

ISSUE 5, DECEMBER 2021

OUR WORK, OUR LIVES

Return, Reintegration & Socio-economic Inclusion



Our Work, Our Lives

Issue 5, December 2021

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Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Our Work, Our Lives

Many members and partners of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) work closely with women workers to support and strengthen their organising. The women earn their living from domestic work, sex work, agriculture, weaving, entertainment work, garment sector work, home-based work, and any available daily wage work. Except those who are working away from home, all women also carry out much of the care work in their families. While some workers are affiliated with trade unions, others are part of informal collectives or community groups linked to local NGOs.

Since March 2021, some GAATW members and partners have been part of an online initiative called *Women Workers for Change*. The group has held discussions to understand what women workers who engage in unpaid and paid labour define as 'change' in their lives, how do they want to participate in creating change and what the CSOs can do to improve their accountability towards women workers.

Our Work, Our Lives, a monthly E-Magazine, is born out of those discussions. Published on the last day of the month, each issue will take up a simple theme that resonates with the everyday lives of low-wage women workers, their joys, sorrows, struggles and most importantly, their agendas for change.

While this English language E-Magazine will act as a bridge among CSO colleagues (and the few workers who can communicate in English) in different countries, each group will create publications in their own language. Where the workers have no formal literacy, they will use other innovative techniques. GAATW Secretariat will do all it can to democratise digital technology and facilitate knowledge building and sharing from ground up.

CONTENTS

Issue 5, December 2021: Return, Reintegration &

Socio-economic Inclusion..... 6

ANAMIKA: Need for large-scale employment guarantee by the state.....	10
BANGLADESHI WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS FORUM: A virtual discussion with Bangladeshi women garment workers in Jordan.....	16
BISHAKHA BHANJA: Impact of Covid-19 on women internal migrant workers in India.....	24
CORPORACIÓN ESPACIOS DE MUJER: Wherever you go, your rights go with you!.....	29
CORPORACIÓN ESPACIOS DE MUJER: Reintegration after trafficking.....	32
DEVI KUMARI MOKTAN: I want to give the best to my daughter	36
DOMESTIC WORKERS SOLIDARITY NETWORK (DWSN), JORDAN: Returning home: Reflections and Recommendations	39
JUDITH: Once you're in an abusive state of mind, it's a hard cycle to break.....	45
KYUN PAR: Rights are the foundation of life	50
KHADEEJA: I want a life of retirement, but I don't think I have the luxury of it	55
LIYANGE VAJIRA: Life goes on.....	59
LUCY TURAY: Life After Return: A focus group discussion among returnee women in Sierra Leone.....	62
MALANI KANDAARACHIGE: Save some money, learn some skills, and make some plans for life after returning home	70
MARIA TERESA MANALO: I wish it were possible to follow up on my backpay claim.....	77
MARIAM: I felt protected by Thai Law.....	82
MARITES: The most important thing was my daughter's future.....	85

MESSIE CHEKOLE: CVM’s work with returnee women migrant workers in Ethiopia.....	86
NODI: We should have a Women’s Platform	92
NOI: I am sad because of all the migration regulations.....	100
PLATFORM FOR LABOUR ACTION: Focus group discussion on life of women migrant workers after returning home	103
PUSHPA SHARMA, DHANMAIT SINGH & RABIN MANNA: A little timely support may go a long way.....	109
RAHEL ZEGEYE: I need to work with my people	113
ROHINI: No one was happy to see me	119
RUBY MAHTO: In the absence of knowledge and courage, we lose our rights	123
RUMANA BEGUM: Migrated for work two times but still struggling....	128
RUTH: Everybody should be able to dream	130
SALMA AKTER MONEY & RUCHI SRAVASTI: A discussion among returnee women migrant workers in Bangladesh	133
SALMA: A page from my diary	139
SANJEEVANI: Isn’t there something called humanitarian assistance?.	142
SEETA: Whatever our status is, we are still citizens of this country	145
SITI BADRIYAH: My Journey: Battered woman, abused migrant worker, and migrant rights advocate.....	150
SURYA MAYA: Our Government should lift the travel ban on domestic workers.....	159
SWAN VANCOUVER: Life as an immigrant in Canada.....	163

Issue 5, December 2021: Return, Reintegration & Socio-economic Inclusion

Dear Friends,

The December issue of **Our Work, Our Lives** focuses on Return, Reintegration and Socio-economic Inclusion of women migrant workers. We chose to focus on these themes because they resonate with the work of many GAATW members and partners. Some of our colleagues in South and Southeast Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America are currently doing Feminist Participatory Action Research on these topics.

The [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration \(GCM\)](#) in its objective 21 places an obligation on states to ‘cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration’. Given the fact that many states overtly or covertly violate international human rights laws while ‘returning’ and ‘readmitting’ migrants, objective 21 aims to address an important lacuna. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights of Migrants’ [study on return](#) had pointed out that the so-called ‘voluntary return’ is not genuinely voluntary, preferable as it may be to forced return or expulsion.

Unlike return and reintegration, socio-economic inclusion often does not feature in international documents. At a time when most countries prefer to have temporary migration schemes, perhaps it is assumed that migrants would return to their home countries and reintegrate socially and economically. Yet, ideally, measures for socio-economic inclusion in countries of destination should be put in place, even for temporary migrants.

The lived experiences of millions of migrants, especially those in low-wage jobs, challenge the simplistic narrative of return and reintegration. The entire process of labour migration is fraught with challenges for them and rights protection at workplaces are minimal or non-existent. Most of them start with very little social or economic capital. Labour migration policies in many countries of origin are strategies to relieve unemployment pressure. They may have contributed to their families (and indirectly to the country's economy) but upon return they face the same labour market that does not offer any employment to them. Returnee migrant women face added social challenges such as stigma, rejection, and discrimination. In the absence of employment, social support and social security, reintegration measures are merely short-term services offered by non-state actors.

This issue features thirty-three stories from seventeen countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. Most of our authors have experience of working as migrant workers. Their years of work range from 6 months to 38 years. Some are currently working in countries of destination while others have returned to their home countries. All of them have organised themselves in formal or informal groups. Many have experienced human rights violations by agents or employers. While several are still struggling socially and economically, some have been able overcome challenges and achieve their migration goals. A few are community leaders and human rights activists now. While most of the stories are from Asia and Africa, in this issue we also have contributions from Canada, Colombia, Germany, and the UK. Some stories from India focus on labour migration within the country.

Many colleagues have supported the process of 'writing' by doing in-person or online interviews and focus group discussions and transcribed and translated into English the spoken or written words of women workers in their local languages. The stories highlight the need for employment guarantee and state support for health and education, change in patriarchal attitudes towards women workers and value of formal and informal organising among the women.

We hope these stories will trigger further discussion and concrete action. You can write to us with your comments, suggestions, or stories for upcoming issues at bandana@gaatw.org.

We wish you a good year-end break and a happy new year.

Warmly,

GAATW-IS Team

Return, Reintegration & Socio-economic Inclusion



Need for large-scale employment guarantee by the state

ANAMIKA

I will call myself Anamika for this story. I am 48 years old and from Ambajipeta in East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh, India. I have two grown-up children. My son is 22 years old and my daughter is 20.

I completed my graduation at the age of 20 and got married the same year. My husband and mother-in-law used to harass me for very small reasons and he used to beat me often. My husband was very suspicious and very irresponsible. When I could not tolerate the violence and neglect, I came back to my mother's place with my two children. He quickly filed for divorce as he was having an affair with another woman. During the divorce, I didn't claim anything from him. There was no one to guide me through the process. So at the age of 27, I became the single mother of two young children. I didn't get any kind of support from my in-laws or husband for the upbringing and education of my children. He got remarried within a year of our divorce.

As I was living near my mother's house and she could give some time for my children, I started working as a schoolteacher. I had completed graduation but didn't have a B Ed (Bachelor of Education), so I couldn't continue teaching for long. The salary was also very low. I started working with a couple of NGOs as a field-level staff, including with UNICEF for 15 years. My salary was increasing very slowly and it was becoming difficult for me to meet the expenses of my children's education and health.

Several years after my divorce, an agent encouraged me to go to Dubai so I could earn more. My dream was to give good education to my children and buy a flat for us to stay. After discussing with my children and mother, I decided to go abroad to work. My son was doing his Intermediate Degree and daughter was in class 10 at that time. The agent had pursued me for almost one year and I trusted him. He only prepared my passport and visa and I paid him 6,000 rupees for all that and another 20, 000 for my air ticket. He brought me to Hyderabad and put me in touch with another agent there. This new agent took me to the airport and I boarded the flight to Muscat. This was in 2016 and at that time I didn't even know which country I was going to arrive in.

I was very secretive about my plans. Only my mother and children knew. I had not told our friends and relatives because I thought they would not approve of my leaving the children and travelling alone. Some people were already looking down on me because I was a divorcee. I was also worried that if my plans did not work I would be a laughing stock. I didn't know about the rules and regulations for working abroad and I had no idea who to talk to and where to find them. Even if I knew I would have preferred to go through an informal channel.



When I faced harassment at employers' house for the first time, I tried to contact my agent but he said that I would have to put up with all that for the sake of my children. I struggled a lot with the work burden. I used to work 18 hours a day, I was not used to eating bread and I do not eat meat. The family was eating meat every day and I was given some bread to eat. I was not getting enough sleep and if I tried to sleep in between work, my employer used to scold me and beat me with a stick. Not being able to understand Arabic was another reason for beating. I tried calling the agent again but his answer was the same as before: "Put up with some problems, think of your children's future", he would say. Three months passed and my employer was getting more abusive. I didn't know what to do. One day when everyone had gone out for dinner, I escaped from the house. I had no idea where I should go. Luckily, I met a cab driver who knew about these kinds of problems. He dropped me at the Indian Embassy. There I met with a counselor who spoke Telugu. The embassy made my duplicate passport and visa and sent me back to India. I did not get my wages for the three months that I had worked there. I had lost my money and suffered abuse.

After coming back from Muscat, I attended some awareness meetings organised by Sr. Lissy of National Workers Welfare Trust in Ravulapalem. In the meeting, many issues were discussed and it was emphasised that people seeking jobs abroad must go through the formal channel. We were advised to use the government channel to apply for jobs, receive an agreement with working conditions, salary, working hours, time for rest and relaxation and other entitlements of decent work such as healthcare etc. We also received orientation on working conditions in GCC countries, food habits, and the need for basic language skills. We were told that if we decide to go through

recruitment agents, we must find those who are registered with the government.

After this awareness training, I went to Oman in October 2017 via another agent, worked there for two years and returned in November 2019. This time I had managed well. Though I had 18 hours of work per day, I repeatedly negotiated with the employer, communicated assertively and was able to resolve the issues with the employer. I was able to reduce my working hours to 9-10 hours per day.

I was getting 18,000 rupees per month as salary. My madam used to deposit the amount in the bank and show me receipt and my son would get it here in India. He was getting only 16,750 rupees as 1,250 was cut as a remittance fee. Now I learnt the value of migration as it gave me better wages compared to what I would have got in India. I felt that the condition of Indian workers in Oman was more vulnerable compared to workers from Ethiopia and the Philippines. Their governments have better bilateral policies with the government of Oman.

I had learnt Arabic well and was able to communicate with the employer. During my second visit to Dubai, I brought gold worth 100,000 rupees with which I made black beads for myself and one gold chain for my daughter. Both my children have completed their engineering degrees now. My daughter got married when I was in Dubai and my son got a job in a private company. He insisted that I should come back to India, so I returned in December 2019. If all goes well, I may go and work abroad for a couple more years. The salary that I am getting for my work with an NGO does not let me save anything.

I have a government health insurance card, *Arogya Sree*. With that I had got my hysterectomy operation done in 2004, before going to Dubai. I had also taken a housing loan and built a house in which I am living now. But currently I do not get any kind of support from the government. I do not even receive the single woman pension. I don't have a valid ration card, as I my card got cancelled when I was in Oman. I could not even receive the free ration distributed as Covid-19 relief.

As I am very talkative, mingle with people, interact with them frequently and know their issues, I wanted to become a leader so I ran for ZPTS (local body) elections on behalf of a well-known national political party but I lost.

I don't have financial support for entrepreneurship; if I have some support I am interested in starting a food stall.

I feel that that *Gram Panchayats* (local government) are more accessible to rural women. They can orient, train, and educate us on migration and if records are maintained at Gram Panchayat offices it will be easy to get data on migration and to identify most vulnerable returnees so that the government can help those in crisis.

In general men can get a lot of information during their meetings with friends at street corners and *chai* shops. They interact with political party leaders, *Gram Sarpanch* (local government official), ward members etc. They are free to go anywhere and everywhere and at any time but for women that is not possible. So it is important that local level mechanisms are created for women to access reliable information.

There is also a need to address the excessive reliance on middlemen/agents. Usually they are from the same neighbourhood and in the absence of other easily accessible information, women rely on them. Panchayats and local NGOs can build awareness among communities on migration policies.

Finally, the most important thing is large-scale employment guarantee in rural and urban areas. Right now, hunger and unemployment are huge problems. Our government should step up social support for all of us. When vulnerabilities increase people will migrate desperately without worrying about safety.

(Transcribed and translated from Telugu by Sucharita Gandhe, [Centre for World Solidarity](#))

A virtual discussion with Bangladeshi women garment workers in Jordan

BANGLADESHI WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS FORUM

Background

The women migrant workers who participated in this virtual discussion are all from Bangladesh and are employed in the garment sector in Jordan. It is a mixed group with some recent arrivals, as well as some who have been there for about 8 years and have migrated multiple times.

The group is informal and came together around 6 months ago as part of a GAATW initiative to form Women Workers' Forums (WWFs) in different origin and destination countries to provide a learning and sharing environment for women and to facilitate their self-organisation. The group currently has 16 members.

Below is a summary of a group discussion held in December 2021 via IMO. The discussion focussed on socio-economic situation at home, life in Jordan, hopes and fears about return and Government support needed upon return.

Socio-economic situation at home

Many women in the group are the main wage earners in their families (except for 2). Most have children whose education and other expenses they support with their earnings, in addition to other expenses such as the education costs of younger siblings. Some women are not yet married and migrated to save some money for their own future and to support their families.



Their age ranges from 18 to 36. It was interesting to note the high value the group placed on education. The women who have not been able to pursue higher education because of poverty, lack of opportunities, and discrimination are keen to help educate their own children and younger siblings.

“I am supporting my younger sister in her education. I’m very proud of her, she is studying BSc Honours second year.” (Rupali)

Some of them, especially those who have a migration history of 7-8 years, have been able to save some money and buy land in their villages. They are hoping to use this as an asset to secure a measure of independence after their return.

“I’m from an extremely poor family. Besides my parents, I have 6 siblings, and my own son. Since my older brother left the family, I have been their main source of income. After 7 years of hard work, I was able to buy a small piece of land in our village.” (Jannath)

It was quite common for married participants to have husbands who are not working, and in many cases, who have mistreated them. For example, Jannath’s husband left her because her parents were unable to fulfil the dowry demands and her mother-in-law found another wife for her son.

Mahmuda said that she migrated because her husband was unemployed and addicted to drugs, and he never supported her or their son. Now she is sending her earnings to her father, who is saving up to buy some land for her. Some others like Rupali, Nurjahan and Anoara, were deceived by their own family members, including parents and husbands, and lost all their hard-earned savings.

Life in Jordan

While talking about who they socialise with and what their social life in Jordan has been like, several patterns emerged. A few of the women stated that they make friends easily with other Bangladeshi women. Some said that they don't like to have many friends because they have had their trust broken in the past and are afraid of getting hurt and stabbed in the back again. Availability of affordable wi-fi and smartphones has led to more interest in creating and maintaining virtual friendships in other countries (with men in particular) rather than with people around them. Some even have boyfriends from Bangladesh who work in other countries, such as Qatar.

One of them said, "I haven't made friends in Jordan. I have a boyfriend who works in Qatar, who I met online, He's a very nice person. Whenever I have time, I talk to him. He visited my parents in Bangladesh during his vacation."

Another said: "I have several Bangladeshi friends in other countries. I talk to them in my free time. Sometimes I feel like men are better friends than women because women are good at backstabbing."

(The facilitator was a bit concerned to hear this from the group, given that many of them had been deceived by and experienced violence from their husbands, boyfriends, and male family members, and she tried to encourage them to build more trust among themselves. However, they were sharing all their personal experiences in the group and talking freely among themselves. So perhaps one can say that an environment of trust is slowly being created and it may get stronger in future.)

On weekends, the women go to different shops together and sometimes visit other cities, together with colleagues or friends. For the most part, these groups consist of Bangladeshis only.

When asked about their wages, and if they feel they are being paid adequately, all of them said that considering their hard work and the sacrifices they have made, the money they receive is really not fair at all. Sabina said, “Just to get by we are forced to rely on overtime work until 10 pm most nights.”

Masuma added, “I have been suffering from a bad toothache for a long time. I never dared to see a dentist here because it’s too expensive. The factory will not cover it. The factory doctors only deal with small issues. Therefore,

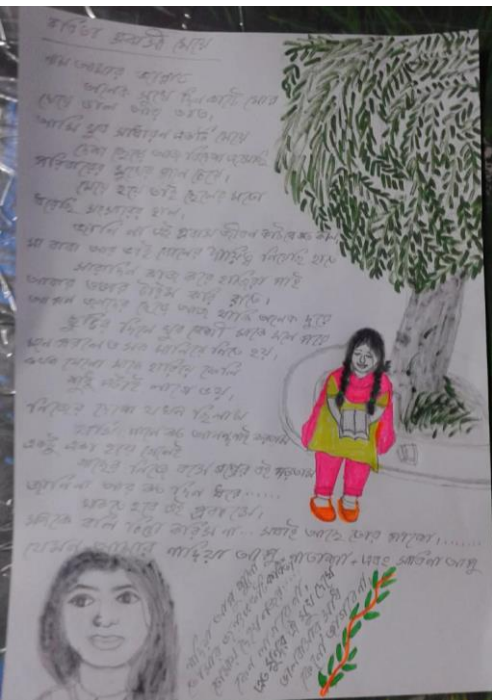


we think it's better to save our money and send it home. A better wage would have helped us in these types of situations."

Hopes and fears about return

The group's responses about their thoughts on returning home were mixed. For example, some were concerned they might not have a regular income upon return which would make life difficult. Even those who have bought some land were worried that their savings would not suffice to build a house. In such a scenario, remigration might be the only option, but they are also exhausted and were not really keen on it.

Some of the women have clear plans. Nurjahan said that she has some handicraft and tailoring skills and is planning to start a small shop. Similarly, Rupali plans to get married and start a small business.



At some point in the discussion, some women expressed their deep frustration at the high price they had to pay for relatively small rewards and the toll it has taken on their lives. "I have been living in Jordan for almost 8 years. I was very beautiful when I migrated. But over the last 8 years, because of the harsh weather in Jordan and my hard work, I have lost most of my hair, my skin has become very dry and wrinkled, I don't feel beautiful anymore. I feel like I have lost the golden time of my life." (Shefali)

For some, especially those with older children, future seemed uncertain. They said that they did not know what to expect and whether they will be welcomed back home.

Government support needed upon return

All of the women feel that the Bangladesh government must support them upon return so that their lives will be a little easier and more secure. They mentioned access to justice for legal and financial compensation, public benefits including social security and skills training, and a more active role by their government in negotiating their working conditions and payment abroad.

Group members had the following recommendations, not only with regard to return, but also to improve their overall situation:

- “Many of our husbands cheated on us or got remarried. This has been a reality for many migrant women for years. And yet, there is never any justice for them. It’s as if this has become the norm. Ironically, it’s the migrant women themselves who are being called ‘bad women’. No one ever complains about this publicly, and the government does nothing about it.” To address this, they demanded access to functioning redress mechanisms, which could hold cheating husbands to account and get compensation. The same goes for financial cheating by any family members. (Sabina)
- “Public office holders get a lot of benefits in Bangladesh; they don’t have to worry about their future. Our contribution is no less than theirs, in fact, it is more. Why don’t we get a handsome pension like them?” (Several women)

- “I don’t want to spend or risk all my savings to start a new business. My savings may not even be enough for that. It would be very helpful if the government gave me some seed money for my business as a loan when I go back.” (Nurjahan)
- “I think educated people understand our contributions and that we are not doing anything bad here. So people should be educated and know that we work very hard and we are not ‘bad’ women.” (Shefali)
- “We want our government to negotiate with destination countries, so that we get better wages.” (Many women)
- Several pointed out that the current practices for home leave are inadequate. “We are not given paid leave to go home regularly, and thus have to spend out of our own pockets, which eats into our savings. Our government should negotiate better terms for us.”
- They also fear that if they go back permanently or prematurely, it will be hard for them to come back, since factories prefer younger workers, who are seen as more compliant.



- Some also recommended lowering the migration costs for men in Bangladesh, which would keep those women who prefer to stay with their children from being coerced into migrating. “It would have been easier if I could have stayed with our children, and we could have sent my husband or one of my brothers abroad instead,” Anoara said. “The government should lower migration costs for men.”

(This discussion was facilitated by Nadia Afrin in Bangla via IMO. Nadia also transcribed, summarised and translated the discussion.)

Impact of Covid-19 on women internal migrant workers in India

BISHAKHA BHANJA

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted people not only on the health front, but on all fronts – social, economic and psychological. This impact has not been uniform for everyone. While clearly women have been impacted differently than men, different sections of women have also been impacted differently.

The sudden and severe lockdown to contain spread of the pandemic exposed the precarity of the labour migration regime within the country. Migrant workers from the cities started returning to the villages in their home states. They had lost their jobs almost overnight and in the absence of any savings, they had to deal with hunger and homelessness. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children were seen walking back home hundreds of kilometres away.

With the steady erosion of agrarian economy, many people in India have moved from the countryside to the towns and cities to find employment in the informal sector. The work that internal migrant workers do is wide ranging. Construction, small and medium industries, brick kilns, garment sector, domestic work, and many others. The common thread that connects these different types of work is their precarious, temporary nature and lack of state protection. While certain sectors of work such as domestic work and garment work have predominantly or exclusively women workers, women also work with men in brick kilns, factories and at construction sites. They also do home-based paid work (alongside their unpaid work).

Against this backdrop, National Alliance of Women (NAWO) conducted a study to understand and highlight the social and economic challenges faced by women migrant workers in the wake of Covid-19. The study looked into the impact of the pandemic in both urban and rural contexts.

Data was collected from 500 women migrant workers in Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh.

Key findings

- Young girls, as young as 15, are migrating in search of work and they constituted around 7% of our total sample. Another 47% belonged to the age group of 20 to 30.
- Nearly 57% of our respondents had migrated for work alone and not with husbands or families.
- 40% of the women we interviewed were first-time migrants.
- 20% percent said that the factory where they were working closed down and they did not get any wage or salary. After some time, it became difficult to pay for house rent, food etc., so they had to return.
- 10% respondents said they felt like hostages in the workplace (those who were staying in hostels inside the factory, mostly in garment industry, and fulltime domestic workers) and the fear of not being able to see family members forced them to leave the place and come back.
- None of the migrant women we interviewed said that they had received any help from the Migration Facilitation Centres (state-run centres) for their journey back home. None of them knew that these institutions exist.

- Indebtedness increased: around 29% said they had to borrow money to return home. The rest said they used up their entire savings during the lockdown.
- Despite efforts by civil society and the government, around 23% of respondents said they hardly got any food during their journey and had to do without food for two-three days.
- The women who stayed back in the city also experienced shortage of food. Many migrant families have their ration cards (public distribution system) in their native villages.
- 12% said they were extremely worried about their safety, though none reported any case of sexual violence during the journey.

Key recommendations to the Government of India

1. Migration is a complex phenomenon and women's migration is usually analysed through the lens of "independent" or "dependent" migration. Women are defined by their "family role" rather than by their "market role". This problematic categorisation captures only one reason for migration and puts most of the women who migrated with family or because of marriage as "associated migrants". It thus invisibilises the migrant women workforce. Even seasonal migrants are not counted as migrants under this definition. In order to recognise the economic role migrant women play, they should be registered as migrants and not as associates or dependants.
2. The study showed that none of the returnee migrants received support from Migrant Facilitation Centres during the pandemic. If the migration support centres had been running effectively, perhaps migrants would not have faced such gigantic problems during the pandemic/ lockdown. Migration support centres in big cities and in

industrial areas must work more efficiently and the existence of such centres should be advertised widely so that migrant workers can make use of them.

3. A sizeable number of migrant women work as domestic workers. They do not have any social security benefits. Though there is provision for Domestic Workers' Welfare Boards, they exist in name only. There should be resource allocation to meet the social security needs of domestic workers.

We also demand for Ratification of the ILO convention 189.

Though under MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) 100 days of paid work a year is guaranteed to those who need work, the study showed that only 11.7% of respondents received work under the scheme. If the government wants to stop distress migration (which is the purpose of MGNREGS) it is important to ensure sufficient days of work. Those who need work must get at least eight to 10 days of work per month. The government must also think of including different types of work under MGNREGS.

4. A skill mapping of migrant workers and opening up other local job opportunities beyond MGNREGS is the need of the hour.
5. Both men and women should migrate if they want to. However, the government should ensure safe migration as well as safety and security of workers in the workplace. There are laws in place for this but effective implementation seems lacking.

The existing rules for pre-departure orientation for migrant workers need to be effectively implemented by labour departments.

The POSH Act (Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) 2013), especially the Local Complaint Committee which is meant for women of the unorganised sector should work effectively. There should be regular orientation on POSH Act both for workers and for Local Complaint Committee members.

6. Review of Labour Codes from a feminist perspective is necessary especially for those working in the unorganised sector, who have migrated but are involved in home-based work (e.g. *gota* and sequin fitting in sarees in Surat).
7. Most of our respondents were unaware of their entitlements. Many did not even have a bank account. They missed out on the few benefits they were entitled to for lack of appropriate documents. So, a concerted effort by state and central government agencies is needed to ensure women are properly informed and to help them get their benefits.

Conclusion

Post lockdown, when we contacted the respondents again to find out how they were doing. We found that young girls who were working as domestic workers or those who had gone independently for work in other sectors had migrated again. Those who usually go along with their spouses had stayed back, but planning to go back when the situation eases down a bit.

Some efforts from the government, such as ration card portability and registration of all informal sector workers (E-Shram), have been initiated.

Wherever you go, your rights go with you!

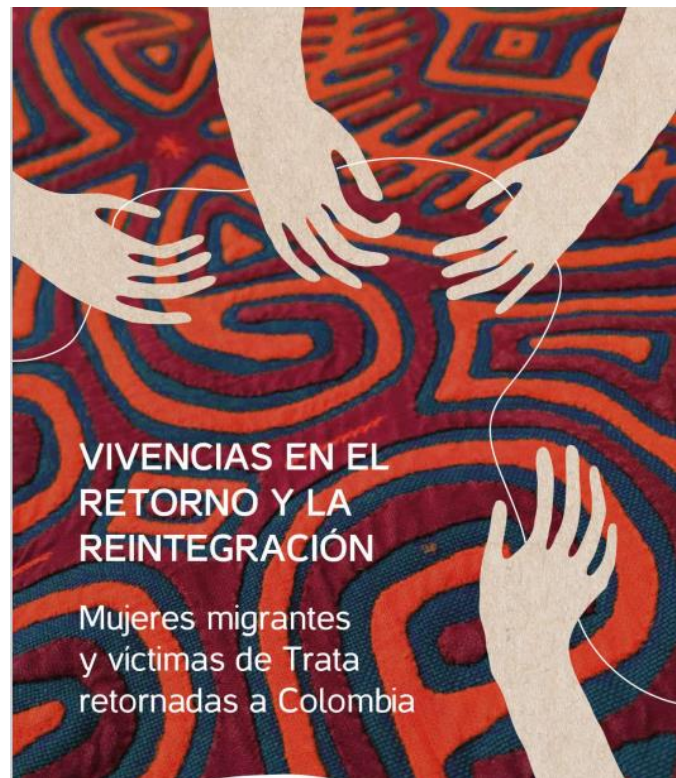
CORPORACIÓN ESPACIOS DE MUJER

Yéxica and Esmeralda Gonzalez are two sisters from Maracaibo, Venezuela. Yéxica is a social communicator and Esmeralda is a lawyer. Together with their two other sisters, who are also professionals, they are the only economic providers for themselves and their elderly parents. The sisters are very active in their community and frequently engage in the city's diverse socio-cultural activities. However, due to the severe economic and political crisis in their home country, in 2017 both Yéxica and Esmeralda lost their jobs.

Since entering Colombia is relatively easy, the Gonzalez sisters decided to travel to Medellín, a city with a pleasant weather, where they thought they could find jobs to support themselves and send money to their parents, who remained in Venezuela.

Upon arrival to Colombia, however, the sisters realised that life as a migrant was nothing like they expected it to be: finding a decent job as a Venezuelan woman is hard, and the relief packages provided by the Government for Venezuelan migrants and refugees are not enough to cover their basic needs, let alone send money to their families back home. None of the sisters was able to find a job within their fields, so they started to work as domestic workers and in the service sector. They had no written contracts and they couldn't access any social benefits, but they had no other choice if they were to bring their parents to Colombia.

In Medellín, there is a large Venezuelan community, so it didn't take long for the sisters to cross paths with other Venezuelan migrants. They realised that the community was facing many challenges when accessing health and education services and didn't receive any guidance on the social and economic inclusion programmes available to them. So they decided to organise a group of Venezuelan volunteers to guide and support Venezuelan migrants and refugees arriving in Medellín and the metropolitan area (9 municipalities) to access basic services.



The group of volunteers first got to know about *Corporación Espacios de Mujer* during a series of awareness raising activities to prevent human trafficking. Since then, they have been receiving support and capacity building for the promotion and protection of their human rights.

The Gonzalez sisters then enrolled in other training activities that weren't necessarily directed at the migrant population.

When in March 2021 the Government of Colombia issued a **Temporary Protection Statute** aimed at Venezuelan migrants who entered Colombia through regular channels, easing their transit from a temporary and extraordinary protection regime to an ordinary one, the entire Gonzalez family was supported in the registration process.

Currently, Yéxica and Esmeralda live with their parents in Medellín. They have rented an apartment and have started their own family business selling desserts and cakes from their home. They have opened a Facebook and Instagram page to promote their business, through which they provide for themselves and their family. They continue to lead the group of volunteers and are recognised in the city for their work on behalf of the Venezuelan community.

(Interview-based story prepared by Bianca Fidone, [Corporación Espacios de Mujer](#). Translated from Spanish by Emilia Cebrian, GAATW-IS)

Reintegration after trafficking

CORPORACIÓN ESPACIOS DE MUJER

In 2017, Angie was a 19-year-old high school graduate who lived in Valle del Cauca with her mother and her three brothers. She came from a low-income family and supported herself by selling fast food on the street or working in clothing stores. She described her work situation as *enslaving* and *denigrating* because she didn't have any rights as a worker. She didn't have any professional training and didn't see herself well-connected to her community: her only interest was to provide for herself, and she didn't have time for social or cultural activities.

However, one day she lost her job and was left with nothing. She realised that she couldn't count on her family either. *"The family ties weren't really that strong."*

At this point Angie remembered that one of her sisters had invited her to go to China, where a friend of hers had offered her a job that would pay a lot of money. *"That girl looks like she wants to help you, she seems like a good person, and you are very young and pretty. There you can look for new opportunities!"*, her sister told her. Angie was convinced that she wouldn't have another opportunity like that and accepted her sister's proposal, who acted as an intermediary throughout the process.

Her sister's friend sent her the flight ticket and the money to organise the trip. Angie was aware that she would have to take care of her debt upon arrival, but this didn't worry her because once that was covered, she would earn enough money to buy a house in Colombia for her family, and would

finally be able to pay for her studies to become a police officer – something she had dreamt of her whole life.

Angie left for Hong Kong, where she stayed for some time before moving to mainland China and then Thailand. In all three countries, she was forced to do sex work and comply with the owner's orders to pay off her debt: Angie was a victim of Human Trafficking.

“Had I known what was going to happen to me, I think I would have stayed and sold food for the rest of my life, because at least I was free to make my own decisions, even if I had to work more than twelve hours a day. At least I was free to express what I felt and do what I wanted. After that, I couldn't take the money I was making even though I was the one working. When I got there, everything changed, it was nothing like they had promised before I left”.

“I entered the country legally and [my captors] complied with all the legal procedures: I have met other victims whose passports were taken away from them, but not all traffickers have the same method. In my case, for example, they never took my documents away because where I was, [the police] could stop me on the street and if I didn't have my papers, my traffickers could find themselves in a lot of trouble. I was allowed to go out, and when I did, I had to always show my passport, no matter where I went”.

For just under a year, Angie lived in this situation: *“It's a completely different world and I felt so small. Everything is very different there, from the people to the language and the food. It felt as if I was on another planet because they think and act differently from us Colombians, so I found things very different from what I imagined”.*

One day, tired of being subjected to this and from the death threats to herself and her family, *“I decided to escape and went to the Embassy. I took off. I was angry because she [the trafficker] didn't care about anything other than me paying my debt: she threatened that if I didn't pay her, she would kill me or my family and that made me feel tied to her. I was her slave.”*

After reporting her situation to the Colombian Embassy in Thailand, Angie was referred to an NGO in Bangkok, where she stayed for just under two months before returning to Colombia. Upon arrival in Medellín, she was referred to Corporación Espacios de Mujer for her reintegration process: *“Over time, I realised how much they [Espacios de Mujer's team] have supported me emotionally, they have been there for me more than my own family. When I returned to Colombia, I began to see the people who helped me while I was in Asia and now that I'm back here as family: they were always looking after me, they supported me and offered their guidance and assistance”.*

“I started a process with Espacios de Mujer which helped me to become stronger both emotionally and personally. I participated in the Atenea School (for women's empowerment) that the NGO carries out. I took a course in human resources and I also started taking meditation classes and other activities. All these spaces are very important to me”.

Currently, Angie has reoriented her life project by setting new goals: she wants to get a degree and become a better person as a way to overcome everything she had to go through.

“Right now, I feel great: I have gained knowledge, I am learning and I am working in a very good place, a Catholic school (Don Bosco). Getting here was not easy but I feel very lucky. My employer is fair and my boss is a very correct, human person. He doesn’t make me work extra hours, and I have enough time for lunch”.

Thanks to the support and legal assistance provided by Corporación Espacios de Mujer, in October 2021 Angie was the first victim of human trafficking in the country to receive compensation, after her trafficker was taken to court, prosecuted and convicted (in Colombia).

Angie regularly participates in talks and trainings at Corporación Espacios de Mujer.

(Interview-based story by Bianca Fidone, Corporación Espacios de Mujer, Colombia. Translation from Spanish by Emilia Cebrian, GAATW-IS)

I want to give the best to my daughter

DEVI KUMARI MOKTAN

My name is Devi Kumari Moktan. I currently live in Lalbandi in Nepal but I come from Sindhuli district. I have a family of 10 including my mother, father, 6 brothers and one sister. My family was not rich. Everyone had to work so we can get our two meals per day. This is how my childhood passed. I got married. My husband was not employed or earning anything. At first, even though we were poor, everything was going well. But after several years, my husband took to alcohol and started abusing me. He used to raise his hand and torture me mentally. It got worse as days went by. By then I had given birth to a daughter. My husband went to work in Dubai but returned because of health issues. I was getting very worried.

Then I had a discussion with him about me going abroad for work. He was against it but I decided that I would go. My husband's sister had gone to Oman via India. She was visiting us and told me that going via India would not cost me anything. So I started the process and went to India with my sister-in-law. But upon reaching India I found out that many other women from different parts of Nepal were waiting there to process their foreign employment papers. Some women had waited for 6 months. Seeing all that, I got very scared and returned to Nepal after one month in India. Meanwhile, after 20 days, my sister-in-law received the fake papers from the brokers. Now she is in Kuwait. She tells me that everything is alright, but they don't give holidays and other benefits. She also says that without the right papers sometimes things get difficult.

Seven months after returning from India, I decided to go to Dubai with my husband with visit visas. My visa was sent by a Nepali woman residing in Dubai. We had to pay around 70,000 NPR for my visa and the cost for my husband's visa was around 110,000 NPR. My husband did not get any job in Dubai but I got work as a live-in domestic worker. For a year, the money I earned was spent for my husband's room rent and visa costs. He didn't get any job for a long time and finally got something just before the pandemic started. When Covid- 19 struck I lost my job. My husband also lost his job. Later, I got a job at another house. Everything was fine. I used to work for a family of 5 people. I used to get a day off every two weeks. But for my husband, it was getting very hard to get another job because of Corona. Later, he got a job in a coffee shop but he got sick while working there. He got stones. The company paid his medical costs for some time but the expenses became too high so he came back to Nepal. Meanwhile, I was also dealing with a health problem. I had had a foot operation when I was in Nepal. Some problems had continued even after the operation. One of my sisters-in-law helped me with ticket costs to come back to Nepal.

Both of us returned with empty hands. We have not been able to save anything nor paid off our loans. I keep telling my husband to do something, but he doesn't think of getting involved in any small work. Our need is increasing day by day. He does not like the idea of going abroad again either. I have not been able to send my daughter to a good school. He says that he wants to start some agricultural business. He had tried to do that a while back, but it left us only with debt and no profit. I do not want him to get involved in the business once again. I keep worrying about our unpaid debt. I am thinking of going abroad once again but he does not like the idea.

I am constantly worried about the future of our daughter. Since I am not finding any opportunities here in Nepal, I am planning to go back. I want to give the best to my daughter and that can only be possible if I have a good income.

(Interview and translation from Nepali by Binita Poudel, Tarangini Foundation, Nepal)

Returning home: Reflections and Recommendations

DOMESTIC WORKERS SOLIDARITY NETWORK (DWSN), JORDAN

(This is a collation of observations and insights from a group discussion among 7 members of DWSN. The online discussion was facilitated in English by Alfie Gordo of GAATW-IS via WhatsApp. Special thanks to Adoracion Doris Bunag, Aisha Novie Baleong-Qayj, Ann Carillo, Bernie Astorga Penaflor, Maria Corazon Laggasid, Mary Joy, and Ruth)

The Domestic Workers Solidarity Network (DWSN) was formed in Jordan in 2014 by a group of community leaders representing migrant domestic workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. The network formation was supported by the Solidarity Center through a series of thematic workshops and dialogues with the migrant domestic worker communities on labour exploitation and human trafficking, which led to grounding the vision and advocacy of DWSN. The network is designed to provide a collective voice for migrant domestic workers and ensure that they have access to full workers' rights in Jordan.

The group

My friends call me Aisha (37 years) after I converted to Islam during my marriage. I came to Jordan from the Philippines back in 2005 when I was only 19 years old. I came to chase my dream of a better life. For five straight years I worked as a domestic worker. And in 2010, I got married to a Russian man who has a residency status here in Jordan. We are blessed with one daughter. Until today, I continue my work as a domestic worker.

I'm Ann from the Philippines. I have been working as a domestic worker in Jordan for 18 years. I came here in 1982 with a degree in Elementary Education. It has been a long time and I have made a lot of personal sacrifices; I sometimes regret not being able to practice my skills in teaching as I am the sole breadwinner for my family.

I'm Bernie, a Filipino and I have been working here in Jordan for the past 15 years. I am a single parent of 2 now grown-up sons, and the only wage earner in my family. On a scale of 1-10, I am at stage 4 of realising my plans of building my own house.

My name is Doris and I'm from the Philippines. I've been living and working here in Jordan for 23 years. Prior to working as a domestic worker in Jordan, I worked as a nursing aid in Saudi Arabia for 6 years. When I moved to Jordan, I started with a salary of 200 USD, at that time it was 50 USD higher than the minimum wage standard because I managed to negotiate for a higher rate given my previous employment. From 1998 until now, I continue to work with an aim of elevating my family's economic status from being poor to an average level.

I'm Maria Corazon, a Filipino domestic worker here in Jordan since January 1996. As a single parent I decided to work abroad to support my family. I first came to Saudi Arabia in 1992 and 5 years later I moved to Jordan. My kids were still small when I first migrated for work. I had no choice but to leave them and come here.

My name is Mary Joy and I have been in Jordan for 21 years. I have 2 children in the Philippines whom I fully support.

I'm Ruth from Kenya, and I came here in October last year to work as a migrant domestic worker. I work hard to help my siblings with school fees, and my grandmother for her utility bills.

The seven women have been in migration for an average of 18 years, with one year being the minimum stay and the highest period spent as a migrant domestic worker has reached 30 years.

Five out of seven are the sole bread winners in their families. Motivations for migration were highly driven by their vision of better economic status, through investment in livelihood and in education of children and siblings, and to some extent, for themselves.

The discussion

Aisha, Ann, Bernie, Mary Joy, Ruth, Maria, and Doris spoke to Alfie from GAATW-IS on three key topics: their migration goals; their hopes and fears about returning home; and their recommendations to their governments.

Migration goals

I have completed my mission in providing for the education of my siblings; we are now at a point where we can share the financial responsibilities in the family. I am now able to invest in my studies to pursue what I left behind before becoming a migrant worker, and that is to become a teacher. At the moment, I plan to invest in setting up a local shop before returning home for good. - Ann

Our economic status has definitely changed for the better. Through hard work and perseverance, I have been able to save up for a small business investment. Together with my siblings, we are trying to realise our plans. Unfortunately,

the current pandemic has been a big blow and kept our plans on hold. We remain hopeful and we will not stop saving up for our future plans. – Doris

Being part of migrant organisations here in Jordan, I have been able to access a number of skills trainings. I have been able to gain skills and knowledge that I hope to use some day. That is why it is essential to save as much as I can to start a simple business upon returning home. – Maria Corazon

Migration goals vary from building a house, investing in sustainable livelihood, completing a degree for upward employment, to acquiring new skills for business start-ups. Some also recounted on how the situation of being a sole wage earner changes over time as more jobs or livelihood opportunities are accessed by other family members, or as the economic situation of the family improves.

Hopes and fears on return migration

Aisha has hopes of not having to live a difficult life anymore when she decides to return home for good.

Ann hopes that all women migrant workers realise the importance of having a migration goal prior to migration, and/or access to jobs suitable to their skills and experience upon returning.

Ruth hopes that society would become aware of the work and sacrifices involved in migration, that women migrants should not be looked down upon or blamed if they return home without any savings.

Mary Joy, with her 21 years of working as a migrant domestic worker, expresses concerns of not being able to save anything since she is still prioritising her children's education and daily needs.

The same financial insecurity was echoed by Bernie, as she hopes for a stable livelihood for her family and herself.

Doris and Ruth shared the prevailing misconceptions on overseas migration in their communities. Most people think migration easily brings more money and increases financial status. They don't consider the sacrifices involved in the work, and how inability to invest or lack of savings is seen as a failed migration experience.

A call to action to our governments to support women migrant returnees
Ann highlighted the need for government to force recruitment agencies to pay for migrant workers' social security and health insurance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. She does not have a health insurance and she thinks the meagre savings of migrants can easily dry out because of the high cost of medical care.

Our government should provide targeted livelihood programmes for returning women migrant workers, especially those who have difficulties of finding alternative jobs and means to support their families. – Bernie

There should be specialised offices to address the concerns of different sectors of work in which migrant workers are involved, and to organise consultations to better understand our motivations for leaving our country, so that

development policies will work towards improving the lives of families left behind. - Ann

It is important to ensure that all migrant women workers have financial security during and after migration. Economic empowerment will in turn boost the country's economic growth and help lift the socio-economic status of migrant families. – Doris

We should have access to trainings and loan services in local communities, not only in main cities or urban areas since a lot of migrant returnees are coming from different provinces. – Mary Joy and Maria Corazon

Our government should provide scholarships to those who would like to pursue a degree in college in any university. - Aisha

There should be financial infrastructures and finance coaching support available to migrant workers in destination countries as well as in countries of origin. For example, having diaspora banks that will provide easy and direct banking transactions from destination countries and home countries. This helps in abolishing third-party intermediaries that can sometimes lead to fraud/theft of the hard-earned money of migrant workers. – Ruth

Once you're in an abusive state of mind, it's a hard cycle to break

JUDITH

I will call myself Judith. I would like to start by inviting you to hear my story, as I am about to narrate what I have been through, what I could have gone through, and what I could have done had I known what my rights were, before Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery introduced themselves to me.

First things first, let me tell you one of the most common situations of an exploitation: you might honestly not realise, while you are going through it and for years after, what you really went through. In my case, I was literally told so from an observer's point of view, and I am still trying to digest it all, with professional assistance and support from NGOs such as [LAWRS](#) and [FLEX](#), and the UK Government through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

I was exploited while working as a domestic worker in the UK for a period of eight months. Deprived of sleep, sometimes food, and definitely deprived of everything I have a right to according to international and national law, as a human being with dignity. My bosses were a rich English family that needed a person to live in the parents' house. Before then, I had also been exploited for four months while working in a hostel after I had just arrived in the UK, and later in a similar job in Spain. But the poor conditions I had to endure in this last situation, while working as a domestic worker, was the last drop to pour my emotional health all over the place.



After I left the situation I was in last, I one day saw a post on Facebook which said something like: “If you have been exploited, we would like to hear your story and we pay a certain amount for your time”. I immediately answered that call from FLEX, not only for the money, but because at the bottom of my heart I knew that I had been exploited. Although I wouldn’t admit it in part because of this culture of toxic positivity we see on social media, TV and self-help books, which makes us think we have to take responsibility for everything that happens to us. There is no excuse: “you attracted it, you are responsible for being abused”, my mind would say.

When I got to speak to the person carrying out the research, I felt like I was giving them my time and telling them how I was abused, while at the same time deeply questioning whether my abusive situation wasn’t actually better than the place I was in at that moment. It was as if there were two of me fighting and one was saying: “you were being abused but at least you were

safe there". How can someone be safe in such conditions? But I was convinced that being safe is enough for surviving, and that that was all that this world had for me. I was wrong!

When you start looking deep into human trafficking, it is sad to see how many victims end up going back to their abusers, to their pimps, to their bosses, to their owners. And then the story starts to get sad and consuming. Why would somebody take such desperate action? How can being exploited be the safest option?

It is generally the same for everyone, but without generalising I will use the right I have to talk about my experience and if it does resonate with the readers, the objective of this text will have been reached successfully.

It all started in my childhood. It usually starts there.

I was severely abused from the age of four by the person who was supposed to love and care for me: my mother. I was physically beaten to the point of her exhaustion. She would only stop when her arms would not let her continue, and then eventually she would use the laws of physics in her favour to punish me: I would have to kneel on corn grain, metal bottle lids, and the weight of my own body would punish me.

For many years I have been trying to convince myself that what she did to me was out of love. Weird, I know. But I had to find a positive behind it all in order to survive. To be sober under these circumstances was and is, sometimes, unbearable. And I need help from time to time.

So, my justification for this was the exact one that she gave me from a very young age. She had stopped her life because I had been inside her belly. She

had put on weight and I had drained her cells and all she had to grow inside her. She had stopped studying and thriving in life because now she had that little piece of self that although it was now detached, was still part of her. Hence, she had the right to have done what she had to me. She gave me life, she fed me, she carried me around and then, finally, she destroyed me.

This was the reference of love I knew. These were the sacrifices I was ready to take in life.

I am having therapy because after I spoke to FLEX as part of that research I mentioned before, they referred me to LAWRS. And through them I realised that I was not alone in this. That this situation is more common than one can think, and it has to stop.

It took me months of therapy to have the first glimpse on what it means to be “worthy”. My therapist had a tough time convincing me of that. And I am still not sure sometimes. Once you are in an abusive state of mind, it is a hard cycle to break. In my case, what it took was to see this post saying: “WERE YOU EXPLOITED? WE’D LIKE TO HEAR YOUR STORY”. If the post had said: “were you exploited? Would you like to sue your exploiters?” I would have run miles away. But as it was casual and simple, I just jumped in rather quickly to be heard and to get the money offered. I took the bait to my freedom. And today I throw baits to freedom: I know who to go to or how to say to a person where they can be heard and from there, find out they can be helped, just like it happened to me.

I still remember the kind lady at FLEX called Letícia who referred me to LAWRS. LAWRS got me an immigration and compensation lawyer for free,

offered me support with counselling even though I had insecure immigration status in the UK.

So, finally, I am free of most of the thoughts I would have when people would come to gaslight me. I have tools to identify abusive situations and to leave them rather quickly! And when my brain comes up with the words: “but they had reasons to do what they did...” I shout it out rather skilfully and walk away to a position where I am wanted, accepted, respected and valued.

My heart still breaks when I see oppression, aggression, injustice, tyranny and violence, because I have experienced it on my own skin for thirty years and it is undoubtedly triggering and might never stop, but I hope it will. I hope to uplift people so they can stand up for themselves, as I am able to do today. Through my activism, I developed a workshop of self-esteem and holistic healing through drama for victims of human trafficking and refugees.

That is my story. Thanks for stopping by and have a good and safe life and remember: you are worthy. What has happened in the past won't define who you can be in your future, as long as you don't feel ashamed to ask for help. Asking for help is a sign of bravery and the utmost step for changing.

(As told to Latin American Women's Rights Service, UK; a longer version of this story was first published on the [website of Focus on Labour Exploitation, UK](#))

Rights are the foundation of life

KYUN PAR



My name is Kyun Par. You can call me Champa. Currently, I am the president of the Network of Migrant Domestic Workers in Thailand. I am 46 years old, of Burmese-Nepalese descent. My grandparents emigrated from Nepal to Burma during World War II. I grew up in the Kachin state of Burma or Myanmar. I have been a domestic worker for 29 years.

My father passed away when I was 5 years old, so my mother looked after all nine children. When I was young, most families in our neighbourhood received money from female members of the family who were outside the village. I was told that they were in Bangkok. Many men were also working

away from the village but they didn't send money regularly. Everyone said that it is because men can't save money.

I didn't know where Bangkok was and what they did, but I noticed that their money was very helpful for their families. I grew up thinking that I would also go to Bangkok to work and send money home for my mother. I came to Thailand at the age of 17. Someone helped me come here. I was told to be careful because the police might give me trouble. I did not have any documents. Many years later, I learnt that I was smuggled. I was an illegal migrant. At that time there was no way to register migrants, I think. Anyway, I kept myself away from the eyes of the law and worked here.

Initially, my main problem was language. I did not speak Thai language. But I could speak Hindi and I hoped that it might help me find a job with an Indian family. I did find an employer and started working as a babysitter at the age of 17. When I learnt Thai, I sensed that Thai colleagues who work as domestic workers didn't like me. When they saw me, they would say, "Your people are taking our jobs. It is so hard for Thai people to find a job." I felt guilty when I heard this because I was working illegally and "stealing" local people's jobs.

Now I have legal documents, like visa and work permit, and I pay taxes. That means I have rights as a worker. I believe that everyone should have a chance to work. Employers should be just and fair to everyone. There is enough opportunity for a lot of workers. No one is stealing anyone's jobs. Sometimes employers take a Burmese worker because they can pay us less and make us work more. We take the work because many of us do not have papers and need the money.

I worked without a contract for a long time. Mostly, I worked with an employer for at least 2 years. I worked as a domestic worker in an Indian family for 5 years and with a westerner for 10 years. He didn't say that he would hire me for 10 years. I just stayed until he went back to his country. The money I earned here helped my family a lot. I used to send all my money to them.

I had no idea what an employment contract was but now I know. I didn't know that I could take time off, I never had a day off. When I noticed that my friend had a day off, I looked for a job with a day off. When I did a job interview, I negotiated with my employer that I needed a day off once a month.

I agree with the current Thai migrant worker policy that lets migrants register as legal workers but the process is so cumbersome that many migrant workers still prefer to come illegally. Then they are exploited by recruiters. I would like the Thai government to make the process easy. I also think that the health insurance policy is good. When I was sick, it helped me a lot. In the past, I didn't have a health insurance, I had to pay for it all.

When my work permit expired in 2014, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know anything about the government's plan. Someone suggested that I should meet HomeNet Thailand and I did. They explained everything to me carefully and I told my friends.

I met Thai domestic workers and learnt that Thailand currently has the ministerial Regulation No. 14 on the protection of domestic workers. It made me realise that domestic workers have rights. I would like all migrant

domestic workers in Thailand to know about the law and negotiate with employers for rights protection. It is not a favour, nor anyone's kindness. It is our right. In the past, I used to think that I had a day off because my employer was kind. When I didn't have a day off, I thought it was because of my bad luck. But now I know that all workers have rights, no one has less or more rights. I have also understood that we need to demand our rights and one person can't do it alone. No one will listen to just one person's voice. Domestic workers, regardless of their citizenship status, have the same problems. So we need to organise as domestic workers, make our voices louder and Thai domestic workers and migrant domestic workers need to be in solidarity.

Now that we have a network, everyone notices us and our advocacy for increased legal and social protection of domestic workers in Thailand. Most domestic workers are women but the law doesn't protect our maternity rights. The government doesn't look upon domestic work as work and we are not seen as contributing to the economic development of the country because we work in a private employer's household. So, we are not in Section 33 of the Social Security law. I don't see it that way because we have jobs, our workplace is the employer's house. We must have the right in Section 33 of social security because we have employers and we are employees. We look after the employer's family and because of our work they can work outside and not worry about their home. So we are indispensable to the economy too. The



employer pays us wages. When we buy things in a convenience store, we buy it at the same price. The store doesn't ask us who we are.

COVID-19 has had an economic and social impact on many domestic workers. Some of us had to put in many more hours of work because the employer worked from home and their children didn't go to school but studied online. So everyone in the family needed more support from the domestic worker. Some domestic workers got suspended or lost their job. Some were asked to work for less hours on a reduced salary. In addition, we have noticed new prejudice and discrimination during this pandemic. Migrants were seen as carriers of the virus. Many people thought that Burmese migrants were the cause of local transmission. Actually, COVID-19 does not discriminate between Thais and foreigners. The virus cannot see people's ethnicity. In my opinion, this was unfair to migrant workers. We will need to discuss these things openly and take precautions.

(Interview and translation from Thai by Kullanat Suksumek, [HomeNet, Thailand.](#))



I want a life of retirement, but I don't think I have the luxury of it

KHADEEJA

I am Khadeeja (not real name), a 67-years-old widow from Nilambur in Malappuram District of Kerala, India. I have worked abroad for 21 years but I'm still struggling to survive.

I stopped my schooling after 4th standard because my parents couldn't afford my education. We were 10 children and my parents' primary concern was to make sure that we had enough to eat. I got married when I was 25 years old. It was a very late age by the standards of that time. Most of my friends married before they were 18. Mine was a special case. My parents could not afford to arrange my marriage earlier because of our bad economic situation. Finally, I was married off to an old man. But he abandoned me when I was a mother of 5 children (one son and 4 daughters). He left me and married another woman. Then I started doing domestic work to feed my children. I had no other means to earn a livelihood.

One day, a woman named Alice approached me. She was working as a mediator of a large recruitment network which sends women abroad. I thought it was a good chance to earn a better income and I decided to migrate. I moved to Bombay and waited for my turn for 3-4 months. I travelled with one of my roommates' passports since she could not go. I was sent to Qatar for domestic work and I stayed there for three and half years. I faced a lot of problems there such as overtime work, irregular

payment, not enough food, etc. After three and half years I came back and stayed here for 3 months.

I migrated again to Saudi for domestic work and stayed there for 17 years. During this time, I worked under the same employer and renewed my contract every two years. My son had also migrated there. We returned in 2021 during the pandemic. I had worked hard to marry off my four daughters. My only hope was my son. He was working as a driver in the same city but lost his job during the pandemic. He is searching for a job now.

I was not being paid according to my experience and workload. But they paid the salary on time and allowed me to visit my family every two years. My employer never gave me a salary hike nor any other allowances. I asked them several times and they told me that they would think about it. I was the only person earning money during the lockdown and that was one of the most difficult times I have gone through. I was struggling to manage everything on my own. I am ready to migrate again if my employer meets my demands. My son and I returned together to India when international flights resumed. My employer gave us money for tickets.

After coming back home I was diagnosed with an eye-related disease and I am currently in treatment for that. We don't have a proper source of income now. Our life is becoming difficult in this pandemic as we are not able to meet our expenses. This house is an old one and we have to renovate it soon. But I am not finding any means to do that. Nobody will believe that after spending all these years abroad I am left with no savings. At least my son has to find a decent job.

I have not heard about any of the policies and programmes by the state for returnee migrant workers. Nobody told me about them. Once someone told my son about this but he did not get the details. I never thought about things like that. You (the interviewer) are the first person to tell me about Kerala State Pravasi (migrant) Welfare Board and NORKA (Non-Resident Keralites Affairs). I wonder why I didn't hear about it before. If somebody had told me about these things, I would have received some support from the state. But now I am 67 years old and it might be too late.

My employer and working conditions? I don't know what to say. I was the one who managed the entire household responsibilities and looked after their children. Their children reminded me of mine. But still, I faced overtime work, low payments, discrimination, etc. I have been raising my demands for a very long time but they didn't respond. It was only after coming back home that I informed them that I am ready to work again only if they agree to my demands. But they have not said a proper 'yes' yet. I don't know what I should do. I want a life of retirement, but I don't think I have the luxury of it.

Recommendations and expectations

1. There should be a proper mechanism in the state to inform people at the grassroots level about state policies and programmes. The Panchayat/Municipality can play an important role in this. They should reach out to migrants from each category of society (men and women, literates and illiterates, etc.).

2. There should be support programmes from the government for returnee migrants. This can include financial assistance for building a house, medical assistance, assistance for finding a new livelihood, etc.

(Transcribed and translated from Malayalam by Sruthi P, [SEWA-Kerala](#))

Life goes on

LIYANGE VAJIRA

I am Liyanage Vajira. I was born in 1974 in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and currently live in Batticaloa. I started my schooling in Jaffna. When I was a child, I lost my father in a road accident. Later when the ethnic war broke out in Jaffna, my mother decided to come to Batticaloa with my two brothers and me. My elder sister was already living here. However, when the war started disrupting life in Batticaloa, we ended up living in the refugee camps and in the bunker camps.

I still remember the day and the events that separated me from my family. I was 9 years old then. On that day an army camp in the area where we lived was attacked. In retaliation the army started attacking my village. In fear and confusion, I ran into the streets. A Sinhala man who was selling coconuts in a lorry saw me and took me with him to a Sinhala town (Kurunegala) and handed me to his housemaid. She became my adoptive mother. I was sent to a Sinhala medium school but I could study only up to grade 4. When I turned 15, they changed my year of birth to 1968 and gave me in marriage to a Sinhala man. My name Marimuthu Kamalambika was also changed to Liyanage Vajira.

From then on, I lived with my husband in his hometown. We had two daughters and we were able to manage our household expenses with whatever we earned. But as the children grew up, their needs started increasing. Living costs were going up too. Many women were migrating overseas for work. Following some discussion with my husband, I left my two children with him and my mother-in-law and migrated to Kuwait in

1997 to work as a domestic worker. Two years later I came back to Sri Lanka but remigrated to Dubai. I returned in 2002 for good as I wanted to be with my family. However, my dream of a happy family collapsed when my husband and I separated. I was allowed to keep my two daughters who were 10 and 8 years old then.

In desperation, I started to look for my original family who were in Batticaloa. Finally, with the help of the police and the Divisional Secretariat, I was reunited with my family whom I had lost when I was 9 years old. While we were there, my younger daughter was down with chicken pox and started asking for her father. Eventually, I informed him about our daughter's situation and he came to see us with a friend. He seemed very happy to see his family again and he left for his hometown telling me that he would sell everything there and come to live with us.

Unfortunately, eight days later we received the devastating news that his body had been found in a well in his hometown. We had barely overcome that grief when we were hit by the tsunami. Life became extremely difficult. A friend of my brother used to visit us during those difficult days. He was very helpful. After we got to know each other a little better he promised to marry me and take care of my family. I trusted him and agreed to a relationship. By the time I realised that he was cheating on me, I had a son with him. I think that was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. Anyhow, I filed a case against him in the courts. He agreed to pay alimony to the child but he did it only for a short time.

After learning many harsh lessons in life, I decided to stand on my own two feet and take care of my children. So I left my son at Harry Orphanage and

once again migrated to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker. I got my daughters married with my own earnings. I continued to work in Saudi Arabia as I wanted to save some money for my son and for my own future. One day, when I was still in Saudi, I received the sad news that my second daughter had committed suicide. She had two young sons. This news completely broke my heart and I decided to return for good and take care of my grandchildren. It was an emotional and hasty decision and my financial plans were not realised. Fortunately, I could get some support from the *Samurdhi* allowance given by the government at that time.



[ESCO](#), a local NGO, launched the “Safer Labor Migration” project in our area at a time when I was in utter despair and shock. They were the first to help me overcome the trauma I had endured for years. In that process, I was also introduced to the Migrant Society that they had formed in our area. It was the Migrant Society that gave me the opportunity to participate in some

trainings and get some guidance. I chose sewing as my future career. I took special training in sewing and with the help of ESCO I was able to get a sewing machine at the end of the training. It helped me get orders and work from home. The teacher who taught me sewing also helped me in finding sewing orders.

Although COVID-19 has affected my income, I have tried my best to get orders to sew face masks. I also make plastic decorative garlands to supplement my income. The money I earn is enough to take care of my two grandchildren, who are now aged 8 and 6.

(Translated by Monica Alfred)

Life After Return: A focus group discussion among returnee women in Sierra Leone

LUCY TURAY

Domestic Workers Advocacy Network (DoWan) is a self-organised group of returnee women migrant workers in Sierra Leone. The group works facilitates skills training and provides psycho-social assistance where needed. DoWan also works in the communities with adolescent girls and their mothers to provide information on labour migration and human trafficking.

Sixteen returnee women migrant workers held a half-day focus group discussion at the Dowan office on Monday, 6 December 2021. The youngest in the group is 23 years old and the oldest is 40. Most of them are in their mid-20s or early 30s. All had completed their higher secondary school education prior to migrating for work. They had migrated to Oman, Kuwait, and Lebanon. All had worked as domestic workers. The length of stay ranged from 6 months to 4 years and 9 months. Most had worked for 2 years.

The discussion focussed on their migration goals, life after return, and what they expect from their government. Below is a summary of the discussion.

Participants in the FGD were Mariatu Conteh, Rebecca Kamara, Saio Conteh, Memunatu Mansary, Esther Koroma, Isatu Conteh, Margaret Kamara, Emma Mansary, Adamasay Jane Kamara, Isatu Conteh, Mabinty Kabia, Kadiatu Mohamed Kalokoh, Aminata Jolloh, Isatu Kamara, Mariatu Conteh and Isha Bangura.

Lucy Turay, the founder of DoWan, facilitated the discussion and prepared the summary.

Reasons for migration

All the women said that their main goal was financial. Some wanted to support their parental or own family. Many are single mothers and hoped that overseas migration will enable them to earn more and look after their children better. Others wanted to use the money to set up a business upon return.

Circumstances of return

Several mentioned employer abuse. Some had run away following abuse and were staying as undocumented workers. Rights violation at the workplace included non-payment of wages, physical and verbal abuse, and long hours of work. Covid-19 created panic but also some countries waived exit visa requirement so they decided to leave. Some left because they were sick and had to pay from their salaries for medical treatment.



Not a single person said that they had fulfilled their migration objectives. Many had taken loans to migrate and are still in debt. Some had not received any money because the agent was taking it all. Several had sent back all their earnings to family members including husbands. One woman said that her husband used up all her money for another woman who he married in her absence.

Life after return

None of the women have jobs. They have received some training from DoWan, experimented with farming, and learnt to make some handicrafts. While this brings in a little money, these are not regular jobs so life remains difficult. Some said that life is 'worse than before'. Several reported that hunger is a real problem. Family and community reactions have generally been negative. Many have felt rejection and rudeness from family. None of them have received any support from the government. DoWan has provided some support.

"They look down upon me. They think I am stupid."

"It is really difficult and frustrating. They mock me every day and treat me badly. Some of my friendships have ended. It is deplorable."

"My family has forsaken me because I did not bring any money when I returned. On top of that, I came back in very poor health. They did not look after me. No one consults me on any important family matters anymore."

"Some people provoke me and taunt me. A few take pity on me."

Margret Kamara's story

After I returned to Sierra Leone, I felt ashamed and even afraid to go back to my hometown because my family had taken a loan to pay for my migration costs. They had even sold a small piece of land and I had promised to refund them from my earnings in Oman. I haven't been able to keep my promises. When I finally went home, people in the community laughed at me. I felt humiliated.

My family handed my children back to me and no one is ready to help me anymore. Life continues to be difficult. My children can't go to school. I decided to join prostitution which was the only option to earn an income to take care of myself and my children. Later, I met Lucy Turay who treated me like a queen. She listened to me without judging me. I felt motivated and decided to learn some skills. I now know that I am good at so many things. But help from our government is needed.

Kadiatu Kamara's story

Every Sierra Leonean wishes to travel to Europe to look for greener pastures. Life there is totally different compared to here. So with big dreams I got in touch with an agent who told me that he has a direct link to someone in Europe who can organise a lucrative job. I felt excited and hopeful. The agent asked for \$ 4,000 and promised to arrange everything within two weeks. I met my family and explained everything to them. My father had put together all his savings to build a house in the dry season. I talked to him and convinced him to give that money to me.

I travelled to Kuwait on 24.4.2017. I was told that Kuwait would be my first stop and from there I will move to Europe. Instead, I found myself in

someone's house as a domestic worker. They treated me as if I was not a human being. I was asked to do all the housework. I did not even have enough sleep. I could not communicate with anyone, not even with the agent. My madam slapped me because I was sick and could not prepare food. Finally, I managed to run away. By chance, I met one of my Sierra Leonean sisters who helped me and put me in touch with Lucy. I returned to my country on the 3.3.2021. I decided to stay with Lucy at DoWan because I could not face my family. I stayed with Lucy for 6 months and received lots of skills training. I finally returned to my family but I have lost all respect in their eyes. I need a regular job.

Isatu Kamara's Story

I took the money my mother had saved for a business because my agent promised me to send me to Canada where I can work in a hotel and get paid huge sums of money that will be plenty for my 3 children and my parents. So I paid \$ 4,500 to the agent which was my mother's lifetime savings as well as the money from selling some land. The whole thing turned out to be a disaster. I found myself as a domestic worker in Lebanon, a country on the verge of collapse. Escaping from an inhuman employer, I ended up with a large group of Sierra Leonean women with similar life stories. Lucy was there. She was advocating for our safe return and trying to find support from various people. She herself had bad experiences like us. But I wasn't thinking of returning home. I joined prostitution in Lebanon because my huge debt from my mother back home was always bothering me. I wanted to earn some money. I continued in prostitution until I left. When I returned to Sierra Leone, I had no place to stay. I had no job. I stayed with a friend but she later asked me to move out. Then I called Lucy who asked me to stay with her

in Makeni city. I stayed with her for 7 months and I received lots of trainings with her like handicraft and [Gara dyeing](#) and weaving. But where is the job? Will our government help us get jobs?

Expectations from the Government

- The government should give skills trainings and provide job opportunities after that.
- There should be financial assistance such as low-interest loans to start businesses. And some should be given skill trainings that will provide sustainable jobs for them.
- We would be happy to do farming if we get financial support and training from the government.
- The way migration is happening from our country is not right. Our government should create proper mechanism and have bi-lateral arrangements with destination countries. Rights of Sierra Leoneans should be protected wherever we are.



- The government should have regular meetings with us to understand more about the problems and solutions.
- Since most migrants return without money, there should be free healthcare for us and our children.
- We should also have free government supported education that will encourage us to take up professional careers.

Save some money, learn some skills, and make some plans for life after returning home

MALANI KANDAARACHIGE with Bandana Pattanaik



Preamble

Mala and I met in 2013 at the café/meeting room of [Nasawiya](#), a Beirut-based feminist collective. My colleagues and I were in town to meet up with various social justice organisations working with migrant workers in Lebanon. We wanted to meet women migrant workers from South Asia and friends from Nasawiya put us in touch with Mala, a Sri Lankan domestic worker who was also an activist. Mala came to see us and promised to organise informal meetings with women workers from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka on the weekend.

Our weekend began with a visit to a café in one of the back alleys of Beirut, which was the meeting point for many Nepali workers on the weekend. We

70

spent a couple of hours there talking to women and men from Nepal. Mahendra and Renu, our colleagues from Nepal, decided to stay there some more.

Seeta, Caroline, and I headed to the southern district of Mount Lebanon, about 40 kilometres from Beirut. After many wrong turns and misadventures caused primarily by our lack of Arabic, we finally met with Mala who led us to our meeting place, the topmost floor of an old multi-storey building. That was the living quarters of an Indian couple who worked for the owner of the building and had the freedom to invite friends over.

Soon after our arrival, Mala's Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi friends came over. The next three or four hours were filled with animated conversations about life in the home countries and life in the homes of their employers where they lived and worked. While the Sri Lankan women we met were working with the same employers for more than two decades, the Bangladeshi women were new migrants who had 'run away' from their abusive employers and sought refuge in the area. The unfair sponsorship system meant that they did not have legal documentation to stay in the country anymore. But despite uncertainties around employment and fear of deportation, they had part-time work and were staying in Lebanon with the hope that somehow, some day the problems would be solved.

Mala and I have kept in touch over the years via Facebook and she has always made time for me on my many subsequent trips to Beirut. Below is an excerpt from a WhatsApp call with Mala. It was partly a call to catch up with her and partly to hear her thoughts on Return and Reintegration of Women Migrant Workers.

I told her about Our Work, Our Lives and said that I would share a summary of our conversation in the magazine. “Yes, you must”, she said. “I have been a migrant worker for 38 years now. I think some of my life experiences could be useful for the women who are migrating for low wage work now. At least, they will know what they should not do”, she added.

Mala’s migration story

“I left Sri Lanka in 1983 to work in Cyprus. But because of some confusion created by my agent, I ended up in Lebanon. The Sri Lankan Civil War was still in its infancy but the Lebanese war had already started. I had left my husband and three girls back home in Sri Lanka when I came here. My eldest girl Nimmi who you have met was 13 years old at that time and the youngest was only 5 years old.

Life was not easy here. I could not cope so I went back after a few years. But I came back again and have been with the same employer for the last 32 years. I migrated 38 years ago at the age of 32. I am 70 years old now.

These days I only cook for the family. If I have a community meeting or a meeting with an NGO or some other agency, I finish all my work on the previous night. My Mister [employer] is okay with my activism. I can visit Sri Lanka every year.

I am still on a temporary work visa which needs to be renewed every year. One day I will go back to Sri Lanka. But I do not know when.”

Activism

“I am one of the oldest women migrant workers here. I know all NGOs, UN agencies, and others working with migrant workers here. I am a member of the International Domestic Workers Federation. I reach out to anyone who can provide support to migrant workers and fights for their rights.

During this pandemic period, I have been busy with vaccine campaigns. IOM made vaccines available for migrant workers and [AMEL Association](#) administered it to the migrants through their country-wide healthcare centres. Some other migrant worker leaders and I reached out to migrant communities and shared this information with them – to everyone, documented and undocumented.

That is how I met with a very old Sri Lankan lady who was living like a destitute in a parking lot. She is unwell, is completely bent from waist down, her hands and legs don't work well, and she has very little memory. She does not even speak Sinhala anymore. For several years, she used to sweep the public area and water the plants in the parking lot. Kind people used to give her food and a little money now and then. But now she can barely look after her own body. She has no papers and no memory. I managed to get her vaccinated.

Through my contacts in Sri Lanka, I was able to locate her address there. I have arranged her papers from the Sri Lankan Embassy and collecting money from the community. I will travel with her to Sri Lanka as soon as possible and make sure that she reaches her family.”

Family back home

“My husband passed away two years ago. He was a good man. He looked after the children to the best of his ability. I earned money here and sent it to him. He also had a job there.

My three daughters are grown up now. When my eldest daughter got married, I managed to find a job for her husband and they came here. But after several years, he left her for another woman. She went back to Sri Lanka and I helped her raise her two sons.

My children did not get much opportunity to study because I was working here and their father was also working there. We got them married. My grandchildren are well-educated and have good jobs. One is a doctor and another one is a manager in an insurance company. I feel very proud about the success of my grandchildren.”

Where is home?

“I have lived in this country for nearly 40 years now. My experiences here have shaped me. I am sure I am different from Sri Lankan women of my age who have never left home. My food habits have become different. I have gotten used to the weather patterns of this country.

When I visit Sri Lanka, I am only with my family. I do not have friends there. Our neighbours do not know me.

Sometimes, I feel as if I have two homes. I did not see my own children growing up, but my Mister’s children have grown up in front of my eyes.

They have their own children now. So when they visit this house, they show me the same respect and love as they do to their own grandparents.”

Women migrant workers must make plans for their return home

“My situation is exceptional. Although I have had my share of bad experiences, I have also been lucky. Both with my own family and with my employer.

But I know that many women get a raw deal at both ends. Some of them come here to work because they have multiple problems at home and then things don’t work out here. Sometimes, when they work hard here and send all their earnings home, they find that their own family has cheated them.



Mala and her friends with Bandana in 2013

So my sincere request to all my women migrant worker sisters is that they MUST save some money for themselves, in their own bank account. If you are getting 300 USD per month, don't send everything home. Save some in your own bank account. You never know what will happen. It does not sound good to say this, but you can't trust your own family members.

Secondly, try and learn some new skills. Something that you have an aptitude for. In some countries, there are training opportunities for migrant workers while they are working.

Make some kind of a small business plan. Something that you can do on your own with little investment. May be a takeaway food business. May be something else. Because your government is not waiting with a job for you when you return."

Bye for Now

"The situation in Lebanon is not good now. The country is going through many problems. There is scarcity of electricity and water. The currency is in a freefall. It is a very hard situation for people here.

I will be happy to join any meeting that you may have, if you think my contribution will be useful. I have zoom on my computer. I know how to use it."

I wish it were possible to follow up on my backpay claim

MARIA TERESA MANALO

I am Maria Teresa Manalo from Batangas City, Philippines. I started my migration journey when one of my relatives called from overseas to inform me that she was planning to come home for good. She asked if I wanted to work abroad, particularly in Germany. She knew of a job opening in the house of a diplomat. At that time, I had no steady income. I needed work because my husband was not supporting us. I discovered that he was having an affair with a woman I knew in our community. He even introduced her in our neighborhood as his sweetheart. Of course, this broke my heart and my three daughters were affected too.

I immediately said yes. I had to support my three daughters who were in school at that time. My husband didn't care if my daughters' tuition fees were not paid. He even said that he had no budget for us and that the money he was earning was for the needs of his new family. This hurt me a lot. My eldest daughter was starting college and I had to support her education.

Processing the papers for Germany was not easy. I had to literally beg my relatives for help because I had no money. I thought my future employer would help but instead, he asked me to send him 500 Euro. He said that would serve as a security deposit of my stay in Germany and also that if I ever had an emergency, I could get the 500 Euro. I transferred the money to a bank account he gave me. I was frightened at the thought that I had loans left and right.

After finishing all the documentation, I informed my employer that I was ready to fly to Germany. I won't forget the date, it was 18 April 2008. That was my first overseas travel. I was nervous, sad and at the same time happy and excited because I knew I could give my children a good life now. I was hesitant to leave my daughters alone in the house. My husband sometimes visited but he didn't care about their welfare.

My daughters were crying when I left but they knew that I had to go and work so that they would be able to finish school. We were all crying. I travelled alone by bus. We couldn't afford to hire our own transportation. I reached the airport very early because I didn't want to panic if something unexpected happened. I checked in early and calmed down. I didn't experience any bad incident during my flight. What motivated me was the thought of my daughters waiting for my return.

I was met by one of the staff of my employer at the airport. I was exhausted after a very long flight. My employer was kind enough to let me rest and adjust to a new working environment. I had to buy my personal necessities so I thought I could use the 500 euro that I had sent him. He told me that I could get it after finishing my contract.

After a month of working, I received 450 Euro from my employer. I thought I would be getting 750 Euro every month as that was stated in the contract I had signed. He told me that he deducted for the food and lodging. But in the contract that I signed it was clearly stated that I would be getting free food and lodging. I couldn't do anything because I knew my employer was powerful. I was also working 12 to 15 hours a day and I only had 1 day off every month. Clearly my contract was being violated.

I met another Filipina and she told me we would not be able to accept work outside of our employers' house because we are under contract and it is against the law. But where is the justice there? My employer is clearly violating the law. I was also made to work in the house of his relative without any additional compensation. I couldn't do anything. But I told to myself that I must do something so that I can get justice.

I shared the situation with my Filipina friend. She said she knows Ban Ying, an organisation that helps distressed migrant workers. Upon weighing all the consequences, I left my employers' house and went directly to Ban Ying. I was very happy in their shelter house. They have many activities and we were well taken care of. We also had an allowance of 40 Euros for our personal needs. I stayed in Ban Ying for 11 months. I learnt a lot from them. The organisation helped me file a claim in the Embassy for back wages. We filed it in 2012 but until now I haven't heard anything about my claim. I want to follow it up with Ban Ying but I lost contact with them. The amount of my claim is 7,000 Euro and there is also the 500 Euro which I had deposited with my employer.

I was introduced by Ban Ying to SOLWODI, another organisation. Together we discussed plans regarding my economic reintegration. Ban Ying has been a big help to me. They said that If I chose to stay, they could help me find work or if I chose to go home, I would be provided with 1,000 Euro as economic assistance. I told them that I wanted to go home. They said I would be contacted by a local NGO upon my return to the Philippines. This NGO would further help me with my future journey.

Before leaving for home, I received an email from Batis Center for Women. They asked if I would be met by my family upon my return. Upon learning that my relatives would meet me at the airport, they gave me their contact number and told me to reach out to them. Several days after reaching home, I contacted them and we made an appointment for my visit to their office. I met one of their staff, Tita Guy, who happens to live in the same province as me. We discussed my situation and they invited me to their counselling sessions and group empowerment discussions. After a month, I was asked if they could enroll me in a short course about starting a business. I agreed and I attended six Saturday sessions on how to start your own business. There I met fellow migrant returnees and we happily exchanged our sad migration stories.

Before finishing the course, we had to prepare a project proposal. With the guidance of Batis Center, I proposed “soft ice cream and siomai making”. Soft ice cream business was a new product in our community. Nobody was selling soft ice cream there and I was very excited at the thought that I would be the one to introduce it. We carefully analysed every step of my business plan. We discussed all the pros and cons. Finally, after careful deliberation, they recommended my business to SOLWODI. My business plan was approved and the funds were transferred to Batis.

Upon approval, construction of my small store started. It was strategically located near the public school in my area. Tita Guy of Batis Center directly supervised the setting up of my business. I was very happy because finally I could see a bright future ahead of me. My soft ice cream was a blockbuster in my community. I learnt how to make hamburgers and siomai. My daughters were helping me run the business. It was very successful. But

other women in the community started to imitate my business. They bought cheaper siomai in the market and started to resell it at a lower price. At first, buyers transferred to them but after trying their products, they came back to me, saying that the cheaper siomai had no taste at all.

My business lasted for about five years. I was doing well selling my products until I had an accident: I slipped in our bathroom which caused a crack on my left knee. I had to undergo a knee operation and was advised by the doctor to rest for months. My daughters were all busy and could not make time for my business. The eldest is working and the other two are studying. I had to stop operating my ice cream and siomai business. The small store that I had constructed from the funds was officially used by the public school which I readily agreed.

From time to time there are orders of siomai and hamburgers from friends. I have transferred my business to my house but business is not doing well. My mother who is sick is staying with me now and I have to take care of her. My daughters are the ones who are supporting me and my mother.

I wish it were possible to follow up on my backpay claim. If I receive the money that my employer owes me, it will be a big help for me at this point. It will also make me believe in the justice system.

(After the interview, GAATW and Batis Center helped Maria Teresa reconnect with Ban Ying to follow up on the claim)

(Transcribed and translated by [Batis Center for Women](#))

I felt protected by Thai Law

MARIAM

I will call myself Mariam for this story. I am from S'ang district in the Kandal province of Cambodia. I am a mother of two boys.

Prior to my marriage and migration, I was a garment factory worker in Cambodia. I had started with a salary of 70 USD per month and even after 10 years my salary was only 100 USD per month. With the hope of earning a better income and to build a house, I decided to migrate to Thailand. My cousin had migrated there and had done well for herself, so I decided to follow the same path.

After a lot of discussion in the family, I left to work for a factory in Pathum Thani, Thailand. I took help from a private recruitment agent who charged me 250 USD. I paid him from my savings. His services were good and in Thailand I obtained all required documents as per Thai labour law. I started at 8,000 (270 USD) Thai Baht per month and by the time I decided to return to my country after 3 years, my monthly salary was 15,000 Thai Baht (500 USD) per month. I could send home 5,000-10,000 Baht per month. My mother was saving all my money. My work was not too hard and the supervisors were kind-hearted. It was not an easy life but it was not a bad situation either. I had a purpose and I was working to fulfil that.

I returned home in 2015 and started my own small business in tailoring and selling cosmetics. Soon I was able to buy a small piece of land and build a house. Following my marriage, I switched to selling daily items including

mosquito nets, mats and blankets with my husband. We bought a secondhand van for 4,000 USD and invested 2,000 USD for the items. We go to remote villages to sell our items. At the moment, we earn about 25 USD per day (net profit). We plan to change to newer model of van soon and add more items to our list.



Neither I nor my husband have had much education. But we want our children to have good education. So why did I have a good migration experience when so many people face problems?

Here is what I think:

- I took a lot of care to find enough information and went to an agent who had a good track record. I discussed with my family and returnee migrants. I made a plan for myself.
- I did not have much control over things in Thailand. I don't know if I should have been paid more. But I was paid what the agent told me I would get. I got my money regularly and on time and it was more than what I used to earn in Cambodia. I was very careful with my expenses and saved as much as I could.
- My family was supportive. Not everyone has a supportive family. My mother was my emotional support while I was away. I was strong and she made me stronger.

- Not only that, but my mother also saved all my money. I have heard from others that sometimes family members cheat their daughters.
- I also think that my having the legal papers may have helped. At least I felt safe because I had the papers with me. I wasn't afraid. I don't know what I would have done if I really had problems, but I felt protected by law.

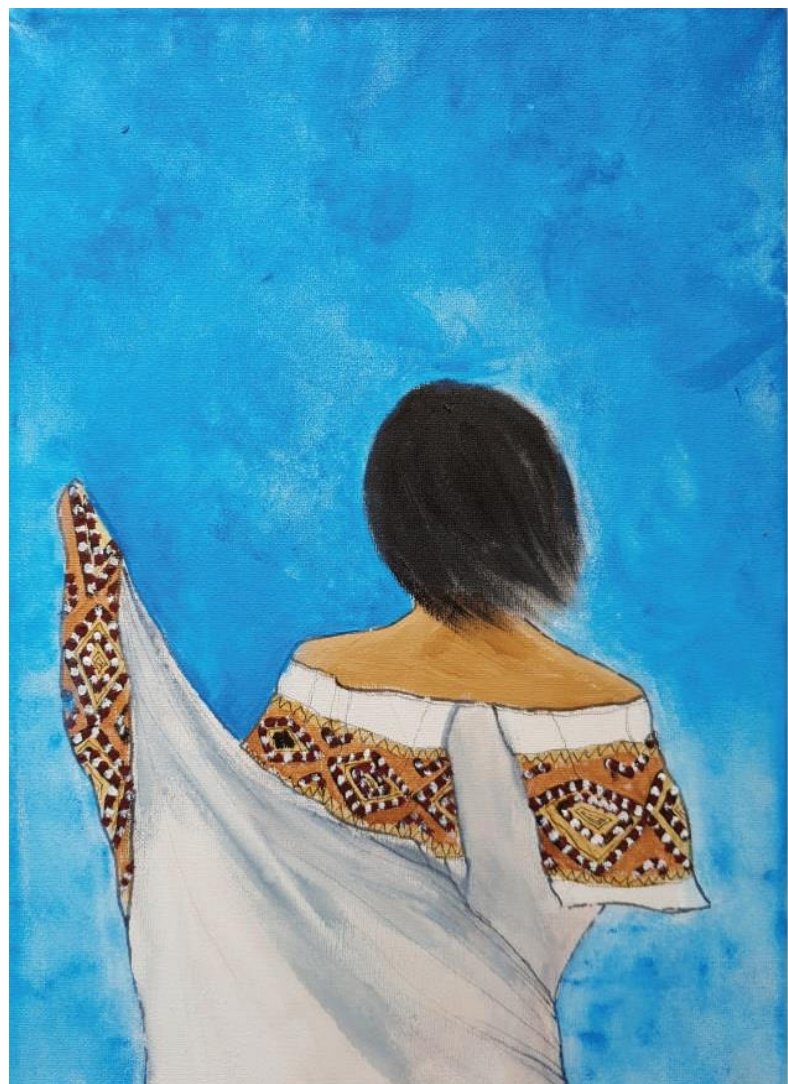
(Translated from Khmer by Pok Panhavichetr, Executive Director, [Cambodia Women's Crisis Centre](#).)



The most important thing was my daughter's future

MARITES

My name is Marites and I come from the Philippines. I came here to Germany when my employer from Saudi Arabia brought me. In Saudi Arabia, I worked as a domestic helper. And then, I don't know, maybe it was destiny, that my employer got a job in the embassy in Berlin. He brought me and a few other Filipina colleagues here to work in the house. Then when I got pregnant, I ran away. When I ran away, the employer was searching for me and said he will send me back in the Philippines. But I had a child. When I was giving birth at the hospital, I was all alone – that was my experience as an immigrant. After I left the trafficking situation, I lost my work. I started to live here in Germany but it was difficult because I can't even speak the language. I started learning German so I can go back to work and find a good job. Now I have an unlimited residence status and a job in a restaurant, and another job in house cleaning.



Artist: Krisanta Caguioa-Mönnich, [ArtworxByKrisantaCM](#)

(Transcribed by Lea Rakovsky from [Ban Ying](#), Germany)

CVM's work with returnee women migrant workers in Ethiopia

MESSIE CHEKOLE

Comitia Volontari per il Mondo (CVM) is an international organisation implementing various humanitarian and development projects in Ethiopia for the last 41 years, mainly focusing on socioeconomic reintegration, decent working condition for local, migrant and returnee domestic workers, livelihood and food security, HIV/AIDS prevention and control, and water, hygiene and sanitation for the needy, rural people in Oromia, SNNP and Amhara regions.

Return and reintegration of migrant workers have increasingly become prominent in the migration governance agenda. Returnees face a lot of difficulties upon return; return can strain the socioeconomic fabric, especially when high numbers of returnees arrive within a short period of time. At the same time, returnees may struggle to readapt and rebuild their lives once back home because of many of the same economic, social, and psychosocial factors that prompted them to migrate in the first place, particularly if they have been out of the country for a long time.

Taking these problems into consideration, CVM has been implementing a project entitled “Provision of Assistance, Protection, and Repatriation program for the returnee migrant domestic workers - Securing Women Migration Cycle (SWMC)” since August 2018. The Project aims to support sustainable and durable reintegration in all regions of Ethiopia.

The overall objective of the project is to contribute to the assistance, protection, repatriation, and reintegration of Ethiopian returnee migrant domestic workers from Lebanon and other Arab countries. The specific objectives are to ensure and strengthen the network of cooperation to facilitate the assistance, protection, and repatriation of 360 migrants within the migration cycle from Lebanon to Ethiopia; reintegrate 360 returnees socially and economically to their community in Ethiopia; build the capacity of 360 returnees and 90 families of migrants who choose to stay in Lebanon; conduct sensitisation programme for the community and 300 potential migrants.

To meet these objectives, CVM's integrated approach deployed three levels of support:

- Initiatives at individual-level to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of returnees and returning family members;
- Community-level initiatives that respond to the needs, vulnerabilities, and concerns of communities to which migrants return, including returnee families and the non-migrant population;
- Structural-level initiatives to promote good governance of migration through engagement with local and national authorities and stakeholders and support continuity of assistance through adequate local public services.

Within each of these levels, CVM addressed three dimensions of reintegration:

- The economic dimension that contributes to re-entering economic life and sustained livelihoods;
- The social dimension that addresses returning migrants' access to public services and infrastructure in their home region, including access to health, education, workplaces, justice, and social protection schemes;
- The psychosocial dimension that encompasses the reinsertion of returning migrants into personal support networks (friends, relatives, neighbours) and join Domestic Workers Associations.

CVM has a referral channel with Caritas Lebanon and IOM through MoUs. Therefore, the migrant returnees are informed about CVM through our referral channel and after we reached them they are informed about CVM and its work by our staff.

The project has been provided the following support for migrant returnees in the last two years:

- 381 returnees have been received, reunified, and reintegrated.
- 381 returnees received shelter and accommodation assistance.
- 40 returnees received medical assistance.
- 649 women repatriated from Lebanon received emergency support such as pocket money, sanitary napkins, COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment and reintegration guide.
- 34 returnees received scholarship support.
- 381 returnees received orientation sessions on labour rights.
- 55 school-aged children of returnees received school materials.

- 304 returnees were trained on basic business skills/ small-scale entrepreneurship.
- 268 returnees received life skills training.
- 243 returnees received start-up capital and engaged in viable income generating activities.
- 5 returnees and local Domestic Workers Associations have been established and capacitated.
- 381 returnees received monthly follow up over phone.
- 169 returnees received business scale-up training.
- 381 returnees connected with their families.

Over the last two years, 381 migrant women returned through our referral channels from 9 Arab countries: Lebanon - 321 returnees, Sudan - 42, Saudi Arabia - 9, Libya - 4, Iraq - 2, Algeria - 1, United Arab Emirates – 1, and Yemen - 1.

Most of the returnees had migrated through irregular channels. As a result, they have faced different challenges while they were abroad. The main reason for return is “crisis”, in which the migrant returns due to political upheaval, an outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and reasons of security, salary denial, abuse and sexual harassment by the employers. Our referral partners assisted them to return voluntarily to their country of origin.

Tagesech Lemecho's story



My name is Tagesech Lemecho. I am a 26-year-old married woman. I came back from Beirut recently. I live in Hosahena. I have three sisters and a brother. I had lost my father and my mother was supporting us alone. I went to Beirut because I needed to support my family. I stayed there for four years but was not paid for a year and six months. I ran away from the first house because of workload and harsh treatment. Then I rented a small place and worked as a live-out domestic

worker. My family was expecting financial support from me and I could do that. Then I returned to Ethiopia due to Covid-19 deportation.

After I returned to Ethiopia, I received trainings from CVM. With the support I got from CVM, I opened a beauty salon and worked hard to earn money. I was also supported by my sisters with the materials needed for the beauty salon. When the machine got broken, I closed the beauty salon and started a new business of mini restaurant where I started selling coffee, tea and breakfast. My business is going well. Now I am planning to expand my restaurant and start selling lunch to customers. My husband is also helping me. In addition to my current business, I want to reopen the beauty salon in the future. I have an income of 58,400 and a net profit of 14,210.00 Birr. I also have cumulative savings of 6,000 Birr. I am working hard. The business scale up training that I received has helped me. I am planning to expand and strengthen my business more. I have family and community acceptance which helped me to be successful. As I have experienced painful effects of irregular migration, I am telling others not to do that.

Women who have returned after working abroad faced the following social and economic challenges:

- Absence of family or relatives as their families were displaced due to war in the country;
- Inability to cover pregnancy costs, no food, clothes, and education support to children;
- Lack of acceptance by their family and neighbours because they returned without money and/or returned with kids and/or pregnant;
- Stigma and discrimination by the community and the government personnel. The community named them as '50/50' which means 50% normal and 50% abnormal or crazy;
- Lack of trust by the community, the government, and families so they were unable to access credit service;
- Not being chosen for marriage especially those who came from the northern part of the country;
- Scams by their boyfriends and sexual harassment;
- Lack of capital to engage in income-generating activities;
- Lack of employment opportunity;
- Lack of workplace to start a business as well as market fluctuations;
- Lack of technical skills to run a business;
- When they requested services from the respective government entities, the government officials asked for bribes.

Depending on the geographic location and level of understanding of the community, the community and the family look at returnees in different ways. In some areas they have a positive attitude and in other areas they are negative. In some communities and families, returnees are seen as role models while in others they are seen as 'crazy women'.

To combat the above challenges that returnees have faced, CVM Ethiopia has organised awareness creation and discussion platforms at national, regional, and local levels for government bodies, universities, schools, CSOs, CBOs, community members and others.

We should have a Women's Platform

NODI

(Nodi, 27, is a Bangladeshi returnee migrant who spent four years working in the garment industry in Jordan. During her stay there, she became involved in a GAATW-led FPAR research project documenting the working conditions and experiences of women in the factories. Nodi was instrumental in organising and coordinating the participation of her friends and colleagues, all of whom provided valuable inputs to the final report.

Nodi is a very confident woman who always wanted to help others. She was also very keen to learn new things. This outlook prompted her to attend English and computer classes at the Workers' Center in Al Hassan Industrial Zone. During these visits, she came to know about the FPAR project, and participated in a leading role.

She returned to Bangladesh in December 2020 during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Jordan hard and led to significant downsizing of the workforce in many factories.

When she heard about this issue of Our Work, Our Lives, she wanted to share her experiences.)

Pre-migration

My husband was an auto rickshaw driver. I used to work in a garment factory in Bangladesh, where I earned very little, around BDT 5,000 a month. My husband was working but he was not earning much either. When I was pregnant and could not work, we would feel the money crunch.

So I would go back to work as soon as I could and even do over time to add a little more to my salary. At that point, a recruitment agent told my husband that he should go to Mauritius as a garment worker because the salary is good there. My husband was interested but we did not have money to pay the fee of BDT 500,000.

My husband asked me to take loans from my relatives to finance his migration. He said that he would pay them back soon. My relatives, who trusted me, gave me the money, even though they weren't very rich, and my husband went to Mauritius.

Once he started working there, he refused to pay back the loan. He totally changed, he didn't send us any money, not even for our daily expenses and the children's education. Whenever he called, he used to make excuses and tell me to take care of expenses from my salary. My relatives started asking me for money, but I had nothing to give.

When he didn't send any money for two years, I decided to migrate to pay back the loan. I went to Jordan in 2017. My younger daughter was only 18 months old; I didn't want to leave her, but I had no choice.

Life in Jordan

My life in Jordan as a garment worker was no different from that of others. But I used to feel for everyone and was very interested in learning new skills. This led me to the Workers' Center, where I was taking English and computer classes on Fridays (my days off). I learn new things easily and adapt to new environments quickly. Besides Bangla, I already spoke Hindi and a little English, so during the flight to Jordan and my transit, I was able to help a lot

of other workers communicate with the airline staff. While taking my English class, I came to know about a research project, which Nadia Apu, our English teacher, was conducting. When she described the type of work and the objectives of the research, I became very interested, because I realised that through this research, I would be able to channel the voices of migrant workers, and it would also be a good learning opportunity for me. So after one of the first FGDs, I decided to become the research assistant for the project.

I conducted most of the interviews with the workers, not only from our factory but also from other factories. It was not an easy task for me. I had to be very inventive and do things secretly during my free time. Initially it was difficult to convince my fellow workers and build trust, but after a while they were on board. With my team, I conducted interviews and we came up with suggestions and recommendations. Everyone spoke from their hearts with me. It was a very good experience and I also learnt about different kinds of abuse that our sisters face, for which they could never seek justice. I became so inspired that I thought somehow of continuing to work on women's rights.

After the research was published in 2019, my factory somehow got to know that I had helped with the interviews. They didn't say anything, but they were always observing me. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, there was a big strike in our factory when workers got upset about the COVID measures. Although I was not actively involved in the strike, after a few months, a few colleagues of mine and I were told that they were going to fire us. When I asked for the reason, I was told that they were sending back the people who were not efficient and had bad manners. I was shocked and hurt – my behaviour was never bad; I was always kind to everyone. I had many friends

among the workers, not only Bangladeshi but everyone, because I got along with all of them.

Return to Bangladesh and starting over

I told my family that I would be coming back and prepared for my departure. However, a few days before I left, I was told by my factory that I could stay if I wanted to. I was confused by this, and I still felt hurt by their initial slander against me. So I returned to Bangladesh in December 2020.

I only had BDT 50,000 in savings and I spent BDT 35,000 on items to take back with me. When I arrived at the airport in Dhaka, I was told that there was a mark in my passport that would prevent me from ever returning to Jordan. On top of that, I discovered that my suitcase hadn't arrived, and I was told that the factory never sent it. I later contacted the factory about it, and they assured me they would send it, but it's been one year and I still haven't received it.

My daughters were very happy that I was back and they didn't want me to go again. We are happy to be reunited, but it's just the three of us and my mother now. I have finally cut ties with my husband and got a divorce.

It has been difficult to make ends meet. Since I returned during the pandemic, it was not easy to find work. I wanted to work with a women's or migrants' rights organisation and reached out to a few people but they told me they didn't have any position for me.

I then considered returning to work at a garment factory, but I realised that even though the minimum wage has gone up in Bangladesh, I would not be

making as much as I did in Jordan. A monthly salary of BDT 15,000 (with overtime) would not be enough to cover rent, groceries, and other costs in Dhaka.

Although I was told at the airport that I could never go back to Jordan, I still wanted to give it a try. I went to the Technical Training Center where the Jordanian factories conducted interviews to hire new workers. I met a representative from my old factory, but they said that those who left in 2020 could not return, for some reason. They also said that it was not just me.

Then I heard that Canada was planning to recruit some Bangladeshi workers in the agricultural sector, so I decided to apply. To improve my chances, I have been taking an English course, and some driving lessons. However, this process will take at least a couple of years, it's very uncertain, and I don't have any savings left. Therefore, I decided to start a business.

I'm setting up a fish farm, since my parents have access to some lowlands with a pond. I am also planning to use this for making some additional income from local tourism by constructing some simple cottages that can be rented out to short-term holidaymakers. To help me get started, I am planning to take a loan from the Expatriate Welfare Bank – they're giving it at 4% interest, and no instalments due for the first 6 months. A lot of women do not know about this loan and the process is very complicated. However, I am not giving up, I have already talked to the bank.

Returnee migrant workers like me were also supposed to get additional support from the government. During the pandemic, they had announced

that we would be entitled to BDT 13,500 as a one-off payment. I tried to get this money but I couldn't – I have no idea how people get it.

What the government should do for us

I know that we are very important for the country – our remittances contribute a lot to the economy. But the government is not doing much for us. We should have some tangible rewards when we return. For example, it could be either a lump sum payment – not just a loan – to help us continue our working lives, especially for those who come back in difficult situations without any savings or support from their families. For those coming later in life, it could also be a monthly pension, so they do not have to worry about surviving when they get too old to work.

I know many people who come back with different illnesses or injuries or who have been financially unsuccessful in their migration. They hardly get any support from the government. And even for the small schemes that exist, almost no one knows how to access them, so the government needs to do a much better job of informing migrants and reaching out to them. I have seen that, when we leave, BOESL (Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited; a government-owned recruitment company that is tasked with sending migrant workers abroad in certain sectors) has all the lists of workers who are leaving – so then, why don't they have lists of workers who return, so that they can reach out to them, inquire about their status, and offer adequate support?

They could set up an easy contact point at the airport, for example, where returnees can register and get information materials on the various types of support available.

We had so many recommendations in our FPAR report, I don't know if the government even read it or took it seriously.

I think we should come up with a women's platform – an organisation where we can help each other. When we come back, everyone gets busy with their own struggles, and there is no solidarity. What is missing is some basic support for establishing a network, where returnee migrant women can support each other.

Many migrant workers come back with a lot of new skills. Whenever I go to a government office, I see them giving us a lot of attitude and being very lazy and uninterested in helping us. Why don't they give us those jobs, we are very hardworking and will do a much better job!

I want to see a mental health support system for women migrant workers. I met a lot of women in Jordan during my FPAR interviews who were mentally very distressed, in their work and in daily life. Many of them had suicidal thoughts. I really think we need a centre where they feel they have someone who stands by them and supports them during difficult times. Their families cannot do that, and sometimes the situation at home is very difficult.

We also want our government to negotiate with destination countries, so that any criminal action or violation of rights against migrant workers will be punished directly in those countries, to set an example and lead to greater justice for us in the future.

As you can see, I have many ideas. I hope at least some of them can be realised.

(Transcribed and translated by Nadia Afrin)

I am sad because of all the migration regulations

NOI

My name is Noi. I am 51 years old and I come from Samut Sakorn province in Thailand. I've been living as a transgender woman since my 20s.

My family had a food shop where I used to help before I decided to migrate. I finished high school and learnt fashion design. Now I run a shop at ICON SIAM in Bangkok, where I make clothes to order and also sell readymade clothes.

In 2008, my aunt who is married to a Danish man persuaded me to travel to Denmark. I wasn't earning much from my small businesses in Thailand and thought that going abroad would be a good opportunity. I enjoyed visiting Denmark, Germany, and Norway. My aunt worked as a cleaner for a company in Copenhagen. So I went with her to work and earn some income. My parents could survive on their own business, so I didn't need to support them. They didn't mind that I decided to go abroad.

In Denmark, I helped my aunt sell food and Thai dessert to Thai massage workers. Every 4-5 months, when my visa expired, I would come back to Thailand. Although I could earn some money from working with my aunt, I paid a lot of money for the travel costs, so in 2011 I decided to get married so I could get a permanent visa. As a transgender woman, this also fulfilled my dream to have a family and be a part of society.

According to regulation, my husband had to pay DKK 50,000 as a deposit to the government. However, he did not have that amount of money. So my relatives and I had to find it for him. He lived in a province far from Copenhagen and I moved to live with him. I also had to learn Danish language, according to the regulations, but it was difficult. I was not happy in the class because I felt that some people looked down on me. My mother-in-law didn't like me either. I was also feeling homesick. After one year, I decided to return to live with my aunt in Copenhagen again.

In Copenhagen I felt much better. I continued attending the Danish language class there and I started as a cook in a restaurant. I could earn income and I also got a three-year visa. I even saved some money and I moved out of my aunt's place to live on my own.

On the third year, I found out that my name was removed from my husband's house registration. I felt upset because this meant that he wanted to end the marriage, and so we got divorced. I met a new man and I hoped to marry him.

I visited Switzerland. When I returned to Denmark, I was informed that I had to leave the country soon. I don't know why but I suppose it's because I left Denmark before I got my permanent visa. I didn't know that my visa would be invalid if I left the country.

I tried to seek help from many places. The Thai embassy said that this is the law in Denmark, so they couldn't do anything. So I bought a ticket and returned to Thailand.

When I returned, I was 47. I didn't face any particular challenges. I didn't feel any stigma. I had some savings from Denmark and I still have a share from my parents' business.

But I wanted to migrate again. I tried to apply for a visa to Denmark with my new lover's guarantee, but I was refused because he has never been to Thailand. So I started a massage training and got a certificate. In 2019, I contacted the Ministry of Labour and applied to work in a massage shop in Hungary. However, my plan was stopped because of Covid-19 and then my document to migrate expired in March 2021.

When I was working while I was married, the payment and working hours followed the labour standards in Denmark, although the rules were strict. When I was working without documents, the work was harder, because I had to work long hours for lower pay. I didn't think of complaining because I was on a tourist visa.

Now I'm sad because of all the migration regulations. I got to know this Danish man and I want to visit him and find out if we can share our lives. But it is not possible now.

(Transcribed and translated by Usa Lerdsrisuntad)

Focus group discussion on life of women migrant workers after returning home

PLATFORM FOR LABOUR ACTION

In early December 2021, Platform for Labour Action (PLA), Uganda convened a Focus Group Discussion with 10 returnee women migrant workers to find out about their life upon return. The discussants were Nabanjja Milly, Naigaga Dinah, Kyomuhendo Eunice, Lucky Ampumuza, Ndagire Sharon, Claire Namujugu, Nambozo Brenda, Namugalu Daphine, Sumayiya Adul and Nankunda Sanyu. The youngest among them is 23 and the oldest is 38 years old. They had migrated to Saudi Arabia and Dubai and worked as domestic workers, translators, and nannies for periods ranging from 6 months to 2 years.

The discussion focussed on their reasons for migration, whether they achieved their migration goals, circumstances of return, and life upon return.

Reasons for migration

All participants mentioned financial need or aspirations as the main reason for migration. Poor economic condition of the family, unemployment, and families headed by single mothers (either as daughters of single mothers or as single mothers themselves) were mentioned. Desire for a better life for their families and hope for financial independence from relatives had also motivated them to migrate. Some wanted to earn in a foreign country and save up to buy assets such as plots of land or build a house, purchase a motorcycle, or start a small business.

Some had dropped out of school or had not gotten far in school so they did not think their skills/ qualifications to get a well-paying job in Uganda. Some had tried but failed to find any job in Uganda so migration seemed like the only employment option.

Achieving the migration goal

Most of the women said that were able to meet their migration goals. One shared that she and her family were previously renting a place and her siblings didn't have jobs. But with the money earned abroad she was able to purchase a motorcycle for her brother which now brings in daily income for the family. Her earnings also enabled her mother to build a house.

One woman talked about her failure to achieve her objectives which frustrated her. She had supported her family and come back with some money to start a poultry business but her lack of experience and the pandemic worked against her plans.

Experience abroad

Being exposed to new gadgets, learning new skills such a different cuisines and baking were considered positive experiences.

Women also talked about abuse from employers such as being spat on, beaten, shouted at and things being thrown at them.

One shared that her employers wanted her to convert to Islam since that would draw them closer and make her part of the family. When she converted, the employers were overjoyed and bought her a lot of gifts. However, she confided that she did it only to please them and to be treated fairly by them. Upon returning, she converted back to Christianity.

Circumstances of returning

“I was a live-out domestic worker and worked part-time in several homes. I was getting exhausted from all the work and decided to come back. Unfortunately, I didn’t have an exit pass from any employer. To make matters worse, I had also lost my passport. I had to seek help from our embassy where I had to spend six months.”

“When Covid-19 hit, my life became very difficult. Offices were closed and all members of the employer’s family were at home all the time. It was impossible to go out and report rights violations. When lockdown was lifted and travel bans eased, I sought assistance from the agent’s office to return home.”

“My mom was looking after my children in Uganda. She passed on due to Covid-19. I had to return as soon as I could.”

“My employer’s daughter started abusing me and it reached a stage where we almost got into a physical altercation. This forced me to run away from my employer’s home as I feared for my life. My parents sold the plot of land that I had purchased, added the savings from my remittances and sent me the money for emergency passport and costs of ticket.”

“My employer started to give me duties out of my job description but without any increase of salary for these extra tasks.”

“I returned home after I fell sick and underwent an operation. I came home to rest and recuperate.”

Life upon return

“Life has not been easy because the gentleman that I sent my money to help me build a house didn’t do as instructed. Instead, he used the money for himself. Now he is hiding and doesn’t want to pay back. I even reported the case to the police but they have not communicated any progress on apprehending him.”

“I returned at a time when the impact of COVID-19 was being felt by many people in Uganda. My single mother and my sisters depended on me for support. Therefore, even the little money that I had saved up from abroad was depleted in dealing with everyday problems.”

“Life has greatly improved because of my migration. My family now has a plot of land with a house and my brother has a motorcycle for ferrying passengers which helps with the family’s basic needs.”

“I am depressed because I have not been able to meet my objective for going abroad. My mother has used up my savings and there is no chance of getting it back.”

Reaction of family and community to their return

Many family and community members were simply happy to see the women return home alive as there are many cases in the media of bodies of domestic workers returning in caskets or women coming back injured or mentally disturbed. Some of the community members were happy to see that not everyone faces abuse or problems. Some were inspired to send their loved ones abroad to earn a living.

“My family was overjoyed to see me and threw a surprise party in my honour.”

Current economic situation

Most of the women have invested their money in purchasing land and starting up various businesses such as dealing in second-hand clothes and opening shops.

One is currently working with Kampala Capital City Authority as a street sweeper. However, she has been working for over three months without pay.

“I am now the director for an entertainment group which organises different shows in my community.”

“I work as a shop assistant in my mother’s shop. I also took a course in baking and I own a small bakery business.”

“I work as a programme assistant in an organisation.”

Recommendations to the Government of Uganda

- The government should revise and reduce the taxes that are levied on the money that workers send back home.
- The government should put in place programmes for financial management for the workers because many return with money but waste it away.

- The government and recruitment companies should bargain for higher salaries for the migrant workers just like other countries bargain for their citizens.
- The government should also monitor and ensure that the recruitment agencies abide by rules and regulations around labour migration.
- Our embassies and labour attaches in the countries of destinations should be functional and responsive when workers report cases of rights violation.

(Transcribed and summarised by Hellen Amagro from [Platform for Labour Action](#))

A little timely support may go a long way

PUSHPA SHARMA, DHANMAIT SINGH AND RABIN MANNA with

Nivedita

Manisha Kumari (name changed)

I am from Gumla district in Jharkhand, India. I was studying in class 8 when a close relative of mine encouraged me to go to Delhi for work. My friend Sandhya and I decided to go. My relative's husband accompanied us. We went to Banaras first and after staying there for a week went to Punjabi Bagh in Delhi. There I was sent to a placement agency. I was sexually assaulted there but could not complain to anyone as I was completely under their control. After two days, I was sent to someone's house as a live-in domestic worker.

I had no idea what my work would be, how much money I would receive and where I would stay. I started work and found the situation very hard. I was scolded for small mistakes, given food only 2 times in a day and could eat only after everyone had eaten. Whenever I tried to say anything, I was scolded. They used to beat me if I said I wanted to go home. When asked for my salary, they said that they have given the money to the placement agency. Three and a half years passed like this. I kept hoping that my relative would come and get me out of that house but she never did.

There was another woman from Jharkhand in the house who used to do cleaning work. She told me how to escape and I did. She also helped me get a train ticket and I came back to Jharkhand.



Someone told me about Srijan Foundation and I met them. They helped me register a case in Palkot Police Station. Luckily, with the education I had, I had a lot of accurate information. With legal support from Srijan, I have already received 145,000 INR. The case is still going on in the court.

With the help of Srijan, I have started a small fast-food shop. So far, it is doing fine and I am hopeful that this will work well.

Laxmi Devi (name changed)

I am Laxmi, a 48-year-old woman from Gumla District, Jharkhand. Along with my husband and daughter I migrated to Bombay to work in a brick kiln.

Our previous generation also used to migrate for brick kiln work. So my husband and I continued the tradition. We have some land, but it's not enough to sustain our livelihood so we prefer to migrate for work. While there, my husband suddenly got mental disorder and he was not able to work. I continued to work alone and looked after my husband and daughter. Then this disease called Corona came and suddenly everything closed. I had to come back. The situation at home was difficult. We had no savings. We were dependent on our wages. Without that we were helpless. I wanted to work in my own village, but due to lockdown, nothing was available at that time.

Srijan Foundation helped me to start a small business. They provided me potatoes, onions, garlic, ginger, and red chillies so I could start my own shop.

I was also supported by Srijan Foundation to set up a Kitchen Garden in my backyard.

For the last two months, I am only using vegetables from my own kitchen garden. I am currently working to set up a small stall in the nearby market. I am not sure how this will work. It is not like a regular wage or salary. But I am hopeful and will try my best.



Naresh Thakur (name changed)

I am Naresh, a 50-year-old man from Hazaribagh district. Prior to the pandemic, I owned a hair dressing salon in Patratu, a town not too far from our village. We had the salon for 25 years. We used to stay there. During the nationwide lockdown last year, all the factories and industries were shut down, we had no customers. I returned home in March 2020 and haven't gone back to my workplace since then.

I opened a shop in our village in an abandoned room near my house. I got the room repaired and got a metal shutter fitted in it to safeguard my business items, but I did not have enough tools and implements to start the shop and no money to buy them. Fortunately, I came to know about the initiatives of Srijan Foundation and HCL Foundation on reinstating the livelihood of the returnee migrants. Mr. Rabin Manna from Srijan visited my house and the shop to assess the situation and supported me with a barber kit.

Right now, I have been able to create a clientele in my village and earn around 4,000 to 5,000 INR per month. I used to earn a similar amount from my old salon but the living expenses were more. Living costs in the village are much less, I also do not need pay any rent.

My son who is in college assists me in the shop if I have many customers. I am hopeful that this salon would stabilise my life.

(Pushpa Sharma, Dhanmait Singh and Rabin Manna shared the stories with Nivedita in Hindi. Nivedita translated them for the e-magazine.)

I need to work with my people

RAHEL ZEGEYE

Preamble

“You don’t need to make an appointment with me, Bandana. Just call me if you see me online. If I am online, it means I am at home. Whenever you feel like talking to me, just call,” said Rahel.

Rahel and I know each other for nearly 5 years now. We had met every year or sometimes even twice a year until COVID-19 struck. She was on her way to India, my home country, when I met her in Beirut, in 2017. She came to a workshop that we were doing with Bangladeshi women migrant workers together with Farah Salka from the Anti-Racism Movement to speak to the Bangladeshi sisters. She was going to Trivandrum to join a leadership programme in [Kanthari](#). Several months later, I met her at the beautiful campus of Kanthari. In 2019, we met in Addis Ababa, her hometown, when she came to participate in a GAATW meeting. It was a privilege to see Addis in her company and spend time with her loving family.

Below is a summary of a WhatsApp conversation we had on 6 December 2021. Rahel had just come back home (her employer’s place) after a demonstration organised by the Ethiopian community in Beirut in front of the UN house. The community is concerned about the civil war in Ethiopia and wants the UN to play a role in bringing peace to the country.

Family in Addis



“Do you know that the house that you had been to is not there anymore?” asked Rahel. I was confused. Apparently, the house was in a low-lying area (I hadn’t noticed that) and a recent flood damaged it so much that the family couldn’t stay there anymore. I remembered Rahel’s family, her adorable little nephew, and the feast they had laid out for me. I remembered the cows her father had insisted I should see. I remembered talking to Rahel about my father’s love for cows.

So the house is gone and the family is temporarily scattered. “I will build another house. A nicer one. We have a small piece of land in another part of the city. Next time you come to Addis, you won’t stay in a hotel,” Rahel said.

We talked about her financial contribution to the family. Rahel is proud that she has been able to support them. The first few years in Beirut were bad but ever since she found her current “mister” (employer), things have been good.

Rahel came to Beirut when she was barely 20 years old. She is now 40.

From abused migrant domestic worker to film maker, writer, and activist

The first few years were horrible. But the last 15 years or so have been good. Her employer is a kind, elderly gentleman who encouraged her to pursue her interests. Rahel learnt photography and documented the work she was doing with fellow Ethiopian workers in Lebanon. She encouraged them to organise and in collaboration with other friends founded an organisation called [Mesewat](#). Together they address many small and big challenges the community faces.

Rahel has made 2 films in Lebanon in collaboration with friends. The first one was called BEIRUT; and the second was SHOUTING WITHOUT A LISTENER. She wrote the script, acted and did some of the camera work. It took her 6 years to finish them.

“My first film was to show a different perspective on the lives of Ethiopian workers in Lebanon. We often hear stories of abuse and bad treatment of foreign domestic workers. Most media and organisations working to help migrant workers in Lebanon portray the worker as a helpless victim, her fate ruled by evil agencies and bad madams. Although this often does happen and is definitely an issue that needs attention, reality is much more complicated. I wanted to shed light on the inner lives and thoughts of a domestic worker, an aspect which is usually hidden from the Lebanese and foreign public.

Many Ethiopian MDWs who come to Lebanon decide to run away from their employers. Some do this due to real reasons of mistreatment but others don't. They might be tempted to leave the boring household chores and duties at the employer's house for a 'freer' existence."

The leadership training in Kanthari has motivated Rahel further to work for social justice and human rights. She has been trying hard to register Mesewat but it has not happened yet. Work in the community goes on. Some Mesewat members have migrated to other countries. There is good will and support but official registration is still proving to be a hurdle.

Where is home?

"You know, Bandana, when I am in Ethiopia I worry about my mister. He is 84 years old now. He forgets things. When I am away, he messages me because he can't find things in the house.

Addis will always be my home. You know that because of some silly rules I could not go back to my home country for a long time. I want to have a nice house there.

But will any home contain me anymore? You know that I got married 5 years ago, right? You saw my wedding photos, didn't you? He is an Ethiopian man who lives in Germany. We were neighbours in our childhood. He came here and we had a church wedding. My mister organised it. It was beautiful. But we couldn't register our marriage, so I can't move to Germany. I am not sure if I would be able to. I have tried

my best. I also know that only a family life will not be enough for me. I need to work with my people. So I don't really know what the future holds for me. My priority now is to find a way to register Mesewat somewhere. Can you find out, Bandana?"

I promised I would.

Some words of advice to Ethiopians wanting to come to Lebanon

"You know that my country is in a big problem now. There is civil war again. So people will leave. They are leaving. Running away from violence.

What they may not know is that Lebanon is also a broken country. Everything has collapsed here. One US dollar used to be 1,500 Lebanese Lira; now it's 25,000. The currency is in a freefall. There is water scarcity. There are frequent power cuts. Prices of everything have gone up. Even transport costs. Today so many Ethiopian friends came for demonstration. Truth is that most do not have money for bus fare sometimes.



But Ethiopians are still arriving here. They are getting deported or repatriated. But they are still coming. I don't know how.

My only word of advice to people in my country is that they should not come here. There is nothing here. Citizens are big trouble. I hope the situation improves soon. This is a good country. There are many good people. But at this moment, no one should come here.”

No one was happy to see me

ROHINI

I will call myself Rohini for this story. I am 46 years old. I'm from a small village in Gorkha District of Nepal. I was raising my two sons and a daughter as a single mother after my husband went missing 10 years ago. I had to take care of my old in-laws too. Survival was a struggle because our small piece of land did not yield enough to feed my family of six. I also wanted to educate my children in a good school. So I planned to go and work in another country. I had seen many women from my village going abroad and earning good money for their family. I informed my mother-in-law about my plan to migrate for work. I had no money for the processing fee but I hoped to arrange it somehow.

I knew an agent in our village who had sent many other women, so I went to meet him one day. He advised me to go to Saudi Arabia saying that it would be the best choice for me. He also assured me that I didn't need to pay any money for my documentation and visa. But I didn't know anything about migration. Since I had no idea about the documentation process, I did not ask any questions. Luckily, I did not face any problem in my journey via India. I stayed in India with many other women like me for nearly three months till my visa arrived.

After three months, I flew to Saudi Arabia and immediately started work as a domestic worker. Work was okay and as promised but was I was paid less than what the agent told me. When I called my agent after a few months, he told me that I had got a very good job and the employer will raise my salary after some time. This didn't happen. Still I did not complain about it and I

sent all my salary to my in-laws for my children. After eight months my employer sent me to Kuwait. They promised me that my work will be easier and my salary will be more than what I was receiving.

After a while, I realised that I was cheated. I had to work like a slave with no rest. Sometimes I had to even work for 22 hours with no rest. I was paid less than what I used to receive in Saudi Arabia. I wasn't given enough food and I was verbally and physically abused. I was never allowed to go out of the house or communicate with my family. My employer also cheated me with his fake gold chain which he exchanged for my real gold chain. I realised only after I was back in Nepal that it was not gold. I used to cry alone because I had no one to help me or listen to my cries. When I called my agent to rescue me, he tried to avoid my calls and then switched off his mobile. I even lost contact with my family as I was not allowed to speak with them. After a year, they stopped paying me but said that they will pay all my salary when I return home next year. But they never paid me. I worked there for nearly five years. I sometimes thought that I might not return home alive to see my family so I started thinking of ways to run away. It took me nearly five years to run away from that house.

One early morning when all the family members were still sleeping, I managed to get out of the house. With help from various people I reached our embassy in Kuwait. I took a deep breath and felt thankful that I had survived the ordeal and would be going back to my family alive. My passport was with my employers so I had to stay in the shelter for a month till my travel document was ready. NRNA (Non Resident Nepali Association) Dubai helped me with my flight tickets. I returned to Nepal after more than five and a half years with no money and no family contacts.

When I landed in Kathmandu, I had no idea where I should go as I had no money but only a few Kuwaiti Dinars given to me by friends in the shelter. I was lucky that I was received by AMKAS Nepal's client support officers at the airport as NRNA Dubai had informed them.

I was escorted to the shelter where I met other victimised returnees like me. I was very weak, malnourished, traumatised, and depressed when they received me. I just started crying when they asked me questions. They were very kind to me and assured me that they are there to help me. After sitting with the psychosocial counsellor several times, I started feeling relaxed. They were successful in tracing down my family's address from the information I provided them about my village and family. I also attended a post-arrival orientation session in the shelter with others and have learnt a lot of things regarding migration, human trafficking, COVID-19 and our local government schemes for returnee migrants.

After seven days in the shelter, my family was traced and contacted by AMKAS officer. I was so happy to speak to my family but at the same time sad because I came back empty-handed. What would my children think, what would my in-laws think, and what will my community say? At first, my neighbors and even my own family were not happy to see me. I was asked to strictly maintain my distance with them because of COVID-19 which I did though I was not happy with it.

Now I'm with my family but financially in the same position as what I was five and half years ago. Nobody, even my relatives are not ready to help me in any way because I have no money.

I am very grateful to AMKAS for taking good care of me. My belief in humanity had faded away but AMKAS restored it. I hope that AMKAS will find a good job opportunity for me and a way for my children's future too. Thinking about my past experience, I never want to go abroad again but sometimes I feel that is the only option I might have. There just aren't enough jobs in my country.

(Interviewed and transcribed By, Amira Subba, translation by Bijaya Rai Shrestha, [AMKAS Nepal](#))

In the absence of knowledge and courage, we lose our rights

RUBY MAHTO

Many women and men from Jharkhand migrate to work in other parts of the country. Sometimes they go as families, sometimes women go alone with help from agents. They work in brick kilns and in people's houses as domestic workers. Women also go to work in garment factories after receiving 3-6 months of skills training in government training centres. None of these have strong provisions for rights protection. People are left at the mercy of agents, employers, and their luck. Despite knowing about abuses, people go because there are no jobs available in their villages or within their states. Working conditions are very poor and all jobs are temporary. Following the nationwide lockdown that was announced without any notice, hundreds of thousands of internal migrants started their return journey to the home states. Many literally walked hundreds of kilometres. However,



when things got slightly better, many went back again because there was no other option.

Recognising that there is no data on internal migrant workers, the Government of India has now made a provision for their registration under the E-Shram Card. The card promises insurance coverage in the event of an accident or death at the workplace. However, potential migrants are largely unaware of this provision. Many NGOs, including SMS, are helping people fill out the online forms.

Last year, in collaboration with NAWO (National Alliance of Women's Organisation) we conducted research to understand the situation of women migrant workers during the lockdown. The survey tried to assess the impact of the lockdown on interstate migrant women and find out about their willingness (or not) to migrate again. Our goal was to carry out some collaborative national-level advocacy for protection of rights of women internal migrant workers.

I'd like to share the story of Kalpana Purti who we worked with. Kalpana is 36 years old. She is from Khaimati village in Sonua block of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, India.

Kalpana is married to Jaiprakash Purti who was working as a daily wage labourer in the village. But the wage was low so two years after their marriage, Jaiprakash decided that they should move to Andhra Pradesh. They both went there and started working in a brick kiln. Time passed and Kalpana gave birth to 3 children (two sons and one daughter). They changed employers and lived with their children in makeshift accommodations in the

places where they worked. The whole family used to come to the village once a year or once in two years and then go back again to Andhra Pradesh.

In 2020, when Covid-19 struck and there was a sudden lockdown, both Kalpana and her husband lost their jobs. They were also afraid of the disease. They had lived and worked outside their home state for so many years but they had no security in the destination state. Everything was temporary and precarious.

They decided to return to their village. The journey was very difficult. Upon return, Kalpana joined a women's group that she was part of many years ago. She came to meetings regularly and participated actively. She received whatever government support was available to all villagers.



When lockdown ended, Kalpana postponed her decision to return as she was unsure of getting work. The pandemic was not over yet and she did not want go with children. The traumatic return journey was fresh in her memory. But Jaiprakash went. This time he went to work for Eagle Construction Company in Ulhasnagar, Maharashtra.

Just before he left, we from Shramjivi Mahila Samity in collaboration with the government had organised a camp in the village to help everyone fill out details for the online E shram cards and link it with other cards such as Aadhar. Both Kalpana and Jaiprakash had got their cards.

Meanwhile, in October 2021, Jaiprakash had a workplace accident. He fell from a three-storey building while at work and became unconscious. The company immediately admitted him in the hospital. Jaiprakash did not regain consciousness for three days. Kalpana did not know about the accident. Whenever she was calling, her husband's phone was switched off. After several days she called the company and heard about her husband.

Kalpana talked to her women's group and together they kept calling the company to ensure that her husband gets good care and she is kept informed. They came to know that his hand was broken and there has been a lot of blood loss. Kalpana continued to put pressure on the company, Jaiprakash was kept in the hospital for 10 days and given good care.

The company spent 300,000 INR for his treatment. As Jaiprakash would not be able to work immediately, Kalpana requested the company to send him home. The company gave 30,000 INR to Jaiprakash when he returned. But upon consultation with her women's group Kalpana insisted that the company should acknowledge that this was a work accident and compensate them better. Finally, the company paid him 6 months of salary.



Kalpana and her friends think that information and persistence are necessary to hold employers to account. In the absence of knowledge and courage, we lose our rights, she says. There was a similar case in their

neighbourhood several months ago. In fact, the worker had died following a workplace accident but the company just gave them 30,000 INR for the last ceremony. If his family had the right information, then they could have got a better compensation.

Kalpana is grateful to her women's group for giving her moral support while she was negotiating with the company for her husband's claims. The group in turn admires her determination. Kalpana got a small piece of land from her in-laws and organic vegetable seeds from Shramajivi Mahila Samiti. We are very happy that the women's groups are getting stronger and claiming their rights.

(Translated from Hindi by Purabi Paul, Shramajivi Mahila Samity.)



Migrated for work two times but still struggling

RUMANA BEGUM

My name is Rumana Begum, I am 40 years old. I am from South Dharmashur area in Bangladesh. My father died when I was 6 years old and my mother died a year later. Then I started living with my elder brother. I used to go to school when I lived with his family. After some years my elder sister took me to her family. My life took a difficult turn there.

My brother-in-law stopped my schooling and gave me all kinds of work to do. He used to make me sit at his shop, send me to work in the field, and do household chores. I had to work in the sewing factory too. He did not give me enough food to eat. My sister couldn't protest because she was afraid of him. In the year 1999, he married me off to a rickshaw puller.

My husband did not look after me well. I gave birth to three daughters. We were living in a miserable condition. My husband did not go to work regularly and earned very little. I could not do anything to add to our income. I married off my daughters when they were very young. The youngest one is in class 5.

To get out of extreme poverty I went to Saudi Arabia in 2016. Misery followed me there. Everything was different, I did not know the language. Their food was different. My employer did not even let me talk to my children on the phone. He paid me 20,000 Takas per month and then stopped giving me my salary regularly. He would only pay after 6 or 7 months. He was also sexually harassing me.

I left Saudi Arabia after 2 years and 2 months. But the economic situation at home was just the same. I had no other option but to migrate again. In 2018, I went to Saudi Arabia for the second time. But I couldn't stay there for long because my husband used to call me and abuse me on phone. That is why I had to return. Upon return, I saw that my husband had spent most of my money. I also heard that he was sexually harassing our daughter's friend. I had sent 5 lakh Takas but I could get only 3 lakhs from him. I bought some land with that money, but my husband registered it under his name. After several years, I sold the land at a much higher price and bought more land with that money. But my husband started torturing me again to give him ownership of that land. He started spreading bad rumors about me and stopped going to work. After two stints in Saudi, I am facing the same situation of poverty at home.

Right now, Badabon Sangho, a local NGO, is giving me some help. I have received counselling and some training in tailoring. Now I am earning some money from working in a small mask-making factory. I am also able to save a little bit. I talk to other returnee women and encourage them to get trainings.

(Translated by Lipi Rahman from [Badabon Sangho](#))

Everybody should be able to dream

RUTH

My name is Ruth and I am from Kenya. I am a member of the Domestic Workers Solidarity Network-Jordan. I have been a migrant domestic worker here in Jordan since October 2020.

I have twin sisters and a younger brother whom I support for their school fees. I also have my grandmother who raised me, so I work hard to make sure that all her bills are paid. I'm not the only wage earner in the family; my older brother and I both support our family's needs, although he is not earning very much. If you come from a humble background, you have to stand up and take some family responsibilities.

A migrant woman's dream

My biggest goal has always been to do better. I try to gain more skills, to learn more and get a well-paying job. My biggest dream is to become a nurse. If I can earn enough money to take myself through nursing school, then that will be a dream come true for me.

Financially, nobody supports me to achieve this dream. But my mother gives me moral support, and so does my extended family, especially my sweet grandmother. They remind me that there is so much I can achieve so I should keep going.

I haven't been a migrant worker for many years but I hope that migration will help me realise my ambition. I also hope to be able to help other women to be better and feel better.

Being a domestic worker should not be limiting, everybody should be able to dream. They should believe that their dreams will come true. And I believe that one day my dream will come true, one day I will be a nurse.

Hopes and fears of returning home

I don't know how to talk about this because it makes me very emotional. I was educated, I've gone to college but due to lack of employment back home, I opted to come overseas and look for work. The work available was domestic work and I decided to take it up.

Living here, I worry about how to reconnect with people if I decide to go back home. I am here, but my friends and family are back home. They continue with their lives. Living away from one's home country I feel that it is easy to feel disconnected. It can be disorienting. Where to start from when you go back? Your old friends may not relate with you, because you have a different perspective on things now.

Many people back home believe that working overseas means you are earning a lot of money. So they don't expect you to come overseas and then go back home.

They say *'Oh you went overseas, you are so lucky! You should stay there.'* And so the sad thing is that if you go back home, they literally condemn you and think that you are worthless. They wonder why you would even want to go back to (what they think is) *poverty*.

For me as a fresher to this migrant situation, I can tell you for sure, that there is always so much we can do back home and be successful.

But the attitude in our society has made it very hard for the migrants to return home. Migrant workers' contributions often go unrecognised or are taken for granted even by their own families. At times, migrants are not careful enough to save something for their own retirement. Sometimes financial responsibilities become endless, thus making migration a permanent source of livelihood until you grow old and don't have enough energy to work anymore.

I believe there is lack of education about migrating to another country.

There is so little understanding about why people migrate.

If only it were normal to go back home if things are not working for us overseas.

If only it were normal to move whenever we want to move.

If only we could return whenever we want to return and migrate whenever we want to migrate. Just normal.

(Transcribed by Alfie Gordo)

A discussion among returnee women migrant workers in Bangladesh

SALMA AKTER MONEY AND RUCHI SRAVASTI

On 9 December 2021, a group of 18 returnee women migrant workers and 6 women whose spouses are migrants had one of their bi-weekly meetings at the Munshiganj field office of OKUP, Bangladesh. The recently formed group is currently in the process of organising itself and meeting regularly for collective knowledge building and digital literacy.

Most of the women have returned from KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). There are also returnees from Lebanon, Jordan, and Oman.

The discussion focussed on Life Upon Return. They talked about why they had migrated, whether they have been able to meet their financial goals, the circumstances of their return, life after returning, and their expectations from the state.

Salma Akter Mony and Ruchi Sravasti facilitated the discussion in Bangla, took extensive notes and prepared the summary report in English.

Motivation behind migration

Most of the participants said that their reason for migration was mainly financial: for purchasing land, paying back debt, and to earn a higher income.

“I wanted to buy a plot of land to build a house. Our house was in a terrible condition. When it rained, we would get drenched. Sometimes we even tried to

take shelter under our beds. So, when I was offered a job in Saudi, I accepted it happily.” (Rumana)

“I used to work as a domestic worker before going abroad. But I could not even buy milk regularly for my 6-year-old son. My husband had a lot of debts and part of his weekly wages was going towards its repayment. So, I decided to go abroad for our survival.” (Moyna)

Some women had migrated because they were divorced or widowed and had to support their children. A few mentioned that they migrated because their husbands were lazy or addicted to alcohol and gambling. Two women said that they were forced by their families to migrate.

“I had no choice, I was forced to migrate because of my husband. He threatened to divorce me if I did not go abroad to work. I had save my marriage.” (Rozina)

In terms of fulfilling economic goals, 15 women said that they have been partially successful. They have either purchased a piece of land, paid back their debts, or successfully used their savings for children’s education. The other 10 women had returned with unpaid salaries and felt that their financial plans were not successful.

Saving money

Most of the women had sent their earnings to family members, in most cases to their husbands. They burst into tears while telling us that family members have spent all their money. They regretted the fact that they had not thought about saving money in their own names.

Circumstances of return

Very few women were able to return soon after completing their job contracts. Three were forced to stay on for more than a year even upon the completion of their contracts. Some had to return because of illness. Two were forced to return due to Covid-19 as their employers stopped paying them regularly. Some had to continue working for 5-8 months even after the contract just to get the air tickets from the employers.

“Even after finishing my contract, I had to stay for more than a year at my employer’s house. Almost every night, I was sexually abused by my male employer. They were probably mixing something in my food because I used to be completely unconscious during sleep. I could not walk in the morning. I felt pain in the lower parts of my body and realised that something was happening to me at night. I wanted to lock my door at night but the madam did not allow me. I wanted to escape but was afraid that I might end up in a worse situation.”

(Lucky)

Social challenges upon return

Everyone said that the situation upon return was horrible and unexpected. It was as if a social barrier has been created between them and other people. Even family members did not receive them with warmth and understanding. Those who returned with physical illness faced neglect.

“When I sent money regularly, I was treated like a responsible person in my family. My mother used to consult me before taking decisions. But the whole thing changed when my employer sent me back without paying 7 months of salary. I was very ill when I came back. Instead of looking after me, my mother would shout at me and blame for my untimely return. She flatly refused to pay

for my medical treatment. I have thought of leaving our home many times.”
(Sonali)

Similar stories were reported by other members who returned without ‘success’. They had to face verbal abuse from family members. People in the community gossiped about them and made fun of them. They said that they did not feel like joining any social gatherings because of the unwanted attention they were getting.

“I felt afraid all the time, and eventually I forgot how to laugh. I locked myself and my daughter in my room most of the time to escape from the rude comments of people around me.” (Ruma)

The spouses of male migrant workers added that the attitudes towards men and women are different but ‘unsuccessful’ men also face rejection. Everyone expects them to come back with a lot of money, pay back loans and show tangible benefits of migration. When that does not happen, people in their community mock them as ‘good for nothing’ and failures.

Some members said that ‘successful’ migrants, on the other hand, are seen as smart women and men. They are seen as people who could solve the financial problems of their families.

Everyone agreed that if those who have returned without ‘success’ do not get any psychosocial support they will start losing faith in themselves. Group members felt that if the returnee migrant forum members support each other, some attitudinal change may happen.

Economic challenges upon return

Most returnees had no savings and many are unemployed now. They cannot get any jobs because there are none. Because they are returnees, people think that they must have made a lot of money. Some women said that prospective employers assume that having worked abroad they would be less gullible and more conscious about their rights and demand better salary and benefits. So some employers reject returnee migrants.

Most group members did not know if there were any skills trainings available for them. As far as they knew, there are no specific reintegration programmes for returnee migrant workers. They know that Probashi Kalyan Bank provides loans to returnees but their experience in accessing it has not been easy. As per their information, the government does not have job placement policies for returnee migrant workers, male or female.

Expectation from the Government of Bangladesh:

- Information on available skills training for returnee migrants should be widely available.
- The procedures for low interest loans for returnees should be less complicated.
- The Government should create more jobs.
- Low-cost health insurance and free healthcare should be available to all.
- Given the current situation, cash stimulus should be continued.
- The Government should increase human resources in the embassy to provide sufficient support to migrant workers abroad.

- If possible, the Government can set up regional offices, especially in large countries like KSA which has many administrative districts. Migrant workers in remote locations find it difficult to contact the embassy from far away.
- The Government should keep a record of migrant workers and their employers' details even before they migrate.

A page from my diary

SALMA

I will call myself Salma. In my 23 years old but I have experienced all kinds of hardship. Pain has touched me so deeply that I am now entangled in it. It all started three years ago when my husband divorced me. I never imagined that he would have an affair with another woman. But that was what happened. With my two-year-old son, I had to get out of my husband's house. The end of my marriage left me traumatized and I went back to my parents. Although they did not want to treat me as their burden, my poor parents really worried that they had to feed two more mouths now. So, I tried hard to be self-sufficient and contribute to the family.

However, in a country where marriage is considered sacred for women, divorce becomes the very opposite of that. People in my neighborhood started questioning my loyalty to my husband. They made me feel as if it was my mistake. Even though I was trying to get over my separation, they didn't miss an opportunity to put me down. I tried to avoid talking with them. I started wearing a burqa with a long veil so that they couldn't see me. In fact, I was becoming afraid of meeting people. So, whenever I went outside to look for a job, I wanted my father to accompany me.

I tried to get a job in the soap factory in my area, Narsingdi Sadar, but did not get it. One day a man came to our house and offered me a job in Saudi Arabia. He said that he was a sub agent in a company that sends people to work abroad. I accepted the offer. I thought it would be better to move and get away from all the hurtful words of people in our community. I thought I

would also be able to earn more if I migrated. The only painful thing was to leave my small son behind.

At my employer's house in Saudi Arabia, another brutal chapter of my life started. The employer's family members did not treat me like a human being. They told me that they had bought me with money. I was severely beaten up, sometimes with a belt or a shoe. I still have many scars on my face and my arms. They would hit me on the head if they found me sitting on the floor for a minute. I had no time to rest. Sometimes the employer's mother woke me up at 3 or 4 AM as she needed me to massage her. They also mocked me because I was skinny.

There were also incidents of sexual harassment. The employer's cousin always tried to grope me whenever I was sent to work at his house. I informed my Madam but she did not believe me. So every time before going there, I used to cry, make excuses of being sick, and request my employer to not send me there. But I got no break. I started losing my faith in God because he was not listening to my prayers.

I don't know why but sometimes I felt like hating my son. I know that it is a horrible thing to say but I used to feel that he was the root cause of all my problems. Some days I felt that I should give him away and kill myself. The next moment I would be filled with love for him and think that everything would be alright. I started talking to the furniture of that house. I shared my pain with it. I knew it was not very normal but it was something that I was doing so I do not go completely crazy. However, seeing this behaviour, my employer sent me to the recruitment agent's office where I was severely beaten. They said I would be sent back home if they found my abnormal behaviour again. So I had to be very careful about myself.

I was just twenty years old at that time but burdened with so many negative experiences. After completion of three years of work, I tried to extend it further. But I could not and returned home. My salary for the last eight months was not paid.

When I returned home, I could not get along with people. I did not feel close to my parents. My brother also cut off his ties as he considered me an unholy woman. But he happily used my money to buy a new tiller machine. My 5-year-old son did not seem to like me either. If I went closer to hug him, he would push me away. There was rejection at home and in the community. I heard people still making fun of me. They now called me a greedy woman because I went abroad leaving my small son behind. Some people would just stop me on the street and ask how much money I have made. Some of them would ask if I was poorly treated there. At some point I just felt like shouting at them. Even after three years, I am still a defeated person.

These days I try to sew *kantha* (blanket) but I just do not have the courage to go from door to door to sell.

Every day I try hard to get over my depression, but I am still in the same condition due to the huge social stigma. I don't know when these people's mindsets will change or when they will leave me alone. How easy would it be for me if all the people just accepted me as I am—as a divorcee, as a returnee migrant woman. As a woman who is living her life.

(Transcribed and translated by Ruchi Sravasti, OKUP)

Isn't there something called humanitarian assistance?

SANJEEVANI

I am Sanjeevani from Kurunegala district in Sri Lanka. I am 41 years old. I was a good student in school and did very well in my GCE Advanced Level examination. But I could not continue with my studies because of financial constraints, nor could I find a well-paying job. So going abroad seemed like a good option. I completed all legal formalities and went to Kuwait to work as a domestic worker in 2002.

I worked with several employers in Kuwait. I got married to a Sri Lankan man I met there who was working as an office assistant in a lawyer's office. Our first child was born in Kuwait. He was a child with special needs. When he was four years old, I brought him to Sri Lanka and left him under the care of my parents and went back to Kuwait. Our plan was to build a house in Sri Lanka and to give the best medical care to our son.

My second job in Kuwait was as a beautician. With this new job, I no longer had to live with any employer. My husband and I could stay together. A few years later our daughter was born. When she was 9 months old, we had a car accident that left my husband severely injured. Later, the police filed a lawsuit against him for causing serious damage to several vehicles, his visa and driver's license were revoked, and his passport was blacklisted. He couldn't work, nor could he return to Sri Lanka because the case was still in court.

So now I was the only person to look after the entire family, including our parents back in Sri Lanka. Our medical and legal bills were high and children were growing up. It was difficult for me to manage my work and look after my husband and daughter. So I travelled again back to Sri Lanka with my two-year-old daughter and handed her over to my mother. I continued to work very hard for a few years. In the interim, due to some irregularities, my visa and employment contract expired and I was caught and punished by the police on several occasions. I was working for low wages because of my undocumented status. Employers took advantage of the situation because they knew that I would not be able to make a legal complaint against them. I made complaints at the Sri Lankan Embassy, but I did not receive any relief. I endured all the harassment because I wanted to take care of my children and my ailing husband.

In 2020 COVID-19 struck. I became jobless and life became extremely hard. I thought we would die of starvation or disease. I took whatever work was available. But I could not pay our rent with that money. The landlord sued us for non-payment of rent for 11 months. On many days we had nothing to eat. Kind Sri Lankans in Kuwait were donating food and groceries and we managed with that for some time. But we did not get any help from the Sri Lankan embassy. I requested the embassy to help me get an affordable ticket but they did not help. They said that nothing could be done as my husband had no visa and there was a case pending in the Kuwait court. Finally, my husband's friends in Kuwait told me that they would take care of him and I should return home. They said that once the case was over, arrangements could be made to get him back to Sri Lanka.

Thus, in March 2021, I got my mother to mortgage the only piece of land we had in Sri Lanka. She sent me 300,000 LKR. My air ticket (including quarantine costs) cost 250,000 LKR. An additional 25,000 LKR was spent to prepare the required documents. When I finally got home, I couldn't even bring some toffees for my children. Upon return, I took loans from several places and saved our small piece of land. At present, we live on the money I earn from daily labour work. The debt is yet to be repaid.

People who do not know my true story think that I am financially strong since I worked abroad for 19 years. But much of my earning has been spent on my ailing husband, our son who needs special care and for my daughter. I still live in a very small house. Our dream to build a house has not come true. I want my son to get good education in a special school but the costs are prohibitive. I do not have money to start my business as a beautician. I feel extremely helpless.

I went to the Bureau of Foreign Employment to lodge a complaint and seek help to bring my husband back to Sri Lanka. However, as my husband had gone abroad without registering with the Bureau, I was told that he would not be able to receive any help. That is the law, I know. But isn't there something called humanitarian assistance? If not the government, then are there any private institutions to address these issues? I do not know how long I will have to go through life like this.

(Transcribed and translated by Monica Alfred)

Whatever our status is, we are still citizens of this country

SEETA

I am Seeta (not my real name). I have no formal education; I have only learnt to do my signature. I was 35 years old when I migrated to Kuwait as a domestic worker. I was married and had two daughters and a son. My son is my youngest and he was 4 years old when I decided to go abroad. I used to be a daily wage worker before I migrated. We have a small piece of land but the produce was not even enough to feed our family, let alone earn any income. We had no money to invest in modern high yield agriculture. Moreover, my husband had problems with his eyesight and could not work properly so the family responsibilities were mostly on me.

I knew women who had migrated to Kuwait. When they came to Nepal on holidays, they had good things to say about their work. The salary they said they got was much more than what I would ever get here. Given our family situation, I thought it would be very helpful if I worked abroad for some years.

I discussed my plan with my family and took a loan of 5,000 rupees from a relative to make my passport. I came to Kathmandu to find an agent and prepare other documents. The agent I met assured me that there would not be any other expenses. I also consulted the Government Department of Manpower but I couldn't afford their fee. In fact, agents from Manpower told me that I could easily migrate without their help. I had heard about travel bans for women migrating for domestic work to some countries so I did not want to go through official channels. My agent recommended travel

via India. I knew women who had done that so I agreed and the process started. Initially a male and a female agent talked to me. After some time, only the male agent was in contact with me.

I did not have to go through any training or health examination before migrating. All the required documents were prepared by the agent. I went to Delhi from Kathmandu by train and stayed there for 5 days. There, I met five other Nepali women who were also migrating. Then I went to Dubai. We were there for 7 hours and then connected to the Kuwait-bound flight. An agent received me at the airport in Kuwait. I stayed in their office for two days. Then an employer came and took me to their house.

My life as a domestic worker far from home was hell. I did not understand their language and they did not understand mine. Everything was different there. My owner used to tell me things through sign language. After a week, I got some ideas about my work.

I was given food once a day. The lady owner used to scold me for drinking water. I was not allowed to go to the toilet many times. My employer's children used to accompany me and wait outside when I went to the toilet. I was allowed to take a bath only once a week. I was given just a mat and a blanket to sleep. I had to sleep in their storeroom. There were CCTV cameras all over the house, even in the room where I slept.

The male owner was good. However, the female owner used to treat me very badly. She used to pinch me and I would get blue marks. I used to do all the household work alone. I would wake up at 5 AM and work until 2 AM. I would look after 8 people in the house, including 6 school-going children.

When I confronted my lady employer and asked her to give me enough food at least, she said that she had bought me for 1,200 KD and if she wanted she could starve me.

I had no mobile phone. At first they did not let me use their phone. After repeated requests, I was allowed to borrow my employer's phone to talk to my family but I had to pay her 1 KD per 15 minutes of call. When I requested them to send my monthly salary to Nepal, she refused. After a month, I lied to them and said that my mother-in-law was very ill and my family needed money. She then sent my two months' salary to my family in Nepal. I was also able to send my third month's salary home. But I could not cope with the cruel treatment and ran away before completing my fourth month.

It was not easy but I managed to run away one night. I found an Indian taxi driver and requested him to take me to the Nepalese embassy. He took me to the embassy without charging me a fare.

Our embassy gave me food and shelter. It took a week for me to recover as I was very ill due to lack of proper food and water. I was treated well there. But after some time they asked me if I wanted to stay in Kuwait or return to Nepal. I told them that I would like to work in Kuwait if they found me some good work. They replied that my only option is to go back to the same employer. So I decided to return to Nepal. The people in the embassy hostel asked me for 200 KD and my passport to send me back to Nepal. I had no passport and no money. They also asked me if I had someone in Kuwait or even in Nepal who could bear my return expenses. I had no one who could help me with money. So I stayed there. I asked them to find me a job, so that

I could earn money for my return, which they refused. After two months, police came in search of me as the owners of the place where I worked issued a missing person notice. I stayed in jail for a week. Then Kuwaiti police booked me a ticket and sent me back to Nepal.

I thought my family would understand my situation and make me feel better. We are poor but I was hoping that they would be happy to have me back with them. That did not happen. People in our community suspected that I must have done something bad in the foreign country. I was also being blamed as stupid.

I had worked only 3 months, sent home all my earnings and the money was used up by our family. When the pandemic struck, our situation got much worse. We were all worried about our health and there was no support from anywhere.

I have not heard of any government employment generation schemes or programmes for returnee migrant workers. Upon return, I looked for work in Kathmandu with little hope of actually finding it. But I made contact with an organisation and when I shared everything with them, they promised to find some work for me. I got work in three houses and a hospital. But after the lockdown, I work in only one house and the hospital. I don't get regular duty in the hospital but I hold on to it with the hope of being regularised at some point. When people come to know about my hospital work, they think it is risky to let me inside their homes because I might bring infection. Life is very difficult now.

I think that the Government of Nepal should recognise domestic work as labour and standardise salaries. I think my travelling via India was not a good decision. Whatever our status is, we are still citizens of this country. So ensuring safe return should be the government's responsibility. We should also be able to talk to our embassy if we have problems in a foreign country.

(Transcribed and translated from Nepali by Subash Khatri, [Pourakhi](#), Nepal)

My Journey: Battered woman, abused migrant worker, and migrant rights advocate

SITI BADRIYAH with Devi Nova

“After surviving my return on a goods boat that endangered my life, I did not immediately go to meet my children and parents in the village. It is very difficult to return to the village without carrying money. I chose to meet with a migrant rights organisation in Jakarta to seek help for getting my salary and passport back from the agents in Malaysia. Who would’ve thought that a few years later I would join the same organisation to work with migrant workers!

*While working I have also completed my law degree. In addition to policy advocacy, I also help **Migrant Care**, the organisation where I work, run the Desbumi (Village Care for Migrant Workers) programme which helps migrant workers to continue with their lives in their home villages.” (Siti)*

Siti’s story

I am Siti Badriyah, born on 14 July 1976 in Termas Village, Karangrayung District, Grobogan Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. My mother works at home and my father is a farm worker. I have 7 siblings.

In 2000, I married a man from a neighbouring village and moved to live with his extended family. Every day, I worked in the house and on his family’s land. His family was richer than mine. This fact made them interfere a lot in my household. My husband ignored their rudeness but yelled at me. Finally, I filed for divorce and returned to my parents’ house with my nine-month-old baby.

Being a single parent with a toddler and living at your parents' house is not easy. The negative attitude of people in the village was hurtful. I then decided to leave my baby with my parents and migrate for work.

I met a recruiter who came from a neighbouring village. He told me that I can make Rp. 2,000,000 (139 USD) a month by cooking and washing in someone's house in another country. The amount was very large compared to the Rp. 150,000 (10.45 USD) a month that one would earn as a domestic worker in our village so I showed interest. The recruitment agency made me a passport with the same name as mine but a different address. They asked me to memorise the fake address to avoid trouble with immigration officials.

They took me from my village to Semarang, the capital city of Central Java, about 3 hours away by bus. Then I took the four-day journey to Medan, the capital of North Sumatra.

I stayed at the PT Sere Multipertiwi shelter in Medan for 40 days along with 200 other prospective women migrant workers. Every day we took turns in cooking, cleaning the rooms, cleaning the office, and learning foreign languages. We slept on small mattresses in a dormitory. From my conversations with friends, I learnt that most other women had experienced domestic violence too. At that time, smartphones were not popular yet. So I was couldn't communicate with my family while in Medan.

Becoming a migrant worker

From Medan, the agent sent me to Penang, Malaysia by sea. Under the employment agreement, I would be employed as a domestic worker.

The first two weeks in Penang, I worked for a chicken entrepreneur. I was in charge of cleaning the chickens that had been slaughtered. I did that from dawn until 10 pm. At 10 pm I returned to my employer's house to clean and do other household chores. The agent transferred me from one employer to another. Within 9 months, I worked intermittently with different employers: in a school canteen, a noodle factory, and a mini market. Sometimes, I was doing three different jobs at the same time. For example, I was a shop assistant in the mini market, I was also in charge of moving goods from the mini market to the 4th floor of the employer's house and I had to work in the market owner's house. I only had 2 hours of sleep at night. My next job was in a hardware store.

By then I had worked for 10 months and not received any salary. I couldn't take it anymore. I mustered the courage to ask my employer for my salary. The employer asked me to ask the agent who hired me. When I asked the agent, I didn't receive a salary but a threat – that if I demanded my salary he would take nude photos of me and make them public.

One morning, I ran away from the employer's house penniless. I thought if I didn't run away from this situation, I would never know what hope lies beyond the gates of this building. There was a police station and a mosque nearby so I went to the mosque and asked the caretaker for help.

An undocumented migrant worker

The caretaker of the mosque found a job for me. I started working as a canteen waiter at a Sony factory with good working conditions. I worked from 5 am until evening. I was given a place in a shared flat. If I worked on

Saturdays and Sundays, I got paid overtime. I didn't have to pay for food, because I could eat for free in the canteen. My salary was 700 ringgit (166 USD) per month.

But I didn't have any papers. I didn't know if my passport was held by my agent or my previous employer. All the workers in our dorm were undocumented. In fact, the police knew this and sometimes did fake raids. My friends and I would give the police 50 ringgit (11 USD) and we would not be reported.

Many of my friends, all undocumented women migrant workers from Indonesia, were making friends with and getting married to migrant workers from Bangladesh. One day a Bangladeshi man suddenly walked into my flat and tried to kiss me. When I refused, he said that my friend had suggested it and I could have a relationship with him. I was very angry with my friend but she argued that every woman needs a man to look after her. I was not convinced. How can one undocumented worker protect another? What will happen if he turns abusive?

This incident kept bothering me. I didn't want to go on as an undocumented worker. I started thinking about my baby and my parents. I tried to reach the Indonesian embassy but failed. One day, a customer at the canteen gave me the address and contact number of an organisation that helps migrant workers. It was called KOPBUMI (Indonesian Migrant Workers Consortium) based in Jakarta. My hope rose again.

Risking my life on a goods boat

Through information from friends, I found a way to return to Indonesia. By paying 1,800 ringgit (427 USD) 5 other undocumented migrant workers and I travelled by car from Penang to Johor. Then we were dropped off at the edge of the forest, and walked all day, until we arrived at a hut. There were already several people there and now we were a group of 17. Since the beginning of the trip, we did not have much clarity on the return journey. At 3 am, the boat we were waiting for arrived at the beach. We rushed through the mangroves and swam to reach the boat. This was a real gamble for life. Those who cannot swim would lose their lives. Arriving at the ship, my friends and I were asked to lie face down on a pile of goods. About 5 hours later, we arrived in Indonesian sea. Several more trips by car and ship and almost a week later, we were in Jakarta.

My goal was to work in Malaysia to change my economic situation. Clearly, I had not achieved that. If I hadn't run away and become an undocumented migrant, I don't know where I would be.

From a Migrant Care client to an advocate who defends migrant workers in the Constitutional court

When I arrived at Tanjung Priuk port in Jakarta, I immediately headed to the KOPBUMI office. KOPBUMI took my salary and insurance complain to the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration. In my home province in Central Java, a women's organisation, the Legal Resource Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (LRC-KJHAM) in Semarang, helped take my case to the Center for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BP3TKI). While waiting for the case handling process which takes a long time, I went to work in Brunei Darussalam as a baby sitter.

Returning from Brunei, I learnt that my case file, which was submitted 14 months ago, has been lost in the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration office. I was frustrated. Maybe my own experience motivated me to work with other migrant workers. I chose to volunteer at **Migrant Care** to help fellow migrant workers.

Jakarta became my work place. I visited my family when I had time. Through all the hardships, my family has always given me support and strength. I can't say the same for people in my village. They have often made me feel uncomfortable. People in the villages have a black and white picture of migrants. They judge us quickly. If we bring money we are seen as successful. If we don't, we are seen as failures. In my case, some people commented that I faced problems because I divorced my husband. But I've been hardened by life in Malaysia and do not let myself be affected by other people's opinion of me. Interestingly, a few years later, when I was able to buy a small teak garden near my parents' house, people started to see me as someone with value. As I became more and more involved in handling cases of migrant workers and my face began to appear on television, people in my village began to understand what my life's concerns were.

While working with Migrant Care, I met a returnee migrant and we decided to get married. My husband is in business now, while I continue to work for fellow migrants. I have two children from my second marriage. Now my husband, my three children and I live in Jakarta.

As a Migrant Care Policy Advocacy Division staff, I am responsible for the lobbying team in the People's Representative Council (DPR). I work as a

bridge between what members of DPR need in order realise the pressures of the migrant worker movement and linking the main ideas of Migrant Care to members of DPR.

In 2017, most of what we lobbied for was realised with the passing of the PPMI Law. But in November 2019, ASPATAKI (Association of Indonesian Employment Service Companies) submitted a judicial review of several articles of the PPMI Law to the Constitutional Court. Immediately Migrant Care and SBMI countered the judicial review because ASPATAKI wanted to reduce the protection of migrant workers for which we have been fighting for a dozen years. I fought again, this time as a team advocate, because I had already earned a law degree. For a while, it looked as if things were going in the right direction and we took a deep breath. But the struggle has no end. In October 2020, the Government of Indonesia included the PPMI Law into the Job Creation Law (Omnibus Law) without consulting migrant workers and migrant rights organisations. My friends and I from the migrant worker movement gathered and strategised again. Our request for judicial review has been granted by the Constitutional Court. This victory is crucial for us, because otherwise our movement would face a setback.

These have been exhausting years for me, but also grateful years. In 2021, I received an award from the Australian government for Promoting Women's Empowerment and Social Inclusion. I've gone beyond the stakes of life and death. Domestic violence, eighteen-hour working days, loss of wages, days in the mangroves, swimming in the sea, piled up like fish in a cargo boat, fighting for the rights of migrant workers, taking up studies again and becoming a lawyer, finding love and starting a family again – I have been through all. My life experience has made me stronger.

Desbumi - Migrant Care's efforts to get the state to support migrant workers' reintegration

From at least 2002 (when I returned) until now, the state still blames migrant workers who return home with unpaid wages and after experiencing violence. The state has no empathy for undocumented migrants. Officials usually say, "When you went abroad, you didn't report it to the government. When there is a problem and you return to Indonesia, you report it to the government! Why? What can we do?" I think the state should understand why some of us get undocumented and the underlying reasons behind violence. No migrant worker wants to experience violence and abuse.

What is called 'reintegration of migrant workers' in my opinion is a complicated issue. Especially when we are talking about return and reintegration during this 'new normal'.

Migrant Care has a programme called Desbumi (Village Care for Migrant Workers). It is an initiative to encourage the protection of migrant workers, especially women, at the village level. Villagers, assisted by civil society organisations, migrant worker family communities and the village government, are encouraged to revitalise their own economy. Through Desbumi, we provide trainings for returning migrants so that they can optimise business opportunities in their home villages. And linking their initiatives with government programmes at the village, provincial, and national levels. Currently, the Desbumi programme is implemented in at least five provinces – West Java, Central Java, East Java, West Nusa Tenggara and East Nusa Tenggara.

Through Desbumi we also help with the psycho-social recovery of returnee migrant workers. This is crucial because sometimes migrant workers, especially women, come back in a very fragile mental condition and no one tries to understand them.

Through Desbumi, we hope that the village government, civil society organisations, the family of migrant workers, and villagers can make an effort to understand the challenges and support each other.

(Interview conducted, transcribed, and translated from Bahasa Indonesia by Dewi Nova.)

Our Government should lift the travel ban on domestic workers

SURYA MAYA

My name is Surya Maya (not real name) and I'm 37 years old. I live in Chobhar Municipality in Lalitpur District of Nepal with my disabled son, his wife, and my grandson. I lost both my parents when I was very young. People from my community brought me up as I had no other relatives. I got married at a very young age and became a mother soon after. Since my husband had no interest in working I had to work very hard to earn a living for my family. Finally, when even with all my hard work it was difficult to even just feed my family, I decided to go for foreign employment. I didn't want to inform my husband because he never cared for us.

I had heard that many women are going to work in the Gulf countries as domestic workers and no formal education was needed for that. So I looked for a good recruitment agency with the help of my friend. I took a three-month long domestic work training, which also included basic Arabic language. I prepared my police report and got a passport and a work permit for domestic work in Kuwait. I also attended a final pre-departure orientation training. I travelled from our international airport with all my legal documents. I did not face any problems in my workplace. I used to send money every two months to my husband. When my work visa expired in two years, I had to return which was not a problem for me but when I reached home I found out that my husband had left us with no money. He had cheated and left me for another woman. Our disabled child was left alone at home. He had taken all my hard-earned money and left us penniless.

After a year my son got married. Due to his disability, he could not earn but at least he had his wife to manage the household chores. Since I was the only breadwinner, I decided to migrate as a domestic worker again. Due to the travel ban for domestic work to the Gulf countries I had to go through an agent as an illegal migrant. I crossed over to India through Kakarvitta open border and went to Delhi where I was kept with many other women in a small room. I was lucky to get a visa in four days. There were others who had been waiting for more than a month. I reached Kuwait and started working as a domestic worker.

This time my work was tougher than the first time. I had to do a lot of tasks and I worked up to 17 or 18 hours a day. I also had to look after their one-year-old baby. They used to threaten me, saying that if I didn't look after the baby properly they will throw me into a machine and kill me. They often abused me verbally and even beat me for small mistakes. I was living in fear and trauma because of their abusive behaviour. I was also accused of stealing things like money and mobile phone. They did this just to cut off my salary. Even in my free time, I was never allowed to call my family. No matter how much I tried to give my best, they never appreciated my work.

My Filipino coworker consoled me whenever I cried after facing torture from the employer. She used to tell me that because I was illegal, they were treating me badly and taking advantage of me which made me very unhappy. My agent had told me that I could call him if I experience any bad treatment so I called him for help. I asked him to place me with another employer. He said that would not be possible before six months. After nine months I was sent back to my agency's office. I changed more than five houses and could not work for more than a month in any house. Some employers paid me for

the whole month and some only paid me for 15 days. When I finally got a good family and was working happily, I was asked to quit my job because of COVID-19.

Because of COVID-19 and maybe because of my illegal status, my employer called the agency and asked them to take me back. I had not earned what I hoped to. I pleaded with my agency to find me another job. But neither the agency nor the Nepal embassy helped me. I used to cry every day, worried that I might not return home alive as I saw and heard many people die every day. International flights were closed. Luckily, the Kuwait government helped many migrant workers like me. I was taken to a camp where many migrants were given accommodation. We were well taken care of in the camp. We had to maintain distance and clean our own place and washroom. We were provided gloves, masks, and sanitisers for free. We had to take a bath every day and we received healthy food. I also attended an orientation session provided about COVID-19. I stayed in the camp for more than two months. The Kuwait government provided me with a free ticket and I returned home. I am grateful to them for taking good care of me and others like me.

When I arrived in Nepal, I was not allowed to go home directly due to restrictions. I was taken to a holding centre. AMKAS Nepal came and took me to their shelter. I was quarantined there for 14 days and finally allowed to go home. The situation in the holding centre was horrible and I felt lucky that I was moved to AMKAS' shelter.

I think the Nepal government has not done enough to support us in this COVID-19 situation. I would not have migrated for the second time without

documents if our government had given us job opportunities in our own country. I had tried looking for a job here but wherever I went I was told that since I was a returnee migrant I must show medical report. I don't understand why.

I am also thankful to AMKAS for their support and for providing me with information and listening to my story. I have experienced how it is to travel with proper documents and how it is go without the right papers. I hope our government will lift the ban so that we women can also migrate from our own airport and not be victim of abuse and exploitation. I am still hoping that AMKAS Nepal will help me find a job or engage me in some income generating programme.

(Interview conducted and transcribed by Pratima Thapa Magar and translated from Nepali by Bijaya Rai Shrestha, AMKAS, Nepal.)

Life as an immigrant in Canada

SWAN VANCOUVER

The three stories below are excerpts from interviews with women migrant workers in Vancouver, Canada, conducted by **SWAN Vancouver** as part of GAATW's global research on social and economic inclusion of migrant and trafficked women. The women were asked questions about their experience finding work and settling down in Canada.

“Yes, there is some discrimination. If your English is not very good, it's very difficult to find a job, you can only do the simplest job. Or you can only work at places like some restaurants, where people speak your language. But if your English is better, you may find a job at a Western company or at a better company. But I think in some Western companies, you need to have degrees, qualifications, and experience in order to work there. Without good recommendations or good background, you can't get a good position. My English is not that good but my listening and speaking skills are okay.

I had been working at this Western company for several years. However, the good positions there, the positions of managers, were taken by Westerners. There were not many Asians who were managers. The managers were all white people. And during the time I was working, there was more or less... Not that the white managers had discrimination against your skin colour or anything like that. But when everyone around you is basically Westerner and there are not too many Asian faces, there will be some unfriendly talks or attitudes. There was a bit of those things. It wasn't easy. And especially when I first started working there, I really didn't know anything. And my English was not very good. Sometimes, when I didn't quite understand, or if

I only understood half of the things, some colleagues would blame me. Of course, even if we were speaking the same language, those kinds of situations would happen as well. But when you're in a foreign country, you would feel uncomfortable, you feel at a loss. But when you get through this period, you will be fine. The beginning is the most difficult. That's what I feel from my own experience." [Jojo, late 40s, Chinese, school café worker, has been living in Canada for 8 years].

"I had a lot of difficulties when I didn't have a work permit. Then I got one and I found a different employer but I felt that he was using me to just finish a job and then not offer me a new one even though my work permit was still valid. My work permit was from October until December, but because he would have to spend money for lawyer fees, he refused to continue the job. So I felt cheated, because he didn't really want to take responsibility by offering me a permanent job. Then I found a job with another employer but he was making me work for long hours and didn't pay me what we had agreed, so I left. They take advantage of your situation. I was getting only 80% of my salary and he was keeping 20%. And when I left, I had to stop sending money back home to my family. My current job is OK for now, but sometimes I don't like the way people treat me. Sometimes if I don't finish my task on time, my boss, she's also Hispanic, starts yelling at me. I think it's because I don't have a work permit right now. If I had a work permit, maybe I would be treated better and with more respect." [Maria, around 30 years old, from Latin America, construction site cleaner, has been in Canada for two years].



“After I graduated, I had two mainstream jobs. Back in China, I had a job for three years. Then here in Canada, I have been doing this job for ten years. When I first came to work at the company [in Canada], I started from the lowest level, which was the assistant position. It was actually a big step down compared with the job I had in China. I don’t think my diploma was recognised here. I started from the very bottom. And even if your foreign education is recognised here, they consider you based on your resume. That’s what everyone wants to see. Like when they see your education background, they don’t trust the education you had. So they would only give you the lowest-level position. But no one would actually say it. So even if you went to all the institutions here to get your diploma certified and told them that your university and graduate school are very good, they would be like ‘yeah right’. So education is one thing. Another is your English ability. Since English is not your mother tongue, they may doubt your English ability and that’s another reason why you can’t get a high-level position in the beginning. Like in my case. Maybe this is not so true for people who majored in engineering. But jobs like mine, which require communicating with people... It was a big disadvantage for me when I first came here.” [Coco, in her 40s, Chinese, purchasing manager, has been in Canada 11 years].



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