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# **BEYOND BOUNDARIES**

A Critical Look at Women Labour Migration  
and the Trafficking Within

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The views and interpretations expressed in this study are the sole responsibility of the author.

Thérèse Blanchet

## Executive Summary

The research aimed to document women labour migration and occurrences of trafficking. In Bangladesh, six sites where women were known to migrate out of country were selected for research. Outside Bangladesh, Kolkata, Mumbai and Kuwait were visited.

Informants were selected among returnees without prejudice as to whether they had been trafficked or not. Returnees' narratives constitute the richest data of the research. It was completed with interviews with *dalals*, manpower agents, local leaders and family members of the migrants. To the extent possible, the research moved back and forth between sites of emigration and sites of immigration. In all, 496 case histories of migrant women were recorded out of which 208 had gone to the Middle East, 70 to Kolkata, 190 to Mumbai or Uttar Pradesh and 28 to Malaysia.

Migration to the Middle East is characterized by its high cost and even though women pay less than men, visa, plane fare and margin profits of *dalals* and recruiting agencies add up to a considerable sum. The money provided by a husband, a father, a money lender or an NGO must be recouped, and this obligation exerts tremendous pressure on migrant women to accept whatever work is demanded.

A majority of women went to Kuwait, followed by Bahrain and the UAE. The *kofala* or sponsorship system, characteristic of the Gulf states, applies in all these countries and similar types of visas are issued. 82.2 percent of the women went with (or were promised) domestic visas, the rest went with company visas to work as cleaners in schools and hospitals. Domestic workers lived in with their employers and had little autonomy; company workers could dispose of their time after performing their 8 hour duty, 5 days a week. A majority, in both categories admitted that sex work was an integral part of their job (domestic workers) or was engaged in on a part time basis, beside their official duty (company workers). Ten percent stated that sex work was their only occupation. Most first time migrants were unprepared for such work but salaries being extremely low they were compelled by economic necessity (company workers) or they had to acquiesce to the demands of their employers in order to keep their jobs (domestic workers). In several households, sex work was conducted under the direct supervision of the employer who used his/her maids as a source of income.

The success of migration is generally measured by the amount of money earned. Slightly more than half (52.4 percent) of the women considered they had been benefited while 38.9 percent said they had been highly benefited. The rate of failure is high: 22.6 percent of the women returned empty handed. Husbands were the most common recipients of remittances and only 9.1 percent of the women kept their savings for themselves.

One noted a marked increase in the cheating of women after 1998 following the closure of several migration routes. Promised a contract of 2 to 3 years for a domestic job, women were sent to Dubai on short term visas to do sex work and were forcibly returned within 3 months nearly empty handed. Such practices were considered the worst possible kind of abuse.

Seventy women from Bangladesh were interviewed in Kolkota brothels. As many as 59 (84.3 percent) were considered trafficked and many cases were recent. Small networks of traffickers were found operating in Satkhira. They recruited candidates from neighbouring villages and among their distant relatives. Some had been arrested by the police and fined but their work was not stopped. Known as traffickers in their community, they had become powerful and no one dared oppose or expose them. Local arbitration (*shalish*) was poorly equipped to deal with them.

Migration to Mumbai is not new. In the sixties and seventies, poor families from Jessore and Satkhira begged their way to the big city. Work for women in bars became widely available after 1990. Bar work often entailed sex work but not necessarily so. Women engaged in it with the permission of their husbands/families. *Dalals* played a lesser role. Motivators and recruiters were mainly relatives, neighbours and parents. There were "contract marriages" whereby a man married for the purpose of migration to Mumbai. Marriage protected him from accusation of trafficking and he could claim 50 percent of his wife's income. Exploitation at the core of families or between "married" partners took place under the cover of powerful ideologies which are constitutive of moral order. They threatened the very fabric of society. Here 31 percent of the informants were considered to have been trafficked, 41 percent were not trafficked and 28 percent were in an undermined category.

The location/occupations of Bangladeshi women abroad, which were documented in this study are a partial reckoning of a much larger field remaining to be explored and researched.

The study concluded by recommending that the ban on the migration of unskilled women labour to the Middle East be lifted as it did not prevent women from migrating nor protect their rights. It suggested an uninhibited recognition of women migration as a fact and as a right. Human rights abuse suffered by both men and women should not be read with different lenses and sex work in itself should not be a criterion of "trafficking". The money earned and the autonomy exerted by women in this activity largely determined whether they considered themselves to be trafficked or not.

Migratory routes differed markedly and so did the modalities of trafficking. Organizations implementing anti-trafficking programs should be knowledgeable about the situation prevailing in their locality and adjust messages accordingly. The use of words like "mafia" or the depiction of traffickers as villain outsiders do not correspond to the actual garb taken by most traffickers. Research findings should guide anti-trafficking programmes.

The overwhelming majority of "women" found to have been trafficked were adolescent girls below the age of 18. Special attention must be given to that age group. Finally, women migrants were generally very poorly equipped to deal with health risks. In Mumbai where 60 percent of the sex worker have been found to be HIV positive, the risks are immense. Also, more needs to be known about the effect of injected drugs used in Dubai and in Mumbai to make sex work more acceptable.

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# Chapter One

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Research problems

#### 1.1.1. The invisibility of women labour migration

Women labour migration is little known, little researched and little acknowledged in Bangladesh; yet, the trafficking in women attracts considerable attention. Anti-trafficking campaigns, seminars and workshops emphasize a problem needing urgent remedy. Highlighting trafficking in women while ignoring women labour migration amounts to taking the head for the entire body. It creates a distorted view of both, migration and trafficking. The potentially revolutionary impact of women's labour migration and the challenges it creates for existing gender and class relations are thus obscured; only the crime is highlighted and presented as a growth to be exterminated.

In 1997, the Government of Bangladesh reiterated the illegality of women cross border labour migration excepting only highly skilled professionals. Facing protests, the ban was partly lifted but maintained for domestic workers. Adopted from 1981 onwards, government bans and restrictions have not stopped women from migrating. However, they prevented the GOB from collecting data on migrant women worth speaking of. Illegality has not only pushed underground the work of recruiters but the very subject of women migration has been denied a place in public debates. In 1996, one could read in a report presented at an international conference: "Bangladesh women do not migrate, it is not in their culture."<sup>1</sup> Negating the fact of migration has never protected migrant women.

The migration of women, especially unaccompanied by guardians, has long been regarded as suspect in Bengali society. Traditionally, men could migrate for work or for study, they could see the world and explore its outer contours but good women remained inside, within boundaries. The symbolic space inhabited by purdah-abiding women defined the honour of families. The legendary faithfulness and patience of Bengali women who could wait indefinitely for a migratory husband has been praised in ancient myths and

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<sup>1</sup> Shah, N.M. 1996

more recently has been portrayed in films and in novels. Women known to venture 'outside' were deemed fallen and denied respect.

Such heavy symbolic investment in women's confinement has left a problematic legacy for women migrant today. Although behaviour and attitudes are fast changing, admitting that women migrate unaccompanied by guardians is still cause for uneasiness and shame. In such a context, traffickers taking the garb of guardians have always been able to operate with ease and impunity. An aunt or an elder sister who transports across borders and forcibly puts to work a niece or a younger sister for her own benefit is not seen as a trafficker. This study will show that marriage provides an excellent license ensuring that a man will not be pursued as a trafficker when he is known to entice, cheat and put a wife to work against her will for his own enrichment. Marriage confines women and whatever they do in obedience to a husband acquires a kind of morality in the eyes of society. The community does not intervene. Attempting to distinguish between 'true' and 'fake' marriage does not address the issue. After all, husbands' ability to make marriage look true provides the very basis for exploiting these women.

### **1.1.2. Trafficking as an aspect of labour migration**

Trafficking in women should be located within the wider field of labour migration. Trafficking is not opposed to migration but an aspect of it. Case histories collected here show that the experience of being trafficked often initiates a migrant career. Lured, deceived, cheated, deprived of freedom and/or income, compelled to engage in work against their will, women who are trafficked painfully learn and acquire skills useful to their survival. In an adverse situation the incentive to learn can be very strong. After being trafficked, life goes on with the need to earn, tackle risks and manage in an environment offering poor protection. There is usually no return to a pre-trafficked situation. It should be underlined that the outcome of being trafficked very seldom leads to rehabilitation in a rescue home. Studies on the trafficking in women carried out from such establishments do not adequately represent the life path of most "trafficked" women.

Labels fix identities and poorly convey the succession of roles played in a scenario unfolding over time. A fix identity cannot account for the changing consciousness of those pursuing a journey that is geographical, social and personal as well. Whatever the outcome, migrants are transformed by the experience of migration. Worldviews are altered even if it were reluctantly or imperceptibly through the *habitus* of switching codes and acting up new roles necessary or useful for survival in a new context. Meanings change and what is trafficking here may be a normal and acceptable recruitment method

elsewhere. Perceptions of trafficking are far from being homogeneous or constant. Trafficked persons themselves re-assess their experience of having been trafficked over time, the interpretation depending very much on how they read the overall outcome of their migration.

### **1.1.3. "I agreed to sell myself": agency and trafficking**

Numerous attempts have been made to perfect the concept of trafficking in persons, adding ever more specifications and fine-tuning. Yet, the difficulties of applying these definitions to concrete situations remain. In the research presented here, some 500 women migrants were interviewed. More or less informed, cheated, used and abused, more or less benefited financially, made richer and wiser by the experience, the stories are difficult to squeeze in little boxes. Tracing a continuum of experiences from the most exploited to the most benefited may be feasible but it can never convey the complexities of events encountered and the thickness of human lives.

"I agreed to sell myself for three years. I counted the days, I hated this work", declared a Gazipur woman who had returned from Kuwait a year earlier. She had been employed as a domestic worker but had to sexually entertain her employer and his guests under the threat of losing her job. She consented because she could not return to her husband empty handed. She earned well but she came back scathed. Her husband bought land in his name from her remittances. He never wanted to know how the money had been earned. Wives are expected to bring wealth and prosperity to their husband (as *Lokkhi*). This, she did. But migration made her question the very ideal of *Lokkhi* and what its fulfillment required of her person. For women who could never exert much agency in their lives, for those who never earned a salary for themselves and went to the Middle East in obedience to a husband, migration (even with its strong element of coercion and abuse) is often an eye opener. Some women feel the "trafficking" began in their husbands' homes, yet how can they reject such homes. What alternative place do they have? Migration raises difficult questions for both, men and women. It is immensely threatening to established order.

### **1.1.4. Men migrate, women are trafficked: an enduring construction of gender**

The word "trafficking" is practically never applied to men in Bangladesh. As migrants, men are also known to suffer abuse and exploitation (including sexual), they are lured and cheated, yet, they are not said to be trafficked. One man met in Kuwait in the course of this study explained that men could not be trafficked because "a man can sleep anywhere at night". He was

referring to a construction of male sexuality, which makes men unrapable, and untraffickable. His associating trafficking to a kind of vulnerability inherent to women's nature (read bodies) and a corresponding invulnerability in men is a common assumption. I suggest it needs urgent unpacking. Why should women's bodies be a source of vulnerability? Why can't they be a source of power and strength? And the same question arises for men. Values do not inhere in bodies but stem from social and power relations.

Are migrant women actually more victimized than men because of their bodies? A conversation held during this research is good to relate here. In Kuwait, June 2001, a group of Bangladeshi men and women who worked for a cleaning company were met. Once in Kuwait, they were made to accept the same wages (22 Kuwaiti Dinar or 66 US\$) per month. This salary, extremely low by any standard, had not been paid for 3 months. The situation was desperate, yet no one had informed their families about their plight. One man exclaimed: "The women here are better than us, at least they have something to sell". These men and women had been "trafficked" by manpower agencies whose business it is to trade in visa and in people. They were transported overseas even though there was no (or not enough) work for them to do. Men's situation was not any better than the women. They had paid even larger sums of money to manpower agencies for the "privilege" of working in Kuwait. I saw men scavenging the dustbins of Hassabia for something to resell. An official at the Bangladesh Embassy stated that the suicide rate among the men was the highest. On what basis then should it be said that the *dhandha*<sup>2</sup> (secret occupation) women resorted to made them into greater victims?

Research on trafficking exclusively focusing on women obviously finds only women as victims. The trafficking in men is not even imagined; perhaps it hurts images of masculinity. Men who are sexually abused have been seen to be even more reluctant to talk about their ordeal than women are. The idea here is not to minimize the exploitation and the hardship suffered by women nor to deny that the types of jobs offered to them are often specific to their sex but to question the different criteria used to judge the exploitation of men and women.

Trafficking in women leaves no one indifferent. The cause is good to use in awareness and fund raising campaigns but the benefits gained must be weighed against the potentially negative effect of the gender stereotyping it carries. An unbiased gender analysis of trafficking should include both men and women. Positing as a premises that men migrate, while women are trafficked, is a normative statement about gender wrongly taken as a "fact".

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<sup>2</sup> The word *dhandha* refers to an income earning activity which is generally low prestige and/or illegitimate and which is not revealed to outsiders. Here it clearly refers to sex work.

## **1.2. Research Objectives**

The objectives of the study were set as follows:

Document women labour migration. To the extent possible, assess the incidence of Bangladeshi women and adolescent girls cross border labour migration by air and by land.

Identify characteristics of the migrant population (age, education, marital, economic and honor status, occupation prior to migration, number of dependents, motivations for migration, etc.);

Identify facilitators, recruiters and traffickers, agents and transport operators. Study their modes of operations;

Describe the role of family members in initiating, supporting or discouraging the migration of women and adolescent girls;

Describe types of work promised and types of work actually done, terms and conditions of employment, work and living environment, cost of migration, remuneration (or lack of), recipients of remittances and control exerted over the money earned by the migrant;

Underline the positive and the negative outcomes of women labour migration;

Review definitions/modalities of trafficking;

Suggest means to address problems subsumed under the term "trafficking" in women and adolescent girls.

### **1.2.1. Limitations of the research**

The stated objectives were partly met. The research carried out explored one part of a much larger domain, poorly researched and whose contours are not even traced. Many of the occupations and sites of emigration of Bangladeshi women abroad could not be covered in this study and we acknowledge this limitation.

We attempted to locate trafficking within the larger domain of women labour migration. This theoretical position was clear and determined the constitution of the sample which was made up of women returnees regardless of whether they had been trafficked or not. An interest in abuse may have inadvertently led to a greater emphasis to such cases. Whenever a woman accepted to confide her secrets, the revelations were such that we felt they should be shared. Women's narratives are both a strength and a limitation of the research.

### **1.3. Organization of the research**

#### **1.3.1. Time frame and research**

The research spread over 15 months and involved one principal investigator, four full time researchers and nine field level assistants recruited locally for the duration of research at a particular site. The gender balance of researchers and assistants was slightly tipped in favour of women who represented sixty percent of the research team. This seemed appropriate for a research on women labour migration.

#### **1.3.2. Research chronology and sites of investigation**

Inside Bangladesh, six sites were investigated and, outside Bangladesh, three cities in two countries were visited. Other pockets of emigration and different countries of immigration could have been chosen, no doubt. The challenge was to provide a range of migration profiles as representative as possible within the limited time available for the research.

#### **1.3.3. Sites inside Bangladesh**

##### ***A) Dhaka city***

The team first sought to identify women migrants in Dhaka City but returnees were dispersed and reaching them was time consuming. Given the mobility of urban society, stories could not be easily crosschecked. Manpower agents were guarded in their information. The research moved at a frustratingly slow pace. When some *dalals* declared that rural areas were for them better recruiting grounds than cities, we took their clue and looked for women migrant outside Dhaka.

##### ***B) Gazipur district***

After a period of trial, Shalna of Kaultia Union in Gazipur district was selected. A manpower agent gave us names and addresses of women who had gone to the Middle East warning us not to mention his name or that of his agency. Shalna proved to be an excellent site for our purpose as

women who had migrated could be found every two households. A few women had gone to Kuwait in the 1980's. In the aftermath of the Gulf War these pioneer women brought their relatives and neighbours. They did good business as did men *dalals*. Migration declined in 1999 after the Kuwait Government stopped issuing visas to Bangladeshis following the murder of a Kuwaiti by his Bangladeshi driver. Women were then diverted to other countries of the Middle East.

This research site has never been completely closed and is still visited as this report is being written. Kaultia Union is a rural area with a dominant agriculture economy. Prior to migration, most women had not been employed outside their homes. For most of them, the first trip outside their father or husband's village was to the airport and on the plane to Kuwait.

A second site was opened in Kapashia and Sreepur Upozila. It was not as fruitful as Shalna because homesteads were dispersed and communications difficult. Here women migrated to the Middle East but also batches of younger, better-educated and often unmarried girls went to Malaysia from 1993 onwards. Most of them returned between 1997-99 as they lost their jobs or their work conditions deteriorated beyond the tolerable following the economic crash of 1998 in south-east Asia. The number of women interviewed who went to Malaysia was small but they are important to the research as the pattern of migration (type of job, remuneration, freedom of movement, etc.) differ significantly from the Middle East or India.

### **C) Narayangonj**

In May 2001, a third research site was opened in Shahidnagar, a ward of Narayangonj Municipal Corporation. The area had already earned a reputation as a "trafficking" zone after local and national newspapers exposed a scandal regarding young boys sent to Dubai as camel jockeys. A judicial pursuit led to the condemnation of a woman trafficker who is still in jail today. Ekushey Television made a reportage on trafficking. Following on the footsteps of journalists had advantages and disadvantages. Familiarity with the word "trafficking" was evident but there was also a marked reluctance to talk to investigators of any kind. Spending a few months living in the community and employing local people as assistants proved to be a fruitful research strategy. It helped to melt the suspicion and to gain people's trust. It had been tried in Gazipur and became a regular feature of the research set up in the next sites as well.

In Shahidnagar, women labour migration to the Middle East was older than in Gazipur and considerable information could be gathered on its history and on working conditions in the Middle East in general. The main country of

immigration was Bahrain, followed by Kuwait and Dubai. Narratives confirmed much of the information obtained from Gazipur, and a clear pattern emerged on women's migration to the Middle East further complemented by the one-month visit to Kuwait. Shahidnagar continues to be visited as this report is written.

#### ***D) Satkhira and Jessore***

Finally, information was needed on women who migrated by land to India. Though difficult to estimate, the number of these undocumented migrants is undoubtedly higher than migrants to the Middle East. Jessore and Satkhira had come top of the list among the districts of origin for the women we interviewed in the red light districts of Kolkata. A few villages also had been identified. Following these indications, investigation was conducted in Ghona and Boikari unions of Satkhira Sadar and Hizoldi and Shonabari unions of Kolaroa Upozila in Satkhira district. Here, it was discovered that the bars of Mumbai were a most popular destination for migrant women. Kolaroa informants indicated that the people of Bakra, Zhikorgacha Upozila in Jessore had migrated to Mumbai before them and had shown them the way. So, villages of Zhikorgacha Upozila constituted the last site. We found there some families in which three generations of women had gone to work in Mumbai.

In Satkhira and Jessore, cases were found of very young girls who had been sold in marriage in Uttar Pradesh ten to fifteen years earlier. The last bride recruiters who had visited the village could not find parents willing to hand over their daughters to them. This particular mode of trafficking appears to be in decline but remains important as a type of migration.

Villages of Jessore and Satkhira situated close to the Indian border have a long tradition of cross border travel for different purposes including seasonal work, shopping, marriage, medical care, running away from criminal cases, etc. There is a strong pull towards India and many villagers said they were better acquainted with Kolkata and Mumbai than they were with Dhaka City. The cultural proximity, the ease of travel and the possibility to blend in are unparalleled in the Middle East. Bangladeshi migrants may become "Indians" in a relatively short period of time.

Research sites in Jessore and Satkhira were closed down. Being more distant from Dhaka, follow up could not be maintained.

### 1.3.4. Sites outside Bangladesh

#### A) *Kolkata*

Physical and cultural proximity as well as the commonality of the Bangla language made Kolkata an obvious choice for the research. One researcher, with a locally recruited assistant, conducted a 6-week fieldwork in the red light districts of Kolkatha. The purpose was to identify women from Bangladesh and record the history of their migration. The team was helped by the Durbar Mohila Samannoi Committee (DMSC) without whom access to Bangladeshi women would have been much more difficult.

#### B) *Kuwait*

Kuwait had been shown to be the main country of immigration in Gazipur. This country is not open to tourists or to researchers unless a Kuwaiti citizen sponsors them. A one-month visa could be arranged through a friend anthropologist who knew the manager of an international company operating in Kuwait. This was fortunate. Conducted from mid-May to mid-June 2001, the visit permitted the principal researcher a better understanding of the working and living conditions of Bangladeshi migrants in Kuwait and a better knowledge of the make up of Kuwait society and the nature of its migration policies. The number of women who worked as domestic servants had reduced after 1999 and those who remained were difficult to access. Women who worked for cleaning companies were easier to contact but could not give much time as they were busy earning through their official jobs as well as through the *dhandā* they practiced afterwards. Finally, women with so called "free" visas and women without visas did not speak easily. Some contacted the researcher by phone but refused to give their address. In depth interviews such as those conducted in Bangladesh villages were not possible in Kuwait but the visit permitted a much better understanding of the physical and social environment in which migrant workers lived.

#### C) *Mumbai*

Two researchers spent one month in Mumbai from mid-October to mid-November 2001. The main purpose was to find out more about the lives and the working environment of girls and women earning in the dancing bars. Women from Bangladesh who worked in the more traditional red light districts of Kamathipura and Pila House (Falkland Road) were also met and a history of migration patterns over the last 3 decades could be sketched.

Meeting Bengalis was not difficult but identifying Bangladeshis was highly problematic. "After crossing the border, all of us become West Bengalis", said one man. Bangladeshis in Mumbai are invisible. New migrants try their best not to be noticed until they can blend in the heterogeneous megacity where new comers are so many. The number of Bangladeshis in Mumbai is practically impossible to know, not only because people hide but also because of the double/nebulous identities of many in a country where criteria of citizenship have been unclear. Bangladeshis in Mumbai readily gave an address in West Bengal; some obtained a voter identity card, a ration card or a driving license from West Bengal, some procured an Indian passport. The question as to whether a Bengali came from Bangladesh or not was soon dropped as it provoked intense suspicion. People feared police informers and painful memories of "push back" moves were still vivid. The older the migration, the more difficult it was to assign one exclusive nationality to a person. We found many migrants who spent their working lives in India returning to Bangladesh to vote, to marry off their children and to invest in landed property. Several women had no wish to return to their village in Bangladesh as they found the social space there stifling. One month did not suffice to know this under cover world. However, much useful information was obtained about the booming business of the ladies bar industry.

#### **1.4. Research methods and strategies**

##### **1.4.1. Locating trafficking within migration**

Research methods reflected the theoretical position that trafficking in women should not be located outside the field of migration but considered a part of it. Thus women who had migrated were selected for interview without prejudice as to whether they had been trafficked or not. In a few cases, the history of the migrant was reconstituted in her absence but this was exceptional. For the most part, migrant women who had returned themselves talked about their experience. Family members, neighbours, *dalals*, transport operators, etc. were also interviewed in an attempt to reconstitute the migration scenario as completely as possible. The migrant woman or her family did not always identify elements of trafficking within the migratory journey. In most cases, persons socially distant were more likely to see trafficking than close family members did. Women interviewed in the brothels of Kolkata were the exception. They readily admitted having been trafficked. The research sought to record different points of view on who the trafficked women were and what is trafficking. Disparities and inconsistencies were not ironed out because the confounding picture that emerged more closely reflects a complex reality.

#### 1.4.2. Collection of narratives and interviews

The narratives of the women returnees constitute the richest data of this research. Tape recorders were used when possible, otherwise researchers wrote down what they remembered as soon as possible after the interview. We did not use printed questionnaires, or anything that looked official in the presence of informants.

Seeking to document trafficking elements within the migratory scenario, emphasis was given to the following points. Who initiated the process and who decided the migration? Who paid for it? Who accompanied the migrant? What was the work promised and what was the work actually demanded or forced upon the woman? How did the women consent/or not consent to the demands made on her? How did she cope with her decision afterwards? Did she earn as promised and could she control her income? How did her family receive her as she returned? Was she empowered within her family or community following migration or did the opposite happen?

Taking the freedom to lift the lid and speak up about experiences not normally shared with family, relatives and neighbours was a perilous decision for the women. Sometimes a woman was willing to speak but was rebuked by her mother-in-law, her husband or other people around. Some stories were interrupted and could never be heard to the end. In the brothels in Kolkata, the *malkins* always tried to shut up their *tsukris* or made sure the latter were out of sight when the researcher came. Girls and women who were the most bonded could not be reached and one can only infer from the testimony of those who came out of bondage what these situations could be like. In Mumbai as well as in the Middle East, some doors remained closed to us. In Bangladesh villages, *dalals* strongly discouraged the women from speaking pointing out that this would only further ruin their reputation. Securing a time and a space where women could freely express themselves was a real challenge throughout the research.

In spite of these difficulties, a surprisingly large number of women agreed to speak up. Most narratives required several sessions. As the researchers themselves gained more knowledge and confidence, they could lead the interview in such a way that the interviewees felt there was no point in hiding their work since conditions overseas were largely known. Some women described what had happened to others but did not admit what had been their own experience. The local assistant was often asked to leave the room before a woman revealed the nature of work performed abroad. Speaking to an outsider seemed to be easier. Some of the women admitted feeling a bit lighter after sharing their secret. After living on a site for some time, a

number of women came to tell their story unsolicited. Some spoke because they hoped to get medical help or advice.

Speaking to *dalals* was more difficult. They cleverly circumvented our questions and avoided exposing their deals. Interviews with them were often unproductive and seemed a waste of time. There were a few exceptions, however. On the whole, women *dalal* were more honest than men *dalal* were.

Family members were not always truthful in their statements. Husbands living off their wives' earning did not acknowledge their dependence and regularly put up another story. Also, families living off their daughters' income did not easily admit it. We learned from lies and attempts at covering up as well as from true statements. Stories had to be pieced together, contradictions interpreted, until a picture (or several pictures) emerged.

#### **1.4.3. Moving back and forth from the site of emigration to the site of immigration**

One overall strategy, which structured the whole research and proved to be very successful, was to follow up migrants from their area of emigration to the country or city of immigration. With the knowledge gained from research in Bangladesh villages, investigations in Kuwait and in Mumbai could be well focused and were made more productive. Similarly, data obtained in Kolkata guided our research in Jessore and Satkhira and the latter guided our research in Mumbai. Visits abroad are costly. This strategy minimized costs and maximized results.

Moving between sites of emigration and sites immigration allowed not only to cross check information but also to participate ourselves to some extent in the migratory journey. We could share some of the secrets of the migrants, witness and partake in the switching of roles, the selective hiding, the covering up and the occasional reconstitution of the *samaj* in the country of immigration. We were sometimes stunned to see the change in behaviour, clothing, and language at the place of work in the country of immigration. We witnessed shameful situations but also, for many, a life of freedom unknown prior to migration.

Although we traveled some of the routes the migrants used, entering these countries as respectable, documented travelers made it a different kind of

experience. We did not sneak into India as illegal migrants nor did we go to Kuwait as migrant workers having to put up with low prestige jobs and humiliation. This placed us in a different category, a fact regularly pointed out by our informants. "Apa, you have a well-paid job, you came here with a passport and a visa, you don't need to do what I do".

#### **1.4.4. The community approach**

The women who migrate do so as wives, daughters, and sisters. They are unmarried, happily or unhappily married, separated, divorced, and widowed. Their primary role and their social insertion (or lack of) within family and *samaj* are important determinants of their migration. The community focus permitted to see how parents, relatives, community leaders perceive, explain, justify, hide or denigrate the labour migration of women. It permitted reading better the social risks taken by migrant women and the stigma, which may follow. Also, connections between local *dalals* and their recruits could better be grasped. How these *dalals* could be so well informed about a particular woman (her problems, ambitions, resources), target their effort in her direction, exploit her weakness and rip good benefits from her could be observed at close range. Information could be gained on how *dalals* secured the leniency of local leaders (*matbors*) by paying them bribes, thus avoiding harsh condemnation when a *shalish* was held. The community approach permitted to observe how local societies allowed trafficking in women to take place and how it corrupted them at their very core.

#### **1.4.5. A variety of methods adapted to different locations**

The research necessitated a variety of methods. Fieldwork in Kuwait and Mumbai was partly investigative journalism, partly detective work, and partly ethnographic inquiry. The social geography had to be explored first, the migrant women had to be found and situated in the context of their migration. Research in the brothels of Kolkata was more narrowly focused. The DMSC members who guided us identified informants. The problem there was the lack of time and several visits to a same informant often could not be made. We were helped but also constrained as we could not do anything, which would jeopardize DMSC's work, for example by showing too much interest in bonded girls (*tsukris*). In Gazipur and in Narayangonj, ethnographic research methods could be more easily applied. Researchers lived in the community and were available at most times. They collected information by interviews but also by observing and listening to conversations not meant for their ears, listening to women who came to get help or otherwise spoke without being interviewed.

## Chapter Two

### CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANT WOMEN

In this research, the case histories of 496 women were documented. Their characteristics provide some indications on who are the cross border migrant women.

#### 2.1 Levels of education

Two third of the migrant women were illiterate. Nearly 9 out of 10 were either illiterate or had not completed primary school. The difference between women who migrated to the Middle East and those who migrated to India is not significant. However, women who went to Malaysia stand out as better educated: 46.4 percent of them had studied up to Class IX or X. Some were selected directly from school and education was an important criterion for their recruitment, which was not the case for the Middle East, or for India.

Table 1: Level of Education by Country of Immigration

Educational level	Country of immigration			Total
	Middle-East	India	Malaysia	
Illiterate	122 (58.7)	192 (73.8)	7 (25.0)	321 (64.7)
Did not complete primary level	66 (31.7)	46 (17.7)	6 (21.4)	118 (23.8)
VI – VIII	17 (8.2)	16 (6.2)	2 (7.1)	35 (7.1)
IX – X	3 (1.4)	3 (1.2)	13 (46.4)	19 (3.8)
SSC and above	-	3 (1.2)	-	3 (0.6)
Total	208 (100.0)	260 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	496 (100.0)

Source: Drishti, Trafficking study, 2001.

(Numbers in parenthesis indicate percentages)

#### 2.2 Age at first migration

Eighteen (18.5) percent of the migrants were below the age of 16 and nearly one third were below the age of 18. They were so young that the term

'woman' should not apply. The great majority of informants first migrated in their twenties while some 8 percent did so in their thirties. There are significant differences between countries of immigration.

The high number of under 16 year old who migrated to India (33.8 percent) is to be explained by the low cost of land travel, the absence of documents and the fact that entire families migrated together which was not the case for Malaysia or the Middle East. Girls who went to India with their families nearly always worked. Those who did not work were returned to Bangladesh after a short period of time.

Women migrated to the Middle East at a later age and, if a few under 18 year old slipped in, most migrants were adult women. Visas are required for the Middle East and these are granted individually to adult women. Families in Bangladesh may also be more reluctant to permit young girls to migrate since they go unaccompanied and must cope on their own in a foreign land.

Most girls who went to Malaysia were aged between 16 and 24. A relatively large number of them were under 18 years old. The higher level of education sought by the employer was more likely to be found among younger girls/women. In this case, girls from a same area often migrated together, which made it easier for families to allow them to go. In Malaysia, groups of girls from a same village or area often worked at a same factory and shared a same residence. Social isolation similar to that suffered by women domestic workers in the Middle East was not seen here.

Table 2: Age at First Migration

Ages (in years)	Country of immigration			Total
	Middle-East	India	Malaysia	
Below 16 years	2 (1.0)	88 (33.8)	2 (7.1)	92 (18.5)
16 – 18	27 (13.0)	64 (24.6)	9 (32.1)	100 (20.2)
19 – 21	24 (11.5)	45 (17.3)	6 (21.4)	75 (15.1)
22 – 24	47 (22.6)	29 (11.2)	5 (17.9)	81 (16.3)
25 – 27	44 (21.2)	12 (4.6)	3 (10.7)	59 (11.9)
28 – 30	33 (15.9)	12 (4.6)	1 (3.6)	46 (9.3)
31 – 33	20 (9.6)	3 (1.2)	1 (3.6)	24 (4.8)
34 – 36	8 (3.8)	2 (0.8)	1 (3.6)	11 (2.2)
37 – 39	3 (1.4)	3 (1.1)	-	6 (1.2)
40 and above	-	2 (0.8)	-	2 (0.4)
<b>Total</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>260 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>496 (100.0)</b>

## 2.3 Marital status

Most women were either unmarried, had 'failed' marriage or were widowed. Of the 42.5 percent who were married, one third stated that they migrated to escape from a bad marriage or because they faced problems with in-laws. The higher percentage of married women who migrated to the Middle East is consistent with their older age. In all groups, migration was seen to delay the marriage of single women.

Table 3: Marital Status by Country of Immigration

Marital status	Country of immigration			Total
	Middle-East	India	Malaysia	
Married	129 (62.0)*	69 (26.5)	13 (46.4)*	211 (42.5)
Unmarried	33 (15.9)	119 (45.8)	11 (39.3)	163 (32.9)
Divorced and Separated	34 (16.3)	62 (23.8)	4 (14.3)	100 (20.2)
Widow	12 (5.8)	10 (3.8)	-	22 (4.4)
<b>Total</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>260 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>496 (100.0)</b>

(\*) Among married women, one quarter (23.9%) wished to migrate because of problems with husband or in-laws.

## 2.4 Occupation before migration

Table 4 shows that a very small proportion of the women who migrated had entered the formal labour market. Only 9.9 percent worked as garment factory workers. On the other hand, 30.8 percent worked at jobs carrying low pay and low prestige, such as day labour, petty trade or domestic work. Over a quarter of the women was unemployed and the same proportion was occupied as housewives.

Table 4: Occupations before migration by Country of immigration

Occupations	Country of migration			Total
	Middle-East	India	Malaysia	
Housewife	81 (38.9)	41 (15.8)	11 (39.3)	133 (26.8)
Day labourer	14 (6.7)	72 (27.7)	-	86 (17.3)
Garments worker	42 (20.2)	4 (1.5)	3 (10.7)	49 (9.9)
Petty trader	33 (15.9)	6 (2.3)	1 (3.6)	40 (8.1)
Unemployed	31 (14.9)	95 (36.5)	7 (25.0)	133 (26.8)
Domestic worker	6 (2.9)	21 (8.1)	-	27 (5.4)
Student	1 (0.5)	18 (6.9)	6 (21.4)	25 (5.0)

Smuggler	-	3 (1.2)	-	3 (0.6)
<b>Total</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>260 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>496 (100.0)</b>

## 2.5 Countries/areas of immigration

Table 5 gives areas/countries of immigration. One sees that 41.9 percent went to the Middle East with Kuwait topping the list of countries followed by Bahrain and UAE (Dubai). Thirty-two women worked in several countries of the Middle East. Only one woman went to Dubai after working in Malaysia. A certain degree of specialization is apparent and once a woman has learned a new language, understood a local working culture and moved within a certain network, she is likely to emigrate to the same country again unless the demand stops as happened in Malaysia and in Kuwait. When Kuwait closed down, *dalals* tried to send women to other countries of the Middle East. Dubai, with its fast expanding tourist industry, as well as Lebanon then emerged as new destinations.

Some women moved from Kolkata to Mumbai. However, no women who had gone to the bars of Mumbai moved to Kolkata. From Mumbai, some women were contracted for periods of 3 to 6 months to work in Dubai. In such cases, they went as Indian nationals and, enjoyed far better terms and conditions than the women recruited from Bangladesh villages.

Table 5: Countries/areas of immigration

Destination		Number of migrants (%)	Total (%)
Middle-East	Kuwait	86 (17.3)	208 (41.9)
	Bahrain	45 (9.1)	
	UAE (Dubai)	40 (8.1)	
	Lebanon	4 (0.8)	
	Multiple countries	33 (6.7)	
India	Mumbai	141 (28.4)	260 (52.4)
	Kolkata	90 (18.1)	
	Uttar Pradesh	20 (4.0)	
	Others	9 (1.8)	
Malaysia	Malaysia	28 (5.6)	28 (5.7)
<b>Total</b>		<b>496 (100.0)</b>	<b>496 (100.0)</b>

## Chapter Three

### Migration to the Middle East

#### 3.1 Introduction

Migrants can best piece together the episodes of their migration. At the centre of a drama, their sense of having been enticed, lured, cheated, abused, sold, hurt, helped or benefited should be heard. Although selective and partial, migrant women's narratives provide the richest information available. Several stories authored by different women will be included in this report. Together, they present a unique documentation on the different facets and phases of migration. They are completed with interviews conducted in Bangladesh with family members, neighbours, recruiting agents and community leaders as well as information gathered in Kuwait.

Sahara' story will lead us into the subject matter. She was 16 years old when, in 1996, encouraged by her husband, she left for Kuwait. Hers is a story of failure as, unable to cope with the work demanded, she came back after 3 months empty handed.

**3.1.1 Sahara's story** My husband first spoke to me about going abroad. He said: "Many girls are going. It is not so costly. You can earn well. Now we have no children. It is a good time to go."

His arguments were good and I was convinced.

It cost 55,000 taka. Collecting the money was a real struggle. My uncle, my father and my husband contributed. We sold two cows and borrowed 12,000 taka against interest.

Josna (*a woman from her village who had returned from Kuwait with visas to sell*) told me: "Don't be afraid. Everybody is Muslim there. You will live in *purdah*. You will not have to go out. And I will be there if you have any problem."

Shaju (*Josna's son-in-law who manages her business in Bangladesh*) took me to the airport and Josna picked me up in Kuwait. She left me in a home. The employer did not have a good reputation. I don't know exactly what he did. His son was a police officer. He was a very bad man. If I did not listen to him, he beat me and withdrew food. Josna left me in a place, which was hell. I was alone. There were no other maids. Sometimes Bangladeshi women visited in the afternoon, stayed the night and left in the morning but I was not allowed to speak to them and I could not speak to anyone else, as I did not understand their language.

I was only thinking how could I return to my country. How could I be absolved from these sins? I was always depressed. Nothing pleased me. I was very young. There were many things I did not understand and all of a sudden I was introduced to that kind of place. I trusted my husband. I believed what he had said and this is why I had agreed to go. Did he not know where he had sent me?

The kind of work I was made to do was not possible for me. I was not this kind of person. I cried. I refused to work, so they took me back to Josna.

Josna's husband hit me so hard, the marks are still on my body. This man is from Comilla. I don't know if he is her husband really or just a man who helps her in her work. I never saw him in Bangladesh. I had hoped for Josna's support but she just rebuked me: "He, woman (*magui*), you will not work? You will not do as you are told? Why did you come then?"

At first, she pretended she could not do anything for me because my employer had kept all my papers. But when she saw I was crying all the time and she would never get anything out of me, she offered to lend me 15,000 taka for the plane fare on the condition that I reimburse her son-in-law immediately upon return.

When I came back, I went straight to my father. He sold land and reimbursed the money within 3 days. Meanwhile, through her son-in-law, Josna mounted a campaign against me. She said that I was like the daughter of a *zamindar*. I was lazy and did not know how to work. She was protecting her business and her reputation.

I could not endure what I had experienced and I could not tell anybody either. I never suspected the kind of work Josna does over there. The face she shows in Bangladesh and the woman I saw in Kuwait are like night and day.

I thought my husband would be happy to see me back but I was wrong. I suffered and I am still suffering. Four years after my return, he still does not see me with kind eyes. My in-laws do not take food from my hand and my sister-in-law calls me a spoiled woman. My father and my brother do not like me as much as before because I spoiled their money. I cannot speak boldly anywhere. I have to keep my head low.

My husband still blames me for having gone abroad. When I point out to him that I followed his advice, he says: "If I asked you to steal, you would? If I asked you sleep with another man, you would? Don't you have any head of your own?"

Perhaps if I had stayed longer, people would not see me so negatively...If I had known my return would be so painful, may be I would have stayed and returned with money."

Sahara's story introduces many issues, which will be developed in this chapter. The following may be here underlined.

##### **5 *The age and the maturity of the migrant woman,***

We have seen that most women migrants are older than Sahara. Some of them, especially from Narayanganj, were out fending for themselves before migrating. Because of poverty, failed marriage, widowhood or the holding of a job in a garment factory, many had moved unprotected outside and had learned to negotiate men's gaze over their bodies and other difficult situations. Sahara was especially vulnerable because she was only 16 years old and she had led a very sheltered life.

## **6 Who motivates the migrant? How?**

Sahara was first motivated by her husband who sent her on a family mission, so to speak. Had the husband migrated himself, the cost would have been twice as much, so it seemed justified to send his wife instead. Sahara accepted. In Gazipur and in Narayangonj, many women's departures are decided in this way. Men send their wives overseas while they stay behind. Sahara's husband expected a great deal from his young wife. No doubt, he also trusted Josna. This woman who came on leave from Kuwait with visas to sell played a central role in motivating Sahara, her husband and their respective families. Her reference to a Muslim society where morality is safeguarded as women are kept in purdah is especially pernicious considering the brothel-like "hell" Sahara was brought into. Hers is a good example of the clever talk *dalals* hold with their recruits. Exploiting their family problems, their fears, their ambitions or their inner rebellions, they seem to find just the right words to drive in their wedge and convince family members and the women themselves to migrate. We have seen women seeking to assert their independence through migration, others wanting an assurance that their honour would be protected. *Dalals* promised them just what they wanted and, of course, wealth which is the main purpose of migration. Some women were so totally blinded by their *dalal* that they later believed they had been bewitched or fed magic.

## **7 How is the money raised? Who contributes?**

Sahara's husband, father and uncle contributed what they could. The rest of the money was obtained from a moneylender. These people took risks but if the migration had been a success, they would have benefited. As it is, they incurred a loss and were also victimized. "Poor people are able to get loans for migration but they would not get them for other purposes", said a village man. In spite of the very high risks of losing, many still believe in the myth that migration brings wealth. For Abdelmalek Sayad, a French/Algerian sociologist of migration, the myth and the collective lies are the very means through which migration is built as an economic necessity. The mirage of success is thus collectively entertained.<sup>3</sup>

Families sending women to the Middle East must be able to raise a fairly large amount of money to cover the cost. They must have some assets or be credit worthy. Very few women can raise this money by themselves (see table 6). Most of them leave with a debt and this has far reaching consequences. The situation contrasts with migration to India, which poor women can afford to pay.

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<sup>3</sup> Sayad, A. p. 50-51

## **8 Who provides the visa and takes the migrant to her employer?**

Josna, a woman who had lived in Kuwait for several years, sent the visa. It will be seen below that women generally do not visit a manpower agency in the city. They deal with local *dalals* they know, often people of their own community. Josna's name has often been heard in Shalna. She recruited many women several of whom were interviewed in the course of this study. Josna herself was met when she visited Bangladesh in May 2001 and a good documentation has been gathered on the way she operates. She undoubtedly knew where she was taking Sahara and the kind of work that would be expected of her.

## **9 The journey: the airport, the plane, the waiting to be picked up**

Sahara did not express any fear here. She was picked up as expected at the airport in Kuwait and taken to her employer. This is not always the case. Some women waited for days and some were never picked up. Others were picked up by agents, lived at an agency for sometime and were used in different ways before being appointed to a regular job.

## **10 Common problems encountered in domestic work**

Sahara was clear about some of the problems she encountered (beatings, food withdrawal) and implied others. She described a brothel-like situation stating that she was made to do work which was not possible for her. "I am not that kind of person," she said. Sex service or sex work is often expected of the women who go to the Middle East, so much so that after a period of trials many conclude that there is no other work available for them in those countries but this.

## **11 The return to Bangladesh**

Sahara came back hurt and bruised. Yet, she was not well received by her family and was given little chance to nurse her wounds. Directly or indirectly, she was blamed for the money lost and the failure of her migration. At the same time, she could not reveal the reasons why she refused the work demanded. Even so, her reputation suffered. Her in-laws do not take food from her hand and neighbours spread bad stories about her. Tolerance about women migration varies considerably in the different communities studied. Interestingly, women who stayed out of country longer had fewer problems than those who returned early. The first may have put up a story of success and were more likely to have saved money. Possession of wealth commands respect. Returning empty handed is the worst possible

outcome. Women who failed migration like Sahara were generally left poorer and weaker than before.

## **12 The trafficking within Sahara story**

Sahara was a victim of traffickers in visas and in persons. Josna and her associates (a husband and a son-in-law) were here key players within a larger system they had not created. Note that Josna retained her profit even though the migration was not a success. Sahara's father was made to pay for the return ticket. Other key players were the Kuwaiti sponsor/employer (*kofeel*), the father and the son who abused Sahara but little information is given on how they operate. Their abusive behaviour must be understood within the structure of dominance instituted by the *kafala* system, which regulates relations between Kuwaiti citizens and their non-Kuwaiti employees. This system will be discussed below.

One particularly disturbing aspect of Sahara's story is her conclusion. She believes it would have been better if she had stayed in Kuwait, accepted the abuse and the work demanded of her and returned with money. What is suggested here is that, considering the cost of migration, the misery of returning empty handed is worse than enduring hardship and accepting to engage in sex work. Perceived as the cause of her family's downfall, Sahara gets no sympathy. "She agreed to go. Why did she not stay after spending so much to get there," said her husband. The role played by family members in the migration/trafficking of women is here brought into question. One can see that women are denied agency and deprived of control at the two poles of their migratory journey. In the country of immigration, pressure is applied on them to get involved in work they were not informed about and most are reluctant to do. Extra-territoriality allows keeping a cover on this. Upon return, strong pressure is exerted not to lift the cover and not to reveal what went on abroad. As a result, Sahara who failed to earn money was not seen as a victim but as a culprit. The silence maintained on the abuse suffered abroad is not so innocent.

Did the husband know where he was sending his young wife? We see Sahara wakening to the fact that her husband, meant to be her guardian, did not (and perhaps could not) protect her.

### **3.2 Countries of immigration and number of Bangladeshi women in the Middle East**

Official figures on unskilled female migration to the Middle East are scarce. What exists is misleading and is not worth quoting. Siddiqui, the only researcher who applied herself to an analysis of available sources of information concludes:

"The annual figures (up to 1999) more or less indicate that female migration from Bangladesh is not only negligible, it is almost coming to an end ... This is, however, quite surprising. Firstly, because it contradicts the recent global trend of feminization of temporary work force. Secondly, it also denies the reality that female migration involves less cost. Thirdly, empirical evidence has shown in different pockets of the country, that sub-agents of recruiting agencies are strongly involved in recruitment of female migrants. During the course of this study areas were also located from where thousands of women had migrated, returned and are still migrating." <sup>4</sup>.

The present study confirms the existence of important pockets of female emigration within Bangladesh. However, data collected are insufficient to allow an estimate of the number of women migrating every year to the Middle East.

In this study, the first country of immigration was Kuwait, followed by Bahrain and Dubai (UAE). A few women also went to Qatar, Lebanon, Oman and Jordan. Women officially left for two types of employment: domestic work and cleaning in government schools and hospitals at the employment of private companies. The Government of Bangladesh classifies such jobs as unskilled. The BMET data processed by Siddiqui show that the highest number of unskilled women, who officially migrated as domestic aides between 1990 and 1999 went to Kuwait, followed by UAE. <sup>5</sup> This accords with our data. More information could be collected about Kuwait.

In March 1992, the Kuwait Government introduced a law, which entitled a Kuwaiti householder to bring 3 maids from abroad without cost. A 4<sup>th</sup> maid could be brought for 50 KD. Non-Kuwaiti had to pay KD 200 per year per maid. Between March and September of that year, 250,000 maids are said to have arrived in Kuwait. Kuwaitis obviously took advantage of this generous allowance. The number of Bangladeshi women in Kuwait peaked in the mid-1990's. It rapidly decreased after 1999 when the Kuwaiti Government stopped issuing visas following the murder of a Kuwaiti by his

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<sup>4</sup> Siddiqui, T. p. 38

<sup>5</sup> Siddiqui, T. p. 43

Bangladeshi driver. When Kuwait was visited in May-June 2001, domestic workers were estimated at about 5,000 while women working for companies mainly as cleaners in schools and hospitals were about 15,000. According to the Bangladesh Embassy, women made up about 12 percent of the Bangladeshi migrant population in Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia is the first country of immigration for Bangladeshi men but the number of Bangladeshi women there is unknown. In this study, some women were found entering Saudi Arabia with their Kuwaiti employers and working there for some time under the latter's patronage. One woman was flown to Jeddah airport and sent directly to work in a brothel. Her statement as well as others confirm that some Bangladeshi women work in Saudi Arabia but the underground nature of their activities makes it difficult to document their number and their exact situation.

The UAE is the second country of immigration for Bangladeshi men. Here the number of Bangladeshi women is more important. This study reveals that, after 1999, an increasing number of women were sent to Dubai. As this report is being written, Dubai continues to be an important destination. The demand may be linked to the tourist industry, which is fast developing in this city and to the availability of visitor visas.

### **3.3 Districts of origin of the migrant women**

In this study, all the women who migrated to the Middle East (41.9 percent of the sample) were from Gazipur and Narayangonj. The visit to Kuwait, however, showed that Bangladeshi women came from many other parts of the country, including Jessore and Satkhira. No woman mentioned coming from Sylhet, Noakhali or Comilla. This is interesting as men from these areas are well represented in Kuwait and many are old migrants involved in the purchase of visas and the recruitment of women. Siddiqui also observed: "The districts of Sylhet, Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Dhaka are some of the pockets of male migration. In contrast, it was evident from the list [prepared from BMET files, a survey of recruiting agencies, trade union, NGOs, etc.] that female migrant workers emigrated largely from greater Dhaka, Munshiganj, Manikganj and Chandpur".<sup>6</sup> It appears that where men have migrated in large numbers, women have not been encouraged to do so. This suggests different attitudes towards female migration in different parts of Bangladesh. The question is interesting and needs further study.

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<sup>6</sup> Siddiqui, T. p.94

The women of Narayangonj started migrating to Bahrain in the early 1980's while the women of Gazipur started going to Kuwait in the mid 1980's. Later migration spread to other countries as well but the networks built in the early years continued to determine that a majority of women from one area emigrated to a particular country. In Narayangonj, public knowledge about the types of work available in the Middle East was greater and less hidden than in Gazipur. Also, women were better prepared to accept the work offered and less returned because they were unable to cope.

### 3.4 The *kafala* or sponsorship system: a specialty of the Gulf region

In Kuwait as well as other Middle East countries, foreign workers depend on their employers for their entry visa and for their residence and work permit. This system called *kafala* is generally translated as sponsorship and is characteristic of the Gulf region.

"The noun *kafala* comes from the root *k-f-l*. Some of its derivative verbal forms means (1) to feed, to provide for; (2) to vouch for, to be responsible and (3) to be legal guardian of (Wehr, *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*). It has been suggested that this socio-cultural institution originated from the age-old Bedouin custom of granting strangers protection and temporary affiliation to the tribe for specific purposes (Beaugé, 1986)"<sup>7</sup>

Through the *kafala*, the state delegates to its citizens the functions that, in other countries, usually belong to state institutions. The system is described as follows by Longva: "...the length of the workers' stay in the country and his departure from it can be arbitrarily decided by the employer; as long as the workers are present in Kuwait the law expects the sponsor to be aware of their whereabouts and to report to the authorities any changes in the worker's work and residence status.... The effectiveness of the *kafala* system as a control mechanism lay in the restriction imposed on the migrant worker's right to act as a judicial person and the delegation of this right to his or her sponsor. Indeed, a prerequisite for the *kafala*'s smooth functioning is that the worker's freedom - of movement, labour and judicial action - has not only to be restricted but handed over to the sponsor."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Longva

<sup>8</sup> Longva, p.101

### 3.5 Types of visas in Kuwait

The Kuwaiti Government grants four types of visas but two types concern us here. These are the Domestic Sector Visa ("Visa No. 20") and the Private Sector Visa ("Visa No. 18"). The first is generally known as "House Visa" and the second as "Company Visa". The Kuwait Government also has provision for sponsorship by state institutions ("Visa No. 17") and sponsorship for business partnership ("Visa No. 19"). A migrant worker coming under one type of visa cannot switch to another type unless he/she leaves the country. Each visa holder requires a Kuwaiti sponsor and the system is highly restrictive of migrant workers mobility.

Men and women who have lived in Kuwait for many years and run their own businesses obtain what is casually called a "free" visa. This is a visa (it could be a No. 18, a No. 19 or a No. 20) bought from a sponsor without any expectation that the visa holder will work for her or for him. If the police arrest a "free" visa holder, the sponsor is contacted but takes no responsibility for the migrant worker. He/she may pretend that the worker ran away and he/she did not know about his or her whereabouts. The cost of "free" visas is individually negotiated but is generally more than regular visas. Though illegal, the selling of "free" visas as a profit making enterprise is widespread in Kuwait. A lucrative and easy way of making money the sales of visa, according to Longva, is mostly done by lower middle class, unskilled Kuwaitis.<sup>9</sup>

Longva sees in the sale of "free" visa the establishment of a relationship which is freely entered and freely maintained and which has advantages for both the sponsor and the sponsored. This is one side of the coin. The sale of visas also has disastrous effects when an unnecessary large number of visas are sold while there is no work or not enough work for migrant workers to do. Those who benefit from maximizing the number of visas sold are the Kuwaiti sponsors and the Bangladeshi visa traders/manpower agents while new and unaware migrant workers are generally victimized. The system creates a reserve of cheap labour ready to take up any kind of work in order to survive and reimburse the debt incurred at home for their migration. It has contributed to an increase in women (and men) engaging in sex work for their survival. While the consequences of this unchecked visa business are often hardship, misery and exploitation, it is not certain that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages for Kuwaiti society either. Illegal activities have been allowed to proliferate and Kuwait today has a serious problem with criminality.

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<sup>9</sup> Longva, p.107

A number of men and women without visa also work in Kuwait. They stay in the hope that an amnesty will be declared allowing them to leave without penalty as happened in the past. If caught by the police, workers without visas are sent to jail for some time before being fingerprinted and deported. These workers are not allowed to come back.

### **3.6 High cost of migration to the Middle East and its consequences**

Sending women to the Middle East is cheaper than sending men and this is a major argument in the decision taken by families. "It is not so costly", said Sahara' husband. Had he gone himself, the cost would have been between 1,00,000 and 1,50,000 taka.

The cost for women going to the Middle East varies depending on the type of visa, the number of intermediaries involved, the relationship with the *dala* and the area. In the 1990's it ranged between 35,000 taka and 80,000 taka (see Table 6 below). Going for domestic work is the cheapest as sponsors obtain visas without cost. Visas for company work are not free, however the cost for women is lower than for men recruited for similar work.

Even though the amount women pay is less than what men pay, it is still considerably more than the cost of going to India by land. Again, it should be underlined that the money disbursed for women's migration to the Middle East places tremendous pressure on them to give in to their employer's demands so that they may keep their jobs and not return home empty handed.

### **3.7 Sources of money to cover migration costs**

The Table (next page) gives the sources of money from which are drawn the costs of women's migration.

Table 6: Sources of money for migration cost  
(Middle-East & Malaysia)

Sources of Money for Migration

Sources	Self	Husband	Parents	Husband+Self	Self +Parents	Re
Own Savings	4	6	3	7	5	
Loan (village Samity+NGOs+Money lenders)	20	18	12	1	0	
Sale of land and other assets	6	21	38	1	0	
Mortgage of land and other assets	1	38	25	2	4	
To be paid from salary	2	0	0	0	0	
Total (%)	33(14.0)	83 (35.2)	78 (33.1)	11 (4.7)	9 (3.8)	22

Women who borrow from moneylenders at high interest rates are under the greatest pressure. Renu Begum, a 31-year-old woman from Kapashia, was taken to Saudi Arabia in March 2000. She was promised a job as a hospital cleaner but was taken to a brothel instead. She had agreed to pay a high amount (77,000 taka) to get a 'good' job. The shock was rude when she realized she was expected to do sex work full time. She refused and after being submitted to various ill treatments, she was eventually put on a plane and sent back. Her ordeal lasted two months and 13 days. Renu Begum had borrowed 37,000 taka from a moneylender. She came back to face the consequences of this huge pending debt.

"Those I borrowed money from come everyday to claim their due. They threaten to kill us. There is a lot of tension. All they can take from me is the tin roof of my house. I went to Mohsin (*the dalal*). I said send me again. I will give you another 20,000 taka but he was not interested. I threatened to kill him but he did not move."

Such situations lead to despair. What can a family do to cope with such a crisis? Often, no other alternative is found but to try migration again and, the second time, women generally accept whatever work is offered. If Renu Begum does not go, someone else in her family may go. In another case, a 20-year-old daughter-in-law was sent to recoup the money lost by her mother-in-law. The risks of going abroad are said to be like lottery. Some win, some lose and today's losers could be tomorrow's winners.

Most women command no financial resource of their own. When a loss is incurred, they are losing a husband's, a father's or someone else's money. More over, going to the Middle East damages their reputation. The money earned somewhat compensates for this but when the expected gain is not realized nothing redeems the loss of honour. Men's migration does not represent the same challenge to reputation. Also, more than women, men are likely to control some asset of their own. Those who don't are unlikely to suffer the consequences of a failed migration the way women do because of their ascendancy in the family. A husband whose wife returned empty handed 3 months after leaving expressed his anger and bitterness as follows:

"What nerve she got! When I told her we did not have the money, she told me not to worry, she could manage. Because of her work at the garment factory, she had become very daring. If you allow women to go out of the house, this is what happens. Now, *[after his wife returned empty handed]* I am looked down upon in the *samaj*. My friends tease me. When

I hear people talk, I myself despise my wife. I try to check my anger.

Good women don't go *bidesh*. Those who belong to the street, they go. Women belong to the home. Inside the house, they can remain good."

This man had forbidden his wife to return to the garment factory where she worked before migration. Controlling a wife appeared more important to him than the money she could earn working. As seen in Sahara's case, a failed migration often disempowers women.

A study carried out in Kuwait in 1997 concluded that the cost of emigration to that country was highest for Bangladeshis.<sup>10</sup> This could not be explained by the cost of transportation but by the greater involvement of manpower agents and the profit they take. The large cost of migration increases the debt, which must be repaid before savings can be made, further reducing migrants' freedom to refuse the work offered.

"I thought I should endure all these bad treatments. How could I go back home with all the money I had borrowed."

"I decided not to pay attention to all these problems. I just wanted to earn money. I was afraid to go to jail or be sent back to Bangladesh, so I did not protest. I was thinking of the land mortgaged which we had to get back."

These two quotes express a common reaction. Because of the pressing debt, most women tolerate abuse and hardship as the thought of returning empty handed evokes even worst consequences. This is how most women adapt to *bidesh*.

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<sup>10</sup> Shah, N. M., 1998, p. 59

Table 7: Cost of Women's Migration by Year of Migration (in thousand taka)  
(Destination: Middle East)

Year	House Visa (Figures in thousands)					Total	Company Visa (Figures in thousands)			
	Below 40	41 – 50	51 – 60	61 – 70	Above 70		Below 40	41 – 50	51 – 60	61 – 70
2000 – 2001	1	32	2	1	1	37	1	2	-	1
1998 – 1999	1	33	2	-	-	36	-	1	1	4
1996 – 1997	-	21	-	-	-	21	-	2	1	2
1994 – 1995	3	25	-	-	-	28	2	-	1	1
1992 – 1993	1	10	-	-	-	11	1	-	-	-
1990 – 1991	1	3	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
1988 – 1989	-	4	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
1986 – 1987	4	2	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	-
1984 – 1985	11	-	-	-	-	11	-	-	-	-
1982 – 1983	7	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	-	-
1980 – 1981	4	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-
Before 1980	2	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Total (%)	35 (20.5)	130 (76.0)	4 (2.3)	1 (0.6)	1 (0.6)	171 (100.0)	4 (10.8)	5 (13.5)	3 (8.1)	8 (4.7)

### 3.8 A short migration always entails a financial loss

Migration to the Middle East is generally planned for a minimum of two to three years. Such time is necessary to reimburse the cost and may not even suffice to collect savings. A short migration always entails a loss.

Zulekha worked in a garment factory before she left for Dubai on the 10 March 2001. She was 20 years old and unmarried. The rich narrative she made was recorded two months after her return as she still had a vivid memory of her experience.

#### 3.8.1 Zulekha's story

"My parents could not marry me because they were too poor. They only owned the land on which our house is built. If my parents had been better off, I would have been married long ago.

One Babul (*a local dalal*) convinced my parents to send me to Dubai. We mortgaged our land and got 60,000 taka. 45,000 taka was given to Babul and the rest we kept. Babul told me not to announce my departure; being an unmarried girl, it would be better for my reputation. One day, all of a sudden, at sunset, Babul told me I had a flight. I was not ready. I gathered a few things and left with father. Babul handed over my papers at the airport.

- "Someone will come to pick you up. Work well," he said.

I was terrified. I thought, what will happen to me. Will I be sold? I had heard so much about those kinds of risks. I had been working for 2 years in a garment factory and I was not so ignorant. Yet, I accepted to go because I could not say no to my parents.

In Dubai, no one came to meet me. I waited for 6 hours. I was crying when a Bangladeshi man came to me.

- "No one came to pick you up?"

- "No one came. I don't know who is supposed to come. I know no one here," I said.

He wanted to see my papers. I showed him. He looked and took me with him in his expensive car. He appeared to be a well off man. I liked the way he talked and I began to trust him. I felt that indeed I was lucky to have met him. He took me to a house where I had a bath and ate a good meal. I saw many Bangladeshi girls there, may be 15 of them. I thought he was a garment factory owner.

The next day, the man told me his name was Pappu. He was from Comilla and had been living abroad for 15 years. He told me he had provided work to many girls and they did well if they worked hard. He said: "I hope you will also work hard. Your salary will be 4,000 taka. Food is my cost." Pappu did not tell me what kind of work I would have to do and the other girls there did not tell me either. I agreed to work without knowing. I needed the money and, beside, I trusted Pappu.

The next day, he took me to a hotel, asked me to wait and went to talk to 3 men. Then he left me with these men and said he would return 3 days later. "You just do as they tell you", he said. One of the men spoke Bangla. He took me to the third floor, to a beautiful room where there were all kinds of lamps, a large table, long pillows, and many bottles, may be it was alcohol. When I saw this, I got frightened and turned stiff as wood. I could not say a word. What should I do?

One man brought me a set of clothes and asked me to wear them. I refused. He started to threaten me. Then, he slapped me. "Guests will come. You will have to make them happy. Don't make trouble. You have been contracted to this hotel for 3 days and your *malik* (owner, employer) has already been paid." This man left and closed the door on me.

Some time later, two large men entered and closed the door. I had already changed my clothes out of fear. I was wearing short pants and a T-shirt. I could not understand the men, so they made signs. Come. Pour us some drinks. Eat. Dance. Take off you clothes. I did as they told me. I was too frightened to say no.

One of the men left late at night, the other stayed with me. On that day, the two of them used me 6 times. It

was painful and I was terrified because of their size and their strange looks. The next day, the second man left. I don't know when I fell asleep.

I woke up, took a shower and ate the expensive food they brought me. I was resting when another man entered. The door was locked from outside, I had no control on who came in. This man stayed 3 to 4 hours and used me twice. In 3 days, I had sex 13 times. No one gave me any money.

I did not feel tired and I did not dislike it either but I was terrified I may become pregnant. I also felt distressed at committing so many sins. They gave me something like syrup and everyday I had an injection. I also drank alcohol with customers. This was before sex. I felt dazed afterwards.

Three days later, Pappu came to get me. I did not speak to him. He spoke a lot. Because I did not reply, he kicked me in the lower abdomen. Then he said he would punch me more unless I speak. "Don't you see how many girls there are in my house? They all do this work. Your visa is for this kind of work". In the end, I had to reply to his questions.

This way, I lived for 2½ months. I went to hotels, mess, and homes. No one gave me any money. Pappu brought a doctor to examine us every week. Once a week, we had a day rest.

One day, the doctor said I was pregnant. When Pappu heard this, he sent me back to Bangladesh. None of the other girls were told why. He gave me 10,000 taka and bought my plane ticket. He advised me not to reveal what I had done to save my honour.

I came back unexpectedly. My parents were astonished to see me and angry that I had come back so soon. I said I married. My husband is from Comilla. He sent me back because I am pregnant. He will come to see me next year.

What will happen to me in the future, I don't know. I came back on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2001. I want to find a job in Dhaka in a garment factory. I don't want to stay here because my parents are angry with me, my reputation is spoiled and, who knows, in Dhaka I may get a man whom I can present as a husband.

What happened to me, I cannot tell anybody but I cannot forget for the rest of my life either. I met with Babul but I said nothing to him fearing it may further damage my reputation. May be he and Pappu work together? They are powerful people. With them, we cannot fight.

My father's land is gone but my parents cannot blame me for this. It was their idea that I go overseas. I was not so interested. All the same, I feel sorry for them. Now I know I will never marry in my life. If someone had provided me with contraceptives, I would not be in that kind of situation. I had accepted the work. Many girls do it. I had no choice. It was written in my visa. But then, why did they not give me contraceptives?

- "Did you think about having an abortion?"

- "If I had an abortion, no one would believe I married and that would be even worst for my reputation. I must carry the child. I will go to Dhaka. I may get married to cover up.

This vivid description made of a recent migration (March-April 2001) provides detailed information on recruitment process, general working conditions of a woman taken to perform sex work in Dubai, methods to ensure compliance, and problems of early return with an unwanted pregnancy. The abuse suffered by Zulekha is extreme. She was promised domestic work but was forced to take up sex work. She was even told that this was written on her visa. Methods to break her in and gain her "acceptance" were sophisticated. She was fed medicines (Valium?) which removed her resistance. Zulekha described the effect of these drugs as follows:

"After taking these, I felt serene, light. I did not feel like protesting whatever was done to me. I was fully aware of what was happening but I felt passive."

It will be seen that the administration of drugs to women requested to do sex work has become common practice in the Middle East and is also seen in Mumbai. Women are made compliant and even feel the work is agreeable for a while. They are little aware of the mid and long term effect of the drugs taken. In the course of this study, two women were found who suffered badly from an overdose of these drugs and had to be repatriated: one got paralyzed and another suffered other complications.

The salary promised, at 4,000 taka, was incredibly low. For comparison sake Bangladeshi women recruited from the dancing bars of Mumbai and

sent to Dubai on 3-month contracts to perform similar work were paid 30,000 to 40,000 rupees per month and the cost of their transportation was born by the recruiter. Note that the Mumbai women left well aware of the work they would do in Dubai. They consented because the pay was good. Zulekha "consented" (after being duped and coerced) and the pay was not good.

We note that Pappu, the man who put her to work claimed to be from Comilla. Being Bangladeshi, he easily gained Zulekha's trust as she was left alone at the airport. Pappu was mentioned in several other case histories and appears to be a big name among Bangladeshi pimps working in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We met him picking up women at the airport, putting them to sex work and managing one or several agencies. We often saw him sending women back to Bangladesh after three months when they had been promised work for two years. As mentioned, two years is a minimum period, short of which migration makes no sense to those who invested so much to leave. Zulekha had "accepted" sex work after she was coerced into it. Being sent back after 2½ months, pregnant and unmarried, was the worst possible outcome. Another victim caught by the same Pappu and sent back after three months expressed similar views.

"At first, I did not like doing this work, then I got used to it but when I had learned a bit of the language, lost my fear and my shame and accepted this work, just then, I was sent back to Bangladesh.

If I had stayed, I could have found my own customers. This is why Pappu does not keep women for too long."

We suspect these women were sent back because they came on a 3-month visitor visa, which is available for Dubai. There are advantages for managers/traffickers in women like Pappu in keeping women for such short period of time. Still under the shock of the bumpy transition they undergo, these women make few demands. Locked up and unaware of on going rates in Dubai, they accept the extremely low salary offered because they are new to sex work, new to *bidesh* and their references regarding remuneration are from Bangladesh.

Pregnant, Zulekha was rejected by her employer/trafficker like a damaged merchandise. No compensation was given and no responsibility was taken. Women involved in sex work in the Middle East are generally provided with contraceptives. Avoiding pregnancy is in the interest of the employers. Pregnancy is risky, abortion is troublesome and expensive and repatriation

may not be desirable. With short-term visas, the employer need not bother about such problems as the stock of women is regularly renewed. Such dumping-after-use is extremely exploitative of women. It could also be a very damaging practice for the spread of AIDS. Zulekha as most new migrants to the Middle East did not seem to be aware of this risk. She mentioned that condoms were available but the decision to use them was entirely left to the clients.

Zulekha was "trafficked" and her on-going pregnancy is a constant reminder of the abuse she suffered. Upon return, she did not find, nor seek, shelter in a special home where she could nurse her wounds, gather strength and plan her future. Again, it must be underlined that this is the case for all the women interviewed in this study and such situation we believe is representative of women returned from abroad, including those who have be abused and trafficked.

Back in Bangladesh, Zulekha did not confront her "traffickers", as she feared them and considered them too powerful to be fought. The shameful pregnancy, tentatively covered by a story of marriage, makes her particularly vulnerable socially. Zulekha must now live with the fiction she has invented: a husband that will visit next year. This "husband" is still to be found. Where can Zulekha go in her state? Is there any shelter for her anywhere?

Table 8: Duration of Migration by Country of Immigration

Duration	Country of Immigration			Total
	Middle East	India	Malaysia	
Up to 3 months	44 (21.2)	18 (6.9)	-	62 (12.5)
Up to 6 months	10 (4.8)	17 (6.5)	-	27 (5.4)
Up to 1 year	14 (6.7)	28 (10.8)	-	42(8.5)
From 1 to 3 years	67 (32.2)	40 (15.4)	8 (28.6)	115 (23.2)
From 3 to 5 years	40 (19.2)	39 (15.0)	13 (46.4)	92 (18.6)
From 5 to 10 years	33 (15.9)	41 (15.8)	7 (25.0)	81 (16.3)
From 10 to 20 years	-	60 (23.1)	-	60 (12.1)
From 20 years and above	-	17 (6.5)	-	17 (3.4)
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>260 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>496 (100.0)</b>

The Table above shows the duration of migration by country of immigration. It can be seen that one third (32.7 percent) of the women migrant to the Middle East returned within one year while none of the women who went to Malaysia did so. Early return from India occurred but it does not have the same causes or the same effects. The cost being low, migrants can easily

come back without incurring a financial loss and some women even choose to work seasonally. The above data support the conclusion that women migrant to the Middle East are the most exploited and have the highest rates of failure.

### **3.9 Airport prostitution: Masuma earns her ticket back home**

At the end of May 2001, Masuma, 17 years old, was sent to Dubai by Siddique Ali, a local *dalal*. She was never picked up at the airport. The reasons were not clear and no one told her what was the matter. All she knew is that she had to get back to Bangladesh by whatever means.

**3.9.1 Masuma's story** I went through Siddique Ali. No one came to get me at the airport. I lived hell. In my 17 years of life, I never suffered so much. I had taken some food with me (*gur, tsira*) which I ate. Many girls were there, like prisoners. Among them, a majority was Bangladeshi. The police maltreated us.

Many Bangladeshi men asked me to follow them, they would give me work but I refused. I was so sad and so depressed. What would happen to me if I entered that country? Who would give me a ticket to come back? I had no phone number I could call, no one to whom I could ask for help.

Seeing me like this one policeman told me: "If you want to go back to Bangladesh, if you want to earn, you can do this work in a secret place and buy your ticket". I reluctantly did as he said. Men came to me, some were Bangladeshi, and others were different nationalities. I did not need to know about them. All I needed was money. I was so angry but in this way I managed to return. It cost 15, 000 taka for my ticket. I thank god I was able to get away, even for this price. It could have been worst.

I received between 25 and 35 Dirham per customer exceptionally I got 60. They paid the police and the police paid me. One policeman kept my money. He would tell me how much I had earned everyday. I started this work 3 days after my arrival. The sex work went on in a back room arranged by the police. The police fixed the clients and used me as well.

When I came back, my family was astonished to see me. I looked in bad health and my mother cried. For 27 days, I could not eat nor wash properly. I could not do what is necessary (*cleaning*) after sex. I was also very depressed.

With my father, I went back to Siddique Ali. He said I had bad luck. My employer had gone to Saudi Arabia and could not come to pick me up. He wanted to appease me:

- "Don't scream, just be patient. I will send you again for less money. If you make too much noise, your reputation will suffer."

He took away my passport. He spoke so nicely and behaved so well that, no matter how angry I was inside, in front of him I could not speak. I think this man knows magic. Now, I am in this situation, still depressed. We have to depend on Siddique Ali.

Masuma's family spent 35,000 taka for this catastrophic tour. It had just been confirmed that Masuma was not pregnant and her mother felt relieved. She said:

"The wealth of my bosom has come back. I am happy. She has not been lost. She has not been sold. I thank Allah a thousand times. We were wrong to send an unmarried daughter abroad.

To safeguard her reputation, we should not speak about what happened. My daughter will not be married for another 2 to 3 years now. She had a lot of sex in a few days. If she married now, her husband could tell something is wrong and divorce her.

We should have spent the money on her dowry instead of sending her abroad, that would have been right."

How many men did Masuma have to "do" to earn her ticket back to Bangladesh? Fifty? Sixty? She was lucky not to be pregnant but there are other risks about which she did not seem to be aware. "I was new to this work. I did not think about condoms and customers did not use them," she said. Siddique Ali, the *dalal* who sent her, sent other women recently, all of whom returned within three months. False papers and short-term visas appear to be his specialty.

The attitude of the airport police in Dubai is remarkable. Unfortunately such behaviour is not a monopoly of the Middle East. A woman returnee got caught in the same way at Dhaka airport. She had lost her suitcase and an airport employee told her that if she waited a few days, it could be recovered. She had no money and she was proposed to earn as Masuma did. After practicing this occupation for one month at the airport, she never recovered her suitcase, which contained all her savings. She commented that there was little difference between Dhaka and the Middle East. Women are used in the same manner.

### 3.10 Reasons for returning to Bangladesh

Table 9: Reasons for returning to Bangladesh

Reasons	Country of Immigration			Total
	Middle East	India	Malaysia	
Finished "Contract"	83 (39.9)	N/A	15(53.6)	98 (23.0)
On leave/Returning to workplace	18 (8.7)	89 (46.8)	-	107 (23.2)
Sexual abuse/Physical torture/Refused sex service	59 (28.4)	10 (5.3)	1 (3.6)	70 (16.4)
Family pressure/problem	7 (3.4)	16 (8.4)	3 (10.7)	26 (6.1)
False documents	22 (10.6)	N/A	-	22 (5.2)
Illness or pregnancy	6 (2.9)	12 (6.3)	5 (17.9)	23 (5.4)
Sufficient money has been earned	-	13 (6.8)	-	13 (3.1)
Low/withheld payment	5 (2.4)	2 (1.1)	3 (10.7)	10 (2.3)
Caught by CID/Police and sent back	2 (1.0)	3 (1.6)	-	5 (1.2)
Social problems	3 (1.4)	2 (1.1)	1 (3.6)	6 (1.4)
Not return after holiday	2 (1.0)	N/A	-	2 (0.5)
Lost or no connection	-	21 (11.1)	-	21 (4.9)
Never returned from India	-	11 (5.8)	-	11 (2.6)
Pressure on Dalal	1 (0.5)	6 (3.2)	-	7 (1.6)
Failed Trafficking	-	3 (1.3)	-	3 (0.7)
Did not get good opportunity	-	2 (1.1)	-	2 (0.5)
<b>Total</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>190 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>426 (100.0)</b>

The table above shows that the main reason given for returning before completion of the period agreed upon is sexual abuse, physical torture and refusal to do sex work. As many as 59 (28.4 percent) of the women who went to the Middle East fall in this category. Small as it is, the Malaysia sample includes only one woman (3.6 percent) who was similarly abused. If one includes also those who were given false documents or short-term visas and those who were not paid, the proportion of cheated women (41.6 percent) for the Middle East is particularly high. It will be seen below that the number of such cheated women increased markedly after 1998.

### 3.11 Work promised and work actually done

Table 10: Work promised and work actually done (Middle-East and Malaysia):

Types of work	Work promised		Actual work done	
	Middle East	Malaysia	Middle East	Malaysia
Domestic work	171 (82.2)	-	45 (21.6)	-
Company/Factory work	37 (17.8)	28 (100.0)	4 (1.9)	21 (75.0)
Domestic and sex work	--	--	115 (55.3)	-
Company and sex work	--	--	17 (8.2)	7 (25.0)
Only sex work	--	--	21 (10.1)	--
Company/domestic/sex work	--	--	3 (1.4)	--
Not mentioned	--	--	3 (1.4)	--
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>

The above table shows that 82.2 percent of the women who went to the Middle East were promised domestic work while the rest went with company visa to work as cleaners in schools and hospitals. A majority, in both categories of workers, admitted that sex work was an integral part of their job (domestic workers) or was engaged in on a part time basis, beside their official duty (company workers). The proportion of women engaging in sex work is high in both groups but slightly higher for company workers. Ten percent of the women stated that sex work was their only activity. The situation contrasts with Malaysia where all women were recruited for factory work and none was employed as domestic aide. Here, 25 percent of the women interviewed combined factory work with sex work. Some started with factory work and ended up doing only sex work.

The table was computed from women's own admission of the work they did and, in a few cases, the testimony of a fellow migrant who had witnessed the activities of a cousin or a neighbour. Uncertain cases were not included. Given the purpose of the study, special efforts were made to unearth work done under coercion and women were invited to speak up about all aspects

of their lives, including the most hidden and shameful. Although some women knew sex work would be expected of them, most first time migrants were caught unaware. The situation is different with second time migrants and here 6 women requested to be sent directly to sex work. "If I have to do sex work, I may just as well get paid for it", commented one of them. Note that the table above only deals with work done at the first migration.

### **3.12 Sexual abuse and sex work**

Though not the same, sexual abuse and sex work are often related in that initiation into sex work often starts with sexual abuse. As seen in the case of Zulekha, many women arrived in the Middle East unprepared for the demand put on them, they began by resisting and later gave in. We have mentioned the necessity to reimburse the debt incurred for migration, which exerts tremendous pressure, but other coercive, punitive or enticing methods are used as well.

Stories of sexual abuse and forced "acceptance" of sex work in the Middle East could make a fat volume. Squeezing the complex situations encountered in little boxes neatly labeled could never convey the spiritual, physical and bodily experiences related by the women. It seems particularly important here to reproduce as faithfully as possible migrants' women own words about the fear, the hurt and the pain - and sometimes also the pleasure, the personal consideration and the material benefits - and thus discover the actors in their complex humanity. Here are different narratives, each portraying a particular set up. First come women employed as maids.

### **3.13 Sexual services required by the men of the house**

Maids required to meet the sexual demands of the men of the house had to manage the conflicting expectations of father and sons, sons' friends and other men knocking on their door at different times of the day and night. Men's requests often clash with the domestic work demanded by the mistress of the house. It is impossible to select a representative story, as all are different. Here is Champa's, a 30 year old women, mother of 3 children, who went to Bahrain in 2000 and returned 7 months later after spending 5 months in jail.

### 3.13.1 Champa's story

My husband and I together decided that I should go abroad. Many people have gone from here and many have done well. Perhaps I could also do

something to improve our situation.

I asked Zobeda's brother to arrange a visa (*Zobeda's brother had been living in Bahrain for many years and sent visas to his sister*). The cost was 45,000 taka. I got 10,000 taka from the NGO savings group, my brother gave 10,000 taka, I had 5,000 taka in savings and 20,000 taka were borrowed from a moneylender. I opened a bank account in my own name. This, my husband did not like.

Within 25 days, I got my visa. I left the children with my mother-in-law. Before leaving, my husband warned me: "Don't forget, money is in the hands of others. You have to work to get it in your hands. Don't do anything, which could result in you coming back to Bangladesh too soon. We have to reimburse the money borrowed. Never forget this."

The day I arrived in Bahrain, Zobeda's brother took me to a family. The man was a police and his wife did not work. They had 6 children. They said I would be paid 4,000 taka plus food and clothing. It did not take long for me to learn the language and the work.

For 15 days, I was fine. I liked it because I had suffered so much in the past. The food was good, the living conditions were fine and the thought of being paid 4,000 taka made me happy. In my life, I had never earned so much money. Sometimes I thought about my husband and my children but I tried to put these thoughts aside and think only about the money I was going to earn.

After fifteen days, late at night, the husband entered my room. When I saw him, I immediately sat up. I was afraid and felt shame. Why is he coming to my room so late? What have I done wrong? I could not think he had come to spoil my honour. I could not protest aloud... I feared someone might find out. That would be even more shameful. He stayed 3-4 hours and left. He said he would give me some extra money. Slowly, I lost my shame and the husband came to me almost every day. He was a handsome

man, about 39-40 years old. His wife was not good looking.

One day, the wife got to know. She did not tell her husband but hit me and threw me out of the house. I had nothing, no money, and no paper. I did not know the area. Soon, a police found me and brought me to the police station. I gave the telephone number of my employer and told them my story. After 7 days, my employer and his wife came to the police station and filed an accusation of theft against me. Over there, they only listen to their own people. Our voice has no value. I was sent to jail for 5 months.

In jail, life was tough. I got beaten. The food was very poor and the place horrible. After 5 months, I was freed and sent back to Bangladesh. I came back empty handed. I did not even have money to go home. I was tired, in bad health and depressed. I also felt ashamed and frightened. What could I tell my husband?

Although she first expressed shock and fear when approached by her employer, Champa did not seem to experience the sexual encounters as unpleasant. She considered the man good looking and seemed to have enjoyed his appreciation of her. The pain came later when Champa got caught in a role she had not chosen and was thrown out of the house by the wife. Picked up by the police she was eventually accused of theft by her employers. Turning the victim into a culprit protected the husband from being accused of carrying on an illegitimate relationship with his maid. Champa being a *khaddama*, her voice against her employer had no value.

The consequences of this affair for Champa were catastrophic. She suffered 5 months in jail, was repatriated empty handed and had to face her husband's anger and the huge unpaid loan. Like many women returnees, she could not tell her husband the whole story and had to bear the secret of her "sin". The worst for Champa was not the sexual partnership forced upon her by the employer but her total lack of control over a very risky situation, both in the home and at the police station. Women who found themselves in homes where the employer was a widower or a married man who led a separate life and reserved a place for a consort/concubine did not face such problem. It will be seen below that migrant women who found such position and were not in conflict with a wife were often highly benefited.

Morium is the second narratives of this section.

**3.13.2 Morium's story** "I decided to try migration to improve our situation. I lived next to a woman whose father works in Kuwait as a driver. I asked for her help. Her father sent me a letter. He said he could send me a house visa. I would have no problem. He knew the family and there was no man in the house. He added: "I know how much you have suffered with your husband. You are like a sister to me. I will see to it that you get peace. I am sending the visa through Badol *dadal*.

I went to my father with Badol after he received the visa. My father who did not want me to go at first, could no longer refuse. Badol said the visa had to be paid for whether I went or not.

In Kuwait, the driver took me to my employer. It was a woman and her child. Her husband had died a little time before. I was the only maid, so I had to do everything. After working hard, the mistress did not feed me properly. I was given the leftovers on plates. If I asked for more food, she called me *miskin* or she said I should not eat so much, I will get fat. If I did anything wrong, I got hit. They had no kindness whatsoever. At first, I could not understand the language but I was not excused for this. Once I ate an apple without asking. She got furious and beat me with a stick. If I did anything wrong, I got locked in the toilet. Every day, I was maltreated.

If there had been only this, I may have stayed but I was also sexually abused. There was no man living in the house but this woman had a distant cousin who stayed regularly. This cousin had an illegitimate relationship with the woman as well.

The first time he came to me, I did not understand the language but what he wanted was very clear. He used me forcibly and kept coming to me almost daily. Naked, he used me like an animal. This man used me and never offered me anything in exchange. Sometimes the woman went out but the man stayed and used me. As I spent all my time with him, I could not do the housework and when the woman came back, I got punished.

The driver who had given me the visa never contacted me and I could not send news home either. After losing my honour, I wanted to leave but then I thought about problems at home. With my husband, I had no peace. In addition, if I returned now, I would have to face my father and my brother's anger and their deception at my failure. So, I decided to stay but my situation got even worse. My hands were full of sores, I was poorly fed and my health suffered. And this man who used me everyday.

I wanted to escape. But how? They always locked me in when they left. One day, the boy had opened the door and was playing on the street. I slipped out of the house. I met a Bangladeshi driver and told him my story. He said he could not help because if he took me in his car the police would also catch him. He told me to hide in a broken house. I spent the night there. In the morning, I was so hungry I went out and asked for food at a shop. They gave me bread and a banana. Then I walked on the street and the police soon arrested me. I was taken to the police station and I gave them the name of my employer. *(At that stage, she gave the man's name)*

They called him. Everyday, he came and told me not to mention the sexual abuse. He said if I did, I would be sent back to Bangladesh, so I said nothing. I was kept in jail for 1½ month. Then a court decision was taken and my employer was asked to return my papers and send me back to Bangladesh. My employer kept me for 3 days. During this time, he abused me like before. Another girl had replaced me and the worst was that he used me in front of her. These people know nothing about shame and decency."

Zobeda and Morium's stories give us an idea of the isolation of maidservants, their imprisonment in homes where anything can happen. Kuwaitis often complain about employing women who do not speak Arabic or English, do not know about modern house appliances, Kuwaiti norms and lifestyle, etc. If there are problems from the employers' point of view, they are incommensurable with those of the employees. Morium found no other recourse but to run away which is common for maids. Like Zobeda, she was soon picked up by the police who called her employer. Zobeda spoke about not getting a fair hearing while Morium was frightened into silence. In Kuwait, labor laws do not protect domestic workers who are placed under the

Ministry of the Interior. The problems of domestic employees are handled by the police and are regarded as matters of law and order and not as labour conflicts.

### 3.14 Maids' sex work used as a source of income for the employer

A practice reported from all countries of the Middle East is for employers to recruit foreign maids and use them as a source of income. We have seen that governments have been generous to their nationals in permitting them to bring foreign domestic workers. It was mentioned that in March 1992, a new law in Kuwait authorized householders to bring 3 maids at no cost and a 4<sup>th</sup> for 50 KD. Meanwhile, Non-Kuwaiti had to pay 200KD per year per maid employed. Between March and September 1992, 250,000 maids reportedly arrived in Kuwait. At the time, photos in newspapers showed maids camping at the airport for days as no one had come to pick them up. In the UAE, in 1994, 19.1 percent of the nationals employed 3 maids or more.<sup>11</sup>

Homes present an excellent cover for illicit activities. Longva, an anthropologist who studied Kuwait writes:

"The concept of 'home' in Kuwait society implied a pronounced sense of privacy related to traditional sexual segregation...Although sexual segregation no longer officially existed in public places, the Kuwait home was still viewed as a sanctuary into which outsiders never entered unless explicitly invited. It was within this context of guarded privacy that the *kafala* in the domestic sector was operationalized."<sup>12</sup>

In 1993, Fatima, a woman interviewed for this study reported being placed in a home where there were 9 *khaddama*, all engaged in sex work. The women were taken out and left with clients or clients came to the home. Either way, the illicit activity managed by the Kuwaiti *kofeel* was well protected. Some women worked for several years in such a set up finding a niche to which they could accommodate. Helena was 29 years old and mother of 3 sons when she left for Kuwait in 1995. She returned to Bangladesh 5 years later.

#### 3.14.1 Helena's story

"There were two of us in that family, one Sri Lankan maid who earned

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<sup>11</sup> In *Middle East Expatriate*, Dec 1994, vol.XI, no 9

<sup>12</sup> Longva, 1997, p. 91-92

more than me and myself. It took me three months to learn the language. Beside housework, I was expected to do sex work. If you did not accept this, the employer did not keep you.

At the beginning, I had a lot of problem to agree to this but when I understood that unless I took up sex work, I would be sent back, I gave in. I came for the money and I decided not to be picky about the way I would earn. At first, my employer and his son spoiled me. They used me against my will but I did not protest much. Then I was taken to hotels and to other homes. They earn a lot of money through me. Some days, I had ten men. Think how much money that is. At the end of the month, the employer gave us a bit extra on top of our salaries, sometime 5 KD, sometime 10 KD. We also had baksheesh, which we kept.

Women who do this, in the end think they have lost everything (*chastity and honour*), so they don't want to come back. They return eventually but when they have made a lot of money. I am talking from my own experience.

When I became spoiled, I thought why should I do this only a little. A little bad or very bad, what is the difference? If I work more, I will earn more. But I had a fear inside. Sometimes I felt depressed and guilty and I worried about catching disease. I worried also about my children. I felt shame when I thought about them.

I accepted this work from the beginning, so I was not maltreated but I saw others who refused, they were often beaten. In hotels, before meeting big parties, we were given injections or alcohol because there was a lot of pressure. In homes, we were not given injections because the pressure was less. Sex work increased when there was a celebration such as a birthday. The host announced to his guests that women were available for sex and they came to us.

With my husband, sex made me tired but over there, so many men came to me and I was not tired. I liked *bidesh*. Life is comfortable there. It would have been even more comfortable if we had not had to do so much sex work.

My customers sometimes used condoms. If 5 men came to me, maybe half of them used condoms. A same customer often used condom for the first time but not afterwards. We could understand who was a gentleman (*bhodro lok*), they used condom more. The employer's wife gave us a pill everyday (*contraceptive?*).

After five years, I paid my own ticket back. I did not want to stay any longer because of my children. My husband is happy. I sent home about 4,00,000 taka.

Helena managed to stay 5 years with the same employer. He played an active role in managing the sex business, bringing his maids to hotels or other homes for work. None of the family members ignored what was going on. The wife managed contraceptive pills in what looks like a small family enterprise. Helena provides a good example of a woman who adapted to the requirements of the job. She acknowledged some damages but also recognized benefits; the most important was the savings realized which now permits her family to live in comfort. Helena gained self-confidence and can speak quite matter-of-factly about her life abroad.

"Before going abroad, I was ashamed and embarrassed. Look, how I am speaking to you now. I could never have done that in the past."

Helena is aware that if she had not worked under a *kofeel*, she could have earned much more doing the same work. Another *khaddama* admitted contracting men without the knowledge of her *kofeel* through a Bangladeshi shopkeeper working nearby. She earned much more in this way but was caught one day. The *kofeel* immediately terminated her employment and sent her back to Bangladesh. Workers in the domestic sector have little autonomy and little chance to keep for themselves the total income from their sex work even after several years. Long time migrants who developed a partnership with their employer, engaged in sex work themselves, brought new women, and put them to sex work. They kept a percentage of the profit but their employer took the largest share.

Women like Helena found the work tolerable and at times, even enjoyable. Others stayed and "accepted" but felt tormented throughout. It could be that the employer was especially harsh, imposed a number of men beyond the tolerable, injected drugs whose after effect was depression or imposed clients whose demands were humiliating and unacceptable. Such women did violence to themselves in order to stick it out. They "accepted" forced by necessity.

Hafeza was 21 years old when she went to Bahrain in 1992. She was unmarried. Her parents had died and she lived with her brother.

**3.14.2 Hafeza's story** "I earned 2,50,000 taka in 4 years. Because of my going abroad, my family is better off. I stuck it out because *bhabhi* (elder brother's wife) warned me not to come back earlier. Believe me, it was not easy.

My employer was an electrician. He had one wife and six children. From the beginning, they did not treat me well. They hit me even with a chain because I did not understand what they wanted. The first three months, I only did house work. Then, they requested me to do 'bad work'. I was unmarried. I felt ashamed. Then, I remembered my *bhabhi's* words. I thought, if I go back to Bangladesh, my parents have died, who will look after me. And if I don't listen to my employer, I will have to go back. So, I did, as they wanted.

There were two girls from Teknaf working in the same house. Both were unmarried and had been there for a long time.

The first day it happened, I was terrified. The Pakistani man who came used me the way he wanted. He wore no clothes and also took mine off. I closed my eyes and did not open them until he left. He used me three times, in the bathroom, in the room. It was painful. Afterwards, I did not want to leave the room. How could I show my face?

At the table, madam asked me: "Did you have any problem?" I did not reply. She took the money. This is how my *deho bebsha* (sex trade) started. The housework was not too bad. I was more pressurized to do sex work than housework.

A separate room in the house was kept just for this purpose. Everyday, I was given an injection. I was also fed beer. After a while, I quite liked it.

The employer never came to me. The Teknaf girls attended to his needs. There was no special time for this work. I had to be available always. Everyday, someone came. Most days, there were 5 to 6 men. I

never saw Bangladeshis. They were Saudis, Pakistanis, Iranis and other nationalities.

After one year, I began to detest this work. I think if people were not made of blood and flesh, if they were made of wood, brick or iron, then they would be reduced by half doing this work. The way *khaddama* are used in that country, all this wear and tear, friction, abrasion of their bodies, it does not show, no mark is left. Outwardly, girls are protected in this way. When I went back to Bangladesh, the work I had done did not show and this was lucky for me.

Bahrain is such a place; people just eat, gather strength and have sex. Very little kindness or tenderness is shown. If I had to do this work once in a while like husband and wife do it for years, it would not have been so bad but not in this way.

When I came back, everyone was happy. I looked healthy. My value in the family had risen. But inside I thought: Hare! Money, you have made the world blind.

Soon after her return, Hafeza married but the marriage did not last. Her husband told her: "After *bidesh* you are used up. I find no pleasure with you". "It is true", commented Hafeza, "I don't like sex anymore". Before the marriage broke up definitively, Hafeza returned to Bahrain for one year as her husband pressurized her to get a share of the money she had given to her brother. She decided to go again, this time for her husband's benefit. Hafeza worked in a home where she had to serve the men of the house only. She did not find it any easier.

"The second time, there was myself and a Sri Lankan girl. There was no peace there either but it was not with outsiders. It was the father and the sons. That was even worst. Father and son using the same woman! Think of it. I was not angry with them but with myself. I thought: Allah, what kind of life did you give me? Why not death instead of this? I could not take it anymore, so I bought my ticket and came back home."

These stories show how common is the bodily appropriation of maids and their systematic use as providers of sexual services. The attitudes and the behaviour reported from Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman are similar. One woman was taken to Saudi Arabia by her Kuwaiti employer to do sex work under his

sponsorship. This man had two wives, one Kuwaiti and one Saudi. He left his maid one year in one country and one year in the other. In both places, wives saw to the daily management of the sex business conducted in their homes through their Bangladeshi maid. The cover of secrecy may be thicker, but the same work goes on in Saudi Arabia. National borders here make no difference to the way maids are used.

Abused maids cannot get justice done. They keep silent or they abscond. We have seen maids arrested by the police only when found on the street. Police generally do not enter homes. When a maid is arrested on the street, she is taken to the police station and her employer *cum* sponsor (*kofeel*) is called. We have seen the victim being punished, not the abuser. Champa ran away from her employer only to be released to his care and raped and humiliated for 3 more days before being put on a plane.

Embassies of the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in Kuwait managed refugee centres for runaway maids who did not want to return to their employers. Most of these women did not wish to be repatriated. They preferred to be appointed to another employer. Commercial placement agencies also sheltered such women. A release letter must be obtained from the first employer to legally permit the maid to work under another sponsor. It may or may not be given. Some employers charge a fee for doing so. Problems arising out of this system may be illustrated through an event well covered by the Bangladesh media. It occurred in 1999.

A Bangladeshi driver from Noakhali named Billal killed his Kuwaiti employer. The event led to a ban on the recruitment of Bangladeshis by the Kuwaiti Government and was widely commented in the Bangladesh media as a result. Perhaps what was not sufficiently underlined were the circumstances which led Billal, holder of a "Visa No. 20", to kill his employer. Billal argued that he was regularly humiliated and ill-treated by his employer and his wages were withheld. He did not want to stay working under him and found another sponsor. But the first employer refused to issue a release letter, he would not return the passport and pay the unpaid wages. It led to an altercation and Billal, infuriated, killed his employer before escaping to Bangladesh.

Murders of *kofeels* are rare. Attempts to keep employees in bondage - keeping their passport, delaying or not paying their wages, refusing to issue a release letter or demanding a very large fee to do so - these are much more common. As Billal could not get released from his *kofeel*, he could have gone to the police and demand to be repatriated or he could have stayed on illegally which is risky. Otherwise, his *kofeel* held him hostage. Domestic workers, men and women, are at the mercy of their employers and

this easily leads to abuse. The relationship is one of dominance and compliance. Case histories are replete with statements like,

"We have no choice but to do as they ask. Otherwise we cannot stay. There is no point bargaining over there."

### **3.15 Sexual abuse of male domestic workers**

Although this study is dealing with women, to understand the context and the status of domestic workers in the Gulf and also to present a more balanced view of gender (gender is not only about women), it is useful to consider for a while the situation of men and the abuse which some of them suffer. One interview was taken with a 35 year old man who went to Kuwait in 2000 and returned with serious health problems 8 months later. He had migrated because he had no news of his wife who had gone to Kuwait 4 years earlier. He wanted to see for himself where she worked and how she was. The purpose of his migration was defeated as his wife's employer did not allow him to visit his wife and his wife did not want to meet with him either. Beside these, Afzal faced other problems in the house of his employer.

#### **3.15.1 Afzal's story**

"I married at 21 because I loved my wife. I never had sexual problems with her or with anyone before going to Kuwait.

In 1996, my mother-in-law who had been in Kuwait for many years sent a visa for my wife. I did not agree but my in-laws thought it was a good idea. I did not have the power to oppose their decision because I could not properly feed my wife. We were very poor.

After leaving, my wife did not keep in touch with me and she sent me very little money. She just sent enough for our two daughters.

We had a good relationship before she left. After going abroad, she became very 'clever' (*chalak*). It is true that here her life was difficult and over there she could live in comfort. After 3 years, she came back but she stayed only 20 days. I had hardly any time alone with her.

I really wanted to know why she changed so much, what she did abroad, where she stayed, etc. I found her address through someone and decided to go and

see for myself. People said many things about her but I did not want to believe them.

I sold my father's land and went to Kuwait for 90,000 taka. I was sent to do housework. My salary was only 30 KD (*lower than maids*). I lived outside my employer's residence with 3 Bangladeshi men.

My employer was a widow. She had 3 daughters and 4 sons. The 3 elder sons were from her co-wife who had died. The first 2 months, I had no problem. Then, the eldest son (a 32 year old unmarried man) started to do bad things to me. He got me to masturbate him and.... If I did not agree, he beat me and threatened to send me back to Bangladesh. I was terrified. The first day, when he came and asked me to do these things, I was stunned. Sometimes, they came in a group, at other times, he came alone. They did this to me standing, lying, and sitting, from the back and from the front. The way a cow is held to be sacrificed, they held me in the same way to do this work. They did not even lock the door. Other Bangladeshi boys saw me in those positions and later insulted me. I felt such shame.

The mother also used me. That was embarrassing at first. I was afraid it got known but no one spoke. What kind of country is this? I liked having sex with the woman. She invited me inside. The door was closed and she was discrete. For a long time, I had not had sex with my wife, so that was good. She also gave me *baksheesh*. With her, I was not forced.

But in the end, she did not like me anymore. I was nervous and I ejaculated immediately. I got *baksheesh* from the mother for four months. The last 2 months, she did not want me anymore.

Boys came to me everyday. I cried. Out of disgust, I stopped eating. In the end, I got sick but I did not have the ability to get treated. Sores appeared on my penis, something like pus came out. I had fever and felt like vomiting. I felt weak and dizzy. After 8 months, I returned to Bangladesh. I could have stayed if these boys had not tortured me like this."

Met at his village home, Afzal spoke because he believed he could get medical help. He had told only his sister-in-law about his problem. If

women do not speak about the abuse they experience in the country of immigration, for different reasons, men generally do not reveal their problems either. Afzal failed the test of manly performance on all counts. Rejected by his wife and by the Kuwaiti woman who had solicited his sexual services from him, he was repeatedly gang raped, humiliated and emasculated by a group of men. Deeply hurt in his person and his manhood, Afzal came back badly infected with a STD, deeply traumatized and, impoverished. Considering the cost of his migration, he bought his misery for an even higher price than women do. Cases of male sexual abuse are rarely reported. The ban imposed by the Bangladesh Government on the labour migration of unskilled women signals danger for women. What about men? Are they not raped, abused, humiliated and victimized also, especially those who are employed in the domestic sector? Why this different treatment of men and women? Victimization is not a matter of bodily constitution but of powerlessness. Employed as a *khaddam*, Afzal's position was not better than a maid.

### 3.16 Practices reminiscent of slavery days

Some of the practices exposed here recall those of slavery days. We know that in Kuwait slavery was officially abolished in 1924 but the practice reportedly continued for some time. Longva's views on the links between slavery and today's practices are interesting. She writes:

“... domestic slaves (*mu'aliid*) were commonly found in all well-to-do Kuwaiti families until the late 1950s...Their ownership was an important status symbol for the family and consequently they were well treated. Female slaves were often incorporated in the family through the mechanism of concubinage, which was permitted in Islam. This tradition may play a certain role in accounting for the widespread sexual abuse suffered by many female migrant domestic workers at the hands of their male Kuwaiti employers nowadays. But it is certainly not the only, or even the main, explanation as can be seen from the fact that abuse was also carried out by non-Kuwaiti male employers. It is obvious that the main explanation for this phenomenon lies in the legal organization of the domestic sector which ensured the total power of the sponsor/employer over the migrants and the latter total lack of legal protection.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Longva, 1997, p.75, note 27.

The stories above show the powerlessness of domestic employees, female and male. In the domestic sector, the dominance of the *kofeel* over his/her male/female employee is so pervasive that all abuses are possible. Stories of employers' magnanimity, generosity and forgiveness of servants wrongdoings were repeatedly heard from Kuwaitis in Kuwait, many of whom could not believe the stories heard from women migrant who had returned to Bangladesh. Historians also have written about domestic slaves being well treated by their Kuwaiti masters.<sup>14</sup> The notion of workers rights is remarkably absent from these discourses. The right to personal integrity, privacy, autonomy, negotiated contracts, weekly holidays, etc. is not recognized. Workers are expected to serve as directed by their employers and submit to their demands unresurvedly. Continued employment and remuneration are conditional upon compliance.

### 3.17 Company workers, holders of "Visa No. 18"

Among the 208 women interviewed, a small number (17.8 percent) had gone with private sector visas, commonly called "Company Visas". From the mid-1990's, such visas became more available. Most women were recruited to work as cleaners or caterers in schools and in hospitals. Two women were recruited for garment factories but were not actually appointed to this work. Unlike domestic work, visas for company work are not free, thus increasing the cost of migration to the migrant. The cost of migrating with a company visa for women has been around 60,000 to 75,000 taka compared with 45,000 taka for domestic work (see Table 6). The higher cost of migration is not compensated by higher pay. The advantage of going with a company visa, as *dalal* advertise it, is the freedom to take up another job after completion of official duty. In June 2001 in Kuwait, basic salaries were so low that company visa holders had little choice but to take up another job as well. 33 of the 37 (89.2 percent) returnees interviewed admitted having engaged in sex work. This was the main, if not the only, alternative source of income (*dhandā*) for women. In the Bangladesh community, houses of prostitution were referred to as *dhandā ghor*.

Women working in factories were unlikely to know their Kuwaiti sponsors. They organized sex work themselves or operated under Bangladeshi pimps or 'husbands'. As they did not reside inside Kuwaiti homes and did not benefit from the "protection" of a Kuwaiti patron, their sex work was more exposed. In May-June 2001, newspapers in Kuwait regularly reported police

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<sup>14</sup> See Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World*, paperback ed. 1992, New Amsterdam Books, N.Y. He writes: "The wealthier the master of a household, the more slaves he was likely to acquire as domestics and concubines...In more recent times, female domestic slaves owned by members of the Badawin tribe in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia often held responsible household positions", pp. 58-59

raids in private brothels. The women and their pimps were mostly Bangladeshi. This gave a bad name to the community. One man met outside the Bangladesh embassy commented,

"We have sold our honour. Kuwaitis treat us like dog; they respect us less than a dog. I don't tell I am Bangladeshi here. I rather say I am Indian,"

The women met had little time to consider these issues. They were busy working and earning. In June, schools were closing down for the summer holidays and those who worked in these establishments were considering how they would survive without work and without pay for three months. One company, Al Afraz, had recently recruited a few hundred Bangladeshi workers whom they had not paid for three months. Many women had begun engaging in sex work. Others had to make a decision fast. None of the women interviewed had informed their families about the predicament they faced. Silence was important to avoid raising suspicion and to cover up the actual or eventual taking up of sex work. Also the women did not want their families to worry.

It is well known that the conditions of company workers, throughout the Middle East, have kept deteriorating. In June 2001, salaries for cleaners in Kuwait were down to 22KD per month (66 US\$) without food. Contract with a company allowed workers to get a residence permit (*akama*) at a relatively good price and this was its main advantage. Women's main income came from prostitution. Two case histories will show how these women organize their lives. The first one is from Rokeya who left for Kuwait with a company visa on 5 January 2000 and returned after 15 months.

### **3.17.1 Rokeya's story**

"I was 29 years old when my husband sent me abroad to improve our economic situation. My own family disapproved and I was not keen either. I just obeyed my husband.

My husband contacted Shaju (*Josna's son-in-law*). I was sent with a company visa. Because the salary is low, Josna promised me to help find another job. She said I could earn about 50 KD a month in this way.

The cost was 75,000 taka. I left one month after giving the money. My two children stayed with my mother-in-law. Josna came to get me at the airport in Kuwait. I was at her place for two days, and then she took me to the Al Nocif Company.

We lived in a *brek* (residence). There were 20 girls in my room, 15 Bangladeshis and 5 Sri Lankans. Our duty was from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. We received only 20 KD per month and we had to feed ourselves. It was not possible to send money home, so girls were forced to take up another work. I was also forced to do it. My husband had warned me: "I spent all my capital on you, so don't waste it. No matter what the work is, no matter how difficult, you must stick it out and recoup this money." I always remembered these words. This is why I was forced to do it. No one who works for a company can pretend to send money home without doing this work.

After official duty, women lined up outside the *brek* and were picked up by customers. They were taken to clubs, mess, and hotels, inside shops, even in cars. Sometimes they were taken to brothels.

Those who worked through drivers, shopkeepers, and other intermediaries did not make much money. If you can contact clients directly, it is more profitable as you get the money straight into your hand. At first, I did this work through a Bangladeshi shopkeeper (actually his main business is collecting women, his shop is just a front). He was a Comilla man, about 38 years old. His name was Salam. Other girls from my *brek* introduced me to him. I worked through Salam for about 6 months and once I understood what it was about, then I contacted clients myself. Salam tried to stop me. He threatened me and I had to work out of his sight.

What is the use to show shame? What I did abroad I told you. If I had not done this work, I could never have sent money home. And if I had not sent money home, my life would have been hell upon return.

Those who took us were Saudis, Pakistanis, and Kuwaitis. Very few were Bangladeshis. Bangladeshi men did not pay us much and because of this we did not like going with them. Through the shopkeeper, I could earn 4-5 KD per day but, alone, I earned 10-12 KD per day. If I went to a hotel or to a club, I got more. If I spent a night at a private home, I earned 7-8 KD. Every day I could earn something and free food came as a bonus. I went with different men every time.

We were always busy and short of time. We had to be very well organized. When going through a *dala*, we had to do more men and we had less money and less freedom. Some days, I could take rest if I wished. I did not mind. Contraceptives were not the customer's headache. That was ours. Pills, condoms, injections were available. I used pills. (*Rokeya shows no awareness about the risks of contracting AIDS*)

The first six months, I did not get much money because I did not understand. The lowest amount I sent home was 10,000 taka; the highest was 25,000 taka per month.

One day, I got very frightened. I met some people I knew from our area. I thought, if my husband learns what I do, he may divorce me. I also thought about the sins that I was committing, so I decided very quickly to go back to Bangladesh. Seven days after taking that decision, I was back home.

Our situation has improved. My husband is happy. He has money in his hand. Relatives are happy. I kept 20,000 taka for myself, my husband does not know this.

I would not have spoken so much. I told you my story so that you may know what uneducated women do abroad and how selfish husbands are. What kind of work they get their wives to do. If they get the money, there is no problem. If I had failed to send money, for sure, my conjugal life would have been difficult.

I don't feel much attracted to my husband any more. I am angry that he sent me abroad but I hide these feelings from him. No one but myself knows what I did over there. Now, I say my prayers everyday and ask for Allah's forgiveness."

Rokeya's description about the way she organized her work (*dhand*a), first through a shopkeeper then by herself is interesting. She showed an impressive intelligence and fearlessness, not allowing pimps to control her and take a cut from her earnings for very long. The amount of money she earned in one year is one of the highest recorded for a first year migrant and no woman who worked as a maid could do the same. The qualities required here were not compliance but entrepreneurship and boldness. As a self-employed sex worker, Rokeya could take a day off once in a while and she could afford to reduce the number of clients if she wished.

Rokeya could have felt empowered by her ability to earn if the migration project had been her own. But she went to Kuwait under pressure from her husband and she did not claim these achievements as success. She now feels extremely bitter at the way her husband used her. Migration has saved her marriage (outwardly) but in a sense it has also ruined it.

Women's past experiences obviously condition the way they cope with migration and assess its success. Unmarried women who must preserve their reputation in order to marry later are particularly fearful of the consequences of migration; so are married women like Rokeya who must ensure that their husband takes them back. Those who have failed marriage or have passed the age of marriage and do not expect or want to marry anymore (and can afford to say so) enjoy more freedom in the way they lead their lives. The next story is that of Shazeda who can be considered a successful migrant. She was interviewed twice alone and once with the 4 women with whom she shares a flat in Kuwait.

### 3.17.2 Shazeda's story

"I was 13 years old when my mother died and I went to live with my brother-in-law. His wife, my elder sister, was already in Kuwait.

That was risky. My brother-in-law wanted me. He used me and I became pregnant (at 14 -15 years old). Quickly after this, he arranged my marriage with a very poor man from a neighbouring village. I went to my husband for 3 days. Then, my marriage ended. I got an abortion. Everything came to me early (sexual activity, pregnancy, marriage, abortion and divorce).

My sister-in-law informed my elder sister about what had happened and she sent a visa for me to join her in Kuwait so that my brother-in-law (*her husband*) leaves me alone. My brother -in -law had not been informed beforehand and was not pleased. I went to Kuwait with a company visa. This was in 1993 (*she was 16 years old*). It cost 40,000 taka. In Kuwait, I could not see my sister much (*her sister worked in the domestic sector and she worked with a company*).

I have been in Kuwait for 9 years now. The first three years, I did not do any other work. I did not understand. I feared for my honour and I had not learned to be 'clever'. But then, I thought, why should I fear? For whom should I safeguard my

honour? I have no husband; I have no children. I have only myself to think about.

A woman helped me at first. She was from Satkhira and had been in Kuwait since 1981-82. Her name was Farida. She rented a big house and had many teams of girls like us, may be 20 (I don't know exactly but judging from her lifestyle and from the number of girls who visited her at the end of the month to gave her money). She had a "free" visa herself and lived nearby. Every month we gave her 60 KD (about 2,000 taka) each. She fixed customers for us and showed us how to work. We are grateful to her for showing us the way. She did not force us. We agreed.

Farida told us that she kept only a small amount of the money we gave her. She had to manage the police. That was fair because if we had been caught, we would have been deported. We stayed in her house in Abassya for 8 month. Once we understood how to get clients and how to manage the police, we moved to Salmiya and rented our own house.

We are 5 women living together. We earn 20 KD per month from the company. Every month, we earn 45-50 KD each on top of this. We could earn more but we don't want to because we have little time. We also want to protect our health and have a good time for ourselves. That is why we accept only a few customers.

Saudi, Pakistani, Irani, Kuwaiti and Indian men come to us. They pay well. They offer us gifts and they don't stay too long. Bangladeshi men pay little, they stay a long time, and they sometimes cause problems, so we prefer not to take them.

If we get good customers, 5 a month are enough. We don't want more money. At first, we felt shame but now we regard this as a profession. It is our main job. We don't have to depend on anyone; we don't need to pay intermediaries. Two days a week, we mainly stay outside doing this. If we remain healthy, there is no problem. If you truly accept this work, there is even some pleasure in it.

When I started, a friend told me that if I really set my heart to it, it would be much easier. And I did. Wives of important men do this work; some do it for free,

others for money; some are discovered, others manage to hide it. Those who can keep it secret are not called prostitutes (*khanki*).

Four of us worked in a garment factory in Bangladesh before going to Kuwait. We were hundred of girls there. The General Manager used to call pretty girls for his own use. No one said anything. If a guard had done the same, he would have lost his job. What goes on in Kuwait also goes on in Bangladesh.

We don't need to get married. Abroad, we can meet our sexual needs and get money as well. People don't bother us. There is no punishment and we are valued.

(Shazeda) When I became pregnant at the age of 15 through my brother-in-law and he married me to someone else, when I was rejected by my in-laws who suspected I was not pure and when the child I carried was aborted, I had no value. I don't miss what I left. In Kuwait, I can find lots of men like my brother-in-law. But they send expensive cars to pick me up; they offer me gifts and money. In Kuwait I have value. For me, *bidesh* is good. I don't want to stay in Bangladesh.

After what my brother-in-law did to me, I despise men. They are good as sex partners but not to share a life with. May be there are exceptions but that has been my experience.

There are 5 of us living together in Kuwait. We are there to help each other and we are strong. We vow to stay together until we die and to work in Kuwait for as long as we can."

Shazeda has undergone a profound change. Her narrative is exceptional in her claim that *bidesh* is not only made up of hardship sustained because of a promise of future enjoyment. To her, life abroad is also pleasurable in the here-and-now. Shazeda and her friends are not full time sex workers and this makes a difference to their perception of themselves. They live in a relatively good neighbourhood and have upgraded themselves in the sex service market, choosing their customers and demanding a price commensurate with the value they accord to themselves.

Shazeda and her friends have made their own analysis of society and they refuse to be categorized as 'bad' women. The friendship, which unites

them, is evidently a source of strength. *Bidesh* has allowed these young women an alternative lifestyle that is not only more comfortable than what they knew in Bangladesh but has given them more self-esteem and consideration. The importance of being valued - through money or otherwise - is a leitmotiv which comes back regularly in their narrative. The fact that value is obtained through sex work or in other ways is not the issue.

This case history shows once more that women working for companies exert greater autonomy than house workers and may, after some time, organize their own sex work without intermediaries. In this way, they earn more and, therefore, need not take so many clients. Shazeda wishes to become like Farida and eventually get a "free" visa.

### 3.18 "Free" visa holders

We have seen that men and women who have spent several years in Kuwait and have developed their own activity generally obtain what is called a "free" visa. Farida, the woman who initiated Shazeda into sex work, is the holder of a "free" visa. So is Josna, the famous woman recruiter from Gazipur who brought Sahara and many others to Kuwait. We saw the latter engaged in many activities fitting the definition of trafficker in women. "Those with free visas, they are the worst", said one returnee. It is true that a number of men and women with "free" visas are involved in shady deals, bringing women and supplying them to hotels, brothels or private clients for sex work. Longva writes about the sale of "free" visas:

"Both parties had a common interest in keeping the relationship alive; both derived clear advantages from the arrangement, and the sponsor, constrained by the illegality of his action, had little latitude to exercise control or power over the expatriate. It was here that *kafala came* closest to being a mutually balanced transaction, not only freely entered but also freely maintained."<sup>15</sup>

Longva describes the "free" visa system as the back door where natives and migrants meet and deal with each other freely. Though such freedom has its positive side, one can see that it can also accommodate illicit activities like "trafficking" in women.

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<sup>15</sup> Longva, 1998, p. 108

### 3.18.1 Josna: holder of a "free" visa and trafficker in women

This is how Josna, the recruiter/trafficker whom we met in April 2001 in Dhaka explains her work.

" I have a "free" visa. It cost me 400 KD for 2 years.  
I help women who are in trouble, give them shelter,  
provide them with another job, negotiate crisis."

Josna has been living in Kuwait since 1986. Her life was difficult at first but after five years she obtained a "free" visa and developed her own business under the patronage of a Kuwaiti sponsor. The latter even arranged her marriage with a Comilla man, apparently to facilitate their work.

"The Kuwaiti sponsor who taught me everything took a percentage. So did the Comilla driver."

The Comilla driver was described in Sahara story (he is the man who beat her so hard, the marks are still on her body). He was Josna's partner/husband for some 15 years until he died in 2000. People with "free" or with "company visa" may marry in Kuwait. Marriage is useful to protect their illicit business. Josna's history is patchy. At one stage, she declared:

"I did everything in Kuwait. I was in jail. I stayed with a faked visa. I ran away. I stayed in hiding and I survived."

The narratives of women returnees revealed more on the kind of work Josna did and still does in Kuwait. After Sahara, Afroza gives the following description.

**3.18.2 Afroza's story** Josna is my *khala shashuri*  
(husband's mother's sister).  
Through me, she did a business  
and she did that with other girls as  
well. Because of her, the first 2½  
years, I did not get paid and could not send any  
money home.

Her difficulties start at the airport where she is not picked up. This was in 1994.

"I had to wait 3 days at the airport in Kuwait. Josna came to meet me but she could not take me. She said not to worry, she would come back in 2 days. This was very difficult. I cried. I wondered why the

airport in Bangladesh did not tell me that something was wrong with my visa.

After another 3 days, Josna and her Comilla husband came to get me. She took me to her house where I found other Bangladeshi women. They were from Comilla, Munshigonj and Joydebpur. Seven days later, Josna took me to an employer. I could not understand the language but she asked for money as one who is selling merchandise. She left me there for 2 months, and then she took me out and placed me elsewhere. She did this 3 times and I was not getting paid.

With the third employer, Afroza had problems. The man had 3 wives and 14 children. Afroza complained that one of the sons sexually assaulted her.

"One day, one of the sons tried to rape me. I found shelter in the room of the Sri Lankan maid. She told me if I did not want to provide this service, I should go back to Bangladesh. There was nothing to be gained by protesting. I understood maids did this work. They had no choice. The next day, I called Josna and asked her to come and get me. I was shocked by her words". She said:

- "What small thing has happened, let it be. You make a lot of it. What can I do? You came abroad; you have to accept storms and rain. If you don't bake the clay, it does not get hard. Now, you decide what you want to do."

I said, "Send me back to Bangladesh. What I have suffered, I have suffered. I don't want to live this anymore."

She said: "Do you have any money to buy the ticket?"

I replied: "All my employers said you have received my salary. Can you not buy the ticket?"

- "I can do one thing. I can leave you at the agency."

I spent 2 months at the agency. The agency people used me in all kinds of way. What could I do? I had no money to go back to Bangladesh. After this, I decided to go to a fourth employer and accept everything.

On what kind of visa Afroza stayed in Kuwait for 2 ½ years is not clear. She was aware of getting a proper work permit (*akama*) only with her sixth employer. Josna placed women in difficulty and without proper papers temporarily in different homes and these women did not get paid. In the 1990's, agencies did the same, collecting the salary straight from the employer. This could be a fee for service but women who were repeatedly shifted from one employer to the other like Afroza did not earn anything for months if not years. Now a seasoned migrant, Afroza does not mince her words about Josna.

"Josna sells women and makes a lot of money out of it. She usually picks girls who are weak and have no family to look after them and she sells them in different places. She is very powerful in Kuwait. You cannot escape her.

She also makes money from girls she keeps in her home. In 1992, she took Korimon from our village. She had a company visa. She kept her at her house a long time and used her. Korimon left very angry. She is lost now. She has not given news for 4 years. Her mother wants to know if she is alive. Can you look her up?"

### **3.19 The role of "agencies" in the Gulf**

Migrant women repeatedly refer to "agencies" where they were taken upon arrival, from where they were sent to employers and to which they returned when crises occurred. In Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, all major cities have such recruitment/placement agencies, which deal with women migrant workers. More information could be gathered on two of them, one located in Kuwait, the other in Abu Dhabi.

Josna, for some time, worked closely with the first agency operated by men who were once well known recruiters (and are still recruiting through intermediaries) of women from the Gazipur area. Afrin Akhtar who went to Kuwait in 1996 has much to say on how both, Josna and the "agency" treated her.

**3.19.1 Afrin Akhtar** "I was left 10 days at the airport without washing, without eating or sleeping properly. No one came to pick me up. I was terrified. After 10 days, Josna came with a Bangladeshi man. They

took me to an office. There were many girls there from Bangladesh and from other countries. They were all young like me and beautiful. We were well fed. Bangladeshi men came and talked to us. After 15 days, I was sent to work in a house.

There were 6 Bangladeshi men from different districts in that house. They did not tell me anything about salary. When someone came, they presented me as the wife of one of them. I could not protest. They said the law is very strict and this was the only way I could stay. They said, give us your bank account number and we will send money directly to your family. After 1½ month, they showed me a letter supposedly from my husband. It said he had received 8,000 taka but I later found out it was not true. I had to work day and night. I had bought my misery from Josna and she had sold me to them.

After 1½ month, I ran away and the police picked me up. I stayed 25 days in jail. Josna freed me. I don't know how she did this. I was taken back to the agency. I was there for one week and taken to another employer for 3 months. There again, I got no salary. Because of this, I quarreled with the lady and went back to the agency. For one year, I was sent to different homes and worked on a daily basis. The agency took all my money. The employer paid for me but I received nothing. The agency people kept saying they would pay me after 3 months, after 6 months. I could not send any money home. I felt really depressed.

I told Josna one day: "You are using me, making money out of me. You have done nothing for me."

Josna replied: "Fine, I will send you back to Bangladesh."

I said: "No. I spent a lot of money to come here, my relationship with my husband is not good, my father has given me my share of the inheritance, I cannot go back."

Josna sent me to work in the house of a police officer. He had two wives, one Saudi and one Irani. At this point, I accepted everything the master asked for. I was so afraid of experiencing again a situation like what I had known the first 1½-year.

Josna's connection with the Kuwaiti police seemed to be excellent. She was able to release women from jail and could also take them out of the airport. We noted that most Bangladeshi women were often employed in the houses of policemen. It will be recalled that domestic workers are under the Ministry of the Interior and, therefore, under the authority of the police. The Kuwaiti patron who first taught Josna about the business and for many years took a percentage of her profit was also in the police.

Josna worked in partnership with the above agency for some time but said they cheated her. Agencies are seen to recruit and place maids, they also manipulate, coerce and break them into accepting whatever work is demanded of them. The agency sometimes is presented as a pick up point for men seeking maids and or sex workers. One man who lived several years in Kuwait described the agency as follows.

"The agency buys and sells women. Those without valid documents are sheltered there for some time before being put on a plane and sent home with a little pocket money. Those with valid documents who do not please their employers are left there and may be employed elsewhere."

What this man did not say is that while women waited for a solution to their problem, they were made to work and earn. Several stories relate how women were sent on a daily basis to hotels, to homes or other locations to do various jobs including sex work.

"We went to the agency. They gave us sex work. Everyday, we went to different places. We were under such pressure. In the end, it got too much. We said: "Send us back, we can't bear it anymore". So, they sent us back without anything." (*Sofura sent by Josna to Kuwait in 2001 on a one-month visitor visa after being promised a two-year one without her knowledge*).

Embassies have been accused of playing a role similar to agencies and this was confirmed in at least one case in this study. A woman who took shelter at the Bangladesh embassy in 1994-95 mentioned that she was sent to do sex work on a daily basis from the embassy shelter. The Embassy staff also charged a fee similar to what agencies collected when she was helped to find another employer. Whether there was an official shelter at the Bangladesh Embassy at the time could not be confirmed. In 1996, one researcher in Kuwait was officially told at the Bangladesh Embassy that

there was no Bangladeshi women labour migrant in the country as it was not part of Bangladesh culture.<sup>16</sup> If such was the official line, one may doubt that the Bangladesh Embassy shelter mentioned in the above story had an official status.

In a smaller way, Josna did the same work as the agency. In 2001, she was seen keeping a few girls at her house and sending them to work for her own benefit. These activities still go on.

### 3.19.2 Anura's story

On 7 April 2001, two of us left together for Kuwait. We bought company visas from Josna who came to visit Bangladesh. The cost was 75,000 taka each. One Comilla driver, partner of Josna, picked us up at the airport and took us to Sabaya. There were 7 girls living there. Some had been there for 3 months, others for 6 month, all had been there for less than one year. Two girls were from Teknaf, 2 from Narayangonj, 1 was from Gazipur, 1 from Tangail and 1 from Dinajpur. We were not allowed to mix with them. They used to come back from duty tired early in the morning and leave again after lunch well dressed and well made up. The driver took them to their work place and brought them back. Two of them looked very depressed and sad, the others looked happy.

The driver had a mobile. He spoke often to Josna (*who was in Bangladesh at the time*). They spoke in Arabic. We could not understand their conversation.

We were at Josna for 5 days. The driver promised us a salary of 40 KD plus food and cosmetics. Then he took us to Abassya. He did not explain what kind of work we would have to do but he said we could not wait until Josna returned to start.

We were taken to a room and asked to put on a dress we could not possibly wear. We were told we would have to please two foreign men. The driver tried to frighten us. He threatened us. We refused to wear the clothes and he hit us. He took us back at Josna's house and locked us up for 24 hours without food,

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication from Dr Nasra M. Shah, Department of Community Medicine, Kuwait University, May 2001

water and fan. Then, he asked us whether we had understood.

We agreed to work but between us we had decided to run away. He took us to a Bangladeshi woman who runs a brothel. We were there for 3 days. We did not show our disagreement, then, we ran away through the bathroom. They could not break us; we were strong because we were two together.

It took us another 15 days to return to Bangladesh. One man took us to the Bangladesh Embassy and the Embassy suggested we give ourselves up to the police. If we had agreed to do as the driver asked us, we would have earned good money but we could not do it.

Why is no one putting Josna in jail? How can she do this to people."

Josna took 75,000 taka from each of these women on the presumption that they would be given company work. They were never taken to a company.

One remarks that most of the women Josna kept in her home for sexwork without disguise were not from her village area. This is often the case. Recruiters/traffickers like Josna take care not to spoil their reputation in their own community. As Sahara so well observed, this is a business strategy since the community of origin often constitutes a fruitful terrain for the recruitment of new women.

### **3.20 Migrants without visa**

A number of Bangladeshi men and women stay and work in Kuwait without valid visa. They absconded from their *kofeel* (domestic workers) or stayed on after their visa expired. Some migrants were never issued a visa although they had paid for it. This was the case for workers met in June 2001 that had been recruited to work as cleaners by the Al Afraz Company. Three months, the time allocated to obtain a work and a residence permit (*akama*), had elapsed but the employer had not provided the document and these workers were staying illegally. They were furious but they had no means of redressing the wrong done to them. Without valid *akama*, women who engaged in sex work were highly exposed and many had already been picked up by the police and sent back to Bangladesh.

According to Josna, Bangladeshi women without *akama* often leave the big city and go to remote places. Wherever they go, they are likely to be more exploited than those who have valid visas.

As mentioned, in the past, the Government of Kuwait declared an amnesty, which allowed illegal migrants to leave the country without fine or other penalty. Many workers were waiting for such an amnesty to be declared. Meanwhile, they had to lie low to avoid being caught. If arrested by the police, illegal aliens were sent to jail, fingerprinted and deported. They were not allowed to come back.

### 3.21 "Successful" migration

Certificates of failure are easy to deliver but migrant women and their families claim there are some success stories also. These should not be denied even though there is a great reluctance to accept as positive the outcome of unskilled women labour migration, especially to the Middle East.

At which criteria should "success" be judged"? Who is to make the sum total of the plus and the minus points making up a migratory journey? Migration inevitably forces a rupture, a jump into the unknown, which can be traumatic, violent and painful. The situations encountered, the roles imposed, the work demanded are more or less acceptable and women's ability to repossess their strength after the shock of the transition varies enormously. Problems also arise after coming back to Bangladesh. Which place do returnees occupy? Can they keep control over their earnings? How can those who are married re-integrate home and family after several years of absence? What kind of marriage can unmarried women returnees hope to contract? Can women talk about their experience abroad?

Economic betterment is the main purpose of emigration and a broad agreement can be found on this. If a large amount of money is earned and lasting security and well being ensured for the migrant and her family, migration is generally considered to be successful. Such objective underlies most of the reasons for emigration listed in the table below.

Table 11: Reasons for Emigration as given by Interviewed Women (Middle-East & Malaysia)

Reasons	No. of Migrants (%)
To become self reliant	42 (17.8)
No other family member available to go abroad	29 (12.3)
Pressurized by husband	22 (9.3)
With husband, wanted to improve economic condition	19 (8.1)
Due to marriage failure	20 (8.5)
Husband is irresponsible/Lazy	18 (7.6)

Due to poverty	25 (10.6)
The cost is less for women	17 (7.2)
Due to husband being ill/ incapable of working	19 (8.1)
No peace in family	13 (5.5)
To pay for dowry	7 (3.0)
Reputation ruined/nothing to loose	5 (2.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>236 (100.0)</b>

### 3.22 Earning well

Achieving positive economic results, the stated objectives of women migrants and those who send them, generally requires a long-term engagement. "When a woman goes abroad, she can do well if she stays long enough. She must learn the language and understand the people. That takes time." As mentioned, a two-year contract seldom suffices to achieve success.

Economically successful migrant women generally increased their basic income through additional activities. Those in domestic work had to "please" their employers. This was not a matter of choice but the very condition to keep their jobs, receive their salaries and, perhaps, gain a little extra. Some of the women who were greatly benefited developed a good understanding with their employer with whom they shared an intimate relationship as well as a

business partnership. The employer provided visas and the employee supplied new women from her area of origin. In many cases, business included the trading in women as well.

**3.22.1 Sofura : a successful migrant** "I had a good understanding with my employer. He supplied me with visas and I recruited girls from Gazipur.

They were sent to an agency for placement. I also kept girls in my home and supplied them to customers. They sometimes took them for a few days, visited other countries - Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait. I also went on such outings. I took 25% of the benefit, my employer kept 50% and the girls kept 25%. At first, I felt bad but this is the main business over there. Others do it. I made a lot of

money in this way. The more I made, the less I felt guilty about it."

Sofura spent 16 years in Kuwait with the same employer. She looked after his paralyzed wife while serving herself as a wife substitute. She came back a rich woman. With the money she sent to her husband in Bangladesh, land was acquired, a house was built and a large chicken farm established. The wealth obtained and displayed served to advertise the benefits of migration and helped to recruit more women. Here the image of "success" became a resource in itself. "With my wife, we sent about 150 migrants abroad, men and women", said her husband. Recruiters need success stories for reference and the success of a migrant wife is particularly convincing.

After performing the *haj*, Sofura finally returned to Bangladesh in 1998 to enjoy the benefits of her labour. Needless to say, such success has its price. Sofura spent nearly all her married life out of country attending the needs of other men. She gave birth to three daughters, at least one of whose genitor is doubtful and people in the village gossip about it. She did not see her children grow up. Her marriage with her cousin withstood the long separation. With the money earned by Sofura, he bought land (men's wealth) in his name. Following a traditional pattern, Sofura kept jewelry (women's wealth). Upon return, she took the garb of a good Muslim woman, wearing the burqa and reputedly fasting and saying her prayers. She is now seen acting as dependent on her husband. Interestingly, at the end of a long absence, traditional gender roles in this couple have been restored, at least outwardly. Sofura is much occupied with her image of success. She did not share her private thoughts with us.

Such partnership between a wife migrant and a husband managing her remittances in Bangladesh has been encountered in several cases. For the partnership to endure, both partners must respect the terms of an informal agreement. The wife works abroad and sends remittances and visas to her husband. The husband helps in the recruitment of women, invests the money earned by his wife and makes it fructify. He should not remarry (at least not without his wife's permission) and must offer an honorable shelter to her when she comes back. It is understood that he can manage his other needs as he likes and does not ask questions about the way his wife lives and earns abroad.

### **3.23 Care of the Migrant Women's Children**

Most of the women were married and had dependent children. Unlike women migrating to India, no mother going to the Middle East could take her children with her. Those who conceived abroad had to return to Bangladesh to give birth (or to abort). The tables below show who cared for children in the absence of their mother by district of origin and by country of immigration.

Table 12: Care of Migrant's Children by Districts

Care Taker	Place of Origin				Total (%)
	Narayangonj	Gazipur	Jessore	Satkhira	
Migrant mother	0	0	18 (16.8)	21 (25.3)	39 (9.2)
Migrants' own parents	24(25.0)	18 (12.9)	18 (16.8)	21(25.3)	81 (19.0)
Migrants' in-laws	14 (14.6)	35 (25.0)	11 (10.3)	2 (2.4)	62 (14.6)
Children's father only	26 (27.1)	30(21.4)	7 (6.5)	1 (1.2)	64 (15.0)
No dependent children	32 (33.3)	57 (40.7)	53 (49.5)	38 (45.8)	180 (42.3)
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>96 (100.0)</b>	<b>140 (100.0)</b>	<b>107 (100.0)</b>	<b>83 (100.0)</b>	<b>426 (100.0)</b>

Table 13: Care of Migrant's Children by Country of Immigration

Under care	Country of Immigration		Total (%)
	Middle East and Malaysia	India	
With migrant mother	0	39 (20.5)	39 (9.2)
With migrants' parents family	42 (17.8)	39 (20.5)	81 (19.0)
With Migrants' in-laws family	49 (20.8)	13 (6.8)	62 (14.6)
With father only	56 (23.7)	8 (4.2)	64 (15.0)
No dependent children	89 (37.7)	91 (47.9)	180 (42.3)
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>236 (100.0)</b>	<b>190 (100.0)</b>	<b>426 (100.0)</b>

Gazipur women were more likely to leave their children with their in-law's than with their own parents. The opposite occurred for the Narayangonj women who relied more on their own mothers. Fathers cared for less than one quarter of the children. These two tables show that grandparents, and not husbands, take the greatest responsibility for childcare, a conclusion also reached by Siddiqui.

The study did not particularly focus on the consequences of women leaving their children behind but it is clear that mothers pay a high price for their migration, as their children grow distant from them. The outcome of a mother's absence from the children's point of view appears less dramatic in Gazipur where the extended family is stronger and can better compensate.

Children left behind without their mothers are said to often fail their schooling, as no one is there to see to their regular school attendance. Another consequence of women's migration is children's early marriage. This is both, because guardians prefer to marry early a girl who does not have the protection of her mother and because youth left unsupervised are more likely to develop relationships and arrange their own marriages. A few mothers said they were reluctant to migrate because of their children but they were not given the option to oppose the decision taken for them by their husband or their in-laws. Except in one case where a woman in Narayangonj paid a neighbour to look after her two children, children were always left with family members.

### 3.24 Keeping control over remittances

Many women faced problems in keeping control over their savings. Some willingly handed over their savings to a husband, a brother or a father, hoping to get security and recognition in exchange. They may have learned too late that they would be guaranteed none of these. Tania earned a considerable amount in her 15 years abroad, and in that sense her migration was successful, but her family is in crisis and she has now no control over the assets she contributed.

"I who has been struggling abroad for 15 years, spent my blood, lost my honour and made my husband a rich man kept nothing for me.... Since my birth, I endured so much; my heart has turned into a stone. While abroad my mother and my brother died, my children grew up without me. How I had to turn my heart into a stone to withstand all of this! Well, I must make my heart even harder and go back, I will stay there, come what may. I am tired. If I had found peace at home, I might have settled here.

This is a very sad statement. Tania's "success" here has a bitter taste of failure in what is most important, that is peace and security at home. Many Gazipur women were seen handing over their entire income to their husbands. The two tables below indicate who were the recipients of migrant's income by area of immigration and by district of origin.

Table 14: Recipients of Migrant's Income by Country of Immigration

Recipients	Country of Immigration			Total
	Middle-east	India	Malaysia	
Husband	52 (25.0)	17 (8.9)	4 (14.3)	73 (17.1)
Husband and herself	34 (16.3)	34 (17.9)	5 (17.9)	73 (17.1)
Parents	31 (14.9)	24 (12.6)	8 (28.6)	63 (14.8)
Parents and herself	15 (7.2)	14 (7.4)	4 (14.3)	33 (7.7)
Husband, parents and herself	5 (2.4)	11 (5.8)	-	16 (3.8)
Kept herself	19 (9.1)	22 (11.6)	2 (7.1)	43 (10.2)
Husband and parents	4 (1.9)	-	-	4 (0.9)
Dalal and husband	-	4 (2.1)	-	4 (0.9)
Dalal	1	20 (10.5)	-	21 (4.9)
Dalal and herself	-	19 (10.0)	-	19 (4.5)
Income not gained	47 (22.6)	25 (13.2)	5 (17.9)	77 (18.1)

<b>Total</b>	<b>208 (100.0)</b>	<b>190 (100.0)</b>	<b>28 (100.0)</b>	<b>426 (100.0)</b>
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Table 15: Recipient of Migrant's Income by district of origin

Recipients	Locations				Total (%)
	Narayangonj	Gazipur	Jessore	Satkhira	
Husband	12 (12.5)	44 (31.4)	12 (11.2)	5 (6.0)	73 (17.1)
Husband and herself	26 (27.1)	13 (9.3)	16 (15.0)	18 (21.7)	73 (17.1)
Parents	16 (16.7)	23 (16.4)	10 (9.3)	14 (16.9)	63 (14.8)
Parents and herself	9 (9.4)	10 (7.1)	11 (10.3)	3 (3.6)	33 (7.7)
Husband, parents and herself,	3 (3.1)	2 (1.4)	9 (8.4)	2 (2.4)	16 (3.8)
Kept herself	13 (13.5)	8 (5.7)	19 (17.8)	3 (3.6)	43 (10.2)
Husband and parents	1 (1.0)	3 (2.1)	-	-	4 (0.9)
Dalal and husband	-	-	1 (0.9)	3 (3.6)	4 (0.9)
Dalal and herself	-	-	9 (8.4)	10 (12.0)	19 (4.5)
Dalal	1 (1.0)	-	8 (7.5)	12 (14.5)	21 (4.9)
Income not gained	15 (15.6)	37 (26.4)	12 (11.2)	13 (15.7)	77 (18.1)
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>96 (100.0)</b>	<b>140 (100.0)</b>	<b>107 (100.0)</b>	<b>83 (100.0)</b>	<b>426 (100.0)</b>

One notes first the large number of Middle East migrants who did not gain anything (22.6 percent) especially marked for the Gazipur women (26.4 percent). Few women kept their savings for themselves. Husbands come top of the list as recipients of remittances. In Gazipur, 31.4 percent of the women sent their entire remittances to their husbands. Women going to the Middle East were more likely to be married hence the greater importance of husbands as recipients of remittances. That so few women should have kept at least part of their savings to themselves is revealing. Giving a large sum of money to the husband is often seen as an obligation to keep the marriage together (this was the case for Rokeya) and/or as a way to redeem the damage to reputation caused by the migration itself. Women have to juggle carefully in preparing for themselves a social and an emotional shelter when they return.

"In 5 years, I made a lot of money. I satisfied everybody. I sent about two-thirds of my income to my father and one third to my husband. I had to be generous with my husband because I have some weak points. I was married before, I have a daughter and he is one year my junior. So that my husband never complains about me, I gave him about one third of my income, the rest I gave to my father.

This husband is from Rangpur. He invested the money I sent in his district. He may leave me one day. Now, I am young and attractive. I have a job, the husband stays but anytime, he could go. I became convinced of this after I returned from abroad."

Money sent to the father is often considered as a way to save for oneself. Husbands do not offer the same security.

The recipient of remittances and the principal motivator for the migration bear a relationship. Here again, one sees the preponderant role of husbands, especially for Gazipur. In that locality, the husband was the principal motivator, alone or with someone else, in 43.7 percent of the cases. This compares with 35 percent each for parents or for self-motivation. By contrast, the Narayangonj women showed more self-motivation and in 73 percent of the cases they decided migration alone, with husband or with parents. As suggested earlier, the Narayangonj women manifested more independence and self-reliance than the Gazipur women did.

Table 16: Principal Motivators for Migration by Area of Origin

Motivators	Area of Origin				Total (%)
	Narayangonj	Gazipur	Jessore	Satkhira	
Parents	5 (5.2)	14 (10.0)	21 (19.6)	13 (15.7)	53 (12.4)
Husband	6 (6.3)	29 (20.7)	8 (7.5)	8 (9.6)	51 (12.0)
Husband + parents	6 (6.3)	-	2 (1.9)	1 (1.2)	9 (2.1)
Herself	21 (21.9)	24 (17.1)	14 (13.1)	6 (7.2)	65 (15.3)
Parents + herself	21 (21.9)	13 (9.3)	5 (4.7)	1 (1.2)	40 (9.4)
Husband + herself	28 (29.2)	12 (8.6)	9 (8.4)	2 (2.4)	51 (12.0)
Dalal	5 (5.2)	5 (3.6)	12 (11.2)	2 (2.4)	24 (5.6)
Dalal + parents	-	22 (15.7)	4 (3.7)	2 (2.4)	28 (6.6)
Dalal + husband	3 (3.1)	21 (15.0)	1 (0.9)	-	25 (5.9)
Close relatives (Aunt, uncle, sister, and brother in-law)	-	-	8 (7.5)	20 (24.1)	28 (6.6)
Neighbour + distant relative	-	-	19 (17.8)	22 (26.5)	41 (9.6)
Lover	-	-	1 (0.9)	6 (7.2)	7 (1.6)
In laws family (Bhashur/Shashur/Shashuri)	1 (1.0)	-	3 (2.8)	-	4 (0.9)
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>96 (100.0)</b>	<b>140 (100.0)</b>	<b>107 (100.0)</b>	<b>83 (100.0)</b>	<b>426 (100.0)</b>

### 3.25 "Success" expressed in percentages

In this sample, out of 208 migrant women, slightly over half (52.4 percent) considered they had gained economically and, among them, 81 (38.9 percent) considered they had been highly benefited. One third (33.2 percent) said they had been personally, socially and economically benefited. If migration is like lottery, some win and some loose. The losers here are many, yet winners can still be found. The percentage of successful migrants in this study is lower than in Siddiqui's survey where out of 200 women migrants, more than 60 percent were economically benefited.<sup>17</sup>

The different results of the two studies may be attributed to differently constituted samples. In Siddiqui's study, one quarter of the informants were family members of migrant women as the latter were absent. Sexual abuse or sex work was unlikely to be reported by family members. Siddiqui included nurses as well as garment workers and she did not separate out women who migrated to Malaysia from women who went to the Middle East. The present study separated the two regions, it did not include nurses and while a few women were sent as garments workers, none were given this

<sup>17</sup> Siddiqui, 2001, p. 159

type of work in the country of immigration. Different methods of inquiry were also used. We invited women to narrate their stories after living in the community for some time. Visiting several times, we waited that a relationship of trust be established. One-time visits would not have yielded the same results. The focus of the two studies also differed. Siddiqui studied migrant women while the present study focused on the abusive practices and on the "trafficking" within the wider field of women labour migration. Siddiqui did not find any woman engaged in sex work and only 4 out of 57 women considered they had been sexually abused.

Siddiqui justly pointed out the inconsistency of claiming a very high number of "trafficked" women while official figures indicate that female migration from Bangladesh is negligible.<sup>18</sup> Surely, the number of female migrants is higher than the number of trafficked women. Siddiqui can be applauded for making this point so clearly. However, looking at the field from a distance, one may not see what, at closer range, appears between the blades of grass. She did not see the "trafficking" within women labour migration as this required a different kind of lens. Once again, can be verified the importance of the research focus which highlights certain issues, while leaving others in the dark.

To complete this section, one fairly long narrative recorded on a cassette will be presented. It shows how the motivator, the person who pays for the migration and the recipient of remittances can act out a plan with great determination. This powerful story rich in details points out to the difficulty of separating out those who, under different guises, exploit women. The story was collected from Gazipur.

### **3.25.1 Trafficked through marriage: Anessa's story**

"In 1988, I migrated to Gazipur with my mother. We were very poor. My mother worked in people's home. I did the same. At the age of 13, I went to work in the house of one Samad. He was a leader type, not much educated but well off, about 50 years old. He had one wife and three children. Sometimes my mother worked there. She called him *mama* (maternal uncle), I called him *nana* (maternal grandfather).

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<sup>18</sup> Siddiqui, 2001, p. 39.

Samad used to tell me about going abroad. I just listened. He was much older than me. I feared and I respected him. One day he told me:

- "I feel a lot for you. I want to marry you."

Hearing this, I felt flattered. I thought: I will be a rich man's wife. That was a lot for me. I did not think, he has one wife and grown up children and my life could be difficult. One day, he took me to Joydapur and married me at the Kazi' s office. He forbade me to tell anyone. I continued to work in his house as a servant. I could not do anything special for him as a wife does for her husband, serve him his meal and attend to his needs. I wondered, what kind of situation is this. I married him but we do not behave like married people. We never even had sexual intercourse together. One day, Samad told me:

- "I am sending you abroad. You are now my wife. To ensure your happiness and security is my responsibility. Since your co-wife's children are big, may be I cannot give you much of my assets, so I thought you should go abroad for 2 to 3 years and earn something for yourself. I will pay for your migration. You can also help your poor mother in this way."

Hearing such nice words, how could I not trust him? Two months after my marriage, Hormotullah (a local *dala*) and my husband sent me to Kuwait. I did not understand they had been preparing this. When I had a medical exam, they said it was for treating me, when my passport was made, they said it was to register some land in my name. Samad took the initiative for these. He took no one else along with him.

All of a sudden, one evening, I was told that a good job had been found in Kuwait. My husband said:

- "You don't need to tell anyone now because if it does not work out, you will feel embarrassed."

I was afraid but that was of no use. I was sent to Kuwait early in 1997. I opened a bank account in my husband's name. I don't know how much it cost him to send me there. I only told my mother that I was leaving.

My husband told me to be hard working and obedient and to make my employer happy.

- "Send money every month", he said, "I will do something for you. You could lose it or it could get stolen if you keep it. I will see that your mother gets what she needs. You will have wealth in your own name and if I go and live with you, my wife and children will not be able to object".

I was met by my employer at the airport. He took my papers. I ate and I went to sleep. There were six other women in the house, 1 Sri Lankan, 2 Philippinas and 3 Bangladeshis. The following day, I sat with the employer, his wife and one Bangladeshi woman who had been in Kuwait for a long time and served as the interpreter. Their talk was very clear.

Hearing them, I got astonished and afraid. I remembered my husband's words. I feared he knew very well what kind of work he was sending me to do. Then I thought, there will be money, I will have my own family (*shongshar*), I can help my mother, I will be respected. Besides, I thought here this is probably what holding a job meant since everybody did this work.

At the time, when I said yes to sexwork, I thought this would be an easy job but when I started I realized how oppressive the work could be. One week later, after getting some training about looking attractive and keeping clean, I started work.

For five years I did this work regularly in the hope of getting some happiness. I dreamed about Samad living with me as my husband. Every month, he sent me cassettes or letters through people. He said beautiful things, words that could melt a stone. I felt loved. The man who brought the cassettes and the letters never left them with me.

I worked 6 days a week and, on my day off, I had to work in the house of my employer. I never had a day to myself. That was the case for the other girls as well. Every month, I sent 10,000-12,000 taka to my husband. I thought here I am struggling but one day when I go home I will find happiness. Then, I will forget what I do now and start a new life.

My husband always gave me news of my mother and that made me happy. After listening to his words, I felt even more eager to work and to earn for our future.

I was usually left at hotels. My employer himself drove me. I used to go in the afternoon and return in the morning. Sometimes we were sent to homes when there were big parties. Men of different countries came to us. We had to wear tiny clothes that left us half-naked. I had to massage, serve them drinks, lit their cigarettes and have sex with them. The most shameful work was to suck them. Each man had his own demand. I used to get very tired. Sometimes 10 men came, sometimes only one. I also had to do group sex.

Bangladeshi boys who worked at the hotel used to tell us that the men who came to us paid large amounts of money but it was never given to us. In the hotel, there was an office and, as we arrived, we were given clothes. Everyday, we were injected with a medicine. After this injection, we lost our shame. Condoms and cream were placed on a shelf in the room. Some men used them. Also, the employer's wife saw that we took a tablet everyday.

I was young. I never had sex with anyone before, not even my husband. I ate well, so I had a lot of strength. Sex work was something entirely new to me. I got a lot of money, so I was not unhappy but when I returned from work, I felt depressed and frightened. I was thinking what kind of work am I doing.

I lived like this for 5 years, and then my employer one day sent me back. He did not cheat me, he paid me regularly. I am now more beautiful than before, people say. Life over there in many ways was comfortable.

I gave news to my husband that I was coming back but he was not there at the airport to meet me. I rented a car and came home by myself. I had only a small bag with me. I carried no money. I had given everything to my husband but I was not allowed to enter his home.

I stopped at a neighbour and there I heard that he had divorced me. His sons did not allow me in. They

hit me. I told many people that he had married me and had taken my money for 5 years but no one took my side. There was no trial (*bitsar*). With my tears, I returned to my mother.

I will never marry again. My mother has not abandoned me. I am now working in a garment factory. If I get a chance, I will go abroad again.

After return Anesara became painfully aware of her powerlessness. She listed the points, which made her weak as follows. Her father had died, her mother was poor, she had no elder brother, she was illiterate and her family came from outside Gazipur. These points made her an ideal candidate for migration. It will be seen below that recruiting agencies and *dalals* are advised to target just such “weak” woman. She had been an easy prey. Anesara was trafficked by a husband. She was caught by her desire for security, status and respectability, which, she believed, a husband would provide. Anesara liked the idea of being a big man's wife; above all she valued the consideration she would get, she who had been a servant since her childhood. For five long years, the “husband” fed her with loving words, enticed her to work ever harder and earn more. He milked her like a cow. The duration of trafficking is one of the longest recorded in this study. She sent him about 6,00,000 taka.

The exploitation Anesara experienced abroad evanesces under the enormity of the cheat she suffered in her own country. Anesara is ready to return abroad. She considers her employer in Kuwait treated her much more fairly than her 'husband'. After all, the employer told her what the work would be and paid her regularly. It was a clear deal.

### **3.26 Managing feelings of guilt and shame**

Women, who have been cheated and hurt, women whose honour has already been tarnished are less hesitant to take up the occupations offered abroad. Others who are married to irresponsible men who do not provide for the family relieve themselves of personal guilt onto their husbands.

"The sins I make are upon him. Why can't he feed his family? If my husband worked properly and fed his wife and his children, would I need to go *bidesh* and manipulate other men's bodies. Life is a matter of fate. Why did I get the husband I got? A woman can remain honest when her husband provides her with shelter. How is this possible for me? The one who should protect me is no good."

It would have been better to have a dutiful husband but given the circumstances, migration and sex work allowed this woman to provide for her children and buy some land in her own name.

In the Narayangonj community, where the social fabric was weaker, several women were met who no longer cared about public opinion. Farida is one of them. She was an orphan who begged her food as a child. Married at the age of 13 to a husband, who was poor, did not work and mixed with other women, Farida coped alone all her life. She did not hide her lifestyle and her means of earning. Her words were forceful and unhindered.

"I did not mind doing this [sex] work. I had already decided that I would do anything. I wanted money. Besides, if men can do it (free sex), why can't women do the same? I was angry with my husband. I always thought: Allah, you are the master of life and death, food and wealth. Please, give me wealth. The Last Judgment will come after death. What will happen in my grave, no one will see, no one will know. But on this earth, people see my misery and all the injuries I suffered; they laugh and they denigrate me. Please, save me from this. Please, give me money."

Farida's prayer was granted to some degree. On her second and third migration to the Middle East, she went straight into sex work as it paid more. She refused to be condemned any more harshly than her husband who mixes with other women and lives off their income.

For the majority of women who engaged in sex work, the idea of being "spoiled" weakened with the duration of the stay abroad and the amount of money earned. This was *bidesh*. Everybody did it there. At home, no one would know or see how they earned. Husbands or relatives towards whom they owned respect were not invited to join them. This made it easier to work undisturbed and keep at bay feelings of guilt and shame. One woman warned:

"Do not make the mistake I did. I went to Kuwait, and then I sent a visa for my husband. Once he knew what women do over there, he started being suspicious and pestered me with his questions. Did I sleep with my employer? How can I tell him that I did? I made a mistake in sending him abroad. His eyes were opened."

Tania sent back her *bhabi* (elder brother's wife) within three months of her arrival as she was finding out too much about her activities.

Some women who had accepted to do sex work and were earning well suddenly found sentiments of guilt surfacing at a particular moment and had to quit. Others fought with a conscience that tormented them throughout their stay. They were caught between the obligation to earn and feelings of guilt, which never left them.

"In 5 years, I sent 3,00,000 taka to my husband. He bought land, built a house, did everything in his name. I kept nothing for myself. This is because I went abroad to improve my relationship with my husband and because he sent me. Over there, I had to do sex work. Once I "accepted", my salary increased. But inside myself, I could not find peace. I just thought when would it all be over. I counted the days. I was always tense. On the day I heard I was being released, I thanked Allah a thousand times. I was so happy I couldn't tell you. I was liberated from a jail. It was like a second birth." (Shona)

Shona's original contract was for 3 years. Josna who first recruited her and gave her work in Kuwait came on leave towards the end of the first contract. She asked the husband if he wished to extend his wife's stay abroad for another 2 years. The husband took the decision without consulting Shona. He continued benefiting from her remittances. Shona had not told her husband about the work she did and how painful it was to her. He did not care to ask either. About her experience abroad, she commented:

"You have to make yourself so small. You always live in fear. Only I know this. Everybody cannot accept this work. I am one of those who inwardly could never accept. They forced me to do it. I take god as a witness."

Feelings of shame often come from a sexual behaviour considered uncivilized, from breaching taboos and infringing rules that the women considered basic morality. For example, many women found repulsive and unacceptable having to attend to the sexual needs of father and son, or engaging in sex at any time of the day with everyone in the house knowing about it. Many women found sex work in the home more difficult to accept than sex work outside. In the home, they could never get away from their status of available women. On the whole, women reacted to what they considered an obsession with sexuality and non-stop demands made on

them. They judged severely a society where they saw many disorders among both men and women. For many, the idealized image of an Islamic society they held from migration was profoundly shattered.

Shona carried out her husband's project while feeling guilty and doing violence to herself. She may have gained a material comfort and an appreciation of a kind but like a hard-working slave valued by her master.

Stories like Shona are here presented to show how important it is to unpack the concept of "success". Perhaps migration is never a total success, nor is it a total failure. And the impact is always more than economic. Migration transforms migrants and often alters their very idea of "success".

### **3.27 Sticking it out**

Women's courage in sticking out difficult situations is impressive. Sometimes, their determination yielded results of a kind and after a number of difficult trials, an employer was found, a setup identified which permitted earning more rapidly, less painfully, and may be even pleurably. The intelligence displayed, the struggles fought could be empowering especially when women fought their own battle. However, those who were sent against their wishes and were warned to stick out to the work and endure the hardship whatever it be, often felt bitterly used and abused underneath appearances of success. This is certainly the case for Shona above.

It was noted that family members who benefited from a woman's remittances generally claimed that the migration was successful not bothering to find out whether the migrant woman herself had another story to tell. The attribution of success covered up issues better left untold.

One can read a malaise here about migration, which is found not only at individual or family level but also nationally. In spite of the millions of men and women who migrated from Bangladesh to the Middle East over the last thirty years, a literature on them has not developed. The migrants are silent and their experience abroad is almost a taboo subject. Most do not feel free to speak out about the ways in which migration has transformed them and changed their understanding of the society they originate from and, in most cases, go back to. This is the case for men, but especially for women who went as unskilled workers and ended up in sexwork. How can they speak out?

### 3.28 Increase in the number of cheated women in the last 3 years

Table 8 showed that the second cause for an early return and a failed migration was false papers and inadequate visas. In a majority of cases, the migrant women themselves did not know the exact reason why they were not allowed to enter a country or had to leave within one to three months. Whatever the reasons, they understood they had been cheated because they were promised a two-year contract and, on that basis, they or their families had agreed to disburse the cost of migration.

This kind of cheating increased markedly after 1998 when manpower business in Bangladesh slowed down following the South Asian financial crisis which affected Malaysia in particular and the Kuwait Government stopping to issue visas for Bangladeshis one year later. *Dalals* apparently tried to save their trade by sending an increasing number of women with false documents, short-term visas or without anyone to meet them at the airport. In our study, most stories of women promised a two year contract but having to return within 3 month occurred recently.

Table 17: Cheated women by year of migration

Migration Year	No. of Migrants	Percent
Before 1998	11	12.6
1998 - 1999	24	27.6
2000 - 2001	52	59.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Out of a total of 208 migrants to the Middle East, 87 were forced to return early because they were cheated (in ways defined in Table 8). For the number of cheated women by country, Dubai topped the list (59 percent), followed by Bahrain (51 percent).

## Chapter Four

### Recruiters and manpower agents

#### 4.1 Identifying the recruiters (and traffickers) of women

Identifying the agents involved in manpower business and uncovering the different aspects of their role in sending women to the Middle East was not an easy task and progress was slow. Presenting oneself as a researcher at recruiting agencies in Dhaka (Motijheel, Fakirapool, Purana Paltan and Banani) did not produce much result. Claiming to be a potential migrant did not work either. Expressing the wish to work as *dalal* led to interesting advice. The following was heard from the managing director of a licensed recruiting agency.

"Don't send people who are too clever or too daring like someone involved in black business. Don't send people who are well off either. Find a *rickshawallah* or a day labourer, one who must either sell his land or borrow money to go abroad. Such men will be ready to stick it out and will not come back easily. If a man comes back soon after leaving, he will go after you, he will demand compensation and you won't be able to stay home."

This advice refers to the recruitment of men but, holds for the selection of women candidates as well, at least in its logic. Recruiters preferably target those who are weak, socially and politically. Candidates, of course, must have some asset or the ability to borrow for what is sold here is a costly package. Migration to the Middle East is not cheap and this is a major difference with migration to India.

Licensed recruiting agencies do not want to be seen participating in illegal activities and, at first, their staff denied being involved in the recruitment of women. After probing, a few said they sent women for company work but none admitted sending women for domestic work. Needless to say, sex work, was never mentioned. The most helpful information was obtained

from friends and relatives of the research team working in recruiting agencies. They first directed us to villages where a large number of migrant women could be found and shared with us some of their knowledge. They spoke because they trusted they would not be exposed. It goes without saying that no one in this report is identified by his or her true name following the practice in our research. The purpose is to understand the system and its mechanisms.

Table 18: Interviewed persons engaged in recruiting business

Person/institution	Number	Percentage
Local dalals	11	29.7
Local dalals recognized as traffickers	6	16.2
Dhaka based dalals	5	13.5
Local helpers of dalals	2	5.4
Migrants who send visa to family members	7	18.9
Office staff of licensed recruiting agencies	4	10.8
Sub-Agents	2	5.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Above is the list of persons interviewed. Ten (27 percent) were women who worked as recruiters and motivators at community level. We have seen that women abroad sent visas to relatives and recruited themselves when they visited Bangladesh. No woman was found sitting at a manpower agency. These offices are exclusively male spaces, thus showing that migration concerns men only.

A high level of education is not required to be a recruiter. Seventeen of the persons interviewed (45 percent) were illiterate or had not completed primary education. Those who studied beyond matriculation level (16 percent) worked in recruiting agencies.

*Dalals* and recruiting agents took up the job in the following circumstances or for the following reasons. Fifteen (15) were themselves migrants and it is while abroad that they gathered information on visa business and built up a network for this work; five (5) were candidates for migration, were cheated and became *dalal* to recoup their loss; five (5) worked in collaboration with a migrated wife, daughter or mother-in-law who sent them visas, four (4) chose the job as it did not require any investment and good profits could rapidly be made, five (5) worked for another *dalal* and two (2) chose this work as they found nothing else to do.

## 4.2 The important role of local *dalals*

"I work mainly in Kapashia, Gazipur and Chandpur. I have my own people in these areas. If they recruit a candidate, they get 2,000 to 3,000 taka. I need local people, otherwise how could I be trusted." (a *dalal* from Narayangonj)

For their own financial gain, local *dalals* conduct an active search for potential candidates. It could be a woman whose parents failed in arranging her marriage, a woman whose husband is lazy and irresponsible, a woman whose husband dreams of getting rich or a girl whose reputation was ruined because of an illegitimate affair. As mentioned, the candidate's family must have some land or other assets. Individuals without resources or the ability to borrow are not targeted. The potential migrant woman or her guardian (husband, father, and brother) is motivated. Convincing arguments are many (see the Table above on motivations to go abroad) and *dalals* are very clever in finding out the traits, which may be exploited for their end. Gazipur is the location where *dalals* motivated the highest percentage of migrants (see Table 15). Note that this is also the location where women were most cheated.

*Dalals* announce the price for migration and explain terms and conditions. They mention the country of immigration; the type of visa and the work to be done, the salary expected, the duration of the contract, etc. The agreement concluded with the migrant is informal. No written document is drawn and, usually, no external witness is present when a deal is made. We have seen *dalals* recommending the greatest discretion to their recruits, departure dates not being announced beforehand and passport and visas being handed over at the airport immediately before flight departure. These procedures are standard. It is clear that as little evidence as possible is left and *dalals* are careful to protect themselves from eventual pursuit.

If local *dalals* regularly cheat their recruits, they are also cheated by the recruiting agencies they deal with. A visa different from the one promised may be given or delay may occur in delivering the visa after payment has been made. Since migrants and their families usually do not know the name and the address of the recruiting agency their *dalal* dealt with and are not aware of its role, *dalals* get blamed whenever something goes wrong. Recruiting agencies are seldom disturbed. We have seen women stranded at the airport in Kuwait, Bahrain or Dubai having no name and no telephone number of a person/agency they could call to come to their rescue in Bangladesh or abroad. One woman learned on the plane that she was going to Kuwait and not to Malaysia as she had been told but she could not

appeal to anyone. Migrant women are deliberately kept ignorant by recruiting agencies to avoid problems.

The Table below shows that 66.1 percent of the women obtained their visa from *dalals*, 22 percent from neighbours and only 2.1 percent got it from recruiting agencies. Neighbours take the same profit as *dalals*. Only close relatives (mother, wife or sister) were seen not engaging in the sale of visa for profit.

Some *dalals* accepted partial payment and demanded that the remaining amount be paid after starting work abroad. There is a slight risk for the *dalal* if the woman returns early, empty handed and claims to have been cheated. In such cases, the canceling of the "debt" can be presented as a favour exchanged against a promise not to pursue the *dalal*. Sometimes, the agency abroad is requested to keep the woman's salary until her debt is reimbursed. Different *dalals* have different ways of working and reaping profit.

The high number of women migrating through *dalals* and neighbours (88.1 percent) has important consequences. Not only does it increase the cost of migration for the migrant but also it multiplies the risks of being cheated without any possible recourse. The illegality of unskilled women labour migration has contributed to create such situation, which does not benefit women.

Table 19: Identity of Visa Providers to Women Interviewed (Middle East and Malaysia)

Visa Providers	No. of Women	Percent
Dalal (Local and outsiders)	156	66.1
Neighbours	52	22.0
Relatives	23	9.8
Manpower Agents	5	2.1
Total	<b>236</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### 4.3 A low prestige job

Recruiters (called *dalal* in Gazipur and *delegator* in Narayangonj) do not readily advertise to outsiders the work they do. Women returnees or their families identified them for us. When approached, most of them refused to acknowledge that sending women abroad was their main occupation. They claimed they were helping relatives or neighbours only or presented their

engagement in this field as a service and not as a business; some said it was a temporary occupation, others acknowledged having engaged in this activity in the past but not anymore.

" I could not accept this job fully. This is not good work but I do a bit to earn."

The man who pronounced these words is one of the most active *dalals* in Gazipur. Another *dalal* who sent two of his wives abroad and used their "success" to advertise his business (marrying a third wife to look after his other needs at home in the meantime) exclaimed:

"I myself feel it is very denigrating to admit that I am a *dalal*. I feel shame to mention that I do manpower business but what can I do, I have to live.

After sending my own wife, this business has been easier. This is an easy way of making money but one's position in society suffers. We can be insulted anytime. We must tell lies. Our word has no value. My own sons do not like what I do."

The low prestige of the job rebounds on family members and those who engage in this work often hide their activity or suffer their family's disapproval. Fauzia is a 38 year old woman who worked as a motivator for a well known *dalal* who could no longer enter Gazipur because he made too many enemies. Fauzia claimed to have recruited 15 women. Her brother with whom she lived did not know about her work. Her son and her sister-in-law knew and disapproved. They urged her to stop before it got too much known. Fauzia used the good name of her family as an asset for the business.

"My father was a well known and respected man, he was a *Matbor*, so, I can easily enter people's home.

The *dalal* who employed her provided a little capital for Fauzia to carry out a sari business allowing her to enter people's home, talk to women and identify candidates. The cover was safe. But Fauzia was well aware of doing 'bad' work (morally wrong and socially damaging).

"I will not go abroad. What women do when they go as maids, more or less everybody knows. That kind of work is not for me."

- "Why do you convince women to go for work you would not do yourself?"

- "For a living, people do anything. Besides, the profit I make is very little compared with that of the *dalal* who employs me.

She argued that making a little profit reduced the badness of the work. Necessity is the supreme argument excusing all evil. The discourse is common among *dalals*. Fauzia explained:

"This is not good work. We are cursed people. We are insulted. I know this. But for money, people do so many kinds of work.

If I get caught and there is a *shalish*, *Matbor* will ask, where did she get such fearlessness? I am a widow and I am poor. This is why I should not do this work. I depend on my employer's kindness. I know where he lives. He cannot run away from me."

The cheater could be cheated one day. In this job, fortunes are precarious. Although Fauzia made relatively little profit and paid a high personal price in terms of social reputation, economic "necessity" led her to play a central role in the cheating of (and trafficking in) women.

#### **4.4 Risks and advantages of recruiting women**

For recruiters, sending women abroad is seen as both riskier and easier than sending men. The risks come from the possibility of being accused of trafficking in women, a serious offence which carries a heavy penalty. This happened to Nuru Mia, a 42 year old man from Narayangonj who was interviewed after he was jailed for two weeks, beaten up by the police and finally bailed out by his family. His trial was pending.

"I sent women to Malaysia, Bahrain, Dubai and Kuwait. I never faced any problem. This is the first time I get caught. I made a formal promise to Allah that I would never send women abroad again. After getting arrested, my business has gone, so has my name. It will be difficult now to marry my grown up daughters."

When he was arrested, Nuru Mia was about to send a 17 year old girl to Dubai. In the absence of her mother who was in Dubai, the *dalal* had convinced the father and the latter had already disbursed the cost of migration. The mother, a migrant herself who knew only too well what such

journey entailed, objected to the decision. Hearing that her daughter was about to leave, she quickly returned to Bangladesh and tried to convince her husband to abandon the plan. But Nuru Mia considered the deal concluded and moved the girl to his own house. Infuriated, the mother filed an accusation of trafficking in women against the *dalal*. The story is interesting. It shows that the experienced *dalal* had miscalculated the power and the determination of a mother who had both, money at hand and accurate knowledge about migration. She had been lured by the same men a few years earlier and was determined to protect her daughter from experiencing the same.

Nuru Mia's arrest spelled a warning but it hardly disturbed the business of other *dalals* in the area. Getting a reputation as a trafficker inevitably means the end of business, at least in a particular location. Such person may move on and continue the same work elsewhere as has been seen with other famous *dalals*. A woman recruiter met at an agency in Dhaka talked about her own experience of being on the move.

"If our name gets spoiled, we have to leave the area. In Dhaka, I cannot stay anywhere for long. I have to keep changing place. I live like a thief. We give our real address to no one."

Shahidnagar in Narayangonj has acquired a reputation as a location where trafficking in women and in children is common. It started in 1996, when parents filed an accusation of trafficking against the woman *dalal* who had taken their young son to work as camel jockey to Dubai. They had agreed to send the boy but they were promised a regular payment, which they did not receive. Interestingly, the accusation of trafficking came only as the parents were not paid. The press here played an important role in publicizing the case and in alerting the public to other cases of trafficking. The local journalist who first exposed the case and wrote about the children camel jockey observed that traffickers in children and traffickers in women in his area often helped each other but he was not allowed to speak about this.

"When I wrote about trafficking in children, the reaction was explosive. The way I could write about child trafficking was not possible about women. The women told me their stories but they requested me not to publish them."

Without the press and TV coverage of these events, we suppose the police would not have acted the way they did. They may not have arrested the traffickers and filed a court case which led to condemnation. Journalistic denunciation is important but it seldom can it be sustained for long. Alone, it

does not suffice to change a system. At the time of our fieldwork in this area, many women were still being recruited for the Middle East, lured, cheated and "trafficked". That kind of "trafficking" (seldom identified as such by the public) had not stopped. The local *thana*, however, continued to show interest in arresting "traffickers". One woman had been employed by the police to identify women returnees and convince those who felt they had been cheated/trafficked to file a case against their *dala*. In one case, a returnee did so and the police recovered on her behalf 30,000 taka, representing half the amount she had lost. The good action benefited the police who pocketed part of the money extracted from the *dala*. Using illegal activities as a leverage to extract money from wrongdoers, for the police, is not a new method of doing "justice".<sup>19</sup>

Many *dalals* find sending women abroad easier than sending men.

"I send women because they create less problems. When they get into difficulty, I can talk to them and manage the problem."

"I sent about 25 women to the Middle East, mainly Dubai. There was no problem. Problems come from men. It's men who complain that they were not given the job or the salary they were promised."

Some of the reasons why cheated women did not pursue their recruiters were clearly exposed in the case histories. Women suffer the same weaknesses as men but, in addition, they fear the consequences of exposing the work they did abroad. This is a major deterrent to seeking justice and is a true gift for *dalals*. We have seen the latter manipulating women returnees and, emphasizing the importance of keeping silent in order to protect their reputation. It generally worked. This vulnerability in women is clearly socially engineered and we see *dalals* being particularly interested in reinforcing women's shame for their own benefit.

#### 4.5 Recruiters' costs and benefits

"I sent two women before Eid and had to pay the agency 47,000 taka for both. I deal with 3 agencies in Noya Paltan. Each has a rate according to the country of immigration and the type of work. Whatever I can manage above this is my benefit."

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<sup>19</sup> Such case was related in Blanchet (1996), p. 199-218

This is how a *dalal* described his work:

The research team followed up the two women sent before Eid. Both returned within 3 months and failed migration (they were probably sent with short-term visitor visas). They had been promised housework but were forced to engage in sex work. Both came back empty handed. Having interviewed them, we have no hesitation in stating that they were trafficked. They were cheated by the *dalal* here and, used and abused by the Bangladeshi manager who put them to sex work in Dubai.

The local *dalal* charged them 45,000 taka each: one had paid the entire amount while the other had paid 35,000 taka with the promise to pay the rest, as she would start to earn. The *dalal* therefore pocketed 23,000 taka before the two women left. He did not press to recover the amount due from one of them, taking the occasion to show his magnanimity. He said he would try to send her again. This particular *dalal* specialized in sending women on short-term visas to Dubai without informing them. The cost is lower than company visas, which is attractive to candidates who are promised housework. The *dalal* knew he was selling what he called "risky" visas. He did not inquire about the ordeals the two women went through. Why should he be curious about these problems? He knows enough to carry out business; in other words, he knows how to select the right candidates for "risky" visas.

*Dalals* and large traders in visas are known to make the largest profits in the manpower business. Profit margins are variable and there are no fix rule or fix price here. We have seen women migrating to the same country, at the same time and for the same work being charged different prices. Costs depends on how well informed the migrant and her family are about on going prices and how much the *dalal* can get from them.

*Dalals* have some costs.

"If I send someone abroad, I make 10,000 to 15,000 taka profit. Out of this, there are some costs: entertainment of relatives, hotel, bribes, compensation for money lost, etc."

"In this job, you cannot keep your promises, so before sending someone, a lot of time is required and there are expenses."

"If I send someone to a job different from what was promised and this person returns within 3 months, compensation must sometimes be offered. Out of 10 migrants who leave, one may come back. You have to keep this in mind when you do this business. If a

*shalish* (village arbitration) is called, before the meeting, one or two *Matbor* should be paid which lowers the fine. Tension is always there and this has its cost too."

Although the job requires no capital to start with, a large amount of money may be needed when problems arise with the police as happened to Nuru Mia. Journalists may have to be bribed when threatening to expose a misdeed. Police, local political groups may have to be kept happy at times, all of which is costly.

#### **4.6 The role of recruiting agencies**

According to BAIRA, there are some 850 licensed recruiting agencies in Bangladesh. The role they play in women labour migration, as suggested above, is clearer for company workers than for domestic workers. In this study, the latter constitute only a minority (17.8 percent of our sample) of women migrants. One manager stated,

"We do not send women for house work because they get sexually abused."

We have seen that women sent for company work get abused in other ways. Their salaries are so low that they have little option but to engage in sex work. That they should be sent legally does not reduce women's pressing need to earn and the risks of engaging in sex work.

The manager of one recruiting agency who claimed to have sent over 2,000 men and women to Kuwait in the last 2 years explained the system showing that he was well informed and fully aware of the deplorable situation migrants faced in Kuwait.

"In Kuwait, a special permission is needed for a Kuwaiti company to recruit Bangladeshi workers. They must promise their Ministry of Labour to pay their workers 35 KD per month if food and lodging is provided and 45 KD if it is not. Here we show a letter to the Labour and Manpower office saying the workers will be paid 50 KD. Actually, people over there get paid 25 KD. We tell them so.

What happens is that with such a pay, a person can provide for his/her own need but cannot save and send money to his/her family. In order to earn more, men engage in risky work, they get caught by the police and are sent back.

Those who are clever can do well. Look at my boss. He went as a worker. Now he is the owner of a company.

When a Kuwaiti company gives 20 or 22 KD instead of 25 KD, there is nothing we can do. We cannot guarantee the duration of the contract either. This is the responsibility of the Kuwaiti Government."

The catastrophic consequences of such a recruitment system, with all its appearance of legality, could be observed in May-June 2001 in Kuwait. Responsibility to enforce the recommended rate of pay appeared to be left to the weakest party, that is the migrant workers themselves. Recruiting agencies in Bangladesh took no responsibility for the plight of the workers they sent.

"We will send people with visa. This is not a problem. But over there, there may be no work, there may be work but salary is delayed or is not paid as promised, a man may be appointed to another job. We cannot do anything about these problems."

Look, this is a business. We need contracts. We have fixed costs to cover here. We must make 15,000 to 20,000 taka per worker, otherwise profits are not interesting. "

This manager of a recruiting agency could not have stated more clearly his objective.

Licensed recruiting agencies also make an income by processing visas obtained by individuals. They deal with tickets, government clearance and medical certificates for which they charge 2,000 to 3,000 taka per migrant worker. Discretely, they process the papers of women sent as domestic workers as well. Many are aware that women sent with company visas (which is legal) may be appointed to other work.

"Going to Dubai as a garment worker is easy. Visas are available. What women do over there is something else."

Manpower agencies admit that the business is presently very low. The cost of visas for Saudi Arabia has doubled, the same is true of visas for Kuwait and these are pushing up migration costs while salaries are being reduced. Attracting workers in such conditions is getting more difficult and *dalals* must work harder to find convincing arguments, pushing yet a degree higher the

deceit and the lies. In this business, women migrants undoubtedly occupy a place, though very much shaded.

Many questions remain unanswered in our quest to know more about the trafficking of Bangladeshi women to the Middle East and the role played by the chain of people involved in their recruitment. What are the links between brothel owners in Kuwait or in Dubai and recruiting agencies in Bangladesh? That and many other issues remain poorly documented. More time and research are needed to understand better this subject and other well guarded secrets.

#### **4.7 The morality of sending women as migrants**

Even though the abuse and the deprivation of rights suffered by men and women migrant to the Middle East are often similar and even though women (who at least have something to sell) are not necessarily worst off, the attitudes of *dalals*, recruiting agents, police officers, and government staff towards women place them in a category apart. To many, sending women abroad appears to be a greater sin than sending men.

One police officer posted at the airport emigration (on condition of anonymity) confided that when he began his duty, he could close his eyes on men leaving with false documents but he could not bring himself to allow women to go.

" A man can go as labour. The Special Branch must give clearance. But women can only go as housewife, visitor, student, artist or businesswoman. This profession is in their passport and they must get special permission."

The government had declared the migration of unskilled women labour to be illegal and this emigration police was empowered to stop them. For two days, he did not permit women to leave but, on the third day, his superior called him and asked how he would repay the 25,000 taka his colleagues had been deprived of through his zeal. The police at the time collected 5,000 taka per woman (*jhupri* in police jargon) and 2,000 taka from men leaving for the Middle East. These rates have now increased to 6,000 taka and 2,500 taka respectively. The money was discreetly handed over by the

*dalal*. When asked why higher amounts were required for women, the police officer replied that they took higher risks by allowing women to leave.

This police officer wanted to keep his job and had little choice but to comply with his colleagues' expectation. Gradually, he was drawn into the system. He said: " I felt like a *dalal* myself when I received phone calls from Dubai or Kuwait asking whether such and such woman had boarded the flight." Through this informant, we realized that the government (the police at any rate) had pretty accurate records on the number of women who left the country as illegal migrants.

Distinctions are often drawn by recruiters/migrants about the type of women who can be taken abroad and those who should not (our women). One noted earlier that men from Comilla, Sylhet and Noakhali were well represented in the Middle East. Many were old migrants. Some of these men lived and worked in partnership with women from other districts of Bangladesh. They did not select women from their own area. Very few women were seen from Comilla and we met none who were from Sylhet or Noakhali. These are districts from where men migrate but women stay home (pure and preserved). In a group discussion with men who had spent several years in Bahrain and Kuwait the same observation was made.

"Most of these husbands/*dalals* are from Sylhet, Noakhali and Comilla. Women are from other districts."

One manpower agent similarly expressed the view that (our) women should be kept at home.

"I do not recruit women from Kushtia (his home district). *Bidesh* is not for them. I don't mind sending girls who worked in garment factories in Dhaka. They are not so pure anymore."

For many, sending a married woman is less objectionable than sending an unmarried girl. Combining morality, pragmatic wisdom and a sense of business, a woman recruiter said she preferred married women for the following reasons.

"I do not choose any woman. I only choose women who have suffered like me. I prefer women who have been married. They can do everything. They are not so particular about preserving their honour and their leaving causes less suspicion."

Finally, some disapproved all together the migration of women. One local *dalal* explained:

"I don't send women. I was in Saudi Arabia. I saw what women did over there and I don't want to be involved in sending them."

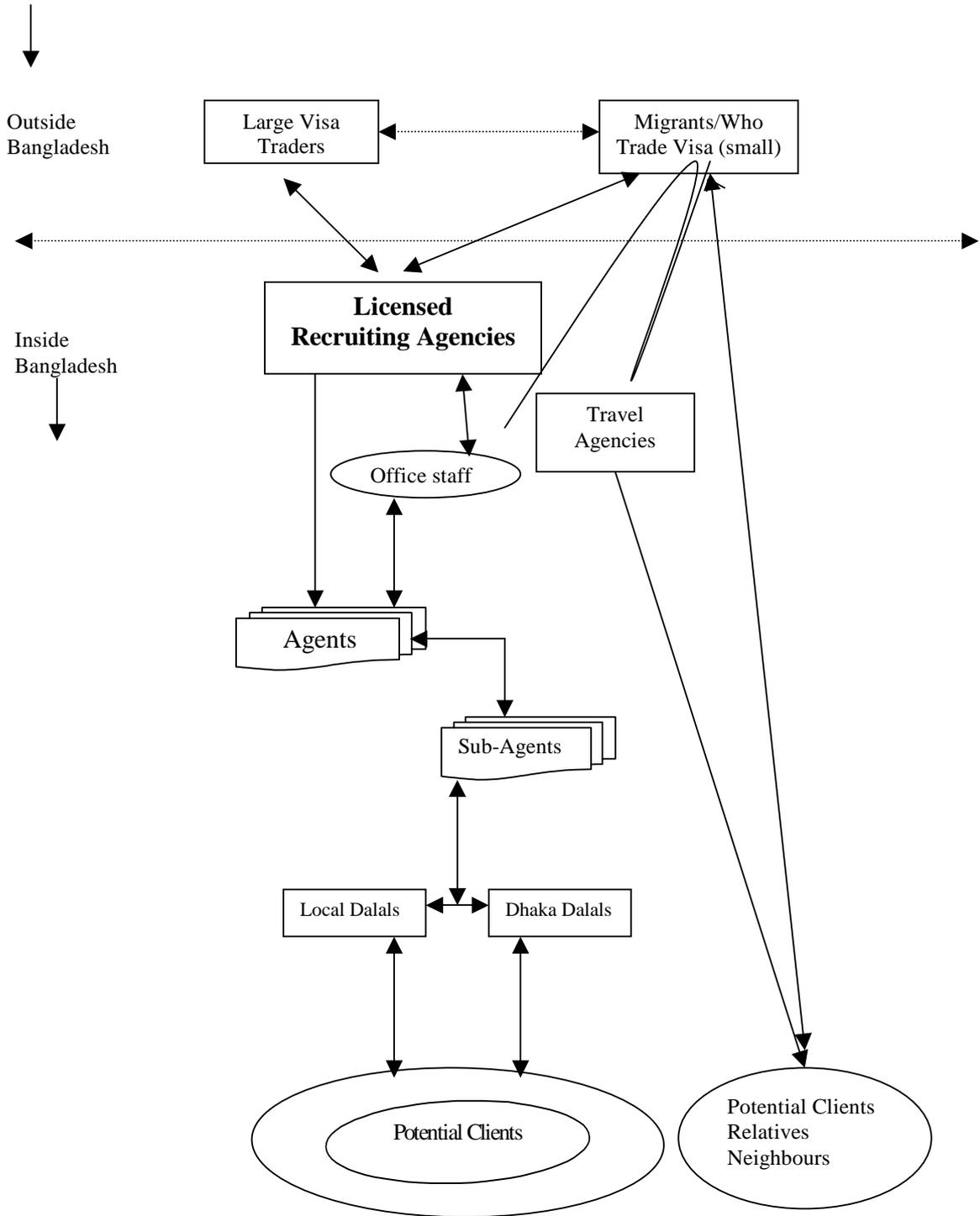
Beside morality, for reasons of pride it is clear that many Bangladeshi men abroad do not find it easy to witness the prostitution of Bangladeshi women, especially as many of them can little afford to visit them as clients and pay the price of their service.

"Women made more money and stayed longer than men. All of them had to do sex work either because they had to serve the men of the house or they had to make extra money because their salaries were so low....We went to Bangladeshi women. To have sex once cost us a quarter of our monthly salary."

"When we saw Bangladeshi women doing prostitution, we felt very small. We saw more Bangladeshi women than other nationalities in this occupation. May be it was because of our network."

Migration did not place Bangladeshi men and women in the same camp. The migration of Bangladeshi women challenges Bangladeshi men in their masculinity in more than one way. The topic (which could help explain the government ban on the migration of women) should be the subject of more research.

## Women Labour Recruiting Process



## Chapter Five

### Bangladeshi Women in Kolkata brothels

#### 5.1 The purchase of girls: part of brothel culture

Red light districts in Kolkata were visited to assess the presence of girls and women from Bangladesh and find out how they had entered.<sup>20</sup> Time was short and the population reached was small. Yet, we believe the findings are useful to ascertain a particular type of migration, which is not new. The elements traditionally associated with the trafficking in women and in adolescent girls are often present here: lure, deceit, legal cross border migration, sale, loss of autonomy, confinement and forced prostitution for the benefit of someone else. Well framed by the media, this image of trafficking in women has come to typify the phenomenon. To revisit the stereotype, document actual modes of entry into the brothel and see what has changed over the years seemed important. Is "trafficking in women" from Bangladesh the same today as it was in the 1970's when poverty, famine, child marriage and large families were more prevalent?

One of the problems with the stereotyped picture of "trafficking" is that it is too often a still shot. Or when it is a moving picture, it ends with entry into the brothel, not showing history going on afterwards. It will be seen here that the immediate outcome of being trafficked into the brothel is the imposition of a *tsukri* status, which may last a few months or a few years. Then, greater independence is generally achieved and most women are eventually able to earn and make choices for themselves. There is a life after being "trafficked". And as women move on, the experience of having been trafficked is read in a different light.

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<sup>20</sup> The presence of women from Bangladesh in Indian brothels has been asserted in several studies and reports. Khan and Arefeen mentioned Joardar (1984) who pointed out in his study of Calcutta brothels that many women originally came from Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries. See Prostitution in Bangladesh (undated). Elsewhere, in a report titled Survey in the Area of Child and Women Trafficking (BMWLA, June 1998) one reads: "The Social Welfare Board of India estimates that 2.7 percent of all prostitutes working in India are from Bangladesh, making them the largest population of foreign born prostitutes working in India.", p. 35

"Although I was cheated and made to join this profession, I now accept it as something god wanted."(A 28 year old woman who now works as an independent sex worker)

The study presented here is mostly brothel based but some information was also obtained in the communities women originated from in Jessore, Satkhira and Narayanganj. The latter complement the former allowing an understanding of family circumstances, past history and present connections between brothel and village society. The search for the community of origin was time-consuming and could be done only in a few cases<sup>21</sup>.

As pointed out elsewhere, the brothel context affects the way girls and women present themselves and tell their stories. First, the sex work they engage in need not be hidden, everybody does it or knows about it. Second, those who have been "trafficked" readily acknowledge the fact. To admit that one has been bought and/or forcibly put to work, especially after the period of bondage (*tsukri*-hood) has ended, is neither dangerous, nor exceptional, nor shameful. It is a common way of entering the brothel, almost a "normal" phase in the life of brothel women which some later see as a period of apprenticeship. Trafficked women need not carry the guilt of having "chosen" sex work and be blamed for it as someone else decided for them. It may be easier to admit being a victim of trafficking than showing one decided to enter the brothel. A study we carried out in 1993-94 in Daulotdia brothel in Bangladesh found proof of this and concluded that claims of trafficking may be higher than the number of women actually "trafficked". It called for caution while recognizing the high incidence of trafficking as a mode of recruitment into brothels.

Women trafficked to the brothel generally underwent a bumpy transition. They were made to understand quite abruptly that they had been appropriated and had to engage in sex work for the profit of their captor. The amount of the purchase or the "debt" to reimburse could be fairly small, yet its announcement sufficed to destabilize, and disarm those who were caught and induce compliance. In Kolkata brothels some *malkeens* did their own recruiting, in which case there was no sale-and-purchase but various trappings, psychological manipulations and threats in order to break girls' resistance to sex work. Some *malkeens* showed kindness and generosity in

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<sup>21</sup> Studying the sending communities were not part of our original plan. However, while carrying out fieldwork in Satkhira the homes of a few women met in Kolkata brothels were visited and information could be triangulated which was very informative.

the beginning and the new recruit was made to feel indebted towards the woman who later exploited her.

"When I first came here, I was sick. My *malkeen* looked after me and paid for my treatment. For the first 4 months, I was not given any customers. My *malkeen* now keeps my income but when I go home, she gives me some money. (Nazmun, 20 years old)

Most new entrants were cut off from their families, intensively re-socialized and encouraged to develop a new identity. After entering the brothel, their lives changed dramatically. Girls brought up inside the brothel as children and introduced into the profession by their mothers (fictive or real) appeared less common in Kolkata than in Bangladesh. Once the period of bondage was over, many girls/women remained in the profession. The numbers of those who ran away or were let go is obviously difficult to assess in a brothel-based study.

If trafficking is readily acknowledged in the brothel context, revealing the same in the community of origin is more problematic. Most trafficked girls/women put up stories for their families back in Bangladesh. They could not reveal the work they did and therefore could not declare having been trafficked into a brothel. Unlike the Middle East migrants, their families did not invest precious resources in the migratory project and the pressure to come back with a "success" story was less felt. These women could afford to come back empty handed. But the consequences of having been trafficked (with the suspicion that a woman was involvement in sex work) were just as detrimental to their reputation and prevented women from telling frankly their story.

After being trafficked, some women waited years before contacting their families. Nissa is such a woman. Her story was heard from her mother, father, sister and sister-in-law who reside in Jessore, Zikorgacha.

#### **5.1.1 Nissa' story**

"Nissa was first married at 13 years old. After failing two marriages, she returned to her father who was very poor. She struggled to feed her two children. One of them died. She was 24 years old when Anjuara, a woman, from her village who had done well in Kolkata approach her. This was 6 years ago."

(her mother) "We had no idea what kind of work she would be proposed. We had never been to India. Anjuara did not ask for transport cost, she just took my daughter for free. For two years, we did not know where she was. When Anjuara came on a visit and we asked about Nissa, she said she had married and she was fine. We told Anjuara to send Nissa back immediately. We had been left to look after her son and she did not send anything for him. Six months later, Johra (Anjuara's sister) gave us 1,000 taka on Nissa's behalf. Then, some time later we heard that Anjuara and Johra sold women to the brothel. They all worked in Sonagachi (*a well-known red light district of Kolkata*). The news spread. The village people beat up the two sisters once and took their money. Their father was also insulted.

Three years after leaving, Nissa finally came to visit with a man she presented as her husband. She said she had left the brothel and lived as a wife. The youth club boys asked for proof of their marriage and challenged them. In the end, the *moulvi* was called and they were forced to marry.

Nissa and her husband were told to stay in the village. They agreed but said they needed to sell a few things in Kolkata first and would return later. Nissa got frightened and because of the village people she never came back. We have not seen her for 2½ years."

Even though Nissa is seen as a victim by her parents, she is guilty in the eyes of the villagers because she is suspected of working in a brothel. The parents are particularly upset that she sends no money for her son. Other members of the family are angry for other reasons.

(her sister-in-law) "I have been belittled because of my sister-in-law. I just married my daughter. I fear her in-laws may find out about the work her aunt (Nissa) is doing."

This story shows some of the difficulties in admitting having been trafficked and continuing working in a brothel. Parents may know where a "trafficked" daughter is, they may benefit from the money she sends, but they keep the secret to themselves. One can see why investigating cases of trafficked women in a brothel would yield higher result than a village-based study.

## 5.2 Women migrating illegally need not be trafficked or engaged in sex work

It should be made clear at the onset of this section that Bangladeshi women who migrate to India do not all engage in sex work and those who engage in sex work are not all in brothels. A unique focus on brothels may twist the image of women migration as a whole. Ranabir Samaddar mentioned other sectors of activity for Bangladeshi women migrated to India. He writes:

"These reports [*on trafficking*] fail to capture the situation of transborder flow of women in its entirety... Many young women, indeed girls, have successfully crossed the border and have taken up jobs in road repairs, helping the coolies in big bazaars in Calcutta, in paddy transplantation work, they work as housemaids and particularly work in brick fields and shrimp-cleaning units..."<sup>22</sup>

Some Bangladeshi women first engaged in the above occupations but later chose sex work as it paid more. These girls/women were usually not trafficked, though they may have suffered considerable abuse as migrants without shelter. Here is the case of Minu, a 25 year old woman from Pirojpur who has been living in Kolkata since the age of 11.

"My father died when I was very small. My mother died when I was 7 years old. I am their only child. After my mother died, I lived at my father's younger brother (*chacha*) who was very poor. It was a difficult life. When a village sister who lived in Kolkata came to visit, I asked her to take me with her.

I lived at the flower market underneath Howrah Bridge. Many Bangladeshis lived there. I earned by bringing water to the flower stall owners. When I was 12, I was lying down underneath the bridge and one *maastan* (muscle man) took me and raped me with his gang, 7 men in all. People saw this but could not do anything. In the morning, the police took me to hospital. I was there for one month. After this, I slept in front of the police station and worked as a rag

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<sup>22</sup> R. Samaddar, 1999, p.195

picker (*tokai*). At 14, I went by myself to Rambagan (a red light district) and joined the profession."

There are many such stories. The subject of child or family labour migration to India is vast and research has hardly begun.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned in earlier chapters, it would be wrong to highlight trafficking and ignore labour migration. The issue may be politically sensitive but recording only the trafficking gives a wrong picture of labour migration. In this report, the view on Bangladeshi women labour migration to India is somewhat widened by the study carried out in Mumbai but it remains very partial. Many more studies are needed to present a fuller picture.

### 5.3 Working with the Dubar Mohila Samannoy Committee

The research in Kolkata brothels was carried out with the collaboration of the Durbar Mohila Samannoy Committee (DMSC or Durbar), a sex workers organization. With their help, 70 Bangladeshi women were identified and interviewed in 6 brothels of the city. The criterion of selection was the Bangladeshi origin of the women and not whether they had been trafficked.

Members of the DMSC were helpful in more than one way. They identified women of Bangladeshi origin faster than we could have done alone and they helped us to establish a relationship of trust. Although the fear is less than in Mumbai, many Bangladeshi women in Kolkata prefer to hide their Bangladeshi origin. It is easy to do so. The border between Bangladesh and West Bengal divides a people who speak the same language, share a same Bengali culture and look similar in their physical appearance. Criteria of citizenship have been inconsistent over the years, creating confusion and allowing room to maneuver.

*Malkeens* encourage their new recruits from Bangladesh to memorize an address in West Bengal, change their names to a more Bengali-sounding one, learn some Hindi and a few other tricks so that they may pass as Indians and be protected from being jailed and deported should the police raid the brothel. Some have managed to obtain a ration card and an Indian passport within a few years of having been trafficked and have become documented "Indians".

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<sup>23</sup> A study titled *The situation of trafficked women and children from Bangladesh and Nepal to India* was carried out by Natasha Ahmed with IOM funding. The data presented under this ambitious title are unimpressive. The sample consisted of 14 men and 51 women interviewed in Kolkata, New Delhi and Mumbai. There were no children, never mind the title. The conceptual confusion maintained between illegal migration and trafficking is disturbing. The study superficially touches upon many issues but the analysis is hesitant and inconclusive.

The Durbar members, being themselves women of the milieu, are well considered by the sex workers and through them access to Bangladeshi women could be easily gained. Those who accompanied the researchers were articulate and excellent informants themselves. There were a few drawbacks, however, which are interesting to mention. Durbar is not a research organization and the time they could give us was limited. Most importantly, Durbar is a sex workers organization whose primary objective is to promote the health of sex workers and prevent the spread of STDs/HIV/AIDS. For the success of their program, they rely on the collaboration of *malkeens* whom they cannot afford to antagonize. Keeping the *malkeens* as their allies hinders efforts to combat trafficking. This is to be expected. *Malkeen* are older women, less active or no longer active as sex workers. They acquire girls, keep them in bondage and depend on their sex work for an income. The Durbar staff is well aware of this but often, do not intervene.

"We cannot ask new girls how they came. We don't talk to them and, if we do, the *malkeens* don't like it. Only after a while, slowly, we can get to know these girls. By that time, they have joined the profession."  
(A Durbar supervisor)

During our research, a group of *malkeens* complained to the Durbar office about the interest we took in their *tsukris* and we were warned to be cautious. New *tsukris* were difficult to access and although some cases of recent trafficking could be documented, many could not.

Finally, it should be remembered that the Durbar women, being themselves sex workers, were socialized into the brothel culture where the purchasing of girls or their appropriation on different grounds is normal practice. Away from the office, while in the field discussing with other *malkeens*, they could easily speak the same language as them. One day, a famous trafficker had been arrested and one *malkeen* commented that the punishment meted out to this man had been too harsh. She argued that someone who purchased a girl for a high price normally gets furious when she refuses to entertain clients. The runaway girl, whose accusation of torture had led to the arrest of the trafficker, was not so young anymore (she was 21 years old). Why was she so reluctant to work as expected, the *malkeen* argued. The Durbar staff who was about the same age as the *malkeen*, approved. Observing this attitude (quite different from Durbar official line on trafficking) was interesting and made us realize that many Durbar staff had double identities, each matching different moral standards. We learned from their knowledge as insiders but also realized their difficult position in rescuing trafficked girls. Challenging the hierarchical structure of the brothel and the human rights violation it permits, in other words, transforming brothel culture

is not so easily achieved. In spite of these limitations, the Durbar women could speak with their own voice and we learned to respect them.

The brothels of Kolkata are not very different from the brothels of Bangladesh, which we had studied earlier. One finds more or less the same hierarchical structure with the same status and the same words to name them. In Kolkata and in Bangladesh, there are *tsukris*, that is girls who are usually bought and made to work for the benefit of a madam called *sardani* in Bangladesh and *malkeen* in India. There are also sex workers who work independently (*salami diye, bharatia*) and sex workers who work on a sharing basis (*adiya*). In Kolkata, some women live outside; they are called *flying sex workers*.

#### 5.4 A high percentage of trafficked girls/women

Seventy-seven red light districts have been recorded in West Bengal, 15 of which are located in Kolkata City. The Durbar women stated that Bangladeshi girls and women were found in every red-light district of the state and the majority had been sold.

In our survey carried out in 6 red-light districts of Kolkata, as many as 59 (84.7 percent) of the 70 girls and women interviewed indicated that they had been sold and/or forced to engage in sex work for the benefit of someone else without getting an income. This is a very high percentage indeed, higher than that found in the Daulotdia study we carried out in 1993-94<sup>24</sup>. It supports the common view that a considerable number of Bangladeshi girls and women who work in the brothels of India were trafficked.

Table 20: Interviews taken in Kolkata brothels

	No. Of women	Percent
Women interviewed	70	100.0
Trafficked women	59	84.3
Migrated by their own decision	11	15.7

Source: Drishti, Kolkata brothel survey, 2001.

The practice of procuring girls through purchase is known to be ancient in brothels. The table below gives an indication of trends over the last 30

<sup>24</sup> In Daulotdia, about 25 percent of the sex workers were daughters of mothers who had been sex workers. In Kolkata brothels, mothers initiating their daughters in the trade appeared less common. Most mothers there brought up their daughters outside and planned a different life for them. See Blanchet, *Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhoods*, UPL, 1996.

years. Our small sample does not support the view that trafficking is diminishing.

Table 21: Year of Trafficking to Kolkata Brothels

Duration	Total Migrated Women	No. of Trafficking Cases	Percent of Trafficking
2000 – 2001	10 (14.3)	9 (15.3)	90.0
1998 – 1999	11 (15.7)	10 (16.9)	90.9
1996 – 1997	9 (12.9)	7 (11.9)	77.8
1994 – 1995	7 (10.0)	6 (10.2)	85.7
1992 – 1993	7 (10.0)	7 (11.9)	100.0
1990 – 1991	3 (4.3)	2 (3.4)	66.7
1985 – 1989	14 (20.0)	12 (20.3)	85.7
1980 – 1984	6 (8.6)	4 (6.8)	66.7
During the 70's	3 (4.3)	2 (3.4)	66.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>70 (100.0)</b>	<b>59 (100.0)</b>	<b>84.3</b>

Forty four percent of the girls and women here were trafficked between 1996 and 2001. It is evident that traffickers are still active. Older sex workers in Sonagachi and Baubazar said that trafficking had decreased. Even 7 or 8 years ago, they claimed that traffickers came with groups of girls to sell at a time. It is possible that the risks of trafficking have increased and the activities are more hidden or have changed form. Durbar is trying to check the entry of very young girls and with the help of the powerful clubs they have been successful in sending a few of them back. One 20-year-old woman who refused to entertain clients was rescued and sent back to Bangladesh while this research was on going. It is not certain that such rescue, sometimes highly publicized, significantly reduces the overall number of trafficked girls but it sends clear signals to traffickers.

In the traditional red light districts of Mumbai, in Kamathipura and in Pila House (old Falkland Road), one heard similar remarks. It was said that trafficking in girls and in women had diminished and prices offered by *malkeen* were so low, they no longer interested traffickers. These traditional red light districts, which are included in tourist guides, are indeed shrinking in size but we heard others were opening up in the suburbs.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> This was stated by Ms Pritti Patkar of Prerana. She mentioned WASI and VIVALDI as areas where a large number of brothels had been opened.

The small population surveyed here does not permit a firm conclusion. Newly trafficked girls may be put to work in less visible locations. We know of private brothels where girls are kept as prisoners and are unlikely to be met by Durbar staff or independent sex workers or club members who may help to set them free. Below is the story of Piyara who was 22 years old and working in a garment factory in Uttora, Dhaka, when a woman called Joynob proposed to take her to Kolkata to do the same work.

**5.4.1 Joynob's story:** "In Kolkata, we stayed at the house of one Shushanto Mistri. Joynob told me that to get a good job I needed to learn Hindi. She said, stay here with Babu. You do the household work and learn the language. I was there two months. During this time, Joynob's Babu tried quite a few times to have sex with me but I refused.

After 2 months, Joynob brought me to a private house in Rabindra Sarani. She forced me to do sex work. At first, I refused. She tried to convince me, and then she hit me. I told her, send me back to Bangladesh. I want to go back to the garment factory but she did not listen. She said that girls who came here could only enter. They could not leave.

I was confined in that house for 9 months. I was never allowed out. At first, I pleaded with customers not to have sex with me. Many paid the fee and left without using me. I received none of that money.

Who ran the closed house where Piyara was kept is not clear. Joynob could have sold her for a specific period of time. Such trafficking was found elsewhere in India. One 18-year-old Bengali girl met in Mumbai said she had been sold in Ahmedabad at the age of 13, reclaimed one year later by the woman who had trafficked her and sold a second time in Mumbai. In Mumbai, traffickers are known to sell girls on a monthly basis and some of the bargirls we met had begun their career in this way. Girls unwilling to engage in sex work are broken into the trade in these confined and highly controlled brothels.

Let us follow Piyara. After a 9-month confinement in the private brothel, Joynob took her to Shonagachi. There, Piyara quarreled with her.

"Why she never paid me? Here, other girls gave me ideas to fight her."

Once in Sonagachi, Piyara did not object to sex work anymore but she wanted to be paid. She found support from other sex workers and broke away from Joynob. She began working as an *adiya* and later as an independent sex worker. But Joynob continued to pursue her.

"Joynob is still after me. She wants my money because she knows I am earning well. A few months ago, she offered to accompany me to get an abortion. I don't know what she fed me but I felt very sick in my head afterwards. She hit me many times. When I told others that she had fed me some harmful medicine, she said I was mad.

Joynob then decided that I should go home because I was not well. She made me withdraw all my savings at the bank in preparation for the trip. I had 82,000 rupees in all. Then she ran away with my money."

Joynob manipulated Piyara and took advantage of her vulnerability, as she needed an abortion. One wonders how Piyara could have trusted Joynob after all the harm she had caused her. These repeated cheating and betrayals had destabilized Piyara who appeared fragile. Brothel culture may be slowly changing but it remains a very exploitative environment especially for girls who are inexperienced and naive.

We saw there are closed houses where abuse is less likely to be checked. In Mumbai, people referred to "Jamuna Mansion" and "Congress Building" as being such highly controlled places where girls were generally younger and more likely to have been trafficked than in Kamathipura. We did not visit these closed houses but the description made by a 25 year old woman, Shyama, met in Zikorgacha, Jessore, gives some indication of the conditions which prevailed in one such brothel some 5 years ago.

**5.4.2 Shyama's story** "I was 15 years old and my little sister was 13 years old when *mashi* sent us to the brothel.

Before starting work, she got us a Copper-T, so that we would not become pregnant. My sister and I were sent to different places but we were sometimes brought together to meet our mother at *mashi's* house. I was in Wadibondor. I don't know how much I earned the first year as *mashi* kept my income. The second year, I got 3,000 rupees per

month, which I gave my mother. My sister did the same.

I started work at an age when girls are married, so I could cope. But my little sister was too young. I did not like this. Sometimes she cried, I felt very sad but there was nothing I could do.

We were 60 girls in one building. Quite a few were Nepali. Under one *malkeen*, there were 10 girls. Most days, I did 6 to 7 men, sometimes I did more. Clients were Pakistani, Saudi, Kuwaiti and Indian. At first, I did not like it, and then it was O.K. If a girl refused to work, she was beaten. We could not go out. We were prisoners. Customers paid the *malkeen* and after a customer left we were searched in case we hid some money. It was not possible to run away. But even if we could, where would I have gone? My mother was in this line, I was the eldest of the family and I felt responsible for my brothers and sisters. I had to help my mother. "

Shyama did not consider she had been trafficked. The highly controlled brothel where she worked could suit the purpose of traffickers very well even though, in her case, the padlock on the door was not necessary. She had spent 5 years as a maidservant at the *mashi's* house. The latter took care of her education and prepared her to enter the brothel. Shyama adapted and did not resist. The situation is different with her little sister who could never accept that her mother did not protect her from this harsh life. She eventually escaped with a boy and is now estranged from the family. A third sister worked for the *mashi*. The latter sold her to a husband in Uttar Pradesh at the age of 12 and she was never seen again. The *mashi*, a Bengali woman from Kolkata, had been highly trusted for many years by Shyama's mother. But the selling of the youngest sister finally opened the mother's eyes. She had gone to Mumbai with 3 daughters and returned to Bangladesh with only one, Shyama.

### **5.5 Education does not protect from trafficking**

In the Kolkata study, forty seven (nearly 80 percent of trafficked girls) were illiterate and only 4 (7 percent) had completed primary education. But educated girls are not safe from trafficking either. Minara, one of the victims had completed her SSC and did a private job in Jessore but still fell into the trafficker's trap. Here is her statement:

“A local man named Hori convinced my mother that he would find an office job for me in Kolkata. My salary would be 3000 rupees. I did not agree to go but my mother was adamant to send me. I told my mother that he could sell me in Kolkata. My mother replied: "He is not that kind of man". I came with Hori and he sold me in Khidderpore (Watgonj) for 20,000 rupees.”

Another victim, Mala, studied in a *madrassah* where she obtained her Dakhel (equivalent to SSC) in 2000. She was trafficked by a distant relative who had been in the sex trade for a long time. Mala and her parents did not know this.

“Roma (known as Sita Di in the brothel) persuaded my parents to send me with her so that I could look after her 7 year old son. With her cunning proposal, my parents fell in the trap. She brought me to Sonagachi. I understood very quickly what kind of place it was but I could not escape. Sita Di pushed me into this work. I never thought it could happen to me.”

In both cases, the girls were not keen to go but their parents pushed them. In their naïveté, they facilitated the work of the traffickers.

## 5.6 A majority of girls trafficked below the age of 18

The data shows that 42 of the 59 (70 percent) "girls" who had been trafficked were 18 years old or below when the trafficking event occurred and 20 (34 percent) were below the age of 16. Numbers are small but the pattern here is very clear and is confirmed elsewhere.

Table 22: Age when trafficked

Age (in years)	Age when trafficked	
	No. of Women	Percent
Up to 15	20	33.9
16 – 18	21	35.6
19 – 21	13	22.0
22 – 24	3	5.1
25 – 27	1	1.7
28 – 30	1	1.7

31 above	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100.0</b>

This finding is important. The age curve is similar to that found in the community-based study we conducted in Satkhira where the majority of the trafficked cases (mainly to Mumbai) were also adolescent girls. Here, out of 83 migrated girls/women recorded, 47 (56,6 percent) were considered to have been trafficked. The assessment about trafficking was made from a compilation of the victim's opinion, her family, the community and our own assessment. In this exercise, 76.6 percent of those considered to have been trafficked were eighteen years old or below and 44.7 percent were below the age of 16.

The research aimed to capture trafficking in women, yet we find here mostly trafficking in adolescent girls. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, such adolescent girls are categorized as children. Women and children should not be lumped together, experts on trafficking tell us. There are convincing reasons not to do so although, practically, the two categories may be difficult to sort out. When considering problems of trafficking, we suggest that adolescent girls be a category in itself; they should be distinguished from women above the age of 18 but also from children under the age 12 (e.g. boys trafficked as camel jockey).

Table 23: Age when migrated

Age (in years)	Locations of women interviewed			Total
	Kolkata	Jessore	Satkhira	
Up to 15	21 (30.0)	41 (38.3)	26 (31.3)	88 (33.8)
16 – 18	28 (40.0)	15 (14.0)	21 (25.3)	64 (24.6)
19 – 21	16 (22.9)	20 (18.7)	9 (10.8)	45 (17.3)
22 – 24	3 (4.3)	14 (13.1)	12 (14.5)	29 (11.2)
25 – 27	1 (1.4)	5 (4.7)	6 (7.2)	12 (4.6)
28 – 30	1 (1.4)	7 (6.50)	4 (4.8)	12 (4.6)
31 – 33	-	1 (0.9)	2 (2.4)	3 (1.2)
34 – 36	-	-	2 (2.4)	2 (0.8)
37 – 39	-	3 (2.8)	-	3 (1.20)
40 above	-	1 (0.9)	1 (1.2)	2 (0.8)
<b>Total</b>	<b>70 (100.0)</b>	<b>107 (100.0)</b>	<b>83 (100.0)</b>	<b>260 (100.0)</b>

The 260 informants whose age is recorded above migrated to India. We have seen that migration to the Middle East did not engage such young

persons. As mentioned in a previous chapter, migration to India sometimes involved entire families and young girls accompanied their parents. In some cases, as seen with Shyama above, mothers allowed their young daughters to be initiated into bar/sex work at an early age, while in other cases, they protected their daughters and sent them back to the village.

Traffickers target adolescent girls and see many advantages in them. The latter can be more easily manipulated and controlled, they are highly in demands as sex workers and their family's difficulty in protecting them and safeguarding their reputation can be exploited. Many girls, who were later trafficked, were first compromised in an affair that tarnished their good name. The "fault" could be minor (such as falling in love with a boy and exchanging love letters). Yet it led parents to agree to send them away or marry them off quickly without checking too carefully the credentials of the person who took them away.

Traffickers of young girls may transport them far away. Here is Sita's story, a 28-year-old woman from Kolaroa in Satkhira who now works in Kolkata as a *malkeen*.

#### 5.6.1 Sita's story

"A village brother promised to give me a job in Kaligonj but took me to Kolkata instead. He gave me to Rina Malkeen in Sonagachi. I was only 11½ years old and she kept me for one year with relatives outside the brothel. When I had my first menstruation, she took me to Bombay and sold me there to a *malkeen*.

Many foreigners came and, among them, many Arabs. They like little girls. One man from West Bengal especially liked me and he told the *malkeen* not to send other men to me. I had more free time as a result. My *malkeen* sent me to the market and I used to keep a few rupees for myself and deposit these with a shopkeeper.

Under our *malkeen*, there were 65 girls and I was the youngest. I could not speak Hindi. One day, the police raided our place. In court, I spoke Bangla and said I had come out of my own accord. I was quite tall and I looked older. I was returned to my *malkeen*.

When I was 15 years old, I fled with another girl. The *malkeen* took all the money my *babu* gave me, so I

had nothing except what I had deposited with the shopkeeper. We went to the railway station and the shopkeeper bought our tickets for Kolkata. I went back to Rina Malkeen. I worked as an *adiya* for her for 2½ months but she did not keep the accounts properly, so I quarreled with her and moved with another *malkeen*."

This story provides more information on closed and highly controlled brothels, which are difficult for researchers or NGO's to access. It shows an international clientele with many Middle East clients. When Sita fled the Mumbai brothel, she returned to Kolkata, which was home to her. She even went to work under the *malkeen* who had sold her, which shows how well Sita had been socialized into brothel culture. Sita now lives in Sonagachi with her son. She keeps two *tsukris* and when a customer comes, she vacates the room they all share. She did not explain how she recruited her present *tsukris* but it is clear that she is now involved in trafficking herself.

### 5.7 Present status of women interviewed

Half of the women interviewed worked independently. Eight out of 59 (13,6%) were *tsukris*, one quarter worked on a half-and-half sharing basis (*adiya*) and 5 (7 percent) had become *malkeens*, i.e. they were owner of bonded girls.

Table 24: Present Status of Brothel Women Interviewed

Status	No. of Women	Percent
Independent sex worker	37	52.9
Adiya (income shared 50-50)	18	25.7
Tsukri (bonded)	8	11.4
Malkeen (owner of tsukri)	5	7.1
Flying sex worker	2	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### 5.8 Origin of the Bangladeshi women

Some 46 percent of the women interviewed were from Jessore and Satkhira districts of Khulna division. Relatives and neighbours were the main enticers/traffickers here - and this is confirmed in the community based study carried out in those districts - whereas unknown persons, generally a woman member of an organized trafficking group, were more likely to entice girls from Dhaka.

Table 25: Origin of the women by Division

Division	No. of Women	Percent
Dhaka	23	32.9
Chittagong	4	5.7
Khulna	39	55.7
Rajshahi	2	2.9
Barisal	2	2.9
Sylhet	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100.0</b>

One notes again the absence of girls and women from Sylhet and the very small number coming from Rajshahi, Barisal or Chittagong Divisions. These findings more or less accord with the mapping exercise of trafficking cases done by Ishrat Shamim under IOM sponsorship<sup>26</sup>.

## 5.9 Women's movements across the sub-continent

The majority of women interviewed first went to Kolkata and stayed there. Movements between brothels inside the city are common. For example, several Bangladeshi women were first sold in the Khidderpore red light district but later moved on to other parts of Kolkata. In this research, Khidderpore has been repeatedly mentioned as the hub of a trafficking network for Bangladeshi girls.

In Mumbai, several Bangladeshi women were met who first worked in Kolkata and later moved on to Mumbai. The direction of movement is generally westward where the income is higher. One informant in Jessore stated that the amount a *malkeen* earned in ten years in Kolkata could be gained in three years in Mumbai. This could be observed in Jessore and Satkhira. On the whole, migrants to Mumbai had acquired more wealth than migrants to Kolkata.

There are exceptions to the westward movement. After being trafficked to Mumbai, we saw that Sita returned to Kolkata which felt like home. Shahanara is another exception who moved westward, then eastward. Her story shows the vast distance migrant/trafficked women may travel and the impact of opened and closed borders. Shahanara presently works in Kalighat red light district in Kolkata. Her close friend, Nazmun, her elder

<sup>26</sup> The compilation was done from one decade of newspaper reports from January 1990 to December 1999. See Shamim, 2001.

sister and her daughter who reside in Shahidnagar, Narayangonj, told her story.

**5.9.1 Shahanara's story** Shahanara was first married to a rickshawallah at the age of 15. She had two children. Her husband failed to provide for her, so she left him. Then she fell in love with a man who was a bank robber. He was on the run and he left her.

A woman who wanted to go to Pakistan approached Shahanara. One man had told this woman that he could take her to Pakistan provided she found 5 or 6 other women willing to go with her. A group of 5, 3 women and two children, was constituted. Shahanara left with her 8 year old daughter, Masuda left with her one year old child together with the woman who first approached Shahanara.

(Nazmun): "We talked about this among ourselves when we were alone. We never mentioned the project in front of the family. Of the three women who left, Shahanara is the only one who came back. The others were never seen again. That is why we know more about Shahanara. "

Shahanara was told that she did not need money to go to Pakistan (*this was in 1992-93*). Men were then charged 3,000 taka but, for women, it was free. Shahanara did not tell her father that she was leaving.

The group went to Mirpur Madzar where they met two men who took them to Gabtoli and to Benapol by bus. After crossing the border, one man returned and was replaced by an Indian *dala* who took the group all the way to Pakistan.

After Kolkata, the group was instructed to say they were from West Bengal and were going to visit the tomb of a saint near Delhi, the Ajmir Sharif. The Pakistan border was crossed at Bawalpur and the group was taken to Karachi. From there the women went to different places and Shahanara never saw her companions again.

Shahanara was sold to a Pakistani man and given clients to entertain. She could not go out. Her daughter was left with her. For 2½ years, she

received no income. Afterwards, she was able to keep a percentage of what she earned. She then communicated with her family, telling them she was working in a home.

After 6 years, Shahanara demanded to visit her family in Bangladesh. The *dala* agreed but told her she could not take her daughter with her. The girl, then 14 years old, had been employed as a domestic worker since the age of 11. Shahanara left her daughter behind and came to Bangladesh where she stayed for 2 months. When she returned, she found out that her daughter has been forced into prostitution. Her body was full of marks and the girl looked very distressed.

Shahanara worked for another 1½ year and returned to Bangladesh with her daughter whose marriage she arranged. Her daughter was good looking, so no dowry was required. Shahanara stayed 6 months. She spent all her money, then tried to go back to Pakistan. She went by land via Delhi to the Punjab but, this time, was unable to cross the border. So, she went to Kolkata and entered Kalighat red light district where she is presently working.

(her sister) "Our father knows nothing about what my sister did. A daughter does not tell her problems to her father. Presently, Shahanara's daughter is in a difficult situation because her husband and his family found out that she was in Pakistan. They maltreat her. If she were a bit cleverer, she would leave them because she is very badly treated. Her mother keeps in touch with her."

Although several Bangladeshi women are said to have been trafficked to Pakistan, this study recorded only a few cases. Shahanara's story gives some idea about geographical movements. She traveled back and forth across India twice, lived and worked in Pakistan for 7½ years and finally, unable to re-enter Pakistan, went to work in a brothel in Kolkata. Following a trafficking episode and a confinement of 2½ years, her migratory journey seems to never end. She returned to her Bangladesh village to marry her daughter, a duty that often reconnects migrant women with their society of origin. Incidentally one can see that marrying a daughter, who has accompanied a migrant mother, can be problematic. Such girl is suspected of being spoiled even though nothing is said about the work she did abroad.

What happened to Shahanara's first companions is not known. We suspect they were trafficked but their stories cannot be followed up. It does not mean that trafficking for them was the end. Shahanara, on the other hand, is seen to have had a life after having been trafficked. As mentioned, trafficking often initiates a long lasting migration and there is no return to a pre-trafficked situation.

## 5.10 Traffickers and facilitators

The table below shows that most women were trafficked by people they knew. Close relatives, husbands and lovers make 27 percent of the traffickers, neighbours and distant relatives make another 46 percent. Only 27 percent were trafficked by people they did not know beforehand.

Table 26: Traffickers and facilitators

Traffickers/Facilitators	No. of women	Percent
Neighbours	22	37.3
Close relatives	6	10.2
Husbands	7	11.9
Distant relatives	5	8.5
Lovers	3	5.1
Unknown persons (Members of organized traffickers' group)	16	27.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Mala, 16 years old, was mentioned above. She was brought to the brothel by a distant aunt, Sitadi. Here no third party was involved. The *malkeen* did her own recruiting among her distant relatives, using blood relatedness to gain the trust of Mala's parents.

**5.10.1 Mala's story** "If my father knew where I am, he would have a heart attack. I came here 1½ month ago. My aunt brought me. I was a student at the madrassah. Sitadi convinced my parents to take me with her to look after her 7 year old son. She said to my father:  
- "You are my relative. How could I want to spoil the honour of your daughter?"

Hearing these words, my father agreed. There was probably another reason why my father let me go. I had a love affair with a village boy. Our fathers quarreled about a piece of land and my father did not want me to continue with this relationship. He thought that if I went away for 2-3 months, I would forget about the boy. That is why he agreed to let me go so easily.

When I came to Sitadi's room, I understood everything. I am not that young. At first, she tried to convince me to do this work for the money but I did not agree. Then she locked me up with customers. I cried a lot. I did not want to go with them. I hit some of them.

I still have not been given any money. Actually, I don't want that money. All I want is to go back home. One customer told me he could help me to get away but I was afraid to trust him. What if he sells me somewhere else?

I am not allowed to go out except one day when Sita took me to a circus. She wanted to teach me everything. She said not to tell my real name or my real age. Police may come disguised as a customer. I do as she tells me.

Sitadi told me she would take me to visit our village in May. I am eagerly waiting for this, so I try to please her. If I can go once, I will never come back. She lied to me. Why did she ask me to do this kind of work? She could have appointed me to a humble job but not to sex work. I will tell when I go home. Sitadi will not be able to stand in front of my parents.

Sitadi met the boy who loves me. She threatened him. If you come to India, I will teach you, she said. Here I am selling my body. I could do this with the boy who loves me but not with so many strangers.

Sitadi always visits our village with her Kabuli husband. That is why people do not suspect her profession and she could convince my parents. She changed my name to Menuka. It is the name of a goddess. Now I am that goddess.

Sita, the *malkeen* cum trafficker, obviously had a strong psychological hold over 16 year old Mala who feared her. With a mixture of soft words,

pressure and threats, she broke Mala's resistance. Nazmun who claimed that she was looked after for four months and her treatment was paid for by her *malkeen* before she began to earn similarly showed a kind and generous *malkeen*. For the *malkeen*, such display of kindness may pay off as it may delay the day a *tsukri* will demand to be let free. Sitadi was visited five months after the first visit and Mala and Nazmun were no longer with her. Did Mala return to her family as she intended? There are girls who are not good catch for *malkeens*, as they are not good earners and/or the cost of keeping them is too high. Over a few months, we have seen many changes in the household composition of *malkeens* suggesting a high turnover of *tsukris*. If this is so, we suppose new recruits are regularly sought to replace those who run away or must be let free.

## 5.11 Husbands as traffickers

Trafficking by husbands occurred in 7 cases. Here is Sharifa's story, a 22 year old girl from Satkhira.

**5.11.1 Sharifa's story** "I worked in Dhaka as a domestic servant for three years. I left that job last Kurban Eid (2001) and returned to my parents who were even worst off than before. A man from a neighbouring village used to come and visit a friend who lived near our house. Whenever he came, he tried to see me, he made jokes and we laughed together. Within a few days, he proposed to marry me. I was taken by his sweet language and I agreed. One month later, he proposed that we visit one of his sisters who lived in a village under the same district. He fixed a day. We started early in the morning. In the evening, we arrived in this room. The room belonged to Setara, a *malkeen* from our district.

The next day, I realized my fate. My husband and Setara whispered. Then Setara handed over 5,000 rupees to him. Afterwards, she told me that if she had refused to pay, my husband would have sold me to Mumbai and I would never have seen my parents' face again. After getting the money, my husband left me here."

That "husband" returned one month later and again demanded money. Sharifa had none. She was working but her income was kept to reimburse the money her husband had borrowed earlier. Or perhaps she had been appropriated by the *malkeen* as a *tsukri*. In any case, it made no difference to her bondage. When the husband visited, he claimed marital rights as well as money. While he stayed with Sharifa, she could not take other clients. Sharifa appeared confused about what she still owed to that "husband". It seems that having been trafficked by him did not necessarily cancel out her wifely obligations. We later learned that Sharifa's husband worked with Yunus who is a well-known trafficker.

Mumtaz is another woman who was brought to Watgonj 20 years ago by her husband, a man from Comilla. The husband used to work at the Watgonj dockyard where a large brothel attended to the needs of sailors and dockers. He lost his job and a few months later brought his wife and engaged her in sex work. His aunt (*khala*) was already in the sex trade in the same location.

"When she saw me, his *khala* advised me to flee but I did not know how to go back to Bangladesh. I stayed with him. He took all my income for seven years. He was a violent man and I feared him. Within one year, my husband brought two more wives from Bangladesh and engaged them in sex work also."

It took 7 years for Mumtaz to be able to get away from her husband's control and tyranny. A friend helped her to move out of Watgonj and settle in Tallygonj. She has been working with the DMSC since 1993. She claimed that today it would be impossible to force a woman to engage in sex work against her will in Tallygonj. However, in Khidderpore red light district, of which Watgonj is a part, one needs only pay the police and the local club 2,000 rupees each and buyers of new girls are left in peace. Here again Khidderpore is identified as a location where trafficking is relatively easy.

Polygamous husbands engaging their wives in prostitution and living off their income has been found with Renuka, a 42 year old woman met in Kalighat red light district.

### **5.11.2 Renuka's story: a life of hardship**

Renuka's two sisters, her daughter and her cousin were traced in Shahidnagar of Narayangonj and were interviewed. Three sisters of this

family worked in Kolkata brothels. Two of them later migrated to Bahrain and Dubai. Piecing together their stories constructed a puzzling image.

We first spoke to Renuka in Kalighat. She mentioned that she had come to Kolkata with her husband who later took two more Bangladeshi wives and settled in brothel. Renuka herself had brought two of her married sisters to the brothel but both had returned to Bangladesh. "They have become good now", she added. These two sisters had husbands who financed their migration to Bahrain and to Dubai. The latter destinations were regarded as more prestigious than Kolkata. Although the two sisters upgraded themselves, the one we interviewed in Narayanganj admitted that the work she did in Bahrain was the same as the one she did in Kolkata, only the pay was better. Let us hear Renuka's daughter, Minoti. Now 18 years old, she tells about her childhood with her mother in a Kolkata brothel.

### 5.11.3 Minoti's childhood

"My mother took me to live in India when I was 2 years old. I did not understand at first what work she did but slowly I got to know. I lived with my father and one of my stepmothers. My mother was my father's first wife and he had two more wives. All were involved in prostitution. My father had four children, two with my mother and two with his second wife. The third wife had no children. We all lived in the same *para* (closed quarter) but separately. We met everyday. My mother's two sisters (*khalara*) joined us later. They came with their husbands, stayed 2 or 3 years and left. Later, they migrated to the Middle East. My mother could not go because it required a large sum of money. My aunts had husbands who could help. Also my mother liked to stay in Kalighat. From there, she could visit Bangladesh often.

I grew up. At the age of 11, my mother introduced me to sex work. My father had died (*he was an alcoholic*) and a little brother had been born. I hated this work and my relationship with my mother deteriorated. I asked her to take me back to Bangladesh. When my mother realized that I could not adjust do this work, she took me back to Bangladesh with my little brother. We lived at my *khala*. My mother sometimes gave money for us. I joined Proshika School. At the age of 13, I was married to a man from Vikrampur who worked in a leather factory.

I have been married 5 years now; still I have not been pregnant. May be this is because of all the medicines I took in India when I was a prostitute. May be I have become sterile and my mother is responsible for this.

I told my mother to come back but she does not listen. My brother is with me. He is 12 years old now and studies in Class V. I brought him up. I want to keep him with me.

Mother does not give us her address. I can tell she is not doing well financially. She comes here with torn clothes. She earns a little from the *tsukris* she keeps but she does not work much herself anymore.

I hope my mother does not come back alive from India. Others get involved in bad work, then they become good again but my mother does not want to become good. I don't want my mother's money, not even for my brother."

Minoti was not trafficked but her mother certainly left her with a heavy heritage. Perhaps, women cannot offer their children what they do not have and never received themselves as children. About the mother's childhood, a cousin (*chachato bhai*) who saw her poverty and destitution at close range was interviewed. This cousin, a man roughly the same age as Renuka, is now a respectable member of his community in Narayangonj. He helped us in our study on women labour migration. He knew much about the subject but he mentioned his cousins' story only after we had pieced it together ourselves and he knew that we knew. Then he spoke:

"What can I tell you? Renuka is my sister (cousin). Her father died leaving 9 children behind. The 5 daughters were the eldest; the 4 brothers were little. The mother worked as a maidservant. My uncle had no wealth. They were extremely poor and they did anything just to eat. (*je jar peter dhandra, she she coresse*).

The sisters got spoiled doing these jobs. They all got spoiled (lost their chastity) early. When we realized this, we arranged their marriage. Renuka was married at 13. She struggled for 5 years. There was a famine in Kanainogar where she lived with her husband. In the end, her 2 children died and so did her husband.

She came back to her mother and worked as she had done before gleaning rice, helping at the jute godown. In the end, she got into prostitution. Sometimes we blamed her for it, but we knew we could not really condemn her. What else could she do? She met her second husband in Tanbazar brothel (*the largest brothel in Bangladesh, now demolished*) and married him without our approval. Both were into this 'bad' work. The bastard married two more women from Tanbazar afterwards. We did not see Renuka anymore. Then we heard she had gone to India.

We kept no connection with her family. They do not have the guts to visit us and we don't visit them either. But blood connection cannot be erased. It is lucky that they do not do this bad work in Bangladesh. If I saw them, it would be harder. After all, their grandfather (*dada*) was also my grandfather. People talk but I want to keep my eyes and my ears closed. I cannot say anything. I am ashamed to tell you this but I believe they had little choice. Others made money out of this work, but none of the sisters did well."

Renuka was born at the wrong time. She suffered the 1971 War, the want, the poverty and the famines that followed. The eldest of a family of 9, what could she do after her father's death? Her story seems to include all the social ills of the period: children who are orphaned, condemned to beg, get sexually abused or prostitute themselves, early marriage, early widowhood, low paid jobs, prostitution, a brothel marriage, a daughter brought up in the brothel and put to work at the age of 11. Renuka's life history unfolds like an infernal circle. We see the outcome of her destitution carried onto the next generation. Renuka's 18 years old daughter remains bruised by the harshness of her early life. We are here reminded of a dark side of Bangladesh recent past, a past which left its marks. These are not stories of trafficking. We know that famines, floods, wars brought cohorts of girls to the brothel. They entered "willingly", to survive.

Renuka's story shows the limitation of solidarity within lineage and extended family. At the age of 13, her uncle duly arranged her marriage, an obligation given priority over food or other kinds of support. Family honour was at stake. But in the long run, marriage did not solve any of her problems.

## **5.12 Elder sisters appropriating the income of younger sisters**

An elder sister appropriating the earnings of a younger sister is a regular occurrence in the brothel. Anita is 19 year old and has been in the brothel since she was 13. She is not doing well and blames her sister for her predicament.

**5.12.1 Anita's story** I come from a village in Bagerhat. We are three sisters and have no brothers. I am the youngest. My father is a carpenter and has no land.

At the age of 13, I was sold in a brothel in Barisal by the niece of the woman who sold my sister Monika to Sonagatchi. Monika came to visit the village soon afterwards and heard that I had disappeared. She looked for me and she found me. A *shalish* was held. The *matbors* said that I had become spoiled and I could not stay in the village. So, my sister took me to Sonagatchi. For 3 years, I worked for her as a *tsukri*. Then I quarreled with her because she was keeping all my income.

I left and I worked as an *adiya*. Then I had a *babu* and set up independently."

The social re-insertion of a 13-year old girl rescued from the brothel after being trafficked is known to be problematic in Bangladesh society. Such girl is considered damaged and the prospect of contracting a good marriage is generally poor. In a way, her fate is sealed. This justified the elder sister taking Anita to Sonagatchi brothel.

At the brothel, Anita had a series of misfortunes. She gave birth to 3 children in 6 years. One died and the two others are in poor health. Abandoned by her *babu* during her last pregnancy, Anita spent all her savings while she could not work. In the end, she could not keep her independent status and is now working as an *adiya*. In 6 years, she was unable to visit her family in Bangladesh once. She is especially bitter towards her sister.

"My sister, she goes home. She is well off. She has TV, refrigerator. She laughs and she is happy. But how could I visit? How could I go empty-handed? How could I make them happy with my problems?"

An elder sister forcing a younger sister to engage in sex work and/or keeping her income is not usually perceived as trafficking. This was seen in the study we carried out in Daulotdia. Elder sisters have considerable authority over younger sisters and are seen as mother's substitutes. They

take some responsibility for their younger siblings but are also seen to exploit them.

### **5.13 Trafficked by a neighbour**

Girls trafficked by a neighbour or a known person of their community is the most common in this sample. Two well-documented cases will be presented here. The first is that of Rakhi Chowdhury, 16 year old met resting after she had broken her leg following a jump from a second floor balcony in an attempt to escape. Rakhi was a student of Class VIII when she was captured 4½ months before the interview. Her family is from Shyamnagar Thana in Satkhira and is not poor.

#### **5.13.1 Rakhi: a 16 year old student who sought adventure**

"Barek, a man in his mid-fifties whom I called Nana (grand-father), had a house near ours. He lived in Kolkata much of the time but village people did not know what he did. I used to joke with him (*culturally permitted with a nana*). Once, I told Nana that I would like to see Kolkata. I said my brother could come with us. Nana agreed to take me but alone and he said I should not mention it to anyone. He told me to meet him at a certain point. I put a few clothes in a bag. My mother saw me and asked what I was doing. I said that I was going to get my clothes ironed.

On the way to Kolkata, I got afraid and asked Barek:

- "You are not going to sell me, are you?" He said:

- "Of course not".

I was not re-assured.

In Kolkata, he took me to Chompa (a *malkeen*, and Barek's lover). Then I understood I had been fooled and Nana had lied to me. The first night, I was left alone. The second night, I went to bed with a girl but before I was given a Thumbs Up soda. I don't know what they put in this drink but I fell deeply asleep. While I was asleep, the girl left and a man entered.

The door was bolted from outside. This man used me. I bled a lot. I was not prepared for this. The next day, I felt terrible and the *malkeen* took me to the doctor. She said it cost her 1,500 rupees.

After a few days there, Barek went back to the village.

Two months ago, he came back and wanted to take me to Mumbai. I refused. I told him to take me back home and if he did not do so I would run away. After this, Nana told the *malkeen* to keep me in a locked room. They sent customers to me and I was not allowed to go out. I was given so many customers everyday, that was terrible. Many *dalals* were sending men to me. They advertised a new girl. Barek and Chompa together, they managed me.

One day, I could not take it anymore. I went on the balcony and jumped from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Barek and Chompa immediately took me to a private clinic where I was kept for one month. I wanted to die but I just broke my right leg. Rekha and Barek told me that my treatment cost them 1,00,000 rupees. When I was taken back, they insisted that I work even harder to reimburse my debt. Pressure on me was even worse than before.

I told my sorrow to another girl and she spoke to the Durbar supervisor. The latter contacted the club people. Together, they forced Chompa and Barek to release me. I was then placed under another *malkeen* as an *adiya*.

The cost of my treatment was checked and it was only 28,000-30,000 rupees, which I had certainly earned through my previous work. Barek and Chompa tried to claim me back but the club protects me.

What Barek did to me, I cannot explain it. I have nightmares about him. He cursed me. He vowed that I would never marry. He used to tell me not to reveal that I came from a good family and that I had studied up to Class VIII. "

The Durbar supervisor who helped Rakhi to get free from Barek added:

"For sure, Nana did something to her. He cast a spell or fed her some medicine. He terrorized her. She cannot openly accuse him even though we are

protecting her. I suggested to her that we go to the mosque and to the temple and ask for 'blows' (*jhara*) to remove Nana's spell on her."

Rakhi sought adventure. She followed an elderly man of her neighbourhood whom she called grandfather, never suspecting that he had a partner in the brothel to whom he supplied new girls. The second night after her arrival, Rakhi was drugged and raped. She was later locked up in a room while a large number of men were sent to her by *dalals* recruiting on the street. Rakhi was well hidden and her pain could not be discovered. Her jump from a second floor balcony was a call for help. She was lucky to survive.

The Durbar supervisor and the club people eventually rescued Rakhi from the hold of Barek and Chompa but their help came only after she had suffered considerable abuse. Even after she jumped from the second floor in a dramatic cry for help, she was not liberated from her captors. They got her treated but continued to terrorize her. Rakhi has been deeply hurt and the psychological damage done should not be minimized. Nana systematically attempted to break her, denying her sense of being a valuable person, educated and from a good and loving family. Rakhi is still haunted by Barek. Interestingly, the Durbar supervisor suggested visits to a mosque and to a Hindu temple to get rid of his hold. Brothel culture accommodates several faiths and easily blends them. Finally, and it should be underlined, Barek and his associates have not been incriminated and Rakhi, with the terror inside and her broken leg not fully healed, is still entertaining clients.

Rakhi's confinement and torture took place in Sonagachi. This story shows that the sale in girls may have diminished but trapping, confinement and forced prostitution certainly have not ended. Rakhi mentioned that in four months, she was placed under four different *malkeens*. This suggests that girls who are captured and put to work against their will are made to circulate. This could be to confuse possible rescuers, to avoid pursuit or to confound the victim, who does not stay long enough anywhere to develop relationships of trust.

#### **5.14 A family of traffickers raking neighbouring villages**

Soniya Begum, alias Setara, is a well-known *malkeen* of Sonagachi Lane. In the congested area where several women commonly share one room, Setara has three rooms and, on our first visit, she kept 7 *tsukris*. Because of the good relationship the DMSC supervisor had with Setara, we were allowed to speak to the girls. Every time we visited the place, new *tsukris*

were found. We learned that her brother is a busy trafficker from Satkhira who regularly supplies girls to her.

The information gained at Setara's place guided our fieldwork in Satkhira. Her village and the villages of some of her *tsukris* were visited. The knowledge obtained there made us discover links between the brothel and villages in Bangladesh. The considerable profits made from sex work and trafficking in girls and their impact on local economies, politics and justice delivery systems could be better understood. Once more, going back and forth between the society of origin and the site of immigration was fruitful.

We learned about Setara's family. Three sisters once worked in Kolkata brothels. Presently, two are still there and one retired two years ago with a man who was once her *babu*. The latter had to convert to Islam to be allowed to live in the community as a husband and villagers closely watched his religious performance (fasting, attending prayers, growing a beard, eating cow's meat, etc.). Setara's elder brother managed the land, the shrimp culture (*gher*) and other family business while the younger brother lured and supplied women for the brothel. This family had been extremely poor but was now well off, so much so that no one in the village dared speaking against them. Setara, 35 years old, was the first member of her family to join the brothel. Here is her statement.

**5.14.1 Setara's statement:** "We are 3 sisters and 3 brothers. Our family was very poor and I had to look for a job early. An elderly woman from a neighbouring village proposed to my mother that I accompany her to Kolkata where she would find me a job. That woman sold me in Sonagachi. I was 15 years old. The first year, my *malkeen* kept all my income. The next two years, I worked as an *adiya* under the same *malkeen*. Meanwhile, I learned about the brothel and brought my elder sister."

As an *adiya*, I had a *babu* (a regular man/lover). Eventually we married and I left the brothel. I stayed outside with him for a few years but I was not happy. Everyday, he reminded me of where I came from. I did not conceive and he blamed me for it. While in the *para*, I had an abortion and I probably damaged my womb. Because of his bad treatment, I returned to the brothel. In a short while, I got another *babu* and, with his help, I became a *malkeen*. There was no divorce with the first *babu* but he does not come

anymore. My second *babu* is about 42 years old and is well connected with the club.

I visit the village with my *babu* several times a year. We cross the border at Hakimpur. The cost is one thousand taka per return trip for the two of us. I have adopted one daughter. She is now 5 years old and lives with my mother in the village."

Setara's trips to the village accompanied by her "husband" are also recruitment tours. But new girls are mainly brought by Yunus, her 28 year old brother who visits Sonagachi several times a month. One day we arrived at the brothel and heard that Yunus had come the day before with 3 new recruits. Two women were taken elsewhere and one was left at Setara's place. The latter was about 30 years old, named Jaida. On her first day at Sonagachi, she seemed lost, ashamed and worn out. She said her husband had taken another wife and had kept their son while she had returned to her mother with their daughter. She was looking for work when Yunus offered to take her to Kolkata. He had already taken her two nieces and this is why she had trusted him. But now she did not like the place and wanted to go back to the village. Yunus told her that she could go back but she would have to reimburse the cost of her travel to Kolkata first, she would also have to manage her return by herself. Jaida needed 1,000 rupees to go back to her mother's village. Although this is a small amount, incomparable with the cost of migration to the Middle East, it may suffice to trap a woman. Jaida said: "How can I get such money". In the brothel, there is one obvious way women can earn.

Jaida's 19-year old niece, Tamanna, had been interviewed on a previous visit. Her story throws more light on Yunus' trafficking in women.

**5.14.2 Tamanna's story** "We are four sisters and one brother. My father is a day labourer.

When I was at home, my parents often quarreled and we quarreled with our parents because food was short. My mother used to tell me to leave when we had these fights. I would reply that one day I would do so.

I came here because of my younger sister, Monzila. Two months ago, she left her husband's home after a fight and Yunus exploited the situation. He took her to Sonagachi. My father suspected this and alerted people. He called one journalist and informed the

police. He told them: "I believe Yunus took my daughter to India and sold her there." Pressure mounted on Yunus. He argued that he left Monzila at his sister's house in Kolkata and if my father wanted her back, he could bring her.

After a few days, Yunus brought Monzila back home. He trained her in such a way that she did not want to stay. Monzila told my parents that she was happy in Kolkata and that she wanted to go back. After 7 days, she returned with Yunus.

One month later, Yunus came to our home and said that Monzila was very ill and she wanted to see her sister Tamanna. My parents sent me straight away. When I reached here, I realized my sister was in a brothel. I saw that she was not sick at all. I asked her what she was doing here. She did not reply.

I asked Setara and Yunus to send me back to the village. They said, all right, you can go back, but alone. But how could I go? I did not have any money. My sister said she had none. Three days later, I was given my first customer. He paid 110 rupees. This was the first man in my life.

I have been here for one month. I don't go out much. The police raid the place. With the customers I have, I can hardly cover my cost.

My sister Monzila has gone outside to a district town. The *dalal* took her. She will come back after a few days. He gave the *malkeen* 400 rupees per day for her. If my sister earns more than this, it is the *dalal* and the hotel manager's profit. I am new here. My *malkeen* has not sent me outside yet.

My parents know I have gone to Kolkata. They had no objection because they believed what my sister told them. Everyone believed my sister. Her story sounded so good, how could they not believe her.

Monzila later mentioned that she had been contracted out by her *malkeen* to a *dalal* for outings three times. The third time, the police raided the hotel and she was taken to the police station. She was freed the next day but, after this, she refused to go on outings with *dalals* again. We learned that girls who are fairly new, *tsukris* and *adiyas* are generally sent out in this way. Those who work independently refuse to go. Working in hotels, women are more exposed to police raids; a large number of customers may be sent to

them and they cannot refuse them. Such short-term contract, between the *malkeen* and the *dalal*, amount indeed to a second sale of a *tsukri*.

We had met Tamanna one month after she entered the brothel. She could not quite make up what was happening to her but her dream of a normal life had been shattered. It is with tears that she said she would probably never marry in her life. We asked her:

- "Did your father make arrangement for your marriage?"
- "No, he did not."
- "Did you fall in love with any boy?"
- "We are poor girls. I never had the courage to make a relationship with any of them."

Tamanna was brought up not to allow herself any attachment and, of course, not to dispose of her body. These were reserved for a husband who would be given to her by her parents. But someone else disposed of her life and many men used her body in ways she did not decide.

A few weeks after meeting Tamanna at the brothel, we visited her village in Satkhira and found her there. She had come home with 1,000 rupees. Tamanna made signs not to reveal where we had met before. But once alone, she spoke freely. She said Yunus visited Kolkata every week and brought new girls from Bangladesh. He had been involved in this business for several years and had built a network of collaborators, one of whom was Sharifa's "husband" (mentioned above).

During the Satkhira study, another young woman was interviewed who had been trafficked by Yunus two years earlier. Abandoned by her husband at the age of 16, she was staying at her father's house when Yunus's wife, who came from the same village, introduced her to Yunus. Yunus immediately offered help. "My sisters are working in a tailoring shop in Kolkata, if you are interested, I can take you there" he said. She gathered some money and left the next morning for Yunus' village alone without telling anyone. The next day, Yunus brought her to Sonagachi. Seeing what kind of place it was, she did not want to stay but Yunus told her that her reputation was spoiled already and there would be no benefit in returning to her village. Yunus left her with Dipali *malkeen*, another of his sisters. More stories were heard about Yunus who had trafficked many girls and women and continued to do so.

The DMSC staff confirmed Yunus and Setara's trafficking activities. One supervisor said that the Kolkata police picked up Yunus once but Setara and her partner paid a large amount of money and got him released. The two local clubs in Sonagachi at the time also demanded high subscription

fees. The DMSC supervisor was well informed, as she had served as an intermediary when Yunus was arrested.

Only a few of Yunus and Setara's deeds could be unveiled in this brief research but they are informative. In their Satkhira village, many people knew about their activities but nobody prevented them. Yunus was feared. One young man who had received training on anti-trafficking from an NGO said that he knew Yunus and other traffickers in his village but he did not disclose their activities at the training session. He was too scared to do so. "These people could kill me", he commented. He suggested that the kind of training received was inappropriate. Traffickers were portrayed as villain strangers and this image did not fit the traffickers he knew and the techniques they used. Yunus is a handsome 28 years old man, married with two children. He does not look like a villain and he is not a stranger to the women he traps.

The wealth accumulated by Setara, her brother Yunus and others in the family has considerably improved their status in the village. Once very poor, they depended on others for work but now they provide work to the poor and even the not so poor depend on them. A local businessman said Setara and Yunus bought land every year and he had sold some farmland to them only one week earlier. He added that, this season, Yunus and Setara leased a big shrimp farm (*gher*); they also cultivated 24 bigha of rice land under the management of their elder brother. Rich local farmers could not compete with them any more. Others mentioned that Setara's brothers were once ostracized from the *samaj* because of their sisters' activities (punishing prostitution more than trafficking) but the excommunication could not be sustained because many poor families depended on them for their livelihood. Wealth has given a respectable front to this family who has become influential in village politics.

It could be seen here that money earned from transborder trafficking in women and sex work in Kolkata feeds the economies of bordering villages, impacts on the price of land, and influences local politics. Village justice and honour systems cannot contain these activities and cannot ostracize the traffickers. Traffickers have become too powerful to be stopped at that level. Unless state authorities intervene, their criminal activities will continue and hastened the decay of village society. The consequences of such a state of affair should not be minimized.

## Chapter Six

### Bar Work in Mumbai

#### 6.1 Sources of information

The data presented in this chapter were collected in a community-based study conducted in Jessore and Satkhira, two border districts of Bangladesh where cross border labour migration is known to be important. From mid-October to mid-November 2001, fieldwork was also conducted in Mumbai, the main destination of migrating women in the locations studied. Visiting Mumbai allowed a close observation of the milieu of immigration and verification of some of the information obtained in Bangladesh. Uttar Pradesh, another province of India where Bangladeshi women emigrated could not be visited and Kolkata was described in the previous chapter.

Quantitative data on women migrating to India for work have been compiled from 260 case histories: 190 from Jessore and Satkhira and 70 from Kolkata brothels. Some 20 case histories were documented in Mumbai but these data were not joined to the above sample. The Table below shows that among the 190 case histories from Jessore and Satkhira, bar work in Mumbai was the main occupation, coming far above sex work in brothels, domestic work or migration for marriage.

Table 27: Type of work done/situation faced in India by district of origin\*

Type of work	District Of Origin		Total (%)
	Jessore (%)	Satkhira (%)	
Bar work	75 (58.1)	56 (65.9)	131 (61.2)
Sex work in Brothels	19 (14.7)	12 (14.1)	31 (14.5)
Domestic work	15 (11.6)	2 (2.4)	17 (7.9)
Sardani/Dalali	6 (4.7)	1 (1.2)	7 (3.3)
Marriage (sold in UP)	8 (6.2)	9 (10.6)	17 (7.9)
Lost/Unknown	3 (2.3)	2 (2.4)	5 (2.3)
Attempt at trafficking failed	-	3 (3.5)	3 (1.4)
Refused sex work	3 (2.3)	-	3 (1.4)
<b>Total</b>	<b>129 (100.0)</b>	<b>85 (100.0)</b>	<b>214 (100.0)</b>

\* The total is more than 190 as some women were involved in different activities

## 6.2 Bar work in Mumbai

Fahima, a 27 year old woman met in her Satkhira village two days after she returned from Mumbai will introduce us to the life of bar girls. Married with two children, she comes from Hizoldi union, Kolaroa thana. Her husband, his sister and her husband were also interviewed. Fahima first explained the circumstances which led her to migrate with her family.

### 6.2.1 Fahima's story

"I was married at the age of 14. There was no demand for dowry because I was beautiful. My father and my husband were both poor, so my living conditions did not change after my marriage.

My mother-in-law kept poking at me because I had not brought a dowry. She used to say: "Why don't you eat the water in which you bathe your beauty". She was angry at my father-in-law and at my husband who had chosen me as a bride even though my father could not offer a dowry. My husband could work but there was no work. We had a house without walls. Food was short. Everything was short.

One day, we had enough of my mother-in-law's nasty remarks. We decided to go to Mumbai without asking for anyone's help. We planned to work for 3 to 4 years, save money, return and never go again. We feared that the good relationship my husband and I shared would get spoiled if we carried on quarreling like this because of want. From birth, we both knew what it meant to be poor. We had suffered enough.

With great difficulty, we saved 1,500 taka and left with our 5½ years old daughter and 1-year old son. We told neighbours we were going to Dhaka. They heard later that we were in Mumbai because there are plenty of people from Hizoldi over there.

We crossed the border on foot. The BSF (*Indian border police*) took 50 taka per head. From Bethari, we traveled by bus to Howrah station where we boarded a train for Mumbai. We stopped at Nalasopara. It cost 1,400 taka to reach there. When we arrived, we had only 100 taka [rupees?] left. We

had no address to go to. In the end, we had no money left at all.

We met a Marathi man who owned a house. We told him our story. He accepted to rent us a room, lent us some money and wanted to give us work but we did not agree to his last proposal. We had heard that there was a price to pay if one lost one's freedom. We said we would reimburse the money as soon as we could.

It took 3 days for me to find work. I am a good-looking woman, this I know. I went to Kaluabar. The first day, I went with my husband by bus. We waited outside the bar. I said I wanted work. I was taken inside to meet the bar owner. He took down my name and explained the work. He wrote my address and said I would be picked up by car the next day.

At the bar, I found many girls I knew. They all did the same work, so no one could speak badly against the other. Everybody goes to Mumbai for money. So much money can be earned there, those who go don't want to come back. In Mumbai, money is flying and crows are fed on rice.

They gave me a shelwar kameez to wear (*Fahima usually wore a sari*), they also provided make up. I poured alcohol to clients, presented the bill, took the money to a cashier and kept the tips. The first time I felt very shy but I soon got used to it. Some of the bar girls were contracted by clients to go outside for sex. The bar owner was not involved in this.

For 3 months, I did this work. Some of the women were selected to work inside. They were given a special training on how to dance, dress and act with clients. I decided to switch to inside work. There was not enough money to be made just working at the bar. I went for the money, so the quickest and the more I could earn, the better. I could tell by the way men looked at me that I was in demand.

At the bar, we got no salary, we only received a commission for the alcohol we served. With tips, I could earn from 700 to 1,000 rupees in a day (*this could be an exaggeration. Other informants quoted lower amounts*). The car picked us up early in the afternoon and dropped us up at the end of the night.

After I switched to inside work, customers took me on outings. I could not inform my husband beforehand but he could find out from the bar or from the driver for how long I had gone. My husband looked after the children and the house. I was so tired when I came back, I just slept. I had little time for him. It was difficult for my husband. He worried about me but he did not have the courage to ask questions. I was doing this work with his permission and I handed over all my income to him. That made him happy and lightened his worries. My husband did not spoil my money. He carefully saved it.

When we were taken out, the bar owner arranged everything. He told us for how many days we were going, with whom and how much we would get paid. If a customer did not treat us well or caused any problem, he told us to report it. But if the tips were good, we did not say anything.

The bar gave us clothes and medicines. We were given "injections" before entering the room where customers were waiting. I liked it.

There was more money to be made by going out but I could not go for too many days because I had small children. Even if I did 'bad' work, I still felt for them. The bar owner took a good part of the money we earned when we went out. We did the work, he earned just sitting at a table. There was a fear of being kept forever by these customers. In the bar where I worked, it did not happen but I heard it happened elsewhere. Girls were sold to Uttar Pradesh and were never seen again.

For one night out, I got 2,000 to 2,500 rupees from the bar owner. If there were tips, I kept them. I quite liked the work. I could have earned more by taking customers at home. Many girls did this but I needed rest. Besides I had the children.

Over there, I wore short pants, brassieres, T-shirts. I drank alcohol. The customers who took us, they could use us anyway they liked. We could not say no because we had been sold to them. With my husband, I can say no but not with these men. We were their playthings. Our work was to please them. If I could make a customer happy, I benefited, the bar owner benefited and so did the customer. These

injections, they increased the pleasure and removed all hesitation. Outside, the customers gave us the injections themselves.

Most customers used condoms. The last 5 months we were taught to use female condoms. We had access to the doctor. If he saw a major problem, our employment was terminated.

By going to Mumbai, my eyes were opened and I discovered the world. So many different kinds of women work there, Nepalis, Bangladeshis and others. All of them said they came because of poverty.

Those who work in bars cannot satisfy their husbands. Husbands have to go elsewhere. You would not believe it. In 1½ years, I had sex with my husband 2 or 3 times, that is all. He did not dare asking me and, if he had, I would not have agreed. When he went elsewhere, I did not get angry. He needed it.

We came back 2 days ago. We would have stayed longer but just as I was earning well my husband's sister and her husband came to visit us all of a sudden. We did not want them to know what kind of work I did.

After covering all expenses, I brought back 150,000 taka. My mother-in-law is pleased with me and I have more value in my own eyes. I can express my opinion and I am given importance. Before, I had no money, I had no possibility to earn. I had nothing."

#### 1) Availability of information on bar work in Mumbai in Satkhira villages

One is impressed by the information Fahima and her husband were able to collect from their area before emigrating. They knew how to cross the border, how to reach Mumbai, where to stop and look for work; they were aware of dangers and avoided them. Although she spoke no Hindi and had never been to Mumbai before, Fahima found work within 3 days of her arrival. Her migration to Mumbai is clearly not a case of trafficking. The information collected beforehand was accurate enough and made her and her husband wiser and better able to resist possible attempts at trafficking.

#### 2) Low cost of travel to Mumbai

Fahima and her husband could never afford migration to the Middle East but they were able to save enough money to travel to Mumbai. Thanks to cheap

and efficient transport systems, reaching Mumbai from Bangladesh by bus and by train was easy. The BSF collected 50 taka (rupees?) per head and the family had no problem crossing the border on foot without passport. A mere 1,500 taka sufficed to cover the entire cost of their journey to Mumbai. Most first time migrants hire a *dala* to reach Mumbai and Fahima going alone with her family was unusual. Her sister-in-law with her husband reached Mumbai with the help of a *dala* and paid slightly more (2,400 taka). The cost of traveling to Mumbai, with or without *dala*, remains extremely low. This is why the very poor living along the border have been able to afford migration to Mumbai for generations. In the 1970's, very poor families reportedly left without any money and begged their way to the big city. Presently, the prospect of earning well in the bars continues to attract the poor but also draws a class of people who are not so poor.

### 3) Advantages of migrating with a husband

Migrating to Mumbai with a "husband" has many advantages. It creates less suspicion in the community of origin as well as en route to Mumbai. In Mumbai, "a husband is necessary when a woman does this job for her safety and protection", claimed a bargirl. Though not an absolute necessity, most bar girls met in Mumbai were seen living with a husband. If they did not come with one, they acquired one once there. Girls who came with family members usually left them after sometime and negotiated a contract with a "husband".

Fahima migrated to Mumbai with her *biyer shami*, that is her first and only husband to whom she had been given by her parents at the age of 14. Such first marriage is particularly sacred in Bengali culture and is generally more resilient than second or third marriages (*nikker biye*). We saw that the marriage withstood the kind of work Fahima did in Mumbai and the reorganization of family roles it entailed. While she left for work in the afternoon and returned early the next morning, he looked after the children and took care of the house chores. She sometimes did not come back for a few days. Fahima could not attend to her husband's sexual needs. Except for the income which she handed over to him, there was here a complete reversal of traditional roles within a bengali marriage. Fahima repeatedly pointed out that her husband did not spoil the money she earned. He remained the trusted manager of her (their) income, most of which was saved to be invested back in the village. Both respected the deal they had made.

In Mumbai, the lifestyle of a few Bangladeshi women who worked in bars could be closely observed. Here is an extract from my diary dated 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2001. We were in Neherunagar, Vile Parle, a suburb of Mumbai.

The women we meet appear to exert sufficient power within their couple. At home, their husbands serve them. Last night, we observed Rekha taking her meal before going to work. Tall, slim and good-looking, I spotted her on the dance floor at the Laxmi Bar yesterday. She is a fiery dancer and no doubt a very good earner. At home, she was given the best pieces of fish by her mother-in-law who was visiting the couple. She asked for water and her husband, holding their baby in his arms, got up and brought it to her. She ate while her husband and her mother-in-law stood by attentive to her needs in a total reversal of traditional roles. Having eaten, Rekha was busy beautifying herself. She smiled at her 5 month old baby but she had no time to hold him. For half an hour she put powder upon cream and cream upon powder, tried different colour lipsticks and redid her hair several times before settling for a particular style. When she spoke to us, she did so freely and no one tried to censor her words or speak for her. Rekha is 19 years old and has been working in a bar since the age of 16.

Rekha as Fahima, handed over all her income to her husband who kept the couple's accounts. She pointed out that her husband gave her permission to work as she did recognizing in this his ascendancy but the fact that the family depended on Rekha's income gave her considerable importance. Migration to Mumbai inevitably transforms relationships within couples including those who were married traditionally like Fahima. It also leads to new types of marriages whereby men select good-looking girls and conclude with them "contract marriages" specifically for migration to Mumbai. Note that women also select "husbands". Such marriages are not expected to last. It could be a give-and-take kind of agreement where both parties derive benefits or it could be a very unequal arrangement where a young girl is lured away and put to work by a calculating husband seeking above all his profit. Fahima's brother-in-law, Azizul, who visited Fahima and her husband in Mumbai prompting their rapid departure, expressed his intention to marry again after seeing Mumbai.

"After the election, I will decide. I know now the way and I will go back to Mumbai. I will make a contract with a girl. We will go as husband and wife. We will split the income half and half and I will be rich.

Farida, my wife, is not good looking. She cannot earn well and, beside, her brother does not want her to go to Mumbai. I will not take her. If I leave with another

girl I should marry her, then no one can say anything against me, here or there. Later, there will come a time when the second wife will leave me by herself because she will not accept the first wife and her children. More over, these Hizoldi girls when they go to Mumbai, their eyes are opened and they themselves divorce their husbands after a while."

Azizul expected his first wife (*biyer bou*) to stay even if he married again. Interestingly, he believed a "contract" wife would not put up with him for too long. Several case histories here show that men's plans to get rich by marrying a young girl do not always work out as imagined. Migration to Mumbai leads to a re-negotiation of men and women's relationship and a significant transformation of the marriage contract. Even though couples normally switch back to more traditional roles as they return to their villages in Bangladesh, Mumbai lifestyles impact on village society in more than one ways.

4) "I could not accept that my sister worked as my wife did"

Fahima felt particularly embarrassed to be discovered by her husband's sister and her husband in Mumbai. The day they arrived unannounced, Fahima was at work. They saw her returning in the early hours of the morning looking "beautiful". After this, Fahima hardly went back to work. She and her husband tried to prevent their guests from going out and finding out about bars. Fahima's husband in particular could not accept that his sister got involved in this type of work. He said:

"Her husband wanted her to work but I did not like this. They thought I would help them but I could not. There is money to be made in Mumbai but my sister is not good looking. Besides, I could not accept that my own sister worked as my wife did."

A sister owes respect to her elder brother and the latter should behave in a dignified manner in front of her. To be discovered in Mumbai living the way they did, breaking all traditional rules provoked intense shame and embarrassment in Fahima and even more so in her husband. "If Fahima had a younger sister (*shalli*), her husband could get her into bar work but not his own sister", claimed Azizul, the sister's husband. The latter mentioned that during his one month visit to Mumbai he went out by himself, entered bars and discovered many women he knew from his area (he gave a list of 21 names). What women did in Mumbai could not be hidden from him but still, the topic was never openly discussed with his relatives.

It will be seen in this chapter that most husbands display a very pragmatic attitude towards their wives' bar and sex work. Most, however, refrain from asking questions and cultivate a distance to save themselves from embarrassment. "I never go to the bars. I went once with a friend to White House because my wife had kept the key to the flat with her but that was the only time." said one husband. He wanted to emphasize that he did not waste money in bars but, also, he would not witness his wife at work.

One man in Mumbai explained that his wife (from whom he was separated) had gone too far.

" She left. She is a woman without morals. We both have our faults but I never did these things in front of her. In front of me, she "took" a boy younger than herself. How can a wife do this in front of her husband?"

A husband should be spared seeing his wife at work and most couples carefully separated out the wife's working space from the home they shared.

##### 5) "In Mumbai, money is flying and crows are fed on rice":

Fahima and her husband had just returned with what was to them a considerable amount of money. She was happy to display her success and may have exaggerated her income. In some bars of Mumbai, money is literally flying. We visited establishments where rich customers showered bills of 50 or 100 rupees over beautiful women who had ravished their attention. Accumulated at their feet like fallen leaves, the bank notes were shoveled away by bar boys. Bars encouraged in men the display of a particularly generous machismo and no doubt contributed to uphold the mythic image of Mumbai as a city of wealth.

People living close to the border in Satkhira and Jessore knew that money could be got in Mumbai and that it required women. Most young men met in Hizoldi had visited Mumbai but alone they were not interested to stay. One man explained:

"I came to Mumbai some years ago and found work in a hotel. I used to get paid 800 rupees per month. Now may be, the pay is 1,200 rupees for such work. I stayed 1½ month, then left. The pay was too low. The objective for most Bangladeshi men who come to Mumbai is to learn the hotel trade, get a certificate, obtain an Indian passport and, hopefully, get a job in the Middle East. Before, it was easy and cheap. Now the cost has increased."

This man who had studied up to college level lived off his wife's income and was not happy about his situation which he regarded as degrading. His wife was of a different opinion. She much preferred life in Mumbai to her in-laws' home.

Fahima's husband stated that he worked on a construction site in Mumbai. His claim is not credible. The couple had two young children who needed care and Fahima, clearly, had no time to look after them. The Bangladeshi men we met in Mumbai mostly earn as "husbands". They earn so well as "husbands" that other jobs lose all attraction. In November 2001, the rate for day labourers on construction sites in Mumbai was 80 rupees per day. Such pay may be compared with the earnings Fahima mentioned above. As she poured beer and did not go out with customers, she claimed to have earned between 700 and 1,000 rupees a night. When she started going out and engaging in sex work, she earned two to three times this amount. Different classes of bars obviously provide different earnings and women are not all equally successful but, on the whole, bar girls' income is a multiple of what men day labourers earn. Even compared with brothel sex workers, bar work generally pays more. In Kamathipura, the rate per shot was 50 rupees while, for a night stand, women could get about 500 rupees.

Fahima may have exaggerated her earnings (as mentioned, other informants quoted lower figures for similar work) and may have presented her life in Mumbai as more glittering than it actually was. She briefly referred to the risks of being sold and to her husband worrying about her but she mostly brushed aside risks, fear and hardship. She was in a euphoric mood as she returned with wealth she never possessed in the past. Compared with what she had known, one can understand her enthusiasm.

6) "We could not say no to customers because we had been sold to them"

Fahima did not seem to feel devalued by the work she did. She clearly enjoyed some of it even though she admitted that she could not say no to customers since she had been sold to them. She kept repeating that she was a good looking woman and was aware of being in demand. This pleased her. Fahima was not explicit about the kinds of demands customers made to her. She only said that they could use her any way they liked. To be a provider of erotic pleasures was certainly a new experience for this peasant woman. Her assessment on the whole was positive. Fahima said she discovered a world and her eyes were opened. The beautiful clothes, the bright lights, the music, the drinks, the injected drugs and the acknowledgment of her beauty are the nice memories she wished to recall.

Narratives catch the moods of informants at a particular moment. One can imagine that life in Mumbai was not always easy for Fahima and her

husband. As they first arrived empty handed, the pressure on her to earn fast was tremendous as the family depended on her entirely. In Mumbai we heard that undocumented Bangladeshis preferably lived in flats to avoid police raids. Flats are more expensive than slum or semi-slum dwellings. In addition to the monthly rent, newcomers must pay a deposit of 10,000 to 15,000 rupees. This money can be borrowed against interest. These costs add pressure on the women to earn fast. This probably leads to taking up sex work early as it pays more.

### **6.3 The expansion of ladies bars in Mumbai**

Ladies bars have spread rapidly in Mumbai throughout the 1990's. In the 1970's and 80's, unskilled Bangladeshi women who migrated to Mumbai sought domestic employment but it did not pay much. Case histories show that it was often complemented or replaced by sex work, at least for the younger women. There were also girls sold to brothels but one did not hear about ladies bars.

According to Shubhada Chaukar, a journalist who carried out a small study on Bar Girls in Mumbai, the first ladies service bars were opened in the late 1980's by Shetty men from Bangalore.<sup>27</sup> The Shetty community traditionally had been involved in running restaurants. With their dhosas and idlis, some offered beer to increase their profits. A younger generation of Shetty men went further. They brought girls from traditional dancing families in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh to present shows for the clients and sold drinks at higher prices. In 1997, Chaukar claimed that there were about 1,200 ladies service bars in Mumbai and that 90 percent of them were owned by Shetty men.

There is no official figure on the number of girls/women working in the bars of Mumbai. Anand Shetty, leader of the bar girls' association, in 1997, estimated they were 100,000 to 125,000 and said their number was increasing every year. Bangladeshi girls reportedly were associated with these establishments from the start.

"There is a general conception that a majority of girls entering this field were north Indian or Bangladeshi...When these bars were first set up, around 1990, the young girls who were initiated into prostitution in the brothels of Congress House and on Foras Road had two ways of earning, the bar by night and the bed by midnight.... In the beginning, the girls in this business were from Bangladesh, West Bengal,

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<sup>27</sup> Subhada Chaukar, *Problems of Bar Girls in Mumbai*, A Study report prepared under Vasant Rao Bhagwat Memorial Fellowship, published by Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1998

Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and such areas. Their fair complexion and well-built physique lured customers. But now, north Indians and Bangladeshis do not have a monopoly in the bar business."<sup>28</sup>

In her survey of 50 bar girls, Chaukar found 10 (20 percent) from West Bengal and none from Bangladesh. Perhaps one finds what one looks for. We looked for Bangladeshi girls and women and we found them. Many worked in the suburbs of Vile Parle, Andheri and Mira Road. They reportedly worked in several other locations as well but time was too short to survey further.

One West Bengali bargirl who had worked in Mumbai since 1993 claimed that there was a massive arrival of Bangladeshi girls in 1995-96. An increase in the emigration of women at that time was also apparent in the villages of Jessore and Satkhira we studied. Bars have continued to expand since and the number of bar girls has no doubt increased. Their individual income, however, is said to have decreased.

In Bangladesh, no study was found which mentioned the presence of Bangladeshi women in the bars of Mumbai. It must be said that very little field research has been carried out on the occupations held by Bangladeshi women in India. Journalists and NGO activists passed through Mumbai we heard but they did not stay long enough to carry out research. Bar girls are actually difficult to pin point as they are very mobile. Not being tied to a particular bar, they keep on changing work place and residence. Two Mumbai-based NGO's working on the prevention of HIV/AIDS said they did not work with bar girls as, unlike brothel-based sex workers, they could not be followed up. The physical mobility of bar girls added to the difficulty of our research in Mumbai. Several times, we tried to locate a girl known to an informant but her trace was lost. She had moved elsewhere, she had returned to Bangladesh, she had married and her husband did not permit her talking about her previous life. These observations suggest that the turn over of bar girls is high.

#### **6.4 The young age of bar workers**

Chaukar found that 62 percent of the bar workers she interviewed were between 16 and 25 years old.

She writes:

"Although there was a variety in respect of religion, caste, language and background, the one common factor was age. This business is confined to young

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<sup>28</sup> Chaukar, p. 6 and 7

girls. As youth and beauty go together, only girls and women between 16 to 35 are to be found in this field. Those in the right age are in demand."<sup>29</sup>

The young age of bar workers is suggested by our data as well. Table 2 in Chapter 2 showed that among the 260 women who migrated to India, as many as 33.8 percent were below the age of 16 and 58.4 percent were 18 years or below. Bar workers were not segregated but since this occupation is the most important in our sample of migrants to India, the young age of bar workers is here implied. The youngest girls initiated into bar work in this study were 13 years old (see Tamzida below).

Table 3 showed that, even though, the migrants were very young, a substantial number had already been married and had failed marriage (23.8 percent). These figures confirm a relatively high level of early child marriage in Jessore and Satkhira, a high rate of failure among them and a propensity to migrate following a failed marriage. Tables 2 and 3 compared women migrating to India and women migrating to the Middle East. Beside the young age, one notes a higher level of illiteracy among migrants to India. This may be due to two reasons: an older migration at a time when female literacy rate was lower than today and, the poorer economic level of girls and women migrating to India. As mentioned, this was especially true in the 1970's and 1980's but is less apparent today with the great attraction exerted by the bar industry on lower middle class families as well.

## **6.5 Types of ladies bars**

The typology of bars presented below was drawn from women bar workers, bar clients, male bar attendants and bar owners, our own observations of these establishments and Chaukar's study report.

**6.5.1 Ladies service bars** This is the type of bar where Fahima first worked. It is described by Chaukar as follows:

"Some bars are divided into two, three or four sections. The front section near the entrance is manned exclusively by bar girls. There are no shows here. These girls do all the chores of the male

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<sup>29</sup> Chaukar, p. 12-13

attendants, like arranging tables, taking orders, pouring liquor, etc. Service with a smile is expected, as also a coy urging for one more peg."

### 6.5.2 Dance bars

Rich Mumbai businessmen took us to such dance bars. Thirty to 50 women beautifully dressed in *lehengas* or in clinging saris danced in the middle of a brightly lit floor to the sound of Hindi songs. Although two women sometimes formed a duo, there was no group choreography. Male spectators sat at tables disposed around drinking beer or other alcoholic beverages served by male attendants. Women tried to spot generous customers and attract their attention by eye contact and a display of their dancing skills. Customers showed their appreciation by tipping them. The women came to get the bank notes from their hands (getting a closer look) and returned to the floor holding or tucking these in their belts. A captivated customer at time showered bank notes over the girl of his choice while she gave a stunning performance detracting attention from other dancers. Women displayed their youth, grace, charm and beauty while men exhibited their economic power. Men squandering money was part of the game and offering 10 rupee notes at a time would not do. "We would look very cheap, if we did so", commented a lawyer sitting next to one of us. Fifty and 100 rupees notes (preferably new) were flying around or accumulated on the floor. Chaukar mentioned the offering of garlands of banknotes (*daulatzada*). Bars kept a stock of these which could be got for two hundred, five hundred, one thousand or five thousand rupees.

In such bars, customers were strictly forbidden to touch the women but they could eventually fix a *rendez-vous* and meet them outside. Bar owners did not arrange these meetings and girls were free to refuse. When asked, however, most seemed quite willing to exchange phone numbers and show their availability for future contact. Each girl had a box marked to her name in which rupees earned were stored. The accounts were settled at the end of the evening, bar owners keeping 30-35 percent for themselves.

In these bars, women's income varied enormously, the best dancers and the most beautiful women earning handsomely while those who looked unhappy and failed to attract customers' attention found their box practically empty by the end of the evening. No salary was given and income came entirely from

tips. The film *Chandni Bar* released in the cinema of Mumbai in October 2001 portrayed quite well the life style of these bar girls.

The dance bar where Fahima worked as she went "inside" appears to be somewhat different. The "injections" given to dancers to remove all hesitation suggest sexier dances. The clothes she described were also scantier. Fahima was taken on outings arranged by the bar owner, so the bar was also a pick up point. We were told that such bars often have small cubicles on the upper floor which can be rented for sex. These are not publicized by bar owners for obvious reasons but they were mentioned in some of the women's narratives. Here is Tazima's story;

"One week after arriving, I was taken to a bar. There I earned between 200 and 400 rupees. Six months later, I started working "inside" but I could not dance much as I was too fat. After one year, I picked up customers at the bar and took them upstairs. I could then earn up to 1,500 rupees a day."

### 6.5.3 Disco bars

Most Bangladeshi girls/ women in Mumbai reportedly worked in disco bars. Some wore saris, a few wore *lehengas* but many wore western outfits such as tight pants or mini skirts with T-shirts. The music in disco bar was louder and 'harder'. Girls went to customers, shook hand and introduced themselves, they sat by their side and asked to be bought a drink. They held conversation (difficult to hear with the blasting music), touched, kissed and fondled customers willing to pay and allowed them to do the same. Customers could dance with the bar girls if they wished. They could take them out, in such case, they paid the bar owner a fine of 150 rupees. Some girls left the dance floor 2 or 3 times in an evening and then returned. Here money was not so much earned for skilled dancing as for other services. The owner of Laxmi Bar where nearly half of the girls were Bengali (Bangladeshi) said:

"For disco bars, we accept all women. It does not matter whether they are good looking or not, whether they can dance or not. We pay them no salary. They only get tips from customers. We take no percentage from what the women earn."

The disco bars we visited were extremely crowded places with psychedelic lights and an electric atmosphere. Bar owners' income came from selling drinks at high prices and to some extent from sex work though this aspect of the business was not openly revealed. Girls were instructed to incite

customers to consume as much as possible. Many girls used the disco bars to make contacts with customers whom they met later. Some of the flats we visited in Neherunagar were equipped with telephones and these ran incessantly. Customers called to have a chat or to make an appointment. The women called customers to keep up relationships. Married women on outings called their husbands to say that they would not be back on that day. Telephones were important working tools for the disco bar women, one telephone being shared by several of them.

It should be pointed out that some women working in disco bars do not accept to go out with customers. This could be verified with Rosy, a married woman we visited several times at home and at work. She had gone to Mumbai following a crisis in her marriage. Her husband eventually joined her. He accepted that his wife worked in a bar providing she did not do 'bad' work. Rosy earned less than others as a result but she preferred to save her marriage. Such women walk on a tight rope. We observed Rosy at work and could see that while she did not "go out", she allowed considerable intimacy to take place with customers. Unlike prostitution in a brothel, disco bars offer the possibility to limit the services offered and/or make a husband believe that one does so. Although a majority of women working in disco bars engage in sex work, the fact that some do not makes the occupation less stigmatizing. The glamour and the higher pay also contribute to give a status definitely higher than that of sex workers in traditional brothels.

#### **6.5.4 Free service bars**

Here customers pick up a girl/woman and for 100 rupees sit with her in the dark. They order drinks and a meal that are highly priced and enjoy the girl next to them. They may kiss, fondle, masturbate and even engage in penetrative sex while sitting in the dark cubicles. Customers may also take the woman out if they wish. Here there is no dance.

A male informant who spent 2 years in Mumbai claimed that new comers from Bangladesh often start in free service bars and move on to disco bars once they have acquired language and dance skills. We have some evidence of very young girls (14 to 16 years old) who were first made to work in free service bars. In such cases, initiation into sex work was certainly an abrupt one.

Chaukar mentioned another type of establishment called *mujra* bars. "Here the customer is seated on mattresses, presented with obscene scenes and then given satisfaction. There are only a few bars of this type in Mumbai."<sup>30</sup> We heard of such bar but, for our informants, free service bars were

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<sup>30</sup> Chaukar, p. 12

described as the most obscene. The latter were found in suburbs where the police could be more easily co-opted. Wasi and Vivaldi were mentioned as two such areas.

## **6.6 Recruitment / trafficking of bar girls through relatives**

Table 16 showed that the recruiters for work in the bars of Mumbai are mostly relatives and neighbours. *Dalals* play a lesser role than in the Middle East. The exploitation of girls and young women by family members or by close neighbours usually is not seen as trafficking. Often the abuse is not seen at all by members of the community and remains a non-issue.

To illustrate such recruitment, the activities of a particular family at the centre of which stands a couple, Jahangir (30 years old) and Monjuara (34 years old) will be described. The couple has involved their brothers, sisters, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law in the identification, enticement and transport of new recruits. Unmarried aunts, poor nieces and cousins, poor girls in difficulty were taken to Mumbai through this family network. Victimized and trafficked, or helped and benefited, situations vary. Points of view on "trafficking" also differ depending on the relationship between parties. Since "trafficking" within a family is regarded as an internal affair, outsiders generally do not interfere.

Jahangir's home is in Bangladesh only a few metres from the Indian border while Monjuara grew up on the other side of the border in India. Both were first involved in smuggling goods before engaging in "trafficking". Their marriage was a strategic one for the purpose of their business. It helped securing allies and collaborators on both sides of the border. Other members of the family (e.g. Jahangir's sister) have married on the Indian side of the border reinforcing the network.

## **6.7 Marrying to avoid accusation of trafficking**

We first heard about this family through Jahangir's younger brother, Rezaul (28 years old) who was accused of sheltering a 15-year-old girl, Beena, whom he was about to take to Mumbai. Beena stayed at Rezaul's house for some time as the border was not safe for crossing and rumors mounted that Rezaul was getting ready to traffic a girl. Someone spied on him and informed the Union Parishad Member of his eminent departure. As Rezaul was preparing to leave, he was summoned to Member. The latter warned him that he could be arrested for trafficking unless he married Beena. If he did so, no one could go against him. Rezaul paid Member 3,000 taka and married the young girl at the Kazi office. Thus, he got a license to travel to Mumbai with her undisturbed.

The man already had a wife. For 6 months, she had worked in Mumbai but had just returned as she was pregnant. Rezaul avoided meeting us but his first wife, Fatima, was interviewed after Rezaul and Beena left for Mumbai. Fatima first described her life in Mumbai. She then expressed anger at her husband for marrying again. Interviewed as she visited her sister, she felt free to speak.

**6.7.1 Fatima's story** "When I was 18 years old, Rezaul and I had a love marriage (she is now 24). We first went to Mumbai to visit. Then, Monjuara and Jahangir suggested I do this work. I started 25 days later. I poured drinks to clients. We were given some training on how to dress, talk and get customers to spend on drinks. Some girls danced but I was too fat to do that. At first I did not like it. What kind of work is this, I thought. But shame and embarrassment did not last.

We had to work 12 hours a day. We left at 2 p.m. and returned at 6 a.m. I was so tired, I lost interest in my husband. I had left behind my 6 month old baby and I missed him terribly. I did not earn very much because I did not go out with clients.

We lived with Jahangir and Monjuara. We paid them 600 rupees per month as rent plus 120 rupees per day for food, 4,200 rupees a month in all. I gave all my money to my husband. He did no other work. I supported him. After 7 months, we came back with 21,000 rupees. For myself, I had ornaments made for 8,000 rupees.

Many girls live with Jahangir and Monjuara in their house in Mumbai. His two unmarried aunts (*khalas*), his two nieces (*bhatiji*), one cousin (*phupato bon*), the daughter of his aunt's co-wife (*phupur shottiner meye*) and the daughter of his sister's brother-in-law (*boner bhashurer meye*). They take the whole income of some girls. With others, they have a different arrangement. Jahangir did not take all my money because I am his brother's wife."

"What I did not do for them. And look what he did to me. Before he left, he told me:"

- "You are my first wife (*tumi amar bieyer bou*). What she (Beena) will earn, you and your children will eat. Now you are pregnant, you cannot work."

"I trusted him. I never thought he would do that to me. I see the next six months what he does, how he looks after me. If he does not, I know the road. I will go back to Mumbai. I can stay there without a husband. I will leave my two children with my mother-in-law. I speak Hindi. I know the way now."

We have seen above Azizul thinking about marrying a girl more suitable for bar work than his present wife. Rezaul did just that. Six month pregnant, Fatima was useless in Mumbai. She also seems to have engaged in bar work somewhat reluctantly and was not a very good earner. It is not clear whether pressure was put on her to earn more by engaging in sex work. She denied that she did so but her sister's husband suggested otherwise.

"Everyone knows that they (*Jahangir and Rezaul*) are involved in the flesh trade. My sister-in-law is married in this family. Her husband also got her to do it. What can we do?"

Her sister reinforced the point.

"Jahangir, Rezaul, they are such bad people. They earn money selling their own wives' virtue (*era eto kharup, niger bou izzot bikri core taka banai*). He got my sister to work in a bar and lived off her illegitimate activities."

When he first suggested they visit Mumbai, Fatima had refused to leave behind their 6-month-old son. She had not been told that she would have to work in a bar and that it would be impossible to care for the child. Her husband knew this perfectly well. To please her husband, Fatima had left her baby behind, had gone to Mumbai, had worked in a bar and yet, after she became pregnant, he took a more suitable "wife" who could earn better than her. Fatima was told not to complain since Beena was going to earn for her as well. The possibility to return to Mumbai allowed Fatima to speak up her mind and to set limits to what she may tolerate. Wives who do not have that option and (because of age, looks or family background) stay behind may put up with much deprivation.

What about Beena? Was she trafficked by Rezaul? If one assumes so, Beena may be imagined to be more ignorant and less astute than she was. Her previous life should be told. Married at 14 to a much older man, a widower with children, Beena could not adjust and left him after 6 months.

Her mother had died and her father was very poor. He had agreed to the marriage because he could not afford to pay for a dowry. Where could Beena go after walking out of her first husband's home? Young, good looking, poor and unprotected, Beena would have to deal with men's gaze on her whether she went to Mumbai or not. In her situation, the prospect of going to Mumbai could be seen as a better alternative than staying exposed and without a place of her own. How much she knew about bar work in Mumbai is difficult to say.

On the other hand, the purpose of those who showed an interest in Beena was very clear. They planned to make money out of her. Rezaul's sister who lived next to Beena first identified her as a good candidate for Mumbai and introduced her to Rezaul. When Beena was met at Rezaul's house, she said she was going to Mumbai where Rezaul would marry her. Did Beena understand this union as a "contract" marriage for the purpose of migration only or did she see Rezaul as a future husband to whom she would be morally bound. For Rezaul, the very exploitation of this ambiguity offered the possibility to benefit from a larger part of her income.

In Mumbai, several couples were met who were thus constituted. Men had married a second time a young and good-looking wife who could earn well in the bars of Mumbai. As earners, these young women were not without power but securing for themselves a place in the *somaj* and being accepted by their in-laws back home cost them dearly. The role of wife required a frequent display of generosity and good-heartedness. They were solicited to reimburse a pressing loan contracted by their husband, to pay for repairing his house, to cover the dowry or the education of his siblings or his children. Acceptance by in-laws was conditional upon fulfilling these good actions. Some of the women we met wished they could help their own families more. As they gained experience, many became more assertive in this respect.

In the eyes of village society, Rezaul marrying Beena made it impossible to pursue him as a trafficker. A husband may legitimately take his wife abroad. The wife is under his authority and the community does not challenge whatever he decides. One repeatedly heard in Mumbai that husbands nowadays earned more than *dalals*. In migrant villages of Jessore and Satkhira, criterias for selecting a wife had changed. Many men looked for pretty, tall and slim girls, aware of fashion and possibly good dancers rather than the frugal and hard working girls of yesterdays.

## **6.8 Accusation of "trafficking" difficult to sustain among relatives**

Other cases of girls transported to Mumbai by, or with the connivance of, Jahangir and Monjuara had contributed to the couple's reputation and had

shown them as "traffickers". Among them, were Monjuara's two nieces, Shamima and Lota who were taken to Mumbai under false pretence and were put to work in bars. The two sisters, now in Mumbai, could not be met. The story was heard from their parents.

In 1996, Monjuara proposed to her sister and brother-in-law to take Shamima, their eldest daughter, to Mumbai. She argued it would be easier to find a good husband for her. Some say Shamima was 14, others say she was 16 years old. Everyone agreed that she was exceptionally beautiful and her parents were poor. Shamima's parents accepted the proposal and she left with her aunt. One year later, the aunt and uncle visited Bangladesh and sent a message that Shamima's younger sister Lota, 13 years old, should come to get clothes which Shamima had sent for her. Lota went and did not come back.

For another six months, the parents received no news of their daughters. Then, Shamima appeared with a cousin. She explained that she had been made to work in a bar and had run away. Her younger sister was engaged in the same activity. For 1½ year, Monjuara and Jahangir had pocketed all her income and continued to appropriate that of her sister, Lota. The parents were furious to learn that Jahangir and Monjuara had used their daughters and had fooled them in this way. They sent a message asking them to return Lota immediately but time passed and nothing happened. Some two years later, in January 2000, the father filed a case with the local police accusing Jahangir, Monjuara, Rezaul and Rezaul's father of trafficking Lota. Then, he went to Mumbai to rescue the latter. Shamima was there to help him but it was not easy. They reportedly had to buy a large quantity of alcohol to enlist the cooperation of muscle men. In the end, Lota left Mumbai with her father. As they arrived at the border, Monjuara and Jahangir had informed Jahangir's brother-in-law and the latter had the two arrested by the police for traveling without passport. They spent 22 days in a West Bengale jail.

Meanwhile, Jahangir's home in Bangladesh was raided by the police and pressure mounted on his family. Smelling fire, Monjuara and Jahangir returned from Mumbai. In West Bengal, they bribed the police and got Lota and her father out of jail. They then went to an elderly man of Monjuara's family and asked for his advice on how to settle the family dispute. The elderly relative recommended making peace and as this was a family affair, the police should not be involved. Lota's mother later commented: "I could not send my own sister to jail". She and her husband finally accepted the apologies of the wrongdoers and absolved them of having "trafficked" their two daughters. In the eyes of Shamima and Lota's parents, the greatest fault of the traffickers appears to have been the appropriation of the girls' income. Introducing them to bar work and encouraging (or forcing) them to

engage in sex work was not brought up as the issue. The mother kept repeating that for 1½ year in Shamima's case and for 2½ years in Lota's case, Jahangir and Monjuara "ate" their income.

Through these events, Jahangir and Monjuara's business in girls got publicized but it did not stop their activities. Fatima quoted above mentioned that they continued to keep many girls in their homes in Mumbai and that they took all the income from some of them while with others they charged a fee for board and lodging.

Only six month ago, Jahangir's sister who had a bad relationship with her husband fled to Mumbai with with Mona, a 16-year-old orphan who is her husband's elder brother's daughter. The young girl was initiated into bar work and, although it is not clear who benefits from it, Jahangir and Monjuara who sheltered the fugitives have been accused of trafficking.

"Trafficking" within the family may never be uncovered and if it is, there is generally no agreement on whether the case is one of trafficking or not. In the case of Mona who has no father, various relatives expressed conflicting claims over her and it is in the midst of claims and counter claims that accusation of trafficking were eventually made. Though not an orphan, Shamima had been entrusted to Jahangir and Monjuara who became her de facto guardians in Mumbai. The parents had agreed to this arrangement for the purpose of marriage but not for bar/sex work, especially as they received none of the income. In the case of Lota, she was lured away, appropriated and put to work for the benefit of her aunt and uncle. Jahangir's sister did the same with Mona. We have seen that village community members generally regard such matters as internal to a family and refrain from interfering. More over, parents cheated by close relatives hesitate to take them to court preferring to settle the issue internally. We will see that such events also destroy families at the core and children exploited by their own parents – whether we call them traffickers or not – are extremely alone and defenseless.

## **6.9 Girls "trafficked" by non-relatives**

Where bar work in Mumbai is known, beautiful young girls are sought after. Those without guardians or those with very weak guardians are targeted by hunters of easy preys. The next narrative is such a case. Parveen was taken to Mumbai at the age of 14 after being thrown out of the house by her father.

### **6.9.1 Parveen's story**

"My mother died when I was 7 years old. My father, a van puller, remarried 9 months later. My

stepmother made me work very hard for the family. She regularly beat me. By the age of 14, I started protesting. My father came back tired one night and he pushed me out of the house. I took shelter at a neighbour. Three days later, I visited another village with that family. There, I met Hamida. She offered to take me to Mumbai, teach me dance and fix a good job for me.

- "You will be able to earn well and fend for yourself", she said.

I left without informing my father. I did not have a clear idea about bar work. The first 3 months, she kept me and taught me to dance. I was quite happy to put on beautiful clothes and learn to dance. I felt like a cinema heroin. She gave me good food. I called her Nanni (*maternal grand-mother*). I trusted her. She used to say:

- "When you earn, I will look after your money and when you go home, you will be able to buy land. You will see your father will love you."

I never suspected Nanni could cheat me. I returned one month ago. She gave me 4,000 rupees and promised that her *jamai* (daughter's husband) would give me the rest.

- "The money will be transported through a *hundi* agent. It is too dangerous to carry such large amount yourself. You could get stolen. Look for land you can buy and the money will follow."

I brought gifts for my family. My father looked for land. Today, I came to get the money and Hamida's *jamai* said nothing had come for me. I could not believe it. Hamida owes me 1,00,000 rupees. I was a good earner. I was young and successful and she used to say I should make the most of it."

Parveen was met as she had come to collect her savings. She had just found out that she had been cheated, that she had been "trafficked" for 1½ year. The reckoning was painful. Hamida is a well-known *dalali* in this locality and she has a reputation for cheating girls. We found 5 girls whom she had taken to Mumbai. As with Jahangir and Monjuara, the arrangement made with each of them was different. She offered 22 year old Rasheda the following deal. She would take her to Mumbai, fix a job for her, provide room and board and, in exchange, keep half of her income. The rest she would

send through a *hundi* agent to her family. But Rasheda's family received only a fraction of the amount they were supposed to get. It led to a quarrel and Rasheda left Hamida after 9 months.

Another woman had stayed only 3 months with Hamida. Her mother said her daughter was astute and did not allow Hamida to exploit her for long. Hamida cheated her youngest recruits the most. Nineteen year old Sultana has been with her for 3 years and has never returned to visit her village. Through Hamida, her family received 4,000 taka per month. Being poor and unaware of Mumbai's rates of pay, the mother is happy with these remittances.

Hamida recruited girls who were in a precarious situation. One had been the object of a scandal as she was caught having a love relationship with her husband's younger brother; another compromised her reputation with the son of a rich farmer who then refused to marry her. These girls/women had 'faulted' and their families wanted them to leave the community so that the scandal could fade away. Hamida's offer to go to Mumbai came as saving grace and guardians did not attempt to negotiate the best conditions for their daughters. Parveen was an excellent recruit for Hamida. Rejected by her father and without mother, lonely and unhappy she could easily be manipulated and we see Hamida promising that she would gain back her father's affection if she worked hard and earned a lot. It was clear that Parveen had no strong guardian who could fight on her behalf and that Hamida "trafficking" her would go unpunished. One village man present on the scene when Parveen realized she had been cheated said: "If Hamida had given her a little bit more, Parveen would have been happy", implying that it was acceptable for Hamida to make a good profit out of Parveen's work but she did not have to be so stingy and cause such bad feeling in the young girl.

It should be pointed out here that, for the most part, Bangladeshi women met in Mumbai did not open bank accounts and did not transfer money by official channels. They feared using such means because they were illegal migrants. Women from West Bengal had no such problem. Many sent postal money orders to their families on a monthly basis. In Mumbai, several stories were heard of women who were robbed of their savings either in that city or as they traveled back to Bangladesh, especially as they crossed the border. In October 2001, Prerana, a Mumbai-based NGO active among sex workers was busy helping women to open bank accounts after many had entrusted their savings to a "marwari" who then fled with their money. This problem increased women's dependence on a "husband". One of the main jobs of husbands was to regularly transport their wives earnings across the border and invest them at home.

Migrant women were also regularly cheated by *dalals* operating at the border who changed their rupees for an equal amount of taka earning 20 percent benefit in the process. Needless to say, none of these money transfers go through official channels and affect the foreign exchange reserve of Bangladesh.

### **6.10 Older women rip a good income from young recruits**

Hamida's methods for making money out of new recruits to bar work may not be very different from those used by Halima Begum, a 42 year old woman who spent 20 years in Mumbai. She explained how a woman her age can still earn in the big city.

"All these girls who are new have no place to stay. I give them shelter, help them find work and teach them what the work is about. I have a large network of acquaintances and friends in the bar milieu.

Experienced women who teach new girls get a good share of their income. There are many women like me who have been in the trade for several years. Now they keep girls. Different kinds of contracts can be made with them. (1) they pay a monthly pension of 1,500 to 2,000 rupees, (2) I promise them a fix salary for 3 to 6 months while they give me all their tips. In such case, I appoint someone to check on them and see how much money they are making. New girls quite like this arrangement. (3) I charge a fix amount, say between 5,000 and 10,000 rupees, for teaching the trade, help them find a job and get their clothes made. A girl who is slow may require up to 3 months to learn but some do it within a month. There is little profit to be made for me in such arrangement. (4) The greatest profit is when girls agree to hand over half their income to me over a period of 6 months to 1 year"

- " How do you get girls to accept such arrangement?"

"If they come from my village or are my relatives, they believe I am *aponjon* (one's own people). They trust me. I tell them how to avoid the CID (police), I warn them not to talk to people, not to reveal their Bangladesh address. I inform them about

contraceptives, tell them about the risks of being exploited by a boyfriend, etc. They do not know the way and they believe me."

This description of the various ways an experienced woman can earn is confirmed in other narratives and seems fairly accurate. How fair, how exploitative are these various arrangements? The border line between "fee for service", "exploitation" and "trafficking" is extremely difficult to trace objectively. Halima suggested that relatedness and social proximity increases the possibility of exploitation. Her young recruits believed and trusted her especially as they perceived her to be *aponjon*. This is an interesting observation pointing out to types of psychological manipulation most effective in ripping profit from new recruits.

### 6.11 "Without risks, there is no money"

Halima is a fearless woman who helped new recruits gain confidence and tackle the most risky jobs.

"Girls who are clever and good looking and want to earn a lot put up their names in free service bars. Over there, the risks are greater but the income is higher.

Also owners of bars in Saudi and Dubai contract girls from Mumbai and take them to their countries. Some girls never came back. My daughter went 3 years ago with another girl and that girl did not return. Without risks, there is no money. Girls need to be fearless and willing to satisfy the demands of any customer. Everyone has its *dhormo* (rule of conduct, religion, morality). Fearlessness should be the *dhormo* of bar girls."

In her own life, Halima has shown much determination and fearlessness. She has practiced to some extent the *dhormo* she is teaching. This is how she explained the circumstances which led her to first migrate to Mumbai:

"My mother had 5 daughters and no son. Because of this, I was married at the age of 9 to a 14 year old boy who became a *ghor-jamai*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> A *ghor-jamai* is a man who comes to live with his wife's parents in their compound, contradicting the normal practice of patrilocality. A *Ghor-jamai* cannot exert over their wives the same ascendancy as men who take wives to their homes. The term is slightly derogatory.

At the age of 20, my father remarried and went to live with his second wife elsewhere. He put his land for sale. I wanted to buy it, otherwise where would I live with my husband and our two children. This was in 1979. Many families in Bakra had already left for Mumbai. So, I decided to go with my husband and our 2 children. After 6 months, I sent back my husband and children to my mother and stayed by myself.

I worked hard and after 1 year I had earned 14,000 taka and was able to buy my father's land. I ensured that my mother and my husband would not be displaced. I have bought 10 *bighas* of land with my income over the years. I stayed in Mumbai and my husband used to travel back and forth. He looked after the land in the village.

## **6.12 Families split across countries**

Halima Begum has two households, one in Mumbai and one in Jessore. Several women we met share such situation. Income is made in Mumbai while investments in land and in prestigious projects are made in Bangladesh. Women earn in the big city while men (husbands or daughter's husbands) manage their investments and look after the land at home. A similar situation has been observed with Bangladeshi women who migrated to the Middle East. The complementary roles of men and women in earning and in managing money are a strong glue holding marriages together in spite of lives lived apart.

In Mumbai, Halima Begum rents a large flat where she lives with her eldest daughter together with the girls she (they) keep for an income. Her eldest daughter opted for bar work while her youngest daughter was married in the village.

"My eldest daughter Fatima was brought back to the village at the age of 18 to be married but because she had been in Mumbai and was dark, she could not find a husband even though we had agreed to pay a dowry of 60,000 taka. Fatima told us she did not mind. She decided to go back to Mumbai and marry later after she earned some more. My daughter took the right decision. She is appreciated in Mumbai. She is now at the peak of her career and earns more than any of us.

My younger daughter, Masuda, grew up in the village. There was no problem in marrying her last year at the age of 16. No dowry was required."

Halima Begum was a free service bargirl and so is her eldest daughter. The stigmatizing effect of such work for herself and her daughter is brushed aside but she excludes a Mumbai returnee as a wife for her son who is about to marry.

Through migration, Halima Begum was able to turn into benefits some of the disadvantages of being born female in a patriarchal society. As a daughter, she did not inherit any of her father's land and when her father abandoned her mother who had not produced any son, she and her sisters faced eviction and destitution. Migration to Mumbai allowed Halima to buy her father's land. Her "dark" daughter also turned her disadvantage to benefits. Unable to find a husband in Bangladesh, she returned to Mumbai and is now earning handsomely.

Halima knows that the benefits of youth are short lived, especially in the kind of work she did. The recruitment of new girls into the trade continues to provide an income to Halima. Bars being more open places than brothels, the hold on new recruits cannot be maintained for long, so the search for new girls is constant. Women like Halima must devise clever means to ensure that new recruits do not wake up too early to the extent of their exploitation. Hamida invested in Parveen, taught her the trade for three months, fed her well and allowed her to dream that she was like a cinema heroin. This is a good example of the techniques used to hook a young girl, so that she will not realize too soon that she is being exploited and "trafficked".

### **6.13 The intelligence to make money**

Described as beautiful but 'simple' in mind, Tamzida, first went to Mumbai at the age of 13. She returned 2 years later with a bad report. It was said that she did not have the intelligence to make money. Estranged from her family, she migrated once again at the age of 15 and has not been seen for 1½ year. Her story was heard from her father and her elder's brother's wife (*bhabhi*)

#### **6.13.1 Tamzida's story**

(Her sister-in-law) Tamzida was very good looking but lacked intelligence. She was married at the age of 12. At first, her in-laws did not require a dowry but

later they made demands. She came back to us and her marriage ended.

Amena (*a dalali like Hamida and Halima*) said to us:

- "Why don't you give me Tamzida. You will have no cost. She will stay with me for 2 years. She will follow what I tell her. In return, you will get 20,000 taka."

She did not say what kind of work Tamzida would do. We agreed. Tamzida left and returned 2 years later. Amena gave us only 10,000 taka. She said Tamzida did not listen to her and did not work well. Later, Tamzida told me that she was asked to do 'bad' work and when she refused, she was beaten. Other girls who lived with Amena were made to do the same."

(her father) "Even though we did not get the full amount promised, we thought Tamzida should go back with Amena but Amena refused to take her. What could we do? We arranged her marriage with a boy from a neighbouring village but that did not work either. Tamzida told her husband what she did in Mumbai. She is so stupid, she revealed everything. She did not understand that such things cannot be told to a husband. He did not keep her."

"After some time, Morium (another Mumbai veteran from the same village) took Tamzida to Mumbai. She said she could fix a job and Tamzida could make a lot of money. This was 1½ years ago. Tamzida has never sent money. Morium told us that she had married a man from Uttar Pradesh, she had a baby, there were lots of expenses and she could not send any money home."

If many elements are missing to reconstitute Tamzida's story of migration, what is revealed here deserves comments. Tamzida was the youngest of 6 children and her mother had died. Considered beautiful, she lacked "intelligence", especially the kind of intelligence valued in a girl, that is self restraint and discretion with a deep sense of the secrets to keep in order to safeguard family reputation. Tamzida was only 12 years old when she was first given in marriage. When it failed, the family did not hesitate to send her to Mumbai, not bothering to find out what work would be expected of her there. She was entrusted to Amena who put the 13 year old to work in a free service bar where the transition into sex work is known to be abrupt and the conditions especially harsh. Amena used violent means but could not break Tamzida into "obedience". In the end, Tamzida did not earn much for her

family and Amena failed to honour the contract agreed with her father. Even though there were problems, the father insisted that Tamzida goes back with Amena. As Amena refused, Tamzida was married off a second time. She was a nuisance and the family wanted to get rid of her. When the second marriage failed, Tamzida was blamed for it. She had opened up the secret box and had revealed the work she did in Mumbai, which was considered "stupid". Whether such attitude demonstrates a lack of intelligence or not is a matter of point of view.

Tamzida was certainly outspoken. After she returned, she reportedly went to a neighbour who considered sending her daughter to Mumbai with the same Amena. Tamzida warned her not to do so. She showed the marks of beatings on her body as proof of the methods Amena used and confessed that she was forced to engage in sex work. Did Tamzida reveal so much out of concern for another possible victim or out of anger and revolt at the woman who ill-treated and exploited her? In any case, the neighbour did not send her daughter to Mumbai in the end but instead of showing gratitude at Tamzida for informing her, she commented that it was stupid of Tamzida to expose herself in the way she did. It proved that she was "simple".

At the age of 15, Tamzida returned to Mumbai with Morium, another veteran of the big city. The family heard later that she married a man from Uttar Pradesh and continued working in a bar until she became too pregnant to do so. Interestingly, Amena and Morium could not control Tamzida and apparently failed to make a large amount of money out of her. They claimed she had relationships with men but forgot about making money. Did a husband manage to instill in Tamzida the sense of business, which Amena and Morium had failed to do? After marriage, Tamzida is said to have continued to work in a free service bar earning 20,000 to 30,000 rupees per month. Amena still judged her "stupid" because she gave all her income to her husband.

Many people attempted to benefit from Tamzida. In the end, a husband from Uttar Pradesh seems to have been the most successful. He provided her with social shelter, allowed her to be a mother and may have used the discourse of "love" which proved more effective than the harsh treatment administered by Amena. Marriage once more appears a most powerful trap and "aunties", even though they were *aponjon* (from her own community), could not compete with a "husband".

## **6.14 "Contract" marriages**

We have seen that most bar workers eventually "take" a husband. According to a woman established in Mumbai for 15 years, less than 10

percent of the women come to the big city with a *biyer shami*<sup>32</sup>. In Neherunagar, young men were observed on the street trying to spot newcomers who had not yet paired off with a "husband". Among the unemployed, candidates for "live together arrangements" and "contract marriages" with a bargirl were many. The men claimed that such marriages were "for the time being", or "for enjoyment". Sharing a wife's income on a 50-50 basis was considered a fair arrangement by these men but the contract could also be more nebulous. For their own security, women readily referred to such partners as "husbands". It should be pointed out that, unlike Bangladesh, no one in Mumbai seemed interested in checking out whether the partners had actually signed a marriage contract or were otherwise "truly" married.

"Clever girls hide some money, they do not hand over all their earnings to their husbands. To succeed in this line, girls have to be cunning and clever." (a woman who spent 15 years in Mumbai)

"Girls who work in free service bars have to do sexual work mainly. That is why they cannot live without men. They need sex. Besides they need men for protection. Men cheat these women. They run away with their money. Whether they be "husband" or "lovers", men are all the same. Women get cheated over and over again. Men are looking for ways to make money by acting up as lovers, the faster they can build a relationship, the more benefited they are. If these girls learned not to be cheated over and over again, they could get established quickly." (A man with a reputation for cheating women)

The boasting of the above informant contrasts with the statement of the experienced woman. Points of view on "contract marriages" vary. No doubt women, and especially those who are young and inexperienced, are cheated by men but men are not immune from being cheated either. Here is Din Mohamot' story, a 33 year old man who first went to Mumbai at the age of 12.

#### **6.14.1 Din Mohamot's story**

"I was 12 years old when I went to Mumbai. Obiron took

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<sup>32</sup> A *biyer shami* is a woman's first husband. The union is considered more sacred than subsequent unions and is expected to last. Even though, Bengali Muslim society recognizes divorce and remarriage, Bengali culture does not regard a first and subsequent marriages in the same manner.

me to work in her house. I went because we were very poor. I was with Obiron for 3 years, then moved elsewhere. I worked in hotels and in people's homes.

When I was 20-21 years old, I met Kodeza. She employed me for 3,000 rupees per month. She was 34 years old, had a 4 year old daughter and worked in a free service bar. Within a few months, I had a relationship with her and we married. I continued to do housework and look after her daughter. She went to work in Dubai for 2-3 months once and left her daughter with me. In Mumbai, she worked in the worst kind of bar, the kind that pays most.

Women who work in such places lose their humanity. Family, religion, they don't care about anything. They get addicted to money, to men and to alcohol. In the end, I told Kodeza that she should leave this work but she refused, so I left her."

Din Mohamot had married a bar woman 14 years his senior. After he left her, back in Bangladesh, he married a woman 12 years his junior, which is more in line with local social norms. The second wife explained that Din Mohamot leaving his first wife was more a matter of economics than morality.

"My husband felt cheated because, after marrying Kodeza, she continued to give him the same amount of money as before. He had expected more. He demanded a share of her income but she refused. They quarreled and he left."

Din Mohamot could not get rich as a Mumbai "husband". Marrying for money may be difficult to admit outright but he did not mince his words about bar girls who refuse to share their income with their husband.

"After living with Kodeza, I lost all respect for bar girls. Men who live with them cannot say anything. My brother was in Mumbai for 9 years. He also married a woman older than himself. He got no advantage, so he left a year ago."

Such stories show what type of work poor boy migrants from Bangladesh may do in Mumbai. Many earn, or try to earn, as "husbands" but shrewdness is not a monopoly of men. As a husband, Din Mohamot had expected to get a share of his wife's income but the latter was not willing to grant so much. Men may claim a right to be the managers and the controllers of women's income while women, who are here the earners and providers, have other

claims and needs. Marriage carries powerful ideologies differently utilized by men and women.

The ways in which the roles of married partners are re-negotiated and the marriage model itself re-defined is symptomatic of a new society being created through this particular type of migration. Agreements on roles played in Mumbai between partners are not revealed back in the village and may be hidden from close relatives. Husband and wife cooperate in hiding that she was the main or the only earner (through bar and/or sex work) and he did the house chores. Upon return, the couple reverts to more traditional positions. Where migration is widespread, however, the secrets of life in Mumbai are shared by a larger number of people. Not talking about it is more a question of etiquette than of morality. Admittedly or not, migration to Mumbai is having a deep impact on village society challenging both, class and gender relations in a significant and profound way.

## 6.15 Fair sharing of income between husband and wife

Contract marriages, not meant to last, sometimes endure as both partners derive benefits. This is the case for Ruma and Ali Hussain, both of whom went to Mumbai in their early teens. After considerable hardship, they met in Mumbai, contracted a marriage and lived off her bar work. Finally, they returned to his village in Bangladesh to live as husband and wife. At the onset of the relationship, she made a contract with him whose terms were very clear. Complicity and mutual sympathy developed in this couple who did not try to cheat each other. Both of their narratives will be quoted at some length. It starts with her being trafficked at the age of 11-12.

### 6.15.1 Ruma's story

"My father was a richshawallah in Khulna. We were very poor. I was the eldest of 3 sisters and 1 brother. One day my cousin (*mamato bon*) offered to take me to Mumbai. My parents agreed. This was in 1981-82. I was 11 years old.

I was supposed to work in her house for 1 or 2 years, then she would arrange my marriage if she found a suitable boy. I worked in her house for 7 to 8 months and, when I understood the language, the bitch sold me to a woman from Kolkata for sex work.

I worked and I cried everyday. I was like a parrot in a cage. I was taught the language, I was fed when I pleased my keeper and I had no possibility to go out. The work was not the worst. I missed my family terribly. My cousin sometimes came to collect the

money. When I asked her about my income she would reply:

"You are a child, yet you speak like a grown up. Your money is there. When you go home, you can take it with you."

After one year I was freed. Then I myself decided to work in a bar. I understood that my cousin intended to sell me off as a wife to a man in Uttar Pradesh. One Bangladeshi woman helped me to escape and introduced me to bar work. Later, I paid her 10,000 rupees.

Two years after going to Mumbai, I recovered my freedom. I then renewed contact with my family and started sending them money through people. If I had been married, this would not have been possible. My cousin was angry with me. I did not keep in touch with her and I never got the money she took from me.

My work was a disgusting one but I was pleased to be able to send money home. One day, I met Ali Hussain. We agreed on a contract and I married him. I had learned a lot by then and I did not trust people easily. I made conditions very clear. After marriage, I would split my income in two: half to my family and half to my husband. I worked 8 years after this. In the end, I left because I was pregnant. We have a 5 month old child."

Though he was not trafficked and was never put to sex work like Ruma, Ali Hussain did not have an easy childhood.

### **6.15.2 Ali Hussain' s story**

"I went to Mumbai at the age of 13 with my mother and my two younger brothers. This was 1984. I worked in a hotel while my mother worked as a maidservant without making much money. I lost touch with her. Much later, I learned she worked as a sex worker and stayed near V.T. station. I did not have the courage to face her then and I did not look for her.

At 18, I started visiting bars and met one woman from Kolaroa. We had a relationship and finally married. She was 5 years older than me. I married for the

money. In fact I did not marry her, I married her money. When I saw she did not give me enough, I left her. She worked in a free service bar.

I once met my younger brother by chance. He told me he was working in the house of a bar woman. He looked after her children and did the house work (my brother is now 28 and married to a bar woman). Then I did not know where my mother was and what work she did. I learned from him that she was a sex worker.

I went back to work as a helper on building sites. Then I met my present wife, Ruma. She was 22 years old and worked in a bar.

She was too old for marriage. I married her for the money. The sex appeal of all these girls who do sex work in Mumbai, whether it be in a brothel or in a bar, is worn out. It is over. Knowing all of this, those who still marry such girls do it for the money.

Ruma made a contract with me. She agreed to the marriage provided she be allowed to carry on with sex work and I do not try to grab her money. She also said she should remain totally free. She said:

- "I will not cheat you. I will give you 50 percent of my income. I will decide how long I will continue working and when I am finished with this work, I will be your wife full time (*ami tomar shongshar corbo*). When I leave, you will never reproach me my past life."

I accepted these conditions. I had been cheated once. I had nothing to lose. I first married at 20. The second time I married, I was 22 years old.

After marriage, I did not like Ruma going to work in a bar. To keep my body and soul together, I hung around, drank, went to other women for sex (with Ruma's permission). One year ago, when my wife got sick, we left. Here, it is embarrassing to say my wife worked in a bar but over there, it was something to be proud of. Such husband is given consideration. He can spend freely.

My wife is sick now but I cannot abandon her. She has given me a lot. Because of her, I was able to buy land. People here do not know how much money I got from my wife and I don't want to tell them. Here she is not a bar worker, she is just my wife and the mother

of my child. I do not want to bring back the past. If I do, I will just create problems for my family"

Unfortunately, the past is overshadowing the present and Ruma cannot enjoy a peaceful retreat. She badly suffers from one or several sexually transmitted infection(s) and looks very sick. She is covered with sores and her child is also affected.

"I have bad sores on my skin. I also have heavy white discharge like pus and it smells. I sought treatment in Mumbai. I was already pregnant when I did and the doctor told me this condition could affect my child. This is why we left.

I am paying for my past sins. I feel depressed. I cannot hide my condition."

Ruma and Ali Hussain are both 30 years old. Their migration to Mumbai lasted 19 and 16 years respectively. Health problems seriously handicap their resettlement in Bangladesh. Although no one mentioned it, the threat of AIDS also lurks in the background.

Ruma and Ali Hussain's stories trace some of the main lines of migration to India in the last two decades. Ruma was taken to Mumbai by a cousin on the ground that she could be married off. Such arguments were frequently used in the past to obtain parents consent. Thought girls are still married very young, age at marriage has increased in Bangladesh and parents are less likely to hand over an 11 year old girl to be married off. Today, poor parents are less shy to admit they are benefiting from their unmarried daughters' earnings and some allow their adolescent daughters go to Mumbai without marriage prospect.

Ruma's story refers to her cousin's plan to sell her into marriage to a man in Uttar Pradesh. Again, there is good evidence that such events repeatedly occurred in the eighties but they seem much less frequent today. In Satkhira, bride recruiters from UP who had been successful in the past, recently came but were unable to find parents willing to "give" their daughters away to them. The sad lives of wives acquired through purchase became known after a few of them were allowed to visit and parents were no longer willing to take such risks. The fear of being sold in UP regularly appears in narratives and may hide something else also. Assumptions that girls who are never seen again are sold in that province are common. As mentioned, Uttar Pradesh could not be visited and what lies at the basis of these fears could not be precisely identified.

## 6.16 "This man has set fire to his own house"

The next story is that of a family broken apart through migration. At the centre of the drama is a man, Gedu, who first took his wife and four children (three girls and one son) to Mumbai in 1994. As we first went to Hizoldi, this family was much talked about. They were given as an example of the disastrous consequences migration to Mumbai could have on relationship between husband and wife, and parents and children. Many villagers felt alarmed at what they saw. They could neither stop, nor accept what they observed. Several visits were made to Gedu and Shikha's household. The main protagonists could not be met but several of their close relatives were interviewed. These include Gedu's elder brother and his wife, two of his cousins, a close friend and his two daughters Jesmin (15 years old) and Poppy (13 years old) who had just returned from Mumbai. Again, we wish to present this family's history at some length as it illustrates many of the problems encountered by migrants in general. Let us hear first Gedu's elder's brother's wife (*bhabhi*), a woman whose two daughters were taken to Mumbai by Gedu. She now benefits from their remittances and cannot afford to be very critical about migration. Her name is Jahura.

**6.16.1 Gedu's story (part I)** (Jahura) "When Gedu was 20 years old, we arranged his marriage with Shikha who was 14 years old. She was beautiful and we did not ask for dowry. Both families were poor. At the time we saw they had a good relationship. Now, it is not so good because after Mumbai Shikha developed too much *power* (the English word was used in the midst of her Bangla speech).

In 1994, there was a bad flood and people were very much in need. There was no work. People sold their belongings to eat and looked for any work they could find. At that time, Gedu went to Mumbai. I don't know with whom or how he went. He did not tell anybody, not even his wife. He returned after 20 days, sold what could be sold and left with his entire family without saying where he was going. His eldest daughter Rima was 13 at the time, Jesmin was 9, Poppy 7 and the youngest, a boy, was 5 years old. None of them had been to school.

One year later Gedu came back. We heard then how they had gone, where they lived and what they did. Gedu here was a bit of a gambler and a drinker. Over there, I heard these habits got worst.

He said he was doing very well and thinking of our hardship he offered to take our two daughters Taslima (18 years old) and Anna (16 year old). He said that in Mumbai, one girl's work could easily support 5 to 6 people. He said there is more work there for girls/women than for men. Hearing this, my daughters were dancing with joy. They happily left with their uncle who covered the cost of their travel. We agreed. We thought they were safe with their uncle and aunt (*chacha, chachi*). We did not have money to arrange their marriage. We thought if they work for 3 or 4 years, then we can marry them. Their father had TB and could not work.

My daughter Anna is now 20. She is beautiful. Her sister, Taslima is 22. They have no father or brother (*who can provide for them*).

Gedu visits once in a while and brings money. Because of this people are gossiping.

- "They live off their daughters earnings", they say.

But what can we do? Everything is a matter of fate (*kopaler lekha*). If our daughters had not gone, we would be much worse off. The help we get is a great deal for us. Because of our daughters, we can live. We mortgaged in land and live off the crops it gives. We could have done even better but the first year Gedu took their money. Shikha did not waste any money. Shikha is from outside (*porer meye*), yet she is better than Gedu.

Three months ago, Shikha went to her father and left me her two daughters and her son. She went to her father to collect more poor girls and take them to Mumbai. She feeds her children (provides for them), I just look after them. They do not like to live in Mumbai. They are only children and they cannot understand danger. They could not go out to play and they complained. They did not listen to their mother, so she left them with me. Our daughters are with them and we look after their children. It is a fair arrangement."

Before commenting of the above narrative, the statement made by Gedu's two daughters recently returned from Mumbai should be heard as it contrasts with their aunt and provides a different light on the family's history. Jesmin and Poppy wanted very much to speak and were remarkably frank about life

in Mumbai, so much so that their uncle at one point interfered and slapped one of them.

"Don't you have any shame", the uncle said. (To the researcher) "These girls are totally spoiled. They cannot keep their mouth shut."

Jesmin retorted:

"When we were poor, you did not help us. Now why should you hit us? We did not eat your food. I told sister the truth. Why should I not tell what your daughters are doing in Mumbai? I told her. That is why you hit me. You believe honour is not lost by doing 'bad' work? You believe it goes only when the truth is told? Everyone knows what work women do in Mumbai."

This incident demonstrated the tension within the family and also the depth of Jesmin's anger and rebellious spirit. The fact that the two sisters had not lived in the village for several years and were socialized in Mumbai no doubt also account for the directness of their speech. Jesmin, 15 years old, first spoke.

**6.16.2 Jesmin's story** "I was small when we went to Mumbai but I remember everything. We had a hard time. No money. We crossed the boarder on foot at Sultanpur. We were very hungry but we could not eat. In Bithary, we stopped at Shahjahan's house and he fed us. For 3 days we traveled on a train. Shahjahan fed us all kinds of food. We worked in Papri, Shatshola, then we settled. Taslima and Anna bubu later came to live with us.

At first, I worked in a hotel, then with my sisters, I went to work in a bar. My sister Rima used to dance and I sold alcohol. My sister had also sold alcohol at first.

My little sister massaged people (*manusher shoril banaito*) My little brother stayed inside the house with my father. When my father visited Bangladesh, he stayed alone. My mother worked in a different bar.

Taslina and Anna, they also worked in a bar elsewhere.

After lunch, a car came to pick us up. My work was a little bit better than my elder sister. To go with men, that was very painful, disgusting, difficult work (*khub koshter kaj*). I did not want to go. Mother punished me. She hit me, withdrew food and yelled names at me. For one year, I poured drinks. Then, I was made to do this other work. I went with men. Different kinds of men. I was afraid of their looks. Some were my father's age. My mother and my father are not good people. They asked all of us sisters to do this work.

If parents order their children to do such work, what is left for the children.

My father wasted our money by gambling; he put women to work, hung around and spent their money. That is why my mother quarreled with him. My mother did not give all her money to my father. This money is not earned easily, so it is very precious. Father wasted Taslima and Anna's money also. Now, they don't give their money to him. That is why they quarrel a lot.

We dressed well and we ate well over there but I prefer to live in the village even if I were to starve.

Before marriage, girls are under their parents' authority and after marriage, they are under their husband. We were taught that girls who do as they like becomes *beadop* (self willed - uncontrollable which is not seen here as a quality). This is why we did as our mother told us.

Then spoke Poppy, her 13 year old sister.

### 6.16.3 Poppy's story

"At first, I gathered papers on the street. Then mother fixed a job for me. On the third floor of the bar, I massaged men.

These men, they hurt me. They grabbed me and they bit me. By force, they got me to lie down. Big fat men came. They frightened me and I cried.

When I complained to mother, she said:

- "There is no work at home, no food. You must stick it out here for a few years, save money. We have to arrange your marriage. Besides, no one sees the kind of work we do here, no one knows. Life is hardship, you must learn this. Don't you see how well Kuddus (*a neighbour whose first wife is reportedly dying of AIDS and now lives off his second wife's earnings*) is doing from this work? Your father does not take any responsibility for you. If you don't work, what will you do?"

I don't like my mother. My elder sister is like her. She does not want to come back.

We used to go to work together but came back separately. Usually, Jesmin and I returned at the same time but the others all came back at different times, sometimes one or two days later. I saw what my elder sister did. We tried not to meet but when we did I felt shame.

Here I cannot tell what my mother does in Mumbai. When people ask, I just cry. My sister and I refused to stay. Before we came, my mother hit us a lot. Still, we did not stay.

Jesmin and Poppy exposed an aspect of Mumbai life which is generally left under cover, hence their uncle's anger. Poppy, 13 years old, said she had worked 7 to 8 months in a bar before coming back to Bangladesh. We heard in Mumbai that some bars kept young girls on the upper floors of their establishment but Poppy is the first informant who stated experiencing such situation.

The young age at which the parents - and later the mother alone - initiated their daughters into bar and sex work reminds brothel practices. Out of 3 daughters, one adjusted to the job while two rebelled and finally refused to carry on. The two daughters have been hurt. Jesmin has been particularly traumatized. Poppy exclaimed"

"My sister Jesmin is sick because of this work. Now she is always afraid and sometimes she loses consciousness. My mother used to hit her because she did not want to do bad work and my sister became very angry and rebellious."

Quarrels over money regularly flared up and violence in this family appears to have been endemic. The two daughters found no peace. For different reasons, they could respect neither their mother nor their father.

Jesmin and Poppy's present guardians, their aunt and uncle totally refused to hear and see the hurt the two girls suffered. Abused with their parents' consent, the two girls were expected to remain silent. Speaking up was considered rude as only "spoiled" and uncontrolled girls behaved in such a way. The interviewer felt that the two girls desperately wanted to talk to someone and get their 'truth' validated.

The aunt and uncle have their own problems to deal with. They sent their two daughters to Mumbai and are presently living off their earnings. The aunt regretted that her daughters could not be properly married because they were too poor to pay for a dowry but, considering their circumstances, she believes sending her daughters to Mumbai was a good decision. There were tears in her eyes when she said so. It is all a matter of fate, she added. The aunt must hear nasty remarks from neighbours and, as Jesmin stated, "everyone knows what women do in Mumbai." At the same time, there is a desire not to know. Jesmin was reminded with a slap from her uncle that speaking up is forbidden.

## 6.17 "Look for another wife, I want to marry again"

Renown for his drinking and gambling habits and for wasting the money earned by "his" women, Jesmin and Poppy's father, Gedu, returned to the village after his wife, Shikha, threw him out of their Mumbai house. He went to his cousin and asked him to find another wife for him. This cousin, another cousin and a close friend related the story to us. The accounts of the three informants are here amalgamated. They first talk about Gedu before migration.

**6.17.1 Ged**  
**u's life**  
**(part II)**

Gedu married Shikha 20 years ago. Both were from the same village. Gedu first did small business. He got involved in smuggling and later became a *ghat malik*<sup>33</sup>.

Gedu liked to gamble. He lost his *ghat malikana* because of his gambling habit. He had accumulated

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<sup>33</sup> A *ghat malik* is a person informally appointed by the BDR (border police) or the Thana police to allow the passage of persons or merchandise across the border for a fee. Each of the two authorities appoints their own *ghat maliks* who are asked to hand over to them a certain sum of money every week. Whatever is earned above this amount is the *ghat malik's* profit.

debts. In 1994, he left for Mumbai and came back 6 months later. He worked as a helper on a construction site. There was little money. At the end of 1996, he left for Mumbai with his entire family.

After struggling to make ends meet, his wife started working in a bar, then the eldest daughter joined her. His wife and eldest daughter worked while Gedu gambled and drank. Then Shikha stopped giving all her money to her husband. She began sending some to her brother in Hizoldi. Because of this, Gedu started beating his wife. The daughter gave all her money to her mother. In the end, they stopped entirely giving money to Gedu and got people to push him out of the house. His wife used to say: "A husband who cannot afford to feed his wife and forces her into prostitution is no longer a husband."

3½ months ago, Gedu came back to the village alone. His health looked bad. He told me (his cousin):

- "If you can find me another wife for Mumbai, I will pay you 5,000 taka."

I found a girl. Her name was Rupa. She was 14 years old, good looking. She had compromised her reputation with a Member's son who then refused to marry her. I told Gedu:

"Come to the girl's village beforehand and show that you are generous. You will give a good impression."

Gedu told Rupa's family that he had no children. Before the family agreed to the marriage, they came to visit Gedu's home. Gedu and I saw to it that they spoke to no one. The marriage was concluded.

Three days after the marriage, Shikha had heard the news and arrived from Mumbai. She had a big fight with her husband. She said:

- "You divorce this girl immediately. If you don't, I will take everything in this house because it is mine."

In the morning, Shikha had changed her attitude. She gave her jewelry to Rupa. But while they were fighting, Rupa had heard the reasons why Gedu had married her. She wanted to break the marriage. Gedu called Rupa's relatives. They tried to convince Rupa to stay. This was her fate, they said. She had been married and she should stay with her husband no matter what crisis erupted. Rupa threatened to

commit suicide unless she was allowed to leave. In the end, they had to agree. They "took" divorce and Rupa returned to her father. In all, she stayed one month at Gedu's home.

Gedu felt belittled by this affair. His pride was badly hurt. Shikha had already left for Mumbai when Rupa left. Two daughters and one son are now with Gedu's mother. "

The cousin who had acted as matchmaker was given only 2,000 taka since the marriage had failed. The men interviewed were astonished to see how Shikha had become *powerful* and assertive after she went to Mumbai. They commented that Gedu's women were out of his control. He was responsible for what was happening to him. Gedu had set his own house on fire.

This family's stories show some of the very serious problems resulting from family migration, including the "trafficking" going on within. Shikha, the abusive mother who under duress initiated her three underage daughters to bar and sex work was also an abused wife who, at one stage, was forced by her husband to engage in sex work and hand over her income to him while he drank and gambled. The battered wife became combative and assertive; she acquired *power* and seemed to want ever more of it. She survived sex work, mastered the trade and became the exploiter of young girls, including her own daughters. Shikha now recruits poor girls. Her change of attitude towards her husband's new wife is also revealing. She was apparently convinced that Rupa could work for her benefit. Hence, the jewelry she offered her on the morning after the fight.

Gedu's princely life paid for through the exploitation of "his" women turned out to be temporary. "He set fire to his own house", said his cousin. This is a paradox of migration. In the end, Gedu lost all rights and privileges. Other men have been found ending up in a similar situation. After enjoying themselves, not only did they lose their wife but also the ability to replace her. Such men's situation deteriorated rapidly. One was met who had become a beggar. He was young, in his early thirties. People called him *pagla* (the fool) but he was clever. Life in Mumbai had destroyed him in other ways.

Can one talk of trafficking when the abusers are a husband, a mother, a father, an aunt or an uncle? How does one deal with traffickers who are themselves victims? Such difficult questions regularly arise in Jessore and Satkhira. Where family members, relatives or neighbours manage migration,

the social proximity and the multiple relationships linking recruits and their exploiters/trafficker blur the issue.

Can such abuse be stopped, checked or reduced? And if it is not stopped, what is the outcome? As mentioned earlier, the trapping of girls/women in lucrative sex work leads to a tolerance for this work among their guardians. After a period of abuse and hardship, sometime with bondage, the lucrative trade eventually provides those who were once victims an opportunity to earn and to assert themselves. After many years, Shikha said "no" to her husband, Taslima and Anna said "no" to their uncle and Jesmin and Poppy said "no" to their mother. These cases are not all the same but they show that at the end of the tunnel there is a way out for most individuals.

Abuse within the family is particularly damaging and the younger the girl, the deeper is the hurt and the scar. Little attention has been paid to such issue in Bangladesh. To the contrary, parenthood, husbandhood or blood relatedness often is seen as a guarantee that extreme abuse will not take place.

## **6.18 The number of "trafficked" women: a difficult assessment**

This chapter, as the previous ones, has shown several of the problems arising in assessing whether a particular story of migration fits the label of "trafficked woman". The table below expresses the difficulty of the task. Many of the cases (29 percent) were placed in an in-between, undetermined, category. Elements were missing, or the story did not easily fit either of the boxes "trafficked" or "not trafficked".

In the communities studied, one noted a difference in perceptions of trafficking between Jessore and in Satkhira. In Jessore, where migration to Mumbai is older, information more freely circulated and villagers less secretive about the kind of work women do in the big city, accusations of trafficking were rare. We found that girls and women went more "willingly" and guardians sent them more "knowingly". The Jessore situation suggests that accurate information is an important factor in reducing "trafficking". It could also be that the migration of girls and women with the abuse and exploitation it regularly entails has become so common, it no longer shocks and, therefore, is no longer considered "trafficking".

The word "trafficking" remains a term easier to use to describe others in distant locations. It seems to fit the exotic better than the familiar. "Trafficking" carries a protest and a condemnation, which those who have accommodated to a particularly exploitative type of women labour migration are not ready to adopt.

In relation to age, most trafficked girls are seen here to be below 18 but some below 18 year old were not considered to have been trafficked. Although such young girls are considered to be "children" in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we did not apply different criteria to assess whether an under 18 year old girl had been trafficked or not.

Table 28: Numbers of trafficked girls/women (Jessore and Satkhira)

Age	Trafficked		Undetermined		Non-Trafficked		Total (%)
	Jessore	Satkhira	Jessore	Satkhira	Jessore	Satkhira	
Below 16 years	16	19	16	3	9	2	65 (34.2)
16 – 18	2	12	6	6	7	3	36 (18.9)
19 – 21	1	4	6	4	13	2	30 (15.8)
22 – 24	-	3	1	2	13	1	20 (10.5)
25 – 27	-	1	1	3	4	5	14 (7.4)
28 – 30	-	1	1	3	6	2	13 (6.8)
31 – 33	-	-	-	-	1	3	4 (2.1)
34 – 36	-	-	-	1	-	2	3 (1.6)
37 – 39	-	-	-	-	3	-	3 (1.6)
40 and above	-	-	-	-	1	1	2 (1.1)
Total	19	40	31	22	57	21	190 (100.0)
<b>G.Total (%)</b>	<b>59 (31.1)</b>		<b>53 (27.9)</b>		<b>78 (41.1)</b>		<b>190 (100.0)</b>

Perhaps more than the table, which resulted from the exercise, the discussion raised in attempting to determine under which column a particular case should be placed was the most rewarding. Countless questions came up and we were regularly confronted with our own prejudices and a priori on the matter. In the end, it seemed most important to be attentive to the voice of the individual person undergoing the migratory journey. Where did she come from? To what extent had she developed a notion of her right not to be "trafficked" as a person, as a daughter, as a sister or as wife? How did she react, adjust, and cope with situations encountered? What was her sense of having been cheated, abused, or "trafficked" and how did she get freed?

The approach selected here may be of limited use to lawyers or policy makers in search of fix and immutable criteria to define trafficking but it has the advantage to restoring the lives of migrant workers in all its thick humanity. It also relocates the phenomenon within a broader socio-economic and historical framework.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### a) Migratory routes changing over time

In this exploratory research, two areas of Bangladeshi women's immigration were investigated, namely the Middle East and India. Some information was also obtained on Malaysia. The conditions and modalities of emigration/immigration to these regions differed significantly. So did the modes of trafficking.

It was observed that particular locations in Bangladesh specialized in one or the other type of emigration, for example, women from Jessore and Satkhira mainly migrated to India, either Kolkata or Mumbai, while women from the centre of the country - Narayanganj, Gazipur, Kapashia - went to several countries of the Middle East and some had gone to Malaysia.

Migratory routes have a history. Some countries closed down to Bangladeshi women (e.g. Malaysia), others nearly closed down (e.g. Kuwait) while new ones opened up or gained importance (e.g. Dubai, Saudi Arabia). Our data also suggest that the Pakistan border has been extremely difficult to cross in the last few years and migration by land has virtually stopped. Statements on trafficking, too often, present old data in the present tense as though nothing changed over time. The advent of "globalization", a particularly nebulous concept, seems to have swallowed up history.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Information about migration/trafficking routes and modalities should be inscribed in time. Recent history should be well known. Messages aiming to sensitize the public about the risks of trafficking in women in a particular area should be up to date and should relate to the type of migration prevalent in that locality. Otherwise, messages will lack credibility and may not be effective.

## The Middle East:

### b) High cost of emigration to the Middle East and its consequences:

The Middle East is characterized by the high cost of emigration and, though rates for women are lower than for men, these costs are considerable to the migrant. Migration to the Middle East requires assistance and cannot be managed alone. Visa, plane fare and *dalal* /recruiting agents fees and profit margins must be paid for. Bangladeshi migrants are known to pay more than any other nationality working in the Middle East for their emigration. Considering the deteriorating conditions of employment in this part of the world, they can hardly recoup their cost within two years. The reasons for this state of affair must be attributed, partly at least, to the widespread trading in visas (and consequently in persons) for profit regardless of the jobs available. Those involved in this trade include both, Bangladeshis and national sponsors in the Gulf.

Governments of sending and receiving countries so far have not sufficiently tried to limit this foul play resulting in considerable misery and human rights abuse for migrant workers, both men and women. Forced to survive in any way they can, taking risks and breaking the law, several migrant workers have been pushed into illegal activities. There is no doubt that the system has fostered a high level of criminality and the trafficking in women is part of it.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Governments of sending and receiving countries should be helped to realize the danger for their respective society of the situation created by the undue sale of visa and the trafficking in persons. Sending countries should collect and share information and, if possible, speak with one voice to denounce breaches of contracts and the numerous other human rights abuse perpetrated on their nationals through such a system. Crime must be more narrowly defined and criminals, regardless of nationality, should be pursued.

### c) Migrating with borrowed money

Women migrating for the first time to the Middle East generally go with borrowed money. Some women are sent on a family mission, others defy their families (or part of it) and this affects the way the money is raised. Whether they raise the money themselves or not, very few women spend their own assets. The last words before departure are a reminder that the money spent for migration must be reimbursed regardless of the hardship. The stern warning puts tremendous pressure on migrants to earn no matter what the requirements are. The consequences of returning empty-handed to face moneylenders, or an angry husband, are felt by most women to be worse than acquiescing to the demands of the employer and/or attempting to earn

in illegitimate ways. Some women who refused to work as expected and were sent back as a consequence were so badly received by their families that they decided to emigrate a second time and accept every thing. A successful migrant is one who has earned well and many families prefer not to know how this was done.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The high risks of failure (in this sample, it was 40-42 percent) should be better publicized. In areas with a high rate of emigration to the Middle East, NGO's should be aware that some of their loans are used for migration and they should warn members about risks. Accurate information about migration should be available from credible sources, so that candidate may take decisions knowingly. Women should be encouraged to judge for themselves the risks and the benefits and make their own decision. Those who leave should be helped not to lose control over remittances.

#### d) Sexual Abuse and Sex work

Among the 208 Middle East migrants interviewed, as many as 75 percent admitted they had engaged in sex work as an integral part of their job (domestic workers), as a part time activity besides their official duty (company workers) or as a full time activity in hotels or brothel-like situations. Ten percent fell in the last category. Most women had not been told about this and were caught unprepared but they eventually gave in. Domestic workers were engaged in sex work, either as a home service or for commercial purposes, the business being conducted under the direct patronage and for the benefit of their employers. Company workers generally worked under Bangladeshi pimps, in association with a Bangladeshi "husband", or independently. Most full time sex workers worked under Bangladeshi pimps who were "free" visa holders

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Amalgamating trafficking in women and sex work must be avoided. The two are often linked but one does not necessarily imply the other.

Upon return, individual women should be entitled to their secrets. For those who wish, however, discrete counseling and other support (psychological, medical, legal) should be available. NGOs or private practitioners could provide such support services. The persons involved in counseling should be aware of the Middle East situation but in no way be involved with manpower agencies. Certain habits should be corrected such as blaming the victim or assuming she is without agency. Venues should be created where women can get a fair hearing and be assured of discretion, respect and sympathy. Returnees willing to speak up aloud should also be helped to broadcast their message maintaining anonymity if they wish.

e) The government ban on the overseas employment of unskilled and semi-skilled women should be lifted

The various bans and restrictions imposed by the Government of Bangladesh on the labour migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women since 1981 have been ineffective in preventing women from migrating. In some pockets of the country, the migration of girls and women to the Middle East started in the early 1980's and increased after the 1991 Kuwait-Iraq war. This study confirmed that home workers were often abused, forced to engage in sex work, many had their wages withheld, were locked up and deprived of freedom, etc. The exclusive ban on women suggests that only women suffered such abuse, which is not the case. There is good evidence that men on domestic visas in the Middle East (drivers, cooks, house boys) were not safe either.

At present, the Government of Bangladesh seems to tolerate the labour migration of women engaged by companies but continues to ban migration for domestic work. Such policy is not consistent with the avowed aim to protect women. This study has shown that company workers are paid even less than domestic workers and the economic compulsion for them to engage in sex work is greater. But then, sex work should not be the criteria to determine the extent of abuse. The study shows that the amount of money earned and the control exerted by the worker on her activity matter a great deal and largely determine the extent to which she feels trafficked. In Kuwait, women company workers who managed to earn a decent amount of money by engaging in sex work were considered better off than the men who "had nothing to sell". Men themselves made this statement.

The ban on unskilled women labour migration has delayed the recognition that a large number of Bangladeshi women migrate to the Middle East. The mind set which sees men as able to look after themselves, as unrapable and untraffickable, and women as "natural" victims stems from ideological constructions of gender. These are not helpful to grasp the actual situations of men and women experience in the Middle East or elsewhere.

**RECOMMENDATION:** There are many good reasons to lift the ban on unskilled women labour migration. Siddiqui<sup>34</sup> pointed out the importance of the remittances from women migrants at a time when there is an increasing feminization of the overseas labour force. Women migrant's contribution here should be acknowledged and better services should be set up for them by Bangladesh Embassies abroad. In Kuwait, we noted that Bangladesh

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<sup>34</sup> Siddiqui, T. pp 185-86

started providing services for runaway maids without shelter later than any other sending country. The new Ministry created to look after the interests of migrant workers should take full cognizance of the importance of female migration and the particular problems women face. Collaboration with other countries, which send women to the Gulf, should be developed and demands for a better enforcement of their rights should be made with one voice.

The human rights abuse suffered by men and women should be judged according to the same criteria.

**f) Recent increase in the cheating of migrant women**

From 1998 onwards, a worrying trend has been observed. As demand for Bangladeshi workers shrank from a number of countries - Kuwait, Bahrain, Malaysia - some manpower agents found new ways to employ unskilled women in the Middle East. The study showed that an increasing number of women were sent (and are still being sent as this text is written) on short-term visitor visas to do sex work exclusively under the management of Bangladeshi pimps residing abroad. These women were taken straight from the airport to hostels for sex workers and after a bath, a meal and some rest; they were supplied to hotels, clubs or homes. Having been promised domestic work and a contract for 2 to 3 years, they awoke to a harsh reality. Forced to engage in sex work, often with the prop of injected drugs, they were sent back to Bangladesh within one to three months practically empty handed. In the eyes of the women, such migration represents the worst possible kind of abuse.

Another worrying recent trend is the increase in women being sent to Saudi Arabia for sex work. The particularly harsh laws enforced in that country for such activity condemn the women to an underground life, without any autonomy and frightening consequences should they be caught.

**RECOMMENDATION:** It is urgent that these recent practices be exposed and stopped. Those who organize and benefit from such "trafficking" in women should be identified and incriminated. Besides the human rights abuse they entail, the consequences of this high turnover of sex workers for spreading HIV/AIDS should be realized.

**g) Few accusations of trafficking are made by Middle East returnees**

In Bangladesh, images generally evoked by "trafficking in women" do not fit the patterns of Middle East migration. Interested parties see that they do not do so. To justify the cost of emigration, good jobs are promised by *dalals* and expectations are kept high. Exposing the actual experience of immigration and the extent of the cheat suffered is not encouraged from returnees and

even family members are spared the truth. There is a tacit agreement not to raise questions and not to volunteer information. Many of the cases recorded in this study would fit most definitions of trafficking in women. Yet, the term trafficking is not used, ensuring that no accusations of trafficking be made. The police most often record "cheating cases". "Trafficking cases" are cumbersome confessed a police officer; we prefer to avoid them.

In their narratives, the women also used cheating more than trafficking, or they referred to their bad luck in a game, which is like lottery. We did not see lottery but well planned strategies to rip off women and their families and make the highest possible profit out of them. "We think only of the money", "In this job, you cannot be moved by tears". Statements of *dalals* are very clear.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** The organization of manpower business should be documented and better publicized, so that migrant women learn how to protect themselves and, once cheated, show greater determination to fight for justice.

#### h) Few women seek justice

Eighty-three of the 208 women interviewed (39.9 percent) considered they had been "cheated". Out of these, only 15 (18 percent) sought justice. Of those who sought justice, 6 attempted to settle the issue privately by mutual agreement with the *dalal*, 6 called for local arbitration through *shalish* and only 3 each went to the police station or to the court. The reasons why women did not seek justice include the fear of losing face if their story was exposed, the fear of being insulted, belittled or not taken seriously. Some felt it was no use complaining, as they did not trust the justice system; most had no money left to pursue a case. The absence of proof to back an accusation against the *dalal* was a common problem. We saw that the latter generally saw to it that no trace be left, even snatching the passport of returnees. Finally, local leaders were sometimes perceived as the allies of *dalals* and sympathy could not be expected from them. Some returnees were threatened with retaliation should they pursue their traffickers. These fears match the perception of the *dalals*, most of whom considered dealing with women easier than dealing with men. Many boasted of their ability to tame women or shame them into silence.

Women's fear of losing face is a true gift to those who exploit them. Women willing to talk about some of the abuse they suffered generally kept silent the sexual abuse they experience and the sexwork they did. The extent to which they resisted, acquiesced or enjoyed this work was almost irrelevant. In either way, they were deemed guilty. Hence, their silence which inevitably weakened their case. On the other hand, the few women

who had to courage to speak out did not get sympathy. This conspiracy of silence protects the traffickers who continue to recruit women and work with impunity.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Again, no one can force returnees to reveal what they wish to keep secret. But those willing to speak up and pursue their traffickers should be offered support. At present, this is utterly lacking. Arbitrators at local *shalish* and local government representatives should be better sensitized to the harm done and should be encouraged to condemn more firmly those who "trafficked" women. The logic of settlement through compromise here does not send the right message. Local *shalish* have limited means at their disposal but an unambiguous moral condemnation and shaming of the culprit could be effective to some extent. Filing an accusation of trafficking at the police station or at a court and pursuing a case is clearly beyond the capability of returnees who have lost a considerable amount of money. Legal aid should be available for these victims and the law should be reviewed. The thorny question of lack of proof should be carefully studied. The present impunity has rendered almost banal the work of traffickers whose activities entail little risks, especially when they target the poor and the powerless. Unless this impunity be corrected, the "truth" of the victims cannot be heard, their stories cannot be vindicated and the comfortable illusion may be entertained that there are no traffickers in women hiding behind the cover of manpower business.

#### i) Targeting the weak

*Dalals* themselves declared targeting economically vulnerable, politically weak and socially isolated women. Giving "risky" visas to weaker parties is an integral part of their strategy. Targeting those who will not dare fight back, will swallow the bitter pill, the loss of their assets, the abuse, the humiliation, the rape is the art of the trade. There is a constant search for such weak candidates.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Those involved in anti-trafficking programmes should know which types of weaknesses make some women ideal candidates for "risky" migration. They should take their clue from *dalals* and build their programs accordingly. Poverty, social isolation, lack of access to accurate information, need to run away from a difficult family situation, failure to marry, divorce, but also curiosity to see the world, desire for independence and autonomy, the list is endless. Not only the women but their guardians must be reached by these programs. We have seen that a good number of migrants do not decide themselves to migrate, they go because a husband, a father or a mother has decided for them.

## Migration to India

### a) Porous border and its consequences

Movement of people across the border with India has existed since the border was created. The social proximity (if not the sameness) of the Bengali people living on both sides of the border, the absence of reliable birth registry, a nationality law which has not always been consistent<sup>35</sup>, the possibility to shift identity to suit the interest of the moment, these make it extremely difficult to estimate the number of trans-border migrants, let alone who is a migrant and who is not a migrant. A communalization of cross border migration issues (Hindus being termed "refugees", Muslims being termed "illegal migrants") has often tinted the debate. This aspect of the question will not be addressed here, though one should be aware of it.

Migration to India is characterized by its cheap cost and a border, which can easily be crossed without passport and without visa. *Dhurer ghat malik*, that is the men unofficially appointed by the border police or by the thana to manage the trespassers, charge a fee of 50 to 300 taka per head. *Dalals* may be hired by first time migrants but these *dalals* are like passing men and their fees are incomparable with those of the Middle East. Since the very poor can afford to migrate and a huge debt need not be incurred, family migration is common. We have seen young girls accompanying their parents and working first as rag pickers, then as domestic workers and later ending up as sex workers. In this type of migration, *dalals* play a minor role.

The border may be porous but it can be used as one more trapping facilitating the trafficking in women. Because they lacked the 500 rupees necessary to return home, girls brought to Kolkata brothels were forced into sex work. The fear of being arrested by the police as illegal immigrants contributed to increase dependence on the *malkeens* and new comers dared not escape. The border appeared to be easily managed by experienced migrants. Those most likely to be frightened, and be caught, were the new comers. Bangladeshi girls who were arrested by the police were jailed for 3 months and later sent to Lilua Home for eventual repatriation. Much has been written about the lengthy process of repatriation. Some girls have qualified the jail and the Lilua Home experiences as more traumatizing than their stay in the brothel.

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<sup>35</sup> See Samaddar R.

RECOMMENDATION: The police should place the emphasis on arresting traffickers and *malkeens* who forcibly transport girls across border and put them to work. Victims should be helped, not furthered victimized.

Sound data on migration, which avoid communalizing the issue are very much needed to help policy makers and law enforcers design and apply policies more respectful of human rights.

## b) Destinations and types of work performed by women migrating to India

This study identified three types of work for which girls and women migrated/were trafficked across the Indian border. These are sex work in the brothels of Kolkata and Mumbai, bar work in Mumbai and marriage in Uttar Pradesh, the latter being far less frequent today. It must be pointed out that women migrate for several other purposes and to other locations as well but these were not covered in this study.

A high percentage of Bangladeshi girls/ women were trafficked into Kolkata brothels. The study conducted in 6 brothels of Kolkata city does not support the claim that trafficking in women has diminished. 59 (84 percent) of the women interviewed from Bangladesh admitted having been trafficked and many cases were recent. With 70 case histories, the sample is admittedly small but indicative nonetheless. Kolkata brothels bear many similarities with brothels in Bangladesh. Girls being trafficked (bought or captured and appropriated as *tsukri*) has been a common way of entering the trade. Though increasingly condemned in discourse, the age-old practice of trafficking in girls is proving difficult to eradicate as many have an interest at stake in perpetuating it. Among them, are the (*malkeens*), older women who no longer engage, or engage very little, in sex work and who depend for their living on the income earned through their *tsukris*.

RECOMMENDATION: To end the practice of acquiring *tsukris*, retired sex workers should be helped to find other means of livelihood and the risks of, and penalty for, buying girls should be increased. For underage girls, the law could be more severe and the younger the girl, the greater should be the penalty.

## c) Small networks of traffickers

The study documented small networks of traffickers operating in Satkhira and supplying girls to Kolkata brothels. They selected their recruits among neighbours and distant relatives. Techniques used to entice included promise of employment as domestic worker, child minder, tailor assistant and, more seldom, marriage or the promise of marriage. Parents nowadays

are less likely to give daughters away to be married off and more girls were directly enticed.

In the villages of Jessore and Satkhira, the traffickers were known persons and social proximity facilitated the luring away of girls and women. After the trafficking event, a complicity often developed between trafficker and trafficked. Together they concealed to the recruit's family the destination reached. Traffickers often brought news to parents that their daughter was fine and would visit them soon. The good relationship permitted these traffickers to continue plucking fruits in the same garden and to later recruit other girls and women from the same family.

Network of traffickers often comprised family members, for example a woman who was herself sold at the age of 15, later invited her sisters to join her and eventually involved her brother in the supply of girls. We saw couples working in partnership.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Traffickers' activities are not difficult to document, yet they carry on. Some traffickers have been arrested and fined by the police but their activities have not stopped. Their profits are shared with police, local community leaders, club members, etc. Clearly, local society, alone, does not have the proper mechanisms nor the power to stop them. To do so requires a political will and a police force at a higher level. One cannot emphasize enough the importance of carrying out justice to demonstrate that trafficking in women is not a banal issue but a serious offense which cannot be tolerated.

#### d) Recruitment of bargirls for Mumbai: the role of family members

Here *dalals* played a minor role in the recruitment of candidates. Parents, close relatives and neighbours were the most important motivators and recruiters. We have seen uncles and aunts recruiting nieces, cousins recruiting cousins and even mothers introducing their young daughters to bar work and forcing them into sex work. Another form of "trafficking" was done by husbands who used marriage as an instrument to rip a good income from a young wife. Marriage provided a license ensuring that men would not be accused of trafficking. Barwork also allowed some older women to take on dependant husbands and dominate the relationship.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Trafficking within marriage and within the family is a particularly difficult problem to address. It creates a rot at the very core of the institutions on which society rest.

It seems important to have the courage to open a little box preferably left tightly closed and see who is suffering inside. When families squash the

individuals they should protect, family affairs should not be left entirely to guardians. Restating a commitment to human rights values at the level of family, community as well as at national levels is more important than ever and such commitment should be expressed in practical help to the victims, especially children and adolescent girls.

**e) Most of the trafficked "women" are adolescent girls**

Although the study focused on trafficking in women, most of the girls found to be trafficked were adolescent girls. Traffickers find them eminently suitable. Easily manipulated and/or frightened into accepting the work, good money can be got from their fresh youth. A similar situation was found in the Kolkota brothel and in the Satkhira, Jessore community study.

**RECOMMENDATION:** How can adolescent girls be protected from trafficking? Their greater exposure necessitates that particular attention be given to this age group and that specific preventive action be directed to them. Poorly represented under the label trafficking in children, they do not quite fit trafficking in women either. Adolescent girls occupy an in-between position and focus on them is often lost.

Both immediate and long-term actions should be taken. Awareness campaigns could be conducted in schools, for example. One should encourage programs, which contribute to extend the education, the awareness, the self-confidence, the economic security and the social space adolescent girls may legitimately occupy.

## **GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

**a) The role of the media**

As we conclude this study, the important role the media can play in presenting women labour migration as a fact and as a right and in exposing problems of trafficking within should be underlined. The media should cover the issue responsibly, protecting the identity of victims of trafficking and respecting their human integrity. Although there have been some excellent pieces of reporting in the past (e.g. the Shabmeher case in 1985 and many more thereafter), writings on trafficking have often been sensational, the analysis shallow and practices which are part of a system have been presented as isolated occurrences. Better reporting should be encouraged. A scandal often triggers attention to the issue and such occasion should be seized to better expose the system behind and the fact that trafficking in

human beings are not sporadic events but regular, on-going and well organized activities. There has been good TV reporting (Ekushey TV). The impact of such programs is tremendous and it is important that the information disseminated be accurate and based on serious research.

In the written press, "serious" articles about labour migration generally deal with economic issues, for example the importance of migrant workers remittances to the economy. The contribution made by women here is seldom acknowledged. The press has its share of responsibility in propagating the idea that migration is male and trafficking in human beings concerns only females, a gender bias, which should be corrected.

#### **b) Particular health risks associated with women labour migration**

This study has shown that a considerable number of women who go to work abroad get involved in sex work without any preparation. Most often recruited from rural areas where information campaigns about the risks of contracting HIV/AIDS have not been particularly effective, these women who are not professional sex workers are very poorly equipped to protect themselves. They are not aware of the risks they are taking by engaging in unprotected sex. Some are not even protected from pregnancy. In the country of immigration, there are often problems of communication as new comers cannot understand the language and cannot negotiate with clients. In Mumbai, women newly arrived from Bangladesh could not be reached by health workers who spoke Hindi or Marathi.

Information on the risks of contracting STIs, including HIV/AIDS should be made available before departure. It should be disseminated especially in areas with a high rate of women labour migration. HIV/AIDS prevention programs could extend regionally in recognition that national borders do not contain people and diseases. Bangla speakers should be involved in health programs conducted abroad. After return, women who have contracted infections need care, which they are not getting at present for a number of reasons. Some have no money to get this care, and nearly all must hide to their families the work they did abroad and therefore cannot openly consult a medical practitioner. We know that the rate of sex workers who have contracted HIV/AIDS is particularly high in Mumbai. Bangladeshi women engaging in sex work in that city are highly exposed. Some Bangladeshi men and women reportedly developed AIDS and never returned to Bangladesh fearing negative reactions. Others, knowingly or unknowingly, may well have returned. Individuals need care and rural communities need protection. We know very little about the sex life of returnees or their husbands/partners. This is an area, which needs looking into.

Another problem encountered is the common use of injected drugs as props to make sex work more acceptable. In at least two cases, women reported

becoming seriously ill - one got paralyzed after being injected an overdose of this drug because she had to serve a very large number of clients. Which drugs are injected? Are they addictive and what are their long term effects? Are clean needles used? Dubai and Mumbai are the two locations where the use of these drugs was most often mentioned.

### c) A need for on-going research

In order to provide relevant, accurate and up to date information on migration and on the modalities of trafficking within, the need for research cannot be overemphasized. Without research, government and NGO programs, media reporting and activists campaigns will lack the necessary factual base. The creation of a Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit is an excellent initiative but more needs to be done. The subject is vast and research has hardly begun. Small surveys may be helpful but they do not suffice to provide the necessary guidance for policies and programmes nor to reflect upon the (re)conceptualization of problem in accordance with an ever-changing reality.

Bangladesh, a major sending country is very much behind in research and is poorly equipped to respond to the needs of its migrants. Quality studies are needed from a number of perspectives and from several disciplines. These should be carried out in the areas of origin as well as in the countries/sites of immigration. Research requires time, sufficient funding and professionalism. Donors should show a greater commitment in this respect because labour migration is unlikely to diminish in the future. Understanding the deep social transformations these population movements entail, the economy they propel and the politics they create are essential to plan future steps in many fields. A big gap in knowledge has already accumulated which should be filled without delay.

### d) The involvement of NGO's in anti-trafficking programmes

Several NGO's have included anti-trafficking programmes to their agenda. We have seen that the messages they use, often, do not reflect the reality of trafficking in their area and, thus are not convincing. NGO's must be more sophisticated in their approach, sponsor good research and keep abreast of research done by others. They have a responsibility not to re-enforce the stereotyping of women as "natural" victims. We recommend that more NGO's get involved in awareness programs about women labour migration and the trafficking within. However, this should be done in an informed manner.

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