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Desh, Bidesh and Fractured Dreams: Bangladeshi Labor Migrants in the GCC

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Poor, low-skilled Bangladeshi men and women represent a majority of the laborers migrating to the Gulf region for transitory work. The Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment & Training (BMET) reports that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), encompassing Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, accommodates millions of Bangladeshi labor migrants annually (BMET, 2023a). Bangladesh's developmental vision champions the role of migrant workers, placing on them the duty of earning foreign currency to nourish the country's socioeconomic health and national status; migrant remittances contribute well over 6% of Bangladesh's annual GDP, making it one of the top recipients of remittance flows in the world (Mahmud, 2023:56; The World Bank, 2023). The economic gains, however, mask the deeper structural inequities and power hierarchies forming the substratum of migration. Caught between intricate class, gender, and racial hierarchies, Bangladeshi migrants come to confront multiple challenges throughout the migration lifecycle.

Gender pervades every step of the migration process in Bangladesh, from the recruitment process to the flow of remittances. Prevailing gender norms dictate men's and women's migration opportunities, processes, and experiences, creating gender-differentiated impacts. Gender, however, does not operate in a silo and intersects with class and race, revealing the interrelatedness of multiple axes of oppression that can influence the migration ecosystem. These interlinked themes animate this paper as I move beyond the economic dimensions of labor migration to contend that the motivations and experiences of poor, low-skilled Bangladeshi migrants are shaped by their embeddedness in complex power hierarchies linked to class, gender, and race.

This essay is organized as follows: It first locates itself conceptually within the rich literature on the gendered causes and implications of migration and the significance of intersectionality in migration analysis. The second section elaborates on the context for migratory flows between Bangladesh and the GCC. The rest of the paper analyzes the process of becoming a migrant worker and the experiences of migrant men and women, exploring the different power relations and hierarchies unfolding throughout the migration timeline.

Background: Bringing Gender into the Frame

The connection between gender and migration has inspired a wealth of literature. Women and femininities have strongly featured in migration studies, with women's representation initially restricted to passive dependents (Zlotnik, 1995); changes in women's mobility owing to changing domestic and global contexts led to a reframing of women in migration studies. The exclusive focus on women, however, caused the 'invisibilization' of men and masculinities, with migrant men typically subsumed under the categories of criminals or oppressors (Charsley & Wray, 2015). Over time, gendered analysis of migration began incorporating masculinities and femininities more holistically, placing more importance on gender as a practice and ideology as well as a structure that influences power relations across multiple scales and levels (Nawyn, 2010:750-751). This reframing has dislodged reductionist and stereotypical conceptions of migration experiences and patterns.

Adopting gender lenses to labor migration illuminates how gender constitutes a significant element throughout the migration process and how gender identities and the broader gender order are refigured and implicated through

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migration. Migration streams are no longer exclusively male-dominated, as female participation in labor markets has gradually increased, largely enabled by broader macroeconomic shifts (Matthei, 1996). But the economic push and pull dynamics affect men and women differently, and it is the interplay of multi-level (macro, meso, and micro) factors, including structural and sociocultural factors, that determines who gets to embark on a migration journey, why they go, how they go, and what happens to them (Nawyn, 2010; Paul, 2015).

The significance of gender in migration has been complemented by an increasing acknowledgment of the intersection of gender with additional markers of identity. Crenshaw's (1989) pioneering work on intersectionality emphasized the importance of the relationship between gender and other social identities, such as class and race, in determining discrimination and violence experienced by Black women. Crenshaw's concept has been extrapolated to wider political and social settings and scholarship, including migration studies, as evident in the 'gendered geographies of power' framework developed by Pessar and Mahler (2003). Pessar and Mahler highlight that mobility, motivations, and experiences are contingent not only on a migrant's gender but also on class, race, nationality, sexuality, and so on. An intersectional approach to migration is therefore necessary to grapple with the issues affecting different categories of migrant men and women.

By foregrounding both Bangladeshi migrant men and women, this paper chimes with the body of scholarship that forays into the relational construction of gender identities, moving beyond the 'feminization' of gender in migration studies. Furthermore, by considering workers from the lowest rungs of domestic and global hierarchies, this paper adopts an intersectional approach to uncover the symbiotic relations between multiple structural inequities.

Bangladesh and Labor Migration

The migration of Bangladeshi men and women to the Gulf region poses an interesting opening for exploring the gendered dimensions of labor migration for several reasons. First, Bangladesh is well-known as a labor-exporting state in which the government actively promotes the migration of poor, low-skilled workers (Wickramasekara, 2016:110; Choudhury, 2024:51-52). Male laborers represent a majority of the migrants, with female laborers comprising approximately nine percent in recent years (BMET, 2023b). Here, the complex amalgam of structural and sociocultural forces that underpin Bangladesh's gender order can demonstrate the gendered causes and implications of migration. Second, the Gulf region has been a popular destination for Bangladeshi migrants since the late 1970s, owing to the oil-fueled growth of Gulf economies that boosted the demand for foreign labor in numerous sectors (Sassen, 2000:521-523). Bangladesh's status as a low-income state can be contrasted with the wealthy Gulf region to unpack interconnections between different economic and social power hierarchies.

Before I proceed with my analysis, it is necessary to acknowledge that because I have chosen to focus on Bangladeshi migrants from various parts of the country who are dispersed throughout the Gulf region instead of specific locations, it is not possible to make blanket statements about migrant experiences. Contextuality is indispensable in migration analysis, as migrants are situated within diverse realities, and further investigation would thus untangle the multifacetedness of Bangladeshi labor migration. To reiterate, while labor migration can certainly be a rewarding experience, it is necessary to be critical of the broader structures and power relations that underlie labor migration, as that offers a holistic reading of contemporary patterns of migration (Nawyn, 2010; Paul, 2015).

Becoming a Labor Migrant

The migration opportunities for poor, low-skilled Bangladeshi men and women have been conditional on the gender order. Bangladesh's gender order is undergirded by traditional gender norms, ascribing specific roles and responsibilities to men and women. Women in poorer households serve as wives and mothers, specializing in domestic and care work, while men focus on income-generating activities to provide for the family (Feldman, 2001; Bridges et al., 2011; Afrin & Saifullah, 2024); for men, serving provider roles brings them closer to a hegemonic brand of masculinity, which will be detailed below. This gendered division of labor at the local level has been projected onto the global level, with Bangladeshi migrant women usually finding work as maids, babysitters, caregivers, and so on, while male laborers dominate the construction and agriculture sectors, usually carrying out physically strenuous work (Choudhury et al., 2014; Uddin, 2021; Bossavie, 2023:4). Although gender roles vary

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according to the cultural, economic, and social settings of an area, the traditional gendered division of labor has proven to be durable across Bangladesh; thus, it is expected that the division determines the entry of men and women into foreign labor markets.

Guided by traditional gender scripts, the gendered nature of state policies has dictated men's and women's migration opportunities. Bangladesh's labor migration policies excluded or marginalized low-skilled and semi-skilled women until the early 2000s, leading to the realm of labor migration becoming a wholly male-dominated one (Uddin, 2021:73; Bossavie, 2023:4); the state's migration policy had often limited women's mobility due to safety concerns and anxieties about violations of social mores (Hossain, 2023:69). The discriminatory policies were likely reformed following backlash from civil society but also to address the state's high population growth and harness women's economic utility (ibid., 66). From an economic perspective, indeed, both men's and women's migration has been the state's most powerful tool in accumulating foreign currency. This, however, raises questions about the state's instrumental use of poor, low-skilled populations as commodified labor for developmental goals while simultaneously demonstrating the country's marginalized status in the global economy.

Local and national conditions are bound up with global contexts, shaping the migration ecosystem. In the case of Bangladesh, global economic restructuring and socioeconomic progress in other corners of the world have stimulated demand for Bangladeshi workers. In the Gulf region, rapid industrialization stirred the demand for Bangladeshi labor in various service sectors, particularly in '3D' (dangerous, demanding, and dirty) jobs that were not taken up by nationals (Bossavie, 2023:4). For instance, much like women in the wealthier Global North, an emerging middle class of Gulf women began outsourcing their domestic and care responsibilities to poorer women from Southeast and South Asia to focus more on their formal labor duties (Uddin, 2021:73; Hossain, 2023:62); relatedly, with female migrants from elsewhere, such as Southeast Asia, seeking better opportunities in the Global North, a vacuum appeared in the domestic service sector that the Bangladesh state gradually filled through the export of low-skilled women (Hossain, 2023:66). The same applies to the demand for Bangladeshi male migrants who were brought into construction, agriculture, and cognate professions to fill labor shortages (Rahman, 2011:402; Bossavie, 2023: 4-5). The different labor market niches are noticeable, but Bangladeshis do find themselves in various jobs in the Gulf.

The allure of the Gulf can be further explained from a religious lens, as the religious spirit of the region resonates with migrants from Muslim-dominated Bangladesh. Some Bangladeshi Muslim women choose the GCC countries for their 'sacredness' and adherence to Islamic customs (Uddin, 2021:79). For Bangladeshi men, countries like Saudi are preferred because men can uphold their 'good character' there due to strict alcohol legislation and segregation of the sexes (Kamal, 2023:44). Religion, an important marker of the men's and women's identities, can therefore prompt them to choose Gulf states as suitable employment destinations.

Gendered Motivations?

It is possible for men's and women's motivations for migration to parallel each other, with socioeconomic success being a mutual goal. For poorer Bangladeshis, the materially superior *bidesh*(abroad) can be juxtaposed with the economically malnourished *desh* (home); thus, *bidesh* comes to represent an opportunity for upward social mobility (Gardner, 1993). Economically and logistically, the Gulf is also ideal for poor, low-skilled Bangladeshis due to fairly lax immigration policies and limited socio-economic capital (such as education) necessary for migration (Choudhury, 2024:51). Despite these similarities, gender differentials in motivations exist.

For men, migration may serve as a rite of passage to adulthood and manhood. Migration facilitates the transformation of a man's identity or status or marks a 'liminal phase' before one unlocks a new status (Charsley & Way, 2015:405-406). In this regard, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is instructive, which is an idealized version of masculinity that males should strive towards (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity in Bangladesh can be understood in terms of 'gainful employment, marriage, and parenthood' (Kukreja, 2021a:166); in much of South Asia, failure to comply with traits of dominant masculinity may relegate men to 'immature' status and can throw them into a 'crisis of masculinity' (Kukreja, 2021b:308). Low-class Bangladeshi men may see migration as a means to fulfill the role of breadwinner and earn the title of *sofol purush* (successful man). Bangladeshi men from small villages, for

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instance, migrate to the Gulf to provide for their families and bring them prestige (Rao, 2012); sending remittances to support their families may reaffirm their provider role (Kamal, 2023:40), and leaving behind their families may be perceived as a noble sacrifice for long-term success, as money remitted may be invested in land, housing, and other material desires (Rao, 2012:31). The heteropatriarchal breadwinner model, however ideal in society, can be pressurizing and evoke concerns about the emotional price of manhood.

It is then not unusual for the path towards *sofol purush* status to be one characterized by hardship and fluidity as one's masculine identity responds to shifting circumstances. Research has shown how migration (re)shapes masculine identities as men engage in 'feminized' and 'marginalized' labor (Batnitzky et al., 2009; Charsley & Wray, 2015:405). Bangladeshi migrant men in the Gulf may work in low-status jobs and participate in feminized labor, which may challenge dominant ideals of masculinity. They may maneuver between 'hard' and 'soft' masculinities to maximize their earning potential and boost their social standing (Sabur, 2024). Bangladeshi men in Saudi and Qatar, for instance, are employed in low-status masculine jobs (such as day laborers) and others in feminine roles in the service sector (such as barbers) (ibid.); working as barbers may necessitate performing emotional labor for clients by being sympathetic to clients' personal stories to acquire extra tips, meaning the men had to be flexible in their performance of masculinity (ibid., 11). Male workers in the region may also engage in 'feminine' labor, such as cooking and cleaning, which may unsettle traditional notions of masculinity (Kamal, 2023). It therefore becomes apparent that Bangladeshi masculinity is not 'monochromatic' but rather a spectrum and highly susceptible to change.

If migration is a rite of passage for male laborers, it may be a route to economic and social emancipation for women. The motivations of poor, low-skilled Bangladeshi women migrating to the Gulf are based on economic and social imperatives linked to gender inequalities (Uddin, 2021). As discussed, Bangladeshi women are generally confined to the private sphere, but when they do find work, they are likely to receive meager wages because of gender discrimination practices or experience workplace harassment (ibid., 75). Considering that a woman's place is in the home, it is also socially disapproved if women travel overseas for work like men, as this would violate the '*pardah*' system (social segregation of the sexes) that prevails in poorer areas (Bélanger & Rahman, 2013:360-362). Economic and social marginalization may then impel women to search for better opportunities abroad (Sultana & Fatima, 2017). For women living in extreme poverty, migration may be a necessity to sustain their families (Bélanger & Rahman, 2013:363; Uddin, 2021:76), meaning women can also assume a breadwinner role; furthermore, women in poor households may be chosen to migrate in place of a male member of the household because of the exorbitant costs associated with male migration (Rahman, 2011:401-402; Bélanger & Rahman, 2013:363). In other cases, migration may be a means to escape violent situations for women in abusive relationships (Uddin, 2021:75). It is, however, worth remembering that there is no one explanation for women's migration, which equally applies to men's migration.

Bangladeshi migrant women in foreign employment challenge the parochial framings of women as passive actors in migration. Women can make significant economic gains and sustain their families through remittances while enjoying greater mobility and a life free from violent relationships (Rahman, 2011:405; Belanger & Rahman, 2013:369; Uddin, 2021); some Bangladeshi women remit more to their families than male migrants (Rahman, 2011:404), but such claims require more critical analysis to avoid essentialization. Despite unsettling existing gender norms, it is contested to what extent labor migration can be an emancipatory experience for women. For instance, even if migration-related costs are lower for women, women are likely to be more financially constrained than men, as they have little control or ownership of resources, which can affect their decisions to migrate (Rahman, 2011:401-402; Uddin, 2021:80). Furthermore, as will be explained, women may continue to be confined to the private sphere abroad and confront gendered vulnerabilities in their new workplaces, including sexual violence. Gender hierarchies, upheld by power structures, deny Bangladeshi women rights and privileges.

Classed, Gendered, and Racialized Subjects

Migration can be a transformative experience, but whether it will be a positive one depends on a range of factors. Gender hierarchies intersect with broader asymmetries of power linked to class and race to inform the (mis)treatment of low-skilled migrant men and women. Gender norms in host societies, job categories, and the nature of contracts

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can make Bangladeshis vulnerable to different forms of abuse (Afsar, 2009). Furthermore, domestic and global inequities rooted in uneven economic development place Bangladeshi migrants at the bottom of the racialized labor pyramid, resulting in mistreatment.

Poor, low-skilled Bangladeshis have been deemed the most stigmatized among South Asian migrants in the GCC (Kibria, 2008:527). They are relationally constructed as 'docile,' 'submissive,' and 'less assertive' to other migrant nationalities, such as Sri Lankans, a categorization that is based on stereotypes underlying the inherent qualities of the Bangladeshi population (Ansar, 2023:39-40; Kamal, 2023:41; Choudhury et al., 2024:57). Bangladeshi men, for instance, are considered suitable for work in the construction sector in Qatar because they are 'meek' and 'accepting of hard conditions' compared to other nationalities, which are seen as more 'professional' and 'trustworthy' and hence deserving of better-paid jobs (Deshingkar et al., 2019:2727); this categorization may be attributed to racial stereotypes pervading Qatari society, which perceive dark-skinned people, like Bangladeshis, to be inferior (ibid.). Despite the religious affinity, Gulf employers label Bangladeshi migrants as *miskin* (beggars/poor) and second-class Muslims (Uddin, 2021:87; Kamal, 2023:41), which fosters unequal employee-employer power dynamics and potentially circumscribes workers' rights.

The Precarious and Insecure Migrant

Beginning with the recruitment process, poor, low-skilled Bangladeshis confront various challenges. It is beyond the purview of this paper to detail the multilayered recruitment process, but there is some consensus that there is a growing commodification of migrant labor, evident in outsourcing practices adopted by some GCC states and the marketization strategies of private Bangladeshi labor agencies (Rahman, 2012; Siddiqui, 2023). Bangladeshi migrants in Qatar, for example, pay much more for the right to work than other nationalities but end up earning some of the lowest wages (Gardner et al., 2013). Similarly, low-skilled Bangladeshi migrants are frequently prey to fraudulent intermediaries who exploit the migrants' lack of experience and knowledge (Das et al., 2014). Unfair recruitment processes, driven by an appetite for profits, can financially cripple Bangladeshi migrants who are already struggling to make a living.

Employment policies and immigration regimes in the Gulf region compound the difficulties Bangladeshi migrants experience. In several Gulf states, the '*Kafala* system' (sponsorship system) has deprived migrants of full citizenship rights and engendered conditions propitious to migrant discrimination and exploitation. The system grants certain institutions or individuals known as *kafeels* the right to hire foreign workers on temporary agreements (Deshingkar et al., 2019; Uddin, 2021); it is akin to modern-day slavery, as laborers are under the authority of a single employer and frequently at risk of arrest or deportation, passport confiscation, and pay refusal (Deshingkar et al., 2019:2727; Uddin, 2021:83). For the classed and racialized Bangladeshi 'Other,' the sponsorship system infringes on their fundamental human rights.

The mistreatment of Bangladeshi migrant men and women under the Kafala system is well documented. To illustrate, Bangladeshi migrant men working in construction in Saudi Arabia have suffered exploitation, including not being paid for months and working long hours daily (Rao, 2012). Other studies have revealed that Saudi employers of Bangladeshi domestic workers did not pay the women on time nor pay them the salary that was contractually agreed upon (Uddin, 2021); there were also limits on the women's freedom, including restrictions on contacting their families and fellow Bangladeshis (ibid.). Mistreatment can entail rampant racial abuse, with some employers dehumanizing the migrants by addressing them by their nationality ('Bangladeshi') instead of their names and using derogatory remarks such as 'poor and dirty' (Ullah et al., 2020:215). This structural barrier, reinforcing the 'Other' status of Bangladeshi migrants, makes it difficult for Bangladeshis to turn to the law in host societies, as authorities may be complicit in mistreatment, leaving the migrants with little to no recourse.

Women, particularly domestic workers, are additionally exposed to gendered insecurities of a sexual nature. The private and unregulated nature of the domestic sphere means that domestic workers are isolated from their peers and vulnerable to the power of their employers (Prusinski, 2016:489; Choudhury et al., 2024:51); some Gulf states, such as the UAE, did not abolish slavery until the 1960s, which may also explain contemporary attitudes toward domestic workers (Halabi, 2008). Migrant women in the Gulf, especially younger women, are usually trapped in

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'master-mistress' relations and forced into sexual favors by employers (Choudhury et al., 2024). Returnee migrant women from the Gulf have claimed to have experienced rape and sexual abuse while working (Ullah et al., 2020). Amid COVID-19, news reports also surfaced that thousands of returnee women experienced physical and mental torture as well as sexual abuse while working in the Gulf (Bhuyan, 2020); in the COVID-19 context, what is notable is the returnee women also dealt with harassment and abuse at the hands of Bangladeshi airport authorities (Ansar, 2023:37). For returnee migrant women, experiences of sexual violence can affect gender relations and their status, as some women may deal with marital breakdowns and social stigma (Afsar, 2011:399; Uddin, 2021:90). It is worth exercising caution when rehashing victimization narratives of migrant women, as this may deny them agency and overshadow the vulnerabilities of migrant men. It is, however, also necessary to emphasize how women's bodies as sites of sexual violations serve as an index of deeper-rooted power imbalances in gender relations plaguing both Bangladesh and the Gulf.

Structural drivers of discrimination towards the Bangladeshis have prompted discussions on reforms of policies and practices related to migrant employment. Presently, Bangladesh's inferior position in the global labor market limits its negotiating power in labor agreements as the wealthier labor-receiving state assumes a more commanding role (Choudhury et al., 2024:64). Nevertheless, it should be recognized that power regimes in both Bangladesh and the Gulf region leave much to be desired in terms of the protection offered to migrant workers. While the Gulf region 'takes' the labor, benefiting from their efforts, and Bangladesh sends the labor to boast about socioeconomic progress, the systemic barriers remain uninspected.

Conclusion

This essay has shed light on poor, low-skilled Bangladeshi men and women who have migrated to the Gulf states for employment, taking an integrative approach to economic and sociocultural processes to understand migrant motivations and experiences. I have underscored how gender functions to shape the contours and innards of labor migration while braiding gender identity with identities of class and race to offer a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of Bangladeshi labor migration to the Gulf.

Trammeled by traditional gender ideologies, Bangladeshi men and women enter the global labor market, aligning with socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity as they find themselves in gendered labor market niches. Bangladeshi migrant men and women may share a common objective of upward social mobility, but motivations can be gendered. Men's masculine aspirations, based on hegemonic socio-cultural norms of masculinity, may serve as an impetus to migrate to the Gulf, though the enactment of different masculinities attests to the dynamism of masculinity. For women, migration opens doors to new employment opportunities and promotes autonomy, which may disrupt existing gender norms.

The value of Bangladeshi migrants, however, is regulated by class and racial stereotypes, which are deployed to construct 'ideal' workers and incorporate them into the global economy as cheap and conformist labor, thereby (re)producing global economic and racial hierarchies. The ill-treatment of Bangladeshi men due to their race and perceived lack of skills when compared to men of other backgrounds, together with their overrepresentation in low-status jobs, may impact how Bangladeshi men navigate and negotiate their subordinate position and consequently affect broader gender relations when they return to Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladeshi women's unique vulnerabilities linked to sexual violence signal the ubiquity of gender oppression and cast doubts about labor migration as an empowering intervention in women's lives.

Bangladeshi labor migrants have carried the development and prosperity of the country on their shoulders, but carrying such weight has not been easy. A narrow focus on the economic dimensions of labor migration is inadequate to grasp the complex nature of labor migration and the interlocking of multiple power hierarchies that define migrant trajectories. As this essay has demonstrated, gender and intersecting social identities paired with an analysis of broader structures and power relations may facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals experience and are affected by labor migration.

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