

WORKING PAPER

**Unravelling the Vicious Cycle of Recruitment:
Labour Migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf States**

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**International Labour Office
Geneva**

May 2009

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First published 2009

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ILO Cataloguing in Publication Data

Afsar, Rita

Unravelling the vicious cycle of recruitment: labour migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf States / Rita Afsar; International Labour Office. - Geneva: ILO, 2009
63 p.

ISBN: 978-92-2-122355-9;
978-92-2-122356-6 (web pdf)

International Labour Office

labour migration / international migration / migrant worker / workers rights / recruitment / Bangladesh / Gulf States

14.09.1

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Printed in Switzerland

Foreword

In June 1998 the International Labour Conference adopted a Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up that obligates ILO member States to respect, promote and realize freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, the effective abolition of child labour, and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.¹ The ILO *Programme for the Promotion of the Declaration* is responsible for the reporting processes and technical cooperation activities associated with the Declaration; and it carries out awareness raising, advocacy and knowledge functions – of which this Working Paper is an example. Working Papers are intended to stimulate discussion of the issues covered by the Declaration. They express the views of the author, which are not necessarily those of the ILO.

As part of these broader efforts, a Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour was created in 2001.² It seeks to help member States address the problems of forced labour and human trafficking through promotional means and technical cooperation, including research and knowledge sharing on different forms of forced labour today, their causes, and the appropriate remedies. Field projects are also implemented throughout the world.

This study in Bangladesh was commissioned against the backdrop of growing concern globally about the particular vulnerability of both regular and irregular migrant workers to exploitation, trafficking and forced labour. It was undertaken to inform dialogue between Asian sender and Middle Eastern destination countries, at a Gulf Forum on Temporary Contractual Labour, held in Abu Dhabi in early 2008, along with a sister study addressing similar questions in Pakistan. While provisional findings were first presented at that time, we are now pleased to publish the full findings of the research, following the launch of the ILO's third global report on forced labour, entitled "*The cost of coercion*" on 12 May 2009.

The influx of foreign workers to Gulf countries over the last few decades has created a unique situation in the region, with the majority of the labour force comprising non-nationals. It is estimated that at least 10 million foreigners work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries³, most of them unskilled and semi-skilled migrants. Most of these temporary contract workers, both women and men, come from South and South-east Asian countries (notably Bangladesh, India, Indonesia Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka). They work in a variety of sectors – women largely in domestic work and in factories, and men in construction, manufacturing, security, transport and other sectors.

This qualitative study of returned migrants by Dr. Rita Afsar of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in Dhaka has shed new light on some of the complexities and problems faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers leaving the country to work in the Gulf States, as well as the benefits that such migration can bring. It demonstrates that, despite the many

¹The text of the Declaration is available at: <http://www.ilo.org/declaration>

² Further information is available at: <http://www.ilo.org/forcedlabour>

³ United Arab Emirates, State of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, State of Qatar and State of Kuwait

legal and institutional safeguards put in place by the Government of Bangladesh to protect its migrant workers, abuses unfortunately still occur – ranging from delays in wage payments and non-respect of rest days to, in the most extreme cases, violence and sexual abuse. It shows clearly that efforts need to be stepped up *inter alia* to regulate the unlicensed, informal sub-agents who recruit migrant workers in rural areas, as well as to make information more widely available to prospective migrants on channels for “safe” migration, on workers’ rights and on how to seek assistance in case of difficulties encountered overseas. It also underlines the need for continued dialogue between sender and destination countries in order to resolve outstanding problems, including closing those legal loopholes that may allow the minority of unscrupulous recruiting agents and employers to derive unfair advantage at the expense of migrant workers. ILO stands ready to work closely with our partners in Bangladesh and elsewhere to tackle these issues.

I would like to extend my thanks to Dr. Rita Afsar and her research team at BIDS for undertaking this research under a very tight delivery schedule, and the ILO Office, Dhaka for their support. I would like also to thank Caroline O’Reilly of the Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour for supervising the research, and for extensive editing of this Working Paper; and to Flory Liuchi de Lopez for formatting the final text.



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Principles and Rights at Work

Acknowledgements

This study was commissioned by the International Labour Office's Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL) to generate a better understanding of the labour recruitment systems in Bangladesh. It aims to contribute to informed policy dialogue between sending and receiving countries in order to eliminate the risks posed by exploitative practices, including trafficking for forced labour.

The study was facilitated by ILO-Dhaka Office and especially by Mr. Shahbuddin Khan. A team of researchers from Geneva including Ms. Caroline O'Reilly, Mr. Roger Plant and others made a significant contribution through monitoring and supervision of the study and editing the manuscript. I conducted the study with support and assistance from a team consisting of Mr. Golam Nabi Majumdar, Research Associate, BIDS; Mr. Nurul Islam Molla, former programme officer, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and a group of research assistants who worked day and night to enrich the study with in-depth information.

All the stakeholders involved in the process of migration, including representatives from the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies and the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited, managers and staff of ten recruiting agencies and five sub-agents (popularly known as Dalals), Union Parishad, NGOs and local community-based organisations as well as both male and female migrants, contributed immensely to the study. They provided all necessary information and revealed the complex process of recruitment and grey areas of migration outcomes.

Interview guidelines in Bangla were typed by Mrs Amina and Mr. Lutfur Rahman Patwary and data processing by Mr. S. M. Jahangir of BIDS.

The author alone is responsible for any errors and omissions that may remain in the report.

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May, 2009

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Acronyms

BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
BIDS	Bangladesh institute of Development Studies
BMET	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
BOEP	Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy
BOESL	Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited
CBO	Community-based organisation
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ILO	International Labour Office/ International Labour Organization
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MEWOE	Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OFRC	Overseas Filipino Resource Centre
POEA	Philippines Overseas Employment Agency
PR	Private recruiter
RM	Return migrant
RMG	Ready-made garment
SAP-FL	Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour (ILO)
SEDF	Small Enterprise Development Fund
SRO	Statutory Rules and Orders
Tk.	Taka ⁴
UAE	United Arab Emirates

⁴ The rate of exchange at the time of the field research in late 2007 was approx. \$1 = Tk.68.

Section 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Migration is a politically sensitive issue that evokes heated public debate in developed and developing countries alike. The influx of foreign workers to the Gulf countries over recent decades has created a unique situation in that region, with the majority of the labour force comprising non-nationals. It is estimated that at least 10 million foreigners work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries⁵, most of them unskilled and semi-skilled migrants. The majority of these workers, both women and men, come from South and South-east Asian countries (notably Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines). They work in a variety of sectors – women largely in domestic work and in factories, and men in construction, manufacturing, security, transport and other sectors. The demand for labour in GCC countries has – at least until very recently – been on the increase, along with the number of migrants wanting to move to this region to work.

The export of labour from Bangladesh began in the mid-1970s, when there were an estimated 6,000 Bangladeshis working abroad. In the last three decades, this number has increased dramatically to an estimated 5.39 million. Between 2001 and 2007, an annual average of more than 400,000 workers migrated (Afsar, 2007a). In 2007 alone, a staggering 832,609 workers migrated abroad, more than twice the number in 2006, representing around 2% of the country's total labour force. The bulk of these migrants – nearly 82% – were destined for GCC countries.

Migration has both direct and indirect benefits. For instance, migration can improve the economic situation of the migrants' households, reduce the unemployment rate, increase the country's foreign exchange earnings, and, through remittances, positively impact national economic growth. Remittances also indirectly assist in generating employment opportunities and in facilitating trade. Furthermore, monies sent home by migrant workers lay a better foundation for human capital development, as expenditure on children's education tends to increase significantly as a result of migration (Afsar et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, there are indications that some workers, irrespective of their country of origin, suffer from severe working conditions and exploitation while abroad. This may be due to the fact that migrants tend to cluster in informal and insecure employment and are frequently considered as flexible and expendable labour. Initial research has shown that the problems faced by some migrant workers start already in their home countries, linked to the recruitment process.

⁵ United Arab Emirates, State of Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, State of Qatar and State of Kuwait

1.2. The pitfalls of recruitment

Private recruitment agencies are often poorly monitored and, in many countries, few regulations exist to control and monitor the level of fees charged to workers. This leads to situations where the migrant workers can be heavily indebted before they leave their home countries. Many do not see their employment contracts prior to departure, and are promised conditions of work that are not subsequently met. Even if they see their contract before departure, it may contain false information about wages and working conditions. Deception during the recruitment process sets workers up for subsequent abuse that can amount, in extreme cases, to trafficking for forced labour.

1.3. Justification for the study

In contemporary development discourse, the protection of workers' rights and migration management have emerged as major challenges for both sending and receiving countries. On the one hand, Bangladesh wants to continue to expand its labour export. On the other, it is concerned about the plight of its nationals working overseas. The Government has initiated certain measures, including through labour consuls, to ensure the fair treatment of its migrant workers and to establish means of recourse should this not be the case. However, at the receiving end, GCC countries are also grappling with their own 'labour pains'. It is encouraging that efforts are underway in some of these countries to improve the situation of contract workers. Such efforts include reviewing the "*Kafeel*" system of visa sponsorship by employers; strengthening the labour inspection and labour law enforcement mechanisms; revision of labour legislation and adoption of new legislation on forced labour and trafficking; and the signing of bilateral memoranda of understanding with sending countries to regulate the flow and working conditions of temporary contract workers.

Under its broader decent work agenda, ILO's Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL) has initiated research to better understand labour recruitment systems, in order to contribute to informed policy dialogue between sending and receiving countries aimed at eliminating the risks posed by exploitative practices, including trafficking for forced labour. As part of this research programme, this study examines the perspective of Bangladesh as a sending country.

1.4. Purpose and objectives of the study

This study aims to examine the situation in Bangladesh, as a sending country of migrant workers to the GCC countries, and seeks to understand and compare the experiences of both regular and irregular migrants, and of women and men, using a variety of recruitment channels. Its focus is on examining the various recruitment mechanisms, processes and contractual arrangements experienced by migrant workers in different sectors, and their different outcomes, in terms of working conditions and workers' rights in the country of destination.

1.5. Methodology

This is a qualitative study. It seeks to examine the recruitment processes of migrants and their varied outcomes in terms of working conditions and workers' rights in the country of destination. Comparisons between migrants are made at three levels. First, both male and female returnee migrants were interviewed to examine the types of recruitment they underwent and the subsequent impact of the recruitment process on their entitlements. It is important to note that it was extremely difficult to find migrants who used clandestine migration means, because Bangladeshi passport holders require a valid visa for departure for overseas migration. Second, migrants were compared by types of visa with which they migrated and their experiences assessed to identify conditions and processes that may have led to them becoming irregular. Third, migrants were compared by types of occupation, to determine to what extent the sector of employment impacts on overall migration outcomes. The findings from interviews with returned migrants were supplemented by interviews with private recruiting agencies including sub-agents, and other stakeholders.

1.5.1. Sampling criteria and the sample selection process

Selection of the migrants

Following the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training's (BMET) district-based statistics on migrants and in consultation with the sub-district administration, the elected representatives, functionaries of the elected local body – Union *Parishad*, NGOs and local community-based organisations (CBOs), the research team gathered information about the Unions with a high proportion of migrant workers, especially those migrating to GCC countries.⁶ Areas for which extensive and consistent information was available were given priority in the selection process.

Box 1.1: Key informants at the local level

- Sub-district Executive Officer
- Chairman and members of the Union *Parishad*
- Female ward members
- Young returned migrants
- Experienced returned migrants
- NGOs, local leaders, Community-Based Organisations e.g. youth clubs

Both key informants and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify different categories of return migrants. In total, 60 migrants were interviewed from four *Thanas*, 15 from each – Keraniganj *Thana* of Dhaka district, Bandar *Thana* of

⁶ Unions are the third tier or the lowest unit of local administration in rural areas after the district and the *Thana* (sub-district). A Union is created with six or more villages and is divided into nine wards for administrative purposes.

Narayanganj district, Balaganj *Thana* of Sylhet district and Laxmipur Sadar *Thana* of Laxmipur district, which is a part of greater Noakhali district. Keraniganj and Bandar *Thanas* were selected in particular for female migrants.⁷ Diagram 1.1 presents the research design and its stages. As the study is based largely on recounting of personal experiences by return migrants – complemented by stakeholders’ opinions – there is an obvious risk of recall bias. To minimise this, the sample respondents were selected from among those migrants who had returned home within a one year period prior to the survey. Efforts were made to include a wide representation of occupational groups, both male and female migrants and also migrants who became “irregular” after their migration overseas.

Selection of the recruiting agencies and the stakeholders

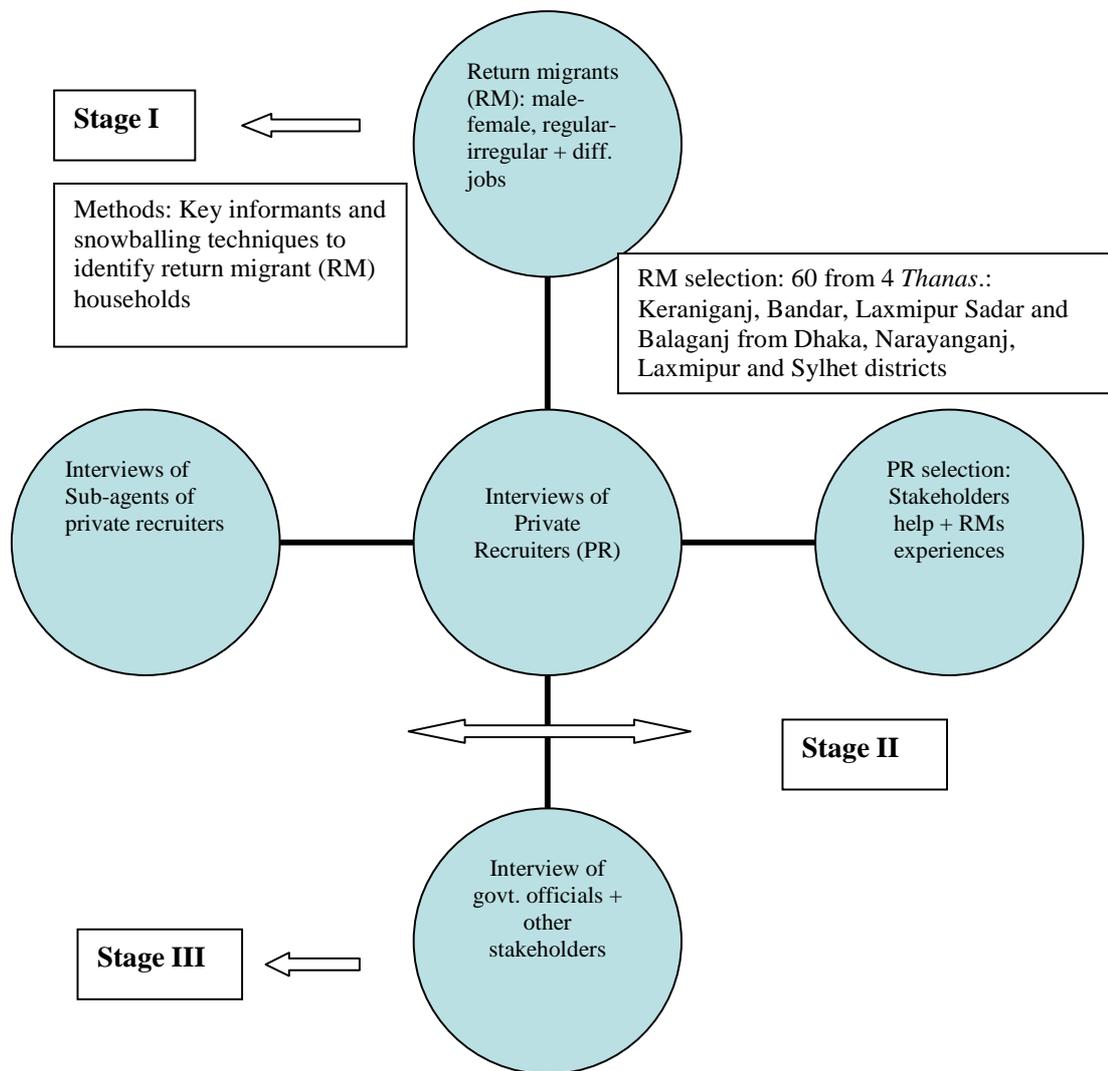
With the help of representatives from the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE), the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) and the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL), managers/management staff of ten recruiting agencies and five sub-agents (popularly known as the *Dalals*) were selected. Both the selection of recruiting agencies and obtaining relevant information from them were challenging tasks which the team had to carry out with patience and tact.⁸ The purpose of these interviews was to carry out a mapping exercise of the recruitment processes by looking at: information sources regarding overseas employment opportunities and the dissemination of such information, including job advertising; interview and selection processes; fees charged; terms and information provided to workers; contracts, their duration and conditions; pre-departure training and other pertinent information.

Finally, the team conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of MEWOE, BMET, BAIRA and BOESL. The purpose was to discuss the major problems that emerged from the interviews with return migrants and recruiting agencies, and to assess the effectiveness of existing government policies, programmes and practices. In particular, the interviews examined the effectiveness of the monitoring and regulation of recruiting agencies by Government, and the challenges involved in following-up on those whose practices do not conform to the law, in order to derive policy recommendations.

⁷ Due to the concentration of women migrants in these *Thanas*, Keraniganj and Bandar *Thanas* replaced Golapganj and Hathazari *Thanas* which had originally been considered for the study.

⁸ Management of recruiting agencies is often suspicious about any research which they think may jeopardize their business. The team visited the agencies several times in order to build a good rapport with the management. Sub-agents were selected from the areas of origin of migrants whilst recruiting agencies were selected from Dhaka city.

Diagram 1.1: Sampling method of the study



1.6. Research Assumptions

From a thorough review of the existing research, both in the country and outside, the following assumptions are drawn for this study:

- Process, experience and outcomes of migration vary by gender of migrants
- Channel of migration and process of recruitment depend on migrants' source of information, level of education, skills, risk-taking attitude, strength of social capital, nature of occupation and economic condition
- Nature of migration and type of recruitment will impact the outcomes of migration.

1.7. The analysis plan

Findings of this study are analysed thematically. Section 2 presents the first theme – the search for a ‘*Bhalo*’ (or good) visa. It consists of a contextual analysis in order to understand the context of the migration decision-making process and migrants’ experiences. Section 3 presents the second theme – ‘*Alo-Andhare*’ (or twilight) – that examines the amount and quality of information that a migrant has to process his/her overseas migration. It seeks to address the ‘how’ part of migration by examining experiences of migrants at the different stages of migration, from looking for overseas employment opportunities through the actual migration process. The third theme – ‘*Pawa-Napawa*’ (or benefits and losses) – examines impacts of migration. Thus, Section 4 focuses on changes that have occurred as a result of migration, what influences it has had on the lives of the migrants and their families, and to what extent the recruitment process affects these outcomes. Finally, key policy implications are presented in Section 5.

Section 2 THE SEARCH FOR A 'BHALO' VISA

2.1. Contextual analysis of the migrants' situations

In order to generate insight into the factors that influence the migration decision process, the paper examines the contexts in which such decisions were made. It is assumed migrants' skills, socio-economic characteristics and family background and support networks, including their marital status, class and fallback position both within the family and outside, are likely to influence the migration decision-making process.⁹

2.2. The migrants' socio-economic characteristics

Of the 60 sample respondents, 45 were male and 15 were female migrants. The majority of the male migrants were drawn from the Laxmipur and Sylhet districts, while all the female migrants came from Dhaka and Narayanganj districts. Laxmipur is part of the greater Noakhali district and both Noakhali and Sylhet are known as conservative strongholds, which do not have female migrants. Female migrants are concentrated in Dhaka and its surrounding areas (Afsar, 2003; Siddiqui, 2002; INSTRAW, 2005).

The mean age of the respondents was 27 years at the time of their migration; more than 80% were under 30 years of age (Table 2.1). In line with existing research, this study also found that the migrant women were younger than the men. Future research should examine whether it is a deliberate strategy on the part of the employers or recruiters to send younger women so as to ensure greater loyalty or productivity, as argued by the author elsewhere (Afsar, 2005).

Three-quarters of the men and all but one of the women were or had been married prior to migration, which may be explained by purity and pollution considerations as argued by Afsar (2005) and Raghuram (2005). Marriage implies obligations and responsibilities for men and women that in turn may induce migration. Half of the women migrants were divorced or widowed; unlike their married counterparts, these women tend to have greater responsibility for family maintenance. Absence of an adult male, more particularly the male 'guardian', also enhances women's mobility, as they face fewer barriers and enjoy greater freedom in their decision to migrate than do the married women migrants.

⁹ Fallback position refers to a person's standing within the family support system.

Table 2.1 Socio-economic characteristics of respondents before migration

District of origin	Male	Female	Socio-economic characteristics	Male	Female
Dhaka	10	5	No cultivable land	11	14
Narayanganj	5	10	Less than 1.0 acre land	17	1
Laxmipur	15	--	Own house	44	9
Sylhet	15	--	Rented house	1	6
Total sample size	45	15			
Mean age (years)	27.7	26.8	Mean family size	7.8	4.4
Age distribution			Households having only one earning member	18	11
<30	31	10	Mean hh. income (Tk/month)	6,842	4,098
30+ years	14	5			
Marital status before migration			Sources of family income* (%)		
Never married	9	1	Agriculture	32.8	15.4
Divorced/widow	--	7	Transport and construction	3.9	6.6
Currently married	34	7	Salaries/wages	15.7	6.5
Educational status			Services	4.3	45.7
Av.education (yrs)	5.3	2.7	Petty business	19.3	12.2
No schooling	13	8	Remittances	22.6	3.2
Primary	10	4	Others*	0.4	6.9
Secondary	18	3			
High school	4	--			

Note: *includes rental incomes; gifts, financial help from family members, pension, welfare/insurance payment; income from savings/investments, etc.

Half of the female migrants had no formal schooling and the remaining attained primary or junior secondary school. By contrast, half of the male migrants had obtained secondary or high school level education. With higher levels of education, the male migrants had greater options in the overseas job market, while women were mainly concentrated in two sectors: domestic work and the cleaning sector. Compared to the author's survey in 2000, the average level of education of male migrants decreased from 7.2 years to 5.3 years. However, there was no significant change in women's education during the same period (Afsar et al. 2002).

The distribution of the respondents by level of education and overseas occupation (Table 2.2) shows that the factory workers, the hotel boys and the fitters had the highest levels of education, followed by the foremen and the salesmen. For all other categories of occupation, the level of education of the employees is mixed, from illiterate up to secondary education. This may be because these jobs still absorb both the skilled and unskilled labourers e.g. construction, domestic help, etc. The analysis of wage levels and the supply-side factors in Section 4 suggests that no systematic relationship exists between the respondents' level of education and their wages. However, as the sample was small and purposively drawn, it is difficult to make any conclusive statement in this regard.

Table 2.2 Distribution of respondents by overseas occupation and level of education

Migrants' overseas occupation	No education	Up to 5 years	6-10 years	11 years and more
Business (8)	3	1	3	1
Carpenter (3)	1	1	1	
Cleaner (4)	2	1	1	
Construction labour (9)	4	2	3	
Driver (1)		1		
Factory worker (3)			2	1
Farm labour (6)	4	1	1	
Fitter (7)	1	3	2	1
Foreman (1)			1	
Hotel boy (3)			2	1
Housemaid (11)	6	3	2	
Salesman (4)		1	3	
All occupations (60)	21	14	21	4

2.3. The migrants' family background

The average monthly family income of the male and the female respondents was Tk.6,842 and Tk.4,098 respectively. The sample families' incomes were slightly higher than the rural and national averages recorded in the household expenditure survey (BBS, 2006). Nearly two-thirds of the migrants' families (38 out of 60) were nonetheless earning less than Tk.6,000 per month, which works out to roughly Tk.30 per person per day, indicating that a large majority were below the poverty line. High inflation has further exacerbated the situation.

The women migrants' poorer background is reflected in their landlessness, overwhelming dependence on a single earning member and lower overall family income compared with their male counterparts. Out of fifteen women migrants, fourteen families had no cultivable land and one had less than one acre. Existing research also suggests that women migrants tend to come from poorer backgrounds than do their male counterparts (Afsar, 2003).

High levels of landlessness among female migrants suggest that the majority of these women come from urban locations, unlike the male migrants, many of whom migrated directly from rural villages. Women's overseas migration is often preceded by internal migration and hence, may be considered as 'step' migration. This pattern is also manifest in the fact that 40% of the women migrants' families lived in rented accommodation, as opposed to only one male migrant.

Male migrants' families derived income from agriculture, remittances, small business and wages, whereas for women, the main income source was services followed by agriculture. That women had very little income from remittances may reflect the fact that women's migration was discouraged for many years by policies and socio-cultural barriers, whereas male migration has been encouraged for more than 30 years.

2.4. The context of migration decision-making

Existing theories often emphasize the ‘pull’ factors, in particular the wage differential between the home and the host countries, as the most important factors in explaining overseas migration. But in reality, migration decision-making is far too complex to be narrowed down to a simple calculation of the wage differential, as envisaged by the neo-classical economists.¹⁰

Despite the escalating cost of overseas migration, this study confirmed that the poorer segments of the population are increasingly adopting emigration as an important livelihood strategy to overcome poverty. This may be due not only to their economic situation, but also reflect their social networks both at home and in the host countries as well as their attitude to risk.

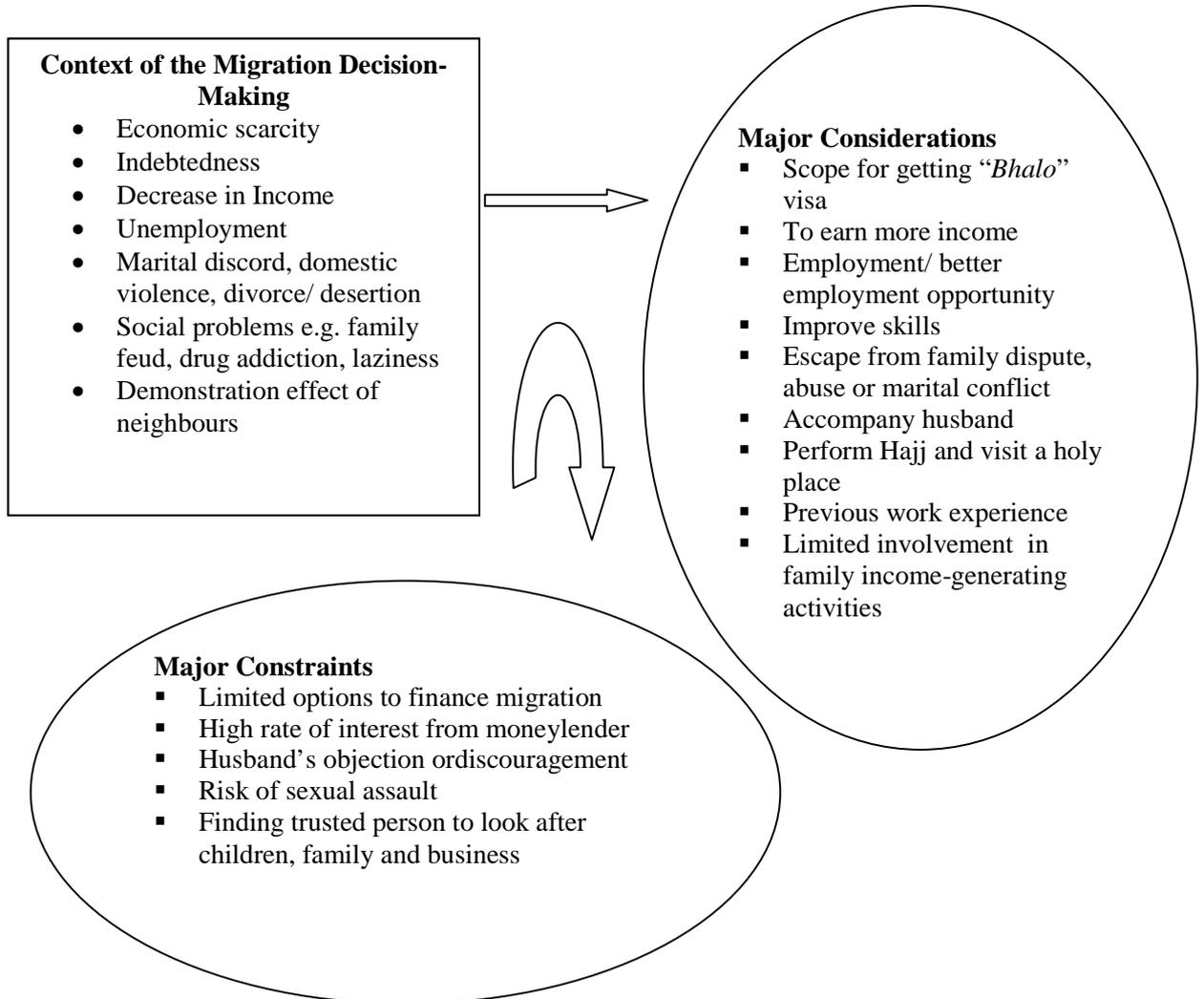
Diagram 2.1 attempts to capture the context of migration decision-making, showing also the factors that received prime consideration and the major barriers to implement the decision to migrate overseas. Information from the in-depth interviews helps generate an understanding of the reasons and processes of selecting – willingly or otherwise – the particular recruitment channel.

Bhalo visa: A route to advancement or entrapment?

Conventional wisdom presumes that poverty-stricken populations seldom adopt emigration as a livelihood strategy given the high cost involved in the migration process. However, findings from the in-depth interviews with return migrants revealed that, irrespective of the economic standing of the migrants, the search for a ‘*Bhalo*’ visa (one that would yield better work opportunities and higher incomes) often triggers migration. Indeed, nearly half of the men and one-fifth of the women migrants expressed that their decision to migrate was prompted by the severe economic difficulties they faced at home.

¹⁰ See for example Todaro (1969)

Diagram 2.1 Dimensions of migration decision-making



Other factors such as decline in income (mainly for the women), sole responsibility for family maintenance and indebtedness were also manifestations of the economic crunch faced by migrants. For some other cases, the major motivations for migration were social in nature e.g. to escape from family disputes, marital problems and drug addiction.

Whilst the contexts in which migration decisions were taken were dominated by the “push” factors, the main motivations for migration were to earn more money and for better employment opportunities i.e. “pull” factors. Even the poorer people were willing to take the risk of migration, despite incurring huge liabilities to repay its cost. This perhaps is due to their high resilience or to complete desperation. More than 70% of the migrants (both male and female) mentioned that they migrated to the GCC countries with the hope of getting better wages and a more secure life. Payment of children’s education also featured prominently in their motivation.

The major constraints were largely economic in nature, related to the financing of migration. Many migrants did not have cultivable land or other resources, nor enough savings or access to low-interest credit schemes. Often they had to borrow from informal sources with high interest rates of 10% per month. Another concern was the need for “replacement” labour in the case of the single male earners and, for married women, for care-givers for their children. Some women respondents also faced strong opposition, mainly from their husbands, who were concerned about their security and marital faithfulness, and who were hostile to women’s mobility in general.

The following paragraphs examine in greater depth the factors influencing the migration decision.

Low incomes hunger and desperation

Severe economic circumstances and the lack of options have turned many migrants into desperate risk takers. Nearly 13% of the male migrants were the only earning members of the family and the vast majority of the respondents were landless. When they experienced severe economic pressures, they decided to migrate. Rather than giving up, the migrants had high hopes and confidence in their ability to earn higher incomes, even if they were in the most severe economic circumstances (Box 2.1).

As well as from illness, respondents encountered a drop in income due to the death of the main bread winner, loss in the business and a host of other factors, amongst which divorce and abandonment are critical for women. All these factors induced migration. Being isolated from traditional social ties and social protection including credit, crop insurance and other safety-nets, landless and land-poor households have little capability or options to manage risks (Kuhn, 2000). Box 2.2 illustrates the economic crunch with the help of four case studies.

Box 2.1: Poverty, hunger and the need for children’s education

Karim and his joint family, including two married brothers, their children and parents were in a terrible financial situation prior to his migration to KSA as he had only a small plot of cultivable land of 60 decimal. Although he and his brothers used to cultivate that land, in addition to taking up share-cropping, what they produced was not sufficient for a family of 15 members. Karim could still recall “how often other family members and I remained half fed and starving”.

Raisul, another returnee, revealed his desperation due to his inability to produce enough paddy to feed his family for the entire year. Whatever he produced was consumed within 3-4 months and for the rest of the year, he had to work for land-owning families. However, he still did not earn enough to cover the family’s food needs nor could he meet the other expenses e.g. for the children’s education. As a result, three of his children could not study beyond primary level.

Box 2.2: Decline in income: The multiple causes

➤ *Death of the main bread winner*

Helal Miah, a young returnee said that his family had no land of their own to cultivate. Along with his father and brothers, he used to work as a 'kamla' or agricultural labourer. He earned between Tk. 100 and Tk. 200 for an entire day's work. Given the seasonality of rice production, he had agricultural work for three-quarters of the year and the rest of the year he worked as a construction labourer. Neither he nor his brothers had formal education. His family was always short of food. The situation further deteriorated when his father died and all responsibilities of family maintenance fell on his shoulders. With little or no options to increase his income, he decided to migrate.

➤ *Loss in business*

Before migration Aiyub Ali had a hotel which was running at a loss. He started this business in partnership with one of his friends. He believed that his friend had misappropriated money that he invested, money which he earned when he had migrated overseas previously. Aiyub was frustrated, and he decided to migrate overseas again to earn more money.

➤ *Family breakdown*

Nazma and her nine month old son were abandoned by her husband. She had no land and no earning member in the family. She migrated to earn enough income for her family's maintenance and for the child's welfare and education.

Rumana was the second wife of her husband. He had a job as a sub-agent and earned between Tk. 10,000 and 20,000 per month. However, after some time he migrated to Dubai as a factory labourer. By that time, Rumana already had another child. When her husband returned, he did not give her enough money and they often quarrelled. At one stage she separated from her husband and decided to migrate overseas.

The debt trap

Economic hardships entangled some respondents into a debt trap. Nearly 7% of the respondents – both male and female – decided to migrate when they saw no other option to get out of their indebtedness. For example, Matin recalled how he struggled with his meagre monthly income of Tk. 4,000-5,000 to support a family of eight. In order to meet the family's daily basic needs, he gradually became indebted to the local grocer for such supplies as rice, lentils, oil and soap. Within a short time he owed Tk. 20,000 to the grocer which was beyond his capacity to repay. Under the circumstances, he considered migration as 'the only way out'.

The debt trap often exacerbates multiple vulnerabilities especially for women, as may be seen from box 2.3.

Box 2.3: The debt burden, illness of spouse and domestic violence

Moina was living with her husband and three baby boys in an old house made of corrugated iron. Her husband was a petty vegetable seller whose income barely exceeded Tk.4,000 per month – not sufficient for the family’s maintenance and the children’s education. Their situation deteriorated further when her husband fell ill. As a face-saving measure, Moina borrowed Tk. 10,000 from the nearby Grameen Bank office to cover the medical expenses, against an instalment of Tk. 250 per week. Due to his illness, her husband could not sell vegetables everyday and the income loss was adding to the family’s misery. After a month her husband recovered and resumed his work, but the family expenses had multiplied, as they had to pay the monthly instalments on the bank loan. This tension created a disruption in their conjugal life. Her husband resorted to beating her quite frequently – twice or thrice a month. Even though she was illiterate, she thought of migration as a way to escape the abuse and to increase her family’s income.

Unemployment

More than 90% of the male respondents were employed prior to migration – with two-thirds engaged in non-agricultural activities such as construction, manufacturing, services and petty business. The final third were engaged in agriculture, both as labourers and as owner/operators. Whilst agricultural labourers made up most of the internal migrants, the non-agricultural workers dominated the male overseas job-seekers. The female respondents were mainly housewives prior to migration and the lone exception was Fatema (Box 2.4). In-depth interviews also reveal that the migrants who were unemployed had a higher level of education than those who were employed prior to migration. This might suggest that those with a higher education level could “afford” not to work while waiting for overseas employment.

Getting away from family discord and anti-social habits

Unhealthy habits, particularly drug addiction and family discord can also spark migration. For example, Sabur decided not to continue his studies anymore when he failed his high school examination. He was spending idle time with friends and was addicted to *ganja* (opium) and *Phensidyl* (cough syrup). He often fought with his parents for money to buy drugs. To rectify his behaviour, his father was anxious to engage him in some productive work and decided to send him abroad. In another case, family discord pushed the parents of Akkas Ali and Masud to arrange visas for their sons to migrate overseas.

Box 2.4: Unemployment – a push factor

Fatema was looking for a well-paying job as she had acquired a secondary-level education. She was not willing to work as a house maid and thought of starting a small business. But she needed capital and skills e.g. training on sewing or animal husbandry, neither of which she possessed. So she decided to migrate to Bahrain.

After completing his high school education, Md. Zafar tried to get a job, but it was not possible to get a 'good' remunerative job with this qualification. Hence, he decided to migrate to KSA.

Demonstration effect of fellow villagers

The demonstration effect emerged as an important 'pull' factor. Rapid changes in the fortunes of the illiterate, semi-literate, the unskilled and poor fellow villagers as a result of migration to Gulf countries often triggered migration by their neighbours (Box 2.5).

Box 2.5: Demonstration effect – a 'pull' for overseas migration

Abdul Jabbar realised that if he continued to work as a day labourer he would never change his miserable condition. Motivated by his fellow villagers who successfully changed their economic situation, he decided to migrate abroad to earn more money and reduce his family's suffering.

Kamal Uddin, 31, used to work in a small grocery shop with his father at a local market. In the *boro* season, he grew potato, onion and other crops which he stocked and sold in the lean season. In this way he earned about Tk. 30,000-35,000 in a year. However, due to the ever-unpredictable weather conditions which caused crop damage, his income was unstable. Kamal found that his friend's family could continue the same business smoothly with the help of the remittances sent by his friend. So, Kamal also decided to migrate to earn enough to restart his family's business.

The other 'pull' factors that influenced the migration decision were previous migration experience as well as the presence of social networks at the destination country. An overwhelming majority of the respondents – more than 90% men and 80% women – already had one or more relatives abroad. A little over half of the male migrants had previous experience of overseas migration themselves (Table 2.3) while among women, for the majority (66%) it was their first migration.

Table 2.3 Distribution of the respondents by their past experience of overseas migration and the number of family members/relatives living abroad

Number of relatives abroad	Male	Female	All
No family members / relative	4	3	7
One family member/ relative	21	7	28
Two family members/ relatives	16	3	19
3 + family members/ relatives	4	2	6
Migration experience			
First time migration	22	12	34
Second time migration	16	3	19
Third time migration	3	2	5
Four and more times migration	4	0	4
All migration experiences	45	15	60

Section 3 ‘ALO-ANDHARE’: THE MIGRATION PROCESS

3.1. Channels and mechanisms of recruitment for temporary contract workers

Field research confirmed that people seeking work in the Gulf States make use of a range of sources of information and services to assist them in identifying job opportunities and in undertaking the journey to the chosen country of destination.

Stages and process of recruitment: An overview

During the in-depth interviews, one of the sub-agents Mohammad Mansur described the process of recruitment as follows:

“During my stay abroad, I observed that some expatriate Bangladeshis were involved in collecting information about the companies/individuals that made applications to the Saudi Government to hire new labourers. In the course of time, those observers attempted to establish contact with the applicants and/or the companies. They also proposed to recruit labourers for them if they sold work permits to them. In this process of negotiation, they bought visas by paying 2,000-6,000 Riyals per permit from those companies/individuals, depending on the nature of job, duration of contract, types of entitlements, etc. Then they sold these visas to Bangladeshis or to recruiting agencies in Bangladesh, keeping a profit margin ranging between 500-2,000 Riyals per permit. If a Bangladeshi expatriate bought a visa, he would then send it to his family members/relatives with the help of a recruiting agency, as under the existing laws of Bangladesh, only listed agencies can buy and sell visas. If an agency bought the visa, it would then recruit manpower through its own network of sub-agents or by advertising in the daily newspapers. As I developed interest, I engaged myself in this business. When I was in KSA, I sold visas to different recruiting agencies after buying them from several companies or bona-fide individuals. I have also sold visas to my cousins and other relatives through an agency. Over time, I found myself connected to a growing network related to this business.”

From the in-depth interviews both with the sub-agents and return migrants, it appears that the recruitment for overseas jobs in the Gulf countries involves at least three stages. First of all, a prospective migrant is hooked by the idea of a ‘*Bhalo*’ visa from an informant, i.e. his/her expatriate family members/relatives, friends/fellow villagers or sub-agents working in the village or adjacent village. Initially, the would-be migrant gets only sketchy information about the job e.g. salary, broad type of occupation and perhaps a rough idea about the migration cost. In the course of time, the migrant may show interest but express his/her difficulties in managing the cost of the visa (although none of the respondents declined the offer on account of high cost). In the second stage, the informant purchases the visa and then declares the cost to the would-be migrant. While

the migrants try to come up with the finances, the informant then proceeds to send the work permit, with the help of a recruiting agency, at the third stage. The migrant would generally make a lump-sum payment to the *dalals* (sub-agents) and sometimes to the recruiting agencies, to cover the cost of the work permit, air fare and other fees. In order to get the job, the migrant then gets his/her passport ready along with other formalities e.g. health check-up with the help of sub-agents and or the recruiting agencies.

The role of social networks in the recruitment process

The bulk of the respondents – two-thirds (30 men and 10 women, out of the total sample of 60) – secured placements abroad with the help of their family members, relatives and friends (see Table 3.1). Nearly 75% of free visa holders and 66% of those who procured contractual visas did so with the help of their social networks. For those respondents who used the *Umra* visa to travel to KSA, they did so with the help of their family members/relatives or on their own, as most had previous experience of migration to that country.¹¹

Social networks played the most crucial role by spreading information about opportunities and risks in the country of destination, by providing migration assistance and helping in the integration process in the host countries. In-depth interviews suggest relatives/friends or village acquaintances were the sources that informed two thirds of the migrants about the possibility of work and a ‘*Bhalo*’ visa at the country of destination. They also purchased visas and sent them through their known recruiting agencies.

Social networks were also instrumental in creating flows of irregular migrants who go to a particular place because someone they know is already there or they have a reliable contact to help them with the bureaucracy or with evading immigration authorities (Zeitlyn, 2006: 73). This is typically the case for migrants who learnt about the cost-effectiveness of the ‘*Umra*’ visa from their own previous experience and, with the help of their social networks, managed to circumvent its restrictions on working and staying long periods e.g. by working in areas where there is little chance of a police raid.

¹¹ As indicated earlier, the *Umra* visa is not a work permit. Pilgrims come to KSA to pay homage before *Eid-ul-Azha* to the holy places of Mecca and Medina, which is known as *Haji*. However, if a person wants to pay homage at any other time of the year, he is also allowed to do so. That pilgrimage is known as *Umra* and the visa as the *Umra* visa.

Table 3.1 How migrants secured their job and visa, by gender

	Male	Female
Family member/relative /villager/friend	30	10
Subagent	3	5
Individual initiative through <i>Umra</i> visa	4	--
Private recruiting agency	6	--
Government	1	--
Direct hiring by employer	1	--
Total	45	15

For example, Mohammad Ali confirmed his idea of migration to KSA after speaking with his friends and fellow villagers, as there is large concentration of Saudi migrants in his village. They assured him that for no more than Tk. 55,000 he could easily go to KSA, if he could manage to procure an *Umra* visa. Although he liked the low cost of the *Umra* visa, he was afraid that he would have to work secretly and illegally. His friends told him that he could avoid the risk of police arrest if he worked with his acquaintances and did not go to the main road or far from his residence. Some of the current migrants in KSA also extended an invitation to him to stay with them upon his arrival in Jeddah. Moreover, while he was working illegally, he could potentially earn enough money to buy a legal free visa for his next visit.

The role of sub-agents

The sample sub-agents were aged in their forties and were mostly high-school graduates. There is a need for at least a minimum level of education in this profession, as one must be able to read the contracts and other documents, and to write necessary correspondence with private recruiting agencies and other relevant stakeholders. By virtue of their education, they enjoy social legitimacy in contacting and convincing people to take overseas job opportunities and recruiting them, largely on behalf of recruiting agencies. As one of those sub-agents said:

“The villagers of my area do not understand anything about the process of migration as they are illiterate. So they come to me and ask many questions like who they should contact to go abroad; how should they proceed; what should they do to obtain an overseas job. As I am an educated person, people also seek help for the procurement of visas. I usually send people to recruiting agencies for more information. Through this process of connecting local villagers with the recruitment agencies, I became familiar with the agency people and I have developed good relationships with some of the agencies.”

All the sub-agents were married and lived with their family. They started their careers at the age of 30 to earn money, as they considered it “a profitable business that helps one to earn enough money within a short time”. However, they also believed that

by virtue of their profession they were also helping the villagers to migrate overseas and earn considerable amounts of money. All the sub-agents interviewed had personal experience of overseas migration and many of them had family members/relatives currently working in the Gulf countries. Many returnee migrants were engaged in this profession, in collaboration with their relatives or friends who own recruiting agencies, or who work with the recruiting agencies.

The main responsibility of the sub-agent is to supply manpower, as per the demand from the recruiting agencies. While placing orders, recruiting agencies usually brief them about the nature of the job, visa type, salary and the working conditions, destination country and most importantly, the cost of migration. The sub-agents work in remote villages which they consider 'ideal' to locate potential migrants. They mainly look for illiterate persons or those with low levels of education, as it is easiest to convince them to migrate.

The sub-agent discusses the risks and benefits of the job with the clients in their mother tongue. After convincing a client, sub-agents usually help by providing assistance in the administrative procedures such as lodging passport applications; helping the clients to undertake medical tests needed for the destination country, and also in dealing with the recruiting agency in order to obtain their visa. In some cases, the sub-agents also accompany their clients to the airport and help them meet all necessary departure formalities. By establishing rapport with the respective agencies and authorities, sub-agents were able to help their clients in the procurement of necessary services.

The majority of the migrants, both male and female, used the assistance of the sub-agents and/or recruiting agencies to apply for and purchase their passports. But despite this help it still took an average of four to six weeks to obtain a passport.

All the female migrants, with one exception, met the necessary formalities (e.g. medical check-up, visa processing and flight arrangements) with the help of sub-agents, as most of them were illiterate and also first time migrants (Table 3.2).¹² A majority of the male respondents also used the services of recruiting agencies or sub-agents.

Nearly 25% of the respondents (9 men and 5 women) obtained their overseas jobs and visas through sub-agents and private recruitment agencies. Family members/relatives and other acquaintances of migrants also advised on selecting private recruiting channels, including the sub-agents. The majority of men and women procuring visas from the recruiting agencies and sub-agents used those that were recommended to them by their social networks.

The sub-agents and even a large number of returned migrants reported that they obtained those services free of charge, which obviously helped the former to build up

¹² Note that 18 migrants who moved to UAE did not need to go for a medical check-up in Bangladesh.

goodwill. However, the in-depth interviews with the recruiting agencies reveal that actually the sub-agents received between Tk. 10,000 and Tk. 60,000 as commission from the agencies on a case-by-case basis, which is inclusive of all types of services that they provided to clients. The *Dalals*' proximity to and trust of the local people made them indispensable sources for the private recruiting agencies to recruit migrants. Some of the management staff of the recruitment agencies said: "*without the Dalals it is impossible to run this business*"; "*Villagers trust the Dalals*"; "*Rural people do not know the recruiting agencies, do not believe the officials of the recruiting agencies but are ready to pay more to the Dalals, because they know them.*"

Table 3.2 Types of services provided by the recruiting agencies and sub-agents

	Male	Female
Lodging application for passport		
Self	13	0
With the assistance of social network	4	2
Through sub-agent	22	8
Through an agency	4	2
Through a local journalist	0	1
Service provided by the recruiting agency		
Assisted to do medical check up	7	1
Made all necessary arrangements to get visa and flight	22	1
Service provided by the sub-agent		
Arranged the whole process (medical check-up, visa processing and flight arrangements) through an agency	7	14

The study also suggests that with more experience, migrants tend to have a better understanding of the recruitment channels available and therefore have a greater propensity to change them. Table 3.3 presents the experience of the 26 migrants who had migrated twice or more. Most changed their recruitment channel and occupation, some changed their visa type, but the majority chose the same destination country.¹³

Table 3.3 Migration experience of repeat migrants

All 2+ time migrants (26)	Channel		Occupation		Type of visa		Destination country	
	Same	Different	Same	Different	Same	Different	Same	Different
Number of migrants	7	12	9	16	11	14	18	6

¹³ Reasons for which respondents embarked on second time or more frequent migration are – to obtain a 'free visa' for the next trip; to work legally; to do business and to generate more savings.

3.2. The reasons for choosing a particular recruitment channel

Sample respondents mainly considered trust and familiarity with the employers or recruitment agencies (either directly or through their social networks) as the reasons for selecting a particular channel for overseas migration and for the procurement of visas and work permits.

Trust and loyalty

Family members, relatives and other social networks are the most trusted source of information about recruitment because “*they live in the destination country and have information about a ‘Bhalo’ visa*”. They played at least three major roles at the pre-migration stage – providing information about job opportunities, procurement of the work permit and identification of a *bona-fide* recruitment agency.

For example, Matin’s brother-in-law processed his visa through a local recruitment agency. As Matin had full faith in his brother-in-law, he did not bother to find out any of the details or conditions of the job. Similarly, Naila never asked for the details about her job in Kuwait, for which her husband sent the work permit. In fact, it never occurred to her to ask for the details, as she believed that her husband would only do what is right for her.

Assurance of support at destination

Some respondents, who organized their work permits with the help of their fellow villagers working in the destination country, were assured accommodation and other necessary assistance at destination e.g. food, information about the job, transportation, etc. by their fellow villages. A case in point is that of Omar Faruque, who was invited to stay with his fellow Bangladeshis upon arrival in the host country.

Familiarity and proximity

The main reason given by the respondents for approaching a sub-agent was their familiarity and proximity. The sub-agents are normally inhabitants of the same or the adjacent village of the migrants. The migrants said they had full confidence in the sub-agents and believed they could recover their full cost if the sub-agent tried to cheat them. In-depth interviews with the sub-agents supported the migrants’ conviction, as they admitted that, if they had any doubts about the visa, they would not give it to their fellow villagers but rather sell it to migrants that they did not know.

Some of the sub-agents were also close relatives or friends of the respondents. For instance, Jahid’s father-in-law used to work as a sub-agent and played the most pro-active role in sending Jahid abroad. Korimon approached a recruiting agency in Dhaka as she knew an employee of that agency who was a fellow villager.

Despite such familiarity, women and the poor, illiterate migrants still ran the risk of becoming victims of bribery, forgery and cheating by the recruiting agencies and the employers. Private recruiters have often been charged with dishonesty in relation to the job contract. All too often there are large discrepancies found between the promised wages and entitlements and the actual benefits received by the emigrant labourer. This will be discussed in depth later in this report.

3.3. Visa category and recruitment channels

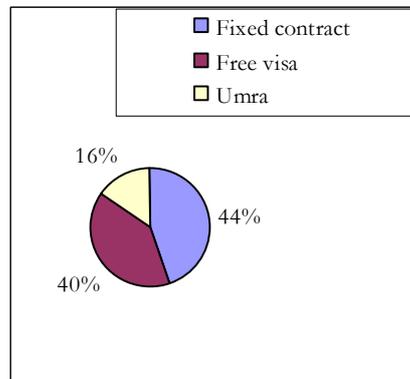
Three types of visas were used by the male migrants to make their passage to the Gulf countries – the fixed or ‘*Aquama*’ work permit, the ‘free’ or ‘Kafeel’ sponsored visa and the *Umra* visa (Figure 3.1). Unlike the female migrants who went overseas exclusively with a fixed work permit, the male migrants were almost equally distributed between those who migrated with a fixed contract visa and those who migrated with a ‘free’ visa. This diversity no doubt reflects men’s stronger social networks, greater mobility, longer experience of migration and greater access to information and other resources, as compared to women. This is not surprising given that overseas labour migration is in its second generation in the case of men whilst women are only just beginning to migrate overseas.

The ‘free’ or ‘Kafeel’ sponsored visa is the most expensive and coveted one because respondents believed that “*it allows us to engage in a wide range of occupations and at times in multiple occupations, unlike the fixed work permit*”. In reality, however, the so-called ‘free’ visa is not without its problems, particularly when the ‘Kafeel’ (sponsor) turns out to be unscrupulous and greedy, which is not at all uncommon. More than 70% of the male migrants organised their ‘free’ visa through their family members and relatives (Figure 3.2).

By contrast, the fixed work permit visa is for a specified job. Under this arrangement, a migrant is supposed to know the working conditions, wages and other entitlements prior to migration. However, the study revealed that most of the migrants were unaware of all necessary information.¹⁴ Forty four per cent of the male respondents, and all of the women, migrated with fixed work permits. As with the ‘free’ visa, family members and relatives were the major providers of such visas, although women migrants relied heavily on the sub-agents (Figure 3.2).

¹⁴ This will be discussed in the next section. Even contractual visas were often manipulated, through discrepancies between the promised job, wages and working conditions and what migrants actually received.

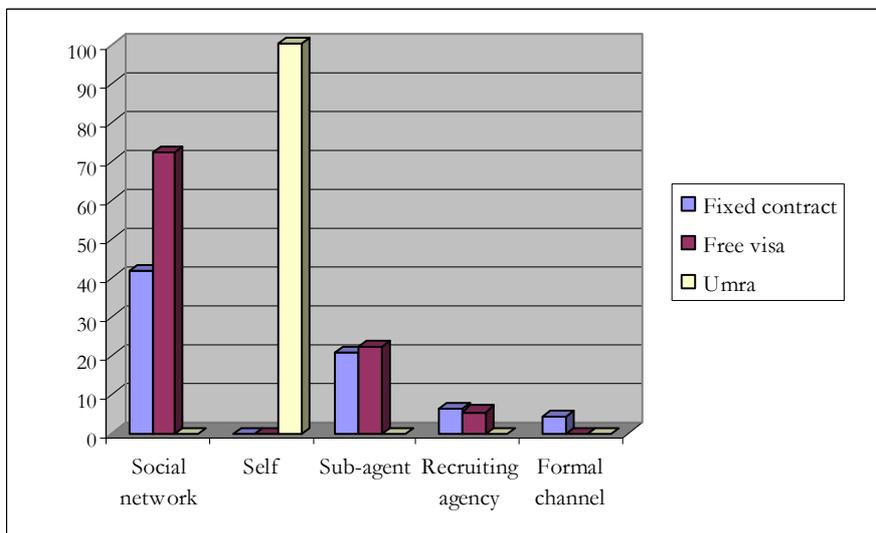
Figure 3.1 Types of visa obtained by male migrants for migrating to the GCC



More than half (56%) of the male migrants procured a ‘free’ visa or an *Umra* visa and did not have job-related information. The *Umra* visa is often preferred by migrants as a means to enter KSA, mainly because it is cheaper than the fixed work permit. Although it does not permit a migrant to work, migrants often work illegally with the help of their social networks.

While the type of visa is important in determining the rights and obligations of migrants in the destination country, they alone do not automatically ensure these rights and obligations are realised in practice.

Figure 3.2: Types of visa by the channels of recruitment



3.4. Level of migrants’ information at the pre-departure stage

The respondents mainly understood that in order to work overseas, they needed a “*Bhalo* visa” or a work permit for the proposed destination country. Very quickly they

were told about the cost of the visa but were seldom given a break-down of overall costs. The information they had about the type of visa, the type of work, the working and living conditions as well as other entitlements, generally remained incomplete and vague.

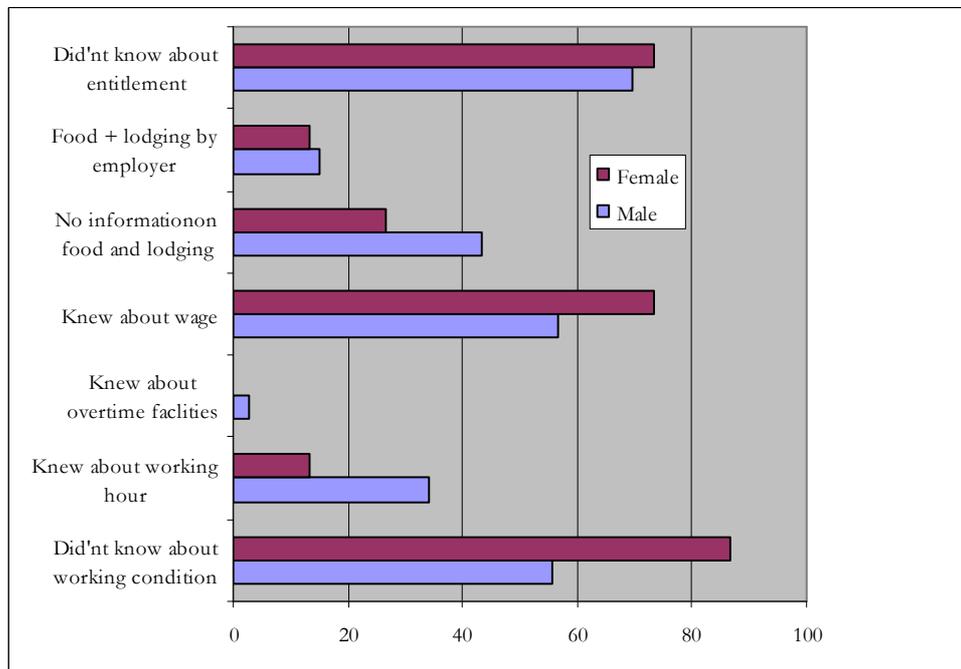
Half of the sample migrants, both male and female, had *post facto* information about the visa cost. In other words, they learned about the cost after purchasing the visa. However, those who migrated with an *Umra* visa knew about the costs involved.

An overwhelming majority of the female migrants – thirteen out of fifteen (as opposed to more than half of the male migrants) did not get any information regarding the work conditions at the destination country (Figure 3.3), notwithstanding their fixed contract visa. Thirteen male respondents – or less than 30% – had information about the daily work hours. Only a solitary migrant had an idea about the weekly holiday on Friday.

Although more than half of the respondents had an idea about their future wages prior to migration, what they received was very different from what they had been promised. This discrepancy will be discussed in a later section. At this point however, it should be emphasised that those who have a fixed job contract are supposed to have all the relevant information about their job prior to overseas migration. The study, on the contrary, shows that almost all the women and a large majority of men with such a visa did not have relevant information about their job conditions, irrespective of their source of visa procurement.

Prior to overseas migration, would-be migrants are required to register with BMET and to have a certificate of attendance at a pre-departure briefing training programme run by BMET. However, in this study, only one respondent attended BMET pre-departure training and the rest claimed not to be aware of such a requirement. Interviews with the recruiting agencies suggest that they obtained BMET certificates on the respondents' behalf by offering extra money to the desk officer. Thus, a large majority of the respondents did not have any briefing prior to migration, while a few attended a "mock" briefing programme run by the private recruiting agencies.

Figure 3.3 Information on working conditions and wages by gender



3.5. Determining factors for choosing a particular country of destination

A marked gender variation can be observed with regard to the destination country. KSA was the major destination for more than 60% of the male respondents. By contrast, the women's destinations were more evenly spread between Kuwait, KSA and UAE. Due to its relatively liberal labour laws compared to other Gulf countries, women prefer Kuwait. Men, on the other hand, prefer KSA because of the strong social networks that have been established over time and also because of the option of going there on an *Umra* visa. Income generated in KSA is estimated to be between 20% and 66% higher than in UAE and Kuwait.

The various issues that the respondents considered in selecting the destination country are discussed below.

The strength of social capital in the destination country

More than one-third of the male and female respondents mentioned that it was natural to go to the country where they have family members, close relatives and/or friends. For example, Karim went to KSA to work in a carpet company because two of his elder brothers were working there and they arranged a 'free visa' for him.

Chance to visit a religious place

Many male migrants attached religious value to going to KSA. Latif was happy when he was offered a job in a leather company in KSA by a representative of the company, because he considered it as ‘*a rare opportunity to visit the holy city of Mecca and Medina*’.

Job opportunities available

Often it was not a matter of choice but the market demand that determined labour migration. For instance, Baker’s father approached a recruiting agency to facilitate migration for him and his brother. The agent suggested that he should send his elder son – who possessed skills in electrical services and repair – to Kuwait due to the high demand for skilled labour there, and Baker to Dubai as he did not have any particular skills. The agent added that due to an increasing investment in infrastructure, Baker had good prospects to find a job in construction in Dubai.

The Umra Visa and the reduced cost of migration

Some respondents preferred KSA as it was easy to obtain an *Umra* visa which also reduced the cost of migration. Omar Faruque said that many of his friends and acquaintances went to KSA with an *Umra* visa which reduced the cost of migration by more than Tk. 30,000. By contrast, to procure a ‘free’ visa one has to spend more than Tk. 150,000. Given his financial situation, he decided to migrate by purchasing an *Umra* visa.

Migration by default

There were a few respondents who tried to migrate to other countries but failed to obtain a work permit and hence, they decided instead to migrate to the Gulf countries.

3.6. Problems faced during the migration process

3.6.1. The cost of migration

The cost of overseas migration emerged as the major inhabiting factor in the migration decision-making process. The average cost of migration is estimated at Tk. 144,584 for male migrants, 2.3 times that for female migrants. Only one woman spent more than Tk. 100,000 to procure her visa, compared to half of the men. When looking at types of visas, those migrants who obtained *Umra* visas themselves paid the lowest cost on average, followed by those who obtained a fixed job visa. The “free” visa was the most expensive. When looking at recruitment channels however, the lowest cost was for those who used formal channels (the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited, BOESL), followed by those who used the services of sub-agents and those who arranged migration themselves (Table 3.4). The highest costs were borne by those who

relied on friends for their migration (although there were only two of these in the sample, reducing the reliability of the figures). The Government has fixed the recruitment cost at Tk. 84,000. However, this is mainly applicable for labour recruitment to Malaysia.¹⁵ The total cost of migration to the Gulf countries should normally be lower than this government figure, as can be seen in the case of migrants recruited by BOESL. The remainder of the respondents, however, spent more than the rate stipulated for Malaysia.

Table 3.4 The cost of overseas migration

	Mean cost (TK.)	N
Male	144,584	45
Female	62,547	15
All migrants	124,075	60
The channels of recruitment		
BOESL	61,500	2
Self	106,250	4
Family members/relatives	120,475	38
Friends	237,500	2
Recruiting agency	176,575	6
Sub agent	98,000	8
Types of visa		
'Free' or Kafael sponsored	166,872	21
Fixed job contract	102,737	32
Umra	93,229	7
Destination country		
Bahrain	40,000	1
Kuwait	107,561	9
Saudi Arabia	120,749	32
United Arab Emirates	142,915	18
District of origin		
Dhaka	162,177	15
Laxmipur	161,858	15
Narayanganj	73,767	15
Sylhet	98,497	15

A migrant has to pay on average Tk. 60,000 more for the procurement of a 'free' visa as compared to a fixed contract. As sub-agents generally supply fixed job contracts, their overall cost may thus be lower. A breakdown of the cost shows that agency fees, along with air tickets consumed more than 90% of the total cost.¹⁶ In 2000, the average cost of migration to the Gulf countries was approximately Tk. 94,500. There has thus been an average 4% annual increase in migration cost over the last seven years. This

¹⁵ www.bmet.org.bd/ministry/htm, accessed on 24 July, 2008

¹⁶ It was almost impossible to get a breakdown of migration expenditure, as respondents had either forgotten or had no idea of the costs, and they did not keep invoices. The information they provided was just a rough estimate.

suggests that the private recruiting agencies do not follow the ceiling for visa fees fixed by the Government. In Section 4 of the report, we will examine whether wages have kept pace with this increase in costs.

The respondents who migrated to the UAE incurred the highest cost. The lower costs incurred by the *Umra* visa procurers may explain the lower migration cost to KSA. The fact that women predominated in the migration stream to Kuwait could lead to the lower cost of migration there.

Respondents from Dhaka had the highest average migration cost, whereas those from Sylhet paid the least. However, the Dhaka costs were inflated by the fact that two of the respondents there who procured a ‘free’ visa from their friends paid an excessive amount, more than Tk. 250,000 per visa, compared to the average cost of Tk.124,000.

Migrants from lower income families predominantly obtained their visa with the help of their social networks and the sub-agents (Table 3.5). With an increase in family income, there was also greater diversity in the types of channels used.

Table 3.5 The channels of recruitment by migrants’ family income before migration

Channel	10,000- 29,999	30,000- 49,999	50,000- 99,999	100,000- 200,000	200,000+	Total
Social networks	2	10	12	6	3	33
Sub-agent	2	3	5	4	--	14
Self	--	2	3	2	--	7
Recruiting agency	--	1	2	--	1	4
Formal channel	--	--	1	1	--	2
Total	4	16	23	13	4	60

3.6.2. Financing migration

The respondents mainly depended on borrowing from family members, relatives, friends or neighbours. This is consistent with the author’s survey in 2000 (Afsar et al. 2002). One advantage of this is that the migrants do not need to pay interest, although they of course need to repay the capital. Family members often raised funds by selling or mortgaging land and other assets. They did not hesitate to give their savings to the migrant and in some cases, even covered the entire cost of migration (Table 3.6). That being said, some 33% of respondents had to resort to borrowing from money lenders at a high rate of interest. Furthermore, 57% of respondents depended on more than one source of migration finance.

The female migrants depended most heavily on money lenders and other informal sources. For example, Moina recalled that she and her family decided to raise the funds by borrowing from two local money-lenders, as they had no other options. She borrowed Tk. 20,000 and Tk. 15,000 respectively, at a monthly interest rate of 10%.

Abul Hossain's mother sold all of her cows and calves for Tk. 60,000, and the remaining Tk. 40,000 was borrowed from a local goldsmith with a monthly 10% interest rate. Malek found that the money he obtained after selling his small plot of cultivable land was not enough for his visa and other costs. So he approached a local money lender for a loan. Initially, the money lender was reluctant, given the fact that he had already sold his only collateral. However, with repeated requests, the money lender agreed to lend him Tk. 60,000 at 10% monthly interest. To manage Zaman's migration cost, his family decided to sell its land. Given the urgency to raise the cash, they sold their only plot of cultivable land at much lower than the market value. In addition, his eldest sister sold her ornaments and lent him Tk. 24,000. Even after that, his father sold a tree and gave him Tk. 5,000 for his clothes and transportation costs. In fact, five respondents sold their only plot of cultivable land to finance the migration process, even though they did not get the market price. Among other productive assets, some respondents sold cattle, particularly cows and calves, paddies and trees. Women respondents generally had fewer options to finance migration compared to the men (Table 3.6).

Only a handful of the male migrants like Jamal, Rahim and Saquib were lucky enough to have family members who lent them money from their savings, and did not need to sell their assets.

Table 3.6 Measures adopted by the respondents to finance their migration

	Male	Female
Selling and mortgaging land and other assets	3	--
Selling and mortgaging family members' land and other assets	2	2
By selling cattle	3	--
By selling crops and trees	2	--
Selling/mortgaging gift items	--	1
Personals savings/own capital	8	2
Family members' savings/business	5	3
Other incomes	1	0
Borrowed from family members and relatives	30	10
Borrowed from friends, neighbours and villagers	5	4
Borrowed from money lenders with interest	11	5
Borrowing from other institutions with interest	3	--
Migration cost borne by other family members from overseas	3	--

3.6.3. Problems in the procurement of migration-related services

Respondents also faced a host of other problems, difficulties and threats in the process of their migration.

Changed Identity

In processing passports, sub-agents can do many things. For example, Rahima was approached by a local sub-agent with an offer to work overseas. Confronted with economic hardships, she expressed her willingness to go. She had no passport, and the sub-agent told her that she must use another person's passport, which already contained a working visa for Kuwait.

Delay in the delivery of passport

In most cases, the time between submission of the application and the final delivery of the passport took a month or even more. The respondents also faced other types of problems e.g. waiting in long queues, lack of adequate information about formalities needed, etc.

For example, Hamid went to the local passport office as a first step in materialising his dream of overseas migration. After collecting a passport form and filling it out with the assistance of a local level officer, he collected a nationality certificate from the Union *Parishad* and then paid Tk.1,300 as a fee to process his passport. He then waited for more than five hours in a queue to lodge his application. It took seven follow-up visits to the office before he finally obtained his passport.

Pre-migration medical check-up

For the pre-migration medical check-ups respondents were fully dependent on the recruiting agencies or sub-agents. Many times they went to the designated medical centres, which were mostly located in the capital city, only to find that the test had been postponed.

Helal Miah for example, endured three postponements before he was able to have his medical check-up. Sharifa also complained about the high fees charged by the medical centres and their untimely service. She ended up paying Tk.15,000 for her check-up.

Section 4 PAWA-NAPAWA: GAINS AND LOSSES FROM MIGRATION

4.1. The Migration and Post-Migration Stages: Gains and Losses

This section examines migrants' experiences during and after migration. The gains and losses are documented and assessed, wherever possible, with a comparison of the actual experience vis-à-vis the migrants' expectations. In doing so, the section attempts to identify the factors that have influenced the outcome of migration.

4.2. Insights from the migrants' work experiences in the destination country

Immediately after arrival at the destination country, most (90%) of the respondents were received at the airport (Table 4.1). For women, the employer, his agent or the representative from the recruiting agency were the most common escorts. For men, it was more often family members, relatives and friends who met them.

Table 4.1 Who met the respondents at the airport?

	Male	Female
Family members/relative	21	4
Agency man	2	1
Company /Employer	11	7
Friends/acquaintances who sent visa	6	2
None	5	1
Total	45	15

Some of the respondents (six men and four women) faced problems at the airport after arrival, including long waits from 5 to 13 hours before being picked up and resulting stress and hunger, as they did not have any/enough foreign currency to buy food.

Nazma was cheated even before she started her job. After her arrival in Jeddah, nobody came to pick her up. She was stranded in the airport for more than 24 hours. The next morning she followed some Bangladeshi men and women out of the airport. There she met a Bangladeshi driver who told her that he came from the company that recruited

her, so she went with him. The driver took her to his office and contacted a person who was later introduced to her as her employer and took her to his house.¹⁷

4.2.1. Employment-related experience

The majority of the respondents who had either a fixed job contract or a ‘free’ visa met their employers within 24 hours of their arrival. None of the women respondents had to wait for more than a week to start their jobs while nearly 20% of the men waited for much longer periods – ranging from two weeks to four months.

Those who went with the ‘free’ visa depended on their social networks or recruitment agents to arrange a meeting with the *Kafeel*. The sponsors often felt no compulsion to provide jobs immediately to the migrants.¹⁸ The migrant’s technical skills, goodwill of the social networks and the *Kafeel* emerged as important determinants with regard to migrants’ entitlements including the nature of the job, wages and other working conditions, and how soon the migrants could start work.

For example, with the help of his brother, Rahim started working as a rod fitter within 15 days of his arrival in Dubai, without a fixed work visa. Some of the other skilled male migrants also did not have to wait for long to obtain their jobs, irrespective of the types of visas. Abdul Gani managed to get a job as a carpenter within a week of his migration, despite having no work permit (he migrated with an *Umra* visa). With his tailoring skills, Nure Hakim managed to obtain a ‘free’ visa from his employer in KSA as a second-time migrant, free of cost. He stayed there for about five and a half years and received 1,000 Riyals per month. In addition, his employer bore all his expenses for food and lodging plus medical treatment.

By contrast, some of the unskilled migrants who did not have a fixed job contract had problems finding employment. Abul Hossain had to wait for three months to find a job as a head loader, with a very low wage and harsh working conditions. For the first seven months his wage was only 200 Riyals per month.

For Amin Mohammad, life was not so smooth after his arrival overseas. An agent received him and took him to his own small room in a boarding house to sleep. The next morning, the agent took away his passport with the pretext of getting a stamp for the

¹⁷ Nazma was placed with a big Saudi family where she used to work all day without any rest. She did not like their food and had language problems to understand their commands which resulted in merciless beating from the employer and his wife. She approached the driver to help her escape but he told her that she had been sold to the employer and hence, she should try to adjust with the food and work. As she refused to go back there the driver approached some other employer but Nazma decided not to work further. The driver finally took her to the airport and gave her a return ticket. In this process she stayed there for 16 days for which she was not paid even a single Riyal.

¹⁸ Recruiting agencies in Bangladesh often have branch offices in the Gulf countries and/or agents operating on their behalf.

Aquama or work permit from the *Kafeel*. However, he neither gave Amin the work permit nor returned his passport. So Amin became illegal, and after four months he found the courage to take up a job as an illegal farm helper. For 18 hours work per day, he received only 1,500 Dirham after three months.

It may be expected that having a fixed contract visa would minimize the irregularities experienced by migrants after their arrival overseas. However, despite having fixed job contracts, nearly a quarter of the migrants experienced discrepancies with regard to the nature of their occupation. Malek for example was shocked to find that, instead of working as a tiler as promised, the company gave him a job as a loader to carry bricks, each weighing 50 kilos. When he complained that he could not do this, his employer advised him to recruit another person to share the work. However, Malek was expected to share both his load and his wage, by paying 75 Dirham from his own pocket. Likewise, Zaman was shocked to find that he had to work as a catering assistant after his arrival in KSA although his contract stipulated that he was to work as a driver.

4.2.2. Wages

The respondents were engaged in a variety of occupations in the domestic sector, private business, construction and formal and informal services sectors, including jobs in shops and establishments, driving, tailoring and other business. The formal sector largely included factories and local or central Government jobs. The most rapid expansion since 2000 has been in the construction sector, reflecting the construction boom in the Gulf countries.

Box 4.2: Distribution of migrant labour by broad employment sector	
	%
Formal service	7
Informal service	30
Construction	28
Manufacturing	5
Private business	13
Domestic work	18

The average level of schooling of a female migrant was only 2.8 years – about half that of the male respondents. However, with the exception of employees in the formal sector, the level of education does not appear to be the major influencing factor in determining wages (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 The respondents by overseas occupation, mean wage, education and the duration of migration

Types of occupation	Average wage (Tk./Month)	Mean education	Type of visa			Duration of migration (yrs)
			Contract	Free	Umra	
Driver (1)	32375	5.0	1	--	--	6.0
Business (8)	26691	5.3	2	2	4	15.4
Salesman (4)	18131	6.8	1	2	1	6.5
Factory worker (3)	16493	10.0	1	2	--	5.6
Fitter (7)	16475	5.6	1	6	--	3.8
Foreman (1)	15750	10.0	1	--	--	8.0
Carpenter (3)	14617	3.7	1	--	2	2.0
Construction labour (9)	12827	3.7	5	4	--	5.3
Cleaner (4)	10671	3.0	4	--	--	4.7
Farm labour (6)	9925	1.8	1	6	--	3.3
Hotel boy (3)	8592	9.3	--	3	--	6.2
Housemaid (11)	5730	2.8	11	--	--	3.7
All sectors (60)	14325	4.7	31	22	7	6.0
Male (45)	16610	5.3	16	22	7	6.7
Female (15)	7142	2.8	15	--	--	4.0

* Note that four migrants – three housemaids and one farm worker did not get any wages at the destination country.

The majority (63%) of the respondents who had the longest stay in the destination country, most of whom came from Sylhet, had strong social networks. This may have positively influenced their income levels. It also appears that the longer the duration working overseas, the higher the wages earned. The time overseas allowed them to learn skills, the local language and to establish social networks. Respondents who earned high incomes – Tk. 250,000 and above annually – had a duration overseas between 7 and 26 years. On the other hand, despite their shorter stay, the fitters and the carpenters earned more than many other occupational groups due to their higher skills levels. Therefore, it is not education *per se* but rather the skills, duration of overseas stay, type of contract, bargaining power, type of employment and the employers that seem to influence the wages of the workers at the destination.

Two-thirds of the respondents reported receiving their wages regularly. Some of them, such as Jamil, were lucky to get a regular salary of 800 Riyals by working nine hours and being paid for overtime. He was working in a carpet factory and migrated with the help of his employer. Asif and Saquib earned between Tk. 25,000 and 35,000 a month during their last migration. While the former provided technical services as a steel fitter in a private sector construction company, the latter had his own business selling used clothes.

However, the study also reveals that one out of every three respondents faced problems with regard to wages, which included irregular payment, withholding of wages for two/three months, discrepancy between the promised and the actual wage, undue

deductions without prior notice, and non-payment (Box 4.3). The informal sector employees, construction workers, farm helpers and domestic helpers were among the worst affected. Some 33% of the respondents reported discrepancies between what was promised and their actual wage.

Although the respondents who migrated to KSA earned the highest incomes, some respondents also mentioned that in KSA, the Bangladeshi migrants are paid 200 riyals less, on average, than nationals of other countries.

Box 4.3 Problems with wages

➤ *Discrepancy between promised and actual wages*

After working for a full month, Lutfa received 400 Dirham although her sub-agent told her that her salary would be 500 Dirham. Abdul received only 350 of the proposed wage of 600 Dirham. He was working as a canteen boy – one of the lowest paid-jobs, with only Tk. 8,592 as a monthly wage in Dubai – despite having senior secondary level of education.

➤ *Unspecified deductions and irregular wages*

Within two months of her arrival in KSA Moina felt sick and was taken to the hospital. She was surprised when her employer later cut two months wages without prior notification, even though she was told by the sub-agent that her medical costs would be paid by the employer. Helal Miah was offered a job on his sponsor's farm initially for two months and he was then transferred to his mother's farm for the next six months. For the entire period he only received wages for two months.

➤ *Non-payment of wages*

Three domestic helpers and one construction worker did not receive any wages. Of the three domestic helpers, two were locked inside and one had to work 15 to 18 hours a day; the other was told that she had to provide sexual pleasure to her employer's four sons. Upon complaining, these women were beaten mercilessly and they finally managed to flee and came back empty handed.

Sudden closure of factories often resulted in non-payment of wages, as in the case of the RMG factories and construction firms. Notwithstanding his migration as a skilled labourer with a fixed contract, Rafiq had no option but to agree to a monthly wage of 400 Dirham instead of the 700 Dirham for which he was contracted. After four years however, his employer fled suddenly and the supervisor declared them 'unwanted' and did not pay them any wage. As the company never made regular payments, he lost seven months' wages in this process. Moreover the supervisor declined to return his work permit and in this process he became illegal, resulting in restricted mobility and work opportunities and a high risk of arrest.

4.2.3. Working conditions and other entitlements

Discrepancies between the contract and actual entitlements were not limited only to wages but encompassed other areas, including the nature of the job, payment for overtime, weekly holidays, sick leave, medical cover and the provision of food and accommodation. A third of the respondents complained about the long working hours. The domestic helpers, agricultural labourers and unskilled helpers in the construction

sector had the longest working hours, between 12 and 19 hours a day without rest or overtime pay. Many were not given weekly holidays. One male respondent, Ehsan, recounted his positive experience of his Eid bonus (Box 4.4).

Box 4.4 Ehsan's Eid bonus

Ehsan was working in a booming construction company in Dubai. During *Eid-ul-Azha* his company granted three days holiday and sacrificed one goat for every five workers. Ehsan reported that during *Eid* an employee was entitled to receive free hospital treatment in case of illness. Similarly, an employee was entitled to paid sick leave if he could obtain a doctor's certificate.

When faced with illness, the respondents had both good and bad experiences vis-à-vis their employers' role and responsibilities (Box 4.5).

Box 4.5 Mixed experiences with regard to illness and medical treatment

➤ *Employer paid for the cost of treatment*

Ever since her migration, Rashida suffered from recurring headaches and an eye irritation. When she informed her employer, she brought some medicine for Rashida. When her health deteriorated further, the employer took her to the hospital and paid for treatment. Rashida soon recovered from her illness.

➤ *Employer provided medical treatment only when the condition became critical*

As a shepherd Sadeq had suffered in the strong Kuwaiti heat. He could not leave his job as he had spent a lot of money to migrate overseas. His health continued to deteriorate and he became more and more despondent. When Sadeq asked his employer for a pay rise, his employer beat him badly. Realising that Sadeq's injuries may be life-threatening, his employer sent him to the hospital and bought medicine for him. However, considering Sadeq's slow recovery, the doctors advised his employer to send him back to Bangladesh and eventually he came home.

➤ *Employer did not provide treatment cost or compensation*

Some migrants received neither medical treatment nor compensation from their employer, even if the injury occurred while at work. In order to pay for medical treatment, some migrants had to borrow money from friends or relatives. Malek for example was injured severely while carrying heavy bricks and was taken to the hospital by one of his Pakistani co-workers. His employer did not cover his medical costs nor provide compensation for the accident. Malek had no choice but to borrow from co-workers and return to Bangladesh within five days of migration, with no income and a heavy burden of debt both at home and overseas.

The same fate was met by Khaleq who did not get medical support or compensation from his employer when he fell ill. The only person in the sample group who received part-payment from his employer – 1,120 Riyals out of 6,000 Riyals (or less than 20% of his medical cost) was Rajib. However, as a skilled worker, Rajib was able to gradually repay his debts and continue with his job, despite the fact that he lost three fingers in the accident.

4.3. Food and accommodation

Most female migrants (domestic workers) and farm labourers, by nature of their jobs, were provided food and shelter by their employer. By contrast, the majority of male migrants had to cover their food and accommodation costs themselves, with the help of their family and social networks (Table 4.3). Male migrants minimised their costs by sharing food and accommodation with others.

However, such living arrangements are often of a very low standard, comprising over-crowded rooms. For example, Mannan took up a job in a new construction factory which was closed down only 15 days after he started working, without paying salaries to the staff or even returning their work permits. As a result, he became an illegal migrant, and took shelter with his fellow villagers sharing with 24 other co-boarders.

Table 4.3. Food and accommodation provision

Provider	Male	Female
Fully borne by the employer	14	13
Partly borne by the employer	3	2
With family members/relatives and social networks	28	-

Female respondents revealed that their fixed job contract visas as domestic helpers did not necessarily ensure provision of food and accommodation of adequate standard. In at least two cases, the employers only provided accommodation and the migrants had to pay for their food. Further, some respondents said that they did not get sufficient food and others were kept so busy that they did not have time to prepare food. Yet others stated that the quality and taste of the food was too bad to be consumed.

4.4. Other problems

Police arrest

Some 25% of the male migrants were caught by police and sent to jail as they did not have proper work permits. The majority of these (45%) comprised workers who failed to get extensions on their visa from the *Kafeel*, those who had still not obtained a valid work permit and those who did not have their work permit with them at the time of arrest (Box 4.6). Another quarter were those with an *Umra* visa who were arrested for overstaying and working illegally. Some of them surrendered to the police voluntarily as a way to obtain a free ticket back to Dhaka. The remainder were fixed permit holders, arrested for various reasons.

Box 4.6 Becoming an illegal migrant

➤ *Loss of work permit by changing jobs*

Noor Alam went overseas with a free visa and had a job at a construction company. His wage was very low and so changed to a better paying job in another company. In the process of changing jobs, he lost his work permit. He remained an illegal migrant until his new employer was able to obtain a new work permit for him. One afternoon when he returned from work, the police arrested him and he was sent to jail. The police demanded 7,000 Riyals for his release, which he could not afford. He was then interviewed by a representative of the Bangladeshi diplomatic mission about his reasons for and channel of migration, after which he was finally deported back to Bangladesh.

➤ *Migrated with a 'free' visa and began working before receiving the work permit*

The day after he arrived overseas, Habib started working as a technician in a radio and television repair shop while his *Kafeel* worked on obtaining his work permit. However, before he managed to obtain his work permit, the police arrested him. Three months later, when his papers were ready, his *Kafeel* released him from jail.

➤ *Factory closure and retention of the work permit by the employer*

Kalam was working in a factory. Seven months after his arrival, the factory closed down and all the workers became illegal, as the management did not return their work permits to them. As an illegal migrant, Kalam worked as an assistant in a tailoring shop. The police arrested him one day when they patrolled the area and found him working.

Language problems

Many of the migrant workers were cheated out of their contract entitlements and faced other challenges due to their lack of understanding of Arabic. Mohammad Naser did not speak Arabic and could not communicate with his employer to ask him for his pay at the end of the month. Finally, sick and disillusioned, he decided to return to Bangladesh. Similarly, when Soheli went to Kuwait for the first time he had problems understanding the language. As a result, his employer would hit Soheli when the work was not done properly.

Physical and verbal abuse and sexual harassment

A large group of the respondents, irrespective of their occupation, type of visa and gender, shared a common experience of being abused verbally or physically. Supervisors were the most commonly identified perpetrators in the case of construction workers, the ready-made garment (RMG) and the informal services sectors, while employers and/or spouse used abusive language and physically abused many domestic and farm workers. The most severe cases of sexual harassment were experienced by two women respondents, as described below (Box 4.7).

Box 4.7 Sexual harassment

➤ *Abuse by employers' unmarried son*

Sharifa was working as a domestic helper in a large family of 22 members. One of the employer's sons used to go to Sharifa's room at midnight and rape her. Sharifa did not have any money and had no access to any channels of communication, but still she tried to protest to the employer's wife. Unfortunately, however, the wife was not on her side and labelled Sharifa a loose woman. She increased her work-load and cut her food ration. As a result, Sharifa often had to go to bed hungry, even after working for 18 or 19 hours. The sexual molestation continued unabated so Sharifa bought a padlock and locked her door from inside at night. But the son broke the door open and entered her room. Sharifa was unable to contact her aunt to seek help, as she was not allowed to go outside and did not have a cell phone.

Within three months, Sharifa became pregnant and was very weak mentally and physically. With the help of a friend, she managed to have an abortion, which cost her 200 Dirham. Finally she gathered up her courage and complained to the employer about his son. However, this could neither save her from sexual harassment nor help bring the perpetrator to justice. Instead the employer made the necessary arrangements to send her back to Bangladesh.

4.5. Reasons for deception regarding workers' job-related entitlements

One major reason for such widespread discrepancy between the promised and actual benefits is the gaps that exist in the implementation of regulatory arrangements, which private recruiting agencies take advantage of. The study found that more than 90% of the respondents had not seen a written contract prior to departure, irrespective of their type of visa, and despite the fact that this is a legal requirement. Rather, the respondents were informed verbally about the terms of their contract.

Interviews with the sub-agents shed light on how they managed to circumvent this requirement. According to one of the five sub-agents, Hasmath, "*generally with every visa, the recruiting agency received a contract letter which details the nature of the work, the salary, duration, and living and food arrangements. But they never show these contract letters to their clients. In some cases however, the agency also does not have enough information about the employer*". All contract-related matters are generally handled by the main agency and so sub-agents do not bother themselves with those details.

The sub agents also suggested that the recruiting agencies often apply mechanisms to by-pass government restrictions, in collusion with staff of the passport office, BMET, civil aviation and airport authority.

Hasmath also disclosed some of the tactics that he used himself to deceive clients:

- Not giving the clients any written documents (e.g. job contract).

-
- Not giving them any money receipts.
 - Recruiting agencies sign the contract, not the worker.
 - Making a fake contract letter.
 - Making a fake contract to get BMET clearance for low-paying contracts.
 - Selling fake visas and passports to people who are not from the same village or area as the sub-agent, in collaboration with local officials.

Box 4.8 Falsifying passports

Hasmath has been working as a sub-agent for last 15 years. So far he has sent over 10 people abroad with fake visas and passports (*gala kata* visa). With the support of the Union *Parishad* chairman and its members, he bought tickets, visas and passports from returning migrants who came on vacation in the middle of their contract period. He bought the tickets, visas and passports for Tk. 40,000-50,000. He then looked for clients with the same name as that of the passport holder or found clients willing to go overseas by adopting somebody else's name. These clients were required to give their photos to Hasmath.

Hasmath then replaced the old photos with the current passport holder's photograph in his 'master pc'. He did so very carefully, even embossing the photograph with a fake government seal that he managed to procure from an underground businessman. Then he sold these fake passports to the new owner at a cost of Tk. 150,000-180,000. For the final clearance before departure, Hasmath had established a network with some civil aviation employees, both at the port of origin and overseas, who gave clearance to the departing or incoming passengers. After sending people abroad he never followed up.

Mofiz and Zakir, two other sub-agents, said that they took some precautionary measures to protect their clients from any possible deception by the recruiting agents. Mofiz for example said that he usually checked the authenticity of the visa at the BMET office when he suspected ill motive on the part of the recruiting agency staff.

Other types of profiteering and unscrupulousness were identified also – dishonest relationships between employers and recruiting agencies or sub-agents; collusion between recruiting agencies and sub-agents overseas and in the country of origin; cheating by people within migrants' social networks; and dubious behaviour by the mid-level management in the destination country, be it the manager, supervisor or foreman (Box 4.9).

The private recruiting agencies tried to explain the discrepancies by blaming the agents and sub-agents who make false promises of higher wages so that they can charge higher fees from their clients. On average, it appeared that agencies charged 66% more for the fixed work visas for semi-skilled and unskilled labourers than for the skilled workers. In this way, they tried to cheat both the workers and the employers. The workers, believing that they would receive high wages, were ready to pay a high price for their visa. But as a consequence, the employers do not get workers with the required skill

levels. In most cases, the employers find an excuse to pay less than the contracted amount.¹⁹

In the words of Mr. Khan, a proprietor of a private recruiting agency:

“It happens because the recruiting agencies of both the sending and receiving countries often send/receive unskilled workers as ‘skilled’ workers to increase their profit margins. There are also some bad employers who collude with these agencies by violating the job contract and harassing the workers”

Box 4.9 Reasons for discrepancies between promised and actual entitlements

Dishonest relationship between employers, recruiting agencies and sub-agents

Most of the respondents who experienced discrepancies found that the employer did not offer them the type of job they had agreed to, or pay the promised wage. Respondents' claims for promised wages and other entitlements were often dismissed as baseless. Without the active involvement of the employers, it is unlikely that these widespread incidences of false promises made by agents and sub-agents in Bangladesh would continue to recur.

Dishonest relationship between recruiting agencies in country of origin and destination

Some of the domestic helpers such as Nazma disclosed that the recruiting agents at the destination country told her that she had been sold to them by the local agencies or sub-agents. Therefore, she was told not to complain about any discrepancies in her wages. She was told to comply with the instructions of her employer. Her attempts to change her employer and her lodging did not succeed.

Undue interference and dubious role of supervisor

Interference by a supervisor and/or foreman often went against the interest of migrants. For example, at the insistence of the supervisor, Majid was offered only 400 Dirham instead of the 700 Dirham for which he was contracted to work in an RMG factory.

Cheating by one's own social networks

In some cases, migrants' own relatives, fellow villagers or friends were actively involved in the racket of selling contracts, knowing full well that employers did not have adequate jobs to offer nor were they ready to offer the promised wage. Masud's uncle sent him a 'free' visa saying that he would work in a construction firm for a 'good' wage. So Masud spent Tk. 182,000 for his work permit and visa, of which more than 80% went straight into his uncle's pocket. But on reaching Kuwait, he found that his visa was valid for three months only and the employer his uncle referred to did not exist, nor did the construction firm.

Migrants' friends charged almost double the average migration cost. Rahim, despite paying a very high price to migrate through his friends, was a victim of cheating. His visa expired within a year, even though the friend had promised it had a three-year validity. Because he was only able to stay for one year, he managed to earn only half of what he spent to finance his migration

¹⁹ Note that six out of ten sample private recruiting agencies interviewed under this study offer different types of skills development training to their clients either directly or with the help of other training institutions.

4.6. The migrants' responses to their problems

It would be wrong to assume that the migrants remained passive and vulnerable when they had bad experiences or were treated unfairly. They adopted different measures to deal with these problems and try to change their situation, including changing jobs and employers; acquiring multiple skills and seeking better job opportunities; sharing food and accommodation with other co-workers and acquaintances; establishing rapport and obtaining a 'free' visa from the employer; collectively and individually bargaining for their contracted wages and working hours; lodging complaints to the police and supporting each other in the time of need.

The fact that they took such initiatives to change their situation is worthy of note, regardless of whether or not they were successful in these efforts. Migrants did so, notwithstanding their level of education, types of occupation and gender. More than one-third of the respondents took active initiatives to change their situations, despite formidable barriers (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Migrants' approaches to deal with problems at destination

Types of initiatives taken	Remarks
Changing job	Perseverance to face adverse situations e.g. low wage; harsh working conditions; company shut-down and subsequent lay-offs
Learning new skills	With the help of their social networks, some were able to undergo apprenticeships to improve their skills and earn a higher income.
Engaged in more than one occupation	Some workers managed more than one job under flexible work arrangements. Despite being profitable, it is not always permissible legally under the fixed job contract. Thus two women cleaners were deported as they were caught working in two jobs.
Individual and/or collective bargaining	The RMG and the construction sector workers bargained collectively while the domestic helpers, the farm workers and the other informal sector workers bargained individually or with the help of their sponsors e.g. social networks/ recruiting agencies
Lodging complaints with the agents, police or Diplomatic Mission	Except for one construction worker who went to the labour court against low and irregular wages, others went to the recruiting agencies. Women also went to the police for help. Two out of seven <i>Umra</i> visa holders surrendered to the police once they earned enough money and managed a free visa. Only on a few occasions did migrants approach the Bangladesh Embassy regarding compensation for a work-related accident but were not successful.
Establishing rapport with the Saudi employer and managing free visa	Mainly the <i>Umra</i> visa holders obtained a 'free' visa for their next migration.
Helped each other at times of crisis, particularly accident, illness, unemployment, financial stress, hunger.	The role of the social networks is pervasive. Some of the migrant labourers have established welfare and cooperative societies. One of the female migrants saved money and earned high returns from one such co-operative.

While one may question the legality of some of the measures taken, migrants often had few options to seek redress for large-scale cheating or foul play that they encountered. This is an important matter that needs the immediate attention of the Government to ensure rights-based migration.

4.7. The outcomes of migration

When assessing the outcomes of migration, there are many grey areas and intangible gains and losses that are very difficult to quantify. An attempt is made here to highlight the different dimensions of the outcomes of migration to Gulf countries, to show how the positive and the negative outcomes often co-exist, and to identify some of the factors that influence overall outcomes.

When comparing the annual incomes and remittances with the migration cost incurred, it may be seen that more than half of the migrants earned enough to offset their migration costs within a year (36 out of 60, or 60%). Thirty-two out of sixty (53%) remitted more than 50% of the migration cost back home each year (Table 4.5).

The channels of recruitment did not appear to have any systematic influence on levels of income and remittances, except in the case of the two migrants recruited through formal sources who had the highest incomes.

Regarding the type of visa, one may observe the apparent success (high incomes and remittances relative to migration cost) of the *Umra* visa holders, followed by those who migrated with a fixed job contract. Having paid the highest prices for their migration, the 'free' visa holders were less successful than other two groups based on this criterion. This is probably due also to the greater scope for fraud in this type of arrangement, whereby a migrant becomes fully dependent on the whims of the sponsor.

Table 4.5 Distribution of the respondents by annual incomes and remittances relative to the cost of migration

Annual Income as % of the migration cost			
	No.	Average duration (yrs)	Average education (yrs)
Above 500%	8	10.7	4.8
Above 350%-500%	3	7.3	9
Above 200%-350%	10	6.7	4.9
Above 100%-200%	15	6.6	4.4
Below 100%	24	3.6	4.2
Total	60	6	4.7

Remittances as % of the migration cost			
	No.	Average duration (yrs)	Average education (yrs)
Above 350%	4	11.3	5
Above 200%-350%	5	10.4	6
Above 100%-200%	11	7.2	3.2
Above 50%-100%	12	7.8	5.3
Below 50%	28	3.2	4.7
Total	60	6	4.7

Annual Income as % of the migration cost				
	No.	Contract (%)	Free (%)	Umra (%)
Above 500%	8	6	18	29
Above 350%-500%	3	6	5	0
Above 200%-350%	10	23	5	29
Above 100%-200%	15	26	18	43
Below 100%	24	39	55	0
Total	60	52	37	12

Remittances as % of the migration cost				
	No.	Contract (%)	Free (%)	Umra (%)
Above 350%	4	3	9	14
Above 200%-350%	5	6	9	14
Above 100%-200%	11	23	0	57
Above 50%-100%	12	26	14	14
Below 50%	28	42	68	0
Total	60	52	37	12

In the following sections, we examine the various economic and non-economic gains and losses of migration. Based on an assessment of economic indicators (the ability to earn sufficient income to offset migration costs within a year; to send remittances or generate savings; to repay outstanding loans, make productive investments and/or raise family incomes), the overall impact of migration was found to be positive for the majority – thirty-four out of sixty respondents (57%). For thirteen (21%), the impact was assessed as mixed and for the remaining thirteen, the experience was, on balance, negative, meaning that losses were incurred.

Overseas incomes vis-à-vis the cost of migration

From a purely economic perspective, the gains from migration are impressive. The annual average income of the migrants was estimated to be 39% higher than the migration cost and 60% managed to earn more than their migration cost within a year of their migration. The proportion of women who earned annual incomes higher than their migration cost was greater than for the men. The fact that men were involved in a wider range of occupations, with a wider variation in income, may help explain this surprising finding.²⁰

Table 4.6 Migration outcomes: Positive, negative and mixed

	Male	Female	All
Positive outcomes			
Respondents who sent remittances	40	12	52
Earned more income in a year than cost of migration	23	10	33
Repaid loans fully or partially	29	11	40
Able to generate savings	21	4	25
Became skilled	3	-	3
Bought land, repaired/ extended/constructed house	15	4	19
Satisfied with his/her migration experience	7	4	11
Negative outcomes			
Income was too low to offset migration cost	22	5	27
Did not have any income	1	3	5
Being cheated, exploited and not satisfied with the migration experience	6	4	10
Did not gain anything but became indebted and lost out	11	4	15
Became sick, had problems with food, had an accident but not compensated	4	1	5
Family breakdown	-	4	4
Mixed outcomes			
Earned handsome income abroad yet dissatisfied with working conditions	7	2	9
Rewarding but cheated by employer/sub-agent/relative	4	2	6
Materially successful but did not receive compensation when suffered an accident while at work	3	-	3

Figure 4.1 demonstrates that there is an increase in the average income and amount of remittances the longer the duration of overseas stay. Incomes and remittances almost doubled when the duration of migration exceeded five years.

²⁰ Although women's migration cost was 2.3 times lower than that of men, the latter earned 2.4 times more than women on average.

Figure 4.1 The respondents' average incomes and remittances by duration of migration

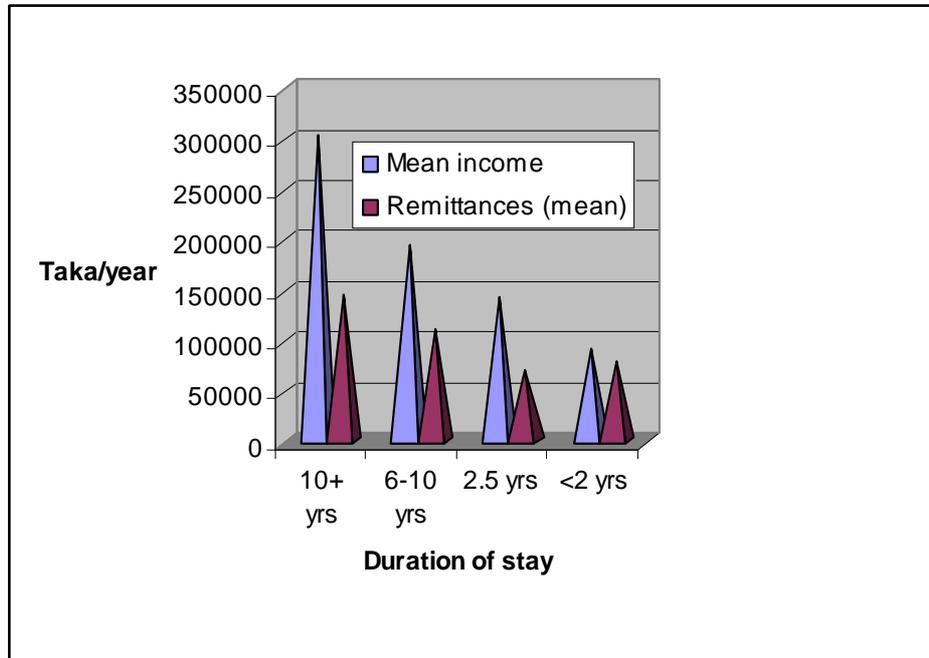


Table 4.7 Respondents' average migration cost, incomes and remittances, ratio of remittances to income and difference between annual income and migration cost, by occupational category

Occupational category (number of respondents)	Mean migration cost (Tk.)	Mean income (Tk./yr)	Average remittances (Tk./yr)	Ave. remittances/ave. income (%)	Difference between annual income and migration cost (Tk)
Driver (1)	125,000	388,500	242,500	62	263,500
Business (8)	102,600	320,290	155,575	49	217,690
Salesman (4)	142,590	217,575	108,250	50	74,985
Factory worker (3)	93,267	197,917	108,800	55	104,650
Fitter (7)	159,507	197,700	109,500	55	38,193
Foreman (1)	85,000	189,000	82,500	44	104,000
Carpenter (3)	56,633	175,400	104,733	60	118,767
Construction (9)	189,980	153,926	70,549	46	-36,054
Cleaner (4)	66,500	128,048	60,270	47	61,548
Farm labour (6)	171,176	119,100	81,600	69	-52,076
Hotel boy (3)	200,667	103,100	6,833	7	-97,567
Housemaid (11)	61,109	68,760	60,270	88	7,651
All (60)	124,075	171,895	95,928	56	47,820

Table 4.7 presents the mean migration cost, incomes and average remittances by occupational category. The third column computes average annual remittances as a percentage of annual income. It shows a wide range, from a mere 7% for the hotel boys to a maximum of 88% for the housemaids. Farm labourers also fared well in this respect,

remitting nearly 70% of their earnings – albeit from a low average income, as is the case with the housemaids. The majority of the workers remitted, on average, around 50% of their annual income back home. The final column computes the difference between mean annual income and migration cost, as an indicator of the financial outcomes of migration. It demonstrates the wide variety in outcomes across the different occupational categories, from a positive balance of more than Tk. 260,000 for the single driver, to a negative balance of almost Tk.98,000 for the three hotel boys (who incidentally also had the highest average migration cost). The other categories fall between these two extremes. Even though these figures must be treated with caution, given the small sample size and the probable recall bias, they serve to illustrate the wide diversity of migrants' experiences in terms of the financial gains and losses of migration.

As noted earlier, the ability to earn higher incomes overseas depends more on skill levels, the duration of migration, type of employer, bargaining power and the strength of social networks at the destination, than on the type of visa and the channels of recruitment *per se*.

“Job satisfaction”

As distinct from financial reward, “job satisfaction” encompasses whether the migrants received their job-related entitlements, including timely payment of wages, holidays, medical coverage, etc. While nearly 20% the respondents expressed an overall satisfaction with their migration, some 25% said that their economic gains alone failed to satisfy them, mainly because they were not given the other work-related entitlements that had been promised (Box 4.10). This demonstrated how economic gains alone do not ensure a positive migration experience.

Box 4.10: The conditions for job satisfaction

➤ *Relations with the employers or the supervisor*

When the migrants had good relations with their employer and/or supervisor, they enjoyed their work even if they had to work long hours. For example, a few domestic helpers such as Farida were highly satisfied as they considered their employers as “good”. Farida used to work 14-15 hours each day, but she was happy because there was no pressure from the employer or his family. She was given good food and her employer bore all her expenditures during her stay, including medical costs.

Both Azad and Dulal who worked respectively as a hotel boy and a pipe fitter were also satisfied because they had good relations with their supervisors. Four out of seven respondents who migrated with an *Umra* visa were highly satisfied because they established good rapport with their employers and managed to obtain a ‘free’ visa for their next trip.

By contrast, Motiur Rahman was not satisfied, even though he earned more than Tk. 140,000 annually and stayed overseas for 7 years. As he explained, “*my supervisor was rude and my employer gave me terrible food*”.

➤ *Entitlements*

Enjoyment of benefits also influenced the level of job satisfaction. Jamil, Asif, Sonia, Saquib, Ehsan expressed satisfaction mainly because they received all the facilities such as weekly holidays, promised wages at regular intervals, Eid bonus and medical expenses.

On the other hand, 17 respondents reported some degree of dissatisfaction with their overseas work experiences regarding wages, working hours, misbehaviour of the supervisor or employer and so on.

Remittances

The most important economic benefit of migration is the money remitted to families back home; more than 80% of the respondents did this. Existing research suggests that remittances provide an avenue for families to move out of poverty (Sen and Hulme, 2004). In fact, this study shows that remittances constituted the largest source of the respondents’ family incomes. However, while family incomes increased by around 22% for the male migrants following migration, the opposite holds true for the female migrants’ households, whose incomes declined by a half. For nearly 33% of households, the remittances were not enough to repay the loan incurred prior to migration. This situation was exacerbated by marital breakdown of three women migrants who got divorced or separated from their husbands once they returned home.

Women did not lag behind in sending remittances – 80% of the women as compared to 88% of the men did so. Given their low incomes, women migrants’ remittances on average represented a higher proportion of their incomes than men.²¹ The average amount of women’s remittances was Tk. 60,680, which is around half that sent by the

²¹ Note that by sending 70% of their incomes as remittances, domestic helpers became the leaders among all occupational groups in this regard, followed by hotel boys and driver, whose incomes were much higher than that of the former.

men. Given women's lower incomes and shorter duration of migration, this is not unexpected.

It is interesting to note that the *Umra* visa holders were among the most successful migrants. They bore the lowest cost of migration and experienced fewer difficulties and less cheating while abroad. In this process, they reaped the highest returns through their longer stay, higher incomes and larger remittances.

Repayment of outstanding loans

Migrants considered their migration as successful when they were able to repay their outstanding loans and invest in buying land or housing and in income-generating activities. Nearly two-thirds of the migrants were able to repay their outstanding loans, of which 20% only partially repaid. That being said, roughly 33% failed to repay their loans at all. They considered that this was largely due to the fact that they had been cheated about their expected wages by the private recruiting agencies, the sub-agents or their social networks.

Savings and investment in land, housing and other assets

Roughly 33% of the men and 25% of women respondents invested remittances in purchasing land and/or housing. This usually served to compensate only partially for the assets they had sold off to finance their migration. Estimates made in this study suggest that the average size of cultivable land declined 10% in the case of the male migrants. Women's investment in land was so small that it hardly improved their asset base.

The loss of land may have been partially offset also by investment in business and the savings generated by 42% of the respondents, including four women. Nonetheless, the lack of attractive and non-taxable investment options for returning migrants acts as a disincentive to productive investment.

The employment situation after return

As the respondents were all return migrants who had returned home within the previous 12 months, it was unsurprising that 25 (42%) of them were unemployed at the time of the interview. However, more than three-quarters of these, including two women, were trying to make their next passage overseas. Along with their newly acquired skills and experience, some of them also learnt Arabic, and so they believed it would now be easier to find better jobs in the Gulf countries. The attraction of a large potential income and migrants' increased ambition clearly prevailed over all the negative aspects of migration. Respondents were only deterred from returning overseas by extreme circumstances, such as serious illness, sexual abuse or marital breakdown.

After their return, nearly 20% of the migrants either joined their family business or started new ventures including grocery shops, fish cultivation and tailoring. They all invested in their respective small enterprises. Some respondents had also learned skills

overseas and four of them took up skilled jobs back home e.g. welding, factory work and catering. While working in construction, a good number of the migrants learned rod binding and pipe fitting, which helped them to acquire better-paid jobs at home or paved the way for better employment when they migrated again.

Marriage and marital breakdown

Prior to migration, more than half of the men (56%) were unmarried, but on return, a number of them got married. A change in the family's economic status through remittances and manifested in material changes in housing, clothing, etc., helped to improve their prospects in the "marriage market". Thus, Jamil, Asif, Saquib and Habib all got married within three to six months of their return. Some of the return migrants (four men and two women) were actively involved in marrying off their brothers, sisters and children.

By contrast, overseas migration seemed to destabilise the marriages of the women, three of whom divorced once they returned home. Sharifa was not accepted back by her husband who expelled her from the house. She returned to her own family, with her nine month old daughter and within a month, received a divorce notice.²² Rahima shared a similar fate; her husband divorced her on the grounds that she did not earn any income and he could not repay the loans he had taken on her behalf. Ironically, it seems that women often had to suffer for decisions taken by others. For example, it was Rahima's husband who had decided to send her abroad to earn more money.

Rumana had originally left to escape abuse by her husband, but returned within four days of her migration. With the help of her maternal family, she started a small tailoring business, for which she took loan from the Grameen Bank and is gradually paying off her loans.

These cases show that without legal and financial support, it is difficult for the female migrants to fight their case, repay their loans and re-establish themselves.

Litigation and conflict

Upon their return, a number of migrants were involved in litigation and conflict with sub-agents and their relatives who cheated them. Malek had a serious accident while carrying bricks at work. He returned home with no income and a heavy debt. Because he obtained his visa through his father-in law, he lodged a case at the local police station against his father in-law for cheating him.

Several other migrants also fought with the relatives or sub-agents who had cheated them. But this did not help them to recover any of their money, as they had no

²² Sharifa was a victim of sexual exploitation and rape by the employer's son and this was the major reason for the breakdown of her marriage.

receipts nor obtained any legal assistance from the Government or NGOs. As indicated earlier, local government functionaries often collude with the sub-agents and hence it is difficult to mobilise institutional support in such cases of cheating.

Illness, accidents and the migration outcome

Of the 15 respondents who did not have rewarding migration experiences, at least six suffered from illness or an accident. This not only created financial problems and drastically shortened their overseas stay, but also affected their post-migration situation (Box 4.11). It was sad to note that none of the respondents received support from the Bangladeshi Diplomatic Missions in their claims for compensation.

Box 4.11 Health conditions impact the migration outcome

➤ *Illness affects income*

Moina fell ill on the job due to her excessive workload and the bad quality food provided by her employer. Although her employer took her to see a doctor, he cut two months from her pay. Consequently, she only earned Tk. 157,000 from two years of work overseas, which was barely sufficient to cover her migration costs and not enough for any productive investment on her return. Her husband was also unable to improve their financial situation, as he had to repay the loan (with interest) that they took to fund Moina's migration.

For Sadeq, things were even worse, as he was still suffering from the injuries he sustained through abuse by his employer. He was sent back to Bangladesh within a year of his migration. At the time of the interview he was very weak and still unable to work. He was fully dependent on his son and daughter to sustain him.

➤ *Accident-induced indebtedness*

Both Malek and Khaleq incurred huge debt because of their work-related accidents. Malek did not receive any compensation and Khaleq received less than 20% of the total cost. Although Khaleq was able to repay his loans by finding another job, Malek was laid off from his job and could not earn any money to repay the debts he had accumulated.

➤ *Stress*

Abul Hossain got his first job only three months after arriving in KSA. He did not have a valid work permit and his employer wanted to charge him 200 Riyals for one – money he did not have. So he was arrested by the police and jailed for 18 days. This stressful situation, including the conditions in jail, affected his health badly. As he had no money to pay for medical treatment, he had to depend on the charity of Saudi citizens. He did not benefit from migration at all and is now looking to migrate again through formal channels, so that he can repay his debts.

Section 5 **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

5.1. Policy imperatives

As long as the global economic crunch haunts the lives of so many people, overseas migration from Bangladesh will continue, even given the formidable barriers and high risks the migrant workers face. Considering the inevitability of migration, the Government must work for the welfare of migrant workers to maximise the potential gains, manage the deployment process and oversee negotiations to address the problematic areas identified in this study, such as the poor dissemination of information on legal channels of recruitment and service providers; lack of effective monitoring and regulation of private recruiting agencies and the unscrupulous relationships between the actors involved that give rise to fraudulent practices.

In this section, we suggest some policy initiatives that could address these major areas.

5.2. Ensuring regulatory compliance

In the context of high transaction costs, frequent fraud and fake work contracts, the Government must put in place simpler and more transparent procedures with regard to recruitment for overseas jobs, improve information dissemination about these procedures and allow public access to the results of inspections and audits of the private recruiting agencies. The rules should be simple and should ensure efficient manpower delivery systems while protecting workers from fraud, cheating, and unnecessary harassment.

Despite there being a comprehensive regulatory framework in the form of the Emigration Ordinance of 1982 and subsequent rules²³, these do not lay down mechanisms by which the Government can act quickly to assist the migrant workers in the case of fraudulent practice. Moreover, the Government's capacity to monitor and supervise the recruiting agencies is extremely limited, even following complaints by workers. Issuance of the Statutory Rules and Orders (SRO) must be supported by increased capacity of the government offices and machinery.

Given that BMET is already involved in delivering multiple services in the process of labour recruitment and migration, BOESL may be better placed to deliver pre-departure training, which BMET should then monitor. The Government's plan to bring all the service-providers under one roof may help to streamline and enhance monitoring. However, considering that most of the information dissemination and transactions are

²³ Emigration Rules, 2002 S.R.O. No. 370-Law/2002; Rules for Conduct and Licensing of Recruiting Agencies (S.R.O. No. 371-Law/2002) and the Wage Earners Welfare fund Rules (S.R.O. No. 372-Law/2002).

actually conducted at the local level, it is most important also to strengthen BMET local offices so that all prospective migrants have easy access to them. These offices should outline the basic “do’s and don’ts” in the process of overseas recruitment. BMET may also develop a network of post offices and banks to provide one-stop, quick services for passport delivery, verification of contracts, loans, and other pre-departure services.

Media partners, including private and public radio, TV and newspapers, must play a more proactive role in disseminating information related to overseas jobs, recruitment procedure and services, publishing the names of blacklisted and well-performing recruitment agencies, and so on.

The Government should involve multiple stakeholders in monitoring the recruiting agencies, including trade negotiators, regulators, legislators, professional associations and civil society. Evidence from the Philippines, for example, demonstrates the critical role played by civil society organisations in ensuring accountability and transparency in recruitment processes. Migration policy is under relentless scrutiny from the press, the Congress, the Church, and countless NGOs and pressure groups who draw attention to any failure of Government to act on abuses or fraud committed against migrant workers.

The Government should incorporate key lessons from good regulatory practices elsewhere. The ‘carrot and stick’ approach adopted by the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) is instructive. POEA protects job seekers by regulating the recruitment industry through effective sanctions in the case of violation of the law; it also rewards agencies for good practice, through tax and other incentives. The Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy (BOEP) should thus ensure adequate punishment for the violation of regulations by private recruiting agencies, to act as a real disincentive. Registration of the *Dalals* should also be made mandatory. The Government must also allocate adequate resources for effective inspection of the agencies.

BAIRA and its member agencies must be brought under compliance. Licenses of blacklisted and non-compliant agencies must be suspended for longer periods, and higher fines charged, and their names made public. It is important also for BAIRA to review its internal rules and introduce necessary reforms, including the removal of Members of Parliament as its members.

5.3. Providing services to migrant workers at destination

The respondents emphasised the role of the diplomatic missions to protect the Bangladeshi labourers in terms of their wages and benefits, and to take action against the employers and recruitment agencies that violate migrants’ rights.

To safeguard migrant workers’ rights, MEWOE and Diplomatic Missions abroad could run Migrant Welfare Centres modelled on the Overseas Filipino Resource Centre (OFRC), in those countries where there are more than 50,000 Bangladeshi workers. It

could provide counselling and legal services; welfare assistance, including the procurement of medical, hospitalisation and repatriation services; post-arrival orientation and related services; training and skills upgrading; monitoring of daily situation of the migrant workers; dispute-resolution services with employers or contractors; registration of undocumented workers; providing shelter to homeless workers; and orientation of returning migrants. The Diplomatic Missions could also provide telephone hotlines for migrant workers, enabling the Mission to take prompt action in case of urgent need. They should also employ a Legal Assistant to provide and co-ordinate legal services to migrant workers in distress. A Legal Assistance Fund should be established, and guidelines, criteria and procedures put in place to govern its use.

Bi-lateral agreements, Memoranda of Understanding and other negotiations should be undertaken with the host country governments and other relevant stakeholders, in order to monitor migrant workers conditions and enforce their legal protection.

These services could be funded by a welfare fund created with fees from the migrant workers and other sources (e.g. surcharge from passport and other services provided by the Bangladeshi diplomatic missions abroad). The Wage Earners Welfare Fund requires reform, to which a migrant worker can currently have access only posthumously e.g. payment of Tk. 20,000 for cremation and Tk. 100,000 to the dead worker's family. As the volume of migration has increased, so has the migrants' contribution to the fund. The Government must now plan for the Fund's proper and effective utilisation, including providing workers with loans for migration costs, providing legal and other support services abroad and re-integration support for returnees (with priority to female workers). For example, at least 20% of the migrant's welfare fund should be directed to a health insurance facility for poor migrant workers, with 20% of the funds reserved for disadvantaged women migrants.

5.4. Policies to build the capacity of migrant workers

NGOs and/or the banking sector could start schemes to offer migrant workers various preferential loan facilities, such as pre-departure loans, housing loans and small business loans. This would help to reduce the number of undocumented workers and to address the perennial problem of financing the cost of migration. Following the Philippine's example, a branch could be created within MEWOE to administer a loan fund with contributions from the Government, Bangladesh Bank and other commercial banks with matching funds from the private sector, including NGOs. All the semi-skilled and unskilled migrant workers may apply for pre-departure loans, with priority given to women. They should also have compulsory skills and language training in Arabic by BMET or BOESL, tailored to the jobs for which they are destined.

Policies related to the post-migration period should be geared to provide low interest loans; preferential access to Small Enterprise Development Fund (SEDF); imports of capital goods and raw materials for returnee migrants who may set up their own small businesses; business training and counselling schemes, premium interest rates

for their savings; favourable tax regime etc. MEWOE must work closely with the local level NGOs to develop re-integration programmes for returned migrants and identify productive and sustainable avenues for investment of remittances. It is also important to target coverage of poor migrant workers' families in the safety net and social protection programmes of the country's poverty reduction and employment generation programmes.

5.5. Concluding remarks

The Government adopted the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Policy in October 2006 but little has been done so far to ensure its effective implementation. To enhance the country's development potential from the perspective of remittances, trade and employment generation, as well as for the benefit of the migrant workers themselves, it is imperative that the Government implement the BOEP.

The Government has developed a strategy paper on migration, which covers:

- a) Extension of existing markets for Bangladeshi workers overseas;
- b) Exploration of new markets;
- c) Strengthening Bangladeshi embassies abroad;
- d) Strengthening the capacity and curricula of the training institutions, in line with the needs of foreign employers;
- e) Controlling fraudulent activities of private recruiting agencies and other organizations working in this field;
- f) Increasing the number of migrants from "*Monga*"²⁴ areas;
- g) Welfare of the migrant workers etc.

This study revealed that, despite respondents' mixed experiences overseas, a significant number (one third) of them were making arrangements for their next migration. The attraction of a large potential income and migrants' ambitions prevailed over all the negative aspects of migration. In this context, it is doubly important for the Government to increase its efforts to ensure regulatory compliance. Good governance is crucial to maximise the benefits of migration and minimise its costs both to the workers themselves and to the country.

²⁴ *Monga* refers to a cyclical phenomenon of poverty and hunger affecting people from the northern region of Bangladesh.

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