



International
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Gendering migration pathways from Bangladesh to Jordan and Lebanon: Before and after the COVID-19 pandemic



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- ▶ **Gendering migration pathways from Bangladesh to Jordan and Lebanon: Before and after the COVID-19 pandemic**

Thérèse Blanchet

► Foreword

Over the past few decades, a succession of public narratives on women's low-income migration have generated stereotypes of migrant women including from Bangladesh. These stereotypes invariably reflect different shades of patriarchal perspectives about women's mobility and work; however, seldom are the voices of those women who migrate heard. Their vast and diverging experiences and reflections on dealing with officials, employers, family members and other men and women who shape these migration experiences in different countries is rarely documented – except as misleading stories of systemic abuse.

The purpose of this ethnography is to follow the lives of these working women and document and analyse the diversity of their individual and

collective experiences. The findings reveal a very different reality that contrasts the usual characterizations of migrant women. Such research is important to ground policymaking on a more accurate understanding of women's work, mobility and motivations. This study is part of a series of assessments meant to document the perspectives of migrant women along different labour migration pathways.

Most of all, thanks to workers and unions, who shared their time with our team during an incredibly distressing international pandemic.

Igor Bosc
Chief Technical Advisor
Work in Freedom Programme

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Igor Bosc has been supportive through this project, respecting the freedom required to conduct an exploratory research. I thank him for the trust he placed in me and for the genuine interest he showed in the findings. Last but not least, I wish to thank the Drishti Research Centre (DRC) team in Bangladesh, and more particularly Hannan Biswas and Anisa Zaman, for all that we share. Many more contributed to this research that are not named. I express my gratitude to the numerous people who trusted me with their stories and remain anonymous in this text as convention requires but not in the memory of my heart.

Thérèse Blanchet
October 2023

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► Abbreviations

BMET	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
BWJ	Better Work Jordan
ILO	International Labour Organization
MEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment
NGO	Non-governmental Organizations
QIZ	Qualified Industrial Zones
UMoU	Memorandum of Understanding

► Note on the terminology

Considering the sensitivity of migrant women workers' trajectories, this study uses personal names that have been modified to protect the identities of migrant women as needed.

Domestic workers and "maids"

According to Article 1(b) of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), the term "domestic work" means "work performed in or for a household or households", and "domestic worker" means "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship". Convention No. 189 applies to all domestic workers and not necessarily to all domestic work. This legal definition is important as it contrasts with colloquial terms like "maids" that exclude the acknowledgement of their work and tend to conflate their tasks with those of persons involved in unpaid household work, especially women.

That said, in the context of ethnographic research, it is important to note the colloquial terms used. These portray the positionality of those who use them, which illustrates subjectivities, prejudices and sociolinguistic characteristics that inform the nature of social, economic and labour relationships. Referring to the official, legal term "domestic worker" when describing these relationships pushes their real nature outside its framework, leading to an abstraction of the object of study.

In Jordan, for example, "maids" along with male cooks, drivers and gardeners administratively belong to the category of "domestic worker". Anthropological research is not served by erasing or neutralizing the gender dimensions of these occupations in societies practising a particularly strong separation of the sexes. In the same context, "maid" is the closest English approximation to the term "*kajer meye*" used in Bangla.

This study fully acknowledges the need to refer to domestic workers in official public discourse. That said, for the purpose of anthropological analysis, the terms that best translate meanings

for the subjects of study may be used. This should not be misconstrued as tacit acceptance of the colloquial expressions in place of "domestic work".

Free visa

The term "free visa" (hereafter free visa) is controversial. It is an informal term coined by migrant workers to refer to a status with variable formal backings that allows them to move and informally work freely, usually with the consent of one or more employers. Legally, there is no such thing as a free visa term or category. The formal visas used to cover such arrangements are usually regular work visas. In the informal parlance of migrant workers, "free" refers to the workers' understanding that their working arrangement grants them labour mobility and freedom of circulation as opposed to other migrant labour practices which are perceived as "unfree" and refer to migrant workers being confined to their place of employment. For experienced migrant workers, the term does not relate to the cost or price of such an arrangement, but rather to "freedom" in a larger sense. The usage of the term with its broader reference to "freedom" is of particular interest to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) efforts to understand better migrant workers' attempts efforts to emancipate themselves from what they perceive as unfree labour.

Confusion and contestation around the term free visa stems from how employers, recruiters and officials refer to workers' coining the term. Experienced informal recruiters tend to know exactly what it means as it is part of their business repertoire and lexicon, and their business reputation hinges on their correct understanding and usage of the term. That, however, does not prevent some of them from playing with the dual meaning of the term "free" to attract clients among unknowing migrant workers in a deceitful manner. On the other hand, formal recruiters, employers and regulators often contest the term as they point out that no such legal appellation exists.

Formal recruiters, in particular, are often highly critical of any such practice and reject it in the name of protecting workers.¹ Such discourse is not only directed against informal recruiters but also against employers who grant such freedoms may be accused of facilitating human trafficking.² Practices enabling labour mobility can influence labour markets and undermine the interests of some players. Regulators in countries of origin and destination are often adamantly opposed to the use of the term free visa. They usually highlight the concern that the term is used by recruiters to deceive migrant workers.

This study fully acknowledges that there are no legally recognized “free visas” meant for migrant workers. That said, for the purpose of anthropological analysis, the language and expressions used by migrant workers are important to highlight and analyse, not least because they testify their efforts to mediate and emancipate themselves from restricted mobility and coercive labour practices underpinned by sponsorship systems.

Absconders and runaways

The terms “absconder” and “runaway” are regularly used in the language of officials, employers, recruiters, the media and even workers in Arab States to describe migrant workers who have left their place of employment and broken their relationships with their *kafeel* or sponsor. The ILO recognizes the right of workers to leave their employment relationship and considers terms like absconder or runaway a way to stigmatize migrant workers.

That said, for the purpose of anthropological research, it is important to highlight the usage of such terms to depict the harsh realities of labour relationships under the *kafala* system. The use of these terms in this study should not be misconstrued as tacit acceptance of the stigma that is inherent in the meaning of such words. For more information on how the language related to freedom and unfreedom affects labour relationships, please refer to the ILO’s Work in Freedom Handbook: A critical glossary of terms relating to freedom and unfreedom in the world of work.

1 Royo News, “Agencies warn of black market for runaway domestic workers, say protection needed”, *Roya News*, 11 August 2020.

2 In Lebanon, for example, employers who facilitate free visas by sponsoring a worker who doesn’t work for them are subject to fines while the worker is subject to deportation.

► Executive summary

The first part of the report presents findings from an ethnographic study on women migrant workers from Bangladesh conducted in Jordan and Lebanon in late 2018 and early 2019. Field visits conducted in Bangladesh by the Drishti Research Centre in the Manikganj and Narayanganj districts complemented research at the two destinations.

In Jordan, Bangladeshi women work in garment factories located in qualifying industrial zones (QIZs), and they are also employed as domestic workers in both destinations. In Jordan, women make up about 80 per cent of the Bangladeshi migrant population, and in Lebanon, they constitute about half. The research was mostly deployed in and around Amman and Beirut, the capital cities. The first contacts were initiated through Bangladeshi-run shops, which offer a wide range of services and serve as gathering spots for Bangla speakers. Women spent less time than men in these shops, and conversations were often pursued at their lodgings where more personal topics could be broached. Discussions with women were also held on the street, in shopping malls, in restaurants, making the best of every opportunity to meet them in the short time they had available. In all, 132 case histories were assembled, two thirds concerning women and one third concerning men. Including men in the research was essential to establish comparisons and to capture the gender dynamics at play.

Nearly half (44.55 per cent) of the workers stated that they were undocumented. Illiteracy stood at 35.7 per cent for women and 13.7 per cent for men, a differential that signalled women's lower socio-economic background. The ages provided by the workers are subject to caution as adolescent girls can have papers made to show that they meet the government regulatory minimum age of 25 years. A table was not constructed to fix marital status as it would artificially freeze a fluid reality. Some women workers took a temporary "husband", and men did the same with a wife. Debates (and

disagreements) on what constitutes a "true" marriage were common. Some deplored the weakness of the *samaj*³ abroad, while others took advantage of new freedoms.

The research followed migrant workers trajectories and did not stick to a sector-specific approach. In Jordan, several garment factory workers who had participated in a strike were dismissed from work, or who had otherwise lost their jobs in a factory in a QIZ, chose not to be repatriated. Most found work in informal garment factories outside the QIZs and stayed undocumented. Absconding domestic workers were common in both countries. Some escaped to flee unacceptable conditions and abuse, while others left the employer as they wished to increase their earnings, join a "friend" or have greater control over their life.

In relation to the *kafala* system regulating migration in both countries, the research documented several practices belonging to a grey zone. Among these practices were the "free visas" in which a migrant worker gets a sponsor against payment with the agreement that they will be free to live independently and organize their own work. Decried by the Bangladesh embassy as a fraud, free visas are highly popular among seasoned migrants as they offer freedom and generally allow higher incomes. Other hybrid arrangements were observed in which live-in domestic workers are permitted, and even encouraged by their *kafeel*, to take clients outside for additional income. Women may then double their monthly incomes while economic pressure on their stingy employers gets reduced. Live-out domestic workers accepted work engagements for one week or one month at a time and were paid a weekly or a monthly salary, thus blurring the distinction between live-in and live-out workers. Such employers did not pay any recruiting agency or government fees, and therefore paid higher salaries.

In Jordan and Lebanon, the Bangladeshi migrant communities have a long history and well-established networks. Regarding domestic

3 The word *samaj* roughly translates as moral society as enforced by local power holders.

workers in Lebanon, one non-governmental organization (NGO) admitted that Bangladeshi women were less likely to knock at their door to seek assistance as they managed problems on their own. In such communities, recruiting agencies play a smaller role as seasoned migrants often do the recruiting and bring new migrants often on a free visa.

The recruiting agencies visited by the researcher, who was taken as a potential employer, did not recommend employing a Bangladeshi maid, advertising Ethiopians, Ugandans (who spoke English), or other nationalities instead. Filipinas were advertised as the best but were recognized as being too expensive for most employers. In advertising domestic workers of certain nationalities, or “colour”, recruiting agencies established a ranking not devoid of business interests. While the language often used had racist overtones, the nationality of the maid proposed also signalled the perceived social rank of the customer.

The second part of the report focuses on the 20 days of fieldwork that was carried out in Lebanon and Jordan in April 2022. The objective was to record alterations in the living and employment conditions of migrant labourers over the three and a half years since the initial study undertaken in 2018–19. Significant changes emerged due to disruptions brought about by the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and Lebanon’s concurrent political and economic turmoil. The pandemic had a worldwide impact on migrant labour, curbing mobility and resulting in job losses. Lebanon’s added complications included a banking system failure, currency devaluation, and the 2020 Beirut port explosion.

The study delves into how migrant workers navigated these issues in both countries despite the short fieldwork period imposing certain limitations. The research encompasses interviews with returning workers and their families, offering insights into their experiences. The research team revisited locations from the previous investigation, conducting interviews with migrant laborers, International Labour Organization personnel, diplomats and making visits to garment factories in Jordan to evaluate the repercussions of the pandemic.

Several key points emerge from this research. Firstly, during and after the pandemic, migrant

women fared better than migrant men. Women, particularly those in domestic and caregiving roles, were more likely to retain their jobs and receive full salaries. In contrast, men faced extended periods of unemployment, and some relied on the income of their working wives for survival.

Jordan and Lebanon, while different in terms of migration history, share a high proportion of migrant women, with women dominating the Bangladeshi migrant workforce in these countries. These women often display remarkable independence and engage in various activities, from recruitment to domestic work. In addition, lower migration costs provided women with greater mobility, allowing them to leave the country and migrate elsewhere. However, many men found themselves burdened by the high costs of their initial migration and outstanding loans, discouraging them from seeking opportunities elsewhere.

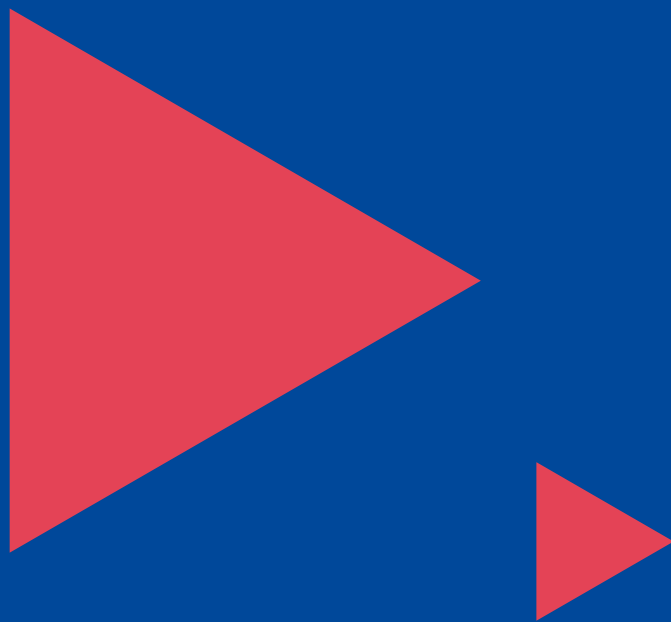
The job market experienced various shocks of different natures, including a notable reduction in the Bangladeshi migrant population in both Jordan and Lebanon. The domestic worker sector in Jordan saw a significant decline following a highly publicized crime involving a Bangladeshi girl, damaging the reputation of Bangladeshi women. They were gradually replaced by workers from other nationalities.

The report also highlights the role of free visas and other arrangements within the *kafala* system. These arrangements, including free visas, exist in a legal gray area and are a contentious subject regarding their legality. Such agreements often benefit both domestic workers and sponsors, enhancing the professionalization of domestic work and task efficiency. However, they are not universally accepted and are criticized by some authorities.

In conclusion, this report offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers, particularly women, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It underscores the need for objective inquiries and reliable reporting to protect job markets and support these workers. Additionally, it highlights the unique characteristics of Jordan and Lebanon as destinations for women and the complexities of the *kafala* system’s various arrangements.

► Part 1

Migration pathways from Bangladesh to Jordan and Lebanon (2018–19)



1. Introduction

The purpose of this section of the study is to explore the working and living conditions of Bangladeshi women who have migrated to Jordan and Lebanon. The aim is to trace their trajectories starting with their circumstances prior to migration, their reasons to migrate and to track their experiences abroad.

In Jordan, Bangladeshi women migrants currently work in garment factories located in qualifying industrial zones (QIZs) and as domestic workers. The first type of workers migrate on company visas and the latter on nominal visas. In Lebanon, these migrant women are issued nominal visas for domestic work, while Bangladeshi male migrants generally migrate on company visas. This report does not cover QIZs in Jordan because the topic is complex and would need a separate study of its own. However, many women (and men) entered Jordan as garment workers and stayed on after their contracts had ended, their factories closed down, or their employment was terminated (for example, after some workers participated in a strike). These workers constitute an important population still living and working in Jordan. Even though company visas cannot be transferred to nominal visas, some women have switched from one type of occupation to the other. Subsequently, they may or may not have regularized their situation.

Migrant workers' trajectories often comprise a succession of jobs with periods of illegal status followed by regularization. Attention is given here to the strategies pursued, the various "arrangements" made, liberties taken, risks incurred, and the means used to maximize income in countries where the official wages are low even by Bangladesh's standards.

In relation to other destinations and in terms of absolute numbers of migrants, Jordan and Lebanon have lost importance over the years.

In 2018, data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) in Bangladesh indicates that Jordan is a destination for only 8.9 per cent and Lebanon for only 1.2 per cent of women migrants (table 1). A number of conditions in both sending and receiving countries explain this state of affairs. On the sending side, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between governments of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter Saudi Arabia) and Bangladesh in February 2015 resulted in the lowering of migration costs for women and a wide availability of visas for Saudi Arabia. Thus, Saudi Arabia became the first choice of destination for Bangladeshi women. On the other hand, following a dramatic event, Jordan stopped issuing visas to Bangladeshi women for domestic work in October 2017. The ban was lifted a year later, but the demand for Bangladeshi maids did not recover to its former level as other nationalities had been recruited in the meantime. The migration of women to Lebanon diminished for other reasons.

The government of Bangladesh's records count departures but not the number of women and men actually living and working in a given country. In other words, they measure the flows but not the stocks. As pointed out earlier, migrants do not necessarily leave after their contract ends, and migrants from Bangladesh in Jordan and Lebanon are characterized by relatively high numbers of undocumented workers. The Bangladesh embassy in Jordan estimates that there are 200,000 Bangladeshi migrants in the country. The figure for Lebanon is 150,000. In Jordan, women are said to make up about 80 per cent of the Bangladeshi migrant population whereas in Lebanon, they constitute about half.

Even though Jordan and Lebanon are no longer major destinations for Bangladeshi migrants,

► **Table 1. Major destinations of women labour migration from Bangladesh, 2013–18 (in percentage)**

Destination/ Year	2013 (%)	2014 (%)	2015 (%)	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)
Saudi Arabia	167 (0.3)	13 (0.02)	20 952 (20.2)	68 286 (57.8)	83 354 (68.4)	73 713 (72.5)
Jordan	21 243 (37.7)	20 134 (26.5)	21 776 (21.0)	22 689 (19.2)	19 872 (16.3)	9 100 (8.9)
Lebanon	10 750 (19.1)	11 990 (15.8)	8 782 (8.5)	2 450 (2.1)	1 642 (1.3)	1 207 (1.2)
UAE	13 710 (24.3)	23 214 (30.5)	24 307 (23.4)	5 151 (4.4)	3 272 (2.7)	2 427 (2.4)
Oman	6 068 (10.8)	11 584 (15.2)	16 980 (16.4)	12 897 (10.9)	9 199 (7.5)	11 034 (10.9)
Qatar	2 100 (3.7)	6 452 (8.5)	8 642 (8.3)	5 381 (4.6)	3 209 (2.6)	3 196 (3.1)
Others	2 362 (4.2)	2 620 (3.5)	2 279 (2.2)	1 234 (1.0)	1 377 (1.1)	1 018 (1.0)
Total	56 400 (100.0)	76 007 (100.0)	103 718 (100.0)	118 088 (100.0)	121 925 (100.0)	101 695 (100.0)
Women as % of total migration	13.8	18.7	15.6	12.1	13.4	13.9

Source: BMET (2019).

they are particularly interesting sites to study. The exceptionally high proportion of women combined with the relative freedom and safety to circulate in public places allows for lifestyles and gender dynamics not found in other countries in the Middle East.

Qatar is a better country for us in terms of pay, but for freedom of movement and lifestyle, I much prefer Lebanon. Qatar is empty. You don't even find a dog on the streets—only sand and more sand everywhere. To buy a packet of biscuits, you need a car. There is no life.

— Asma (24 years old, unmarried; she spent 10 years abroad.)

My husband worked in Malaysia before. Our marriage was arranged on the phone, my daughter was conceived when he came on a visit, and I brought her up alone. I'd had enough of this life. I did not want my husband to return to Malaysia on his own. We came to Lebanon because we can both work and live together.

— Shahida (23 years old; she was married at 14 and arrived in Lebanon in December 2018 on a free visa.)

Bangladesh is a country where men have historically dominated cross-border labour migration to the point of a near monopoly. For many years, the Bangladeshi government adopted restrictive measures and at times imposed a total ban on women crossing borders. However, the year 2015 marked a new turn in this policy, not only allowing but positively encouraging women to migrate. The radical change made disturbed more than one group. At the destination, a majority of men originating from districts where male migration has been entrenched for generations – Brahmanbaria, Cumilla, Feni, Noakhali or Sylhet – have been notably very critical of women's presence abroad. Positioning themselves as national flag-bearers, they blame women for damaging the reputation of the country.

2. The research

2.1 Timing

Fieldwork in Jordan and Lebanon was conducted in two phases, adding up to two and a half months, with 36 days in Jordan and 41 days in Lebanon. The first phase ran from 18 October to 26 November 2018, and the second phase from 14 February to 25 March 2019. To complement this fieldwork, the Drishti Research Centre team conducted investigations in Bangladesh, focusing on locations known to have a high incidence of women labour migration, such as Singair and Chonpara of the Mankigonj and Narayangonj districts.

2.2 Steps and research methods deployed

Considering the limited time available for the research, choices had to be made and opportunities seized while following certain guidelines and principles. Meeting migrant women in their working and living spaces and conversing with them were priorities from the start. Case histories could be written up, some rich and elaborate, others patchier, depending on the circumstances of the encounter. Meeting with government officials, recruiting agencies and other actors would come as a second step.

The adoption of anthropological guidelines and principles was combined with a personal determination to challenge the (dis)regard and the (mis)representation that migrant women have long suffered in a society that refused to legitimize, let alone acknowledge, women as respectable migrants and as workers. “Unprotected” women on the move have either been seen as necessarily victimized and/or morally depraved, the two outcomes often merging into one. A prolific circulation of stories on the woes of migrant women reinforced

the injunction that “virtuous” and respectable women stay at home. Being attentive to the way migrant women told their stories and recognizing them as the subjects of their lives was a way to challenge and root out long-held prejudices.

The fieldwork was concentrated in Amman and Beirut, the capitals of Jordan and Lebanon respectively. Unlike the case with some journalists, meetings were not sought with women repatriated from shelter homes. Several media outlets in Bangladesh have recently made it a point of reporting on women who spent time in shelter homes, meeting them as they landed at airports in the country. Stories of abuse could then be collected along with photos of broken limbs and scarred flesh for greater impact. These reports have produced very negative perceptions among the general public to the point that the topic of this research on women labour migrants was regularly (mis)understood to be about victims of trafficking. Migrant women regularly complained about this (mis)representation of them.

2.3 Research sites

The research sites where migrant women and men were interviewed are described here. These are important as they largely determined the encounter, kinds of questions that could be raised, duration of the meeting, and quality of the exchange.

2.3.1 Shops run by Bangladeshis

The familiar vegetables on display were a sure sign of a Bangladeshi-run shop. These were my starting points for where migrant workers could be met and interviewed. In Jordan, such shops were concentrated in Al Balad (Amman Old Town). Here, nine shops were identified, and regular visits were made to seven of them.

I also visited shops in Raghadan, Mahatta and Jobel Joffah, all neighbourhoods of Amman. In Marka, two small shops that opened late in the afternoon, after the closure of the factories, were identified. In Lebanon, the main concentration of Bangladeshi-run shops was in Sabra and Daoura, where wholesalers also supplied to smaller shops in Hamra, Al Basta, Naba'a, Karm-el-Zeitoun and other locations. Each of these shops served specific neighbourhoods.

These shops sold rice, dal, frozen fish, spices, betel nut, *paan* leaves, mustard oil, beauty products and many other items. Saris, salwar-kameez-dupatta suits and kurta tops often hung in a corner, adding to the "exotic" character of the shop. Entrepreneurs, who were themselves migrant workers, cultivated vegetables with "seeds from Bangladesh" and delivered fresh produce once a week before the start of the weekend. Shops were particularly busy on the weekly holiday, Friday in Jordan and Sunday in Lebanon, when migrant workers came to buy food, socialize, share news and seek a wide range of services. The following is an extract from my diary and gives an idea of the kind of the services a shop could offer and the information a researcher could obtain.

Two girls enter Kalam's⁴ shop. They had decided to return to Bangladesh and had come for advice on how to proceed – they were told they could find help in Al Balad. One girl is very thin and wears a cap over her cropped hair. She is 19 years old and has been in Jordan for 3 years. She said her health deteriorated some time ago, and she was not recovering. Her friend wants to go home because her mother is very sick. Both are undocumented. Kalam calls an Arab "friend" who will take them to the police station. He tells them that they should be ready to spend 15 to 20 days in jail and then they will be deported. Kalam helps them with the last of their shopping, suggesting items they could take in their suitcase when they go home.

— Notes taken in Amman, 23 October 2018

The range of services that these shops could offer was astounding. In one shop in Sabra (Beirut), the following things were available on Sundays: a large range of grocery items, a restaurant serving Bengali food, a tailor, a barber, a "*daktar*" who treated patients and sold medicines, a man who repaired TV sets, and others whose services were not clear.

Shopkeepers operate under local sponsors (*kafeels*) who may not be the owner of the premises. They own the merchandise they are selling and run their own business. Selling goods and services to one's own community is (tacitly) accepted, provided that the shops do not take local customers from local businesses. In October 2018 in Raghadan (Amman), three shopkeepers were arrested by the Jordanian police and kept in jail for seven days on the grounds that shops should be run by Jordanians. Their release required the payment of a fine of 3,000 Jordanian dinars each. One shopkeeper subsequently employed an old Palestinian man – Raghadan being a Palestinian camp – to negotiate with the police should a crisis arise again.

In March 2019 in Beirut, the only Bangladeshi man holding a valid import license was on the run as food inspectors reportedly discovered packets of dry fish with maggots and out-of-date merchandise in his establishment. The Bangladesh embassy said it did not interfere in such matters, and shopkeepers had to abide by the law of the country. In this case, the Lebanese police had entered an enclave that shopkeepers had described to me as "safe" and not under police scrutiny three months earlier. These neighbourhoods were either Palestinian, Hezbollah-controlled (Sabra, Al Basta) or Armenian (Karm-el-Zeitoun). I admit that my understanding of effective territorial control in both Lebanon and Jordan remained patchy. Nonetheless, these events suggested that migrant workers' shops were vulnerable to power shifts or government campaigns over which the migrants had little control.

Most shopkeepers were men with a few notable exceptions where women managed their own shops or worked alongside their husbands. The women who managed shops – often looking

4 Except for officials, all the names in this report have been changed.

after a small child as well – showed remarkable confidence. They dressed casually, as if they were in their home, and attracted women who came to chat. One woman breastfed her child while serving clients, an act difficult to imagine happening in Bangladesh.

On the weekends, the shops provided a formidable window of opportunities to observe – if not always access – migrants of different ages, looks and circumstances. Shopkeepers were usually busy serving customers at those times and had little time to answer the questions of a researcher but for this, I returned at more quiet times. Shopkeepers were well-informed about their clients while being careful not to say anything that would harm their business. Some of them became valuable allies in my research, for example, when they explained to possible subjects that I meant no harm and that it was safe for a woman to invite me to her lodgings to pursue a conversation.

I was often disappointed by women's fleeting appearances in the shops. One Sunday in Sabra, hardly any women came in. I later found out that a message had been circulated on WhatsApp announcing a police raid, and many women had not ventured out as they were undocumented. At a vast Sunday gathering of migrant workers in Daoura (Beirut), Philippine, Ethiopian, Kenyan, Nigerian, Nepali and Sri Lankan women and men enjoyed their day off, but relatively few Bangladeshi women were seen. A woman living nearby commented:

The police entered a house recently in this neighbourhood and arrested 25 women. They had never gone inside homes before. I only go out for work and to buy food. We have to be careful.

— Shahida (35 years old, undocumented worker; 24 March 2019)

Apart from being undocumented migrants, there could be other reasons why Bangladeshi women were less present in public places. It may have to do with growing up in a purdah culture and women perpetuating habits acquired in Bangladesh, whereby the streets belong to the men, and a woman does not go out unless she has a specific reason. Ethiopian and Philippine women were highly visible on Fridays (in Jordan) or Sundays (in Lebanon) as they attended

religious services, which was not the case for Bangladeshi women.

2.3.2 The street

Engaging in conversation in Bangla on the street caused surprise, amusement and curiosity as I do not look Bengali. The reply often came in Arabic – which I do not understand – and it often took some time to establish communication. If a woman had no time or was suspicious, then the encounter could be brief. Nonetheless, street conversations were often fruitful, even when short. Live-in domestic workers sent on errands or those who were allowed to spend some time outside for recreation provided useful information. In Zahlé (Beka Valley, Lebanon), a young woman standing on the street explained that she was waiting for the agency car after completing a two-hour cleaning job in a restaurant. The agency driver would either bring her back to her *kafeel* or take her to perform a similar task elsewhere. It had been agreed that she would work this way for four hours a day and six days a week for US\$ 200 a month. The *kafeel* was party to the arrangement that allowed the young woman to more than double her salary. We shall come back on the various formulae adopted to increase the income of live-in domestic workers when the *kafeel* cannot afford to pay more.

Some women I met on the street invited me to their lodgings. This occurred only with live-out domestic workers. I accepted similar invitations from men also.

2.3.3 Workplaces

Granting that private homes where women perform domestic work were very difficult to access, every opportunity was taken to observe other workplaces. A woman I first met on the street in Amman invited me to her lodgings and after several meetings, she invited me to visit the informal factory she worked at in Marka. It had no signage outside and my “friend” had to lead me in. She did not know the name of the factory that employed her, explaining that it had recently moved from Al Balad to Marka, and that she had followed the owner who appreciated her work. The medium-sized factory (about 50 workers) produced men's trousers and jackets. Most employees were Arab speakers. I was allowed to observe the shop floor and speak at leisure with

the four Bangladeshi women working there. One had a work permit (as a domestic worker) and the others were undocumented, a situation that did not bother the factory owner. The Bangladeshi women had previously worked in large factories located in various QIZs, and they compared their present situation advantageously to their former jobs.

Fieldwork was also conducted in the ladies' toilet of a luxury shopping mall in Beirut where 30 Bangladeshi women were assigned cleaning duties. All were locally recruited and were undocumented. Cleaning companies in Lebanon officially employ only men. A few days before my visit, a police raid had been conducted, and three women had been arrested. Alerted in advance by security, the others had time to run away. They were back at work the following day, estimating that police raids were unlikely to be carried out two days in a row.

I also found women working in shops and in restaurants, some of them serving the public. When these shops and restaurants were located in "ethnic enclaves", the police did not interfere. Finally, young women were interviewed in Hamra (Beirut) who worked as chambermaids in two international hotels. I visited one of the hotels as a potential client and asked to see a room. The young Bangladeshi woman I had met earlier in a shop was also present and was wearing the hotel uniform. She was stunned to see me. Smelling danger, she refused to meet me again. The hotel manager admitted to employing Bangladeshis but did not specify employing women. It would be legal to employ men as "cleaners", but it would probably not be the same to employ women as chambermaids.

2.3.4 Lodgings

An invitation to enter the lodgings of migrant women and men was always welcome as there was much to observe: how single women, single men or couples organized the space of a room or an apartment, the density of occupants, the equipment (fridge, TV, heater), the bathroom, the kitchen, the comings and goings with work shifts. The Bangladeshis generally lived with other Bangladeshis. In Amman, many lived in areas that had once been Palestinian camps (*mokhayem*). Often, floors had been added and extensions built to existing structures in an unplanned and hazardous way and rented to

migrant workers. They Palestinians had now mostly left.

In Beirut, renting a flat and dividing each room up for a specific number of occupants was done by migrant workers seeking to make a little profit or at least break even and cover their own accommodation costs. In Al Basta, a Bangladeshi woman in her forties had just rented a four-room flat for US\$ 1100 per month. She had already found 13 men and 2 couples. With four more tenants, she would break even and with seven more, she would make a profit. The monthly rent was standard for the neighbourhood: US\$ 50 for single men sharing a bed and US\$ 150 for couples who had to provide their own bed. The landlady, who would be responsible for maintaining order, said that she would only rent to men or to couples as single women were likely to create problems. In Hamra, rents were particularly high, and women paid a huge price for a tiny space. I visited some lodgings that looked more like cages with hardly any space to stand up. Sources of employment were available nearby and all the "cages" were occupied.

Interviews conducted in workers' lodgings were more in-depth, and the conversation could extend over several hours. The timing and the number of participants were not in my control, and I was their guest. Ethnographic research methods were adapted to these environments and circumstances. The interview comprised a mix of observations on living and working conditions combined with interviews of variable lengths and depths depending on the available opportunities. The case histories of migrant women were (re)constituted as fully and as faithfully as possible, although some remained incomplete and patchy. A uniform format was loosely followed. While questions were prepared in advance, attention was also given to issues that mattered to the interviewees, respecting their hesitations and silences and accepting that some questions would remain unanswered.

A tape recorder and camera were not used much. A pen and a notebook felt more comfortable, even if pulling out the rudimentary equipment could raise suspicion and interrupt the flow of the conversation, a risk to be weighed against the necessity of writing down important points that could otherwise be forgotten. In Jordan, for a few days, fieldwork was conducted with Nadia Afrin or Daphné Coillard, both of whom brought

with them knowledge and insights and took part in note taking.

In addition to migrant workers case histories, formal interviews were conducted with:

- Bangladeshi embassy officials
- International Labour Organization (ILO) officials
- Recruiting agencies (four in Jordan and two in Lebanon)
- Non-governmental organizations ((NGOs) Tamkeen in Jordan and Amel in Lebanon)
- Local researchers and journalists
- Members of the public, some of whom were sponsors of migrant workers

2.4 Including men in the research

Although the main focus of the research was on women, it was neither possible nor advisable to ignore migrant men in a study aiming to capture gender dynamics. As mentioned, male shopkeepers and the men hanging around their premises were important guides to the Bangladeshi migrant communities, providing valuable information on their history and on the wider context in the destination country. Men also offered their views on their country's women working in Jordan and Lebanon, pointing out that they mostly came from poor families and had histories of misery and hardship for which there could be sympathy. However, some men were indignant about their presence, complaining that migrant women damaged "our" reputation and the image of "our" country. Soiling the country's reputation mostly revolved around women's sexuality. "When I take a taxi and the driver tells me, 'I had one of your women for 5 Jordanian dinars or 10 dinars. Their rate is very cheap.' Can you imagine how I feel? Tell our prime minister to stop allowing our women to migrate," commented one angry Bangladeshi man.

Some men who had previously worked in Saudi Arabia saw it as a reference point for a good Muslim society and were disturbed by women's free circulation on the streets of Amman or Beirut. Jordan and Lebanon were "bad" countries in their eyes. Needless to say, hardly any migrant

women shared this opinion. Outbursts of indignation did not, however, concern all men. Yet, the conviction with which some pronounced damning judgments about migrant women was chilling. How can one explain such harsh judgement? Most men admitted that migrant women earned more than they did while the cost of their migration was lower, resulting in higher benefits for women. "Poor" women were now getting "rich". The relative advantage of migration for each sex had been reversed, and for some men, this signalled the world turning upside down.

Some men explained that their migration was a necessary passage in the making of a man, the ultimate test of manhood:

Our families love us too much. They spoil us and cannot discipline their sons. That is why they send us abroad, so that we can learn how to work hard.

— 28-year-old unmarried man from Brahmanbaria interviewed in Beirut, February 2019

In other words, families were prepared to invest in their sons' migration and wait for a delayed reward. One must admit that such a construction was put to a hard test in the circumstances prevailing in Lebanon in late 2018 and early 2019. While a few men managed to make a financial success of their migration, many were frustrated and disillusioned. With low salaries and high costs of migration, men would require several years to reap benefits, let alone recover their initial investment. Economically, the migratory project was hard to justify. Yet, young men kept coming to Lebanon in 2018.

In Jordan, the majority of Bangladeshi male migrants came from Cumilla and in Lebanon, the majority came from Brahmanbaria, two districts characterized by a high level of male migration and negligible women's migration. In these districts, male migration was a normal affair. But even in districts with a high level of women's migration, the pressure to send a son or a husband abroad was strong. Cases were documented in Manikganj where veteran migrant women gave in to social and family pressure to send a son or a husband abroad even though they doubted there would be any positive outcome of the experience and were later proved right in their apprehensions. Strategies and

discourses around labour migration express deeply ingrained gender views and ideologies that appear remarkably resistant to change even if they may clash with economic realities.

2.5 Plan of the report

Chapter 3 presents the data extracted from interviews conducted with migrant women and men. Some information, such as legal status, age, educational level or number of years abroad, was easily organized for tabulation. Other information described the unstable or ambiguous features of migrant women's lives, such as name changes or marital status. These were not tabulated to avoid fixing what was changing and complex. Chapter 4 highlights the particularities of Jordan with a considerable number of runaway garment workers still working in the country and the situation prevailing after an amnesty for undocumented workers was declared in February 2019. In this chapter, the case study of Aisha, who migrated

at the age of 13 to work in a garment factory, illustrates many of the issues relating to migrant women in Jordan. Chapter 5 highlights the particularities of Lebanon, showing how the number of Bangladeshi women increased after the 2006 Lebanon War and reduced after 2015 while men continued to arrive as "cleaners", altering the sex ratio. The policies of sending and receiving governments are also critically reviewed.

Chapter 6 discusses runaway maids, the reasons why some of them leave their employers, how they escape and who assists them. Chapter 7 describes the practices emanating from the *kafala* system with its offshoots and ramifications, including the free visa system. Chapter 8 describes recruiting agencies for maids and the ranking and stereotyping they practice according to nationality and "race". Finally, Chapter 9 details women's strategies to increase their income comparing two cases with different outcomes.

3. Features of interviewed migrants

The case histories of migrant workers often trace relatively long careers with changes of status and circumstances and destinations and outcomes, and such lives in movement are best presented through narratives. The information that could be quantified is presented in this chapter. It was collected from women mostly living in Amman and Beirut and largely earning as live-out domestic workers, although we discovered other occupations as well. The men interviewed also resided in these two cities.

3.1 High proportion of undocumented workers

Of the 84 women and 44 men interviewed, 44.53 per cent said that they were undocumented (table 2 and figure 1). This could be an underestimate as no one is likely to declare being undocumented if it were not the case. Women are more undocumented than men, and

women in Lebanon are the highest proportion of undocumented workers. Again, these figures should be interpreted with caution as the numbers are small and live-in domestic workers are underrepresented.

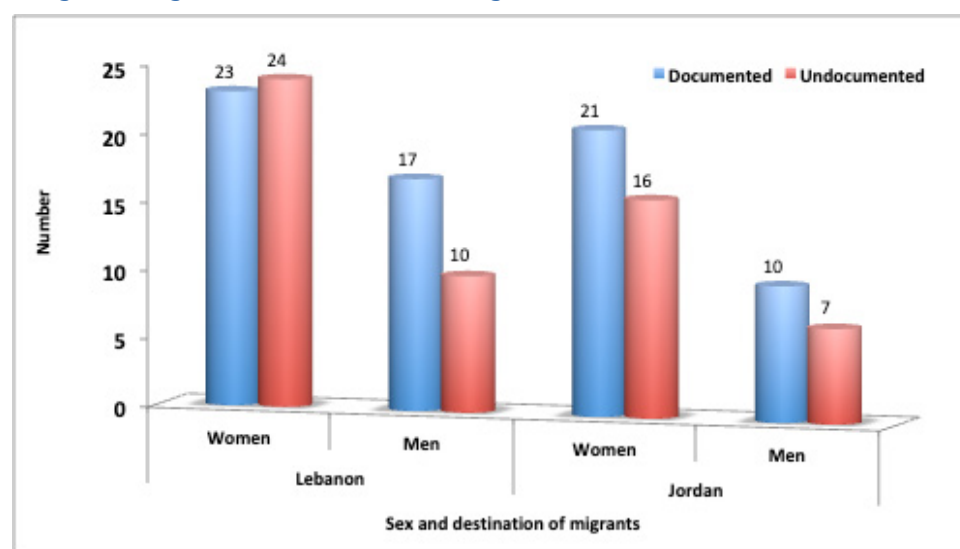
► **Table 2. Legal status of interviewed migrants by sex and country**

Legal status	Lebanon		Jordan		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Documented	23	17	21	10	71
Undocumented	24	10	16	7	57
Total	47	27	37	17	128

Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19)..

The case histories in this report illustrate the strategies adopted by undocumented migrant workers to avoid being caught, including taking on a one-month engagement as live-in domestic

► **Figure 1. Legal status of interviewed migrants**



Source: Author's analysis.

worker, avoiding certain modes of transport and refusing jobs in distant locations. Being caught did not necessarily lead to arrest, and some women talked about paying the police a bribe and being set free. For example, Kona is a singer who was promised a job in Dubai in her profession, but she was sent to Jordan as a domestic worker instead. She ran away from the employer within two months and worked as a live-out domestic worker for six years before taking advantage of the amnesty to go back home.

I was arrested twice. Once, I had to pay 600 dinars, another time I paid 200 dinars. One policeman took me aside and asked me how much money I had. I gave all I had, and he let me go.

Women without papers have been able to work for several years without being repatriated. The uncertainty may have caused them stress at first but with time, most women learned to live with the situation quite well, accepting the transient nature of their life abroad and making the best of it while it lasted. The main problem was not being able to go home to Bangladesh until they were ready to quit.

3.2 Age on passport: Approximation and manipulation

Many women did not know how old they were. Calendar years did not define the sense of who they were. Marriage, motherhood, years of schooling, jobs held were better determining factors. The government of Bangladesh setting an age limit for migrant women – between 25 and 45⁵ – sent a message to workers, although the rule is easily bypassed. In the interviews, it further complicated matters. When women were asked their age, it wasn't clear if they gave the age on their passport or the age they thought they were. The time to untangle the confusion was not always available to the researcher.

With this caveat, it is clear that many women currently working in Jordan and Lebanon first migrated at a very young age. A substantial number were 14–15 years old. Alimon said she was 24 years old, and she claimed to have worked abroad for 10 years. She spent the first six years in Lebanon as a live-in maid, then took up a job in Qatar for two years and returned to Lebanon on a free visa where she had been working for the last three years. We must thus conclude that she first migrated at the age of 14.

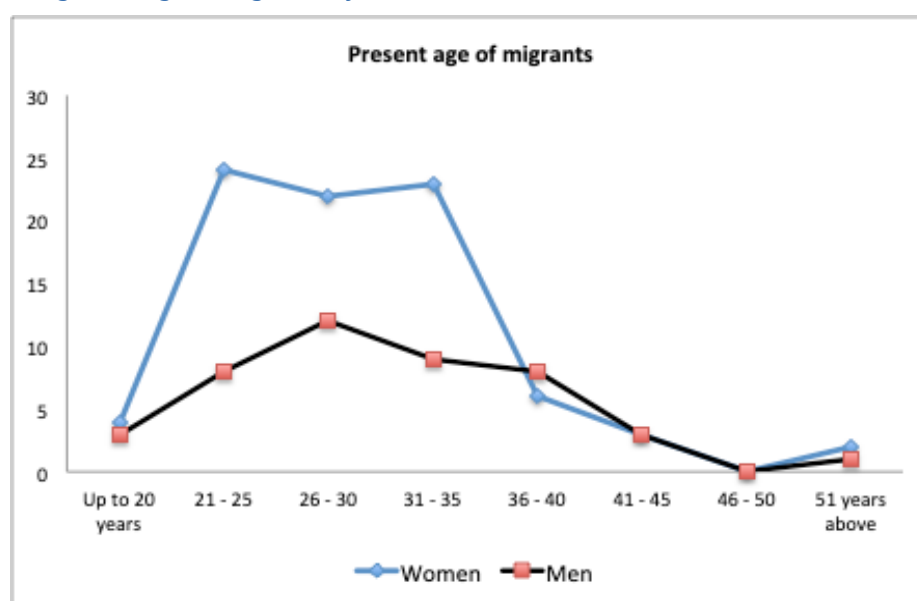
► Table 3. Age of migrant by sex and country

Present age	Lebanon		Jordan		Total	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Up to 20 years	2	3	2	0	4	3
21–25	13	7	11	1	24	8
26–30	11	7	11	5	22	12
31–35	14	4	9	5	23	9
36–40	3	3	3	5	6	8
41–45	2	2	1	1	3	3
46–50	0	0	0	0	0	0
51 years above	2	1	0	0	2	1
Total	47	27	37	17	84	44

Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19)..

5 The guideline issued by the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment on 28 August 2018 further restricted the age of eligible women migrants to between 25 and 38 years.

► Figure 2. Age of migrants by sex



Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

Her sister, Joya, came to Lebanon roughly at the same age with a nominal visa as a live-in maid. The two sisters shared memories of Joya's employer treating her like a child. It was then safe for them to tell these stories of which they were quite proud. Their youth and living with the same employer for several years had allowed an immersion and a socialization into the local culture. They spoke Arabic fluently, and Joya had even learned some French. In retrospect, the two sisters considered their early start as a privilege, while many (including myself) would think of risk and vulnerability. Governmental attempts to increase the age of migration for women may have had a limited effect, but it has also led to more manipulation. Research showed how easily

fake documents could be produced at a little extra cost. I shall not describe these mechanisms here, and let it only be said that computing the ages the women gave, or the estimates I wrote down, should be taken as indicative only.

3.3 Low educational level of women

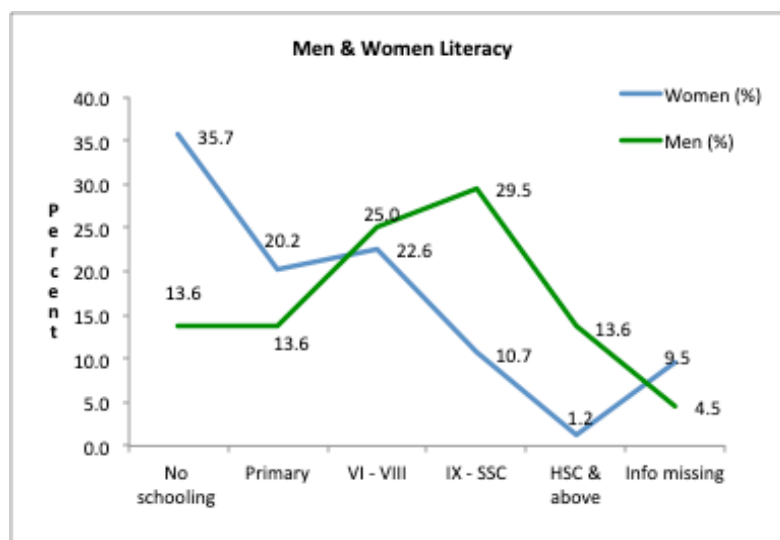
Illiteracy stands at 35.7 per cent for women and 13.7 per cent for men (table 4 and figure 3). The higher illiteracy rate for women could be read as an indication of their poorer economic background, and this fits with the narratives collected from several women.

► Table 4. Educational level of migrants by sex and country

Educational level	Lebanon		Jordan		Total	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
No schooling	19	4	11	2	30	6
Up to primary	8	4	9	2	17	6
Classes 6–8	10	5	9	6	19	11
Class 9–10	7	8	2	5	9	13
Class 12 and above	1	4	0	2	1	6
Info missing	2	2	6	0	8	2
Total	47	27	37	17	84	44

Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

► Figure 3. Education level by sex of interviewed migrants



Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

3.4 The game of changing names

When a woman was asked her name, the question arose about whether she gave the name on her (latest) passport, the name her parents had given her or the name her employer called her. Most migrant women have grown accustomed to using several names. Their employer may not be able to pronounce their Bengali name or may not want to bother with an unfamiliar appellation, calling them Fatima or some other common Arabic name instead. Women absconding from their employers systematically changed their names to avoid being caught. Women deported after staying illegally were barred from re-entering the country for five years. Those who returned earlier than this period obtained a new passport with a different personal name and other details such as their father's name, date of birth, address, etc. In other words, their papers underwent a change of identity. Men changed their identity in the same way.⁶

Women involved in sex work were champions at the game of changing names. In November 2018, I interviewed a woman who was engaged in this

profession. She gave me a name – I shall call her Mina. On my second visit, I heard that she had been trapped by journalists who secretly filmed her while negotiating the price with a client, and the video was later shown on a major Arabic TV channel (and was a great embarrassment to the Bangladeshi community). In the video, Mina was recognizable, but she had given a different name to the potential client. She later told journalists that she was married to a Lebanese man and her friend – Bedona who became Ruby – had a Punjabi husband. Both women were known in the Bangladeshi community in Daoura, and both had Bangladeshi “husbands”. Following this event, Mina escaped, and I could not trace her. I wondered then under which name I should look for her the next time.

Migrants abroad are often identified by their district and sub-district of origin. The question “*Apnar bari ar desh kothai?* (Where is your home?)” often starts a conversation. I left for Jordan and Lebanon equipped with names, addresses and phone numbers collected from migrant women who had come home to Bangladesh on a visit and were preparing to return, but I could not trace these women in the destination.

⁶ In February 2019, some men were interested in taking advantage of the amnesty for illegal migrants, but they were unwilling to wait for five years before returning to Jordan. A shopkeeper, whose shop is simply a front for other businesses, guaranteed that they could obtain a new passport with a new identity at the cost of 70,000 Bangladeshi takas. Modern technology had rendered the issue of such passports more complicated but not impossible.

These stories show some of the difficulties in following individual women migrants because migrants are usually on the move (and some more than others). In these circumstances, the research techniques commonly used with a more stable population, such as the triangulation of information, were impossible to apply.

Changes of name have limitations, though. When live-out domestic workers build a clientele for whatever services they offer, a stable identity and a reliable means of communicating with customers are essential. We have seen that losing one's phone, or being the victim of theft, could have disastrous consequences for women earning their living this way.

3.5 "False" and "real" marriages

To enter the marital status of migrant women into neat little boxes: unmarried, married, separated or divorced would impose a rigidity that belies the reality of their lives abroad, and I shall abstain from such construction. The *samaj* (society) at home clearly rests on "fixing" marital statuses, and these structure society in fundamental ways. Bengali society has been organized on patrilineal principles, with marriage being quasi-universal and virilocal, with women leaving their fathers' homes to integrate into their in-laws' homes upon marriage. Child marriage was, and still is, widely practiced. Simultaneous polygamy has been permitted for Muslim men (under certain conditions) but not for Muslim women. Sexually promiscuous women have been ostracized from the *samaj*. Structurally, they belong to the brothel. The "fixing" of marital status determines a women's place in the family and the *samaj*, and this still holds in the midst of societal transformations.

Many women in Jordan and Lebanon have entered temporary marriages. Some took the freedom of having a "husband" abroad and a husband at home. Men do the same with "wives", but this is seen as a lesser offense. Words are missing to name these (new) types of relationships. The Arabic word "*habibi*" has entered the migrants' vocabulary, but its meaning is unstable. I asked a Bangladeshi woman known to be living with an Indian man how her *habibi* was, and she felt insulted. Her Indian partner was her *shami* (husband) she said. After the woman left the shop, her compatriots

commented that she was not "truly" married. People quarrelled about meanings. What is a "true" marriage anyway? Such debates occur at home as well, but a "true" marriage is more clearly spelled out and the social pressure to abide by norms considerably stronger.

Shilpi, a 32-year-old woman, had been in Lebanon for five years and was sharing her life with a Lebanese man five years her junior for the last two years. A few friends were aware of her "marital" situation, and she did not hide it from me. But it was imperative that her mother did not find out. She became very nervous when her cousin announced his impending arrival in Lebanon, and she destroyed all compromising photos. Unknowingly, her cousin was threatening her newly occupied space of freedom and bringing back the (terrifying) judgment of the *samaj* making her an immoral woman, exactly like a prostitute (*noshto meye*).

Shilpi explained that she had been married off at the age of 10, was a mother at 14 and subsequently locked in an exploitative marriage with a husband who terrorized her, grabbed her salary when she worked at a factory, and had affairs with other women. It was him that had sent her to Lebanon. After one year, on hearing that he had taken another wife, she stopped sending him any money and severed the relationship. Her Lebanese *habibi* was sweet in comparison. He paid the rent and for food, and Shilpi cooked and looked after the place. She had kept some clients, controlled her income and regularly sent money to her daughter. Shilpi knew her temporary "husband" would leave one day, and she had never been introduced to his family. Yet, she appreciated the present situation.

More stories of *habibi* relationships were documented in the course of this fieldwork. The arrangement was often seen as a practical one, bringing a little comfort and pleasure in a life of hardship. The women did not see themselves as *noshto meye*. They insisted that they were not prostitutes.

Anwar's baby

One evening, a story raised much interest among the men gathered in a shop one Saturday night in Hamra (Beirut). Among the group was a man called Anwar, and his wife was expecting a baby any day. I extended my congratulations to the soon-to-be father, and shortly after, Anwar departed from the shop. The next day, his old friend Sharif, who also owned the shop, told me that although Anwar had been living in Lebanon for 13 years, he would never be rich. Anwar spent too much on women, defeating the purpose of migration. For five years, he had lived with a woman who had been arrested and deported as she was undocumented. Anwar worked for a cleaning company, and he had valid documents. After his "wife" was deported, he flew home, determined to marry her. His parents were reluctant to accept as a wife for their son a migrant woman (assumed to be of dubious morality), but they finally gave in. Anwar invited the elders and all those that mattered, incurring all the necessary expenses, and the couple was married within the *samaj*. This was a "true" marriage in Sharif's eyes.

Anwar returned to Lebanon and resumed his job with the cleaning company. His wife followed later on a free visa. Having been married within the *samaj*, the couple moved up a notch on the scale of honour and morality, and Sharif regarded this as a positive development. However, having a child so quickly would not help Anwar get rich. Money would be spent for the delivery (without health insurance), his wife would not be able to work for some time and then they would have to pay for childcare.

Sharif followed a different path, using Anwar's story to highlight the wisdom of his own strategy. In Lebanon, he had refrained from relationships with women, had worked hard, and had put his energy in amassing savings and investing at home. He planned to marry a woman with a college education, and his future wife would never migrate. Both men were from Brahmanbaria, but Sharif positioned himself as the true flagbearer of his district and country.

3.6 Duration of stay in the destination

The patterns for the length of a migrant's stay were quite different for Jordan and Lebanon. Few men had recently come to Jordan but as

mentioned earlier, a whole generation arrived in the early 2000s had never left. In Lebanon, men kept migrating as cleaners, and they had outnumbered women from 2015 (see tables 1 and 5).

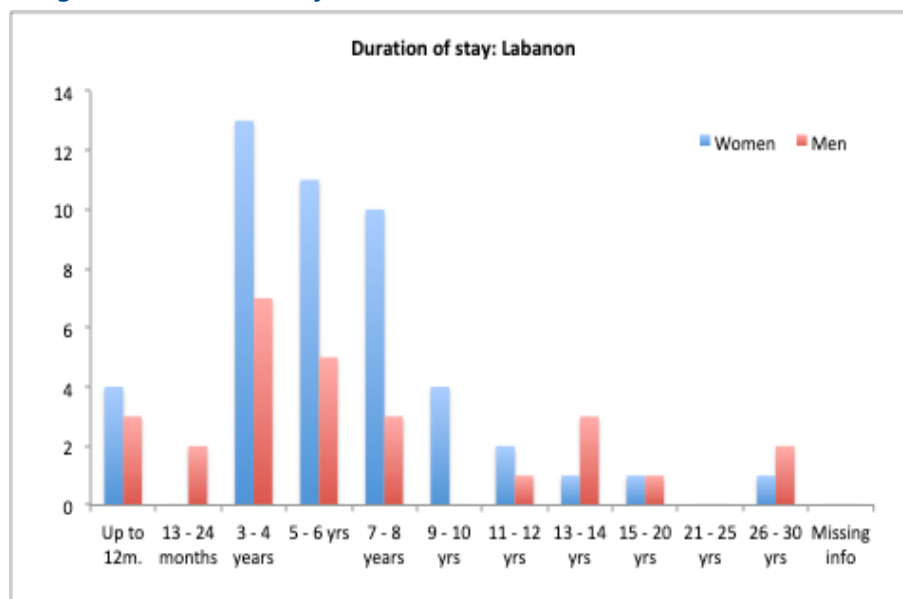
► Table 5. Duration of stay by gender and destination country

Duration	Lebanon		Jordan		Total	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Up to 6 months	3	2	2	0	5	2
7–12 months	1	1	2	0	3	1
13–24 months	0	2	3	1	3	3
3–4 years	13	7	5	0	18	7
5–6 years	11	5	8	5	19	10
7–8 years	10	3	7	1	17	4
9–10 years	4	0	5	1	9	1
11–12 years	2	1	0	1	2	2
13–14 years	1	3	1	5	2	8

Duration	Lebanon		Jordan		Total	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
15–20 years	1	1	1	2	2	3
21–25 years	0	0	0	0	0	0
26–30 years	1	2	0	0	1	2
Missing info	0	0	3	1	3	1
Total	47	27	37	17	84	44

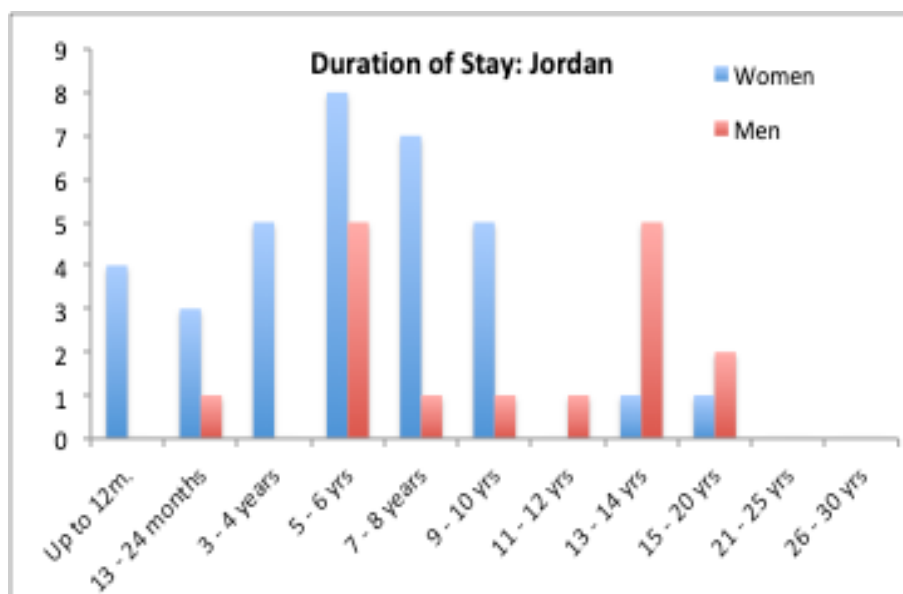
Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

► Figure 4. Duration of stay in Lebanon



Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

► Figure 5. Duration of stay in Jordan



Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

4. Jordan specificities

In the first phase of fieldwork, which lasted from 18 October to 7 November 2018, visits were made to the qualified industrial zones (QIZs) of Al Hasan, Al Dulayl and Sahab. The garment sector in these countries is too important to ignore, and I also wanted to find out about the porosity between sectors – in other words, how and to what extent did workers in QIZ factories move out and take jobs outside. Much has been written about “runaway maids”, and I discovered “runaway garment workers”, an important population which is an integral part of Jordan’s migration history. They became a main focus of the research during my second visit in January 2019.

4.1 Runaway garment workers

Starting in the early 2000s, garment factories located in QIZs recruited men and women from Bangladesh and paid them low salaries. Although men earned more than women, they were the first to quit and seek their fortune elsewhere.

In the beginning, there were more men running away from the factories. Women did not dare to leave and settle alone in a town they did not know. That was 15 years ago. Today, women are not afraid anymore ... Women first came to Jordan to work in garment factories, then they started working in homes ... Today, it has become easier for women ... In Jordan, 90 per cent of the Bangladeshi workers are women. Women earn more than men and that is not good for the men. Men do not find visas easily ... I intend to stay here although nothing is easy for us. There are countries where one can stay, where one can even get the nationality [citizenship]. Here, you can stay as long as you like, but you will get nothing.

— Mahbub (32 years old, married with 1 child, and has spent 15 years in Jordan)

Mahbub also told me his own story.

I came to Jordan in 2003. The cost [of migration] was 70,000 takas. I was sent to a factory in Sahab. The salary was 70 dinars, and I had to pay for my food leaving only 50 dinars to send to my family. That was not enough. When the factory closed down after one year, I stayed in Jordan but quit the QIZ. I worked here and there. That was a difficult time. I did not have papers, and I was afraid of the police. I opened a tailoring shop in Mahatta, but it did not work. I tried a grocery shop with little success. In the end, I came here to Jobel Joffah [a neighbourhood of Amman].

And that is where we met Mahbub in October 2018. The 32-year-old man wearing a beard, a cap and a long Islamic dress ran a grocery shop. In the middle of the interview, he left us to go to the mosque. After he returned to the shop, a client came in and started joking about *habibi*. Mahbub told him to shut up as this was giving us a bad impression of Bangladeshi migrants [we were taking notes]. He regretted that people did as they pleased here, and there was no *samaj*. A pram in the corner suggested that he was probably married and the father of a child, which he confirmed. The pram was empty, and he did not say much about his wife. A sewing machine and some tailoring equipment suggested he still did some tailoring. After living without papers for five years, Mahbub explained that he got a free visa, but he did not explain how he managed it. Now, he renews his work permit every year. It would be difficult to run a grocery shop without such documentation, and the registration of his child would also have required that his

papers were in order. Several interviewees also confirmed that Bangladeshi women and men often first came to Jordan as garment factory workers.

Amena has been living in the country since 2001. Her employer was a Palestinian who owned property in Raghadan, and he suggested that she rent his place. She was the first Bangladeshi to move to the neighbourhood.

When I came to live in Raghadan 17 years ago, there were no Bangladeshis here, only Sri Lankans and Filipinos. They have gone now. Then, the Bangladeshi factory workers who had fled their factory arrived. Many were couples who had met at the factory. Domestic workers started settling here only about five years ago.

— Amena (40 years old, and has spent 22 years in Jordan)

Former garment factory workers were met in several locations. Sadeq (32 years old, studied up to Class VII, hailing from Tangail) lived in Al Balad, the old town in Amman. He worked in a small factory along Syrians, Palestinians and Jordanians making jackets, abayas and chadors and was paid by the piece. A fast worker can earn well, he said, but the work was irregular. He claimed he could earn 600 dinars in a good month. His “wife” intervened, reminding him that she had paid the bills for the last two months as he’d had no work. Pointing to jackets made in China displayed on the pavement, Sadeq commented that Jordan could not compete with the cheaper Chinese jackets.

He did not have work on that day either and was quite depressed. “When there is no work, I take other jobs,” he said. “I also sell second-hand clothes on the pavement [like the many small vendors we saw], and I run away when the police come.” Sadeq had arrived in Jordan in 2004 and had worked for six years in Al Dulayl. He was one of 50 men who had joined a strike to demand higher wages, all of whom were dismissed. “Of my batch, I am the only one still in Jordan,” he said. Sadeq did not have papers and had not visited Bangladesh in 14 years. He lived with Alina, a 25-year-old woman from Faridpur who had come to Jordan five years before I interviewed him on a domestic worker visa, and she had absconded from her employer. Unlike Sadeq, she had been able to regularize

her situation by paying her former *kafeel* 500 dinars to retrieve her passport, and she now renewed her work permit every year. The process of getting a free visa was cheaper and easier for women, and we shall come back to this point.

The largest concentration of former garment workers living illegally in Jordan was found in Marka. This is where I met Mintu who ran a grocery shop at night and worked in a garment factory during the day. He said he did not need a license for the shop because this was Marka, and he opened late. The police did not bother about such shops and did not check undocumented workers either. The shops in Marka became animated and lively in the evenings.

I come from Mymensingh. We are a family of farmers, and I had never worked in a garment factory before. I enrolled in a 15-day training and left for Jordan with big dreams. I still remember my arrival in August 2004. Everything seemed possible then. Fifteen years later, I am stuck here.

— Mintu (38 years old, completed secondary education from Phulpur, Mymensingh)

After working in the QIZ in Al Hasan, Mintu found work in Marka, and this is where he has been living as an undocumented worker ever since. In 15 years, he had not returned to Bangladesh. Mintu had a Bangladeshi “wife” who worked in a factory but having children and establishing a family in their conditions was difficult. He did not say more about this relationship.

In another shop, eight men and two women were purchasing goods or just having a conversation. Pointing at two of the men, one woman declared them *bekar* (not working and not earning). I asked why, and her reply was that they had no skills and were lazy. The men complained about a lack of work, but the women did not share this view. They blamed the men for not finding work. For women, there was enough work. The women acknowledged seasonal variations but on the whole, they were satisfied with the work they were finding. When I pointed out that more women than men now came to work in Jordan, one man burst out in anger and said:

Women’s migration is almost free. This is not right. This is against nature. The government is doing nothing for us. We have been forgotten.

Other men joined in:

We could die here. No one would even claim our dead bodies. To die would be just as well. At least our misery would be over.

The undocumented men who complained so bitterly about their conditions had not taken advantage of the two amnesties the Jordanian government had declared in 2007 and in 2014. They said they were not ready to return home at that point, thinking they would wait for the next opportunity. A third amnesty was effectively declared on 10 February 2019, but I did not return to Marka to find out whether Mintu and his colleagues had decided to leave Jordan. If staying was difficult, returning home could be just as problematic. For these men, migration had not fulfilled its promises. They had no savings. What job could they do, what enterprise could they launch in Bangladesh at this stage in their lives?

In Marka, I also met Arifa in her flat. She had migrated with the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL) in 2009. She explained that the women in her family did not take jobs outside the home, let alone migrate, but a crisis had occurred (she did not explain it any further), and she had secretly arranged to join a garment factory in Jordan. Arifa first took a three-month training in Bangladesh that cost 5,000 Bangladeshi takas and spent an additional 40,000 takas to cover other costs. Her factory in Jordan was in Al Dulayl. She had been working there for seven months when a strike was declared. There was no work, no canteen, no electricity – everything simply stopped. The government closed down the factory, and all the workers were dismissed and sent home.

I did not leave Jordan straight away. I came to Marka, worked for three months, and found a kafeel. He gave me the name of an intermediary [she did not call him a dalal] I could contact in Bangladesh to arrange my return to Jordan. Then, I surrendered to the police, spent eight days in jail and was taken to the airport. My airfare had already been paid by the company. I returned to Bangladesh and called the intermediary, a man from Narayanganj. I visited his home – I did not want to take any chances. He told me what

to do and he took care of everything: the training, the medical exam. I followed all legal procedures and returned to Jordan on a domestic worker visa.

— Arifa (39 years old, from Matlab, Chandpur, divorced with a son]

However, Arifa never engaged in domestic work and always worked in the garment sector. The cost of her free visa was 200,000 takas. Renewing her work permit for one year now costs her 1150 dinars. A few months ago, her *kafeel* – a police officer – obtained a tourist visa for her younger brother at the cost of 350,000 takas, which Arifa paid. The boy soon found a job doing embroidery in a factory making burqas. Arifa hoped that her powerful *kafeel* would be able to change her brother's tourist visa to a work visa, and she was prepared to pay the additional costs. Her brother had overstayed his tourist visa, but she did not worry too much as she believed her *kafeel* could fix things.

4.2 Workers on company visas doing other types of work

We met Yasmeen in a shop in Amman. She had just returned from a one-week stint as a domestic worker. I noticed her hands were in bad shape. She explained that she was made to use a powerful cleaning agent and was not given any gloves to wear. She hoped the problem would disappear with a bit of cream. But more would be needed to repair her depressed mood.

Yasmeen had migrated to Jordan on a company visa to work in a garment factory. In Bangladesh, she had been a senior machine operator, but those skills were of no use in Jordan. The factory owner was Bangladeshi, and he sent her to work in his home for a salary of 160 dinars a month instead. Yasmeen found this acceptable at first (although the going rate outside the QIZ for such a job was 300 dinars). But she soon discovered that the wife was a very difficult person. Yasmeen could not stay, and she absconded.

Although she never surrendered her passport, she could not regularize her situation as a company visa cannot be transferred to a domestic visa. A porosity between sectors exists and workers effectively cross the line, but they become illegal as a result. We have seen that some manage to resolve the problem but always

do so at considerable cost. Yasmeen had no wish to stay in Jordan. In November 2018, when I met her, she was waiting for the amnesty to be declared. She had been cheated and felt bitter about the whole experience. Her migration had been a failure.

4.3 Long-awaited amnesty finally activated

The second phase of fieldwork in Jordan was marked by a long-awaited amnesty that allowed undocumented migrants to return home at little cost coming into effect. The Bangladeshi embassy was authorized to process applications from 10 February 2019. The pardon did not only concern migrant workers – jailed criminals were also freed, a move that the Jordanian media highlighted as risky. As mentioned earlier, amnesties for migrant workers had been put into place in 2007 and in 2014. Such measures reduced the number of illegal migrants, creating space in jails and detention centres and alleviating costs for a government badly in need of money. Keeping a detainee in jail was estimated to cost the state 750 dinars per month.

4.3.1 Disappointment among migrants not ready to go home

The conditions of the amnesty appealed to migrant workers ready to leave Jordan. Such persons were exempted from paying arrears for lapsed work permits, and the overstaying fines would be calculated only from 12 December 2018. At the rate of 1.5 dinars per day, this was a manageable cost. But for those who had hoped to regularize their situation and continue working in Jordan, the terms of the amnesty were disappointing. For example, Kuki came on a free visa in 2016 and stayed legally for one year. The second year, she had paid an agent to renew her papers but was cheated. She told us:

The cost was 1,150 dinars, and I paid the office 1,000 dinars. I waited but they never claimed the remaining amount. The dalal just disappeared. What could I do, sister? I was hoping to regularize my situation this time, but this is no amnesty. We are excused from paying the aqama but not the tasria (work permit) which costs 600 dinars per year. If they had waved that

obligation, many people would have legalized their status.

Kuki's calculations may be approximate, but she had understood the essential points. She had earned enough to reimburse the debts her husband had accumulated, but she wanted to work another two years to make her migration worthwhile. She was not ready to go home, and therefore, she would stay illegally. The same applied to her sister who had absconded from her employer six years earlier and to many others.

If I get arrested by the police and deported, let it be. It is all a matter of luck [she used the Arabic word 'nocif'].

Kalam, the shopkeeper who had spent 11 years in Jordan of his 22 years abroad, viewed the excitement about amnesty with detachment. He was not going home. What would he do in Bangladesh? He had been away for so long. His dream was to reach Europe, but that would be hard to realize. For other migrants, he detailed how the cost of getting legalized amounted to 1,100 dinars.

► Table 6. Expenditure for legalizing migrants' visas

Expenditure	Cost in dinars
Taslia (tasriah) or work permit	621
Aqama	30
Health insurance	40
Blood tests	30
Compensation to kafeel (for acting as sponsor)	300
Miscellaneous	30
Total	1 051

Source: Blanchet field survey in Lebanon and Jordan (2018–19).

4.3.2 Chaos at the embassy

Two weeks after the amnesty was declared, I visited the Bangladesh embassy, and it was in chaos. Some 200 migrant workers were pressing at the door, the great majority of them women. Male *dalals* were proposing that women jump the queue or simply press ahead as there was no queue. There was no extra staff to process the additional workload. Several women had to apply for a new passport first, either because it

had been lost (often confiscated by the *kafeel*) or was out of date. The Embassy then had to check whether any cases had been filed against the migrant worker, and if they had, they needed to identify which police station the women needed to go to settle the issue. No one could leave the country without getting police clearance.

If a case had been filed against the migrant, the police called the *kafeel* and asked if they still had the grievance. Most *kafeels* agreed to withdraw the case unconditionally, but some demanded monetary compensation. Women who had absconded were prepared to pay a certain amount of money, say 300 dinars, but no more. A few were ready to spend time in a detention centre instead of paying a fine. For the police, the purpose was not to send more people to detention, and a compromise was encouraged. A *kafeel* demanding financial compensation from a *khadama* (maid) was a matter of ego more than anything else stated Dina Safarubu from the NGO Tamkeen. But in reality, cases differed. A domestic worker who absconded after two months and one who absconded after two years did not cause the same loss to the employer, and accusations of “theft” could be dismissed especially if they were baseless. I did not hear of any other serious accusations.

4.3.3 Deciding to leave or not to leave

How many women and men were prepared to leave Jordan was difficult to assess, but there was much excitement in Al Balad and Jobel Joffah at the time of the amnesty. Some purchased expensive fish to cook a good meal and celebrate their own departure or that of a friend. Those who stayed were busy buying furniture and other equipment at a discount from those who were leaving or switching to better lodgings. One woman sold her clients’ addresses for 200 dinars and used the money to buy her airline ticket. Those who stayed were pleased to get additional customers, thus these departures were also welcome.

For some, it was a sad time. Shumi had worked in Jordan for 11 years without returning home as she was undocumented. The amnesty gave her the opportunity to return home and reunite with the son she had left behind as a small baby. But leaving also meant separation from the young man she shared her life with. She said he had proposed marriage, but she had declined

considering they were at different stages in their lives, and it would be unwise to stay together no matter how painful the separation was. He was 24 years old, and she was 28 years. He had never been married before; she was divorced and mother of a child. He was from Cumilla, and she was from Faridpur. Shumi felt she had to go home. It is clear that the transient character of attachments was part of a migrant woman’s life. After spending some time with her son, Shumi intended to migrate to another country.

4.4 Aisha: An exemplary story

This is a long story, full of dramatic turns and unexpected rebounds that throws light on just about every aspect of women’s labour migration to Jordan. Aisha was 28 years old, separated and the mother of two children. She was from Shariatpur and had never been to school. Her tale started with the experience of great poverty as a child in her village, doing domestic and garment factory work in Dhaka and then migrating to Jordan at the age of 13. She had worked in a garment factory in Ramtha, had absconded, and worked as a live-out domestic worker while trying to keep her distance from Bangladeshi men attempting to prey on her. But she did not quite succeed. At one point she was arrested, spent time in jail, went home and returned to Jordan with a new passport and a new identity.

I am the third among five sisters. We have no brother. My father died when I was five years old. I was sent to wash clothes for a family in our village, but I was too small to hang them on the line. Later, my sister got a job in a garment factory in Dhaka, and she took me with her. The factory owner found me too small to work on the shop floor, so he made me work in his home ... I left for Jordan in 2003. My passport gave my age as 18 years, but I was 13 or 14 ... I was sent to a factory in Ramtha, where men were paid 75 dinars and women 52 dinars ... I worked there for two and a half years. The factory closed down and we were to be transferred to another factory but before that could happen, I ran away. I had previously made arrangement to work for a Saudi family in Abdoun [Amman]. I was with them for eight months. Madam was very bad. She drank whisky and

brought a lot of people home. She had many fights with her husband. Then, I worked in Khalda for a Palestinian family for two months. After this, I worked in Sofia near Abdoun for three months. In each home, the salary was the same: 150 dinars a month.

After she left the factory, Aïsha nearly tripled her income. In her narrative, she made no complain about her employers – her problem was elsewhere. Each time a job ended, she found herself at the mercy of various Bangladeshi men who offered support but also wanted to make her their *habibi*. Negotiating this risky terrain, she accepted the help of an older man, declaring their relationship to be that of father and daughter.

I am not so stupid. I could see what these men wanted from me. When I had a job, they invited me out on Fridays, but I refused to take my day off to avoid meeting them. When Abdu [the elderly man she saw as a father] called, I gave the phone to Madam and told her to tell him that she needed me, and I could not go.

Each time she was released from a job, Aïsha had no choice but to go to her Bangladeshi compatriots for shelter. Not only was she young and pretty, but she also had a good amount of money with her.

At the factory in Ramtha, the manager used to send my salary to my elder sister. After I left the factory, I did not know what to do, so I kept the money with me. Abdu took my money from me one day. His brother saw this, and he admonished him. That brother later explained to me how I could send money home ... At one stage, Abdu locked me up in a room with his 22-year-old nephew. He left us alone all night and came back the next morning. Although nothing happened with his nephew, Abdu said I would have to marry him as I had compromised my reputation. He brought a marriage registrar and two witnesses, and we were married. I was caught. He had already confiscated my mobile phone. In the evening, I ran to a woman who lived nearby, and I asked if I could spend the night with her. She

said she could not afford to antagonize Abdu who could call the police as she was undocumented. But there is one thing she could do. She gave me an address and said "Go there tomorrow morning. Madam will give you work." In the morning, I jumped into a taxi, went to the madam, and she gave me work for one month. At the end of the month, I returned to Abdu's nephew...I never considered this marriage a "real" one.

I worked as a live-out maid, and I earned very well. I brought two of my sisters to Jordan, one on a contract visa, the other on a free visa that cost 200,000 takas. The sister who came on a contract visa absconded from her employer and got caught by the police. I could not abandon her, and when I went to see her, I was arrested as well. My sister was repatriated quickly, but I had to spend one month in jail because I had been staying without papers for more than three years.

Aïsha returned to Bangladesh at the age of 19. Her family suggested arranging her wedding, but she refused. She was enamoured with a boy from Cumilla who worked in Aqaba (south of Jordan), and she wanted to marry him. Her family disapproved, but Aïsha was determined to return to Jordan. She had two obstacles in the path ahead. She was officially barred from returning to Jordan for five years as she had been deported after staying illegally, and she had a limited amount of money. A woman from Narayanganj she had befriended in the Amman detention centre came to her rescue, proposing that she contacted a Narayanganj *dawal*. The latter got Aïsha a new passport with a new identity, and she could return to Jordan on a contract visa. For this arrangement, he charged 50,000 takas. Aïsha returned to Jordan as Yasmeen, well prepared for a new adventure.

I suspected the new employer would inspect my luggage and confiscate my mobile phone. So, I purchased a second set and wrapped the phone containing the important numbers in a pack of chanachur [a savoury snack], which they did not open. I also carried a 50-dinar note. My employers knew nothing about my previous stay in Jordan. They

were surprised that I spoke Arabic with a Jordanian accent. I said I had worked in Dubai before, and the family was Jordanian, and they accepted this. My employers were Christian...

Aïsha's first attempt to escape failed as a police camera captured the whole incident. Aïsha was arrested and handed over to the employer who returned her to the agency. The agency placed her with a second *kafeel*. This time, her escape was successful. Her beloved, a 23-year-old man, joined her in Amman and became a runaway migrant himself. Aïsha did not appreciate the *habibi* relationship and refused to consummate the union until they were married. They were married – a fairly simple procedure – and Aïsha soon became pregnant. The honeymoon period, however, was short. The husband did not contribute to the household and spent on his own pleasures. He led a dissolute life, enjoying night outings, drinking and having affairs with other women. Aïsha tried to “look beautiful” for him and practiced dancing in front of a TV. There were periods of contentment, but the relationship inexorably deteriorated.

On one occasion, Aïsha got her husband out of jail and arranged for him to get a *kafeel* at great cost. As a documented migrant, he could then travel again. He visited his family in Cumilla with their 18-month-old son and left the boy with his mother without Aïsha's consent. Soon after, a second child was born. The children have been the object of much wrangling and quarrelling, and even a court case, between her family in Shariatpur and his family in Cumilla. When I met Aïsha, she had just returned from Bangladesh after taking her children to a secret location as the husband's family had threatened to kidnap them. She was estranged from her husband but was not divorced. After Aïsha absconded from her employer, an agency helped her retrieve her passport for which she paid 2,000 dinars. After this, Aïsha had never failed to renew her work permit.

4.4.1 Lessons from Aïsha's story

- **All-women households and poverty – A common mix in women's migration stories:** Aïsha's childhood was marked by living in utter poverty. She belonged to an all-women household and after her father's death, survival had been a constant struggle. First

as a maid in her village, then as a domestic worker and garment worker in Dhaka, and then a migrant garment worker in Jordan, Aïsha first worked for her keep and then for an income. By the time she was barely 14 years old, she had already undergone several migrations.

- **No claim to victimhood:** The tone of Aïsha's narrative was not that of a victim. She showed remarkable confidence in her ability to solve problems and survive in difficult situations and to rebound afterwards. She had learned to negotiate a solution to the situation she found herself in. She described her employers in Jordan as fair, even conniving to protect her from the dangers looming outside. She could cope with the work expected of her.
- **Importance of upholding honour and having a good reputation:** Aïsha insisted on marrying the man she had chosen and would not consummate the union otherwise. Early in the narrative, she mentioned that her father was a “*hozur*”, who had set moral standards for her. The family may have been poor, but they were not deprived of moral worth. In dealing with her husband, Aïsha knew that she should not cross a line. She followed him up to a point but dissociated herself from a class of women who she thought had dishonoured the community. The tricks she played with the law belonged to a different realm in her eyes and did not diminish her sense of honour.
- **Bangladeshi men as the most feared predators:** The fearsome villains, those most ready to pounce on her, were not her Jordanian employers but the Bangladeshi men who were after her body and income. Short-term employment, for one month at a time, provided temporary relief from these predators but then she had to face the “jungle” again. When she was trapped into marrying a boy at the age of 16, she decided that the marriage would create no obligations for her. It was not a “real” marriage.
- **Considerable earnings, mediocre savings:** Aïsha had never been short of work. In 15 years, she earned a considerable amount of money. However, marrying the man she fell in love with had had disastrous consequences on her savings. She wasted a huge amount of money on him, and much was also grabbed by her in-laws. When she visited

Cumilla to recover her eldest son, her in-laws sequestered her, seized her mobile phone and demanded that she part with her jewellery and money before she could take the child away. By the time she recovered her freedom and the child, her *aqama* had expired and she had to purchase a new visa. Her savings were gone, and she had to start from scratch.

- **Mobile phones – A lifeline:** Aïsha's story is intimately linked with mobile phone technology. Since 2006, her mobile phone has been her lifeline, and those who have attempted to destroy her freedom have always first seized her mobile phone. This happened when Abdu trapped her into marriage and again when her in-laws held her captive in Bangladesh. Her love affair with the man who became her husband started with phone conversations and the downloading of their respective photos. In 2010, when she wanted to return to Jordan, the phone number of her co-detainee at the detention centre allowed her to find a *dalal* who arranged her return to Jordan. Again, in 2018, when she was looking for a place to hide her two children, a boy she met via Facebook offered his help. As I was leaving her after a day-long conversation, this young man called and Aïsha face lit up. "He is in love with me," she said. I said goodbye and wished her good luck,

suspecting another risky adventure, this time involving her two children.

4.5 Tentative conclusions about migration to Jordan

The garment sector has been a major source of employment for Bangladeshi women and men in Jordan. Many came to work in the garment factories in the QIZs, but they did not stay. We chose to follow these migrant workers to wherever they were rather than look at a sector per se. The investigation followed what had happened to migrant workers who chose not to be repatriated after their factories went bankrupt or after they were dismissed following a labour conflict. Some sought better earning opportunities outside the QIZs, and a few quit to live with a co-worker they had met at the factory. Throwing light on the overspill workers from the QIZs provides information about the garment sector itself.

My brief visits to QIZs permitted me to observe the environment, talk to workers and learn about various issues from the staff at the Workers' Centre in Al Hassan. I also gained insights from the returnees interviewed in Bangladesh by members of the DRC team, but these are not covered in the current report.

5. Lebanon specificities

The overall Bangladeshi migrant population in Lebanon appeared to be fairly stable, although the sex ratio has recently tipped in favour of men. Over the last four years, the few women who had newly entered the country and those I met in the course of this research, all came on free visas arranged by relatives or *dalals* residing in Lebanon. Men came as “cleaners”, and they still come even though the terms of employment are less beneficial. BMET data (table 7) also reflect a reversal in the sex ratio from 2015 onwards.

5.1 A short history of Bangladeshi migration to Lebanon

The arrivals and departures of Bangladeshi migrants to Lebanon have been punctuated by the numerous wars that have torn the country

apart. A Bangladeshi woman who had lived in the country for some 30 years explained how she had come there as a young wife. Her husband had been the driver of a Lebanese national working in Bangladesh for a United Nations agency. He brought the couple to Lebanon and left them behind when he was posted elsewhere. The war (1976–1990) was raging then, and the couple took refuge in Baalbek.

At the end of the war, they both found work in a large guest house belonging to a rich and powerful man, once the minister of sports, who employed workers of different nationalities. The couple had two children who attended local schools and were immersed in Lebanese culture, learning Arabic and English as Lebanese children do. The eldest son now works as personal assistant to the Bangladeshi ambassador, a position from which his mother

► Table 7. Sex-wise migration from Bangladesh to Gulf countries (2009–2018)

Year	Saudi Arabia		Oman		Lebanon		Jordan	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
2018	73 713	183 604	11 034	61470	1 207	4 784	9 100	624
2017	83 354	467 954	9 199	79875	1 642	6 685	19 872	577
2016	68 286	75 627	12 897	175350	2 450	12 645	22 689	328
2015	20 952	37 318	16 980	112879	8 782	10 331	21 776	317
2014	13	10 644	11 584	94164	11 990	4 650	20 134	204
2013	167	12 487	6 068	127960	10 750	4 348	21 243	140
2012	484	20 748	4 102	166224	12 496	2 368	11 582	144
2011	166	14 873	1 061	134204	15 610	3 559	4 338	49
2010	44	7 025	18	42623	15 116	2 152	2 136	99
2009	386	14 280	11	41693	13 062	879	439	1 252
Total	247 565	844 560	72 954	1 036 442	93 105	52401	133309	3734
Per cent	22.7	77.3	6.6	93.4	64.0	36.0	97.3	2.7

Source: BMET (January 2019).

derives a certain status although she still works as a “maid”. Sarcastically, she pointed out that the only “promotion” available to Bangladeshi migrant workers in Lebanon, no matter how long they had lived in the country, was to work for a powerful and generous *kafeel*, saying, “In Lebanon, women are maids and men are cleaners.”

Today, it would be impossible for a migrant couple to send their children to a Lebanese public school as this family had done. In 2015–16, the Lebanese government refused to renew the *aqama* of several women with children in a policy deliberately aimed to prevent migrant families from settling in the country. Criticized by NGOs and human rights activists, the move was strongly resented by long-term Bangladeshi migrants, who had little choice but to send their children back home, often with their mothers.

Following the 2006 war, Bangladeshi women increasingly replaced Sri Lankan domestic workers who reportedly refused to return for the low salary they were being offered (US\$ 130 a month). The migration of Bangladeshi women peaked in 2010–11 and decreased from 2015 onwards as more Ethiopian women were recruited. According to a Bangladeshi journalist living in Lebanon, employers were disappointed with Bangladeshi women, who had acquired a reputation for absconding.

In 2018, it is clear that the image of Bangladeshi women as domestic workers had been tarnished. When I showed interest in employing a Bangladeshi woman at a recruitment agency, the image painted for me was so negative that no one would dream of employing a woman of that nationality. Agencies evidently have their own interests, and the reasons why one nationality is praised while another is denigrated must be critically assessed. In any case, the fluctuating popularity of a destination in the eyes of migrants, and the changing reputation of a nationality in the eyes of the employers are constant features of these markets. We shall come back to this point.

5.1.1 Reopening of the Bangladeshi embassy in Lebanon in 2013 amid turmoil

The Bangladesh mission in Lebanon shut down in 1976 when the war was raging and only

reopened in July 2013. The first two years of its operation were characterized by political infighting and instability. The first ambassador was recalled barely a year later as he reportedly challenged the dubious practices of the manpower agencies operating in the country. Complaints about brokers and middlemen were reiterated in 2017 and 2018 when a parliamentary committee from Bangladesh visited Beirut. The *Independent*, a Bangladeshi online newspaper, in an article in January 2017, gives a hint of the problems addressed:

Expatriate Bangladeshis in Beirut have urged the government to take stern action against some brokers, known as “*dalals*” working in Lebanon ... At a meeting with a 17-member delegation of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence at the Bangladesh mission in Beirut yesterday, the expats urged the delegation to arrest these brokers and repatriate them to boost the manpower market in Lebanon ... As these middlemen are involved with the ruling party, nobody, not even the ambassador, takes action against them. They are earning a huge amount of money through visa frauds... An expatriate Bangladeshi urged the committee members to stop sending women as house help ... The middlemen bring most of them via false visas and get them involved in illegal activities ...

The Bangladeshis summoned to the embassy to discuss the problems faced by migrant workers were neither men in low-paid jobs, nor women domestic workers. The “representatives” represented only themselves and thus could demand that the government stop sending house help to Lebanon – in other words, that the restrictions of yesterdays be reinstated.

The ambassador I met in November 2018 admitted that *dalals* operating in Lebanon still constituted a challenge to the discharge of his duty, and he had to tread carefully. Manpower is big business in Bangladesh, and agents are known to pay their way in and demand “protection” from the party in power. The dismissal of the previous ambassador had reportedly occurred at their request. I met men who had paid large sums of money under false

promises and who requested my help, but I did not feel equipped to assist them.

5.1.2 New government guidelines for sending workers to Lebanon

A delegation led by the secretary of the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) came to Lebanon in 2018. The official purpose of the mission was to explore labour markets and find solutions to the existing problems of the migrant workers. The delegation issued a document on 28 August 2018 titled “Order or Guideline for sending workers to Lebanon”.⁷

Lebanon was recognized as a country with “problems”, some of which were caused by “unsocial activities”, a euphemism for women engaging in prostitution. What was the evidence for this claim? In a private conversation, one man referred to the massive arrival of Bangladeshi women from Dubai who “engaged in immoral activities there and spoiled 80 per cent of our women here”. Several migrants commented on one particular incident: the murder of a Bangladeshi woman who ran a private brothel and whose dismembered body was found on a garbage heap where cleaners unloaded garbage collection trucks. The story, however, had several versions. I must admit missing some pieces in trying to construct the complete puzzle. One thing is clear: women were being blamed for the worsening situation in Lebanon and “runaway maids” were associated with “immoral” work. It should be readily stated that even though there was evidence of women engaging in prostitution, this research does not support this occupation to be dominant unless one considers all women engaging in a *habibi* relationship to be prostitutes and their partners to be clients.

The Guideline formulated a series of measures to correct the problematic situation in Lebanon. It stated that: (1) women candidates for migration must be between the ages of 25–38 and; (2) their youngest child must be more than five years old. Whether the second measure meant to protect children or ensure that migrant mothers would bear the separation and fully concentrate on their work is not clear. Applicable to women only,

the measure was discriminatory in any case. However, I found no sign that the Guideline was being applied.

Other conditions for the selection of women workers included mental and physical health, the ability to read and write Bangla, and the disposition to stay overseas for two years. Women’s migration was made free of cost, while the price of men’s migration was set at 117,780 takas or US\$ 1,400. The basic salaries for women domestic workers were fixed at US\$ 200 and for male cleaners at US\$ 350. The employer would need to pay for the *aqama*, a *daman* (a social security fee) for men, insurance, accommodation and food. The Lebanese government charged a *daman* of US\$ 80 per month from which domestic workers and Syrian nationals were exempt, which partly explained Bangladeshi men’s higher migration costs.

The salaries that companies pay their Bangladeshi employees are low, but their charges are also quite high. Employers prefer Syrians as they do not pay daman for them.

— Labour Attaché, Bangladesh embassy
(20 November 2018, Lebanon)

Bangladeshi men felt the competition of Syrian men in Lebanon. At the same time, occupational niches were quite distinct as Syrians are Arab speakers, considered to be hard working (more than the Lebanese) and could command higher salaries. According to a Lebanese employer, no Syrian man would work for the low salaries that Bangladeshi workers were paid. As for Syrian women, they did not compete with Bangladeshi women as they were not employed as domestic workers.

The labour attaché at the Bangladesh embassy said he took the 2018 Guideline very seriously, or at least the measures that seemed within his field of competence. When a recruiting agency submitted a request for approval, he examined the demand carefully and investigated the potential employer’s capacity to respect their obligation to the limit of his ability. He had the power to turn down requests, and he described two occasions on which he had done

⁷ An unauthorized English translation of the official Bangla text was used for this research. Both versions were read carefully to ensure there were no inconsistencies.

so. With respect to the age limit imposed on the employment of women domestic workers, he pointed out that he only dealt with documents, and it was not his job to question the accuracy of the age inscribed on paper.

Some points in the Guideline reiterated measures adopted earlier that were not followed, such as recruiting persons aspiring to go to Lebanon from those enlisted in the BMET database, thus avoiding using *dalals*.⁸ Regarding the cost of men's migration and the salary given to "cleaners", the Guideline had little effect also. The latest batch of cleaners that had arrived in Lebanon had had their salaries reduced. We met Rahim, an 18-year-old man from Brahmanbaria, on a street in Ashrafieh wearing the RAMCO company uniform and pushing his cleaner cart.

I came here three months ago [July 2018]. I work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week for a monthly salary of US\$ 300. Last month, with overtime, I managed to get US\$ 320. Salaries went down. I was promised US\$ 350 for 8 hours of work a day. The illegals are paid more than us – they get US\$ 400. The cost of my migration was 450,000 takas. How am I to reimburse this amount?

There is no dearth of such cases. Rafiq who had 12 years of experience in Lebanon explained how he managed with falling wages. I met him wearing a smart leather jacket as he was visiting a friend between two jobs. He first told me he worked in a bank. I asked what work he did at the bank, and he laughed. "What else but cleaner?" he replied. Rafiq took advantage of the amnesty in 2014 to return to Bangladesh after living illegally in Lebanon, and he came back in 2016 on a company visa.

My salary is US\$ 420. The company takes US\$ 100 for the aqama. I spend US\$ 50 for transport, mobile phone, etc., leaving me with US\$ 270. Then, I must eat. One cannot live on such an income. I work in a restaurant from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., and that is how I manage.

5.2 Migrant men cumulating jobs

To my knowledge, most companies provided lodging but not food. Even though working in a restaurant reduced food expenses, the men employed as cleaners generally spent to feed themselves. To make their migration worthwhile, several men cumulated jobs, and companies closed their eyes to this practice, which had become a necessity. Many men had two, even three, jobs, such as Dulal who worked for a cleaning company during the day, a pizzeria at night and as a janitor emptying the garbage for an eight-floor building in between the two jobs. With these three jobs, he earned US\$ 750. Dulal had been in Lebanon for eight years. He said it took time for him to find the right combination of jobs to work in this way. But not all men were capable of such a performance. Some tried but had to stop working at that frenetic pace as their health faltered. The salaries men got in relation to the cost of their migration was clearly absurd. Most men paid 450,000 takas to get a "cleaner's" job in Lebanon, and the cost could be as high as 800,000 takas when advantages were promised, which were usually not granted. Understandably, most Bangladeshi men were immensely frustrated.

In March 2019, I asked the labour attaché whether a new amnesty would be declared soon in Lebanon, as it occurred in Jordan,, and he replied:

Declaring an amnesty so soon would destroy the market. It would make it too easy for runaways. It would encourage more workers in this direction. We do not support this.

5.3 Squeezing a variety of jobs under the "maid" and "cleaner" labels

On 15 February 2018, the Lebanese Ministry of Work issued a document spelling out the works, professions, occupations and jobs restricted to Lebanese citizens.⁹ The long list left little space for migrant workers. One way to get around

8 Why women went to *dalals* has been discussed at length in Watson and Blanchet.

9 Mohammad Kabbara, Minister of Work, Republic of Lebanon, Resolution No 29/1, 15 February 2018.

these limitations was to place several types of work under the labels of “maid” and “cleaner”. In Daoura, a Bangladeshi man pressing oranges in a juice bar was employed as “cleaner”. Another worked as chef assistant in a posh restaurant, replacing a Lebanese national who would be paid three times as much. One woman served clients at an upmarket restaurant, another served clients at Zain Chicken, a fast-food chain.

I spoke earlier in this report about women employed as chamber maids and the embarrassment of the management who refused to confirm that they employed them. In Al Nabaa, several Bangladeshi men worked in a garment factory making men’s jacket for export to France. Bangladeshi women were also employed until recently in this factory but were dismissed as business was low and they were also undocumented. One man who had worked there for 13 years said he was instructed by the owner to leave his sewing machine, pick up a broom and sweep the floor should a labour inspector come on an inspection. In relation to women employed in the ladies’ toilets of a luxury shopping mall in Beirut as mentioned earlier, when three such women were arrested during a police raid, there were discussions on women not being allowed to work as “cleaners” such jobs being a male reserve.

In a country suffering from high unemployment rates, the Lebanese government must reassure its population that migrant workers are not taking jobs away from them. Nonetheless, administrative confinement to categories of work at the bottom of the pay scale, not to mention the gender marking, leads to a particularly high degree of exploitation. “We employ Bangladeshi workers because they are cheap,” admitted a Lebanese employer. Interestingly, this man knew how much his company paid the agency which supplied Bangladeshi workers, but he ignored how much the workers at his employ were actually paid by the agency. Beside the convenience of the system for his enterprise, he said it would be illegal for him to hire Bangladeshi men directly. Having shared with him the topic of my research, he suggested I have a conversation with one of his Bangladeshi employees in Bangla. To his dismay, he learned that the man he employed got paid a mere US\$ 250 a month and had to pay for his food from this meagre salary. This is well below the 2018

Guideline issued by the Bangladesh government. Was the Bangladesh embassy, or anyone else, monitoring the situation? In addition, I asked the worker I interviewed if he could find a second job to augment his income. He said it was impossible as the factory was located in an industrial area where there were no restaurants or other establishment that could offer additional work. Thus, to cumulate jobs, migrant men must live in the right location as well.

As is the case with most countries in the Middle East, Lebanon has also adopted the *kafala* system. It relies on recruitment agencies and practices outsourcing. In a remarkable analysis, Longuenesse and Tahar (2014) underlined the consequences of this state of affairs on labour unions and workers’ rights in the country considering that half the labour force is constituted of non-Lebanese workers. The authors show that Lebanese workers’ bargaining power has been broken in this process.

5.4 Wives earning more than their husbands

Lebanon is praised as a location where a wife and husband wishing to migrate may live together. For this reason, three couples who were married in Bangladesh and who decided to migrate to Lebanon were interviewed. All except one had come with a free visa. One couple was able to bear the high cost of migration and came together but in two cases, the woman came first because her free visa cost less and after earning for some time, she paid for her husband’s free visa. The woman who came on a contract visa paid 40,000 takas, and the two who came on free visas paid 200,000 and 240,000 takas respectively. The men paid twice as much, between 400,000 and 460,000 takas.

5.4.1 Shoma and Anis

Shoma and Anis are from Barishal. Both completed their higher secondary certificate education, after which Anis started his bachelor’s degree. Considering that their families were not powerful enough to secure good job for them and that their level of education would not suffice either, they decided to migrate to Lebanon, enticed by a relative who painted a rosy picture of life there. She said:

We met in college, and we had a love marriage. We took the decision to migrate together, and we wanted to come together but the cost was too high. So, I came first, worked for two years and earned enough money to pay for Anis' visa, which I arranged from Lebanon. I have been here three years and Anis for one year.

I met Shoma on the street as she was returning from work, and she invited me to meet her husband. At home, Shoma removed her unattractive grey uniform, and I discovered a handsome couple who could still be college students. Anis was very frustrated. In spite of his education and his dreams for the future, he was a "cleaner" in Lebanon.

You can be a university graduate, it makes no difference. Here, all men are cleaners.

Anis worked as cleaner in an office. He followed office timings and worked eight hours a day for five days a week plus a half day on Saturday for a monthly salary of US\$ 450. Shoma worked for a chain store selling fried chicken and earned US\$ 500 plus tips. Their schedules were quite different: his day off was on Sunday, and hers was on Monday. Both held legal papers for the moment, but they were pondering what to do in the future. Renewing their *aqama* would cost Shoma US\$ 1,100 and Anis US\$ 2,200. He was looking for a second job but had not found one yet. Anis felt that the situation was absurd and was angry at the relative who gave them such wrong ideas about Lebanon. While he earned less than his wife, all the costs were double for him. In my presence, Shoma tried her best to highlight her husband's merits and refrained from saying anything that could hurt his pride. As I left, I wondered if the young couple would survive the trial.

5.4.2 Khushi and Faisal

Faisal is 40 years old, and Khushi is 34. He is from Dhamrai, and she is from Singair. He did not complete his primary school education¹⁰, and she never went to school. Khushi spent seven years in Kuwait before her wedding. Faisal is a first-time

migrant and received 50,000 takas from Khushi's family as dowry when they married.¹⁰ The couple have an eight-year-old daughter who was left with Khushi's mother. Faisal explained his deception:

I would not have come if I had known the conditions here. I am happy to live with my wife but, economically, my migration was a mistake. It cost us 460,000 takas, and I earn US\$ 400 a month. It will take three years just to reimburse the cost of my migration before I can have any savings. I work in a restaurant for 12 hours on 3 days a week and for 9 hours a day on another 3 days [totalling 63 hours]. On Sundays, my wife is off, and on that day I work 12 hours.

The couple rented half a room for US\$ 140 a month. Their half contained a double bed and a fridge, and it had a little space for cooking. Running water and a sink were located in a bathroom shared with seven other tenants. Khushi had come to Lebanon on a contract visa and had absconded from the employer after four months, planning her escape. She needed to earn more than her salary of US\$ 150 very quickly to bring her husband on a free visa which she arranged from Lebanon. And thus, Faisal arrived two years ago.

At the time of the interview, neither of them had legal papers. As a live-out domestic worker, Khushi earned US\$ 400–600 a month. Work could be demanding, but she spent less time at work than her husband did. Khushi was proud of her achievements, and for her, Lebanon had many advantages, which was not the case for her husband. No matter how unpleasant the situation was, the couple could not afford to leave until Faisal earned the cost of his migration at the very least. One notes that Faisal's working conditions were worse than those of Anis. Within the "cleaner" category, a higher level of education, a college student's looks and the sense of one's worth could make a difference, even if small.

5.4.3 Khorsheda and Rony

Khorsheda was 23 years old and studied up to Class 8. At the age of 14, she was married over

¹⁰ The marriage of a Bangladeshi woman returned from abroad generally required a larger dowry because (1) such woman was deemed to have amassed money and (2) her "purity" was in doubt.

the phone to a male migrant twice her age, and she conceived a child when he came on a visit. Khorsheda did not want her husband to return to Malaysia. Her aunt who worked in Lebanon then suggested they join her. Her husband had sufficient savings to obtain free visas for both of them at the same time.

On my last visit, Khorsheda had begun working in a lawyer's office for a salary of US\$ 500 a month. Her aunt who had cultivated a good network had found her the job. She groomed her niece, explained the codes of behaviour in Beirut and saw that Khorsheda dressed appropriately (no shalwar kameez, no head covering and of

course, no burqa). The aunt pointed out that Khorsheda was a very good-looking woman (I agreed), which was a factor in her recruitment. Meanwhile, her 40-year-old husband got a job with a cleaning company for US\$ 400. Apart from youth and good looks, women are believed to be more meticulous in their work and this is why they get better paying jobs.

The three couples described here show once more how women's higher incomes in Lebanon could upset traditional gender hierarchies within marriage in Bangladeshi society. How couples can adjust to the situation in the long run is something for researchers to explore in depth.

6. Runaway maids

6.1 Embassies moving away from “sheltering” women migrant workers

During the research period, the Bangladesh embassies in Jordan and Lebanon did not run shelter homes for distressed women. In Jordan, officials declared that some money had been allocated for this purpose, but it was far from sufficient, and so the project had been postponed. Perhaps in the future, a shelter home could be opened but there appeared to be no strong commitment. At the embassy in Lebanon, the labour attaché outright declared that there was no demand for a shelter home, and the embassy did not plan to open one in the future. This is an interesting statement considering the significant number of women who absconded from their employers every year. Should this be interpreted as moving away from the need to “shelter” women?

It must be said that several NGOs in Lebanon offer services to migrant women, and the embassy could call upon them in case of need. Caritas, KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are some NGOs with whom the embassy has collaborated in the past. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) was also mentioned as operational in the area. The embassy staff present at the interview said that Caritas had called him recently asking him why they were not sending them women. It is a well-known fact that once a shelter home is opened, there is pressure to fill its seats to justify its existence. Thus, why so few women sought institutional “sheltering” is an important question.

6.2 Why live-in maids abscond and where they go

The reasons why domestic workers run away from their employers are assumed to be common knowledge, and include low pay, excessive work, sexual harassment, physical violence and food deprivation. The reasons women gave for running away in the interviews listed the same causes, often repetitively enumerated. The occurrence of such problems cannot be denied, but the reasons for running away are more varied and complex. One seasoned migrant exclaimed:

Girls who are “chalu” [clever, daring, well informed] do not stay long as live-in house maids. They walk out knowing that they can earn more outside and will not be on call 24 hours a day.

Seeking higher income and more control over hours of work could be the main reasons for absconding. Yet, a contract is broken and legally, a fault is deemed to be committed. The NGO Tamkeen in Jordan did not put the blame on the absconding women but on the *kafala* system. A worker should have the right to leave her employer if she so wishes and if such rights were recognized as legitimate, there would be no need to abscond like a thief. The NGO rejected the expression “runaway maid” altogether. The reasons for running away vary. We have seen how Aisha planned to escape to be reunited with her beloved, and how Khushi planned the same thing to earn more quickly and fulfil her promise to bring her husband on a free visa. Both had been abroad before and knew this was possible and had some advantages. To this end, I shall present here two more case histories, among the many collected, the first in Amman, the second in Beirut.

6.2.1 Tureen: Restless and impatient to get rich

Tureen (22 years old, from Magura, studied to Class 5; she is now divorced with 2 children) was married at the age of 10. She went to live with her husband at 13 and soon gave birth to two children one after the other. When the eldest was 1 year and the youngest 20 days old, her husband took another wife. Tureen returned to her mother and divorced him. Eight months later, leaving her two young children with her mother, she migrated to Qatar on a three-year contract. Jordan was her second migration.

It was hard in Qatar. I kept thinking about my children all the time, but I forbade myself to cry. Tureen, you are a man. Stop crying. This is what I used to say to myself ... Here, in Jordan, I fled from my employer after four months. I wanted to be paid US\$ 250. Madam did not say 'no'. She said let us see how you work first, maybe we can think about it next month. I did not wait for the next month. I ran away. My sister was in Jordan. She had been working for four years with the same kafeel, an elderly man with whom she had a good relationship. After I ran away, my sister's kafeel helped me recover my passport, and I paid my former employer 2,000 dinars. My sister's kafeel then became my kafeel. He took 800 dinars from me [he helped her without making a profit] ... I am leaving Jordan. It is a poor country. I need money. I want to complete the building I started. I will offer a house to my children...

Tureen is a very good-looking woman, and she undoubtedly qualifies as clever and witty (*chalu*). She was determined to take her revenge on life and on those who had cheated her. The large amount of money she claimed to have earned in Qatar allowed her to buy land and start building a house. The salary she mentioned (22,000 takas per month) did not quite tally with the lump sum she said she earned (more than 1 million takas). Perhaps she had received very generous tips in Qatar. A young woman earning so much would raise questions on the nature of the work she did abroad. In any case, Tureen had set her standards very high. She saw Jordan as a poor country (in comparison to Qatar), and she did not want to stay. Interestingly, she had agreed to compensate the employer she abandoned and

had renewed her *aqama* with a different *kafeel*. As a result, Tureen could not accumulate savings in Jordan – she hardly gave herself the time to do so.

6.2.2 Lily: A three-day journey to escape

Lily (40 years old, no schooling, from Brahmanbaria, divorced with three children) worked in Saudi Arabia for two years before coming to Lebanon six years ago on a contract visa. Her job was to look after an elderly sick woman. She explained:

I was in a village far away. I looked after an elderly woman who was in a wheelchair. I did not see any Bangladeshis around in the beginning. I worked for a Sunni Muslim family. They were poor, but they paid me regularly. I earned US\$ 200 a month. After two years and seven months, the old woman died. I ran away with my last salary in hand. I had met a Bangladeshi woman who said she could take me to Beirut if I give her US\$ 100. It took three days to reach the city. We first took a taxi to Sur, then a bus to Saida and another bus to Beirut. The woman left me in Sabra where a Bangladeshi man found a job for me as a live-in maid. That job ended after seven months, and I came back to Sabra where I have been living since.

Lily had remained undocumented ever since she ran away. I asked her why she did not try to find an arrangement with her *kafeel* and retrieve her passport. After all, she had worked for two years and seven months, and her job had ended through no fault of her. She replied that she had imagined Lebanon to be like Saudi Arabia and she was afraid of everything. Isolated from other migrant workers, she did not know that a *khadama* could travel in Lebanon without necessarily getting arrested by the police. Lily did not wish to return to Bangladesh, and her escape exempted her employer from paying for her repatriation. Far from causing harm, it may have actually served both parties. When I met Lily, she was wearing mustard pants, a white blouse with frills and a tight-fitting black jacket. Her hair style and her make up gave her a “modern” look. She had definitely abandoned the Islamic outfit she had worn south of Sur (Tyr). The flashy clothes she was wearing had been offered by her present employers.

6.3 Assistance for runaway maids

Like Tureen, who could call upon her sister, absconding domestic workers may have relatives in Jordan or Lebanon who can assist them. Others, like Lily, who worked in a distant location, found a compatriot ready to take her to Sabra against payment. One woman who ran away from her employer in Amman explained that she took 20 dinars from her employer's handbag early one morning – the only time she “stole” money – got in a taxi and asked the driver to take her where Bangladeshis lived, not knowing any address in particular. The taxi driver dropped her in such a neighbourhood. In Amman and Beirut, taxi drivers generally have an idea of these locations.

I asked several interviewees whether they would help a maid who had absconded from her employer. One woman said she would be cautious as it could be dangerous to help someone likely to be chased by the agency or the employer. Others said they would help such a woman provided the situation was temporary. Shopkeepers could refer absconding maids to women known to rent accommodations. In Amman and Beirut, a system had developed whereby absconding maids, or newcomers unfamiliar with the city, found accommodation with seasoned migrant women, sometimes a couple, who provided board, coaching and assistance to find work. The “benefactor” was reimbursed when the woman started earning. The arrangement could last several months or, exceptionally, several years. In Jordan, women paid 50 dinars per month for the accommodation. Providing many girls/women accommodation was a source of income for seasoned migrants.

One Bangladeshi journalist I met in Beirut claimed that when a man, or a couple, gave shelter to a runaway maid, they always exploited her. If she was young and pretty, they circulated a photo and proposed her as a *habibi* to other men against payment – in other words, they sold her. I do not believe such behaviour to be a regular practice. I have evidence of women who were helped by men who became their *habibi*, but they were not sold to other men. Being shelterless (*oshohai*), they found a roof and much else. I would not qualify such situations as necessarily abusive and exploitative. One would need to

know more about the situation to determine the exploitation.

I wish to recall here the particularities of Jordan and Lebanon where women can move independently, work and earn. Free movement in public spaces, demand for domestic work from employers ready to pay the rate and control over earnings ensure that live-out domestic workers exert a fair degree of control over their life. I often heard women saying that they kept a good relationship with the man who gave them shelter and was once their *habibi*. Such women were grateful for the help they received. Those who helped absconding women took a “little something” and this was accepted.

6.4 An informal “shelter home” discovered by accident

A rather large “shelter home” was discovered by accident in Raghadan (Amman). It was run by a woman who rented two well-furnished flats equipped with expensive double locks on the door. Amena (not her real name) was well known in the Bangladesh community. We met her by chance as we explored Raghadan, and she readily invited us to her place. Amena lived with her husband and her two children. She also kept young women – 12 were counted during the two-hour visit – who came to her seeking shelter or were sent by the embassy, she said. We saw women who came and went, and it was difficult to follow everything. However, one thing was clear: Amena ruled over her domain, and the young women were at her service. She dropped her prayer mat and one of them rushed to pick it up and put it away. Others attended to her five-year-old daughter like a little princess. The child was “beautiful” (meaning white) and had no resemblance with her parents. Later, I heard that Amena had sheltered a pregnant woman, assisted her when she gave birth, and kept the child that she left behind.

Amena showed us photos of herself with a former labour attaché at a reception in her home to highlight her close links with the Bangladeshi embassy. Her discourse alternated between praise and resentment. She had wanted to be on the embassy pay roll and be provided with a work permit but that did not happen, nor did the embassy pay her adequately for the services she rendered. Amena first denied that the women

staying in her home worked outside, then she admitted that they needed to earn. The girls were not free to answer our questions and Amena spoke for them.

Amena enumerated the numerous services that she provided. She had accompanied Bangladeshi women returning home and too sick to travel alone. Tamkeen had paid the airline tickets for four of them. She had served as interpreter for the Jordanian lawyer(s) that the Bangladesh embassy employed, and police stations in Amman regularly called her to interpret or to help resolve difficult situations. As though proof was needed, she showed us a photo of a passport belonging to a girl who had committed suicide at her *kafeel's* house the previous month on her mobile phone. It was clear that Amena was a well-connected woman. During our visit, a woman who had been arrested for being undocumented called from a police station. Could Amena help her avoid deportation? Amena told her to calm down but did not want

to say more in front of us. After she hung up, she commented that there were plenty of poor people in Jordan willing to be *kafeels* (and we wondered if that could be a solution to avoid deportation).

Three months after meeting Amena, a young woman recognized me in a shop in Al Balad. She explained that she had escaped from Amena's so-called shelter home after a big fight over the payment of her board. Amena had shown a kind face to us, but there was another side to her, she said. The shelter home was her business, and she ran it with an iron hand. I found out more about Amena from other members of the Bangladeshi community. She was a tough and shrewd woman and could be violent with her "protégés". However, she stayed clear of "immoral" work, and the women she sheltered were not sexually exploited. The labour attaché at the Jordanian embassy later said that they had stopped all collaboration with Amena and did not appreciate her methods.

7. The *kafala* system: Adjustments and outgrowth

7.1 “Free visas”

The majority of the women interviewed in Amman and in Beirut were live-out domestic workers, and those who claimed to have legal documents were holders of “free visas”. There is no such thing as free visa kept repeating officials at the Bangladesh embassy. The nationals who agreed to sponsor migrant workers without employing them were also called “false *kafeels*”. However, the appellations may be questioned, but not the existence of a widespread practice. Using economic jargon, free visas could be described as “products” conceptualized, purchased and sold in the informal labour migration market. Though not enshrined in any law, the “product” is well-known and highly popular among migrants. It is neither new nor unique to Bangladeshi migrant workers.

For Porimal Palma, a senior journalist and a migration specialist working for a leading daily in Dhaka, free visas are totally illegal and highly exploitative of migrant workers who pay a huge sum of money for an uncertain outcome. The Bangladesh embassy in Lebanon also did not mince its words regarding the practice, which created problems for them. Holders of free visas entered the country with valid documents but subsequently did not renew their papers because the cost was too high or because they got cheated were agents who pocketed their money and did not deliver. Such scenarios are known to occur and are problematic for the embassy. For example, should such a person fall ill or die, no insurance will cover healthcare or repatriation, creating a burden for them.

The embassies have good reasons to criticize free visas. However, one should not judge a practice as exploitative simply because it is informal. From the migrant workers’ points of view, and particularly for women, free visas

can be advantageous, and this is why they are in high demand especially among experienced workers. If they can afford the cost, migrants prefer free visas for themselves and their family members. The freedom they confer, the ability to choose the employer(s), and most importantly, the possibility to earn more are worth the initial cost. For Longva (1997), an anthropologist who studied migrant workers in Kuwait in the 1990s, the possibility of a migrant to obtain a work permit from a *kafeel* with the understanding that he/she will be free to work for whoever offers the best conditions brings a welcome flexibility to an otherwise very rigid system. She argues that both parties may benefit, and the point she made twenty years ago is still valid today.

For domestic workers who get nominal visas, the pool of potential *kafeels* is vast and the procedure to create the “product” fairly easy. Obtaining a free visa appears more complicated for men as they are mostly obtained from companies. The cost of a free visa from a company for men is higher, procedures are more obscure, and frauds appear to be more frequent. I met a few men who entered Lebanon with a “free” company visa, presumably issued by a cleaning company. One first-time migrant who migrated with such a visa in 2018 regretted his decision as the income he could make did not cover the 450,000 takas he had spent. Another man from Cumilla had paid 800,000 takas (an excessively high price), was promised a supervisor’s job with good pay but was made to sweep the streets instead, which he refused to do. Violence erupted and at one point, the man was sequestered and threatened by a criminal gang. Knowing that I was employed by the ILO, he asked if I could help but I did not feel equipped to deal with such a case and also feared for my security. From these stories, I concluded that the advantages of free visas may be less obvious for men.

In Jordan, I never came across women garment workers in the QIZs holding free visas. The sector is particularly well regulated, and all workers held regular company visas earmarked for the sector (Rashid and Watson 2018).

Some men working in Amman held work permits from the special economic zone of Aqaba, which is known to be cheaper, and these men had entered Jordan many years ago. Recently, there has been a lack of “free visas” for men entering Jordan and many men came with tourist visas, which were valid for three months with a possible extension for another three months. Such men found themselves becoming illegal workers in a short time. I was told that converting to a work permit from a tourist visa would require a powerful patron with contacts in the Ministry of Interior, and during my stay, several men who entered Jordan with tourist visas got arrested and deported.

7.2 Hybrid arrangements: Live-in maids who take paid work outside

Hybrid arrangements wherein a live-in maid with valid papers is permitted, and even encouraged, by her *kafeel*, to serve clients outside and thus augment her income were an interesting finding. The woman met in Zahlé (Beka Valley, Lebanon) provided such an example. She lived at her *kafeel*'s home, performed domestic tasks for her and also worked four hours a day for a company that sent her to different jobs. Thus, she more than doubled her income. The manager of a recruiting agency in Zahlé declared such an arrangement to be illegal. Another man suggested that the company placing her surely took a cut and made a good profit, but I do not have information on this aspect of the deal. However, the migrant woman, whose monthly salary had increased from US\$ 150 to US\$ 350, was satisfied. She had threatened to leave her employer after two years because she found the salary too low, and this arrangement allowed her to stay. It could be seen as an alternative to running away.

Legal or not, such arrangements have the benefit of (1) augmenting the income of the maid, (2) redefining her work as task-based with a time limit and, (3) tempering a *kafeel*'s temptation to

“own” their *khadama* and demand boundless servitude. Such arrangements addressed the common complaints of domestic workers, including being made to work for the relatives of their *kafeel* without extra pay or being on call at all times.

Kafeels who shared their *khadamas* remained their official sponsors and were therefore responsible for renewing their work permits every year. In Lebanon, a woman who lived with her *kafeel* and also took jobs outside explained that she paid US\$ 500 per year towards this cost. Another woman said the *kafeel* and *khadama* paid equally for the yearly work permit. I did not come across similar arrangements in Jordan, but they may exist.

These practices are not enshrined in any law, and they have developed without official permission. While the *kafala* system structures the relationship between state, sponsors and foreign domestic workers, informal arrangements have permitted adjustments that suit individual needs and conditions. I frequently heard about the deteriorating economic condition of the Lebanese middle class, and the same issue applies to Jordan. Ingenious ways have been found to live with diminished incomes. Employing a maid, even if one could not afford to have her full time, was still a mark of social standing.

7.3 Live-in and live-out domestic workers: A blurred boundary

Many live-out maids, whether documented or not, accepted jobs as live-in maids for a limited period – one week or one month at a time – thus blurring the categorization of live-in and live-out maids as distinct populations. For example, Seena has been in Jordan for six years. Twice, she ran away: once from her *kafeel* who tried to molest her and once from the Bangladeshi couple who offered shelter under unacceptable terms as the man wanted to make her his *habibi*. After working as a live-out maid for three years, an Iraqi family that she had as client proposed employing her on a more regular basis. They offered a monthly salary of 450 dinars. She has the weekends off and returns to her sister at that time. Seena gladly accepted the offer. The arrangement reduced her food and transport costs and offered some protection from police arrest as well. On the other hand, the employer

did not have to pay a recruiting agency's fees or spend for a work permit, which he compensated with a more generous salary. Should Seena get arrested for staying in Jordan undocumented, her employers would not face problems. She would bear the consequences alone. For the time being, Seena feels privileged. Such employment could be fairly stable, and a good employer is precious to a domestic worker and a trustworthy maid is valuable to the employer. In this case, the arrangement had already lasted three years.

There were also "bad" employers. At Nurul's shop in Al Balad, Amman, I met Papia. She asked to

buy a 10-kilo bag of rice on credit as she had no money to pay. She had worked for a Syrian family for one month but on the last day, they refused to pay her salary (300 dinars). Papia believed that her staying illegally emboldened them to behave the way they did. Such employer is likely to be blacklisted in the Bangladeshi community, but the pool of potential domestic workers is probably large enough for them to find another one. Nurul had known Papia for many years, and he sympathized with her. Papia left with the essentials she needed, and Nurul wrote down what she owed him in a notebook.

8. Maid recruiting agencies and the ranking of nationalities

I visited four agencies that recruited domestic workers in Jordan and two in Lebanon. In both countries, I was judged on my appearance (in their eyes) and was assumed to be a potential employer, and I assumed the role for research purposes. At one agency in Amman, my reception was cordial, but their hospitality did not extend to all of us. I was offered a chair and a cup of coffee while the Bangladeshi friend accompanying me was left standing and was not offered anything until I protested. Also, judging on appearances, (in their eyes), she was a maid. Such racial categorization and prejudices were not out of the ordinary. One agency located in the wealthier part of Amman suggested employing Filipino and Ugandan maids. The other three agencies could provide a Bangladeshi maid, but two advised against it.

Why don't you take a Ugandan maid? The price is the same, and there is no problem with them. The Bangladeshis are a bit crazy. They are tense. It is more difficult with them. [Agency 1]

I do not recommend that you employ a Bangladeshi maid. The Filipino are top in everything. They speak English, they are well educated, and they know how to manage. If you want someone who speaks English for a lesser price, you could employ a Ugandan woman. The cost is the same as Bangladeshi maids. [Agency 2]

The agency listed the costs for maids of different nationalities:

- ▶ Filipino maid: 3,400 dinars
- ▶ Bangladeshi maid without experience: 1,900 dinars
- ▶ Bangladeshi maid with experience: 2,000 dinars

One agency showed me their catalogue of Bangladeshi candidates. In the photo clipped on each file, most candidates looked very young, and all were dressed in a black burqa. All indicated that they were “experienced”. Undertaking case histories earlier had made me aware that a burqa was worn to make candidates appear older. Agencies in Bangladesh also suggested wearing a burqa to appear as “a good Muslim”. Two agencies did not proffer negative comments about Bangladeshi maids. One of them employed a woman from Faridpur who spoke Arabic, and the owner had visited Bangladesh a few times. Another agency had close links with one recruiting agency in Dhaka run by two brothers, one of whom lived in Jordan and came to brief Bangladeshi women when they arrived or when a problem arose. The man played the same role with other agencies as well.

I was told that the agency could assist if the maid did not “listen” or did not behave as expected. Agencies are known to play such roles and in one agency, we got a glimpse of the kind of “assistance” that could be provided to an employer. The maid was Ugandan and the *kafeel* was Jordanian. A conflict reportedly arose when the maid broke a bowl and the madam insisted that the cost of replacement be taken from the maid’s salary. Without following the entire scenario, the scene unfolding in front of our eyes was remarkable. The madam was sitting, drinking coffee and smoking cigarette after cigarette with her manicured hands as the maid stood in the middle of the room, crying and a Filipino “counsellor” behind a large desk conducted an arbitration session in English while the Arab-speaking staff observed from a distance. There was no beating, but another kind of violence played out in the humiliating treatment of a “servant” made to feel very small in this circus. Agencies are business

enterprises in the service of their clients, the *kafeels*, and there could not have been a clearer demonstration.

In Jordan, we know that after the ban on the recruitment of Bangladeshi maids imposed in October 2017, other nationalities were recruited. Women from Kenya, Ghana and Uganda were the latest to arrive in the country. Dina Safarubu from Tamkeen suggested that agencies preferred to deal with new groups that did not have established networks and lived experience to draw on. Such women were easily frightened and more easily controlled. Bangladeshi women were not in that situation – they had knowledge and networks, and they had become (too) clever, exemplified by the high number of domestic workers who ran away. Tamkeen did not endorse this negative judgment as they were critical of the *kafala* system and rejected the expression “runaway maid” altogether. They found that women from Kenya, Ghana or Uganda were more likely than Bangladeshi women to knock at their door and seek help.

At the time of this fieldwork, Bangladeshi women had almost stopped coming to Lebanon and only a few came on free visas. Here also, Bangladeshi maids were being replaced by other nationalities. Neither of the recruiting agencies we visited could supply a Bangladeshi maid. I was told it would cost US\$ 6,000 to recruit a Filipino maid. To justify the price, the agency said it required more work for them, and travel was also expensive as the Philippine government had banned migration to Lebanon and a direct route could not be used. The Ethiopian government had also banned the migration of its women to Lebanon, but they still came in large numbers and were not as expensive. In Zahlé, the owner of a recruiting agency had adapted his offering to a clientele with modest means. To my question whether he could find a Bangladeshi maid for me, he replied:

I can offer you Ethiopian or Kenyan maids. I do not deal with Bangladeshis. There are problems with them...They tell lies. They steal and when a man takes off his shirt, they panic, and they run away. I dealt with Bangladeshi maids for six months, then I stopped. I also stopped dealing with girls from the Ivory Coast. I used to bring

Filipino women, but they are too costly. As for Sri Lankans, they stopped coming on their own.

Bangladeshi women were found in Zahlé, and one may suppose that all agencies did not share the same views. What would be my obligations as employer, I asked. I was told that a contract stipulating the terms and conditions would be signed, but I could interpret these according to my needs.

The salary is US\$ 150 per month. The contract stipulates working eight hours a day and getting a day off per week, but it is really up to the employer to manage this, and a day off does not mean a day outside the home. It is better not to take any risks. Anything could happen to the maid if she goes out and the employer is responsible... The cost to you is US\$ 2,000. It covers air fare, government fees (US\$ 666) and the commission to the agency.

None of the agencies referred to workers' rights. Rather, they emphasized the danger of allowing the maid to go outside. They spoke about them as though they were children. In an inquiry conducted in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in 2008–9, Antoinette Vleger found that “agencies actively encouraged employers to restrict domestic workers rights and freedoms and as such actively stimulated exploitation and forced labour”. The agencies visited in Jordan and Lebanon did not appear very different.

Agencies complained that business was low. The agency owner interviewed in Zahlé combined his recruiting work with the sale of chocolates.

Business is not good. It is not that the demand for maids has decreased. There are now too many agencies. When I started in 2002, there were 200 agencies. Now, there are 700 agencies.

A similar pessimistic outlook was also found in Jordan where many agencies were threatening to close. The head of an association of recruiting agencies in Amman reported that they used to get 2,500 to 2,800 requests a month, and they were now getting half this number. Many agencies were going out of business he said.¹¹

11 From a conversation with Suha Labadi, Work in Freedom programme, ILO, Amman.

How to explain the declining activities of recruiting agencies if the demand for maids has not decreased? This research showed that there were other ways for employers to recruit domestic workers without calling an agency as they could tap a pool of migrant women already in the country. Networks developed whereby women looking for work could find employers. Several formulas of employment were documented from live-out maids serving different clients and getting paid on an hourly basis to women engaged for one week, or one month at a time living with the employer and getting paid a fix rate for the period. These domestic workers may or may not be undocumented.

One agency in Jordan strongly denied being involved with “free visas” deemed illegal since the law requires that khadamas reside with their *kafeel*. However, it was clear that free visa holders were part of their clientele. In Amman, two women who held “free visas” said that their passports were kept at a recruiting agency. They could not name the latter nor give the exact address, but they knew how to get there. Once a year, they visited the agency with cash in hand to renew their papers and were satisfied with the arrangement. It should be pointed out that other

migrant workers have been cheated in similar arrangements.

As I walked out of the Beirut recruiting agency that highly praised the qualities of Philippine maids, advised me against employing an Ethiopian woman and painted such a dark image of Bangladeshi women that no one would ever dream of employing them, I went on to meet my Bangladeshi “friends” who in no way could match the epithets used to describe them. I wondered what interest agencies had in “selling” one nationality and denigrating another, or why the maids dressed in a starched pink uniform should rank higher than the maids wearing a shalwar kameez, or why the “white” maid should be worth more than the “black” maid. I also wondered about how the qualities attributed to maids have come to symbolize the employer’s status. In other words, how a hierarchy among maids serves to highlight hierarchies within Lebanese or Jordanian society. This research gathered sufficient evidence on the ability of Bangladeshi women to gain the appreciation of their employers and carve a niche for themselves in certain locations and for certain kinds of work, such as caring for an elderly and/or handicapped person. But they were not found in posh areas.

9. Migrant women's strategies to increase income

Basic salaries are generally low in Jordan and Lebanon, and most migrant workers implement various strategies to augment their income. Depending on their ability, position and good fortune, different opportunities are either created or seized. Let me present the story of two women whose life circumstances, personal qualities and significantly differ, resulting in varying capacities to gain advantages from the process of migration. While each life is different, these two stories may help trace patterns from which certain conclusions can be drawn.

9.1 Shiuli: The intelligence to add up little “somethings”

I met Shiuli on a cold winter day in a restaurant in Al Balad, and she invited me to her home in Jobel Joffah. We took a service taxi that went up a steep hill, and she led me into her cozy place, a welcome shelter from the cold outside. Shiuli lived alone in a ground floor studio. For security, she had a CCTV camera installed outside, and she also had of a small patch of land where she grew vegetables in the summer. Her lodging was one of the most comfortable I had entered so far.

Shiuli, about 40 years old, came from Barguna. She had arrived in Jordan eight years ago on a free visa. Her family was not poor, but circumstances had led her to leave home early. She was (and still is) very good-looking, which prompted an early marriage at the age of 13 to a student a few years older than her. Shiuli continued attending school until she gave birth at the age of 15. Two years later, her husband died from an appendicitis operation gone wrong, and she was a widow at the age of 17. She could easily have remarried, but she decided to leave her child with her mother and look for a job in Dhaka. She worked in a garment factory and as

a tailor in someone else's shop until she opened her own tailoring shop. Before migrating, she owned three tailoring shops. Shiuli was doing very well financially. I asked why she decided to migrate.

One of the reasons I wanted to migrate is that men were after me. It is difficult for a woman in Bangladesh to live on her own. But I never wanted to marry. To be married is to live in a jail...I was also thinking of my son. If I married, I would not be able to give all my attention to him.

Shiuli devoted everything to her son who is now an engineer. This is the mission she had set for herself: bringing up her son and giving him the best education. Shiuli explained that when she first worked at the factory, she lived very frugally. She did not buy expensive fish claiming she did not like it, but the truth was that she could not afford it. She sent her salary home and lived on what she earned from overtime. Shiuli insisted that she comes from a “respectable” family, not rich but not lacking basic necessities. In any case, her son grew up in an environment conducive to studying, unlike the children of most migrant mothers, which can be taken as a class marker like the fact that women in her lineage do not normally migrate.

In my gushti (lineage), 80 per cent of the families have a migrant worker, but they are all men. I am the exception.

Shiuli's studio had two comfortable beds. Pointing out to the second bed, she explained that it was used by women she brought on free visas, and most spent some time with her. One was coming next week, she said. Shiuli said that she had provided free visas to 15 women so far and contract visas to many more. The mother of the girl arriving the following week worked in

Jordan, and she had asked Shiuli to arrange a free visa for her daughter.

They know me. They know I do not take a lot of money, and I do not cheat them. That is why they come to me...The current rate for a free visa is 240,000 takas. It increased three years ago when the price of the tasriah [work permit] changed from 421 dinars to 621 dinars. I keep 40,000 takas for myself and give the kafeel 200,000 takas. The 40,000 that I keep is not a net profit as I have costs. But I keep "something" [said in English].

Shiuli was a mine of information on free visas. She explained how she found Jordanian nationals willing to act as *kafeels*, detailing official fees and how much each one involved received.

Finding a kafeel is not difficult. There are many poor people here, and they are quite happy to earn 300 dinars a year. Kafeels are not rich people. I give them money so that they may show the government that they have the necessary bank balance to employ a maid. Have you seen how little people earn here? Look at taxi drivers. Who would agree to work for such low pay in Bangladesh?

Her relationship with various *kafeels* was warm if not familial. She said she called her own *kafeel*, and he called her two or three times a year to find out how she was. When time came to renew her *aqama* and *tasriah*, she called him to know when he would be free so that they could go together to renew her papers.

Shiuli would be insulted if I called her a *dalali*, and she also did not regard arranging free or contract visas as her main work. She always maintained regular clients as a live-out domestic worker. The day of our interview, she said she worked six hours and got paid 25 dinars. In her room, she opened the sewing machine between the two beds. Shiuli is an accomplished tailor, and this is another type of work she did to earn a "little something". The girl she was expecting the following week would bring several three-piece sets (*shalwar-kameez-dupatta*). Purchased for 600 to 800 takas each in Bangladesh, they sold in Amman for 15 dinars (3.5 times as much). For sewing the three-piece set, work she could complete in one day, she earned another 5 dinars. She showed me several cut pieces

that were waiting to be sewn. Shiuli was an industrious woman with initiative who had known how to add up the "little somethings". Prior to her migration, she had already been a successful entrepreneur. At the age of 40, she had amassed sufficient savings, and she could stop working. Her son who was a professional engineer and married (she showed me a photo) did not need her anymore.

I have money but I wonder who will look after me when I get old. My only son has not contacted me in 4 months. He is busy with his life.

Shiuli intended to repair her father's house and settle in Barguna. Her mission accomplished, she could now think of herself. "Tell me, should I marry?" she asked before I left.

9.2 Asma: Struggling with illness and isolation

Asma did not know how old she was, but I'd estimate her to be about 30 years old. She was divorced and had 2 daughters aged 15 and 12. Asma never went to school, and she came from Faridpur, Nagorkanda thana. I met her at Farid's shop in Jobel Joffah the same day I met Shiuli. She was very thin, and her eyes were sunk. She told me that a client expected her at work on that day, but she felt too weak to go. Asma was under pressure. She needed to work to gather the money necessary to go home (the cost of an airline ticket plus a fine of 1.5 dinars per day starting 12 December 2018). Taking advantage of the amnesty, the quicker she went, the lower would be her cost.

Asma slept in the bed of a woman who had left Jordan. The room was well furnished, but none of the equipment belonged to her. She explained that she had run away from a placement agency (not located in Amman).

I worked for a family for one year and nine months. I do not know the name of the place, but it was far away. The family had four sons and one daughter. The father had a clothes store and was earning well. Two sons, aged 20 and 15 years, behaved very badly with me, they hit me. Madam was also very bad. They gave me what they would throw away to eat. I felt disgusted, and I ate very little. Work was

not the problem – I could manage that. The father's behaviour was correct. He regularly paid me 150 dinars a month. After one year and nine months, the eldest son drove me to town and handed my papers to the office people. He said they would buy my ticket and send me home. But at the office, they wanted to send me to another employer for a lower salary, but I refused. I was not in good health, and I wanted to go home. In the end, I ran away from that office.

The employer's family had not been satisfied with Asma, and she did not appreciate them either. She had worked in Lebanon before coming to Jordan, and she was unable to complete the three-year contract there as well. Because of her poor health, she had to leave six months early. The problem she had in Lebanon had recurred in Jordan: Asma suffered from irregular menstruations with excessive bleeding. She believed her condition was caused by an event earlier in her life. Without informing her, her husband had injected an abortive substance into her, and she lost the baby she was carrying. She then had two "operations", but the bleeding persisted. She blamed her ex-husband for having damaged her body. After Lebanon, Asma had stayed in Bangladesh for two years, been treated and recovered somewhat before migrating to Jordan.

But this was only one part of her trials. One could say that Asma's story of deprivation started before she was born.

I am the youngest of three sisters and two brothers. My father remarried when my mother was three months pregnant with me. He went to work in Thakurgao, and he was bewitched into marrying another woman. He never returned to my mother who raised us alone. To feed us, Mother used to make bidis...in our village (in Faridpur), we were very poor. I came to Dhaka at the age of eight to join my elder sister who was living in Lalbagh with her husband. I worked in a steel factory that made tiffin boxes, in other people's home, on building sites ... There is no work I did not do. At the age of 12, a man who was a "shontrash" [a man who terrorizes people and commits crime] married me.

A long story that I had some difficulty piecing together followed. I understood that marriage was forced upon Asma. She gave birth to two daughters and struggled to feed them as the husband did not provide and made her life hell. I asked Asma how she had the idea to migrate.

A woman I met on the street who knew that my husband was very bad told me about migration. I was interested, but I had no money. I sent my seven-year-old daughter to work in other people's homes to earn the money for the passport ... All in all, the cost of my migration to Lebanon was 90,000 takas. I borrowed 30,000 with interest, and I returned 35,000 takas. My sister gave me 5,000 takas ... After earning in Lebanon for one year, my daughter could stop working in other people's homes, and my sister put her through school, but she did not do well. That daughter is now sitting at home. Don't you understand? She lived here and there, that is why. My second daughter had more continuity and is now studying in Class 5.

I asked Asma whether she had any savings.

I sent money to my sister and to nephew. My elder sister who still lives in our Faridpur village will do what she can for me, but her situation is worse than mine. She used the money I sent to survive. I cannot blame her. She is a bit on my side. My brothers are not helping me.

Asma looked anaemic, and I advised her to eat well but her priority was to save money to buy her ticket home. She ate rice with little else. Her nephew had sent her "vitamins". I checked the label, and they contained no iron. She probably never told him that she had irregular menstruation and excessive bleeding. How would he know what she needed?

Asma's children were staying with her stepmother, the woman her father had married when he abandoned her mother. She said she had no one else who could take care of them. Asma's priority was to arrange the marriage of the 15-year-old daughter now "sitting at home". She did not have much saved, but she would manage.

Life has never been easy for me, but I can look after myself. I will manage. If only I

could recover my health ... [she had tears in her eyes] My mother died six years ago. One who has no mother has no one in the world.

Entering Asma's world was painful even though she did not present as a victim. How could one swallow so much deprivation and find the strength to rebound? Asma had received emotional support from her mother, a woman herself abandoned with five young children, and her death six years earlier had made Asma feel "alone in the world". Her support network was, and still is, constituted exclusively of women. Her brothers, her husband and even her father had relinquished all responsibilities before she was born.

9.3 The qualities of successful migrants

Patchy as they are, these two interviews collected on the same day in Jobel Joffah led me to think about the attributes that may ensure a "successful" migration. A tentative list would include the following and the order could be altered:

- Good health (physical and mental)
- Self-confidence
- Backup/support from the family
- Good communication skills
- Learning/speaking Arabic and English
- Good looks, clean appearance
- Ability to work efficiently, quickly and meticulously
- Honesty
- Ambition

Ability to adapt to an unfamiliar environment

Shiuli scored well on all counts whereas Asma, in spite of her intelligence and good will, had great difficulty. Her bad health had affected her self-confidence and her ability to work efficiently, and her family members who were themselves struggling could not offer much backup.

9.4 Women labour migration and its impact on social reproduction

Married mothers often justify their migration by the need to provide for their children. Let us see how Shiuli, Shiren, Asma, Shilpi and Alema's migrations impacted the children they left behind. Together, these women provide a good range of circumstances that lead mothers to migrate.

Shiuli who was widowed at a young age, devoted all her energy to educate her only son who became an engineer and is now well settled. Shireen, divorced and mother of two adolescent girls, entertained similar determination and intended to do everything she could for her eldest daughter who was a bright student to become a doctor. These ambitious mothers were more educated, benefited from family support and identified with middle class values.

At the other end of the spectrum stands Asma who sent her seven-year-old daughter to work as a maid to pay for her passport and the other migration costs for a domestic job in Lebanon. The daughter started school late as a result and was often moved around, and she finally dropped out of school altogether. Like her mother, the 15-year-old girl is now practically illiterate, and Asma is now concerned with getting her married.

Shilpi is another migrant mother whose migration did not change much for the next generation. She entrusted her only daughter to her illiterate mother in the village. With the approbation of village elders, the grandmother married the girl off at the age of 11 as was the practice in "the good old days". Shilpi did not have the ability, nor did she think she had the right, to intervene as she was an absent mother. Alema's only daughter was married at the age of 10. Alema could afford to keep her at school, but she did not oppose the family's decision and seemed rather satisfied at having found a "good" husband for her daughter. These migrant women who experienced early marriage, early motherhood, divorce, and often underwent a series of crisis that prompted their migration could not change, or did not see the need to change, a sequence of events that repeats the path the mother followed for her daughters. This raises disturbing questions.

While the Bangladesh government takes great pride in its remarkable achievements on many fronts, including poverty reduction, increased school attendance, reduction of child and maternal mortality, etc., most of the migrant women met in this research, like Asma, Aïsha,

Shilpi and others, were bypassed by these "success" stories. And so have their children been. This is not good news for a government encouraging women to migrate with the hope that they occupy a higher niche in the international labour market.

10. Final thoughts

Given the difficulties of accessing women domestic workers living with their employers and the diversity and geographical spread of the migrant populations, choices had to be made in the limited time available for the research. A sectoral approach was not taken. Instead, migrant workers were followed wherever their trajectories took them. When interviewed, nearly half (44.53 per cent) of the workers were undocumented, the percentage being higher for women and the highest for women in Lebanon. Free visa holders were counted as documented workers, although they took certain freedoms with the law.

It could be argued that given the research methods applied, undocumented workers were more likely to be encountered, and I accept this possible bias. There was no perfect sample. However, a quantitative valuation here is less important than the content of the stories narrated. The information shared shows trajectories seldom unfolding according to plan or running a straight course. The study exposed aspects of labour migrants' lives that are often ignored, overlooked or judged negatively by those standing on higher ground.

The overall picture emerging could be seen as chaotic and disorderly since rules and regulations only partially shaped these migratory journeys. For example, Mintu, who I met in Marka, remembered when he landed in Jordan in August 2004. Everything was possible then, he said. Fifteen years later, he was stuck, had not visited home once in all these years, and although he had a Bangladeshi "wife" living with him in Jordan, he could not think of establishing a family. The research recorded the stories of many such disenchanted men. In Jordan, some women had switched from garment to domestic work, becoming illegal migrants as a result. A few were able to obtain documents as domestic workers

although they never did such work and continued working in garment factories outside the QIZs. The *kafala* rules did not permit switching sectors without leaving the country but workers crossed the line nonetheless, marking a certain porosity, at least for women, between sectors.

In Lebanon, case histories we undertook traced migratory movements with the arrival of women peaking in 2013–14, followed by men coming in batches hired by companies as cleaners. Lebanon had been mostly a destination for women, but with the arrival of male cleaners, the sexes reached parity. Again, the research highlighted what official data does not show, which is the significant number of women, and to a lesser extent men workers, continuing to live and to work in the destination country, sending money home but no longer appearing in official records.

In both destinations, women generally earned more than men while the cost of their visa and work permit was lower, resulting in greater financial benefits for the women and greater frustration for the men. In Lebanon, the conditions of men who came as cleaners kept deteriorating even before Lebanon's economy sunk in October 2019. Already, in late 2018 and early 2019, salaries had been reduced, and newcomers were made to work longer hours for lesser pay. Among working couples in Lebanon, the wives' higher earnings were obvious and a potential cause for tension. Unsurprisingly, the wives expressed greater job satisfaction and praised the destination country more than their husbands did.

Some live-out domestic workers entered *habibi* relationships, in other words, they took a "husband" for the time being. Men did the same in settling with a temporary "wife". In these *habibi* relationships, women generally continued working, controlled their income and sent money

home to their families. On the other hand, women who were “truly” married were expected to share their incomes with their husbands and be generous towards in-laws, resulting in low control over assets and the inability to amass personal savings.

Women changed their names after absconding to avoid being found by their *kafeel* or when, after having been deported, they returned to Jordan or Lebanon equipped with a new passport and a new identity. Men did the same thing as well, and this was possible when their old passport was non-digital.

The study showed how migrant women are not necessarily “victims” even when they narrate a story of victimhood. Abuse is regularly invoked to explain and justify domestic workers absconding from their employers, but some women clearly prepared and planned their escape to join a lover/husband, to earn more, or to live in greater freedom. While in some countries in the Middle East, women absconding from their employer is a risky affair as they are likely to be arrested by the police and returned to their employer with an uncertain outcome, the streets of Amman and Beirut are not policed in the same way and are relatively friendly to women. Bangladeshi women often mentioned feeling safer in Amman or in Beirut than in their own country.

The study showed the resourcefulness of migrant women and men, the energy and determination they deployed in the cumulation of jobs and the adding up of “little somethings”. Such dispositions are truly impressive. Most migrant workers seized every opportunity to earn and make the best of their time abroad. Yet not all showed the same ability to adapt, and a few had difficulties coping. Some cumulated quasi unsurmountable problems. One such case is Asma, who we met in February 2019; she was ill and depressed, and she could hardly take advantage of the amnesty the Jordanian government had declared for undocumented workers. She was too weak to work and to earn the price of the airline ticket to go back home. Her deprivation had started before her birth as her father had abandoned the family when Asma was still in her mother’s womb, leaving her alone to bring up five children. Married at the age of 12, a mother at 14, Asma did have a better lot than her mother. Observing her miserable life, a neighbour had suggested that she migrate, and

Asma placed her seven-year-old daughter as a domestic worker to earn the money required to migrate. With her poor health, she should never have migrated. Labour migration produces no miracles and may not solve problems that women have accumulated over generations even if, for many, migration opens a widow of opportunities that permits them to earn a good income, boosting their confidence and ability to challenge the exploitations suffered at home.

Asma’s story also illustrates how labour migration for women may be considered appropriate for the most destitute or said differently, destitution becomes a qualification for migration. Destitute women – divorced, abandoned, unprovided for by a husband – are assumed to be tough and resilient. They are also imagined as having no choice but to accept any kind of work. This construction ought to be challenged and women’s labour migration ought to be dissociated from such negative references. The spotlight should be on women’s qualities rather than their defects and inadequacies. One would like migrant women to be recognized as workers in their own right and accorded the honour and dignity that such a function deserves.

In the destination countries, the numerous accommodations described in the way *khadamas* organized their work, often with the connivance of *kafeels* who encouraged them to take additional clients outside to increase their income and thus lighten pressure on the employer to pay higher salaries, could inspire those who challenge the rigidity of the *kafala* system. The risks and the benefits of free visas should also be reviewed from the point of view of the workers. The hidden and the opaque could be made more transparent.

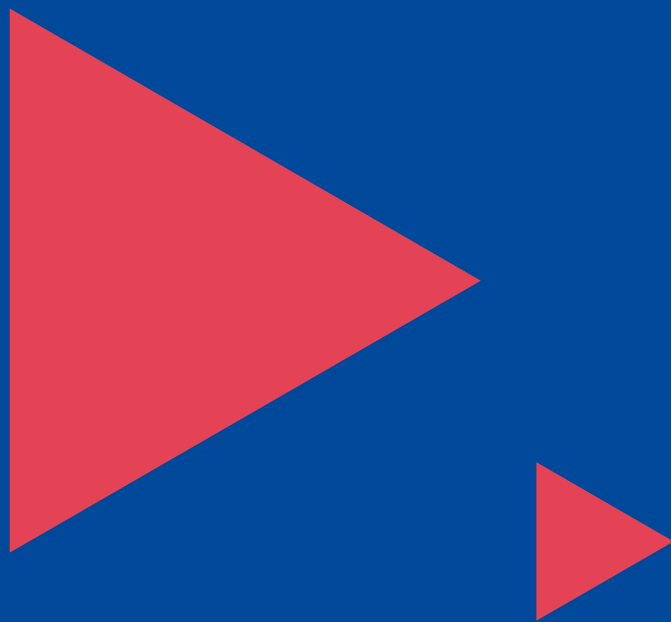
The Bangladesh government has demonstrated its intention to encourage women labour migration. Any government adopting such a policy should be attentive to working women’s specific needs at home as well. At present, creches, nurseries, boarding schools, tutoring and other services for the children of working mothers are seriously lacking in the country. Working mothers generally rely on other women members of their families to look after their children. Having no such relatives or having relatives who are themselves in dire need leaves children in great neglect.

However, the conclusions of this part of my research are tentative because a second round of research, detailed in the next part of this report, was conducted in April 2022 after the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides another chapter on Bangladeshis working in Jordan and Lebanon because the world drastically changed with the arrival of the pandemic in 2020. As we delve into the second part, which scrutinizes the conditions of these same migrant workers during 2021-22,

we witness a new layer of challenges. The pandemic unleashed a new set of difficulties, amplifying the health risks and economic hardships experienced by these workers. Together, these reports provide a more complete narrative, bridging the gap between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic realities faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers in both Lebanon and Jordan.

► Part 2

Migration from Bangladesh to Jordan and Lebanon post COVID-19 (April 2022)



11. Context of the second leg of fieldwork

A 20-day fieldwork study was conducted in Lebanon and in Jordan in April 2022 as a follow-up to the study carried out in 2018 and 2019 on behalf of the ILO's Work in Freedom programme (see chapter 1). Additional case histories of women and men migrant workers were documented, measuring the changes that had occurred in their living and working conditions over the three and a half years since the first study. These changes have been substantial as major disruptions had occurred in both countries during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and, in Lebanon, with a major political and economic crisis.

For approximately one year, beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic considerably impacted migrant workers everywhere, restricting movement, slowing down economic activities, and causing the loss of jobs. The closure of international airports delayed departures to and from destination countries, and after movement could be resumed, the cost of travel had increased. In addition to the damage caused by the pandemic, Lebanon suffered a major economic and political crisis with the collapse of its banking system and the drastic devaluation of its currency. In October 2019, large street protests demanded the resignation of the government and fundamental structural reforms.

As if this was not enough, the explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 killed over 200 people, wounded many more and badly damaged parts of the city. These catastrophes produced widespread impoverishment, and what had been a desirable destination for migrant workers was transformed into an unenviable trap. These workers suffered harm over which they had no control, let alone a comprehension of the events that were unfolding. The fall was abrupt. A better understanding was sought from

the migrant workers still living in Lebanon two and a half years after the collapse of its economy of the conditions in which they live. Similarly in Jordan, we tried to understand how women domestic workers were recovering from the drastic restrictions imposed during the pandemic and how these constraints were affecting garment factory workers in the QIZs.

A 20-day fieldwork strip between two countries carries its own limitations, and this should be kept in mind. Findings from the research conducted in Bangladesh with the DRC team is included here, comprising interviews with returnees from Jordan and Lebanon and meetings with the family members of workers still living in one of the two destinations. In a few cases, the persons met at the destination could be traced at the source and vice versa, resulting in particularly rich case histories with inputs from several persons and collected over a longer period of time.

In both countries, the research sites identified in 2018–19, in and around Beirut and Amman, were revisited. Some former contacts were traced, and many new encounters also took place. Interviews were held with migrant workers in grocery shops, marketplaces, at workers lodgings and at the home of one employer. In both countries, ILO staff and diplomats at the Bangladesh embassies were interviewed. In Jordan, a one day-visit to the QIZ in Al Hassan permitted me to meet garment factory workers and talk to the staff of the Workers' Centre about a major crisis in a garment factories and how it had been dealt with. More generally, I was able to find out how garment factory workers had fared during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before presenting the findings of this part of the fieldwork, it may be useful to review the importance of Lebanon and Jordan as historical

destinations for migrant women. Table 8 shows the main destinations of women's labour migration from Bangladesh over the last 22 years. Jordan ranks second with 17.5 per cent and Lebanon ranks fourth with 10.1 per cent of the migrant women. The pre-eminence of Saudi Arabia as a destination, representing 42.7 per cent of the migrant women, reflects the impact of the 2015 agreement concluded between the Saudi Arabian and the Bangladeshi governments, which offered women higher salaries and free-of-cost migration.

Zooming in on a more recent period and a much narrower time frame, table 9 shows women's destinations in the first eight months of 2022. Jordan appears as the third destination with 13.36 per cent of the migrants while Lebanon has fallen to the bottom rank with insignificant departures. Saudi Arabia largely dominates as the most popular destination with 63.63 per cent, and Oman follows with 17.28 per cent of the departures. The data in these tables set up the framework that indicates alternative destinations for women who leave Lebanon to migrate elsewhere.

► **Table 8. Main destinations for women's labour migration from Bangladesh (2000–2022)**

Year	Saudi Arabia	Lebanon	Jordan	UAE	Oman	Qatar	Kuwait	Others	Total
2000	0	0	0	381	0	0	4	69	454
2001	335	0	95	162	27	0	15	25	659
2002	827	0	104	217	14	0	18	36	1 216
2003	808	1	1 053	108	0	0	333	50	2 353
2004	3 133	0	1 883	3 241	60	0	1 773	1 169	11 259
2005	6 319	12	1 745	3 786	132	6	930	640	13 570
2006	7 358	743	518	7 355	629	3	589	850	18 045
2007	7 341	3 498	12	5 181	1 380	4	49	1 629	19 094
2008	4 144	7 948	201	5 902	276	3	0	2 368	20 842
2009	386	13 062	439	6 095	11	4	0	2 227	22 224
2010	44	15 116	2 136	7 111	18	3	1	3 277	27 706
2011	166	15 610	4 338	7 394	1 061	4	0	2 006	30 579
2012	484	12 496	11 582	6 212	4 102	6	0	2 422	37 304
2013	167	10 750	21 243	13 710	6 068	2 100	0	2 362	56 400
2014	13	11 990	20 134	23 214	11 584	6 452	1	2 619	76 007
2015	20 952	8 782	21 776	24 307	16 980	8 642	6	2 273	103 718
2016	68 286	2 450	22 689	5 151	12 897	5 381	128	1 106	118 088
2017	83 354	1 642	19 872	3 272	9 199	3 209	393	984	121 925
2018	73 713	1 207	9 100	2 427	11 034	3 196	115	903	101 695
2019	62 578	1 611	19 706	2 483	12 226	3 741	758	1 683	104 786
2020	12 735	191	3 661	664	3 358	809	70	446	21 934
2021	53 082	147	13 643	777	10 035	1 997	35	427	80 143
2022(*)	48 727	187	10 229	185	13 232	1 471	369	2 179	76 579
Total	454 952	107 443	186 159	129 335	114 323	37 031	5 587	31 750	1 066 580
%	42.7	10.1	17.5	12.1	10.7	3.5	0.5	3.0	100.0

*Note: Data calculated up to August 2022.

Source: BMET (2000–2022).

► **Table 9. Main destinations for women's labour migration from Bangladesh (January to August 2022)**

Month	Saudi Arabia	Lebanon	Jordan	UAE	Oman	Qatar	Kuwait	Others	Total
January	6 499	16	1 438	143	1 960	180	4	50	10 290
February	6 858	20	1 519	177	1 837	154	5	42	10 612
March	6 617	27	1 917	186	2 158	231	2	73	11 211
April	7 345	25	1 624	143	2 020	225	26	89	11 497
May	4 391	24	814	113	1 164	138	27	82	6 753
June	7 054	30	1 072	210	1 551	187	124	261	10 489
July	3 883	17	874	91	1 049	135	93	133	6 275
August	6 080	28	971	185	1 493	221	88	386	9 452
Total	48 727	187	10 229	1 248	13 232	1 471	369	1 116	76 579
%	63.63	0.24	13.36	1.63	17.28	1.92	0.48	1.46	100.00

Source: BMET (September 2022).

12. Bangladeshi migrant workers in Lebanon

12.1 A historical review

In January 2019, the Bangladesh embassy in Beirut estimated the number of its citizens in the country at 150,000, with half of them being women. In April 2022, according to Mr Abdullah Al Mamoun, Labour Counsellor, the population had decreased by half. Embassies abroad may not know the exact number of their nationals in a host country but can provide rough estimates from the requests they receive.

From the beginning, women migrated to Lebanon in greater numbers than men, constituting an exception to the pattern prevalent in Bangladesh. Table 8 showed that the migration of women to Lebanon peaked between 2009 and 2014. While new entries diminished afterwards, as mentioned earlier, many women continued to live in Lebanon. Those who absconded from their employers found work while remaining undocumented, while others obtained free visas and could extend their stay for many years after being registered in BMET data once only at their first departure.

Between 2014 and 2018, Bangladeshi men were recruited as cleaners, and a few came as agricultural workers or attendants at petrol stations. In late 2018, the RAMCO company still recruited men for street cleaning and garbage collection even as conditions had badly deteriorated. Men wearing grey overalls with the RAMCO logo were highly visible on the streets of Beirut. In April 2022, Bangladeshi men had been replaced by Syrians and Egyptians, and the overall number had considerably dwindled. Also, given the reduction of services, the streets of Beirut were notably dirtier and clogged with detritus. A major labour conflict with the Bangladeshi RAMCO workers had erupted in April 2020, and this will be described below.

12.2 The recent crises and their impacts on migrant workers

Although signs of a malfunctioning Lebanese state were clearly apparent before, the crisis that erupted in October 2019 with the collapse of the banking system marked a new chapter. It led to massive street protests and a movement known as “*thawra*” (the revolt) denouncing a corrupt and failed state. A limit had been imposed on the amount of money that bank account holders could withdraw, and savings in American dollars could only be withdrawn in Lebanese pounds. Two decades of a fixed conversion rate for a dollar exchanging for 1,509 pounds had ended, and a drastic and prolonged depreciation of the Lebanese currency had begun. People were robbed of their life savings, plunging a major part of the population into poverty and despair. The situation has kept deteriorating up to the writing of this report. In April 2022, 1 American dollar was being exchanged for 25,000 Lebanese pounds, and in July 2022, it was exchanged for 29,000 pounds.

Migrant workers are not expected to mingle in the politics of their host country, and it was not for them to denounce the “politico-financial oligarchy” responsible for the crisis, but they suffered as much as the Lebanese. Employers could no longer keep their employees or had considerably reduced their pay. The COVID-19 pandemic that hit the country five months later delivered another massive blow to the fragile economy, depriving migrant workers of work and income altogether, with the men being more severely affected than the women.

With COVID, everything stopped for me from 15 March 2020. For six months, I did not earn anything. My wife continued to have a few clients and without her income,

we would have starved. After restrictions were lifted, I got some work but nothing of interest.

—Alamgir (33 years old, interviewed on 3 August 2022)

In April 2020, Bangladeshi workers of the RAMCO company went on strike and blocked trucks from leaving a depot. They protested being paid in pounds when their contract stated that they should be paid in dollars. The leader of the Fenasol Labour Union and the labour counsellor of the Bangladesh embassy were called to appease the workers and find a solution, but what can really be done when a company is contracted by a bankrupt state. Salaries were eventually indexed to the dollar but were considerably reduced. In April 2022, cleaning remained the main occupation available to Bangladeshi men in Lebanon. Whether employed by a company or individually recruited, their monthly pay ranged between US\$ 120–150. As earlier, men worked double shifts or engaged in a second occupation for much lower pay. Women fared relatively better as suggested by Alamgir's testimony.

Finally, the massive explosion in the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 that devastated parts of the city increased hardship and despair. It made victims of Bangladeshi migrants as well. Nine men working at petrol stations were reportedly killed and 167 more were injured.

12.3 Assisted repatriation of stranded Bangladeshi workers

With successive crises hitting Lebanon, one could imagine the massive departure of migrant workers, but it took time for them to decide to stay or to depart and to organize. Workers were stunned by the rapidity of the economic collapse, and many could not quite believe that the situation would keep deteriorating. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic that followed five months later made travel impossible for some time. Airports were shut, flights were cancelled, and when movement resumed travel costs had increased. Finally, workers who held no valid documents had to wait for government clearance.

The assisted repatriation of Bangladeshi migrant workers began in February 2021, one year and five months after the collapse of the Lebanese banking system. A few who held valid documents and could afford the price of the airfare did not wait for government assistance. This is the case for Taslima who had lived in Lebanon since 2005. She was interviewed on 1 June 2021.

I came back in December (2020) because the situation had become very bad. I could survive because I have experience and many contacts but there was no benefit. Some Bangladeshi men and women are now on the street. I have never seen anything like this. The price of everything has increased: food, airline tickets. I held a valid visa, so I purchased my own ticket and left. The cost was 60,000 takas (about US\$ 700).

On 7 June 2021, Babu Saha signed an article in the *Daily Star* (Bangladesh) stating that 417 undocumented workers had been allowed to leave. They thanked the Lebanese government for allowing them to return home without paying fines or serving jail terms for their illegal stay. Between February and April 2021, over 6,000 undocumented workers returned in 16 special flights organized by the Bangladesh embassy. In all, according to the labour counsellor, 37 such flights were operated by Bangladesh Biman and were organized by the embassy. Interviewed in April 2022, the latter maintained that those who stayed in Lebanon had come to terms with the situation and had no plans to leave. In any case, the government-organized repatriation had ended and would not be resumed.

These flights, however, were not free. Each passenger had to pay US\$ 400, which is less than the US\$ 700 Taslima paid for a commercial flight in November 2020. Still, for those who lost their jobs, exhausted their savings if they had any, and could not get assistance from home, raising US\$ 400 may have proved difficult. The counsellor explained that the embassy had a limited budget and did not have the capacity to assist those with no means to pay, excepting a few highly needy individuals. IOM had repatriated stranded migrant workers in other circumstances but not in this case. However, it provided free COVID vaccinations to migrant workers, a contribution that the Bangladesh embassy appreciated. Whether other organizations helped with the

repatriation of sick or vulnerable individuals is not clear.

12.4 Migrant workers with children born in Lebanon

Couples or mothers alone with a child born in Lebanon generally found the repatriation costs prohibitive as several tickets were required to go home. It may be useful to recall a peculiar feature of Lebanon here, where a relatively high number of migrant women give birth. Such occurrence has not been found in the other countries of the Middle East. In Lebanon, migrant women may lead relatively free lives and make their own living arrangements while serving several employers. Some of them choose to live with a *habibi*. The procedure to marry and register the marriage with the Bangladesh embassy is relatively easy. Women and men who married in Bangladesh also arrange for their spouse to join them, and some couples selected Lebanon as they can live together here. Whether planned or not, children are often born from these unions. Although most marriages are contracted with a compatriot, this is not always the case.

In 2018, the Bangladesh ambassador had explained to an ILO delegation visiting Lebanon that the repatriation of women left stranded alone with a child was an important part of his work. Such situations create additional work for the embassy and are often considered a burden. For example, a six-year-old girl was recently orphaned after her mother died of COVID-19. Her father, a Pakistani national, had already left the country. Tracing the orphaned girl's Bangladeshi relatives was complicated as the mother had married under a false identity after borrowing another woman's papers.

The repatriation dilemma for couples with a child, of mothers alone with a child, or pregnant women will be discussed later. For these families, the pregnancy period and caring for a young child may have already reduced the mother's working time and both parents' income. Saving sufficient dollars to pay for several flight tickets could be impossible. Fieldwork conducted in Bangladesh followed up some of these families and provided a more complete picture.

13. Beirut

This chapter describes situations witnessed and interviews held while circulating through different neighbourhoods of Beirut between 3–11 April 2022. The presentation follows my diary notes during the eight days of fieldwork.

13.1 Gemayzeh

13.1.1 A Bangladeshi cook replaces a Lebanese chef

While walking from Ashrafieh to Gemayzeh, in a reconnaissance tour of the injured city, the aftermath of the explosion in the port of Beirut, the repairs and reconstructions and, more generally, the effects of the economic crisis that engulfed Beirut could be observed. On a Sunday, the streets were largely empty. I stopped at an Armenian restaurant next to an eviscerated grain silo, a tall structure standing in the port of Beirut as a monument of remembrance to the catastrophe. The restaurant had been beautifully reconstructed with the assistance of an NGO I was told. All around, the street bore the marks of the explosion, many disfigured buildings remained unoccupied, while a few trees exposed their amputated limbs. An Armenian woman offered calendars for sale as a dignified way to ask for charity. The manager quickly moved her to another table and brought her a packet of food. On this mild spring day, the inviting terrace remained largely empty. Beirut was desperately waiting for tourists to fill the empty seats.

The following Sunday, I returned to Gemayzeh and sat at a café adjacent to the Armenian restaurant. A friendly Lebanese waiter suggested a local wine and dish. The young man was a student trying to earn money to leave the country. I mentioned that I came from Bangladesh, and he told me that the chef was Bangladeshi. I was introduced to Ridoi, a

29-year-old youth from Madaripur and soon, the conversation switched to Bangla. Ridoi was proud to be employed as a chef. He explained that he had acquired a good command of English, essential for the job, as he had spent three years in Mauritius before migrating to Lebanon. He worked six days a week: three days in double shifts and three days in single shifts with one day off. For work amounting to 72 hours a week, he received a monthly salary of US\$ 400. A mediocre pay, no doubt, but it was the highest I had come across among Bangladeshi men during the week I had spent in Beirut. Ridoi hardly needed to buy food as the restaurant covered his needs. His main expense was the flat he shared with three others, each paying US\$ 25.

In the end, I never tasted the Lebanese dish that was suggested to me but learned a little more about the secrets of the kitchen. A Bangladeshi man prepared the food advertised as Lebanese, and he had replaced the Lebanese chef who had left the country. I was told that if I searched a little more, I would find other Bangladeshis employed in similar positions. The media, at the time, were deploring the departure of skilled Lebanese workers and the problems this would create in reviving the tourist industry. According to the Lebanese government (pre-crisis rules), only Lebanese nationals may be employed as cooks or chefs. But who bothered about such regulations these days?

13.2 Daoura

13.2.1 No more large gatherings for migrant workers

From Gemayzeh, I took a public bus to Daoura and observed the destruction on the side of the port. In Daoura, buildings were intact but the colourful crowd of different nationalities that had

usually gathered here on Sundays had vanished. Several shops were closed, and some of my landmarks had disappeared. I stopped at the petrol station that used to employ Bangladeshi men, but now Egyptians had replaced them, and the crew was much smaller.

Bangladeshi vegetables being sold in front of two grocery shops attracted my attention. I walked into one of them and recognized Obaidul, a shop manager from Brahmanbaria who had been in Lebanon for 10 years. There were fewer products on the shelves than I could remember. One customer vehemently argued on a price, and Obaidul lost his temper. At the back, a tailor stood behind his cutting table. With the three-piece sets, saris and pieces of cloth stacked on a shelf behind, the setup had not changed but customers were fewer. The tailor admitted he had little work, and I heard the same refrain in al Naba and in Sabra. This was the tailor's second job – the rest of the week, he worked as a cleaner. The young man selling fresh vegetables in front of Obaidul's shop also worked as a cleaner during the week. A few women were purchasing food for the week.

13.2.2 Shoppers being put on a smaller budget

Articulate and confident, Pia was in her thirties, and from her appearance, she obviously cared about her clothes and her looks. She said:

I am from Khulna. I returned three years ago on a free visa. I paid for my aqama for one year, and I have been staying illegally ever since. What to do? The situation has deteriorated here. In my community, I was somebody. People knew me and respected me. I was involved in local politics. I had bad luck coming to Lebanon.

Jushna is from Jessore and is about the same age as Pia. She admitted that all migrant workers had a hard time but pointed out that women earned more than men. She insisted on this point as if this was the most important information to inscribe in my notebook.

I send US\$ 100 a month to my family, but it is difficult. I must calculate everything. The hourly rate of pay is now 50,000 pounds, which is US\$ 2 [it used to be US\$ 5]. Work is available. The problem is the pay. I can

earn up to US\$ 300 a month. Here, men earn US\$ 200, and women earn US\$ 300.

Kolpona is from Trishal in Mymensingh and had been working in Lebanon for 16 years. For the last five years, she had been employed in a commercial establishment that she did not specify. She held a valid work permit (for domestic work) and earned a basic salary of US\$ 150 a month on top of which she received tips. Her employer covered her food and lodging. Kolpona moved about talking freely to men and women, and she seemed to know everyone. Of her, I shall retain that she went home in 2021 for two months and returned to Lebanon, which is rare.

Three women came from Antélias, a location eight kilometres north of Daoura. They came here as they got better salaries and could meet friends. The conversation was brief as they had to return home and prepare for Iftar (the meal that breaks the fast during the month of Ramadan). The time for interviews was over. A few migrant workers lingered on, enjoying their day off. A group of Nepalese men and women sat on the pavement drinking beer and eating momos that a woman dished out from an insulated food jar. Inside a shop, a few south Indian men openly drank alcohol. Little seemed to have changed. I remembered the tolerance towards different drinking habits – some Bangladeshi men (and women) would drink alcohol but never in public. During the month of Ramadan, such restrictions would apply even more strongly.

On this first day in the field, information that would be enriched on subsequent days was gleaned. Already, the departure of so many migrant workers, the closure of shops and the austerity regime forced upon those who had stayed were evident. I sensed the resilience, the lowering of expectations and the patience for better days. Families at home had been informed that little money could be sent even if efforts were made to dispatch something.

13.3 Hamra

13.3.1 The desperate and the stoic

The next day, I explored the neighbourhood of Hamra. Many shops had closed for good, and the glamour of the buoyant neighbourhood was gone. The number of women in burqas (mostly

Syrian) and children begging on the street had markedly increased.

At a street corner, I met Usman waiting for a Bangladeshi “friend” who might give him a job for the day. The 28-year-old from Kulaura (Brahmanbaria) looked sad and depressed. He complained that there was no work. During the month of Ramadan, one should eat better food than usual but how could that custom be followed when one had no work and no income. Usman had migrated to Lebanon in 2017 with a free visa that cost 550,000 takas. He used to work as a cleaner and earned US\$ 300 a month. The reimbursement of his migration costs was incomplete when Lebanon fell into chaos: 200,000 takas were still to be paid. Usman asked financial help from his family once, but he felt such a request could not be repeated. He spoke harshly about the Bangladesh embassy. They were all thieves, he said. Usman did not wish to answer more questions, and it would have been improper to insist especially since I had no help to offer.

The despair into which Usman appeared to be sinking had several causes, and they could not all be attributed to the collapse of the Lebanese economy. The large amount of money he paid for the free visa – about US\$ 6,500 at the 2017 exchange rate – did not tally with a monthly salary of US\$ 300. When simply reimbursing costs alone may take nearly three years, what were the benefits of migration?

In 2018, the same question was raised with young men enjoying their day off in Sabra. Their families had consented to send them abroad at a high cost with few expectations about economic returns, at least not in the short term. Migration was a way to complete their education, they said. They would learn to work and cope with hardship. Their families also wanted them to keep away from the problems and dangers – such as unemployment, drug addiction and criminality – looming at home. Did Usman’s family see the benefit of his migration in those terms? In any case, the young man’s ability to cope with the problems he faced appeared beyond his capacity to endure, and the joyous spirit of the young men described above was not his lot. Usman seemed terribly alone. Such despair and loneliness could lead to a tragic outcome. According to an embassy source, cases of suicide had been observed among migrant

men. Interestingly, to his knowledge, the same outcome were not reported among migrant women.

Usman had no money to pay for an airline ticket to return home. And if he were to go home, what work could he do? Migration to another country would require spending a large amount of money again, and more debt would have to be assumed. As shown in a study I undertook with Hannan Biwas (2021), there is no free or low-cost migration for men, which is not the case for women who may migrate for free or at a very small cost. These conditions result in migrant women being more mobile than men. Should they decide to leave Lebanon, they could migrate to another destination without incurring a debt, as illustrated in the cases in this chapter.

13.3.2 Lowered ambitions

I found the Gazi Varieties Store a few metres away from where I had met Usman. Of the three Bangladeshi shops identified in the area over three years ago, only this one remained open. The manager Shah Alom was sitting on the pavement with his friend Abdul Barak. Both men had been living in Lebanon for some 24 years, and they knew each other well. The first was from Cumilla, the second from Barisal. The shopkeeper had no customer, his friend had no work that day, and there was plenty of time to chat. The men recalled how they had managed in 2006 when the war was raging. They had witnessed these events, they had shared the hardships of the Lebanese people and, in some ways, they felt they belonged here.

Abdul Barak had a higher secondary school certificate and worked as a cleaner at a shopping mall in Ashrafieh. He normally did double shifts – working 16 hours a day – and earned US\$ 250 a month and got occasional tips as well. At home, he had a wife and three children. He had informed them that he would not work double shifts during Ramadan, and he would not be able to send money home this month. In all the years he had worked in Lebanon, he was unable to buy land and could only build a house. Comparing his “success” with men who had migrated to other countries, he considered his low achievements as a matter of “*nocif*”, using the Arab word for good fortune. He had reconciled with what he saw as his fate. Unlike Usman, Abdul Barak did not criticize the embassy or show anger at the world.

He was well informed about the repatriation scheme that had been offered but he chose not to leave.

What could I do at home after so many years abroad ... I am no longer a documented worker here, but I don't fear being arrested. These arrests stopped with COVID. The police are not interested. What would they do with us?

The man in his mid-forties had no desire to fight a hard battle. Staying in Lebanon appeared a lesser challenge than returning home.

13.3.3 The risk-takers: From Lebanon to France or Italy

Gazi's nephew, Ismail, used to run his uncle's shop in Hamra. I remember the young man, who was always courteous and helpful when I visited. He left Lebanon in 2020 and was now in France Gazi told me. A third man who joined the conversation suggested that the nephew had helped himself to his uncle's cash box to finance his trip, but Gazi would rather speak of something else. All I heard was that Ismail travelled to Syria, Turkey and Greece before reaching France.

The journey normally takes 6 months, but it took Ismail 18 months because he got sick in Turkey.

Ismail's sickness, however, was not explained. The problems migrant men encounter on such risky journeys are not necessarily shared with their families, and the uncle may have been hesitant to tell me what he knew. I would soon find out that Ismail's case was far from unique. In Sabra, several young men had been advised to migrate to Europe. The route comprised four steps: Lebanon to Syria, Syria to Turkey, Turkey to Greece and Greece to France or Italy, with each leg of the journey having its own cost. In Beirut, I met those who had declined the offer as they or their families had considered the journey too costly or too risky, or both. Clearly, one must be able to afford such a trip.

Alamgir, interviewed in Bangladesh in August 2022, explained how he had inadvertently

financed his younger brother Jahangir's migration to Italy, not suspecting that the latter had come to Lebanon with this purpose in mind. A friend from their village had already migrated to Italy through sponsorship,¹² a costly process that the family could not afford. Jahangir worked in Lebanon three and a half years and all that he earned was used to pay for his trip to Italy. Jahangir was twenty-eight years old, unmarried, and the most educated among three brothers. He migrated to Lebanon in March 2018 at the cost of 480,000 takas, which was paid by Alamgir and their father. This cost was never reimbursed as Jahangir secretly and stubbornly pursued his dream. He reached Italy in March 2021 after a nine-month journey. A Syrian man he had met in Lebanon arranged his trip. Jahangir spent two months in Syria before crossing the border with Turkey and being taken to Greece. The journey from Greece to Italy was organized and paid for by the Bangladeshi friend already in Italy.

Greece had been the most difficult and complicated stop commented Alamgir. "When he reached Italy, my brother was in poor health and his friend cared for him until he recovered. He is now working caring for an elderly Italian man suffering from Parkinson disease," he said. The job was presented as suitable for an undocumented migrant as he stayed mostly inside, away from the police. The total cost of the adventure from Bangladesh to Italy was estimated at US\$ 18,000, excluding the last leg of the journey paid for by the friend already in Italy and to whom Jahangir remains indebted.

The Bangladesh embassy in Beirut confirmed that several men had attempted the illegal passage. Some had been arrested in Syria and the embassy was burdened with their eventual repatriation. The deep crisis that plunged Lebanon into darkness undoubtedly increased such risky departures, but these had been attempted before as well. In 2018, I met men entertaining the dream of reaching France, or another western country, from Lebanon and this was seen as a stepping stone. One of them asked for my help after responding to an offer on the web. A text written in clumsy French could have raised an alarm, but the candidate did not know

12 Sponsorship is obtained through shop owners or entrepreneurs in Italy who apply to their government for permission to bring additional workers. While the process is legal, the selling of a sponsorship at a high price (some 1,200,000 takas) as a ticket of entry to Italy belongs to a grey zone.

that language and did not know who to ask for advice. Unfortunately, he had already spent US\$ 6,000 which was unlikely to be recovered.

Only men were seemed to undertake the journey to Italy or France, some of them leaving a wife and a child behind as we shall see in the next sections.

13.4 Basta and Ras el Naba

The next day, I prepared to meet Shefali who had worked for the same employers for 20 years, a rare story of continuity and mutual trust.

13.4.1 Twenty years in service to the same family: Shefali's story

During the course of an investigation on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers conducted in July 2020 in a village of the Sayasta sub-district (Manikgonj district), Shefali's story drew our attention. Her daughter and her daughter-in-law stated that Shefali had worked in Lebanon for the same family for 20 years, and she fared much better than her son in Iraq or her son-in-law who had recently migrated to Saudi Arabia. Secure in her job and receiving her full salary, Shefali had sent regular remittances during the pandemic whereas her son had barely covered his needs with the subsistence allowance he received. Shefali's daughter-in-law, Rasheda, explained:

We owe our comfort to my mother-in-law. Whatever this family has achieved is thanks to her. I have been married for 15 years and she visited home only twice during this time, staying less than 3 months each time. She came like a guest, and she left again.

Shefali migrated to Bahrain in 1998, stayed two and a half years and returned without achieving much. She left for Lebanon in 2002 on a domestic worker's visa and has remained with the same employer ever since. Such stable employment over two decades has permitted the family to improve their standard of living considerably and durably. Shefali has visited home only 3 times in 20 years and yet, she is in close touch with her family and plays a major role in decision-making. Her husband died in 2018, and unlike many men, he did not waste his wife's income, commented Rasheda. She pointed out that her mother-in-law

had provided equally for her son and daughter. For the latter, she purchased land and built a house. Empowered through her earnings, Shefali could bend patriarchal norms and give her daughter access to the ownership of land.

The family admired Shefali for her tenacity and her achievements, but they could not understand why she did not return home. Shefali explained that she could not abandon the elderly couple who depended on her. She "cared" for them in the sense that she looked after them and also had affection for them using the term "*maya laque*", which could translate as love or filial devotion. In other words, she referred to a bond above and beyond a mere work contract.

After giving instructions to the taxi driver, I reached her address, and the employer welcomed me in. Speaking impeccable French, he apologized for wearing night clothes as he was convalescing, having recently been released from the hospital. He directed me to the lounge, and the madame joined wearing a long velvet gown. She explained that she was missing her hearing aid and would not participate in the conversation. The spacious lounge with its high ceiling, high-quality furniture, delicate china, fine carpets and wide veranda surrounded with greenery at the back signalled a bourgeois home with signs of (past) affluence. I was offered a cup of Turkish coffee and a pastry from a reputed shop.

The host explained that he was a retired engineer who had worked for the government and his wife was a former school headmistress. Both had good savings in the bank, but the amount they could jointly draw each month was limited to US\$ 2,500. In addition, this money could only be taken out in Lebanese pounds at a very poor conversion rate (he mentioned 8,000 pounds to the dollar). The couple had three sons: two settled in Beirut and one living in New York. Shefali's family in Bangladesh had mentioned receiving US\$ 5,000 the previous year from the son living in New York as she requested one year's salary advance to build a house. Her salary came via the same route at other times as well. My host did not mention this arrangement. He presented Shefali as a member of the family. When first employed, the house was full of grandchildren, he said. She had seen them growing up, witnessing their joys and sorrows.

After this warm reception, the couple took leave, inviting me to stay with Shefali for the interview. I was impressed by the dignified manners of this educated couple. In the patchwork of communities constituting Lebanese society, they were Sunni Muslims. All along, I spoke French with the host, Shefali spoke Arabic with her employers, and I spoke Bangla with Shefali. No one spoke all the three languages being used, creating an interesting communication triangle.

Shefali covered her head with a scarf, but one could see that her hair was getting white. In her early fifties, she showed her age. On that day, she was wearing cheap but comfortable clothes suitable for work which did not identify her as Bangladeshi. Obviously, she did not care about matching colours or looking stylish. The scant attention she paid to her looks contrasted with the Bangladeshi women I had met outside.

Shefali described her work, much of which related to caring and nursing a couple with aging bodies. Without inhibition, she described their physical conditions and the diligent attention it required from her. Madame was incontinent and deaf. Monsieur was unstable on his feet and could fall as he got up several times during the night because of his prostate problems. At night, she had to remain alert as she could be called to help them. In the morning, helping them use the toilet and bathe and washing soiled bedding were time-consuming tasks. She kept phone numbers at hand in case of an emergency. She was also responsible for domestic tasks, but recently another Bangladeshi woman had been employed three hours a week to give her some respite. Shefali had no days off. When needed, she ran errands nearby and, for her own pleasure, she sometimes visited a Bangladeshi shop that sold the paan and betel nuts that she liked to chew. She occasionally received visits from Bangladeshi relatives living in Lebanon, but her social life was mostly conducted on her mobile phone.

Shefali was paid US\$ 400 a month. She had no costs and could save her entire salary.

She believed she should be paid more considering the work she did and the responsibilities she shouldered but given the situation in Lebanon, with the currency devaluation that had hit everyone, including her employers, she dared not press for an

increase. It must be said that her salary was the highest a Bangladeshi woman was found to earn during my visit to Lebanon. In Basta, another Bangladeshi woman who cared for an elderly woman with children living abroad received a salary of US\$ 350 a month and, like Shefali, she enjoyed her employer's trust, ran errands in the neighbourhood and took on many responsibilities. Paid in dollars, the devaluation of the Lebanese currency did not affect her. If one compares these two women with Ridoi, the young man working as a chef in a Gemayzeh restaurant, they cleared an income at least equivalent to the man, and as their needs were met, they could save their entire income. Such situation could be envied by all those who lost their jobs or whose salaries had been cut by half.

Four years ago, Shefali had sent her only son to Iraq at the cost of 550,000 takas. "This is not a peaceful country," she commented, "but he will not come back". According to her daughter-in-law, Iraq was selected as a stepping stone for Italy, but the adventure was judged too risky, and the plan was dropped. In February 2022, Shefali's son-in-law had migrated to Saudi Arabia at the cost of 350,000 takas. Shefali's financial support was solicited but she declined to contribute. "He was promised a salary of 1,200 Saudi Arabian riyals, but he is paid only 900," said Shefali regretfully. One must conclude that the amount and regularity of Shefali's income with the possibility of saving it all were unparalleled among the migrant men in her family.

Shefali had her own bank account, but she was discreet about what she held. In the past, she had sent money to her husband, to her son, and later to her son-in-law to oversee the construction of the house. She did not specify who the owner of the house was, making no distinction between herself and her son, and in this, she showed a traditional attitude.

As pointed out, Shefali felt morally torn about leaving the elderly couple, making her departure difficult. Nonetheless, her village in Bangladesh is where she belonged, and she was prepared to return eventually. The employer claimed Shefali to be a family member, but he also knew she would leave although he was in no hurry to see her go.

What place can Shefali carve for herself as she integrates her son's household now under the

management of her daughter-in-law? What will happen when she comes to stay and is no longer a guest? Having been in the role of earner, provider and caretaker for so many years, how will she adjust to being “taken care of”? Shefali herself could not answer these questions, but the truth is that returning could be difficult – as we shall see below with Aklima.

This story also illustrates the globalization of care. It involves three nations: Bangladesh, Lebanon, and the USA, with payments for labour performed in Lebanon routinely sent to Bangladesh. This pattern, often seen in Lebanon, gained fresh significance due to the devaluation of the Lebanese currency. As a result, the diaspora was increasingly called upon to support their financially struggling family members at home.

In conclusion to Shefali’s story, it should be pointed out that she never went to school and the qualities her employers appreciated most – honesty, reliability, gentleness and a moral sense of duty – were not acquired on school benches or at a training centre. This is the occasion to highlight the intelligence and the skills of workers commonly referred to as *kajer meye* (domestic workers), who are regularly denigrated in Bengali society. While the Bangladesh government is showing interest in contributing a workforce to fill the ever-growing demand for caretakers in countries with an aging population, such as Lebanon, and tap the benefits of a potentially profitable industry, we know that Bangladeshi women with higher levels of education show little appetite for such jobs.

Care is not a valued profession. In fact, it is not seen as a profession at all. The migrant women I met who successfully performed such role used the idiom “*maya laque*” to explain the care they provided, referring to filial devotion, or in caring for a child, motherly love. Shefali’s story offers a remarkable example of such commitment. On the other hand, the holidays that her good employers did not grant – a weekly day off and regular visits home every two to three years – and the long hours of work she must put in her care work cannot be brushed away under the assertion “She is part of the family”. Shefali is the highest earner we have met in the study. In that sense, she is “privileged”. How does one argue for workers’ rights in this context?

13.4.2 Zahid: Shopkeeping for US\$ 200 a month

After leaving Shefali and her employers, I explored the neighbourhood and met Zahid who worked in a small grocery shop. Zahid was from Pirojpur (Barisal) and had been in Lebanon for six years. He came with a *mazra* visa to work in agriculture, which he did for six months, the employer later appointing him to different jobs, once in a workshop and once in a hotel. In 2016, sponsors were taking advantage of a Lebanese government policy to boost agriculture. Several *mazra* visas were issued to recruit workers in agriculture, but the workers were soon used in other sectors. Zahid was not the only worker thus being moved around. He stayed with the same employer for four years and was paid US\$ 300 a month for whatever work he did. In 2020, he was told that there was no more work and no more money to pay him and that he was “free” to go. He found his present job through the Bangladeshi network.

Zahid was the sole shopkeeper in the small shop. He worked 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, earning a monthly salary of US\$ 200 with much sitting and waiting, but this was his work. The shop owner paid him the equivalent of US\$ 200 in Lebanese pounds, the amount being adjusted to the exchange rate on the informal market on pay day. Zahid had a wife, a son and elderly parents who depended on the money he remitted. He sent home 10,000 to 12,000 takas every month, equivalent to a little over US\$ 100. The frugal life he led to make this possible can only be imagined.

13.4.3 Asma and her *habibi*: The photo album of a happy couple

I went to Al Basta Tahat where fieldwork was conducted in 2018–19, but the Bangladeshi shop and the restaurant that I regularly visited, located behind the big mosque in the area, were closed and no one seemed to remember who used to gather there. A bit further away, Rina’s shop was also closed. With some relief, I met Asma who was not working that day. She explained that of the seven shops managed by Bangladeshis, only two remained open. Inviting me to her room, she explained that she was from Noakhali but had married in Rangamati. She had two sons, one of whom was married. Considering her sons, I thought she was about 35 years old, although

she looked younger. Asma explained that she migrated in 2009 in anger after her husband took a second wife. In 13 years, she had not returned home even once. She absconded from her first employer after eight months because the salary was too low. I did not try and find out more about events that had occurred long ago knowing that the reasons most women gave for absconding tended to be repetitive and depicted the employer in the most negative terms.

Asma was the caretaker of the building we had entered. In exchange for cleaning the staircase and emptying the garbage, she got a little room on the ground floor rent free. She had been living there since 2014. Signs that she shared her room with a man led me to ask about her *habibi*. Her face lit up, and she pulled out a photo album with shots of a happy couple playing in the snow on an outing. In one of the photos, he carried her in his arms in a stereotypical “honeymoon” shot that did not belong to the Bangladeshi cultural milieu. Her “husband” was from Cumilla, was younger than her and had never married before. Asma’s handsome companion then returned from work. He explained that he had migrated to Lebanon in 2015 at a cost of 450,000 takas and that he currently worked as a cleaner at Republic earning US\$ 250 a month. The COVID-19 closures had left him without work for one year, and he hoped that the worst was behind them.

With two incomes and no rent to pay, the couple was managing reasonably well. Asma sent money to her sons, and he also sent something to his family. The meeting ended abruptly as the building owner called to discuss a leaking pipe and Asma’s companion went to check the problem. Many questions about the enamoured couple remained unanswered. Asma then showed me the location of the two shops still open and I returned the following day.

13.4.4 Abzal: A sense of business

Abzal managed the only Bangladeshi shop that stayed open all day long in Al Basta Tahat. He was from Shariatpur, in his mid-thirties and had arrived in Lebanon in 2008 on a company visa. I asked how he could keep his shop open when so many others had closed, and he said his specialty was to provide home deliveries. On an old scooter parked outside the shop, I saw how Abzal could balance a gas cylinder or a couple of large water bottles at his feet for home delivery.

His spacious shop, which had seen better days, accommodated a tailor and a barber. Abzal sold grocery, telephone cards, advised a woman on how to use her phone and helped another to contact her family in Bangladesh. This list of activities is likely to be incomplete as shops are hubs where many businesses are conducted.

Abzal shared his life with Sultana, a 24-year-old woman from Singair (Manikgonj district) who had come to Lebanon in 2016, and they met there. She had her own clients for domestic work. Sultana was undocumented, but Abzal had a valid *aqama* as he could receive visits from the police. Abzal was also the caretaker of the building and therefore paid no rent in exchange for his services. The couple invited me to share the Iftar meal at their home. In the small, cosy and very orderly room, Sultana prepared a delicious meal served on the bed that also served as a table. The variety of dishes and the methodical organization required in such a tiny multi-purpose space were impressive.

In the same neighbourhood, Bangladeshi migrant workers paid 400,000 pounds (about US\$ 13) a month for a room generally shared by two with access to toilets and a bathroom. After so many migrants had left, lodgings were easy to find and, unlike food, prices had not increased.

13.4.5 The cumulation of jobs: How long can a frenetic pace be sustained?

Alamin worked in Abzal’s shop as a tailor. He came there late in the afternoon, after completing his job as cleaner. In my presence, he patched up and re-adjusted used clothes. I asked why he made no new outfits as was customary before Eid. He replied that new cloth was too costly, and people repaired what they had. His clients were of many nationalities. At one point, a Lebanese couple entered the shop and the woman pulled out a pair of fashionable jeans which were torn and worn out, asking if they could be mended. “Alamin can do miracles!” she said laughingly as he did what he could to prolong the life of the old garment. The image I retained from this scene was one of generalized poverty that levelled off differences between Lebanese and migrant workers.

Alamin worked six days a week in three different jobs. From 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., he worked as a cleaner. Then, he worked as a tailor in Abzal’s shop for one to two hours and, in the evening,

he worked in a factory making shirts, being paid 30,000 pounds per hour. I asked Alamin how he could sustain such a routine, and he said that he often slept one hour on the cleaner job. With these three jobs, he could send home US\$ 150 a month. Alamin came to Lebanon in 2016 on a cleaner's visa, but he worked in a garment factory instead where he earned US\$ 500 a month. A labour inspector came one day, and Alamin was dismissed on the grounds that such jobs were reserved for Lebanese workers. He found another garment factory job where he worked for two years at a salary of US\$ 300. Everything then collapsed, he said, not bothering to single out which of the calamities that hit Lebanon was the most harmful. Young and energetic, he was in a recovery phase.

13.4.6 Rina's declining business

Rina was the only Bangladeshi woman running her own shop in Al Basta Tahat. She opened late in the afternoon after she returned from the homes where she performed domestic tasks. I met her as she was pulling the food that her generous madam had given her out of a plastic bag: biscuits, pastry, bread, onions, garlic and half a raw chicken that she immediately proceeded to cut into pieces and cook for the evening meal. Rina would only need to add rice and she could feed herself, her niece and her niece's husband.

At our first meeting in November 2018, Rina's niece had just arrived in Lebanon and was living with her aunt. She was waiting for her husband to join as both had come to Lebanon on free visas. Rina had found her niece a job in a lawyer's office, and she was briefing her on how to dress and behave. Three and a half years later, the mood had changed. Lebanon had not delivered its promises to the niece and her husband. They had come at the wrong time and could hardly repay the costs of their migration. In April 2022, the niece earned US\$ 150 a month for a five-hour working day. Her husband earned the same in a nine-hour working day, though the cost of his migration had been three times higher. These were bad times for everybody. Again, I noted the difference between men and women's earnings and their respective migration costs.

I had waited for Rina, but she was tired as she returned from work and opened her shop. She had little time for conversation. After fasting all

day, she had to cook a meal and prepare to go to the shirt factory in Nabatya where Alamin also worked. Rina's shop was nearly empty. She no longer imported frozen fish from Bangladesh as it was too expensive, and she had stopped selling Bangladeshi vegetables grown in Lebanon as she saw no profits. One ingredient that she still sold were chilies. She kept saying that finding work was not difficult – the problem was the pay. Like Alamin, Rina struggled to cumulate jobs and sources of income, no matter how small each of them were.

13.5 Ashrafieh.

13.5.1 Work over poverty: Construction workers in Place Sassine

At Place Sassine, we met three men from different parts of Bangladesh working for a construction company. Their monthly salary was 8 million pounds (about US\$ 333 at the prevalent rate). They were given free accommodation but had to feed themselves. One of them had visited Bangladesh and had returned the previous month, a rare occurrence in the present circumstances.

There is no work in the country. So, what I get here is still preferable to remaining idle at home.

BMET statistics reported 180 persons migrating to Lebanon in the first four months of the year 2022, and 49 per cent of them were women. As mentioned, official statistics record new migrants only and do not account for documented migrants returning to the destination after a visit home.

13.5.2 ABC mall workers: Surviving on half a salary

The economic crisis had badly hit the luxurious ABC mall in Ashrafieh. The spacious building still had visitors and was kept reasonably clean. In November 2018, Bangladeshi men were employed as cleaners, and Bangladesh women worked as attendants in the ladies and men's toilets. The number of women employed had been halved, and their salaries had been cut from US\$ 400 to US\$ 200 a month. The women had little work and they could talk at leisure. The supervisor they used to worry about three and a half years ago had gone.

The women felt obliged to send money home, no matter how difficult it was to survive. They worked six days a week, and a few of them managed to get a job on their day off. Every additional dollar thus earned was precious. I asked why they stayed in such poor conditions and, again, I was told that the situation would not be any better if they returned home. The assurance of getting paid US\$ 200 a month was preferable to the unknown.

13.5.3 Sabra's thriving Bangladeshi market

The Bangladeshi market in Sabra remained a lively hub of activities for Bangladeshi migrant workers. On Saturdays and Sundays, it still attracted workers from as far as Saida in the south. The restaurants were busy, and those who were fasting bought food to take away, while others ate there. A selection of fresh fish and a wide variety of vegetables, including Bangladeshi vegetables cultivated in Lebanon, could still be purchased. Fruits grown in Lebanon, such as oranges, were plentiful and reasonably priced. Widespread impoverishment may have reduced sales, but austerity still brought many people looking for cheap prices. Bangladeshi migrant workers also visited Sabra for social contacts and the unique services available there.

13.5.4 A joint family story: Rubel and his brothers

I first met Rubel on a Wednesday at his brother's tailoring shop. He was helping out in response to the increased demand for new clothes before Eid. Here, some women had the means to order new outfits. Rubel was from Chandpur, 33 years old and the eldest of three brothers, all of whom were working in Lebanon then. He was married to Shumi, and they had a three-year-old daughter. Rubel came to Lebanon in 2009 and his youngest brother arrived in October 2019, an unfortunate time to come to Lebanon, but brotherly solidarity could be relied upon. The latter presently runs his own tailoring shop, while Rubel has a grocery shop a short distance away. That day, Shumi combined childcare with shop duty.

Rubel was planning to visit Bangladesh as he needed to consult a doctor for a persistent health problem. He said that the doctors in Beirut did not give him enough attention, and he did not

have the (Arabic) words to explain his pain. He intended to take their daughter and leave her with his mother so that he and his wife could both work and earn. Rubel had not been able to take advantage of the government-organized repatriation programme and would pay a higher airfare. He did not also hold a valid work permit and could be penalized. His old passport was manually written, and the information unlikely to be recorded, therefore he felt he would not be barred from re-entering Bangladesh with a new passport. His plan was to return with a free visa, which now cost 400,000 takas (prices had reduced). Rubel faced another difficulty as the Bangladesh embassy did not allow fathers to bring home a child born in Lebanon – only mothers could do so. The policy was adopted to ensure that mothers did not lose control over their children given the precarious nature of marriages contracted in Lebanon. An event of this tragic nature was documented in the study conducted in Lebanon in 2018–19 (see Aïsha: An exemplary story in chapter 4).

The following Sunday, I met Rubel's third brother who had a regular job and a good income as a tailor in a factory producing high-fashion clothes for export. Shumi had entrusted her small daughter to a child minder and very efficiently managed the grocery shop. The 23-year-old had come to Lebanon six years ago on a domestic worker visa. She absconded from the employer within two months and soon met Rubel who became her husband. After marrying, she left Lebanon, spent some time with her in-laws in Bangladesh and returned on a free visa. She did not renew her work permit the second year and became undocumented. She confided that having a child so quickly after marrying was not part of the plan but once she was pregnant, she accepted the child who was born in Lebanon. Shumi had found her place in this re-constituted joint family sharing accommodations with her husband, her child and her two brothers-in-law. Young, energetic, she was optimistic about the future in spite of Lebanon's gloomy prospects. She considered herself a working woman and not as someone merely "helping" her husband. As most migrant women here, she admitted also engaging in domestic work when she found clients, taking every opportunity to earn.

It was not clear when Rubel and his brother acquired the grocery and the tailoring shops

but in these difficult times, many businesses changed hands and what was a loss for one could be the gain for another. The brothers could also have taken advantage of the situation, investing in shops, and hoping for better days, pooling their resources for better results.

13.5.5 Abandoned with a child: Fatima

Fatima worked as a salesperson in a grocery shop in Sabra's while caring for her two-year-old son. The child played with the rice and spilled some of it, caused a stack of bottles to fall, and ran into the street. Looking after the child kept Fatima fully busy. Fortunately, it was a weekday and clients were few. Fatima explained that the child's father was a Pakistani man who had left Lebanon and was on his way to France. He had promised to bring her and the child once he reached there. But how would he? Fatima clearly faced uncertainty. She was not seen in the shop when I went next. It would have been impossible to combine childcare with customer service. What happened to Fatima could not be followed up.

The labour counsellor at the Bangladesh embassy stated that families in Bangladesh were often reluctant to receive a woman left alone with a child. The embassy may be dealing with the most problematic cases. In our research, it was observed that a child born abroad of a married couple (whether the marriage was fiction or reality) was generally accepted by the family, and women relatives could be relied upon to provide childcare while the mother worked and covered the costs. Regarding Fatima, information is missing to make sense of why she stayed in Lebanon rather than seeking repatriation. It must be said that in April 2022, repatriation had become costly, and the Bangladesh embassy did not provide assistance, financial or otherwise, to those left stranded.

13.5.6 An exhausted family pillar: Rabia

Rabia was on a Sunday family outing. Fashionably dressed and looking fresh, her husband was very affectionate with their three-year-old daughter, ready to indulge her wants while Rabia insisted on some limitations. Rabia looked tired and explained that her husband looked after the child while she worked – she was the only breadwinner. They wanted to return to Bangladesh but paying for three airline tickets

was difficult. Rabia was from Manikganj, and her village was well known to our research team. She provided her family's address, and her brother was easily located. An encounter in a Sabra restaurant led to follow up in a Bangladeshi village. Rabia's stepmother, her brother and her sister-in-law were interviewed at length, and more information on Rabia's migration history and her attempt to leave Lebanon was obtained, and her case history was considerably enhanced.

Rabia had spent 14 years abroad. She first migrated to Lebanon on a domestic worker visa at the age of 15 (2005) and returned home after three years. She married a friend of her brother's, who had just returned from Oman, in 2009. The next year, Rabia migrated to Dubai where she stayed for two years. She then migrated to Lebanon, this time on a free visa. It had been agreed that she would arrange a visa for her husband to join her. The husband waited, but the visa never came. Such visas were then worth 500,000 takas and Rabia may have thought this was too high a price to pay. She sent money for her husband to open a shop instead, but it was not a success. Rabia migrated to Lebanon for a third time in 2016 on a free visa again. The husband got the much-awaited free visa, and he joined Rabia in Lebanon in 2018. The following year, their daughter was born. Nine years after getting married, the couple had their first child and could finally live together as a family. However, in a year, the situation in Lebanon deteriorated, the husband lost his job and survival became a struggle.

Rabia's stepmother described Rabia as hardworking, responsible and cautious. She had been working abroad for more years than her sister, but she had not reaped the same benefits.

Rabia worked abroad many years, but she could not do very well. One reason is that she gave a lot of money to her husband which was wasted. She also helped us. With the current situation in Lebanon, she stopped helping us. For Eid, she sent only 3,000 takas. Her husband now has a job working in a car park. For a long time, he did not have any work. Rabia told us that they wanted to return to Bangladesh with the child. They are now saving to cover the cost of the airfare ... Rabia will migrate again and leave the child with me. We have discussed this already. But

*wh at her husband will do, I do not know.
He is a bit of a saheb type [meaning that
he expected a high standard of living
without working much].*

The situation in Lebanon was difficult for everyone. While the pandemic forced the closure of several establishments, leaving men without work for between six months and a year, in April 2022, many men were seen catching up, working hard and earning any way they could. We have seen couples with children entrusting them to a caretaker, if need be, so that both parents could earn. But such was not the case for Rabia's family. Rabia clearly carried the heaviest burden. On

10 April 2022, in Sabra, Rabia looked worn out and older than her husband whereas he looked young and healthy. The contrast was striking.

In August 2022, Rabia and her family were still in Lebanon. The price of airline tickets had increased, and her husband was unemployed again. Rabia requested her brother to send US\$ 1,800 promising to reimburse him from her savings. She had already planned to migrate to Saudi Arabia free of cost. The husband hoped to migrate to Malaysia as he considered he had no skills suitable for Bangladesh. But who would pay for such an expensive migration journey?

14. Follow-ups from Bangladesh

The first part of this section described the scenes observed and persons met every day while circulating in Beirut during an eight-day field trip. The encounters were often brief, and follow-ups were not possible. This section presents more interviews conducted in Bangladesh with migrant workers who had recently returned from Lebanon and with the family members of migrant workers still living in Lebanon. In Bangladeshi villages, more time could be spent in interviews conducted in homes and several visits could be made, permitting follow-ups over a longer period of time. Each of the eight case histories presented here contains specific information on different issues. More generally, they throw additional light on the reasons why some workers left while others stayed in the battered country, the critical timing of their decision to stay or not to stay and the consequences.

14.1 Veteran migrant women

14.1.1 Choosing to stay in Lebanon: Rohima

Veteran migrant women who had earned well in the past and whose families were secure had greater freedom in deciding to leave or to stay according to their personal preferences. Rohima, a woman in her forties who had been working in Lebanon for 17 years, chose to stay. Her 22-year-old daughter explained:

We tell Mother that she should come back since her income is not good, but she says she wants to stay. What would she do if she returned ... Mother came home at the end of 2019 before the pandemic began. When she returned, her income decreased considerably. She now earns 15,000 to 20,000 takas a month and sends 8,000

to 10,000 takas to my elder sister ... She started with a modest salary. In 2015, the elderly woman she looked after died, and she did not have much work. The family kept her. They proposed that she worked for them and also take jobs outside. Mother continued living with that family and eating with them. With additional clients outside, she earned as much as 50,000 to 60,000 takas a month. She had no costs, and the extra jobs were all profit.

Rohima provided generously for her family in those years. Two of her three daughters were married, her husband cultivated land purchased with her income, and there were no pressing material needs for her to meet. At this stage in her life, Rohima could accommodate to a lower income, and she obviously appreciated living in Lebanon.

14.1.2 A difficult return home: Aklima

Aklima took the second repatriation flight organized by the Bangladesh embassy in February 2021. She had not visited home once in 17 years, and her return was a shock. In all, Aklima had spent 26 years abroad. She had worked in Kuwait (1996–2000), Dubai (2000–02), Oman (2003) and Lebanon (2004–2021). In Lebanon, she had assembled part of her family but lost touch with daily life in Bangladesh.

My niece took me to Lebanon in 2004. Few women then migrated from here [Chonpara]. I stayed three years on a contract visa, then I switched to a free visa. For many years, I stayed undocumented, and it did not bother me much.

In November 2019, the 60-year-old woman was hospitalized with a serious illness. She recovered, but this episode frightened her family. When the embassy announced a repatriation scheme

with a pardon for undocumented workers, her youngest daughter convinced her to return to Bangladesh. It seemed the right decision, but Aklima was not prepared for this abrupt change in her life. She appreciated life in Lebanon.

Lebanon gave me everything: a good income and a good life. Lebanon is the country I most appreciated ... Many people know me in Sabra ... I would not have returned if I had not been sick, and if the currency crisis and the coronavirus had not struck. I never thought I would return. The idea of dying in Lebanon did not bother me.

If Aklima was ill prepared for her return, so was her family. When interviewed in 2018, her eldest daughter, who never migrated stated, that the mother had been living in Lebanon for many years and was unlikely to come back. In the community, Aklima was identified as a most successful migrant. The comfortable house built with her remittances that her eldest daughter, her son-in-law and their children occupied combined with their lifestyle were testimony to this success.

When asked why she had not visited in 17 years, Aklima replied that such trips were expensive and that she did not want to waste money. Her focus had been on the savings she could accumulate for her children. Through the connections she made over the years, Aklima obtained visas against which she recruited male and female candidates, the former being the most lucrative, she pointed out. The recruitment business had increased her income while she continued engaging in domestic work with regular clients – until she fell ill.

Aklima did not mind leading a frugal life. Also, she harshly judged women who engaged in *habibi* relationships. “This is dangerous,” she said. “I know many women who have squandered their income this way.” Perhaps, as a mother surrounded with adult children and grandchildren, such a relationship would have been inappropriate for her in any case. She did not remarry after her husband died.

Aklima had lived in Lebanon as an undocumented worker for many years. However, in Bangladesh, she discovered that she could not attend to her property unless she had a national identity card, which required a birth certificate.

She battled to obtain these documents and complained that her family did not help her. She also grumbled that her family did not recognize all she did for them. Her eldest daughter, who had been her trusted pillar, had disappointed her. Along with her husband and their children, she occupied the best part of the house. They ate well and led a lavish life. Upon her return, Aklima also made some unpleasant discoveries. For example, gold jewellery and household equipment that she had paid for had been disposed of without informing her. Her son-in-law never told her that he registered the land purchased with her money in his name. Even in small matters, she felt belittled and disregarded. Recently, she had asked her son-in-law to change dollars for Bangladesh takas and he had cheated her on the value, as though Aklima, a seasoned migrant, had no idea of current rates.

Aklima was not poor – her brother had purchased land on her behalf several years ago which had gained in value. Once she got her documents, she planned to sell a small plot to pay for the construction of a house on a larger one. In the management of these affairs, she solicited the help of her natal family, distrusting her own daughter and her son-in-law who had appropriated so much already.

Above all, Aklima resented being the elderly, widowed mother she was now perceived as and the role this entailed for her in the eyes of her family. She had worked hard all her life, had earned well, and had managed her life as an independent woman. She was not ready to let go and be “administered” by the next generation. After her husband died, she had not felt the need to remarry, but she wondered whether she had made a mistake. Perhaps she would be stronger and more respected if she had a husband by her side.

In our research on women’s labour migration, mother and daughter conniving and protecting each other’s interests, whether the mother or the daughter was the migrant worker, has often been observed. However, Aklima’s case shows a different pattern. Assuming that her mother would never return, the eldest daughter with her husband – and especially the latter – helped themselves to Aklima’s remittances as if they were their own. The story adds to our catalogue of the different ways in which women’s labour migration unsettles prevailing norms in the

home society. Successful migrant women rarely become powerful matriarchs in Bangladeshi society as specific cultural, social and political mechanisms are at work authorizing the appropriation of their wealth, if they have any. Given her widowhood, age and generational rank, Aklima was not expected to ask how her remittances had been spent. But she did nonetheless. Why was she such a difficult woman was the reaction. It did not show outside, but there was considerable tension in the house. Her return has not been easy.

14.2 The dilemma of repatriation for couples with or without a child

We have seen that a significant number of Bangladeshi migrant workers live in Lebanon as couples, with or without a child. Some got married in Lebanon, while others married at home and brought their spouses to the destination. The benefits of a couple vary widely based on the timing of the migration and whether a wife brought her husband or a husband brought his wife, the former procedure being more costly than the latter.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all male Bangladeshi workers lost their jobs and remained unemployed while the women kept at least some of their clients and therefore continued to earn. As seen in Rabia's case, couples with a child could reverse traditional roles, with the unemployed fathers caring for the child while the mothers earned. Such families survived but could not build savings. We shall review four case studies that describe how couples reacted to the deteriorating situation in Lebanon and how they managed.

14.2.1 Alamgir and Tania: Leaving in time

Alamgir migrated to Lebanon in March 2015 on a free visa costing 550,000 takas. The visa was purchased from Taslima, a neighbour, as she visited their village. She also hosted him for a few months after he reached Beirut and guided his first steps.

Taslima visited home with visas to sell. I showed interest, and we gave her 100,000 takas. Before I left, we gave Taslima's

husband another 200,000 takas. I got this money from my father who had just sold some land. I paid the remaining 250,000 takas after reaching Lebanon. I lived with Taslima the first few months. She fixed a job for me as cleaner in a market. The salary was US\$ 200, then it increased to US\$ 250 and with tips I could clear US\$ 300. Three months after my arrival, Taslima also fixed a second job for me at a shop belonging to a Bangladeshi man in Sabra...

Alamgir had been firmly against his wife working abroad, but he soon changed his mind after getting acquainted with the situation in Lebanon.

I quickly understood that if I stayed alone, I could not do very well. So, I asked my wife Tania to join me. The owner of the shop in Sabra managed her visa which cost 140,000 takas. She arrived in January 2017.

Tania arrived in Lebanon 19 months after Alamgir. The repayment of Alamgir's debt to Taslima was then delayed, but she was understanding and waited for Tania to earn to get her money back. Alamgir and Tania, 33 and 28 years old respectively (at the time of the interview), had met as they worked in a garment factory. They had a "love" marriage. When her daughter was born, Tania stopped working for two years. When she returned to work, she left the child with her mother, an arrangement that continued when she migrated. In Lebanon, Tania traded garment factory work for domestic work and lent a hand wherever called for, attending the shop in Sabra or sitting behind a sewing machine when the opportunity arose. She explained:

I worked very hard in several homes. For the first few months, I went with another Bangladeshi woman and helped her. After six months, I could manage alone, understand enough of the language and move about on my own. I then earned US\$ 300 a month. After one year, my income increased to US\$ 450. The madams were generous. They gave us food and clothes, which reduced our costs.

Alamgir and Tania returned to Bangladesh in December 2021, having missed the government-assisted repatriation programme. Alamgir explained:

Everything stopped with the COVID pandemic on 15 March 2020. For six months, I could not earn anything. Tania continued to have some work and that saved us. Without her income, we would have starved. After the restrictions were lifted, I got some work but nothing of interest ... We were wrong not to come back when the Bangladesh government offered repatriation. We stayed because we had work permits valid up to December 2021, and we hoped the situation would improve. We had to spend US\$ 1,600 (US\$ 800 each) for the return ... After March 2020, we barely survived and could not send any money home. We borrowed US\$ 400 from acquaintances to pay for our return tickets.

Alamgir praised his wife, but he still phrased her contribution as “help” even though she earned as much as he did in a shorter period of time and allowed them to survive when he lost his job. Alamgir said:

Look, I brought my wife and my younger brother to Lebanon. The cost for my brother [Jahangir, who left for Italy] was more than three times, but there was no benefit whereas the gains from Tania were multiplied many times. Thanks to her, I am now standing up... Before COVID, after covering our costs, together we sent home up to 50,000 takas a month. We sometimes deposited the money in Tania's bank account and sometimes in mine. By sending our money to Bangladesh, we preserved its value.

After their return, the couple bought a little house and opened a shop selling ready-made garments. They purchased a sewing machine for Tania to take orders as tailor. For this couple, the Lebanese migration had a positive outcome as they were there at a time when earning well was possible. They worked hard and shared a good understanding. Tania separated the US\$ 100 that she sent to her mother every month from their common savings, and she did this at least until March 2020. Alamgir's brother who escaped to Italy left a debt of 280,000 takas that Alamgir (and Tania) were made to bear. This was their loss.

14.2.2 Stronger together: Resisting family pressure to leave despite the crisis

Many families in Bangladesh did not see the benefit of persisting in working in Lebanon when incomes were low and the remittances zero or insignificant. But workers may have had reasons of their own to stay on, such as enjoying greater freedom, staying away from family conflicts, or spending intimate time with a lover/husband. Such motivations do not appear in the official narrative, but they can be deducted from the apparently “irrational” or “selfish” decision taken.

The protagonists of this story were still in Lebanon at the time of writing this report. Their story was heard from the man's mother, his maternal aunt and his paternal grandmother, Aklima, the successful migrant woman whose story has already been narrated.

Robiul was 19 years old when Aklima brought him to Lebanon on a free visa in 2018. She covered the cost (650,000 takas) and waved the obligation to pay her back if he married his cousin (Aklima's eldest daughter's daughter). But Robiul did not agree to this wedding, and he asked his mother to find another wife for him. The mother looked for a young woman mature enough, capable of hard work, and willing to migrate. Kajol, a garment worker the same age as Robiul, was chosen and a wedding arranged by phone in November 2019. Robiul procured a free visa for her, which he got at a good price (120,000 takas) – prices had already gone down given the situation in Lebanon – and Kajol joined her husband in January 2020. Robiul had time to reimburse two thirds of his debt towards Aklima and had sent regular remittances to his mother. Soon after Kajol arrived, the pandemic struck, Robiul lost his job and could no longer send remittances home. He remained unemployed over a year while Kajol had some work.

Kajol's pregnancy had not been part of the plan. In September 2021, she was seven months pregnant when her mother-in-law requested that she returned using the government-assisted repatriation programme. She suggested that Kajol migrated to Saudi Arabia after giving birth, and she would look after the child. Kajol refused, arguing that it was too risky for her to fly at this late stage of her pregnancy, and, in any case, she would not migrate soon after giving birth.

She wanted to look after her child and preferred staying in Lebanon with her husband. Together, they would manage, and Robiul sided with her.

The child was born in November 2021, and Kajol took a very short maternity leave. She had some work most of the time and Robiul looked after the child when Kajol went to work. In February 2022, Robiul started working again. They then found a minder for the child for when they were both at work, which occurred for four hours three times a week. Kajol had been determined to stay in Lebanon, preferring to have her husband at her side and share the care of their baby rather than following her mother-in-law's instructions, which is a remarkable affirmation of independence from a daughter-in-law.

Robiul's mother, who devoted her life to the upbringing of her only son, could rightfully expect a return, which she did not get. Deprived of remittances from her migrant son (and his wife), villagers saw her as a casualty of the Lebanon crisis. She later accepted the marriage proposal of a widower with adolescent children. Announcing this marriage to her son was an embarrassment because the mother of a grown son should not remarry. Mutual attraction is never mentioned in such situations, only economic necessity, but the 38-year-old woman who had led a celibate life for nearly two decades could have been desirous of a husband and not only a provider.

For this family, the crisis unfolding in Lebanon had unexpected consequences which may not be entirely negative. Kajol had work and could support her small family. Gender roles were reversed, creating a kind of reciprocity between wife and husband. Life in Lebanon was certainly a struggle for this young couple. Nonetheless, choosing to face adversity together, Lebanon provided the opportunity to establish a nest of their own when they took the "selfish" decision to remain in the country even though remittances could not be sent to the older generation at home.

14.2.3 Undocumented, sick and pregnant: Sonia's return after 10 years

Sonia returned to Bangladesh in October 2021 after an absence of 10 years. Finding a seat on an embassy-organized repatriation flight was a struggle, but consideration was given to the state

of her health. Sonia, interviewed on 15 March 2022, said:

I used to say I did not like it here (in Bangladesh) and preferred Lebanon, but when I got pregnant, I felt weak. In the beginning, I vomited a lot. I had work, but I could not work. When the amnesty was declared, I went to the embassy with a photocopy of my aqama but was not considered ... In the end, my husband went. They finally paid attention because I was pregnant and sick. The embassy people never behaved well with us. They called us thieves and blamed us for absconding from our employer.

Sonia paid for half the ticket cost from her savings and borrowed the rest from her sister who also worked in Lebanon. Her husband flew back two months later after his parents sent him the money for the ticket.

Sonia had migrated to Lebanon at the age of 14. She absconded from her employer after four months and had a bumpy few months before finding her way. She then reconnected with her family, earned well, provided generously for her parents and enjoyed living in Lebanon. As she was undocumented, she could not go home, but she did not see this as a problem as Sonia had no desire to return. I first heard her story from her sister who visited their village in 2018, and I met Sonia for the first time in March 2022. Married with a child, the 25-year-old woman had started a new chapter in her life. Sonia said:

I met my husband on Facebook. I lived in Zgharta (near Tripoli in the north), and he was in Beirut. He joined me after he lost his job, and my sister arranged our marriage [her presence as an elder legitimized their union]. Within a year, I became pregnant. It had not been planned this way ... My husband migrated to Lebanon in 2018. He had no time to earn much before the coronavirus pandemic struck. Half the cost of his migration is still to be reimbursed ... When he moved to Zgharta with me, he worked in homes, and I found customers for him. If he goes again, he could do the same work, although he does not like it.

On 15 March 2022, Sonia said that she intended to return to Lebanon, a country she enjoyed and

could navigate with confidence. She felt Lebanon was the best option for her.

Work is available to me. The problem is that my husband cannot easily find work. In Lebanon, I appreciate the freedom and I like the people. I can also live with my husband. One madam I know has agreed to get my aqama. I will do some work for her in return and find other customers for income. This time, I will stay legally at least for some time.

Sonia did not consider the possibility of working in Bangladesh:

Where my in-laws live, there are many garment factories. I see women going to work in the morning. But I do not want to be confined in a factory like this. That work is not for me. I could migrate to Saudi Arabia as there is no cost, but I do not like what I hear about that country. Besides, my husband wants us to migrate together. I can afford the costs for the both of us if we return to Lebanon, but I cannot pay for his migration to another country even if there was no cost for me.

Sonia had managed to collect the 180,000 takas necessary to return to Lebanon with her husband. She was taking responsibility for her husband and for herself – as she had done while living in Lebanon. But on 10 May 2022, her sister called from Zgharta and advise her not to come as the situation in Lebanon kept deteriorating. Instead of spending 180,000 takas for an uncertain outcome, she should accept the proposal that a close relative had made to migrate to the UAE with a visitor (tourist) visa for 150,000 takas. A job could be quickly arranged for her in a departmental story in Sharjah, and the employer would then apply for her work permit.

This plan meant that Sonia would migrate alone. Convincing her husband to accept this outcome took a lot of effort. He gave in after being promised that Sonia would take him to Sharjah at the earliest. Sonia had been able to find small jobs for him in Lebanon, but the question was how she would help him find work in the UAE. Most importantly, who would pay the expenses for a new migration when his previous migration had left a debt that was yet to be paid? The husband's insistence that they migrate together

was complicating Sonia's life. Her husband had become a burden, a situation described in chapter 12, in Rabia's story, where she alternatively resisted and gave in to pressures her husband put on her to cover his migration costs. Sonia entrusted her small child to her mother. She explained:

I will leave my daughter with my parents and not with my in-laws. I know she will be well looked after, and I prefer it this way. I will send money to my parents, and my in-laws will have no claim on my income.

Sonia had a flight to Dubai scheduled on 10 July 2022. She went to the airport but was not allowed to board the plane and was told that travellers with visitor visas were not being cleared at the destination. Another flight was scheduled for 9 September 2022. As of this writing, Sonia was working in Sharjah, her child was with her mother, and her husband who still lives with his parents in another locality has found a small job. By entrusting her child to her mother, Sonia maintained a strong economic and emotional tie with her natal family and by migrating again, she escaped a virilocal marriage and never became a wife at the service of her in-laws. With determination, she persisted in not following "tradition".

14.2.4 Exploited abroad by a violent husband

Media reports and human rights literature regularly point out the abuse that migrant women employed as domestic workers suffer at the hands of their employers. The question was put to the Bangladesh labour attaché in Beirut – did he know about of such abusive behaviour? He replied that, to his knowledge, cases of aggression and violence from employers were rare. Such problems were mostly found among Bangladeshi couples, married or not. This following section examines the issue of violence within married couples with two case histories. The wives were trapped in marriages where the husband spent on his pleasures, and alone enjoyed the freedoms that could be experienced in Lebanon. The women worked hard and earned well but were unable to control their income and could not save anything.

Shanta

Shanta, 22 years old, was interviewed in August 2022 at her in-laws' home as she was preparing to divorce her husband. A major source of the actual conflict was the reimbursement of the loans taken from the Probashi Kalyan Bank (a bank created for migrant workers) in both their names as ex-migrant workers. The husband appropriated the money released, spent it on a motorcycle and used the rest on his pleasures, ignoring the repayment dates. However, the husband's character had been revealed to Shanta while in Lebanon.

Shanta was 14 years old when she married Abu five years her senior. Their marriage had legitimized a love affair. Six months later (2014), Abu migrated to Lebanon on a company visa¹³ that his migrant mother provided. In June 2016, he invited Shanta to join him. Her free visa cost 70,000 takas, and an additional 10,000 takas had to be paid to the airport police as Shanta looked below the regulatory age of 25. Marrying at 14, migrating to Lebanon at the age of 16, Shanta was underage in each situation and thus had to contravene Bangladesh law and regulations. This was required from her family paying for "a little extra cost" each time. Shanta narrated the tale of her life in Lebanon:

The first year, we lived in Daoura. I did only housework for six months, then I joined my husband in a restaurant kitchen where we both worked as dishwashers while I continued housework in my spare time. Then, we moved to Adonis where we stayed for nine months before settling in Yahchouch. This was the best experience as the employer – an unmarried Christian woman who inherited several properties from her father – was very kind. She allowed us to stay in one of her houses, where we acted as caretakers, paying only for electricity. She trusted my husband and gave him many responsibilities. My husband also engaged in the dollar business. He earned very well but with me, he behaved very badly ... My husband is a handsome man, and he speaks very well.

At first, I did not understand what kind of person he was ... He took money from me saying that he needed to invest in his dollar business or that money was needed at home. These were all lies. At the end of 2017, I began to suspect him. I heard that he had lived with another woman before my arrival, and that he called me only after she left him for someone else. He had relationships with several women who worked with him ... I was all alone, and I could not confront him. He went to "bad places" [brothels, nightclubs] with his friends. They drank, and they spent on women. He could be out a few days at a time, ignoring me. Once, I fetched him from such a place, and he beat me up. His friends also blamed me for entering ... Another time, he visited one of these homes where women engaged in both domestic and sex work. I was two months pregnant then, and he started beating me. An older woman threatened to call the police. This was the first time someone had come to my rescue. I did not go back to him for some time after this and stayed with that woman. He came to apologize, and I went back to him because I was pregnant.

Shanta kept working up to the seventh month of her pregnancy and gave birth in a hospital that her kind landlady had booked. She returned to Bangladesh in February 2020, knowing that she could not work with a small child. She stayed with her mother until her husband came on the government repatriation programme in October 2021. Shanta had no savings and her husband also returned empty-handed. They then applied for a loan from the Probashi Kalyan Bank as ex-migrant workers and received 350,000 takas in both their names. Considering her husband to be the family provider, Shanta gave the entire amount to him. He purchased a motorcycle to transport people and to earn as a Patao driver (the Bangladeshi Uber). They put down 50,000 takas as an initial payment, with the rest to be paid in instalments.

We must pay the instalments on our loans, but my husband does not pay regularly

13 Shanta's husband migrated on a company visa but in Lebanon, he acted like a free visa holder as he moved from job to job at his own initiative without reporting to any company. His mother, who procured the visa, is likely to have paid the price accordingly. The same applies to Afroza's husband whose case history follows.

even though he earns 1,500 to 2,000 takas daily. I get the phone calls as I am also a signatory for one loan. We quarrel a lot about this. I think he even got worse than he was. He spends money on women. He is violent with me, and my in-laws do not say anything ... He will not divorce me. Otherwise, he would have to pay. I must do it ... My decision is taken. I will go back to my mother, divorce him and migrate to Dubai. Two of my friends are there already, and my sister can look after my son.

The greater participation of women in the labour market or their access to bank loans are regularly presented in development literature as potentially empowering for them. However, their lack of control over money within marriage could lead to opposite effects, and the measures potentially beneficial may turn into the very instrument of their exploitation. Shanta's story illustrates such an outcome. In Lebanon, the 16-year-old wife, naïve and uninformed, was used as a milking cow for the husband's benefits. The adolescent girl was isolated, and she felt powerless to control the situation. Her description of the locations where they both worked, from Daoura to Yahchouch, and the "bad places" her husband visited in the popular tourist spots in the north of the country provide interesting information on these unresearched locations where Bangladeshi migrant workers worked.

Afroza

Afroza was 17 years old when she joined her husband in Lebanon in June 2015. He had migrated the previous year on a company visa. Members of his family had been living in Beirut for several years and were well settled. If Shanta felt alone, Afroza was surrounded by family, and obligations applied as though she had never left her home country. Her in-laws assisted her in everything but also structured her life. She was under their constant eye, was careful not to antagonize them, dutifully handing her income over to her husband.

My kala shashuri [husband's aunt] arranged my free visa. Within 15 days of my arrival, she found work for me in three households. I worked for two to hours hours in each and received a monthly salary. My husband's aunt showed me the

way to these locations, but I soon learned to go by myself. After six months, she got me another job in a recruiting agency. I prepared tea, coffee, and carried papers from one desk to another. All the staff were Bangladeshi, and I had no language problem. For an eight-hour duty, five days a week, I got paid US\$ 200 a month. I also continued with domestic work. For the first six months, my income was US\$ 300, but in the following months, I earned US\$ 450–500. I worked like this up to the financial crisis in October 2019 ... I earned more than my husband, but I was unable to save anything. My husband entertained many friends, and he spent a lot. I handed my income to him, and he paid for the rent, the food and sent money to his parents. Sometimes, without his knowledge, I discreetly sent US\$ 100 or 200 to my mother who looked after our child. I earned all this money, but I have nothing.

More educated than her husband, Afroza had to "compromise" often. She tolerated the demands on her and thus saved her marriage, comparing her attitude with her husband's aunt, who refused to do the same, leading to the end of her marriage. Afroza settled for the "traditional" role of a dutiful wife who claims no needs of her own even if her resentment is palpable when she mentioned that her husband did not include her mother among the recipients of his generosity. She repaired his omission but did so discreetly, as though she feared being faulted. Having to hide sending money to her mother, who looked after their child, from her husband is quite telling on the constraints that Afroza experienced. She "compromised" to an astonishing degree.

As no woman had migrated from her village, Afroza said she was unaware and ill-informed about taking certain precautions. For example, she did not see the utility of opening a bank account prior to her departure. She had led a sheltered life, leaving school to be married and becoming a mother soon after. The "protected" environment in which she grew up also signalled the social rank and the respectability (*bhodrota*) of her natal family. Yet, Afroza regretted that her education did not prepare her to fight. Her only son is now nine years old. She has no intention to take a job or to migrate abroad again.

My husband and my father-in-law both work. Let them provide. I have no desire to go abroad again.

A woman neighbour recently returned from Lebanon commented:

Afroza was abroad, but she did not leave the samaj. She lived with her in-laws. She had to listen to her nani shashuri [husband's grandmother] and to her kala shashuri [husband's aunt] and to her husband. She had no freedom.

This story shows how the Bangladeshi *samaj* (moral society) can be reconstituted abroad, particularly in a set-up such as Lebanon. Young wives who join their husbands are then expected to work hard and hand over the fruit of their labour to their husband and in-laws. Abroad, they are still in their *shashur bari* (in-laws' home) and the possibility of exploring a larger space considerably reduced. Some women did not accept these constraints, they rebelled and faced the consequences. Others "compromised" and remained within the fold.

15. Bangladeshi migrant workers in Jordan

15.1 Women's employment in Jordan: A changing landscape

Two features distinguish Jordan as a migrant workers' destination: the importance of the ready-made garment factory sector and the women workers who largely outnumber the men. Up to 2010, according to BMET, 76 per cent of the migrant workers entering Jordan were men but, thereafter, their numbers abruptly dropped. Between 2010 and 2021, official data show 98 per cent of migrant workers leaving for Jordan being women. The adoption of a policy to employ Bangladeshi women rather than men in garment factories largely explains the latter sex ratio.

A few Bangladeshi men continued to migrate as agricultural workers, cooks or construction workers, and some overstayed after entering the country on tourist visas. The field study conducted in 2018–19 showed that several men stayed in Jordan, often as undocumented workers, after leaving garment factory jobs in the qualifying industrial zones (QIZs). According to Mr Moniruzaman, the labour attaché at the Bangladesh embassy in Amman, in 2022, men made up 10 to 20 per cent of the migrant worker population in Jordan. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bangladeshi migrant population is estimated to have reduced from 150,000 to 80,000, the sex ratio remaining roughly the same.

The relative importance of the two sectors employing women also changed over time.

Between 2012 and 2017, women were equally employed in both domestic and garment factory work. Following a dramatic event that occurred in October 2017,¹⁴ the Jordanian government banned the recruitment of domestic workers from Bangladesh. The ban was lifted a year later, but the demand never recovered its former level as recruiting agencies switched to other source countries. Interestingly, the proposed bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and Jordan drafted in 2017 with the assistance of the ILO and SDC to regulate the sector and to update the agreement concluded in 2012 was left dormant (Wickramasekara and Ruhunage 2018).

In the first three months of 2022, the Bangladesh embassy had approved only 160 domestic worker visas against 3,419 garment factory worker visas, the first sector representing less than 5 per cent. This drying up of domestic worker visas is confirmed in the ongoing (at the time of writing) field research that the DRC is conducting among source communities in Bangladesh. A man employed by a Dhaka-based recruiting agency appointed to work in Amman explained:

For Jordan, our best years were 2012–17. Women themselves spoiled the market by absconding from their employers. In my own agency, we now process two to three such visas a month. We also work with a larger office, and they do about 40 domestic worker visas a month. Nearly half of these are free visas, the others are house visas. Either way, the profit is the same

14 A 16-year-old *khadamma* was accused of losing her head and killing her employers, an elderly couple who refused to grant her the home leave she had requested. The girl had been in their service for two years, and her youth, hidden behind false documents, was an embarrassment to the labour attaché who handled the case. The Jordanian media dwelt on Bangladesh failing to test the mental health of the recruits they sent. Getting information on this affair has been difficult. In 2022, I heard that the girl had been condemned to death but had not been executed as the Jordanian government reserved execution for terrorists.

for us ... once every two years, we also get 40 visas at a time for male jobs in the agricultural sector. We sell these visas for 500,000 to 600,000 takas each...

This information briefly sets the parameters for the eight-day fieldwork conducted in April 2022. We spent seven days in Amman – in the Al Balad, Jobel Joffah, Raghadan areas – and one day in the Al Hassan QIZ in the north of the country.

16. Amman

16.1 Part-time domestic workers and informal factory workers

Our fieldwork started with an exploration of Al Balad, the old part of the capital city. As in Beirut, shops run by Bangladeshi managers are important sites for meeting and conversing with Bangladeshi migrant workers. Out of the eight shops I regularly visited in 2018–19, two had closed and three had changed hands. They had all suffered because the COVID-19 pandemic, with fewer customers who had significantly lower purchasing power. Recovery had begun but with modest hope, even if the situation was incomparably better than in Beirut. Here also, the month of Ramadan imposed its rhythms, the days ending early with customers rushing home to prepare for break the fast. Coffee shops and restaurants were closed during the day and fieldwork after sunset continued only when a woman invited me to her lodging, which happened twice.

Among the shops that had closed, or changed hands, two had been managed by men who doubled as recruiting agents and engaged in illicit activities. In 2019, one of them had just been released from jail and another was still locked up. In 2022, these two men were gone, one having been deported, the other on the run. Hearsay about their affairs were difficult to follow, but I understood they mostly dealt with male migrants.

The Al Balad shop managed by a woman three years earlier had been taken over by two sisters and remained an important meeting spot for women. The younger sister, better educated and more confident than the elder, attended the shop and served customers with remarkable ease. She declared having mastered the trade.

I spent one year at home because of COVID and came back to run this shop. At first, I did not do well, I ignored which company supplied what and my competitors across the street did not help me. These men do not like a woman running a shop. Now, my shop is as successful as theirs.

Women came to buy, chat, socialize, and share problems and find solutions. This is where I met a very pregnant woman seeking advice about diet, another who praised her *habibi*, and a third who explained how she had escaped from her Al Dulayl factory when the owner had prepared to repatriate workers because the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in cancelled orders. For three months, she found no work in Al Balad and had to call her family to send money. She had remained undocumented since as the *kafala* system does not permit a garment factory worker to switch to a domestic worker visa without leaving the country.

The conversation centred on women's concerns. The contrast with another store in the same shopping complex where a male manager, who spoke English and boasted of a college education, complained about Bangladeshi migrant women ruining his country's reputation was sharp. Unsurprisingly, women did not gather in his shop. Given the importance of the female migrant population in Amman, shop managers had everything to gain by cultivating a welcoming attitude towards them, and most of them did just.

The women I met in Al Balad engaged in part-time domestic work or they worked in small informal garment factories. They had entered Jordan at different times and under different work titles. For example, of the 18 women who provided the information, 8 had first come to Jordan on domestic worker visas, 7 on free visas

and 3 on garment factory worker visas. Between 2007 and 2017, entering Jordan on a domestic worker visa was common while after 2018, the women came on free visas.

16.2 The free visa business

It may be recalled that free visas for women are generally domestic worker visas obtained through a *kafeel* who agrees to sponsor the worker against monetary compensation, the latter being “free” to find her own work. One woman had quit her factory job in a QIZ, delayed her return home, found a Jordanian national willing to act as her sponsor, left the country and returned to Jordan on the free domestic worker visa. As pointed out earlier, switching sector required that a migrant worker leave the country. Seasoned migrant women who came on domestic worker visas from the start generally knew and even chose their sponsors. Others who secured a free visa through a Bangladeshi *dalal* may not have known the Jordanian national acting as their sponsor. In such cases, the risk of being cheated was higher.

Free visas are obtained at the initiative of Bangladeshis operating with the connivance of Jordanian nationals acting as *kafeels* for the benefit it procures. Jordanian recruiting agencies may not admit to, but they process these visas, in which case finding work for the visa holder is not their affair. In 2021, a free visa for Jordan cost women 240,000 takas – twice the amount for a similar one in Lebanon. The cases we documented show that women put down a small sum of money before migrating and paid the rest in instalments after reaching the destination and beginning to earn. The pressure to find work at the earliest was strong as they had a debt to reimburse. For the *dalals*, the system worked best when someone could vouch for the recruit. This was the case for the cohort of women from the same Thakurgaon village that will be described below.

Bangladeshi diplomats abroad regularly point out that free visas do not exist. Yet, they use the term and recognize the practice, which they decry. Free visas are the *bête noire* of the diplomats, and Mr Moniruzzaman, the labour attaché, commented:

The problem with free visas is that women enter the country legally, but they do not

renew their aqama after the first year and they stay illegally. We must deal with the consequences.

16.3 The COVID-19 pandemic and repatriation

The strict lockdown imposed in Jordan from March to August 2020 was a difficult period for many migrant workers. The Bangladesh embassy organized food distribution twice for those who had no work and no income. A massive repatriation programme was also organized. According to the Bangladesh embassy, 15 special flights were needed to repatriate workers. The considerable reduction in the Bangladeshi migrant population discussed in chapter 15 reflects these departures. Passengers on these flights were mostly garment factory workers, but also they included illegal workers and detainees from jails. While garment factory owners covered the cost of repatriation for their workers, other passengers had to pay 400 dinars (US\$ 564) each. In addition, the Jordanian government reportedly repatriated 160 detainees at its own costs. An amnesty for illegal migrant workers was declared in July 2021. A migrant woman explained:

There was a pardon in 2014, another in 2017 and another in 2019. But now, the government announces pardons every year.

More efficient than the Lebanese in tracking down undocumented migrant workers, the Jordanian police reportedly worked with new vigour following the 2021 amnesty. Two young men discussing in a shop expressed concern:

Since January (2022), the government has been much stricter. They file cases now and send you to jail.

Lippi was one of those arrested by the police and made to pay a large fine.

I came to Jordan in 2016 on a free visa. I joined my mother who had migrated to Jordan in 2012, and we shared accommodation in Joffah [name indistinct]. Last year, the police arrested me for staying illegally for three years. I was made to pay 5,400 dinars, and I am now working to reimburse what I borrowed. My family is from Jaganathpur

in Sylhet. My uncles migrated to the UK. I have cousins living in the UK and USA and in France. My father is the only one among his brothers who migrated to Malaysia and had bad luck. He did not do well, and we remained poor.

The large fine that Lippi was made to pay is equivalent 1,350 hours of work (at 4 dinars an hour). Why did she not opt for repatriation instead of paying such fine? Returning to her “londoni” village in Jaganathpur as a loser was not an option for Lippi. She had begun a journey and had no intention of making a U turn. With her patched jeans and her modern looks – she did not wear a burqa – the 24-year-old stood out among migrant women. Animated by a sense of revenge, she wanted to show to her extended family that she could succeed at migration.

The huge cost demanded from migrant workers to regularize their status had been denounced as excessive for many years and as being one of the reasons why so many migrant workers stayed illegally. While discussing the issue, and Lippi’s case in particular, at the ILO office in Amman, I learned that during the last amnesty in July 2021, the Jordanian government had paid attention to the recommendations of NGOs and international organizations, including the ILO.¹⁵ The obligation to pay for the accumulated arrears of work permits and overstaying fines was lifted, thus lightening the burden. This pardon had been effective for two months until the month of September, and some 112,000 migrant workers were reportedly regularized.

Lippi did not mention this amnesty. Whether she was arrested and fined before or after the event is unclear. The women met in Al Balad, Jobel Joffah or Raghadan did not mention the amnesty either. If they were aware of the measure, it certainly did not create a stir as observed in February 2019 when another amnesty had been declared. Perhaps times were now different. After the hardship suffered during the COVID lockdown, the lack of work and the low income, women were in a recovery mood. Some money had to be earned first before planning a return.

16.4 Domestic workers’ hourly rate of pay

The hourly rate of pay for domestic work in Jordan is 4 dinars (US\$ 5.60) which is nearly three times the rate in Lebanon. Women are generally contracted for four to six hours a day. At this rate of pay, working four days a week may suffice to make ends meet. However, the problem is getting regular work. This was always an issue, but the situation got worse after the COVID-19 pandemic. Demand for part-time domestic work has diminished, no doubt reflecting the state of the Jordanian economy, which suffered a long and devastating pause.

In one shop, I met Taslima, who waited for work the whole day at the “office” but never got any, and if there was no work, there was no income. She purchased a large gourd to which the shopkeeper added a few wilted spinach leaves and some words of encouragement. She explained:

*For a 5-hour day work, I get 20 dinars.
I give the office 5 dinars and keep 15.
Earning something is better than staying
idle at home.*

In the same shop, another woman declared that she never obtained work through the “office”. She still had a few good employers, and some of them also paid for her transport.

*I have a very good Palestinian employer
who calls me every week. She covers my
transport and I get paid 24 dinars for
working 5 hours.*

Several women admitted having resorted to an employment agency which may provide work for the day against a 25 per cent commission. I did not come across such “offices” in 2019.

16.5 An invitation to a meal: Lotika’s story

I first met Lotika in 2018 and visited her several times in the room she shared with her sister, up a steep slope from Al Balad. Lotika is about 40 years old and originates from a village in the district of Thakurgaon, northwest Bangladesh,

¹⁵ Personal communication from Suha Labadi, WIF Project Coordinator, ILO Jordan, who was called to give her opinion on the matter.

from where women are not known to migrate. The mother of six children, she explained that her husband had brought home a second wife and imposed her presence on the family for right years. There was no peace at home, yet Lotika could not leave her *biyer shami* (first and only true husband) and could not abandon her six children. Where would she have gone anyway? She never held a job outside home. Her early marriage, her numerous children, her inability to escape, her lack of education – she never went to school – set her apart from her younger siblings who attended school at least for a few years, had fewer children, worked in a garment factory and did not remain trapped in a marriage as she had done.

Lotika migrated to Lebanon in 2016 on a free visa that her younger sister Lukhi procured. She migrated for economic reasons as the husband's polygamy had cost the family dearly. The co-wife left for the same reasons. Lotika joked about the husband who now calls her everyday as he misses her. Lotika had attempted to renew her work permit in her second year, but the *dawal* disappeared with her deposit, and she never got the document. When a pardon was declared in February 2019, she was not ready to leave, and she stayed undocumented. She did not mention the July 2021 amnesty at all.

Lotika sporadically kept in touch with me by phone and in April 2022, we arranged to meet in Al Balad. She looked older than I remembered with her worn-out burqa and her front tooth missing. Having completed a five-hour job, she was reasonably tired.

When employers call us once a month, the purpose is never to perform light work. Today, I had to climb a ladder to clean all the windows.

Rina, her young cousin, accompanied her. Arrived in Jordan in 2021 with two more of Lotika's sisters, all of them on free visas, they constituted an interesting cohort. With Lukhi and Lotika, they were six women from the same village in Thakurgaon district. I shall return to their migration journey.

Lotika fetched the mobile phone she had had repaired and invited me to follow her through the vast market. She purchased some chicken, vegetables, spices and other items, all stuffed in plastic bags that threatened to burst. I could see

more Bangladeshi women shopping, but this was no time and no place to engage in conversation. The shopping done, we started up the steep slope to reach Lotika's home. I remembered taxi drivers being reluctant to take us on such a road three years ago. The bags were heavy, and progress was slow. As we reached the place I knew as our destination, Lotika announced that we were only halfway and that she had moved further up the hill. The cousin parted from us, and we went on climbing. At one point, we left the paved road and continued our ascension on a long cement staircase. Lotika comes from a flat country, and this was Everest. Struggling with the demanding exercise myself, I reflected on the tremendous energy required for Lotika to earn a living. Walking down and up the steep jebel, performing heavy domestic tasks for five hours, making a detour in a crowded market to purchase food, carrying bulky bags and then cooking the evening meal. The next day was a Friday and Lotika would be able to rest.

She occupied a room on the lower floor of a new building erected against a cliff. The room faced west, and the generous afternoon light filtered in. As the sun set on the horizon and lights began to animate the city below, as the muezzins called from mosques to end the fast, the veranda offered a breathtaking view of Amman. But Lotika was unimpressed. She closed the door and put on the electric light.

She shared the room with her younger sister. They paid 40 dinars a month, electricity and Wi-Fi included. The room was sparsely furnished as the little furniture that Lotika possessed had been left to the sister who now occupied her former place. The setting here was temporary, she said, and some of the bedding, such as the heavy blankets, could be taken home when they left. The small room, all at once kitchen, lounge and bedroom, was impeccably maintained. It could even accommodate a guest for the night (however, I declined the invitation).

Lotika began rinsing, chopping, grinding and cooking. Her sister, Rozina, returned from work and helped while talking to her husband and her two-year-old daughter on her mobile phone. On the same floor, five more rooms were rented to Bangladeshi women. Nupur's room was better equipped than the others. She had a TV, a fridge, a bed, a table and a couple of chairs. When Lotika

requested the use of her gas burner, we all moved to Nupur's room.

About 25 years old, Nupur explained that she was from Madaripur. She had migrated to Jordan in 2017 on a domestic worker visa that cost 40,000 takas. She was sent to Dabouq, but there was no peace with the employer (she did not give details) and she returned to the recruiting agency where the situation was even worse. Nupur decided to escape with two others, and they came to Al Balad. She had been employed in a garment factory before migrating, and she quickly found work in a small factory for a monthly salary of 80 dinars. It was not enough to cover her costs, and she soon moved elsewhere. She presently worked in a garment factory where she got paid by the piece, explaining that such terms were more advantageous than working for a fixed salary.

Judging from her relatively well-furnished room, I supposed Nupur to be a very good worker. Lotika offered another explanation. Nupur had a *habibi* who had purchased much of the equipment. One *habibi* had left the country, and Nupur soon replaced him with another, both men being from south India. Lotika did not approve of such relationships, but she kept her opinion to herself. Interestingly, the women living on this floor collaborated and helped each other on practical matters. Their views could diverge but no one was in the position to impose rules of conduct over the others, and the resulting tolerance was clear. Nupur could lead her life as she wished. We have seen that when family members are abroad, the *samaj* may be reconstituted, and migrant women may suffer the same constraints as at home. But women living alone could have greater freedom. Lotika did not approve of *habibi* relationships and was not inclined to take similar freedoms. Anyway, her seniority in relation to her sisters and her niece in Amman would be a deterrent. Their presence required that she honours her place.

16.6 Lotika, her sisters, niece and cousin: The migration network

Lotika, Lukhi, Yasmeen, Rokeya, Rina and Rozina are four sisters, one niece and one cousin, women who all originate from a single village in Thakurgaon district, and they migrated to Jordan between 2016 and 2021. Focusing on the

collective is interesting in terms of exploring the paths they have taken and the networks they used. Why did the women choose Jordan? After 2015–16, they could have migrated to Saudi Arabia free of cost. Who informed them, who influenced them and who assisted them?

Lukhi was the pioneer. She migrated to Jordan in 2014, demonstrating that migration could be beneficial and a worthwhile risk. After a brief marriage and divorce – she had no children – Lukhi left Thakurgaon for a factory job in Dhaka. This was where she heard about migrating abroad. A colleague's husband proposed a domestic visa for Jordan, and she took up the challenge. She migrated and within a few months, she absconded from her employer. She then engaged in part-time domestic work earning twice as much.

In 2016, she arranged for Lotika to migrate to Jordan on a free visa. Both sisters lived together. I never met Lukhi, and Lotika described her as very good-looking, brave and daring, and more intelligent than her. The “modern” woman she was could only be imagined when Lotika showed me the high heel shoes, platform sandals and fancy clothes that her employers had donated, laughingly saying, “Lukhi can wear these!”. The Iraqi family now employing Lukhi knew both sisters but had preferred to keep Lukhi in their employ.

Lukhi was the highest paid among the sisters. She earned 500 dinars a month (US\$ 700) and got Fridays off. Only during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the city was under lockdown, she had to forego the weekly holiday. But during this difficult time, she kept her job and received her full salary unlike Lotika and many others who were without work and income.

The third family member to migrate was Yasmeen, Lotika's niece, who arrived in Jordan in 2019 on a free visa. The 19-year-old had left her child in the care of her in-laws when she took a job in a garment factory in Dhaka, and she had not informed them when she left for Jordan. Only her husband knew of a departure that seemed to have been rushed. She was anxious to find work to reimburse the cost of her free visa. An Egyptian woman with whom Lotika had a friendly relationship had mentioned a family seeking a caretaker for their handicapped daughter, and Yasmeen got the job. In April 2022, she was still

working for the same family and being paid 300 dinars a month. At the exchange rate prevailing in 2019, the cost of her migration (240,000 takas) represented 4.24 times her monthly salary, a far more advantageous ratio than that calculated for men. Her job is secure, but she gets no days off and has been unable to visit home in nearly four years. Her employer renews her *aqama* every year and she has very few costs.

Rozina is Lotika's youngest sister with whom she currently shares her room. She was employed in a garment factory before migrating to Jordan in April 2021 on a free visa. Rozina quickly found work in a small factory situated on top of the *jebel* where she lives, a mere 10-minute walk away. Her factory employs seven workers, and Rozina has plenty of work; she is paid by the piece earning more than Lotika. She explained that it was her idea to migrate, but she is facing a dilemma as her husband is pressing her to return. Paying back the cost of the free visa (240,000 takas) took her seven months, and she had no time to amass very many savings. Returning home after one year would hardly make her migration worthwhile. Rozina believed her husband was making an unreasonable demand. At the same time, she wanted to save her marriage and she missed her two-year-old daughter left in his care. Uncertain about the future, Rozina worked very hard. She was planning to return to the factory the following day on the weekly holiday.

Finally, Rokeya, the eldest of the sisters, came to Jordan in 2021 with Rina, and they were both staying in the room that Lotika had vacated. Lotika guided the newcomers' first steps and initiated them in part-time domestic work.

Except for Lukhi, five of the six women had migrated on free visas. Were these "rational" decisions taken after comparing advantages and disadvantages with other means and other routes? How were these free visas obtained? Lukhi reportedly played an important role as she is reputed to have very good connections, but how she operated was not detailed. As suggested, given that the visas were paid for

after reaching Jordan and beginning to earn, for the *dalal(s)* who arranged these visas, it would be reassuring to deal with closely related women who help each other in many ways. It could be a safeguard for their investment.

Incidentally, it should be noted that three of the women had worked in garment factories earlier, but they did not migrate through BOESL and once in Jordan, only one of them continued working in a garment factory, albeit outside the QIZ. Lukhi and Lotika have been staying illegally for seven and five years now. It is too early to tell whether those who came in 2021 will follow the same path.

According to the Jordanian Ministry of Labour, in 2021, Bangladeshi women made up 15 per cent of the documented domestic workers in the country. They were outnumbered by Ethiopians (48.2 per cent) and Filipinas (22.6 per cent). For the first three months of 2022, the small number of domestic visas approved by the Bangladesh embassy suggest that the percentage of Bangladeshi domestic workers was further reducing. In fact, most of the women I met in Al Balad during this field trip were off government radars. Their number may be small, but the embassy finds them an embarrassment. They are more troublesome than the garment factory workers commented the labour attaché. Garment workers move within a system where there are rules, but these domestic workers have none.

The women who absconded from their employer, those who migrated with a free visa and failed to pay for the work and residence permits in the following years, those who stayed undocumented for many years could be condemned outright for being out of order. Their actions nonetheless constitute a critique of the *kafala* system, and there is much to learn from the initiatives they take. Stepping out of a narrow legalistic framework is here useful and necessary to appreciate the work they do and the important role they play in local economies at the source and destination.

17. The Al Hassan QIZ

The Al Hassan QIZ is located 72 miles north of Amman and I visited on a Friday, the weekly holiday. Al Hassan is the oldest QIZ in Jordan and has the largest concentration of Bangladeshi women working in Jordan. With its 14 factories, dormitories, shops and market, the industrial city is a world in itself. The one-day visit allowed snapshot impressions, a few encounters with migrant workers and a fruitful meeting with the Workers' Centre management.

17.1 The Workers' Centre

The Workers' Centre in Al Hassan was opened in 2013 to provide migrant workers a space outside shop floors and dormitories, a neutral place not controlled by employers. It offers recreational facilities, a computer room, a gym, a room that may be booked for private celebrations and staff available to discuss matters of concern. The Better Work Jordan (BWJ) programme has been a major contributor to the Workers' Centre with other partners. Presently, the Work in Freedom project contributes to its running cost.

On Friday, 15 April, the Centre was not busy. The month of Ramadan may have been part of the reason as Muslim workers were fasting. The quiet time allowed us an uninterrupted meeting with Suneetha Eluri, the project manager, and Marvat al-Jamhawi, a Jordanian national who has been a pillar of the Centre from the beginning and is a mine of information on migrant workers, both inside and outside the QIZ.

17.2 The COVID-19 pandemic

Women returnees interviewed in Bangladesh had described the situation at their factory, but the information remained fragmentary, and subjective. The Workers' Centre management offered a more comprehensive view of events

and circumstances. They could provide information that individual workers were not aware of, such as factory owners adjustment to market fluctuations and their policy towards workers' repatriation. Through their unique position inside the QIZ, the Workers' Centre management could observe individuals at close range and respond to calls for assistance.

At the start of the pandemic, in March 2020, garment factories closed for three weeks, and migrant workers were asked to stay in their dormitories. They were fed and most received their full salaries, albeit without overtime. For one month, remittances could not be sent home as banks were closed. Three of the 14 factories operating in Al Hassan cut salaries and workers went on strike. They solicited the support of the Workers' Centre and won their case. All workers finally received their full pay. This was not the case in all the QIZs in Jordan. One woman interviewed in Bangladesh who worked in Al Dulayl reported receiving food but being deprived of salary for three months until production resumed at the factory. We do not know whether her factory was a member of BWJ, and Al Dulayl does not have a Workers' Centre that may assist migrant workers.

At the Al Hassan industrial estate, workers returned to the shop floor after three weeks wearing masks and observing safe distancing. For a few months, little or no overtime was available, and workers' incomes remained low. This was a period of great hardship for migrant workers outside the QIZ, more particularly in Ramtha and Irbid, where IOM and Caritas provided monetary assistance for rent payments, and they distributed food to all workers and sanitary napkins to women.

17.3 Crisis at Classic Fashions

In December 2020, a major crisis occurred at Classic Fashions. A woman who worked at Galaxy Apparels, located next to Classic Fashions, described the situation after she returned to Bangladesh.

There was a crisis at the Classic factory. We got the information through Facebook. The dead body of a Bangladeshi woman was found in a dustbin in Amman. That was a fact. But the actual problem was the low salary, the overtime and the bonuses. The atmosphere was very tense. Would Classic close down, and if it did, what would happen to the other factories?

Because Classic Fashions was by far the largest company in the Al Hassan QIZ, concern naturally spread to workers of other companies. Rumours circulated that the dead body of a woman found in a dustbin in Amman was that of Rina, an employee of Classic Fashions who had gone missing. Angry and frustrated, the workers went on strike. At one stage, they broke into the company's office and damaged property. To calm the workers, the company's CEO solicited the aid of the Workers' Centre. Suneetha Eluri, the project manager, suggested a fact-finding mission be undertaken and invited workers to voice their grievances. She called a meeting reassuring workers that they could speak freely. The latter had many complaints: the company's management (non-Bangladeshi) had their salaries increased while the workers' salaries (mostly Bangladeshi) were not increased.¹⁶ They were unhappy about bonuses, overtime and other issues.

According to the Bangladesh embassy, the woman whose body was found in Amman had been employed as a domestic worker by a Saudi family. Her name was Asma, and her parents had identified her. Meanwhile, Rina, the woman who had disappeared from Al Hassan had reappeared in Sahab. Factual elements had been gratuitously and wrongly woven together provoking shock, dismay and anger. In many ways, this was a Bangladeshi story. It was found that a former

employee of Classic Fashions who ran a shop in Irbid had made and circulated the video, allegedly adding "nationalistic" overtones.

The connection between the dead body of a Bangladeshi woman found in Amman and a Bangladeshi woman who had disappeared from Al Hassan was exposed as false, but it took time and monopolized much energy. Such videos raise serious questions. Facebook is a major source of (mis)information for migrant workers. Rumours spread fast and can be highly damaging.

There are some lessons to be drawn from this event. Workers may have genuine grievances that should be heard. The Workers' Centre and its project manager devised an effective strategy that helped diffuse the crisis. Second, mechanisms should be developed to check the circulation of false sensational stories. In this case, it concerned Bangladeshi migrant women, was designed for a Bangladeshi public and was widely circulated in Jordan and Bangladesh as well.

17.4 Factory workers repatriated

Expecting buyers to further reduce their orders because of the pandemic, factory owners encouraged the repatriation of workers. However, the way this was done has been criticized. At Classic Fashions, women who had taken part in the protest were reportedly blacklisted, and their contracts were not renewed. The fear of being penalized lasted for some time. Soheli, who returned to Bangladesh in August 2022 after spending six years with Classic Fashions commented:

I completed two contracts. I requested the company to offer me one more contract, but they refused. They penalized those who took part in the labour movement. I went along with these protests. We had complaints about our salary and the rate of overtime. In the end, they increased salaries very little. And they did not renew the contract of those operators – some of whom were very good – who participated

¹⁶ See the report *Industrial relations in the ready-made garment sector in Jordan* (ILO 2022). The report, commissioned by the ILO, details problematic issues including collective bargaining agreements being conducted between two parties, labour unions and employers' associations; salaries that are not adjusted to the cost of living resulting in workers in 2021 being effectively paid less than in 2018; and the social security paid by migrant workers that cannot be reclaimed, robbing them of part of their income.

in the protest, preferring to take new people.

The means to verify this statement are lacking. The staff at the Workers' Centre also heard of deceptive means being used to repatriate women. I have described how a woman I met in Al Balad had escaped from her factory in Al Dulayl with colleagues to avoid repatriation eight months after her arrival. Al Hassan workers may have taken similar recourse, possibly finding shelter in Ramtha or Irbid where many workers formerly employed in the QIZ reportedly live.

Data from the Jordanian Ministry of Labour show that the number of migrant workers in the garment sector dropped by almost one third in 2021. At a national level, this is a significant reduction. Such departures reportedly revived the hope that Jordanian workers may progressively replace migrant workers in the garment sector, an objective that could not be realized in the past and which did not happen this time either.

17.5 Overtime and high income

Having reduced their workforce because a slack period was expected, companies received more orders than anticipated. They had no choice but to ask workers to increase how much overtime they did. For three months, women worked continuously. They had no weekly off and were under pressure to deliver at any cost. "It reached a point when we had to protest," said Suneetha Eluri. The workers' health was now at stake, and this regime of excessive work continued up to October 2021 and workers' incomes climbed to new heights.

The variations in income during these phases were described by Mila's mother as follows. Her 22-year-old daughter, Mila, migrated to Jordan in 2019. Her basic salary was 125 dinars (15,000 takas). With over time, she cleared 25,000 takas, kept 3,000 to cover her costs and sent home 22,000 takas. This was followed by the lockdown and a lull period with low income. Then came the period of intense work when Mila increased the overtime she did and could send home 28,000 to 29,000 takas. One month, she sent as much as 32,000 takas. Such high income delighted her mother. Mila was also proud of her achievement, but the pace was untenable.

17.6 Return to lesser overtime and questions regarding the benefits of migration

Once COVID restrictions were lifted or amended, companies began hiring again and an agreement was reached (around October 2021) that the overtime per worker would be limited to two hours a day, a policy that was still being enforced at the time of writing this report. In July 2022, Mila's mother explained:

Mila's contract ended two months ago, and she signed again for another three years. Her basic salary is now 150 dinars ... In July 2022, there were problems, and she could not work any overtime. When she works two hours overtime every day, she sends us 22,000 to 23,000 takas.

So, the two-hour overtime per day is an upper limit but, in some months, there may be no overtime at all. The amount Mila sends home in 2022 is just a little more than what she sent in 2019. The increase in basic salary from 125 to 150 dinars does not compensate for the decrease in income due to limited or no overtime.

Jesmin migrated to Jordan in March 2022 and got a job at Classic Fashions. Her basic salary is the same as Mila's: 150 dinars. Prior to migrating, Jesmin worked as a senior operator in an EPZ factory. With overtime, she earned 22,000 to 23,000 takas. The information was obtained from her husband interviewed in Bangladesh. When asked whether his wife's migration was a good decision, he said:

Here, she had to go to the factory, get up at 5 a.m. and leave home by 6 a.m. She returned at 10 p.m. Then, she cooked. That was very hard ... I purchased a plot of land, and we have a loan to pay back. With the money she sends, I can pay that loan. Here, she earned more than in Jordan, but she had to pay for transport, and she spent for the children and for the household. Saving was more difficult.

At Classic Fashions, the basic salary is the same for all and no credit is given to experienced workers. The financial advantage of Jesmin's migration appears very small, even though, as the husband pointed out, she saves time and

money on transport and her remittance can be more easily saved.

Interestingly, when they were interviewed in July and September 2022 respectively, Mila's mother and Jesmin's husband did not mention the devaluation of the Bangladesh taka in relation to the Jordanian dinar that began in June 2022. After a long period of stability, the devaluation of the taka with some fluctuations has been constant. Thus, a basic salary of 150 dinars today is worth about 22,000 takas instead of 18,000 takas.

Family members may not have integrated this change or may not have wanted to share the good news with the researcher. Alternatively, the migrant women may not have explained to their family that their income in dinars is now worth considerably more takas than in the past. Jesmin's husband is sorry about the limitation on overtime:

My wife can only work two hours overtime. She is careful with her spending and sends us 15,000 to 17,000 takas a month.

Jesmin's remittances in takas appear very low, especially since the month of June. Either she is not "careful with her spending" or she does not tell her husband how much she is earning, a common strategy among married women observed with factory workers in Bangladesh.¹⁷

In any case, many migrant women, and their families at home, regret the limitation of overtime to two hours a day. Presently, the devaluation of the taka to some extent compensates for the relatively low income in Jordanian dinars, giving migrant garment workers a small advantage over those working in the same sector in Bangladesh. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of migration for the workers and their families and making

projections for the future appears difficult as so much is unpredictable. Migration is a gamble. Between the market fluctuations, currency devaluation and high rate of inflation, Mila's mother and Jesmin's husband could well be lost (as many of us are).

17.7 Random conversations with migrant workers on their day off

I interviewed women who had migrated to Jordan after their families in Bangladesh had gone bankrupt. For example, Rothna's father had a shop in Mirpur but during the COVID-19 pandemic, sales went down, and he eventually went bankrupt. The family accumulated debts which could only be repaid through migration. A drastic decision was taken. The two youngest sons were entrusted to their grandmother, and 16-year-old Rothna was taken out of school. She and her mother paid a *dalal* 50,000 takas each and got a job at Galaxy, a Bangladeshi-owned company in Al Hassan. None of them had experience in garment factories before. The father found work in Aqaba to the south of the country. I met Rothna as she waited for a friend who entered a shop to use Tik Tok.

Another example is Nurjahan, a 33-year-old woman from Chapainawabgonj. She was divorced and lived with her two sons in her father's home. She worked with her father in the tailoring shop he ran but it suffered badly during the pandemic. Nurjahan migrated to expunge the debts accumulated. She found work at Classic Fashions but after one year, she was sick and demanded to be repatriated. The company deducted 20,000 takas from her salary for her airfare. Nurjahan returned to Jordan seven months ago but joined Galaxy.

¹⁷ The importance of this strategy was understood when factory owners introduced the electronic payment of salaries, which they presented as a technological advancement. However, it created an uproar as women could not easily hide how much they earned and keep some money for themselves without creating conflict. Imagine a couple possessing only one phone, which was in the hands of the husband. With the electronic payment, the husband is (1) the first to be informed about his wife salary, (2) he knows the exact amount and, (3) he may collect the payment himself. The electronic payment of salaries effectively reduced women's control over their income.

Final thoughts

This report follows up on two studies conducted earlier on Bangladeshi women who had migrated to Jordan and Lebanon (Blanchet 2023) and to Oman (Blanchet 2021). The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic that struck in March 2020, affecting migrant workers jobs and incomes deeply, could be measured. In addition, the woes of the ongoing political and economic crisis in Lebanon, with the drastic devaluation of the currency, multiplied problems for migrant workers. The following points can be highlighted.

- **During and after the pandemic, migrant women fared better than migrant men.**

While nearly all migrant workers suffered during the pandemic, women fared relatively better than men. Women domestic workers and women caretakers inside homes kept their jobs and received their full salaries while those who did not reside with an employer maintained at least one or two regular customers and, therefore, had some income. Men were without work for six months to a year. An unemployed husband commented that his working wife saved him from starvation, and wives became essential providers.

In Lebanon, women live-out domestic workers, during and after the pandemic, were paid an hourly rate higher than the men employed as cleaners. One may question the regular singling out of women migrant domestic workers as most vulnerable workers as though it was an immutable feature of their sex.

- **Lower migration costs give women greater mobility.**

In Lebanon, the lasting economic crisis cancelled benefits to migrant workers. After airports reopened and international movements resumed, workers could leave but many stayed

for different reasons. Many men were bogged down by the high cost of their first migration and the loans they had no time to reimburse. Even if they had no pending debt, finding the capital to migrate elsewhere discouraged many from making the move. The stranded men had reduced possibilities, which may bear a relation to cases of depression and suicides being reported as more common among men than women. The costs of women's migration being considerably lower, it made it easier for them to leave the country and migrate elsewhere. For example, those whose savings were all spent could migrate free of cost to Saudi Arabia.

- **The shocks that damage the job market vary in nature.**

In the three years and three months separating the last and the current research in Jordan and Lebanon (February 2019 to April 2022), the Bangladeshi migrant population reduced by half in both countries. In Jordan, the garment factory sector remained strong, but the domestic worker sector shrunk to insignificance. The downward trend had started in 2017 after a crime was committed by a 16-year-old Bangladeshi girl who killed her elderly employers after they refused to let her go on leave. Widely commented on in the Jordanian press, the reputational damage to Bangladeshi women was immense. They were replaced by Ethiopians and other nationalities and never recovered the place they had occupied even after the ban on their recruitment was lifted. The few Bangladeshi women still migrating to Jordan as domestic workers today get "free" visas. Recruiting agencies process these visas, but the women find their own work and are responsible for building and retaining a clientele. They have to (re)create a positive image. Before the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, live-out domestic workers earned considerably more

than live-in domestic workers. However, the situation was reversed during the pandemic.

The shocks affecting the job market are of different natures, have different causes and require different responses. Social media may spread stories that are highly damaging, adding to the uncertainty. In Jordan in 2021, a major crisis broke out at the Classic Fashions factory located in the Al Hasan QIZ after a story circulated that a Bangladeshi woman worker who had disappeared from the factory was found dead in a garbage heap in Amman. Proof was later found that the missing woman was alive and that the story on social media had deliberately and wrongly woven together the events that had occurred and reached an erroneous conclusion. Job markets are fragile and reputations matter. Therefore, vigilance ought to be exerted on social media and fabricated stories rapidly exposed for what they are.

More generally, objective inquiries and reliable reporting on women migrant workers are not only possible but highly necessary. Beyond protecting job markets – which migrant women and other stakeholders certainly need – ethnographic studies may also serve such a purpose.

► **Jordan and Lebanon have distinct characteristics as destinations for women.**

Both countries have different migration histories and the sex ratios have oscillated, but they share one characteristic which is the high proportion of migrant women, their early arrival and their long stay at the destination. The two countries are exceptional in the context of Bangladesh, where male migrants have been pioneers and have largely dominated. In Oman, women represented 10 per cent of the Bangladeshi migrants and had arrived later (Blanchet 2021). Presently, women make up 80 per cent of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Jordan and 50 per cent in Lebanon. The two countries have a relatively high number of seasoned migrant women who manage their lives and their work with remarkable audacity and independence. They are found engaging in the recruitment business, in hosting and guiding newcomers, in sheltering absconding workers and in engaging in domestic work as well. The latter work, which they insist on keeping, is a source of income and also allows them to maintain a network, find nationals willing to act

as sponsors or good employers for part-time work.

These migrant women have not been spared disparaging comments on their moral character but given their number and a relatively tolerant host society, they have stayed their course. Women taking a *habibi* or “temporary husband” and men doing the same with a “temporary wife” are tolerated practices. It contributes to mark *bidesh* as a place apart, a site of transient sojourn where emotional and sexual relationships may be engaged in for the time being. Migrants have the moral duty to work and send money home. Provided this obligation is fulfilled, seeking a little comfort in a hard life may be excused. Men have always been permitted such freedom. That women should do the same with a clear conscience is an individual revolution.

Situations vary, but the return home for veteran migrant women could be difficult even when they own property and have savings. Returnees must come to terms with village society, and this could be more demanding for women than for men. After an absence of 17 years, Aklima faced many bad surprises. Why did her son-in-law spend the money she sent for purposes other than those agreed to? Seen as “old”, she was expected to integrate the gender, generational and family roles suitable for her perceived age and her widowed status. For these, she was clearly a misfit. Rohima chose to stay in Lebanon even if she earned only a fraction of what she used to get. She had fulfilled her family duties. Even though she had a husband at home, the man did not exert any pull. Choosing one’s life according to one’s personal taste is not the traditional way. Ex-migrant women stand out in their villages for their modern stances and their self-confidence.

► **Free visas and other small arrangements are part of the *kafala* system.**

The various arrangements made with the *kafala* system, including free visas, is a major finding of this study. They belong to a grey zone and different actors have different opinions on their legality. Domestic workers and sponsors are party to these “deviations”. A very common agreement is for the *khadama* to serve her sponsor and provide her services to other clients as well to increase her income. Such arrangements are rarely found in Saudi Arabia or in Oman, where live-in domestic workers may be

asked to work for the relatives of their sponsor without financial compensation.

We have seen how popular free visas are among veteran migrant workers. The destination country can be entered in all legality as the agreement made with the sponsor appears nowhere on their document. Generally, free-visa holders have no problem with the authorities as long as they renew their *aqama* every year. The problem lies with non-renewal and illegal stays for which they may be deported, a common situation which is decried by the Bangladesh embassy.

Bangladeshi diplomats are right to say that there is no such thing as a free visa. There are domestic worker visas, company visas, visas for commercial enterprises, and so on. When company visas are issued, a few (or many) visas may be set aside to be sold at a higher price to *dalals* who find candidates for free visas. Should free visas be issued on an industrial scale, the profits may be considerable. In Oman, one man was sponsoring hundreds of male migrant workers who were tailors, laundrymen, mechanics and he required a monthly payment from each of them that added up to a considerable amount. Sponsors of domestic workers in Jordan and Lebanon did not earn on such a scale. For each visa, they must show their

bank balance. Very rich people may have more *khadamas* and there is a limit. In any case, the relationship between sponsors and workers is not the same with the company visas that men buy as free visas.

At the Bangladesh embassies in Amman and in Beirut, workers who do not renew their *aqama* after entering the country on a 'free visa' are regarded as outlaws and are frequently blamed and insulted. Such an attitude is not particularly helpful.

The question should be asked: who is benefiting and who is being harmed by the different arrangements and "perversions" of the *kafala* system documented in this report? Ample evidence has been found to support the fact that women who got domestic worker visas under the free visa arrangement had largely benefited, while their sponsors received a compensation. Other types of arrangements agreed upon between sponsors and *khadamas* were advantageous to both parties and contributed to professionalizing domestic work, rationalizing tasks and increase efficiency. The arrangements were made to suit the needs of both parties. They were not imposed from above. The practices described may usefully inspire those who wish to reform or abolish the much criticized *kafala* system.

► Annex 1: Officials and other persons interviewed

Jordan

Mr Moniruzaman, Mohammad
First Secretary (Labour)
Embassy of Bangladesh in Jordan

Ms Saleha Mozammel
Third Secretary & HOC
Embassy of Bangladesh in Jordan

Ms Dina Safarubu
Project Coordinator,
Tamkeen Fields for Aid
Amman

Suneetha Eluri
Project Coordinator, Al Hassan Workers' Centre
International Labour Organization
South Abdoun, Amman

Ms Suha Labadi
National Project Coordinator, Work in Freedom
programme
International Labour Organization
South Abdoun, Amman

Mr Patrick Daru
Coordinator for Amman Decent Work Country
Programme
South Abdoun, Amman

Mr Anas Jamous
Executive Director
Zara Manpower Recruiting Co
Amman

Ms Alaa
Trans Asia Trading Services
Amman

Ms Sherryl
Yousef Hindawi Company for Recruiting Foreign
Manpower
Rabia Circle, Building no 24,
Amman

Lebanon

Mr Abdul Motaleb Sarker
Ambassador
Embassy of Bangladesh in Lebanon

Mr Abdullah Al Mamun
First Secretary (Labour) & HOC
Embassy of Bangladesh in Lebanon

Ms Zeina Mezher
National Project Coordinator, Work in Freedom
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International Labour Organization,
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Ms Cynthia Eddé
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Mr Babu Saha
Lebanon Correspondent, *Bangla Vision*
(Bangladesh)
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Mr Kobi Sarkar Monir
Lebanon Correspondent, *Asian Television*
(Bangladesh),
Hamra, Beirut

Elke for Services, Housemaids and Babysitters
Commodore St. Chatila Bldg.,
Hamra, Beirut

Elias J. Massroua
Massroua General Services,
Zahle, Beka Valley

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