

# TEMPORARY LABOUR MIGRATION OF WOMEN



## Case Studies of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

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**INSTRAW**



IOM International Organization for Migration

**Temporary Labour Migration of Women:  
Case Studies of  
Bangladesh and Sri Lanka**

United Nations International Research and Training  
Institute for the  
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(INSTRAW)

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## Acronyms

ACFFTU	All Ceylon Federation of Free Trade Unions
ACILS	American Center for International Labour Solidarity
ADAB	Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh
AMS	Ansan Migrant Shelter
ASA	Association for Social Advancement
ASK	Ain O Shalish Kendra
ATAB	Association of Travel Agencies of Bangladesh
BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust
BMC	Bangladesh Migrant Centre
BMET	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training
BNWLA	Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BOESL	Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited
BSEHR	Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights
BUPI	Bangladesh Union Parishad
CCDB	Christian Commission for the Development of Bangladesh
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
GSS	Gana Shahajjo Shangstha
INSTRAW	United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JCMK	Joint Committee of Migrant Workers in Korea
MAPA	Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association
NUPW	National Union of Plantation Workers
RMMRU	Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAPRI	Structural Adjustment Policy Research Initiative
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment

## Temporary Labour Migration of Women

SHISHUK	Shikkha Shasthya Unnoyon Kendra
TNOs	Thana Executive Officers
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WARBE	Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees
WIN	Women in Need





## Preface

The rapid growth of international migration in the 1990s, along with the changes in the nature of international migration, has made it an increasingly important and often politically sensitive issue in many parts of the world.

In some regions, notably Asia, the trend over the last decade has been the “feminization” of labour migration, particularly temporary migration. A large number of migrants today are women, traveling beyond the borders of their countries to escape from poverty or to improve the socioeconomic situation of their families. The current pattern is that women workers often migrate alone as single persons, unaccompanied by family members, rather than as dependents of their husbands which was previously the case.

Female migrants are at greatest risk of suffering human rights abuses since they work mostly in the unregulated sector of the economy such as domestic service, not covered by protective labour legislation or policy measures. However, as most women have obligations with their families back home, they work under those conditions and in many cases succeed in improving the socioeconomic situation of their families and their own position at home and in the community at large.

While some recent studies on the subject have addressed the issue of female labor migration, much still needs to be done to understand the impact of women’s migration on the families left behind and on their own empowerment both at home and abroad.

To fill this gap, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of

Women (INSTRAW) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) commissioned two case studies in 1999 focussing on the Asian region, in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The main objective of the case studies was to examine the impact of temporary female labor migration on the families left behind and on their own traditional roles and status. Initiatives of both governments and civil society organizations were examined in these studies in terms of the policies and programmes put in place to protect the rights and improve the situation of migrant women in these countries.

After the completion of the fieldwork, INSTRAW and IOM convened a Meeting of experts on female labor migration in Geneva. Experts from various developing countries were invited to review the preliminary findings of these two studies and to make recommendations for action. The report of the Meeting was published by INSTRAW and IOM in April 2000 and is available from both organizations. It contains proposals for action by states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations. The present publication contains the two case studies, the findings of the surveys and the authors' conclusions.

INSTRAW and IOM hope that this publication will not only alert governments and civil society to the situation of temporary female labor migration in developing countries and to the specific problems faced by women, but it will also contribute to the initiation of relevant action through the implementation of programmes and policy measures to improve the current situation.

INSTRAW and IOM want to thank the authors of the studies Tasneem Siddiqui of the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit of the University of Dhaka for the Bangladesh study, and Myrtle Perera of the Marga Institute for the Sri Lanka study, for their efforts in collecting reliable data and establishing representative samples of female migrants - often very difficult to contact - in order to ensure objectivity. We also wish to thank Julia Tavares, Associate Social Affairs Officer (INSTRAW), Reinhard Lohrmann, Chief, Division of Research; Heikki Mattila, Research Officer; and Niusca Magalhaes, Administrative Assistant (IOM), who contributed to the implementation of this project. Special thanks are also due to Robert Paiva, Permanent Observer (IOM) and Yakin Ertürk

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Director General (IOM)

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Director (INSTRAW)



## **Chapter One: Bangladesh**

### **Introduction**

As in many other South Asian countries, women in Bangladesh have not traditionally been an integral part of the public sphere. Even though traditional attitudes towards gender segregation still remain dominant, major socio-economic changes since the early 1970s, particularly in rural areas, have brought an increasing number of women into paid employment.<sup>1</sup> A significant number of these women have been seeking employment beyond national borders, especially in the Middle East and South East Asia.

The major restructuring of the global economy in recent years has, among other things, increased the international demand for temporary migrant workers (ILO 1997). In this process, women workers have often been the preferred labour supply, and female employment relative to that of men had tended to increase throughout the world. Consistent with this worldwide trend, the short-term migration of women workers from Bangladesh has also been on the increase, despite the government's restrictive policies in the name of protecting women's dignity and honour. However, many migrant women have often found themselves in a precarious position because of these restrictions, as they have had to resort to unofficial channels in order to migrate. Little information exists on many aspects of female labour migration in large part due to the negative official attitude and indifference on the part of civil society organization towards migrant women.

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<sup>1</sup> The increased presence of women in the labour market is discussed in recent labour surveys (World Bank 1997, UNDP 1994).

### *Objectives of the Study*

No database of any significance exists on female labour migration from Bangladesh. Yet, information is sorely needed before any policy measures can be devised to protect and assist women migrant workers and their families who are left behind. Some of the questions needing answers are: What are the socio-economic characteristics of migrant women? how does migration affect gender roles within the family? and what are the empowering effects of migration, if any, on women's lives? The purpose of this study is to shed some light on these and other related questions in order to be of some guidance in policy discussions. The research objectives of this study were to assess:

- the scale and scope of temporary labour migration of women from Bangladesh,
- whether migration is empowering to women,
- gender impact of migration on women's families left behind,
- the gender implications of existing migration policies, and
- the measures, or their lack thereof, taken by governmental and non-governmental organizations to protect the well being of migrant workers and combat discrimination and violence targeted against them.

It is envisioned that the information gathered in this study can guide the following policy objectives:

- identify effective measures to empower migrant women and help protect their human rights,
- help formulate strategies to ensure the well-being of the girl child and that of the older women who stay behind when the principal woman of the family migrates, and
- sensitize the government and civil society organizations to the needs and problems of migrant women and their families.

### *Methodology*

The present study is divided into two parts. The first part of the study provides an overview of the existing

information on female labour migration and identifies its major sources among government agencies, private institutions and non-governmental organizations.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), is the main repository of data on migration. But, because it has never published any information on migrant women, its records had to be scrutinized and officials interviewed in order to assemble the unprocessed data in existence within the agency. Surveys were also administered to recruiting agencies, NGOs, human rights organizations and trade unions. The first part of this chapter is based on information collected from these sources. Information is also presented on actions taken at the national level by different sectors (government and NGOs) in protecting migrant women, and on existing national laws related to labour migration and their observance.

The second part of the study presents the findings of a field survey involving a sample of 200 households. The records and files of the BMET recruiting agencies, human rights organizations and migrant workers' associations were used to guide sample selection and in determining where migrant women were clustered. Interviews were conducted both with women migrant workers themselves, either returnees or those who were on holiday, and with the family members of those who were abroad at the time.<sup>3</sup> Different questionnaires were administered to the two groups. In-depth and open-ended interviews were also conducted with a select number of interviewees from both groups, to generate qualitative data.

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<sup>2</sup> The list of government agencies so mentioned, includes Ministries of Labour, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Women's Affairs, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Women's Directorate and Directorate of Nurses. Among the private institutions mentioned are Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), Association of Travel Agencies of Bangladesh (ATAB). At the non-governmental level, a host of human rights organizations, women's activist groups, trade union and migrant associations are also identified as sources of information.

<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork for the study was conducted from April to June 1999.



## Part I

Part I of this chapter is organized into three sections. The first presents the existing data on migration. The second discusses how female labour migration is managed by government and private institutions and an assessment of the role of various civil society organizations in protecting migrant women. The third highlights the existing national and international laws that regulate temporary labour migration and their degree of observance.

### 1 Existing Data on Migration

International labour migration from Bangladesh has a long history. In the early 1940s, work opportunities in British merchant ships paved the way for labour migration for Bangladeshi men (Mahmood 1996). The migration route has taken various twists and turns since then, and the search for a better livelihood beyond one's national borders continues unabated. Countless women have migrated from Bangladesh as they followed male family members in the past, but since the early 1980s women are becoming the principal agents of labour migration in ever increasing numbers. This section attempts to compile and analyze the existing data on labour migration of women and compare it to that of men.

#### 1.1 Statistics on Total Migration

The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), the department within the Ministry of Labour and Employment responsible for keeping track of Bangladeshis employed overseas began to keep systematic records of migrant workers in 1976. However, BMET does not provide data broken down by gender. Only information on the total number of persons who have migrated overseas for employment, their skill composition and countries of destination is available. The Bangladesh Bank, the central bank of the country, publishes annual figures on remittances sent by Bangladeshi workers, which again are not segregated by gender. Likewise, the Immigration Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs, keeps a record of every Bangladeshi national who leaves the country whether by air, sea or land. It does not however give a gender breakdown of such information.

## Temporary Labour Migration of Women

Table 1.1 presents the official figures on the total labour migration since 1976, showing a fairly uniform rising trend in the total number of migrant workers which peaked in 1997 with 381,077 migrants.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1.1 - Total number of persons having officially migrated by year, skill composition and remittance sent during 1976-1999**

Year	Professional	Skilled	Semi-Skilled	Un-Skilled	Total	Remittance (US\$ Million)
1976	568	1,775	543	3,201	6,087	23.71
1977	1,766	6,447	490	7,022	15,725	82.79
1978	3,455	8,190	1,050	10,114	22,809	106.90
1979	3,494	7,005	1,685	12,311	24,495	172.06
1980	1,983	12,209	2,343	13,538	30,073	301.33
1981	3,892	22,432	2,449	27,014	55,787	304.88
1982	3,898	20,611	3,272	34,981	62,762	490.77
1983	1,822	18,939	5,098	33,361	59,220	627.51
1984	2,642	17,183	5,484	31,405	56,714	500.00
1985	2,568	28,225	7,823	39,078	77,694	500.00
1986	2,210	26,294	9,265	30,889	68,658	576.20
1987	2,223	23,839	9,619	38,336	74,017	747.60
1988	2,670	25,286	10,890	29,356	68,202	763.90
1989	5,325	38,820	17,659	39,920	101,724	757.84
1990	6,004	35,613	20,792	41,405	103,814	781.54
1991	9,024	46,887	32,605	58,615	147,131	769.30
1992	11,375	50,689	30,977	95,083	188,124	901.97
1993	11,112	71,662	66,168	95,566	244,508	1,009.09
1994	8,390	61,040	46,519	70,377	186,326	1,153.54
1995	6,352	59,907	32,055	89,229	187,543	1,201.57
1996	3,188	64,301	34,689	109,536	211,714	1,355.34
1997	3,797	65,211	193,558	118,511	381,077	1,525.03
1998	9,574	74,718	51,590	131,785	267,667	1,599.24
1999 (Jan-Feb)	1,327	11,577	4,964	19,513	37,381	260.24
Total	108,569	798,860	591,587	1,180,146	2,679,171	16,413.30

Source: Prepared from BMET and Bangladesh Bank Data 1999.

<sup>4</sup> More precisely, these figures refer to the total of departures from Bangladesh for employment purposes and are not net figures re-exiting workers who had temporarily returned to Bangladesh for short visits.

## 1.2 Skill Level of Migrant Workers

BMET classifies the temporary migrant population into four categories of workers: professional, skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled. Doctors, engineers, nurses and teachers are considered professionals; manufacturing or garments workers are classified as skilled, domestic workers as unskilled; and tailors, masons and the like are included in the semi-skilled workers category.

Table 1.1 indicates that the proportion of semi and unskilled migrant workers in the total number has risen over time. Even though professionals and skilled workers often equalled or outnumbered the semi-skilled and unskilled workers from 1976 to 1981, their ratio to the latter has fallen to about two-thirds in later years. This relative magnitude of professional and skilled workers seems to have fallen even further in the last three years (1996-1998), reaching its lowest value in 1997.

The relative increase of semi-skilled and unskilled workers in recent years might reflect, on the one hand, a failure of investment in human resources in Bangladesh in past years, and, on the other, a change in the composition of foreign demand for migrant labour. While the Middle Eastern countries needed professional and skilled workers for rapid infrastructure development during the early years of the oil price hike, their demand for skilled labour diminished in the 1990s as the pace of investment in infrastructure slowed down (Shah 1995). Now the relative demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labour for maintenance and domestic work is much higher in these economies.

## 1.3 Country of Destination

Saudi Arabia by far is the biggest employer of Bangladeshi migrant workers, followed by United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>5</sup> Within in this region, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain are also major destinations. Until very recently, Malaysia was the second largest employer of Bangladeshi

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<sup>5</sup> Of the 2,679,171 workers who left Bangladesh from January 1976 to February 1999, 1,126,539 went to Saudi Arabia. In 1998 when the annual flow of labour migration exceeded a quarter of a million, more than half of this number went to Saudi Arabia and close to 40,000 went to UAE.

migrant workers. However, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the number of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia fell drastically.

#### **1.4 Flow of Remittance**

The Bangladesh Bank records the annual flow of remittance from all over the world. Total remittances received from abroad (Table 1.1) have steadily increased since 1976, reaching almost US\$1.6 million in 1998.<sup>6</sup> The lower growth rate of remittances in relation to that of the total number of migrants probably reflects the increasing proportion of unskilled workers in the total and their lower earning capacity compared to the professional and skilled workers.

The figures on remittances do not reflect totals for temporary workers and immigrants who live permanently abroad. However, the source country of remittances, for which a breakdown does exist, can be used as a rough indicator of the relative magnitudes from the two groups. Remittances from Asian countries, which are almost exclusively host to temporary workers, amounted to 83 per cent of the total between 1991 and 1996. During the same period, the amount received from Western countries, where most migrants reside permanently, was about 14 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the relative magnitude of remittances from temporary workers is likely to be higher than that suggested by the ratio above, since migrants in the Middle East and South East Asia are more likely to send their money through unofficial channels which are omitted in official statistics.

#### **1.5 Statistics on Women's Migration**

The officials at BMET had to manually assemble raw data in order to find the total number of female migrants for the purposes of the present study. Because files prior to 1991 no longer exist, information could only be gathered for the period after 1991 and yearly breakdowns could be given after

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<sup>6</sup> By 1997, the remittances sent through official channels alone have reached 20.52% of the country's annual import bill and 36.65% of the annual value of its exports (Chowdhury 1997:77). It is also estimated that remittances account for close to 30% of national savings (World Bank 1997).

<sup>7</sup> The remaining 3% was sent from other countries.

1995. According to BMET figures, which account for everyone who left the country officially for employment purposes, 13,049 women had migrated in the eight-year period from 1991 until June 1998. This figure however is exceedingly low. It constitutes less than one per cent of the total migration from Bangladesh at a time when female migrants constituted nearly half of the foreign labour population at the global level (Commission on Population and Development 1997:198).

According to an earlier estimate based on the number of returnees during the Iraq-Kuwait war, close to 3 per cent of migrant workers are women.<sup>8</sup> Since these women had migrated before 1990 when the flow of women had just begun, the share of women is likely to have increased considerably since then.

One obvious cause of the under-representation of women in official statistics is the state-imposed restrictions and periodic bans on the migration of women. Successive governments have restricted the migration of skilled and semi-skilled women while banning the migration of unskilled women outright.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the abrupt decrease in the number of women migrants in 1998, shown in Table 1.2, is probably closely related to the government's decision to completely ban the migration in that same year.<sup>10</sup> The ban was later reversed for certain categories of women workers.

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<sup>8</sup> After the war broke out, of the 72,000 Bangladeshi returning workers who applied for compensation offered by the government, 2,000 were women.

<sup>9</sup> However, the enforcement of the ban was not always very strict as allowances were made for "special" circumstances.

<sup>10</sup> The financial crisis in South East Asia was another important factor. Moreover, travel agencies that could – in addition to the licensed recruiting agencies – send migrant workers were prohibited from doing so in 1998. However, rather than preventing them from sending workers abroad, the prohibition reportedly induced travel agents to use unofficial channels.

**Table 1.2 - Extent of Women Migration in Comparison to Total Flow (1991-98)**

Year	Women Migrants		Total Number Male and Female
	Number	% of Total	
1996	1,567	0.74	211,714
1997	1,389	0.36	381,077
1998	775	0.29	267,667
1991-98	13,039	0.72	1,814,090

Source: Manual consolidation of figures provided by BMET officials.

In addition to the government's restrictive policy, the bureaucratic red tape might also be of greater hindrance for women than men. According to the recruiting agents interviewed for this study, the legal recruitment of women is an exceedingly cumbersome and time-consuming process. After obtaining a visa and work permit from the host country through a prospective employer in that country, women migrants must meet the criteria set by the Government of Bangladesh and be cleared by BMET, Ministry of Labour and by the Bangladeshi labour attaché in their country of destination. According to some anecdotal evidence, the work permits and visas of women workers on occasion have expired by the time all necessary permits are gathered. Yet, according to some off-the-record remarks of recruiting agents, the paperwork for immigration formalities can quite easily be expedited through recourse to unofficial channels and bribes to government officials, meaning that prospective migrant workers can be sent abroad within 24 hours of receiving their visa and work permit.

It is safe to conclude that a very substantial number of women migrant workers go abroad through informal channels in collusion with immigration officials. However, the attainment of a reliable estimate of the magnitude of such migration was not possible for this study. Nor was it possible, unlike in many other countries, to rely on religious and civil society organizations for a reliable estimate. For instance, in South and Central America, church and other civil society groups have a long tradition of providing social and welfare services to the families of undocumented migrant workers, enabling them to form educated estimates of their numbers. By contrast, civil society organizations in Bangladesh have had little involvement with problems related to labour

migration, especially those of women migrant workers.<sup>11</sup> In future studies, it might be advisable to focus on the number of women passing through airports, and collecting information from passengers' lists of airlines that operate flights to the Middle East and South East Asia.

### **1.6 Data on Female Migration from a Survey of Recruiting Agencies**

A survey conducted for this study found that relatively few recruiting agencies were involved in sending women migrant workers abroad.<sup>12</sup> Among them only two agencies accounted for close to 80 per cent of the total female migration. With few exceptions, the survey findings and BMET records coincided as to which agencies recruited women workers for overseas employment. The information reported by the agencies pertained only to those workers who migrated through official channels.

Table 1.3 gives the number of women migrant workers by year sent by recruiting agencies through official channels, showing that the cumulative total had reached 5,951 as of 1999. This amounts to 43 per cent of the BMET figure for the total official female migration for the period 1991-1998, and conforms with the BMET estimate that some 40 per cent of women workers go abroad through recruiting agencies while the rest go through individual contract. Female labour migration was negligible during the period 1986-1990, and almost nonexistent prior to 1985. Either little female migration existed before 1985, or prior to this date much of the recruitment was through individual contracts or by government agencies. Migration peaked during the 1991-1995 period when demand from both the Middle East and South East Asia was at its highest. The 32 per cent decrease in the following five-year period, which again conforms to the falling trend in BMET figures after 1996, reflects both the partial ban

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<sup>11</sup> The NGOs that are involved with migration issues had limited contact with a handful of individual migrant women workers.

<sup>12</sup> A questionnaire was mailed to the 475 licensed recruiting agencies currently operating in the country. Twenty-six were returned as undeliverable because of incorrect address. Of the 449 who received the questionnaire, 64 (14.25%) responded to the survey. Of the 64 agencies who responded, only 13 engaged in sending women workers abroad.

on female migration from Bangladesh and the financial crisis in South East Asia.

**Table 1.3 - Migration of women through the recruiting agencies over time**

Organization	Up to 1985	1986- 1990	1991- 1995	1996- 1999	Total
Mahbub Int'l Agencies			1,375	835	2,210
Orbital Enterprise			362	138	500
Patriot International		31	22	47	100
Nasser Air Travels		225	1,215	1,035	2,475
Mohamadullah Ltd.	10	31			41
Naz Associates			100		100
Shah Alam Enterprise				45	45
Namiko Engineers			250		250
Bigman Associates				30	30
Noor Int'l Supply			35		35
Probashi International				40	40
Dhaka Exports				11	11
Imam Travels				114	114
Total	10	287	3,359	2,295	5,951

Source: Survey of Recruiting Agencies Conducted by Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

### 1.7 Skill Composition of Female Migrant Workers

Table 1.4 presents the cumulative skill distribution for all female migrants who went through recruiting agencies until 1999. In this group, garments workers with 84 per cent



of the total, comprise the overwhelming majority.<sup>13</sup> Factory workers in various electronic, manufacturing and toy making factories constitute the second largest (12%) category, while nurses, with 3.3% of the total, are a distant third.<sup>14</sup> The category 'others' includes hospital cleaners, school care providers, and persons for whom specific information was not available. At the bottom of the list, domestic aides are almost nonexistent, reflecting the government ban on this group of workers.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1.4 - Distribution of female migrants sent by recruiting agencies by profession**

Organization	Nurse	Garment workers	Factory workers	Domestic aide	Others	Total
Mahbub Int'l Agencies		2,210				2,210
Orbital Enterprise	138	120	242			500
Patriot International	30	47		10	13	100
Nasser Air Travels		2,475				2,475
Mohamadullah Ltd.	20	10			11	41
Naz Associates			100			100
Shah Alam Enterprise			45			45
Namiko Engineers			250			250

<sup>13</sup> Files of recruiting agencies scanned in BMET office also show that recruiting agencies have mainly sent garments workers. Out of 1,076 cases studied from the BMET recruiting agency files, only six were found to be domestic aides.

<sup>14</sup> However, according to an estimate based on information gathered from the Directorate of Nursing, the percentage of nurses in total number of migrants might be as high as 6%.

<sup>15</sup> Officially, the migration of domestic aides is only allowed if they are employed by Bangladeshi nationals or immigrants of Bangladeshi origin. However, as discussed in Part II, few domestic workers sampled in this study were found to have fulfilled this requirement. Domestic workers were by far the largest group in the sample.

## Temporary Labour Migration of Women

Organization	Nurse	Garment workers	Factory workers	Domestic aide	Others	Total
Bigman Associates			30			30
Noor Int'l Supply			35			35
Probashi International	10		20	10		40
Dhaka Exports				5	6	11
Imam Travels		114				114
Total	198	4,976	722	25	30	5,951

Source: Survey of Recruiting Agencies Conducted by RMMRU.

### 1.8 Country of Destination

Information from recruiting agencies shows that the Middle East is the main destination of migrant women from Bangladesh, while a smaller but significant number are also employed in South East Asia, especially in Malaysia. A small number of workers also go to non-labour-importing countries, but these are mostly domestics who are employed by the staff of Bangladeshi missions abroad or by Bangladeshis permanently residing there.

Women migrants are sent to only a select few countries by the recruiting agencies. These countries are, in order of importance, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Singapore (Table 1.5). As shown in Table 1.6, the Middle East, and to a much lesser degree, South East Asia is the main destinations for nurses.<sup>16</sup> In the Middle East, by far the greatest number of nurses (813) went to Saudi Arabia.

<sup>16</sup> The data on nurses provided by the nursing directorate do not indicate a yearly distribution of the migration of female nurses.

**Table 1.5 - Country of destination of women migrants who went through recruiting agencies**

Organization	Kuwait	UAE	Saudi Arabia	Oman	Bahrain	Malaysia	Singapore	Total
Mahbub Int'l Agencies		2,210						2,210
Orbital Enterprise			138			362		500
Patriot International	10	47	30			13		100
Nasser Air Travels	65	1,635		150	625			2,475
Mohamadullah Ltd.		11	20			10		41
Naz Associates						100		100
Shah Alam Enterprise						45		45
Namiko Engineers						250		250
Bigman Associates						30		30
Noor Int'l Supply						35		35
Probashi Int'l	10	20	10					40
Dhaka Exports							11	11
Imam Travels	114							114
Total	199	3,923	198	150	625	845	11	5,951

Source: Survey of Recruiting Agencies Conducted by RMMRU.

**Table 1.6 - Total Number of Nurses by Country of Destination**

Country of Destination	Number	%
Saudi Arabia	813	37.17
Kuwait	364	16.64
Libya	348	15.91
Iran	223	10.20
Bahrain	166	7.59
Iraq	165	7.54
Malaysia	84	3.84
Oman	23	1.05
Brunei Darussalam	1	.05
Total	2,187	100.00

Source: Prepared from information provided by Directorate of Nurses

## **2 Governmental, Non-Governmental and Private Institutions**

This section identifies the major governmental, quasi-governmental and private sector organizations that are involved in labour migration and assesses their role in relation to women's migration. It also discusses the activities of civil society organizations, NGOs, human rights organizations and migrant workers' associations as they relate to efforts to safeguard the rights of migrant workers.

Almost 60 per cent of all migrant workers are recruited through individual contracts secured by personal contacts and initiatives (Rahman undated). Workers already employed abroad often make employment arrangements for friends and relatives.<sup>17</sup> Going through private agencies is the second most common method of recruitment and the third and the least common method involves governmental or quasi-governmental organizations. The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) was the main government agency of recruitment until it relinquished much of its recruitment activities to the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL) which was established as a quasi-governmental organization in 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Once the visa is issued, the prospective migrants usually obtain the services of a travel agent who facilitates their departure by helping with the travel formalities, including the issuance of a passport, BMET clearance and airline tickets.

## 2.1 Institutions of Recruitment

### 2.1.1 Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET)

The BMET is the main employment office of the Government of Bangladesh. In order to assist the overseas employment of Bangladeshi citizens, it registers and places job seekers; collects and disseminates information about the international labour market; develops curricula to train workers in accordance with market demand; assists workers to take up jobs overseas; monitors and controls the licensed recruiting agencies; briefs would-be migrants and issues clearance certificates to those with employment contracts from abroad; facilitates the repatriation of workers in case of war or other emergencies; and negotiates on their behalf for compensation.

**Table 2.1 - Mode of recruitment by year**

Year	BMET	BOESL	Recruiting Agent	Individual	Total
1976	5,279	0	284	524	6,087
1977	5,729	0	1,171	8,825	15,725
1978	6,160	0	1,994	14,655	22,809
1979	6,957	0	2,966	14,572	24,495
1980	5,715	0	7,773	16,585	30,073
1981	6,074	0	22,218	27,495	55,787
1982	4,483	0	24,939	33,340	62,762
1983	730	0	26,320	32,170	59,220
1984	0	157	32,460	24,097	56,714
1985	0	1,221	39,397	37,076	77,694
1986	0	1,895	27,859	38,904	68,658
1987	0	340	33,818	39,859	74,017
1988	0	476	34,117	33,528	68,121
1989	0	707	36,508	64,509	101,724
1990	0	435	40,258	63,121	103,814
1991	0	140	64,889	82,102	147,131
1992	47	541	59,746	127,790	188,124

## Temporary Labour Migration of Women

Year	BMET	BOESL	Recruiting Agent	Individual	Total
1993	503	559	129,479	113,967	244,508
1994	236	178	95,361	90,551	186,326
1995	73	627	74,921	111,922	187,543
1996	0	398	118,670	90,846	209,914
1997	15	335	235,793	144,934	381,077
1998	0	419	85,300	181,948	267,667
1999 (Jan-Feb)	0	62	13,939	23,380	37,381
Total	42,001	8,490	1,210,180	1,416,700	2,677,371

BMET assists would-be migrants in securing overseas employment free of charge and also helps them with the necessary medical tests, issuance of passports, procurement of visas and tickets, finalizing employment contracts, and providing pre-departure orientation courses. Of the 42,001 persons who have been recruited through the agency to date, the vast majority (40,397) was sent between 1972 and 1982. The decrease in BMET's involvement in recruitment is directly attributable to the establishment of BOESL.

### **2.1.2 The Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL)**

The Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited was established in 1984 to take direct responsibility for recruitment. At the time of its founding, the government owned 51 per cent of the company and the remaining 49 per cent was to be floated in public auction. However, for unknown reasons, this has not so far occurred. For all practical purposes the agency is a government body, specializing in the recruitment of professionals and skilled workers. The agency works in coordination with the Bangladeshi missions abroad in assessing labour demand and places advertisements in newspapers for recruitment. Until February 1999, it had recruited only 8,490 persons, which constitute an insignificant percentage of the total number of workers who went overseas since 1976 (Table 2.1).

### 2.1.3 Private Recruiting Agencies

The private agencies work under license issued by the government. They collect information on their own initiatives regarding the foreign demand for labour and recruit workers under BMET permission according to the specifications requested by foreign employers. Each worker recruited by them needs a clearance certificate issued from the immigration department of BMET. In addition the Bangladeshi missions overseas are required to examine the authenticity of the requests for labour posted by the foreign employers/agencies. Until 1998, recruiting agencies had sent 1,196,241 persons, comprising 45 per cent of the total number of workers who went overseas during this period (Table 2.1).

Before the early 1980s, the recruiting agencies received their commission from foreign employers, who were also responsible for the travel expenses of workers. However, fierce competition among labour exporting countries has caused a reversal of the arrangement. Now, the workers have to pay the recruiting agencies for their services and usually meet their own travel expenses.<sup>18</sup>

Recruiting agencies are organized under the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), which was formed by representatives from twenty-three agencies in December 1984. By 1998, the membership

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<sup>18</sup> Recruiting agencies charge male workers Tk 70,000-80,000 for jobs that pay Tk 4,000 to 5,000 per month in the Middle East, and charge Tk 150,000 - 200,000 for jobs that pay in the range, Tk 8,000 - 12,000, in Singapore and South Korea. Because their pay is generally lower, women workers are charged on average considerably less, around Tk 40,000 - 45,000. At the time of this study (1998), the exchange rate between the Bangladeshi monetary unit, Taka, and the US dollar was US\$ 1 = Tk 51. In addition to having to now pay recruitment agencies, the wages received by migrant workers are less today. In 1975, an unskilled worker was paid an average between US\$300-400 for a 40-hour workweek, and in addition received a one-month holiday with pay and a free round-trip airline ticket every year. Now similar types of work pay only US\$80-100 per month for a 60-hour workweek and workers received neither paid holidays nor reimbursement for travel expenses.

of the association included 475 agencies and became an effective voice for recruiting agencies. Its lobbying efforts have been influential both in the reversal of the 1998 government decision to completely ban female labour migration and the passing of the recent prohibition that barred travel agencies from recruiting workers for overseas employment.

## **2.2 Civil Society Organizations**

Because the wages and work conditions of migrant workers have steadily deteriorated over time, the need for involvement on the part of civil society organizations is acute both in labour-receiving and labour-sending countries. However, civil society organizations in Bangladesh have so far taken little initiative on problems related to labour migration.

For this study, various civil society organizations were surveyed to determine the degree of their involvement with migrant workers, and especially with female migrant workers.<sup>19</sup> These organizations can be grouped under four headings: (i) mainstream NGOs, (ii) women's organizations/activist groups, (iii) human rights organizations, and (iv) migrant workers' associations, trade unions and research organizations.

### **2.2.1 Mainstream NGOs**

Among the NGOs that were contacted, only two (Christian Commission for the Development of Bangladesh - CCDB and Shikkha Shasthya Unnoyon Kendra -SHISHUK) had reported migrant workers as a target group they focus on.<sup>20</sup> Though neither organization has yet taken any major

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<sup>19</sup> Organizations were initially contacted by telephone, and then a questionnaire was sent. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with the representatives of organizations that reported some involvement with women migrant workers.

<sup>20</sup> The following NGOs were contacted: Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), *Proshika* Human Development Centre, *Shakti* Foundation, Association for Social Advancement (ASA), *Gana Shahajjo Shangstha* (GSS), Christian Commission for the Development of Bangladesh (CCDB), *Shikkha Shasthya Unnoyon Kendra* (SHISHUK), *Nijera Kori*, *Shoishob Bangladesh*, and the NGO caucus body, Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB).



initiative on female migrant workers, plans were underway for their future involvement.

*Christian Commission for the Development of Bangladesh* (CCDB), in operation since 1972, was initially involved in war relief. Gradually, its scope expanded to include various programmes on credit, training, income generation, human resource development, agricultural training, women development, etc. Currently, it is one of the larger NGOs in Bangladesh.

As part of an effort to increase HIV/AIDS awareness, with which it has been involved since 1997, CCDB has targeted migrants as a high-risk group. In addition to extending funding through SHISHUK (see below) to support efforts to organize migrant workers under an association, CCDB has also organized seminars and conferences on issues related to migrant workers' health. It has future plans for providing pre-departure training to migrant workers, supporting research on problems women migrant workers face, and preparing materials for an "Information, Education, and Communication" programme that targets migrant workers.

SHISHUK is the other NGO that has some involvement with migrant workers. Since 1993, it has been working in the districts of Dhaka, Gazipur, Sirajgong, and Comilla, on rural development, income-generating programmes involving fisheries, HIV/AIDS awareness, and Information, Education, Communication. In its awareness campaigns, it targets youths, migrant workers and truck drivers, among others, and organizes training workshops and seminars. It has supported the organization of a national migrant workers' association (*Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees - WARBE*) in collaboration with CCDB. SHISHUK also has future plans for providing pre-departure briefing and information to migrant workers.

### **2.2.2 Women's Activist Groups**

With the exception of one, all the women's organizations that were surveyed for this study had no activity

involving migrant women.<sup>21</sup> The exception, *Naripokkho*, is a women's activist group that works primarily to eradicate violence against women, the practice of dowry, and other forms of gender discrimination.

Though it has not yet undertaken any specific project on migrant women workers, it played an active role in disseminating a Human Rights Watch report on Bangladeshi domestic aides working in the Middle East. Likewise, it was instrumental in prompting the government to act in support of several thousand undocumented Bangladeshi female migrant workers stranded in Malaysia after their plight was documented in a *Tenaganita*<sup>22</sup> Report. After the Government of Bangladesh intervened, the women were given amnesty and subsequently their status was regularized. *Naripokkho* was also one of the organizations that have brought up the rights of migrant workers to be united with their family at the Migration Chapter of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994).

### 2.2.3 Human Rights Organizations

Several human rights and legal aid organizations were surveyed for the purpose of this study.<sup>23</sup> Of these, Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) regularly targets female migrant workers, providing legal assistance, conducting research and awareness-building programmes. The Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) and Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), have taken up complaints of a few returnee migrant workers from Singapore and elsewhere, while the fourth (*Odhikar*) has yet to provide any support to migrant workers or conduct any research on this topic.

Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a leading human rights and legal aid organization, has been involved in research, legal aid and advocacy work for the Bangladeshi migrant workers since

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<sup>21</sup> These are: *Nari Uddog*, *Shammilito Nari Shamaj*, *Nari Progoti* and *Kormojibi Nari*.

<sup>22</sup> A human rights organization based in Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>23</sup> These included *Odhikar* (Rights), Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) and *Ain O Shalish Kendra* (ASK).

1987. It works closely with the *Tenaganita* based in Kuala Lumpur which has been at the forefront of protecting the rights of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. On behalf of women migrant workers it has:

- brought the government to task by issuing formal protests on several issues concerning migrant workers;
- conducted field investigations to verify the validity of citizenship claims of those who had lost their passports and found themselves in the position of being an undocumented alien;
- lobbied relevant government ministries for the ratification of international conventions on migrant workers;
- published articles in national and international press highlighting the plight of women migrant workers;
- supported organizations working to promote the interests of the Bangladeshi migrant workers.

In 1998, ASK organized a workshop on the "Affects of Asian Economic Crisis on Bangladeshi Migrant Workers", and a discussion meeting on the problems of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. ASK plans to undertake research activities on the role of recruiting agencies in the migration process and on the social, economic and psychological impact of migration on migrant families. It is also interested in: (i) providing training to the migrant workers in collaboration with BMET and recruiting agencies, (ii) developing a training module for migrant workers, and (iii) taking up programmes to raise awareness about rights of migrant workers.

The Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR), active since 1977 in promoting the legal rights of the disadvantaged, states its objective as the establishment of the rule of law and social justice. To that end, it provides legal support services and advocacy, and sponsors programmes to build awareness.

BSEHR has so far dealt with three cases involving female migrant workers, two of which were related to sexual and physical abuse and the third to a property dispute. One case involved a former staff member of BSEHR who went to Kuwait to work as an industrial worker. Immediately upon

arrival she was confined, physically tortured and sexually assaulted. She was interned illegally and was forced to work as a housemaid. After finding out what had happened, BSEHR managed to rescue her. Upon her return home, BSEHR wanted to file a criminal case against the recruiting agency that processed her papers, but she objected fearing reprisals and unwarranted harassment if the case was prosecuted. BSEHR had to content itself with helping her rehabilitate.

The second case involved a housemaid who worked for a Bangladeshi senior official in the Bangladeshi mission in Belgium. She was physically tortured by her employer and eventually rescued by a human rights organization in Belgium. BSEHR learned about the incident through a Belgian journalist and pressed criminal charges against the accused official. The case is still pending.

The third case which BSEHR is currently involved with, is that of another migrant worker, who worked in Kuwait first as a typist and later as a hospital supervisor. After 11 years of work, she saved enough money to buy some property in Bangladesh. When her second husband conspired with other parties to swindle her, BSEHR provided her with legal assistance and advice. She was successful in filing a suit against her husband and in retaining her property.

For the future, BSEHR has plans to organize a network among the human rights organizations in receiving countries and the embassies of the labour exporting countries to prevent trafficking under the guise of labour migration. It intends to increase its support for victims of international trafficking by extending legal aid, sponsoring research and lobbying to amend laws when necessary.

The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), established in 1979 by prominent women lawyers, is one of the pioneer organizations working for the promotion of human rights and the advancement of women in Bangladesh. The Association lobbies authorities on women's rights issues and laws, investigates reports on violence against women, and provides legal aid and training to women.

It has various branches that specialize in different types of activities. One branch provides legal counselling, mediation and litigation, while various other branches conduct research, collect data and conduct surveys on women issues; investigate cases involving rape, torture, murder, land rights, terrorism, deception, abduction, harassment etc.; publish books and booklets on topics of concern for women, such as the family, marriage, divorce, dowry, and inheritance laws; and organize training programmes for law enforcement agencies, government officials and NGOs to help them deal effectively with issues relating to violence against women and children.

In addition, a 'Shelter Home' was established in 1993 under its auspices for women and children victims of trafficking and violence, who were rescued from jails and brothels. BNWLA has been active against the trafficking of women since 1991.

BNWLA has also lent support on occasion to women migrant workers as in the case involving 18 garment workers who had been cheated of their pay in the Maldives, where they had been working since 1993. Forced to work 18 hours a day for four years under inhuman conditions, the amount they were paid covered only 1.3 years of their labour. Upon their return, the workers appealed to the Government of Bangladesh, and eventually approached BNWLA who began monitoring actions taken by the government on their behalf. Diplomatic efforts to secure compensation are still pending, and the employer in the Maldives has reportedly absconded.

BNWLA was also the co-organiser of a recent two-day international conference on "Temporary Migrant Workers of Bangladesh: Towards developing a National Plan of Action". Officials from different ministries and BMET, legislators, NGO representatives, human rights and legal aid organizations, academics and researchers participated in the conference. The future plans of BNWLA include lobbying for legal reform and providing more legal aid to migrant workers in need.

#### **2.2.4 Migrant Workers Associations and the Trade Unions**

Being vulnerable to harassment and exploitation at every turn, migrant workers can benefit considerably from active trade union support, which would also enhance their bargaining position vis a vis employers. However, trade unions have so far shown little initiative in linking up with migrant workers and addressing their concerns. As a recent survey of Bangladeshi trade unions revealed, issues related to migrant workers have little priority in their programmes of action.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the contacts of Bangladeshi trade unions with their counterparts in the major labour receiving countries have been limited to South Korea and Malaysia, mainly because in the Gulf States (and other Arab countries) no trade union movement exists.<sup>25</sup>

During the South East Asian financial crisis, unions expressed much sympathy for the Bangladeshi migrant workers who lost their jobs in Malaysia and called for solidarity. Some unions have organized workshops and seminars to identify their problems and devise remedies, while demanding the ratification by the government of the 1990 UN Convention on the Protection of Rights of the Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, and the relevant ILO conventions.

The relative indifference of trade unions and other major civil society organizations to their concerns have prompted returnee migrant workers to form their own

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<sup>24</sup> Siddiqui, Malik and Abrar, 'International Labour Migration and the Role of the Trade Unions- Bangladesh: A Country Study', ILO Dhaka, July 1999, (Mimeo). Representatives from the following organizations were interviewed: Trade Union Centre, Jatiya Sramik Federation, Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress, Bangladesh Sramik Kallyan Federation, Bangladesh Shangjukta Sramik Federation, Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal, Jatiya Dramik Jote (JSD), Jatiya Sramik League, Bangladesh Trade Union Federation, Bangladesh Independent Garments Union Federation, Samajtantrik Sramik Front, Bangladesh Jatiya Sramik League and Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.

<sup>25</sup> Bangladeshi trade unions also lobby counterparts in other countries through the World Trade Union Congress, World Federation of Trade Unions and International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

organizations. In recent years, two such organizations have emerged.

The Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees (WARBE) was formed by a group of returnee migrants in 1997 with the support of two NGOs, SHISHUK and CCDB. It acts as an advocacy group to promote the rights of migrant workers, striving to empower them through organizing. More specifically, it campaigns for the protection and promotion of interests of migrant workers; lobbies the government to establish a centre to train workers prior to their departure for overseas; engages in AIDS awareness programmes for migrant workers; undertakes efforts to sensitize public opinion to induce the government to ratify various international instruments intended to protect the rights of migrant workers and their families; and strives to develop a network among civil society organizations in Bangladesh as well as those in the receiving countries. The organization also has plans to provide medical and vocational training support for migrant workers and their families, and establish a micro credit loan scheme for its members.

The second organization of this kind, the *Bangladesh Migrant Centre* (BMC), operates simultaneously in Bangladesh and in a receiving country - South Korea. Established in 1998 in the industrial city of Ansan, South Korea, BMC works as a watchdog group to monitor the treatment of Bangladeshi workers in Korea and the observance of Korean labour laws by employers.

The BMC of Korea is closely affiliated with the Joint Committee of Migrant Workers in Korea (JCMK) and the Ansan Migrant Shelter (AMS). It offers counselling on labour disputes and migration; provides food and shelter at the Ansan Migrant Shelter to laid-off workers and medical service to those injured in work related accidents; provides instruction in Korean language and training in worker rights with the help of Hang Yang University students; organises cultural activities (musical soirees, games, movies, picnic, sight seeing tours); and sponsors policy research on problems faced by migrant workers in Korea. BMC has also been building a database on 3,000 migrant workers who had returned to Bangladesh from Korea in order to facilitate the



recruitment of the returnee workers by the Korean companies that are active in the Export Processing Zones (EPZ) in Bangladesh.

### 2.2.5 Research Organizations

Migration has drawn limited attention from the research community in Bangladesh. The remittance aspect of migration has traditionally attracted much of the attention of individual researchers, including those at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (Mahmood 1994, 1996, 1998) and at the Bangladesh Union Parishad (BUP).<sup>26</sup> By contrast, the main concern of the Dhaka University-based Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) has been the advocacy of Bangladeshi migrant workers.

Established as an interdisciplinary research institution in 1996, RMMRU had as its main focus the issue of refugees. Since 1997 it has become increasingly involved in studies related to labour migration. In December 1997, to mark the International Solidarity Day with the Migrant Workers, RMMRU organized a consultation entitled *National Responsibility Towards the Migrant Workers*,<sup>27</sup> which was attended by ministers, law makers, academics, senior government officials from law, labour and foreign affairs, NGO and human rights activists.

In the same month RMMRU organized a national conference titled *Refugees, Migrants and Stateless Persons: In Search of a National Consensus*. As a follow-up to this event in April 1999, RMMRU in collaboration with the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers Association organized an international conference on *Temporary Migrant Workers of Bangladesh: Towards Developing a National Plan of Action*, which was attended by scholars and activists from Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Kuwait (Malik et al 1999). At the conference RMMRU presented a *Draft Model Law for the Protection of Temporary Migrant Workers of Bangladesh* developed by a team of scholars and lawyers. With inputs

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<sup>26</sup> QK Ahmed and Fatema Zohora, 'Utilisation of Remittance from Abroad for Local Employment Promotion – The Case of Sylhet Division', mimeo, prepared by ILO and BUP, Dhaka, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Later published as Occasional Paper 1 of RMMRU (Siddiqui 1998).



from the conference RMMRU is now finalizing the model law for consideration of legislators. The Unit has recently completed a research project on 'International Labour Migration and the Role of the Trade Unions', commissioned by the International Labour Organisation, in Dhaka. Findings of the project were presented to a workshop in July 1999.

RMMRU also has a link programme with the Refugee Studies Programme at Oxford University. The programme is promoted by the British Council. The other activities of the Unit include, research on refugee and displacement issues, publication of a quarterly newsletter *Udbastu* (the Uprooted), holding basic and advanced courses on International Refugee Law, organising seminars and workshops.

### **3 National and International Laws and Their Observance**

#### **3.1 National Legislation on Labour Migration**

Emigration Ordinance of 1982, the anchor law on labour migration, was promulgated when the need for a new law became acutely felt with the gradual increase of temporary labour migration from Bangladesh. Apart from the 1982 Ordinance, a whole range of administrative decrees have also been issued from time to time to deal with recruitment policy. However, both the Ordinance, and the subsequent administrative decrees, mainly addressed the procedural aspects of labour migration, with little attention to safeguarding the welfare of migrant workers. They regulated issues such as the granting and renewal of recruiting agency licenses, the granting of recruiting permission, the charging of placement fees by the licensed recruiting agency, the minimum wages acceptable by Bangladeshi migrant workers, the code of conduct for recruiting agencies and the restrictions on employment of unskilled women.

According to the Ordinance, any person with a work permit from a foreign employer or an employment or emigration visa from a foreign government is considered eligible for labour migration. The Ordinance empowers the government to restrict emigration, if it is deemed to be in the public interest and for persons of a particular occupation, profession, vocation or qualification. Under the Ordinance, the government is authorized to grant licenses to individuals

and companies who wish to engage in the recruitment of workers for overseas employment, and any recruitment without the prior permission of the government is considered illegal. The Ordinance also prohibits recruiting agencies from charging fees for their services that are in excess of the amount prescribed by the government, and provides provisions for penalizing individuals who abandon their employment in breach of contract with a foreign employer.

The Ordinance also empowers the government to specify the minimum standards for wages and service conditions in the host country acceptable for Bangladeshi workers and their recruiters. For instance, an executive governmental decree issued in March 1986 stipulated the minimum acceptable wages in the countries listed in Table 3.1.<sup>28</sup> Another decree a year before had laid down the minimum pay and other conditions of employment in the plantations in Malaysia. In that instance, while the determination of the basic salary was left to the agreement between Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association (MAPA) and the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), it was stipulated that the pay should be at par with what Malaysian workers were paid and not be below US\$150 per month.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 3.1 - Minimum wage of migrant workers per month**

Name of Country	Minimum Salary with Free Food and Accommodation		Minimum Salary without Food but with Accommodation	
	Unskilled	Semiskilled	Unskilled	Semiskilled
Bahrain	BD 55	BD 70	BD 75	BD 90
Iran	TU 4000	TU 5600	TU 5600	TU 7200
Iraq	ID 65	ID 80	ID 80	ID 95
Jordan	JD 45	JD 55	JD 60	JD 70
Kuwait	KD 40	KD 60	KD 60	KD 80
Libya	LD 60	LD 75	LD 80	LD 95
Oman	OR 45	OR 55	OR 65	OR 75
Qatar	QR 550	QR 750	QR 700	QR 900

<sup>28</sup> In a separate decision, the Government decided to allow recruitment for employment in Iraq and Libyan Arab Jamahiriya at a wage up to 10% lower than what it had earlier prescribed.

<sup>29</sup> The decree also called for an 8-hour working day with weekly holidays, and free roundtrip travel, accommodation, and medical treatment.

Name of Country	Minimum Salary with Free Food and Accommodation		Minimum Salary without Food but with Accommodation	
	Unskilled	Semiskilled	Unskilled	Semiskilled
Saudi Arabia	SR 500	SR 700	SR700	SR 900
UAE	DH 550	DH 750	DH 750	DH 950

Note: Amounts for these countries were subsequently revised by the Ministry's Memo No. S-XII/R-5/85/549, dated 5.12.1985.

The rules to effectively operationalize the Ordinance have yet to be finalized by the government. The sub-committee that was involved in framing the rules comprised representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Home and Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh Bank, BMET and two representatives of BAIRA. A set of draft rules that detail the key features of the Ordinance has been framed, and is now in the process of being examined by the Ministry of Law. It is likely to be presented before the Cabinet shortly.

### **3.1.1 Ban and Restrictions on Women's Migration**

Female labour migration from Bangladesh has been periodically restricted since it began to gain momentum in the late 1970s. In 1981, acting on the advice of a religious leader, President Ziaur Rahman imposed a complete ban on the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women with the professed objective of protecting women's dignity. In 1988, a restriction replaced the ban. While professional and skilled women could still migrate with relative ease, the migration of skilled and unskilled women became subject to special permission.

In November 1997, the government re-imposed a complete ban on all female labour migration with the sole exception of highly qualified professionals such as doctors, engineers and teachers. Again, the justification was similar to that of the first ban. The overseas employment of women as an industrial worker, housemaid or even as a nurse was considered to expose them to harm and dishonour, and thus the ban was intended to protect women's very safety and dignity.

Spearheaded by the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), opposition to the

ban was quick to grow into a major campaign. In a well-publicized open letter to the Prime Minister,<sup>30</sup> the president of BAIRA presented two separate arguments against the ban. One argued that the decision would deprive Bangladesh of an important export market in which it enjoyed a special advantage due to its religion - many of the labour importing countries in the Middle East and the Gulf were keen on recruiting women solely from Muslim countries. Thus, the ban would only benefit the other Muslim labour-exporting countries such as Indonesia at the expense of Bangladesh.

The second argued that the ban was an infringement on women's human rights and that it would also undermine women's progress and empowerment. Human rights activists, NGOs and migrant support groups also opposed the ban on similar grounds, arguing that it was unconstitutional and thus illegal because it was discriminatory against women as well. Moreover, the ban, it was argued, would contribute to the illegal trafficking in women.

Within a few months the government rescinded the ban on all categories of women workers except domestic aides. However, a further revision allowed women migrants to work as domestic aides if their employer was a staff member of a Bangladesh embassy, a financially solvent Bangladeshi such as a doctor or engineer, or a foreign passport holder of Bangladeshi descent. In the same decree, the government also named the licensed recruiting agencies the sole legitimate authority in the recruitment of migrant workers, effectively prohibiting travel agencies from taking part in labour migration. However, it is believed that many travel agencies are still in the business of recruiting migrant workers and sending them abroad through unofficial channels in collusion with some immigration and customs officials.

### **3.2 International Labour Standards**

#### **3.2.1 The UN Migration Convention, 1990**

In October 1998, Bangladesh signed the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant

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<sup>30</sup> Published in several daily newspapers on 10 August 1998, including the Daily Star of Dhaka.

Workers and Member of Their Families,<sup>31</sup> which was approved by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1990.<sup>32</sup> The Migration Convention encompasses civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of migrant workers and calls upon the member states to address the problems of undocumented migrants. It also enshrines basic human rights such as the right to life, freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, due process of law, equality of treatment, freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of association with trade unions. The special rights pertaining to migrants, incorporated in the Convention, include the right to leave, stay and return, freedom from slavery and forced or compulsory labour, the right to transfer earnings and savings and the right to cultural identity. The Convention is unique for:

- providing an international definition of migrant worker;<sup>33</sup>
- recognizing the importance of women as migrant workers in their own right;
- establishing international standards of treatment by extending fundamental human rights to all migrant workers, both documented and undocumented;
- viewing migrant workers not only economically but also socially;
- targeting the elimination of exploitation of all migrant workers and members of their families.

Except for a minor conflict with a clause in the Criminal Code, the Migration Convention is found to be in agreement with the Bangladeshi legal system. Having accepted the

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<sup>31</sup> Ref. *Migrants Rights Bulletin*, Oct-Nov. 1999, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> The Convention needs to be ratified by twenty member countries before it can come into force. As of December 1999, it had been ratified by only twelve countries: Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Colombia, Egypt, Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, Senegal, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Uganda. Three countries, Bangladesh, Turkey and Chile, have signed the Convention, but have yet to ratify it.

<sup>33</sup> "The term Migrant Worker 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".

Convention in principle, Bangladesh is expected to ratify the Convention.<sup>34</sup>

### **3.2.2 ILO Instruments on Migrant Workers**

Over the years the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has also been actively involved with the protection and welfare of migrant workers. The following ILO conventions have relevance for migrant workers, directly or indirectly.

- Forced Labour Convention, 1930
- The Migration to Employment Convention (Revised), 1949
- Fee-Charging Employment Agencies Convention (Revised), 1949
- The Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958
- The Employment Policy Convention, 1964
- The Minimum Age Convention, 1973
- The Migrant Workers Supplementary Provisions Convention, 1975
- Collective Bargaining Convention, 1981
- Freedom of Association and the Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1998
- The Employment Promotion and Protection Against Unemployment Convention, 1988

The Migration for Employment Convention (Revised) 1949 (No. 97), is a milestone in international legislation on labour migration. Its objective was to facilitate the transfer of surplus labour between different countries. It emphasizes, *inter alia*, equity of treatment with respect to remuneration, membership in trade unions, and the provision of free public employment services. However, it lacks any specific provision

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<sup>34</sup> A few reservations and interpretative declarations notwithstanding, Bangladesh has also signed six other international instruments in 1998: (a) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (b) Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, (c) Convention on the Political Rights of Women, (d) Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for and Registration for Marriage, (e) Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and (f) United Nations Migration Convention, 1990 (Siddiqui, Malik and Abrar 1999).

to women migrants or their families, and required revision in light of the new realities of international labour migration.

Part I of the Migrant Workers Supplementary Provisions Convention, 1975 (No. 143) was the international community's first attempt to tackle the question of irregular migration and illegal employment that became widespread at the beginning of 1970s. Part II seeks to promote a greater quality of opportunity and treatment for lawful labour migration. The Maintenance of Social Security Rights Convention 1982 (No. 157) attempted to give comprehensive coverage to migrant workers and their family members, particularly those who, due to the temporary nature of their employment, may not be able to benefit from acquired rights or rights in the process of acquisition.

Finally, one important objective of the Fee-Charging Employment Agencies Convention (Revised) 1949, which was later revised by the Private Employment Agencies Convention 1997, has been to regulate the operations of private employment agencies and protect workers within its provisions. The Convention calls for measures to ensure that the workers recruited by private employment agencies are not denied the right to freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively, and that they are not discriminated on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, social origin, or any other trait covered by national law and practice, such as age or disability.

## **Part II**

Part II is divided into five sections. The first of these provides general information on the respondents, causes and procedures of migration. The second deals with work conditions faced by migrant women in the host countries. The third assesses the economic impact of migration, and the fourth discusses the social impact of migration on migrant women themselves and their family members. The last section includes a brief conclusion and some policy recommendations.

### **4 Migration Dynamics**

The objective of the fieldwork phase of this study was to shed light on three sets of questions: (i) what is the nature and extent of female labour migration? (ii) what are the factors that have contributed to women's decision to migrate? and (iii) what are the consequences of migration on migrant women and on their family members?

The section begins with a discussion of the methodology of the field work and continues with some general information about the respondents in the sample. The section ends with a discussion of the factors that contribute to women's migration.

#### **4.1 Methodology**

In preparation for the fieldwork, a comprehensive address list of past and present women migrant workers was prepared from the files of BMET, recruiting agencies, trade unions, NGOs, human rights and other organizations. A few more addresses were also obtained through a separate survey of NGOs, human rights organizations, and women activist groups. The distribution of migrant workers in the assembled list by source of information is given in Table 4.1. The list was used to determine in which regions female migrant women were clustered.



**Table 4.1 - Number of women migrant workers by source of information**

Organizations	Number
BMET (Individual files)	668
BMET (Agency files)	551
Recruiting Agencies	1076
BIGUF	52
CCDB	18
Ain Shalish Kendra	18
BSEHR	3
Directorate of Nurses	40
WARBE	20
BNWLA	1
SHISHUK	1
Total	2448

While the districts of Sylhet, Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Dhaka are the main pockets of male migration, women workers migrated largely from the greater Dhaka district and nearby districts of Munshinganj, Manikganj and Chadnpur. Addresses from other districts were few and far in between. For an extensive geographical coverage, six different locations were identified, including Dhaka City, Manikganj, Nababganj, Daudkandi, Dohar and Narayanganj. Dhaka City was classified as urban, while the other locations were considered rural.

Only a few of the migrant workers or their family members in the list could readily be located. Thus, the “snowballing” technique<sup>35</sup> had to be used in sample selection. Migrant women and their families in the regions specified could be found with the assistance of local *Thana*<sup>36</sup> Executive Officers (TNOs), NGOs, Bangladesh Union Parishad (BUP) Chairpersons and members, school teachers and Imams of mosques. The women members of Union Parishads were especially resourceful in locating the whereabouts of migrant women and their family members.

Interviews were conducted with members of 200 female migrant households. Of these, 150 were women

<sup>35</sup> Technique by which subjects are identified and selected on the bases of references from other subjects.

<sup>36</sup> The most basic administrative unit in Bangladesh.

migrants themselves,<sup>37</sup> and 50 were family members of migrants who were abroad at the time. 130 of the 200 households were from rural areas and 70 from Dhaka City. Table 4.2 presents the distribution of the interviewed households classified as rural/urban and returnee/non-returnees families. Qualitative data was also gathered from a select group of 40 households.

**Table 4.2 - Distribution of returnee and non-returnee female migrants by area**

Area	Returnee		Non-Returnee		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Rural	95	73.1	35	26.9	130
Urban	55	78.6	15	21.4	70
Total	150	75	50	25	200

A major limitation of the study is that it lacked a control group. It is possible that observations that are thought to be specific to migrant workers might in reality be shared by the wider population in the same region. However, given the almost complete absence of information on migrant women workers, a control group was deemed unnecessary. The findings of the fieldwork are presented below.

## 4.2 General Information

The picture that emerges from our sample is that of young - under 35 years of age - and predominantly Muslim women who went to work in the Middle East, and to a lesser extent in Malaysia, in the 1990s. Their marital status and family size are highly varied and show no correlation with whether women are from an urban or rural background.

Table 4.3 presents the age distribution of women migrants in the sample. Those between the ages of 20-25 years comprised the largest group, and about three quarters were under the age of 30. Rural migrants were on the average slightly younger than the urban migrants.

<sup>37</sup> 135 of these women were returnees and the rest were on holiday at the time.

**Table 4.3 - Age distribution of the female migrant workers by area**

Age	Area				Table Total	
	Rural		Urban			
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Up to 17	17	13.1	8	11.4	25	12.5
18-20	17	13.1	7	10.0	24	12.0
21-25	41	31.5	17	24.3	58	29.0
26-30	23	17.7	24	34.3	47	23.5
31-35	17	13.1	10	14.3	27	13.5
36-40	10	7.7	4	5.7	14	7.0
41-45	3	2.3			3	1.5
46 and above	1	.8			1	.5
Total	129	100.1	70	100.0	199	100.0

**Table 4.4 - Religious faith of female migrants**

Area	Religion					
	Muslim		Hindu		Christian	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Rural	120	92.3	9	6.9	1	.8
Urban	67	95.7	3	4.3		
Total	187	93.5	12	6.0	1	.5

Islam was the predominant faith among the women in the sample, and the proportion of those from other religions was less than their share in the general population.<sup>38</sup> Out of 13 non-Muslim women in the sample, four reported that they hid their true religious identity and took Muslim names while applying for migration. In Nababganj and Dohar, regions with significant concentrations of Hindus and Christians, few non-Muslim migrants could be found. This probably indicates that Muslim women have an advantage in the market for labour migration, reflecting not only employers' preference for this faith in the Middle East and Malaysia but also a possible bias against non-Muslims in the recruitment process within Bangladesh.

The distribution of women with respect to their marital status is shown in Table 4.5. While half of the women were married, one quarter of them were divorced or deserted, 15

<sup>38</sup> In Bangladesh, 87% of the population is Muslim, 12.1% is Hindu, 0.6% is Buddhist, and 0.3% is Christian (BBS 1997).

per cent were unmarried and 9 per cent widowed. Urban women were more likely to be married. However, no difference existed between rural and urban migrant families with regard to family size (Table 4.6).

**Table 4.5 - Marital status of female migrants by area**

Area	Married		Unmarried		Divorced/ Deserted		Widow		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Rural	57	43.8	26	20.0	35	26.9	12	9.2	130	100
Urban	43	61.4	5	7.1	16	22.9	6	8.6	70	100
Total	100	50.0	31	15.5	51	25.5	18	9.0	200	100

**Table 4.6 - Family size of female migrants by area**

Area	Number	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean
Rural	130	1.00	15.00	704.00	5.4154
Urban	70	1.00	14.00	352.00	5.0286
Total	200	1.00	15.00	1056.00	5.2800

Table 4.7 indicates the year in which the female migrants went overseas, showing that the vast majority left Bangladesh since 1991, and that only 1 per cent went overseas in the ten-year period between 1970 and 1980.

**Table 4.7 - Year of migration of 200 women migrant workers**

Year	No.	%
1970-80	2.0	1.0
1981-85	5.0	2.5
1986-90	6.0	3.0
1991-95	104.0	52.0
1996-99	83.0	41.5
Total	200.0	100.0

The rural/urban difference with regard to the country of destination was small. While a significantly greater percentage of rural women went to Kuwait, Malaysia seems to have been the host to a larger percentage of urban women (Table 4.8). The vast majority of the former were domestic aides, while the latter were mostly factory or garment workers (Table 4.9). However, 22 of the 33 factory workers in the sample were from rural areas and had no prior work

experience in a factory. The remainder worked as garment workers in Bangladesh before they migrated. While slightly more than half of all garment workers went to UAE - and a few to Malaysia and Maldives - more than 90 per cent of factory workers went to Malaysia. Most of the garment workers had prior work experience in garment factories in Bangladesh.

Domestic aides comprised the majority of the women in the sample. In order of importance, their destinations were Kuwait (56%), UAE (30%) and Bahrain (14%). Almost all school and hospital cleaners, tailors and typists, classified as 'other,' also went to Kuwait. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia, while a major destination for Bangladeshi male migrant workers, attracted no migrant women except for one who happened to be a nurse. Of the other nine nurses in the sample, most (7) went to Malaysia, a couple went to Kuwait.

As expected, illiteracy was more common among rural women compared to those from Dhaka City. More than half of rural women migrants were illiterate, while among urban women illiteracy was lower but high (37%). Most of the illiterate women were employed as domestic aides (Table 4.10).

**Table 4.8 - Country of destination by area**

Area	Destination								Total
	UAE	Bahrain	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Malaysia	Maldives	Oman		
	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %		
Rural	34 26.2	13 10.0	59 45.4	1 .8	23 17.7			130 100.0	
Urban	18 25.7	4 5.7	20 28.6		21 30.0	6 8.6	1 1.4	70 100.0	
Total	52 26.0	17 8.5	79 39.5	1 .5	44 22.0	6 3.0	1 .5	200 100.0	

**Table 4.9 - Destination of 200 female migrants by type of work**

Type of Labour	Destination								Total	
	UAE	Bahrain	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Malaysia	Maldives	Oman			
	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No.	%	
Nurse			2 20.0	1 10.0	7 70.0			10	100.0	
Garment Worker	18 56.3	1 3.1	1 3.1		5 15.6	6 18.8	1 3.1	32	100.0	
Factory Worker	1 3.0		1 3.0		31 93.9			33	100.0	
Domestic Aide	33 29.5	16 14.3	63 56.3					112	100.0	
Others			12 92.3		1 7.7			13	100.0	
Total	52 26.0	17 8.5	79 39.5	1 .5	44 22.0	6 3.0	1 .5	200	100.0	

**Table 4.10 - Education level of female migrant workers by type of work and area**

Education Level														
Area	Labour Type	Illiterate		Up to grade V		Up to grade X		Secondary School Certificate	High School Certificate	Above	Total			
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			
Rural	Nurse					2	66.7	1	33.3		3	2.3		
	Garment Worker	3	30	2	20	5	50				10	7.69		
	Factory Worker	5	22.7	10	45.5	6	27.3	1	4.5		22	16.92		
	Domestic Aide	58	63.7	22	24.3	10	10.9	1	1.1		91	70		
	Others	3	75			1	25				4	3.07		
	Group Total	69	53.07	34	26.15	24	18.46	3	2.3		130	100		
Urban	Nurse							1	14.3		6	85.7	7	10
	Garment Worker	6	27.3	9	40.9	6	27.3		1	4.5		22	31.43	
	Factory Worker	4	63.4	4	36.4	3	27.2				11	15.71		
	Domestic Aide	13	61.9	5	23.8	3	14.3				21	30		
	Others	3	33.3	1	11.1	3	33.3		2	22.3		9	12.86	
	Group Total	26	37.14	19	27.14	15	21.42	1	1.42	3	4.28	6	8.57	70
Table Total		95	47.5	53	26.5	39	19.5	4	2	3	1.5	6	3	200

### 4.3 Factors Contributing to Women's Migration

Factors that contribute to migration can be classified as to whether they are 'situational' or 'catalytic' (Mahmood 1996). Situational factors are related to economic, political, and social conditions prevailing in a particular country at a given time. Among the social factors are: (i) oppressive social institutions such as dowry; (ii) patriarchal exploitation and the culture of self-sacrifice for the family; (iii) temporary escape from an unhappy family and social situations; and (iv) desire for individual independence. In this study, economic compulsion along with a host of other social factors emerge as the important *situational* factors.

Catalytic factors of relevance in this study refer to: (i) foreign demand for labour; (ii) pro-active policies in labour-exporting countries; (iii) growth of fee charging private entrepreneurs; and (iv) the social network of migrant workers.

#### 4.3.1 Economic Factors

Rural Bangladesh has been experiencing a process of impoverishment since the early 1970s. Increased poverty and men's inability to provide for their families have been responsible for the marked increase in the incidence of male desertion and thus in the number of female headed households.<sup>39</sup> The need for sheer survival, in turn, has forced women to break away from traditional roles and become economically active in increasing numbers as early as the beginning of 1980s. Many were compelled to migrate from the rural to urban areas, gradually making their way into the labour force in the garment, food-processing sectors and as domestic workers. In those instances when the opportunity for it emerged, rural to urban migration was followed by international migration. Of the 70 urban migrants in the sample, 52 had migrated from the rural areas to Dhaka city a few years back.

Among the 130 rural migrant families in the sample, economic hardship and misfortune were the leading causes of

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<sup>39</sup> According to UNDP (1994) 30% of rural households are female headed.



decisions to migrate. The reasons cited most commonly were landlessness, lack of employment opportunities to earn a decent living, seasonal unemployment, unexpected death or prolonged sickness of the family provider, and poor working conditions as a domestic aide.

In many regions, increased economic hardship was exacerbated by the structural adjustment policies pursued by the government. For instance, the demise of the handloom industry in Nababganj, a region covered in this study, is thought to have been directly linked to these policies (Siddiqui 1998; SAPRI 1998). The handloom industry was an important source of livelihood for a large segment of the population in the region, and had a labour force that was 70% female (Siddiqui 1998).

In another region also covered in this study, Manikganj, severe river erosion was the main cause of economic impoverishment. Many families in Manikganj, including those in our sample, lost their sole means of livelihood along with the agricultural land they owned. Some also lost their homestead land and became a part of the internally displaced population. Many, it was reported, worked as day labourers but otherwise had difficulty finding jobs, and came to think of migration as the only way out of their predicament.

#### **4.3.2 Political Factors**

A number of garment workers in the sample took part in trade union organizing activity during the 1980s. Supported by a left-wing political party, the labour movement protested the irregular payment of wages, long working hours, lack of adherence to the commitment to pay overtime, among other issues. Their contracts were terminated by their employers in retaliation. In addition to losing their jobs they were also blacklisted, greatly reducing any prospect of their re-employment in the garment industry. Having lost any hope of finding another job, they came across newspaper advertisements for overseas employment and applied. Two went to Dubai, one to Kuwait and another to Malaysia.

### 4.3.3 Social Factors

#### *Oppressive Social Institutions and Practices*

For a sizable number of women in our sample (16) the instrumental factor in deciding whether to migrate was the desire to earn a dowry for eligible daughters. Unmarried or divorced women also migrate to earn a dowry for a second marriage. It has become increasingly common for many unmarried, divorced or deserted women, especially in Manikganj, to sacrifice their chances of (re)marriage in order to earn a dowry for their younger sisters.

Fleeing from threats of violence was another motivating factor. In one particular case, a young woman migrated to flee from bodily harm threatened by her estranged husband. The man already had another wife at the time she was married to him against her wishes. When she abandoned him, he threatened to disfigure her face with acid. She and her family thought that she would be safer overseas. In another instance, the mother of an abused bride brought her daughter home. When the husband threatened to take legal action and possibly more, the mother sent her daughter to work abroad as a precautionary measure.

#### *Patriarchal Exploitation*

In many instances, marriages do not work out because women are either married too early or they are poorly matched in order to pay less dowry. After they return to their parent's home when their marriages fail, these women are usually treated as a burden. Their situation can be harder if they are returning to the home of a married adult brother. Facing an especially hard life at home, deserted and divorced women often look forward to labour migration. In turn, fathers or brothers treat their migration as a family investment and raise money to cover the expense. Reportedly, almost all divorced, deserted and unmarried women in the sample went abroad mainly to sustain their father's family. Sometimes women also migrate to facilitate the migration of the male members in their family. In an interesting case, a son in law is reported to have raised money by selling land to send abroad his mother-in-law, who had no one to live with other than her daughter's family. The son-in-law saw her as

an investment opportunity and was probably correct in expecting that she would send all her earnings back.

### *Temporary Escape from Unhappy Family and Social Situations*

In some households, the husband of the migrant women had other wives. These women found cohabitation with other wives in the same dwelling troublesome and welcomed labour migration as a temporary respite from an unhappy living arrangement. Six of the women in the sample were in a situation that was similar. In another case, the wife of a man who had absconded after he was accused of theft had decided to migrate to escape the stigma of being the wife of a thief. Yet another unmarried woman, well into her years, decided to migrate in order to escape the snide remarks about her dark complexion being responsible for her lack of suitors.

### *Desire for Independence*

In the last few decades, an increasing number of women had found themselves in situations where they had sole responsibility for the sustenance and survival of their families. In many of these cases, greater participation in paid employment and public life has instilled a sense of independence that was unprecedented until then. Moreover, labour migration tended to ease the pressure to conform to traditional family values which denied migrant women their newly found sense of independence. Having the option of migration and the prospect of economic independence also made it easier for women to leave an unwanted husband or oppose an arranged marriage.

## **4.3.4 Catalytic Factors**

### *Demand for Labour in the Labour Shortage Countries*

Women workers from Muslim countries are increasingly preferred in the Middle East and the Gulf states over those from the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka. This has been one of the important 'pull' factors responsible for the recent substantial increase in the migration of Bangladeshi women to that region.

### *Social Network of the Migrants*

Recent studies have shown that informal social networks play a much wider role in facilitating international labour migration than previously appreciated in the literature (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). The importance of these networks is also underscored in this study, given the fact that of the two hundred migrants in the sample, 22 acquired their work permits and visas acquired through informal channels that involved relatives, neighbours or friends. Also, close to half of the 150 returnee migrant women pointed out that they first learned about migration from their neighbours, friends or relatives. Among those with a rural background, only one per cent indicated newspaper advertisements as their initial source of information about migration, further underscoring the importance of informal social networks especially in a rural setting.

In one particular region, Rupganj, the study found clear evidence of a demonstration effect, whereby the success of an individual migrant appears to have been a catalyst in the decision of many individuals to migrate. A native of the region, Shamima Akhter remitted much money home from Malaysia where she was working at an electronic assembly plant. She was also able to take her younger sister, aunt and cousin to Malaysia. The study team found that about 50 women migrated from the Rupaganj and neighbouring villages, all to Malaysia. Of course, the middlemen (informal recruiting agents) procured the visas, but Shamima's success appears to have helped him recruit a large number of women who were ready and willing.

### *Women's Empowerment and Membership of NGOs*

On some occasions, membership in an NGO appears to have worked as a catalyst for migration, especially in the rural areas. Through consciousness raising efforts, credit and training programmes, NGOs seem to have given many rural women some degree of self-confidence. Thirty-six of the rural women, or someone in their family, in the sample were linked some NGO in one way or another. Also, access to credit from an NGO enabled a few families to finance the cost of migration.

However, two women from Nababganj found out that relations with NGOs can also be brittle when they failed to pay back their loans. These women had to stay away from their homes to avoid NGO loan officers.

### *National Policy versus Official Corruption*

Despite the government restrictions, and more recently a complete ban on the migration of unskilled women, slightly more than half of the women in our sample were domestic aides. Except for a few, all had legal work visas, but most went abroad without a BMET clearance. At the airport, officials from various government agencies colluded with fee-charging entrepreneurs to let these women leave Bangladesh without the necessary documents. Thus, a large gap exists between *de jure* and *de facto* government policies on migration.

### *Growth of Fee Charging Private Entrepreneurs*

Over the decades, the private recruiting agencies have increasingly become an important catalytic force in labour migration. These include registered recruiting agencies and sub-agents, individual recruiters, travel agencies, etc. Particularly in rural areas, recruiting agents actively motivate families with female members who can potentially migrate. They make a case for migration by arguing that money is better spent sending off women to work overseas than paying for their dowry, and pointing out that women who migrate can save for their own dowry while they contribute to the family budget. To convince the reluctant families, they also work out simple calculations which show that the cost of dowry is comparable to that of migration. Likewise, they also encourage deserted or divorced women to migrate, suggesting that in this manner they can be an asset rather than a burden to their family. The extensive role played by the recruiting agents is evident in Table 4.11. Almost 30 per cent of the returnee migrant workers had learned about the prospect of migration from such agents.

**Table 4.11 - Information sources for migration by area (150 returnees)**

Area	Information Source										Total	
	Husband No.    %		Neighbours Friends Relatives No.    %		Newspaper Ads. No.    %		Middle-men / Recruiting Agency No.    %		Work Place No.    %		No.    %	
Rural	3	3.2	57	60	1	1.1	34	35.8			95	100
Urban	3	5.5	18	32.7	17	30.9	10	18.2	7	12.7	55	100
Total	6	4	75	50	18	12	44	29.3	7	4.7	150	100

**Table 4.12 - Agents of migration by area (150 returnees)**

Area	Recruiting Agent No.    %		Individual Recruiters No.    %		Neighbour/Friend/R elative No.    %		BOESL No.    %		Rel. Resident Abroad No.    %		Group Total No.    %	
Rural	54	56.8	19	20.0	16	16.8			6	6.3	95	100.0
Urban	25	45.5	8	14.5	6	10.9	15	27.3	1	1.8	55	100.0
Group Total	79	52.7	27	18.0	22	14.7	15	10.0	7	4.7	150	100.0

**Table 4.13 - Sources of financing for migration (rural/urban)**

Area	Own savings No.    %		From Family No.    %		Loan No.    %		Adjusted Salary No.    %		Sale land No.    %		Mortgage land No.    %		Others No.    %	
Rural	30	53.6	36	55.4	109	69.4	15	83.3	27	64.3	6	85.7	16	76.2
Urban	26	46.4	29	44.6	48	30.6	3	16.7	15	35.7	1	14.3	5	23.8
Total	56	100	65	100	157	100	18	100	42	100	7	100	21	100

#### 4.4 Procedural Aspects of Migration

In order to have a complete understanding of the migration process, the present study also undertook to examine the procedural aspects of labour migration: who processes the documents of migrant workers, how is BMET involved in the process, what are the expenses prospective migrants have to incur and how are they financed.

##### 4.4.1 Agents of Migration

###### *Recruitment Agents*

As discussed above, many different types of agencies are involved in the processing of migration documents. For most respondents, the differences between licensed recruiting agencies, non-licensed recruiting agencies, travel agencies and middlemen were not always clear.<sup>40</sup> In their mind, these tended to be lumped together under the common title of "recruiting agency." As much as 57 per cent reported that they bought their work visa from a recruiting agency, meaning one of the above (Table 4.12).<sup>41</sup> 18 per cent mentioned individual recruiters, and 15 per cent their neighbours, friends and relatives who were already based abroad, as the source of their work visa. None of the rural respondents received their visa through the government or a public company. Only fifteen urban respondents went abroad through BOESL, ten of whom were nurses and the rest were garment workers.

###### *BMET Involvement*

As the main governmental agency in charge of migration, BMET issues an immigration certificate (otherwise known as the clearance certificate) for every departing migrant. However, as much as 60 per cent of the returnee respondents did not have deal with the BMET, either because

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<sup>40</sup> In some cases, different types of agents got involved throughout the process, making it particularly hard to differentiate between them. For instance, initial contacts would be made with the local middlemen, and later a licensed/unlicensed recruiting agent/ travel agent would also enter the scene.

<sup>41</sup> Table 4.12 presents only the responses of the 150 returnee migrants. Responses from non-returnee family members were ignored because they were not always reliable.

they migrated through unofficial channels or some agent completed the paperwork on their behalf.

### *Cost of Migration*

The average cost of migration for a woman is around Tk 43,413.<sup>42</sup> This amount includes all expenses, e.g., airfare, passport, visa, insurance, medical check up and other incidental charges like local transport, clothes and shoes, suitcase etc.

### *Sources of Finance*

Most of the women migrants in the sample lacked sufficient resources to cover the cost of migration. While a few of the women could rely on their own savings or that of the family for at least a part of the cost, the rest had to take out a loan, sell or mortgage property (which was usually land) or sell other assets. Table 4.13 shows various sources of financing stated by the respondents.

Of the two hundred respondents, 23 per cent were able to rely on own resources to finance at least a part of the total cost.<sup>43</sup> Another 33 per cent received some support from their extended family, and more than 75 per cent had to borrow on interest at least some part of the total cost. The most common source of borrowing was the traditional moneylenders, followed by friends and relatives.<sup>44</sup> In either case, the rates of interest charged on loans were usually exorbitant, especially if the lender knew the purpose of the loan was to finance labour migration.<sup>45</sup> A small number of women also took out credit from NGOs at moderate interest rates. In few instances, would be migrants borrowed from NGO members who recycled the loans at a higher interest. Land was also sold or mortgaged in almost 25 per cent of the households, and 'other' forms of finance included the sale of items ranging from houses, gold jewellery, sewing machines, farm animals, furniture, to blankets and quilts.

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<sup>42</sup> US\$1 = TK51 at time of study.

<sup>43</sup> Own resources refer to the migrant's, her husband's or son's savings.

<sup>44</sup> However, some family members also lent funds interest free.

<sup>45</sup> The interest rate varied from 5 to 10% per month.



**Table 4.14 - Total cost of migration by source in value terms**

Source	Amount	% of Total Cost
Loan	4,631,900	53.35
Land Sale	938,200	10.81
Land Mortgage	97,000	1.12
Others	790,700	9.11
Own/Family Source	2,224,795	25.61
Total	8,682,595	100

Table 4.14 provides the relative magnitudes of different sources of revenue in value terms in the total cost of migration. Borrowing by far was the most important source of finance, amounting in value to half of the total cost. Second in the list, own and family resources covered on one-fourth, and the sale and mortgage of land accounted for slightly more than ten per cent of the total.

## **5 Conditions of Employment in the Host Country**

This section deals with the employment conditions of women workers in the host country and discusses their working hours, salary, length of contract, holidays and ease of communication with members of family. The section ends with a review of the problems faced by migrant women abroad.

### **5.1 Conditions of Work**

#### **5.1.1 Length of Contract**

Two-year contracts were the norm for most migrant workers in the sample. However, very few workers, all of them nurses, had four-year and a more sizable minority (25 per cent) had three-year contracts as well (Table 5.1). Reportedly, some of the garment and other factory workers who went to Malaysia had to renew their work permit with the government on a yearly basis, even though they held a three-year contract with their employers. Some of the domestic aides had little idea about their contracts.

**Table 5.1 - Contract years of female migrants**

Year	Frequency	Per cent
Up to 2 years	147	73.5
Up to 3 years	50	25.0
Up to 4 years	3	1.5
Total	200	100.0

The average number of years that the migrants remained abroad, a little over three years, is greater than the average length of work contracts. Three quarters of the women stayed longer than two years, while close to one quarter extended their stay beyond five years. Though their professions and skill composition on average differ, there was no difference between rural and urban women in terms of the average length of stay abroad. However, it was a rural woman who stayed abroad the longest (21 years), while the longest staying urban worker remained thirteen years.

**Table 5.2 - Duration of stay and completion of first contract (200 cases)\***

	No.	%
Stayed less than one month	2	1%
Stayed less than one year	22	11%
Could not finish the first contract	57	28.5%
Stayed more than 2 years	149	74.5%
Stayed more than 5 years	45	22.5%

\* Includes cases of multiple migration episodes.

A sizable minority had to return home without having completed their first contract (Table 5.2). Of these, two workers came back within a month and twenty-two within a year. A few had improper documents; some had family and personal problems; yet others, suffered from poor health or had problems with their employers.

All of the four women who were returned because of improper documents were domestic aides. Of these four, one was sent back by the UAE authorities within forty days of her arrival for not having the proper medical documents. Two were returned because they had false travelling documents

and a fourth had lost her documentation when she fled the house of her first employer.

**Table 5.3 - Causes of return before completion of contract**

Reason	Number
Forged travel documents	6
Non-payment of salary/verbal & physical abuse	16
Factory closure and lay off	9
Sexual abuse	4
Personal and family reasons	6
Outbreak of war	5
Due to imposition of ban	3
Health related	4
Did not return after holidays	4
Total	57

Four other women who had to return because they became ill at various stages of their stay, were also all domestic aides. One woman stayed in Dubai for thirteen months and was sent back by her employer when she got sick, even though her visa was valid for another eleven months. Another was sent back when she contracted jaundice within two months of her arrival in Bahrain. Two other women, again in Bahrain, were so homesick that they could not cope with the stress of migration. One was sent back by her employer when her condition began to worsen, while the other went back on her own accord after seven months when she developed a peptic ulcer.

In a few cases, women migrants had to return prematurely because of family problems. Usually, the problem was the poor-health of children or the husband. In some others, extraordinary circumstances were involved as was the case with the five women who had to flee the Iraq-Kuwait war; or, the one involving three domestic aides who happened to be on holiday in Bangladesh when the government imposed a ban on the migration of unskilled women, ruling out their return.

But, in the majority of cases where the worker returned before completing her contract, the problem was employer related. In nine cases involving domestic aides, the source of the problem was either verbal or physical abuse, non-payment

of salary or inhuman working conditions and excessive hours of work. Four of these workers were subjected to sexual abuse. Some factory workers in Malaysia were also not paid their salaries and had to return before completing their contracts when their factories closed down.

### **5.1.2 Hours of Work**

Migrant workers in general work long hours, and women migrants are no exception. It would seem that the less organized the sector is, the longer the hours of work are. Almost all of the ten nurses in the sample reported that their hours were regular, though they worked longer hours for overtime pay. Sixty-six per cent of the factory workers and half of the garment workers reported official work days that ranged from eight to ten hours. They often had to work longer hours and were not always paid overtime. Some garment and other factory workers were on a piece rate, and ended up working longer hours for comparable pay.

Domestic aides constituted the group most vulnerable to working excessively long workdays. Three quarters of them worked as long as fifteen to eighteen hours a day. During the month of Ramadan their workload increased enormously, as they had to prepare early morning meals (*sehris*) for fasting adults before bed, and attend to non-fasting minors and elders during the day.

### **5.1.3 Holidays**

The notion of a regular weekly holiday was alien to most of the domestic aides. Almost all of them did not think that they were entitled to any paid days off. By contrast, all garments and factory workers had a provision for regular holidays in their contracts, but that did not necessarily mean that they could enjoy them on a regular basis. They often had to work through the holidays, and overtime pay was not always prompt. More extreme was the situation of garment workers employed in the Maldives. They reported workdays that were as long as 18 to 22 hours, had no holidays, and had to work even on Eid Al-Fitr day.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Important Muslim religious observance.

**Table 5.4 - Hours of work**

Labour Type	Work Hours Abroad						Group Total	
	Up to 8 hours No.    %	8-10 hours No.    %	10-15 hours No.    %	15-18 hours No.    %	More than 18 hours No.    %		No.    %	
Nurse	9    90.0		1    10.0				10    100.0	
Garments Worker	1    3.1	15   46.9	9    28.1	7    21.9			32    100.0	
Factory Worker	12   36.4	10   30.3	8    24.2	2    6.1	1    3.0		33    100.0	
Domestic Aide	3    2.7	6    5.4	14   12.5	84   75.0	5    4.5		112   100.0	
Others	7    58.3	2    16.7		3    25.0			12    100.0	
Group Total	32   16.0	33   16.5	32   16.0	96   48.0	6    3.0		199*   99.5	

\* Value missing because one person had to return from the airport upon arrival.

### 5.1.4 Method of Communication

Family is of critical importance to most women migrants. They endure many hardships in a foreign land for their children and their family. Thus, the ability to communicate regularly with their families matters greatly to them.

**Table 5.5 - Method of communication with the family**

Method	Area				Total	
	Rural		Urban		No	%
	No.	%	No.	%		
Letter	107	82.30	65	92.85	172	86
Phone	46	35.38	49	70	95	47.5
Fax	1	0.76	6	8.57	7	3.5
Cassette	96	73.84	35	50	131	65.5

Note: Total Number of Rural Interviewee is 130

Total Number of Urban interviewee is 70

Figures reflect multiple answers.

Women migrants maintained contact with their families through a variety of methods including mail, telephone, fax, audiocassettes etc. Illiterate migrants had to depend on others to write and read letters for them. The telephone, though the easiest and the quickest method of communication, was not always available, especially in the rural areas. Only 35 per cent of the rural migrants could use the telephone, while the same was true for no more than 70 per cent of the urban migrants. A few migrants also had access to fax machines, which were generally used to transmit information in connection with money transfers. Taped audiocassettes were also quite commonly used and reportedly were appreciated greatly by the children of migrant workers.

Some families expressed concern that the communication between the parties was not always regular. A few have reported that they had not heard from their migrant relative for years on end. A father from Rupganj had not heard from his daughter for six months after she communicated to him that she was laid-off and that she could return any time. A mother from Manikganj was equally concerned, as she had lost track of her daughter for the past eight months.

### **5.1.5 How Remittances are Sent**

An overwhelming majority (82%) of the migrant women reported that they used official channels to send money, either by cheque or bank-to-bank wire transfer. A few women migrants also sent money through close relatives and friends, and a large number brought it themselves when they travelled home for holidays. Some used more than one method, and the percentage of those who sent money through informal channels at least on occasion was as high as 32 per cent. This is considerably lower than the same ratio for men, probably because women are more risk-averse and usually not as well connected as men to make use of informal channels. Twenty-one women migrants reported losing money at least once while sending it through informal channels. Occasionally, money was also lost when close friends or relatives, and in two cases employers, were the conduits. However, of the 200 women, 164 had no major problem. A few respondents complained that sending money through the bank took too long a time.

### **5.2 Problems Faced Abroad**

Migration to an unknown country is a multifaceted challenge to any person. One needs to overcome the language barrier, adapt to a different culture, and learn to cope with homesickness and loneliness. Usually, temporary migrant workers, especially women workers, have to deal with many additional challenges that range from substandard working conditions to mistreatment and abuse. Many are paid below their contract wage, not allowed to take their regular time-off, forced to work excessively long hours, deprived of any private space and social life, and restricted in their movements.

However, there were also a good number of women workers who had very positive work experiences and faced no serious problems at all. A couple who worked together as housemaids in Kuwait were particularly happy about their work arrangement as well as the treatment they received from their employer. Likewise, another worker from Nababganj reported of having felt "as safe as in mother's womb" at her employer's house. Perhaps depending on who the employer was, women workers reacted very differently to the restrictions on their movements. While some took it positively

as something that was done for their protection, others viewed as an infringement upon their freedom. Table 5.6 presents a list of the main problems that woman migrants reported having faced overseas.

**Table 5.6 - Various problems faced by 150 returnees in the host country**

Type of Problem	Number	%
Food Related	38	25.3
Neglect of Health	37	24.7
Physical Abuse	36	24
Sexual Abuse/ Rape	8	5.3
Seizure of passport	70	46.7
Insomnia	37	24.7
Breach of Contract	16	10.7
Irregular Payment	36	24
Restricted Movement	21	14
Others	28	18.7

Note: Figures reflect multiple answers

### **5.2.1 Food-Related Problems**

In the first few months almost all workers had problems with food. All factory workers had to eat the same food which was prepared bearing in mind the palate of the majority of workers' nationality. In many factories the majority were Sri Lankan or South Indian, and it was very difficult for the Bangladeshi workers to adjust to the spicy vegetarian food. Some lost their appetite at the mere sight of such food and would go hungry after a long arduous day of work. Others however complained that the quantity of food served was never enough. Some domestic aides also had problems with food. Many complained of having been fed stale food, or severely reprimanded when they ate something that was not meant for them. A few had problems adjusting to Middle Eastern cuisine.

However, of the 150 returnee women migrants, only 38 reported food-related problems. Many women thought that food was abundant and that they were at liberty to eat as much as they pleased. Some had employers who bought them special food items so that they could cook their own food as they pleased.



### **5.2.2 Health Problems**

The stress of migration often manifested itself in various forms of physical ailment. When neglected, these often took a serious turn and eventually forced migrant workers to return home. Jaundice, peptic ulcers, temporary insanity were some of the examples of untreated health problems that eventually forced migrant workers to return home. Many workers were in a constant state of anxiety about their family, and as much as 25 per cent of the returnees reported of having developed insomnia which often persisted long after they returned. About the same percentage reported that their health problems were neglected by their employers.

Some employers, however, attended to the health problems of their workers. For instance, when a factory worker in Malaysia broke her leg in an accident, her company bore the cost of treatment and arranged a visa for her younger sister to come and attend her. Likewise, a garment worker in Dubai, who suffered from severe pain from a tumor in her hand, underwent treatment that was arranged and paid for by her company. However, she was not paid for the time she was off work.

### **5.2.3 Physical and Sexual Abuse**

About 25 per cent of the returnees reported that they had been subjected to regular physical abuse, sometimes in an extreme form. Being hit on the head with shoes and belt-whipped are some of the frequently reported forms of physical abuse. According to a respondent from Nababganj, her employer would beat her for any reason whatsoever. Another from Comilla reported that even a child's cry would invite violence on her. A few others mentioned experiences of physical torture such as the pressing of red hot metal objects on their skin. Some workers were also exposed to a high risk of physical harm as they were put in charge of taking care of mentally retarded persons without any prior training or instruction.

In another group of cases, abuse was limited to the initial months and was in part caused by employers' irritation over the language barrier. Tension would usually build up

with the female head of household, leading more often to verbal rather than physical abuse.

Eight women in the sample reported that they were subjected to rape or attempted rape. However, the actual number can plausibly be much higher since many might have felt uncomfortable sharing such unpleasant personal experiences during the interview with a stranger. One of the domestic aides was raped by the brother of an employer who came for a short visit. In another case, an employer repeatedly attempted rape and was successful on one occasion. Rather than blaming her husband, his wife handed the domestic worker over to the police who then sent her back to Bangladesh. Another domestic aide who has since taken up prostitution as her profession was raped while she was in Kuwait.

#### 5.2.4 Breach of Contract

Those workers (16) who reported that their employers breached their contract in some way constituted slightly less than ten per cent. The underpayment of wages was the most pervasive problem. That the actual wages paid was 20 per cent less than the contracted wage indicates the magnitude of the problem (Table 5.7). Numerous other violations of contract were more minor but equally common. Some employers did not pay the return air ticket that was due their workers at the end of their contract, while others deducted the cost of food from wages even though they were supposed to provide food to their workers.

**Table 5.7 - Difference between contract wage and wage received abroad**

Wage	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Total
Contract Wage	1,500	20,000	6,206.29	1,228,846
Wage Received	0	22,000	5,173.25	1,024,304

#### 5.2.5 Restriction of Movement

Most of the migrants did not have much of a social life while abroad. Particularly those women migrants who worked as domestic aides led a life of physical, social and cultural

isolation and were usually deprived of any social contact. Employers usually restricted the movements of these workers because they feared either their own security at home could otherwise be compromised or that other families might lure them away. While some of the women thought positively of these restrictions, 21 workers felt that being restricted in their movements was the most serious problem they faced abroad (Table 5.6). Some of them complained that they were not even allowed to post letters and meet people they knew even once in a while. One woman from Manikganj reported that she could only post a letter after a long time of being employed, when she was once allowed to go to the doctor after much persuasion.

The need to communicate with others was most keenly felt when homesick. All workers reported that at least once in a while they would get an urge to speak to someone in their own language. Their only break from regular and monotonous chores would come when they were sent to work in other houses or when they were taken along during a family outing.

### 5.3 Access to Bangladeshi Missions Abroad

Bangladeshi missions abroad play an important role in safeguarding the rights of Bangladeshi workers. Of the 150 returnees, 46 had sought assistance from their embassy at least once during their stay. The embassy could offer some help to twenty-two of them, while the other twenty-four could not be assisted. However, many of the women migrants did not know about the existence of a Bangladeshi mission in their country of employment. Those who did were not clear what type of assistance it could offer them.

**Table 5.8 - Support received from Bangladeshi missions abroad (150 returnees)**

Support Received from Embassy	Number	%
Yes	22	14.7
No	24	16
Not Applicable	104	69.3
Total	150	100

When faced with a problem, rather than going to the embassy most women migrants sought help from their work

mates who were usually from another country, and other Bangladeshi male or female migrants whom they happened to know. Few of them however were advised by male Bangladeshi migrants whom they accidentally met to seek help from the embassy. In one such case, a particular domestic aide was taken to the embassy by a Bangladeshi who found out that she had not been paid for the last six months. In this incidence, the embassy contacted her employer, and the worker was paid half of the salary that was her due.

Another domestic aide broke her arm when she was pushed by her employer's son. When the employer refused to arrange for her treatment, a Sri Lankan domestic aide employed in a neighbouring house encouraged her to take the matter to the Bangladeshi mission. Though the mission could not secure payment from her employer for her treatment, it managed to arrange some other employment for her. On numerous other occasions, the mission provided shelter and negotiated with employers for the payment of unpaid salary, and paid for workers' return fare when it could not solve their problems.

However, the mission also failed to help other women workers with very similar problems: non-payment of salary, physical and sexual abuse, contract substitutions, being taken into police custody, etc. Reportedly, a common attitude among the mission staff was to deny recognition of migrant women as Bangladeshi citizens. Even after this hurdle was overcome, many workers felt that the staff was more inclined to send them back to Bangladesh rather than fight for their case. In the case of Bangladeshi garment workers in the Maldives, the negligence displayed by the mission staff was a clear example of dereliction of duty. The workers had not received their salaries for years and were unable to return home. Their frantic phone calls and faxes to the non-resident Bangladeshi mission of the Maldives in Sri Lanka were completely ignored.

Some interviewees also made accusations of corruption. A few workers alleged that the mission staff in Malaysia requested bribes to help them. According to one worker, she was refused any assistance because the mission staff accepted bribes from her employer who owed her back pay. Also, the

mission was quite reluctant to help some garment and factory workers who were taken into custody for participating in industrial strikes along with their counterparts from the host country.

## **6 Economic Impact of Migration**

This section examines the economic impact of female labour migration at the household level. The 200 families interviewed in this study are categorized into three groups in terms of whether the overall economic impact of migration on the household has been: (i) positive, (ii) negative, or (iii) mixed. The indicators used to assess this are the changes in employment status and earnings, the amount of remittances sent, the degree of indebtedness, and the accumulation or loss of assets and savings.

The characteristic traits of the families in the first group were the following:

The migrant member stayed abroad for relatively lengthy period of time, and the family

- received a steady flow of remittances,
- could pay back the loans it borrowed to finance migration,
- has been able to buy land,
- has been able to construct a house,
- could generate savings,
- could invest in some business,
- experienced an improvement in its living standard.

In turn, the families in the second group had the following traits:

The migrant member of the family had to return in less than a year, and the family

- was unsuccessful to repay its loans,
- received little remittance,
- had to keep borrowing to meet its subsistence needs,
- could not buy any land,
- could not construct a home,

- did not invest in a business,
- experienced a general deterioration in its economic condition.

Finally, the characteristics traits of the families in the last group were the following:

The migrant member stayed for reasonably lengthy period, and the family

- could partially pay off its loans,
- received a modest amount of remittance,
- had to take out additional loans,
- invested some remittances in at least one or the other of home construction/repair, home purchase, a business.
- experienced no marked difference in its overall economic condition.

### 6.1 Employment Opportunities

The most immediate economic impact of migration on the migrants themselves can be assessed by looking at their employment status prior to migration. Before migration, of the 200 women, 91 were involved in some type of income-generating activity (Table 6.1). The rest held no employment. Thus, migration provided employment – for 3.2 years on the average - for more than half the women in the sample.

**Table 6.1 - Type and level of employment before and during migration period**

Type of Employment	Before No.	%	During No.	%
Nurse	7	7.7	10	5
Garments and factory worker	35	38.5	65	32.5
Domestic aide	15	16.5	112	56
Self-employed / day labourer	32	35.2	-	
Others	2*	2.2	13**	6.5
Total	91	100	200	100

\* NGO Employee

\*\* School and hospital cleaners

**Table 6.2 - Work situation before and after migration**

	Working No.	%	Not Working No.	%	Total No.
Before Migration	91	45.5	109	54.5	200
After Migration	35	23.3	115	76.6	150

However, after their return home only 35 out of the 150 returnees were employed. Some of the returnees were still undecided whether to seek employment at home or try to go abroad again. While garment workers and nurses had little difficulty finding jobs suitable to their skills after their return, those who were employed in other manufacturing and processing industries had a harder time. Women workers who were domestic aides before going abroad did not want to work in that position after their return. Having been abroad, they felt that to do so would be demeaning in view of their newly gained status. However, some of the day-labourers who had little success abroad returned to the same line of work once they were back in Bangladesh.

Table 6.3 compares the monthly before-migration-earnings with monthly earnings while abroad, showing that the average monthly income of the previously employed migrant workers increased more than fourfold after migration.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the importance of the women migrants' contribution to the family budget had also increased substantially (Table 6.4). Before migration, close to one-third of the women who were employed contributed between 21 to 40 per cent of their family income, while the percentage of those who earned more than 80 per cent of the family's income was only seven percent. After migration, half of the two hundred women had become the main earner in their family, earning more than 60 per cent of the family income.

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<sup>47</sup> Before migration, a few women were working as unpaid family labour in the handloom industry and earned no income of their own, while another worked as a housemaid without salary.

**Table 6.3 - Monthly income of female migrants before and during migration period (in Taka)**

Period	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Total
Before Migration	0	4,500	1,178	107,261
During Migration Period	0	22,000	5,173	1,034,600

**Table 6.4 - Female migrant workers' income as percentage of family income before and during migration (200 cases)**

Percentage of Income	Before		After	
	Frequency No.	%	Frequency No.	%
Less than 5%	109	54.5	20	10.0
5 to 20%	33	16.5	10	5.0
21 to 40%	26	13.0	29	14.5
41 to 60%	14	7.0	46	23.0
61 to 80%	3	1.5	42	21.0
81 to 100%	14	7.0	53	26.5
Total	199*	99.5	200	100

\* Information of one person is missing

## 6.2 Use of Remittances

On the average, the amount of remittances sent by a worker in one year was equal to Tk45,126.<sup>48</sup> The income from remittances was spent mainly on consumption and health care, loan repayment, asset building and income generation (Table 6.5).

**Table 6.5 - Remittance use by group**

Sectors	Amount (in Taka)	% of Total
Consumption / Health Care / Education	1,64,04,192	55.65
Loan Repayment	54,65,027	18.54
Savings	20,37,036	6.91
Financing Migration of other Family Members	11,85,300	4.02
Land Purchase	9,85,712	3.34
Home Construction & Repair	5,35,796	1.82
Investment in Economic Ventures	6,13,824	2.08

<sup>48</sup> US\$1 = Tk51 at time of study.



Sectors	Amount (in Taka)	% of Total
Social Ceremony and Dowry	13,62,500	4.62
Involuntary Contribution to Relative	4,57,631	1.55
Others*	4,28,500	1.45
Total	2,94,75,518	100%

\* Others includes misappropriation, purchase of luxury goods, releasing mortgaged land and taking mortgage etc.

### *Consumption, Health Care and Education*

Slightly more than half of all remittances were spent on daily subsistence, health care, and children's education. In some families, the expenses related to chronic illness or other urgent medical needs accounted for a significant share of spending from remittances. In others, especially in the families of urban migrants, the higher disposable income was used to offer a better quality of education for the children and other family members. But, there were also some families who spent a substantial part of their earnings on conspicuous consumption. A telling example was the story of the father of a migrant worker from Nababganj. Professing a latter-day spiritual detachment from worldly concerns, he wanted to visit the holy city of Ajmer in India rather than continue to work for a living. He wanted his daughter, who was by then the sole earner of the family, to finance his journey. Delighted that his daughter could send Tk 22,000, he used the money to fulfil his wish.

### *Loan Repayment*

Usually, the first thing families did when remittances started flowing in was to begin paying off the debts they had incurred to finance migration. Repayment of loans comprised close to 20 per cent of all remittance use. Almost 70 per cent of the families could pay off their debts completely, even though they usually had to pay very high interest rates. Close to 25 per cent of the families could only pay off their debts partially, while some 8 per cent defaulted.

**Table 6.6 - Status of loan repayment by area of origin**

Area	Fully Paid		Partially Paid		Could Not Pay at all		Total No. of Loan Receivers	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Rural	73	66.97	24	22.02	12	11.00	109	100
Urban	34	70.83	13	27.08	01	2.08	48	100
Total	107	68.15	37	23.56	13	8.28	157	100

*Savings*

Around seven per cent of remittances could be saved on average. The highest and most consistent savers were the nurses, and the ability to save among others was much more uneven. While few families bought savings certificates issued by the government or invested in stocks, most kept their money in the bank in order to have ready access to it. In some cases, the money was used in a brother's or some other relative's business, on the condition that it would be returned when the migrant needed it.

*Financing Migration of Other Family Members*

Around four per cent of all remittances was also used to finance the migration of other family members. In a number of cases sisters financed their brothers' migration and a mother her son's, while in two other cases the remittances from wives were used to finance the husbands' migration. Sometimes, savings from remittances were also used to resend women migrant workers abroad after they returned from their first tour.

*Land Purchase*

One reason why little money was invested in economic ventures is because many people considered the purchase of land as the safest form of investment. Thus, not surprisingly, the purchase of land accounted for a higher percentage (3.3%) of remittance use than investments.

*Home Construction and Renovation*

Home construction and repair accounted for close to two per cent of remittance use. This included the construction of new dwellings, the renovation of old structures, and the

addition of facilities in homes such as a new kitchen, storage space or toilets.

### *Investment in Income-Generating Activity*

Investment in economic ventures by migrant families was very low. Only around two per cent of remittance use was earmarked for investment in a new business or some other type of entrepreneurial activity. A few families purchased vehicles, and one family invested in starting up a roadside restaurant, grocery store, tailoring shop, teashop etc. Yet another family began lending small amounts of money on interest. Income from remittances was also used as liquid capital by family members who had businesses or were contractors. In an arrangement that seemed like a dowry, a driver who co-owned the truck he drove managed to buy off his partners' share after he married a migrant woman who had just returned from abroad.

### *Social Ceremonies and Dowry*

The expenses associated with various social ceremonies such as marriage, *akika* (christening) and the rituals performed following a death in the family also accounted for a significant share of spending from remittances. Especially in Manikganj area, the payment of dowry constituted another important area of use for remittance income. As discussed earlier, some of the families' main objective in sending their daughters to work abroad was to earn money for dowry. Many migrant women who were either deserted or divorced could remarry after their return, and became more attractive by their newly acquired dowry or wealth. Altogether, spending on social ceremonies and dowry accounted for close to five per cent of total remittance use.

### *Involuntary Contribution to Relatives*

A significant amount of remittance money, equalling in value to what had been invested, was appropriated one way or another by relatives who were in financial difficulty. In one telling example, the younger brother of a migrant worker felt compelled to lend his sister's remittance money without her knowledge to some distant relative who had some business emergency. Though the relative promised to pay back the loan promptly within a few months the money was never returned.

### 6.3 Assets Lost and Gained

Table 6.7 presents the distribution of families that had to sell various assets prior to migration and those that had gained assets after migration. The two groups are roughly equal in number. While 42 families sold land before, 37 bought it after migration. Again, the number of families who mortgaged their land is equal in number to those who later released mortgaged land or had taken land mortgage. In home ownership, by contrast, the net gain was substantial. While 11 families sold off their home before, 36 families have built new homes after migration.

**Table 6.7 - Assets lost and gained (in no. of cases)**

Losses	Gains	Rate of Recovery in %
Land Sold 42	Land Purchased 37	88
Land Mortgaged out 7	Land Released from Mortgage/ Mortgaged in 7	100
Home Structures Sold 11	Home Structures Constructed 36	327

**Table 6.8 - Additional gains from migration**

Sector	No. of Cases
Home Repair	17
Financing Migration of Family Members	15
Saving	31
Transport Business	7
Business Trading	17
Small Shop	4
Biscuit Factory	1
Handloom Machinery	1
Sewing Machine	8
Others	5

Among the 150 returnees, 31 families were able to accumulate at least some savings, 17 could repair their homes, and 15 could finance the migration of other family members (Table 6.8). Table 6.9 provides a list of the things families expected to achieve with the income from labour migration, indicating whether or not these have been fulfilled, and whether families are hopeful that they could still be fulfilled.

**Table 6.9 - Meeting of expectation by categories (no. of respondents)**

Type of Expectation	Ex-pected	Materialized		Still Hopeful		No hope of Fulfilment	
	No.	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Home Construction	109	36	33.03	23	21.10	50	45.87
Home Repair	50	17	34	4	8.0	29	58
Land Purchase	128	37	28.9	21	16.40	70	54.69
Better Health Care	41	21	51.22	2	4.88	18	43.90
Education	77	44	57.14	12	15.58	21	27.27
Capital	59	31	52.54	10	16.95	18	16.95
Sending family Members overseas	40	15	37.58	4	10.0	21	52.5
Dowry	17	31	182	NA		NA	
Others	39	14	35.90	8	20.51	17	43.59

A common objective among the families was to build a home. Thirty three per cent of the 109 families who had this objective could achieve their goal. Another 23 per cent were hopeful that they still would be able to achieve it in the future, while 45 per cent have given up hope. Of the 50 families whose objective was to repair their home, 34 per cent could do so. Another common objective was to purchase land. While close to 30 per cent could achieve this goal, about 16 per cent were hopeful that they still could do so in the future.

Providing better education to the children appears to be an objective that was better achieved. More than half of the 77 families who had this as a goal felt that they had accomplished it. Interestingly, paying for dowry comes across either as an "over-accomplished" objective or an understated goal. While only 25 families expressed it as an objective, 31 families actually paid for dowry for themselves or a member of family.

**Table 6.10 - Baggage items (150 returnees)**

Items	Retained	Sold	Pilferage	Total No.
Cassette Recorder	78	12	5	95
VCR/VCP	13	4	2	19
TV	10	4	2	16
Radio	8	1	1	10

Items	Retained	Sold	Pilferage	Total No.
Camera	24	8	3	35
Fan	6	1		7
Cloths	112			112
Kitchen Utensils	16	2		18
Gold	67	29	6	102
Cash	--	NA	--	73
Others	16	2	1	19

Table 6.10 lists the baggage items brought home by female migrant workers. Ninety-five of the migrants brought cassette recorders, 19 brought VCR/VCP and 16 brought television sets with them. A number of others brought radios, cameras, fans and clothes. In addition, half of the migrants brought gold jewellery and 73 brought cash. The returnees and their families could retain a significant part of the items they brought, indicating that most families' economic situation did not sharply deteriorate after the return of the migrant worker in the family. Twenty-nine migrants either sold their gold jewellery or gave them away as gifts. In a few cases the returnees lost their baggage items to pilferage, most of it at the Dhaka airport.

**Table 6.11 - No. of respondents who can sustain their improved economic status by type of work (114 cases)**

Type of Work	Total No. Positive Impact	Who Can Sustain Such Improvement No.	%
Nurse	10	10	100
Garment workers	19	12	63.2
Factory workers	20	5	25
Domestic Aide	65	9	14.8
Others		0	0
Total	114	36	31

Based on the criteria outlined above, the overall impact of migration was positive for 114, negative for 53, and mixed for 33 of the 200 families interviewed in this study. However, the positive impact of migration was not sustainable for all who were positively affected (Table 6.11). While all nurses and most garments workers could sustain the improvement in their standards of living, the majority of the others could not.

The ease with which nurses and garment workers could find employment opportunities after they returned appears to account for this difference. Among the rest, the few families that could sustain the positive impact of migration were generally those who had either invested their earnings in some productive venture or had other family members go to work abroad.

## **7 Impact of Migration on Women Migrants and Their Family Members**

This section discusses the social costs and benefits of migration for the migrant women and their families. It tries to assess the impact of the prolonged absence of adult women from their families on the children, elderly women and the principal male member of family. The discussion is based on both quantitative and qualitative data. Forty of the 200 households interviewed were revisited for in-depth and open-ended interviews.

### **7.1 Impact of Migration on Children**

One hypothesis that was examined in this study was that the migration of the principal female of the household would increase the workload of the children and thus adversely affect their education. While the hypothesis could not be accepted or rejected across the board, the fieldwork revealed that women's migration had other important effects on the children as well. Among these were marriage of children at an early age, their exposure to wrong peer groups, and the trauma caused by the desertion of some fathers while the mother was away.

However, the problems faced by the children of migrant women are not necessarily unique to these families. Other youngsters in the slums of Dhaka are also exposed to drugs, violence and criminal gangs, and the rate at which the migrant women's children dropped out of school was actually lower than the national average. Whether the problems faced by migrant families are more frequent or not only be accurately assessed in a comparative study of migrant and non-migrant families.

### *Education*

Women's migration had a mixed impact on the children's education. Some of the migrant women felt that the major cost of their migration was the adverse impact it had on their children's education. In their absence, the children usually had poor school attendance and did not study well at home. Of the 224 school-attending children in the sample,<sup>49</sup> 36 had dropped out of school while their mothers were working abroad. At the time of the fieldwork, the presumption was that girls' education would be more adversely affected than boys', since it was assumed that their mothers' absence would place additional burdens disproportionately on their shoulders. In fact, some anecdotal evidence seemed to support this.<sup>50</sup> Among the younger female migrants in our sample, of the ten who were of school age, four were going to school and had to quit when they migrated. Yet, no difference was found between the dropout rates of the girls and the boys.<sup>51</sup> This is in part explained by the fact that boys were also adversely affected though usually for different reasons. While daughters had to quit school to manage the household or to look after younger siblings, boys were more prone to lose direction when adult supervision slackened.

In some cases, migration also contributed positively to the children's education. In 20 cases, the increased income enabled the families to provide better educational opportunities for their children. In one particular case, a woman who began living with her married sister along with her son after she was abandoned by her husband, could keep

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<sup>49</sup> This figure does not include the children in the families of unmarried migrant women and those who either passed the school age or dropped out before the female member migrated in all other households.

<sup>50</sup> In one family in which the husband was busy with farm work, the daughter had to drop out of school to takeover the responsibility of running the household. In another family, the migrant mother had to entrust her two-year-old infant to her 12-year old daughter who had to quit school to look after the toddler. In another family where a boy dropped out of school, the reason given was lack of discipline rather than overload with family chores and responsibilities. However, in one instance, the oldest son gave up school to look after his three younger siblings when his mother went abroad.

<sup>51</sup> While the former was eleven per cent, the latter was found to be ten per cent.



the boy in school only because she migrated and began sending money. The son was not resentful over his mother's absence, as he understood that she had to migrate to ensure a better future for him.

### *Early Marriage*

The migration of the main female member of the household often resulted in the early marriage of the children. Because many families felt that an adolescent girl was difficult to look after in the absence of her mother, marrying her off at an early age was thought of as a convenient solution to the problem. In some cases, sons were also married off early when there was no female member to take care of the household in the absence of the migrant women.

### *Drug Addiction*

The sons of four of the migrant women fell in with the wrong crowd and eventually became drug addicts. In the case of a deserted woman who had been working in Dubai for three years, her son lost all adult supervision when his grandfather fell ill and the grandmother became too preoccupied with her husband's illness. The son quit school, befriended troubled youngsters and became addicted to drugs. Another son left behind in the slums of Dhaka by a migrant mother and unattended by a wayward father became involved in a criminal gang. The mother felt compelled to return after seven months and found another job in a local garment factory. However, it was already too late as her son never went back to school and her daughter married a vagabond while she was away.

### *Children in Stress*

In a number of cases, the children were too traumatized when the father or the primary care giver deserted them after their mothers left to work abroad. A few of the mothers had to come back as their children could not cope with their absence. However, their mothers' experience in a foreign country also inspired a few of the children as it exposed them to other cultures.

## **7.2 Impact of Migration on Male Household Members**

Various studies have shown that women's workload and responsibilities increase considerably when men migrate in search of temporary work (S.T. Hettege 1997). Taking on the double role of being both the mother and the father, women acquire sole responsibility for looking after the children and elderly in the family, managing household affairs, shopping and making daily family decisions. As women adjust to a new way of life, often, the traditional gender division of labour also begins to give way.

Are gender roles also altered when women migrate? Do men take up the responsibilities traditionally performed by women, such as having primary responsibility for looking after the children, preparing or organizing meals and keeping house? In short, does female migration alter the traditional gender division of labour within the household in any way?

During fieldwork, these questions were posed to find out who performed various household functions in the absence of the principal female member of the household. It was found that male parents very rarely took over the responsibilities traditionally associated with their female partners. In most aspects of family life, the traditional gender division of labour within the household did not change in the 200 families studied. The major responsibilities of women in keeping house such as cooking, cleaning, washing etc. were invariably considered female jobs. That men could possibly perform these tasks seemed inconceivable to the husbands.

Some men however became actively involved in their children's education. They felt a special responsibility to ensure that the children studied properly and attended school regularly. Others considered deprived and felt that they were making a sacrifice by enduring their wives' absence and taking care of their own physical needs. The "sacrifice" was however willingly made as it was expected to improve the economic welfare of the family.

The mother's role in the household was substituted by various methods. The following chart shows that role substitution in the household varied according to the marital status of the migrant women. In the one hundred families

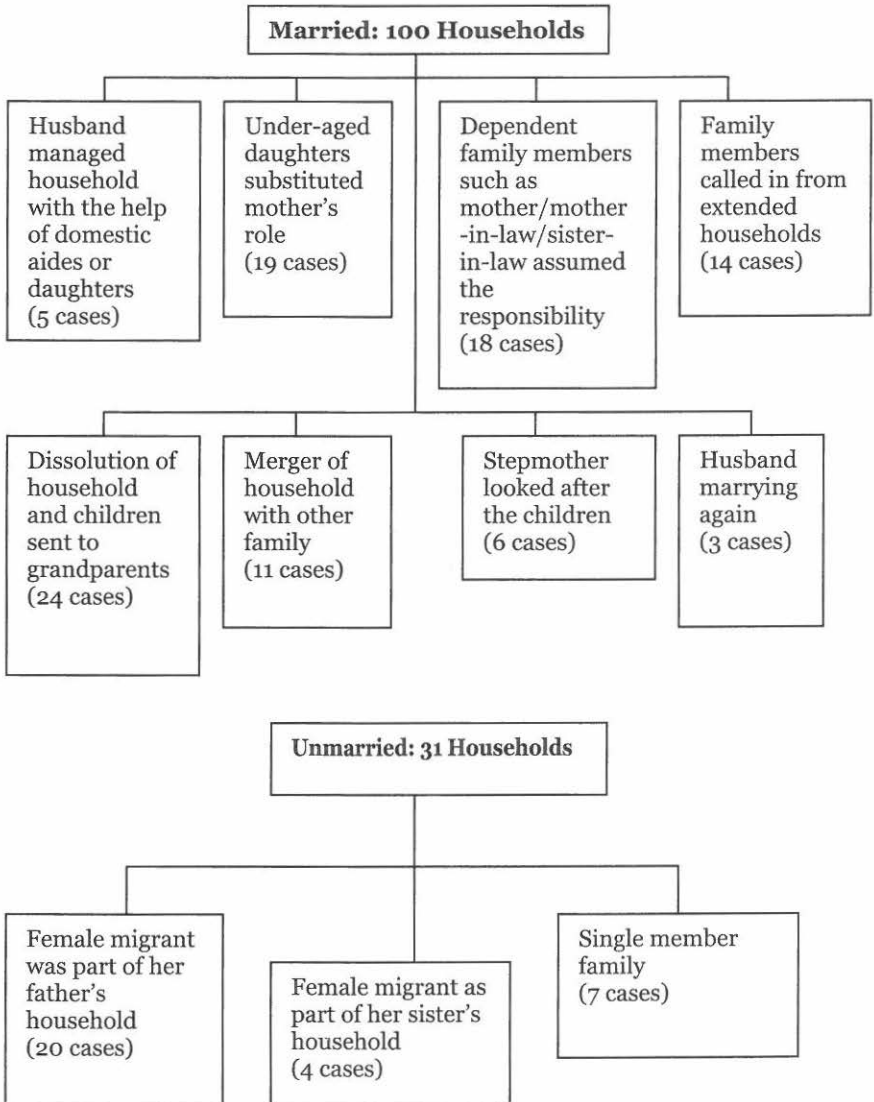
where the migrant women was married, some families remained intact while others were dissolved after the migration of the principal female. In the former group, only in five cases did the principal male assume primary responsibility for the management of the household. In the rest, the mother's role was substituted by one or the other of the following: under aged daughters, mothers or mother-in-laws, and female relatives from other households in the extended family.

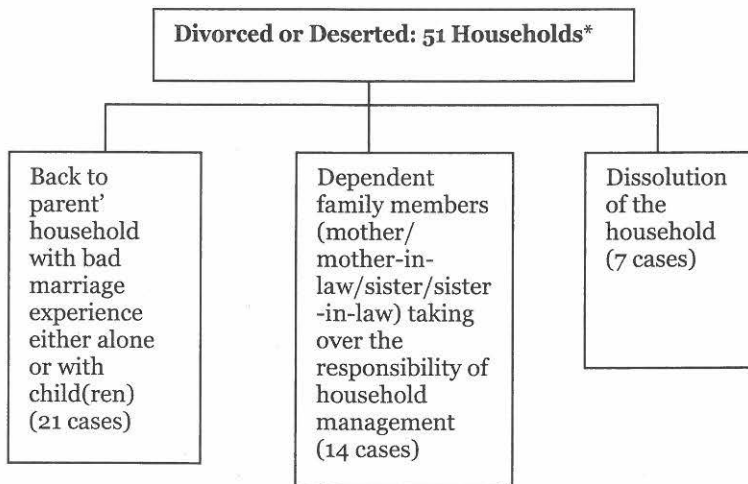
In the second group where the families were dissolved, in most cases the children were sent to live with grandparents. Sometimes their fathers accompanied them as well. Otherwise, the principal male moved into some other form of shared accommodation, living with sisters, sister-in-laws or some other relatives. A few of the husbands had more than one wife. In these cases, the wife (or wives) who stayed behind assumed responsibility for the children of the migrant women.

In households where the migrant woman was deserted or a divorced, there was usually no scope for male participation. These women were usually living with their parents or brothers before going abroad and were not generally the principal female of the household. Nor, was there much scope for change in gender relations when the migrant women were unmarried. However, in households of widowed women where the children lived on their own, in a couple of cases the eldest son managed the family, performing tasks traditionally performed by female members of family.

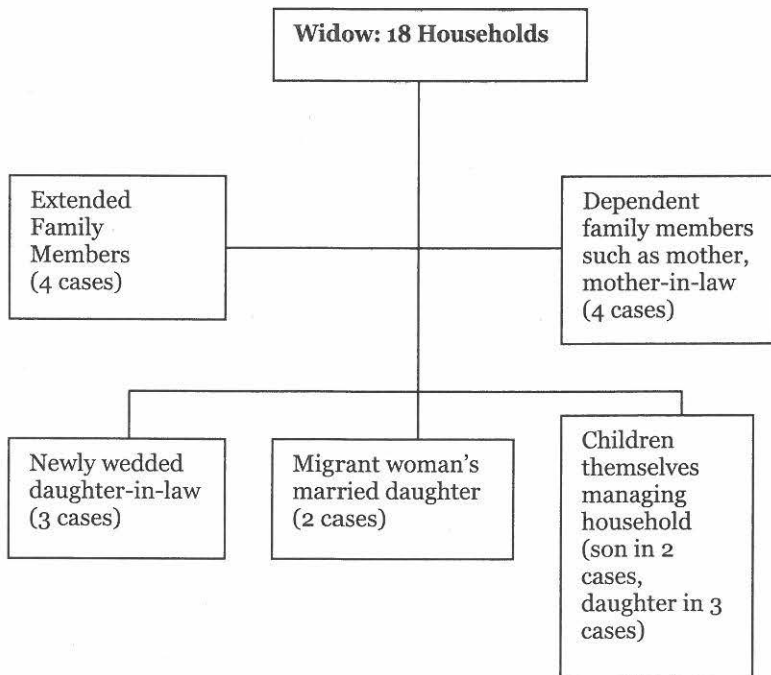
Since arguably changes in the gender division of labour could only take place gradually, the households where migrant women stayed abroad relatively longer were grouped together for closer examination. However, no discernible difference was found between these and the other households in terms of their familial arrangements at home. In the vast majority of cases in both groups, it was invariably a female relative who took care of the children and kept house.

**Role Substitution in the Absence of Women Migrant Workers**





\* Information available for only 42 households.



**Table 7.1 - No. of female migrants staying overseas for more than 5 years by marital status**

Marital Status	Total Number of migrant families	Stayed for more than 5 Years	
		No.	% of total
Married	100	14	14
Unmarried	31	6	19.35
Divorced /Deserted	51	16	31.37
Widowed	18	6	33.33
Total	200	42	21

Incidentally, it was also revealed that married women on average remained abroad for less time. Table 7.1 shows the distribution of migrant women who stayed abroad more than five years by marital status. Fourteen of the 42 migrant women who either had or have stayed abroad for more than five years were married, 16 were divorced or deserted, while six were widowed. In percentage terms, widows topped the list, followed by those divorced or deserted.

### **7.3 Impact of Migration on Elderly Women**

The mothers and mothers-in-law usually shouldered most of the responsibility of managing the household when the migrant women were away. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that without their support, female labour migration would not have been feasible. For some of the elderly women, coping with the needs of growing children was a very demanding task. In particular, adolescent children posed the greatest difficulty, especially the girls. However, no matter how demanding the task was, the grandparents rarely resented looking after the children and protected them against mistreatment within the family. Many were happy that they were being useful rather than a burden to their children in their old age. However, the close emotional bond that usually developed between the grandmothers and the grandchildren at times created tensions with the mothers who felt that the children had become emotionally distant towards them.

#### **7.4 Impact of Migration on Migrant Women**

Migration exposes women to an environment which is devoid of all conventional forms of protection and support. It often results in tremendous hardship, increased vulnerability to exploitation and physical and sexual abuse. However, at the same time, it opens up a window to a new world, giving women an opportunity at self-realization and empowerment. In many instances, earning income for the first time, migrant women gain an opportunity to develop a degree of independence they could probably have never acquired in their traditional environment.

This section draws from the in-depth interviews with forty selected returnee women, whose recollections focused on their: (i) exposure to new work environment, (ii) experience of migration, (iii) experience of employment; (iv) feelings of emotional and physical deprivation, (v) marital relationship; (vi) development of guilt complex; and (vii) role within the family.

##### *Exposure to New Work Environment*

As discussed above, close to half of the migrant women were illiterate and 65 per cent of them came from rural areas. Except for a minority of professionals and skilled workers, who amounted to 20 per cent of the total, almost all women in the sample were unskilled and lacked any previous work experience. None had any real command over English or any knowledge of the language of the country to which they migrated. Neither were they acquainted back at home with the modern household appliances and gadgets they had to use abroad. With the possible exception of garment workers, other types of factory workers were also uninformed as to what was expecting them at work.

It usually took them a few months to acquire some basic knowledge of the language of the host country and learn how to handle home appliances. Likewise, factory workers could also acquire some basic skills during the same time span and become adjusted to their new work conditions. With very few exceptions, most women migrants felt empowered, and had an increased sense of self-confidence at the end of this adjustment process.

### *Migration Experience*

More than half of the women migrants whose families economically benefited from migration felt a sense of achievement. Having made a significant contribution to their families' economic welfare gave them a high degree of self-satisfaction and improved their self-esteem. Some supported their fathers' family, some their own, and yet others both. With their remittances they enabled family members to enjoy proper health care and better educational opportunities, and helped send other family members to work abroad. Their deeds elevated their status within the family and earned them respect within the community.

By contrast, for various reasons a number of women migrants had to return home before they could even recover the costs incurred in the financing of their migration. These women were found to suffer from feelings of extreme guilt and were generally blamed by their families for their failure to persevere abroad. While one tried to commit suicide, another was hiding from moneylenders and officers of an NGO from whom she had borrowed to finance her migration. In a couple of instances where the fraudulent practices of recruiting agencies caused their premature return, women took them to rural informal courts and in one case, won restitution.

### *Experience of Employment*

Exploitative work conditions also on occasion pushed women to fight back. Five returnees, with the help of the embassy, brought charges against their employers for non-payment of wages, succeeding in a few of the cases. The cases lodged by another four who had returned from the Maldives are still pending with the involvement of an NGO, Ministry of Labour and BOESL. However, most migrants did not find themselves in situations where they had to take legal action. Yet, they all concurred that migration had taught them to make decisions on their own and be self-reliant.

### *Emotional and Physical Deprivation*

Most migrant women had a hard time during their stay abroad. Long and arduous work had taken their toll on the health of many. A few garment workers could no longer work on their return because of ruined eyesight. Likewise, others



who had developed eye and skin allergies while abroad had to quit work. Four domestic aides, who had been subjected to intense verbal abuse, lost much of their self-confidence to the point of being incapacitated. Seven others had become hard of hearing because of the repeated blows they received to their heads from their employers who hit them with shoes. Sexual abuse mentally tore apart its victims. Feeling psychologically tortured after being raped while abroad, one returnee eventually became a prostitute on her return.

Living an isolated life abroad, many migrant women were unable to communicate with their families on a regular basis. Home was always in their thoughts and one of their main worries. That they could not meet their sexual needs amplified their feeling of loneliness, causing anxiety and stress. Many suffered from insomnia, while a few others had more serious psychological disorders that required medical treatment at least in the particular case of one migrant. However, many of the women had a 'matter-of-fact' attitude about the problems they faced abroad. In order to reap the benefits of migrations, they felt, one also had to endure its difficulties. For some women, migration was also a respite from a bad marriage. Its hardships were easier to cope with than the emotional distress they had to deal with at home. Likewise, deserted women who lived with their in-laws felt that migration helped them improve their standing in the household. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of the women were willing, and about half of them had already tried, to return abroad again despite its hardships (Table 7.2)

**Table 7.2 - Response of 150 returnees about future migration desire and action**

Response	Would like to go Again		Already Made Attempts	
	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	126	84	71	47.3
No	24	16	79	52.7
Total	150	100	150	100

### *Marital Relationship*

Of the 200 households surveyed, there were eight marriages that had broken apart. In five cases, the husbands did not wish to live alone and had remarried. Three of these

men also usurped the money their wives sent as they divorced them. In three other cases, the wives divorced their husbands, two while they were abroad and another after she returned. On another four occasions four migrant women married during their stay abroad or after their return from abroad. Except for one, all others were second marriages.

### *Development of Guilt Complex*

Migration gave rise to strong feelings of guilt in some of the migrant women who blamed themselves for the break up of their marriages, for the children who dropped out of school and who became addicted to drugs, and, in short, for all the bad things that happened at home during their absence. Many felt that the society and the family also put the blame squarely upon their shoulders.

### *Role in the Family*

The fieldwork showed that the women migrants had in general little power over family decisions involving the use of their remittances. Having no bank account of their own, most sent all their earnings home. But their families usually did not think that the migrant women had any individual right or prior claim over the income they earned. On the numerous occasions where the migrant women expressed an opinion on how the money should be disposed of, their wishes were rarely honoured by their families. In many cases, the families used up their earnings by the time the women returned from abroad.

Nurses however were an exception. They kept a part of their earnings invested in savings certificates, bonds etc. and in general had greater control over their earnings. A few other women migrants also asserted themselves. Some of those who went abroad for a second time or those who stayed relatively longer gradually developed mechanisms to have some individual control over their earnings.

Children's education was one area where women's opinion, especially those of married returnees, was generally respected. Many of these women also found that their judgment on issues such as the marriages of family members were valued more as the remittances they kept sending began to improve their standing within the family.

In those instances where families purchased land, it was registered in majority of the cases under the name of a male member of family rather than the migrant women (Table 7.4). Some men remarked that this was only natural since they had sold property to finance the migration of the female member of family. In only 16 per cent of the cases was the purchased land registered in the migrant women's name.

**Table 7.3 - Ownership of land bought through remittance (37 cases)**

Category	No.	%
Migrant Woman Herself	6	16
Jointly with Other Family Members	10	30
Other Male Member	21	54
Total	37	100

## 8 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 8.1 Conclusions

The objective of the present study was to examine the nature and extent of temporary female labour migration, which has become an integral part of the global economy within the last couple of decades, from Bangladesh. The study had two parts: the first part compiled and assessed the existing data on women's migration, and, the second part presented the findings of a field survey involving a sample of two hundred female migrants and their households.

Examining the available sources of data, the study argued that the official figure on female labour migration from Bangladesh must grossly underestimate its actual magnitude. However, a reliable alternative estimate could not be provided because of the difficulty of getting information on unofficial channels of labour migration.

Discussing the different ways in which governmental, non-governmental and private organizations are involved in labour migration, the study concluded that the Government of Bangladesh has yet to formulate a coherent national policy on migrant workers. Moreover, the government's lack of willingness to acknowledge the reality of female migration has contributed to its inability to take action in protecting the

rights of Bangladeshi women migrants. Bans and restrictions imposed by successive governments over the years have only led to an increase in unofficial migration of women workers, making them all the more vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse. The problems related to female labour migration were also found to be compounded by the relative indifference of the local civil society organizations to the plight of migrant women workers.

The study also reviewed the national and international laws pertaining to labour migration. At the national level, the 1982 Ordinance was found to be out of date and thus incapable of addressing the problems posed by the current situation. Moreover, because the Ordinance has not been effectively enforced, the private recruiting agencies have virtually been accountable to no one. At the international level, the most comprehensive set of international labour standards are codified in the 1990 United Nations Convention, of which Bangladesh is a signatory. However, the Convention has not come into force as it is not yet ratified by the minimum necessary number of twenty countries. Bangladesh has still to ratify the Convention.

The empirical findings of the fieldwork are presented in the second part of the study. The conventional economic theories with their push and pull factors were not sufficient to fully explain the causes of women's migration from Bangladesh. Equally important were the social factors such as the need to earn a dowry, escape from an unhappy marriage, and the unpalatable family position many deserted and divorced women were in. Also, the recruiting efforts of fee charging private agencies, the support from NGOs and the dissemination of information about migration through informal social networks were seen to have worked as catalysts for migration.

The migrant women interviewed for this study stayed abroad on average for a little more than three years. Most were subject to harsh working conditions and in some cases to physical and sexual abuse. Domestic aides in particular were especially vulnerable to mistreatment and had to cope with very long workdays. Many worked without ever taking any

days off and did not even realize that they were entitled to a weekly holiday.

Migrant women used a variety of methods to communicate regularly with their families. In addition to the mail and telephone, taped audio cassettes were also commonly used, especially by illiterate migrants. Whenever the lines of communication were disrupted, it caused stress on both migrant women and their families.

More than half of the households surveyed were found to have economically benefited from migration, while a sizable minority had found themselves in an economically weakened position. On yet others, the economic impact of migration was mixed.

The impact of migration on children was also mixed. While some children benefited from the better educational opportunities remittances could provide, others sorely missed closer adult supervision. A number of the children dropped out of school, although at a rate lower than the national average, and some got into more serious trouble. Interestingly, the school dropout rates for girls and boys were not different, but their reasons for dropping out often were. Most of the migrant women blamed themselves for the misfortunes that struck their children and family in their absence and because of such misfortune developed strong guilt feelings.

A disturbing finding was the high incidence of early marriage among both daughters and sons of the migrant women. Because girls were thought to be more difficult to protect in the absence of their mothers they were married off early. So were boys, in order to bring into the household a bride who could keep house while her mother-in-law was away.

The study found that the workload of elderly women in the households increased considerably during the absence of women migrants. However, most of the elderly women were glad to take a more center stage in the upkeep of their household and took pleasure from being useful to their children.

The migration of women, even when prolonged, caused little change in gender roles within the family. Though women usually tend to takeover male tasks when men migrate, the reverse was not found to be the case during women's migration. Because men did not take on female responsibilities and tasks within the household, other women from the extended family became involved to carry out these tasks.

The impact of migration on the women migrants themselves differed greatly as to whether they were financially "successful" or not abroad. Those who were successful gained in self-confidence and their status within the family improved. However, except for those who migrated a second time, they usually had little decision making power over the use of their remittances. Migration also brought about changes in the marital relationship of women migrants. In some cases, it helped women escape from bad marriages, while in others the husbands remarried with other women while their wives were away. Despite its hardships, most of the women migrants felt that their experience with migration had an empowering effect on them.

## 8.2 Recommendations

Short-term migration of women from Bangladesh is unlikely to slow down, at least anytime in the near future. It is therefore incumbent upon the Bangladeshi government to recognize it and take actions to protect the rights and welfare of its migrant women workers. A few measures that are in urgent need of enactment are listed below:

- A comprehensive national policy on migrant workers to defend their dignity, fundamental human rights and freedom while abroad.
- The immediate repeal of all restrictions and bans on women's migration by honouring women's constitutional right to non-discrimination and equal opportunity for work.
- The immediate ratification of the *UN Convention on Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Member of their Families* and framing of the necessary enabling legislation. Bangladesh should not

only ratify the Convention, but also make efforts to convince other countries to follow suit. Efforts should also be directed for the ratification of, and dissemination of information on, ILO Convention 177 on Home Workers.

- The commencement of bilateral and multilateral negotiations with the labour receiving countries to protect the interests of Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad. In the absence of any effective international law, such agreements may be the only way to establish a legal, or quasi-legal, framework between Bangladesh and the labour-receiving countries.
- The re-evaluation of the existing system of BMET record-keeping on migration. There is an urgent need for establishing a comprehensive gender disaggregated databank on migration, including information on address, age, past work experience, skills, etc.
- The implementation of pro-active labour market policies to increase the efficiency and competence of women migrant workers. Training programmes are needed to impart skills, provide information on the receiving country and develop awareness on the rights of migrants. In particular, domestic aides need skills-centered training, the responsibility of which BMET should relinquish to NGOs and the private sector organizations. The recruiting agencies, in turn, should ensure that the would-be women migrants undergo such training, and BMET should withhold clearance without proof of training. In order to build awareness simple brochures can be prepared on the major countries of destination (Bahrain, Kuwait, Malaysia and UAE). These brochures should highlight the social and cultural milieu of the country, basic labour laws and the rights provided under them such as the minimum wage, the entitlement of allowances regarding pay, overtime, annual vacation accident etc., as well as dismissal and deportation laws. These brochures should also contain the address and phone numbers of the Bangladeshi mission in the country.



concerned and local human rights and legal aid organizations.

- The launching of a campaign in the electronic and print media to inform potential female migrants about the unscrupulous practices of recruiting agencies and the grave consequences of undocumented migration.
- The re-education of the staff of Bangladeshi missions abroad about the important role migrant workers play in mobilizing external resources for economic development at home. The staff should be made to realize that protecting the rights, and serving the needs, of migrant workers is an important way of promoting the economic interests of Bangladesh. Thus, embassies should be proactive in gathering information about the plight of migrant workers and the problems they face, establishing contacts with the human rights organizations and NGOs of the receiving country. They should encourage and assist migrant workers in filing complaints against violations of their contract and other human rights abuses. In any future bilateral or multilateral agreement with the recipient countries the government should negotiate for a provision that would authorise its embassy staff to inspect workplaces for employer malpractices.
- The instilling of a sense of activism among civil society organizations across countries in combating the problems migrant workers face. These organizations need to coordinate their efforts in lobbying their respective governments to promote bilateral and multilateral agreements, ratify the 1990 *UN Convention on Protection of Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* and ILO Convention 177 on Home Workers, frame the necessary legislation to render these effective, and demand the passing of laws that would ensure the severe punishment of those who defraud migrant workers. Regional forums such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can perhaps be used as the institutional framework of such coordination.



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## **Chapter Two: Sri Lanka**

### **Introduction**

The exposure of women to formal education since 1945 was instrumental in easing Sri Lankan women's way into paid employment. However, women's labour force participation, which has slightly exceeded 30 per cent in the 1990s, still remains relatively low in comparison to a country such as Thailand where the same rate stands at 60 per cent. Meanwhile, the rate of unemployment among women is more than twice that of men.<sup>1</sup>

Globalization and the opening of Sri Lanka to the world economy in the mid-1970s created employment opportunities for both semi-skilled and unskilled women workers. Temporary labour migration from Sri Lanka escalated in the 1980s, spreading from the oil-exporting West Asian countries to East Asia. Initially, women outnumbered men among the migrant workers and were for the most part unskilled with little education. Soon, however, young women with ten to fifteen years of education were also attracted to the opportunity of earning a lump sum of money in a relatively short period of time. Growing informal networks which increased familiarity with the host country environment also contributed to the attractiveness of domestic work abroad.

Successive governments in Sri Lanka have actively promoted labour migration since the late 1970s and have taken measures to regulate it. They have also provided services to migrant workers in order to lessen their dependence on

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<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the female unemployment rate was 18 per cent while it was 8 per cent for men.

unregistered and unscrupulous agencies. The liberal government policy on labour migration was influenced by the fact that such migration provided a new source of foreign exchange and an outlet for the unemployed, especially for the educated youth entering the labour force. Slow economic growth, stagnation in certain sectors of the economy and a rapidly increasing population pushed the rate of unemployment close to twenty five per cent in the early 1970s. Even though the unemployment rate fell in subsequent years after the government enacted a programme of economic liberalization, it still remained high at sixteen per cent in 1990 and eleven per cent in 1998.

The contribution of worker's remittances to the foreign exchange earnings of the country has not been any less significant. Currently a leading source of foreign exchange, total remittances from private sources amounted to almost US\$ 800 million in 1997 while they were only around US\$ 35 million in 1980.<sup>2</sup>

### *Rationale and Objectives*

Even though an increasing number of studies on temporary female labour migration have been made available by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), more information is required to assess the effectiveness of outreach policies for the estimated ninety thousand women workers who migrate every year. Thus, the need for further understanding of the effects of temporary labour migration on women workers is the main rationale of this study.

The research objectives of this study are to examine:

- the patterns of female migration;
- the degree to which migration empowers women;
- the impact of migration on female household members left behind, particularly the girl child;

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<sup>2</sup> Worker's remittances are estimated to be ninety per cent of all private remittances. However, information is not available on how much the proportion of migrant workers' remittances within the total (for all private sources) has changed, if at all, over time.

- the extent to which government and civil society organizations help migrants and their families benefit from migration.

The policy objectives are to:

- identify those strategies that can help maximize the benefits of migration for the migrant workers and their families;
- maintain a database on migration;
- evaluate the effectiveness of current policy measures;
- make recommendations for policy formulation and implementation.

### *Methodology*

The study is organized in two parts. Part I provides a review of the existing data sources on labour migration, and examines if and how governments (in both labour-sending and receiving countries), international interventions and civil society organizations help migrant workers maximize the benefits of migration for themselves and their families.

Part II analyzes the findings of the field survey conducted for this study during 1999. For this, three broad research questions were posed regarding how migration affects: (i) gender roles and structures, (ii) the division of labour within the households, and (iii) women's empowerment.

### Sampling Procedure

The sample was selected from migrants who worked in Western Asia, and weighed in favour of urban women workers in view of their larger proportion in the migrant population. Of the four locations where migrants were sampled, two were predominantly urban and the other two rural. A sample of 200 households, consisting of four migrant types and one control group of non-migrant households, was selected.



**Table 1.0 - Sample distribution**

Type of Household	Rural	Urban	Total
Female migrant	30	40	70
Male migrant	20	20	40
Female returnee	30	40	70
Male returnee	5	10	15
Non migrant "control"	5	10	15
Total number	90	120	210

Similar to some previous studies on migration, the "snowballing" technique<sup>3</sup> was used in the sample selection. The addresses of migrants obtained from the SLBFE were used to identify the clusters of areas with concentrations of migrant households. For instance, within the two rural districts where migrants were sampled, some villages presented the case where almost all households had experience with migration. The selection of the non-migrant group posed more of a problem in these locations since they were few and far in between. Because of the nature of questions being researched, the migrants were sampled from those who were married and had children. The sample selection was also restricted to migrants who had been abroad for at least two years and returnees who had been back for at least one year in order to allow for an adjustment period.

### Tools and Techniques

The households in the sample were administered the same questionnaire to obtain quantitative data, while in-depth and open-ended interviews with members of a pre-selected subset of households in each category were used to generate qualitative data. On issues that required probing, additional interviews were conducted.

In order to develop an understanding of how women migrant workers are perceived in their community, focus-group discussions were organized. These groups comprised both men and women, of similar social backgrounds as the migrants, from the same communities where the sample was selected.

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<sup>3</sup> A technique by which subjects are identified and selected on the bases of references from other subjects.

Discussions were held with two groups in the rural locations and four small groups in the urban locations.<sup>4</sup>

Study in the Host Country

The study also included interviews in a selected West Asian country.<sup>5</sup> Those interviewed included members of the academic community, a woman lawyer from an NGO Commission on Human Rights, a member of the National State Assembly and a member of the Human Rights Committee of that Assembly, and members of a women's NGO. In addition, interviews and group discussions were also conducted with both male and female migrant workers, comprising unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers. Lastly, Sri Lankan Embassy officials, run-away domestic workers sheltered within the embassy and Sri Lankan agents located in the receiving country were interviewed.

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<sup>4</sup> In the rural locations, the discussion groups comprised about 15 persons and were organized through the local administration authority of the village. In the urban locations, groups of 4-8 persons were selected.

<sup>5</sup> In order to access information more freely, the author promised government officials that the name of this host country would be withheld.

## Part I

### 1 Existing Data on Migration

#### 1.1 Migration Statistics

In the wake of the economic reforms of 1977, which accompanied a policy of unrestricted travel, workers began to seek employment abroad in increasing numbers. The data on migration is incomplete for the period prior to the establishment of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) in 1985. Because of the inadequacy of official statistics, the number of workers migrating through unlicensed agencies had to be estimated on the basis of the embarkation cards of departing workers issued by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Plan Implementation for different years. These estimates, shown below in Table 1.1 along with the official figures, indicate the magnitude of unofficial labour migration for this period.

**Table 1.1 - Disparities between statistics of migration through registered agencies and estimates of migration from all sources for selected years**

Year	Through Registered Agencies	Estimated Total Departures
1977 <sup>a</sup>	5,633	15,224
1983 <sup>b</sup>	17,865	48,878
1985 <sup>b</sup>	12,374	33,443

Sources: a Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs

b Ministry of Plan Implementation

Having set up a data bank in 1986, the SLBFE has since increased the coverage and refined the process of its data collection. According to its figures, presented in Table 1.2, the total number of migrants has risen from 16,000 in 1986 to nearly 160,000 in 1998. However, when migration through unofficial sources is included, these totals can be considerably higher. The sharp rise in the number of workers in 1995 and thereafter is believed to reflect the increase in the proportion of workers who registered with licensed agents and the SLBFE.

In an attempt to estimate the magnitude of unofficial migration, the SLBFE conducted three airport surveys in 1992, 1993 and 1994. According to the 1994 survey, only thirty six per cent of migrants were registered with the SLBFE and its licensed agents. Sixty four per cent were migrating either through unlicensed agencies (39%), or through personal contacts (25%).<sup>6</sup> In the following years, the proportion of migrants going through unofficial channels is estimated to have decreased to around forty per cent of the total, as regulations were tightened and incentives were introduced to make registration with the SLBFE more attractive.<sup>7</sup> SLBFE estimates that currently the total number Sri Lankan migrants working in Western Asia is 645,000 while those in other countries number 65,000.

## **1.2 Statistics on Female Migration**

The SLBFE statistics on labour migration are disaggregated by sex since 1988 (Table 1.2). According to these official figures alone, female labour migration increased by more than fourfold from slightly above 10,000 in 1988 to nearly 44,000 in 1994. In the period after 1995, when the relative magnitude of unofficial migration is believed to have diminished, the number of migrant women reflected in SLBFE statistics has risen sharply, reaching 105,247 in 1998. Outnumbering men by a large margin, especially during the period after 1995, there were twice as many migrant women as their male counterparts in 1998. Because women are more likely to migrate through unofficial channels than men, these figures might substantially underestimate the actual ratio of female labour migration to that of men.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The airport surveys also provided data on age, marital status, and destinations of migrants. The vast majority of both men and women migrants were found to be married and between the ages of 21 and 40.

<sup>7</sup> All migrants going abroad through licensed agencies are required to register with the SLBFE in Colombo with the exception of those in the Kurunegala district in the North West, where a SLBFE sub-office is located. The so-called 'self-hire' migrants who proceed through informal channels are encouraged to register with the SLBFE district offices or with stipulated banks in their district.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Airport Survey of 1994, the proportion of unofficial migrants was forty three per cent among women and twenty one per

**Table 1.2 - Number of labour migrants by sex from 1986 to 1998**

Year	Male	Female	Total
1986	-	-	16,456
1987	-	-	16,127
1988	8,309	10,119	18,428
1989	8,680	16,044	24,724
1990	15,377	27,248	42,625
1991	21,456	43,612	65,068
1992	15,493	29,159	44,652
1993	17,153	31,600	48,753
1994	16,371	43,796	60,167
1995	45,963	126,504	172,467
1996	43,104	119,468	162,572
1997	37,430	112,413	149,843
1998	53,040	105,247	158,287

Source: Information Data Bank - SLBFE.

Initially, much of female labour migration was from the capital city of Colombo and Gampaha, another predominantly urban district close to the capital. However, with the spread of recruiting agents to all parts of the country over time, migrant women increasingly came from other districts and rural areas.

The destination of most migrant women was the West Asian countries, where they were employed mainly as domestic workers. In 1997, Kuwait had the largest number of Sri Lankan domestic workers (33,540), followed by Saudi Arabia (28,870). Again, within this region, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Lebanon also had substantial numbers of women migrant workers from Sri Lanka. In comparison, smaller numbers have migrated to East Asian countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia (Table 1.3).

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cent among men. The proportion of the self-hire migrants was slightly higher for men (30%) than for women (24%).

**Table 1.3 - Labour migration to selected countries in 1997 (through the SLBFE and registered agencies)**

Country	Total number		%	
	* SLBFE	Reg. Agencies and SLBFE	*SLBFE	♦ Reg Agencies & SLBFE
Saudia Arabia	81	48,123	4.07	32.11
UAE	72	23,843	3.62	15.91
Bahrain	4	3,308	0.2	2.2
Oman	51	4,252	2.56	2.83
Kuwait	2	37,881	0.1	25.28
Qatar	138	9,331	6.94	6.227
Libya	--	10	--	.006
Jordan	2	3,660	0.1	2.442
Singapore	83	2,180	4.17	1.454
Hong Kong	--	164	--	0.109
Lebanon	77	11,745	3.87	7.838
Cyprus	--	897	--	0.598
Malaysia	3	30	0.15	.02
Total	513	14,424	25.78	97.024

♦ All Registered Sources

\*Data is for 1996

Source: Statistical Hand Book on Foreign Employment 1998- SLBFE

### 1.3 Skill Composition

Table 1.4 provides a breakdown of all official migrants by level of skill disaggregated by sex for the period from 1990 to 1996. Although domestic workers, along with other unskilled workers, are likely to be underestimated in the official figures, official data indicates that in 1996, domestic workers constituted 68% of all migrants from Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup> Given the more rigorous recruiting procedures for workers employed in the formal sector of the economy, it is safe to assume that the majority of unofficial migrants are domestic workers.<sup>10</sup>

With the exception of domestic workers, the proportion of skilled female workers is greater than the proportion of

<sup>9</sup> Data on the skill composition of women workers is available only for official migrants.

<sup>10</sup> Because the recruitment practices of companies are usually subject to government surveillance, the illegal entry to skilled or semi-skilled jobs in the formal sector is more improbable.

female workers among unskilled migrants. In 1997, while twenty percent of unskilled workers were women, the proportion of female skilled workers was forty one percent. Most of the unskilled women worked as janitors and cleaners in hospitals, schools and office buildings, while the majority of the skilled migrants were employed as garment workers. (SLBFE Information Data Bank)

### **1.3.1 SLBFE Database**

SLBFE is designing a new website and will include a site for a job bank according to the officials in the research and planning division. The information maintained at the embassies is also being computerized, making it possible to exchange information that would facilitate a more effective surveillance and monitoring system. One of the major services rendered by the database would be the facility to track down migrants who lose contact with their families.

The SLBFE data on grievances and complaints is classified according to the type of problem that the migrant has experienced. These figures are given in Table 5.1 and discussed within the context of the study findings in regard to problems experienced by female migrants.

## **2 Governmental, Non-Governmental and Private Institutions**

The licensed private recruiting agencies are the principal institutions of recruitment of migrant workers. These agencies are registered with the SLBFE and are regulated in accordance with the two Acts of Parliament discussed below in the next section. Though the SLBFE recruits a small number of migrants itself, it operates mainly through licensed private agencies, of which some five hundred are scattered throughout the country in the main towns. A number of unregistered agents are also active especially in rural areas, illegally recruiting migrant workers. Informal networks formed through personal contacts, involving friends and relatives who are migrants or returnees, constitute yet another method of recruitment.

**Table 1.4 - Skill composition of migrants**

Year	High		Middle		Skilled		Unskilled		Domestic Workers		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1990 <sup>a</sup>	121	0.3	1,676	3.9	11,143	26.1	8,862	20.8	20,823	48.9	42,625
1991 <sup>a</sup>	157	0.24	2,303	3.5	16,282	25	1,1436	17.6	34,890	53.6	65,068
1992 <sup>a</sup>	271	0.6	2,475	5.5	11,348	25.4	8,466	19	22,092	49.5	44,652
1993 <sup>a</sup>	479	1	2,843	5.8	12,364	25.4	8,827	18.1	24,240	49.7	48,753
1994 <sup>a</sup>	266	0.4	2,394	4.0	12,582	20.9	8,820	14.7	36,105	60	60,167
1995 <sup>b</sup>	887	0.5	7,070	4.1	26,806	15.6	2,3496	13.6	11,4208	66.2	17,2467
1996 <sup>b</sup>	599	0.4	5,315	3.3	24,327	15	2,1738	13.4	11,0593	68	16,2572

a Placements through licensed agencies and SLBFE

b Placements through all registered sources

Source: Statistical Handbook on Foreign Employment 1998-SLBFE



## **2.1 Management of the Migration Process**

### *The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE)*

Established within the Ministry of Labour in 1985, the SLBFE is responsible for administering government policy for overseas employment. Operating through fifteen regional offices that are spread around the districts, it registers, regulates and assists licensed recruitment agents. In order to promote opportunities for foreign employment, it drafts model employment contracts, negotiates agreements with foreign countries on behalf of the migrants, takes measures to safeguard the welfare and human rights of migrant workers, provides pre-migration training and orientation classes and repatriates migrant workers who are stranded abroad. In addition, it also promotes awareness-building educational programmes about migration, including skits and dramas that are broadcast on national television and radio.

### *Licensed Private Recruiting Agents*

Operating through their counterparts in foreign countries, the private recruitment agents were responsible for the recruitment of 75 per cent of all migrant workers in 1997. As of that year, of the 520 agents who were registered with the SLBFE, 65 per cent were located in Colombo. Organized under the Association of Licensed Foreign Employment Agencies established in 1988, the private agencies are now responsible for providing mandatory training and orientation programmes for female recruits. These programmes supplement those offered by SLBFE.

The fee that the migrant workers pay to SLBFE, with which it is compulsory to register, is proportional to their prospective salary abroad.<sup>11</sup> Seventy percent of this fee is passed onto the recruiting private agency, if there is one. The private agencies also receive a part of the commission the foreign agents receive from the prospective employer in the host country.

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<sup>11</sup> Currently, domestic workers are paid a salary that ranges from RS 6,000- RS 8,000 in the host country, and charged on the average RS 5,700 by the SLBFE. (at the time of this study, Rupee exchange rate: RS70 per US\$1).

## 2.2 Non-governmental Organizations

### *Work of Trade Unions and Non-Government Organizations*

In Sri Lanka, very few civil society organizations have programmes that address problems related to labour migration, and the programmes that are made available are quite meagre in relation to the size of the migrant population. However, despite the large number of migrant households, no migrant organization of any significance exists as well. This might in part be due to the existence of vibrant informal networks that facilitate the sharing of information and the obtaining of jobs and assistance among potential migrants.

The following NGOs target women migrant workers, providing skill training for self-employment and pre-migration training and childcare

- An umbrella organization of trade unions, the *All Ceylon Federation of Free Trade Unions* (ACFFTU), provides a pre-migration training program for women migrant workers. SLBFE assists the programme by providing training curricula and trained trainers, and grants a certificate of training to its participants. ACFFTU also conducts rehabilitation and counselling programmes for women returnees who either require assistance to overcome various ill-effects of migration or guidance in setting themselves up in a micro-enterprise. Encouraged to enroll as members prior to their departure, the trained migrants are instructed to contact the union if they encounter problems in the host country. The union has successfully dealt with the problems of a score of migrant workers, involving delay and default in payment of wages and break down of communication between the migrant worker and her family.
- *Women In Need*, better known by its acronym WIN, is a women's NGO whose aim is to assist all women who encounter problems at home or at the work place. It has recently extended its coverage to migrant returnees who are mentally traumatized or physically impaired because of their experience with migration.

- *The Lassalian Community*, a Roman Catholic Organization, provides childcare to migrant women in a low-income community in Colombo.
- The *National Workers Congress* is a trade union that functions through an NGO called *Migrant Services Centre*. The Centre helped organize two associations for women returnees in Matugama and Kegalle, two provincial towns, in 1997. Even though their membership numbers only fifty, they are reportedly building up a set of programmes that focus on assisting migrants in investing their earnings in self-employment ventures. These include courses in skill training and guidance in obtaining loans from banks and other lending institutions.
- The *American Center for International Labour Solidarity* (ACILS), an American-funded organization, provides training programmes and other migrant services. One that is currently in operation is the pilot Safety Net Project for returnee migrants. As part of the project, health clinics and day-care facilities are established to provide health and childcare for women returnees.

### **3 National and International Laws and Their Observance**

#### **3.1 National Policy on Labour Migration**

Since independence, the Sri Lankan national migration policy has been relatively liberal except for the period between 1970 and 1976 when travel restrictions were in place. After the economic reforms of 1977 lifted these restrictions, labour migration rapidly increased in response to the growing international demand for labour in the oil rich West Asian countries.

The extreme vulnerability to abuse and mistreatment of women migrants employed as domestic workers and janitors abroad called for government intervention. Because these unskilled women were often victimized and exploited by unscrupulous employers and recruiting agents in Sri Lanka, some women's organizations urged the government to ban the migration of domestic workers. Judging that a ban would be

counterproductive, the government instead took pro-active measures both to promote and regulate labour migration. The following legislations were enacted to achieve those objectives.

The *Foreign Employment Agency Act of 1980* permitted the private sector to undertake recruitment under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour. Recruitment by private agencies supplemented that carried out at first directly by the Ministry of Labour and later by the SLBFE which discontinued the practice in 1997. Private agents were granted licenses on the condition that they pledged to protect migrant workers from abuse and exploitation and the sanctity of contract between the foreign employer and the workers they recruited. In addition to paying a license fee of Rs 10,000 per year to register, private agencies were also required to put down a security deposit of Rs 100,000 to be used for the relief of migrants in the event they defaulted.

During this period, agents were often accused of levying exorbitant charges at migrants for processing documents, in collusion with their counterparts in the host countries, and of violating various government regulations. Among the latter, the most notable was the sanction against recruiting for jobs that were not covered by labour legislation in the host country. Despite this, the agents were generally not deterred from recruiting domestic workers to work in countries where domestic work fell into this category.

The *Foreign Employment Act of 1985* sought to address the problem of malpractice by private recruiting agents. In addition to stipulating mandatory jail sentences for recruitment offenses, the Act also established the SLBFE within the Ministry of Labour with statutory functions pertaining to all matters related to temporary labour migration. In order to coordinate their activities, SLBFE brought in representatives from different ministries whose responsibilities touched upon labour migration.

SLBFE also began recruiting a small number of migrant workers directly through its own agents, in part, to set an example of 'good practice.' But, the main thrust of its work has been the promotion of overseas employment for

skilled workers. The Act of 1985 also included among its responsibilities, the following:

- licensing and regulating private recruiting agencies,
- drafting model employment contracts for migrant workers,
- operating a welfare fund for migrant workers,
- ensuring the protection and welfare of migrants,
- carrying out pre-migration training,
- implementing programmes for the rehabilitation of returnees.

In 1994, an amendment to the 1985 Act<sup>12</sup> made it compulsory for migrant workers to register with the SLBFE and enrol in pre-migration training.<sup>13</sup> Registration with the SLBFE entitled migrant workers to a number of services, including insurance coverage against accidents, illness and incompleteness of contract. SLBFE charged migrants a registration fee, which also covered the private agent's fee, the insurance premium and the contribution to the migrants welfare fund.<sup>14</sup> The balance, along with the license fees from recruitment agencies, were used to finance the operations of the bureau.

In its regulatory function, the SLBFE has often had to deal with various types of malpractice by unscrupulous agents. A common example involved agents charging migrants for incidental expenses such as the cost of travel, accommodation and food in the host country, even though they were usually paid by the prospective employer for these expenses. In another scheme, some agents were linked to cartels of intermediaries which monopolized certain market niches, selling premium jobs to the highest bidder (Soysa 1993). To cover what they had to pay the intermediary, agents then charged the job seekers extra fees. Yet another common malpractice involved contract substitution after the migrants

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<sup>12</sup> Amendment Act No. 4 of 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Workers are required to acquire a certificate from the SLBFE before they are allowed to register.

<sup>14</sup> The fee is proportional to the prospective salary of the worker abroad. For instance, SLBFE charges domestic workers RS 5,700 (about US\$ 80).

arrived in the host country, whereby the original contract that had been signed and agreed upon by the recruits was substituted by another which had inferior terms for the worker.

Many migrants who were brought in on false pretenses, and those who traveled on falsified or incorrect documentation, were often stranded without money to pay for their return. Even though the agents who recruited them bore legal responsibility for their plight, many migrants did not lodge a formal complaint. In order to avoid disappointing their families, many migrants took on any job instead of returning home. In circumstances such as these, women migrants usually found themselves in a more vulnerable situation than men, falling victim on occasion to the sex-trade or exploitation by their employers.

As a possible remedy against these types of recruitment offenses, training and orientation classes have been offered free of charge since the 1980s under the auspices of SLBFE. However, these classes have often met resistance from both recruitment agents who felt that they took too much time, and also from prospective migrants who feared being deemed unfit to migrate by the SLBFE authorities.

In the early 1990s, the SLBFE launched awareness programmes on migration through two hundred local administrative bodies and the media, reaching as far down as the village level. It also provided a model contract for women migrants going abroad through informal channels. Though it was not mandatory, women workers were encouraged to sign it prior to departure to ensure their safety. A copy of the contract was then kept with the SLBFE and another with the Sri Lankan embassy in the host country. Now that registration with the SLBFE is compulsory, signing the contract of employment has also become mandatory. These contracts have provided a legal means to handle problems faced by domestic workers whose jobs are often not covered by the labour laws of the host country.

### 3.2 Specific Measures to Address Female Migration<sup>15</sup>

As early as 1978, when it became apparent that a large number of unskilled women were taking employment as domestic workers abroad, the government began to take measures to address the problems specific to this group of workers. A special division in the Ministry of Labour was set up to supervise and regulate the migration of workers from the time of recruitment until after their return. More recently, in 1997, a Presidential Task Force was appointed to make suggestions to protect women migrant workers and enhance their benefits from migration. Though there has been concern all along for women migrants' problems and a political will to tackle them, the migration policy in Sri Lanka was not always effective in benefiting women migrants because of weaknesses in its implementation.

Some of the key measures adopted in the early 1980s were:

- the stipulation of a minimum salary and the right to free food and accommodation;
- the standardization of employment contracts;
- the requirement of prior clearance of employers by the embassy in the host country, (or, if one did not exist, by an embassy in a neighbouring country);
- the institution of a special provision for the settlement of disputes between migrants and employees, with the knowledge and concurrence of the host country government;
- translating on demand and free of charge migrant's birth certificates, from Singhalese or Tamil to English or the language of choice in the host country;
- expediting the issuance of visas to recruiting agents from Western Asia;
- permitting access to the representatives of employment agents at the airport;
- posting officers at embassies in the host countries specifically responsible for mediating grievances;

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<sup>15</sup> This section draws from SLBFE (1997).

- streamlining the process of issuing passports and decentralizing the Department of Immigration and Emigration;
- implementing programmes to orient migrants for employment abroad.

The SLBFE has also provided training for: (i) domestic workers, (ii) juki machine<sup>16</sup> operators, and (iii) migrants to Korea who usually need higher technical skills. A total of 49 training centres has been set up in the districts to train domestic workers. Of these twenty, nine were run by private agencies, and the rest by the SLBFE. However, all trainers in the agencies were either supplied or instructed by the SLBFE. In all, 59,000 domestic workers received free training from the centers in 1997 while 48,000 received such training in 1998.

After 1994, these programmes and services were implemented with greater vigor and their coverage was extended to include the migrants' families. The children of migrants who qualified in stipulated examinations were granted scholarships, and special health clinics and a day-care centre were established for the benefit of family members. Other services provided returnee migrants and their families with training and guidance in setting up micro-enterprises, housing subsidies and emergency loans to households in distress.

### **3.3 International Laws**

The framework of international conventions related to migration has a major role to play in furthering migration and in preventing its adverse effects on migrants and their families. Sri Lanka is one of the eight countries which has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990). Stipulating their basic rights, the Convention outlaws all forms of discrimination against migrant workers and their families in the countries where they live and work. However, because it is not yet ratified by the minimum number of countries required, the Convention has not yet

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<sup>16</sup> These machines are commonly used in the garment industry.



come into force. Given the absence of an internationally accepted set of labour standards, the Government of Sri Lanka tries to broker bilateral agreements with the labour-receiving countries on issues related to labour migration.

## **Part II**

The second part of the study examines the dynamics of migration in the home country and the conditions of work in the host country and assesses the economic and social effects of migration on migrants and their families on the basis of a field survey.

### **4 Migration Dynamics**

This section outlines the economic, social and demographic profile of the migrants interviewed in this study to assess the factors that have contributed towards their decision to migrate. The section ends with an overview of the process of recruitment and migration in the home country.

#### **4.1 Economic, Social and Demographic Factors**

##### **4.1.1 Economic Profile**

The economic profile was drawn from the current or pre-migration employment status of household members other than the migrant. Employment status was used as a proxy for household income, since few of the interviewees could be precise about family earnings, which varied considerably over time.

Unemployment, either their own or that of other household members, was given as the primary reason for the decision to migrate, by both male and female migrants. Those who were employed prior to migration felt that their jobs either paid too little or were too insecure. Almost all households, with the sole exception of two families of female returnees, had at least one to three unemployed members. For instance, among current female migrant's households, seventy per cent had one to three persons unemployed, while 30 per cent had more than three. Among the male returnee households, about half had one to three while the other half had more than three persons unemployed.

The majority of male migrants were the sole earner in their family. Although one in five female migrant households were completely dependent upon earnings from migration, in the households of the migrant women, the husbands were

generally considered to be the main income earner. More than 25 per cent of the husbands in these households were out of work, and 15 per cent were self-employed. While only 25 per cent held skilled jobs, including those who worked as drivers and clerks, another 22 per cent worked as unskilled labourers. Others were farmers or retired. Thus, the large majority of the husbands in the female migrant's households were either jobless or held casual or informal sector jobs. In turn, most migrant women were not economically active prior to migration, and the 40 per cent who were active, held casual jobs or engaged in self-employment. In male migrants' households, the 30 per cent of the wives who engaged in economic activity were self-employed.

#### **4.1.2 Social and Demographic Profile**

Most migrant women were relatively well-educated, especially considering the fact that they had migrated for domestic work. The lure of a lump-sum earning took the social stigma out of such work when engaged abroad. Twenty per cent had primary, 45 per cent secondary and 26 per cent had at least twelve years of education.<sup>17</sup> Three percent even had an advanced degree. Male migrants were even better educated and generally held skilled jobs abroad.

Among the current migrant women, close to half were between 31 and 40 years of age. Those who were between 20 and 30 constituted the second largest age group, while one in five were older than 40 years of age. Thus, the majority of migrant women were over 30 years of age. The male migrants were on the average older. However, because the sample was restricted to those who had been abroad for at least two years, it is likely that it over-represented older workers. Anecdotal evidence from the receiving countries suggests that migrant women as young as fifteen, working with falsified documents, are common.

In all the categories, the average household size in the sample was above the national average which is around five.

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<sup>17</sup> The latter hold the General Certificate of Education-Ordinary Level (GCE-OL).

Economic deprivation in these households might have been one of the factors that had influenced the decision to migrate.

#### 4.2 Process of Recruitment

Recruiting agents have been active in all districts, both rural and urban. Likewise, the decentralized network of SLBFE offices has increased access to pre-migration facilities. Yet, only five per cent of the migrant women had registered with the SLBFE, mainly because most of them had migrated before it became compulsory to do so.

The majority of both male and female migrants migrated through registered agents.<sup>18</sup> For those who did not, informal networks seemed to have worked just as well, if not better. They could make the initial contact, establish a communication link, and have assurances about the job and the credentials of the employer, all through informal channels. Of the 30 per cent of migrant women who had some recourse to informal networks, some had arranged their job through some friend or relative while channeling their migration through a licensed agent.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the informal social networks were the second most common method of job placement after recruitment agents, and the most common source of information about migration (Table 4.1).<sup>20</sup>

**Table 4.1 - Sources of information on migration**

Source of Information	Returnee Female Migrant		Returnee Male Migrant		Female Migrant		Male Migrant	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Friends & relatives	36	54	6	40	27	41	14	47
2. Agents	9	13	5	33	10	15	4	13

<sup>18</sup> Some women migrants were not certain of the legal status of the agency with which they worked.

<sup>19</sup> Most of the women migrants who faced problems dealt with unlicensed agents. However, not all those who migrated through licensed agents were entirely free of hardships or agent malpractice either.

<sup>20</sup> The SLBFE was the second important source of information, followed by the agents.

Source of Information	Returnee Female Migrant		Returnee Male Migrant		Female Migrant		Male Migrant	
3. Former employer	5	7	-	-	7	10	-	-
4. SLBFE	15	22	4	27	19	29	6	20
5. Family member	1	2	-	-	1	2	-	-
6. Through media	1	2	-	-	2	3	6	20
Total no. of respondents	67	100	15	100	66	100	30	100

The agents in the sending country worked in tandem with their counterparts in the host country. They often recruited migrant women in large groups. Because the migrant had little prior knowledge about her work place and was completely dependent on the agent during the initial period, the agent in the host country was expected to maintain contact with the migrant for a period of three months after placement. Now it is mandatory for agents to register with the Sri Lankan embassy in the host country. As a result, the cases in which agents failed to maintain contact have diminished.

At the time of the study, the embassy had in place a practice of blacklisting abusive employers. However, the blacklisted employers could reportedly still obtain workers through illegal channels.

#### 4.2.1 Training

Training has now been made compulsory for migrant women. It is provided either by the decentralized SLBFE offices, or by private agents and NGOs under SLBFE supervision and guidance. However, the majority of both male (63 per cent) and female (59 per cent) migrants, as well as the returnees, in the sample had no training at all prior to migration.

Of the 41 per cent of the migrant women who had undergone pre-migration training, 24 per cent of the current female migrants and six per cent of the returnee females had been trained by SLBFE. Eight per cent of the returnee female

migrants and 14 per cent of current female migrants received on-the-job training from their employer.

#### **4.2.2 Source of Finance**

The major source of finance for migration was borrowing with interest from moneylenders and from migrant returnees. Institutional sources, such as banks, did not figure among the lenders. Twenty per cent of the returnee female migrants and 14 per cent of female migrants received interest-free loans from friends and relatives. Some migrants sold or mortgaged gold jewellery, houses or land, and household goods such as TVs, while a small proportion could rely on own resources and did not have to incur debt.

### **5 Conditions of Employment in the Host Country**

This section discusses the employer-employee relations, conditions of work and the work-environment, the role of agents, and the home country perceptions of female migrants. It also presents an overview of the legal framework of the host country relating to temporary labour migration and the problems faced by female migrants.

#### **5.1 Demand for Migrant Labour**

One of the main concerns expressed about migrant labour in the interviews conducted with government officials and academics in the host country is the growing ratio of non-citizens to citizens in the overall population of the country. Accordingly, a policy of "Arabization" of the work force is being considered in order to gradually replace migrant workers with citizens. However, this policy is unlikely to have much effect on low-grade types of work, such as domestic service, which are viewed with disfavour by citizens.

It is estimated that, in the host country, the average household has two domestic workers. In addition to the increasing participation of educated women at the high end of the work force, the desire to emulate the 'elite' lifestyle in households where women are not economically active has also created an additional demand for domestic workers. The current situation is commonly described as a case of high "maid dependency".

Households with moderate means in particular, resort to various tricks to underpay or otherwise cheat domestic workers of their pay. They tend to hire illegal migrants who are highly vulnerable to exploitation. It is estimated that this preferential demand for undocumented workers has by now given rise to a sizable illegal workforce in the country. Observers remark that families with higher levels of education generally respect the rights of their domestic workers. Moreover, because these families can afford to hire more than one domestic worker, the work tends to be shared and thus the work burden of each worker is usually not very heavy. However, households with lower levels of education and which can afford only one domestic worker are more likely to over-work, mistreat and abuse their domestic workers, denying their rights to fair remuneration and leisure.

#### **5.1.1 Role of Agents**

The agents (or sub-agents) in the host country usually have a significant role to play both in the welfare as well as the mistreatment of domestic workers. The agents are the custodians of the women workers in the initial phase of migration. They are responsible for both ascertaining the credentials and qualities of the employer and ensuring the safety and protection of the rights of migrant workers. While the majority of agents do their jobs in good faith, a minority conspires with employers in exploiting migrant workers.

Recent regulations require that the agents in host countries register with the Sri Lankan embassy by depositing the equivalent of US\$7,000 for a period of two and one half years. Moreover, the agents are required to pay the equivalent of US\$20 for every domestic worker they recruit in order to defray the servicing expenses incurred by the embassy for documentation and other paperwork

#### **5.1.2 The Regulatory Framework**

In the host country, the Ministry of Social Services and Labour is responsible for the surveillance of labour migration. However, because domestic work is unregulated under the labour law, it falls under the purview of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which has no mandate to monitor the working conditions and welfare of domestic workers.

These workers are considered illegal once they are out of the custody of their employers who have complete discretion over their conditions of work and welfare. When they are subjected to mistreatment and abuse by their employers, domestic workers have little, if any, legal means to seek redress.<sup>21</sup>

According to regulations, migrant workers can enter the country on two types of visas. Specific to domestic workers, a Type A visa permits the employer to confiscate the passport of the migrant worker, confine her to the house and dictate work conditions and hours as s(he) pleases. In terms of responsibilities, the regulations only stipulate the fee the employer must to pay – the equivalent of US\$500 – to the recruiting agent.<sup>22</sup> A Type B visa is for the employees, both female and male, who are hired by companies in the formal sector of the economy. These workers, covered under the labour law, enjoy greater rights and are permitted to live outside the work premises.

Both systems have their pluses and minuses. The latter system gives workers greater independence, but it leaves them without adequate protection in the event of a mishap. On the other hand, the former system makes it more difficult for the migrant to seek outside help when abused by the employer.

### **5.1.3 Alternative Arrangements**

In many instances, domestic workers could bend the rules and make alternative work arrangements with the employers with whom they had built up a relationship of trust. Some employers have permitted their long-term workers to live outside their residence and come to work on a daily basis, enabling them to work in other houses and earn considerably higher wages. Other employers have bypassed

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<sup>21</sup> A Human Rights Committee in the State Assembly of the host country inquires into the reported cases of human rights violations and prescribes remedies. Though the Committee reportedly receives, and deals with frequent complaints from migrant workers, it had none from domestic workers.

<sup>22</sup> A part of this fee is paid to the sub-agent in Sri Lanka who 'supplies' the worker.



the recruitment agents to directly recruit the friends and relatives of their trusted workers. In addition to its lower cost, this system enables the employer to hire a worker whom s(he) can trust.<sup>23</sup> Because the employer is legally responsible as the sponsor of the worker, trust is the critical pre-requisite of these 'irregular' practices which appear to have been ignored by the host country government as long as they did not cause complications.

## **5.2 Problems Encountered By Female Domestic Workers**

Most of the migrants who encountered serious problems in the host country were those who had migrated through illegal channels. The loopholes in the system of job placement have been responsible for most of the problems faced by migrant workers in the host country. A well-organized illegal network of unscrupulous agents, operating in both Sri Lanka and the host country, takes advantage of these loopholes to organize the illegal migration of workers with forged documentation. Workers unregistered with the SLBFE also forfeit the benefits of services such as insurance in the event of accident, death or incompleteness of contract. In Sri Lanka many migrants who alleged ignorance of the SLBFE and its services had been able to access the illegal network of agents. Migrants who had little or no education run into problems more often, as they are more likely to lack the ability to access and process information and acquire or benefit from training.

### **5.2.1 Working Conditions**

Because of the unregulated nature of domestic work, many employers could impose harsh working conditions and excessively long workdays on their workers. Around half of the domestic workers in the sample have reported that workdays could reach eighteen, even twenty hours a day. Most had poor accommodations and restricted mobility. Some were denied food as a form of punishment or fed food that was not meant for human consumption. Others had to

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<sup>23</sup> When they do not work through an agent, the employers are required to deposit the equivalent of US\$ 300 with the embassy, but save having to pay the agent's fee.

endure verbal abuse by, and arbitrary punishments from, the mistress of the household.

Table 5.1 lists the problems encountered by the migrants in this study. Excessively long workdays, loneliness and ill health, difficulties in remitting to and communicating with their family, as well as sexual harassment were the most commonly cited problems among migrant women. Excessively long hours were also the main problem reported by male migrants, even in greater numbers. The other common problems men faced were poor accommodations and late or non-payment of their wages.

**Table 5.1 - Problems faced by migrants (responses from female and male returnees)**

Problem	Female Returnees		Male Returnees	
	No:	%	No:	%
1. Working conditions and constant reprimanding				
Work 18-20 hours a day	30	54	11	75
No fixed hours of work	2	3	-	-
Constant scoldings	3	6	-	-
Heavy workload	7	13	-	-
2. Communication related				
Unable to communicate with family	11	20	-	-
3. Payments and remittances				
Non payment/delay in payments	8	14	9	60
Cannot remit money regularly	12	21	-	-
4. Nature of accommodation				
Poor Accommodation /No Accommodation	3	5	10	70
5. Task related				
Job different from promised	2	3	1	7
Job which requires climbing heights	3	6	-	-
Unable to use equipment	3	5	-	-
6. Loneliness, ill health, restriction of movement and contact with outsiders				
Not permitted to go out or talk to anyone outside	2	3	-	-
Loneliness/ill-health	19	35	2	15

Problem	Female Returnees		Male Returnees	
	No:	%	No:	%
7. Physical abuse (beating/physical abuse)	5	9	-	-
8. Sexual harassment	11	20	-	-
9. Jailed for fabricated offences	2	3	-	-
Number of respondents	55		12	

### 5.2.2 Remuneration

Late, under or lack of payment of wages was a problem faced by a smaller percentage of migrant women than men. Those who encountered this problem usually went into debt and became pauperized, returning home in a financial condition that was worse than when they first left. In one individual case that was not altogether too unusual, a young migrant with young children escaped after being assaulted by her employer. Returning home without her wages, she hid from her family until she could arrange to go back abroad for a new job. Her family did not learn of her ordeal until she had recovered her losses and began remitting money home.

### 5.2.3 Communication

The weekly holiday drew large numbers of female domestic workers to market places and parks in the host country. Some female returnees (3 per cent), however, reported of not being allowed to leave the house or talk to anyone from outside. One in five were not allowed to communicate with their families and experienced difficulty remitting money to them.

### 5.2.4 Ill-Health, Mistreatment and Abuse

Stress due to loneliness and ill-health compounded the impact of harsh working conditions on many of the migrant workers. The language barrier contributed to a feeling of complete isolation, and created excuses for the employer to mistreat and abuse the domestic worker. The lack of training of some workers in elementary skills made the situation only worse and gave employers with ill-intent yet another excuse to abuse and even withhold wages from their workers.

Among the domestic workers in the sample, one in ten were physically, and one in five were sexually, abused by their employers or other family members. Some employers appear to have expected their domestic workers to be sexually submissive and reacted angrily when their sexual advances were rebuffed. In 1998, of the 2,164 complaints of harassment made to SLBFE, 48 were cases of sexual abuse.

The unscrupulous agents who ignored the complaints of workers during the three-month period of surveillance exacerbated the problems domestic workers faced. After this period, workers had to seek their own solution, which usually meant finding a way to run away. Several migrants were seriously injured when trying to escape through upper storey windows. Ironically, those who successfully escaped often thrust themselves into deeper trouble. Since their passports were held by the employer, escapees had few places to go. Two migrants who were apprehended by the police were jailed on fabricated charges. Another domestic worker fell into the hands of traffickers in women and was forced into prostitution.<sup>24</sup>

Seeking refuge in the embassy was usually the best option the escapees had. However, even then, they languished there until their 'release' was obtained from the employer, who had to be paid for the expenses s(he) incurred in visa fees. The insurance workers obtained through registration with the SLBFE covered this expense, and the embassy repatriated them in groups.

However, keen on recouping their losses and helping their families financially, many workers persevered and tried to find a new job even after severe problems had compelled them to terminate their contracts with their original employers. Others re-migrated after a brief return home. Many migrants who ran into problems because they migrated illegally, learned their lesson the second time around and went through legal channels. Some women workers have re-migrated up to five times. The lure of migration usually

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<sup>24</sup> This particular migrant was rescued by a fellow Sri Lankan who "purchased" her from her "owner," another Sri Lankan, who had her working as a prostitute.

outweighed its risks and hazards (Gunatilleke et al 1993). But, sometimes it was physical abuse at home which propelled migrants to seek employment abroad time after time.

## **6 Economic Impact of Migration**

In the following section, the economic impact of migration is in terms of the following three variables: the current level of household income, asset acquisition, and investment and savings.

### **6.1 Household Income**

An earlier study estimated that it takes approximately Rs200,000 for a low-income migrant household to experience a significant improvement in quality of life (Gunatilleke 1992). Notwithstanding the possible errors from lapses in recall, the majority of migrants in this study had reportedly been able to remit or earn more than this amount, partly owing to the favourable exchange rates, which raised their earnings in rupees. The average period of migration was four years among women workers, and five among men. However, the length of migration was not always closely correlated with the sum of earnings. For instance, the current migrant women's earnings ranged between Rs5,000 to Rs8,000 per month, while the monthly wages of some of the female returnees was as low as Rs2,300. Again, because of the frequency of defaults and non-payment of wages, the earnings of migrants greatly varied.

The comparison of income levels between the households of current migrants and those of returnees gives an idea about the degree to which the income gains experienced during migration were sustained in its aftermath (Table 6.1). Expectedly, the current female migrant households had on the average higher levels of income than the households of female returnees. The former still received remittance income while the latter no longer did. Even though in both types of households the majority had a level of income that ranged between Rs 5,000 and Rs 20,000, among the current migrant households a greater percentage was above, and lower percentage below, this range than in the returnee households (Table 6.1). A similar pattern in income levels was

also evident between the households of current male migrants and male returnees. Reflecting the higher remuneration of men, in each type of households, the male households on average had a higher level of income than the corresponding female households. The total cumulative earnings of current migrant women was around 83 per cent of that of male migrants, and the ratio of female returnees' earnings relative to that of returnee men was much lower (Table 6.2).

**Table 6.1 - Distribution of households in income groups**

(Rs Per Month)	Household Income (%)				
	Female Migrant	Returnee Female Migrant	Male Migrant	Returnee Male Migrant	Non-Migrant Household
1,000-5,000	6	20	3	10	20
5,001-10,000	40	37	37	57	60
10,001-20,000	44	40	50	30	20
Over 20,000	10	3	10	3	---
Total	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 6.2 - Average earnings**

	Average earnings: Rs
Female migrants	293,000
Male migrants	353,000
Female returnees	68,833
Male returnees	129,000

The income level of returnee households, though lower than in current migrant households, was still significantly higher than in the non-migrant households suggesting that income gains from migration were not totally lost after the migrant returned. However, one in five female returnee households, and one in ten among male returnee households, slipped back to the lowest income group.

## 6.2 Acquisition of Assets

As it has also been borne out in other studies, the acquisition of land and home ownership had the highest

priority for migrants (Gunatilleke et al 1993). Because of an acute shortage of housing in urban and easily accessible rural areas, house ownership is especially prized in Sri Lanka and imparts a higher social status. Even when the houses acquired are small shacks of plank and metal sheeting, this does not detract from the intrinsic value of home ownership.

Interestingly, the increase in home ownership was higher among the households of female migrants, both current and past, than those among all male migrants' households (Table 6.3). In addition, remittances were also spent on acquiring consumer durables, such as TV sets, radio, furniture and vehicles. A greater percentage of female migrant households acquired these consumer durables as well. However, land acquisition appears to have been higher among male migrant and returnee male migrant households.

**Table 6.3 - Increase in asset ownership linked to migrant earnings**

Assets	Female Migrant		Returnee Female Migrant		Male Migrant		Returnee Male Migrant	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
House	26	37	32	58	8	30	4	25
Land	16	23	22	40	11	45	7	45
Television	28	40	34	62	10	40	6	40
Radio	22	32	28	51	12	50	7	46
Furniture	20	29	20	36	2	10	2	10
Vehicle	12	18	13	24	5	20	1	7
Household Equipment	20	29	34	62	16	65	10	65
Number of respondents	70		55		25		15	

### 6.3 Investments and Savings

The households in the study have tried to consolidate their economic gains, with mixed success, by saving cash, buying jewellery and investing in income generating activities.

On the average, men's cash savings were greater than that of migrant women (Table 6.4). This is hardly surprising since men were generally employed as skilled workers and thus earned considerably more than female migrants. Men also had greater control over their earnings. While most

migrant women remitted almost all their income, male migrants on the average held onto half of their earnings.

**Table 6.4 - Average cumulative cash savings per person**

Migrant Type	Average Saving Per Person
female migrants	US\$ 814
female returnees	US\$ 1,570
male migrants	US\$ 1,000
male returnees	US\$ 1,860

However, in nearly 90 per cent of all female migrant households at least some income was spent on gold jewellery. In addition to its ornamental value, it imparted higher status to its bearer. Although in the personal possession of the female migrant, jewellery also functioned as a 'social security' fund for the whole household in times of family emergencies. It also replaced the moneylender as a source of finance for repeated migrations or was used for lending with on interest to others who migrated. A profusion of pawnshops had sprung up to facilitate these transactions in areas where migrant households were concentrated.

Few households also invested in setting up income-earning activities or improving those that were already in operation. A greater percentage of male migrants who had saved money abroad preferred to invest in a vehicle that could be put to commercial use. With lower savings, female returnees could usually invest in smaller enterprises. A few set up or improved grocery stores, and others invested in animal husbandry. Though the exact sums invested were not available, about one-third (30 per cent) of the wives of male migrants had started ventures such as beauty and hairdressing salons or set themselves up as seamstresses, and when in need attended training courses to develop the necessary skills. Some female migrants had also spent on the vocational education of their children in order to create self-employment opportunities for them in carpentry, motor vehicles and electrical wiring.



## **7 Social Impact of Migration**

This section evaluates the different ways in which the migrant and the members of her (his) family have been affected by migration. It assesses the outcome of migration for the households studied and analyzes the impact of migration on the migrant, her (his) family members, and gender roles and values within the household and the community.

### **7.1 Assessment of the Outcome of Migration**

The outcome of migration was assessed through the use of two composite indicators that captured not only the tangible economic effects but also the degree to which livelihoods could be sustained and the family stability preserved. Success was measured by a combination of two indicators. One indicator considered whether the family fulfilled its expectations from migration. This was ascertained by using a checklist of individual goals to see which were fulfilled in the perception of family members. Most households held similar expectations that were modest and realistic. Gaining some capital assets, building human capacity through the education of children, and setting up modest income-generating enterprises, were the kinds of goals all households shared.

The second indicator considered whether or not migration had negative social consequences for family members. The possible social ill-effects of migration included the disruption of marriage or in children's education, the sacrifice of future prospects of daughters, or the health and well-being of female elders, because they had to manage the household, and the loss of employment of husbands.

Those households which attained some of their economic goals while experiencing some negative social consequences in the process were classified as partially successful. Those that were considered failures could not fulfill most of their expectations and suffered from the social ill-effects of migration.

According to this classification, the households of male migrants, both past and present, have fared considerably better than the corresponding female migrant households. The success rate was 80 per cent among male returnees and only 45 per cent

among female returnees (Table 7.1). Likewise, 72 per cent of the current male migrants were successful, while the same ratio was only 43 percent among the current female migrants. While there were no failures in any households of male migrants, past or present, one in five returnees, and one in ten current migrants, among female households were failures. Some of the failures among female returnees achieved a modicum of benefits. They had small savings in cash and gold and had repaid their debts. If these are to be considered partial failures then the total failure rate drops to around 14 per cent among female returnees. Those classified as partially successful were more evenly distributed.

**Table 7.1 - Distribution of migrant households by 'outcome' of migration**

	Returnee Female Migrant		Returnee Male Migrant		Female Migrant		Male Migrant	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Successful	25	45	12	80	26	43	18	72
Partially Successful	19	35	3	20	28	47	7	28
Failed	11	20	-	-	6	10	-	-
Total no. of respondents	55	100	15	100	60	100	25	100

## **7.2 Impact of Migration on Women**

### **7.2.1 Changes in Decision Making**

The manner in which the decision to migrate was made within the household had implications for its outcome. Where family support was lacking or lukewarm, it was more likely that the household was not managed well and that remittances were not made use of in the most efficient way possible.

Sometimes the decision to migrate was made jointly with other household members, but more often it was made by the migrant herself. A larger proportion of migrant women (73 per cent) than men (56 per cent) made the decision to migrate on their own. Also, men (36 per cent) in greater numbers than women (25 per cent) made the decision together with their spouse. Only in very few cases, one per cent of female and two per cent of male migrants, was the

initial decision made by the spouse. In very few cases, the migrant might have been subject to some pressure to migrate.

The women who made their own decisions to migrate were generally supported by their family members. In the 30 per cent of the cases where they were not, the opposition usually came from husbands who were reluctant to assume sole responsibility for the children and the household, or those who feared the possible ill-effects of migration on their spouse and family. Among male migrants, only 17 per cent of wives opposed their husbands' decision to migrate mainly out of fear for the security of their family in their absence.

Once it was underway, migration also had the effect of altering gender roles within the family which were reflected in the changes in decision making in the management of the household. Tables 7.2 and 7.3 respectively, list who made what decisions in the male and female migrant households before and during migration.

**Table 7.2 - Decision making in male migrant household (before and during migration)**

Topic	Person	Before		During	
		No	%	No	%
Food/Clothing					
	Wife	8	32	21	84
	Husband	5	20	---	---
	Both	12	48	---	---
	Relative	---	---	4	16
	Total	25	100	25	100
Education					
	Wife	5	26	17	89
	Husband	2	11	---	---
	Both	12	63	2	11
	Relative	---	---	---	---
	Total	19	100	19	100
Housing					
	Wife	3	21	11	79
	Husband	---	---	---	---
	Both	11	79	---	---
	Relative	---	---	3	21
	Total	14	100	14	100

# Temporary Labour Migration of Women

Topic	Person	Before		During	
		No	%	No	%
Health					
	Wife	10	42	22	92
	Husband	4	16	---	---
	Both	10	42	---	---
	Relative	---	---	2	8
	Total	24	100	24	100

**Table 7.3 - Decision making in female migrant households (before, during and after migration)**

Topic	Decision Maker	Before Migration		During Migration		After Return	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Food & clothing	Husband	4	8	21	35	5	10
	Wife	28	56	---	---	30	60
	Both	9	18	---	---	15	30
	Girl-child	---	---	19	32	---	---
	Relatives	9	18	20	33	---	---
	Total	50	100	60	100	50	100
Housing	Husband	30	75	19	73	20	34
	Wife	5	12.5	---	---	27	46
	Both	5	12.5	---	---	12	20
	Relatives	---	---	7	27	---	---
	Total	40	100	26	100	59	100
Health	Husband	4	10	23	64	6	15
	Wife	34	83	---	---	21	53
	Both	2	5	---	---	13	32
	Girl-child	---	---	3	8	---	---
	Relatives	---	---	10	28	---	---
	Total	40	100	36	100	40	100
Education	Husband	9	23	30	70	4	10
	Wife	19	47	---	---	26	65
	Both	12	30	---	---	10	25
	Girl-child	---	---	3	7	---	---
	Relatives	---	---	10	23	---	---
	Total	40	100	43	100	40	100

As Table 7.2 illustrates, in male migrant households relatives and extended family members as well as children did not play a significant role in decision making within the household. Prior to migration, in a minority of cases the wives made household decisions more frequently than did their husbands. The preponderance of decisions in the categories specified in Table 7.2 was made jointly by husbands and wives. However, in the absence of their husbands, the wives had to make almost all decisions on issues related to the education of the children (89%) and the health problems faced by family members (92%), as well as those regarding food, clothing and housing. However, it was also remarked that some husbands continued to participate in decisions through correspondence. In roughly, one in five households, extended family members participated in housing decisions. In other spheres, their participation in decision making was even less.

In female migrant households, who made what decisions prior to migration and the changes that occurred during and after migration were more complex (Table 7.3).<sup>25</sup> Prior to migration, the wives made most decisions on issues related to food, clothing, health and education, while husbands were generally responsible for decisions on housing. The husband's role in making decisions on housing has decreased slightly during, and more substantially after, migration. Some female migrants had apparently entrusted their fathers and brothers rather than the husbands with house building. Others made their own decisions while abroad. During the migration of their wives, many husbands shared decision making with the girl child and extended family members on issues related to food and clothing, and to a lesser extent, on health and education as well.

While responsibility for decisions in matters relating to food, clothing, health and education had largely reverted back to the wives in the aftermath of migration, there were also a few significant changes:

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<sup>25</sup> Information about decision making prior to and after migration was obtained from female returnees while information about during migration came from other household members.

- The decisions made jointly in all categories except education increased markedly;
- The husband's share in housing decisions diminished, while that of women's increased;
- Men's participation in decisions concerning food, clothing and health moderately increased.

These changes suggest that upon their return the women migrants enjoyed a greater say in household decisions and men's involvement in the management of the households possibly increased relative what it was prior to migration. However, the changes migration had on the gender division of labour within the household appear to have been less significant.

### 7.2.2 Division of Labour

Table 7.4 presents the distribution of tasks traditionally performed by the women migrant among family members in her absence. While in close to half of the general household tasks were assumed by the husband, the responsibility in the remainder was assumed by extended family members (35%) and children (20%).

**Table 7.4 - Distribution of female household tasks during and after migration**

Tasks	During		After	
	No	%	No.	%
<b>I GENERAL HOUSEHOLD</b>				
Husband	29	45	2	3
Children	13	20	3	5
Relatives/Extended family	22	35	3	5
Both	---	---	8	12
Wife	---	---	48	75
Total number of respondents				
<b>II HOUSEWORK</b>				
Husband	26	36	11	16
Wife	---	---	45	64
Girl-child	17	24	5	8
Relatives	27	39	1	1
Both	---	---	8	11
Total number of respondents	70	100	70	100

Tasks	During		After	
	No	%	No.	%
III CHILD CARE				
Husband	7	33	1	5
Wife	--	---	14	66
Girl-child	4	19	1	5
Relatives	10	48	0	---
Both	---	---	5	24
Total number of respondents	21	100	21	100

However, only three per cent of the husbands continued to perform household tasks, and 16 per cent did housework after their wife returned. Another 12 per cent participated in household tasks and 11 per cent in housework. In the rest of the households, the work reverted almost completely back to the wife after her return. While 33 per cent of the husbands performed childcare tasks when their wives were away, this ratio fell to five per cent after her return. However, in 24 per cent of the households men continued to have some responsibility as they assisted their wives in childcare. In the remainder of the households men completely detached themselves from the task. Upon the return of the female migrant, the percentage of cases where the girl child was responsible for housework decreased from 24 to eight per cent, and those where she was responsible for childcare fell from 19 to five per cent.

An analysis of tasks, by type and gender, performed before and after migration indicates to what extent the role change between the husbands and wives can be attributed to migration (Table 7.5). The increase in the proportions of wives who began to perform socially-assigned male tasks, such as disciplining children, supervising schoolwork, and the use of income upon their return from migration indicated an enhancement of status. The moderate increase in the number of jointly performed tasks might also indicate more complementary gender roles within the household.

**Table 7.5 - Tasks performed by husbands and wives before and after female migration**

Tasks	Before Migration		After Migration	
	No.	%	No.	%
<b>1. SCHOOL WORK/LESSONS</b>				
Husband	10	14	6	9
Wife	40	57	46	65
Both	18	26	13	19
Relatives	2	3	5	7
Total	70	100	70	100
<b>2. DISCIPLINING CHILDREN</b>				
Husband	15	21	8	11
Wife	33	47	40	57
Both	20	27	21	30
Relatives	2	3	1	2
Total	70	100	70	100
<b>3. ADVICE ON CONDUCT</b>				
Husband	14	20	6	9
Wife	36	51	43	61
Both	18	26	17	24
Relatives	2	3	4	6
Total	70	100	70	100
<b>4. MANAGING CHILDREN</b>				
Husband	13	19	6	8
Wife	37	53	45	64
Both	18	25	18	25
Relatives	2	3	1	2
Total	70	100	70	100
<b>5. USE OF INCOME</b>				
Husband	13	19	7	10
Wife	45	64	50	71
Both	12	17	13	19
Total	70	100	70	100
<b>6. PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL</b>				
Husband	13	19	3	4
Wife	45	64	46	66
Both	12	17	21	30
Total	70	100	70	100
<b>7. ILLNESS</b>				
Husband	10	14	6	8
Wife	47	67	43	62
Both	13	19	20	30
Total	70	100	69	100



Despite these modest advances in the integration of gender roles, socio-cultural norms, customs, attitudes and beliefs have continued to dictate gender compartmentalization. However, the success of migration has depended to a great extent on the capacity of both sexes to adapt, and change their respective socially-assigned roles. Moreover, migration has been empowering to women to the extent that the two sexes could complement each other and work jointly together to lift their household out of poverty.

In the non-migrant households where the income barely met basic food needs and essentials, the wives were managing rather than controlling household expenditures. They lacked power but had the responsibility to provide for their household. This was especially so in those cases where the husband was an alcoholic. However, there was some joint decision making in few households where the wives earned small amounts of income.

### **7.3 Impact of Migration on Family Members**

#### **7.3.1 Impact on the Quality of Life**

Many of the social benefits accrued directly from material improvements in the quality of life of the family. Improvements in housing, water supply and sanitation and the use of electricity had significant implications for the health of family members, particularly that of women and children. In addition, these material improvements accorded to households a higher social standing which the family members greatly valued. Electricity made it possible to use modern household appliances and amenities, eliminating the drudgery of household chores for many women. Moreover, men were more inclined to share domestic chores when it no longer involved grime and dirt. The exposure to television and radio provided both education and recreation.

Increased income from migration had also made it possible to provide children with better educational opportunities. Migrant households could pay for extra school tuitions and the expenses related to extra curricular activities for their children. Seventy three per cent of the migrant families attributed the educational achievements of their children to their enhanced earnings from migration.

During times of serious illness, the more successful migrant families could access private medical care, which is considerably superior to what is available in public facilities. A number of female returnees had expressed satisfaction in being able to provide for the illness of their parents in this manner.

The achievements of migrant household are brought into focus when they are compared to the inability of the non-migrant household to satisfy the education and health needs of their families. Many of the family members interviewed in this latter group of households remarked that the only kind of medical care they could access is what was available in government hospitals and that they often have had difficulty purchasing the drugs prescribed by doctors. Many of the non-migrant households also lacked the basic amenities of water supply and sanitation and lived in sub-standard housing with little expectation of any improvement. In half of the thirty non-migrant households in the study, the husbands or sons were drug addicts or alcoholics, while five other households had severe marital discord. Even though some of the problems from which these households suffered were often attributed to the ill-effects of female migration, these problems were not at all as acute in the households of migrant women.

### **7.3.2 Workload of Family Members**

In 25 per cent of the female migrant households where the children were not too young and could contribute with the domestic chores, the husbands took the responsibility of caring for them. While all husbands found whatever additional work they had to do burdensome, the degree to which they took on additional responsibilities in the household varied. The care of daughters, traditionally left to mothers, was particularly trying for them. In 15 per cent of the female migrant households, the husbands had to give up their jobs which kept them away from home all day in order to take care of the household. Tasks were also shared with parents, brothers and sisters and grandmothers of either the migrant or the husband, and with adult children.

However, in most cases, these tasks were not distributed equitably among family members. Elder female

family members had to shoulder a heavier burden, looking after young children, taking care of housework, and disciplining unruly teenagers. By far, the greatest workload fell on young daughters. In 24 per cent of the households, they had to forego educational and employment opportunities, or marriage prospects. In order for their fathers to be able to keep their jobs, they managed the household, took care of siblings and supervised their schoolwork. A few, in addition, had to deal with alcoholic fathers.

In male migrant households, by contrast, the wives took on additional responsibilities more readily and generally managed the household single-handedly with some assistance from parents, in-laws, and siblings. Many of the wives felt additional stress because their workload was in their view too heavy. Eight per cent of the wives had also combined the task of managing their household with training or running an enterprise.

### **7.3.3 Family Stability**

Migration had generally brought together the nuclear family unit as well as the extended family. Fathers had developed closer relationships with the children, and siblings had strengthened their common bonds within the nuclear family. In some households where the mother migrated, the children were placed with relatives for the duration of her migration.

In a minority of cases, migration also contributed to the break-up of marriages. In 12 per cent of the male migrants' households, marital problems emerged when either of the partners formed extra-marital relationships in the absence of their spouse. The percentage of female migrants who terminated their marriages for similar reasons was slightly less at eight per cent. In the case of another eight per cent of female migrants, marital problems had preceded migration, and going abroad to work was a means of escape from an alcoholic or drug-addict husband. Likewise, by giving them the means to do so, migration enabled nine per cent of the

female returnees to move out of marriages with husbands who were abusive or alcoholic.<sup>26</sup>

Partly because many had difficulty coping with the prolonged absence of their wives, one in five husbands of current female migrants, and one in four of female returnees, became alcoholic during the migration of their wives. The longer the duration of the wives' migration, the higher the incidence of alcoholism among the husbands. However, because alcoholism among husbands in non-migrant households has also been high, migration alone could not have been the cause. In fact, by rescuing families from poverty and degradation, migration made it possible for some female returnees to rehabilitate an alcoholic husband and restore stability within their family.

## **7.4 Changes in Gender Roles and Values**

### **7.4.1 Women as Providers**

Success of female migrants abroad played an important role in achieving a better standard of living for their family and a better future for their children. Many of these women chose migration because their husbands had few options both at home and abroad. In migration, close to half of these women became the main earner in their family, earning considerably more than their husbands or other family members. In some households, the husbands had to give up their jobs to manage the households after their wives migrated. In others, they were alcoholics and worked only intermittently. Few were jailed for dealing in drugs. Yet, even when the husband had no income at all, he was still considered the main provider of the family in accordance with the traditional social values.

However, in the numerous instances where migrant women's remittances transformed the economic prospects of their household, they began to be perceived by family members and other relatives as the "saviour". Four out of five migrant women were successful, at least in part, in achieving

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<sup>26</sup> This study reports a higher incidence of marital break up than other studies. For instance, in Gunatilleke (1992) marital infidelity was reported at only two per cent.

a degree of income stability for their families in the aftermath of migration. In approximately 25 per cent of these households, the returnee migrants continued to be the main providers either because their husbands left home (7%) or they abandoned or lost their jobs (24%). In another 25 per cent of households, where the husbands had become alcoholic or drug-addict, women returnees had to take charge of family affairs. Most returnees felt that their status, responsibilities and workload within the household changed considerably after they returned.

Along with their enhanced status, which most women returnees welcomed, around half of them reported an increase in their responsibilities. For a sizable minority (37%) the new responsibilities they had to take over were too heavy, and the majority complained of an excessive workload. Though they enjoyed having greater control over money, 40 per cent felt awkward handling money in amounts to which they were not accustomed. Some 17 per cent had difficulty taking prime responsibility for disciplining the children. However, they all valued the increased cooperation they began to have with their husbands, and enjoyed sharing tasks with the older children, especially the daughters who had been responsible for many of the domestic chores during their absence. The majority (70 %) of women returnees liked their new status, particularly, having greater control over money, while 30 per cent disliked it.

Again, a comparison with the position of women in non-migrant households brings into better focus the changed status women returnees experienced. The women in non-migrant households lacked almost all the positive characteristics that enhanced the status of women returnees in the aftermath of migration. Lacking control over family resources, they felt no improvement in their decision-making power in the household. Their reproductive role was the defining characteristic of their identity and status within their family. They had no independent means and little economic security. Moreover, none of these women had the satisfaction of feeling that through their actions they had pulled their family out of poverty.

Some of the non-migrant women expressed a willingness to migrate but felt that they were prevented from doing so by their husbands who were fearful of the possible ill-effects of migration. Others maintained that there were plenty of income earning opportunities in the country, yet did not seem to be exploiting them. However, in most cases the main reason for not migrating was the inability to finance migration. Lacking their own resources, these households were not even sufficiently creditworthy to borrow the required sum.

#### **7.4.2 Perceptions of Female Migration**

Through separate interviews, female migrants and their husbands were asked to assess the impact of migration, using a qualitative rating scale that included the three possible responses of 'beneficial,' 'part beneficial' and 'not beneficial'.

The majority of female migrants and of their husbands felt that migration had been beneficial to the migrant (Table 7.6). However, while 25 per cent of the husbands thought that migration had not been beneficial for the migrant, only 6 per cent of the migrants felt this way. Therefore, the female migrants perceived their migration experience favourably. There was also a difference of opinion on the impact of migration on the children. Most husbands held that migration benefited daughters but not the sons, whereas the majority of women returnees thought that it adversely affected both. The mothers appear to have been more easily disappointed even when only one child had failed to achieve what was expected of him(her). They were more conscious of the ill-effects of their absence on the children, especially on their education. However, the children themselves felt that migration had opened up educational opportunities that would otherwise have been denied to them.

**Table 7.6 - Perception of female migration's impact on household members**

Interviewee	Beneficial %	Somewhat Beneficial %	Not Beneficial %	Total Number
<b>Female Returnee Migrant</b>				
For female migrant	59	35	6	59
For daughters	46	30	24	39
For sons	33	34	33	46
Economic Status	72	18	10	58
<b>Husbands of Female Migrants</b>				
For migrant females	40	35	25	60
For daughters	11	61	28	46
For sons	22	46	33	46
Economic status	67	16	17	58

Discussions were also held with community groups to assess the tenor of social attitudes towards female migrants. In general, the economic achievements of migrant women were favourably acknowledged. And in instances where migration was a failure, the general inclination was to blame the family members who wasted the money earned by the migrant. Some husbands were also blamed for being insensitive to the harsh working with which the migrant women had to cope while abroad.

However, some of the perceptions of community members reflected a more negative attitude. Many people felt that migrant women had become too assertive. Their improved sense of self-confidence which showed in the way they dressed and carried themselves in public was an affront to the traditional value system which ascribed them a more subordinate role. Some of the undeserved harsh community responses also carried over to the wives of male migrants, who were suspected of being susceptible to infidelity during their husbands' absence. Many of the returnees, as in-depth interviews revealed, were conscious of the negative community perceptions. However, they were hardly perturbed that the change in their public demeanor was



construed as a challenge to the conservative sentiments of the community.

Some community responses also took the form of gossip mongering, reflecting envy at what the migrants and their families achieved. At times it was alleged that some migrant women owed their financial success to illicit relationships with men in the host country, yet it was grudgingly acknowledged that most achieved what they did through hard work and good fortune.

## **8 Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has examined the different factors that have a bearing on the outcome of female migration. One important finding is that in addition to how the migrant woman handles her situation abroad, family members, particularly the husband, also play important roles in determining whether migration was ultimately beneficial to the migrant and members of her family.

The question of whether the predictors of 'success' could be specified was not conclusively resolved in this study. While unlikely candidates had made an eminent success of their migration, others who seemed most likely to succeed had run into serious problems. Nevertheless, a number of factors that contribute to or detract from success can be identified with a certain degree of generality.

### **8.1 Predictors of Success**

A good relationship with the employer was crucial, especially in the case of domestic workers who were completely dependent upon their employer's good grace for their protection and well-being. Those migrants who were capable of performing the tasks expected of them efficiently and with confidence usually had a good start with their employers. The knowledge and awareness of the cultural and legal environment as it related to the migrant's position in the host country was also a valuable asset.

However, migrants had no say in choosing who their employer would be. Their employer could be fair and supportive or just as well be mean and abusive. In identifying



the good from the bad, they were often completely at the mercy of the recruitment agents who were not always sensitive to the migrant's concerns.<sup>27</sup> After the first three months of their employment, when the agents were legally responsible to monitor their situation, the new recruits had no link with the outside world. Often, those who needed help did not know where to seek it, and many employers took advantage of the migrants' ignorance and vulnerability. As a rule, educated employers protected and cared for their domestic workers, and those who had such employers were more likely to make a success of migration.

Most problem cases were generally related to those who migrated through the illegal network of recruiters in Sri Lanka and the host country. These migrants had little, if any, protection, as they had placed themselves outside the legal system in the host country and forfeited the safeguards and protections made available to them by the home country.<sup>28</sup> The recruitment agents, on whom they were completely dependent, were often a party to their mistreatment along with their employers.

The migrants could generally rely on the support of their families, which was of critical importance for their well-being. Within the household the key person was usually the husband. In those instances, where he failed to take charge of family affairs back home, the migrant had little peace of mind abroad. Though unsupportive husbands were generally blamed for the failure of the migrant abroad, these men often felt degraded in a cultural environment that had little respect for husbands who were not providers and ascribed inferior value to women's work. Most migrant women seldom

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<sup>27</sup> However, the migrant workers cannot be absolved of all blame either. Some seemed to have a tendency to exaggerate the misdeeds of employers and the recruitment agents, attributing to them all the problems they faced in the host country. A number of recruitment agents alleged to that some workers had broken contract with their employers because of the flimsiest of excuses, such as the monotony of work.

<sup>28</sup> Some migrants had to go through illegal channels for reasons that were no fault of their own. For instance, those women who lacked a birth certificate since birth certificates could not be obtained in Sri Lanka legally, and thus could only travel with forged documents.

understood the fears and trepidation of their husbands in being perceived as a 'female substitute' at home, especially by other men in their community.

As it has been suggested in one of the community group discussions conducted for this study, the husbands would benefit from beginning to work together with their wives on household tasks well ahead of the latter's migration. Some evidence seemed to support this. Even a modicum of planning, goal setting and prioritizing could enhance the potential for success, as it was more often evident among the male migrants' households. Male migrants and their wives in general exhibited a greater capacity to benefit from migration, and had usually a higher level of education than most female migrants and their husbands.

## **8.2 Female Empowerment**

Central to the study was the question of how, if at all, migration had had an empowering effect on migrant women. In addition to the variables included in the indicators of economic and social outcomes, the assessment of female empowerment draws from the earlier discussion in four areas namely, changes in: (i) household decision making, (ii) division of labour, (iii) gender roles, (iv) and community perceptions. Empowerment transcended the issue of "success" or "failure" of migration as measured by the economic and social indicators. In fact, at times failure in migration seemed to have contributed to empowerment.

In most female migrant households, migration was the only option the family had to pull itself out of poverty, and women were better positioned than men to migrate. This situation in itself placed these women in a position of strength. Even the very endorsement of the women's decision to migrate by their families meant that they were recognized in a role much different from the traditional role.

Migration had the effect of extending women's decision making power to spheres that were in men's traditional domain, such as the decisions involving housing, investment and the disciplining of children. During and after migration, the incidence of joint decisions by wives and husbands and of decision making by women increased as the percentage of

### *Training*

- Remedy the shortcoming of current training programmes which fail to provide information on and orient migrants to the culture, legal system and social norms of the host country.

### *International Organizations*

- A comprehensive manual on the legal systems that prevail in the different labour-receiving countries, which can be prepared by an international agency such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), can be very useful in the training of migrant workers. In this and other manuals of this kind, special emphasis should be placed on informing migrant workers of the avenues of redress for their grievances in the host countries.
- International organizations should persuade/pressure host countries to become signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990), as well as the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979).
- International pressure should also be organized to bear upon host countries to have them establish severe jail sentences for those who perpetrate physical and sexual abuse against female domestic workers.

### *Facilities in the host country*

- The establishment of mechanisms for regular communication and contact between the embassy and the migrant worker should be made compulsory.

### *Issues for future discussion*

- The problems female migrant workers encounter when they wish to leave an uncongenial work environment, e.g. domestic workers having to escape out of houses at risk to life and limb.

- Ways to deal with the illegal system of recruitment that exploits and victimizes female migrants in both sending and receiving countries.

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