

Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers in The Middle East: A Study of
Migration and Women's Empowerment

by

Faizah Imam

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List of Abbreviations Used

AusAID- Australian Development Program

BAIRA- Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies

BDT- Bangladeshi Currency

BILS- Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies

BMET- Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training

BOESL- Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited

BRAC- Bangladeshi Rehabilitation Assistance Committee

DEMO- District Employment Manpower Office

ILO- International Labor Organization

IOM- International Organization for Migration

MDG- Millennium Development Goals

MoEWOE- Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment

MRC- Migrant Resource Centre

NGO- Non-Governmental Organization

OEMA- Overseas Employment and Migrants Act

PKB- Probashi Kallyan Bank

PSHTA- Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act

RMMRU- Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit

TTC- Technical Training Centre

UAE- United Arab Emirates

UK DFID- United Kingdom Department for International Development

UNIFEM- United Nations Development Fund for Women

UN- United Nations

USAID- United States Agency for International Development

USD- US Dollar

WARBE- Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees

WEWB- Wage Earners' Welfare Board

Abstract

The number of Bangladeshi female migration to the Middle East has risen in recent years. Though they leave their home country and migrate to the Middle East for their and their families' better future, but they go through both positive and negative experiences in their employment in the Middle East and after returning home. In my study, I attempted to figure out if these women's journey to the Middle East can serve as a vehicle for their empowerment and bring changes in their lives after their return. I explored these migrant women's diverse experiences and the role of the Bangladeshi government and NGOs supporting migration of these women to the Middle East. I figured out that these women cannot be treated as a homogenous group and their diverse experiences are shaping their empowerment journey. The research for this study was done by taking interviews with NGO employees and researchers working with female labour migration in Bangladesh. Thus, the study reflects their understanding of female migrants' experiences.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

From the early 1990s, Bangladesh formally started sending its female labour migrants to the Middle East, mostly for domestic labour and caregiving jobs. (Ahasan, 2018). Almost 860,000 female workers are currently employed in various roles (Faruk, 2019). In 2021, 80,143 women went to work abroad; 56,810 of them went to the Middle East alone, with the highest number of women migrating to the Saudi Arabia (BMET, 2022). This is an increase from 656 women migrants in 2001 to the Middle East, with a peak in 2016 at 117,061 (BMET, 2022). During 2020, due to COVID-19, the number of outbound migration towards the Middle East decreased, but the numbers rose again in 2021¹.

Earning money abroad and sending it home is a dream come true for many families, and this opportunity gives families the chance to become prosperous and financially secure. Living away from home offers both positive and negative experiences to the migrant women. Even after they come back home, they face different experiences in their homes and society (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). This thesis aims to examine if Bangladeshi female migrant workers' experience in the Middle East and their return home can serve as a vehicle for their empowerment.

In this study, signs of empowerment would include increased control of the migrant women over their own lives, as well as their financial and household resources; more decision-making power in their lives and households; and lastly, women's positive self-perception in their lives. In this thesis, I am mostly talking about individual or personal level of empowerment rather than societal changes and structural aspects of gender equality. The

¹ Refer to Table 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5 in chapter 2 for better understanding about the Bangladeshi female labour migration.

concepts of empowerment will be discussed in the chapter 3 of this thesis. I explored these issues based on interviews with NGO employees and researchers based in Bangladesh who work with female migrant workers. I could not have direct conversation with the migrant women due to COVID-19 and travel restrictions, and this thesis does not have direct representation of the Bangladeshi migrant women.

1.1 Who are These Bangladeshi Migrating Women

For Bangladeshi people, migration has been viewed as a poverty-alleviation strategy for many decades (Buchenau, 2008). Most of the female labour migration in Bangladesh occurs due to poverty, lack of opportunity back home, inability to find work and abandonment by husbands (Nessa, 2021). Most of the female migrants migrating to the Middle East are from impoverished families, and these women would be less likely to migrate if they or their families were not in a dire financial situation (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014). Comilla and Chittagong are the top migrant sending districts in Bangladesh (Tithila, 2020). All the districts sending female migrants are in rural Bangladesh; the number of women migrating from the urban parts of the country are lower than the rural parts (Blanchet and Biswas, 2021).

Eighty-nine percent of the total population of Bangladesh are Muslims, almost ten percent are Hindus, and rest of the population are mostly Christian, Buddhist and indigenous religions (Wohab, 2021). Almost all the women migrating to the Middle East are Muslim (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). These women are mostly migrating to Middle Eastern countries, such as, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Lebanon, and Qatar (BMET, 2021). The reason for them to choose this part of the world for migration is their religious affinity with Middle Eastern Muslim nations (Sultana and

Fatima, 2017). They also believe that it will be safer and easier for them to practice their religious traditions in the Middle East because of the similarities in their religious practices (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). As all these destination countries' leading and main religion is Islam, they are dominated by Islamic cultures and traditions in their daily lives (Curtis et al., 2022).

There is a gender binary present in Middle Eastern societies, and no other gender except male and female is socially accepted due to religious traditions and practices (Curtis et al., 2022). Middle Eastern countries have some of the world's most restrictive legislation for the LGBTQ+ community (Curtis et al., 2022). In 2013, Bangladesh recognized Hijra² as the third gender and provided legal recognition to them (Day, 2013). Although information regarding LGBTQ+ labour migration could not be found, given that the Middle East has some of the world's most restrictive legislation for the LGBTQ+ community, it is unlikely that Bangladesh's LGBTQ+ and Hijra communities engage in much labour migration to this region. There are also specific gender roles practiced in these Middle Eastern countries where it is believed that women are naturally good in household works and should remain in their homes taking care of families (Asi, 2021). The employers in the Middle East specifically ask for Muslim women to work in the caregiving and the domestic sector (Sultana and Fatima, 2017).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The number of women migrating to the Middle East has risen in recent years, so this is a timely study which will provide a better understanding of the situation and experiences of

² In 2014, Bangladeshi cabinet announced the Hijra people as the third gender. Hijra is a term used mostly in South Asian countries to identify people who were designated as male at birth with feminine gender identity (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Bangladeshi female migrant workers in the Middle East, and this research seeks to understand whether and to what extent migrant women's employment in the Middle East and experiences after return provided them with capabilities to empower themselves in their lives.

In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh where major decision-making power and financial resources are in the hands of the male members of family and community, a woman's decision-making power is limited and often dominated by men. Whether women's financial contribution and experiences from their work and return to the home community can change this and also work as a vehicle for their empowerment will be explored in this study.

Research Question:

The research question this thesis seeks to answer is:

- Can Bangladeshi women's labour migration experience in the Middle East serve as a tool for their empowerment and how does labour migration affect migrant women's lives?

In order to answer this question, this thesis explores the following two questions:

- What are the factors before, during and after migration that enable or hinder Bangladeshi women from benefitting from their work in the Middle East?
- What is being done by the government and the NGOs to ensure positive experiences for these women?

As mentioned earlier, this is a timely study because of the rising numbers of women migrating to the Middle East for work from Bangladesh. It is important to know whether their labour migration has any positive impact on their empowerment journey.

According to Naila Kabeer (1999), women's empowerment refers to the women's ability to make life choices. It is a process by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices (Kabeer, 2017). Throughout this study, I will analyze if female Bangladeshi migrant women have the necessary ability to make choices that will give them control and ownership of their lives in different stages of their migration journey. By exploring the aforementioned questions, I will find out whether these women's journey to the Middle East brought any changes in their lives and what is being done by the government and NGOs to ensure that they have more control over their lives and safety while residing in the Middle East.

1.3 Data Collection

For this study I have used both primary and secondary sources. In February 2022 and March 2022, I conducted seven interviews via Skype Private Conversations or the medium of interviewees' choice. The interviews were conducted in Bengali, the official language of Bangladesh and English. Convenience sampling and snowball sampling were used in order to find potential interviewees. Convenience sampling involves collecting information from easily accessible participants (Sedgwick, 2013) and initially, the respondents were chosen using the convenience sampling method. These interviewees referred me to more participants. Among seven of my interviews, five interviewees are working with local NGOs in Bangladesh, one interviewee is working as a research fellow for a research organization working on Bangladesh's labour market experiences and the final interviewee

was a PhD student conducting research on female labour market experience in Bangladesh. These interviews played a very important role in terms of shaping the focus of my study. For more information on the interviews, please see Appendix 1.

This qualitative research study primarily employed semi-structured interviews which allowed for the flexibility in the interview to go off-script. The interviewees were able to provide me with knowledge about the issue to think outside the box. Interview questions broadly focused on the following themes: 1. interviewees' conception of women's empowerment; 2. women's experiences in their migration journey; 3. changes after they came back home; 4. government and NGO support to ensure better and safer migration experience; 5. the failures and success of government and NGOs' efforts; 6. migrant women's decision-making power in every stage of their journey; and 7. women's control over their earned money and resources.

I have also relied on secondary sources including books and articles written on female labour migration from Bangladesh, newspaper articles on the current situation of Bangladeshi female labour migration to the Middle East, and other sources, such as NGO reports and websites, government websites and statistics, and research organizations' reports.

1.4 Data Analysis

I have coded data into themes or categories for my study. I used deductive coding to understand the collected data and organized my initial set of data based on existing research questions (Bernard, 2006). In deductive coding, the researcher will have a hypothesis, and the purpose of the deductive coding is to test if that hypothesis is correct or not (Bernard, 2006). I did not use any software and did the coding by hand. I have divided my first round

of data into different themes or categories, including women's lived experiences; government's activities supporting the female migration; and NGOs' activities supporting female migration. Later in the second round of coding, I used subcodes in these categories. For example, I divided women's lived experiences into three parts based on the three stages of their migration journey, predeparture, departure and living abroad, and their return. Government activities were sorted into six categories based on the government policies and initiatives; and NGO's activities into four categories based on their services. Finally, I refined these categories even further. For example, I looked at the success and failure of government and NGOs' activities.

1.5 Anticipated Ethical Issues

Conducting interviews with the key informants who are NGO employees and migration experts in Bangladesh pose very minimal risks for the interviewees. However, to mitigate any risks to the participants, protective measures were taken including having participants read and sign a consent form and freely choosing whether to participate or not. I also made sure that any personal information provided was kept confidential, and no names of the participants or their workplace were mentioned in this study. Interviews were conducted in a private setting, and they were conducted in Skype Private Conversations or any other medium of the interviewees' choice. My study underwent review by the Research Ethics Board at the Dalhousie University to ensure that I have taken all the precautions to minimize any ethical concerns.

1.6 Limitations of Research

This research tries to understand whether women have the capability to empower themselves following their employment to the Middle East and experiences after their

return, and the study would have been greatly benefited from direct conversation with these migrant women. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, it was not possible to interview these women in-person. Online interviews with these women were also not possible as most of these women have very limited access to technology in Bangladesh. Phone and internet connections in the rural parts of Bangladesh are extremely poor, which was another serious impediment against the endeavor. So, my study lacks representation of the migrant women. These migrant women have very diverse range of experiences before their departure, while staying in the Middle East and after their return. Some of them have relatively positive experiences than others throughout their journey, but for some, the experiences might vary and can be very traumatizing and unfavourable towards their empowerment process. These women cannot be treated as a homogenous group because of the range and diversity of their migration experiences. Without talking directly with these migrant women, it is not possible to fully understand their diverse and different experiences or to determine whether their experiences in their migration journey and return have served as vehicle for their empowerment.

As I have only talked to the NGO employees and researchers that work with these female migrants, the study reflects women's migration experience primarily through the understanding and knowledge of these researchers and NGOs. Through these interviews, I have found more generalized observations on the issues rather than these migrant women's personal views and experiences. Further research is needed particularly based on interviewing female migrant returnees about their experiences abroad and upon their return home to better understand how migration contributes to women's empowerment. This thesis can work as a base for that further research.

Secondly, the paper does not explore irregular and unauthorized migration. This type of migration and human trafficking are a different domain where the government and NGOs have very little monitoring and control. The struggles and experiences of unauthorized and undocumented migrants are often different from those of women migrating through legal channels. This study focuses on legal migration and migrants registered under Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET). Lastly, there are reintegration challenges of the returnee female migrants which also cannot be analyzed without talking to women directly.

Despite these limitations, however, the research adds to the limited existing literature and points to areas for further research.

1.7 Gaps in the Current Literature

Most research and literature on women's migration and empowerment in Bangladesh does not take NGO and Government policies into account. There are various campaigns and policies by several government offices, the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC), BMET and Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), and different NGOs contributing to the experiences of the migrant women, including their experiences upon return home. I analyze whether these government policies and NGOs' activities provide these women with resources and legal protections to help take control over their own lives.

Although there are annual migration trend reports published by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), and NGOs and the Government policy briefs describing their policy instruments and success, there is very limited comprehensive research on the Government's and NGOs' efforts on female labour migration and women's

empowerment. This study aims to help fill this gap in the research by analyzing different policy instruments and government projects, along with NGOs' efforts to understand migrant women's experiences of empowerment.

1.8 Chapter Outline

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows: the second chapter will provide background on Bangladeshi labour migration, particularly with respect to the Middle East. The third chapter examines the different concepts of women's empowerment. The fourth chapter will focus on the women's migration journey, and their experiences while living abroad and after coming back home, based on the interviews taken for this research and secondary data sources. The fifth chapter will talk about government and NGOs' initiatives promoting safe and better migration experience, and their success and failures. The sixth chapter will analyze the experiences of migrant women to find out whether their experiences have any impact on their access to resources, their agency and their final achievement in their road to empowerment. Lastly, my final chapter will conclude my argument and talk about these women's diverse migration and employment experiences in the Middle East and return home impacting their empowerment journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to find out whether Bangladeshi women's labour migration to the Middle East and return can serve as a potential vehicle for empowerment for these women migrants, or if it was more mixed or not empowering experience abroad and upon their return home. In this chapter I will elaborate on the history of labour migration in Bangladesh, review literature to find out the patterns of female labour migration and women's experiences before leaving, while living in the Middle East and upon their return from the Middle East.

2.1 Labor Migration in Bangladesh

Migration is an age-old phenomenon. International migration can be traced back to early 12th century, but it is believed that international migration began a long time before that (Munshi, 2015). The mass flow of migration started during the first wave of globalization which was around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. At that time almost 60 million people migrated from Europe to the 'New World', specially towards the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. In the 1930s, migration to the USA slowed down due to political and economic reasons (Munshi, 2015). After World War II, Mediterranean oil rich countries became a major attraction for labour migration because of their industrial development that started due to their oil production. In the 1970s, similar reasons caused migration towards the Middle East, Malaysia, Singapore, North America, and Latin America, enabling them to become lucrative destinations because of their industrial development at that time (Munshi, 2015). According to Sultana and Fatima (2017), almost ninety percent of the migration in the world is motivated primarily by economic reasons. Migrants bring growth to their country of origin by sending remittances

which leads to economic growth at home, and at the destination country, they fill the gaps in the labour market. In recent times, along with the rise of cross border trade and investment, the number of migrant workers has been increasing globally (Ullah, 2012). As a result of the global trend, emigration from the Asian region including from Bangladesh continues to rise in search for employment (Ullah, 2012).

The countries of the Asian Region contribute a large percentage of the world's migrant workforce (UNIFEM, 2005). Women accounts for a significant number of this workforce and in some countries, they are almost half of the whole migrant worker population. According to the United Nations (2010), the percentage of female migrants is around 49% of global migrants, though they are not always part of the workforce, and they often move with their families. Since 1990's to 2017, women are accounted for 42% of the total labour migration in the world (Sultana and Fatima, 2017).

Bengal region has a long history of migration which can be traced back to the 18th century (Sikder, 2008). Bangladeshis still continue to migrate to different parts of the world for studies or for employment. Although the history of Bangladeshi emigrants can be traced back to the British Colonialism, but free and non-forced labour migration truly began after the independence in 1971. New opportunities for international migration due to the rising oil prices and major infrastructural development in the Middle East were the main reasons behind this new flow of migration (Sikder, 2008). By the end of the 1970s, the newly industrial countries of Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia and Singapore and Brunei also became a destination for Bangladeshi labour migrants (Sikder, 2008). This migration covered a diverse range of human resources from low-waged to professional groups (Uddin, 2021).

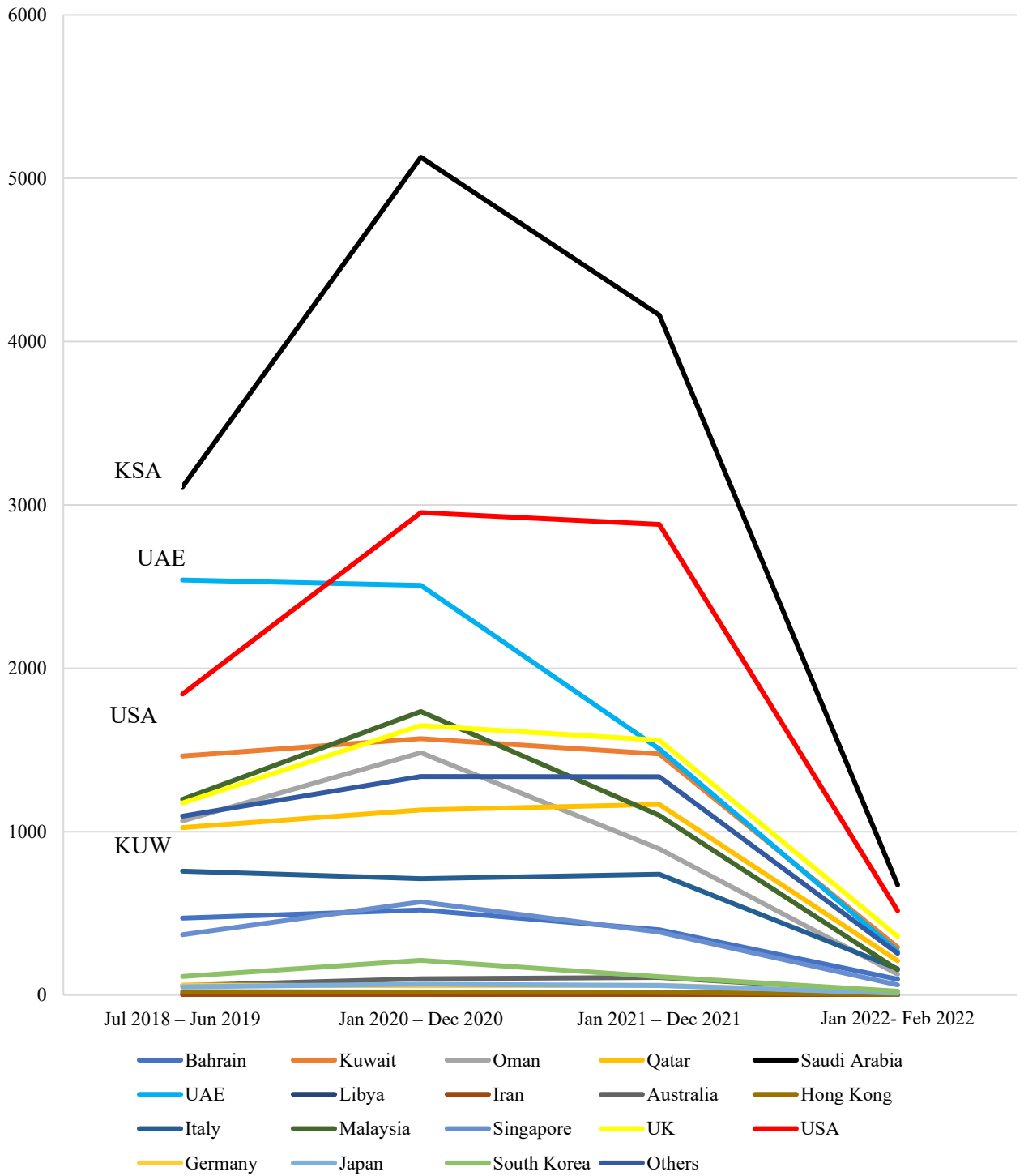
Migration has become an important livelihood choice for Bangladeshi people and has positive impact on the economic development of Bangladesh. According to Nurul Islam (2011), Bangladesh is considered as a resourceful country because of their huge labour force, and Bangladeshi workers are engaged in various types of works in 143 countries in the world. The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) of Bangladesh categorized Bangladesh labour market into four groups where the skilled (manufacturing or garments workers) and professional labourers (doctors, nurses, engineers, academicians etc.) go to the industrial West, and semi-skilled (tailor, mason) and unskilled³ (housemaid, cleaners, day labourers) go to the Middle East and the Southeast Asian countries (in Sikder, 2008 and Islam, 2011). The second category of workers usually return home after completion of their contract, and they are known as the migrant contract workers (Sikder, 2008). According to Sikder (2008), the majority of the total migrant workers fall into this category, and key destination for the migrant contract workers are the countries like- Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Libya, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, China etc. According to Uddin (2021), the highest number of migrant workers go to the Middle East. From the table 1.1, it can be seen that these migrants are sending a very large amount of money to Bangladesh, and this money plays a significant role in Bangladesh's economy. Their remittances constitute almost 11-12% of the total GDP.

In the figure below, we can see the trend that the highest amount of remittances comes from Middle Eastern countries in between 2018 to 2022. This makes the Middle Eastern countries the most lucrative destination for labour migration. Migration to the Middle East

³ Unskilled labour is an outdated term. This thesis will use the term low-wage, unless quoting a source.

is becoming more and more significant in terms of boosting the economy of this developing middle income country. According to Uddin (2021), most of the migrants in the Middle East work in informal service sector, and their migration not only benefits the national

Figure 1: Wage Earners Remittance Inflows to Bangladesh (2018-2022) - from country of destination (in millions \$USD)



Source: Graph based on BMET- Overseas Employment and Remittance Statistics (2022)

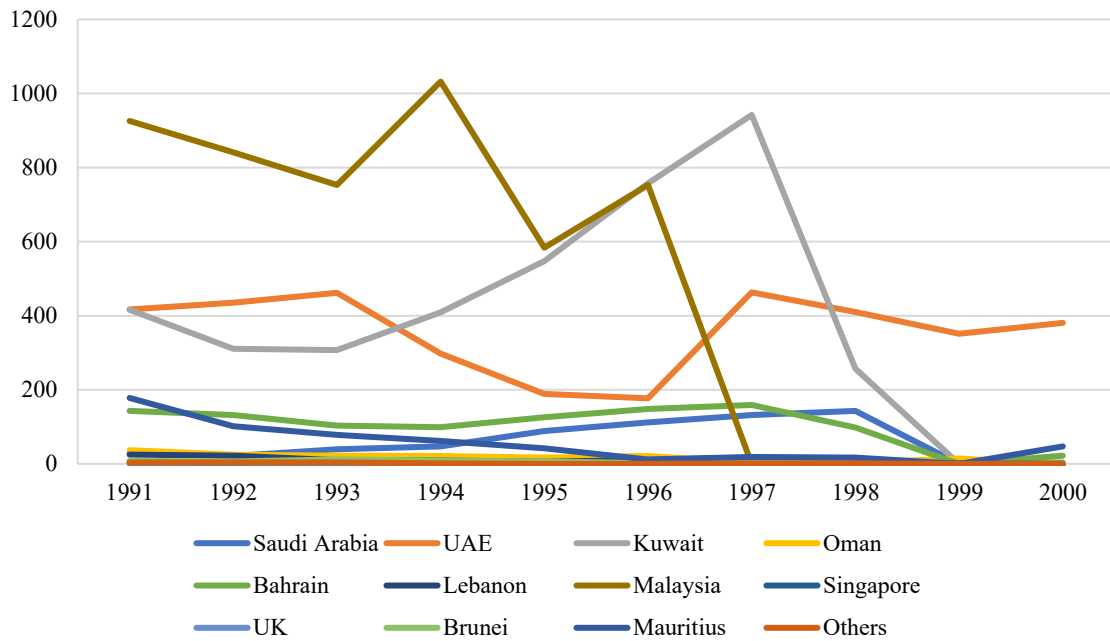
economy, but also their families. One of the most prominent goals for Bangladesh right now is to achieve the sustainable development goal of eradicating poverty by 2030. International remittances sent by these migrant workers have emerged as a key driver to poverty reduction in Bangladesh (Nessa et al., 2021).

2.2 Patterns of Bangladeshi Female Labor Migration to the Middle East

The factors behind male and female migration may differ. According to Nessa et al., (2021), Bangladeshi women are less likely to migrate for work than their male counterparts, but female migrants remit a higher proportion of their income to their families. According to an International Organization for Migration (IOM) report in 2014, most of the female labour migration occurs due to poverty, lack of opportunity back home, inability to find work and abandonment by husband (in Nessa et al., 2021). Ghosh (2009) discussed the trends of women migration both nationally and internationally. His findings revealed that female labour migration has mostly positively impacted sending countries by increasing their foreign exchange and remittances reducing poverty (in Sultana and Fatima, 2017). Islam et al. (2013) in their study concerning Bangladeshi female migration, found that there is a co-relation between literacy rate and growth rate of remittance, which improves living standards (in Sultana and Fatima, 2017). Earning money abroad and sending it home is a dream come true for many families, and this opportunity gives the families the chance to become prosperous and empowered (Rashid, 2016). Living away from home offers both positive and negative experiences for migrant women. Not all women have the same experiences after their return, and different women have different experiences in their households and in the society (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014).

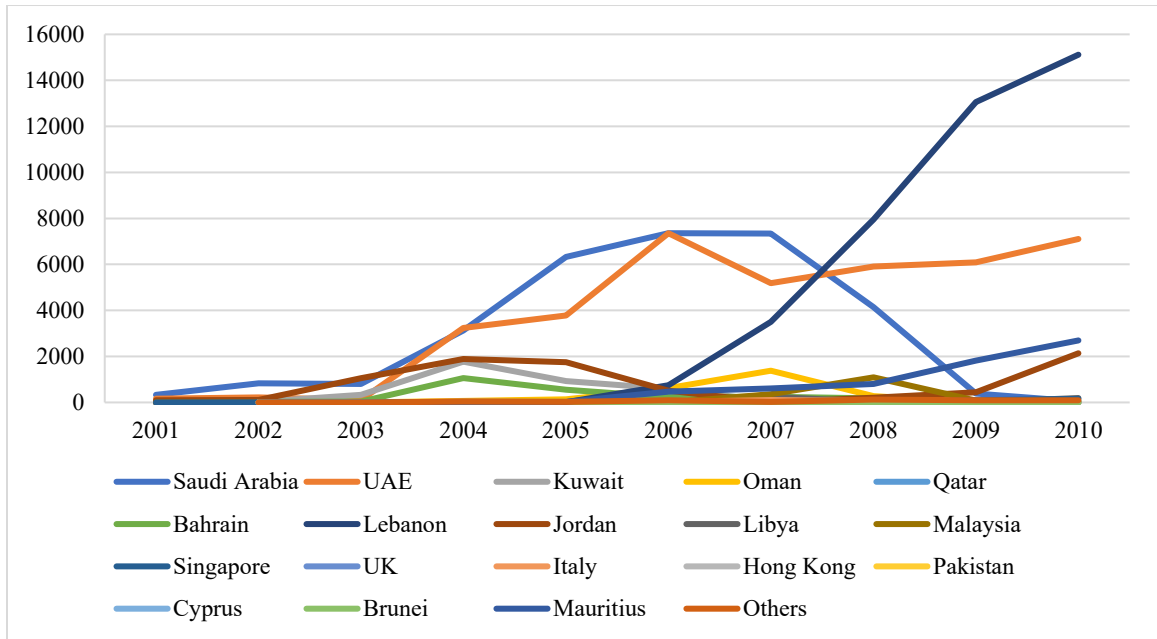
In the early 1970's the Government of Bangladesh did not have a concrete policy that explicitly addressed women's labour migration (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). In the early 1980s, through a Presidential Order, certain categories of female workers were restricted to migrate overseas, and the order stated that professional and skilled women could migrate, but semi-skilled and low-skilled women could not go overseas without a male guardian (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). The government justified their decision on the ground that it will protect the dignity of Bangladeshi women. During these early years, women migrants mostly consisted of doctors, nurses, and teachers (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). From the early 1990s, Bangladesh formally began sending its female labour migrants to the Middle East, mostly for caregiving and other low-paying jobs, such as cleaning, domestic work, etc. (Ahasan, 2018). At that time semi-skilled and low-waged female workers were still restricted to migrate without their male guardians, and because of this reason, female migration was only 1% of the total flow till 2003 (Morshed, 2021). In 2003, MoEWOE (Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment of Bangladesh) brought changes in female labour migration policy and allowed low-waged and semi-skilled women to migrate under special permission once they become 35 years of age (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). In 2006, the Ministry relaxed the regulations on female labour migration, and the age limit was reduced to 25 (Das et. Al, 2019). For all these reasons female labour migration from Bangladesh to the Middle East started rising in the 21st century. The tables below show the outflow of female labour migration from 1991 to 2022. These tables show the rising pattern of female labour migration, and that the Middle Eastern countries are the primary destination.

Figure 2: Overseas Employment of Female Workers in Bangladesh, 1991-2000



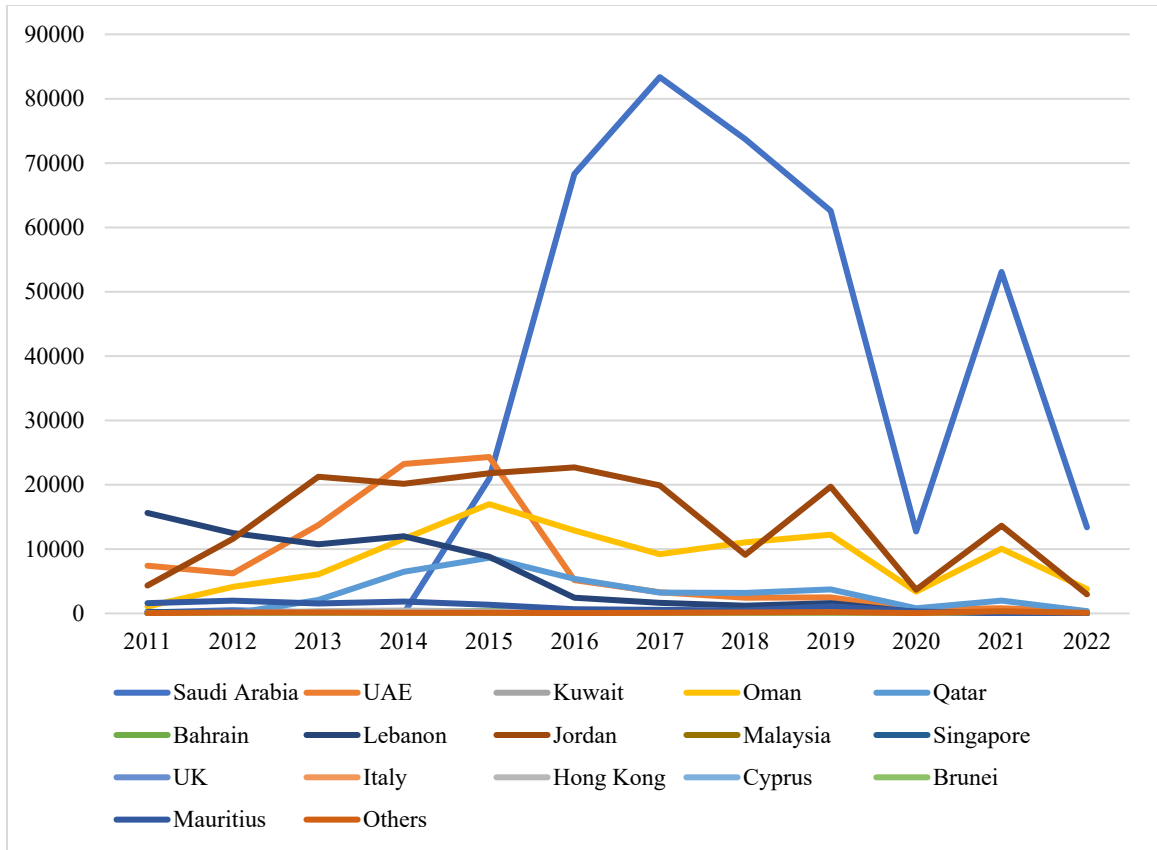
Source: Graph based on BMET- Overseas Employment and Remittance Statistics (2022)

Figure 3: Overseas Employment of Female Workers in Bangladesh, 2001-2010



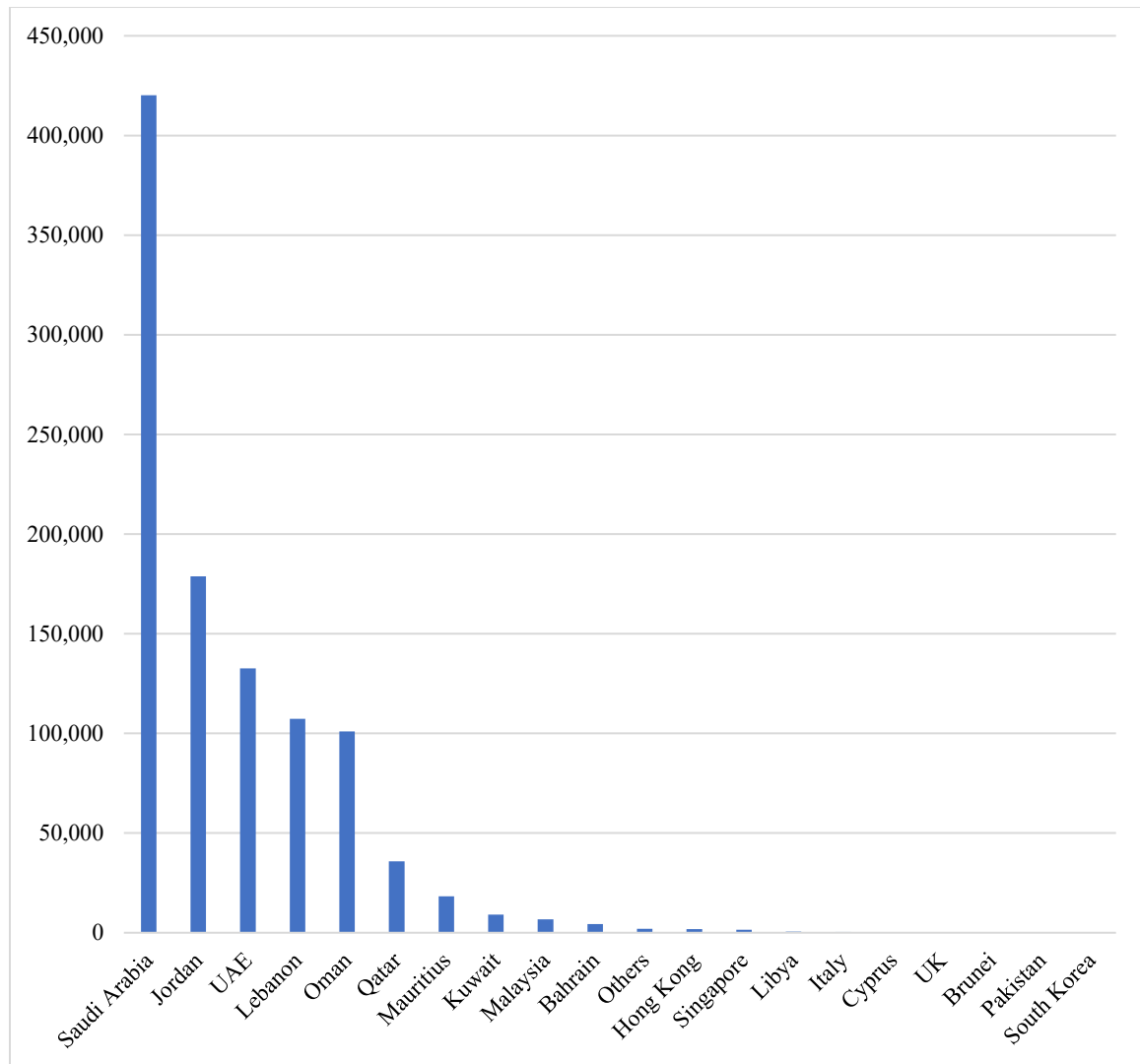
Source: Graph based on BMET- Overseas Employment and Remittance Statistics (2022)

Figure 4: Overseas Employment of Female Workers in Bangladesh, 2011-2022



Source: Graph based on BMET- Overseas Employment and Remittance Statistics (2022)

Figure 5: Total Female Employment by Countries from Bangladesh, 1991-2022



Source: Graph based on BMET- Overseas Employment and Remittance Statistics (2022)

It can be seen from the charts above that the migration flow of female workers is usually towards Middle Eastern countries. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and UAE are the top recipients from 1991 to 2022. It can also be seen from the numbers that from 1998 to 2001, the number of female labour migrants was low due to government restrictions. In 2003 the number started increasing and by 2015, the number significantly

rose. This happened because of the 2013, Overseas and Employment Act, which made the women feel safer in their destination countries. According to the Act, they can lodge complaints directly to BMET, and there are laws prohibiting fraudulent activities, such as human trafficking, falsifying work permit and employment opportunities etc. specifically mentioned in the Act (Ministry of Welfare of the Expatriates and Overseas Employment, 2016). Furthermore, the more women started leaving for work, the more women learned about the financial gains of migration from the returnee migrants and also from the local recruitment agents. In 2015, Bangladesh signed a Bilateral Agreement with Saudi Arabia to encourage labour migration and the safety of the migrant workers (Ministry of Welfare of the Expatriates and Overseas Employment, 2016). This agreement was broadcasted in the media to promote labour migration. The tables also show that the numbers decreased in 2018 and 2019. Siddique, et al. (2018) talked about the fact that since May 2018, many aspirant female migrants felt discouraged to go abroad as the media was highlighting the news of physically and mentally abused women migrants returning from Saudi Arabia. BMET also became cautious about the recruitment of female migrants to this part of the world. Almost 800 female labour migrants returned to Bangladesh in 2018, and almost all of them claimed that they faced a range of problems in their destination countries including physical and mental abuse. Due to these reasons, there was a little decline in the numbers in the years of 2018 and 2019. The chart also shows that the number of female labour migrants declined in 2020, largely due to COVID-19, which improved in 2021.

Sultana and Fatima (2017) discussed that one of the main reasons for the high demand for female Bangladeshi workers in Middle Eastern countries is the similar religious norms between the region and Bangladesh. Demand for cheap labour, reputation of the

Bangladeshi workers as loyal and religious, and ageing population in the receiving countries are some of the reasons behind high demands for migrants of the receiving Middle Eastern countries. The increasing need in the service sectors in rich and industrializing Middle Eastern countries has encouraged the Bangladeshi government to send its women as semi-skilled and low-waged workers there for remittance inflow (Morshed 2021). Nurul Islam (2011) argues the main push factors for low paid female labour migration are poverty and insecurity of livelihood in Bangladesh. The scope of better earnings in the destination country encourages the women to migrate for work.

Due to these reasons, the outflow of migration is rising. This outflow is resulting in an increase in remittances which contribute to the country's economic growth, and which may also affect the migrant workers' social and families' status. How the female labour migration to the Middle East is affecting the lives of these women will be discussed in the next chapters.

2.3 Bangladeshi Women in Their Daily Lives

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in last 20 years in improving the lives of girls and women (Haque, 2022). Maternal mortality rate is falling, fertility rate is declining, and there is greater gender parity in primary school enrolment (Haque, 2022). At the same time almost eighty percent of the women are suffering from some sort of gender-based violence which prevents them from achieving their full potential (Haque, 2022). Fifty-nine percent of girls are married before the age of 18 which is the highest among the South Asian countries (Haque, 2022). Women in Bangladesh depend on the male members, such as father or husband of their families for economic support in their day to day lives.

Eighty-nine percent of the total population of Bangladesh are Muslims, almost ten percent are Hindus, and rest of the population are mostly Christian, Buddhist and few minor indigenous religions (Wohab, 2021). Almost all the women migrating to the Middle East are Muslim, and they are migrating to this part of world due to their religious affinity (Sultana and Fatima, 2017). The employers in these Middle Eastern countries also demand Muslim female workers, and there is a reputation of Bangladeshi workers being loyal and religious (Sultana and Fatima, 2017).

Due to Islam being the dominant religion in the society, Muslim cultures are predominant in Bangladeshi societies. Deep rooted cultural norms, religious customs and traditions have shaped the patriarchal nature in the Bangladeshi societies (Mamun and Hoque, 2022). Culturally and traditionally, two sets of social norms, 'purdah'⁴ and patriarchy shapes the position of Bangladeshi women in the society (Rahman, 2020). In this patriarchal society, women are traditionally remaining within their household taking care of the family while men work outside (Mamun and Hoque, 2022).

Goswami and Islam (2019) point out the fact that the social and economic situation of the Bangladeshi women are complex where they are always struggling to keep their position in the family and society. Most of the women in the rural areas cannot come outside their household to work and earn for their families, and even if they do, their earnings are limited and lower than men (Goswami and Islam, 2019). At the same time, if these women's families want them to migrate to another part of world in hopes of financial gains, these

⁴ Purdah means veil. But it is a practice in Muslim and Hindu societies for women to cover face or live in a separate room in order to stay out of the sight of men (Britannica, 2022).

women come out of their comfort zone and migrate for work. They do not have much power to make decisions in this regard (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014).

The situation is not the same for urban educated women. According to the study by Tabassum et. al (2019), the urban women of Bangladesh are relatively more educated and working beside men which makes them more self-reliant, and have more decision-making power over their personal, professional, and social life. Still if we look at the overall scenario of Bangladesh, women are mostly working close to home or working in their households. For the women working in their households, their non-wage activities in their families are not considered as important as the men's work (Goswami and Islam, 2019). These women always tend to have a feeling of dependence on men which causes disempowerment for the women (Goswami and Islam, 2019). In a poverty ridden family, women are considered as burdens, as they don't financially contribute to their families (Goswami and Islam, 2019). According to Tabassum et. al (2019), if women engage in work outside their households and participate in income generating activities, they have more freedom to make decision for themselves and their families.

Though in the past few decades, Bangladesh has undergone significant transformation in terms of perception about women's position in the society, but still women lag behind in terms of achieving gender equality and empowerment in society.

2.4 Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers' Experience in Their Migration Journey

2.4.1 Pre- Departure Phase

In their study, Jolly and Reeve (2005) found out that, women may have little influence on migration decisions in their households, and even in the situations where women are

migrating alone, their decisions to migrate are likely to be determined by the household's livelihood strategies and remittance expectations. They also point out the fact that expectations regarding remittances and the amount of pressure placed on migrants to remit vary according to the migrant's gender, age, and position in the family.

For Bangladeshi people, migration has been viewed as a poverty-alleviation strategy for many decades (Buchenau, 2008). According to Abdul Barkat and Manzuma Ahsan (2014), women in Bangladesh would be less likely to migrate if they or their families were not in a dire economic situation. The parents or the husband of these women see it as the women's duty to migrate and send money home, and therefore force her to migrate, regardless of the women's desires (Barkat & Ahsan, 2014).

According to Barkat and Ahsan (2014), in the pre-departure phase of migration, women are usually assisted by intermediaries or an agent⁵. All their transportation procedures and employment at the destination country are handled by these agents and the women are heavily reliant on these agents. Not all the agents are legal and registered under Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training of Bangladesh (BMET). If women are migrating through the illegal agents, they can become subject to dishonest and corrupt practices, sexual harassment and psychological abuse (Nahar and Akond, 2017). Sometimes these women also fall victim to human trafficking (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014). After these women reach their destinations, they are taken by their employers to the workplace. These illegal agents require high fees in return for their services and the families may need to sell their

⁵ BMET has a list for Valid recruiting agents that can be found here- <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/agentlistpreview.action?type=valid> , these agents have their own intermediaries dealing with the aspiring female migrant workers employment issues. There are also illegal agents who are not registered by the BMET (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014).

assets, mortgage their lands, sell their livestock, or take loans to pay. Thus, the women may fall into debt even before they have migrated (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014). The government has taken safety measures to stop the activities of the illegal agencies. This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

It can be argued that these women have little choice regarding whether to migrate or not. Their family or household's socio-economic situation largely decides for them. Even after their decision to migrate has been made, the agents make decisions for them throughout the pre-departure phase including their employment and search for jobs at the destination countries.

2.4.2 Departure and the Journey Abroad

According to M. Saiful Islam (2018), sometimes the female migrants in the Middle East are not well informed about their rights as migrant workers which exposes them to a number of abuses, exploitations and sufferings. Many domestic helpers face physical and sexual abuse, and they are also not paid regularly or sufficiently (Frantz, 2017). Many newspapers have reported that hundreds of Bangladeshi female workers are choosing to leave Saudi Arabia due to their alleged sexual abuse and torture by their employers (Islam, 2018). As I further discuss in chapter 5, they have complained about assault to the embassies or to the BMET asking for support to leave their destination countries and return home. Many of the migrant women flee from their workplace and take shelter at the Bangladeshi consulate requesting for protection and repatriation. Some women claim that they have not received the job and salary as promised and thus, they want to return to Bangladesh (Nahar & Akond, 2017).

In some designated countries in the Middle East, the domestic sector is not covered by the labour laws despite the fact that domestic work is recognized as labour market activity under the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Domestic Workers Convention (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014). This is the reason most designated Middle Eastern countries offer very limited protection and rights to women migrant workers. Job opportunities and migration of these low-paid women migrant workers are mostly regulated by the sponsorship system which is often referred to as the 'Kafala System' (International Labour Organization, 2017). This system is used to monitor and recruit migrant workers, especially those working in the construction, domestic and caregiving sectors in the Gulf Cooperation Council member states and a few neighbouring countries, such as Bahrain, Qatar, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Khan, Azfar, and Harroff-Taval, 2011). Under this system the migrant workers cannot typically enter the country, resign from a job, or transfer employment without obtaining permission from their employer or sponsor (ILO, 2017). As a result, they become modern slaves trapped inside a job in a country far from their home. This is not true for all Bangladeshi migrant women and there are both positive and negative cases. But not every woman's experiences are same and equal. Some migrant women are more subjected to the abuses of Kafala system than others, and some actually thrive under this system and find better empowering opportunities to boost their self-confidence.

An obvious advantage for migrant women workers is their better wage and this positive aspect largely drives the migration from Bangladesh to the Middle East (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014). This provides the women with economic liberty, and the women enjoy more independence and decision-making power in the family and the community (Barkat and

Ahsan, 2014). However, it is not always true. According to Deshmukh-Ranadive (2003), women's status inside their family does not necessarily change when incomes are generated (Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2003). According to Rahman (2012), most of the migrant women's earnings goes to the following expenses, 1) repayment of loans taken for migration, 2) family maintenance, 3) medical treatment, 4) land purchase, and 5) business investments. Rahman also (2012) points out that only a minority of migrants could invest or save their overseas earnings after they come back home.

2.4.3 Life After Returning Home

After returning home, these women face various uncertainties and are not always accepted back into their family and the society (The Daily Star, 2017). According to UNIFEM⁶ & the ILO (2010), returning migrant women are considered by some to be in need of moral rehabilitation and may be rejected by their families because of their exposure to outside influences. When this happens, they need socio-economic support. There are some effective strategies for the social and economic reintegration of these returning women migrants that are being offered by the Government and the private or NGO sectors, but reintegration into society still is a major problem for these returning female workers (UNIFEM & ILO, 2010).

According to Karim, Islam and Talukder (2020), these returning migrant women find themselves in a vulnerable position and lower status within their family after coming back home. As most of these women were employed as domestic workers, they find that the skills they learned in the Middle East are of no use in their home community, as there is little demand for that kind of work in their home community, and they remain unemployed

⁶ United Nations Development Fund for Women

unless they start a new business or train themselves for other jobs (Das, 2012). Many keep repaying the loans they took before going to abroad with the money brought back home. As a result, some of these migrant women find themselves in a similar economic condition as they were before they left.

The women migrant workers' journey to the Middle East is not always bad. As mentioned earlier, these women are challenging the traditional gender roles in their households. For some women, they get to escape negative social situations and build a life for themselves. They also get to contribute to their household's economic status by sending remittances to home, and this gives them the power to make decisions for their families and societies upon returning home. Despite the reintegration problems and social stigmatization, there are also positive aspects of migration. Some women migrate to escape unhappy personal and social situations, including bad marriages, harassment, violence, and lack of employment opportunities for themselves and their spouses (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014). Those who are able to bring back money and gain some economic independence to escape these situations upon their return. According to Yang (2009), migrant households' incomes increase with remittances. All this gives more decision-making power to the migrant women over their own lives and households. According to Barkat and Ahsan (2014), women are challenging the gender roles inside their households through migration and sometimes women's absence leads to substantial social changes, such as the father looking after the children while the woman migrant earns money overseas (Barkat and Ahsan, 2014).

According to Tasneem Siddique and Chowdhury R. Abrar (2003), the remittances these women send back home play a huge role in the rural economics of Bangladesh. The migrant households invest the remitted money to various small businesses, and it not only improves

the household's socio-economic status, but also improves the country's economic condition. These remittances also help the households to improve their literacy rate. Migrant women want their children to have proper education, which eventually gives these children a better life in the future (Siddique and Abrar, 2003).

The literature suggests that international labour migration is a vital part to Bangladesh's economic and social development. Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the pattern of international labour migration shows an upward trend and the most lucrative destination for the emigrants are the Middle Eastern countries. During the 21st century the number of female labour migrants to the Middle East has increased, along with the money remitted. Whether women's migration experience and income can have a positive impact on women's empowerment in Bangladesh will be discussed later in the thesis.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

This chapter will explain the concept of empowerment. I will be using the empowerment framework developed by Naila Kabeer (1999)⁷ to analyze whether Bangladeshi female migration to the Middle East can serve as a tool for women's empowerment and social change in Bangladesh. This chapter will talk about different definitions of empowerment and Naila Kabeer's framework of empowerment, and why this framework is suitable for my study.

3.1 Defining Empowerment

Empowerment is an increasingly popular concept in development studies and almost every developing country accepted empowerment as a legitimate goal for their national policies concerning women's development (Dadawala, 2018). National and international organizations are seeing women's empowerment as a tool for gender justice and equality. Many also regard women's empowerment as process, rather than an outcome where empowerment of women will bring change in women's experiences in this new era's history. By assuring empowerment, male bias will be challenged, and gender equity will prevail. But despite of all the efforts to define women's empowerment for almost 30 years or more, still women's empowerment is contested issue and it is described and defined in many different ways.

Since the mid-1980s, the term empowerment has become very popular in the development field, especially with the reference to women (Batliwala, 1994). But there is no consensus

⁷ In the article called Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. To establish conditions for measurement of women's empowerment, Naila Kabeer conceptualized empowerment as three interrelated dimensions. According to her, these interrelated dimensions of empowerment will help analyze and measure women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). The later part of the chapter will talk about the concepts broadly.

what this term means among development scholars and practitioners (Batliwala, 1994). One definition of empowerment suggests it is an improvement of the livelihood of women (Kabeer, 1994. Mayoux, 1998) and another definition talks about transforming the women's lives in a socioeconomic and political sense (Wallerstein, 1992). Bennett (2002), conceptualizes women's empowerment as social inclusion where the gender equity gap will be reduced, and women will take part in decision-making processes. Maton (2008) defines empowerment as a development process which gives the individual greater control of life. All these definitions talk about transformation of lives and increased decision-making power over the various aspects of life. But some views empowerment just as a social and political inclusion of women as a group where they exercise more power in a public domain. Others might see it as an individual development in terms of exercising power over their lives.

According to Srilatha Batliwala (1994), women's empowerment requires challenging the patriarchal power relations, and with new consciousness where women can assert the right to control resources and participate equally in decision-making. Batliwala (1994) also points out the fact that, the concept of women's empowerment is the outcome of important critiques that have been generated by various women's movements, particularly by 'third world' feminists, and these movements clearly state that women's empowerment requires the challenging of patriarchal power relations that result in women having less control over material assets and intellectual resources. The empowerment process starts from within, and it starts with the consciousness about oppression. With the strength of solidarity, women can assert their right to control resources and to participate equally in decision-making. Batliwala (1994) points out the fact that, women's empowerment must become a

force that is an organized mass movement which challenges and transforms existing power relations in the society. More recently, Batliwala talks about three aspects of power structures that a women must challenge to achieve empowerment: 1) Ideas - changing ideology, 2) Resources - changing the way material, financial, human and intellectual resources are controlled, 3) Institutions and systems - changing the institutions and systems, such as family, community, state, market, that are responsible for unequal power relations (2008).

Zoe Oxaal and Sally Baden (1997) also point out that empowerment has become a 'buzzword' in international development in that time but is often poorly understood. According to them, the need to 'empower' women responds to the growing recognition that women in developing countries lack control over resources, lack self- confidence and lack opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. They also point out the fact that, unless women are equally participating alongside men in the development process, all the development efforts will only have partial effect. Empowerment strategies must carefully define their meaning of 'empowerment', and these strategies must be integrated into mainstream programs rather than being pursued separately. Oxaal and Baden define women's empowerment as women's ability to control resources and to participate alongside men in the development process (Oxaal & Baden, 1997).

CARE, an international humanitarian organization defines women's empowerment as women's ability to enjoy bodily integrity, positive images of her own worth and dignity, equitable control and influence over strategic household and public resources (CARE, 2005).

For Alsop and Heinsohn (2005, p.4), “Empowerment can be defined as a person’s capacity to make effective choices and to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes. The extent to which a person is empowered is influenced by personal agency (the capacity to make a purposive choice) and opportunity structure (the institutional context in which choice is made)”.

According to Naila Kabeer, the concept of empowerment is not always clearly defined or measured, but the ability to make choices is a sign of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer states, “To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 2005, p.13).

Theoretical conceptualizations of women’s empowerment mostly focus on women’s ability to make choices and to control resources to ensure their agency. Srilatha Batliwala (1994) defines women’s empowerment as women’s right to control resources and equal participation in decision making. Zoe Oxaal and Sally Baden (1997) also define women’s empowerment as women’s ability to control resources and to participate in decision making alongside men. Kabeer’s definition of women’s empowerment (2005) also talks about the women’s ability to make choices as an empowering action. According to Alsop and Heinsohn (2005), empowerment is about a person’s capacity to make effective choices and to transform choices into desired actions. According to Andrea Cornwell (2016, p. 342-359), feminist conceptual work from the late 20th century makes another thing clear and that is- empowerment cannot “be done” or “for anyone else”. She also talks about the thoughts of Jo Rowlands (1996) that how empowerment is about people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy the decision-making space. Kabeer (1999)

conceptualizes women's empowerment as a process, rather than a single outcome. Empowerment is the pathways through which women accrue power or decision-making choices, and at the same time this power and decision-making choices ensure further empowerment for women (Kabeer, 1999; Pathways, 2011). Empowerment is the process of women acquiring control over their lives through the expansion of strategic choices. Andrea Cornwell (2016, p. 345-350) brings one more very interesting point and that is the idea of empowerment is different for everyone. What empowers one woman might not empower another or what one woman assumes as empowerment can be thought as disempowering to another. So, there cannot be one recipe that fits all.

According to Elisabeth Porter (2013), development policies traditionally view aid, education, and health care as a route to empowerment. But they ignore gender politics that legitimizes local traditions and practices while establishing empowerment prescribed by Western development donors. They try to give one recipe for women's empowerment all over the world. The main difference among the theoretical conceptualization of women's empowerment and development policies' definition of women's empowerment is that while development policies define women's empowerment as an objective phenomenon where similar or equal strategies might bring change in the societies, the theoretical conceptualization accounts for individual needs and different social structures. Elisabeth Porter (2013) also talks about the United Nations (UN), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom Department for International Development (UK DFID) and the Australian Development Program (AusAid) and how these organizations have a general use of the term "empowerment". The UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) talks about gender equality and empowering women. But

they are focusing mostly on health, education, and decision making and political participation (Progress towards meeting the MDGs for women and girls, 2022) which is not enough to ensure women's empowerment in different parts of the world. The USAID and the UK DFID both have a separate department or office for gender equality and women's empowerment dealing mostly with girl's education, security and justice, maternal and child health and microcredit loans (USAID, 2011; DFID, 2011). AusAID talks about the importance of women's empowerment relating it with economic and human development (Porter, 2013). World bank's understanding of empowerment talks about an individual or a group's ability to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions or outcomes. Most development organizations and governments give more emphasis on economic empowerment of women, and education of girls and women as sign of empowerment. There have been many policies and program of the Government of Bangladesh, NGOs and other institutions that addresses the economic participation of women in the country, but they do not sufficiently address the issue of women's empowerment apart from economic achievements (Reza and Yasmin, 2019). Organizations like USAID are promoting women entrepreneurs and female labour forces to increase women's empowerment in Bangladesh (USAID, 2021). But this approach to empowerment does not always give women the power to have control over their lives and acquire ability to make strategic choices. And also, while implementing policies, all these organizations are missing one very important point and that is- every society and parts of the world are different, and they need separate recipe for women's empowerment rather than one common guideline.

There is one similarity that brings both theoretical conceptualization of women's empowerment and development policies together, and that is their attention towards women's self-development. They focus primarily on the women, rather than their whole families or society. But women's empowerment depends on her surroundings, also they hope that supporting a woman will bring changes in their family's livelihood, which will lead to positive social changes. Development policies provide one recipe to empower all women, and they use aid, education, healthcare, and economic strategies for women's empowerment; in contrast, theoretical conceptualization of women's empowerment highlight that women are not a homogenous group, and that there are distinct types of social and political structures present in different societies and countries which makes women's experiences different from one society to another (Sen and Grown 1988; Moser, 1989; Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997; and Agarwal, 1994)

3.2 Women's Empowerment and The Case of Bangladesh

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of women's productive roles, mobility, and contribution to development in Bangladesh (Reza and Yasmin, 2019; Khan and Ara, 2006). There have been policies and programs initiated by the Government of Bangladesh, organizations such as USAID and NGOs that address the economic participation of women in the country by promoting women's employment and development as entrepreneurs, but they do not sufficiently address the issue of women's empowerment apart from economic achievements (Reza and Yasmin, 2019 and USAID, 2021). According to a study by Sabina Alkire and James Foster (2011) indicates that women in Bangladesh defined women's empowerment as related to their financial position - having money, assets, and a job. They also found out that, women's empowerment was

synonymous to a family's success or empowerment. Which means that, whenever a woman's family had more social prestige or financial stability, it was considered that the woman was more empowered and most of the measurements of empowerment were based on family as a unit of analysis rather the individual women.

According to Sanawar, Islam, Majumder & Misu (2019), no matter how independent and how economically empowered a woman is, she will almost always lack authoritative power within a Bangladeshi household. Perova (2010) argues that woman's authoritative power increases whenever her income increases because then the household is become better-off, the men feel less stress and are more likely to give women shared decision making power, which, in turn, causes the woman to feel empowered. However, a study by Mathur and Salvov (2013) suggests that an increase in authoritative power associated with economic empowerment happens when women have significantly higher income than their male counterpart. Their study is focused on intimate partner violence in Bangladesh but can be useful while analyzing women's empowerment more broadly in Bangladesh.

Solotaroff et al. (2019) in their book explicitly talk about the financial gender gap and its relation to women's empowerment. They argue that wealth empowers women in various aspects of life and in their research have found that women who had some sort of income or job tend to present themselves differently and speak more convincingly due to their confidence and self-reliance. All these are signs of empowerment according to them.

In the National Women Development Policy 2011, Bangladesh is focusing mostly on gendered economic inequality and this policy explicitly sees equal rights to wealth and resources earned through income, succession, loan/credit, land and market management as sign of gender equality (Solotaroff et al., 2019). So, it can be seen that much of the

literature and studies on women's empowerment in Bangladesh focuses on economic empowerment rather than other aspects of empowerment.

There is literature on Bangladeshi women's empowerment which focuses on other aspects of empowerment rather than just economic aspects. Hashemi, Schuler & Riley (1996) talks about eight indicators of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, and they are 1) mobility; 2) economic security; 3) ability to make small purchases; 4) ability to make larger purchases; 5) involvement in major decisions; 6) relative freedom from domination by family; 7) political and legal awareness and lastly; and 8) participation in public protests. Mahmud, Otsuka, Sawada, Tanaka & Tanaki (2017) pointed out four different indicators of empowerment in Bangladesh, and they are 1) female school enrollment; 2) female labour force participation; 3) marriage age; and lastly 4) fertility and decision to have children. So, it can be seen that other issues apart from economic prosperity are important when talking about women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

For this study, the women's empowerment framework developed by Naila Kabeer will be used to analyze the Bangladeshi women's labour migration experience in the Middle East. This framework talks about resources leading to agency or decision-making power that gives the women control over their own lives. It will also help determine whether these women's return home can lead to positive and empowering social changes. Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework and why it is more suited for my study will be discussed in the later part of the chapter.

3.3 Naila Kabeer's Conceptualization of Women's Empowerment

In the '*Conditions and Consequences of Choice*' (1999), Naila Kabeer points out the fact that not everyone accepts that empowerment can be defined or measured, and there is a

fuzziness of the concept. 20th century feminist scholars, such as Sen and Grown (1988), Moser (1989), Batliwala (1993), Kabeer (1994), Rowlands (1997) and Agarwal (1994) recognized that women did not form a homogenous group. There are socio-economic differences based on caste, class, race, location, religion etc. There are also differences and commonalities among women based on their practical gender and strategic gender needs (Molyneux 1985). Shulika (2019) uses Molyneux's writing and gives the definition of practical and strategic gender needs. "Practical gender interest are those instant and socially accepted basic needs like safe water food, housing, health care, monetary income, employment and transportation, required and identified by women (or men) as indispensable for their daily human survival (Shulika, 2019, p. 82)". "Strategic gender interests or needs are those considered as women's real interests, and aim to address the problem of women's subordinate positions in society (Shulika, 2019, p. 83)". For example, reservation for women as legislator in government bodies, engaging women in entrepreneurship opportunities etc. can be considered as strategic gender needs. According to Naila Kabeer (2017) practical gender needs are reflected in the roles and responsibilities of women within their socio-economic hierarchy, and it varies based on context, such as class and race. Strategic gender needs focus on women's subordination and the promise of transformative feminist politics. Naila Kabeer (1999, 2001, 2017) defines women's empowerment as a combination of both. Women's basic needs and the needs that women ask for that will help them get rid of their subordinate position in the society are both important in the empowerment process. As these needs differ from among societies and countries, empowerment process will also differ too. For example, reservation for women as legislator is not important in a country where women have adequate representation in

the governing bodies of the government, but in a different country that might be needed. In Bangladesh there was no adequate representation of women in the governing bodies and despite of having two female prime ministers over almost for last 30 year, still Bangladesh's legislative body needs reservation for women to ensure proper representation of women. So, empowerment is women's ability and the capacity to exercise agency in relation to their own lives as well as in relation to the larger structure on the strategic level.

In the article, 'Between Affiliation and Autonomy: Navigating Pathways of Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice in Rural Bangladesh', Kabeer (2011) calls the process of empowerment a multidimensional process of change rather than a final destination. This process touches on many aspects of women's lives, both personal and public. Empowerment effects the sense of self-worth, also status in society, along with their vision of social justice. According to her, the structure of constraints within family and kinship system plays a central role in shaping gender relations in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh. She talks about the fact that Bangladesh is the primary example of Kandiyoti's (1988) "classic patriarchy" where authority is vested on senior male household head and women are irrelevant when it comes to decision making (Kabeer, 2011, p. 501). Dependence on male members of the family leaves the women vulnerable to what Cain et al. (1979, in Kabeer, 2011, p. 501) call "patriarchal risk"⁸. According to Kandiyoti (1988, in Kabeer, 2011), women might actively resist individual rights if these are seen to undermine the traditional or social norms and practices. This resistance will pose serious challenges to women's empowerment. Kabeer (2005) also talks about the fact that

⁸ Patriarchal risk means the risk associated with the dependence on male members of the family that leaves woman more vulnerable creating more dependency on the male members of the family (Cain et al. 1979, in Kabeer, 2011).

women's identity and selfhood is formed through highly unequal relationships of family and kinship. So, the injustice and unfair practices of social norms are deeply rooted in their beliefs, and they see it as normal without even thinking about the discrimination. According to Kabeer (2011), women need to find their own identity through participation in alternative forms of associational life or employment to break the chain of patriarchy and subordination. Economic freedom, employment opportunities, awareness building, solidarity among women, building social relationships, and ideas about justice may bring social change. These social changes will lead to women having enough resources and agency to take decisions for themselves which will give them a sense of empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). Through these, women's empowerment can become a reality.

As already discussed earlier, Kabeer (2017) defines empowerment as the ability to make choices, and making choices to take control of their lives. She explains empowerment being a process by which women will take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. She emphasizes that the concept of empowerment varies in different societies and women should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Nevertheless, there are certain interrelated dimensions to empowerment that she regards as universal: 1) Resources (or alternatives), 2) Agency and 3) Achievements (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer describes these dimensions as follows:

Resources (or alternatives)

Naila Kabeer (2005, p.15) explains resources as a medium through which agency is exercised or accumulated. Resources usually mean material resources related to economic resources, but along with that social and human resources are also necessary for human wellbeing. Kabeer (1999, p. 2-4) divides resources into three categories, 1) Economic

Resources- which talks about the financial situation or asset quantification of the households of the women, 2) Human Resources- this is the knowledge, skills, qualification, and creativity that the women bring to the table while decision making, 3) Social Resources- the social obligation and the household's expectations towards the women.

In any institution or society, a group or class of people might have more power than others, such as heads of the family, tribal chief, managers of organizations, elites within a community (Kabeer, 2005, p.15). The distribution of resources is controlled by these people. If a women's primary form of access to resources is dependent on a male or powerful member of the family or other types of organizations, her capacity to make choices are likely to be limited (Kabeer, 2005, p.15). To ensure empowerment, women must have control over available resources or alternatives to make strategic life choices.

Agency

Kabeer (1999, p.3-4), describes agency as the ability to define one's goal and act upon it. Agency is the process by which the 'power to choose' is exercised. It is about "power within" or the power to make decision. Kabeer (1999, p.3) also says "It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis". According to Kabeer (1999, p.3-4), agency is about motivation, meaning and purpose of the activity that a woman must have in order to achieve empowerment. Agency is the heart of empowerment process and here the individual makes choices to ensure and demonstrate her empowerment.

In her book, "Power to Choose", Naila Kabeer (2000), talks about four kinds of agency- 1) Passive or reluctant agency in which action is taken under circumstances or pressure where the women do not have much power over their own decisions; 2) Suppressed agency is

defined as a situations in which women can express their opinion, but fail to acquire the power to make decisions for themselves; 3) Negotiated agency occurs when women's decision or agency is not completely accepted, but there is conditional support towards their decisions; and finally, 4) Active agency, where women have complete decision making power over their lives.

Kabeer (2005 p.14) describes positive and negative connotations to describe agency. In positive sense, "power to" refers to people's ability to make and act on their own choices and life, even in the face of other's opposition. The negative sense talks about "power over", that refers to exercising authority over or violence on another (Kabeer, 2005, p.14). Agency, in relation to empowerment also implies challenging the power relation of the institution. Agency is all about exercising power using available resources.

Achievements

Kabeer (1999) defines achievements as the final outcome of these choices. Resource and agency play important role on the final outcome of the whole process. Here the women finally taste the fruit of their labor and in this step, we can understand whether the women have acquired power or are being empowered or not. While describing achievement, Kabeer (2005) says that "resources and agency make up people's capabilities" (p. 15). Their potential will only come into being if the women are using the given recourses to achieve some ultimate goal. Kabeer (1999, p.23-26) brings out an important point by saying that, evidence of ultimate empowerment can be seen through the achievements. Achievement can be seen in women's emancipation, belief in daughter's education, freedom of movement, reported sharing roles in decision making, challenging gender roles, and financial autonomy- controlling own earnings (Kabeer, 1999, p.23-26). Achievements are the final source of empowerment. Kabeer later in her article 'Gender Equality and

Women's Empowerment' (2005) later states that achievement is empowering if it contributes to women's sense of independence rather than just meeting survival needs. So, realizing self-worth, gaining self-confidence, and positive self-image has more to do with empowerment rather than simply achieving practical gender needs.

These three dimensions are interrelational and change in one dimension might have effect on another. (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15-16). For example, achievement in one aspect of life might create resources for another, giving more resources will lead to more agency or power. This will result in active changes in achievement for another aspect of life. Similarly, inequalities in one aspect of life might reproduce inequalities in other aspects of life. To ensure empowerment all the dimensions are equally important.

Naila Kabeer's three dimensions of empowerment breaks down the empowerment process into elements which help me to analyze the degree to which women migrants' control their resources and have more agency, and to analyze the women's achievements from their migration to work in the Middle East. I will examine the women's situation at every step of their migration process and whether they had any control over their resources before leaving, during their stay in the Middle East and after their return. This will involve examining the impact of NGO and government programs in assisting women to gain more control over their resources. I will also explore their decision-making power at each step of their journey, and their agency leading to more control over their lives and resources. I will use the NGO employees' and researchers' understandings and perception to reach my conclusion, rather than using the women's direct claims and statements.

According to Kabeer (1999), "positive transformation on how women perceive themselves can also be a signal of empowerment." In the later chapters, I will try to figure out if there

has been any transformation in women's self-perception which signals empowerment. I will be using secondary data sources, and data from interviewees who have worked with these women for long and gave me ideas on how these women view themselves. I am not using statistical data on the general indicators of empowerment, such as, education, fertility and income to find out if there has been a change in the female migrants' lives because there is no recent elaborative statistical data or survey done on female migrant workers. The last survey on these women was done in 2011, and the number of Bangladeshi female migrants to the Middle East rose in 2015 making that survey obsolete.

Empowerment has various definitions and meanings. This chapter talked about those definitions, and why Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework is better suited to explain empowerment for this study. By using Naila Kabeer's three dimensions of empowerment, I will analyze if the female migrant workers' time working in the Middle East has help them make progress in their empowerment journey.

Chapter 4: Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers' Migration Experience

In this chapter I will discuss the factors that are enabling or hindering empowering changes in the home societies for the Bangladeshi female migrants who went to the Middle East. This chapter will be divided into two parts. The first part will provide socio-economic details regarding the Bangladeshi female migrants. The second part will discuss their journey and how their experiences and conditions both at home and the destination countries enable or hinder them from benefitting from their work in the Middle East. The information for this chapter is gathered from the interviews conducted for this studies and the secondary data sources.

4.1 Profile of Migrants

If we look at the statistics, migration for work was mostly a male centric affair in Bangladesh until 2015 when female labour migration began to increase. Before that, the number of female labour migrants was relatively small. While conducting interviews, it came to light that there are no recent data available to the non-government organizations that can give an overall country-wide understanding of Bangladeshi female migrants' socio-economic profiles. The numbers of total female migrants and the remittances received can be found in BMET's official website, but there is no detailed information by government organizations about the characteristics of the women who migrate for work. There is some information regarding male migrants, but documentation on female migrants is largely missing. Some studies talked about the basic traits of these women, but they used small data samples. There was a survey done by BMET in 2011 on female migrants from Bangladesh, but as the numbers significantly changed after 2015, that survey is not entirely

reliable to use here in this study. In this research, the data on female labour migrants' profiles was mostly collected from the interviews, as most of the interviewees have direct experience working with female migrants and have firsthand information of their socio-economic profiles.

As discussed in the introduction, the information for this chapter was gathered from seven interviews with researchers and NGO employees of Bangladesh. Please refer to Appendix 1 to read about the interviewees.

- **Age:** According to my interviews, most female labour migrants are older than 25. NGO interviewees indicate there is a small percentage of migrants who are aged between 18 to 25 and female migrants going abroad for the second time tend to be older and aged between 28 to 40 years.
- **Education:** Based on interviewee estimates, roughly 50% of the female migrants do not have any formal level education, and around 20% of the women have only primary level education⁹.
- **Family Background:** All interviewees agree that almost all the women face economic hardship and the main reason to migrate is their financial troubles.
- **Skills as Worker:** Most of the women migrants enter low-paying jobs mostly as domestic labourers or cleaners. 5 of the 7 interviewees agree that these women have mostly worked in their homes, and that is why they were more interested to work as domestic labourers because they feel it will come easily to them. However, interviewee 4 pointed out that even if they are not working in their homes, there is

⁹ Primary level education in Bangladesh consists minimum 5 years of education in Primary School Level.

a mindset that women are naturally good at household work, so domestic labour will be a perfect employment opportunity for them. They get training from various government and non-government organizations for these positions before leaving for the Middle East.

- **Employment Before Leaving:** The majority of the migrant women are married, and they do not work outside their homes before migration. Most of the women do not have employment opportunities in Bangladesh, and this is the reason why they migrate abroad to support their families financially.
- **Reasons Behind Choosing Overseas Employment:** According to interviews from the NGOs, research institute and the PhD candidate, the main reason for Bangladeshi women migrating to the Middle East is the women's economic situation; however, some also leave in the hopes of increasing social dignity and self-reliance.

4.2 Factors behind the Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers' Journey Enabling or Hindering Their Empowerment

4.2.1 Pre-Departure Phase

Decision To Leave and Intrahousehold Decision-making Before They Leave

As mentioned earlier, most women migrate because of poverty. According to the interviews conducted for this research, the women are compelled by their families' need for financial support, and they are influenced by their family members, especially their fathers, spouses and other male members of the family. So, the decision to leave might not be entirely that of the women, but they are influenced to migrate for work. Sometimes outside sources, such as other returnee female migrants in the society or recruiting agents influence them to leave. All of the NGO workers interviewed for this study agreed on the

point that when these women were asked if they were forced to leave or not, most of them answered that they were not forced to leave, but they left for their families' wellbeing. These NGO workers also added that there are some women who said that their father or spouse wanted them to leave, and they did not have much control on the matter. Nevertheless, according to one study conducted in the Manikganj district of Bangladesh (Akond, 2019), 94% of women chose to leave and were happy with their decision before they migrated to work in the Middle Eastern countries. According to Akond (2019) there were some women who were widowed or divorced, and they said that it was their decision to migrate and they wanted financial independence.

Employment Opportunity

According to the Manikganj district study, female migrants did not have any particular choice of employment, they were just interested to do any income generating work (Akond, 2019). One NGO worker who was interviewed for my study said that most of the women want to work as a domestic worker¹⁰, while some want to work in the garment sector (Interview no. 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022). They believe that they have the necessary skills to do these jobs, but they do not have much idea about how to acquire these employment opportunities, and they are mostly dependent on recruitment agents for employment (Nahar and Akond, 2017). Sometimes they also learn about employment opportunities from their social networks and other returnee migrant women (Interview no. 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022). The agents sometimes are not honest with the women about the work environment into which they are entering and when the women

¹⁰ According to ILO (International Labor Organization), domestic workers are those who perform work in or for private household or households.

reach their destination, the reality is not what they had been promised and they face difficulties (The Daily Star, 2022).

4.2.2 Journey Abroad

Work Environment and Freedom of Movement

The NGO workers and researchers interviewed for this study all agreed that the work environment, especially for domestic workers, is a difficult adjustment for the migrant women. The hours are long, sometimes up to 16 hours a day (Interview no. 2, Local NGO worker, February 16, 2022). The Alliance for Women Migrant Voices (AWMV) recently stated that some migrant women are not capable of dealing with the adverse environment in the destination country (The Business Standard, 2022). The Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) published a report, and it suggested that 50% of the migrant women working in the Middle East were subjected to forced labour and had to work additional hours (Ahamad, 2021). The same report also said that 33% of the women were psychologically abused and 16% faced some kind of sexual abuse (Ahamad, 2021). Women who were found to be talking on the phone when they were not permitted, sleeping, accidentally breaking household items and taking food without permission were sometimes required to work extra hours or have their salaries cut or sometimes experienced physical and/or verbal abuse (Ahamad, 2021).

According to one NGO official, who is working for the rights of women, most of these women do not have the right to go outside (Interview no.1, February 13, 2022). The most they could do is to go to the balcony. Sometimes their employers forbid them to talk to people outside the household, and that makes these women very lonely and isolated. The employers sometimes take away their mobile phones, and they cannot talk to their families

or spouse without the permission of their employers (Interview no. 1, February 13, 2022; Interview no 6, March 16, 2022). But this is not always the case, sometimes the women have better working environments (Interview no. 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022). The women migrating for the second or third times report to my interviewees that even if the working environments were not always in their favour, but if the salary was good, they are willing to migrate again for work (Interview no. 2, Local NGO Worker, February 16, 2022; Interview no. 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022). There are many circumstances that make their journey very difficult and challenging, but the financial benefits of migration and the hope for a better future encourages them to leave and work abroad.

Employment and Wages

Most of these women do not have any formal labour market skill sets. They receive training from the government and NGO training centres after they decide to migrate. These centres give them basic work training, and there is also a one-month mandatory training program by the government¹¹. Some of the women have the experience of working in the garment sector in Bangladesh and they believe that they would be able to work in a similar sector or job if given the chance (Interview no. 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022). One study conducted by Bangladesh Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA), in 2011 suggested that 99% of the women had some idea on what sort of work they want to do in the Middle East (BOMSA, 2011).

A study conducted on Bangladeshi female migrant workers in 2022 suggested that women in the Middle East earn almost two-thirds of what the men earn, but women tend to remit larger part of their money home or had greater percentage of savings than the men. (Rashid,

¹¹ Elaborate discussion on the training centers will be discussed in the next chapter.

2022). One NGO official suggested that, as the women are mostly engaged in domestic work, their employers are responsible for their living expenses and their travel cost. As a result, most women have the ability to save almost all of their earnings (Interview no. 4, NGO official, March 5 2022). Another NGO worker suggested that women tend to care more for their families and their children, so they try to send or save as much as they can (Interview no. 3, Local NGO worker, March 16, 2022). A female migrant woman on average remits BDT¹² 75,018 per year (approximately USD 900) (Jasmin, 2019). The NGO workers interviewed for this study, reported the amount varies, but they estimated from BDT 70,000 to BDT 2,00,000. For male migrants who migrated to the Middle East, the number is much higher and estimated around BDT 1,00,000 to BDT 12,00,000. Men earn more because they are employed as construction workers, driver, hotel worker and electricians (Interview no. 1, NGO Official, February 13, 2022; Interview no. 3, Local NGO Worker, March 4, 2022). These type of jobs pay more and these are considered as men's job in the Middle Eastern society. As both men and women migrants send their money through both legal and illegal ways, the number could not be more specific. But usually, the migrant workers family are poverty ridden, and even the lowest estimate BDT 70,000 is enough for them to improve their financial situation.

Decision To Come Back

Four of the interviewees (those working for NGOs and the research fellow) explained that the main reason of the female migrant workers' return is the needs of their families and children back home, and their desire to reunite. They talked about other reasons, such as irregular payments, physical and psychological abuse, work pressure, and expiration of

¹² Bangladesh Taka (Currency)

their employment contracts. Aurongajeb Akond's 2019 study also found that the main cause of the women's return is the need to reunite with their families and to take care of their children and families. The research fellow added that married women also have a feeling that their spouses need them and to save their marriage they return home and that those who are unmarried return home to get married and start their own family (March 5, 2022). Furthermore, according to this interviewee, divorced and widowed women do not generally have much desire to come back home and get married again. Migrant women without children do not have the same urge to come back home. If given the proper work environment, they stay abroad for longer periods than married or unmarried young women (Interview no. 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022).

Most of the interviewees suggested that unless the women's contracts expire or their employers are exploitative, these women make their own decision to return. In the event their contract expires, the women can apply to renew it or they can return home and remigrate. So, they are not always forced to come back home if their contracts are expired (Interview no. 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022).

In the case of an abusive work environment and exploitative employer, the employer might forcefully make the women stay. Because of the Kafala System, these women are not allowed to come back home or resign from the job without permission of the employer until the contract has expired (International Labour Organization, 2017). As discussed later in the next chapter, there are help hotlines and offices in the Bangladesh embassies in the Middle Eastern countries that can support these women and help them return. Nevertheless, according to all the NGO interviewees, if the employer is abusive and wants to exploit the women, it is very difficult to help the women. On the other hand, one Interviewee 3 also

mentioned scenarios in which the employers send the women back home because they don't have adequate expertise to work in the position they were hired for, or the women are not adjusting to the environment in which they are working (March 4, 2022).

Remittance Sending

According to the study conducted by Aurongajeb Akond (2019), most of the women do not send money home on a regular basis. Women tend to send money via legal banking methods, such as a bank account and BKash¹³. This study also found out that around 10% of the women use middleperson or illegal ways to send money. The PhD student working with labour migrants interviewed for my research, pointed out that the amount of illegal remittance is very tough to calculate correctly. There are studies that discuss the probable sum of illegal remittances, but credibility of those studies is questionable as those studies use a very small sample size to determine the remittances (Interview no. 7, PhD student, March 29, 2022). No matter what methods the female migrants use, they send most of their money to their spouses, if they are married (Interview no. 2 and 3). If they are not married, they send the money to their parents (Interview no. 2 and 3). Some send their money to their children.

A 2017 IOM report suggests that remittances are used mostly for food and clothing, loan repayment, purchase of land, home construction, and savings for future. According to the interviews, women also send or save money to invest in their children's future, such as education (Interview no. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6). Most of the women with children want them to have better futures, though the interviews suggest that the women do not have much control over their sent remittances when staying abroad. They send the money in good faith and

¹³ BKash is a mobile financial service in Bangladesh.

hope that their family will utilize the money for their children's lives and future (Interview no. 2 and 3). The IOM report also found that despite the women being the income earners, the recipients of the remittance may disregard their desires if the women are living abroad (2017). This is the reason why the NGOs and Government initiatives suggest the women to take control of their own money and they should save their money and come back home with it for better utilization (Interview no. 1, 2, and 3).

4.2.3 After They Come Back Home **Social Acceptance**

According to Barakat and Ahsan (2014), female migrant workers of Bangladesh face different realities after coming back home. The little research that exists on their experiences upon their return home suggest that while a small group of returnees were treated well and given more respect than before (GAATW, 2019), the majority feel they are treated with suspicion and not accepted by their own families and society (Bhuyan, 2020; Barakat and Ahsan 2014; Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). Some women were treated as “immoral” individuals who might have earned money by sex work or other sorts of “sinful” acts (GAATW, 2019). According to one Bangladeshi returnee in a OKUP Report (GAATW, 2019), her neighbours accused her of sleeping with men for money as she came back home with a good amount of money. Another returnee said, her husband had become more verbally and physically abusive after she came back home, and she wanted to leave him if it was possible. According to Nawaz and Tonny (2019), criticism from family and society, and unwillingness of families to welcome the women migrants back are a common phenomenon for Bangladesh. In their study they suggested that almost 98% of the returnees coming back from the Middle East think they are treated as unwanted by the society (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019).

One NGO worker suggested that it is very hard for the women to prove that they were not engaged in “sinful” activities (Interview no. 2, Local NGO Worker, February 16, 2022). She also added that if the women bring money back home and have some sort of savings, they are treated better because of their families’ expectations to gain more financial support. When they remit money home, their family has it and in this case, when they come back home, they face more challenges after returning. But if they bring the money with them, their families treat them better because they have a degree of control over their own earnings. According to one reputed migration specialist, these women mostly come from families that are financially very unstable, and whenever they bring some money home, they are accepted by their families (Interview no. 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022). Though they might feel that they are unwanted after coming back home, their financial contribution would almost always be acknowledged by their families.

Two of the NGO workers pointed out that although the migrants and their families knew about the social stigma the women may face after their return, still they choose to go due to their poverty (Interview no. 2 and 3, Local NGO worker).

According to interviewees, most of the migrant women feel this money and the experience abroad changed their lives positively, as well as negatively. The money that these women send home or bring back home changes the lives of these women’s families. As they bring back money home, they have more decision-making power over their money and resources that have been accrued with that money. Sometimes the migrant women come back empty-handed, and the families do not accept them after discovering the lack of financial benefits (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). At the same time, some women anticipated that their family would make wise investments with the money they had sent home, but later found that

there is very little actual savings and investments, and the families tend to demand more money after the women come back home (GAATW, 2019). When asked about this, NGO workers agreed on the fact that this is the reason why they tell the women to have some savings while staying abroad and not to send all their money back home (Interview no. 2 and 3). Money is their only leverage over their families to gain acceptance. Though it is also true that not all the families and spouses mistreat the migrant women upon their return home. One NGO worker strongly suggested that the migrant women's control over their money gives them the proper respect and acknowledgement from their families (Interview no. 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022). She also added that, they just need to know how to use their money and how to invest it.

Marriage and Women's Lives

According to a Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) report, a not insignificant portion of returnee migrant women struggle in their marriages after coming back home. This study found 14.7% of the returnee migrants divorced and 10.5% were left by their husbands (2021). This is not happening to all the returnee migrants. There are women who are accepted by their families and spouse, and they are happily married, and also providing financial support to their families (Interview no.1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). According to the interviewees, the experience of working abroad also provided some women confidence to live on their own and the money they brought back home gave them a degree of financial independence (Interview no. 1, 3 and 6). Even if they do not bring money back home, they have the confidence that they can work and live by themselves. As one NGO worker explained, the women's journey abroad made them confident, and now

they are positive about their capability; they are confident that they can leave their abusive home if necessary (Interview no. 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022).

Work and Re-integration

As most of these women were engaged in domestic work, after return they found that the skills, they learned in the Middle East are of no use in their home community as there is little call for domestic workers (Nawaj and Tonny, 2019). Their foreign work experiences rarely contribute to employment opportunities back home and they find themselves right back where they started in terms of employment upon return. According to Nawaz and Tonny (2019), 85% of the women coming back from the Middle East tend to have some sort of financial difficulties in fulfilling their family's basic needs due to lack of employment opportunities. With the Overseas Employment and Migrant Worker Act 2013, the Government has made some improvements to the legislation of Bangladesh, but the Act does not offer any detailed guidelines about a reintegration strategy (ICMPD, 2021). There is also a lack of consideration for female migrant workers and support for the National Women Development Policy (2011) in the Overseas Employment Policy.

A doctoral student interviewed for this study suggested these women tend to invest in small businesses, and local NGOs help them do so (March 29, 2022). If they are confident enough, they can succeed. In a recent study Syeda Rozana Rashid (2022) provided examples of such success stories. She talked about a woman who worked for 7 years abroad, and after coming back home started a rice paddy business where she bought cultivable land with the money she brought back, and employed workers to grow paddy and sale them. She became the main provider of her household. In one interview, an NGO worker talked about a woman whose daughter is studying to be a doctor (Interview no. 3,

Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022). Another talked about a group of women running a small food cart together (Interview no. 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). Women becoming providers in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh can bring social changes (Kabeer, 2000). If women can earn, provide for the families and make decisions for their families, it gives women confidence and self-reliance which leads to greater personal freedom and autonomy. Not just the migrant women, seeing the migrant women providing and working outside their home, other women are also influenced by their work and experience to go outside and find employment. The more women are contributing financially to their families, the more it becomes normal in the society for women to work outside and become more self-reliant. All the NGOs workers interviewed for this study said that their organizations are encouraging the women to run small businesses or make wise investments with the money they brought home. They are giving them support and information, so that they can make better investments, find employment, or start small businesses. The role of various NGOs in these returnee women's lives will be discussed in the next chapter.

Intra-Household Decision Making

Because of the money these women send or bring back home with them, their decision-making power is increased (IOM, 2017). A study from 2012 suggested that their jobs have positively contributed to their social and economic empowerment (Das, 2012). It enhanced their bargaining power and gave them a better decision-making position in the family and community (Das, 2012). Rashid (2022) points out that due to gender roles in Bangladeshi society, if the men of the house remit money, they get more decision-making power compared to the women remitting money. Nevertheless, female labour migration increases

the women's fallback position to bargain with the patriarchy (Rashid, 2022). As now they are providing for their family, their families also take them seriously and their voices are heard while making any decisions in the family.

When asked about this, the NGO workers in this study all agreed that though the women might not have full capability to control or use their own money, their employment still gives them confidence and boosts their self-image (Interview no. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6). Being an income earner, many now have more decision-making power in the family and community than before.

My research based on interviews and secondary data indicates that generally, labour migration changes the socio-economic position for these women within their families. They leave their home country for a better future and financial independence and come back to face both positive and negative consequences. But their experiences abroad have the capability to make them confident to survive the negative experiences back home. Their economic and financial contribution makes them more self-reliant and confident. It also gives them more decision-making power over their families. Their self-reliance might be contradictory to the patriarchal practices of Bangladesh where their confidence might create imbalance and complexities in the families or society. Their increasing need of independence might not be always accepted in their families. But some of them have the confidence that they have survived without the male members of their families in the Middle East, they have the capability to survive on their own in their home societies too. With their both positive and negative experiences from their migration journey, and support from the government and the NGOs, some of the women are becoming more capable of making their life choices without being dominated by their fathers or husbands. But the

situation is not same for all the migrant women and their diverse experiences can impact their lives and empowerment journey differently. In chapter 6, the impact of these women's diverse experiences on their empowerment journey will be elaborately discussed. In the next chapter of the paper, I will discuss what the government and NGOs are doing to support these women and how they are helping them in their migration journey.

Chapter 5: Government and NGOs Supporting Female Migrant Workers

The previous chapter talked about the experiences of the women in their journey to the Middle East and their experiences after coming back home. The main goal of this research was to find out if these women's experiences in the Middle East can serve as a tool for their empowerment and if their journey and experiences abroad can bring empowering changes in their lives after they come back to their home country. This study also analyzes the government and NGOs' contribution in terms of supporting female migrants' empowerment. All the information for this chapter was collected from the interviews¹⁴ and secondary data sources.

This chapter will first discuss the resources and supports that the government and NGOs provide to make the experiences of female migrant workers safer and positive. It will then explore the success and failures of these resources and supports. The chapter ends by examining the impact of COVID- 19 on women's migration and the government and NGOs' involvement to assist the female labour migrants in this uncertain situation.

5.1 Approaches of Government and NGOs to Support Female Migrant Workers: Good practices and Challenges

5.1.1 Government's Role in Supporting the Female Migrant Workers

The Government of Bangladesh has established a ministry and two types of service providing facilities to ensure safe migration and positive experience of the female migrant workers. The Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) was formed on December 20, 2001 to facilitate all matters related to safe migration for

¹⁴ Interviewees are all working in NGOs or research organizations. I was not able to reach any government officials who had enough experience to talk about the Bangladeshi female labor migration. This is one of the major limitations of my study that no government representation was included in the paper.

Bangladeshi immigrants (Akond, 2019). Until then, the Ministry of Labor and Employment and the Ministry of Manpower Development and Social Welfare were in charge of international labour migration in Bangladesh (Sikder, 2008). The sudden increase in international labour market activities of Bangladeshi workers in the era of globalization was the main reason for this Ministry's establishment. This Ministry has four Agencies dealing with labour migration from Bangladesh (MoEWOE, 2022). They are 1) Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET); 2) Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL); 3) Prabashi Kallyan Bank (PKB); and 4) Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB). The two types of service providing facilities are directly and indirectly controlled by the Ministry: 1) the District Employment and Manpower Office (DEMO), and 2) the Technical Training Centre (TTC) (MoEWOE, 2022). There are also welfare wings and offices in the Bangladesh Embassies and missions abroad which are under direct control of this Ministry (MoEWOE, 2022). MoEWOE has direct oversight on almost all the matters dealing with labour migration of Bangladesh via these agencies and offices spread throughout Bangladesh and abroad. The BMET working under the ministry is the most powerful tool of the government to ensure and monitor safe migration of the Bangladeshi migrants all over the world. There are also national legal frameworks in place to ensure safe migration which monitored by the MoEWOE, and its agencies and service providing facilities.

National Instruments to Maintain Flow of Migration

After independence in 1971, Bangladesh continued to regulate its migration using the '1922 Emigration Act', which had its origins in the country's British colonial past (Sikder, 2008). But according to Sikder (2008), it soon became inadequate to deal with the

Bangladeshi labour migration to the Middle East due to the rising numbers of emigrant. In 1976, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) was established to explore employment and work opportunities in both within and outside the country, and to ensure proper training and guidance of both the unemployed and employed workforce of Bangladesh (Das et al., 2019).

As the demand for labour continued, the Emigration Ordinance was established in 1982 by the government to regulate ongoing international migration (Sikder, 2008). This ordinance replaced as well as re-enacted certain amendments of the previous 1922 Emigration Act. It talked about the registration and granting of permits to emigrants, recruitment agents in the home and foreign countries, new regulations for emigration, penalties unlawful and fraudulent emigration, penalties for violating the ordinance and many more issues relating to safe and lawful migration (The Emigration Ordinance, 1982). The ordinance was basically designed to set rules for governing the labour migration sector, and it explained the licensing and monitoring mechanisms of recruiting agencies (Rashid, 2016). It explicitly described the punishments for individuals and private recruiting agencies for fraudulent activities, such as charging the women money¹⁵, providing false employment documentation to apply for work permits or visas in the destination country, falsifying visa and work permit documents, providing false employment documentation to the aspirant migrant women, and providing fake training certificate to the migrant workers (Das et. al, 2018). This ordinance also talks about punishment of dalals or illegal agents promising work opportunities aboard. These dalals have an informal network in Bangladesh to recruit

¹⁵ The women are not required to pay anything for their employment or migration. The employer is responsible for the women's travel and training expenses.

workers, and they send them illegally and do not take any liability if something bad happens to them (Qayum, 2017). Migrants choose to pursue an illegal migration process because they fear that legal procedures might prevent them from going abroad. Most of the migrant workers are financially poor, and usually the agents tell them about the legal procedure of migration, but in case of illegal migration, the illegal agents or dalals do not talk about the legality of migration which results in lack of knowledge about the legal procedure (Das et al., 2019). As a result of the desire to earn more money and the lack of knowledge about the legal procedure, human trafficking continues to remain one of the biggest difficulties in terms of international migration in Bangladesh (Das et al., 2019).

In the late 1990's, the demand for development of a more comprehensive national policy on migration was proposed by the civil society of Bangladesh due to the rising numbers in both legal and illegal migration. To prevent illegal human smuggling, also to ensure that the legal migrants were safe and protected, a new national policy was proposed. In response to civil society's sustained advocacy, the MoEWOE initiated the process of developing an overseas employment policy (Bhattacharyya, 2018). In 2002, with the help of different ministries of the government, the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees (WARBE), the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), the MoEWOE prepared and proposed a draft of the policy (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The new employment policy was adopted on November 5, 2006 (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

Despite the laws and ordinance in place, some recruitment is still done through illegal agencies, social networks, and illegal private recruiting agencies (Das et al., 2019). To prevent this, the Bangladesh Government enacted the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) 2012 (IOM, 2020a). According to the '2021 Trafficking in Report: Bangladesh', published by the US State Department, in terms of anti-trafficking capacity, Bangladesh is in Tier 2 out of total 3 tiers, meaning the anti-trafficking of the government could not meet the standards of several key areas, such as- forced labour, child sex trafficking and sex trafficking in the Rohingya community (Ramsey, 2022). The same report suggests that the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012) criminalized sex trafficking and labour trafficking, and prescribed penalties of five years to life imprisonment and fine of not less than USD 588. The government also trained police officers through an anti- trafficking module at the police academy, and 348 cases were investigated under PSHTA in 2020, and prosecuted 517 suspects. But according to the same report, there are still failures to ensure 100% safety from trafficking, and Bangladesh has to secure its borders, provide more thorough inspections in airports, provide proper training to the officials, including law enforcement, labour inspectors and immigration officers to monitor the illegal migration procedure.

To promote more opportunities for overseas employment, and to establish a safe and fair migration process, the Government of Bangladesh enacted the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act in 2013 (OEMA) (IOM, 2020a). This act talks about a framework for regulating labour migration and identifies functions of various government agencies, recruiting agencies and individual recruitment agents. It has provisions on recruitment agency licensing, registration of migrant workers, migration clearance and restoration of

migrants' rights, etc. (IOM, 2020a). This was the last policy initiative which was specifically directed towards the migrants' journey. But there are certain gaps in the OEMA 2013. There is little detailed instruction on pre-departure checks and training of the migrants, and there is nothing that talks about irregular emigrants who migrate using the informal channel, and no proper instructions are given on compensation if a worker is abused or ill-treated (IOM, 2020a). In an interview, one well-known NGO official in Bangladesh said that they have been demanding a change for a long time now, and there was a possibility of new legislation; however, due to COVID-19, the whole process is not going any further (Interview no- 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). Though there were no new policy initiatives related to migrant workers' recruitment, journey, and employment, the Wage Earners' Welfare Board has established the Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act in 2018 (Siddiqui et al., 2018). This act outlines the emergency support available to migrants and ensuring migrants' protection after return. Bangladesh has also signed various Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Oman, UAE, Bahrain and Jordan (Islam, 2011). In these MOUs both the parties arranged some welfare measures for the migrant workers, which have been implemented, ensuring protection of the rights of the migrants to some extent.

The Government of Bangladesh has different policy instruments to try and ensure safe migration. For example, since the return of tortured female migrant workers from Saudi Arabia in 2018, the government has been trying to ensure minimum standards that are applicable to female migrants going to Saudi Arabia (Siddiqui et al., 2018). The government still has not succeeded in putting minimum standards properly, and the employers who have tortured the women are still have not brought under justice, the cases

are still open and are being investigated (Interview no. 1, NGO Official, February 13, 2022). In the interviews conducted for this study, NGO workers talked about the government helping the migrant workers during the time of COVID- 19. This assistance is limited to trying to bring the women back if they want to return, including arranging special flights free of cost (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022; Interview no- 5, Research fellow, March 5, 2022).

It would have been impossible to oversee the overall process of labor migration, especially to monitor the female labour migrants' outflow, without the government's support and regulations. The national instruments are intended to protect and ensure the safe journey for the female migrants. If women know about their rights and about these national instruments supporting their rights, they will have more power to make an informed decision.

Registration of the Migrant Workers

BMET and district level¹⁶ DEMO offices are mainly responsible for the registration of the migrant workers. To legally migrate abroad to work, it is mandatory for all migrant workers to register in this central database (Hasan, 2022). DEMO collects information, such as name, photograph, and fingerprints of the aspirant migrant for registration. All this information on the aspirant migrants is saved in one database to monitor outward labour migration and to counter fraudulent activities and identity theft (Migrant Resource Centre, 2022). The DEMO offices also verify the documents that the aspirant migrant workers provide before they leave and makes sure that the migrant workers are not providing false

¹⁶ Districts are specific areas governed by district council. Bangladesh is divided into 64 Districts.

information (Reza and Islam, 2022). Registration on this digital platform helps the government keep track of the migrant men and women.

Training

After the registration, the migrant workers are instructed to go to the Technical Training Centres (TTCs) for their mandatory training. TTCs mainly provide skill development training and knowledge to the aspirant migrants, so that they can do their jobs efficiently. This training also enhances their capability to cope with the adverse situation abroad (BMET, 2022). There are a range of different training programs. There is a mandatory basic one-month training on language and skill development, and there is also more specific skills centric training of six months. It mostly depends on the aspirant migrants and agencies to choose which training program they should join. One instructor who worked at a government TTC mentioned that most of the female migrants choose the basic one-month skill training (Interview No- 3, Local NGO Worker, March 4, 2022). According to the Migrant Resource Centre (2022), TTCs are the main instrument used by the BMET to ensure skill development of the women, to teach them about legal rights and different legal banking channels to send their money home. But the main challenge for these TTCs is that most of these aspirant migrants are interested to acquire only the mandatory training of one month duration. Within this one month, these women are taught and trained about local customs of the destination countries, basic skills on how to work in their job field, basic language and communication skills, and lastly, their legal rights. Within this short time, it is impossible to give them extensive knowledge about important issues, such as the receiving countries' and employers' culture and food habits, proper language fluency, in depth knowledge about their workplace and how to operate the modern kitchen or any other

surroundings (Interview no- 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022). But according to Islam (2011), as these migrant workers want to migrate as soon as possible due to their financial situation back home, longer mandatory training periods result in higher levels of illegal migration. These migrant workers want to leave as soon as possible to earn money and improve their financial situation back home. If the mandatory training period is longer, they turn to the illegal channels to migrate. This is the reason why the government initiated one-month basic training programs. If someone is interested in more extensive training, there are other specific training programs on different skills and services. The NGOs and the trainers at TTC encourage the women to join these programs for better skill development, but very few women are interested (Interview no- 3, Local NGO worker, March 4, 2022).

Apart from the technical training, TTCs also provide knowledge on legal rights of female workers and how to contact the Bangladesh Embassies, BMET, MoEWOE and the NGOs. These training centres also educate them about the online complaint mechanisms and their basic rights as a migrant worker. There are a few small local level private training centers run by NGOs which also help the workers get training and information to work abroad (Interview no- 1, NGO Official, February 13, 2022).

Recruiting Agencies

Almost all the legal female migrants to the Middle East are finding their employment and going abroad by help of recruiting agencies. BMET is responsible for issuing licenses to the recruiting agencies (BMET, 2022). This license is a legal authorization that the recruiting agency is listed under BMET, and they are authorized to legally recruit migrants. These private recruiting agencies receive information regarding employer needs and search

for possible workers. Most of the private recruiting agencies work at the local level and try to recruit women from nearby areas. Sometimes the agencies employ returnee migrants to encourage new labor migrants to go abroad, and these returnee migrants work as agents for the recruiting agencies (Interview no- 4, March 5, 2022).

All recruitment agencies are registered by BMET, and a list of registered recruiting agencies are published and updated with contact information in the BMET website. The BMET also directly monitors the recruiting agencies through the local DEMO offices. Arafat Ara (2021) points out the money fraud by some recruiting agencies. She talks about recruiting agencies charging extra money to find employment for aspirant migrants. Most women do not know that their future employers abroad are responsible for all the cost of their recruitment, including the plane fare and other journey expenditures. Migrant workers do not need to pay anything. The agencies charge both the employers and the aspirant migrants, which is illegal. However, the BMET Director-General have denied this allegation by saying that the women are informed about their zero cost of migration during their training in the TTCs (Ara, 2021). The women and NGOs can also launch complaints in the DEMO offices or directly to the BMET office, if they face or suspect any illegal or fraudulent activities by the recruiting agencies. But Arafat Ara (2021) talks about cases where the women paid extra money to the recruiting agencies despite knowing that it was not required for them to pay, and they did not lodge an official complaint about this extra payment. The women are really dependent on the recruiting agencies, and they believe that the extra money might ensure a better and fast employment opportunity for them. The BMET fails to monitor recruiting agencies in this regard. But if fraudulent activities are

proved against the agencies, that is punishable by the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (OEMA) 2013 (IOM, 2020a).

BOESL is the only “state owned” staffing company or recruiting agency in Bangladesh, which was established in 1984 (BOESL, 2022). It provides different assistance and facilities to the future migrants. BOESL searches for employment opportunities and receives employer demand letters. They search and help the potential migrants to acquire a job suitable for them (BOESL, 2022). They help the migrants with visa advice and work permits. They also review and make necessary changes if needed. According to research fellow I interviewed, BOESL is one of the safest ways to migrate, as the government indirectly takes responsibility for these migrants and there is very little possibility of fraudulent activities here. Even if the women are abused, it is easy to track down the employer and take legal action against them, as everything is recorded with the government. But there is only one office of BOESL located in Dhaka and BOESL does not have any local offices. As a result, it is not accessible to all the aspirant migrants (Interview, March 5, 2022). Accessibility is not the only factor; the women tend to trust the local agents more, as there are other women in their locality who went abroad with their help, and they feel that these local agents are more familiar and trust worthy than the government.

Complaints

The migrant workers can contact BMET, WEWB and different embassies to launch complaints against their recruiting agencies or their employers (BMET, 2022). Before these women leave for the Middle East, they are provided with the necessary information on how to communicate with the BMET, the embassies in the destination countries and NGO

hotlines. The women can call these hotlines to launch a complaint against their employers or recruiting agencies. As women may find it easier to contact their families, the BMET and DEMO offices in Bangladesh also receive complaints from the families of the migrant women and NGOs, who launch complaints on their behalf. BMET also contacts the embassies if it is necessary to ensure the women's safety. If needed, they take action to bring the women back home (Interview no- 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022).

After receiving a complaint, the related organizations start investigating. If the complaints are valid, the complainant is brought back home. But according to the Migrant Resource Centre report (2022), procedural problems delay investigation, which results in delay of justice and compensation. BMET and the embassies have a long list of complaints and a very limited number of people to investigate the validity of the complaints in the destination countries. Though TTCs prepare the female migrant workers to deal with the problems and let them know about their legal rights, the BMET and the Embassies' delayed response threatens their safety at the destination countries. According to the Assistant Director of WEWB, the women can come to safe houses¹⁷, and they will be immediately rescued if they feel they face an immediate threat (Bari, 2018). BMET has 5 shelter houses in Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar (Akond, 2019). Women can reach out to these shelter houses if they feel threatened or vulnerable, and BMET and WEWB will provide them with the necessary safety and legal support to bring them back home. But sometimes the women cannot reach the hotlines because their employers have taken away their mobile phones or other communication devices, and they are not permitted outside contact. In

¹⁷ Safe houses are the accommodation that the Bangladesh Government arranges in the destination countries where the abused or threatened women can take shelter in until they return back home.

these cases, the embassies and the labour wings cannot help the female migrants, and these women are the most vulnerable to abuse (Interview no- 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022; Interview no- 2, local NGO worker, February 16, 2022; Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). According to one interviewee, this is the reason why the Government and NGOs are allowing families to launch complaints too. The women just have to contact their families and let them know about their sufferings. This particular NGO worker also mentioned that in the awareness programs they also talk to the family members and tell them to contact the authorities or the NGOs if they have even a slight sense that the female migrants are being abused or even if they are not communicating with the families in a daily basis (Interview no- 2, Local NGO worker, February 16, 2022). In the interview she also talked about a case where the woman's husband launched complaint in the BMET through their NGO when she did not call him for almost one month, and the BMET was able to bring that women back (Interview no- 2, Local NGO worker, February 26, 2022).

A recent 2021 study by RMMRU found that 52% of the women coming back mostly from the Middle East were subjected to some sort of harassment or abuse at their workplace (The Business Standard, 2021). Some of these women came back with the help of the Government after launching complaints (Abrar and Reza, 2021), and some of them kept on working and finished their contracts despite the abuse and harassment in the hopes of money and better lives when they return home (Interview no- 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022).

Financial Support

PKB is the main government bank giving financial support to both aspirant and returnee migrants. They have two types of loans specially for migrant women: the female migration

loan to help them migrate to the destination country, as support to their families back home; and the female reintegration loan for initiating new employment and business opportunities (Akond, 2019). The money is given directly to the women, so they have control over the money, providing them greater decision-making power inside their household. (Interview no- 1, Local NGO worker, February 16, 2022).

From July 2020 to July 2021, PKB distributed almost USD 32 million to women and men migrant workers (both male and female combined), but only 2.6% of the total migrant workers received the loans, and only 1.15% of the total female returnees were able to receive this loan (The Business Standard, 2021). According to the OKUP report (Siddiqui, 2021), Almost 80% of the women need this loan, but a very small percentage of women received the loans. According to Siddiqui (2021), due to bureaucratic complications and lack of workforce in the banks, there is a long wait to process and receive these loans. There is a long list of people waiting for the loans, but very few of them receive the loans in time. According to one NGO official, there is not much discrepancy between men and women getting these loans, just that the number of total returning migrants are so high that the bank is having trouble processing all their loan applications (Interview no. 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022).

5.1.2 NGO's Assistance to Female Migrant Workers:

There are various NGOs working with female migrant workers. These organizations can be divided into two types: 1) Organizations directly working in the field with the women to ensure a better experience for them; and 2) Research organizations studying the process of labour migration. Organizations working in the field play a more direct role influencing the experience of women in their journey to the Middle East and their reintegration in the

home society after coming back. Research organizations also produce data for NGOs and the Government, playing a crucial role in policy formulation and decision-making.

The women can come to the NGOs and ask for support. There are different kinds of services available for women, including psycho-social counselling, combating violence against women program, special guidance on how to operate a small business, training on farming, legal guidance for women filing for divorce or if women's basic property rights are violated, special scholarships for the children of the migrant women (in collaboration with local schools), awareness campaigns and economic support and special low interest loans (only BRAC provides this service) (Interview no- 1 and 4, NGO officials, Interview no- 2, 3 and 6, NGO workers).

One of the biggest problems deciding the success and failure of these type of services is that the NGOs do not have any comprehensive plan to help these women (Interview no- 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022; Interview no- 7, PhD student researching female labour market of Bangladesh, March 29, 2022). Most of these NGOs have local offices in various districts of Bangladesh, and they go home to home to find out if the migrant workers are experiencing difficulties and sorrow, and provides them with knowledge on investment, small business and employment. There is very little research done on the success and failure of these local NGOs and their demand driven and the need-based programs. Most of these studies are done by the NGOs themselves. If they try to glorify their own work in the research, and the credibility of the research is questionable. According to the PhD candidate, the success and failure of these NGOs are very tough to evaluate as their need-based support programs do not have any fix structure or approach to support and reintegrate the female migrants. Not all the women are getting benefitted from this need-based support

programs, some of them are being benefitted, some of them are only being partially benefitted, and some of them are not benefitted at all. But the PhD student (Interview no-7) also pointed out that every woman's family and social experience is different, and they face different difficulties after coming back home. A need-based approach focuses on their different needs to ensure better reintegration, but the success and failures of the programs are dependent the particular migrant woman.

Awareness Campaign

Increasing awareness about safe female migration is one of the most important tasks done by the NGOs. There are two types of awareness campaigns run by the NGOs: 1) arranging meetings or seminars with government and non-government organizations to ensure safe migration for the future; and 2) arranging local level gatherings involving both aspirant migrants and the returnees.

In the awareness seminars, the parties come together and talk about the current situation, threats and future strategies of safe migration for the women. For example- in September 2021, the Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants (WARBE) arranged an online discussion titled "Annual Dialogue on Women Migration with the Relevant Government Officials, CSOs & Stakeholders" (The Daily Star, 2021). They discussed the different challenges of female labour migration and how to mitigate these challenges. In February 2022, the EMK (Edward M. Kennedy) Centre Human Trafficking Awareness Month took place virtually and it involved month long awareness-raising and discussion programs (The Business Standard, 2022). In these programs various stakeholders of migration come together to discuss safe migration and these play very important role in future policy making. One of the criticisms of these programs is that they

involve very little actual representation of the women living abroad. Only 1 or 2 returnee migrants are included to talk about their difficulties and concerns (Interview no- 7, PhD student, March 29, 2022). Only government officials, and NGO officials get the opportunity to share their views. But the migrant women's direct lived experiences and their voices would have made more significance in these awareness raising programs. According to one NGO official (Interview No- 2, February 13, 2022), workers from their organization and they themselves talked to these women during the local level awareness meetings, and they tried to understand and represent these women as much as they can to ensure a proper representation of the migrant women in front of the government officials and various stakeholders.

The local level awareness campaigns usually talk to the aspirant and returnee migrants. Here the aspirant migrants are taught about safe and legal migration, recruiting agencies, how to get training before migration, and lastly how to send money back home and best utilization of that money (Interview no- 1, NGO official, February 12, 2022). The returnee migrants are mostly taught about the investment of their earnings and how to ensure control over that money, future employment opportunities (both home country and abroad), how to run small businesses, etc. Some NGOs help the women form groups and start their own business. Organizations like the Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK), the Bangladeshi Ovhibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA) and the Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) help these women to establish their own businesses (Interview no- 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022). They usually do not provide the women with financial support but provide them with the knowledge on how to use their money to start their own

business. They may also bring a few of the women together in these campaigns to form a group to start a small business.

Economic Support and Knowledge Distribution

These women are also given knowledge about future utilization of their remittances in their TTC trainings. These women are given 2% incentives on the money remitted by the government for sending remittances by legal channels since 2019 (Migrant Resource Centre, 2022). The success or failure of this incentive program is still to be decided due to the current uncertain situation of COVID- 19 and the disruption it caused in the remittance flow. The decision to send money to their home is in the hands of the migrants if they are paid regularly (Interview no- 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022). However, it is almost impossible for them to oversee the investments made by their hard-earned money at home while they are residing the Middle East. The male members of their families have the most control over the remittances while the female migrant is away from home, and these women send their money in good faith and with hopes that their family will utilize the money to better their lives and future (Interview No- 5, Research Fellow, March 5, 2022; Interview No- 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). The NGOs encourage the women to send less money home while they are living abroad and come back with a bigger share of their earnings in order to have more control and decision-making capacity over these earnings (Interview no-1, NGO official, February 13, 2022; Interview no- 2, local level NGO worker, February 16, 2022; Interview no- 6, local level NGO worker, March 16, 2022).

Finding employment or starting a new business after coming back home plays a very important role in terms of utilizing the skills and remittances the women have acquired. The women's financial independence gives them more decision-making power and self-

confidence. The NGOs give them knowledge and information about how to find employment or start their own business. Some NGOs have special economic reintegration programs. For example- BOMSA has an economic program that helps women invest their money and skills for employment. Almost 1,150 women have already taken part in the program (Interview No- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). WARBE also has a utilization of remittance workshop program to help the women utilize their hard-earned money (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). BNSK assists in forming groups of returnee women in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh and to help them start their own clothing and tailoring shops, small shops or food cart business. They have already successfully established a few tailoring shops and food carts in Manikganj and Dhaka (Interview No- 1, NGO Official, February 13, 2022). NGOs are also helping these women come up with a business plan to apply for loans from banks. The NGO workers are helping them write their loan applications and also talking to the banks on behalf of the women (Interview no- 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). The NGOs do not take liability for the women's loans, but with the help of the NGOs, the returnee migrant women get the confidence to apply for the loans and start their own businesses (Interview no- 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). These supports and workshops from the NGOs help the women make wise investments which helps them gain prestige and acceptance in the family after returning.

5.2 COVID-19, its Impact on Bangladeshi Female Migrants to the Middle East and government and NGO intervention:

COVID-19 has disrupted female migration to the Middle East, and none of the programs developed by the government and NGOs were prepared for the impacts of COVID-19. Data presented in the literature review chapter suggests that the number of migrants

suddenly dropped in 2020 due to this pandemic. According to studies, due to COVID-19, many unwanted difficulties have emerged, including health risks, arbitrary return, unequal wage, wage theft, and other violations of human rights, (Arora & Majumdar, 2021; Bhagat et al., 2020; de Haan, 2020; Jesline et al., 2021; Ansar, 2022). COVID-19 put tremendous pressure on the global labour market and economy, and due to the chaos happening at that time (mostly between the second half of 2020 and the end of 2021), Bangladeshi women migrants were left vulnerable without any proper legal or social support (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). While, the number of aspirant migrants decreased at that time, there were many migrant women who were stranded in the Middle East. Due to travel restrictions, they could not come back home (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). As the employers of the domestic workers were forced to stay home due to the lockdowns, the domestic workers had to work overtime and were required to take on extra duties (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). Prolonged stays at the home in which they were working took a serious toll on mental health for both the employers and the workers. As a result, the rate of violence against women migrants increased during this period (BNSK, 2021). According to one study which was done between April to November 2020, almost all the respondents¹⁸ suggested that their workload increased, and the workhours were not fixed during this time. According to another study which was done between 1 April to 13th October 2020, 53% of female migrants working in the Middle East did not get wages from their employers and 31% got only partial wage during COVID-19 while only 16% received their full wage (BNSK, 2022).

¹⁸ 35 returnee or current Bangladeshi female migrant domestic workers in the Middle Eastern countries.

One woman said that during this pandemic her employers did not pay her for almost one year nor let her come home. Many women felt trapped as they could not remit money back home because of the restrictions and closure of banks and other formal or informal money sending channels (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). Jamil and Dutta (2022) found that some lost their jobs due to the economic situation. These women were out of jobs, yet they could not come back home. They sought support from the Embassies, but at the time there was not much to do for these women (Interview no. 5, Research Associate, March 5, 2022).

There was psychological distress as well. One NGO worker suggested that at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, most of the women were anxious to come back home. The women did not know what was happening to their families back home. They could not return home or send money. One NGO worker shared a story of a woman whose father died due to COVID-19. She heard the news and could not do anything at that time (Interview no- 6, Local NGO worker, March 16, 2022). Another woman heard that her husband lost his job due to the economic recession in Bangladesh, and she could not do anything for her children and husband (Interview no-6, Local NGO worker, March 16, 2022). The government arranged special flights for them, but this opportunity was limited and not all of the workers could come back home (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). As both men and women migrants could not send money back home, their families required financial support and emergency food assistance (BNSK, 2021).

In 2020 roughly 20,000 women migrant workers returned to Bangladesh from the Middle East (Tithi, 2021). In 2021, almost 49,000 migrant women from all over the world returned (Tithi, 2021). However, a study done by a local Bangladeshi NGO suggests that 64% of

the women were unemployed after returning to Bangladesh (BNSK, 2022). They could not find work and due to the economic unrest in the country, they could not invest their money safely. The NGOs and the government have been trying to support them and giving them special assistance to get back on their feet since the economy started to recover.

COVID-19 was an unprecedented situation, and the government and the NGOs did not have much anticipation of the event. One study found out that, during the initial period of COVID-19 (2020 and the first half of 2021), the MoEWOE and the embassies in the destination countries were not ready for the situation. As they were not prepared, they failed to provide the necessary support to the women migrants who were calling to complain about their workplace and asking about ways to return back home. After the initial shock of the event, the government and the NGOs started their efforts to support these women.

The Bangladesh Government approved a 5-year plan (2021-2025) in 2020 to ensure a better and safer migration process in the future (Siddiqui, 2020). While formulating this plan, the impact of COVID-19 was kept in mind. This plan talks about returnee migrants and their unemployment problem. This plan talks about various aspects of health for the migrant workers and how to ensure better health care for them in the destination countries. New loan schemes have also been introduced for migrant workers recently to assist with the impacts of COVID-19. WEWB introduced a new loan scheme of 4% interest rate for returnee migrants. They are preparing to give almost BDT 200 crore (almost USD 23 million) as loans to returnee men and women (WEWB, 2022). The Prime Minister's Office allocated another BDT 500 crore (Almost USD 57 million) in its budgetary allocation in 2020 for this purpose (Siddiqui, 2020). WEFW provided immediate assistance of BDT

5000 (USD 57) to each male and female returnee migrant at the airport (Siddiqui, 2020). With the help of various grassroots organizations, the government provided other emergency supports. These supports were beneficial to the migrants and provided them with short term support in this uncertain time.

WARBE Development Foundation provided emergency relief throughout Bangladesh during COVID-19 (Interview no- 4, NGO official, March 5, 2022). OKUP conducted a COVID awareness campaign reaching almost 75,000 people along with thousands of returnee migrants in 6 districts of Bangladesh (Siddiqui, 2020). Organizations like BNSK and BRAC also conducted awareness programs and campaigns, along with providing financial emergency relief at this time (Siddiqui, 2020). In addition to the government and the NGOs, local diaspora communities also came forward to help the migrant workers. A panel of doctors asked the embassy to start a medical support centre in Saudi Arabia. They called it The Probas Bandhu Call Centre, and anyone in need of medical support could call them for help and advice (Jamil and Dutta, 2021). Another group in Saudi Arabia started the Dhaka Medical Centre and they also distributed food and provided financial support to those who needed help (Jamil and Dutta, 2021). A similar initiative was also taken in Bahrain, where the diaspora community provided food and financial support to the Bangladeshi migrant workers (Jamil and Dutta, 2021).

After the initial shock passed away, the government and NGOs took different need-based measures to support the migrant workers. The government gave assistance to bring back the female migrants who wanted to come back home, and they were given financial support by the Government and the NGOs. Still the government and the NGOs are trying to cope up with the uncertainties of COVID-19 and the economic instabilities.

The Government is trying to make the migration journey of these women safer and more reliable by implementing policies and taking legal instruments to support these women. NGOs play an important role in terms of making female labour migration safe and reliable. The organizations work directly with women and have more understanding of their troubles than the government. Their reports and publications are helping the government put together their policies and amend their legal frameworks. Both government and NGOs play an active role to ensure that the women can have enough information and training before leaving so that they can have a safe and stable life abroad. Even after coming back these women are given information on how to invest and secure their money. They are also given legal support in case they have some sort of adverse experience both at the destination country and home. The support from the government and NGOs are making the women feel more confident to assert their decision-making power on their families. The programs and projects of the government and NGOs are directly impactful in terms of making these women feel more empowered to lead their lives and make their own decisions.

Not all the programs and initiatives introduced by government and NGOs to assist migrant women have been successful, but some of the initiatives are helping and assisting the women on their journey. These initiatives are supporting women in their empowerment journey and making them conscious about their rights both at home and abroad. Even during the uncertain time of COVID-19, the government and the NGOs tried to help and support these women with social assistance, relief, and legal support.

Chapter 6: Labour migration for Bangladeshi women – Is it an Empowering Journey?

The previous chapter examined what the Bangladesh government and NGOs are doing to ensure protection and decent employment conditions for migrant women.

This chapter will turn to the main research question and explore if women migrants' experiences to the Middle East and their return can serve as a vehicle for their empowerment. The analysis will be based on Naila Kabeer's theory of empowerment and her three dimensions of empowerment: resources, agency and achievements.

Naila Kabeer's framework identifies empowerment as a process that gives women more independence and confidence rather than just fulfilling their day-to-day needs. In this study I explore whether and to what extent Bangladeshi female migration experiences in the Middle East can bring empowering changes in the female migrants' lives, such as, control over resources, increased decision-making power, positive self-perception and confidence after their return. I examine if these are signs of empowerment for female migrant workers. Kabeer's conceptualization of the three interrelated dimensions of empowerment—resources, agency and achievements is perfectly suited to this type of analysis, as this thesis explores if migrant women's experiences to the Middle East and return have brought transformative changes in their lives or if their experiences have brought minor or no changes at all.

6.1 Bangladeshi Female Labour Migration and Their Access to Resources

Naila Kebeer (2005) explains resources as a medium through which agency is exercised or accumulated. She highlights three types of resources: economic resources, meaning

financial situation and assets of the households or community; human resources meaning the knowledge, qualification and creativity that women bring to the table while decision making; and lastly, social resources meaning the social status, perception, obligation and household expectations towards the women. According to Naila Kabeer (2005), controlling resources means more decision-making power over the resources, and resources are usually controlled by the male members of the family. Women's access to the resources are often dependent on the male members of the household or community. To ensure empowerment, women must take more control over the resources.

Economic Resource

Bangladeshi migrant women do not have much control or access to resources before they leave for work in the Middle East, and they are mostly influenced by the financial situation and the male members of their families. These women mostly belong to impoverished families and the resources the families do have are usually controlled by the male members.

While in the Middle East, the women have the power to choose whether they want to send their money back home or to bring that money with them when they return home. If they send their money home, the remitted money is mostly controlled by the male members of their families. The women have very little or no control over their earned money if they are sending it back home. If they bring that money with them when they return, they have more control over it. This is the reason why the NGOs and government organizations advise the women to bring their money when they are returning home, and also give the returnee women knowledge about suitable investments, reminding them to monitor the investments and expenditures their family members are making (Interview no-2, Local NGO worker, February 16, 2022). As mentioned in chapter 4, even after the advice to bring

money back home, women continue to send large parts of their earnings home and the men of the migrants' household have control over the women's remittances. For these women, they might feel good about their earnings and hope that their families will utilize the remittances back home. But money is their only leverage over their families to gain acceptance, and if they return without money or with little money, they might not be accepted by their families (Interview no. 2 and 3). For those women who have brought some money back home, female labour migration increases their fallback position to bargain with the patriarchy. Eighty-five percent of the returnee women face some sort of financial difficulties after their return and the unemployment rate for these women is also very high (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). Organizations like PKB, WEWB and BRAC are able to support some of these migrant women with low interest loans, but only a very small number of women are receiving these loans. If these women do not bring money back home, they have very little possibility of future financial contribution to their families, unless they migrate again. Without financial contribution to their families, these women do not have much decision-making power and access to economic resources in their households. As a result, their journey abroad does not change their position in their households.

Human Resources

Human resources are the knowledge, skills, qualification, creativity, experiences, and individuality that women bring to the table while exercising their agency (Kabeer, 2005). Women's own perceptions about themselves and their own abilities are also considered as human resources (Kabeer, 2005). As for the human resources of these migrant women, they do not have much education. But they are given training and knowledge about their

work and legal rights before their departure. These are the resources they receive from the government and NGOs. This short-term training is not always adequate to teach them the necessary skills and provide knowledge for their employment abroad. The women might find themselves in trouble in their workplace in the destination country because of their lack of skills, knowledge and language proficiency.

While having financial control over the resources is tremendously important in and of itself, they also get psychological boost from their positive experiences abroad. When they return home, they have experience of traveling abroad, knowledge of a new language, and the confidence that they can survive without their male counterparts. But for the women who have been physically or psychologically abused at their workplace, they are traumatized by their experiences, and even after their return, they may not be accepted by their families and societies. This can make them vulnerable and put them in a more difficult situation than before. However, there are also some women who had negative experiences and tolerated abuse, and feel that as they have survived in the adverse situations in the Middle East, now they can survive the adverse situation back home too (Interview no. 1, NGO Official, February 13, 2022).

Not all the women achieve equal confidence, some women's experiences make them more confident than others giving them self-esteem, which is one of the best resources for them to go forward in their empowerment process. But for some, their migration experiences and return are so traumatizing that they might not have any confidence to empower themselves.

Social Resources

While human resources talk about these female migrants' self-perception, social resources talk about how they are viewed and perceived by their families and societies (Kabeer, 2002). The higher social resources mean that these women are being perceived and viewed as more important and significant by their families and societies. Before these women decide to migrate, they are treated as inferior and are dependent on the men of their families. Most of them do not work outside the home and they do not make a direct financial contribution to their families' needs. But once the decision is made that they will migrate, their families may treat them better in hopes of future financial gain. The expectations are high and their status and social resources inside their families' change. But as mentioned in chapter 4, these women are sometimes not accepted in their families and society after their return and treated as unwanted in the society. Sometimes their families do not accept them, and the divorce rate is also high for these women. Although their families knew about the social stigma the women may face after their return, still they accepted the women's migration due to their poverty.

The situation is not always so negative and, in some cases, if they are bringing back money home and investing the money well and financially contributing to their families, they are appreciated by both their families and society. Being an income earner, many now have more decision-making power in the families and community than before.

At times, they may not be accepted by society, but their economic contributions are appreciated by their families. If they bring back money home or contribute financially to their families, they are viewed as important and have more social resources.

The migrant women's access to these three types of resources are very diverse and depends on their individual experiences. Some women have more positive experiences than others, some might have struggled to acquire these resources, and others do not have any control over their economic resources, or do not acquire any human or social resources from their experiences in the Middle East and their return home.

6.2 Bangladeshi Female Labor Migration and Their Agency

Kabeer (1999), describes agency as the ability to define one's goal and act upon it. It is about the power to make decisions. Naila Kabeer in her book "Power to Choose" talks about four types of agency: *passive or reluctant agency* in which action is taken under circumstances or pressure where the women do not have much control over their own decisions, it can be considered as having no agency at all; *suppressed agency* which occurs in situations in which women can express their opinion, but fail to acquire the power to make decisions for themselves; *negotiated agency* when women's decision or agency is not completely accepted, but there is conditional support towards their decisions; and finally, *active agency*, where women have complete decision making power over their lives.

Based on my interviews and the secondary literature, it is clear that women do not have much decision-making power over their decision to migrate; they are influenced by the male members of their families due to their financial needs. At this stage women have passive or reluctant agency where decisions are made under pressure. But once they migrate to the Middle East, their situation changes. They have more power over their earned money unless their employers are withholding wages. If their wages are being withheld, they can complain to the government organizations and the NGOs. Additionally,

as mentioned previously, some employers sometimes do not let the female migrants come back home by taking away their passports and other papers, sometimes they are not even allowed to contact their homes (Interview no- 2, Local NGO worker, February 16, 2022). In all these cases, the women are completely dependent on the government and NGOs to support them. As discussed in the chapter 5, the initiatives and legal instruments by the government and NGOs are not always successful, and not all women have received appropriate support from the government and NGOs. If the women's wages are withheld or their movements are controlled, they have little recourse aside from appealing to the Bangladesh government and NGOs' for support. If they do not receive appropriate support from the government and NGOs, they are forced to stay abroad without their will, or they come home empty handed without receiving their proper wage. Even if they come back home with the help of government and NGOs, the government and NGOs do not have proper reintegration programs for returnee migrants who are not accepted by their families (Interview no. 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). It is clear that in these circumstances their migration experience has not been empowering or increased their agency, but rather created new difficulties for them in their journey abroad and after their return.

If the women are receiving their wages, it is mostly up to them that whether they send it back home or not. After their return, things become more complex. While in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, it is difficult for women to get complete control over their resources when they return home. If these women bring back money home and have the possibility of future financial contribution to their families, they might gain the partial power to manage their financial resources. Their control over their resources gives them confidence which helps them stand up to their male partners and families, demand their

right to control their own earnings, invest their money, run small businesses, or seek employment. At this stage they have negotiated agency, where the male members of their families might not completely accept their decision-making status, but they negotiate and give conditional support due to their financial dependence on the women. Bangladeshi women migrants generally do not have active agency due to the patriarchal social structure of Bangladesh; however, some do have relatively more agency or decision-making power after returning from the Middle East. If they do not bring money back home or do not have any possibility of future financial contribution to the families, this agency and decision-making power is considerably reduced or absent (Interview no-2, Local NGO worker, February 16, 2022).

What is clear from the research is that the experiences of migrant women vary tremendously at each stage of labour migration and in the outcomes of their migration. Not all women have the agency to make decisions and act upon them while staying in the Middle East and after their return. Those who have positive experiences in their journey and return gain varying degrees of agency to control their lives and households alongside men. But for the women who had negative experiences in their journey or return and are not able to financially contribute to their families after their return, their agency does not change much. Sometimes their situation is worse than before due to lack of acceptance in their families after their return from the Middle East.

6.3 Bangladeshi Female Labor Migrants and Their Achievements

Kabeer (1999) defines achievements as the final outcome or ultimate goal of the choices. According to Kabeer (2005), achievement is empowering if it contributes to the sense of independence rather than just survival needs.

For some women, their experiences in the Middle East are helping them become more independent and confident rather than just fulfilling their families' financial needs.

As they now have the financial resources and self-confidence that they can survive in an adverse situation without the help of the male members of their families, they have the ability and desire to take control over their own lives and resources. Their financial contribution to the families gives them more decision-making power in their homes. They now have the agency to leave behind their passive roles in the decision-making chain of their families.

My research found that if the women are primary earners or one of the primary earners alongside the men of the families, they have more financial control over their resources. If these women are provided with useful information from the government and the NGOs, some have a better understanding on how to use and invest their money. I also found that their experiences leaving home and working abroad may have given them a sense of confidence to live their lives without depending on the men of their families.

But for others, their negative experiences may include abusive and terrible behavior by their employers while staying in the Middle East. There is also high unemployment rate amongst these returnee migrant women, and 85% of the women face some sort of financial trouble upon returning home (Nawaz and Tonny, 2019). Some returnee women left their homes after returning to Bangladesh due to abusive behaviour and the lack of acceptance by their family (Interview no- 1, NGO official, February 13, 2022). So, due to these experiences, their individual, financial and social conditions do not indicate positive achievements after their migration to the Middle East. Even if the returnee migrant women are making the decision to migrate to the Middle East for the second time, due to their

financial troubles, unemployment, and lack of acceptance in the society, their conditions may be forcing them to remigrate.

Thus, there are both positive achievements and negative challenges and experiences that exist in the migrant women's migration experiences and their return home. Some women might feel empowered by their journey and employment experiences in the Middle East, but once they come back home, they might have negative experiences in their reintegration in the societies. For other women the experiences in the Middle East might be filled with adversity, but their families can be more accepting after their return. Others might have a total negative experience in their whole journey and employment in the Middle East and reintegration after return. There are more diverse range of experiences for these women, and the outcome of migration is not an empowering experience for all the migrant women or even most of them. More research is needed to understand whether and to what extent the labour migration journey factors into these women's self-esteem and sense of self-reliance, which contributes to the process of empowerment.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

My study focused on Bangladeshi migrant women's different experiences during their migration journey, in their workplace in the Middle East and after their return home. Throughout my paper I have talked about different phases of the women's migration journey and return, and how government and NGOs support or fail to support migrant women throughout their migration process and reintegration in the society. I have tried to explore both positive and negative experiences of the women, and how these experiences are shaping their lives after their return and how their experiences have been empowering or not.

Female labour migration to the Middle East significantly rose in the recent years. Though migration to the Middle East is a widely discussed issue in international labour market experience of Bangladesh, but studies focused on male migration rather than the female. Research on female migration mostly focuses on the positive aspects of female migration and how it is financially and economically beneficial for the families and the country. There are very limited scholarly articles talking about the women's experiences in the Middle East and the government and NGOs' role in their migration process. Before starting the study, I was hoping to learn about the positive and empowering experiences of the women. But while doing the research, I was surprised to learn the complexities of female labour migration, and how they are impacting the women.

After completing my research, I have found that through their experiences in the Middle East some women are achieving more self-confidence and independence to live their lives by their will. Their financial contributions definitely help their poverty ridden families. But I have also learned that not all women are having same positive experiences. Their negative

experiences in their workplace and after their return are sometimes creating distress and difficulties for them in the destination countries, as well as in their home communities and families. The NGOs and the government have programmes in place to support their migration journey and reintegration to the society after return, but these have their shortcomings.

The government and the NGOs are providing trainings to female migrants, but the mandatory one-month training is rarely enough for them to learn extensively about important issues, such as the receiving countries' and employers' culture and food habits, proper language fluency, in depth knowledge about their workplace and how to operate the modern kitchen or any other surroundings. During their stay abroad, these women can complain about their work conditions and employers to the government and the NGOs. But not all the women receive appropriate support from the government and NGOs. Even after their return, not all the women receive financial support from the government and NGOs. The NGO need-based reintegration programs are also not always successful. But the knowledge distribution and awareness program for both aspirant and returnee migrants by the NGOs and government, and legal instruments to monitor legal migration and registrations by government are making some women's experiences safer and more positive.

Their experiences both abroad and after return home can vary. Their acceptance in their families and society is problematic and debatable. Not all the women are accepted with open arms, but almost all the women's financial contributions are always well accepted and appreciated by their poverty ridden families. If they bring money back home, due to their financial contribution, their control over household resources, decision-making power

and agency increases. Also, some of their experiences abroad may make them more confident to survive the negative experiences back home. For some, their newfound confidence and self-reliance might be contradictory to the practices of Bangladesh's patriarchal society, but it helps them to take control over their own earnings and resources to survive the adverse situation and find new employment or investment opportunities. But other women's experiences in the Middle East and after their return home may leave them in a worse situation than before migration. They are traumatized by their experiences in the Middle East; they are not accepted by their families and societies after returning; and the unemployment rate for these women is high. As a result, they do not have much opportunity to find new work in their home country.

In this research, I interviewed NGO employees and researchers who have been working with or conducting research about Bangladeshi female migrants and their labour market experiences to find primary data for my research. From the combination of these primary data collected from the interviews and secondary sources, I have reached the conclusion that, not all the women encounter and have the same experiences during their migration journey and return. They face different level of complexities, and their experiences in the Middle East have impacted them both positively and negatively in their empowerment journey. More research is needed, particularly based on interviewing migrant returnees about their experiences abroad and upon their return home to better understand how migration contributes to women empowerment. Naila Kabeer sees empowerment as a process, not something that is fixed or an outcome. The empowerment process gives women more independence rather than just fulfilling their day-to-day survival needs. For some women, labour migration has helped with their empowerment journey, for others the

migration experience has some empowering aspects, and still for others, the experiences are not empowering at all.

This research tried to combine the knowledge on migrant women's experiences¹⁹ in their journey and return home, and the success and failure of government and NGO initiatives to come to the conclusion. As already discussed earlier that there is very limited comprehensive research done on the Government's and NGOs' efforts on female labour migration and women's empowerment, this thesis sought to help fill this gap.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the research could have benefitted by directly talking to the migrant and returnee female workers, but due to COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, this was not possible. Online interviews were also not possible due to the limited access of technology and internet in Bangladesh. These women's employment experiences in the Middle East would have been better analyzed if I had the chance to talk to these women. As I have talked to the NGO employees and researchers, the information on women's migration experience primarily reflects their understandings and knowledge on the issue, and through these I have found more generalized observations on the issue rather than these women's personal views and experiences. The reintegration process and experiences also could not be analyzed due to lack of information and representation of the women. Without directly talking to the women, it is impossible to understand their individual experiences in the Middle East and their reintegration in the society after their return. Further research is needed to understand the women's migration experiences, their

¹⁹ Women's experiences were found in secondary sources and through the interviews with researchers and the NGO workers.

reintegration experiences, and their position and social status in the home society after their return.

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Appendices

Appendix 1²⁰: List of the Interviews Conducted for The Study

Serial Number	Name of the Interview	Designation of Interviewee	Date of the Interview	Work Experience	Special Notes
1.	Interview no-1	NGO Official	February 13, 2022	17 years of experience working with Bangladeshi female labour migration	The person is one of the founding members of a prominent local NGO
2.	Interview no-2	Local NGO Worker	February 16, 2022	4 years of experience working with women in a local level	
3.	Interview no-3	Local NGO Worker	March 4, 2022	Almost 7 years of experience working with Bangladeshi female migrant workers	Before joining the local NGO, person used to work for a government TTC.
4.	Interview no-4	NGO Official	March 5, 2022	Almost 20 years of experience working with Bangladeshi female migrant workers	Working as one of the directors of a very prominent NGO in Bangladesh. Her NGO is also influencing government activities on a policy making level.

²⁰ All of the interviews are conducted with people currently residing in Bangladesh via online interviews.

5.	Interview no-5	Research Associate	March 5, 2022	Working on topics related to Bangladeshi labour migration for almost 20 years	Person used to work at different organization both government and NGOs ran.
6.	Interview no-6	NGO Worker	March 16, 2022	6 years of experience working with Bangladeshi female migrants at a local level	
7.	Interview no-7	PhD Student/ Doctoral Candidate	March 29, 2022	Researching on Bangladeshi women's labour market experiences for almost 7 years	Person did her undergraduate thesis and master's thesis both on female labour market experiences of Bangladesh, and currently working with a similar topic.

Appendix 2: Recruitment email text to potential participants

Subject: Invitation to take part in research interview on empowerment of Bangladeshi female migrant workers in the Middle East.

Dear [Recipient],

My name is Faizah Imam and I am a Masters student in International Development Studies at Dalhousie University in Canada. I'm conducting research on empowerment of Bangladeshi women who migrate to work to the Middle East. I would like to conduct an interview with you about your perspectives on the experiences and empowerment of these women.

The goal of this thesis is to assess whether the labour migration of Bangladeshi women workers to the Middle East can serve as a vehicle for their empowerment. This research will investigate whether the Bangladeshi women migrants had any power and control over their choice to migrate to the Middle East, whether they have the power to make choices for themselves when they were residing in the Middle East, and this research will also investigate whether these women now feel they have more decision-making power in their households and societies after they came back from the Middle East.

The interview will take 45-60 minutes and can take place over Skype Private Conversations. While I highly recommend conducting the interview via Skype, I can also conduct it in another video conference application convenient for you. But if you opt for any software applications other than Skype, I will not be able to fully ensure privacy and confidentiality during the interview. I am hoping to conduct approximately 30 interviews with experts in the field of Bangladeshi women's labour migration, such as yourself. The

risk associated with this research is very low. Should you choose to participate, your identity and that of your organization will be kept confidential throughout the research process and the dissemination of the findings. I will be aware to not use any information in direct quotations that could lead to the identification of participants. You may choose not to answer any question that you'd rather not talk about and you can withdraw your answers from the study before up to one month from the date of your interview. The whole interview will be audio-recorded. If you wish to receive a transcript of the interview, you can ask for one and I will send it to you via a personal email.

Please respond to this email by calling or texting me at 782-640-6383 or emailing me at Faizah.imam@dal.ca if you are willing to take part in the interview.

If you agree to participate in the interview, I will send you a Statement of Informed Consent to review, which explains in detail the risks related to the research and the steps we will take to protect your confidentiality. Please make sure you have read the document prior to signing the Consent form. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any confusions or questions.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email: ethics@dal.ca (and reference REB file # 20XX-XXXX).”

Regards

Faizah Imam

Appendix 3: Statement of Informed Consent

Project Title: Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers in the Middle East: A Study on Migration and Women's Empowerment.

Lead researcher: Faizah Imam
Department of International Development Studies
Dalhousie University
Halifax, N.S.
Email: Faizah.imam@dal.ca
Tel: 782-640-6383

Supervisor: Dr. Theresa Ulicki
Assistant Professor
Department of International Development Studies
Dalhousie University
Halifax, N.S.
Email: ulickit@dal.ca
Tel: +1 902-494-1377

Introduction

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by me, Faizah Imam (Master's student at Dalhousie University, Canada in International Development Studies) on empowerment of Bangladeshi women who migrate to work to the Middle East. The information below tells you about what is involved in the research, the themes I hope to

discuss with you in an interview, and the measures I will take to protect your confidentiality.

Invitation to participate: We invite you to take part in an interview for this research study. The choice to participate is entirely up to you. Please ask us as many questions as you like about the study before you decide.

Purpose and Outline of the Research Study

This research will investigate whether the Bangladeshi women migrants had any power and control over their choice to migrate to the Middle East, whether they have the power to make choices for themselves when they were residing in the Middle East, and whether these women feel they have more decision-making power in their households and societies after they came back from the Middle East.

The research question this thesis seeks to answer is:

- Can Bangladeshi women's labour migration experience in the Middle East serve as a tool for their empowerment and how does labour migration affect migrant women's lives?

In order to answer this question, this thesis explores the following two questions:

- What are the factors before, during and after migration that enable or hinder Bangladeshi women from benefitting from their work in the Middle East?
- What is being done by the government and the NGOs to ensure positive experiences for these women?

Who Can Take Part in the Research Study?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are an expert in the field of

Bangladeshi women's labour migration. Your experience and knowledge of a certain aspect based on your employment and tenure with the organization is deemed highly valuable for data collection of this study.

What does the interview involve?

I will ask questions about your personal interpretation of the concept empowerment and its different indicators, and cases of Bangladeshi female migrant women's empowerment covered under your research aspects. I will also ask questions about the Bangladeshi women labour migrants' experiences while they are making decision to migrate, their experiences while staying in the Middle East and also about their experiences after they come back to Bangladesh. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be conducted via Skype, or any other video conferencing application of your choice. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview. You do not have to answer any question or line of questioning that you do not want to answer. You may end the interview or take a break at any time or tell me to pause recording if you want any part of our conversation to be 'off the record'.

Possible Benefits

This research will not generate any direct benefits to participants. The conversation might help you to expand your personal conceptualization of women empowerment. Besides, I will share some data from indices or mention specific cases while questioning which are unknown to you. This might help you to learn more about your own area of research and enhance your professional capability.

Possible Risks

There might be some privacy concerns for you regarding being mentioned or quoted in the

study. In order to eliminate these concerns, all interviewees will be anonymous throughout the research and your personal information and organizational affiliation will not be revealed in the thesis or any other work resulting from this research. I will take all possible measures to ensure the confidentiality of your interview and to keep the data from your interview secure (please see below).

How your information will be protected: In case you do not want your identity to be revealed, I will ensure the following measures to protect your privacy and confidentiality during the interview and after it has been completed.

Privacy

The interview will be conducted via Skype Private Conversation or a video conferencing application of your choice. But if you opt for any other software applications than Skype, I will not be able to fully ensure privacy and confidentiality during the interview. I will not disclose to anyone else that you have participated in an interview for this research.

Confidentiality

Your interview and the data from it will be treated as confidential. With your permission, I will record your interview on a password protected and encrypted audio recording software application named 'Protect+'. Please note that, the recording is a mandatory part of this study and if you do not consent to your interview being recorded, this interview cannot take place. I will not record your name or the name of your organization in the audio recording. Instead, I will assign your interview a code number and only I will have access to the document which connects your name to the interview files. After the interview is conducted, I will transfer the encrypted audio file to a password-protected folder to which only I will have access. The audio file will then be transcribed by me. If you want a copy

of your recording to be kept by yourself for the purpose of documentation and to avoid any intentional manipulation, I will send you a copy of the recording in a private email by attaching the password-protected folder containing the copy of the recording. To keep you anonymous, in the final thesis, the research report, the PowerPoint presentation or the journal articles produced out of this research, I will not use your name or any specific information that could be linked back to you. I will only refer to you by the number I have assigned to you (i.e.- Participant 3). I will not use direct quotations from your interview, and I will omit those phrases from appearing in the thesis to mitigate the possibility that other people might link a particular phrase or word in a quotation back to you. For instance, if you are working on a specific project and you have named that project in the interview, I will not quote your speech as you had expressed it, rather I would interpret it omitting the name of the project and other phrases that might be directly linked to you.

Data retention and management

After the recording of your interview has been transcribed, I will store the transcription (with your name and organization removed) in a password-protected folder until April 30, 2023. On May 1, 2023, I will destroy the recording and the interview transcript.

Withdrawing from the study:

During the interview, you are free to not answer any questions, to stop the interview, or to ask to turn off the audio recording. At the end of the interview, I will ask you to confirm that you are still willing for us to use your interview in the research. If you are not, I will destroy the audio recording and any notes from the interview. If you decide that you do not want your interview to be used in this research project after the interview is over, please contact me (Faizah.imam@dal.ca) within a month of your interview date. If you do not

inform me via email within the one month deadline, I will not be able to remove the information you provided, because I will have integrated it into the overall analysis.

How to obtain results from this research project

I will be sharing results from this research project with participants who are interested. If you indicate that you want to receive results, I will send you a PowerPoint Presentation based on the research findings by email.

Questions

I am happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. Please contact me at Faizah.imam@dal.ca at any time with questions, comments, or concerns about the research study. I will also tell you if any new information comes up that could affect your decision to participate.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email: ethics@dal.ca (and reference REB file # 2021-5794).”

Signature Page

Project Title: Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers in the Middle East: A Study on Migration and Women Empowerment.

Researcher: Faizah Imam
Department of International Development Studies
Dalhousie University
Halifax, N.S.
Email: Faizah.imam@dal.ca
Tel: 782-640-6383

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I have been asked to take part in an interview that will occur via video conference. I understand direct quotes of things I say may be used without identifying me. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study until one month after the interview.

I agree that my interview will be audio-recorded Yes No

I would like to have a copy of the recording sent to me in a private email Yes No

I agree that direct quotes from my interview may be used without identifying me Yes No

I agree that only Faizah Imam will have access to my personal information Yes No

I agree that Faizah will retain the recordings and interview transcripts until the research outcomes have been published in several journals as separate journal articles (April 30, 2023) Yes No

I would like to receive the PowerPoint Presentation file containing summary of research findings by email after the completion of this project Yes No

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study Yes No

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____