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**Returning International Labor Migrants
From Bangladesh:
The Experience and Effects of Deportation**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of a study of former or returned international migrant workers from Bangladesh. The analysis focuses on the economic situation and return experiences of those who had been deported or officially repatriated back to Bangladesh by the destination state. Data collection took place in 2003, in the Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet regions of Bangladesh. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with eighty-one returned workers, twenty-five of whom had been deported. Study-participants were recruited with the cooperation and assistance of the community-based organization WARBE—the Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees. The data did not reveal a clear and statistically significant difference in the economic outcomes of the migration episode for the deported in comparison to the other returnees. Also of note was the high incidence, as reported by the informants, of returning to Bangladesh under conditions of duress; coercion and constraint guided not just the return experiences of the deported but were present throughout the sample. The findings point to the need for policies that target the reduction of such returns of duress for international migrant workers from developing countries.

Returning International Labor Migrants From Bangladesh: The Experience and Effects of Deportation¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

The deported international migrant worker has been a central image, a symbol in current debates and perceptions of a “global migration crisis”. Deportation involves the official, state-initiated repatriation of the migrant by the destination country to his or her country of origin. From the perspective of the migrant-receiving state, the problem of the deported migrant worker highlights the challenges of maintaining and policing the integrity of national borders and interests. For sending societies, the situation of the deported migrants raises additional questions about how to ensure the welfare and protection of citizens working abroad. Despite these concerns, the nature and consequences of deportation for international migrant workers have not been extensively studied.

This paper reports on the findings of a study of former or returned international migrant workers from Bangladesh. The study sample included but was not limited to persons who identified themselves as having been deported from the country to which they had traveled in order to work. The study examines the economic consequences of the migration episode for the former migrants. Drawing on the informants’ narrative accounts of how and why they returned to Bangladesh, it also analyzes patterns of variation in their circumstances of return, in order to better understand the distinctive character and significance of deportation in comparison to other types of return for migrant workers.

The findings highlight elements of continuity and similarity, with respect to both economic outcomes and return experiences, between the deported and other returned international labor migrants. Deported migrant workers can, I suggest, be usefully viewed as a subset of a larger category of former migrant workers—of “returnees under duress” or migrant workers who have returned under circumstances of coercion and constraint. I argue for the need to consider institutional changes that reduce and minimize these circumstances of duress, thereby enhancing the benefits and equity of international migrant worker flows.

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2. THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF DEPORTATION FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

The flow of migrant workers from less developed countries (LDCs) to developed countries (DCs) is a central and visible aspect of the contemporary global system. The term “migrant worker” as defined by the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers refers to “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national”(Office of the High Commission for Refugees 2004). Flows of migrant workers are typically marked by some cases of deportation or incidents in which migrant workers are officially sent back from the destination state to the country of origin. Deportation, in comparison to other types of involuntary migrant return, is distinguished by its mandatory and state-sponsored character, or the explicit involvement of the receiving society government in directing and organizing the return of the migrant. Generally speaking, the deportation of migrants takes place following the determination by receiving country government officials of the migrants’ undocumented presence in the country. The actual frequency of deportation within international migrant worker flows is highly fluid and variable, because of the different and shifting policies of receiving societies.

Studies of returned LDC migrant workers highlight tremendous variation in the economic benefits that they are able to derive from the migration experience. For some, the migration strategy is a successful one, resulting in economic gains and thus improved socioeconomic status upon their return to the country of origin. But for others, there is no change or even a decline in comparison to their pre-migration situation. These varied outcomes clearly relate to structural conditions in the community of return, such as the availability of business and job opportunities which enable the returned migrant to make effective use of capital and skills acquired abroad. Also relevant are human capital differences among migrants, such as those of education and skills, which work to differentiate economic outcomes both within and across particular migration streams (Gamburd 2000; Ghosh 2000; Sorensen, Van Hear and Pedersen 2003). In a review of the literature Olesen (2003:46) notes that the greatest benefits tend to accrue when the migrants are highly skilled, remain abroad for 10-15 years, remit while they are away, and return with financial and social capital.

The economic consequences of deportation per se have not been widely studied; however, the findings cited above do suggest that deported migrant workers are likely to derive less benefit from the migration episode in comparison to other returnees. For one thing, those experiencing deportation are more likely to be among the more socioeconomically disadvantaged sectors of the migrant worker stream. These disadvantages, in terms of skills, education, and access to capital, are reflected in their inability to arrange the necessary legal documents, which then results in the undocumented status that triggers their forced repatriation from the receiving society. Also relevant is the premature termination of the migration episode that is implied by

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deportation and relatedly, the unplanned and/or undesired character of the return that is part of it. Because of this premature termination, deported migrant workers may have had shorter periods of stay abroad in comparison to others who have returned. They are thus likely to have had less opportunity to generate savings, send remittances, and recover the financial investments that they have made in arranging for migration.

This paper draws on data from a study of returned migrant workers in Bangladesh to investigate the nature and consequences of the deportation experience for international migrant workers. It explores the assumption that those deported are at a particular economic disadvantage. Through an analysis of variations in migrants' circumstances of return, I also look at the meaning and significance of the premature and unplanned termination of the migration episode that is implied by deportation.

3. INTERNATIONAL LABOR MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH

International labor migration from Bangladesh has grown in significance since the 1970s, reflecting the country's status as a less developed and labor surplus society. Gross official figures indicate that from 1976 to 2002 (July) approximately 3.24 million Bangladeshis migrated for overseas employment and that a total of US\$23.7 billion was sent back in official remittances (Haque 2002). During the period 1978 to 1998, remittances, on an average, contributed to 26.5% of the country's foreign exchange earnings (ILO 2001, in Siddiqui and Abrar 2002).

Much of international migration from Bangladesh—an estimated 74.5%—has been to the Middle East, especially to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Ahmed 1998; Shah 1999). However, since the 1990s Bangladeshis have also become a notable part of the international labor migrant pool in a number of Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. In 1994 for example, Malaysia became a prominent destination, as the Malaysian government, faced with labor shortages, entered into an agreement with Bangladesh for the annual importation of 50,000 workers. For the most part, labor migration from Bangladesh, whether destined for the Middle East or Southeast Asia, has involved unskilled and semi-skilled male³ workers.

As a group, labor migrants from Bangladesh have been highly vulnerable to deportation. Underlying this vulnerability is the fact that there are significant numbers who are working in the receiving country without official government sanction; some estimates are that the number of undocumented workers is close to the numbers of legal or documented ones (Mahmood 1999). During periods of high economic growth and demand for low-cost labor, incidents of deportation may be few, due to the tolerance of receiving countries towards the presence of clandestine foreign workers. But the situation can change quickly during times of economic and political upheaval. For example, the Gulf crisis of 1990-91 resulted in the forced return of a large number of Bangladeshi

³ The migration of women, especially unskilled women, has since the 1980s been subject to a variety of bans and restrictions imposed by the Bangladesh government. While relatively small in number, women have nonetheless, often through unofficial means, participated in these labor migration streams (see INSTRAW and IOM 2000).

workers from the region (INSTRAW and IOM 2000: 8). In general, since the 1990s, controls over illegal migration in the Gulf states have been tightened. Several countries have had amnesty periods allowing illegal migrants to leave without penalty or to regularize their stay. This has been coupled with mass deportations⁴ as well as the creation of employment policies designed to minimize dependence on foreign labor.

A somewhat similar course of events has taken place with respect to Bangladeshi labor migrants in Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. In these countries, the currency crisis in Asia that started in July 1997 worked to curtail the demand for migrant labor; what followed were crackdowns on clandestine international workers. In 1997 Malaysia deported 100,000 Bangladeshi workers and in 2001 announced restrictions on the importation of foreign labor (Netto 2001). The forced return of large numbers of Bangladeshi workers has also occurred in Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand.

Reflecting both its growing prominence and volatility, international labor migration has in recent years become an important political issue in Bangladesh. To date, Bangladesh is among the handful of states to have ratified the 1990 UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. In 2002 the government of Bangladesh created the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment, replacing the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), which had previously been the main regulatory agency for international migrant workers. The Ministry's functions include the creation and implementation of legislation regarding migrant workers as well as the regulation of labor recruitment institutions. The Ministry also oversees the Wage Earners Welfare Fund which was established in 1990. The Fund, which requires contributions of 300 taka from each migrant worker, was set up to help migrant workers and their families in situations of illness or death, provide informational briefings prior to departure as well as legal aid and information to workers abroad through Bangladesh Embassies.

Even with the development of these state interventions, it nonetheless remains the case that international labor migration from Bangladesh is highly privatized and often an unregulated matter. As mentioned earlier, a substantial part of the migrant worker flow is undocumented, thereby falling outside the purview of the official institutional framework. Also of note is the prominent role of the private labor recruiting agencies that are registered with the government. These commercial agencies organize the actual process of recruiting labor migrants and arranging for them to work abroad.

The 1990s saw the development in Bangladesh of NGOs and advocacy groups concerned with the protection and well-being of Bangladeshi international migrant workers. The legal rights of Bangladeshi international migrant workers have been the concern of BSEHR (Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Rights) and the Bangladesh Migrant Centre (BMC). At Dhaka University, the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) has been established as a forum for conducting research and advocacy work on behalf of migrants. In 1997, a group of returned migrant workers formed WARBE (Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees) with the

⁴ In 1996, 50,000 Bangladeshi workers were deported from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

goal of promoting the rights and welfare of migrant workers. In communities across Bangladesh, WARBE has organized Migrant Centres which have worked to disseminate information about migrant rights and to provide support to those who have returned as well as to the families of current migrants. WARBE has also advocated for greater government transparency and accountability in the administration of the Wage Earner Welfare Fund.

4. STUDY METHODS

Eighty-one interviews were conducted in 2003 in Bangladesh with former international migrant workers. The interviews were conducted in the Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet regions of Bangladesh, in several rural and urban communities with relatively heavy outflows of international labor migrants. Respondents were recruited and identified with the assistance of WARBE as well as the referrals of local community leaders. The sampling method was thus a convenience one, producing a non-random sample of returned migrant workers. The parameters of the sample were also shaped in some deliberate ways. I interviewed only former international labor migrants who had returned to Bangladesh no less than two months and no more than 12 years ago. In addition, a special effort was made to locate and interview former international labor migrants who had been deported from the receiving country. However, the initial project goal of conducting half of all the interviews with persons who had been deported proved difficult to meet. Besides the general difficulty of finding and recruiting deported migrant workers to interview, our reliance on self-identification of deportee status posed methodological challenges. In a number of cases, interviewees who initially identified themselves as having been deported were found in the course of the interview to not meet the project's definition of deportation, that is repatriation mandated by the receiving state. Although less frequently, I also encountered reverse cases: interviewees who had actually been deported but did not identify themselves as deportees. In the final sample of 81 persons, 25 had been deported from the country to which they had traveled to work.

All of the interviews were conducted in Bangla and lasted an average of one hour. Prior to the interview, the respondents were read and shown an informed consent form which provided basic information on the study as well as their rights as a participant in the project. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, respondents were asked about their migration histories, with detailed questions on the circumstances of return as well as the economic benefits derived from the migration episode. Reflecting the predominance of men in Bangladeshi migrant worker flows, 7 of the interviews were with women and 74 with men. Eleven out of the 81 persons reported more than one episode of international labor migration. As far as motivations for having become an international migrant worker, 68 out of 81 identified economic reasons. Seven persons spoke of having left the country due to fear of political persecution from local political parties and authorities. Six of those interviewed mentioned the opportunity to perform hajj (Muslim religious pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia to be an important factor. As shown in Table 1, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates were the most common countries of destination. As far as those who had been deported ("deportees"), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had been the top former destinations.

Table 1: Country of Destination

COUNTRY	RETURNEES	DEPORTEES	TOTAL N	TOTAL %
Saudi Arabia	15	7	22	27
Malaysia	12	2	14	17.2
Kuwait	6	7	13	16
U.A.E.	7	4	11	13.5
Oman	3	2	5	6.1
Bahrain	3	1	4	5
Brunei	0	2	2	2.4
Japan	2	0	2	2.4
U.S.A.	2	0	2	2.4
Cypress	1	0	1	1.2
Iraq	1	0	1	1.2
Libya	1	0	1	1.2
Pakistan	1	0	1	1.2
Qatar	1	0	1	1.2
Singapore	1	0	1	1.2
TOTALS	56	25	81	100

5. THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF MIGRATION

This section explores the economic consequences of the migration episode for the former international migrant workers. It begins by offering information on two characteristics that are potentially important to understanding the economic consequences of the

migration episode: the educational backgrounds and length of time spent abroad by the former migrants. As we will see, the findings tend to confirm the idea that those deported are a disadvantaged group to begin with relative to other returned migrants.

Table 2: Years of Education/Degree

Years of Education/Degree	Returnees		Deportees		Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	6	10.7	5	20	11	13.4
1 to 5 years	8	14.3	6	24	14	17.3
5 to 10 years	9	16.1	7	28	16	19.8
SSC (Secondary School Certificate)	9	16.1	3	12	12	14.8
HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate)	8	14.3	1	4	9	11.1
Bachelor's Degree	11	19.6	3	12	14	17.3
Master's Degree	5	8.9	0	0	5	6.2
Totals	56		25		81	

As shown in Table 2, a range of educational backgrounds were represented in the sample. Nineteen of the eighty-one respondents were college graduates and twenty-five had had five years or less of formal education. The mean years of schooling for returned migrant workers was nine years. As expected, the average educational background of those deported (“deportees”) was somewhat lower than it was for the other returned migrants (“returnees”). Deportees indicated an average of seven years of schooling in contrast to ten years among the returnees. Whereas 56.3% of the returnees indicated more than ten years of schooling, the comparable figure for deportees was 26.8%.

Table 3: Length of Time Spent Abroad

Length of Stay	Returnees		Deportees		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than 6 months	2	3.6	6	24	8	9.9
6 to 18 months	0	0	7	28	7	8.6
18 months to 2 years	11	19.6	2	8	13	16
2 to 4 years	18	32.1	4	16	22	27.2
4 to 8 years	16	28.6	3	12	19	23.5
More than 8 years	9	16.1	3	12	12	14.8
Totals	56		25		81	

Table 3 presents information on the length of the migration episode. In general, for the entire sample of eighty-one respondents, the duration of the migration episode had often been quite brief—an average of 3.7 years.⁵ As expected, the deportees had worked abroad for a shorter period of time—a mean of 2.7 years in comparison to 4.2 years for the remainder of the sample.

I turn now to look at the economic consequences of the migration episode. Table 4 reports on the former migrants' overall assessments of the economic impact of the migration episode on their lives. During the interviews, respondents were asked to specifically compare their general economic family circumstances now in comparison to what had been the case prior to migration. As we see, 44.4% of the interviewees indicated that they were “better-off”, or that the impact of the migration episode had been positive for them. Slightly more than half however felt that they were “worse-off” than

⁵ The average 3.7 years duration of the migration episode in this study is less than the figure of 5.3 years as reported by a 2002 IOM study of 200 returned migrants in Bangladesh. A possible reason for this discrepancy is the deliberate over-sampling of deported migrants in my study and the premature termination of the migration episode implied by it.

before. When the results were broken down by deported versus non-deported status, they showed a greater frequency of “worse-off” assessments (76% versus 39%) and a lesser frequency of “better-off” assessments (20% versus 55.4%) among those who had been deported. Chi-square tests of statistical significance confirmed a significant difference in the general economic assessments of those who had been deported in comparison to the other returned migrant workers.

Table 4: Assessment of Post-migration Economic Situation

Economic Impact of Migration	Returnees		Deportees		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Better-Off	31	55.4	5	20	36	44.4
Worse-Off	22	39.3	19	76	41	50.6
Not sure	3	5.4	1	4	4	4.9
Total	56		25		81	

Note: The difference is significant (chi-square=9.53, p= .009)

Besides the question of general economic assessment, the degree of economic benefit was also gauged through several other questions. These results, as reported in Tables 5-7, reveal no statistically significant difference between deportees and returnees, thus raising questions about the presumed positive relationship of deportation to the negative economic outcomes of migration. As shown in Table 5, informants were asked about whether they had repaid any debts that they had incurred for the costs of migration, such as fees to recruiting agents and passage fares. Twelve persons had not had to rely on loans and thus incurred no debts. Of the remaining 69 persons, 39 (48% of the total sample) told us that they had successfully repaid the debts. However, 30 respondents (37% of the total sample) indicated that they still had debts to repay for the costs of the migration episode.

Besides the ability to pay off financial debts, changes in employment status and mobility are also relevant to understanding the economic consequences of migration. I asked respondents about whether they had experienced any change, pre- and post-migration, in their job or occupational situation in Bangladesh, and whether the change had been positive or negative. Three of the interviewees spoke of having retired from the labor force after returning to Bangladesh. Thirty of the 81 persons (37%) indicated improved post-migration job circumstances. However, over half of the sample felt that there had either been no real change or even a negative change in their occupational status after returning to Bangladesh.

Table 5: Repayment of Migration Debts

Repayment of Debts	Returnees		Deportees		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
No debts incurred	10	17.9	2	8	12	14.8
Debts paid off	29	51.8	10	40	39	48.2
Debts still remain	17	30.4	13	52	30	37
Total	56		25		81	

Note: The difference is not significant (chi-square=3.82, p=.148)

Table 6: Post-Migration Occupational Mobility

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Migration Occupation	Returnees		Deportees		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
No change	21	37.5	14	56	35	43.2
Positive change	25	44.6	5	20	30	37
Negative change	7	12.5	6	24	13	16.1
Retired	3	5.4	0	0	3	3.7
Total	56		25		81	

Note: The difference is not significant (chi-square=6.97, p=.073)

The study informants were questioned about the specific uses to which their earnings abroad had been put, including the remittances that they had sent as well as the money that they had saved and/or brought back with them. Based on these responses, I compiled a summary dichotomous measure of whether or not any portion of the money acquired by the migrant worker abroad had been placed in long-term investments. I defined long-term investments to include savings, educational expenses of family members, the purchase of land, houses, house construction, as well as business investments. I specifically excluded routine living expenses, such as food and rent, the repayment of loans, the funding of social ceremonies, and the purchase of consumer items. As reported in Table 7, a slightly larger number of respondents—46 (56.8% of the total sample) compared to 32 (39.5% of the total sample)—reported no long-term investments.

Table 7: Long-Term Investments

Long-term Investments	Returnees		Deportees		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	26	46.4	6	24	32	39.5
No	28	50	18	72	46	56.8
Not clear/n.a.	2	3.6	1	4	3	3.7
Total	56		25		81	

Note: The difference is not significant (chi-square=3.68, p=.159)

In summary, the above analyses suggest a number of key points. Paramount among these is the highly uneven and uncertain character of migration as an economic strategy of improvement for Bangladeshi migrant workers. To be sure, some of those interviewed had derived significant benefits from the migration episode. However, for a substantial proportion of the returned migrants, there had been minimal or even negative gains. A number of studies have noted the economic reintegration problems faced by returned Bangladeshi migrant workers (Ahmed 1998; Gardner 1995; INSTRAW and IOM 2000; Mahmood 1991; Siddiqui and Abrar 2001). The most noted problems include a failure to use remittances productively and effectively and an absence of job opportunities upon returning to Bangladesh.

As far as the question of whether the economic outcomes for those who had been deported were particularly distinctive in comparison to other returnees, the results are

mixed and clearly call for more extensive studies. The deportees' overall assessments of their post-migration economic situation were more negative than those of the others. However, several other more specific economic outcome measures showed no statistically significant difference between the deportees and the others. A possible explanation for this discrepancy, one that requires further investigation, is the general pessimism with which deportees are likely to view their migration episode, given the circumstances of their departure from the receiving society. This pessimism colors their overall attitude and thus overall economic assessments in ways that it may not for the other returned migrants.

6. A TYPOLOGY OF MIGRANT WORKER RETURN

I turn now to look at the informants' stories of return—their narrative accounts of how and why they returned to Bangladesh. I draw on these stories to construct a typology of migrant return. Underlying this typology is the conceptual distinction of voluntary and forced movements. While the framework of voluntary versus forced migration has been central to analyses of the origins of migrant flows, it has not been applied to the study of return migration.

The informants' stories of return bring our attention to the multiplicity of forces and motivations that guide return migration. The majority of the informants reported that circumstances of coercion guided their return. Deportation as a type of return was both distinctive and similar to other experiences of return.

A. Returning Voluntarily

Among states that are pursuing temporary international migrant programs as a way of relieving labor shortages, an idealized model of the international labor migrant often informs their pertinent policies. In the idealized model, the migrant works in the overseas country for a limited and predictable period of time and then returns to his or her originating state. The return of the migrant is understood to be both certain and voluntary in the sense that it is not a matter of challenge and negotiation by the migrant.

This idealized model of migrant worker return was affirmed by a few of the narrative accounts of return that we collected. In these accounts, the decision to return to Bangladesh was spoken of in conscious and positive terms. The former migrants had actively decided to return, even perhaps in the face of opportunities to remain abroad for a longer time. Several of the most economically successful of the interviewees spoke of their return in these ways. They felt that they had amassed enough resources from their sojourn abroad and so did not have to remain overseas. They had come home to enjoy retirement or to engage in income-generating activities such as investments and entrepreneurship that were less taxing and/or more prestigious than those in which they had been involved while abroad.

Besides the successful achievement of their economic objectives, the “voluntarily returned” also included those who had come back for personal reasons such as the illness

of a parent or because of general feelings of dissatisfaction with their lives abroad. For Abul, who had worked in Japan for almost nine years, there were clearly multiple factors at work. But paramount was a desire to get married and to start a family, options that he did not see as available to him if he had remained in Japan:

After so many years, I was tired and I wanted a normal life. My father was sick and there were family disputes over property. I had some savings by then. I decided to come home and get married.

I include among the “voluntarily returned” those who spoke of their return to Bangladesh, in its nature and timing, as having taken place in a predictable and expected fashion. Unlike the accounts of Abul in the above, these did not describe a conscious, active decision to return. These persons spoke rather of how the timing and circumstances of return had been decided in advance for them, typically in written or verbal work contracts that had been agreed upon prior to departure from Bangladesh. This was the case for Chanchal, who had spent four years in Malaysia:

Before I left, I knew I would be in Malaysia for four years. My family knew that I would not see them for four years. That’s how long I was prepared to be abroad. So when my time was up, I returned.

B. Returning Under Duress

By far the most common type of return described was return under duress. In these accounts, coming back to Bangladesh was marked by elements of coercion and constraint—as a course of action it was neither desired nor predictable as in the “voluntary return” accounts just described. In what follows I explore variations or subtypes of such return:

i. Escape from Abuse

Some informants spoke of having actively sought return to Bangladesh. They had done so in order to escape from the highly abusive working and living conditions in which they had found themselves abroad. Thus although they had in fact traveled back to Bangladesh of their own accord, the coercive circumstances of their stay abroad sharply distinguishes their situation from those who had returned voluntarily.

Those who related stories of escape from abuse all spoke of going overseas voluntarily to work. Once abroad however, they had found themselves living and working in conditions that were vastly different from what they had been led to expect. These conditions were coercive and punitive and typically involved little or no financial remuneration. Faced with these conditions, they actively sought return to Bangladesh. As suggested by their expressed desire to have stayed in the overseas country longer if conditions had been different, they had sought return as a way of escaping from the abuse; their return was not a rejection of the strategy of working abroad.

Accounts of “escape from abuse” were particularly prominent among the women informants, highlighting the particular vulnerabilities of women to such exploitative situations. Rumana, a woman in her mid-twenties, spoke of having gone to Kuwait in 1999 and stayed there for about eighteen months. The recruiting agent with whom her brother had made the arrangements had told them that she would be working in a factory in Kuwait. But upon her arrival she was immediately taken to a large family home where she was put to work as a domestic servant under abusive conditions. She managed to flee from the home and find her way to the Embassy of Bangladesh which assisted her return:

I had to take care of the children and do cooking and cleaning. They used to beat me. And I didn't get any salary. I also had to constantly guard myself against the misbehavior of the master of the house. I lived in fear and was not allowed to go outside. After over a year I escaped. I got help from the gardener who was Indian. He secretly sent me to the Bangladesh Embassy. At first the Embassy people did not believe me, but then they arranged for me to come back home.

While Rumana spoke of help from the Embassy of Bangladesh, other informants spoke of escaping with the assistance of kin and acquaintances, often fellow Bangladeshis based in the receiving states. In the case of Monir, the recruiting agent (dalal) who had placed him in the abusive work situation was also the one who helped to get him out. Ironically, the agent charged Monir and his family additional fees for retrieving him from Saudi Arabia:

I paid 120,000 taka⁶ to go to Saudi Arabia. I was supposed to be an office peon but I worked as a domestic helper in a house where the atmosphere was very bad. I could not leave the house and I would often not get food. I was not paid any salary. My employer lived alone. He was a drinker and a womanizer. If I complained about the lack of food, I would be beaten. He once threw me off the second floor. He would threaten me with weapons and once even fired a shot. There was a Pakistani man who also worked in the house. He told me, if you go to the police here, they will just throw you in jail. After a few months I was able to get in touch with my brother who asked the dalal to get me out. So the same man who brought me to the house came one day and took me to the airport. But now because of this we are under even greater financial debt to the dalal.

ii. Returning due to Illness

There were also stories of return due to illness. Among other things, these accounts highlight the absence of adequate health care provisions for many international migrant workers. The informants spoke of becoming sick while working abroad. While in some cases the employer bore the costs of medical care, in others they refused to do so, even when work-related injuries were involved. Even with their illnesses, the migrant workers often continued to work, motivated by a desire to continue generating income and not to jeopardize their stay abroad. As in the case of Habib as described below, informants typically spoke of having wanted to remain abroad longer if it had been possible. Habib had spent three years in Malaysia where he had worked at a garments factory before experiencing a serious hand injury. Habib expressed considerable

⁶ The 2004 official currency exchange rate is USD1. = 59.5 Bangladeshi taka.

resentment at the treatment he had received from the factory owner. Nonetheless, he had returned to Bangladesh reluctantly, only after coming to the conclusion that he had no other viable options. Thus while his return to Bangladesh was voluntary, it was also guided by powerful constraining circumstances.

The owner of the factory was very rude. If we protested anything he harassed us with the help of the local police. I was not happy with the conditions but I would have stayed longer if it was not for the accident. My hand got injured in one of the machines. The owner refused to pay for my medical treatment, I had to pay out of pocket. Even so, I wanted to stay, to continue working. But it was not possible for me to work. After sometime I asked the employer to pay for my return, and he agreed since I was not of much use to him.

iii. Returned by Employer

The most frequent narrative of return was of “returned by employer”. In these cases informants spoke of having been forcibly sent back by their employer, despite an active wish to remain abroad longer. Of relevance here are the laws guiding the presence of migrant workers in receiving countries, and the employer dependence that is often promoted by them. As noted by Nasra Shah (2002) in an analysis of the laws of the Gulf states, the rules make it difficult for migrant workers to change sponsors and even to leave the country without the sponsor’s permission.⁷ Under these conditions, the migrant worker’s return to the originating country is at least potentially a completely unilateral decision, under the complete control of the sponsoring employer.

A few informants spoke of being sent back to Bangladesh by their employer because of a downturn in the employer’s business. But far more common were stories of return that were triggered by disputes with the employer over pay and working conditions. Some of those interviewed spoke of being misled and/or misinformed, prior to their departure from Bangladesh, about the wages that they were going to receive abroad. Others related discovering upon their arrival in the receiving state that they were being paid far less than other workers for performing the same tasks. These discrepancies triggered demands and protests which then resulted in conflicts and ultimately the dismissal and return of the worker. In some of these cases the employer bore the costs of the passage back to Bangladesh but a more common pattern was for the fare costs to be cut from back wages owed. Muntasir, a man in his early twenties whom we interviewed in the Chittagong area, told of going to Saudi Arabia in 1997. He had paid the recruiting agent 80,000 taka to arrange for him to go there; he had yet to completely repay the loans he had incurred. He had worked in Saudi Arabia for about three years, in a jewelry-making factory. His repeated requests for a pay raise eventually led to his forced return to Bangladesh:

⁷ With reference to the Gulf states, Shah mentions that the rules frequently stipulate that the migrant worker cannot change his or her sponsor before 2 years. In the case of changing the sponsor, the initial sponsor must give a transfer paper to the employee. Exit permits also depend on the permission of the employer.

At the company I first did casting work, then later I did polishing work. I had to work with dangerous acids but there were no protection gloves. The acids and gases would go into your system and make you feel sick. At that time I was getting 700 riyals which was low compared to what the other workers were getting. I told them to give me more. They kept on telling me, next month, next month. I had to spend a lot of my salary on medicines. I thought to myself, all of my money is being spent here, so what use is it to be abroad. I tried to explain this to the supervisors. They told me, we have a 4 year agreement with you. Although I had never signed an agreement with them. After a lot of angry fighting, they sent me to the airport with a ticket. Even then, they made trouble for me. When I was leaving they sent some men after me to beat me up as revenge for the inconvenience I had caused.

iv. Returning in Anticipation of Deportation

There were also accounts of returning to Bangladesh in response to **anticipated** trouble with the official authorities abroad. Returning to Bangladesh was seen as a way to avoid the imprisonment, fines, and other hardships that were the anticipated and feared consequences of being caught by the authorities. Such anticipation was often linked to the migrant's undocumented status. But it also reflected changes in the political environment, such as a crackdown on foreign workers which could motivate undocumented workers who might otherwise have remained in the receiving country to return home. Of note also is that even as these accounts highlighted the understood significance and vulnerability produced by undocumented status, they also made clear the complex realities of this status. Some of those interviewed spoke of being unaware of their undocumented status until they were actually abroad. While abroad, they discovered to their dismay that the recruiting agent had sold them fraudulent working papers, thereby rendering their entry illegal. These had allowed them to successfully enter the receiving country but had then left them without any legitimate employment provisions. In other cases informants spoke of moving from documented to undocumented status, perhaps due to a change in place of employment or to shifts in the regulations for migrants in the receiving country.

In their stories of return, the former migrant workers often spoke of how the conditions of their stay in the receiving country had become progressively more difficult due to their undocumented status. We see this in the account of Selim, a man in his mid-thirties who had worked in Malaysia for about seven years. He had entered Malaysia legally, with official clearance to work at a factory. He was dismissed, however, after about a year when the factory closed down. He decided to remain in Malaysia and managed to find work as a truck driver despite the absence of legal working papers. His decision to return to Bangladesh was guided by a sense of the growing risks, given his undocumented status, of remaining in Malaysia:

After I got laid off I was not there legally, so it was difficult. But I managed. I drifted for a while. Then I was able to get a driver's license through a fake i.d. and I found work as a truck driver. While I was driving I was caught by the police three times; they found that I did not have all the correct papers. My boss was able to get me off by paying them some

bribes. But the third time the police said I would end up in jail the next time. I decided not to take the risk and I left.

Since the 1990s, Saudi Arabia and a number of other Gulf states have had amnesty periods for undocumented foreign workers. In general, these amnesty programs have offered opportunities either to regularize one's stay or to leave the country without incurring the penalties that are usually imposed on the undocumented at the time of departure. A few of the study-participants spoke of returning to Bangladesh during these amnesty periods. Besides the advantage of not having to pay penalties, they also spoke of returning in response to the increasingly difficult political environment for undocumented migrant workers in the receiving state.

v. Returned by the State: Deportation

Those who were deported spoke of being apprehended and detained by the police or other local authorities while abroad because of their undocumented status and in a few cases, their possible involvement in illicit activities. The periods of detention ranged widely, from one day to almost eight months, with most citing periods of two to four weeks. Repatriation to Bangladesh typically took place after the payment of fines and passage fares to the authorities. A number of the respondents were unsure about who exactly had borne the expenses for their release and repatriation. A few referred to local religious and charitable organizations in the receiving country having played a role in arranging for their return. But in most cases, family and friends intervened, or former employers were required to pay the pertinent charges. The latter was the case for Musabbir who had gone to work in Dubai (in the United Arab Emirates) in 2002, paying 130,000 taka to an agent to get there. But he spent only three months abroad. Following a dispute, his employer dismissed him, thereby effecting a change in his status, from legal worker to undocumented migrant. He was then turned in to the police and spent some time in jail before being deported. Musabbir's account suggests the possibility of a high degree of overlap between those who reported having been returned by their employer and those who had been deported:

I worked in Dubai as a farm worker, with a monthly salary of 500 dirhams. I soon found that I was getting much less than the others working there, the Indians and Pakistanis. I also found out that my contract said that I was to be paid 800 dirhams. I questioned the boss about it. I was immediately dismissed and sent to the police. I spent a few weeks in jail and then the police made arrangements for me to return. I actually collected no salary because the police took the money for my plane ticket from the employer, who told them that he was applying my salary to the cost of the plane ticket.

The case of Asif serves to challenge the idea that those who have been deported have always had short and economically unsuccessful periods of stay abroad. Asif had gone to Oman in 1985, remaining there for fifteen years. He had started off as a construction crew member. Eventually he opened his own business as a building contractor, organizing and supervising crews of Bangladeshi migrant workers. By mutual agreement, he had registered his business in the name of a local businessman, a necessary measure

because of his undocumented status as well as local laws that restricted the business activities of foreigners. Asif spoke of being picked up by the police during a period of official crackdown on clandestine foreign businesses and workers. Asif was placed in police custody, but remained there only for a few hours. With his resources and contacts, he was quickly able to arrange for his release and repatriation. While Asif did not regret his time in Oman, he bemoaned the circumstances of his departure, which had not allowed him to effectively tie up his business interests in Oman before leaving:

I left Oman suddenly, that is my only regret. My business partner, the man in whose name my business was registered, ended up cheating me. He kept the profits and since I was told to leave Oman immediately, I could not do much about it. It is Allah's will, that is all I can say. I worked in Oman for years and I was a respected man. No one, the police, the local people, no one questioned me. Then the government decided to make trouble for foreign workers and business people.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has reported on the findings of a study of deported and returned international migrant workers from Bangladesh. The reported economic outcomes of the migration episode did not reveal clear-cut and significant differences between those who were deported and the other returned migrants. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, these results clearly require more investigation. Future studies on this topic may consider the use of sampling techniques that depend on institutional means of identification of the deported rather than the self-identification strategy used in this study.

Among the possible explanations for the absence of clearly differentiated economic outcomes for the deported and the other returnees is the generally low level of economic benefits that were derived from the migration episode. Overall, as a means of economic betterment, working abroad seemed to be a highly risky and uncertain strategy. Many of our informants spoke of continuing to be in debt for the costs of the migration episode, and for approximately half of the sample, migration had not resulted in occupational mobility or enhanced long-term investments. These outcomes undoubtedly reflect the high proportions of unskilled workers that have been part of the migrant worker flow out of Bangladesh. The point is that under these conditions, the negative economic effects of deportation may not be so significant and visible. In the case of flows in which the workers are more privileged, by virtue of their human capital as well as other conditions, and thus more likely to derive economic benefits from the migration episode, the economic gap between the deported and others is likely to be greater.

As suggested by their narratives of how they returned to Bangladesh, many of the study-participants reported that circumstances of constraint and coercion marked their return to Bangladesh. Deportation then, as a type of return, may be conceptualized as a subtype of return under duress. In making this point, I do not intend to minimize the distinctive qualities and most importantly, the special human costs of deportation. Deportation is likely to involve particular physical and psychological costs such as those stemming from

the experience of incarceration or of being placed in government custody in the receiving society. However, an exclusive focus on the situation of the deported would also I believe not do justice to the more wide-ranging and systemic challenges that face migrant workers.

Based on the findings of the study, I make the following policy recommendations with respect to international migrant worker flows from Bangladesh and other LDCs:

1. The creation of institutional mechanisms within the receiving society that reduce the legal dependence of the migrant worker on the sponsoring employer. This may include arbitration courts and committees that offer accessible and non-intimidating services to migrant workers.
2. Dissemination of information to migrant workers about their legal rights in the receiving state.
3. Reduction of the practice by recruiting agents, both within the originating and receiving states, of selling and trading fraudulent visas and work contracts.

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