

From Risks to Rights: Evaluation of a Training Programme for Women Aspiring to Migrate for Work



THÉRÈSE BLANCHET

With the collaboration of Hannan Biswas,
Anisa Zaman and Masuda Aktar Lucky

DHAKA, JULY 2018



Acknowledgements

Samantha Watson, from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, was co-investigator for the Bangladesh evaluation of the community component of the ILO led WiF programme. Our shared concerns, her attentive reading of the narratives and her penetrating remarks throughout were immensely stimulating. Samantha left early, and we missed her. Ligia Kiss had the difficult task of catching up and I thank her for her understanding and pertinent observations. Christine McLanachan was present throughout resolving thorny administrative issues with calm and serenity.

SANEM facilitated our work acting as institutional umbrella in Bangladesh. I wish to thank its director, Selim Raihan and his team for their courteous manners and efficiency.

Igor Bosc, Chief Technical Officer for WiF, has been an attentive interlocutor, receptive to research findings and actively seeking to broaden the discussion platform. Suraia Banu, the WiF national coordinator, organised linkages with the local NGO and provided support when needed.

Acknowledging all the persons who contributed to this research is not possible and, for confidentiality purposes, many will not be named. My special thanks to the chairman of the implementing NGO who gracefully accepted our intrusions. Project manager, trainers and fieldworkers were patient with our questions and gave us time in their busy schedules. We owe much to the persons regularly solicited for the interviews. Their polite response, their trust, and on a few occasions the sharing of private thoughts and family secrets give us a special responsibility never to betray their confidence.

As usual, I owe a great deal to the Drishti Research Centre research team: Hannan Biswas, Anisa Zaman and Masuda Akhtar Lucky. I thank them for everything that we share.

A research is always incomplete and open to challenge. I take full responsibility for the text, the interpretations, the analysis, and the mistakes that may be committed.

Thérèse Blanchet

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Citation: Blanchet T., (2018). From Risk to Rights: Evaluation of Training Programme for Women Aspiring to Migrate for Work. Dhaka, SANEM Publications

ISBN: 978-984-34-5572-5 (HB)

ISBN: 978-984-34-5573-2 (On Line)

First published: December 2018

Published by: SANEM Publications, Flat: 5K, House: 1/B, Road 35, Gulshan 2, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Telephone: +88 02 58813075; Fax: +88 02 9883445; Email: sanemnet@yahoo.com

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of LSHTM, ILO or DFID.



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Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BMET	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training
CARAM ASIA	Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility, Asia
CEDAW	United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
DFID	Department for International Development
DRC	Drishti Research Centre
GAATW	Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ILO	International Labour Organization
IO	Implementing Organization
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
MFA	Migrant Forum Asia
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PI	Principal Investigator
PKB	Probashi Kollan Bank
SANEM	South Asian Network on Economic Modeling
SWiFT	South Asia Work in Freedom Transnational Evaluation
WiF	Work in Freedom
WHO	World Health Organization



ABSTRACT

This research report evaluates the Bangladesh component of 'Work in Freedom' (WiF), a largescale international project managed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) with Department for International Development (DFID) funding and implemented in 5 countries from 2013 to 2018. WiF aims to prevent labour trafficking by enhancing women's autonomy and generating wider awareness with adoption of 'safe migration' practices and assertion of migrant workers' rights. Research started in October 2015. Training for women candidates for migration conducted by the NGO assigned for research was observed and a cohort of women participants were selected and interviewed at regular intervals over 18 months. One or several of their family members were met at the same time points. Staff of the NGOs were interviewed over a shorter period. Women's migration projects – pursued or abandoned, successful or failed – and the reasons for these outcomes are closely followed. WiF does not promote women's migration. Yet, the strong pro-

migration policy adopted by the government at the time filters through. 'Rights' and 'safe migration', core components of the training, are problematised. Women who migrate for the first time having followed 'safe migration' procedures are led to expect 'rights' they do not find causing anger and frustration. The services promised – NGO and government – are not available to them. Dismissed as a lure, the notion of 'rights' is later re-interpreted to serve the purpose of women who defy dominant social norms. Fieldwork with a relatively small population socially situated permits to apply anthropological research methods. The relatively long duration of the research also captures the profoundly transformative effects of cross border migration showing that positions and identities are not fixed or 'frozen'. The research concludes on the need to relate training to the concrete situations that women migrant workers commonly face. The promotion of abstract and remote 'rights' that they do not have the ability to enforce is painful and can be damaging.



1. WiF project: overall structure and purpose

This report presents the findings of a research and evaluation conducted on the Work in Freedom (WiF) community-based programme in Bangladesh. Drishti Research Centre (DRC) conducted the research in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). The investigation tools were initially designed together, and the production of data was shared at every step. Nonetheless, as a research group, it appeared useful for the DRC to present a separate report.

Work in Freedom (WiF) is a large-scale international intervention for women labour migrants involving five countries: Nepal, Bangladesh, and India, which are source countries, and Lebanon and Jordan, which are recipient countries. WiF was designed and managed by ILO with funding from DFID. The same donor funded the LSHTM to conduct research and evaluation, and a unit was created named South Asia Work in Freedom Evaluation (SWiFT). The five-year project, which began in 2013 and is scheduled to end in 2018, aims to prevent labour trafficking by enhancing women's autonomy and generating wider awareness with adoption of 'safe migration' practices and assertion of migrant workers' rights. Community-based interventions are implemented in partnership with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in each country. Interventions include pre-decision orientation and pre-departure training to empower prospective migrants. Ultimately, WiF's aim is to foster women's informed choices on economic strategies, either by equipping them to migrate as well-informed, skilled workers with higher income opportunities, or by increasing access to local livelihood.

WiF was well underway when the DRC was contracted in October 2015 by the LSHTM to conduct research on one of the NGOs implementing the programme in Bangladesh. This late participation meant that the conception, logic and assumptions of the project could not be directly followed at the inception stage. We observed and studied WiF as implemented at village level. Fieldwork was conducted in three sites to find out how the WiF messages were phrased and delivered, how they reached out to 'women candidates for migration', and what influence they had on their perceptions and behaviour.

Due to our late engagement and our focus in one single country, an overview of the WiF project as a whole came late. The SWiFT teams from Nepal, Bangladesh and India met for the first time in June 2017 and it became clear each source country had quite different approaches.¹ In a decision that preceded our engagement, we learned that site selection and methodological directions were agreed with ILO and DFID and India focused only on in-country migrants, while Nepal and Bangladesh focused on cross-border migrants. Unlike Nepal and India, the Bangladesh programme did not include large-scale surveys to identify who the migrant women were. The NGOs selected for WiF chose a geographical area assumed to have a high incidence of women labour migrants and we worked with the 'candidates for migration' thus identified.

Migration routes changed throughout the duration of the project as they commonly do, and by the project end the identified source countries no longer matched the destination countries. By 2017, the migration of Bangladeshi women to Lebanon for domestic work had dwindled to insignificance (at least in official records), and Saudi Arabia had become the first destination.

1. Evaluation sites were selected in partnership with the ILO regional offices, and broad methodological directions were agreed between the LSHTM, DFID and ILO, with directions from the Project's Reference Group and Advisory Board.

Jordan remained important for garment factory workers, but had reduced as a destination for domestic workers. Nonetheless, WiF remaining active in both the source and recipient countries was beneficial for the research even when these no longer corresponded to the same sets of migrants. It contributed to broaden the perspective and attention could be given to what accounts for changes in migration routes and differences and commonalities in destination countries, for example in the application of the *kefala*² system.

2. Bangladesh community-based programme

2.1 SET UP

In Bangladesh, ILO first conducted pilot projects with several NGOs to test the WiF concept and then selected three of them to implement the community-based programme. One was assigned for research and evaluation, and we refer to it as the NGO or Implementing Organisation (IO). This NGO conducted the WiF programme in Narayanganj district, covering 10 unions and employing one fieldworker for each union. Our focus here is on the implementation of the WiF programme and other activities of the NGO were considered only when they were offered to participants as part of a package of available services – such as the use of a helpline for migrant women. The community programme ran for 11 months from April 2015 to March 2016. A second phase began in June 2016 was not part of this investigation.

2.2 TRAINING MODULES

The NGO prepared training modules with inputs from regional partners, namely Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and Migrant Forum Asia (MFA). GAATW inspired a “feminist participatory methodology” and proposed a health approach ensuring that “women have a better understanding of their bodies and some skills to look after themselves”. MFA conducted an overall review of the communication material.³

The pre-decision orientation presented the following topics over two days:

Day One:

- Goal setting
- Knowledge about migration and criteria to migrate legally
- Decision making; adjusting to life abroad
- Jobs, destinations and costs
- Risks of migration and how to minimise them; existing laws and ‘safe migration’

Day Two:

- Gender roles; women’s rights as workers
- Family budget and proper utilisation of remittances
- Alternative livelihoods and job opportunities in Bangladesh
- Women’s health, HIV and AIDS

2.3 MESSAGES DELIVERED IN THREE STEPS

1. Fieldworkers reach out to women who are at home during the day, and conduct doorstep and courtyard meetings. They explain conditions to ensure ‘safe migration’ and describe the services the NGO offers to migration candidates. Those interested in hearing more are invited to attend the pre-decision orientation. The names and phone numbers of these ‘candidates’ are collected so they could be informed later of the date and the venue of the training session.
2. Pre-decision orientation sessions are held on two non-consecutive days at a local venue that fieldworkers organise. Venues have to be made available free of cost.
3. Pre-departure training is offered to a smaller number of women at a more distant location, with live-in accommodation for five days.

The programme employs three trainers who conduct both the pre-decision orientation and the pre-departure training following the same modules. The research team observed doorstep and courtyard meetings and participated in several pre-decision orientation sessions, but did not attend the 5-day pre-departure training.

2. The *kefala* is a sponsorship system prevailing in all countries of the Middle East with minor differences. Migrant workers get their working visa through a private citizen, a company or the government of the recipient country who thus become their *kofeel*. Should a worker find his/her working conditions unacceptable, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to leave the *kofeel* without becoming

undocumented or illegal in the destination country. The *kefela* system imposes many restrictions on migrant workers while being a source of power (and in some cases an important source of income) for sponsoring agents.

3. *Community Empowerment Report, Work in Freedom Bangladesh*, ILO, 6 February 2015.

3. Research

3.1 RESEARCH TEAM AND CALENDAR

Four researchers – three women and one man – conducted the fieldwork and interviewed four cohorts of informants in Bangla. All are members of the Drishti Research Centre, a Dhaka-based study group that conducted several anthropological studies focusing more specifically on women's cross border labour migration from 2001 onwards. The research team was therefore familiar with the topic and also had some knowledge of the area.

The research spread over 18 months beginning in October 2015. Field research overlapped with the WiF community programme for 5 months. As the second round of interviews were conducted, the WiF programme was closing down. At the third and fourth rounds, fieldworkers were no longer employed. They were unavailable for information or for services, even if they resided in the same locality. Fieldworkers were uncertain about their future for over two months and, when re-appointed, many were sent to new locations. Women 'candidates for migration' no longer expected assistance. Some wondered why researchers were still coming to them.

Sister, you keep coming to me. I like speaking to you, but could you not do anything for us? I went to the [NGO] training hoping I would get a visa and they would help me to migrate but got nothing... [the NGO] needed us. That is why they came to us. Now they are finished with us. We do not see them anymore. They are not trying to find out how we are doing.

Projects have limited duration and this one was short given its considerable ambitions. So what did participants retain from the WiF messages? The last interviews give some indications of the lasting effects of a 2-day orientation and a 5-day training. We saw that some women continued to declare having benefited, while others denied having learned anything useful. Months after the training ended, the research continued to focus on women's lives and their migration plan or any other alternatives they may be pursuing. For those hoping to migrate, convincing a reticent husband, finding someone to take over family responsibilities or re-assuring their entourage that honour and reputation would be safeguarded are all questions for which women had to find their own solutions.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODS

The original evaluation plan comprised interviews with three cohorts: 30 women who followed the training and one of their family members, interviewed over 3 rounds at 3 months intervals, and 10 NGO staff interviewed in 2 rounds. The research was structured, and costs were calculated based on these 200 interviews. We actually considerably expanded upon the original research base. The first cohort was increased to 40 women. Attrition was negligible and only one woman became untraceable after the first round. Women who migrated were followed through family members, and in one case by direct phone conversations.

In the second round of interviews, the research included women who migrated but cut their stay abroad short when they could not cope with the demands of the employer or for other reasons resulting in a 'failed' migration – which will be made more explicit later in this report with case histories. At this stage, let it only be said that a woman's 'successful' migration is expected to fulfill two conditions: earning reasonably well and safeguarding one's reputation. Women who earn (too) much and (too) quickly are suspected of immoral conduct (which is not the case for men). Some women had attended the WiF training, others had not. In line with the evaluative purpose of the research, women who have not been exposed to the WiF messages are considered separately. The addition of these returnees considerably deepens our understanding as it permits to assess the usefulness and relevance of the WiF training in relation to the very real problems women encounter abroad.

The WiF project focuses on two occupations: paid domestic work and garment factory work. In two of the three study sites, girls and women are recruited for other occupations as well. Considering the overall purpose of the WiF project, which is to prevent labour trafficking, these occupations cannot be ignored. The research investigated the case histories of five young women and adolescent girls planning to migrate, or having migrated, with short-term tourist visas to work in dance bars in Dubai. They or their mothers attended the WiF training.

3.3 SITE SELECTION

Three sites were selected for the research. The purpose was to identify communities that were more or less familiar with and tolerant of women who cross borders for work. Even though the WiF

trainers proclaimed that ‘all women are potential migrant workers’, this is not a view shared in Bangladesh society, nor it is a reality observed on the ground. Degrees of tolerance towards female migration vary considerably between and within communities and marked geographical disparities exist in this regard.⁴ For example, Narayangonj district itself is not representative of Bangladesh as a whole. It contains pockets from where women have been known to migrate at a time when such movement was not only illegal but unheard of in other parts of the country. This patchwork landscape was kept in mind and sites were selected to reflect diversity. They include:

1. A rural union where agriculture is the main activity. Women are less engaged in wage work, but this is changing as a large industrial complex started recruiting women. Most of the inhabitants live in their ancestral home. One also finds a displaced population coming from villages that have been claimed for urban development. In these more traditional communities, female migration remains low and is often frowned upon.
2. A resettlement colony established in 1975 for Dhaka slum dwellers. Families originate from different districts and share a past history of extreme poverty and displacement. Young women and adolescent girls found employment in the garment industry and other factories that opened in the 1990s, which resulted in better living conditions. Today, the place is no longer considered a slum – it forms a loosely knit community with relatively weak social control⁵ and constitutes a major pool for the recruitment of migrant women. It will be referred to in this report as Balupara, a fictive name.
3. A densely populated semi-urban area on the outskirts of Narayangonj, a major industrial and commercial centre. Cheap housing and availability of work nearby attracted migrants from other districts. This is one of the first locations from where Bangladeshi women migrated abroad.

3.4 THE COHORTS OF INFORMANTS

The first cohort women were selected according to two criteria: (1) preparing to migrate or seriously considering doing so and (2) participation in WiF

4. See Blanchet, T. Razzaque, A. and Biswas, H, *Documenting the Undocumented: Female Migrant Workers from Bangladesh*, Pathak Shamabesh, Dhaka, 2008.

5. Another way to speak of weak social control is to say that Balupara is a society without *samaj*. It is said that women in particular have no modesty and are (too) free. There are many

pre-decision orientation and/or pre-departure training. Women drawn to the training for other reasons – and they were many – were not selected. The reality on the ground proved complicated, however. In two cases, the family and local recruiting agents, commonly called *dalals*, forbade the women who had enlisted to attend the training, and one woman had to catch her flight early. These women only heard WiF’s messages from the fieldworker at their doorstep. Other women declared attending the training (and were officially counted as such) but admitted coming only to sign that they had been present and collect the lunch box. Such ‘light’ participation was uncovered in the course of the evaluation.

The second cohort consisted of the family members of the women participating in the first cohort. More than one person was often included here in order to provide useful and often necessary information, crosscheck facts, or document complex family histories. The third cohort was composed of fieldworkers, trainers and management staff of the implementing agency and the fourth cohort consisted of the *dalals*. The number of rounds of interviews was also increased for cohort one and two. Tables 1 and 2 detail the number of informants and interviews conducted.

TABLE 1: PERSONS FOLLOWED PER COHORT AND PER ROUND

Cohort	Number of persons followed				Total
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	
One	40	44 (39+5)*	48 (44+4)	14	49
Two	34	46 (32+14)	45 (36+9)	14	57
Three	10	11 (9+2)	–	–	12
Four	3	6 (1+5)	6 (3+3)	–	11
Total	87	103	97	28	129

Cohort one = potential migrants and returnee migrants

Cohort two = husband and other family members

Cohort three = IO staff

Cohort four = *dalal*/intermediaries

* From previous round + new interviewees

households without ‘real’ men. The social mechanisms orienting and controlling behaviour in a (normal) *samaj* here do not operate, say its critiques, comparing Balupara with an idealised society elsewhere. Not everyone agrees on the low ranking of Balupara. Many inhabitants are proud to declare that it is no longer a slum and attribute achievements to women’s hard work.

TABLE 2: INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED PER COHORT AND PER ROUND

Cohort	Total number of interviews				Total
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	
One	40	44	48	14	146
Two	34	46	45	14	139
Three	10	11	–	–	21
Four	3	6	6	–	15
Total	87	107	99	28	321

A checklist of questions was prepared before each round of interviews permitting minimum coherence and collection of standard data. Interviews were not limited to these points and women were invited to narrate events or particular situations that made them want to migrate and/or interfered with this ambition. Each new interview at roughly 3 months intervals brought new elements and the situation was never the same. Relationship with the researchers also took new turns. Beside these regular interviews, attention was given to unsolicited conversations or events unfolding in the community – such as the early and unexpected return of a migrant woman. A tape recorder was used in some cases, but many interviews were written up from jotted notes and from memory. There is no room here to discuss the respective merits of these methods, but both served our purpose with sufficiently good results. The narratives were translated from Bangla to English by the chief researcher who reviewed each encounter with the field investigator, taking note of the circumstances, duration of the meeting, location, individuals present, what was said (and not said), the tone, emotions, body language, etc. Links were drawn, and a preliminary interpretation suggested. Where major discrepancies were spotted between rounds or from one informant to the other, further investigation was undertaken where possible.⁶

3.5 RESEARCH PROCESS

Fieldwork began with the observation of fieldworkers conducting home visits and courtyard meetings followed by attendance at pre-decision orientation in different sites. Initially, we relied on

fieldworkers to gain access to the women who had participated in the training, and their benevolent assistance is appreciated. However, this mode of introduction has its drawbacks as people were confused about the identity of the researchers and the purpose of their questions, and few believed they could be independent from the NGO. On the other hand, fieldworkers are unaware of research methods and the ethics of rigor and objectivity that researchers are committed to. As a result, they felt inclined to demonstrate their good results. In one case, a fieldworker brought a woman who declared having obtained her passport without paying a *dalal*. She acted as instructed at the training, and we were led to applaud such an exemplary programme participant. However, it did not take long to discover that the woman's uncle paid for the service of a *dalal* like everyone else. The attempt to select 'good' participants who would speak positively about the WiF programme and fieldworkers was soon apparent. After the first round of interviews, the researchers tried to work independently to avoid this kind of manipulation and as time passed, a better work relationship developed. Researchers uncovered situations that fieldworkers ignored even though they were local women – such as girls leaving for dance bar work in Dubai – and information could be shared both ways.

Working in their own locality, the fieldworkers made use of personal relationships and networks developed in their previous jobs to gain access to homes and convince women to join the WiF training – a social proximity which had both advantages and disadvantages. Some of the women interviewed clearly wished to 'protect' the fieldworker in the eyes of researchers – who were perceived as outsiders – and had only good words for them. Others criticised aspects of the WiF programme or revealed 'secrets' about life abroad warning not to report their words to the fieldworker as they belonged to the same community. Perceived as harmless outsiders, researchers were more likely to hear stories of sexual abuse or admission of sex work, all 'secrets' that were not acceptable to divulge within the community.

Please, forgive me and do not repeat what I told you to [the fieldworker]. I could not stay here if others knew what I did abroad.

6. Research is never without selections, translations and interpretations. Anthropological knowledge stems from personal encounters engaging researcher and researched in an 'anthropological present'. The data extracted from 'the field' construct knowledge as

hypotheses and theories are tested and enriched. The construction thus emerging cannot be taken as a replica of the 'real' world. See Blanchet and Watson (2018) for a discussion of methods and theory.

As we shall see from their interviews, fieldworkers are a notch or two above (potential) migrant women in terms of social status, educational level, and economic security, and thus have other options. None of them actually had personal experience of cross-border migration. They belong to communities where the departure and return of migrant women are common occurrences, but were mostly unaware of their actual experiences. They did not share the 'secrets' of returnees, and this 'distance' had consequences for their understanding of migration.

3.6 INTERVIEWS WITH JOURNALISTS

In addition to the interviews with the four cohorts, a number of Dhaka-based journalists working for national and international media were invited to share their views. These journalists were known to cover stories on women labour migrants and they also comment – in some cases very critically – on government policies. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Government of Bangladesh and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in February 2015 has been a major focus of their attention. This MoU stipulated that Bangladesh will send 200,000 women to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers over the next 2 years. The journalists wanted to know why Bangladesh should fill in the gap and send its women to Saudi Arabia after five other countries (Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia) refused to do so and imposed a ban for what they said were very good reasons. Expressing a middleclass point of view, journalists in general voice strong reservations and do not appreciate sending women to low paid and low status jobs and to countries where reports of abuse are frequent.

Sharing their stories with journalists are a last recourse for the families of distressed/trafficked women who are kept confined abroad, and the role some journalists have played in these situations is an important source of their knowledge. Exposing abuse and violation of contracts in the media is a way to apply pressure on a recruiting agency or on the police to get them to take action. Journalists have often been effective in getting a woman repatriated and ensuring that a legal case be filed against a trafficker. The investigation of such

cases – while rich in learning – gives a particular bias to the knowledge that journalists acquire. It also raises the question of which stories are newsworthy, and which do not warrant coverage.

Journalists complained of having insufficient time to investigate women labour migration, an important topic deserving more resources and better attention. Investigative journalism is costly, and editors have other priorities. All further admitted exerting a degree of self-censorship in exposing sensitive topics, such as sexual abuse and trafficking, and in criticising government policies.⁷

4. The Bangladesh context at the time of the research

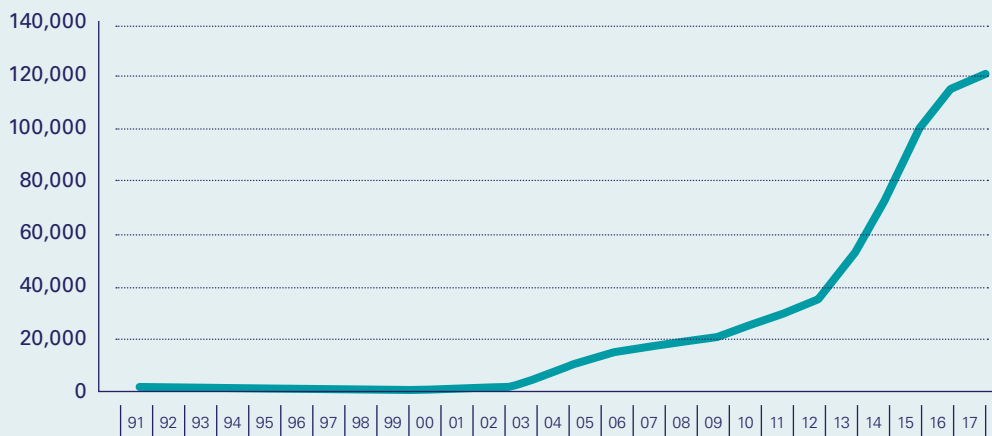
The Government of Bangladesh fully supports women's cross border labour migration. The MoU signed with the KSA in February 2015, promising to send 200,000 women as domestic workers in 2 years is a clear manifestation of this orientation. A policy paper adopted by the cabinet in 2016 makes the promotional policy even more explicit. One reads (our translation from Bangla): "In order to increase the incidence of female migration, Bangladesh missions abroad, labour attachés, labour wings and other government and non-government organisations should take special responsibility"⁸. That NGOs should be solicited to implement this policy is interesting, and the NGOs implementing the WiF project may thus have been expected to participate in the promotion in the eyes of the government. The paper explained that in 2011, the Government of Bangladesh ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and their families (1990), necessitating the modification of a previous policy issued in 2006. The 2016 policy paper aims not only to increase the number of women migrant workers but also to broaden the narrow range of occupations to which they were presently confined – mostly low-skills – while recognising still-existing social barriers and the low level of interest among educated women. Figure 1 shows the remarkable increase in the number of women migrating for work, especially since 2013.

7. Two damning reports on the situation of Bangladeshi women migrants in Saudi Arabia have recently been covered in the daily *Samakal*. A lead news appeared on 12 March 2018 titled 'Despite being tortured, women are sent to Saudi Arabia' and another on 20 May 2018 titled 'So that no woman ever migrates to Saudi Arabia' (our translation from Bangla). The articles present interviews from repatriated women who sought refuge at a Bangladesh government shelter home in Saudi Arabia. "Our employers used us like slave," says

a woman. Without directly questioning the Bangladesh government policy, these articles draw attention to recruiting agencies' profitable business and the 'unwritten' condition requiring that women be sent to Saudi Arabia in order to secure visas for men.

8. See *Probashi Kallyan o Boideshik Kormoshongshtan Neeti 2016* (Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016) issued in January 2016 and approved by the cabinet in April of the same year.

FIGURE 1: WOMEN LABOUR MIGRATION TRENDS: 1991–2017

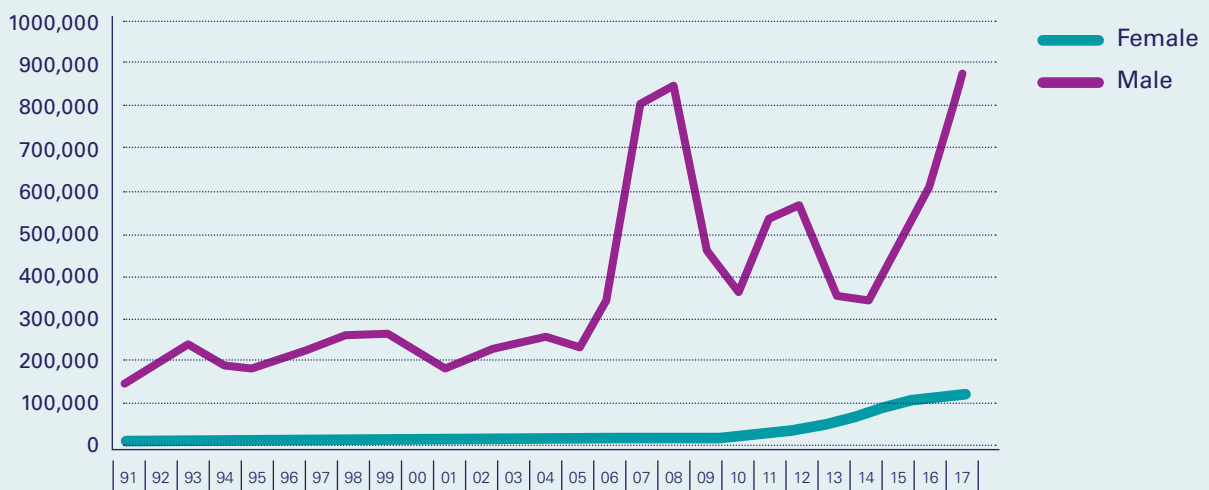


Source: Chart produced by authors from figures published by Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), 2018.

Figure 2 compares male and female migration trends. One notes the ups and downs of male migratory flows, which have been seriously affected by the economic crisis of 2008-2009 and the collapse in the price of petrol that hit major destination countries in the Middle East a few years later. Women labour migration, though much lower than men, shows a regular and steady growth.

The sharp reduction in male migration did not immediately translate into a drop of remittances,⁹ which came later. The level of remittances dropped from 2015 onward despite an increase in the number of migrants (see Figure 3). The promotion of women labour migration undoubtedly relates to a concern with maintaining remittance levels on which the Bangladesh economy is strongly dependant.

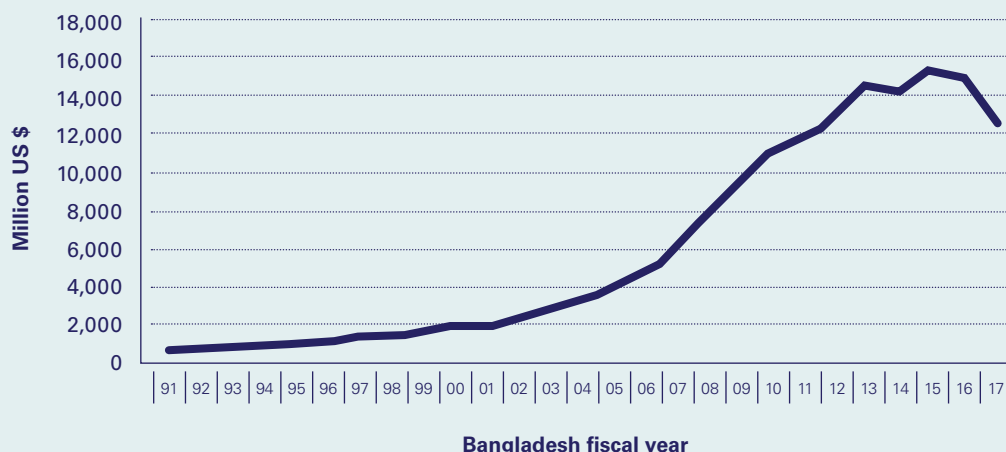
FIGURE 2: ANNUAL MALE AND FEMALE MIGRATION TRENDS: 1991–2017



Source: Chart produced by authors from figures published by Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), 2018.

9. Even though the lower number of male migrants certainly has an impact, there could be other causes explaining the drop in official remittances. Unfavourable rates of exchange may encourage use of *hundi* transfer or other channels.

FIGURE 3: BANGLADESH REMITTANCE TREND: 1991–2017 (IN MILLION US DOLLAR)



Source: Bangladesh Bank and Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), January 2018.

Women’s migration has been used as a bargaining tool to re-establish male migration flows with Saudi Arabia. In the first year of the MoU, the number of migrant women was below target and Saudi Arabia pressed Bangladesh to ‘respect’ the terms of the MoU. Bangladesh then requested Saudi Arabia to lift the 7-year freeze on male migration. Finally, it was agreed that for every woman sent to Saudi Arabia, visas would be provided for two men. On the second year of the MoU, bottlenecks for women were further removed, their migration declared ‘free

of cost’, and visas became widely available. As this report is being finalised, the MoU no longer applies, but the issue of visas for men is still conditional on a ‘sufficient’ number of women migrating with domestic visas.¹⁰ Human rights activists denounce this situation, accusing the government of ‘selling’ women. These activists see the promotion of women labour migration as a trick to re-establish a lucrative migration business. While women labour migration has been declared ‘free of cost’, the price of male migration has soared being 20 to 40 times more

TABLE 3: MIGRATION OF MEN AND WOMEN TO SAUDI ARABIA: 2014–2018

Year	Female	Male	Male and female	Total Migration	% of women migrant in KSA	% Overall migration to KSA
2014	13	10,644	10,657	425,684	0.1	2.5
2015	20,952	37,318	58,270	555,881	36.0	10.5
2016	68,286	75,627	143,913	757,731	47.4	19.0
2017	83,354	467,954	551,308	1008,525	15.1	54.7
2018 *	30,102	107,935	138,037	273,304	21.8	50.5
Total	202,707	699,478	902,185	3021,125		

Source: Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET)

*Data available Jan to April (4 months)

10. See Rajib Ahmad lead news in the Bangladesh daily *Samakal*, 12 March 2018

than the cost of female migration, a situation that further exacerbates gender differences in cross border mobility without contributing to the protection of women workers' rights. The table below shows the impact of the MoU on migration trends. In 2014, prior to this accord, the number of women labour migrants was insignificant. In 2015, there was an increase but well below target. For the next two years, there was a regular upward trend in women's migration, but the most spectacular increase was in men's migration. Between 2016 and 2017, numbers increase more than six fold, representing a very profitable business for recruiting agencies (see Table 3).

Table 4 illustrates the growing importance of Saudi Arabia and the sharp drop of

Lebanon as destination country for women migrants. The sites of our research more or less follow this national trend.

Taking into account the differing national contexts within which the WiF regional project unfolds is important. How can such national factors not percolate into the project? While the Nepal government imposes a ban on women's employment for domestic work, the Bangladesh government promotes it. The huge gap in the costs of migration for men and women noted above is another important dimension of the migration scenario. Men from poor households cannot afford migration but they can send their women 'free of cost'. The research findings will bring some light on these issues.

TABLE 4: DESTINATIONS OF FEMALE MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH: 2015–2017

Destination/Year	2015 (%)	2016 (%)	2017 (%)
Saudi Arabia	20,952 (20.2)	68,286 (57.8)	83,354 (68.4)
Jordan	21,776 (21.0)	22,689 (19.2)	19,872 (16.3)
Lebanon	8,782 (8.5)	2,450 (2.1)	1,642 (1.3)
UAE	24,307 (23.4)	5,151 (4.4)	3,272 (2.7)
Oman	16,980 (16.4)	12,897 (10.9)	9,199 (7.5)
Qatar	86,42 (8.3)	5,381 (4.6)	3,209 (2.6)
Others	2,279 (2.2)	1,234 (1.0)	1,377 (1.1)
Total	103,718 (100.0)	118,088 (100.0)	121,925 (100.0)
Female as % of total migration	18.7	15.6	12.1

Source: Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), 2018.



5. Demographics of women in the cohort

The data below gives the demographic information of 49 women consisting of the cohort of 40 women interviewed from the first round, plus 9 women included in subsequent rounds.

5.1 AGE

Ages of the women ranged from 17 to 55. The Bangladesh government authorises the migration of women for domestic work between the age of 25 and 45. By these guidelines, some women are either too young or too old to migrate, but there were good reasons to include them in the cohort.

TABLE 5: COHORT ONE: AGE BY SITE

Age	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Total (%)
Below 20		1	1	2 (4.1)
20–24	1	2	1	4 (8.2)
25–29	4	5	3	12 (24.5)
30–34	3	5	7	15 (30.6)
35–39	1	4	1	6 (12.3)
40–44	1	3		4 (8.2)
45–49		2	2	4 (8.2)
50+	2			2 (4.1)
Total	12	22	15	49 (100.0)

Fieldworkers welcomed younger participants to the training – often students in their teens – probably not realising how quickly some of these girls would effectively migrate. For example, Poppy¹¹ was 18 years old when she attended the pre-decision orientation and pre-departure training. She left for Dubai a few weeks later with a tourist visa to work as a dance bar worker, as several of her friends did before her.¹²

I have been dreaming about migration. Many of my friends left already. When... [the fieldworker] told me about the training, I went dancing all the way. I happily attended the 7 days. I took everything in, writing all information in a notebook. I know I am too young to go abroad. At the training, this was made very clear. Women must be 25 years old... Friends my age have passport made showing they are older. I already declared that I was older when I filled up the form for my passport.

Fieldworkers also invite women above the age of 45 in the hope that they would influence younger women to attend. Many were ex-migrants and a few engaged in recruitment, as *dalal*. Some intended to migrate again hoping to ‘fix’ their age, though this is not always successful.

My passport says I am 50 years old but in fact I am a bit older... I do not think a woman my age cannot work abroad... At the... [NGO] training, you say that migrant women should be between 25 and 45 years old. Yet, I have seen that you include women who are much older. I did the two-day and the five-day training. I can tell you, there were few young women there. Most women were about my age (Asia).

11. For the sake of confidentiality, the names of persons in this report are fictive.

12. Informed by the researcher, the field worker was astonished to hear of Poppy’s departure – she knew her personally. She also discovered that there were occupations others than those mentioned in the WiF training.

Asia never managed to ‘fix’ her age as she learned that a birth date inscribed in a digital passport cannot be altered. As a result, she had to abandon the idea of migrating altogether. On the other hand, Rohima, another cohort woman in her fifties who worked abroad for 9 years, managed to leave as she applied for a digital passport for the first time and was able to change her age.

5.2 EDUCATION

The educational level of the women was remarkably low: 77 per cent were either illiterate or had not studied beyond primary level.

TABLE 6: COHORT ONE: EDUCATIONAL LEVEL BY SITE

Education	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Total (%)
Nil	5	9	6	20 (40.8)
Up to Primary	4	11	3	18 (36.7)
VI–VIII	1	2	4	7 (14.3)
IX–X	2		2	4 (8.2)
Total	12	22	15	49 (100.0)

Younger women are likely to have a higher level of education, but overall most women intending to migrate could be characterised by illiteracy or near illiteracy. This finding is not surprising and is in line with previous studies on migrant women.

5.3 MARITAL STATUS

Married women living with their husband were a little less than half of cohort. Along with widows, separated and divorced women, a new category was created for women with ‘visiting’ husbands, quite often polygamists who contribute little if at all to the household. Women have little expectations regarding such ‘husbands’ but they prefer to be considered socially married. Two women never married.

TABLE 7: COHORT ONE: MARITAL STATUS BY SITE

Marital status	Site 1 (%)	Site 2 (%)	Site 3 (%)	Total (%)
Married	9 (75.0)	5 (22.7)	9 (60.0)	23 (46.9)
Married with ‘visiting’ husband		5 (22.7)		5 (10.2)
Unmarried		2 (9.1)		2 (4.1)
Widow	1 (8.3)	4 (18.2)	3 (20.0)	8 (16.3)
Separated	2 (8.3)	3 (13.6)	1 (6.7)	6 (12.2)
Divorced		3 (13.6)	2 (13.3)	5 (10.2)
Total (%)	12 (100.0)	22 (100.0)	15 (100.0)	49 (100.0)

5.4 AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE

Together with the low level of education, age at first marriage can be read as an indicator of low socio-economic level. In this cohort, 89 per cent of the women have been married before the age of 18. The mean age at marriage for the 40 women married before 18 is 14.47 years old. Such early marriages are notoriously unstable.

TABLE 8: COHORT ONE: AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE

Age at first marriage	Number	Number by cluster	%
12	1		
13	6	31	68.9
14	14		
15	10		
16	8	9	20.0
17	1		
18	3	5	11.1
19 and above	2		
Total	49	45*	100.0

*Two women never married and information is missing for two others

5.5 OCCUPATIONS

A summary of the women's occupations prior to the first interview is given below. Factory work, mostly in ready-made garment factories tops the list, followed by migration abroad – mostly as domestic worker. Repairing roads, chipping bricks on building sites, or selling ash¹³ from door to door are the lowest occupations in terms of status and pay. Women rarely engage in a single occupation throughout their life. For example, Asha was a mother of 4 children and had a 'visiting' husband (who no longer visited). She worked as helper in a garment factory for five years, then in road maintenance (which she found particularly degrading) before getting a job in a bakery and finally migrating abroad.

For some women, work in a garment factory is a short-lived experience as they quickly get into a relationship, marry, and stay home when they give birth to children. Factory work is remembered as a period of freedom and enjoyment, with the salary enhancing a sense of value. Only two women never held a paid job. One had recently divorced, the other had a husband who did not allow her to work outside the home.

TABLE 9: WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONS AND SOURCE OF INCOME

Occupation	Number	%
Factory worker (garment, cotton, snack factories)	24	43.6
Cross border migrant worker	15	27.3
Housewife assists husband on family farm and takes some piece-work from factories	7	12.7
Repairs roads/chips bricks/sells ash	3	5.5
School <i>ayah</i> (nanny)	2	3.6
Domestic worker in Narayangonj	2	3.6
Never worked for income	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0

13. Ash is customarily used to clean dishes and cooking pots and to handle slippery fish when prepared for cooking. In rural households, the indispensable substance was collected from the family hearth. It became the object of sale and purchase in crowded urban slums.

5.6 EXTENT OF PARTICIPATION IN THE WiF PROGRAMME

Before proceeding to a discussion on the WiF messages and how they were received, it is useful to review the exposure the women had. Forty women (81.6 per cent of the cohort) attended the 2-day pre-decision orientation. This includes the 5 women admitting only signing their name and collecting the lunch box, a minimal attendance which got revealed when questions about message content elicited only vague answers. Fourteen women (28.6 per cent) participated in the 5-day pre-departure training. Another 6 women were enlisted but could not attend as the *dalal* and the family discouraged participation, or they had to catch their flight. For such women, exposure to the WiF messages is limited to the fieldworker's explanation of 'safe migration', the collection of the NGO helpline number and the promise of assistance.

In all, 11 out of 49 women (22.4 per cent) had minimal exposure to the WiF messages (we excluded those with no exposure at all). This finding presents an interesting picture regarding who is reached and in what manner. Incidentally, it also invites caution in reporting high numbers of enlisted participants as a measure of 'success'.

TABLE 10: COHORT ONE: EXTENT OF PARTICIPATION IN THE WiF TRAINING

Participation	Number	%
Attended the 2-day pre-decision orientation in full	24	49.0
Attended the 2-day pre-orientation and the 5-day pre-departure training in full	11	22.4
Attended the 5 day pre-departure training in full	3	6.1
Signed in on the pre-decision orientation attendance sheet and returned to collect the lunch box	5	10.2
Enlisted for the orientation but did not attend as <i>dalal</i> /guardians did not allow or flight came early. Safe migration messages heard at courtyard meeting only	6	12.2
Total	49	100.0

5.7 LABOUR MIGRATION

Prior to round one, 15 out of 40 women had experienced migration. By the study end, 23 of the original cohort had experienced migration. That the sample comprised such a high proportion of women who migrated before is an interesting finding, as this was not part of the selection criteria. On completion of round three, 28 out of 49 women (57 per cent) experienced cross border labour migration with various outcomes: 11 women 'failed' migration and 4 were unsatisfied with the benefits though they had not totally failed. A 'failed' migration often leads to more migration until hopefully, success is achieved. Having paid the price in terms of both monetary loss and reputational damage, women often keep on trying until monetary benefits are reaped. Such logic will be exemplified later through case histories.

TABLE 11: NUMBER OF TIMES WOMEN MIGRATED BY ROUND 3

Number of times migrated	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Total
Never	6	10	5	21
Once	4	7	3	14
Twice	1	3	4	8
Three times or more	1	2	3	6
Total	12	22	15	49

TABLE 12: NUMBER OF TIMES WOMEN 'FAILED' MIGRATION BY ROUND 3

Failed migration	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Total
Once		5	4	9
Twice		2		2
Neither failed nor succeeded	1	1	2	4
Total	1	8	6	15

The small size of the cohort and the selection criteria do not permit any conclusion on the percentage of women who 'fail' migration, and such is not the purpose of the evaluation. Nonetheless,

14. One year later, we found out that the adolescent girl (now 17/18) quit school but her family refused to say where she was. She may well have gone to Dubai for dance work but there was no confirmation. Schools are required to investigate when a student

acknowledging these outcomes is important. No records are kept on migrant workers (women or men) who return early having failed to complete the period of a contract. The low cost of women labour migration, as opposed to men, no doubt increases the phenomenon of these early returns for women. Recruiters deplore the situation.

Looking at migration status by round three is interesting. Out of 49 women, 8 were working abroad and 12 were at various stages of preparation for departure. 10 had migrated but returned early unable to complete their contract terms, 7 gave up the idea of migration for personal reasons, 8 were declared unfit or too old, and 7 were keen to migrate but faced opposition from their families. Finally, a 16-year-old girl intending to migrate as a bar dance worker postponed her migration after attending the training, though didn't give up on the idea.¹⁴

TABLE 13: COHORT ONE: MIGRATION STATUS AND OCCUPATION BY SITE AT ROUND THREE

Migration status and occupation	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Total
Working abroad	3	1	4	8
Housewife taking final preparation for migration		1	3	4
Factory worker trying to migrate	4	3	1	8
Hoping to migrate but took no step		2	1	3
Ex-migrant, wants to migrate again but found medically unfit or too old	2	2	4	8
Returned in short time: 'failed' migration		8	2	10
Migration impossible for various reasons	3	4		7
Student waiting to get a bit older		1		1
Total	12	22	15	49

In retrospect, one can say that women of the original cohort were serious in their intention to migrate and the selection was appropriate. Finalising the decision to migrate and acting it out

stops attending classes in order to prevent early marriage, as the head-teacher did in this case. He admitted knowing of several school girls who left to work in dance bars but feels powerless to stop them as they are already gone by the time the school investigates.

can take time. Some women leave quickly, others face various impediments delaying departure and a few are forced to give up the idea of migration altogether when guardians do not approve.

6. Training venues, message content and delivery modes

6.1 VENUES AND SETUPS

As mentioned, the research team observed door to door and courtyard meetings and attended several sessions of the 2 days pre-decision orientation in different locations. The 5-day pre-departure training could not be observed directly, but positive comments were heard from nearly everyone attending about the joyous atmosphere, the songs, the good food, and a monetary allowance distributed at the end.

Fieldworkers arranged the venue for the pre-decision orientation sessions. It has to be free of cost and large enough to accommodate 30 participants. It could be a classroom, a large room in a private home, or the locale of an NGO. In a classroom, the trainer stands at the teacher's dedicated place and participants sit behind desks. School compounds can be noisy and trainers unable to control disruptions. In private homes, the space is often congested and trainers complain of being unable to apply techniques learned to keep participants alert. Fieldworkers worked hard to find suitable venues and had to do with what was available.

Trainers use an illustrated training manual which gets circulated among participants for a closer look (unreliable electricity supply preclude the use of a projector). They write on flip charts inviting participants – given a pen and notebook – to note down important points. Few women were seen writing, which is hardly surprising judging from the low level of education we recorded. Only a few participants, mostly younger women, wrote in and brought back the notebook on the second day. At the onset, the trainer announced:

When questions are put to you, do not be shy to speak. It does not matter if your answer is right or wrong.

While the intention may have been to stimulate participation, trainers fixed the agenda and often requested silence and discipline. At the interviews,

they admitted having insufficient time to open up the floor for discussion, as they had to cover a very full curriculum. Women with experience of migration had little chance to share their stories and express any opinions. If they spoke, the trainers often did not know how to handle their comments. They were unprepared for testimonies that did not fit the training manual and could be out of line with the official discourse on 'safe migration'.

Fieldworkers were responsible for ensuring there was the required number of participants, oversaw the presence sheets and assisted the trainer as requested. Many discussions were on the best time to distribute the lunch packets. If distributed too early, participants could go home and not return, and distributed too late, their attention could be lost. During the month of Ramadan, the programme got squeezed, as no one could remain attentive after 2pm. To their credit, trainers worked extremely hard in difficult circumstances. One trainer alone animated the entire session by herself and, many times had lost her voice by the end of the day. She then had to get home through Dhaka's heavy traffic on her own as the NGO did not provide transport.

6.2 LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL TRANSLATIONS

The pre-decision orientation started with an explanation of the word *obhibashi*, meaning 'migrant'. In an area familiar with overseas migration, many villagers do not understand this literary word. One fieldworker with a BA degree, candidly admitted being unfamiliar with the term herself:

Many people ask what is 'obhibashi'; what does it mean. I have to spend time explaining the word. To tell you the truth, before joining... [the NGO], obhibashi was not part of my vocabulary.

Literary Bangla words unfamiliar to the participants had to be explained. English words were also used by the trainers when a perfectly adequate colloquial Bangla term could serve the purpose. A case in point is 'budget'. Village women are familiar with the idea of balancing expenditure against income, which is called *hishab cora*. The use of English words and literary Bangla terms, unwittingly perhaps, conveyed the social distance separating well-educated urban trainers and little-educated village women.

Fieldworkers attended a 4- to 5-day training – accounts varied – after they were recruited for

the project. They admitted having difficulties following the training conducted in English (a GAATW team came from Bangkok) with a translator. Problems of translation added to the difficulties of grasping notions that are complex enough in any one language such as 'safe migration', 'trafficking' or 'gender'.

We were first invited to take a 5-day training... Trainers came from outside and their words were translated into Bangla. This was not easy to follow... They talked about gender, trafficking, safe migration... There are many things I did not understand.

Translation is not only a matter of lexicon. The urban trainers and their manager appeared to be unfamiliar with the environment in which village women live. For example, the health module dealt with menstrual hygiene. When the trainer announced that it would be unhygienic to use a sanitary pad for longer than 6 hours, silence followed. The topic may have been embarrassing but, more importantly, not a single woman among the participants purchased such equipment, the cost being prohibitive and their practices being otherwise. The trainer understood and tried to change her message. She then suggested that if disposable pads were too costly, new cloth should be procured and after being used, washed with soap and dried in the sun. However, even this was not useful for the women as rags are generally used, and they are also not displayed in the sun after being washed, rather they are hidden in a dark corner where no one can see them. Other advice on personal hygiene was quite inapplicable given the lack of privacy alongside the rudimentary sanitary equipment available to most village women.

6.3 DEPICTING A MIGRANT WOMAN

The trainer's manual shows an aspirant migrant woman wearing a *shelwar-kameez*. The sari-clad woman is considered 'too old' and a frock-wearing girl is 'too young' for migration. However, with the legal age for women's migration between 25 to 45, the manual shows a young woman looking like a 'student'. The same illustrated women can read and write, apply for a passport, seek information from recruiting agencies, and obtain government services without being accompanied with a 'guardian'. She never covers her head and a burqa-clad woman appears only when the migrant reaches a Middle Eastern country. These

illustrations – which may have been copied from other countries' manual – do not correspond to the actual behaviour of Bangladeshi women who normally cover their head. Many would also wear a burqa when visiting a government office or a recruiting agency and would not travel alone.

6.4 WORDS THAT HEAL

While several women objected to some of the messages or found them of little relevance for migration, the friendly environment was generally appreciated. One woman in particular highly praised the training for repairing her wounded self and for restoring her self-confidence. Parul's story (a fictitious name) is exemplary. She started work in a factory at the age of 13 to provide for a family of five siblings. Her father had just died, and she became de facto head of family. She felt appreciated then. However, one night as she was returning home from the factory, Parul was gang raped. The event received wide publicity and her reputation was ruined. Potential suitors turned their back on her and she ended up as a recluse at home. By the age of 28, she was still unmarried. The WiF training pulled her out of the lethargy that followed this tragic event.

The NGO training made me realize that I was not rotten, in spite of that event in my life. I am whole and alive. And if I can go abroad, I can be economically prosperous. I thank... [the NGO] and... [the fieldworker] for that opportunity. I was afraid that somebody would point a finger at me and bring back my story but that did not happen... We were all women... I was hesitant on day one and I arrived late but on day two, I was the first one to reach the venue. I attended the 2-day and the 5-day training. My eyes were opened. I could dream of making my life good again... It took me a long time to get convinced that I am 'manush' (human), that I have rights and that I am free. When one is not a worker, one has no place, the family gives you no value and one quickly gets old. No one understands this better than me. Other women faced problems similar to mine, but no one fell in a hole as deep with no one helping her to stand up again.

This praise for the training was expressed in the first two interviews before Parul migrated to Saudi Arabia in November 2016. The training did not guarantee a successful migration and

Parul returned within 2 months. Nonetheless, the words that helped a wounded woman to feel healed and stand up again must be recognised.

6.5 GOAL SETTING

The theme of goal setting is introduced with the story of Pakhi, a character in the WiF programme that participants particularly liked. At least one quarter of them reported finding her an inspiring model. Pakhi is 25 years old, with two children. She is hard working and ambitious. She has a good relationship with her husband, and family decisions are taken jointly. The couple cultivates vegetables for the market and the demand for their produce is high. They would like to cultivate a larger plot but they do not have the capital to expand. To augment their income, Pakhi purchased a sewing machine and learned tailoring from a friend.

Pakhi then considers migration. That Pakhi – neither a widow, nor a destitute woman – should think of migrating abroad gives the option legitimacy and respectability. Should she decide to migrate, Pakhi would need accurate information to ensure a ‘safe migration’. If she does not go, other ways for her to increase her income and improve family wellbeing are announced to be discussed later. Alternative means of livelihood are set aside at this stage and Pakhi’s story is left uncompleted.

The trainer explains the costs and benefits of migration mostly in monetary terms. Other factors such as family disruption or child care are hardly touched upon, and possible damage to a migrant woman’s reputation is not mentioned at all. The ideal migrant woman is ‘rational’ and has clearly defined goals. As we shall see, the reality of women’s lives, their embeddedness into family and community and the position each occupies within a web of norms and obligations renders the option of individual migration a far more complex affair than presented here.

6.6 ADJUSTING TO LIFE ABROAD

The training underlines the need for migrant workers to adapt to a foreign environment. It advises the candidates to be mentally prepared to cope with unfamiliar ways of living, to learn a basic vocabulary in the language spoken at their destination, and familiarise themselves with modern household appliances. They are

warned about food in particular, as those unable to live without ‘rice’ should think twice about migrating abroad. ‘Rice’, a life sustaining food, means more than it says. Returnees who failed migration regularly complained about being unable to eat ‘rice’, a polysemic word heavily charged with symbolic meanings. Trainers do not dig into the several meanings the expression may carry in this particular context.¹⁵

Examples of situations abroad used in the training are based on women employed as domestic workers. Garment factory workers were not alluded to and nothing was said about the other ways in which women may be employed abroad (regardless of visa). Experienced migrant women are well aware that other ‘work’ may be required and clearly said so in the interviews we conducted with them. However, as already mentioned, they were not invited to speak during training, and so this information was not shared.

6.7 RISKS OF MIGRATION AND HOW TO MINIMISE THEM

Migration risks are introduced in training through the case histories of two women, Asha Begum and Shahinur. Both were lured, abused, molested, sold, held captive – one in Lebanon and the other in both Qatar and Syria. In these stories, the women’s families lack power and could do little to help. In one case, assistance came from an NGO that applied for repatriation through government procedures. The story did not tell how long it took for the woman to return home. In the other case, the victimised woman and her family received assistance from a journalist who pressured the police to act and file a complaint against the *dalal* – a powerful man enjoying the backing of the ruling party.

The two stories exemplify multiple potential sites of exploitation and abuse, both abroad and in the community of origin. They could have led to a robust discussion, but that does not happen and there is no attempt to dissect the complex situations. The trainer simply asked participants what the two women should have done differently and what behaviour increased their risks, with the answers written in the manual: the women should not have migrated with the assistance of a *dalal* and they should have obtained their visa and work permit directly from a licensed recruiting

15. When Lovely desperately called her mother from Jordan saying she could not stay because she could not eat the local food, she meant to say that she was living in great discomfort. Later on, she

explained that her room had no lock on the door and every night the employer tried to force his way in. Lovely could not say this. She referred to food to mean something else. See case history below.

agency. Even though the stories paint a damning picture of local power holders, exposes connivance between migration brokers and local government representatives, and mentions multiple villains across borders, the local *dalals* that the women contacted alone are made out to be the culprits. This prepares the conclusion. Thus, foremost amongst advice given to ensure 'safe migration' is to avoid *dalals* (which participants do not accept).

Participants are later informed of the laws enacted to protect migrant workers, including the 'Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking 2012' and the 'Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013' and are told that the NGO could assist them with legal aid. Trainers announced a service that, clearly, the NGO could not provide. It wasn't until January 2017 when the government finalised and adopted the implementing rules for the 'Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012', a delay that activists deplored, that the law could be applied. Actually, participants were mostly indifferent to the discussion of laws, and none of the women commented on them in the interviews.

The risks of migration are a real issue for women intending to migrate. When asked how they perceived these risks, their replies did not reflect WiF messages. The advice from training to migrate without *dalal* was strongly and overwhelmingly rejected. Women recognised risks but outcomes, for example whether one would get a 'good' or a 'bad' employer, are largely attributed to chance. Basically, migrant women admit having no control over the issue. Some of them resorted to spiritual or magical means to ensure some degree of protection. On the recommendation of her *pir*, one woman offered a goat in sacrifice for the success of her migration, another carried prayer beads and a copy of the Quran to hold as a shield. The WiF training and its promises of 'safe migration' were also interpreted by some as a 'certificate' with special power, a kind of talisman that would protect against risks.

Mukta, an experienced migrant who proudly acknowledged three successful migrations, offered the following advice to cope with risks:

The best way to keep safe abroad is to entertain a good relationship with the employer, behave well, follow instructions, keep strong and patiently tolerate what one cannot change... One must never forget the purpose for which one goes abroad. Any work should be considered as part of the job.

These words were the response to a question regarding the content of WiF messages that Mukta considered unconvincing. Notably there is no mention of 'rights' here. The recommendation to "patiently tolerate what one cannot change" could be an admission of powerlessness. At the same time, these are not the words of a loser, as Mukta has been a very successful migrant. "Never forget the purpose for which one goes abroad" is a reminder of the situation left behind which may give women the strength to put up with hardship abroad. Mukta measures her achievements in terms of income but also in relation to the position she once occupied. Her difficult life evidently colours her appreciation of 'risks'. Finally, "any work should be considered as part of the job" is a hardly veiled admission that sex work is an acceptable source of earning. Other women with experience of migration offer similar 'practical' advice to deal with risks abroad.

6.8 THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S WORK

During the second day of training, one of the modules underlines the value of women's work, both paid and unpaid, and also their important contribution to family welfare, which often goes unrecognised. Whether participants intend to migrate or not, this message was enthusiastically received and reflected in the interviews. Women gave detailed descriptions of the work they did, pointing out expense-saving activities as well as jobs done for 'additional' income – embroidering *punjabi* tops or sewing buttons at home or in factories. The training enhanced women's awareness of this, and their statements markedly contrast with husbands who regularly minimised their wife's economic contribution. Husbands did not 'see' what wives were keen to highlight. While there was wide agreement on the normative gender division of tasks, husbands providing 'food' from the field or from the market and wives providing the 'extra', such as clothing, school fees for children, pocket money, or other expenses, the difference lies in the importance given to these 'extra' that women consider important to family status and wellbeing. Their definition of needs, for their children and also for themselves, extended far beyond 'food'.

With the three research sites situated close to industrial complexes, many women had worked in factories, comparing it to work at home or on the family farm. Factory work procured better recognition, even when the salary was low.

When the baskets I weave are sold, my husband regards the income as his. Although he entrusts me with the money, he checks the accounts. When I worked at the factory, my salary was mine and everybody recognized this. Working with my husband is not a problem and we can make ends meet. But I lost the independence I had. When I worked at the factory, I could spend... I did not have to ask my husband. Now, I must ask and whether he agrees or not I feel hesitant. This is my husband's money (Rozina)

Rozina migrated to Saudi Arabia in February 2016, mainly to escape a violent marriage. Three months after her departure, her husband had not received any money and was furious. One researcher spoke to Rozina on the phone and found she had sent money to her father first. Her job was demanding, but freedom in dispensing her income as she wanted gave her a sense of control she enjoyed. A desire for individual recognition and some control over income are both strong motivations for women to migrate. One aspiring migrant explained:

What I provide for my children now comes from family income. What I could bring from abroad would have a different value because it would come from abroad and because it would clearly be earned by me.

These narratives on the whole describe the re-shaping of gender roles in a rapidly changing economy and the different interpretations men and women and husbands and wives, make of these transformations. Resulting tensions are clearly manifest and these are reflected in attitudes towards women labour migration.

6.9 BUDGETING

Another training module deals with family budgeting and the proper use of money. Pictures of various objects are circulated to illustrate essential and superfluous needs. Nutritious food, children's education, medical care, housing or electricity were in the first category, while jewellery, expensive clothing, birthday parties or cosmetics were placed in the second group. Whether intending to migrate or not, women enjoyed this exercise and expressed a fair degree of agreement on which item should be placed in which category. The trainer underlined the importance of saving and investing in projects that create lasting security. They preached a virtue familiar to

village women, there was nothing controversial, and overall, women appreciated the lesson.

6.10 ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

Alternative livelihood options are the fourth topic on the second day. This is late during the day, and not including fatigue amongst participants, trainers appeared insufficiently prepared to address the topic. Participants were told to check with their local government regarding trainings offered at union level and were also informed about a government loan to help launch independent enterprises. Once again, the NGO uncritically described a government scheme without considering what is actually delivered or can be accessed by the women. Women later reported that there was either no training in their union or that any training offered was poorly managed. None could access the aforementioned loan.

I enlisted for training on batik-making which the government offered. I attended 4 of the 5 days programme. We were not given any material, not even a notebook and a pencil to write down the name of the chemicals needed to make batik. The government promises a lot but offers nothing. At the orientation training... [the NGO] recommended that women avail themselves of such formation, after which they can get a certificate, allowing them to get a loan. But the people offering these trainings did not study the market. The demand for tailoring is much higher than for batik products. I found this out by myself and, having worked in a garment factory for many years, I did not need any training for opening my own tailoring shop (Dina)

Most women showed little interest in the alternative livelihood options presented to them. They were far more responsive earlier in the day, when the value of women's work was discussed with a 'feminist' approach. Dina pointed out that the 'feminist' approach inspired her to open a tailoring shop, for which she did not need any government training as she had worked in a garment factory before and had the necessary skills.

The message on alternative livelihood options could have built on Pakhi's story introduced earlier. Actively engaged in vegetable cultivation with her husband, Pakhi sought to expand production. Is this not a good livelihood option and if additional capital

was needed, would migration be the best way to obtain the money? The discussion could have taken another turn, but this was not the purpose. Pakhi's story was meant to introduce – and inadvertently promote – women's labour migration. The WiF training did not seriously consider other livelihood options which are given only a 'light' treatment.

6.11 HEALTH AND PERSONAL HYGIENE

The module on health and personal hygiene demonstrated innovative methods, starting with a lesson on female anatomy. Any man present in the room was asked to leave, after which the trainer or the fieldworker put on a long apron depicting the position of female organs: vagina, uterus, ovaries, etc. In simple and even poetic language, the trainer talks about sexual desire, intercourse, menses, and pregnancy. Women listen attentively, but a few women later admitted feeling shame and embarrassment.

I particularly liked the health section, but I also felt embarrassed. It was shameful to me when they talked about prolapse of the uterus and demonstrated with practical exercises how one should contract muscles down there. Many were laughing out of embarrassment. Also, they used English words I did not understand.

I regret my participation to the... [NGO] training as it revealed what should have remained secret.

The presentation demystified the female body and gave useful information that participants generally appreciated.

The part of the training I found very useful was on health. I could understand better why I suffered the condition I did abroad. One cannot tell these things in public.

All this information on health is good to know whether one migrates or not.

As mentioned earlier, messages about menstrual hygiene confounded participants. Women were told that for hygienic reasons they should use Senora (a brand of sanitary pad) for no more than 6 hours or else it could cause infection. Women are familiar with the brand name – advertised on television – but the great majority never use the product as it is too costly. Alternatively, they were

then told that new cloth can be set aside for the purpose, washed carefully after use and dried in the sun. In the crowded and shaded settlements where these instructions were given, where was the sun, and how could such cloth be exposed in full view? This instruction was also followed by a description of the symptoms of common vaginal infections and various home recipes for treatment were given. Douches with an infusion of tea leaves, *neem* leaves or other concoctions were suggested. However, even if such ingredients could be procured, women lack the bathroom and privacy to apply these lessons. Innovative as they were, these messages were inappropriate considering the average living conditions in a village. The risks of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases and protections available were also covered using official WHO language. This was too much for some of the participants, as HIV and AIDS is a frightening subject.

AIDS, we don't want to hear this word and it should not be pronounced in front of young women hoping to migrate either. They will be frightened and no one will want to go abroad. Knowing what I know, I will not send my daughter abroad.

Women returning sick after spending years abroad is a known occurrence in sites of high migration. The suspicion is strong that they have contracted 'the deadly diseases' even though the word AIDS is never uttered. Such outcome not only nullifies all the gains of migration but also brings moral condemnation and social rejection.

Amena spent over 20 years in Bahrain. She was divorced and had no children so she was very generous helping brothers and sisters. But she caught a bad disease abroad, she came home and she died within 3 months. Everybody said bad things about her implying that she had engaged in a sinful life, which caused her untimely death. Look, if I had stayed longer myself in the job that I landed in Dubai, I could have finished like her and this would not have been a successful migration. (Asha)

Engaged in sex work for two years in Dubai where she caught a sexually transmitted infection that made the work painful, Asha found the module on health particularly useful. However, she still did not want to hear about HIV.

Contraception is another delicate issue and experienced migrants felt the topic was inappropriately treated.

At the training, they talked about human rights... But instead, they should say, take precautions before going abroad and make sure that you don't fall into trouble by getting pregnant. Could they not have spoken about this?

How should one explain to women leaving with domestic visas the need to use contraceptives? Is it not suggesting risks that should not be talked about? A three month-contraceptive injection was reportedly administered to all migrant women undergoing government training. But for experienced migrants, this is insufficient and women should leave with longer-term protection.

7. Critical assessment of the WiF messages

7.1 ASSESSMENT AT A GLANCE

The table below presents an overview of the women's assessment of the WiF messages, based on statements made in three rounds of interviews. Half of the women made positive comments while a substantial number (40.8 per cent) expressed the view that the training did not fulfil their expectations. One fifth were highly critical and said they were misguided and faced problems that they attributed to deceptive messages.

TABLE 14: COHORT WOMEN'S ASSESSMENT OF WiF TRAINING AT A GLANCE

	Number	%
Enhanced confidence and removed fear about migration	23	46.9
Learned about our rights	13	26.5
Did not fulfil expectations	20	40.8
Were misguided with these messages	11	20.4
Helpful to some extent	2	4.1
Information missing	1	2.0

Source: WiF Study 2015–17. Multiple answers recorded from 49 case studies.

Before discussing these responses, it is useful to look at participants' expectations, what they hoped to gain and how the WiF training was presented to them.

7.2 ATTRACTIVE PROPOSITIONS, INFLATED PROMISES AND PRESSURE TO MEET TARGETS

In order to convince women to enrol in the training, fieldworkers multiplied attractive propositions. Women will know what needs to be done to ensure 'safe migration'; they were eligible for a loan from the Probashi Kallyan Bank to cover the costs of migration; they would have access to a dedicated helpline should they face problems abroad, etc. These promises created expectations, but a good number of women considered that they were not delivered, resulting in the recorded disappointment. In the end, no participants obtained bank loans, and women who faced a crisis abroad did not receive assistance from the NGO helpline, nor were they helped by the Bangladesh embassy for that matter.

Sister [the fieldworker] told me that... [the NGO] offered training to women intending to go abroad and provided them with assistance. She said after taking the training, a woman could cope with problems abroad. If she has... [the NGO] 'seal' on her documents, she will get help and she will be successful. She will get good work and good income. I never thought of going abroad before listening to Sister. But after hearing her, I began dreaming about migration (Lovely).

The fieldworkers were under pressure to ensure that at least 30 women attend each pre-decision orientation session. Hence, they oversold promises to achieve their target. The NGO signed a contract with ILO to train 3,000 women 'candidates for migration' in 100 batches within a limited period of time. Mathematically, this required 30 participants per batch, a standard uniformly applied in all sites. ILO put pressure on the NGO management, which was passed on to fieldworkers. Meeting these quantitative targets ended up as a measurement of their performance. Fieldworkers admitted this requirement was a tremendous challenge. Motivating women to attend, reminding those enlisted to come and making sure that they actually turn up is hard work, so strong arguments were needed. When an insufficient number of women showed interest, or when some of those enlisted failed to turn up, fieldworkers filled in places with whoever was available and could afford the time. At one pre-decision orientation in Volta, a village characterised by low female migration, the research team found, out of 32 participants, 8 students aged between 13 and 19 and several wives of migrant men. These persons did not intend to migrate – and clearly said so. The trainer told them

to listen nonetheless and share the WiF messages with their entourage. With a multiplier effect of 4, messages addressed to 32 participants were thus calculated to reach 128 persons, a number duly inscribed on the report sheet. How 'safe migration' messages percolate or spread horizontally is not checked – the metrics are purely mathematical.

The challenge of recruiting 'potential migrant women' to the WiF sessions was not the same in all sites. Where women labour migration is a well-entrenched practice, it was easier to get women interested, but in areas where such movement is not only uncommon but frowned upon – such as the rural site in this research – the fieldworker had a hard time finding participants.

The fieldworker is my niece. She came to me as she wanted to identify women who could be enrolled in the NGO training. All I could do is send her 4 women. There are so few women interested in migration here. She has difficulty in meeting her target. I cannot help much. (Khaled dalal)

Khaled sends men abroad. His three sons work in Gulf countries but he would never dream of sending his daughters abroad, or any woman for that matter, as he considers this immoral. Nonetheless, he genuinely tried to help his niece. Participants also enrolled in the training out of sympathy for the fieldworker.

M. is a nice girl. She had a hard life and her mother just died. I feel sympathy for her. I am not interested in migration but I came to save her job.

As mentioned earlier, five of the women admitted having no interest in the WiF messages, and that their motivation for enrolling was elsewhere.

The World Vision office where the training took place is next to my home. I was abroad before and I do not need any training but I went for... [the fieldworker]. I did not stay the whole day. I signed in and went for the lunch box.

Pressure for a uniform number of attendants at each session in all sites, regardless of the interest in, familiarity with, or tolerance for women labour migration in a particular community resulted in a medley assembly of women. Trainers admitted that the more heterogeneous the group, the more arduous was their task. Keeping participants

interested could be quite a challenge. Within the NGO, there were complaints about the pressure for numbers, but no one openly questioned this requirement. Thus, 'women potential migrant workers' could be anyone, an undifferentiated population imagined by planners sitting in a faraway place. Such erroneous assumption actually muddled up the focus of the WiF messages.

7.3 "ALL WOMEN ARE POTENTIAL MIGRANT WORKERS": A PROBLEMATIC THEORY

One NGO manager blamed fieldworkers for not explaining the purpose of the WiF programme clearly enough, and for failing to attract the 'right' candidates to the training. The view that 'all women are potential migrant workers', a slogan repeatedly uttered, could justify the assumption that fieldworkers have a large population to tap into. However, blaming fieldworkers for a mismatch between a theoretical position (or wishful thinking) and reality on the ground is not useful. Fieldworkers know their community often better than NGO managers, and many of them effectively recognised that the women most likely to migrate are not 'all' women but rather correspond to certain types.

Women who migrate here are mostly widows, divorced or abandoned women. Some have husbands earning very little or earning well but providing little. I could not get to the pre-decision orientation all the women preparing for migration. There are many reasons for this. They are the poorest. These women often work every day for their livelihood, or they have young children and no one to look after them. We had a rule not to bring small children. In each batch, I try to ensure that 5 or 6 women would attend from such background.

Not allowing women to bring their small children and not conducting training sessions on Friday (the weekly holiday) restrained the participation of poor working women. Another problem, insufficiently recognised, is how attendance to the training may expose women interested in migration and attract dubious recruiters. It could signal an eminent departure that many women would rather keep secret (the reasons for which are discussed later).

Moreover, women whose profile corresponded to the description from the fieldworker above may have had no wish to attend the WiF training. One such woman we met we shall name Jahanara. The training venue was located only a few metres from

her home and the fieldworker tried hard to convince her to join but Jahanara was adamant. She said she did not have the guts to confront ‘respectable’ society. Aged 28, poor, uneducated, good looking, twice divorced, and the mother of a 9 year old daughter, Jahanara’s profile would fit what most *dalals* would recognise as a suitable candidate for migration (presuming her vulnerability and her attractiveness to potential employers). When we first met Jahanara, she had just returned from Saudi Arabia, having left with another woman from her neighbourhood and returning six weeks later, alone. Why did she come back when her neighbour stayed? Could she not cope with the work as her companion did? Jahanara faced accusations to which she could not easily respond publicly. She narrates her story to the researcher six weeks after her return.

I left for Saudi Arabia on 13 August 2015. My first employer was a man with 2 wives and 5 unmarried sons. He made it very clear that he purchased Bangladeshi girls for one purpose only. One Indonesian woman was responsible for the cooking and another Bangladeshi girl was there for enjoyment work. I was there for 4 days, maltreated and roughed up... The employer said he purchased me from a Bangladeshi man for 4 lak taka. I refused to do the enjoyment work for which I was recruited, so he sold me to another man. As I was travelling with that man, the police arrested us, and I was sent to jail where I stayed 1 month.

Jahanara is sent to a job she has not signed for and to which she does not consent. Her powerful *dalal* enjoyed the protection of the ruling party and she feared him. She was cheated (trafficked?) but did not seek justice or compensation. Defiant, she commented:

We did not get anything from this society. Why should I not open my mouth about Saudi Arabia and tell what they do to women.

Her mother added:

Because of my daughter, we are ostracised... Before, I could visit people’s home and I could get some help but now I cannot go anywhere. We are outcasts.

In this conservative community, Jahanara and her mother are made outcasts. The difficulties in

bringing Jahanara to the training venue certainly cannot be blamed on the fieldworker. It lies with the makeup of village society and the treatment meted out to poor women who dare speak out. Jahanara never received sympathy from her ‘respectable’ neighbours, and her words are also bad publicity for the powerful *dalal* who sent her. They are embarrassing to the husband receiving remittances from a wife who did not return. No one wants to hear “what they do to women in Saudi Arabia”. Her speaking out is condemned by all those complicit with the opaque business. Even if a tolerant and friendly atmosphere can be created inside the training venue, the WiF staff does not have the ability to intervene in what happens outside. To announce the legality of women labour migration and speak about their rights may create a comfort zone for those inside but it does not alter the harsh realities outside. We did not include Jahanara in our cohort as she did not attend the WiF training prior to migrating and did not fit our selection criteria. However, such women who refuse to attend the training, and their reasons for the refusal is also included in our evaluation.

7.4 PARTICIPANTS’ EXPECTATIONS FRUSTRATED

A majority of the participants hoped to receive practical assistance from the NGO. Renu considers a ‘good’ visa to be a guarantee of ‘safe migration’ and she enlisted with the expectation that such a visa would be provided – showing little interest in anything else.

They only talked about ideas. I did not understand these things. I did not pay much attention either. I was only thinking about getting a visa. I was obsessed with the idea and nothing else entered my head.

A majority of the participants (59.1 per cent) entertained the same hope as Renu though the WiF programme does not provide visas. On demand, the NGO would give addresses of recruiting agencies officially licensed to handle visas for women and insist that women should not depend on *dalals*. As pointed out, this recommendation caused general consternation among participants as they wondered how a woman could organise her migration without the assistance of a *dalal*. Compared to a boatman taking passengers across a river, or a bridge linking one shore to the other, a ‘good’ *dalal* is deemed essential

by the women.¹⁶ Possibly in response to these protests, the NGO later modified their message about *dalals* in the course of the research.

TABLE 15: COHORT WOMEN'S EXPECTATIONS FROM THE TRAINING

	Number	%
To be provided with 'good visa'	27	55.1
To get assistance if difficulties are faced abroad	16	32.7
A few messages appreciated but did not suffice to fulfil expectations	14	28.6
To obtain a loan from the Probashi Kallyan Bank	12	24.5
To get assistance for passport application	6	12.2
No specific expectation	7	14.3
To get assistance in opening a bank account	3	6.1
To get a 'certificate'	1	2.0
Missing info	3	6.1

Source: WiF Study 2015–17. Multiple answers recorded.

The WiF messages generally echo official government discourses regarding services offered to migrant workers. Women are informed of the procedures and costs in obtaining a passport and are advised to file the application without recourse to a paid intermediary. One woman followed this advice, but after facing numerous hassles and delays she went to a *dalal* like everyone else. Another attractive proposition is the possibility of obtaining a loan from the Probashi Kallyan Bank, and one quarter of the women interviewed mentioned this was a major reason for enlisting in the training. To the best of our knowledge, however, no one in any of the 3 sites under study obtained such a loan. One husband of a migrant woman voiced his frustration in this regard:

My wife wanted a loan from the PKB [Probashi Kollan Bank]. The NGO made us dream about this but it is a promise that could not be delivered. They lied to us. We lost money and time. Because of all

16. For a discussion of the *dalal*, see Watson, S and Blanchet, T. 'Bangladeshi migrant women's pathways to employment: 'To cross a river one needs a bridge'. Paper presented at *Migrating out of Poverty: From Evidence to Policy Conference*, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, 28 March 2017.

the hassle, my wife missed a flight and had to postpone her departure. The NGO said that after handing over all documents we would get the loan within 2 days. To get this loan, we spent 4,000 Taka. We collected everything required and, in the end, we got only harassment. Getting 3 guarantors was particularly difficult. We are a test case. We can now tell anyone who wants to hear that all these beautiful words about getting a loan are pure lies... That experience has been a great disappointment. We lost our trust in the NGO.

The NGO knows (or should know) the poor performance of the government agency, so the question is why they would promote a service so uncritically. One NGO manager commented that documenting the applications that women filed for the bank loan can be useful for the NGO's advocacy work. But why use these women – many poor and hard-pressed – as instruments for research? As the husband above comments, the unfulfilled promises resulted in the loss of trust for the NGO.¹⁷

Another example is advice given to open bank accounts. Women are told to open one bank account for family needs and another for personal savings, but which documents are needed and how to proceed are not explained. Amiron opened a bank account and found out after she migrated that the account had become dormant as she failed to deposit money in due time, but no one explained this rule to her. Trainers describe official procedures without considering the practical difficulties women may encounter in obtaining the service. The NGO also exaggerates the extent of its own services, like the helpline. The social worker answering the calls, in spite of her good will, simply cannot deal with crises abroad. There is also no service around the clock and with time differences and difficulties in accessing a phone for migrant women, we found that the helpline has little impact overall. The limitation of this service is well documented in one case that we followed closely.

7.5 WOMEN LABOUR MIGRATION PROMOTED

At the pre-decision orientations, the trainers say to the women: You may not think of migration today but later on you may consider the possibility. The government has given you permission and

17. For a critical assessment of this bank, see 'Probashi Kallyan Bank outlives its utility', Arafat Ara, *The Financial Express*, 17 March 2017; 'Government fails to make Probashi Kallyan Bank effective' *New Age*, 5 September. 2015.

women can now migrate legally and openly. They need not hide, as in the past. At the end of the first day, trainers ask how many women are interested in migrating and the number of those raising their hand is markedly higher than earlier in the day when the same question was put to them. The new number is inscribed on the report sheet. Is the recorded increase interpreted as the successful delivery of the WiF messages? It certainly appears so.

Trainers and fieldworkers denied they were promoting women labour migration and pointed out that the WiF messages could also convince a woman not to migrate as she weighed the costs and benefits. They say that their purpose is to encourage women to take a 'rational' decision and make an informed choice. Whatever the intention, there is no doubt that participation in the training boosted interest in migration for many women who never thought of migrating before. It is worth noting, that the stigmatisation migrant women suffered in the past, and still do to some extent today, is brushed aside in these training sessions. Messages stress that women have rights and migrating legally for work is a legitimate option. Legal migrants sign contracts that stipulate employer's obligations and workers entitlements. These 'rights' convinced some women that risks were minimal and they lost their fears about migration. Many underestimated the difficulties they would face in convincing their husband and other family members that migration is now a respectable option, as will be shown in the next section. The 11 women who considered themselves misled by the WiF messages were originally among the most enthusiastic participants in the training. After they 'failed' migration, they became the most critical blaming the NGO for the false sense of security the training had instilled in them. They received partial or inaccurate information and the 'rights' announced were meaningless abroad and could not be claimed.

7.6 MESSAGES USEFUL HERE BUT DANGEROUS TO APPLY ABROAD

Women's appreciation of the training commonly distinguished between information and advice that could be useful in their own society but could not apply abroad and would even be risky to attempt. The rights one may claim at home should not be expected abroad. There was wide consensus on this point and it would be foolish, indeed dangerous,

to pretend otherwise. For example, advice given to negotiate with the employer in case of conflict was judged inapplicable, regardless of language skills. An experienced migrant commented:

I liked the messages. But what one needs to know to succeed abroad is not part of it. This is not a training to succeed abroad. This is good to look after oneself here. All this talk about rights, I don't believe it. Here in my own place, I have rights but abroad I must do as I am told. All this talk about patiently negotiating with the employer is nonsense. This is not the way it works abroad.

Another woman in her mid-thirties with 3 migration episodes and considerable 'success' compares the situation of a migrant woman in her employer's home to that of a new wife in her in-laws' home. A new wife (*nuton bou*) is expected to serve all the members of the household patiently and selflessly, and forget her own needs. Even though marriage practices are changing, this notion is still powerful. The statement above may be a reaction to the trainer's affirmation that migrant women have rights in the house of their employers. A third woman, aged 42 and recently widowed, claimed to have enjoyed rights, power and freedom within her own family. Yet, when she opted for migration, she 'knew' that one should be mentally prepared for any kind of work.

I knew what it means to go abroad. It means selling oneself. It means handing over the key, surrendering. It means going by their wishes.

Even when accepting to "hand over the key", candidates for migration still may not be successful. The woman quoted above returned after two months unable to complete her contract, as her body could not cope with the demands of the employer. One is reminded here of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory.¹⁸ There could be a serious mismatch (*déchirement* is the word Bourdieu uses) between dispositions incorporated earlier (for example, on sexual behaviour) and the requirement of the job (in this case commercial sex). Agents undergoing such *déchirement* generally acquire greater awareness of what they had taken for granted, says Bourdieu. Case stories amply demonstrate that migration, more than training, is the disturbing experience and the eye opener.

18. In *Méditations pascaliennes*, collection Liber, Seuil, 1997, p.190-191

At the pre-departure training, some of the protective techniques demonstrated, such as the use of knife, blade, spray, or judo techniques are deemed totally inappropriate for use abroad. Again, experienced migrants were especially vocal in their criticisms of these suggestions.

I got interested in all these techniques to protect oneself from aggression: blade, hit at sensitive places, etc. But how could one use such techniques abroad. You would be sent to jail if you did. These techniques are good for here, in one's own country.

Experienced migrants underlined the limitation of the training exercise as a whole:

You can give all the trainings you like but the truth of the matter is that if one cannot adjust... the training will have no effect. And one learns where and when one needs to learn. It does not happen in a classroom.

TABLE 16: RESPONDENTS REACTIONS REGARDING MESSAGES

What do you think about the messages given at the training?	Number	%
Good for women living here but not appropriate abroad	18	36.7
Migration without <i>dalal</i> impossible. The NGO gives wrong advice	16	32.7
Messages alone do not ensure success or security abroad	13	26.5
Good to hear about women rights and gender roles	14	28.6
Information about health, documents, bank account useful	2	4.1
Useless to make a success of migration	7	15.9
Can't share these messages with my husband	6	12.2
Can't change my mind, will still follow <i>dalals</i> /relatives' advice	4	8.2
Useful if crisis occurs abroad	2	4.1
Missing info	2	4.1

Source: WiF Study 2015–17. Multiple answers recorded.

7.7 “THIS KIND OF TALK IS NOT FOR US”

Throughout the training the term *amra* (us) is used intentionally to create a sense of togetherness and erase social distance between trainers and participants, a strategy that was effective to some extent.

The trainers were sisters from Dhaka. They wore beautiful clothes and they spoke very well.

I liked everything about the training. The way the sister talked, the food... But if you ask me what was said I could not tell you. I forgot most of it.

However, these words cannot erase the social distance between trainers and participants (or that between researchers and the cohort women for that matter). No matter how pleasant the environment was and how respectfully the NGO staff behaved, the ‘they’ and the ‘us’ always re-surfaced. Asha, a 45-year old illiterate woman who attended the WiF training after a life of struggle and one migration episode commented:

I liked what they said about rights. There is nothing wrong with these beautiful words. But this kind of talk is not for us. It is good for educated people like you [pointing to the researcher]. What do we do with these nice words? We cannot implement them.

Asha observed that the language of the trainers was not ‘their’ language and, most importantly, that she does not have the ability to realise the ‘rights’ proclaimed. Asha appreciates the aesthetics of a discourse but has no illusion about implementation. Renu is another woman who reacted with disbelief, and even anger, to the discussions around rights. Considering the deprivations that she suffered in her life, these ‘beautiful words’ plunged her into a depressive mood. At the age of 34, Renu has no children, family or home. Her parents died of tuberculosis when she was a child and she never went to school. At the age of 14, her brothers arranged a marriage but Renu refused to go to the husband when she found out that not only was he much older but also had another wife. Her brothers rejected her as a result. Renu then worked in different factories before migrating thrice – being robbed of her earnings each time. When we met her, she had found refuge at the *akhra* of a *pir*.

What to tell you about rights? I did not like what I heard at the training. It made

me sad and angry. From birth, I did not get any rights. Two husbands cheated me. Everybody cheated me. I have two assets that give me some rights: my body and the money I earn from it.

“Granting ‘humanity’ to everyone in a purely formal way amounts to exclude, under the cover of ‘humanity’, all those dispossessed of the means to realise it”, wrote Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁹ In their own way, Asha and Renu confirm the sociologists’ words. Even though migration provided some economic gains, they have been largely deprived of the social, cultural and symbolic capital, which makes a person valued. Both women earned (and learned) with their bodies. When we met them, both had become the fervent followers of a *pir*, surrendering to a ‘living saint’ that others in the village regard as an exploiter of women’s credulity. Interestingly, 5 of the 14 cohort women in site 2 were followers of the same *pir*. Describing such cult is outside the scope of this report. Let it only be said that the dispositions cultivated among *pir* followers (the surrendering) stand diametrically opposed to the ‘rational’ attitude in decision-making promoted at the WiF training.

Those who are pir followers are not concerned with material wealth. They seek their path, try to serve their pir, help others, offer them shelter, feed them... Girls exposed to predators come here to get shelter. The pir has the power to protect them. (Raju, a woman pir follower who administers Renu’s remittances)

7.8 ON THE NOTION OF RIGHTS

In the first round of interviews, over a quarter of the women stated their appreciation of messages on rights. One would expect a larger proportion of participants expressing a favourable opinion in this regard, but ‘rights’ are a complicated matter. How do normative roles at different stages of their life allow women of different socio-economic backgrounds to claim rights? The WiF training announced universal rights that women should enjoy as women, as workers and as citizen. It hardly touched upon issues of applicability.

Throughout the research, we returned to the notion of rights. As mentioned, some women confidently asserted having been able to exert rights, power and freedom within the family. They

claimed they had a good understanding of these notions and the WiF training did not enhance their knowledge. These women are often middle age and de facto head of family. Except one woman who had been candidate at a local election, none claimed or expected ‘rights’, power and influence beyond the family. Candidates for migration on the whole do not belong to powerful families.

I can take some decisions for the household. No one outside the family wants to hear my opinion. I am not the wife of any Chairman, Member or Leader. I am a small fish.

Exceptional situations may also create conditions for women to exert exceptional rights but with the end of the exception, ‘normality’ is restored. This is what happened to Parul, described earlier. Being the eldest among siblings, she took a factory job at the age of 13 to provide for her sisters and brother. For several years, her position gave her considerable ‘rights’, power and influence but as her sisters and brother grew up and started earning, Parul lost her ascendancy. Following a tragic incident, she gave up her factory job and became dependent on her siblings, serving their needs for her keep. The situation then became completely reversed. When her brother married and demanded to bring his new wife at home (re-affirming virilocality as the dominant norm), Parul was pressed to vacate the parental home. She then placed her hope in migration. Seeking to earn by all means, she sought to establish a new base and (re)claim some rights. Parul migrated to Saudi Arabia and was sent to a brothel in Dammam. She had already stated that to achieve the ‘rights’ she hoped to (re)claim, if need be, she would accept any work, including sex work.

When I was raped, I did not agree but this time I accepted.

Parul’s dreams of acquiring ‘rights’ with money earned in any way were not realised. She was not suited for the brothel job and was sent back after 6 weeks. Her life then took a new turn. She became a *fakirni*, a healer claiming spiritual power switching to a different register. She no longer spoke of ‘rights’. At the last meeting, Parul was drifting from *mazar* to *mazar*.²⁰

Sabiha also experienced a loss of ‘rights’. She joined a factory to provide for her three children

19. Op. cit., p. 80 (author’s own translation).

20. Shrine associated to a *pir*, or living saint, in the Islamic tradition. *Mazars* are not sectarian and devotees may come from a wide range of backgrounds and be members of different religions.

when her husband got sick. She became head of family when he died and enjoyed a degree of power and autonomy. Her two sons are now adults. They can provide for her and they categorically refuse their mother the 'right' to migrate, let alone work outside the home. Like Parul, Sabiha lost the 'rights' she once enjoyed.

In this family, I am no better than a servant. I work and I get fed. I have not earned for many years. This is why I have no value. My sons believe that their honour would suffer if I went abroad at my age. My sons, and many people here, do not understand that food and clothing in not all one needs and desires in life.

The diktat of rank and respectability may not accord with the 'rights' proclaimed at the training. For several women, the discourse on women's rights in an all-women assembly raises no difficulty, but it is too controversial even to be repeated at home in front of husbands.

All this talk about rights, I liked it very much but there is no way I can share it with my husband. He would feel insulted and would not tolerate it.

In my village, if husbands knew, they would not allow their wives to listen to such messages. Husbands want to rule over their wives and keep check on them.

These two women, one in her mid-twenties and the other in her early-thirties, are married to men who strongly oppose their migration. So, what is left of the discourse on rights once the training is over? Evaluating the long-term impact of exposure to the notion of 'rights' is not a simple affair, even more so as points of view change in the course of time. The message could be forgotten for a while but like a seed remaining dormant for a season, it could well germinate and grow later when conditions are adequate.

8. 'Failed' migration: Three case histories

Some of the most severe critiques of the WiF training were expressed by women who migrated for the first time after hearing about

and expecting 'safe migration'. We present here the case histories of three women who sought repatriation after being given 'work' that they were not contracted for and were not willing to provide. The rights they were led to expect in the WiF training were found to be non-existent. In the first interviews soon after their return, the women are angry and highly critical of the WiF messages. Met again a year later, their assessment is more nuanced as they reflect on a succession of events. Repatriation is a moment of relief and joy in their entourage, but suspicion soon follows and their return leads to embarrassing questions. Relationships with the husband and other family members deteriorates and a sense of personal failure grows. If 'successful' migration means earning well and preserving one's reputation, these women fare badly on both counts. In these trying circumstances, WiF messages are remembered and the notion of 'rights' re-considered.

8.1 CASE ONE: SHIKHA

Shikha is 23 years old and married with one child. She is secretly preparing her migration when she hears of the WiF training, which she eagerly joins. Hoping to work in a garment factory, a neighbour convinces her to leave for Saudi Arabia with a 'house' visa instead. On the eve of her departure, her worried mother calls upon the NGO fieldworker who is their neighbour seeking re-assurance. The latter expresses her faith in the efficacy of the WiF training and tells the mother not to fear – Shikha is well equipped to deal with the situation abroad.

Eleven days after arrival, a distressed Shikha calls her husband and her mother and demands to be repatriated. She makes several phone calls during the following two days. The fieldworker recommends that the phone be kept ringing. According to the latter, Shikha is acting childish and is not taking sufficient time to adjust. However, sensing that her daughter could be in danger, the mother picks up the phone and takes her daughter's distress seriously. Shikha also calls the NGO helpline from the employer's home. The social worker tells her to stay put, but two days later Shikha runs away carrying a copy of her papers. She is rapidly picked up by the police who call her employer and request him to drive Shikha to the employment agency. Shikha calls the NGO again from the agency. The complicated situation in which Shikha finds herself, the inability

of the NGO social worker to understand a problem that Shikha cannot reveal, the social worker's impatience, the technical difficulties with the line repeatedly being cut off show the limitations of a service repeatedly highlighted at the training.²¹

At the NGO office, one of the trainers remembers Shikha as an exemplary participant. How could this happen? Something obviously went very wrong. One of our researchers by chance is present at the NGO office when Shikha calls from Saudi Arabia and follows the conversation. Shikha returns within two months of her departure and is interviewed one week later. Her husband and her mother had been interviewed 3 times already. Note that Shikha is not part of the original cohort. She is included as an additional case from round 2.

Shikha (20 May 2016)

My passport says I am 27 years old, but my real age is 23. I left on the 17th of March and returned on the 13th of May... I first had a passport made for 8,000 Taka... I stole money from my husband's shop to pay for it. I did all of this in secrecy... Seeing how well migrant women did, I wanted to do the same... When I heard that... [the NGO] is offering training to women planning to go abroad, I asked the fieldworker to include me. I attended the 2-day and the 5-day training... My husband did not agree to my departure. He loves me very much and I could finally convince him... My hope was to go to Jordan with a garment visa. But I fell in a trap. I listened to the sweet talk of a neighbour and I left for Saudi Arabia instead... I am responsible for my bad luck. That woman works for her nephew who is a big dalal... in Fakirapool. They promised me a garment job in Saudi Arabia, they talked of good salary, light work, free transport, board and lodging. I would get a 2-year visa with the possibility to extend for 1 more year. I needed to pay only 30,000 Taka. I rapidly gave my consent. My husband and my mother said I should take time, but I did not listen.

At the airport [in Dhaka], I had a copy of my visa made in a hurry. I got this idea from...

[the NGO] and I thank them for it. I left a copy of my documents with my husband and took another set with me hiding it in my clothes... I was picked up at the airport [in Saudi Arabia] and taken to the agency office. From there, the employer took me to Riyadh. I rapidly understood that I was given a house visa. The employer had 11 children, 4 sons and 7 daughters. His wife was pregnant. In that country, when a wife is pregnant, the husband can sleep with the maid. This is their custom. The wife made me understand that she had no objection. The grownup sons also disturbed me. I was given a room below the staircase, which had no lock on the door. Two days after my arrival, the trouble began. I could not accept this. I fled from the house on the 17th day.

In this time, I phoned... [the NGO] office... A woman picked up the phone... She said, why do you want to come back. I could not tell her the real reason, I spoke about the food I could not eat and that I felt depressed. She kept asking me if there was any other reason, but I did not reveal the real problem. I feared for my honour and my reputation. She insisted. She said she was all alone and I could speak freely but I did not believe her... I called my family several times... I cried a lot. I said I would die if I was forced to stay... Two days after these phone calls, I fled my employer's house. Again, I called... [the NGO] from the agency office. Communication was difficult. I could not tell them where I was. They got annoyed with me. I handed the phone to a Bangladeshi man nearby and he told them... [the NGO] told me not to move from there. They said at least 3 to 4 months would be required to get me repatriated through government channels. My guardians went to the... [NGO] office. They were told that at least 150,000 Taka would have to be paid and they repeated it would take 3 to 4 months. Hearing this, my husband was a bit rude with them. I had done everything according to their instructions. They promised we would get help but that is all they had to say. My husband and my

21. Presented as part of a package of services that the NGO offers to migrant women, the help line predates the WiF programme and received funding from another source. Yet, for women participating in the WiF programme, the possibility to call a help line contributes in no small way to the assurance of 'safe migration'.

mother did not return to the... [NGO] office and I no longer communicated with them.

Desperate to bring back his wife, the husband went to the agency in Fakirapool and pleaded with his mother-in-law and his child at his side. In the end, the agency agreed to send back Shikha if the family paid 50,000 Taka. Assets were sold in a hurry, the money paid and Shikha was back 4 days later. The rapid denouement of this affair for a cost much lower than what the NGO had announced made Shikha and her husband even more critical towards the NGO's offer of assistance.

Shikha's husband

... [the NGO] did not provide any help, to the contrary, they complicated matters and after visiting their office we felt even more depressed. Already, we were under pressure, as we did not share our problem with anyone. When... [the NGO] talked of 3 to 4 months before Shikha could come back and cost that could run as high as 150,000 Taka, I got very angry. My mother-in-law asked me to remain calm. She said we should beg for help, not demand it outright... I went to the agency. My mother-in-law cried. We behaved as though we were the ones who had done something wrong. We even brought my daughter to the office and prayed to them to bring back her mother. We pleaded and kept our head low. At one stage, someone in that office said that if we paid 50,000 Taka, Shikha could be brought back. We raised the amount and brought it to the office without telling anything to relatives and neighbours. We gave the money on the 9th May and Shikha was back on the 13th.

Shikha returned determined never to migrate again.

Shikha (20 May 2016)

I spent 1 month and 8 days at the agency office. I don't want to talk about what I saw there. I don't want to remember it. Before I left, I promised my husband on the Quran that I would not allow anyone to touch my body. I took beatings, but I kept my word. How can I explain this to people? I feared all the time ... I will never advise

anybody to go. I have seen it now. Those who are involved in the work I refused will not talk about it either. I don't need money if it requires selling my honour. Those who need money, they can do it.

Ten months later, Shikha's opinion had changed and she was considering migrating again.

Shikha, (12 March 2017)

When I came back, I felt welcome. My family was pleased to see me ... They cried with me on the phone ... My husband and my mother did everything in their power to rescue me. But less than a week after my return, they started blaming me. They said I wasted their time, their money and their reputation. My husband got back part of the money he spent for me, but he still blames me. He says: I left dancing-dancing [all excited] and I came back the same way. He is right. I left and came back without thinking much. I was wrong. If I had taken the time, I would not have come back so quickly. I am not the only one who faced a proposition such as the employer made to me. Many women face the same. Employers use their maids and to earn more they propose them to other men. There are also employers who bring women only to do a business out of them. What would have happened if I had accepted I do not know because I refused from the start. Now I think I should have accepted. This is not such difficult work. I could manage. I could have left when considering it was enough. I would have come back with some money then.

Shikha clearly had lost much of her fears. She had wanted to safeguard the good relationship with her husband, but it deteriorated anyway. She worried about losing her reputation but could see that successful migrant women (those likely to put up with employers' demands) are admired for the money they earn. The fear of committing 'sin' no longer appears in her speech. What employers abroad request of their *khedima*,²² Shikha now calls 'work' and she goes on explaining with remarkable details the different arrangements under which women are employed in commercial sex. This is not such difficult 'work', she says.

22. Arabic word for female servant or domestic worker commonly used in Bangla conversation. Pronounced 'khaddama', it also depicts a role specific to Middle East societies.

I am a good-looking woman and I am young. I had the ability to do the work I was given abroad. But I refused. I feared for three reasons: my husband, judgment after death and what society and neighbours would say. I could have applied... [the NGO] training there but I did not. That is why I came back. Now, I think this was a good time for me to accept this work.

The way in which Shikha retrospectively remembers the WiF messages on 'rights' is interesting. It seems to include the right to engage in work (any kind of work) without fear.

My family and I have been very critical of... [the NGO]. I still do not like their staff but I like the messages I heard at the training. I did not realize when I left and immediately after my return the importance of these words. They had no influence on me to begin with, but I shall remember them for the rest of my life because my eyes were opened.

Shikha is now rebelling against her husband and the norms the *samaj* imposes on her. She says she would migrate again and may well accept the work proposed abroad. Hers is an affirmation of individual freedom to pursue her ambitions and become a 'successful' woman, though the interpretation Shikha makes of her 'rights' in the context of migration may not be the one intended at the WiF training. It may be recalled that the WiF programme recognised only two occupations, namely paid domestic work and garment factory work.

One researcher met with Shikha again in November 2017. She had given birth to a second child and her husband was employed as a long-distance driver. Shikha was not planning to migrate for the time being but she is not happy with her present situation. Incidentally, her story, which received much publicity locally, contributed to a loss of credit for the NGO implementing the WiF programme.

8.2 CASE TWO: LILY

Lily is a 32-year-old woman living with her elderly father after a tumultuous and violent marriage ended in divorce. Her two children are left with her ex-husband. She is first interviewed as she prepares to migrate to Jordan having completed the 2 day pre-decision orientation. Lily married into a prosperous family and she never had to work for a living before. Her divorce left her in a precarious

situation, and so her aunt and cousin suggested she migrates. Reluctant at first, her elderly father accepted the proposition and spent his meagre savings to cover the cost. Lily opted for Jordan, a country that in her eyes, offers better guarantees than Saudi Arabia. At the first interview, she is confident and feels well equipped. Lily is part of the original cohort and is interviewed from round one.

Lily (9 December 2015)

... [the NGO fieldworker] invited me to join the 2-day training. I thought it would be good if I left with all the right information... I liked the way the sisters spoke.

Lily left with a 'house' visa on 26 December 2015. She returned on 16 February 2016 in a very perturbed state. The researcher met with her on February 22nd in the midst of a tumultuous family reunion and again on March 1st, in a quiet location. Still very upset, she agreed to tell her story.

Lily (1 March, 2016)

I had a house visa but in Jordan I was given forbidden work (nishidho kaj). Don't you understand? 'nishidho'. I earned with my body, I sold my honour. I allowed men to use my most precious wealth... Did I need to go abroad to do this kind of work? There are special places where you can do just the same in [the city where she grew up in Bangladesh]. My husband was a regular client in those places. We paid 70,000 Taka to do this rotten work. For this, I blame my aunt, my cousin and the dalal. I did not have much desire to go abroad in the first place. I never worked for money before... I am an educated woman... I have always been very cautious. But this time, I trusted them and I lost everything... I feel ashamed of myself. This is a new feeling for me. At the employer's house, I was forced to do this work. To avoid doing it, I kept a copy of the Quran on my chest. I held it as a shield but could not escape. I was there for 24 days. At the office, I had to do it also to be able to return home...

I told the employer I did not want to stay and he took me to the office. I said the same thing there but no one listened. I dialled the... [NGO] helpline but no one received the call. I understood I was all-alone and I

would have to solve my problem. I knew father did not have the money [they asked for] for repatriation and I did not want to rot there. I decided to do the necessary. I had no choice. I earned my return ticket... I asked the office people how many days it would take to earn 80,000 Taka. They told me I should just work, and they would inform me when the necessary amount would be earned. After 22 days, they bought my ticket and took me to the airport. I am angry with the NGO... [the fieldworker] is from here. I will not say anything to her. What I have to say, I will say to others. Their nice words, what utility did they have? I took the 2-day training. What I learned was of no use here and it did not help me to manage problems abroad either. What can one learn in 2 days, anyway? How can one change what has been instilled from birth? How can one acquire new convictions, develop courage and strength? How is that possible? The... [NGO] people did not know I had come back. The fieldworker met me by chance and she was astonished to see me.

Lily was interviewed two more times. During the third round, she was working in a local factory, not earning much but pleased to contribute to the household and pay for her father's medicines. Her references to having been forcibly engaged in 'forbidden' work were gone – she now mentioned returning in a very perturbed state but gave a different explanation. She says her husband bewitched her and treatment to neutralise the harmful effect of the *chalan kora* started before she returned. Lily repeats the story the *dalal* – a distant relative – circulated about her.

Lily (15 and 22 July, 2016)

... I came back after 22 days. I spent 10 days at the employer's home and 12 days at the agency. The first week, I was fine. The second week, I don't know what happened, I had burning sensations, I felt restless, I could not sleep. Uncle [the *dalal*] went to a *fakir* and explained to him that my husband had bewitched me (*chalan kora*) in such a way that I could not stay quiet. My husband was angry because I had divorced him. It was feared that he had used such strong witchcraft that I could have died if uncle and father had not treated me. If you had seen me when I came back, you

would have understood my condition. I was hardly alive. When I was abroad, I was not myself. I was terrorized. I could not sleep. I thought somebody might kill me.

This time, Lily described her stay in Jordan as much shorter – 22 days – a discrepancy with her earlier account, which is puzzling. Her passport was checked, and the dates stamped were those she gave (with precision) in the first place. Why has she 'shortened' her stay abroad? Lily said that she remembers the beginning and the end but she has 'forgotten' the period in between. The intolerable has now been blacked out. The story the *dalal* circulates about her – apart from casting him in a good role – could fit with the traumatic events Lily experienced in her marriage. These are 'facts' about which there is agreement. It makes sense. The shameful, the unacceptable that occurred abroad can be 'forgotten'. Lily, her father, and relatives all subscribe to this new story: her husband has bewitched her and this is why Lily 'lost her mind' and could not stay abroad. The *dalal* and her father 'treat' her with amulets and holy water and the harm is neutralised.

Lily was interviewed again 8 months later. She no longer has a 'black out' in her memories, and she is considering migrating again.

Lily (10 March 2017)

What I told you first truly happened. I was so upset then. I did not hide anything. Today, I am fine ... After my return, I did not do anything for some time. Then I took a job. The first month I did not like it. But when I received the first salary I was pleased and after some time I liked my work as well... I tell my friends that I have changed... The Lily Aktar that was born after this crisis can speak up and can be strong. The previous Lily Aktar never imagined that she would have to work for a living but now I accept this. I used to live like a princess, then I fell into a hole and now my life is more like a plain field. When I was a princess, I was dependant on others... This is the way my mother brought me up. She did not prepare me for life... Something positive came out of my migration. I was hit and that woke me up... My reputation here is that I do not pick up fights. After my return, many people said: How could such a soft spoken and withdrawn girl succeed abroad. She did not have the right qualifications...

Sister, now I go out every day and I enjoy it. I go to the market and I can do everything. Some of my relatives think I am too free. They think I should marry but I will do so only if I choose to. I used to say that I went abroad because of... [the NGO]. When I came back I blamed them. Now, I believe that what I learned at the training helped me to find my way and reach the state I am in now.

Lily has turned a page – the experience abroad, painful as it was, transformed her and she finds strength in a new situation. She also feels more positive about the NGO training and is considering migrating again, an astonishing declaration considering how she abhorred the idea a year earlier.

I will go abroad again but this time I will leave knowing what to expect. I will show my relatives that I am not a born loser and that I can succeed. My aunts keep saying that I am no good, that I failed marriage, that I failed migration and nothing I undertake ever succeeds.

This time, Lily no longer speaks of preserving her greatest wealth, and her fear and precautions are gone. She wants to prove that she is not a loser and sees migration as a path to ‘success’. Has Lily ‘forgotten’ (again) her experience abroad? Does she imagine she can now find the strength to cope? The Lily who earlier doubted that one could change dispositions instilled from birth, now expresses tremendous confidence in her ability to adapt. She is incorporating habits corresponding to the position of a divorcee in an environment where women cannot afford to act ‘like princesses’. After her divorce, Lily experienced migration of a kind. The conservative and financially secure middle class family in which she grew up does not send its women to work abroad, let alone to work outside the home, but here they do.

8.3 CASE THREE: LOTIKA

Lotika’s case history was added during the third round of interviews, as she had just returned from Qatar four months after departure. Lotika is 28 years old and married with two children. She used to work in a garment factory earning reasonably well but was encouraged to migrate by the NGO fieldworker, who also convinced her to enrol in the training. A *dalal* spotted her at

training and further convinced her husband.

Lotika (13–14 July 2016)

Before I went abroad, my husband and I had a good income and we lived well. I used to earn [monthly] 5,000–6,000 Taka and even 7,000 Taka at the time of Eid... We lived in... [a bad place] but rented a solid house. We organized a good environment for our daughters... I fell into a trap when I attended the NGO training... [the fieldworker] told me that they offered training to women intending to go abroad and provided them with assistance... I worked at the factory at the time. She came to me at night or on Fridays... I never thought of going abroad before. But after hearing her, I began to dream about migration. I thought I have been working in a factory for many years now. Why not try. I gave up my job in January 2016. I needed to be free for the trainings [NGO and government]. My husband was also pleased with my decision... I went to the NGO training and this is how Ali dalal got to know I was interested in migration... He came to our place and talked to my husband. He spoke so well. We believed him... I had a passport made... All in all, we spent 67,000 Taka. We used our savings. I did not mind spending because I had so much hope. Everything was done in a rush... Ali Dalal said my visa was for housework, but I could also do sewing on the side. The promised salary was 20,000 Taka, almost 4 times what I earned... I returned on 18th June 2016. The salary was 15,000 Taka. I slept in the drawing room and the work was not at all what I had expected. I did not like the food, the environment and the behaviour of the employer... Where were the rights the NGO had talked about? Where were the promises of the dalal? I quickly decided that I would not stay but I had to earn a bit of money first. I could not come back empty handed. My husband would not take it well and people would raise questions. I wanted to change job, but I could not go anywhere. I tried to cope for some time, but then, they sat over me to get me into their business... I stopped eating so that the employer sends me back. In the end, he bought my ticket and gave me 30,000 Taka.

In the rush of my departure, I forgot to take the helpline number, but I doubt I would have been able to use it because I was not free to use a phone... Presently, I feel very bad inside, but I cannot show it outside... I admit there is work and good income to be made abroad but on the condition that one sells oneself. If you accept to surrender in this way, you get appreciated. It is not true that Bangladeshi women are not valued abroad. When they listen to the employer and do as he wishes, they are fine. But everyone cannot sell oneself. I could not... The little I did was forced upon me and I believe Allah will forgive me... I will join the factory on 1st August. I want to forget that experience and look ahead... I will never go abroad again... I have spoken to you today... I do not know what you think of me but do not consider me a bad woman. I was a victim of circumstances... Do not tell my story to anyone. People could easily despise me. I heard about rights at the NGO training but got none of those. I had a good job here. Why did I listen to... [the fieldworker] and the dalal? I got smeared with filth because of them.

Lotika and her husband saw no major difference in the enticing discourses of either the NGO fieldworker or the *dalal*. “Equipped with a torch light”, both showed “a clean and beautiful path”, minimising risks and hiding the kind of work a woman may be called to do in order to ‘succeed’ abroad.

Lotika’s husband in a separate interview (15 July 2016)

I do not know if you will believe me, but we became enthusiastic because of... [the NGO] and Ali Dalal. Equipped with a torchlight, we saw a clean and beautiful path. Lotika did not need to go abroad. We had a good income here. I became too greedy and fell in a trap. That is why I enlisted her for the NGO training. Ali Dalal then took his chance. We had the money in hand and we could take the decision very quickly.

The *dalal* pocketed 30,000 Taka as his fee, which Lotika and her husband paid without hesitation. Being a man, the *dalal* would not be

invited to the WiF training but women recruiters (*dalali*) have been known to participate.

Lotika told her story behind closed doors to a researcher that did not belong to her community. Like Lily, she warned not to repeat it to anyone in her entourage. Most returnees who ‘failed’ migration do not tell their story and those who speak out are not necessarily believed and can be ostracised, as seen earlier with Jahanara. Politics of story-telling and strategies of (re)presentation are complex. Some women may wish to speak out. But then, will they not suffer more abuse? Lotika did not want public exposure, and this desire for discretion ought to be respected.

Lotika was met by the researcher for two more interviews. The relationship with her husband continued to deteriorate. For example, she donated money to the mosque after her return and her husband interpreted the gesture as proof that she needed to amend for ‘sins’ committed abroad. The husband makes Lotika pay for her failure. The reputational damage he suffered (as the husband of a migrant woman) have not even been compensated by financial benefits and he is angry. At the last interview, Lotika was considering migrating again in spite of her earlier declaration never to do so, a *volte face* similar to that of Shikha and Lily. The pattern we see emerging is rather troubling.

A final interview with her husband confirmed that Lotika had migrated again to Saudi Arabia. The news he shared were not good – Lotika was in jail and he had no intention of intervening for her. Lotika further could not expect assistance from her brother and sister as she married a man they did not approve of, and relationships with them were severed. The husband returned to his village with their two children and we lost track of them. Meanwhile, unaware of these developments, the NGO fieldworker continued recruiting women for training.

8.4 ON RESEARCH METHODS

The three case histories presented here, which constitute just one part of the rich material collected in this research, may also serve to illustrate the research methods deployed. Rounds of interviews spreading over 18 months (and in some cases beyond) capture a series of moments that, following Kirsten Hasrup, we may call ‘anthropological presents’.²³ Juxtaposed one against the other, the

23. See Kirsten Hasrup who theorised these events of speech and action from which the anthropologist constructs its object. *Social Anthropology*, (1993), 1,2

narratives recorded at different times show the tortuous paths of migratory journeys, the initial impulse, the hope and the fear, the blacking out of intolerable occurrences, the changing perceptions, the transformations and the re-consideration of risks and benefits. This relatively long period allows for the recording of important changes in women's dispositions and life circumstances. We see that women who 'fail' migration (and some who succeed) do not resume the place they occupied before leaving home. Relationships with family members are altered, as migration changes the migrant's perspectives and family expectations. The profoundly transformative effects of cross border migration that we observed here has been found in our previous research as well.

Fewer rounds of interviews and a narrower time frame would not have captured many of the important changes that take place over time. Positions and identities here are not fixed or 'frozen', instead migrants are depicted journeying through a historical course with a 'before' and an 'after' and numerous pains, trials and tensions in between. Women who 'fail' migration and could qualify as victims of trafficking at one stage of their migratory journey, later emerge transformed with a new perspective and views of their future, having re- interpreted the past. This is how 'victims of trafficking' should not be essentialised and opposed to 'successful migrants' as these labels may characterise different phases in the migratory journey of a same person. Our research methods allow for the study of these transformative processes and may not serve well those holding strongly ideological and often polarised views on women labour migration. Yet, they more justly reflect migrant women's journeys in their complexity. Shahana, a 26-year-old woman who earned exceptionally well abroad after being cheated and abused makes a sobering assessment of her 'success'.

Those who go abroad cannot be winners in every way. There are always losses somewhere. All one can see is money. One can impress with land and beautiful buildings but what are the inner feelings, only the migrant knows. When I consider myself, I think I both lost and gained.

9. Cohort two: husbands and family members

To review, the first cohort originally had 40 women selected on the basis of their enrolment in the WiF training programme, and their intention to migrate. 9 more women were added to this sample, who migrated after hearing the WiF messages and returned early unable to satisfy the employer and complete their contract. One or several of the family members of these 49 women interviewed in several rounds constitute the second cohort. In this cohort, there are 57 respondents – 40 men and 17 women comprised of: 23 husbands, 12 mothers, 4 fathers, 4 brothers, 5 sons, and 9 individuals with other relationships. These interviews throw light on how women candidates for migration have been encouraged or discouraged in their migration, with it being precipitated, delayed or abandoned. Table 17 shows the number of interviews by relationship and site. Site 2 (Balupara) has the highest incidence of women labour migration and number of informants. Table 18 shows educational levels, which are remarkably low – 75 per cent are either illiterate or did not study beyond primary school.

TABLE 17: COHORT TWO: RELATIONSHIP WITH POTENTIAL MIGRANT WOMAN BY SITE

Relation	Site 1	Site 2 (Balupara)	Site 3	Total (%)
Husband	7	10	6	23 (41.3)
Mother	2	7	3	12 (20.6)
Father			4	4 (6.9)
Brother		3	1	4 (6.9)
Son	2	2	1	5 (8.6)
Maternal Uncle		2		2 (3.4)
Son-in-law		1		1 (1.7)
Daughter	1	1	1	3 (5.2)
Daughter-in-law	1			1 (1.7)
Pir and his wife		2		2 (3.4)
Total	13	28	16	57 (100)

Source: WiF Study 2015-17

TABLE 18: COHORT TWO: EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

Edu. Level	Husband	Mother	Father	Son	Brother	Others*	Total (%)
Nil	10	9	2		1	1	23 (42.9)
Up to V	5	2	2	3	2	2	16 (26.5)
VI-VIII	4			1	1	4	10 (14.3)
IX-X	3	1				2	6 (12.2)
SSC and HSC	1						1 (2.0)
BA /Fajel ²⁴				1			1 (2.0)
Total	23	12	4	5	4	9	57 (100.0)

Source: WiF Study 2015-17

9.1 INTERVIEWS WITH HUSBANDS

A majority of the women are married, and husbands form the largest group of interviewees. Most husbands could be interviewed and those missed out on the first round were met later on. One wife requested we did not interview her husband as it could endanger her security and the 'visiting' husbands of Balupara women also proved difficult to meet. Overall, 60 interviews were held with 23 husbands in 4 rounds.

TABLE 19: NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS WITH HUSBANDS PER ROUNDS

Location	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Total
Site 1	6	6	6		18
Site 2	7	8	6	1	22
Site 3	6	7	6	1	20
Total	19	21	18	2	60

Out of the 23 husbands interviewed, 9 opposed their wife's migration project, 7 supported it, 4 held inconsistent views and 3 were powerless and had no say in the matter.

Men who oppose their wife's migration

It should be pointed out that this relatively high level of opposition (39 percent of the interviewed husbands) is found amongst men whose wife wish to migrate and not among the general population. Husbands who oppose their wife's migration may

not always stop it but there are consequences for the marriage. These husbands are found in all sites, including Balupara. Such men generally consider their income sufficient to support family needs. They are 'real' men who can feed their family and they despise husbands who live off their wife's earning. They generally hold that migrant women lose their purity and honour and become *noshto* or 'spoiled'. The violence of the words some of them emit shows how threatening the proposition can be to their sense of manhood. Here is Sharif Mia:

My wife told me she wanted to go abroad to work. I told her clearly that the day she leaves, she is also walking away from me. She is my son's mother... She did what she wanted before marriage but, as a husband, it is my duty to keep her on the right path. Women who go abroad get defiled... In this way, their marriage ends. Only husbands without backbone stay married to such women. Those who are not repulsed by this, those who do not understand what a sin is, such husbands can stay. I am not one of those.

Sharif Mia has two wives. He met his second wife, Dina, at the garment factory where they both worked, her as a machine operator and him as a master cutter. They had a love affair, married and a child was born. Dina owned a home in Balupara and the couple moved there. For Sharif Mia, the place was convenient, close to his work place, cheap, and more comfortable. After giving birth, Dina stopped

24. Fajel is a qualification obtained in the Islamic education system equivalent to B.A.

working overtime and eventually quit her factory job under pressure from her husband. She has a son from a previous marriage that Sharif Mia would not accept. He also has a son with his first wife but does not regard their respective situations as equivalent. Although he mostly lives in Balupara, Sharif Mia declares his address to be in Gopalganj where his natal family and his first wife reside.

At home [Gopalganj], I live with my first wife and my 8-year-old son... All brothers and sisters are married and none of them live in a bustee-like place such as [Balupara]... In Gopalganj, women do not work abroad. Such move was unseen before. A few destitute women without husband migrate today. They are enticed by dalals who cheat them.

Using women's migration as the ultimate reference for a respectable society, Sharif Mia's patriarchal views are very clear. He positions his two wives in two radically different environments, the 'good' society where his first wife lives and the despicable bustee-like place where Dina and her family belong. Speaking of the latter, he says:

I don't like her family. They are without men, unruly. They are six sisters and her father is an elderly man. One sister works abroad. She sends visas to her husband and he recruits women. He sits at home and does nothing except looking for candidates for migration. He is not a real man. He lives with his mother-in-law and his 4 children. He depends on his wife's income. I am embarrassed to present him as my relative... I spend little time here. I don't socialize with people... [Dina] has high ambitions. She is a fighter. I don't like this... I asked her to give up her factory job.

Dina insists she would migrate in spite of her husband's opposition, but she still tried to save her marriage for the respectability it confers. Her father walked away from her mother when she was a child and the all-female household was the object of malevolent gossip. This left Dina with a bitter taste, and she wants to avoid finding herself in a similar situation. A new pregnancy delayed her departure, but she still did not give up her intention to migrate, as her mother and sisters

could offer support. At the last round, relationship between Dina and Sharif Mia had grown sour and violence regularly flared up.²⁵ Dina declared that she would definitely migrate and make her eldest son as the-man-of-the-house. She later migrated to Saudi Arabia, which we will discuss later.

Mohiuddin is another polygamist husband who praised an honour-bound society (*samaj*)²⁶ where wives do not migrate and mind their husband's authority. A long-route bus driver, he sleeps at different places depending on his itinerary. One of his wives and mother to his son, is a Balupara woman. He despises both the wife and the place.

I did not truly know about the place and its people before I signed a marriage contract. I met... [my wife] on the road. I made the mistake of having a relationship with her. I fell into a trap. I have come to understand that these people belong to the street. For them, everything is possible. I tried to restrain her and put her on the right path but did not succeed. I allowed her to migrate reluctantly. She would not have minded my word anyway. This was the first time, but I clearly did not give permission the second time. She defied me. I used to control her, and she accepted my rule to some degree, but I have now given up to save my honour... My true wife lives in Comilla. She never defies me because she belongs to the samaj. Here, there is no samaj. Women do as they please. They are free and daring whether they migrate or not.

Both of these polygamist husbands draw a 'moral' map of the territory in accordance with the incidence of women labour migration, locations reputed not to allow their women to migrate holding the highest ground. The discourse of the two men bears comparison with brothel clients who engage with 'fallen' women and return to their 'true' wives and the sanctity of their homes, the latter being the 'real' address from which social identity and rank are derived. The ability to move back and forth between sites (and women) without getting inherently stained/polluted – a kind of migration – is a man's privilege and a marker of their manhood. These men's positions are nonetheless highly ambiguous as they live in Balupara, at least part of

25. Mona left for Saudi Arabia on 1st January 2018.

26. *Samaj* here refers to a well-ordered moral society that upholds principles applying in a specific religious tradition. Abiding by its norms and values (and keeping women 'in their place') procures honour and respect to male-headed households. *Samaj* is a core

social formation of Bangladesh society, changing in time and space, yet recognisable in its continuity. A moral person is deemed to belong to the *samaj* and adhere to its principles. To say that an individual is without *samaj* is denigrating and insulting. The law of the State and the norms prevailing in local *samaj* may well differ. This could be the case for women labour migration, legal yet frowned up in local *samaj*.

the time, are married to Balupara women and have fathered children who grow up in that community. Their personal histories complicate the landscape.

A third husband in this group is Hashim, who married a Balupara woman but is monogamous. He met his wife, Kushi, when he was visiting the area with a friend. He liked the 14-year-old girl – then half his age – and proposed to marry her. They married and settled in Balupara. Now in her mid-twenties and a mother of two sons, Kushi is thinking of migration but Hashim will not hear of it. He does not allow his wife to work outside the home either.

I don't want my wife to work and to earn. Her job is to look after the house and take care of the children... No woman among my relatives have gone to work abroad but many have done so in her family... I personally do not like this. Her family is encouraging her to migrate. She listens to them and the idea of migration has entered her head like a virus. This has brought a lot of conflict... We have known no peace in the last 7 to 8 months. Quarrels, confrontations and violence are now regular occurrences.

At the last interview, Kushi said she had given up the idea of migration as her husband's behaviour has improved but Hashim does not trust her words because they live in Balupara where women's migration is a normal occurrence.

Kushi denies thinking about migrating now. But I hear from others that she is still seeking information. I think she has these ideas because we live here... I made my point very clear. I will not allow her to migrate... You have seen my home, the kind of clothes my wife wears. Do you think we are poor? I am a good husband because I am a good provider and I keep my wife happy... I don't believe women can maintain their purity when they work outside... Even if they want to remain good, they cannot... My wife is still young, and she is good looking. She will attract men. I can speak to you without shame. I do not want to share with someone else the woman I use.

The wives of these three men all pointed out that they could not share the WiF messages about women's rights with their husbands as it would cause more conflict.

Morshed is another husband in the same category. He lives in site 1, which is a more 'traditional' community where few women are employed in formal jobs and women labour migration is not easily accepted. At first, Morshed did not object to his wife's migration but later changed his mind, placing all kinds of obstacles in the way: their 16-year-old daughter could not be left behind unmarried and her marriage would have to be arranged first. Other objections followed. Eventually, Morshed refused to allow his wife to migrate even though he is struggling to feed the family. It should be noted that the risks his wife would incur should she migrate are not his main concern.

When I was thinking of sending my wife abroad, I did not fear for her, but for myself. The kind of talk I heard from men at the bazar was embarrassing. They made fun of husbands whose wives are abroad. They would say: How can you send your wife to earn abroad while you sit here drinking tea? I did not want to be their laughing stock.

Morshed refused to be interviewed at the second round, as he was convinced that the researcher encouraged migration. Morshed firmly believes – as many men do – that a husband is the moral guardian of his wife and bears responsibility for her wrongdoing. The fear of committing a sin combined with the shame of being ridiculed by other men should his wife migrate.

It may be wrong for women to go abroad to work. What will I answer after death at the final judgment? I will have to answer for this. These thoughts bothered me in the past and they still do today.

Desperate to cut short his wife's migration plan, Morshed appealed to his in-laws and their sense of honour. No woman in their lineage (*gushti*) had migrated before and he pointed out that such precious honour capital should not be jeopardised. If they helped cover their daughter's marriage costs, his wife would have no justification to migrate. Eventually, he won and his wife, Sonia, gave up the migration project. However, this did not restore peace. More educated and ambitious than her husband, Sonia criticised his controlling attitude and said she would divorce him if she was younger.

My husband does not allow me to work outside. He cannot do anything in the house. He can't even help himself to food. He wants

me to be there at his side all the time. This is not for the love of me. It is domination. He wants the presence of a wife to respond to his needs and to boost his importance.

The WiF messages were not lost on Sonia, and they buttressed her self-confidence and pride. She highlighted to the researcher the numerous jobs she undertook to increase family income, often without her husband's knowledge. In the interviews, she made her husband to be a small man, deploring his lack of ambition. Even though Sonia gave up the idea of migration, the WiF training brought forth other troublesome questions for this couple.

Bula resides in site 3. As a businessman and the local leader of a political party, he could not possibly allow his wife Fatima to migrate, his status forbidding it. In his view, only helpless poor women migrate for work. Yet, the family had a huge debt and Bula's business was not doing well. More practical than her husband, Fatima conspired with her children and organised her migration. Bula could not stop her.

I did not know at all that she had made such plan. When I heard about it, she was ready to leave. I rushed to the recruiting agency office and demanded that they cancel her flight and return her passport. The agency people showed me the agreement my wife and my son had signed. It could not be cancelled. I returned home very angry. My wife told me that the reason for migration was the huge debt we had and she had obtained the blessing of our pir mother. When I heard that our pir mother had given permission, I could no longer object.

Here is an interesting denouement. Bula and Fatima are both devotees of a woman *pir* (a living saint) in Chittagong. Bula could not oppose the *pir* mother and her blessings are interpreted as a ticket to proceed, overriding any considerations of status. In a way, this argument also saved Bula's pride. Fatima left, but Bula had a stroke and so she had to return 3 months after her departure, with their debt growing even bigger as a result. Even so, Bula declared his wife will never migrate again. Fatima is defiant and says she will go if she has a chance. Her preference would actually be to send their son, but the cost is prohibitive. While Bula continues to speak of honour and reputation, his wife is thinking of pragmatic solutions to solve the debt

problem. Recognising her husband, and now her son, as family providers, Fatima does not challenge gender roles – and men as naturally providers and migrants – but exceptional circumstances can lead to exceptional arrangements. She repaired the family's catastrophic economic situation in the past and is ready to do so again.

These case histories show that wives do not always abide by their husband's command even though it may spell the end of their marriage. The three sites offered a good range of situations and only a few could be presented here. However, they should suffice to demonstrate how simplistic and misleading the mantra is that 'all women are potential migrant workers'. In spite of a market presently favouring women's migration, social values do not change overnight. Some opposition remains in districts like Narayanganj where women have been known to migrate for longer than elsewhere in the country. Husbands also object and prevent their wife's migration even in a place like Balupara where women are known to be relatively free.

Men who support their wife's migration

Karim is married to Rohima, a 50-year-old woman who spent 9 years in Saudi Arabia. Rohima could be interviewed once at the first round before she migrated to Oman in April 2016. She left in spite of her age being above the government permitted limit. In her family, only men migrate. Karim explains the exceptional circumstances that led his wife to migrate in the first place.

We had 5 children and I did not earn much... If my wife had not gone abroad, it would have been impossible to marry our 4 daughters. My wife and my eldest daughter wanted the first migration. I did not object, but her brothers were against it. My wife was determined, and she left all the same. If she had not gone, we would have remained poor.

Karim admits that his wife takes most decisions, but says they manage the family together. At the basis of this 'equality' is the fact that Karim was landless and came to live with his in-laws after marriage. Rohima inherited from her father the plot of land on which they built their house, giving her a strong position. Negative comments about his wife's migration do not bother Karim.

When my wife first migrated, some people were talking. But we were in dire need and others encouraged her to go. Still today, there are people speaking very negatively about female migration. It has never been a problem to me. My wife is a good person and I trust her... Everything is a matter of luck. At the time my wife migrated, many people were saying Saudi Arabia is a bad place but where my wife worked, they were good people.

With her income, Rohima could provide dowries and arrange 'good' marriages for their four daughters, following the duty of respectable parents. This constitutes her major achievement. Their only son is presently working in Dubai and three of the four sons-in-law are also migrant workers. Large sums of money were paid for their migration – whether dowry money was used or not is not clear – but none of the migrant sons-in-law are doing well. Rohima explained:

My eldest daughter's husband is presently in Libya. He first went to Egypt but there was no work there. So, the dalal sent him to Libya where he is staying illegally working at what he can find... My third daughter's husband went to Oman 2 months ago. We are a bit worried, as we have no news of him. My fourth daughter's husband has been in Iraq for the past 2 years, staying illegally and not doing well either.

The situation of these men is clearly alarming. The son sent to Dubai to wash dishes in a restaurant is unhappy with his situation, earns little, and could not even recover the cost of his migration in 3 years. In spite of these disastrous outcomes, the cultural preference for male migration in this family (as in most of Bangladesh) is still firmly in place, making Rohima's migration an exception. Her brothers objected to it from the start and especially forbade it this time. One of them erased the phone number of her former employer who wanted her back, so that she could not contact him. He argued that Rohima had fulfilled the purpose for which she migrated – marrying her daughters – so what would the need be to migrate now? But the family has a big loan to reimburse and Rohima was determined to migrate one last time. She got a new passport lowering her age, which was possible as her previous passport was not digital and eventually left without informing her brothers and son. Karim commented:

My son is furious. Why did we allow his mother to go abroad? He cannot tell his friend that his mother migrated. This is a matter of shame for him.

Rohima's brothers and son – all men who are or were migrants themselves – have been shamed by Rohima's migration, but her husband is supportive of her and has been throughout the years. Their relationship comes out as one of trust and affection even if others may say that he is not a 'real' man.

After working abroad for 9 years, my wife was here for some time. We got used living together again and I miss her... After she left, I did not go out to work. My wife told me that I need not sell my labour outside so long as she is abroad.

Binu is another husband who accepted his wife's migration even though in his lineage (*gushti*) no woman ever migrated before. He did not hesitate to side with his wife Nurnahar when she suggested migration.

My wife's migration was a joint decision. My mother and some relatives did not approve... But we did as we thought best. I have full trust in her. We have a good relationship. She would not leave without my consent and I don't care what people say. The truth is if I cannot feed myself nobody will feed me. Some people say that women who go abroad get dishonoured. They can talk.

Nurnahar insists that her husband rallied to the idea of her migration after she proposed it:

It was my idea to go abroad but my husband did not oppose. My brothers did not see this with a good eye (all are migrants in the Middle East). They have been helping me financially, but I did not think I could rely on their assistance forever and I wanted to end our deplorable economic situation.

Nurnahar spent 11 months in Dubai. The work was more than she could take and, unable to change her employer, she purchased a return ticket. She sent money to her husband but there was nothing to show for it when she returned. She complained that her husband was a poor manager and did not like hard work.

What can I do with a husband who does not work and does not know how to plan? How can I improve our condition? In the last 3 months, we both have been unemployed and without income. All our savings are gone.

Once again, Nurnahar decided to migrate, borrowing money and this time opting for Saudi Arabia, the cheapest destination. She no longer trusts her husband and sends remittances to their 15-year-old daughter instead. Binu explains:

My wife has a bank account with the Islami Bank and my daughter has a student bank account in her name. My wife sent money thrice for a total of 45,000 Taka into our daughter's account. We were able to reimburse our loans and pay for school fees.

Nurnahar found a way to reign in her husband's inability to manage by sending money to her daughter instead. She told Binu that her employer may issue a visa for him, no doubt to flatter his ego. None of the migrant wives who made this promise could realise it. Employers do not favour such arrangement even though, in Bangladesh, the government has announced that a woman could bring a close family member, supposedly for her protection.

Nazrul is another husband who supports his wife's migration. Often busy at work the researcher met him for the first time during round 3. Nazrul studied to Class IX and works as a cutting master in a small factory close to his home. He has a good relationship with the owner and when the factory temporarily closed down due to a lack of orders, Nazrul did not look for another job. He went 6 months without work or income. The family had to borrow money and the daughters were forced to interrupt their studies as school fees could not be paid. Although Nazrul did not agree with his wife wanting to migrate in the past, this time, he rallied to her idea.

It was difficult for me to accept that my wife migrates. But after weighing the pro and con, I decided to send her. She is going through a relative of mine and I depend on him. I have been married to her for 19 years. She is the mother of my 3 children. I know her and I trust her. We really need additional income. Taking all this in consideration, I agreed to her departure. Everything

depends on god. If god blesses my family, my wife will be able to work properly.

Nazrul declared that women have been migrating for many years in his area and people know very well what the risks are. However, this time, given the desperate need for money, Nazrul set aside his apprehensions. He points out the good relationship he has with his wife, the trust he has in her, and the *dalal* who is a relative. Men in such situations often claim the same trust in their wife, demonstrating that they are caring and responsible husbands. For the rest, they rely on god and on fate.

Men holding inconsistent views

Several husbands hold inconsistent views about their wife's migration, being supportive as long as they foresee personal benefits. However, they may turn violently opposed when this is not the case. In the first interview, Mannan praised his wife Mukta who spent 5 years abroad.

If Mukta had not earned, I could not have managed the family. She is a hard-working woman and she has good ideas.

Mannan comes from a prosperous family but messed up his studies. He did not say much about his delinquent past except that his family rejected him. Mukta is more explicit and has a memorable story to tell about their marriage.

My grandfather arranged my marriage. I did not understand why he did this. Later, I learned that my husband kidnapped him and forced the family to agree. We were poor and we could not protest. This is how my marriage was arranged... I was forcibly taken out of school at the age of 13 to be married. At the time, many journalists came. They tried to stop my marriage as I was only a child but did not succeed because members and chairman took my husband's side and my husband had muscle men with him... My husband was involved in criminal activities. He was a terror and people feared him.

Such is the beginning of Mukta's married life. At 17, the mother of two children, she takes up a garment factory job. Her husband does not work, and life is difficult. A third child is then born. Seeing how irresponsible Mannan is, Mukta's father and father-in-law cover the cost for her migration to Lebanon. After working 3 years in Lebanon and 2 years in

Jordan, Mukta earns enough to offer many luxuries to her family. Mannan can hardly speak against women labour migration then. However, he does not publicise the fact that their much-improved living standard is due to his wife earning abroad.

I do not like the idea of women going abroad myself. I used to despise such women. But now I can no longer speak this way. None of my relatives in Munshigonj know that Mukta has worked abroad. In Munshigonj, there are many migrants, but all are men.

Mannan feels ambivalent. He is amazed (and disturbed) at the profound transformations he observes in his wife.

There was a time when my wife could not look at me straight in the eyes. After two migrations, she is unrecognizable. Her appearance, her life style, her spending ability, her language... What can I do about this change in her? Through her income, our family became solvent. I cannot earn as she does, so I keep quiet.

Mukta agrees to pay for her husband's migration to Malaysia but that plan fails. At the second interview, Mannan is preparing to migrate to Qatar to work on a construction site. The cost is 350,000 Taka and he is waiting for his wife to send money.

If I can go abroad and earn well, I will ask Mukta to stay home. At least, this is my intention. She may not agree. They say that water is very tasty abroad and it is not easily given up. If she does not listen to me, our relationship may suffer. Of course, I can only ask my wife to give up her life abroad if I meet success myself... Mukta is trying to pacify me with money. I can read her very well... I do not say anything because, presently, she is strong, and I am weak. I cannot afford to protest.

At round 3, Mannan has left for Qatar. His daughter says he grew increasingly restless waiting for Mukta's money and, in the end, he went to his village and sold land to pay for his migration.

When mother phoned he insulted her, so mother stopped calling and when father called, she did not pick up the phone. Father

wants all the money mother is earning. We heard from mother about our father's past history. That is why mother is very careful... Father asked her to come back. He said you don't need to work abroad. Why should you work abroad if in all these years you were unable to send me a visa? What did you do for me? A wife should think of her husband first. You do the opposite... Father got so angry that he threw the phone and broke it.

Mannan supported his wife's migration up to a point, but at the end, he could not accept the transformation in her: self-confidence, the ability to make decisions, and economic power. He becomes obsessed with her infidelity and when money does not come forth for his migration, he gets violent and terrorises everyone. His departure is a relief to his children. In March 2017, Mukta visits Bangladesh with money to buy land in her own name.

I had the ambition to transform him, but you don't make a donkey move by beating him and you don't straighten a dog's tail with oil massage... [Mannan] now lives in Qatar. He never sent anything to the children and does not keep in touch. I feel these children are mine alone. That man is so restless and angry. I put up with this when I had no choice. But now I cannot stand it... He developed a new sickness: jealousy. He said I did not take him to Saudi Arabia because I did not want him to witness the life I lead. He sold his father's land and went abroad. In one way, that is good. I don't have to deal with him anymore.

Husbands who have no say

Of the three husbands who have no say, one is married to a *pir* devotee and two are *ghor-jamai*, that is, husbands who live with their wife's family, contrary to the dominant rule of virilocality. All three husbands are residents of Balupara (site 2). In the first interview amidst a group of women, Farzana, the *pir* devotee, describes her husband:

My husband is not in good health. He is smaller than me. He is weak. He looks like a dry shrimp. He appears much older than he is.

Jamal, the husband, is a rickshaw puller and does not speak in the presence of the *pir*. It soon

becomes apparent that the *pir* controls Farzana and her entire family. He decides Farzana's migration, covers the cost and organises everything. Farzana's dependency on the *pir* has a long history. At the age of 8, her father, himself a *pir* devotee, 'gave' his daughter to the *pir*. When Farzana was 14-years-old, the *pir* arranged her marriage to an orphan boy who inherited from his mother²⁷ a plot of land adjacent to the *pir*. The two households function as one and Farzana spends more time with the *pir* than with her husband. Jamal says he is uncertain as to who actually fathered the five children Farzana gave birth to. Farzana migrates to Saudi Arabia on 15 April 2016. When asked about his wife, Jamal replies:

... [The pir] can tell you everything about Farzana. He is her ancestor for 14 generations [said with derision]. He decides. She follows his word and he sets conditions in everything. I see with my eyes, I hear with my ears, but I keep my mouth shut. I do not have the ability to protest. I do not have the stature... Farzana did not discuss anything with me and it was not in my power to give her any advice. I did not go to the airport to say goodbye to her. The pir and the dalal went... Farzana told me that every month the pir would give me money for the household. He would do so whether he gets remittances or not. "Do not worry. You will not be starving," she said... On 16th of May, I got 4,000 Taka. He said Farzana had sent money. I did not ask how much. I knew... [the pir] would get first rights over her income.

Relationships between the *pir* and his female devotees is the object of much criticism in the community. The *pir's* wife is one of those critics and in subsequent interviews, in the absence of the *pir*, she reveals more about his activities. After Farzana's departure, she convinced Jamal to send away their 15-year-old daughter to remove her from the *pir's* gaze and not repeat what she witnessed when Farzana was the same age. After some time, Farzana also sends money to her husband paying heed to her daughter's warning that the situation was embarrassing for them.

It would be wrong to generalise about *pirs* but in this particular location, this *pir* takes much interest in his devotees' migration, grooming them for work

abroad, and making arrangements with a local *dalal*. In the course of this research (18 months), he was able to add another floor to his house, mostly with the remittances he received. The *pir* is careful not to leave any trace of these money transfers and official bank transfers are never used. We got confirmation that most of the *pir's* devotees engage in commercial sex at destination. In a well-documented case, a woman devotee refused to engage in sex work abroad as she did not have the permission of her *pir*. She returned to Bangladesh at her own cost and went to him. The *pir* gave his blessing so long as the woman took sex work as *peshha* (occupation) and not as *nesha* (addiction). According to a close friend, this is the activity that Farzana practises abroad. The two women worked in the same establishment and she said Farzana is doing very well.

Two of the husbands who have no say in their wife's migration are *ghor jamai*. A *ghor jamai* in Balupara controls very little – not even a wife. He ranks very low. This is how Siddique speaks of himself:

I do not have large ambitions. I was born poor and I am still poor... Jesmin, my wife, wants money to go abroad. She makes all kinds of demands. I don't like the idea of her going abroad in the first place and where would I find money anyway... Don't ask me anything. How can I answer your questions? My relationship with Jesmin is not sweet like honey. We are husband and wife, that is all. I cannot earn 'dollars' [said in English]. So, I have little value in her eyes. Jesmin is uncontrollable. Her mother is the same. When I come home, I do not open my mouth. I spend a lot of time at tea stalls to avoid spending time at home. If Jesmin goes abroad, I think she will despise me even more. I will have no place as a husband.

Siddique does not pay the rent, but he buys food that his wife cooks. Though modest, he has a regular income which his wife considers insignificant. Jesmin migrates to Saudi Arabia in January 2017. At the last round, Siddique had also moved elsewhere. We find other husbands living in a house belonging to their wife (like Sharif Mia above) but they hold better paid and more highly ranked jobs and so are not called *ghor jamai*. In Balupara, several women were able to hold on to the plot of land originally

27. In Balupara, the NGO that assisted the poor population transplanted there in 1975 distributed plots of land and registered them mostly in women's name as they were the pillar of families. Jamal was his mother's only child and when she died of tuberculosis he inherited her plot of land.

registered in their name and some could pass it on to their daughters.²⁸ This is one of the reasons why one finds more *ghor jamai* in Balupara than in other settlements. Land ownership – even a tiny plot – constitutes an important basis for the continuity of the male lineage and for men's identity.

9.2 INTERVIEWS WITH MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Mothers make up the second largest group of persons interviewed in the second cohort. They generally encourage and assist their daughters' migration just as daughters sympathise with the plight of their mother and 'understand' their reasons to migrate. Mothers see migration as an opportunity for daughters who must fend for themselves and their children to establish a sound economic base. They seem less affected by questions of honour and rank, and may even battle with husband and sons to achieve their daughter's migration. Mothers and mothers-in-law also play an important role as they often take responsibility for childcare.

We saw with Rohima that her daughter agreed with her mother's migration while her son disapproved, expressing shame, embarrassment, and anger. Similar reactions are found in other cases as well. Adult sons generally do not approve of their mother's migration.

One interesting case is that of Amiron, a 42 year old widow, and mother of two grown up sons and one adolescent daughter. She is interviewed once before her departure for Saudi Arabia on 17th March 2016. She explains, without giving details, that a major conflict with her sons led to a family crisis and forced her to flee from home. Her *dalali* is more explicit about the cause of her precipitous departure.

After her husband's death, Amiron had a relationship with another man younger than herself. Her son caught her with that man in the house. When a shalish [a village court] was called, it was about this. No one took her side. This is when I gave her shelter.

When the scandal breaks out, Amiron has been a widow for 3 years. The members of village society still harshly condemn her behaviour, and her sons would not forgive her. Sexuality

28. Two foreign NGOs played an important role in Balupara after it was set up providing relief, clinics, schools and other assistance. Registering plots in women's rather than men's names was done at their initiative.

is denied to a widow with grown up sons. Saddened by these events, the daughter remained loyal to her mother throughout.

My two brothers behaved very badly with mother. They pushed her out of the house. When mother left to go abroad, she could not do so from her own house. She had to take shelter at one of my uncles. But mother told us from abroad that all she had were her children and what she was earning through hard work was for them.

The eldest son, married and the father of a child, condemns his mother in no ambiguous terms. Moreover, and regardless of the 'fault' she committed, nobody sees a woman of Amiron's age with two healthy sons, both working, opting for migration as a good thing. The boy runs a successful business and, in spite of his youth, displays a remarkably conservative attitude in line with his social ambitions.

If I were richer, I would require all the women of my family to stay inside and observe purdah.²⁹ I don't like the idea of my mother going abroad and I am not too curious about costs and benefits... In any case, I will not touch the money she will earn abroad. She can take that money with her in her tomb when she dies.

The youngest son cannot forgive his mother for 'not keeping her place' and also condemns her decision to migrate. He refused to talk to her when she phoned.

I still have not spoken to mother... My elder brother and I told mother she did not need to go abroad. What the two of us earn is enough. She could eat with us. But mother did not listen. I am still angry with her. The trust I had in her has been destroyed... Of course, one's mother can be a prostitute, or something else, she remains one's mother. I know this. If a mother behaves like a mother, one can touch her feet seven times [to get her blessing] but what to do if she does not keep her place. My brother and I have always been against our mother's migration. Mother said even if you do not give me any money, I

29. *Purdah* meaning curtain, veil, and partition also refers the seclusion of virtuous women. Practices relating to *purdah* have considerably changed over the years and women are far more visible in the public domain than they were a few decades ago. Yet, the notion of *purdah* expressed in styles of clothing or behavioural restraint remains alive and strong.

will work like a slave to raise the money and I will go. One of our relatives who spent many years abroad also warned us not to send our mother. He knows. Mother did not listen to anybody. Neighbours did not see this with a good eye... In the end, we could not stop her.

Amiron sent remittances to her eldest son once. At the last interview, we learned that he accepted the money, contrary to his earlier statement. The mother gave instructions to buy a large quantity of sweets for distribution at the mosque, and to celebrate the birth of her grandchild. Her sons carried out her instructions. Amiron tries to amend herself. She also promised to do the pilgrim to Mecca at the end of her stay. Her daughter explains:

When we received 30,000 Taka from mother, we purchased 15 kg of sweets (mishti). We offered 8 kg at the mosque where mother demanded that a milad be held and that we pray for her. Mother asked that sweets be distributed in the village. Another 3 kg was given to my brother's in-laws to bless her grandchild that had just been born.

Other cases similarly show solidarity between mother and daughter. One of them is Sabiha, the 42-year-old widow quoted earlier, who worked in a factory after her husband died. Her children were small and she became the de facto head of household for a few years. That situation changed after a relative gave the family some money so her eldest son could migrate for work. Sabiha receives remittances from him but this is a mere technicality. She is instructed to hand over the money to her daughter-in-law, who manages the household, finding herself without work and disposable income, and totally dependent on her sons and daughter-in-law. We interviewed her youngest son, who holds particularly restrictive views regarding the place of women and boasts of his knowledge and authority – he was educated in a *madrassah* – to silence his illiterate mother. His mother's work is done, he says, and she should stay home, pray and prepare for death. About this son, Sabiha declares:

I sent [her youngest son] to a madrassah, the way of Allah. My purpose was to gain respect on this earth and get blessings for the after-life. It did not turn up as I expected.

Sabiha wants to migrate but her sons will not hear of it. The exceptional situation that made her head of household is over. She speaks of her frustration:

I struggled to bring up my children and bring some prosperity but I can see, after marrying this son, my position in the family has considerably deteriorated...

My son and my daughter-in-law feed me but they never give me any pocket money. No mother whose son works abroad is in as bad a situation as myself. My son has given instructions to hand over everything to his wife. The reason for these restrictions is that he fears I may give something to his married sister. I have only one daughter. She has no place here.

Unable to migrate, Sabiha takes revenge when her 23-year-old daughter tells her that her husband is impotent, and she expects nothing from the marriage. Sabiha then suggests that she migrates and convinces her son-in-law – who has nothing to lose. Sabiha's sons strongly disapprove but their married sister is under the authority of her husband and they have no right to intervene. Foreseeing the end of her daughter's marriage, Sabiha arranges for remittances to be sent into her bank account and not to her son-in-law, which quickly creates more conflict. The research ends before the final outcome could be observed. Most probably, in such family battles, nothing is ever final. Sabiha's two sons are firmly against women labour migration, the eldest because he 'knows' what migrant women do abroad being a migrant himself, and the youngest because of his religious education also 'knows' in a different way. Both speak with authority from their 'dominant' positions. Sabiha's family can be seen as a microcosm of the divisions found in Bangladesh society regarding women labour migration.

As mentioned, an overwhelming majority of mothers approve and support their daughter's migration. Cases documented in this research are varied: one mother arranged her daughter's migration to save her from a violent marriage with a drug-addicted husband. Another gave support to a daughter who previously led a dissolute life damaging family reputation. 'A mother cannot reject her child', she says, even though other family members do not approve of her unconditional love.

The interviews in the second cohort contain rich data that in many ways complement the first. The stories narrated and commented here introduce a complex social reality outside the training venues of the WiF programme, where discourses on human rights, government policies, economic calculations and the supposed benefits of women labour

migration get mired with other social and cultural considerations. Interviews show women labour migration to be a hotly debated topic in which understandings profoundly differ within families and at community level, giving rise to sympathies and collaborations, oppositions and conflicts. Women labour migration impacts individuals, families, lineages and communities leaving an imprint on the country as a whole with districts ranked depending on the prevalence of women labour migration. The stories expose a recurrent gender dimension intersecting with considerations of class and rank. The complex dynamics of women [and men] labour migration briefly introduced here warrant more analysis than the scope of this report can offer.

10. Cohort three: managers, trainers and fieldworkers

Twelve people are interviewed in the third cohort: 6 fieldworkers, 2 trainers and the NGO chairman are interviewed twice, while the project manager – who left the project before the second round – a project officer, and a social worker who answers the NGO helpline are interviewed once. The NGO signed a contract with ILO stipulating collaboration with researchers and there is no difficulty in obtaining individual meetings at mutually agreed locations. Even after the fieldworkers completed the term of their employment (11 months) and were uncertain whether they would be re-employed, they still agreed to meet. This is a difficult time for them and we sense caution in their words as if what they say could affect their chance to be re-employed.

As seen in Table 20, the WiF implementation team is fairly young and educational levels are relatively high, with six people holding post-graduate degrees, four being graduates, and two having studied up to secondary level. Personal experience of migration and/or engagement with women migrant workers is not given the same importance as academic achievement, and most have never worked on migration-related issues prior to their engagement with WiF. Those with experience of migration worked with male migrants or the wives of male migrant workers. Three NGO staff organised training for the latter on use of remittances and prevention of HIV. Such activities can be presented as valuable experience, but wives of male migrant workers and female migrant workers are quite distinct populations. Wives incur no loss of status for the migration of their husbands and they need not infringe rules of *purdah* or norms of feminine propriety.

Remittances may even allow them to observe a stricter seclusion and be seen as ‘good’ women. If the wives of migrant workers do not constitute a homogeneous group, their socio-economic levels are generally higher and gender roles in their households are more in line with dominant norms. The NGO management apparently ignored these important social demarcations, which is also evident in the uncritical adoption of the problematic theory that ‘all women are potential migrant workers’.

Interestingly, one fieldworker had been employed on an HIV prevention programme targeting women migrant workers in 2004. She does not mention this engagement in the interview and we find out accidentally from one of her former colleagues who expressed dismay after hearing the WiF messages. The former colleague wondered how the discourse could have switched so radically pointing out how different the NGO message was then as risks of migration for women are highlighted and women are advised to be cautious and even to curtail their movements. This encounter is a useful reminder. How do NGO workers today, including the NGO we studied, subscribe to the new narrative on ‘rights’? How can ‘rights’ apply to the situation of women labour migrants as they know it, and have they given any thought to this? Or is the question simply irrelevant, the new speak being a consequence of working for different bosses who decide the ‘fashion’ of the day? Unfortunately, these issues could not be discussed freely with the NGO we studied. At least one manager refused to engage in any debate posturing as an expert and pointing out that he had nothing new to learn on ‘safe migration’. For such ‘experts’, research is also a waste of time.

10.1 RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES

The NGO recruited as fieldworkers young women residing in the selected unions. To identify candidates, various networks are used without placing formal advertisement in media outlets. Local residence and knowledge of the population are the criteria for selection.

Some women applied from my union and 4 of us were called for the interview. I said I had worked for World Vision before... They wanted to know how much fieldwork I had done. I explained that I visited the families of the sponsored children... My knowledge of the area and my connection with these families, some of which had migrant mothers, interested them.

TABLE 20: COHORT 4: PROFILE OF INTERVIEWED STAFF AND MANAGEMENT

Status	Age	Educational level	Current position	Marital status	Migration related work experience
FW -1	38	Bachelor of Arts (Education)	Fieldworker	Married	Briefly worked in a project on risks of HIV among migrants. No specific experience with migrant women.
FW-2	28	Secondary School Certificate	Fieldworker	Separated	Never worked on migration issues. Before joining WiF, worked for BRACTB programme.
FW-3	23	Bachelor of Arts	Fieldworker	Unmarried	Worked at Union Information Centre for several years. No migration-related work experience.
FW-4	23	Bachelor of Science	Fieldworker	Unmarried	Worked for World Vision child sponsor project. Never worked with migrants but knew about them through relatives
FW-5	29	Bachelor of Arts	Fieldworker	Married	Never worked for NGO and had no good connection with the community. She had no knowledge about potential female migrants and had many difficulties delivering her duties.
FW-6	31	Secondary School Certificate	Fieldworker	Unmarried	Never worked for an NGO. She lacked confidence and had many difficulties in delivering her duties. She had no basic idea about potential female migrants.
Trainer-1	26	Master of Social Science (Economics)	Trainer	Married	Started her career with this NGO. Before joining WiF, she worked for another programme meeting with spouses of male migrant workers on use of remittances and health issues.
Trainer-2	23	Master of Social Science (Social Work)	Trainer	Unmarried	Joined WiF in June 2015 after obtaining her Master degree. No experience on migration related issues.
Social Worker	27	Master in Child and Family Development	Counselor answering on helpline	Married	Worked for this NGO for the last six years. Currently she receives helpline phone calls and act as counselor.
Project Officer	28	Master of Social Work	Project Officer	Married	Joined the NGO 18 months before the WiF project started. Worked in Munshiganj to organize meetings for spouses of male migrants. Never worked directly with female migrants.
Project Manager	29	Master of Science	Project Manager	Separated	Worked for the NGO for three years participating in field research and programs dealing with women labour migration. Attended GAATW training in Kathmandu and became chief trainer and programme manager of WiF project. Left the NGO after 1st phase to take an ILO job in Jordan.
NGO Chairman	-	Master in English Literature. & Master in Social Welfare	Project Director	Married	Co-founder of the NGO. Has worked on migration and migrants' rights for several years. Before founding this NGO, worked with another migrant organization. Has followed migration policies over several years and is regularly interviewed by the media.

When a fieldworker was recruited for this union, I was not the first choice but the candidate selected resigned after some time and I was offered the job. One of the requirements was that I live within the union. I grew up in... [this place] but I lived outside. I promised I would come to live here, which I did in October 2015.

In some unions, there is no competition for the post.

I was the only candidate applying from this union. When the interviewers heard that I had worked at the union information centre, they were immediately interested in employing me. They were satisfied with my answers about ways to approach people or get assistance to arrange venues for the training.

10.2 SALARY AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The NGO chairman admits staff recruitment to be a troublesome affair given the short duration of the project (originally planned for 11 months). The best candidates generally seek longer-term employment and the remuneration (a standard rate determined by the ILO) is not attractive enough, he says. One fieldworker confirms this opinion:

When people ask me, I am embarrassed to tell them how little I earn for all the work we do. When I compare this salary with my previous job at the union parishad³⁰, where I could clear 4000 to 5000 Taka a month sitting in an office [for a few hours a week], it does not seem fair. I don't feel we are paid sufficiently for the work we do.

Living with one's family in a village, fieldworkers could manage with a monthly salary of 8,000 Taka. On the other hand, trainers who have to rent an accommodation in Dhaka, where the cost of living is much higher, may find the income insufficient. One of them points out further that no overtime is paid for the long hours worked, and ILO does not practice what it preaches.

My monthly salary is 20,000 Taka. Some people are saying this is not bad for a first job but considering the price of everything, this is not a good living wage. This is an ILO-supported project. We

talk about workers' rights and working hours being recognized. What about our rights considering the workload and the working hours we must put in?

All persons interviewed feel the project duration is too short questioning what could be accomplished in such a period of time. They are evidently concerned about the security of their job. In April 2016, while discussions were in their second phase, the fieldworkers (but not the trainers) were left without salary for 2 and a half months. When re-employed, they expected an increase, which was not granted.

I like working for [the NGO] but the salary should be increased. A higher salary would motivate fieldworkers. We told this to brother but he said they may even cut down. Don't they realize this will affect our motivation? We worked very hard. I did not expect the job would be so demanding.

Trainers and fieldworkers undeniably worked hard and long hours. The share of the WiF budget allocated to the grass root delivery of messages may not sufficiently recognise the importance of this work for the success of the project.

10.3 THE TASKS OF FIELDWORKERS

Fieldworkers describe their work to the interviewer. At doorstep and courtyard meetings, they introduce the NGO and provide information on 'safe migration', on the causes of human trafficking, on appropriate channels for migration, etc. Finally, they enlist women interested in attending the pre-decision orientation. All fieldworkers mention that they put forward attractive propositions to motivate participation. The NGO also brings back the body of migrants who die overseas. As far as we know, these propositions are not part of the WiF design. Nonetheless, they bear a direct relationship with the pressure for a pre-determined number of participants, a requirement closely monitored by the ILO. The NGO's response to this pressure is to highlight uncertain government services and equally uncertain NGO assistance. Some of the services the NGO advertise are funded from sources other than WiF.

A form titled 'potential migrant profile' is used to register the names and phone numbers of women

30. Unions are the lower tier of government. The union *parishad* is constituted of elected members and one chairman. It has a secretariat providing services where this field worker was employed.

interested in the training. The title of the form is a misnomer. Courtyard meetings assemble women who can afford the time and agree to sit and listen to the fieldworker. The meetings we observed gathered housewives, often older women with less work pressure, and students with time to spare. In areas close to industrial zones, women working in factories are noticeably absent. Fieldworkers exert their communication skills, but for questions they cannot answer, they refer to the NGO helpline. One fieldworker admits facing serious challenge from the local *dalals* who attempted to sabotage her work discouraging women to enrol in the training and threatening those enlisted.

At one stage, I felt very frustrated. I told [the NGO] that I would quit the job. I received some advice from... [management staff] and... [a trainer] talked to me over the phone. She told me that I could share my problems with her. This was helpful."

Once a month, salaries are collected at the NGO office and fieldworkers can meet with the project manager and discuss problems encountered. Otherwise, they manage as they can. One project officer mandated to supervise the fieldworkers' day-to-day activities and assist in the organisation of training seemed to spend little time in the field – at least this is what we conclude when he finds it difficult to locate the fieldworkers and the venues of training. Fieldworkers are solicited for different kinds of assistance, such as filling the form for passport application, or convincing a husband to allow his wife to attend the training. Although some husbands are not easy to talk to as they are against their wife's migration, fieldworkers' intervention can help. All fieldworkers state that their most difficult task is to ensure that 30 women will attend the pre-decision orientation. One fieldworker makes an eloquent description of her work.

"My first responsibility is to provide information about safe migration. My second responsibility is to organize the pre-decision orientation meetings, find suitable venues, and motivate a minimum of 30 participants. Moreover, I must select participants for the 5-days pre-departure training. My most difficult time is the day prior to a pre-decision orientation. I feel tense. Can I ensure that the women who promised to come will actually turn up, or will I fall short of the target... Some people understand us wrongly. They think we are sending women abroad. It is difficult to make them understand that

we are just giving information... Another problem is when women promise to come but do not turn up. Maybe they think it will be a waste of time and they will not learn anything useful. Others come but they do not want to stay. I must make them understand that this orientation is good for them and they will be benefited. Convincing takes a lot of energy. When the venue is far away, some women in need of the orientation do not come. There are also women who were abroad and think of migrating again. Many are reluctant to attend the training and it is quite impossible to bring them."

Motivating women and convincing them that 'the orientation is good for them' appears to be quite hard work, suggesting that the benefits of the training are far from obvious to the targeted population.

10.4 TRAINERS AND PROJECT MANAGER

The project manager, a dynamic woman who largely carries the training component of the WiF project on her shoulder played a key role in the preparation of the training modules. Earlier, she took part in two trainings for trainers held in Kathmandu and in Dhaka. She regards WiF as an experimental project and is open to discussion. When interviewed, the advice given to women not to use the services of a *dalal* is under review in the NGO. WiF followed the government line in this regard but the message is clearly rejected by the potential migrants. "The problem is very tough. We are working on it", she says. She subscribes to the view that all women could be candidates for migration and all should hear the WiF messages. On a trafficking story recently exposed in the media, she comments:

The media only show problems [e.g. trafficked women]. They don't give importance to what we do. I don't give importance to these stories.

Constructing a consensual community is a deliberate strategy. She does not wish to expose dissent and instructs the trainers to speak with one voice. Hence, the use of 'us' (*amra*). That the unity created inside the training venue may quickly dissolve outside is not the object of her attention. She shares many of the NGO chairman's ambitions to influence migration policies at national level. The project manager has regular interactions with the trainers who find her very supportive and inspiring – one could say that their good

relationship is their strength. She leaves for an ILO job in Jordan towards the end of the project.

At the time of the first interview, trainers have to abide to a very tight schedule of consecutive orientation sessions in different locations with no time to rest. One of the trainers explains:

We must cover a large number of topics during the orientation session. In order to complete the modules within a limited time, we must often forego games. It would have been good to get more training from ILO. I never went to the ILO office. I learnt from the NGO project manager who explained to us the modules and the training methods. With time limitation, we cannot explain all the message contents and we are not able to apply the techniques appropriate for training.

Well educated, urban and middle-class, project manager and trainers often ignore the reality of rural women's life. They are also limited in their understanding of migration scenario. For example, they are unaware about young women being recruited for dance bars in Dubai or Singapore, some of whom attend the training. They are unprepared for, and do not know how to manage, the 'grey zone' falling outside official sectors and procedures. One trainer – otherwise an excellent communicator – admits that the questions participants raise are often left unanswered. She says this is due to the lack of time, but not her difficulty in dealing with certain issues:

You are right. Especially questions stemming from the women's health module and those dealing with getting a loan for migration from the PKB. If I answered their questions, I would have no time to cover the programme. I am under pressure and I must always keep in mind the schedule and the topics to be covered. I leave from Dhaka for the training. We have no car and we depend on local transport. Sometimes, we reach the venue late. After the training, I must think of the journey back to Dhaka with the traffic jam. So, we cannot give time to answer participants' questions. We don't let them speak from their experience. It is just not possible.

The agenda is certainly crowded and there are complicated topics, all deemed essential. The trainers must explain literary terms and English words that the participants do not understand.

In the classroom set up they 'naturally' act as teachers. In spite of these limitations, the project manager and the trainers are admirable in the dedication and the energy they deploy. One may regret their lack of opportunity to spend time in 'the field' to enrich their knowledge of local practices. The management does not give such instruction and there is no time. An inevitable top down approach results from these pressures.

10.5 LIMITED TRAINING AND INADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WOMEN LABOUR MIGRATION

In July 2015, soon after being recruited, fieldworkers received a 4-day formal training from a GAATW team and in January 2016, a 3-day refresher course is given with input from CARAM Asia. According to the NGO chairman and the project manager, no funds are available for additional training. At the first round of interviews (before the second training) all fieldworkers deplore the limitation of their preparation. Here are four statements:

We only had a 4-day training. That was insufficient, and I faced a lot of difficulties. Elders believed we were sending women abroad and said that such women lose their virtue and become spoiled. People put questions to me which I could not answer.

Trainers came from outside and their words were translated in Bangla. This was not easy to follow... They talked about gender, trafficking, CEDAW, safe migration... There are many things I did not understand. This was my first training and the first time I stayed away from home for 5 nights. Before joining, I did not know much about the situation of migrant women. In our society, many people believe that such women are immoral. And migrant women themselves do not share their experience.

I did not have much knowledge about female labour migration before taking the job. In our neighbourhood, many women migrate. I was aware that some return, as they cannot cope with the work or for some other reason. I knew very little about the problems these women face. I only received 4-day training which was insufficient... On a personal level, the training helped me to realize I had rights.

I joined... [the NGO] in June 2015 after obtaining my Master degree... I got to

know about women migrant workers after joining the WiF project... I had a vague idea about the subject before. I did not know there were so many women migrating from Narayanganj which I knew as an industrial area...

In the beginning, fieldworkers clearly feel ill-equipped to discharge the duties entrusted to them. Some deplore the lack of technical tools, others admit their lack of basic knowledge about women labour migration and the lack of arguments to justify their work in the community. Fieldworkers are made to endorse the coat of knowledgeable persons speaking with authority on 'safe migration', 'trafficking', etc. they but hardly know more, or better, than those they are meant to inform. On the other hand, some of the fieldworkers mention benefiting from the training they received on a personal level realising that themselves had rights.

The quotes above refer to the supposed immorality of migrant women, the 'secrets' that returnees refuse to share and the bad rumours circulating about them. How do fieldworkers manage these 'rumours' which seem too loud to be ignored, and how do they react to them personally and professionally? One must admit that these 'rumours' do not sit very well with the discourse on 'rights' that the WiF training promotes. The question is put to one fieldworker who answered by describing how she handled a recent event. A woman unexpectedly returned from Oman in a disturbed state, and the fieldworker invited her to join the on-going 5-day pre-departure training. She explains how she reassured the woman:

I will not put any question to you. And you should not speak about what happened to you abroad. It would only cause harm to you and your family. You should come to the training. You will hear beautiful words and it will do you good.

Let us reflect on the way the fieldworker reports dealing with the distressed woman. On the one hand, she invites her to join a pre-departure session, increasing the number of participants, which counts as a good point on her performance. On the other hand, she cares for the distressed woman by not putting any questions to her, recommending silence, and reminding her that speaking would be harmful. Has anyone instructed her to act in this way? Probably not. The NGO management does not invite fieldworkers to engage with returnees. In this particular case, the distressed woman

is encouraged to keep her 'secrets' while the fieldworker expresses extreme confidence in the power of 'beautiful words'. This returnee did not attend the WiF training prior to migration, so its messages in no way can be faulted for what went wrong. In another case related earlier in this report – that of Shikha – the same fieldworker confidently re-assures the mother of the young woman about to migrate telling her that she needs not worry, Shikha holds the WiF training 'certificate' and she will know how to respond abroad. We know what happened next. Shikha calls the NGO helpline on the 11th day of her arrival demanding to be repatriated. The fieldworker's exaggerated confidence can be the result of her ignorance. In any case, fieldworkers are not prepared to hear 'bad' stories.

10.6 QUESTIONING THE PROMISES OF THE NGO

At the second round of interviews, fieldworkers are asked what they know about the services that the NGO provides to migrant women, and whether they are aware of unmet promises that may negatively affect the credibility of their work. While some fieldworkers are careful not to blame the NGO (they are waiting to be re-employed), others are more candid.

I know of 7 women who tried to get a loan from PKB but, because of unrealistic conditions, not a single woman was able to get it. We see poor women taking loans with high interest from moneylenders.

When a woman goes abroad and gets into serious difficulties, what kind of assistance she may get from... [the NGO], honestly, I cannot tell you. I know of no one who received such help.

I talk over and over again about safe migration, but I know very little about this. I do not have a clear idea about the services that... [the NGO] is providing for migrant workers and what they do to ensure safe migration. Our training did not give us this information. There is a big gap here.

The services that the NGO provides appear largely obscure to its field staff, the frontline workers who deal with candidates for migration as well as their families and the community at large. At the second round of interviews, fieldworkers have had some time to learn on the job and feel more confident. While some have less questioning minds and a

more mechanistic approach to their work, others are keen observers and make very pertinent remarks. For example, one fieldworker sees her society divided on class lines and discovers how women labour migration remains a contested issue:

Since I have been involved in this work, I can see that there are many people objecting to female migration. No one opposes directly but negative comments are heard. Women who are suffering and struggling do not judge badly. But there is still a section of society that regards female migration very negatively. Such people are solvent and need not worry about their next meal.

Another fieldworker is critical of the measures that WiF advocates to ensure 'safe migration':

We tell women they should get their papers checked before leaving. But the reality of work abroad does not correspond to the papers we ask to check. No contract mentions being employed to do bad work.

This is a very pertinent comment. 'Bad work' is not made explicit but everyone understands what it means in relation to migrant women – or at least they think they do. 'Bad work' posits a moral judgment amalgamating a range of actions that do not belong to the same categories in terms of human rights abuse. After all, commercial sex work proposed to consenting women who leave prepared for it, and sexual services requested/ imposed on domestic workers caught unaware, whether they resist, fight back, or give in reluctantly, are not the same even though we have seen that, over time, one type of disposition may slide into the other. Regardless, unpacking the expression 'bad work' (*karup kaj*) in relation to human rights abuse has not been part of the training fieldworkers receive and many may know very little about the 'secrets' of migrant women.

To tell you the truth, I never tried to find out what were the experiences of these women [who return without completing their contract].

At the end of the first phase of the WiF project, the NGO asks the fieldworkers to conduct research in order to evaluate their work. Instruction is given to follow up with women who participated in the pre-decision orientation and the pre-

departure training and find out in which ways they were benefitted. Each fieldworker seems to have a different understanding of what she should do. One of them explains:

"Our job is to visit door to door and talk about safe migration and make people aware about human trafficking. The purpose of the follow up now is to assess people's awareness about these issues. Up till now, I did not hear of any woman in my area getting trafficked or any labour trafficking for that matter. The women who migrated after attending [WiF] orientation and training are doing fine."

Investigations may be designed to find out only what one is looking for and what falls outside a narrow frame remains in the dark. This is the case with this so-called research. The above fieldworker is posted in the union where Lily Akhtar lives and has some knowledge of her case (see Chapter 8, Case no 2, Lily cum Lily Akhtar).

"Only one woman named... [Lily Akhtar] returned from Jordan within a short while. Her employer and his wife were good people, but Lily was restless and could not settle. She told me that her husband bewitched her through a kobiraj³¹ and this is why she fell sick... Her father got her treated with another kobiraj and she is fine now. Why did she come back? The environment abroad was fine and her children are not so small... Her husband lives in... [another district] and they have been apart for several years. Why would he bewitch her? I cannot tell what truly happened. She just wanted to come back... I do not understand."

The fieldworker, who holds a master's degree, does not believe this story of bewitching, and her questions about what truly happened are left hanging. Yet, as far as she is concerned, there are no cases of 'trafficking' in her area and she may conclude to the successful outcome of her work. Actually, how fieldworkers understand 'trafficking' is unclear. One knows it exists – the media expose it (too much according to the programme manager) – but it is not explored. In the phase under study, the word is mentioned but its occurrence is kept at a (safe) distance as though it could contaminate a programme focusing on 'rights' and aiming to be positive about women labour migration.

31. Kobiraj are traditional healers who treat by means of amulets, mantra, blessed water, etc.

With Lily, this is how far the fieldworker 'research' goes. There is cause for reflection here. Issues of abuse and trafficking are not easy to investigate. Lily's ordeal could well qualify as a case of trafficking, yet she has warned members of our research team not to share her story with her neighbours, including the fieldworker. At one stage, we have seen that she goes as far as to erase the intolerable occurrence from her account, and possibly from her memory. Her desire for discretion is understandable and ought to be respected, needless to say. Nonetheless, and in spite of the difficulties involved, a project aiming to combat human trafficking- as WiF describes its objective – should be built on the knowledge of facts. To paraphrase Anne Gallagher, 'forensic investigations' of particular cases are necessary to untangle human trafficking and labour migration. This requires finding out what 'bad work' or 'failed migration' entails and breaking into 'secrets' which – though not impossible – is a real challenge here.

Our investigation leads us to conclude that trainers and fieldworkers remain largely unaware of how close to home episodes of human trafficking – and the victims of such schemes – are found, or could be found. How can one combat that which is ignored? Fieldworkers and trainers may display care and sensibility, yet they are not encouraged to find out what lies beyond the 'secrets' and 'rumours' circulating about migrant women. Admittedly, belonging to the same community as the migrant women creates some limitations, so more thought should be given to how responsibilities for understanding this could be distributed. At the level of the institutions responsible for the WiF programme, however, one can deplore the lack of resources (and interest) in the entire journeys of migrant women. How can a training aiming to combat exploitation and trafficking be constructed, and later assessed, if one ignores concrete situations?

Some may have such faith in the efficacy of training that they expect women to be able to shape the conditions of their employment abroad. In other words, convinced of the rights they 'hold', trained women may alter the balance of power in the house of the employer. Such assumptions are naïve at best and could even be dangerous as the case stories documented in this research demonstrate. Women who 'believed' in human rights had high expectations, including being protected. When it proved inoperative, they were doubly hurt.

11. Conclusion

The WiF project developed messages that value women as workers, decision-makers and entrepreneurs of their life. Women's important – yet largely unrecognised – contributions to the economy and wellbeing of their families, their communities and the country as a whole are highlighted, raising women's confidence and encouraging their ambitions. Women are deemed competent in deciding the course of their life. Any woman may choose to migrate for work and may do so legally and openly, provided she follows government rules and regulations. These messages are a clear departure from an earlier discourse that depicted women as potential or actual victims of exploitation and trafficking and recommended that they curtail their movements, exert extreme caution and stay home. The WiF messages reverse the stigmatising image that women crossing borders suffered for generations and, from this perspective, they are revolutionary.

Within the training venues themselves, the NGO trainers and fieldworkers endeavour and largely succeed in creating a congenial atmosphere that may restore a damaged self-esteem for some participants. Women are recognised with respect and dignity. Useful information and advice are offered that may benefit any woman, whether she intends to migrate or not. The module on health demystifies women's bodies for women's own benefit. In the all women assembly, sensitive issues not easily broached elsewhere are shared, with topics ranging from sexual desire to contraception, menstrual hygiene or protection against sexually transmitted diseases.

The training is addressed to 'potential migrant women'. How should one define such population? Is the training meant for 'all' women, or only for those intending to migrate? Should 'all' women be interested in migration? WiF implementers actually proclaim that all women are potential migrant workers. The stance that all women are potential migrant workers works from the view that all women have the same interests, ambitions and need for information on 'safe migration'. It conveniently justifies throwing the net wide and large in order to get the highest catch. A wide range of women are invited to the training, many of who do not intend to migrate, and clearly say so. The theory that all women are potential migrant workers and the strategy

of wide recruitment actually blur the focus of the WiF programme and confuse the participants.

There is a pressure to meet pre-determined quantitative targets and ensure that 32 women attend each training session regardless of variable local interest in women labour migration. Attractive propositions – which cannot be fulfilled – are multiplied to meet the objective. The NGO succeeds in producing numbers but there is a price to pay. It is later criticised for luring participants with false promises.

The strategy adopted ignores the patchy distribution, socially and geographically, of women labour migrations and the profound ambivalence, if not clear disapproval, found in many parts of Bangladesh society regarding women's mobility. This is still the case in spite of favourable government policies, a robust demand for women labour abroad and a lowering of migration costs. Our modest study may illustrate the point: out of the 23 husbands interviewed, 9 object to their wife's migration arguing that migrant women get (necessarily) defiled and destroy family honour apart from challenging men in their role as family providers. A few wives abandon the migration project as a result, others persist and risk their marriage. Adult sons also oppose their mother's migration while daughters are more likely to accommodate, a gender line emerging in the positions taken. It may be recalled that areas with a high incidence of male migration in Bangladesh are known to be particularly hostile to individual women labour migration. This research confirms attitudes that are well entrenched and do not change overnight.

The government of Bangladesh clearly encourages women labour migration presently and this promotional stance percolates into the WiF programme. The NGO implementing the WiF programme denies favouring migration, yet the promotion is insidious. In weighing the pros and cons, the balance of advice clearly tips in favour of migration. Care is taken not to paint a negative image of migration outcomes and there is little interest in investigating the problems that migrant women actually encounter abroad.

None of the fieldworkers had personal or work experience of labour migration before joining the WiF programme (the same applies to 2 of the 3 trainers) and the initial training does not suffice

to provide understanding of complex notions – also controversial and debatable – such as 'safe migration', 'sex trafficking'. Women with experience of migration who attend the training point out that some of the advice, though possibly useful in one's own society, are inappropriate or even dangerous to apply abroad. In their eyes, the WiF training holds utopic and unrealistic views about conditions abroad. These women express their views in the interviews with researchers but are largely ignored or silenced in the WiF training sessions.

WiF receives important inputs from regional players. While these agencies provide ingenious methods and novel ideas, insufficient attention is paid to linguistic and cultural translations. Too many words are incomprehensible to the participants and some of the information given ignores the living conditions of village women. It should not be assumed that urban middle-class women know about village women in their own country – the gap exists there as well.

About the notion of 'rights' which is a major theme in the training, interviews stretching over 18 months show that the seed may germinate belatedly. Several women who migrated were initially angry and frustrated for not getting the rights they were led to expect but 'rights' are later re-considered along transformations resulting from migration. The individual 'right' to choose one's path – even when husband and family oppose the choice – is an idea that the women trace back to the WiF training. Messages on 'rights' are re-interpreted in a way that may not have been anticipated when women decide for example in a spectacular volte face to accept 'work' that they had earlier deemed repugnant, such as prostitution. Such cases raise difficult and complicated questions. Julia O'Connell Davidson writes on individuals who consent to restrictions on their freedom: "We are no longer able to speak in absolutes, but rather have to make judgments about the kind of restrictions to which people can legitimately be invited to consent... These judgments are historically and contextually variable and contested."³² We must accept to enter zones of greys and abandon images of the black and white.³³ This study reaches a similar conclusion.

32. See Julia O'Connell Davidson. *Modern Slavery, The Margins of Freedom*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp 194-195.

33. An article accepted for publication (2017-0249) discusses these issues. See Thérèse Blanchet & Samantha K. Watson, "Learning to Swim in Turbulent Waters: Women's Migration at the agency-exploitation nexus". *Journal of Contemporary Asia*.

One of the projected outcomes of the WiF programme is that “recruiting agencies adopt ethical recruitment based on international standards and are subject to improved monitoring and enforcement.”³⁴ The study shows that recruiting agencies at source and at destination remain as un-regulated as ever. Their trade is built on opacity and make-belief methods and one must admit that little has changed in this regard.³⁵ Promoting ‘rights’ in a community-based programme while recruiting agencies carry on ‘business as usual’ can only have very limited impact.

12. Recommendations

Several activists and media personnel in Bangladesh have criticised the government for promoting women labour migration, in particular to Saudi Arabia, and for ‘selling our women’ in order to open up the market for male migration. They believe women should not be allowed to migrate in the present circumstances, given the level of exploitation. Even though ‘safe migration’ cannot be ensured, we firmly believe that one should not yield to the temptation to re-impose the bans and restrictions of yesterdays. Bans create more problems than they solve.

If women are to migrate, they should do so with accurate information and some understanding of the risks. This is why factual data are so important to share. For example, what migration ‘free-of cost’ may entail and who will foot the bill if a woman refuses the ‘work’ and demands to be repatriated. Women should be warned about this. The implementing NGOs ignoring experienced migrants has been a major mistake. These women have useful information of a practical nature to share and a certain wisdom. Many of their critiques are pertinent. A future project should find a role for them. The media are also a source of information even though they have preference for scoops and the reports they produce need critical scrutiny. Other reliable sources exist. The challenge is how to sift the information circulating, including ‘official’ talk.

The manner in which some of the WiF participants and some of the fieldworkers understand ‘rights’ calls for a thorough review. ‘Rights’ are not a talisman that one takes into one’s suitcase, nor a

kind of certificate delivered after training. We have seen that such naïve understanding may have catastrophic consequences. The notion of ‘rights’ is multi-faceted. Let it only be said that what matters most to migrant women are not the international treaties and the laws they are powerless to activate, but ‘rights’ that make a difference and give access to entitlements. For example, the common view that ‘one must satisfy the employer to succeed abroad’ should be discussed/challenged. Coupling rights with obligations and what it means to be a responsible person could be a way to proceed. One of the purposes should be to increase the ability and confidence women have to make choices in difficult circumstances knowing that there are no ‘rights’ (reward, entitlement, money) without ‘risks’ and ‘costs’.

The WiF project covered official sectors of employment, namely garment factory workers and paid domestic workers. A project aiming to address exploitation and trafficking cannot ignore the grey zones on the margin of official sectors of employment as sites of potentially high exploitation. We have seen women legally migrating with a domestic visa being sent to work in a brothel. Young women from our research sites have been sent to work in dance bars in Dubai or Singapore. One may agree with seasoned migrants when they say that one learns to tackle difficult situations when one actually meets them and not in a classroom. At the very least, the WiF implementers should be aware of the destinations and the kinds of work migrant women are sent to and they should have some knowledge of the risks.

In a future project, a better use should be made of the local and regional studies available on migrant populations. Social scientists, particularly sociologists and anthropologists, could be solicited early to establish a more solid grounding and a clearer focus. As implementing agencies, NGOs offer valuable experience. Their leaders are often ‘activists’ attempting to influence national policies and public opinion, intervening in the media and other public forums and highlighting their ‘grass root level’ knowledge and their expertise as ‘doers’. There is a competition with researchers as to who ‘knows’ best which is not helpful. The competence of each should be justly recognised.

34. Listed as Outcome 2 in an official document on WiF issued by ILO country office for Bangladesh.

35. See Antoinette Vlieger, “Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates: Trafficking Victims?.” *International Migration*. 2012, Vol 50(6), pp 180-194.

Lexicon

akhra: location where pir and disciples gather for devotional practices, temporary refuge for disciples

amra: us

burqa: large outfit covering the whole body worn by Muslim women observing purdah

bustee: slum

chalan kora: procedure to bewitch someone

dalal/dalali: man/woman acting as intermediary; broker that recruits migrants on behalf of recruiting agencies for profit.

fajel: degree conferred to students of madrassah claimed to be equivalent to bachelor degree

fakir/fakimi: man/woman devoted to spiritual pursuit, someone living like a beggar

Fakirapool: Dhaka neighbourhood known for its concentration of recruiting agencies and services of all kinds related to migration.

ghor-jamai: husband living with his wife's family, contrary to the norm of virilocality. Derogatory term depicting a lesser man with no control over his wife.

gushti: lineage

hishab cora: to keep account of income and expenditure

hundi: unauthorised but widely used channel to transfer money

kobiraj: traditional healer who treats by means of amulets, mantra, blessed water, etc.

khaddama/ khedima: female domestic worker in Middle Eastern countries

kameez: top outfit worn by girls and women increasingly replacing the sari worn by married women in Bengal.

Qur'an: central religious text of Islam

lak: number equivalent to one hundred thousand

madrassah: Islamic school

manush: man, human

mazar: shrine devoted to a pir

milad: social gathering to celebrate the blessings of Allah and the prophet generally ending with the distribution of sweets.

mishti: sweets

neem: tree reputed for its beneficial properties. The leaves are infused to treat skin problems, vaginal infections, etc.

neshha: addiction. To do something for pleasure suggesting loss of control. Opposed to *peshha*, a job undertaken for money. Sex work procures benefits as *peshha*, but not as *neshha*.

nishiddho kaj: forbidden work, sex work

nuton-bou: new wife. In the house of her in-laws, she is expected to serve everyone patiently and selflessly. Compared with a migrant domestic worker in the house of her employer

obhibashi: migrant (literary term)

peshha: job, occupation

pir: living saint. The positive view is challenged by orthodox Muslims and also by those who suspect pirs to cheat their followers

probashi kollan: migrants' welfare

punjabi: long top worn by men often decorated with embroidery

samaj: core social formation of Bangladesh society, changing, yet recognisable in its continuity. A moral person belongs to the samaj and adheres to its principles. Samajik norms and State law may not coincide. This is the case with women labour migration.

shalish: village court, local arbitration

shelwar: baggy pants, traditional outfit worn by men and women

shontrashi: criminal, thug

taka: Bangladesh currency

