SWiFT Evaluation
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Emerging findings from STUDY ON WORK IN FREEDOM TRANSNATIONAL (SWiFT) Evaluation

Community-based pre-migration training in bangladesh: learning from women for future participant-centred programming[1]

The South Asia Work in Freedom Transnational Evaluation (SWiFT) is a five-year programme of research and evaluation funded by the UK Department of International Development (DFID/ UKaid). SWiFT assesses and informs the International Labour Organization's (ILO) DFID-funded "Work in Freedom" (WiF) multi-country intervention to minimise women's vulnerability to labour trafficking in South Asia and the Middle East.

This briefing note summarises the findings from the Bangladesh research component of SWiFT, which considered the influence of a two-day community-based training on migration for women.

This briefing note is drawn from the report on SWIFT's Bangladesh research arm, led by Dr Thérèse Blanchet of Drishti Research Centre, a Dhaka-based study group with a long history of anthropological studies on women's cross-border labour migration. Findings from the full report can be found in *From Risks to Rights: Evaluation of a Training Programme for Women Aspiring to Migrate for Work*. This work informed WiF and a linked briefing note detailing the specific changes and the updated programme design. Further, related ILO lessons and additional learning about the entire WiF programme can be found in the ILO's Lessons Learned document.

WiF community-based 'pre-decision' training programme for prospective female migrants

The aim of WiF's programme is to support prospective migrant women in their decision to migrate, fostering informed choices about economic strategies by either equipping women to migrate or by increasing access to local livelihood.

The evaluation focused on the pre-decision orientation sessions. The sessions were held on two non-consecutive days and the content included, for example: criteria for legal migration; adjusting to life abroad; migration risks; women's rights as workers; alternative livelihood opportunities in Bangladesh. Training modules were prepared based on input from Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and Migrant Forum Asia (MFA), the former designed with a feminist participatory methodology and health approach to ensure "women had a better understanding of their bodies and some skills to look after themselves".[2]

Women participants were identified via doorstep and courtyard meetings by the implementing agency. Importantly, for these activities, all women were considered prospective migrants. For a smaller number of women, pre-departure training was offered at a more distant location, with live-in accommodation for five days.

In Bangladesh, the WiF programme took place as migration policies favoured female labour migration. Specifically, in 2015, a memorandum of understanding

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION DESIGN

1. What do local populations consider 'successful' versus 'failed' migration?
2. How might quantitative programme goals inadvertently create problems for staff and beneficiaries?
3. Who are the specific populations at risk and how will the programme accurately identify and reach them?
4. How will the programme manage participant expectations and offer guidance that is realistic and feasible?
5. How will levels of participation be measured?
6. What are the delivery styles and messages that are suited to the participants?
7. Do migration-related information and training activities inadvertently encourage migration?
8. How will the intervention staff be compensated sufficiently and retained beyond the initial programming investment?

1. This summary guide to intervention programming is adapted from the research report by T Blanchet: *Evaluation of a Training Programme for Women Aspiring to Migrate for Work*. Drishti: Dhaka 2018.
2. Community Empowerment Report, Work in Freedom Bangladesh, ILO, 6 February 2015.

(MoU) was signed between the Government of Bangladesh and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which stipulated that Bangladesh will send 200,000 women to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers over the next two years. While for women, labour migration was declared 'free of cost', the price of migration for men soared to 40 times the cost of female migration. Poor families could not afford to send their men, though male migration was the preferred option socially.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Bangladesh research team followed local trainings in Narayangonj district in areas considered to have a substantial incidence of female migration. Training sessions were conducted at the village level by the NGOs commissioned by the ILO.

The research team interviewed a cohort of female participants in the WiF programme at regular intervals over 18 months (n=40), starting in October 2015. An additional nine returnee women were interviewed, making a total of 49 study participants.

Field work 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. The research also included interviews of one or several of their family members (n=59), implementing agency workers, trainers and management staff (n=12) and labour intermediaries (i.e. *dalal*) (n=11). This briefing note draws primarily from interviews with the women. Findings from interviews with family, implementing agency workers and *dalal* can be found in the full report.

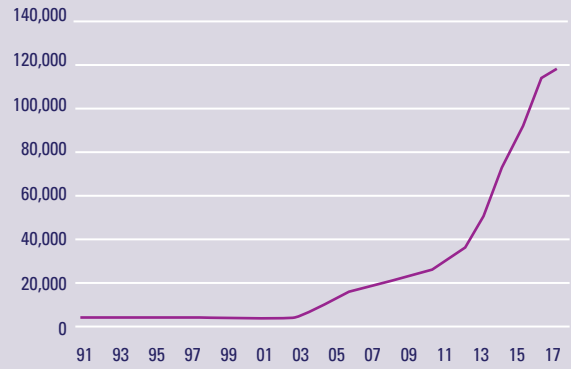
The research focused on women's migration plans – pursued or abandoned, successful or failed, and gained an understanding of women's changing perceptions over time. Fieldwork with a relatively small and socially embedded population permitted anthropological research methods.

The relatively long duration of the research allowed the research to capture the deeply transformative effects of cross border migration revealing the ways that women's positions and identities were not fixed or 'frozen'.

Female study participants (prospective migrant women)

Ultimately, 49 women were interviewed, of whom the majority were between ages 25–34. The women's educational level was low: 77% were either illiterate or had not studied beyond primary level. Age at first marriage was also very young: 40 participants were married before the age of 18, and the mean marriage age for those who married before age 18 was 14 years old.

FIGURE 1: Women labour migration trends: 1991–2017



Source: Chart produced Blanchet et al from figures published in BMET 2018

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE INTERVENTION DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The research findings from Bangladesh suggest some of the fundamental questions that should be posed when designing, monitoring and evaluating programmes that aim to address labour migration.

1. What do local populations consider 'successful' versus 'failed' migration?

Findings from Bangladesh indicate that a woman's 'successful' migration is expected to fulfil two conditions: 1) earning reasonably well; and 2) safeguarding one's reputation. 'Failed' migration was generally declared for women returning earlier than planned, not having earned the expected income and/or returning amidst suspicions of having done work that damaged her reputation, specifically sex work. It is also noteworthy that when women believe their migration experience has failed and experience an uneasy return, they strongly consider re-migrating, often with the understanding that they now know what to expect and what they might accept.

Future programming considerations:

- Undertake local assessments of perceived migration risks, hopes, successes and failures;
- Weave relevant local perceptions of success, failure and related measurable outcomes into the programme theory.

2. How might quantitative programme goals inadvertently create problems for staff and beneficiaries?

Donors often insist on quantifiable outcomes or impact in terms of, for instance, population reached, percentage reductions or increase or changes in prevalence. The study results suggest that setting quantitative targets as a measure of programme success may pose certain risks, This inadvertently can create multiple negative

effects for programme staff, participants and the reported effectiveness of the activities.

Staff pressure

Implementing agency staff were originally mandated to ensure that 32 women attended each training session. This goal was the same for all sites regardless of variable local interest in women's labour migration. This quantitative goal created substantial pressure among field staff, which often led them to make attractive, but likely unfulfillable, propositions to potential participants to encourage them to attend. The NGO was later criticised for luring participants with false promises. All field workers noted that the most difficult task was to ensure that 32 women will attend the pre-decision orientation.

> "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… I must make them understand that this orientation is good for them and they will be benefited. Convincing takes a lot of energy."

Participant disappointment, satisfaction

To convince women to enrol in the training, field workers suggested that women will gain: guidance to ensure 'safe migration'; eligibility for a loan from the Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) to cover the costs of migration; access to a dedicated help-line if they face problems abroad, etc. These promises created expectations, but a good number of women considered that they were not delivered, resulting in substantial disappointment. In the end, no participants obtained bank loans, and women who faced a crisis abroad did not receive assistance from the NGO help-line nor help from the Bangladesh embassy. Based on three rounds of interviews, half of the women reported positive comments about the WiF messages, while about 40% said that the training did not fulfil their expectations and one-fifth were highly critical, explaining that they were misled and encountered problems that they attributed to deceptive messages.

> "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."

Future programming considerations:

- Consider carefully the value of and uses for quantitative targets;
- If number-based targets are considered beneficial, develop relevant and ethical means of achieving 'numbers';
- Consider the complementary qualitative targets needed to strengthen and/or validate any quantitative targets;
- For newer programmes (e.g. in an adaptive phase), prioritise qualitative monitoring and evaluation data.

3. Who is the specific programme population at risk and how can they be accurately identified and reached?

Findings strongly indicate that the programme's premise that 'all women are potential migrant workers' was a problematic theory. While this perspective enabled field workers to draw from a large potential population to achieve their quantitative goals, this definition of a target population adversely affected the programme and the participants. For instance, precious programme resources appeared to be used to provide information to individuals with no intention or ability to migrate. The pressure to achieve numbers meant that training places were filled with whoever was available. For example, in a village with limited female migration, of 32 participants, 8 were students aged between 13 and 19, with no intention to migrate.

> "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." NGO FIELD STAFF

Defining all women in a community as potential migrant workers also assumes that all women have the same interests, ambitions and need for information on 'safe migration'. Thus, with this broad target, the recruitment strategy seems to have blurred the focus of the WiF programme and confused the participants. Moreover, casting such a wide participant net meant that no special provisions were made for women who might have been the most likely to consider migration, such as especially poor women, working women, divorced women and women bringing up small children on their own.

Future programming considerations:

- Consider carefully who are the target populations for the intervention;
- Consider who will be left out;
- Consider how women would prefer to be informed about opportunities to engage in the intervention (vs dedicated or pressured recruitment strategies); and
- Identify women's opportunities and restrictions to participate.

4. How will the programme manage participant expectations and offer guidance that is realistic and feasible?

Among the most important findings of the research is that a programme must be able to deliver what it promises and what is delivered must be specifically suited to the beneficiaries and the context. Meeting expectations was especially challenging for the WiF staff because, even though the programme staff could offer a supportive atmosphere and rights-oriented messages, in reality, they had little ability to prepare participants for the harsh realities beyond the training

walls. The research indicated that a majority of WiF participants hoped to receive practical assistance from the NGO. For instance, it was not uncommon for women to report they enlisted primarily to acquire documents to migrate. Many appeared to believe that the NGO training would offer reliable labour broker services or at least help with migration preparations that would ensure a safer migration experience.

> "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…. Any work should be considered as part of the job."

Additionally, the findings also indicated that the trainers had difficulty understanding and discussing the complex realities of female labour migration, especially the potential for sexual abuse. None of the trainers had previous experience of migration. Thus, the trainers often seemed to prefer the simple messages from the training manual: "women should not migrate with the assistance of a *dalal*" and "they should obtain their visa and work permit directly from a licensed recruiting agency". However, the women in the course strongly and overwhelmingly rejected the advice to migrate without *dalal*. Women also generally expected that whether one would get a 'good' or a 'bad' employer was largely attributable to chance. Ultimately, both the women and the NGO field staff appeared to agree that the content of the training was not really able to foster, let alone, ensure 'safe migration'. Trainers also admitted that they had little experience with migration, so were feeling a bit uncertain about giving advice, especially with returnee women attending the sessions.

> "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."

Efforts to refer women to local government support schemes and livelihood options also seemed unrealistic to the women. NGO staff announce schemes without considering the reality of what was offered or could be accessed. None of the women reported being able to obtain the loans reportedly granted after following a skill training at the union level. However, women appeared to value information provided on health and female anatomy. They found this information interesting, regardless of their migration intentions.

> "I know of seven women who tried to get a loan from PKB but, because of unrealistic conditions, not a single woman was able to get it."

Yet, some of the messages seemed to be communicated in inappropriate ways. For instance, when discussing HIV, trainers used official World Health Organization language, which was not necessarily comprehensible. It also created fear, as HIV and AIDS was a frightening subject to the women. Women who had previously migrated suggested that contraception should have been discussed more thoroughly, because of the high risk of pregnancy. A three-month contraceptive injection was reportedly administered to all migrant women undergoing government training. But for experienced migrants, this was insufficient protection.

Future programming considerations:

- Consider carefully the local interpretation of activity announcements to recruit programme participants and seek feedback on what target groups are expecting;
- Pilot-test the content with local experts and with different groups of beneficiaries;
- Be 100% certain that programme recommendations are genuinely available to the participants.

5. How will levels of participation be measured?

Evaluation results indicate participants had different motives and availability to attend the two-day pre-decision sessions. For instance, five of the 40 women told researchers they only signed their name and collected the lunch box, and six women were enlisted but could not attend because the *dalal* and their family discouraged participation or they were migrating imminently. Programme effectiveness should be considered based on possible 'dose effects' and what levels of participation are needed to achieve certain knowledge and/or skill levels. These differences will influence programme content design, sequencing and have budget implications.

Importantly for participation measurement, it is notable (and somewhat worrisome) that participants were asked to share WiF messages with others in order to create a potential multiplier effect of four – thus messages addressed to 32 participants were calculated to reach 128 persons (the number inscribed on reporting sheets). There was no specific follow up to assess whether participants transferred this knowledge, and if yes, to whom and what levels of new knowledge were acquired by possible 'secondary participants'.

In addition to suggesting that participant numbers should not be used as a measure of programme success, findings indicate the complexity of using migration outcomes or participant actions as measures of programme effectiveness. For example, after three rounds of interviews, 28 of 49 women had undertaken cross border labour migration, of whom eleven reported 'failed' migration and four indicated they were unsatisfied with the results. For instance, ten women had migrated but returned early, seven gave up the idea of migration for personal reasons, eight were declared unfit or too old, and seven were keen to migrate but their family was against it. Notably, a 16-year-old girl intending to migrate as a bar dance worker postponed her migration after attending the training, though she didn't give up on the idea.

Future programming considerations:

- Consider how to assess women's motivations and availability for participating before enrolling them in a particular session;
- Consider flexible ways to make information available to meet women's needs;
- Identify the highest priority information and/or skills and consider sequencing the sessions to ensure that women are exposed to the most critical information.

6. What are the delivery styles and messages that are suited to the participants?

Findings suggest that while the programme intention was to stimulate participation, trainers set a tight agenda and often requested silence and discipline. Trainers noted they had insufficient time for discussion, because they had to cover a very full curriculum. Importantly, women with migration experience were offered little chance to share their experiences and make suggestions. Moreover, if they spoke up, trainers often had difficulty handling their comments because these were generally inconsistent with the official training discourse on 'safe migration'. The field workers also explained that they also had difficulty following the original training they received because it was conducted in English with a translator and it dealt with difficult or unfamiliar notions.

Additionally, the results raised questions about the gendered nature of migration and the role of male family members. For instance, nine men (of 23) objected to their wife's migration as they believed that migrant women get defiled and destroy family honour. Adult sons also opposed their mother's migration, while daughters were more likely to be accepting. The programme did not help women manage these conflicts within their household.

Importantly, the evaluation results suggest that the 'social distance' separating the well-educated urban trainers and less-educated village women negatively affected the training rapport and messaging. For example, when offering guidance on menstrual hygiene, when trainers taught that it is unhygienic to use a sanitary pad for longer than six hours, silence followed. For participants disposable pads were considered costly and unnecessary. Even an alternate message to use washed cloths and dry them in the sun was rejected because women usually would hide used rags in a dark corner.

Future programming considerations:

- Programme content and delivery style should be developed with local community members and likely participants, drawing on principles of human centred design[3] and participatory action research[4];
- Prior to conducting migration-related information and training sessions, trainers should take time to talk with returnee women to understand the complexity of their experiences;
- Trainers should be selected based on their ability and willingness to communicate with participants or should be given the time to learn and adopt the effective ways to work with rural women.

7. Do migration-related information and training activities inadvertently encourage migration?

Results strongly indicate that whatever was the intention of the training sessions, participation inevitably boosted women's interest in migration among many who never thought about migrating. Information on 'rights' appeared to convey to some women that the risks were minimal, which reduced their fears about migration. Many appeared to gain a false sense of security, while others who had migrated recognised a reality that was otherwise, some commenting that they thought the idea of 'patiently negotiating' with an employer was 'nonsense'.

> "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)."

And much more seriously, a number of women came to understand that the price of a 'successful' migration was to accept sexual encounters, as one participant noted that on her second migration: "When I was raped, I did not agree but this time I accepted". 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'.

Lily

I dialled the [NGO] help-line 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 field worker] 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 two-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 two days, anyway? How can one change

3. See for example: http://www.designkit.org/methods or https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/175630614x14056185480186
4. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/175630614x14056185480186

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 field worker] met me by chance and she was astonished to see me. 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.

Lotika

"I fell into a trap when I attended the NGO training… [the field worker] 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 went to the NGO training and this is how Ali *dalal* got to know I was interested in migration."

Future programming considerations:

- Conduct preliminary assessments to understand both the reality of migration among returnees and migration-related interests among target populations;
- Discuss and test curricula with local groups to assess the influence it will have on migration hopes and plans.

8. How will the intervention staff be compensated sufficiently and retained beyond the initial programming investment?

Interviews with field workers indicated their concerns about future employment after the relatively short programme (11 months), and their perceptions that their training and experience would go to waste. For those invited to a next phase, they were especially concerned about a salary level that could be even lower than the previous pay. The job insecurity and relatively low salary levels gave the impression that the workers were somewhat exploited in order to achieve the NGO and the WiF programme goals. Of course, this was not the intention, but an inadvertent outcome of how the work was structured.

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

Future programming considerations:

- Programmes should conceive of and plan for long-term employment of project staff or consider not undertaking the work if staff cannot be treated respectfully and fairly;
- Programmes in low-income areas should never depend on volunteer or under-paid staff;
- If there is a trade to be made between further programme reach or fair treatment of staff, the latter should always be prioritised.

CONCLUSION

The WiF programme did not aim to promote women's migration. Yet, the strong pro-migration policy adopted by the Bangladesh Government appeared to seep into the WiF training. The training messages are a clear departure from earlier discourses that depicted women as potential or actual victims of exploitation and trafficking and recommended against migration. The WiF messages reverse the stigmatising image that women crossing borders suffered and, from this perspective, they are revolutionary.

Yet, at the same time, while the WiF's discussions of 'rights' and 'safe migration' were core components of the training, it led women who migrated for the first time to try to follow the 'safe migration' advice and to expect 'rights', which they did not find, causing anger and frustration. The services that were promised – by the NGO and government – were not available as implied. Future training must be certain to address the genuine range of situations commonly faced by women migrant workers. Programmes need to avoid promoting abstract and remote 'rights' that cannot be realised, because for migrant women, these illusions are painful and can be damaging.

Future interventions must avoid placing blind faith in the efficacy of trainings that imply women can shape the conditions of their employment abroad. Pre-migration information, if offered, must convey the realities that women may not be able to alter the balance of power to exert their rights. Such programmatic assumptions about women's and workers' rights in the circumstances often prevailing, especially in the Gulf States, are naïve at best and could even be dangerous.

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