

LEARNING TO SWIM IN TURBULENT WATERS: WOMEN'S MIGRATION AT THE AGENCY-EXPLOITATION NEXUS

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Abstract: The last two decades have witnessed shifts in official representations of women's international migration in Bangladesh. An historic pre-occupation with risk/danger, in which (poor) women's international mobility was presented as synonymous with "sex trafficking" has latterly been superseded by more "positive" images. More recently, the government has taken steps to actively promote women's migration for "low-skilled" labour to, primarily, the Middle East. This shift is mirrored in a reconfiguration of awareness-raising and training initiatives targeting aspiring women migrant workers. The "counter-trafficking" programmes that once dominated, with their focus on risks/dangers, have begun to be supplanted by curricula representing women's international migration as "a legitimate and respectable option." This, new, pro-female-migration, stance presents a widening of women's opportunities – and an overt challenge to the stigmas tainting female transnational mobility in "good society," yet its progressive goals are partial and unstable. While restrictions on women's mobility are demonstrably harmful, it does not follow that the active promotion of international migration - as a disciplined and devalued labour force - is progressive. This article explores these tensions based on 18 months of qualitative and ethnographic fieldwork following women participating in one such "new generation" anti-trafficking initiative.

Key words: migration, labour, gender, Bangladesh, ethnographic evaluation, anti-trafficking

Historically, international migration was represented as a male preserve in Bangladesh, with (legal) female migration restricted to a tiny minority within the professional classes. Bélanger and Rahman (2013: 357) cites Bangladesh's (together with India, Pakistan, and Nepal) "value-driven emigration policies" as responsible for this historical aversion to women's migration. They elaborate as follows:

In these countries, men's labour migration is strongly encouraged and put forward by sending governments as an economic development strategy. *In*

contrast, policies towards women's migration are driven by social values located in a patriarchal global and local gender order. The value-driven emigration policies of these countries have, from time to time, entirely banned the migration of women or imposed barriers to it in the name of safety and appropriate female patterns of mobility.... When states officially construct female migration as being negative, harmful or dangerous, a patriarchal ideology is reproduced and significant barriers for aspiring migrants and for returnees are created. In such a context, women who migrate internationally have to overcome numerous structural, cultural, religious and political barriers. (Bélanger and Rahman, 2013: 357, emphasis added).

Bélanger and Rahman seek to unpack the ways in which Bangladeshi women negotiate and overcome these “value-driven” restrictions on migration. Yet, these countries’ historic orientations towards *men*’s emigration are no less “value driven.” What’s more, the historic and contemporary migration policies of sending and receiving countries do not exist in isolation from one another. The policy positions of countries with “demand” for low paid, disciplined and socially dis-embedded migrant labour are not independent from the policy positions of sending countries. In the case of Bangladesh, the government’s repositioning of poor women’s migration is integrally linked to international demands for labour. The ways in which particular “values” are ascribed, expressed and reinterpreted in terms of gendered migration “opportunities” require further unpacking. This is a setting in which dualisms tend to obscure rather than reveal.

In this article, we draw out a series of tensions in the representations and experiences of Bangladeshi women’s labour migration. We focus on the (apparent) contradictions between agency and exploitation in this context, and the ways in which “vulnerability” and

“victimhood” are materially, symbolically, and discursively assigned and experienced. We present the results of 18 months of qualitative research following women’s interactions with a “new generation” anti-trafficking initiative in Bangladesh. We consider the broader lessons that might inform the design and implementation of future, similar interventions. The article is organised as follows: In the next section we delineate the changing terrain of women’s migration in Bangladesh, before summarising the fieldwork on which the paper is based. We then draw out the multiple and contradictory implications of new-generation anti-trafficking programme’s heightened emphasis on rights and consider the implications of an equally heightened de-emphasis of commercial sex. We conclude by summarising our findings.

SHIFTS IN OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN’S INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

The last two decades have brought a series of shifts in official representations of women’s international migration in Bangladesh. An earlier preoccupation with the perils of migration, in which (poor) women’s mobility was regarded as synonymous with “sex trafficking” - and “protection” with “prohibition” – has been steadily eroded. From the mid 2000’s, a more “positive” image of women’s international migration has come to dominate official discourse, in tandem with relaxations of state restrictions on the same (Blanchet and Biswas 2017, Rashid and Watson 2017).

The Bangladeshi government, heavily reliant on remittances, which exceed annual receipts from foreign direct investment and international development assistance, has taken steps to actively promote women’s migration for “low-skilled” labour, mostly for the Middle East (*The New Nation* February 12, 2017, Basar 2016, *Dhaka Tribune* February 28, 2017).¹ This official, more “attractive,” image of female migration has percolated through society,

widening and legitimising opportunities for women's international migration (Blanchet and Biswas 2017, Rashid and Watson 2017). The resulting social reconfiguration of women's migration was considerably boosted by the collapse in demand for male migrant labour following the 2008 global economic crisis and subsequent decline in oil prices. During this period, the demand for "low skilled" women migrant workers remained buoyant, fundamentally altering the economic calculus of migration at both state and household levels (Rao 2014, Azmeh 2015, Jarallah 2009).

By 2017, although male migration had rebounded, in large part due to re-establishing suspended male migration flows to Saudi Arabia,² Bangladeshi women continued to migrate for "low skilled" labour in historically unprecedented numbers (BMET 2018a; 2018b). Table one, below, shows the trends in women's international migration since official records were first disaggregated by gender, in 1991. The trends reflect a series of regulatory changes to loosen state restrictions on women's migration. In 1991, a total of 2,181 women migrated internationally for work through official channels, accounting for 1.5% of the total. By 2017 this figure stood at close to 122,000 (12%). Women's migration as a proportion of the total peaked in 2015 at 19% (104,000).

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

The vast majority of women migrant workers travel on "house" visas, an official category of migrant worker visa, covering work undertaken in and for private households, expecting to take up paid domestic work in the Middle East, with a smaller number employed in the transnational ready-made garment (RMG) sector (GoB 2016: 18). The dominance of these highly feminised, "low-skilled," low-paid sectors rests on Bangladesh's perceived competitive advantage over other low-paid, female-migrant-worker-exporting countries. This

is a competitive advantage that depends on nationality-based wage hierarchies and the Bangladeshi state's sustained willingness to preserve migration channels closed by other sending countries (Islam, 2010; Rashid, 2012; Rashid and Watson 2017). A willingness that White (2017: 265) explicitly connects to the state's continued reliance on an economic model that depends predominantly "on the exploitation of "raw materials ... [not least] ... the labour of women and migrant workers...".

The government's shift to a more pro-female-migration stance has been mirrored by a broad reconfiguration of state and non-state awareness-raising initiatives and training programmes targeting aspiring women migrant workers. The "counter-trafficking" programmes that once dominated this field in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, with their focus on risks and dangers, have been steadily supplanted by curricula that represent international migration as a "legitimate and respectable option for any woman" who meets the government's eligibility criteria (Blanchet and Biswas 2017: 4). In its 2016 policy framework on migration, the government of Bangladesh (GoB 2016: 18) emphasises the need for such comprehensive pre-migration training to:

support [migrant] worker's rights to freely chosen employment ... [and]
protect migrant workers from being lured into forced labour, debt bondage,
and trafficking ... [with] special attention and support ... [for] women's
decision-making.

This policy position reflects a fundamental shift in the state's representation of women's international mobility from a site of "risk" to a site of "rights." Paternalistic and patriarchal discourses of "protection," which earlier justified state bans and restrictions on women's international migration have given way to a less explicitly gendered emphasis on the

“agency” of *all* migrant workers, *including women* (see, for example, Ghosh 2015, Rao 2014, White 2010, 2017).

This re-orientation represents a break with some of the problematic assumptions grounding anti-trafficking initiatives internationally, as identified by a growing body of critical scholarship. Such critiques have become more prominent in recent years, as global interest and investment in “trafficking” and “modern slavery” has proliferated to become a global priority of the times (see, for example, McGrath and Watson 2018, Mahdavi 2013, 2014, O’Connell Davidson 2015). This critical scholarship has pointed, not least, to the forms of social control enacted *by* and *through* traditional anti-trafficking programmes, particularly as they relate to women and migrants (Shah 2008, Doezema 2010, Ho 2011, Kapur 2011). The literature highlights a series of intractable tensions between progressive claims and aspirations and regressive implications of anti-trafficking discourse and practice, whereby:

... the figure of the “trafficking victim,” especially of the “trafficked sex slave” has ... been worked to most effect in the service of extremely conservative moral agendas on prostitution, gender and sexuality and in support of more restrictive immigration policies and tighter border controls (O’Connell-Davidson 2010: 244).

Anti-trafficking interventions have traditionally adopted an overt *anti-migration* stance whereby female migration is discursively conflated with trafficking, and then deterred altogether in the name of “protection” (Kempadoo 2011, Kotiswaran 2012, Mahdavi 2015). This *protective imperative* is an important feature of what Agustín (2007) terms the “rescue industry,” which has itself been the subject of extensive criticism in recent years (McGrath and Watson 2018, Connelly 2015).

“Protection” has tended to take on an explicitly sexual hue in much *female-focussed* anti-trafficking work, invoked as justification for both migration bans and heavy-handed “rescue” missions in many settings. It is in this context that the critical literature has problematised the anti-trafficking field’s attachment to a dominant “victimisation paradigm” (Ghosh 2015: 1222), through which women’s capacity to exert agency has largely been discounted; a tension we interrogate further below. Conversely, the sexual abuse and / or exploitation of male migrant workers has largely remained invisible in the anti-trafficking orthodoxy (Blanchet 2002).

As Chapkis (2003: 924) writes, one important outcome of this gendered distinction is that “trafficking victims, described as vulnerable women and children forced from the safety of their home/homelands into gross sexual exploitation are distinguished from economic migrants who are understood to be men who have willfully violated national borders for individual gain.” Perceptions about gendered vulnerabilities thus serve to distinguish “innocent victims” from “knowing agents” (Chapkis 2003: 924).

While the government of Bangladesh’s emerging “pro-female-migration” stance opens opportunities for mobility and labour force participation historically denied to women – representing an overt challenge to stigmas tainting (poor) women’s international mobility, its progressive goals remain unstable. State-enforced restrictions on poor women’s mobility are demonstrably harmful, but it does not follow that the active promotion of poor women’s international labour migration as a disciplined and devalued labour is necessarily progressive (see, for example, O’Connell Davidson 2015, Radhakrishnan and Solari 2015, White 2017).

The structures and conditions of profound inequality that formerly provided symbolic justification for the state’s protection of women migrant workers remain firmly in place. What has changed is that the individualisation of “choice” and “risk” formerly the preserve of poor male migrants has been extended to their female counterparts.

“VULNERABILITY-ASSIGNING” VS. “AGENCY-ASSIGNING” DESCRIPTIONS OF WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

We highlight here a distinction between “vulnerability-assigning” and “agency-assigning” descriptions of highly exploited/exploitable migrant workers. That is, “between the treatment of [such] workers as vulnerable victims and at the same time as agents who are able to make choices about their own lives” (O'Neill 2011: 11). Concerns about the (in)compatibility of “victimhood” and “agency” often express a deeper and mistaken concern that loss of agency entails loss of personhood, dignity, and humanity, such that “to describe a person as a victim...is...to deny her full status as a...person” (O'Neill 2011: 14). This, however, represents a distortion of “what it is to be a [full] ... person”:

Humans are constituted by their passive powers not just their active powers ... such passivity is not just involved in relations of oppression and domination. It is a ubiquitous feature of human life... [what's more] there are specific forms of humiliation, exploitation, oppression and domination that only ... persons can suffer (O'Neill 2011, 15).

It follows that vulnerability-assigning descriptions do not entail the denial of personhood:

While part of the injury of being a victim of violence and coercion might involve the perpetrator's failure to recognise the dignity of the worker, the description of the person as being a victim need involve no such failure.... It is rather to properly describe that condition (O'Neill 2011, 15).

Here the point is that the opposition of “victimhood” and “agency” is not itself the issue. The issue is not the incompatibility of “victimhood” and “agency” *per se*, but rather with a conception of dignity and personhood which erroneously places personhood and vulnerability in opposition to one another³.

Implicit in this discussion is a rejection of a second, related, opposition – that of dependence and independence. This chimes with recent critique of the individualisation of migration. This has two dimensions. The first is that “migration neither can nor should be reduced to the decision of an individual mover or migrant” (Cohen and Sirkeci 2016, 98). In part, this is a call for a social, relational approach to migration and a rejection of atomising, individualised assumptions. The concern is to reflect the social embeddedness – in families, households, communities – of individuals and “their” decisions, while also acknowledging that “decisions are never made in a vacuum and can be constrained by many factors” (Cohen and Sirkeci 2016, 97). The second, related, dimension involves the import of neo-classical assumptions which cast migrants as rational, utility maximising actors. The concern here is that:

the assumption that migration is a rational act and that migrants are rational actors looking for opportunities not available at home directs our attention away from the exploitative and negative social, economic and political ramifications of mobility, or, in other words, the insecurity that surrounds mobility (Cohen and Sirkeci 2016, 97).

Here, Cohen and Sirkeci (2016) are inverting the concern common in the literature on “trafficking” where vulnerability assigning descriptions displace agency-assigning

descriptions. Their focus is on the obverse, that a fixation on migrant workers as rational actors blinds us to their vulnerabilities. Of course, in reversing the concern, the dualism is maintained. One response to the issue of the privileging of independence and individualism versus dependence and social embeddedness is to acknowledge that “the very exercise of active powers of choice and agency is only possible against the background of constraints and dependencies” (O’Neill 2011, 15). It is in and through social support and social networks that needs are met and social powers realised. Just as vulnerabilities and agency co-exist in a proper account of personhood, independence and dependence are co-produced in and through social practices, interactions and relations (Reader 2007).

Returning to the apparent opposition of vulnerability- and agency-assigning descriptions, we consider the extent to which the former represents a denial of the latter. That is, the extent to which agency itself – rather than as a proxy for personhood – is consistent with vulnerability and victimhood. In this context, we return to our initial point of departure, whereby agency-assigning descriptions are taken to relate to a person’s ability to deliberate and make choices. Here, the concern is that vulnerability assigning descriptions refute this capacity. Yet, while being subject to relations of exploitation, coercion and abuse is patently not a form of agency, agency can – and often is – exerted in response to such relations.

Vulnerabilities, particularly of the type entailed by limited or absent alternatives, are not inconsistent with agency-assigning descriptions. The apparent conflict rests on the collapse of two meanings of “choice” – as an “act” *performed by* an individual, versus the (lack of) options *available to* that individual. As O’Neill (2011, 19) explains:

[It] is a claim about the alternatives that are available to an agent. It is not a claim about the attributes of the agent and her capacities to engage in acts of

choice in these contexts. It need ... involve no ascription of passivity to the worker or an incapacity to exercise agency.

This is a vital distinction. Limits on the spheres in which agency can be applied and exercised do not entail that the person subject to those limits *lacks* agency. Her agency remains intact.

RESEARCHING INTERSECTING LIFE, LABOUR AND MIGRATION HISTORIES

The findings reported in this article are based on 18 months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in Bangladesh between December 2015 and May 2017, led by the first author. The research followed women enrolled in a new generation “safe migration” initiative. Although the intervention was active in several districts of Bangladesh, this research was limited to a single district which we do not identify to protect research participant’s confidentiality. The intervention was active in ten sites in the selected district and a single non-governmental organisation (NGO) was responsible for the programme in all sites. Three of the ten intervention sites were selected for this study.

Of the three sites, one is a peri-urban area, recognised as one of the first locations from which Bangladeshi women migrated abroad against a backdrop of strong legal restrictions. The second site originated as a government planned resettlement area for Dhaka *bastee* (slum and squatter) dwellers, and today constitutes a major pool for the recruitment of migrant women for international work. The third site is a rural area, where agriculture is the main economic activity, with women less engaged in wage work (although this is changing) and where there is greater suspicion of female migration. Throughout Bangladesh, marked geographical and social disparities exist in the degree to which female migration is tolerated and field sites were selected to reflect this diversity.

A cohort of 40 women was selected from across the three field sites with roughly equal numbers from each site (see table two, below). Eligibility depended on participation in the intervention, as well as a stated interest in migrating abroad. From this “eligible” sample, we constructed a cohort that varied according to life-stage, education, marital status, and migration history. Five rounds of interviews were conducted between December 2015 and May 2017 at roughly equal intervals, permitting the field team to follow programme participants over a period of up to 18 months. Interviews with one or more family members were separately conducted at the same time-points, providing a counterpoint to the interpretation of women’s own narratives and a window into the inter-household dependencies, tensions, and decision-making processes involved in individual migration episodes. Two further interview series were undertaken, the first with NGO staff involved in the delivery of the programme, and the second with local informal intermediaries (termed *dalal*) through which the vast majority of aspiring women migrant workers in Bangladesh organise their international migration.

From round two onwards, we added a series of interviews with adolescent girls and young women migrating on three-month tourist visas (known colloquially as “dance” visas). In these additional cases, either the migrant or her mother had attended the NGO’s pre-migration training. The prevalence of this migration route in one of our three field sites justified its addition. Several other cases were added from round two onwards, as they came to the attention of the research team as particularly revealing. In the sections that follow, we signal when findings relate to these latter cohorts. Loose interview guides were developed, which provided the minimum structure necessary to produce comparable case histories, while allowing narratives to take unexpected turns and sensitive disclosures to be followed through. Interviews typically lasted 40-60 minutes, though longer interviews of up to three hours were

not unusual. Ethnographic observations, recorded in field diaries, further deepen and extend the findings.

Of the 40 women enrolled in the original cohort at round one, 15 had prior experience of migration. Eleven women migrated – eight for the first time – in the course of the study (see Table 2). By the study’s end, 17 women had never migrated, though a majority still hoped to do so. In all, 20 women could be interviewed about their experiences abroad and their reintegration into family and society upon their return. In each of our three field sites, migration was primarily undertaken with visas for domestic work. Visa’s for international RMG industry, while widely preferred, were inaccessible to all but a handful of women. All the women in our initial cohort migrated with the assistance of *dalal* (local informal labour intermediaries) despite warnings dispensed at the NGO training about the risks of doing so. We do not dwell on migrant-*dalal* relations in this article, which we analyse in some depth in a separate paper based on the same data (Watson and Blanchet 2017).

Taken together, the 40 longitudinal case studies, complemented by those of family members and *dalal*, provide unparalleled insights into women’s intersecting life, labour and migration histories. The relatively long study duration permits decision-making processes and family negotiations to be followed over time and the information and skills imparted at the pre-migration training to be reflected on and tested by participants. Here, the case studies of women who did not migrate are equally revealing, permitting the factors inhibiting migration to be followed. Although inevitably selective and partial, women’s narratives provide the richest information available about the experiences of international migrant workers.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

CONTRADICTIONS IN “RIGHTS” DISCOURSES

As elsewhere, “rights” are increasingly at the core of contemporary pre-migration training programmes in Bangladesh. Curricula delineate the “right” *to* migrate, the “rights” *of* migrant workers (for example, to rest and minimum wages) and the “rights” of *citizens* temporarily residing internationally (such as to Bangladeshi embassy assistance and repatriation).

In practice, the delimitation of legal rights simultaneously closes and opens opportunities. For those on the “closed” side of the equation, formal “rights” can be experienced as exclusionary, rather than emancipatory. Bangladesh’s enforcement of a legal upper-age limit of 45 for women’s international migration for domestic work (but not for men) is one such example. Among our study respondents, the existence and enforcement of this upper age restriction is encountered as an arbitrary and unjust rights limitation which is inconsistent with broader programme messages on women’s newly available right to migrate.⁴

Conversely, programme discussions of women’s intra-household rights were received as stimulating and encouraging. Up to a point, women can stand up for themselves, though the outcome is not assured. Familiarity with social norms and conventions and the availability of support networks allow space for women to manoeuvre at home. The training inspired some women to take major decisions, or at least question and confront those who curtailed their mobility. Sabiha, a 42-year-old widow with three grown up children, worked in a factory after her husband died. As temporary household head, she held power and could take decisions for the family. Her situation is different now that her grown-up sons are claiming “guardianship” over her. Dependent on sons who strongly opposed her migration plan, Sabiha had to give up her plans to migrate:

My sons do not understand that food and clothing is not all one needs.... I told [one son] that I also need pocket money. I need space.... I want to be respected. I want to have things of my own and be able to entertain guests. My son told me that such rights can be claimed up to a certain age and while a woman has a husband. I should now stay home, say my prayers, appreciate what I receive ... and prepare for death. These are my rights and duties. I heard about rights at the [NGO] training and it meant more than this ... I am 42 years old, healthy and capable. For my son, I am on my way to death. I feel powerless and sad....

Sabiha's sons did not allow their mother to migrate but they could not stop the migration of their married sister who, in their view, is under the authority of her husband. Following her participation in the NGO training, Sabiha inspired her daughter to migrate and organised her departure after the latter confided that her husband was sick and impotent, therefore incapable of providing. Hoping to benefit, the husband was easily convinced. The daughter migrated and her income was sent to Sabiha's bank account for the daughter's benefit. Such alignment of women within a family is not unusual.

In Bangladesh society, the application of women's rights to freedom of work and movement regularly clashes with criteria of honour and respectability that firmly ground women under the "protection" and rule of sons, husbands or brothers acting as their "guardians." The study shows that these questions remain at the core of women's (and men's) pre-occupations when women consider migrating for work.

In proclaiming the right of all women to migrate, the NGO ignored these dimensions of gendered individuals who "belong" to a community. Women aspirant migrants were left alone to debate with their "guardians" and decide on a course of action. The debate could turn

violent. Another respondent, Dina, a 33-year-old, married woman with two children and one more born by study's end, put up with an abusive husband as she waited for the right occasion to migrate in spite of her husband's opposition.

Dina suffered in her childhood from the "bad" reputation of the all-female household in which she grew up. Her father had left her mother after she gave birth to six daughters (and no sons). The mother encouraged her daughters to brave the outside world and enter factory work at an early age. Two of Dina's sisters are presently working abroad and three are working in RMG factories in Bangladesh. But income alone does not guarantee respectability. Dina explained:

After my father left, having seen how my mother suffered with all this mud throwing, I am trying to save my marriage even though my husband does not behave well with me. After my first marriage broke down, people said I was just like my mother.... Up to a certain age, a woman needs a man. He can be a father, a brother or a husband.... I liked the [NGO] message about men and women's rights but I will not repeat it at home because it would be understood wrongly. People will say that I have become too clever. Men rule in this country.... I have ideas about rights, freedom and power within myself and I value them. The problem is that one cannot exert these rights in this environment.

Towards the end of the study period, Dina had decided to forego the "protection" of a husband. With the support of her mother and her sisters, she was preparing to migrate. The longitudinal study allowed following through the internal contradictions, hesitations and

struggles women like Dina fought, torn between a desire for respectability and autonomy. A universal and disembodied “rights” discourse has little utility here.

The rights of migrant workers are similarly circumscribed in practice.⁵ Among women with experience of migration to the Middle East, “formal rights” are dismissed as abstract and remote. This results in a tension within training programmes, which can in turn undermine trust in the relevance and authority of training staff. Asha, 45 years old, with no formal education and separated with four children, was an experienced migrant worker when she attended the training. She summarises a common reaction:

All this talk about rights [at the NGO training] – I don’t believe it.... Abroad, I must do as I am told. All this talk about patiently negotiating with the employer is nonsense. That is not the way it works over there.... I liked what they [the NGO] said about rights. There is nothing wrong with these beautiful words. But this kind of talk is not meant for us. It is good for educated people like you. What do we do with these nice words? We cannot implement them....

At the first interview, Asha had recently returned from Dubai after more than two years abroad and was preparing to migrate again. Asha was never dismissive of the NGO training. She appreciated and enjoyed the discussion of rights, as well as many other aspects. However, she encountered “rights” as an abstract ideal that migrant workers such as her cannot hope to claim and enforce abroad. For Nasreen, 30 years old, with no formal education and married with one child, also an experienced migrant when she attended the training, the gap between knowing about rights and claiming or enforcing them was experienced even more starkly:

They [the trainers] talked about independence, strength of character, rights. I knew these things before. Today, even children hear about rights. The advice given to protect oneself is a joke. How can such methods be applied abroad when they are impossible to use in Bangladesh?

Both Asha and Nasreen migrated on house visas but were directed to commercial sex work once abroad. Women who reported they had been exclusively employed as domestic workers were equally dismissive of the protection “formal” rights could offer. Jhorna, 32 years old, educated to class V and married with two children, typifies this group. She had recently returned from Dubai at the time of her first interview and was preparing to migrate again. She had cut short her stay after ten months, paying for her own ticket home, unable to cope with the working hours and workload she experienced as one of two *khedima* (paid domestic worker) in a household of 21 members:

I liked the topics discussed [in the NGO training]. These are useful to know, but, in many cases, what they [the programme staff] say cannot be applied. Employers abroad ignore all these rights ... they don't abide by them. We cannot demand these things.

Momotaz, a married woman with four children, aged 50 and a high school graduate, had returned from Saudi Arabia six years earlier and was hoping to migrate again at the time of her interview. Momotaz similarly discounted the possibility of enforcing rights abroad. Her conclusions that hardship must be endured and problems managed independently are common among experienced migrants.

The situation was different for novice migrants. Women who attended pre-migration training before their first migration tended to trust the information they received. Some were “model students,” listening attentively and following the guidance on steps to take before departure (checking and photocopying documents, opening bank accounts, and so on). For them, instructions to contact the Bangladeshi embassy in the destination country, or the NGO dispensing the training (the latter via a dedicated helpline) in the event of mistreatment at destination, were particularly comforting.

These reassurances do not play out as expected, however. Within the course of the study several novice migrants departed and returned, following a disastrous experience abroad. In all such cases, the crisis concluded without assistance from the Bangladesh embassy or the NGO, even in cases where such assistance was sought. The absence of rights in employee-employer relations was felt keenly. As was the unattainability of anticipated routes home.

The “safe migration” programme’s inadvertent exaggeration or idealisation of assistance and “rescue” channels abroad has far reaching consequences. Migrant women who find themselves in situations they did not anticipate and/or consent to find that resistance is met with physical assault and or demands for money to meet inflated costs of repatriation. Those who follow recommended procedures for requesting repatriation are left bitter about the experience.

Shikha’s experience starkly illustrates the disillusionment with the NGO’s training messages that followed “failed” migrations. She was not enrolled in the original sample for this study. However, her case was added when she returned from Saudi Arabia. The research team became aware of her situation when she called the NGO helpline from abroad to request assistance with repatriation. Shikha, aged 23, educated to class five, and married with one child, was invited to participate in the study from round two and was interviewed four times.

The intention was to understand her experience of repatriation and pre-departure training. Shikha had listened attentively to the advice and information during NGO training. She duly brought her papers to the NGO for inspection before departure, leaving a copy as instructed. On the eve of her departure an NGO fieldworker reassured Shikha's mother that Shikha was well informed, and her mother need not worry.

Shikha's migration was disastrous. Nevertheless, she appreciated some of the practical information she received. She was, however, deeply disappointed to find that the rights she had been told about could not be enforced once abroad and that official repatriation channels entailed an expensive and lengthy process. Her case history is complicated and cannot be fully delineated here for reasons of space. However, the "lessons" Shikha expresses in the dénouement of her narrative throws into relief a number of important issues:

... What did I gain from this talk about rights? It raised my expectations. It would have been better not to have heard about this. [The NGO staff] ... talked about rights but when I wanted to enforce my rights, they blamed me. They criticised me for running away. I was at fault.... They talked of rights. But where are my rights now? To whom can I talk of rights? I had none abroad, and I have none here.

Despite being well-prepared, abroad Shikha faced a situation that she had not foreseen and could neither endure nor reveal. Her family did not follow the NGO's advice regarding repatriation procedures. They retrieved Shikha independently, which was both quicker and cheaper, but it entailed the sale and mortgage of assets. This case speaks to miscommunication and irreconcilable outlooks on "rights."

Shikha and her family tested the information provided at the training and were highly critical of what they received, just as the NGO staff became impatient and annoyed with Shikha and her relatives for failing to “listen.” In relation to those trained, the NGO staff positioned themselves as experts delivering solutions, but the reality proved to be different for Shikha and her family.

UNTANGLING “SEX TRAFFICKING” AND COMMERCIAL SEX WORK

About half of the migrant women in the study disclosed that commercial sex had been an integral part of the work proposed or imposed abroad. The term “commercial sex” is used broadly here, to refer to paid-for sexual services. Three distinct forms are present in respondent narratives: (i) provision of sexual services to the man or men of the house as an expected – but separately remunerated – part of the *khedima*’s duties; (ii) provision of sexual services to “outside” clients at the employer’s behest, alongside work as a *khedima*; and (iii) exclusive engagement in commercial sex, undertaken in brothels, bars, clubs, hotels or a combination of venues.⁶

Of the 20 women in our original sample who migrated for work in the Middle East and could be interviewed about their time there, 11 revealed involvement in commercial sex, either undertaken exclusively or in combination with domestic work. Although open recruitment for sex work did occur, most first-time migrants were unaware that they were – at least in part – recruited for commercial sex. The situation is different among experienced migrants who, even if not openly recruited for commercial sex, perceived it to be ubiquitous, especially for younger women, unless a company or garment visa could be obtained in place of a house visa.

For some women in our sample, commercial sex of any type is abhorrent, while for others it can be – or can become – accepted in the absence of alternatives. For others, the “work” itself is not encountered as objectionable, so long as remuneration, working arrangements, hours and intensity are manageable. These perspectives are themselves changeable, as circumstances and perceptions alter over time, further challenging simplistic dichotomies between “sex work” and “sex trafficking.”

Over time, and sometimes multiple migrations, some women manage to turn a highly exploitative situation into a highly profitable one. The following sections juxtapose different migrant women’s experiences of commercial sex, to convey the complexities and contradictions that exist beyond the content of pre-migration training.

The case history of Lily provides an entry point into this discussion. For her, the experience of migrating and returning home has been deeply transformative. Her complex journey is presented in some detail, in order to draw out wider implications, which we follow up with additional case histories. Lily was 33 years old at the time of her migration. She is educated to tenth class and had two children. Her arranged marriage to a violent husband from a “good” family ended in divorce.

Following her divorce, Lily moved to live with her father in our peri-urban field site, a location where the incidence of women’s international labour migration is relatively high and relatively socially acceptable. This is in marked contrast to the conservative town where Lily grew up, cared for by her maternal grandparents following her parent’s separation. Lily is, then, also an internal migrant. Her case history is inflected with the contrasting attitudes towards female labour migration prevailing not only across social classes but also in different parts of the country.

Prior to migrating overseas, Lily had never worked outside of the home. Conservative and cautious, she planned her migration carefully. Her father, who doted on her, reluctantly consented, spending his life savings to finance her plan. Lily was finalising preparations for her migration when she was first interviewed in December 2015. She was careful but optimistic, feeling well-prepared and well-informed:

Here, people tell me that since I am a divorcee, I should think of going abroad to work.... First, I wanted to go to Saudi Arabia, but I changed my mind when I heard that it was a bad place.... [Now] I am getting ready to go to Jordan ... Many left for Jordan from here. They have done well. This is why I agreed to go.... I am going for housework. The salary is 15,000 Taka.... I completed the [NGO and government] training.... I thought it would be good if I left with all the right information.... The greatest risk abroad is to get a bad employer, one who is violent.... In the first three months, one should be patient and try to learn....

When Lily was again interviewed in late February and early March 2016, we learned that her migration had been disastrous. She returned within six weeks, very shaken by experiences that were not lightly revealed:

I had no wish to migrate. My aunt, my cousin and the *dalal* strongly encouraged me to go abroad. [The] *dalal* sent me with a house visa but over there I was told to do *nishido kaj* [forbidden work].... I was forced to do this work. After a month, [the employer] sent me back to the [Jordanian recruitment agency's] office. I was there [at the recruitment agency premises

in Jordan] for 22 days ... [and] they demanded money to send me home.... Father had [already] given me the savings he kept for his old age [to pay for upfront costs].... I phoned the [NGO] helpline but no one answered the call. I understood then that I was all alone.... I decided I would do what was necessary to go back home. I had no choice.... I did *bhari paper kaj* [work that amounts to major sin].... We paid 70,000 Taka to do this rotten work....

I knew father did not have [any more] money and I did not want to rot there. So, I earned my return ticket.... Everybody is blaming me [for returning home, incurring losses], except for my father.... I cannot tell them the kind of work I was given abroad and the problems I faced.... I will never go abroad again, and I will never encourage anyone like me to go. I am not *harami* [a bad woman].... I am angry with [the NGO].... Their nice words, what utility do they have? None.

When interviewed in July 2016, Lily expresses a much more ambivalent position:

[My] relatives and neighbours say all kinds of bad things about me. They say: “Abroad, I had a good job, a good employer and a good salary. Why could I not stay as so many other women do? Girls younger than me survive hardship and they benefit their families...”. Father spent all his savings for me.... [He] had to spend another 26,000 Taka to bring me back [the money Lily was required to raise in Jordan was in addition to money her father was able to raise to bring her home, which fell short of that demanded].... If I could have

stayed abroad, think how much money I could have earned. My salary was \$170 per month. In six months, that makes a lot of money....

In her final interview, conducted in March 2017, one year after she returned from Jordan, Lily's perspective has continued to shift, and she intends to migrate once more:

The problem I encountered abroad could have disappeared if I had accepted the work.... I will go abroad again but this time I will leave knowing what to expect.... I went abroad after taking the NGO training. I did not understand then that I could have got strength from that training.... I will show my relatives that I can succeed.... The Lily that was born after this crisis ... can be strong. The previous Lily never imagined that she would have to work for her living but now I accept this.

Lily's narrative begins and ends with an intention to migrate "well informed." This intention takes on different meanings in her first and last interviews. Initially, Lily details the cautious planning underway for her first migration. She seeks to migrate with "all the right information." Her final interview echoes the first. She is again planning to migrate and again stresses that she will depart well informed.

This time her expectations are informed by the direct experience of migration. Lily has come to the troubling twin conclusions that commercial sex work is the only work available to her abroad and that the "problems" she encountered can be avoided, provided one accepts the work. Lily's perspective has altered fundamentally between round two (immediately following her migration) and round five (one year later).

The hostile reception she received on her return, combined with her economic and social insecurity, altered her outlook. Those who managed Lily's first migration – her aunt, her cousin, and her *dalal* misjudged her. They only paid attention to “external” criteria in their profiling, and assumed that Lily – a divorcee, without income and dependent on her elderly father – would accept whatever work was offered abroad.

They failed to consider her conservative and sheltered upbringing and the extent to which she had internalised the norms of a society where “women do not migrate” and commercial sex is *nishido kaj*. By round five, Lily makes no mention of concerns that occupied earlier rounds – “honour” and “sin.” She no longer views overseas commercial sex work as the preserve of *harami* – instead it is instrumentalised as the means to “succeed” at migration.

As part of this transformation, Lily reinterprets the NGO training messages she received prior to her migration. Advice to patiently endure hardship, to follow employer's instructions and to permit time to acclimatise to life and work abroad are (mis)construed to have a sub-text in relation to commercial sex.

Lily's intention is to put her earlier victimisation behind her and make a “success” of her next migration. This bumpy and partial transition from “innocent victim” to “knowing agent” is not unique (Chapkis 2003: 935). Other case histories reveal a similar, if accelerated, trajectory. Such case histories demonstrate that, though not synonymous, “sex trafficking” and “sex work” are not wholly discrete. Agency and consent (and the lack thereof) are highly problematic in the first phases of Lily's and other narratives. Clearly, Lily did not consent to engage in commercial sex when she initially migrated. Her experiences are close to “textbook” examples of “trafficking” involving overt deception, compulsion and both physical and financial barriers to exit. She began as highly resistant to the idea of engaging in

commercial sex and came to instrumentalise it as a possible way to secure uncertain futures. Lily endured. As Reader (2007: 597) reminds us, “[T]here are times when the *endurance* of harm, exploitation, or suffering is the only option: “It is not action, it does not show positive capability, it is not chosen or independent. Nevertheless, it is a way to be a person in adversity.”

Not all women who were unwillingly inducted into commercial sex came to accept it. Women with family support and some financial resources were better placed to reject such demands. Jesmin, who was 35 years old at round one and married with three children, typifies this case. She never attended school, but her husband completed matriculation and has secure and relatively well-paid employment. At the time of her migration, she was in a stable and loving marriage. She had limited experience of work outside the household.

Jesmin was first interviewed in December 2015. She had migrated to Dubai the previous June. Jesmin begins by explaining that she had no *need* to go abroad, as her husband’s income sufficed to support the household at a good standard. Like Lily, she migrated on a house visa but was taken directly to a brothel on her arrival in Dubai. Jesmin was threatened and roughly treated and her return home was made contingent on a payment of 150,000 Taka. On receipt of 50,000 Taka, rather than the 150,000 initially demanded, the Dubai recruitment office repatriated her.

Ultimately, Jesmin did not have to pay to be repatriated. Her husband, with the help of local influential people, pressured the *dalal* who had arranged her migration to meet this cost. This strategy is not widely available. It was dependent on the local influence Jesmin’s husband wields. Like Lily, Jesmin initially had no intention of migrating again, but reconsidered this in later interviews. Her reputation had been sullied by the publicity her “failed” migration received, and her, once close, relationship with her husband – who blamed her for the financial and reputational losses her migration precipitated – had deteriorated.

While Lily and others concluded that commercial sex is an unavoidable part of work migration abroad, Jesmin believes it could be avoided by migrating for garment work instead of domestic work. She planned to migrate again once she had sufficient vocational experience to qualify and sufficient savings to independently finance her migration.

The deterioration of marital relationships following women's failed migration is not uncommon. As in Jesmin's case, relief at returning home from a "failed migration" is tempered and ultimately soured by growing mutual resentments. Women then come to reconsider their initial determination never to migrate again.

In some cases, women are aware that they are being recruited for commercial sex and have no objection. Selina was interviewed over four rounds between December 2015 and October 2016. She is 23 years old, has one son and is educated to class four. Her first marriage, arranged when she was 13, ended in divorce. Her second husband, a drug addict, died one year before our first interview. For eight years Selina worked in cotton mills where conditions were poor and the pay low. Selina is a fervent Pir ("living saint") devotee and her Pir was overseeing arrangements for her migration.

Following a series of delays, Selina migrated in June 2016, returning around three months later, in time to be interviewed again in October 2016:

I went abroad to entertain men in my bed. I had a house visa, but my work was to provide services to men.... That work was not a problem for me ... the salary was paid regularly, caretakers behaved well, and we had access to health services. I worked well for two months but then it became too painful.... The doctor said I had a bad disease.... The employer then sent me back. He did not hassle about the cost of the airline ticket.... I was there for

two months and 21 days. I came back because of my bad health. I was never lucky in my life and could never succeed anywhere....

Another case is Renu, a 35-year-old, divorced, childless and homeless woman who is also a fervent Pir devotee. She had migrated twice to Dubai when we first interviewed her and was preparing to migrate again. She was very much alone, and her situation insecure. Her parents are both dead and she is on bad terms with her brothers. The money she saved during her previous migrations has been lost, having been lent it at interest and unrecoverable. In a first interview in November 2015, she explained:

I did not mind the work.... With a house visa, one has to do this work.... Employers abroad hire us to make money. If we don't serve their business well, they do not appreciate us.... In 2010, I left for Dubai with a house visa. My basic salary was 500 Rial but I earned 700 Rial per month with my extra work. I was there for two years and three months.... We were four Bangladeshi women in the same house. The others were very good looking. They were also younger.... Those who came to me were not well off. I was second choice ... I could have stayed longer if I had been better looking.... The employer sent me back.... [After returning] I stayed for about four months but I did not like it here. I went to see another *dalal*. He sent me to Dubai with a house visa. I stayed there 14 months. I was getting old and I was not in demand. I hope to go abroad again.

Parul was 13 when her father died, and she was removed from school to begin work in a cotton mill. At 15, she joined a garment factory, where she remained for ten years.

During this time, she was the sole or main “breadwinner” for her household. When first interviewed in late 2015, Parul had ceased work, following a gang-rape suffered on her way home from work two years before. The attack became widely known, resulting in Parul leaving her job and limiting her movements. The scandal also limited her marriage prospects.

Parul hoped that migration might offer a way to put these events behind her, as well as provide for her future security. Preparations were being made for her brothers’ marriages, and – in accordance with virilocality – their wives would move to the family home, meaning Parul must depart to make room. The sacrifices she has made for her siblings are poorly acknowledged. At round one, in March 2016, Parul was hoping to travel to Kuwait. She credits the NGO training with reviving her self-confidence and making her proactive in her pursuit of migration opportunities:

For the past two years, I have been without income. I cook, I wash, I do the shopping, everything is on me.... My life here is nothing but slavery.... For at least three years, I have been thinking about migration.... What is the problem with engaging in “bad” work abroad?... The work is not a problem. What I want is to earn.... When I build a two-floor building [here] with the money earned abroad, people will give me recognition....

Parul ultimately migrated to Saudi Arabia on a house visa, where she was inducted into sex work as she had anticipated. On her return to Bangladesh, Parul let her hair grow, donned red clothes, and set herself up as a “healer.” With her *jot* (dreadlock) and her sojourn in Saudi Arabia - considered a holy land, Parul is now recognised as having special powers and women pay her a few Taka to receive her blessings. Her brother reluctantly allowed her

to occupy a corner of the house as she is earning her keep. Clearly, Parul's migration was deeply transformative.

The frequency with which commercial sex was disclosed by the migrant women in our study warrants consideration. How should we interpret it? It is unlikely to simply be an artefact of sample selection. In short, we did not go in search of women who had experienced – or who we imagined would go on to experience – commercial sex. While we did not set out specifically to study women migrants experience of commercial sex, nor did we close-down or disqualify discussion of “taboo” experiences abroad or indeed at home.

CONCLUSION

The women in study do not fit easily into dichotomies “between innocent [victims] and knowing [agents]” (Chapkis 2003: 935). The complexities entailed in their narratives are not easily broached in pre-migration “training” sessions by NGOs. If the skills and knowledge imparted are inadequate to meet challenges abroad, those who “consent” to what amounts to highly abusive situations seldom claim the status of victims.

The powerlessness and the lack of choice that many women acknowledge prior to migration has much to do with patriarchal domination and their low status, experienced over many years. The media in Bangladesh – and elsewhere – reporting on “victims” of trafficking often fails to acknowledge the pre-migration situation of migrant women. A short training programme can only do so much. Within traditional understandings of personhood, victimhood is presented as a failing. A richer version of personhood recognises that “full persons - *all of us* – are passive, needy, constrained and dependent as well as active, capable, free, and independent” (Reader 2007: 603 – 604, emphasis added).

Bangladesh's "new generation" of anti-trafficking programmes present international migration as a right to be actively claimed by individual migrants. These rights are dependent on, and restricted to, highly specific, legally circumscribed contexts. The training programmes developed in this setting must grapple with the fact that the government's increasingly proactive out-migration stance has not, as yet, been matched by a suitably "protective" in-migration stance and capability in destination countries. Historically, "protection" has tended to be invoked in support of prohibitions and / or restrictions on women's labour mobility and has restricted the opportunities for women to migrate through legal channels. But expanding the spheres in which individual agency may be applied does not necessarily translate into spaces for it to be exerted.

Profound legally sanctioned and enforced asymmetries of power persist in the migrant labourer-employer relation, and official repatriation channels remain remote, difficult-to-access, over-burdened, under-resourced, protracted and expensive. In practice, these *de jure* and *de facto* delimiting of the rights of migrant workers produce tensions in pre-migration orientation and training programmes intended to prepare migrant workers for their life and work abroad. As O'Neill (2011: 33) explains: "Acting as an independent agent is in part a matter of being protected ... from domination. An individual is dominated if they are subject to the arbitrary power of another. As such it requires positive protections ... from the powers of others." Reversing decades of state activity in which vulnerability assigning descriptions of women were privileged, and the spheres in which women could exercise agency thus delimited, requires more than the celebration of individual agency. Privileging agency-assigning descriptions without acknowledging that vulnerability and agency, and independence and dependence, co-exist and inform one another, serves to individualise risks over which the individual migrant worker exerts little control.

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NOTES

¹In 2017, 99.2% of women migrating through official channels, travelled to the Middle East, a majority to Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia: 68.3%, Jordan 16.3%, Oman: 7.6%, UAE: 2.7%, Qatar: 2.6%, Lebanon: 1.4%, Kuwait: 0.3% Bahrain: 0.02%. It should be noted that official statistics do not record migration to India (BMET 2018b).

²In 2015, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, committing to send 200,000 women for paid domestic work within two years, on the understanding that Saudi Arabia's suspension on male migration be lifted.

³The "agential bias" underpinning in this distinction has deep roots in western philosophical tradition and ordinary ways of knowing (Reader 2007: 571). In recent years, several philosophers have begun to question this bias, exploring need and dependency as constitutive aspects of personhood (Kittay 1999, O'Neill 2003, Reader 2007).

⁴Three women in the study were aged over 45 at the time of their first interview and so legally barred from migrating for international domestic work. Though formally ineligible, all three had been admitted to the training programme. Two women held passports that falsified their age and the third was invited to attend the training owing to her local influence where her participation encouraged other eligible women to attend.

⁵Migrant workers' structurally weak position in employment relations is heightened by the existence of the Kafala system of employer-based sponsorship in much of the Middle East. In practice, the Kafala system regulates migrant workers' possibility and conditions of entry,

residency, recruitment, employment, and exit (from both the employment “contract” and the country). An in-depth review of the Kafala system and its geo-political specificities is beyond the scope of this report but see Longva (1999), Gardner (2012) and Timothy and Sasikumar (2012).

⁶No single country monopolised the demand for sexual services from *khedima*: women reported similar experiences in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Dubai, Lebanon, Qatar and Oman. Reports of brothel-organised prostitution were limited to Saudi Arabia, Dubai and Jordan in our sample, though this does not imply a broader “rule.”