks.

### *Bangladesh and female emigration*

International migration from Bangladesh mainly flourished after it gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 (Mahmood, 1994). The labour migration from Bangladesh expanded as the Government started to promote international migration as a part of an overall development plan (Rodriguez, 2010). Regarding the matter, the Bangladeshi government established a government agency named the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (hereafter BMET) in 1976 to explore the employment opportunities in the ME and newly industrialized South-East Asian countries (Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia . . . ) (Rahman, 2012). Gradually, Bangladesh emerged as a major migrant sender-country, and the number of emigrants sent and the number of receiving countries also increased (BMET, 2021; Rahman, 2011, 2012, 2018; Siddiqui, 2004). However, the precise figure of these short-term emigrants is not available as the Bangladeshi government only possesses data on registered emigrants, and there are no available statistics concerning the returnees. BMET (2021) shows that the number of short-term labour migrants was 13.29 million from 1976 to 2021. Concerning the ME, the number of

Bangladeshi workers migrated with short fixed-term employment contracts to SA (4.49 million), UAE (2.38 million), Oman (1.5 million), Qatar (0.82 million), Singapore (0.81 million), Kuwait (0.63 million), Bahrain (0.41 million), Lebanon (0.27 million), and Jordan (0.19 million; BMET, 2021). We must stress that these *Probashis*<sup>2</sup> are playing a vital role in the Bangladeshi economy, by sending approximately US\$15 billion of remittances back home every year (BMET, 2020; Fondazione, 2021; Rahman, 2018). Bangladeshi migration was male-dominated for a long time and women were not legally allowed to migrate overseas for work until recently (Rahman, 2011, 2018). In most cases, women's autonomous migration, for example, crossing borders without male guardians, was not allowed in Bangladesh as this has been considered a violation of the traditional norms and values of *purdah*<sup>3</sup> (Dannecker, 2005; Oishi, 2005).

Bangladeshi professional women's (doctors, nurses, teachers . . . ) migration started in the 1980s as the government allowed them to work overseas independently (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). Bangladeshi government however banned the expatriation of all women workers in semi-skilled and unskilled categories in 1997 (Rahman, 2011). This decision was revised in 2003 which brought a noteworthy change in the gender pattern of migration (Rahman, 2011; Uddin, 2021). Since then, countries in ME have emerged as major destinations for Bangladeshi women migrants to seek work. This overseas migration, with a short-term contract visa, has become one of the most important livelihood strategies of Bangladeshi unskilled and semi-skilled women workers (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). According to BMET (2021), between 1991 and 2021, a total of 921,732 Bangladeshi women have migrated to ME countries. Most of these short-term women contract workers joined the labour market of SA (372,192), Jordan (167,506), UAE (132,056), and Lebanon (107,221) as domestic helps to support their families back home. Yet, their representation in international labour market is negligible compared to other Asian countries, for example, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Philippines (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014; Rahman, 2011).

It has been observed among potential woman migrants in Bangladesh that they negatively reflect on the prospect of becoming a house-help in ME countries. This is largely due to print and electronic media spreading awareness about the harsh and abusive working conditions for women in the ME region (Siddiqui et al., 2019). The Bangladeshi newspapers often claim that Bangladeshi women workers face a range of adversities in the ME countries which include physical torture and sexual violence by the employers and agencies. These have included beatings, slappings, and in some cases, even loss of life. *Prothom Alo* (8 October 2020), a leading Bangladeshi newspaper, reported that over 17,000 women migrants, who have already returned to Bangladesh amid the pandemic, complained of forced return, deportation and non-payment of their monthly wages for several months. The returnees said that they endured physical and mental torture, faced a shortage of food and were often sexually violated by the employers or the family members and had to work for more than 20 hours daily. Instead of being paid for the additional hours of work, many were deprived of their salaries that were agreed upon in the contracts. Another leading English language daily newspaper, *The Daily Star* (2022), also reported 63 migrant women's death in ME between January and September 2020. Among them, 22 lost their lives in SA alone, while 14 died in Lebanon, 11 in Jordan, 7 in Oman, and 4 in the UAE. Citing government data BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement

Committee) Migration Programme stated a total of 487 women's bodies have been returned to the country from the ME from 2016 till March 2021. Among these women approximately 175 lost their lives in SA.

The circumstances of migrant labourers (both men and women) in GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries cannot be understood without considering the role of 'Kafala' (sponsorship), which effectively shapes nearly all aspects of the life of a migrant as well as the 'employer–employee' relationship in the host country. Under the Kafala system, the migrant workers are legally bound to the *kafeel* (sponsor) throughout their stint in the host country. They are not allowed to enter or leave the country, transfer employment and so on without the consent of their *kafeel* (sponsor/employer). It has been reported that in most cases, *kafeels* confiscate their passports and travel documents. The migrants' freedom of movement and expressing opinion, ability to create/maintain social networks and all other pertinent issues are inextricably linked with their *kafeel*'s commands (Nurchayati, 2011). Although recently some changes in Kafala system have been recommended, studies perceive it will take a long time to replace the old rules. Newspaper reports and other reports, though very limited, suggest precarious working condition of Bangladeshi women migrants, yet only a small body of research (Uddin, 2021) exists on this topic.

### *Conceptual underpinnings*

This study argues that the situation of female migrant workers in SA cannot be adequately explained with a single theoretical perspective. We thus draw on multiple theoretical analyses to explore and explicate differing aspects of these difficult experiences. More specifically, in order to understand the exploitation, deprivation and violence faced by female migrant workers in the ME in general and SA in particular, we draw on theoretical explanations such as Crenshaw's (1991) 'intersectionality', Bales' (1999) theory on modern slavery, Perocco's (2023) research on migrants' struggle, and Wallerstein's (2004) notion on power hierarchy.

Crenshaw (1991: 1243) provided an analysis of intersectionality to explain the situation of Black women in the United States. She denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experience. She adopts this perspective (showing the combination of racial, sexual, and class oppression) in order to analyse domestic violence and the issue of discrimination to which Black women in the United States are subjected. This study also finds that the particularly vulnerable role of women migrant workers is detectable through an intersectional perspective that combines (at least) their status as migrants with their gender (Anthias, 2008; Christian and Namaganda, 2018; Crenshaw, 1991). Reflections upon domestic work carried out by migrant women thus constitute 'a useful starting point for an intersectional analysis concretized by means of normative assumption and marginalization embedded in gender equality policies' (Åsberg et al., 2010: 150).

Drawing on Crenshaw (1991), we analyse the social and working conditions of female Bangladeshi migrant domestic workers in SA. We considered the implications of multiple identities, inequalities, opportunities, and normative constraints derived from the intersection between social class, gender, cultural identity, and civic stratifications,

adopting an analytical intersectional lens to grasp the connections between structural dimension, cultural constructions, and subjective choices. That is, the relations of economic and social inequality linking Bangladesh to SA (Anthias, 2008).

Bales' (1999) concept of 'modern slavery' can also be used to grasp migrant women's working and living condition. In this concept, Bales incorporated the following three aspects: violence and the threat of violence, restriction of physical movement and very little communication with the outside world, and economic exploitation. All these three aspects are very much present in the lives of migrant women workers. Bales also termed the migrants as 'disposable people' which is pertinent to comprehend the status of migrants. Perocco's (2023) comment concerning institutional racism also contributes to our understanding of violence against migrants.

Wallerstein (2004) argued that the countries in a position of greater power within the international division of labour (such as the petromonarchies of the ME) satisfy the internal demand by importing workers (especially female workers) from countries in a position of political and economic subordination (such as the countries of the so-called 'Indian subcontinent') to keep the cost of the domestic labour force low. Labour laws and policies of ME countries do not seem to be labourer friendly, which effectively eliminate the rights of migrants. In this current international division of labour, Bangladesh is clearly situated in a disadvantageous position as they send migrants and depend heavily on remittances. This process highlights the unequal division of labour on an international scale within the same Asian countries. Wallerstein's (2004) argument regarding international division of labour, migrants' limited rights, and power gap between countries helps us understand the weaker bargaining stance of migrant sender countries.

We argue that class, gender, and racial identity of Bangladeshi women migrants weaken their position in their host society. The relationship between the employer and the worker is more akin to a 'master-slave'/'master-mistress' relationship. This history of enslavement of weaker people, migrants' limited socioeconomic and cultural capital, the kafala system of GCC countries, and labour provider countries weaker negotiating ability in the international labour market – all have a role to play in the mistreatment of female migrants.

## **Methods**

This study was conducted in Sylhet, Bangladesh. The city was chosen purposively because Sylhet is known to be a culturally conservative and religious city in Bangladesh and as such women's independent international migration from this particular region naturally evoked interest among the authors. In order to gain a thorough understanding regarding the experiences of Bangladeshi women migrants in SA, this study has employed a qualitative approach (Mason, 2002). The empirical findings of this study are based on in-depth interviews with 10 women migrant returnees from SA. All of the respondents were from resource-poor households. They all went to SA to make a better contribution to their households. Before migration, they were betrothed to the construction sector as casual day workers. All of them were the principal or one of the most important breadwinners of their households. Two of our respondents were widowed; three of them were married, living with husband and children upon returning home; one was separated, and

the rest of them had husbands, but they were not permanently living in the same house. Their husbands each had another wife and family and visited them occasionally. These four women were married, though they did not have conventional conjugal relations with their husbands. None of our respondents finished primary school. However, a couple of them quickly learned a few skills after migrating to SA. For example, Afia (all the names of the respondents are fictitious) learned to speak Arabic to a satisfactory level; Shorifa learned various life skills to survive social taunts after returning home.

We employed a snowball sampling strategy to select the samples. In the beginning, we were not very confident that we would be able to include these many respondents, as in this study, we exclusively focus on women who migrated to SA. As mentioned previously, according to different print and electronic media, SA is the country where the women workers experience the most tragic incidents. Contrary to what we predicted, we managed to recruit respondents who were willing to participate in our research. The interviews gathered data on the following topics, the difficulties they faced, the physical and verbal violence they experienced, and their working and social lives in the destination. The interviews were conducted by the first author as she herself is a woman and is aware of the sensitivity of the issues under discussion. The interviews took place in private houses with prior consent of the respondents. The interviewer ensured the utmost privacy of the respondents and made sure that no other person entered the room while the interviews were taking place.

This study is sensitive in nature as respondents were requested to talk about the abuse they faced including sexual assault. In Bangladesh, women feel constrained to talk about their own sexual experiences, as sex is considered a taboo which cannot be discussed or even uttered in public. Under such cultural context, our respondents talked about their experiences. However, it took us several sessions to build a trustworthy relationship with the respondents. Gradually they felt comfortable and appeared to believe that we had no intention of causing any harm to them or divulging their secrets to others.

All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed subsequently. The interviews were conducted in Bangla and later translated into English for this contribution. We never interrupted the flow of the conversations; our respondents led us and enlightened us about different facades of their experiences. We then analysed the collected material, starting from a full reading of the interviews and – even if aiming to maintain a global reading of all of the narratives – attempting to relate them to each other. We then carried out a codification of the various thematic segments and their horizontal comparison.

## **The many difficulties**

In this section, representations of the work and migration experiences of the Bangladeshi women interviewed will be analysed. From their narratives emerge multiple difficulties, forms of labour exploitation, and violation of human and social rights. The former include linguistic, logistical, and migration-related barriers; the latter involve the deprivation of food, labour exploitation, and underpayment, even verbal, physical, and sexual violence.

### *The language barrier*

Respondents of this research reported that before leaving for SA, they received a short training provided by the government agency. BMET provides a mandatory pre-departure training to the aspirants. This training particularly focuses on developing some skills on airport behaviour – for example, how to check-in, how to behave on flights and they were taught a few common Arabic words for basic survival. Respondents were neither aware of or were interested in the exact functions of BMET and other important government wings which take care of migration related issues.

In this regard, the oldest respondent, Farida, narrated,

I joined the training along with other women who also aspired to go to Saudi Arabia. Some young women also came for the training. The trainers taught us names of different household items and how to do various household chores abroad. The young women used to gossip all day long and burst into laughter about big and small things. They were singing, joking, and spending time in a light mood. One young woman started a secret love affair with a man there and was planning to elope with him. I did not like the overall environment of the training centre and decided to go back home. I went back home, none of the trainers or officials insisted that I stay. Once you enroll, their responsibility is over; they do not care if you attend the training sessions or not. (Farida, 54, widow)

It would seem that the interest of the government bodies of Bangladesh lies in simply sending female workers abroad to collect foreign revenue. The actual wellbeing of the workers is not their focus as they are not trained well or are given any education about their rights (cfr. BMET, 2020; Fondazione, 2021; Rahman, 2018).

Other respondents' narratives also bolstered Farida's claim that the trainers of BMET were not very sincere about the wellbeing of the workers. The interviewees had very little formal education and they were not attuned to self-learn; hence, learning a new language within a brief period proved extremely challenging for them. Consequently, some trainees, like Farida, found it 'tiresome', 'not so pleasant' and did not continue the training. Furthermore, they were constrained by their socio-cultural capital to understand the significance of such training and develop important skills before migrating to a new country. We argue that the intersectionality of gender and class position of these women give government agencies some sort of leverage. They tended to believe that not discharging their assigned responsibilities would not create much concern as the group they are working with are inhibited by their position to identify the loopholes and raise voice against the negligence and irresponsibility.

Studies (Kumar and Jamil, 2020; Sargent and Larchanché, 2011; Sweileh, 2018) argued that language barriers (e.g. inadequate speaking, writing, comprehension skills) expose the migrants to a great vulnerability. Dustmann and Fabbri (2003) found better communication skills actually tend to facilitate the migrants' access to better paid employment (20% higher salaries). For instance, due to their socio-cultural attainments, the Phillipino and Sri Lankan migrants enjoy a better status in their host countries in comparison to their Bangladeshi counterparts (Oishi, 2005). Interviewees also completely agreed with this finding that 'not knowing the language' of their employer was a 'great problem'. Language barrier not only lessened their earning capacity, it also



exposed them to different forms of abusive behaviour. The narratives revealed that they experienced difficulties in a foreign land as they did not know any other language except Bangla. Almost all interviewees told us that not being able to comprehend their employers' language would enrage their employers. The interviewees only learned the names of a few common household things, initially they struggled to understand their employer's instructions. In this regard, our respondent, Swarupa recounted,

My employer's elderly mother would become angry if I was unable to understand what she was looking for. I would bring everything that I could think of in front of her eyes to make her comfortable, yet it would make her further dismayed. She kept complaining about me all the time as she would think I was doing it on purpose. As a cranky elderly woman she was unable to understand my weakness. (Swarupa, 43, married)

The annoyance on the part of the employers was often manifested through verbal and/or physical violence towards the workers. Migrant workers interviewed described verbal violence, slandering as a 'lower race' (the interviewees reported that employers tended to believe Arabs are superior to non-Arabs) and smashing their heads against the wall were the most common forms of expression of anger on the part of the employers. Arab employers' behaviour clearly demonstrates that they believe the relationship between employers and employees is essentially a hierarchical one. We maintain that employers' untamed rage might be explained by two issues. First, Bangladesh government's weaker position as a labour sending country and SA's status as a labour recruiting country give the SA employers a sense of pride of being 'superior'. In addition, given their economic affluence and histo-cultural experience of keeping slaves, the employers believe that they can treat their women employees as they wish. We contend that the employees' status both as 'women' and as 'resource poor' might unconsciously (or consciously) provide them a sense of power and authority. Since they believe these people are 'disposable', fostering a 'master-slave' relation between the employers and employees may appear 'normal' to them (see Bales, 1999; Uddin, 2021).

### *Verbal and physical violence*

Respondents' experiences find resonance with Sultana and Fatima's (2017) study which also revealed that due to the lack of their noticeable skills, women workers migrated from Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka often experience various forms of exploitation including verbal and physical violence. The interviewees commented that verbal violence was a regular occurrence. As mentioned previously, due to their extremely limited linguistic skills, in the beginning, the respondents would not realize what their employer was grunting. Eventually, they began to grasp the verbal, facial expressions/body language of their employer and understood that the insults hurled at them were extremely demeaning. One of the interviewees, Afia, narrated a story where her employer's married daughter called her names. It was not an isolated incident, in fact, it was routine of her employer's daughter taunt her:

I could not take this anymore as I was already exhausted by doing household work on that day. I also hurled the same abusive words back at my employer's daughter. Seeing my 'audacity',

the employer charged towards me hurling insults whilst holding his shoe in hand to hit me. The employer's son also charged towards me with a chair and threatened that he would bash my head in with it. I got extremely nervous and started crying; all the while, faintly arguing in my favour, saying, 'You all felt bad that I insulted your daughter, but you did not seem to care when she did not even spare my deceased parents from her insults? She always calls me horrible names. If you try to do anything bad to me, I will go to the police and tell them what you have done'. I was trying to threaten my employer and was hoping they would let me go for that day. However, in the midst of all this, my employer's wife came into the scene, dragged me away, and locked me up in the store room. I was so terrified that I unconditionally begged for mercy and reassured them that I would not make such mistakes again. (Afia, 33, married)

Verbal abuse was a common complaint among other respondents. All the interviewees regularly experienced such behaviour. Rima, for example, recounted 'ungrateful Bangladeshi maid' were the most common words from her employer. Reznu, described,

No matter how hard you try to please your employer, it is not easy to satisfy them, I would say it is impossible. No amount of work or service is enough for them. They do not consider us as human beings. I assume even machines will not be able to give them the level of service that they demand from a household help. (Reznu, 52, widow)

Another respondent, Shorifa, was responsible for taking care of two young children alongside doing the housework. In her words,

The children were not very easy to manage and they would often break things, run to the main street whenever they got the chance and do other things that might expose them to harm. Whenever the children did something really bad the employer would get mad and he would beat his children, wife, and I. (Shorifa, 36, separated)

Drawing on Bales (1999) explanation, we have argued in the previous section, the employers tend to believe that resorting to verbal and/or physical violence against these 'disposable' domestic workers is 'normal' and they have some sort of 'right' to inflict pain on them. Furthermore, given the Kafala system, both parties are aware that the employees are tied to their *kafeel* and accordingly their wellbeing entirely relies on the wishes of the *kafeels*. Johnson and Wilcke (2015) argued that the relationships between the employer and employee in ME countries are 'state-produced and sanctioned'. The state provides the employers' indemnity, which further shifts the power balance in their favour, taking away any negotiating power the employees had. This structural mistreatment of the migrant workers gives the state both an economic and a political edge against the sender country.

### *Food deprivation*

Bangladeshi women domestic workers in SA experienced some level of food deprivation. Our respondents said that their employers used to eat frequent meals and also in large quantities. However, they did not seem to feel that their domestic helps needed to eat full meals. This scenario was well explained by Reznu and Shorifa:

I was not given food on a regular basis. It was not that the employer was not bringing food home, they used to bring a lot of food. Guests would come regularly for lunch/dinner but there was nothing left for me. They used to give me dry bread or leftovers that I never ate at home. (Reznu, 52, widow)

I categorically refused to eat the leftovers. After insisting repeatedly my employer gave in. However, the food they gave me was not of my choice. I stayed hungry all day long. (Shorifa, 36, separated)

Shorifa was missing Bangladeshi food and requested her employer's wife to buy some fish for her. She flatly denied Shorifa's demand, by saying 'I cannot get you fish to eat, in this country, fish is more expensive than gold'. Other respondents, for example, Jhorna, Swarupa, Rima, had similar complaints that they did not get adequate food at their employers' house. It appears respondents were not familiarized with the food they were offered and they did not find the food appetizing, hence, they skipped meals, which also contributed to their food deprivation.

Many of the respondents (e.g. Farida, Reznu and Shorifa) alleged that most of the time they were offered dry bread. They were dying to eat rice as they were habituated to eat it back home. However, a respondent, Monni, told us that her employer had a dairy farm and he used to bring plenty of milk home. She could drink milk to quell her hunger. All the interviewees agreed that they never got the food of their choice and no one cared if they were eating well. Shorifa though requested her employer to buy fish, other respondents reported that they never even dared to ask for things as they already knew that their employers had no intention to provide them adequate amount of quality food and/or food of their likings. Instead, they tried to adjust with the small portion of food, in most cases the leftover, as they anticipated demanding more food than their allotment might enrage their employers.

Our empirical findings also underline the fact that the hierarchy between the employers and employees is inflexibly crystalized due to the perceived differences (e.g. class, culture, and race) between the parties. The employees' compulsory dependence on *kafeels* allows the employers to utterly disregard even their basic needs. One might assume that the migrant domestic workers who have been living in their employers' house would develop a relation of trust, empathy, affection, and mutual dependence. However, narratives of the respondents did not bear testimony to this. We assume the cultural differences (language, food habit, manners and etiquette appropriate to the host society, etc.) prevent both parties to establish a familial bond of care and sympathy. One might think that both the employers and employees are Muslims and Islam seems to talk about equality, as such, there must be some sort of solidarity on the basis of religion between the employers and employees. However, our respondents' narratives did not affirm such assumptions. Monni, one of the respondents, narrated,

Before going to SA, as a Muslim I was super excited. I thought the people there would be very pious with all humane qualities, e.g., soft spoken, kind, angel like! I thought I would get the chance to perform Hajj and learn many religious things. However, the reality was different; our

employers did not even think that we are Muslims! To them we are just ill-bred slaves. (Monni, 34, separated)

### *Small rewards, long working hours*

Rahman's (2011) study conducted on Bangladeshi migrants in UAE found that domestic workers' working hours were too long. Their day begins as early as 6 am in the morning and ends no earlier than 11 o'clock at night with a 2-hour break in the afternoon. Similarly, Afsar (2009) revealed that domestic workers are supposed to work very long hours without rest and/or without getting any overtime allowance. A more recent study conducted by Sultana and Fatima (2017) also reiterated a similar finding that Bangladeshi women domestic workers are coerced into working long hours. The stories collected verify and validate the studies mentioned earlier as the respondents repeatedly talked about long, arduous and restrictive work hours. Payment for doing overtime was something 'surreal' and 'dreamlike' for them. Shorifa told us with utmost dismay:

These people did not even give me my regular wages and you are talking about overtime. Even in Bangladesh when we work long hours or do something special/extra for someone, they give us some extra money. If the amount is small, they would say 'keep this money, you will have tea/betel nuts and leaves with this'. However, these Arab people are so uncouth that they even do not consider this matter. (Shorifa, 36, separated)

Other respondents also recounted Shorifa's experience and told us that none of them ever received allowance for doing overtime. While some of them mentioned that the guests who would visit their employers occasionally gave them 5–10 SA Real as tips. Contrary to Rahman's study conducted on Bangladeshi migrants in UAE, the interviewees did not have any fixed working hours or resting periods. They recounted that they had to work long hours in the kitchen cooking, cleaning and washing. Employers did not have a set timetable nor did they feel uncomfortable to wake them up in the middle of the night or very early in the morning to serve them food. Our respondent, Reznu's narrative describes how her employer deprives her from having normal sleep time:

My employer did not want to allow me to rest even for a short while. They would switch off the air conditioner and fan so that I could not sleep. If I still fell asleep due to tiredness since I had to do a lot of work, my employer would not give me food on that day. I had to carry on with work the next day with a weak body and troubled mind. (Reznu, 52, widow)

Similarly, other respondents also talked about regular interruptions during sleep time. Afia, for example, mentioned that during her stint in SA, she could not sleep peacefully for a single night as her employer's daughters would regularly taunt her saying,

It is not your father's house. Do not consider yourself as the daughter of a king. You have been brought here to do the housework not to relax and spend time in idle. What did you think? Did you think you can go to bed when we go to bed and you can sleep as long as you want? Do not forget that you are a domestic help who has been brought to serve us. (Afia, 33, married)

We found that in most cases, the interviewees were deceived in terms of their job descriptions as well. All of them went to SA as domestic workers; they were given wrong information about the family size of their employer and job responsibilities. Except for Swarupa, the interviewees recounted that the family size was quite big and they were entrusted with too many responsibilities. Afia was recruited to serve a small family but she ended up serving a big family consisting of 25 people. Reznu was told that she would work for a family of four, in reality, there were more than 10 members in the family and they had too many guests coming over regularly. Jhorna was told that she was to do household chores for a small family, in reality, she had to take care of two ‘unruly’ young children alongside the chores. In Jhorna’s employer’s house, every night they had visitors. Reznu also shared that her employers had guests either for lunch or dinner every day and she had to cook in large and heavy pots, which eventually caused her chronic back pain. However, in some cases, workers do not quietly endure all the difficulties, exploitation and humiliation. Afia, for example, did not keep silent. Whenever her employer taunted her, she in return spoke back. Her arrogance evidently annoyed her employer, which led to verbal abuse. Afia revealed,

My employer threatened me numerous times that he would send me back if I did not change my attitude. I begged for an apology every time but their behavior was so bad that it was very difficult to control my anger and frustration. I am a short-tempered person, nevertheless, I tried to keep quiet. Despite my effort, I could not avoid speaking back again and again. Trust me these people are so debauched they will provoke you to lose your temper and then punish you for not being obedient. (Afia, 33, married)

Like Afia, Shorifa also gave a detailed account of how she would regularly fight with her employer over the issue of bedtime as her employer would call her whenever they felt the need of her service. Farida left her employer’s house for the same reason – no adequate sleep and an excessive workload. She told us she felt that she would go mad if she remained in such situation for any longer. Farida exclaimed in desolation:

These Arab people have no conscience; they do not even appear to believe that we are human beings. They just treat us like animals. (Farida, 54, widow)

In line with Shorifa, Reznu, Afia, and Farida, other respondents also narrated that the concept of leisure time for domestic workers did not exist. Some complained even when they did a job perfectly, their employers would say the work was not done properly. The respondents tended to believe their employers would do that to punish them implicitly. One of the key findings of this study is the differences in class and culture, employers’ perception of women’s subordinate status in society, and employers’ belief of their racial superiority all are compounded to justify such behaviour against migrant women. The high number of deaths of these migrant women in ME countries, particularly SA, fortifies Johnson and Wilcke’s (2015) claims that their safety and wellbeing are just an afterthought.

### *Shattered dreams, lacerated minds*

Afsar (2009) found that regardless of gender a significant number of migrants face problem concerning their wages. Non-payment and/or irregular payment of wages, variance

between the assured and the actual wage, unjustified wage cut and wage reduction without prior notice are regular occurrences in the life of Bangladeshi migrants. The same study also reported that Bangladeshi migrant workers in SA earn much less than other nationals. Other studies (Neetha, 2004; Sultana and Fatima, 2017) also argued that there is a discrepancy between the proposed and paid wages. In this study, we observed that the respondents belonged to resource-poor families, struggled very hard throughout their lives to earn a livelihood; thus, went to SA with the dream of improving their financial situation. They wanted to give their children a better life and create a peaceful space for themselves. They were aware that migration to a foreign country would separate them from their children and family for whom they endured all the pain. They thought the pain of temporary separation with their family members would be compensated by the economic affluence that would come along with migration. One of the respondents, Rima did not tell anyone before leaving for SA:

I informed my family (husband, mother, and siblings about my migration over the phone only after reaching Saudi Arabia. I was angry with my husband that is why did not tell him. I knew my mother, and siblings would discourage me to migrate so I did not tell them either. (Rima, 33, married)

The respondents knew migration might place them in a difficult situation both within family and society, eventually they weighed the consequences of social criticism with economic solvency; and chose the latter. Yet, as Afsar (2009) mentioned, we also found that none of the interviewees got the salary they were promised. All of them had to forgo at least a part of their salary when they returned home. Hubbard and Donovan's (2020) more recent study revealed that many workers experienced a salary cut as their employers used the inception of COVID-19 as a justification for the pay cut. Although, the women we interviewed uniformly reported that even before the outbreak of the virus they were deprived of their promised wages. For example, Afia alleged,

I was promised by my agent that I would get 1,000 Reals per month. I however, did not get more than 700 Reals per month. I asked my employer about this but he flatly denied to give me the promised amount. If I wanted to raise my voice, my employer would throw my bag outside the home and ask me to leave their house immediately. This happened to me several times. In a foreign land I found it difficult to accept the challenge of leaving their house on my own, accordingly every time I had to apologise for my 'bad manners' to stay in my employer's house. (Afia, 33, married)

Other respondents claimed, like Afia, they also tried to raise their feeble voices, yet their employers paid them no heed. Instead, every time they raised the issue of their decreased salary, they experienced further harassment such as the threat of being sent back home. Swarupa, for instance, had a 2-year contract. Regardless, she was sent back home only after 3 months. Rima was also sent back home only after a few months. Swarupa and Rima could not bring a single penny home, neither were they able to send any money home from SA. The narratives revealed that employers used the excuse that they were not 'skilled workers' not only to torture them both physically and mentally but deprive

them from their due salary. Respondents argued that it was written in their job contracts that the employer would teach them household chores if the need arises. They alleged that their employer never tried to teach them chores, helped them to learn new skills and languages; rather they punished them physically and mentally to vent their personal frustrations.

Therefore, it can be argued that poor and unsafe working conditions for migrant women are due to a combination of factors. Race, social class, gendered identity, limited socio-cultural capital, and obligation to *kafeels* are compounded by the Bangladesh government's gross oversight and diminished bargaining capacity in the international labour market. The employers seem to apprehend that their ill-treatment does not evoke much reaction and as such they do not feel the pressure to amend their attitude and behaviour towards the employees. In line with Perocco (2023), we also argue that violence and forms of torture against migrants have become a structural element of the migratory experience in most of the world, especially as a result of the worsening of the conditions of migration, the tightening of migration policies, the escalation of institutional racism, which favour contexts permeable to violence towards migrants.

### *The ubiquitous reality of sexual harassment*

As mentioned earlier, talking about sex or sex-related issues in public is deemed shameful and inappropriate in the Bangladeshi social context and this is particularly true for women. Even if women experience sexual harassment, they themselves and their family often try to maintain secrecy about it as victim themselves are often blamed and criticized for their plight. Under such circumstances, it is easily understood why women tend to keep quiet in any discussion concerning sexual harassment. Women migrants are already under severe social scrutiny as they have transgressed the traditional 'feminine' boundary. Consequently, Jamil and Dutta (2021) noticed that Bangladeshi migrant women generally do not feel very comfortable to talk about their experiences of staying abroad because of the fear of social censures and their family members' vengeance and disapprovals. The reluctance to share their experiences mainly emanated due to the nature of the violence they encounter while working abroad, which to a large extent are 'sexual in nature'. Our respondents' narratives find resonance with the researchers' claim. When we wanted to identify the forms of exploitation our respondents were not very willing to talk about their own experiences. However, after a few sessions of relaxed chit-chat when a relationship of trust and friendship was built between the researchers and respondents, they gradually started sharing the stories of other women whom they met during their stint abroad. As the relationship became stronger, they eventually started sharing their own dreadful experiences. Our witty participant, Shorifa, succinctly articulated the voice of all respondents:

Saudi Arabian people are really bad, no one can be as lowly as them. They even do not understand the relationship with mother, daughter or aunt – these relationships do not mean anything to them. They do not spare anyone. We (migrant domestic helps) used to call our employers '*baba*' (father) but this fictitious relationship had no value to them. (Shorifa, 36, separated)

All the respondents uniformly commented that SA is not a safe place for women. The employee–employer relationships, in most cases, do not remain confined to ‘master–slave’ relation but often get extended to ‘master–mistress’ relationship. Our elderly respondents, Farida and Rezu, claimed that pressurizing the maids for granting sexual access is a common practice, their age, however, saved them from being violated. Both of the narrated horrific stories of sexual violence that they came across while staying in the travel agent’s office in SA before flying back home. We learned from our respondents that in Bangladesh they were able to exercise their agency to a certain extent. For instance, they sometimes could defy their employers, use their agency to accept or reject proposals which were sexual in nature, and could manoeuvre some situations in their favour if the need arises. However, this was not the case in SA, in fact, they found themselves in a tangled situation that was beyond their imagination.

One may wonder if women experience all this harassment then why they migrate. We found that before migrating to SA, none of our respondents thought that their situation could go that bad and they would find themselves in utmost distress. Upon returning home, they rarely shared their bad experiences with others as they thought it would bring further shame and misery for themselves and their family. These are experiences of psycho–physical violence and humiliation resulting from the objectification of the female migrant worker body, which is perceived as purchasable, marketable, monetizable and mechanically adaptable to any request and desire on the part of squalid male employers.

## **Conclusion**

Bangladeshi women who migrated to SA as domestic workers experienced a wide range of issues that exposes them to further vulnerability in both their place of origin and place of destination. These women are predominantly from poorer households and with extremely limited socio-cultural capital. They did not even have a rudimentary understanding of the whole process of migration. Before migrating, they naively drew a rosy picture of their future and tended to believe that it would not be a big challenge to assimilate into the host society. The dearth of adequate knowledge about their host society led most of the respondents to overvalue their own manoeuvring capacity. As a result, we found they suffer in all aspects – be it their wages, workload, food intake, mental and/or physical health, and in maintaining propriety and dignity not only as a woman but as a human being. Women migrate with a big dream yet they often return home devastated, ashamed, and heartbroken. The intersectionality of their class and gender not only placed them in a disadvantageous position in their host country but made their voices feeble and left their distresses unheard in their own country. Instead of being concerned and inquisitive regarding the adversities encountered by them, the government signed new contracts to send more female labourer to SA (Blanchet and Biswas, 2021). Perhaps the financial gain that entails these women’s migration gets precedence over their wellbeing.

It appears that the female bodies are requested because they are perceived to be more ‘docile’, ‘disposable’, and ‘culturally’ suitable for carrying out domestic work. Perhaps they are more preferable because of their supposed ‘racial inferiority’ which legitimizes the violence and the denial of the human and social rights of these workers (Bales, 1999; Perocco, 2023). Finally, the international, social, and gendered division of labour (productive and



reproductive) are intertwined, on one hand, with social and ‘racial’ inequalities and hierarchization at the macro level (relating to the different levels of development and wealth among the nations of the world); on the other hand, to inequalities at the ‘micro’ level, linked to an unequal distribution of social and economic power between actors of different social classes, nationalities, and genders. In addition to the proponents of intersectionality theories, in line with Wallerstein (2004) we also contend that Bangladeshi migrant women’s sorrows, exploitation and violation of basic rights intensified as they are from a peripheral country. Bangladesh is a densely populated developing nation which needs to ensure job for at least a portion of its population by exploring the international labour market. The government also needs remittances from migrant labourers. We contend that both international and national hierarchical socio-economic structural elements constitute the basis of migrant women’s plight (Bales, 1999).

The predicaments of women labourers are deep rooted and thus it is not easy to ameliorate the situation instantaneously. However, in no way we are arguing that the causes behind their troubles are unsurmountable. It is imperative on the part of the Government, first, to take stringent measures against the travel agents who hide facts about potential troubles and only present the glowing picture in front of the aspirant migrants to lure them into choosing migration. Second, the government must ensure that the (government) agencies entrusted with the responsibilities to deal with women labour migration perform the right job. Third, the government should focus on developing skills of the migrants so that they no longer rely on ‘less benevolent’ ME countries for labour migration where labour law is frail (Ireland, 2014). The Philippino women, for instance, possess far better socio-cultural capital and as such the country can send their women to European labour market where the labour law is fairly strong. If the Bangladesh government sincerely wants to improve migrant women’s situation and protect their dignity, they need to take steps consistent with other sender countries.

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### **ORCID iD**

Tanzina Choudhury  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3814-2472>

### **Notes**

1. We are aware that the expression (and the concept of) ‘Middle East’ is historically constructed, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by the economic, political and military interests of the main imperialist nations of the time and, therefore, it is an eurocentric and orientalist expression, dictated by the geographical position of the area with respect to Europe. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity, it will be used in this article.

2. 'Probashi' is the Bengali term for 'emigrant', 'expatriate'.
3. This expression, which literally means 'veil' or 'curtain', indicates the set of incorporated practices that contribute to the construction of 'modestness', 'honour' and 'shame', and preserve the symbolic or material separation of genres and gendered spheres of activity through clothing, daily practices, the structuring of domestic environments, physical segregation.

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### Author biographies

Dr Tanzina Choudhury is a Professor of Sociology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh. She specializes in research and teaching in the areas of gender and development, migration, and poverty in local and global contexts. She was PI (Bangladesh team) of the GCRF funded Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE) Project (2017–2022, £3.7 m) and continued to lead the GlobalGRACE Bangladesh team until the project ends in 2022.

Dr Mohammad Morad is a Professor of Sociology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh. His research activities are devoted to international migration, social networks, transnationalism, diaspora, citizenship, and intra-EU mobility. His work appeared in peer-reviewed leading international journals, including *The British Journal of Sociology*, *International Migration*, and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

Francesco Della Puppa (PhD) is Professor in Sociology at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and member of the Master Program on “Immigration: Migratory Phenomena and Social Transformations” at the same university. He carries out research and teaching activities in the field of international migration and asylum, migrant family and family reunification, the social construction of gender and the transformations of masculinity in the migratory experience, the transformations of work, digital work and daily life; the “Bangladeshi diaspora” in Europe.

## Résumé

Les mouvements migratoires en provenance du Bangladesh concernent essentiellement les hommes, et aussi bien les politiques nationales que la construction culturelle de la société bangladaise ne sont pas réputées favorables aux femmes. Pourtant, entre 1991 et 2021, pas moins de 921.732 femmes originaires du Bangladesh ont migré vers les pays dits du « Moyen-Orient », en particulier l'Arabie saoudite, pour y travailler comme employées de maison (femmes de ménage, gardes d'enfants, aides-soignantes, aides à domicile, etc.) et aider leur famille restée au pays. Ces travailleuses migrantes connaissent des conditions de travail difficiles et sont victimes en Arabie saoudite de violences et d'abus de la part de leurs employeurs et des agences de placement, y compris de tortures physiques et psychologiques, de coups et de violences sexuelles. Sur la base d'entretiens approfondis avec des travailleuses migrantes employées dans le secteur domestique en Arabie saoudite, cet article analyse leur expérience professionnelle et sociale dans le pays de destination, notamment les difficultés auxquelles elles sont confrontées, les violations des droits humains et sociaux qu'elles subissent, ainsi que les stratégies qu'elles adoptent pour y faire face.

## Mots-clés

Arabie saoudite, exploitation, intersectionnalité, migrantes bangladaises, travailleuses domestiques migrantes

## Resumen

Los movimientos migratorios desde Bangladesh son mayoritariamente masculinos y las políticas nacionales, así como la construcción cultural en la sociedad bangladaise, pueden ser consideradas como hostiles hacia las mujeres. Sin embargo, entre 1991 y 2021, un total de 921.732 mujeres bangladesíes han migrado a los países del llamado "Oriente Medio" (en adelante OM), especialmente a Arabia Saudita (en adelante AS), para trabajar como trabajadoras domésticas (criadas, niñeras, enfermeras, cuidadoras, etc.) y apoyar a sus familias que quedan atrás. Estas trabajadoras migrantes experimentan duras condiciones de trabajo y sufren violencia y abuso en AS, por parte de empleadores y agencias de empleo, incluyendo tortura física y psicológica, palizas y violencia sexual. A partir de entrevistas en profundidad con trabajadoras migrantes, empleadas en el sector doméstico en AS, este artículo obtiene conclusiones sobre sus experiencias laborales y sociales en el país de destino, destacando los desafíos a los que se enfrentan, la violación de los derechos humanos y sociales que sufren, así como las estrategias de afrontamiento que adoptan.

## Palabras clave

Arabia Saudita, explotación, interseccionalidad, mujeres migrantes bangladesíes, trabajadoras domésticas migrantes