Negotiating Domination:

Agency and Resistance amongst Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia Corridor

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Abstract

This thesis examines the exercise of agency amongst migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in the face of domination and multi-level power asymmetries. This qualitative study draws on interviews with 65 participants. 50 participants were returnee MDWs in the Bangladeshi–Saudi Arabia migration corridor, half of whom returned prematurely, before their contracts expired. This study highlights how they demonstrated a multitude of negotiation techniques. They employ a blend of defiance and conformity when subject to violence, abuse, and exploitation, thus challenging the conventional characterisation of their passivity. Amongst their responses are the employment of persuasive strategies and the practice of small-scale overt confrontation, transcending the binary distinction between coping strategies and everyday resistance.

This study demonstrates that the negotiation strategies by MDWs are circumscribed by multi-level power asymmetries marked by dominance, complicity, retaliation, and impunity that shape and reinforce the unequal power relationships between MDWs and their employers. This study argues that power asymmetry remains inadequately understood in migration studies, particularly within the context of employer-MDW relationships, necessitating the consideration of larger power structures operating at multiple levels that affect their agency.

This study argues that even when enmeshed within multi-level power asymmetries, which serve as the backdrop for enduring mistreatment and immobilisation, MDWs show resilience in determining their negotiation strategies. Exiting an abusive employment relationship is often perceived as a failure in the existing literature, yet this study contradicts this notion. This study finds running away and creative story-making as negotiation techniques to exit exploitative working conditions, constituting an expression of their agency. The term "agency" in this study pertains to their capability to negotiate domination and power asymmetry that seek to circumscribe workers' efforts; whereas "negotiation" encompasses diverse responses that challenge and undermine power structures through various acts, tactics, and strategies.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, whose unwavering love and enduring sacrifices have served as an enduring source of inspiration throughout my academic and professional pursuits.

Acknowledgement

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my original work, and I am the sole author. I also declare that this work is yet to be presented, either in whole or in part, for a degree, publication, or other qualifications at this university or elsewhere. All sources in this work are acknowledged as references.

I have read and understood the university's rules, regulations, procedures, and policies for the postgraduate research degree award and my thesis.

Mohammed Hossain Sarker
22 April 2024

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Thesis

Migration has emerged as a rapidly growing phenomenon in the contemporary world. The increasing interconnectedness and interdependence among nations and societies, coupled with noticeable demographic and economic disparities between countries, have fuelled individuals' desire to seek better lives and explore employment opportunities overseas. This trend has been significantly facilitated by advancements in communication technology and transportation, resulting in enhanced mobility from developing to developed countries, with millions of skilled and unskilled aspiring workers crossing geographical boundaries in search of better prospects. The global migrant population soared to unprecedented levels, reaching 281 million in 2020. Within this vast demographic, approximately 169 million people, accounting for nearly 60% of the total, were identified as migrant workers (IOM, 2023).

This exponential growth in the number of migrant workers underscores the ever-evolving nature of the global job market, which has experienced discernible feminisation. Overseas employment was primarily associated with men, but an increasing number of women have now become prominent in labour migration. Although family reunification was once the most prevalent reason for women's migration, there has been a significant shift. Women now migrate independently in search of overseas employment opportunities (Parreñas, 2008; Oishi, 2005). This shift has opened up unique avenues for women that were previously unavailable in the absence of migration (Bloch, Kumarappan, and McKay, 2014).

The transition of "care responsibility" from the public domain to individual households, along with the deliberate privatisation strategies adopted by wealthy states, has substantially contributed to the growing demand for women migrant workers. As a result, the care sector has emerged as the largest employer of women's overseas jobs. Migrant domestic workers (MDWs)[1], who engage in domestic work within an employment relationship for a household

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[1] The definition of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) is derived from the definitions of "migrant workers", "domestic workers", and "domestic work". The "International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), 1990 ", defines "migrant worker" as a person who is to be engaged is engaged, or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state in which he or she is not a national. On the other hand, the "Domestic Workers Convention 2011 (C 189)" defines "domestic workers" as

or households in a state where they are not national, constitute a significant portion of this workforce. It is worth noting that out of approximately 11.5 million MDWs globally, 8.45 million are women, underscoring the pivotal role played by women in fulfilling care-related roles abroad (Parreñas, 2022:27).

Availing domestic jobs abroad by women on the above scale can be understood through the lens of economic liberalism and macroeconomic development policies that have integrated both sending and receiving states in recent decades. Nonetheless, it may seem puzzling to see MDWs who willingly secure overseas jobs despite potential exploitation. An increasing body of scholarly literature supports the argument that the decision to seek employment overseas does not occur in isolation. Structural constraints, such as economic stagnation and limited employment opportunities in home countries drive workers to seek better prospects abroad. It is essential to recognise that the pursuit of overseas jobs arises as a response to the economic challenges and constraints faced domestically both by would-be migrant workers and sending states. The demand for low-skilled jobs in destination countries, brought about by economic globalisation along with the significant revenue generated through workers' remittances, compels labour-surplus sending states to actively encourage their citizens to take up domestic jobs overseas (Chuang, 2010).

Therefore, despite the high potential of exploitation of their citizens, the apparent paradox of facilitating overseas employment by states finds its roots in complex economic and structural factors. Sending states prioritise the facilitation of migration over safeguarding workers' rights. They do so by being fearful of losing labour markets to competing countries (Ireland, 2018). This phenomenon is also driven by the government's aspirations to boost the economy and address unemployment and capitalisation on remittances.

Consequently, the pursuit of overseas jobs has become the norm among labour-surplus countries. These states perceive labour exportation as a viable strategy for development. Hence, an intricate interplay emerges, wherein a condition of dependence diminishes the bargaining power of sending states. This, in turn, yields a dissuasive effect on the sending

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those who engage in domestic work within an employment relationship, where "domestic work" refers to the work performed in or for a household or households. Combining these definitions helped define migrant domestic workers (MDWs).

states, deterring them from taking a firm stand against the mistreatment of their citizens working abroad.

Against the diminishing bargaining power, the active facilitation by sending states often results in overlooking abuse and exploitation in the receiving states. Throughout this thesis, the term "abuse" is defined as the infliction of physical brutality, emotional assault, mental torture (Parreñas, 2022:150), and sexual harassment. The "exploitation", on the other hand, refers to the common understanding of the act of using someone unfairly for own advantage.

In addition to acknowledging unprecedented overseas job opportunities, it is essential to recognise the increase in instances of ill-treatment experienced by MDWs. The widespread existence of disturbing incidents such as suicides, unnatural deaths, runaway cases (Naufal and Malit Jr., 2018; Johnson, 2011; Frantz, 2013; Malit Jr. and Naufal, 2016), and premature returns[2] that occur before the completion of the contractual period, are common among MDWs in the Asia-Arabian Gulf migration corridor. This corridor serves as compelling evidence for the existence of exploitative working and living conditions.

However, recurrent abuse and exploitation in the sending states should not lead us to assume that MDWs remain passive in the face of adversity in their workplaces. Despite these limitations, MDWs actively confront difficulties and strive to improve their employment conditions. In other words, they demonstrate agency by negotiating challenges even in the absence of meaningful support mechanisms. Thus, it is imperative to avoid viewing them as victims or subjects of deliberate state policies. By adopting this broader perspective, we can recognise the agency they exert throughout their migration cycles.

Hein De Hass's (2021) aspiration-capability framework proves invaluable in this regard, as it helps us understand how MDWs endeavour to secure overseas jobs, negotiate challenges in their workplaces, and make decisions to exit exploitative working conditions and return to their home countries. De Hass's framework conceptualises migration as a function of

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[2] For contractual migrant workers, returns occur in two forms: mature and premature. The agreed contract period for the jobs of MDWs in the GCC states is two years (Frantz, 2013:1079). However, returns can occur before the end of an employment contract for various reasons, including dissatisfaction with working conditions, familial reasons, abuse, trafficking, political disruption, or environmental disaster (Battistella, 2018:3-4). Taking insights from Frantz's and Battistella's work, this study meant the premature return as a return that occurs before a two-year contract period.

capabilities and aspirations within a perceived set of geographical opportunity structures (De Hass, 2021). He categorises existing migration theories into two broad paradigms: functionalist migration theories (neoclassical, new economics of labour migration, push-pull migration theory, migration system theory, and migrant network theory) and historical-structural theories (dependency theory, world system theory, dual labour market theory, and globalisation theory).

De Hass highlights that functionalist and historical-structural theories often portray migrants either as soulless utility-optimizers or passive victims of capitalist forces, respectively. Critiquing these two sets of migration theories, he introduces the aspiration-capabilities framework, which emphasises human agency. De Hass defines agency as "the limited - but real - ability of human beings (or social groups) to make independent choices and to impose these on the world and, hence, to alter the structures that shape and constrain people's opportunities and freedoms" (De Hass, 2021: 14).

Aligned with the premise of De Hass's aspiration-capability approach, the present study takes a stance by acknowledging migrants' experiences in an empowering manner. By adopting this framework, this study seeks to gain insight into the agency of MDWs. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how these workers actively negotiate challenges, including choosing to pursue overseas jobs, confronting exploitative and abusive working conditions, and addressing power asymmetry and domination in their workplace. Moreover, it sheds light on the pivotal decisions they take concerning whether to continue their employment relationships or terminate them to return home.

1.2 Domination and Power Asymmetry Between MDW and Employer

The increasing mobility of women MDWs in the international labour market has given rise to a significant protection deficiency, primarily attributed to the structural barrier posed by sponsorship visa regimes.[3] Under such arrangements, receiving states delegate the responsibility and controlling authority to employers, resulting in the residency and

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[3] A system in the Arab states including in Saudi Arabia where an employer sponsors a MDW to enter and work for an overseas domestic job. The key feature of this arrangement is that workers are tied with employers for what workers cannot change employers, jobs, or the country.

employment status of MDWs becoming entirely dependent on the will and satisfaction of the employers.

This arrangement creates the conditions for "forced immobility" (Mansour-Ille and Mendow, 2018), wherein MDWs cannot change their jobs or return home. Workers need to acquire an exit visa from their employers before they are allowed to exit employment relationships. Therefore, employers use the exit visa provision as a tool to bind workers. To a large extent, employers do not allow workers to leave after the completion of a contractual period. Workers are coerced into staying and working longer if they try to leave exploitative relationships. They avoid issuing exit visas, a mandatory requirement for workers to leave employers legally.

In contrast to forced immobility, MDWs like other migrant workers also face the distressing predicament of "forced return" (Newland, 2017; Battistella, 2018), wherein employers unilaterally decide to send workers back to their home countries without their consent. On most occasions of such forced returns, employers create grounds for which workers should not be liable. In the context of MDWs, employers can repatriate workers by introducing allegations of theft and damage. Occasionally, workers are sent back when they cannot meet employers' expectations because of deteriorated health, when workers need treatment for workplace injuries, or when workers endure sexual abuse. Similar to forced immobility, the phenomenon of forced return accentuates employers' domination and exercise of power.

In addition to restricting mobility or forced return, employers often tend to assert dominance over MDWs in various ways. MDWs' workplaces are considered as the private domains of their employers. The absence of provision for inspecting these spaces allows employers to evade scrutiny, except in sporadic cases that attract media attention. This lack of oversight grants immense power to employers, making it challenging for workers to hold employers accountable for any mistreatment they endure. This has led to a recurring cycle of exploitation, deprivation, and abuse within the context of MDW-employer relationships. The absence of robust labour standards or meaningful support mechanisms further exacerbates the situation, exposing workers to consistent ill-treatment, where domination and power asymmetry play pivotal roles.

Study shows employers dehumanise MDWs (Parreñas, 2022). They perceive MDWs as commodities- something they purchase and thus have the right to use whatever ways they wish. MDWs have been subjected to forced isolation at both the physical (spatial) and psychological levels, separated from their friends, families, and colleagues. MDWs' labour rights are violated through the denial of sufficient food and sleep, arbitrary withholding or deduction of salaries, and forcing for prolonged working hours without days off. Even those who receive relatively better treatment are often infantilized through authoritarian rules, denial of choices, constant surveillance, and intrusion into personal affairs (Parreñas, 2022).

Among others, employers in many Arab states, particularly in the Gulf region, not only exploit the sponsorship visa regime, but also take advantage of discriminatory provisions specified in standard employment contracts[4]. Instead of protecting MDWs through labour laws, receiving states confine workers' labour rights to those within the aforementioned standard employment contracts, which are often grossly inadequate and discriminatory. Adding to the complexity, receiving states set different labour standards for sending states, thus showcasing a clear distribution[5] of labour standards.

At the employers' level, exploitative practices are perpetuated by breaching contracts. Employers frequently breach contract provisions with impunity (Malit and Naufal, 2016), rendering contracts mere legal fiction (Jureidini and Moukerbal, 2004). In addition to this unscrupulous practice, employers confiscate workers' passports upon arrival, which serves as one of the two most common exploitative tools in conjunction with contract manipulation. This practice restricts the actions and mobility of the workers.

The inability to change abusive employers or exploitative workplace places MDWs in an asymmetrical power relationship. Facing inhumane working conditions, MDWs may attempt to terminate their employment relationships (Ullah, 2018). However, this course of action often worsens the situation. As residency and employment status depend on employers'

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[4] The standard employment contract is signed by MDW, the employer, the recruitment agency in the sending state, and the recruitment agency in the receiving state.

[5] Saudi Arabia prepares different ''standard employment contracts'' for different sending states. The conditions in the contract vary based on the bargaining power of the sending states. For instance, the monthly salary for Filipino MDWs is set at $400. In contrast, it is only 800 riyals (200$) for Bangladeshi MDWs.

sponsorship, state regulations criminalise the act of exiting employment relationships without employers' consent.

MDWs risk becoming undocumented if they unilaterally exit employment relationships. Attempts to escape from abusive employers often invite dire consequences, such as detention, imprisonment, or repatriation for those who dare to terminate such employment relationships. Abusive employers, recruitment agencies, and middlemen run after the runaway workers. These actors coerce workers to return to abusive and exploitative working conditions (Frantz, 2013:1080).

Fearing retaliation, MDWs request that their employers release them from their employment. Simultaneously, they ask recruitment agencies to change their employers. Sadly, their pleas to leave their abusive employers are often denied. Employers ask workers for significant sums of compensation to dissolve relationships. In a few cases, the termination of an employment relationship is amicably settled with the assistance of recruitment agencies acting as mediators. Those unable to reach a settlement seek rescue through informal channels, such as social media. Surveys, media reports, testimonies from returnee MDWs, and academic and non-academic research provide compelling evidence that various distressing situations such as runaway cases, premature returns, suicides, unnatural deaths, reports to embassies[6], and appeals for rescue are deeply rooted in workplace exploitation. This exploitation is sustained by the prevalent domination and power asymmetry within the relationships between MDWs and their employers.

While power asymmetry between workers and employers (Malit Jr. and Naufal, 2016:78; Hennebry, 2017:4) significantly impacts the lives of MDWs, it is not the only form of asymmetry that affects them. Power asymmetry at the state level (Ullah and Haque, 2020:113; Fernandez, 2014:6) also has detrimental effects on the well-being of these workers. Sending states seldom stand firm against mistreatments in the receiving states. Receiving states, on the other hand, offer little substantial remedies for mistreatment and abuse, if any.

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[6] In 2012, 2349 Filipina MDWs reported to their embassy in the UAE after leaving their employers (Parreñas, 2022:86). A substantial number of runaway cases have prompted the Philippines to establish temporary shelters in receiving states. Establishing safe homes or shelters has now become a common practice by respective embassies in the receiving states.

The major hurdle lies in holding the receiving states accountable for the mistreatment of workers as enforcement of agreed-upon protection is always lax or insufficient.

There exists power asymmetry between MDWs and recruitment agencies as well. Recruitment agencies are involved in illegal practices and capitalise on fundamental loopholes in the recruitment system. They are involved in transnational collusion with their counterparts through misinformation regarding working conditions and contract manipulation. Workers face enormous power asymmetry when confronted both at home and abroad. This is complemented by the culture of impunity. The power gap between MDWs and recruitment agencies has profound implications on employment relationships between MDWs and employers, as recruitment agencies collude with employers in the name of disciplining workers on most occasions.

1.3 Problem Statement

The authority to control almost every aspect of the life of an MDW and to exercise domination with impunity often leads to the characterisation of MDWs as powerless victims (Mahdavi, 2011), in need of protection (Jordhus, 2017). However, portraying MDWs as victims of domination inadvertently obscures their agency in negotiating power dynamics (Johnson, 2018). In other words, an overemphasis on victimhood may fail to acknowledge the multivariate ways in which MDWs actively negotiate and challenge power imbalances within their working environment. Moreover, it is important to recognise that not all MDWs experience exploitative working conditions, and they may not remain passive in the face of power struggles.

A focus on victimhood as the primary lens constructs MDWs as having a limited potential to bring about meaningful improvements in their working conditions. In contrast, a shift away from such a reductionist approach can yield positive real-world implications by encouraging and empowering workers to have confidence in their ability to improve their working and living conditions.

Employers wield authority and control to instil obedient and compliant attitudes among MDWs. But that does not mean that MDWs leave things uncontested. MDWs' efforts and

involvement in improving employment conditions means their workplace is something to be seen both as a site of struggle and battleground. Nevertheless, negotiations with numerous day-to-day strategies displayed by MDWs have garnered less attention in both the academic and non-academic domains. This study recognises everyday forms of negotiations as a response against domination 'from below' that challenges and undermines existing power structures through acts, tactics, and strategies.

Contemporary scholars have explored the agency of MDWs in different contexts (Fernandez, 2020; Constable, 2007). However, the predominant focus of investigation concerning MDWs' agency has revolved around the sphere of coping strategies (Fernandez, 2020; Jiang, 2018; Moukarbel, 2009) and everyday resistance (Fernandez, 2020; Moukarbel, 2009; Constable,2007) for managing adversity, originating from the structure of the *Kafala system*,[7] an institutional framework of the sponsorship system introduced by Saudi Arabia and other GCC states that delegate authority to employers to control migrant workers like MDWs. Nonetheless, a compelling rationale exists for a more comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions encompassing the agency of MDWs beyond the aforementioned purview. The prevailing characterisation of agency tends to overlook other transformative strategies - strategies that challenge existing power dynamics in an overt manner or strive to improve working conditions. Consequently, the generic discussion of MDWs' agency calls for a deeper inquiry to gain a comprehensive understanding of negotiations and the diverse expressions of the agency they exhibit.

Looking at MDWs' agency from a generic point of view is the reason that the effort to exit exploitative working relationships is equated as merely escaping exploitative working conditions and employers' domination. The extraordinary efforts of workers to negotiate difficulties have been overlooked. Simultaneously, the paucity of understanding of power dynamics in the employer-MDW relationship is one of the main reasons to view leaving employers as a failure. Therefore, the emerging literature on agency demands a nuanced

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[7] Arrangement under the *kafala* granted employers near-total control over workers' visas and legal status (Rajan and Joseph, 2020). Therefore, the entry, residence, and exit of migrant workers are contingent upon the employers' satisfaction and desires.

understanding of how MDWs exercise agency in multifaceted ways. To address these critical questions, this study addresses the following research questions:

(I) How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

(II) What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

(III) How do they overcome these obstacles?

To address these questions, this study draws upon the lived experiences of live-in women MDWs within the context of the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor. This corridor is one of the most significant global hubs in MDWs mobility. Simultaneously, MDWs in this corridor often experience exploitative conditions, which have been associated with distressing incidences, such as suicide, unnatural deaths, appeals for rescue, exit attempts, running away, and premature returns. The conceptual implication of the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migratory relationships is extensively explored in Chapter Four.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Despite engaging in various strategies within highly exploitative working conditions, MDWs' agency is often narrowly equated with coping strategies or everyday resistance in existing research. Consequently, a critical theoretical question remains unanswered in studies of MDWs: Do MDWs' efforts solely fall within these two categories of strategies? This study is dedicated to understanding the efforts of MDWs to negotiate constraints that tend to circumscribe their actions in numerous ways. The novelty of this study lies in its broad framing and presentation of acts, tactics, and strategies under the comprehensive concept of negotiation, which inherently implies agency and subsumes expressions of diverse strategies.

While a few studies have delved into the agency of MDWs in the Asia-Gulf migration corridor, the focus has been predominantly limited to specific countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Ethiopia. However, despite the notable rise in the number of Bangladeshi women engaging in domestic work in Saudi Arabia in recent years, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. As a result, a comprehensive study examining the agency of MDWs in the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor remains largely unexplored. This

study aims to address this critical gap in the literature and shed light on the agency of MDWs in this migration corridor.

The present study seeks to shed light on how MDWs actively negotiate the challenges posed by an exploitative power structure and strive to improve their working conditions. While the primary focus of this study is agency, it also recognises the need for the synthesis of power dynamics to understand the intricate relationship between agency and power asymmetry. To this end, the present study examines workers' efforts in adversities along with their decisions and independent choices in exiting exploitative employment relationships that are often perceived as deficiencies in agency and equated as failures.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This chapter (Chapter One) presented the background, significance, and research questions of this study. Thus, while this chapter sets the broader context of this research, the remainder of the dissertation is organised into seven comprehensive chapters, each serving a distinct purpose in exploring intricate subject matters.

Chapter Two synthesises existing scholarly works on power, domination, and agency to provide an analytical framework for understanding the myriad acts, strategies, and tactics employed by live-in MDWs. It draws parallels between the characteristics of MDWs and subalterns in the literature on power, illuminating some of the compelling resemblances that contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of their agency as well as predicaments. An examination of the subaltern positionality of MDWs vis-à-vis other actors helps contextualise MDWs struggle with the rubric of power and resistance. The exploration of agency in the face of power and domination invokes the concept of negotiation, which encompasses the interplay and overlapping nature of coping strategies, everyday resistance, and other responses by MDWs.

Chapter Three focuses on the research design and methodology. It sheds light on the sample selection process and explains the criteria employed to ensure the participants' relevance and representation. It focuses on ethical considerations and discusses the importance of

reflexivity and the difficulties faced in fieldwork . This chapter explains the data analysis strategies, discusses the thematic analysis method and the process of coding and generating themes from the collected data.

Chapter Four provides a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of overseas employment in the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor. As a receiving state, Saudi Arabia's policy and actions create a socio-political context that allows employers and other actors to exploit and abuse workers with impunity. This chapter highlights the context of repressive working conditions that prevail in this corridor. It offers insights into how, despite significant protection deficits and scandalous stories of abuse, Bangladeshi state continues to facilitate and actively promote sending MDWs to Saudi Arabia. Critical factors influencing Bangladesh's stance include dependency, power imbalance, and the country's inclination to engage in the race to the bottom in terms of labour standards. Reflecting on these insights, this chapter then attempts to theorise the migratory relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Central to the argument is that power asymmetry at the state level, excessive dependency, and the fear of losing the employability and remittance have diminished the bargaining power of the Bangladeshi state.

Chapter Five centres on identifying and analysing obstacles faced by live-in MDWs as they strive to exercise agency and negotiate the complex dynamics of power and domination. It highlights how MDWs find themselves entangled in significant power asymmetry with employers, where their agency is severely curtailed. Crucially, the chapter delves into power asymmetries at multiple levels including the culture of impunity and complicity among powerful actors, which constrains workers' agency and expands power asymmetry, creating hyper-asymmetry in power relationships. This chapter highlights the concerted efforts of employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and states to constrain the agency of MDWs.

Chapter Six portrays the efforts of MDWs under the broader rubric of negotiations. It provides a comprehensive analysis of how workers negotiate immense constraints in their workplace, strive to address workplace difficulties, advocate for fair working conditions, and negotiate the inherent power asymmetry within the employment relationships. This chapter delineates the various strategies employed by MDWs, shedding light on their approaches to improve

employment conditions. These include coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation. By illustrating how their agency evolves, takes shape, and is applied within an unfavourable environment, where powerful actors collude to exploit workers, this chapter offers an understanding of the strategic ways in which these workers negotiate their difficulties and seek to improve reorient the employment relationships. It presents evidence that coping strategies and everyday resistance are inadequate in understanding the entire range of negotiation and agency employed by MDWs.

Chapter Seven focuses on workers' agency in exiting exploitative relationships with their employers and potentially with Saudi Arabia. While doing so, this chapter highlights how the extraordinary efforts by MDWs to terminate employment relationships are often diminished and equated with 'absconding' or 'running away', inadvertently invoking negative connotations of how they have 'failed' in migration. By unravelling the complexities of their experiences, this chapter then reveals the transformative ways in which they assert their agency. The central claim of this chapter is that MDWs engage in running away and creative story-making strategies to defy immobility. They strive to shape their destinies despite formidable challenges, displaying resilience and resourcefulness as they negotiate adverse circumstances.

In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, the discussion begins with a reflection on the research questions addressed in this study. It critically analyses the findings and insights obtained from this research, highlighting their significance in shedding light on the complexities of the subject matter. Subsequently, the chapter presents the research contributions, focusing on both knowledge supported, wherein existing concepts have been enriched; and knowledge extended, where novel perspectives and understanding have been unearthed. It explores opportunities for future studies and offers ways to improve policies to better support and protect live-in women MDWs.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

In many places around the world, including in Saudi Arabia, live-in women migrant domestic workers (MDWs) confront varying degrees of domination and power asymmetry in their workplace. They grapple with mandatory provisions, such as being tied to specific employers, exit visas, and co-residence requirements, which force them into dependency on their employers. At the same time, these provisions grant employers the authority to exert control over MDWs, leading to exploitative relationships. Moreover, MDWs often endure mistreatment from recruitment agencies that operate with impunity. The lack of cooperation and inaction at the state level further compounds the challenges faced by these workers.

Despite voluntarily embracing the risks and challenges of overseas jobs, MDWs are often depicted in media and policy discourses as powerless victims of abuse and exploitation. There is a gendered aspect to such conceptualisations of agency- men migrants are typically perceived as potential criminals or illegal border crossers, while women migrants are portrayed as vulnerable and passive victims of trafficking (Fernandez, 2020). In this context, the focus on safeguarding women MDWs has led to an excessive emphasis on their victimisation (Parreñas, 2022), inadvertently obscuring the agency they demonstrate in the face of power.

Research suggests that MDWs exercise agency in a myriad of forms, which are intricately shaped by the context in which they find themselves and by the nature and intensity of the domination and power they are subject to. Consequently, there exists a wide spectrum of responses, ranging from obedience to subversion. Some workers covertly undermine their employers' authority, while others take a more direct approach by openly challenging it. It is therefore crucial to understand the intricate interactions between live-in MDWs and their employers, especially on the dynamics that shape workers' actions and choices.

This chapter explores, synthesises, and presents relevant literature on the key concepts of power, domination and agency that are manifested through a constellation of acts, tactics, and strategies by MDWs as different forms of negotiation. While understanding the

repertoire of negotiations as an agency of MDWs is the primary focus, this chapter synthesises power dynamics because agency and power are entangled to each other, and one cannot be understood without comprehending another.

2.2 Dimensions of Power

Conventionally, power used to be understood as the ability of one entity to exert control or influence over another, often involving explicit struggles and visible displays of control and authority. This one-dimensional view of power centres on actions that lead to compliance and obedience. However, this perspective falls short in capturing power dynamics where authority is less apparent.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) made significant contributions to the study of power by highlighting the second dimension of power. This dimension of power does not necessarily rely on explicit authority or direct action, but revolves around the ability to control, shape, and set agendas. Bachrach and Baratz introduced the concept of power as the ability to shape the discourse and decision-making processes. Within this agenda-setting aspect of power, they emphasised its productive nature, suggesting that power not only limits and constraints but can also generate positive outcomes.

Both the first and second dimensions of power, regardless of their potential for generating positive or negative outcomes, can elicit resistance. Subsequently, Steven Lukes (2005) expanded the understanding of power by introducing a third dimension that may not invite resistance. He observed that elites or power holders can maintain their power by satisfying and advancing the interests of dominant classes. In addition to the "domination" and "agenda-setting" aspects, Lukes recognized the concept of hegemonic power.

Drawing on Gramsci's thoughts, Lukes put forth the notion that hegemony is exercised by influencing the beliefs and desires of subordinates, thereby securing their consent to maintain the existing power structures. This approach prevents subordinates from expressing grievances as it shapes their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences (2005:11). As a result, subordinates may remain unaware of their own interests unwittingly supporting the status quo. Lukes argued that power can be exercised through the capacity to obtain willing

compliance from others, rather than through the direct exercise of power itself. Hence, to Lukes, power is a "capacity to exercise power,'' emphasising the underlying capacity and influence it entails, rather than merely "exercising" power in a visible manner.

Reflecting on the MDW-employer relationship, it is perceived that the three forms of power discussed above are disproportionately skewed in favour of the stronger actors, namely the employers. The first dimension of power, domination, is observable through the actions (such as forced return, forced immobility, food, rest and sleep deprivation, salary withheld) taken by employers to assert control over MDWs. The second dimension of power is also evident as employers limit workers' access to information, resources, and labour laws, impede communication, isolate workers, and obstruct avenues for seeking redress.

In terms of the third dimension, employers may perpetuate discriminatory practices and uphold unequal power relationships by virtue of their privileged position, political connections, and influence. However, it is essential to note that MDWs may not necessarily consent to this form of power, suggesting that hegemony may not be effectively established in this particular relationship. While the second and third dimensions of power may contribute to maintaining precise control, it is the first dimension, domination, that appears to be more profound and prevalent in the MDWs-employers' relationships.

From the perspective of MDWs, power in the form of domination can be seen as an avenue of resistance, manifested by challenging the authority of employers through arguments, strikes, "counter-intimidations" (Nurchayati, 2011:497), filing complaints, and exiting employment relationships, among others. In terms of agenda-setting, MDWs can manifest this form of power through collective activism, forging transnational alliances, and strategically positioning themselves to influence and advocate for their own agendas. Through collective resistance and advocacy, MDWs may contribute to shaping dominant discourse and emerge with alternative narratives. However, while the first dimension of power can be manifested through resistance, the execution of the second and third dimensions of power by MDWs seems to be more of a possibility rather than a certainty.

In addition to understanding power from a three-dimensional perspective, it is practical to conceptualise power in terms of its positive and negative aspects. This approach allows for a

comprehensive understanding of power by acknowledging that even actors with relatively less influence can possess and exercise power. For instance, if power refers to the ability to shape and control one's life, it can be viewed as a positive form of power. Therefore, MDWs, as both human beings and migrant workers, possess power in this sense, as they make choices and decisions that impact their lives. However, it is essential to avoid romanticising the power held by weaker actors like MDWs, as their degree of power may be limited in comparison to stronger actors that they interact with.

If power is defined as the ability to arbitrarily interfere with the lives of others, then it is negative power[8]. Employers monopolise this negative power. They possess the capability to exert arbitrary control over the lives of MDWs, whereas the position of MDWs may not afford them an arbitrary interference in the lives of their employers. The power possessed by MDWs may be more nuanced and relatively less pronounced, given the structural constraints and power imbalances they face in their working and migration contexts. As Bayat eloquently noted:

> Much of the resistance literature is based upon a notion of power that Foucault has articulated that power is everywhere, that it "circulates" and is never "localised here and there, never in anybody's hands". Such a formulation is instructive in transcending the myth of the powerlessness of the ordinary and recognising their agency. Nevertheless, this "decentered" notation of power, shared by many poststructuralist "resistance" writers, underestimates state power, notably its class dimension, since it fails to see that although power circulates, it does so unevenly- in some places, it is far weightier, more concentrated, and "thicker", so to speak, than in others (Bayat, 2010:54).

Acknowledging the "decentred" notion of power, I concur with Bayat's proposition that power is relatively thinner on the side of weaker actors, such as MDWs. Another perspective to consider is that the term "domination" carries negative connotations, while power can

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[8] One of the conceptualisations of power is that it could be both positive and negative (Haugaard, 2012; Allen, 2002).

encompass both positive and negative aspects. In other words, the negative power wielded by employers can be understood as a form of domination that manifests through the "exercise" and "use" of power.

In this study, the term "exercise of power" refers to one actor exerting power over another, implying direct actions or control that influence the actions and decisions of the weaker actors. On the other hand, the term "use of power" signifies the advantage gained by one actor over another through the utilisation of institutional and structural factors, such as regulations, policies, dependency, social organisations, and so forth. The following section delves into the conceptual approach to domination and its manifestation through use and exercise in greater detail.

2.3 Domination

This study adopts Gwilym David Blunt's (2015) concept of domination, which defines a social relationship as dominating when one agent (X) possesses the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with the choices available to another agent (Y) who is dependent on them. This concept provides a framework to analyse power dynamics in MDW-employer relationships and sheds light on the imbalances of power that MDWs often face.

In addition to the above, this thesis aims to elucidate the conditionalities of domination proposed by Blunt (2015), which comprise four essential elements for understanding domination in a social relationship. Firstly, there is the interdependence of agents on each other, signifying a relationship of reliance and mutual influence between employers and MDWs. Secondly, there is an asymmetry of power that grants the ability to more powerful agents to interfere with the choices of weaker agents. This asymmetry of power becomes evident in the employers' authority over MDWs, affecting their living and working conditions.

The third condition necessitates a sufficient asymmetry that creates a dependency of one agent on another. In the context of MDWs-employers' relationships, this dependency is often rooted in the sponsorship through which receiving states delegate controlling authority to employers, where MDWs rely on the will and satisfaction of their employers. Lastly, the power

possessed by the stronger agent must be arbitrary to the extent that the weaker agent cannot check it (Blunt, 2015). In the context of MDWs, this arbitrariness is evident in employers' control, leaving MDWs with limited means to challenge or contest.

Domination is pervasive in the relationship between live-in MDWs and employers, resulting in a host of exploitative practices. Upon arrival, workers' passports are confiscated (Jureidini, 2004). Employers resort to lodging false theft and damage allegations against MDWs, further reinforcing their control over these workers. Wage theft- the illegal non-payment or underpayment of wages in violation of wage and hour law or contract law (Lee and Smith, 2019:765)- is also a prevalent issue. It encompasses various exploitative tactics such as deductions, underpayments, salary withholdings, and non-payments. Some employers engage in wage theft to extract labour without incurring cost, while others use it as a means to offset recruitment costs and enforce dependency, keeping workers bound to their will and mercy.

The exercise of domination by employers is manifested across a spectrum of divergent mistreatments. These encompass, but not confined to, excessive work, instances of verbal censure, physical violence, and sexual abuse. Besides that, the curtailment of basic sustenance in the form of food and sleep deprivation, the imposition of involuntary repatriation and forced isolation are some of the deleterious strategies that serve to perpetuate arbitrary authority of employers. These exploitative tools further solidify the power imbalance, which render employers the leverage to maintain control over MDWS.

In addition to the above, the practice of replacing contracts with duplicate ones offering fewer benefits is common (Jureidini, 2016). This deceitful tactic leaves MDWs with diminished rights and protections. Moreover, employers employ the threat of killing and discard workers in the deserts. They also intimidate workers to report to the police or force repatriation as a means of coercion, reinforcing their dominance over the workers. Colluding with other stakeholders, such as recruitment agencies and middlemen, employers discipline workers. MDWs are denied the ability to change employers or occupations, effectively stripping away their autonomy, the capability of the migrants to move on from one condition to another, one job

to another, one economic situation to another, and one economy to another.''(Samaddar, 2020:71).

This denial fosters dependency and perpetuates a "superordinate-subordinate" relationship (Moukarbel, 2009:198), a relationship that is systematically developed and sustained through the exercise of domination. The cumulative effect of these exploitative practices creates an environment where MDWs are subjected to continuous dominance, leaving them with limited agency and constrained ability to challenge the power dynamics at play. Therefore, understanding the pervasive nature of domination is essential.

In contrast to domination, the elements of agenda-setting and hegemony can be less visible in the power dynamics between MDWs and employers. This understanding prompts me to draw upon the work of the key subaltern scholar Ranajit Guha, whose seminal work highlighted that elites exercised power without necessarily relying on hegemony in British India. Guha's study of power relationship between colonial rulers and marginalised subaltern classes, such as peasants, tribal communities, and marginalised individuals, challenged the unidirectional power dynamics and hegemony, and shed light on contestation of power (Guha, 1983, 1997).

Likewise, the seminal work of anthropologist and political scientist James Scott emphasises the constant negotiation and contestation of power, introducing the concept of the "hidden transcript" as a means for subordinate groups to resist and defy oppressive systems. The hidden transcript encompasses various forms, including rumours, folklore, and veiled expressions that marginalised peasants employed to challenge the controls of the elites. In contrast, the "public transcripts" refers to the expression, performance, and behaviour of subordinates in the presence of powerholders, which mask their true feelings, desires, and aspirations. This work sheds light on the agency and resilience of subaltern groups in the face of domination.

In the face of large-scale structures of domination, subalterns remain circumspect and carefully mask their inner thoughts, as observed by Scott. Their gestures, speech, acts, or practices may remain beyond direct observation by the dominant, allowing them to express dissent or resistance in more covert ways. The less powerful subordinates conceal the hidden

transcript to avoid retaliation from the powerholders, recognising the potential consequences of openly challenging the status quo. The extent of disparity between the public and hidden transcripts depends on the severity of the domination they face, with more severe forms of domination leading to a wider gap between the two (Scott, 1990:134).

The aforementioned public and hidden transcripts manifest as "differential behaviour" among subalterns, a term used to describe the variations in actions and expressions based on the context of power relations. By applying the insights from Guha and Scott's research to the context of MDWs and employers, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play. Like the marginalised subalterns, MDWs navigate their complex power relationships with employers through everyday resistance and hidden transcripts, strategic concealment of true sentiments. Thus, reflecting on the experiences of MDWs, this study finds a resemblance between MDWs and the subalterns, studied by Ranajit Guha and James Scott. The subsequent section will delve into these in further detail.

2.4 MDWs as Subalterns

The term subaltern, in general, describes subordinate and marginalised people. A brief historical context on subalterns becomes pertinent here. The study on subalterns originally emerged under the guidance of historian Ranajit Guha several decades ago, drawing inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern. The original meaning of subalterns in Prison Notebooks by Gramsci was different from the adaptation by subaltern scholars. In Gramsci's concept, subalterns were not defined by experiences of exclusion, which was the case for subalterns by subalternists (Thomas, 2018: 865). Gramsci's subalterns were involved with elites under hegemony, while subalterns studied by subaltern scholars were not involved in hegemonic relationships, meaning subaltern scholars adopted the concept with opposite meaning.

Though the initial focus by subalternists were on South Asia's colonial history, this approach has since found widespread use in examining the experiences of marginalised people in postcolonial settings. As defined by Thomas (2018:862), "the subaltern [thus] emerged as a

category well-suited to analyse and problematize the experiences of marginalised, oppressed individuals and groups, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts."

In the context of understanding MDWs, subaltern studies offer valuable insights, especially in exploring the power dynamics within the employers-MDWs relationships, which bear resemblances to the struggle between landlords and tenants examined in James C. Scott's (1985, 1990) work. One compelling characteristic that places MDWs as subalterns is their marginalised status within their relationship with employers. As live-in women domestic workers, they often face structural inequalities and power imbalances, leaving them in a vulnerable position relative to their employers. This marginalisation is further exacerbated by their exclusion from labour law protection and the presence of discriminatory provisions in employment contracts, which reinforce the notion of their subaltern status.

Subordination to the dominant class represents a general trait of subalterns. Subaltern groups, including MDWs, often find themselves subject to the policies and initiatives of ruling groups (Green, 2002). In the case of MDWs, their exposure to an exploitative system that discriminates against them places them within the category of subalterns. Their attributes align with those of subalterns, as they are undervalued, under-protected, and underrepresented within society.

Spivak (2020) engages in a more intricate analysis to expand upon the inherent attributes characterising subaltern subjects. She propounds a compelling argument that underscores the salient characteristic of subalterns that they are defined by their exclusion from political and aesthetic representation, thereby being deprived of the ability to voice their concerns. A critical aspect of subalternity, as highlighted by Spivak, lies in the absence of organisation and representation, leaving them with limited avenues for asserting their rights and agency. The concept of subaltern thus embodies a complex amalgamation of intricate elements.

Historically, subalterns have employed both overt and covert forms of resistance. A relatively recent study by Indrajit Roy (2015) demonstrated that subalterns engage in agonistic political practices vis-a-vis elites, utilising a range of strategies and tactics to assert their claims (Roy, 2015: 643). Understanding MDWs within this framework seems useful, as they employ a

range of acts, tactics, and strategies to improve their situation, reflecting the spirit of negotiation. These acts of resistance may manifest in various forms that we will see in empirical chapters in this thesis (Chapter Five, Six and Seven).

At this point, it is crucial to delve into the meaning of power from the perspective of subalterns or weaker actors. The notion that subalterns also possess power may seem less convincing if power is understood solely in terms of domination, agenda-setting, and hegemony. However, if we shift our understanding of power to encompass agency, resistance, and negotiation in the interaction of subalterns, such as MDWs, with powerful actors, such as employers, this perspective becomes more meaningful. In other words, interpreting the efforts and actions of MDWs as agency, negotiation, or resistance offers a valuable lens through which to analyse the dynamics at play. When viewed through the lens of agency, the actions and strategies employed by MDWs to negotiate power imbalances and domination gain deeper significance.

2.5 Agency in the Face of Power and Domination

Within the theoretical landscape, agency extends beyond the confines of resistance, encompassing a more expansive realm of human actions. As discussed comprehensively in the Theoretical Framework section, agency itself manifests in dual forms: capable agency and resistant agency. Approaching with a simplified perspective, the exercise of resistance is the expression of resistance agency. Scholars hold diverse perspectives on the impact of resistance on power dynamics. Lilja and Vinthagen (2018) demonstrate that resistance can have complex outcomes, as it has the potential to both challenge and reproduce existing power structures. While resistance is often intended as a means to challenge and negotiate power relations, it can inadvertently end up reinforcing relations of dominance. Therefore, it is crucial to critically analyse resistance to understand its implications fully. While resistance can serve as a powerful means for subalterns to challenge and negotiate power, it is essential to remain cognizant of the potential pitfalls, such as unintentional reinforcement of existing power structures.

As mentioned earlier, resistance is a course of action undertaken by subalterns, primarily seen as a response to power from below—an active practice with the potential to challenge, negotiate, and undermine power (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018). From a broader perspective, resistance can take two forms: public and everyday. Public resistance is openly expressed through assemblies, protests, or large-scale organised actions, making it visible and evident to a wider audience. In contrast, everyday resistance is more indirect, hidden, and disguised, typically not openly displayed.

Scott's influential study highlighted that formal and organised political activism could be rare among subordinate classes (Scott, 1985). However, this absence of organised activism does not imply that subordinates passively accept subordination without question. This understanding challenges the perspective of traditional Marxist and capitalist historians, who tend to view subordinate behaviour as neutral in the face of domination and oppression. Scott offered an alternative perspective by identifying various strategies employed by subordinates, such as "everyday resistance", "weapons of the weak," and at times, "infrapolitics." These forms of resistance encompass a wide range of actions and behaviours that subordinates utilise to challenge power and maintain a degree of agency. Examples of everyday resistance resorted by weaker actors against power holders include foot-dragging, slander, sabotage, false compliance, pilfering, and similar actions.

While everyday resistance may appear quiet, dispersed, disguised, or seemingly invisible, it serves as a crucial means for subalterns to survive and undermine domination. These acts of resistance may not necessarily result in dramatic confrontations with powerholders, but they reflect the agency and creativity of subalterns in navigating their constrained circumstances. By engaging in everyday resistance, subalterns can disrupt the smooth functioning of dominant power structures and assert their agency in subtle yet impactful ways. By highlighting multifarious expressions, Scott's conceptualization of everyday resistance challenges the notion that subordinates are passive victims of domination.

Scott's work emphasised that certain behaviours exhibited by subaltern groups are not always as they initially appear, but rather acts of resistance aimed at navigating their circumstances and challenging domination. He illustrates how subalterns employ these tactics as strategies

to resist in ways that may not be immediately recognizable to the dominant groups. According to Scott, these forms of everyday resistance may not seem revolutionary in nature but are contextually appropriate responses to their specific situations.

Scott argues that open rebellion by subordinate groups can be limited due to their lack of political power and resources compared to the dominant classes. As a result, everyday resistance becomes a persistent and viable option for subalterns in their ongoing struggle against power structures. The disguise in everyday resistance is a testament to the creativity and adaptability of subalterns in navigating their constrained circumstances. In Scott's study, the disguise in subalterns' actions was a striking characteristic of everyday resistance:

> The disguise is of two main types, with many intermediate possibilities. The first and most common is the concealment or anonymity of the resister. The poacher, the pilferer, the deserter, and the tax evader, hopes that he and his act will be undetected or passed over. Similarly, the propagators of rumour and gossip are, by definition, anonymous; there is no apparent producer but scores of eager retailers. [...] By contrast, a great deal of symbolic resistance by peasants and other subordinate groups reverses this arrangement. Instead of a clear message delivered by a disguised messenger, an ambiguous message is delivered by clearly identified messengers. Many of the folktales of peasant and slave culture fall into this category (Scott, 1989: 54-55).

Understanding the dynamics of the relationship between employers and MDWs necessitates considering the interplay of two opposing forces: resistance and power. Empirical evidence has shown that neither employers nor domestic workers hold a monopoly on power, as workers simultaneously protest against and conform to the power structure (Constable, 2007:13). Constable's advocacy for recognizing the existence of multiple forms of power and rejecting a unidimensional perspective is crucial in understanding the complexities of MDW-employer dynamics. She demonstrated that MDWs also possess certain forms of power that assist them in their resistance, challenging the portrayal of workers as entirely passive and powerless. She demonstrates that studies that solely focus on oppression tend to exaggerate

the passivity and powerlessness of workers, and thus neglect and conceal other coexisting and competing forms of power and agency (ibid:10).

Building upon these insights, the present study highlights that MDWs adopt various courses of action rather than remaining passive in the face of power and domination. Some MDWs adjust and cope with their circumstances by exhibiting patience, while others respond more actively. Depending on the context, they may employ contrasting forms of action at different times and in different situations. Consequently, the responses observed in this study varied greatly, ranging from silence and everyday resistance to direct and overt confrontation.

2.5.1 Coping Strategies

Subaltern individuals, including MDWs, possess a range of strategies to navigate power and domination (Adnan, 2007). However, an important question arises: should all of these strategies be categorised as acts of resistance? While active agency is often associated with resistance, it is worth considering whether coping strategies should also be viewed as forms of resistance, as they reflect an individual's active engagement with their circumstances. Viewing coping strategies as resistance, however, presents some challenges, as they do not necessarily seek to defy or challenge the ill-treatment imposed by powerful actors. Coping strategies are often aimed at adaptation and assimilation, rather than defiance or challenge. As a result, these strategies may not meet the criteria for resistance if resistance is understood as an oppositional act against power (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016). The inference is that some forms of action may indeed be expressions of resistance, while others may serve as survival mechanisms or attempts to improve their circumstances within the existing power structure.

Coping strategies do not necessarily stem from antagonism or seek to disrupt the prevailing status quo, as is often the case with resistance. This distinction indicates that coping strategies are indeed distinct from resistance. By differentiating resistance from coping strategies, this study aims to shed light on tactics that do not necessarily seek to challenge the status quo but rather to accommodate or navigate exploitative labour conditions. It is important to recognize that coping strategies do not invalidate the power dynamics at play within the

employer-MDW relationship; instead, they serve to illustrate the power-laden nature of these relationships. The present study advances the notion that not all forms of active agency can be classified as resistance. It distinguishes resistance from commonly employed strategies, such as coping mechanisms. Resistance, in its essence, is not universal nor homogeneous; rather, it is multidimensional, complex, and nuanced (Cohen and Hjalmarson, 2020). Conceiving the above insights, this study rejects absolute accounts of resistance.

MDWs often find themselves resorting to compromising and adapting to unfavourable working and living conditions. As mentioned earlier, coping strategies utilised by MDWs serve as a means to accommodate their exploitative work and living environments. Within the scope of this study, coping strategies refer to the methods employed by live-in domestic workers to adjust and survive within their exploitative work settings and the inequitable contractual relationships they have with their employers (Cohen, 1991:198). Cohen identified three different strategies among live-in coloured MDWs in adverse situations. His conceptualization of three techniques provides valuable insights into the strategies employed by MDWs in the context of a dominating relationship. The present study adopts these three categories of management techniques as a framework for comprehending both coping strategies and resistance.

The first approach involves leveraging external connections, such as engaging in social interactions outside of work, maintaining strong ties with family and friends, and fostering solidarity with others in similar situations. These connections provide a support network that can offer emotional assistance, practical advice, and a sense of belonging, helping MDWs navigate the challenges they face in their work environment.

The second category pertains to the utilisation of internal power resources, such as seeking opportunities to change workplaces or intentionally reducing productivity as a form of passive resistance. The third category encompasses redefining the dynamics of the relationship by adopting a subservient mask, where workers consciously downplay their intelligence or competence, a phenomenon Cohen referred to as "cognitive alteration" (Cohen, 1991). Through this tactic, MDWs strategically navigate the power dynamics and employ a deceptive appearance of subservience to protect themselves from potential abuse or retaliation.

Although he viewed these three techniques as coping strategies, the second and third techniques were everyday resistance rather than coping strategies.

While Cohen's categorization does not explicitly distinguish between coping strategies and resistance, it provides valuable insights into the various approaches MDWs employ to navigate their challenging circumstances. These strategies are essential to understand the power-laden relationships between workers and employers, shedding light on the dynamic interactions within the employer-MDWs relationship. MDWs demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of challenging working conditions. Given the absence of standardised employment conditions, their responses and strategies vary based on the specific circumstances they encounter. In situations where they confront exploitative working conditions, MDWs often resort to coping strategies to navigate their predicament.

One prevalent coping strategy observed among MDWs is the use of ''self-discipline'' (Constable, 2007). This approach involves adjusting their behaviour to align with their employers' preferences and expectations. They do so by meticulously adhering to proper etiquette, maintaining cleanliness, displaying lady-like comportment, exercising politeness, and exhibiting subservience (ibid, 2007). Through these actions, MDWs attempt to establish a sense of harmony within the household and reduce the likelihood of conflict with their employers. Along with resorting to these coping strategies, subalterns engage in everyday resistance, which is discussed below.

2.5.2 Everyday Resistance

The daily exercise of power and domination limits subalterns' options. Therefore, in an asymmetrical power relationship, subalterns engage in innocuous everyday resistance, what Scott (1985) called 'weapons of the weak'. He elaborates, as insubordination or open refusal to comply can invite retaliation, subalterns engage a large arsenal of techniques of everyday resistance in the form of foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and the like. In his subsequent study, Scott demonstrates that subalterns conform not because they internalise, but because they deem it prudent given any circumstances. He shows that subalterns engage in dual roles: their public

actions and offstage actions. Their public actions are masked with having hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990).

MDWs demonstrate a multifaceted approach akin to the actions of peasants described in Scott's study, involving small-scale and individualistic tactics that are carefully disguised. These non-revolutionary acts, such as lying, pilfering, foot-dragging, and story-making, serve as subtle ways for MDWs to challenge power imbalances without attracting immediate attention or retaliation. The use of covert resistance is often driven by the awareness that direct and open confrontation with powerful actors, such as employers, could lead to adverse repercussions. As Scott proposes, the principle of everyday resistance involves either disguising the actions or the actors themselves. By employing everyday resistance, subalterns strategically shield themselves from potential harm while still seeking to challenge exploitative power dynamics. Nonetheless, engaging everyday resistance is not the only way subalterns negotiate difficulties, they employ rightful resistance on the basis of their rights and entitlements which we are going to discuss in the next section.

2.5.3 Rightful Resistance and Moral Claims-making

Recognizing their ability to employ both coping strategies and assertive actions reinforces the notion that subalterns actively engage with their circumstances, seeking to improve their well-being and working conditions in a context where standard protections and regulations are often inadequate. Working on rural poor in China, Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li (2006) demonstrated that Chinese rural people combined the language of rights with resistance while negotiating difficulties- what they called ''rightful resistance''. Drawing on their work, Indrajit Roy highlights that subalterns' politics is not limited to ''false binaries'' of coping and resistance (Roy, 2018:407). Instead, their politics transcends these boundaries. While employing coping strategies in adversities or engaging in resistance, they engage in a web of intricate negotiations to improve their situations.

The present study has found a similar trend, whereby MDWs use their language of rights and entitlements while demanding their entitlements, which they are deprived of. This strategy involves appealing to the moral sensibilities of their employers, a practice referred to as

"moral claims-making" by Parreñas (2022) in her study focusing on Filipino MDWs in the UAE-Philippines migration corridor. It is one of the means by which MDWs assert their aspirations to attain an improvement in their working and living conditions. Within exploitative work environments, moral claims-making represents the first level of strategies that MDWs utilise. Moral claims-making serves as a powerful manifestation of MDWs' voices as they assert their entitlements. By drawing on moral principles, MDWs aim to redefine their relationships with their employers and challenge the status quo. Central to this approach is their awareness of their rights and entitlements as workers.

Among the fundamental rights that MDWs seek to uphold in their interactions with employers are access to sufficient food, uninterrupted rest, a weekly day off, appropriate clothing, and access to toiletries, among others. Their consciousness of these entitlements is shaped through peer learning, firsthand experiences abroad, and the pre-departure training they undergo before embarking on overseas employment. As a result, MDWs remind employers of what is reasonable, fair, and standard in terms of their employment and living conditions.

But rights and entitlements, or juridical language are not always the means that subaltern groups resort to. Along with language of rights, they engage in negotiation based on a language of exceptions, especially when they are excluded from entitlement on the basis of criteria set by the state authority (Roy, 2018: 39). MDWs demonstrate resourcefulness in their pursuit of better working conditions, employing various persuasive strategies to influence their employers' behaviour in the direction from rudeness to kindness or from abusive treatment to consideration. Rightful resistance, moral claims-making, and the language of exceptions are the basis of their persuasive strategies, an assertive and active form of strategy through which MDWs strive to ameliorate their working condition. This is one of the under-studied areas that I will be dealing comprehensively in empirical chapters, especially in Chapter Five. Nonetheless, MDWs go further showing their assertiveness in creating a space that aims to reshape the relationships, which the following section discusses in detail.

2.5.4 Transformation Through Individual and Collective Resistance

Contrary to the disguised form of everyday resistance, MDWs also engage in acts of open and direct confrontation, setting them apart from the traditional understanding of everyday resistance. While these acts may not fully align with public resistance, which involves larger-scale organised actions, they do challenge powerful actors and display a willingness to confront oppression. These open displays of resistance reflect a more overt assertion of agency, even in the face of potential risks and retaliation.

The experiences of MDWs demonstrate the power of social and political activism in effecting positive change in their working conditions and rights. In the United States, MDWs made significant strides through social movements and activism, receiving support from various rights campaigners and advocacy groups (England, 2017). These efforts have involved forming alliances, fostering solidarity, conducting training, organising rallies, and launching campaigns to raise awareness about their predicaments and demand better treatment. Similarly, in Lebanon, domestic workers have exhibited resistance through a progressive journey, starting with individual acts and gradually evolving into dyadic and sporadic activism, culminating in collective action (Mansour and Hendow, 2018). Coming together, they created communities and support structures to facilitate their activism and establish communication with one another. Pro-migrant NGOs played a vital role in supporting and facilitating these efforts.

In the United Kingdom, the labour of MDWs was not recognized as formal work, and workers lacked the ability to change employers. However, activism in the 1980s led to the establishment of self-help organisations like *Waling Waling* and non-profit organisations like *Kalayan* (Anderson, 2010). These groups advocated for the rights of MDWs and advanced their cause. As a result of their collective efforts, the UK government eventually granted workers the right to change employers and even provided opportunities for regularising their status, albeit with certain conditions. Although these rights were later repealed, this example illustrates the potential of collective activism to yield positive outcomes.

The significant role of NGOs in driving public resistance and advocating for the rights of MDWs is evident not only in receiving states but also in sending states. A comparative study between Sri Lanka and the Philippines conducted by Patrick Ireland revealed that the Philippines

benefited from having an active and independent civil society that exerted influence on the state to improve working conditions and provide safety and protection for domestic workers abroad (Ireland, 2018:334). The support of a strong civil society in the Philippines played a pivotal role in pushing for progressive policies and reforms in favour of domestic workers.

Similarly, a study focusing on Indonesian MDWs found that NGO-led activism played a critical role in challenging the state's silence on abuse and advocating for worker protection (Silvey, 2004:247). NGOs in Indonesia 'internationalise' the issue of worker protection, drawing attention to the plight of domestic workers on the global stage. By raising awareness about the challenges faced by MDWs and advocating for their rights, NGOs contributed to the advancement of protections and support for domestic workers. These findings underscore the importance of civil society organisations, particularly NGOs, in driving collective resistance and effecting positive change for MDWs.

Having explored the concepts and manifestations of power, domination, and agency, as well as the subaltern nature of MDWs, this chapter contextualises struggles within the framework of power dynamics and agency. The examination of coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation has shed light on the diverse ways MDWs exercise their agency and challenge power imbalances. The repertoire of strategies is how MDWs negotiate workplace difficulties and strive to improve working and living conditions. Building upon these studies, this research presents the following theoretical framework.

2.6 Theoretical Framework for this Study

Subalterns are enmeshed in power dynamics with power holders and resistance is their vital means to negotiate against power and domination. Therefore, domination and exercise of power evoke resistance. The concept of entwinement between power and resistance indeed offers valuable insights into the complex and dynamic interplay between MDWs and their employers. It invites us to examine the inherent conflict and tension that exists between these two forces of power and resistance. Scott's (1990:70) ethnographic study provides illuminating perspectives on this tension, where those in positions of power strive to maintain

the appearance of power, and subordinates may either accept that appearance or refrain from challenging it. Resistance, regardless of its form, has the potential to redefine power relationships, but its nature is also shaped by the prevailing power structure.

An insightful proposition that helps in comprehending the dynamics of power-resistance relationships suggests using resistance as a diagnostic tool for power (Abu-Lughod, 1990). This proposition rests on the premise that the study of resistance can provide a deeper understanding of the intricacy of power (1990:42). Abu-Lughod posits an entangled relationship between resistance and power, emphasising the need to view their connection in terms of entwinement rather than outright opposition. This proposition was supported by Lilja and Vinthagen (2014), observing the entanglement of power and resistance in the following manner:

> Traditionally, power and resistance have been considered as necessarily opposed, a view that is increasingly being abandoned. This is because not only are forms of resistance shaped by existing power relations, but also resistance paradoxically reinforces and/or creates power relations. Occasionally, power relies on the production of resistance. Power and resistance exist in a mutually constitutive relationship, and the two concepts are increasingly being understood as interconnected and entangled (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2014: 111).

In examining everyday resistance within power-laden relationships, as studied by Scott, two distinct forms emerge: (i) overt acts by actors in disguise, and (ii) overt actors where acts remain in disguise. However, the present study argues that this understanding of subalterns' efforts falls short in capturing cases of small-scale open and direct confrontation at the individual level, which can be equally prevalent alongside disguised forms of everyday resistance displayed by subalterns.

This study argues that not all resistance by subalterns occurs in disguise, nor do actors consistently remain hidden. In alignment with Lilja and Vinthagen's proposition, this study recognizes that disguised resistance is just one of many types of small-scale or individual resistance practices. There exist numerous scattered, dispersed, and small-scale resistance

practices that can be complex and more nuanced than what is covered by the concept of hidden and subtle everyday resistance (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018:212).

Therefore, resistance among subalterns can encompass instances where both actors and their actions are overt. Shapan Adnan's (2007) research provides valuable insights into this phenomenon. His study of the mobilisation of impoverished peasants in rural Bangladesh, observed a gradual shift in resistance from covert to overt forms, indicating that everyday resistance practices by subaltern groups can manifest in ways where both actors and their actions are explicit and visible. Adnan noted,

> The set of feasible options of resistance and domination available to powerful and subordinate groups respectively can change over time, resulting from the interactions between them as well as exogenous factors. [...] The switch from covert to overt forms of resistance indicates that the poor have a repertoire of strategies to oppose domination, upon which they can draw in accordance with changing circumstances (Adnan, 2007:185).

In the context of MDWs, despite facing numerous challenges, they employ multiple strategies to negotiate their marginalisation and subjugation. These strategies include coping mechanisms, such as self-restriction and adjustment. MDWs may also engage in persuasive strategies capitalising on their consciousness of entitlements, rights and beyond. Similarly, they engage in both disguised everyday resistance and open confrontation. Therefore, this study rejects the notion that they confine their activities within coping strategies and everyday resistance.

This study focuses on the agency of live-in women MDWs, examining how they navigate constraints stemming from power asymmetries. While Scott's study tends to conceptualise agency as a form of hidden everyday resistance, agency is far broader and should not be equated solely with everyday resistance. As noted by Fernandez (2020), migration studies discuss two critical dimensions of agency: (I) resistant agency and (II) capable agency. This implies that agency can be both resistive and transformative.

The distinction between resistant agency and capable agency is crucial in understanding the multifaceted nature of MDWs' responses to their working conditions. While resistant agency aligns with Scott's concept of everyday resistance, capable agency, as proposed by Leah Briones (2009), draws from Giddens' structuration theory and Amartya Sen's concept of capabilities. In the latter framework, agency represents the capability to act, and capability refers to the freedom to make the agency capable of doing (Fernandez, 2020:10-11). These two dimensions of agency seem applicable for MDWs, and these are useful for understanding MDWs' ability in taking overseas jobs, their determination to stay and work, and their choices and efforts in terminating employment relationships.

In addition to the aforementioned conceptualizations, the framework proposed by Rydzik and Anitha (2020) provides valuable insights in understanding agency exhibited by MDWs. By categorising their acts into resilience, reworking, and resistance, this framework offers a comprehensive view of the diverse strategies employed by MDWs. Resilience refers to the ability of MDWs to adapt and persist in the face of challenging circumstances. Reworking entails strategies geared towards altering the conditions of individual workers' lives and creating more viable everyday experiences (Rydzik and Anitha, 2020, 884-885). This framework helps gain a deeper understanding of the various approaches employed by MDWs.

While these frameworks define agency as a combination of seemingly separate and important elements, Fernandez (2020) adopts a broader perspective, defining agency as the capability to exert some degree of control over social relations and structures, implying the potential for transforming them to some extent. This view invokes the concept of negotiation, which encompasses the interplay and overlapping nature of accommodation, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, open confrontation, and the like. The present thesis acknowledges the heterogeneity of negotiations capitalising which individuals can exercise agency even within highly asymmetric power relationships. It considers diverse approaches as negotiations that characterise, shape, and reshape the relationships between MDWs and their employers.

Instead of being passive recipients, MDWs take different courses of action. Some adjust and cope with the situation by being patient, whereas others take more active recourse. Moreover, based on context and own position, one can recourse to opposite forms of actions.

Therefore, the responses by MDWs are highly diverse, ranging from silence to everyday resistance to a direct and open confrontation. This reminds us of the "ambivalences and ambiguities" of resistance (Ortner, 1995). Therefore, this study holds the idea that the diverse range of strategies by MDWs should not be limited within the concept of resistance. For the same reason, Uday Chandra (2015) proposed resistance to be reconceptualised as negotiation rather than the negation of power. However, the nuance between Chandra's proposition and the present study is that while Chandra conceptualised resistance as negotiation the present study views all strategies by MDWs including resistance as negotiation.

This study explores MDWs' negotiation with state and non-state actors in social configurations and settings that enmeshed them in asymmetric power relationships. It demonstrates how MDWs intersperse defiance with compliance during their negotiations in power asymmetrical relationships. This study puts forward several critical arguments that warrant empirical exploration. First, the multifaceted efforts of MDWs, even within domination and asymmetrical power relationships, challenge the notion of passivity. A key proposition presented in this thesis is that these negotiations constitute a crucial repertoire in the politics of MDWs, comprising both defiance and conformity.

The second argument is that the subalterns' resistance does not necessarily occur in disguise, nor do the resisters remain hidden. Along with disguised everyday resistance, MDWs engage in direct forms of negotiation that demand comprehensive exploration. These open and direct forms of resistance are also quotidian in nature. They challenge the dominance by the power actors and reorient the asymmetrical power relationships. This insight complicates the understanding of everyday resistance, which often assumes acts or actors to be disguised. The third premise is that, along with coping strategies and everyday resistance, one should consider persuasive strategies that subsumes the elements of rightful resistance, moral claims-making, and the language of exception. In addition to that the open confrontation should also have to be considered in order to understand the entirety of agency. Therefore, this study challenges narrowing MDWs' diverse approaches as binary forms of coping strategies and everyday resistance as they engage in persuasive strategies and open confrontation.

MDWs demonstrate agency through a continuum of responses, starting with coping strategies and culminating in open confrontation. Their multifarious activities and strategies express their struggle for fair treatment and their determination to assert their rights. Inspired by the work of Roy (2015, 2018) and Chandra (2015), the present study views MDWs' strategies from a broader perspective of negotiation, where it comprises not only resistance but also the politics of accommodation or so by MDWs, viewing it as a repertoire of various activities employed by MDWs in exploitative employment relationships. The heterogeneous nature of their negotiations provides valuable insights into understanding the paradox of resistance and compliance.

This thesis demonstrates that negotiations are situational, multifaceted, and dynamic. The heterogeneity of negotiations emphasises that MDWs apply agency even within highly asymmetrical power relationships. Therefore, by adopting negotiation as a concept, this thesis moves beyond the boundaries of the workplace, recognizing that negotiations extend into various aspects of MDWs' lives at every level of their migration journey, such as exiting employment relationships and returning home. This understanding allows for a more realistic account of negotiations within unequal power relationships.

Informed by these discussions and reflecting on MDWs' efforts and constraints, the term "agency" in this study refers to their capability to resist (both in disguise and direct form) and engage in coping and persuasive strategies whereas, "negotiation," refers to the manifestation of all expressions of acts, tactics, and strategies employed by MDWs in their interactions with employers, reflecting the multifaceted nature of their efforts within exploitative employment conditions characterised by domination and power asymmetries.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I set out the epistemological basis that provided the foundational structure and guided the research process for this study. To begin with, I adopted the constructivist perspective in the philosophical worldview for this study, which centres on understanding issues related to human actions and experiences (Halaweh Fidler and McRobb, 2008). This worldview is grounded in the belief that individuals construct and reconstruct subjective interpretations of actions and social experiences (Castles 2016; Creswell and Creswell 2018). Moreover, constructivism recognizes the existence of multiple realities within belief systems. Given that this study delves into the agency of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) amidst domination and asymmetrical power dynamics, the constructivist view serves as the overarching philosophical worldview framework of this study.

Secondly, this study employs a qualitative research design, which proves invaluable in providing a thorough investigation and detailed description of the phenomenon, thus leading to capturing the struggles and a deeper understanding of the acts of negotiation strategies by MDWs. Given the intricate context of MDWs, this approach allows for the gathering of rich insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants. In the context of the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor, this qualitative approach serves as a powerful tool to explore the agency and negotiation strategies by MDWs.

With a view to investigate how MDWs navigate power dynamics and domination in their workplaces, the study addresses the following research questions: (I) How do MDWs exercise agency, when faced with abuse and exploitation? (II) What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change their situation? and (III) How do they overcome these obstacles?
This study primarily relied on interviews with MDWs as the key participants and main source of empirical information. Besides that, the data collection process incorporated observation techniques and examining grey literature, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how MDWs prepared to take workplace challenges.

3.2 Data Collection

To enhance the data validity and credibility, I employed the well-established practice of "triangulation" (Yin, 2018) that involved incorporating multiple sources of data, including interviews, participant observation and grey literature. First and foremost, the data collection for this study involved conducting in-depth interviews with the participants. Through these interviews, the study aimed to gain insights into the agency developed and utilised by MDWs in navigating power dynamics and asymmetrical relationships within their workplaces. The focus of these interviews was to understand the specific actions, tactics, and strategies employed by MDWs in negotiating workplace domination. By examining the experiences and perspectives of MDWs, this study sheds light on their repertoire of negotiations in the face of exploitation, effectively documenting the workers' agency in overcoming the obstacles they encounter.

While in-depth interviews served as the primary data source for this study, this research deliberately avoided relying on a single data source. Therefore, I employed another data collection method, participant observation techniques, to collect primary data directly from natural settings. By conducting participant observation at training centres, I gained a broader understanding and obtained rich contextual information during the preparatory stage. This allowed me to delve deeply into how workers readied themselves to face challenges in their overseas workplaces and how states instilled in them an attitude of accepting exploitation.

To ensure a more comprehensive and robust interpretation of the findings, a third form of data collection method, documenting grey literature from public offices, recruitment agencies and NGOs was employed. The insights obtained through grey literature, including from reports, circulars, guidelines, and survey findings complemented the findings from interviews and participant observation. This study avoided an overreliance on a single type of data. By integrating diverse secondary data sources with primary data, I achieved a more nuanced understanding of the research problem and a more thorough analysis of the research data. I was able to embark on a firsthand exploration of contextual factors and social dynamics through the comparison and synthesis of various data sources. This study thus effectively mitigated potential limitations and bolstered the overall credibility and reliability of the research.

3.2.1 Recruitment and Selection

As outlined in Table 3.1, I interviewed four groups of participants. The primary participants in this study were returnee MDWs. In addition, I also conducted interviews with other key stakeholders in the migration industry, such as government officials, recruitment agency personnel, middlemen, NGOs, and civil society members. In total, I recruited and interviewed sixty-five participants, ensuring a diverse and representative sample size for this study.

Table 3.1 Number of Participants by Category

	Category		Number
(A)	Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs)	Premature returnees: women MDWs who returned home before the contract expired	25
		Mature returnees: women MDWs who returned home after completion of their contract period	25
(B)	Government officials	Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE)/Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)/Embassy	5
(C)	Recruitment Agency/middlemen	Licensed recruitment agencies and unlicensed middlemen	5
(D)	NGO/Civil Society	Pro-migrant NGO personnel/civil society members	5
Total		---	**65**

Since the primary focus of the study was to gain insights into the perspectives of returnee MDWs regarding their efforts to negotiate dominant power dynamics and asymmetry in the abusive working conditions, the highest number of participants was among the returnee MDWs. I conducted interviews with two distinct groups of returnee MDWs: premature, who returned home before the expiration of their contract and mature who returned home after the completion of their contract. The decision to include both categories was driven by the objective of exploring potential differences in their responses regarding the conditions they faced and their approach against adversities. Moreover, the study aimed to delve into the dissimilarities in how agency was developed and exercised by premature and mature returnees.

A 'non-probability' sampling strategy was employed in this study to recruit these participants, primarily because the 'sample frame' for Bangladeshi returnee MDWs was unavailable. Initially, assistance was sought from NGOs to identify potential returnee MDWs, and then a 'snowball sampling' technique was applied based on their recommendations to recruit additional participants. This approach allowed for the inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives from the target population.

Prior to commencing the fieldwork, I established strong connections with some prominent pro-migrant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh. These organisations included 'Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)', 'Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK)', and 'Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Programme (OKUP)', which are actively involved in supporting returnee MDWs. They help MDWs in facilitating communication with government offices, especially embassies, during challenging times, helping returnee MDWs file complaints against recruitment agencies and middlemen, and helping in identifying alternative livelihood opportunities.

To initiate the recruitment process, I obtained initial contact details from these NGOs and then utilised the snowball sampling technique to recruit additional returnees. Moreover, a woman research assistant (refer to Section on Fieldwork Experience below) with prior experience working with this cohort of workers played a crucial role in the recruitment process. Given the practical limitations of using emails as a communication method, mobile devices were employed to contact the returnee MDWs. As part of the process, the 'Participant Information Sheet' (see Appendix 2) and the 'Pre-interview Consent Form' (see Appendix 3) were provided to the participants on the day of the interviews. Initially, the plan was to conduct interviews with forty returnees; however, the number of interviews surpassed the initial target. By extending the number of interviews beyond the initial plan, I aimed to capture a comprehensive and thorough understanding of perspectives of the returnees. Their experiences in Saudi Arabia ranged from a few days to several years, with ages spanning from 16 to 56 years old (refer to Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Characteristics of Returnee MDWs (n=50)

Age		Length of stay		Work experience abroad		Marital Status		School Attended		Training	
min	max	shortest	longest	Yes	No	Married (including divorcee)	Unmarried	Primary or no	Secondary and up	Yes	No
16 years	56 years	7 days	4 years 3 months	36%	64%	80%	20%	76%	24%	46%	54%

*As per government regulation, women between 25-45 years were allowed to take overseas jobs

The second group of participants in this study consisted of government officials who held the crucial responsibility of safeguarding the interests, rights, and safety of workers abroad. These officials were carefully selected from two key entities, taking into consideration their positions and relevant experience: the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) and the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET). The MoEWOE is involved in policy formulation, while the BMET is responsible for policy implementation. In addition, an interview was conducted with a former labour attaché stationed at the Bangladesh embassy in Saudi Arabia, who had direct experience in addressing the vulnerability and difficulties of MDWs. The contact with these officials was established through email communications.

The third category of participants in this study comprised personnel from recruitment agencies, playing a vital role in the placement and recruitment of workers for overseas employment. In Bangladesh, licensed recruitment agencies heavily depend on informal recruiters who serve as intermediaries between prospective migrants and formal recruitment agencies (Rahman, 2011). The identification of these personnel was facilitated by obtaining references from returnee MDWs. This method helped in recruiting individuals with direct involvement in the recruitment process and allowed for a comprehensive examination of the dynamics at play. However, a careful and cautious approach to protect the safety and identity of the MDWs were ensured during contact with the informal recruiters.

Lastly, interviews were conducted with NGO personnel and civil society members who played a vital role in raising awareness among potential migrants, amplifying the voices of workers,

and providing them with essential training to cope with challenging working conditions abroad. The selection of these participants was based on their significant engagement with MDWs. To identify NGOs working with returnee MDWs, a comprehensive stakeholder mapping process was conducted, supported by government and NGO reports. Besides that, media reports proved to be valuable in providing information about the activities of prominent NGOs.

3.2.2 Informed Consent

During the communication with research participants, a brief introduction to the study was provided, emphasising its purpose to understand how MDWs negotiate dominant power dynamics and asymmetrical relationships with employers. The distribution of the 'Participant Information Sheet' and the 'Consent Form' was conducted to ensure that informed consent was obtained from all participants, empowering them with knowledge about the research process (Glense, 2006). Prior to the interview sessions, participants were familiarised with the researcher and the research project through prior communication. However, to establish a comfortable and transparent environment, the interview sessions began with a self-introduction, primarily as a student.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I disclosed my affiliation as a civil servant who was on leave for this postgraduate study. This disclosure was essential to ensure transparency and build trust with the participants. Participants were assured that the research was conducted independently and without any government influence. Emphasising the independence of the research aimed to minimise the effects of identities and positionalities and to fostering a neutral and unbiased approach to the investigation. Participants were informed that the study strictly adhered to the University of York's ethics and integrity protocols. Confidentiality of their responses was guaranteed, and the research was committed to maintaining impartiality throughout the process.

3.2.3 Site of the Study

The field research was conducted in various locations across Bangladesh, with interviews taking place in prominent migrant-sending administrative districts, including Dhaka,

Munshiganj, Narsingdi, Gazipur, and Narayangonj (see Figure 3.1). These districts were selected due to their higher concentration of returnee MDWs.

Interviews with returnee MDWs and middlemen were conducted in public settings that were convenient for both the participants and the researcher. However, it's worth noting that at times, certain challenges were encountered, such as background noise from nearby small-scale factories, music from local programmes, or loudspeakers used for religious gatherings. Despite these environmental factors, efforts were made to ensure the interviews were conducted with as much clarity and comfort as possible. Interviews with government officials, formal recruitment agency personnel, and NGO representatives took place at their respective offices in the capital city, Dhaka. This approach allowed for a conducive and professional setting to gather insights from these key stakeholders.

Figure 3.1: Site of Study

3.2.4 Interview Techniques

I placed significant emphasis on fostering insightful interactions and achieving a deeper understanding of the research issue to effectively analyse the data. To capture participants' experiences and perspectives, I conducted in-depth interviews, utilising various conversational techniques as identified by Gray et al. (2013). These techniques included

revealing self-information, such as the researcher's affiliation with the government and research experience, as well as providing background information about the researcher's interest in the research topic. Disclosing such information aimed to establish a rapport with the participants, promoting open and candid discussions.

During the interviews, I consciously demonstrated active listening and encouraged participants to reflect upon their experiences. I summarised key points to ensure accurate understanding and captured the essence of the participants' narratives. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, employing predetermined questions outlined in Appendix 4-8 as a framework for the discussions. These guiding questions were thoughtfully designed to elicit insightful and thoughtful responses, contributing to a comprehensive analysis of the data. While most of the interview questions[9] were similar for both mature and premature returnees, specific inquiries were tailored to identify and elucidate the divergences. By incorporating these targeted questions, the investigation sought to gain deeper insights into the experiences and challenges encountered by each category of returnees.

Several important considerations were diligently applied throughout the interview process. I ensured that the conversations naturally flowed along the lines of inquiry, allowing participants the freedom to express their thoughts and feelings without imposing any predetermined boundaries. This approach aimed to capture genuine and authentic insights from the participants, enabling a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. In addition to that, I actively refrained from posing unfriendly or intrusive personal questions that lacked relevant context. Similarly, I avoided leading questions that might inadvertently introduce bias (such as "Wouldn't you agree?"). Besides that, I steered clear of asking threatening questions (e.g., Did you feel guilty?) that could potentially manipulate participants' emotions. I was attentive to the emotional well-being of participants and actively avoided any form of coercive questioning. Smooth transitions were employed to maintain the flow of the conversations, while tactful addressing of any inconsistencies in their answers encouraged participants to reflect on their responses thoughtfully.

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[9] One of the tailored questions for premature returnee was ''would you continue your work for a different employer if given the opportunity?''; against the questions for mature returnees, ''what factors contributed to the completion of your job?'' (refer to Appendix 4 and 5 for more0.

Recognising that certain aspects of the interview might be sensitive to participants, I made it explicitly clear to the participants that they were under no obligation to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. Their comfort and well-being were of paramount importance to me throughout the research process. To further protect the participants, I provided them with the option to review the transcripts of their interviews before proceeding with the analysis for the dissertation. This was to ensure that they had control over their own narratives and could ensure the accuracy and context of their responses. In accordance with ethical standards, I prioritised the protection and well-being of the participants. I ensured that their rights, needs, values, and desires were always respected and upheld throughout the study of the research. During the recruitment process, participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and their decision to participate or not would not impact the services they received from NGOs or public offices, if applicable.

I took care to maintain an appropriate duration for each interview, recognizing the importance of avoiding both excessively lengthy and overly brief sessions. This approach helped minimise the potential influence of interviews on each other, as emphasised by Yin (2018). As such, the interviews were generally kept within a balanced range of one to one-and-a-half hours, ensuring a meaningful and respectful engagement with each participant. Throughout the interviews, I adopted a keen and attentive approach, actively listening to participants' responses while paying close attention to both the content of their answers and the manner in which they expressed themselves. To ensure comprehensive data collection, I took detailed field notes that encompassed not only the verbal responses but also the participants' nonverbal communication. This included observing emotional expressions conveyed through their facial appearance, tone of voice, hesitations, and signs of confusion.

At times, what initially began as a one-on-one interview evolved into an impromptu group discussion, as other returnees from neighbouring areas spontaneously joined the meetings. Although conducting one-on-one interviews was the intended approach, I embraced the opportunity and did not hinder their participation when such situations organically unfolded. These unexpected and unstructured group conversations occasionally yielded valuable

insights and information. While I had limited control over these situations, they nonetheless made a meaningful contribution to the overall research process.

Moreover, the involvement of family members in the research context was a noteworthy aspect. While I politely requested that family members refrain from directly participating in the interviews on a few occasions, some parents and husbands of the returnees expressed a strong desire to be present at the interview site. In certain instances, they even provided additional answers to some of the questions posed to the returnees. These inputs often proved to be complementary and valuable, enriching the depth of understanding of the participants' experiences. However, it may be that participants refrained from sharing some of their experiences because of the presence of family members at their interviews.

Besides that, the perspectives of family members held significant relevance as they actively advocate for the well-being of their loved ones. They take limited but highest possible steps to secure MDWs safety and safe return from exploitative working conditions abroad. Their proactive efforts prove to be vital at times. Therefore, considering their crucial role in interacting with middlemen, recruitment agencies, NGOs, local administrations, and political representatives, it was deemed disadvantageous to entirely exclude them from the interviews.

While the majority of interviews conducted in this study followed a semi-structured format, some interviews were of an unstructured nature. For instance, conversational interviews were conducted with government officials and recruitment agencies. Moreover, due to participants' reluctance, some interviews were not recorded. In retrospect, this turned out to be advantageous, as recording might have hindered the participants' willingness to speak candidly. Noticeably, some returnees shared valuable information related to the research topic after the recording had stopped. In those situations, I diligently took notes to capture the relevant points for later reference.

During the fieldwork phase, I scheduled and conducted interviews with government officers after gaining insights from interviewing with returnee MDWs. This approach allowed me to better prepare, discuss critical issues, and address gaps in knowledge. Moreover, I adapted

the guiding questions during the fieldwork based on the knowledge acquired through the literature review. As I progressed, I also recognized the limitations of my initial assumptions and adjusted accordingly. For instance, in a few initial interviews, I asked premature returnees how they ran away from their employers' houses, assuming that they all returned home after running away. However, I later realised that this assumption was not true for all cases.

After conducting several interviews, I gained insights that led me to realise the diversity of reasons behind premature returns. Running away from employers' houses was just one aspect of premature returns. Many returnees experienced premature returns due to various reasons, such as forced return as employers send workers back early, amicable settlements through recruitment agencies' arbitration, or providing compensation. Besides that, some returnees cited workplace injuries or deteriorated health conditions as reasons for their early return. These diverse experiences highlighted the need to revise and rephrase the initial question to encompass a broader range of circumstances. Consequently, I adapted the question to better capture the various factors contributing to premature returns. Instead of asking, "How and why did you run away from your employer's house?", the question was rephrased as ''Why and When did you exactly think of exiting the employment relationship?" This revision aimed to elicit more comprehensive responses and acknowledge the multifaceted nature of premature returns.

3.2.5 Participant Observation

During my field research, I had the opportunity to visit two government-run training centres. To gain an authentic perspective, I chose not to inform anyone about my visit in advance. This approach allowed me to observe the situation as it naturally unfolded. During my visit, I discovered that the course instructor of ''Housekeeping Training'' was on leave, leading to operational challenges due to a shortage of staff. A key official at the centre expressed frustration over the lack of instructors and the resultant difficulties in managing the centre with insufficient staffing. During my interaction with this official, the significance of "mandatory residential training" for preparing workers for the challenges they would face abroad was strongly emphasised. According to the official, workers who attended the month-

long residential training exhibited greater resilience and were less likely to return home prematurely.

I dedicated an entire day to attend training sessions at another training centre. My aim was to observe the training sessions in their natural setting, without any influence. I observed two different types of classes- class lecture and practical class. I randomly attended two lectures in a classroom setting, where the instructor discussed potential workplace scenarios to instil expected behaviours among the workers. In one instance, there were 26 out of 50 participants present, and in another class, there were 18 attendees. The bustling noise from the street outside significantly permeated the classrooms, impacting the learning environment. In one of the classes, the initially assigned instructor was replaced by a more competent one. I presumed it might have been an attempt to create a positive impression during my presence. The practical class I attended focused on providing hands-on learning opportunities for the trainees, allowing them to perform tasks related to electronic equipment.

3.2.6 Documentation of Grey Literature

Recognizing the significance of grey literature, I incorporated the collection and documentation of relevant materials as the third method of data collection during my fieldwork. This approach served as a valuable complement to the findings derived from interviews and observations. The grey literature was sourced from three essential channels: (I) public offices, (II) non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and (III) recruitment agency offices. The documents collected from these sources varied in content and purpose, offering diverse perspectives.

While some basic information relevant to this study was available on the official websites of these offices, a majority of the documents were not accessible online and required fieldwork to obtain. A notable example is the 'Housekeeping Training Manual' published by the government, which I acquired during participant observations at a training centre. This manual provided valuable insights into the content of housemaid training, enriching my

understanding of the training process and the specific focus on issues taught before workers' deployment to workplaces.

In addition to collecting materials from public offices and training centres, I also sourced documents from pro-migrant rights NGOs. These materials encompassed a wide range of resources, including general reports, statistics, survey findings, and research reports. While some of these documents were available online, several were not readily accessible. Gathering and reviewing grey literature from NGOs significantly contributed to a more evidence-based and compelling understanding of the challenges faced by MDWs.

Lastly, I gathered several invaluable documents directly from recruitment agencies. These included the standard employment contract, partnership contract[10] between recruitment agencies, illegitimate pledge between MDWs and recruitment agencies, the template for workers' profiles in the e-platform (*Musaned*) system, and even evidence of physical violence through photographs. These documents provided critical insights into the contractual arrangements and working conditions of MDWs, shedding light on the realities they encountered in their employment journey.

Among all of these documents collected from the recruitment agency office, the unlawful pledge between MDWs and recruitment agencies is particularly mentionable. This pledge is used as a coercive tool to obligate workers to stay even in exploitative working conditions. Along with a formal employment contract, MDWs are obliged to sign and submit this pledge declaring that workers will not return home before the contract ends; and that if they wish to return home after six months and if their employers agree to leave them, they will have to bear the cost of returning home.

As a guarantor, one guardian (either husband or father) of workers has to sign that document as well. Accessing this document was only possible through field research, and it provided

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[10] Is the contract between recruitment agencies in sending and receiving states based on which recruitment agencies are involved in placing workers for overseas jobs. It expires as soon as the standard employment contract expires.

crucial insights into the exploitative practices by recruitment agencies. Understanding the content of this illegitimate contract shed light on the challenges and vulnerabilities experienced by migrant domestic workers.

The collection of documents from recruitment agencies, public offices, and pro-migrant NGOs played a vital role in shaping my data collection methodology. These documents provided invaluable insights directly related to the focus of my study and allowed me to delve deeper into the complexities of the research topic. Incorporation of grey literature helped triangulate the research findings and enhance the validity and reliability of my research. Moreover, the grey literature played a crucial role in comprehending the multifaceted factors that significantly impact the lives of migrant domestic workers, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. The utilisation of field research and the incorporation of grey literature proved to be indispensable in the present study. This approach allowed me to uncover hidden aspects and gain a holistic view of the issues faced by migrant domestic workers, highlighting the importance of such methodologies in this research endeavour.

3.3 Fieldwork Experience and Overcoming Difficulties

I was aware of the complexities involved in the interview process for social research. I was aware that participants could feel uncomfortable in certain settings, and it might hinder their ability to spontaneously share their experiences. Hence, I consciously approached the interviews with sensitivity and empathy. Because audio recordings can sometimes impede honest responses (Bell and Waters, 2014), I prioritised the participants' desires and preferences, ensuring that they felt comfortable and at ease during the interviews. Building a relationship based on respect and empathy was of the highest importance to me.

One advantage that I had during the interviews was being from the same racial, linguistic, and geographical background as the participants. However, I made a conscious effort to respect local customs and practices, understanding the significance of cultural sensitivity in establishing rapport with the community I was working with. During interviews, there were occasions when returnee MDWs kindly offered me light refreshments and sometimes even a meal. Although I was not hungry or even did not anticipate such offers, I gratefully accepted

them, recognizing the importance of these gestures in building trust and fostering a deeper appreciation for the cultural values of the community.

Recognizing the conservative and patriarchal nature of the society I was researching, I was mindful of the potential discomfort some returnee MDWs might feel sitting with me, a man researcher, and sharing certain experiences. To address this concern and create a more comfortable environment for the participants, I took the initiative to recruit a qualified woman research assistant with prior experience working with MDWs. This initiative played a crucial role in conducting interviews, as the presence of a woman research assistant allowed the returnee MDWs to feel more at ease during the interviews, facilitating open and candid discussions.

Noteworthy to mention that finding a qualified research assistant for this short-term engagement required significant effort and consideration. Fortunately, I was able to secure the assistance of a social science graduate with experience in the migration sector, who graciously took a leave from her job to support this project. Collaborating with my supervisors, I diligently ensured that the woman research assistant received thorough training in interview skills and ethical protocols, aligning with the principles outlined in my ethics application. These protocols encompassed essential aspects such as maintaining anonymity, confidentiality, participant vulnerability, safeguarding participants' rights, recognizing the sensitivity of research data, and mitigating potential risks.

As upholding ethical guidelines was of paramount importance to me, I took the initiative to sign a 'Confidentiality and Data Ownership Agreement' (Appendix 9) and an 'Ethics Compliance Agreement' (Appendix 10) with the research assistant. These agreements served to reinforce the commitment to maintaining confidentiality and protecting the participants' interests. In addition to that, I provided her with a brief introduction about the research, ensuring she was well-prepared to conduct interviews independently.

This approach provided the participants with the option to decline an interview with a man researcher, offering them a more comfortable and inclusive environment. However, none of the participants declined to sit with me, indicating a positive reception to the research

process. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a woman research assistant addressed potential discomfort and proved to be invaluable for the research process, particularly in terms of communication with the participants, scheduling interviews, and coordinating logistics.

Throughout the majority of the interviews, returnee MDWs felt comfortable sharing their experiences, even those related to sensitive topics such as sexual harassment. However, I remained attentive to the participants' comfort levels, and on a couple of occasions, I sensed that participants might feel more at ease discussing her experiences in my absence. In such situations, I briefly excused myself from the interview, allowing the woman research assistant to take over the conversation. The research assistance and I had discussed and agreed upon this approach beforehand that the research assistant would delve deeper into issues of sexual harassment during my absence and that I would rejoin the interview after a few minutes. The research assistant took extensive notes during that time. These notes, along with the audio recording, facilitated me at a later stage.

Maintaining the privacy and anonymity of the participants was a top priority throughout my fieldwork to minimise emotional distress and foster trust. However, achieving complete anonymity posed certain challenges, particularly when employing 'snowball sampling' to recruit returnee MDWs, as it might lead to indirect identification. To address this, I avoided disclosing the references during the recruitment process.

Furthermore, my interview data did not reveal any serious criminal behaviour, such as human trafficking or forced prostitution, and thus I was not placed in a position where I was legally mandated to report such incidents. Nevertheless, I highlighted this legal and moral obligation and possibility of being required to surrender such data. To ensure transparency and informed consent, this information was clearly communicated in the 'Participant Information Sheet' and the 'Consent Form' that I provided to participants before the interviews. By adopting these measures and adhering to ethical protocols, I aimed to create a supportive and respectful environment for the participants, safeguarding their interests and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

I had anticipated that some participants might experience emotional distress while recounting incidents of abuse and exploitation during the interview process. This apprehension proved to be partially accurate, as it occurred on one or two occasions. For instance, there was a case where a premature returnee became visibly overwhelmed by the memories of her tragic experience, resulting in momentarily stopping talking during the interview. To address this, I promptly recognized her distress and offered a pause in the interview. Her parents, who were present nearby, engaged in a comforting conversation with her. After a brief interval, the returnee re-engaged with the interview, and the need for postponement was avoided.

Though my research topic was not politically sensitive, there were instances when participants made critical remarks about government actions during the interviews. While such instances were not significant, I remained mindful of the potential implications of political sensitivity. As a precaution, I carefully framed and presented allegations and criticisms in a neutral, non-specific, and depoliticized manner (Glasius et al., 2018). I also exercised meticulous care to prevent any adverse publicity for the university.

During the field research, my personal safety and well-being were of utmost importance (Glasius et al., 2018). To ensure this, I followed advice provided by the UK government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice platform and regularly consulted local media sources to stay informed about the areas I visited. Prior to travelling to different administrative districts, I informed the local government authorities of my presence. Moreover, I familiarised myself with the localities by seeking assistance from personal networks, including friends, relatives, and acquaintances. To further enhance safety, I adopted a 'buddy scheme' approach and engaged a local friend to accompany me to interview locations. I ensured that this person remained off-site during interviews.

I conducted interviews with returnee MDWs in their homes in remote villages or at nearby NGO or school premises. Securing meeting places in these remote villages required considerable effort. Grassroots-level volunteers often aided in identifying suitable houses or meeting locations. While efforts were made to exclude volunteers from the interview settings, their presence was occasionally necessary to create a conducive atmosphere. On a

few occasions, their presence proved beneficial, particularly when it came to understanding local dialects or strong accents.

During the field research, I encountered certain challenges that required innovative solutions. Some returnee MDWs faced difficulty in reading the 'Participant Information Sheet' and the 'Consent Form' despite being prepared in their native language, Bangla. To address this, I read the documents aloud to them before conducting the interviews, ensuring they fully understood the content and provided informed consent. Another fieldwork challenge was traffic congestion, which occasionally made it difficult to meet participants on time. To overcome this issue, I carefully planned my journeys in advance, allowing for sufficient travel time to ensure punctuality.

The COVID-19 pandemic also caused significant health and safety concerns during fieldwork. In adherence to local guidelines and to prioritise the well-being of the participants, I took strict measures to protect both myself and the participants. Whenever there were any doubts about COVID-19 symptoms, I refrained from travelling and rescheduled interviews. I consistently followed safety protocols such as wearing face coverings, frequently sanitising my hands, maintaining social distancing, and regular cleaning of the interview settings. Besides that, I minimised interactions and avoided enclosed spaces whenever possible to reduce any potential risks. Before arranging any meetings, I carefully screened the participants for any symptoms and ensured they were in good health. Regularly consulting the government website (https://corona.gov.bd/) and following the guidelines provided by the British High Commission in Dhaka helped me stay informed and updated on the evolving situation.

To minimise the risk of infection, I downloaded the 'Corona Contact Tracing App' and strictly adhered to instructions. Recognizing the potential for travel restrictions, especially with Bangladesh categorised as a red zone on the UK government's COVID-19 restriction list, I maintained a cautious approach throughout my field study. I was acutely aware that a worsening situation could result in travel restrictions, potentially leaving me stranded in Bangladesh. Fortunately, such circumstances did not happen during my fieldwork. During the fieldwork, I faced personal concerns as well, as my two children in the UK contracted COVID-

19. This naturally led to worries about the possibility of my spouse falling ill and the need for care arrangements. Fortunately, my spouse remained unaffected during that time, allowing me to complete my field research without any disruption.

3.4 Ethics Approval and Compliance with Standards

One of the essential ethical principles followed in this study was the "No Harm Policy," which aimed to prevent any form of exploitation and mitigate legal liabilities (Bell and Waters, 2014). Upholding this principle required strict adherence to university guidelines and principles, obtaining formal approval from the Ethics Committee, and diligently following their advice. These measures were implemented to ensure the protection and well-being of the participants throughout the research process.

The approval process for this project from the Ethics Committee (Appendix 1) was rigorous. It involved addressing numerous queries, resulting in a six-month waiting period. Although the waiting time may have seemed extensive, it provided a valuable opportunity for reflection on aspects that might have been previously overlooked. This thorough process significantly contributed to my preparation for the field research and reinforced the significance of adhering to ethical considerations.

Respecting the rights of the participants was of paramount importance throughout the study. Therefore, ethical considerations were diligently followed. Informed consent, as mandated by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 2018, was obtained from all participants, and measures were taken to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The university's "Code of Practice in Research Integrity" served as a comprehensive ethical framework for guiding all aspects of the field research. Local ethical guidelines were also consulted and adhered to, manifesting my commitment to ethical conduct.

To ensure the utmost confidentiality and data protection, strict adherence to the GDPR 2018 and the Data Protection Act of 2018 was maintained throughout the study. The collection of personal information was kept to a minimum, and participants' personal and identifying data, such as names, contact information, and addresses, were removed and separated from the

research data after each interview. Special care was taken to ensure the anonymization of all direct and indirect identifying information, safeguarding the privacy and well-being of the participants. To maintain anonymity, participant codes were used during the anonymization process, and pseudonyms were consistently employed throughout the dissertation to refer to individuals. The research findings and reports were presented in a manner that preserved the anonymity of the participants. Any personal data collected during the fieldwork phase was solely used for communication purposes and treated with utmost confidentiality.

To ensure the security and confidentiality of the data, I implemented strict measures during data handling. Audio recordings were securely uploaded to a password-protected Google Drive under the university's account and then deleted from the recorder. Regular backup copies of the data were stored on an encrypted laptop and an external hard drive, both of which were password protected. Physical storage of data and electronic devices were kept in a locked closet to prevent unauthorised access. Moreover, transcripts and field notes were carefully paraphrased and utilised in the research before being safely disposed of, further safeguarding the confidentiality of the participants' information.

During the fieldwork, I encountered a challenge due to the returnees' busy schedules and limited availability. Many of them were engaged in various livelihood activities, such as small-scale trading and cattle rearing, leaving them with limited time for interviews. Some participants even requested quick interviews to accommodate their busy lives. In certain cases, participants expected compensation for their time, which presented a dilemma as other researchers might have provided monetary incentives. However, after careful consideration, I chose not to offer monetary compensation for their time and participation. Instead, I prioritised the ethical principle of voluntary participation and emphasised that their involvement was entirely voluntary and without any financial obligations. To address the practical concerns of participants who were reluctant to meet at their own homes, I offered to cover their transportation expenses if they preferred to meet at a location away from home. This ensured that their convenience and comfort were considered without compromising the integrity of the research process.

3.5 Reflexivity and the Researcher's Role

Reflexivity played a pivotal and essential role in shaping the trajectory of this study, ensuring a conscientious examination of potential biases, and safeguarding against the inadvertent replication of existing ideologies, conventions, discourses, and power dynamics (Charmaz, 2014). To achieve this, I reflected on my own background, considering aspects such as culture, gender, socioeconomic status, and personal experiences, as these attributes had the potential to influence my understanding and interpretation of the research data.

In line with the principles of this study, reflexivity was embraced as a process through which researchers engage in critical self-reflection concerning their own backgrounds and how these backgrounds may impact the research study. It involved a thoughtful examination of how researchers' pre-existing assumptions and perspectives might shape their interpretation of the data, how participants might experience the study, and how readers might react to its findings (Cresswell and Baez, 2021:233). The practice of reflexivity in this study encompassed three fundamental areas: power and influence, positionality and reciprocity, and gender relationships.

3.5.1 Power and Influence

The researcher-participant relationship inherently involves a power imbalance that can significantly impact the integrity and interpretation of research data. This power asymmetry stems from various factors, including differences in status, social identity, experience, and knowledge between the researcher and participants. As a result, it was crucial for me to acknowledge and actively address these power dynamics and their potential influence throughout the entirety of my field research.

I was aware that the privileged identity of one party, often the researcher, can contribute to the creation and reinforcement of these power imbalances. In my analysis, I adopt a comprehensive perspective on identity, considering two crucial dimensions: ascribed characteristics and achieved characteristics. The former encompasses inherent attributes such as race, ethnicity, cultural background, privilege, sexual orientation, and gender, which can significantly shape an individual's social position. On the other hand, achieved

characteristics pertain to factors such as education, knowledge, occupation, and social status that individuals may acquire through personal accomplishments and experiences (Muhammad et al., 2015:1047).

I actively maintained a keen awareness of my own self-identity, privileges, and positionality throughout the research process. In order to address any potential power imbalances, I implemented several measures. Firstly, I placed significant emphasis on cultivating a positive rapport with the participants, especially with returnee MDWs. By demonstrating respect and creating a welcoming environment, my aim was to ensure that they felt empowered during the interviews. Moreover, I adopted a meticulous approach to uphold the participants' dignity by acknowledging and respecting their choices. I remained attentive to their emotional and psychological well-being and established transparent lines of communication to make them feel comfortable sharing their experiences. I was careful to foster an empathetic atmosphere. This approach not only facilitated their participation but also contributed to building trust and mutual respect.

Furthermore, I acknowledged the potential for subtle influence during conversations between the participants and myself. I recognized that this influence could result in what is known as a "reflexive threat" (Yin, 2018:120), where my perspective might inadvertently influence participants' responses and vice versa, potentially impacting the direction of the inquiry. Therefore, I exercised caution by being mindful of any potential reflexive threats during conversations(Ibid, 2018). By taking these measures, I aimed to create a research environment that prioritised the participants' agency and well-being, allowing for an open and genuine exchange of information. My commitment to reflexivity and ethical considerations played a crucial role in ensuring the credibility and integrity of the research findings.

3.5.2 Positionality and Reciprocity

It is essential to recognize that each individual is shaped by a specific sociocultural context, which includes various factors such as culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, language, and values (Glesne, 2006). These unique attributes result in diverse perspectives

among individuals, necessitating self-awareness when engaging with participants (Ibid, 2006). The participants and I shared the same racial, linguistic, and geographical backgrounds, which facilitated the development of mutual relationships and the preservation of participants' dignity, rights, and safety. However, navigating this process remains complex. To address this, I prioritised the establishment of a "relationship of trust" by approaching participants with warmth and respect, recognizing the importance of their individual experiences and perspectives. By fostering a safe and supportive environment, I aimed to encourage open and authentic sharing of their experiences.

Moreover, I highly valued the knowledge and contributions of the participants. To foster rapport with them, I adopted the concept of a "gift relationship" (Oakley, 2016). This relationship was founded on the understanding that I heavily relied on the participants' involvement. Since I had limited means to compensate them for their time, energy, and effort, I sought to acknowledge and appreciate their valuable contributions to this study.

I recognised the potential impact of my previous position in public services on my interactions with participants. Acknowledging that some participants might harbour reservations towards government officials, I took precautions to ensure that this did not hinder the establishment of a trusting relationship or compromise the quality of data obtained. To address this, I openly disclosed my affiliation with the government in a friendly and transparent manner. I assured participants that my previous position had no influence on this research and that their confidentiality would be strictly upheld in the interpretation and reporting of the data. By maintaining a commitment to data confidentiality, showing humility, and treating participants with respect, instilled confidence in the participants. This approach allowed for more open and authentic communication, enhancing the quality and depth of the data collected during the interviews.

3.5.3 Gender Relations

Various gender-specific factors had presented challenges in my interactions with returnee MDWs and understanding their experiences. As a privileged man, it was crucial for me to confront any unconscious biases and avoid perpetuating marginalisation. To address this, I

incorporated feminist values into the research process, emphasising the need for self-reflection on my worldview and striving to understand the experiences of women participants (Jenkins, Narayanaswamy, and Sweetman, 2019). Insights from feminist perspectives have guided me in conducting research that is modest and less oppressive (Gray, 2013).

Aligned with feminist principles of equality and reciprocity, I worked to minimise power imbalances between myself and the research participants. I constantly acknowledged the value of their contributions and made sure they understood the importance of their involvement. In my interactions with participants, I maintained respect and caution. I strive to ensure that my social position did not inadvertently perpetuate through my actions, behaviour, and attitude. By prioritising a more equitable approach, I aimed to foster an atmosphere of trust and cooperation throughout the research process. I recognised that gender relations could significantly influence the interview process and outcomes, including participants' responses and my understanding. Given that gender relations shape the lives of both men and women distinctly, they inevitably impact the research process (Herod, 1993:306). Therefore, maintaining a keen awareness of gender relationships was essential in the research process.

I acknowledged that participants' responses might differ depending on whether a man or woman researcher conducted the interview, and the interpretation of these responses could also vary to some extent (Herod, 1993:308). Considering that the main participants in this study were women returnee MDWs from a conservative patriarchal society in rural Bangladesh, I anticipated that some might feel hesitant to participate in interviews and could be uncomfortable sharing certain experiences with a man researcher like me. Being aware of these gender dynamics allowed me to adapt my approach and create a supportive environment by engaging a woman research assistant, ensuring that participants felt at ease and comfortable sharing their experiences during the interviews.

However, my practical experiences were mixed. While most returnees participated in interviews without hesitation, I do recall one instance where a woman was accompanied by her husband during the interview. Her husband stayed at a distance and waited for her. I was fortunate to have the support of a woman research assistant during the fieldwork, which

proved beneficial in overcoming gender stereotypes and bridging the gap between me and the returnee MDWs.

The appointment of a woman research assistant proved highly beneficial in bridging the gender gap and fostering a non-hierarchical and non-exploitative relationship between myself and the main participants in this study. Together, we ensured informed consent, created a safe and comfortable environment for sharing experiences, respected local customs, prioritised the well-being of the participants, and assured them of their freedom to share or withhold any information. These efforts contributed to creating an environment where returnees felt more at ease and engaged more spontaneously during the interviews.

Overall, participants felt comfortable and at ease during our interactions. While the presence of a woman research assistant facilitated open and candid conversations for most participants, there were instances where some individuals felt more comfortable sharing certain experiences with me. For example, during one interview, a participant chose to disclose an episode of sexual harassment by her employer while the research assistant briefly stepped away, highlighting the nuanced, sometimes unpredictable impact of gender dynamics.

Therefore, it is essential to recognize that gender relations can persist even when the researcher and participants share the same gender (Herod, 1993:308). Owing to that, addressing gender relations extends beyond the appointment of a woman research assistant. It remains crucial to continually consider the impact of gender on interview dynamics and participants' responses throughout the research process. As a theoretically informed researcher, I remained mindful of this aspect by incorporating this awareness into the interview process, data interpretation, and research reporting. By doing so, I sought to ensure the richness and validity of the research findings and avoid perpetuating any gender biases or inequalities that may have otherwise influenced the study outcomes.

3.6 Data Analysis Framework

Thematic analysis, a robust and widely used method, was selected as the data analysis framework for this study. This approach was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By employing thematic analysis, the study aimed to gain a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the qualitative inquiry, ensuring that the identified themes captured the essential aspects relevant to the research questions.

The data analysis process followed a systematic and structured approach, consisting of six sequential steps, as depicted in Figure 3.2. These steps allowed for a rigorous and transparent analysis of the data, promoting reliability and accuracy in the interpretation of findings. The process involved familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and finally, producing the results. Each step contributed to uncovering significant insights and patterns within the data, enhancing the credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions.

Figure 3.2: The Six-phase Thematic Analysis

1 Familiarising with data:	2 Generating initial codes:	3 Searching for themes:	4 Reviewing themes:	5 Defining and naming themes:	6 Producing the report:
Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set, coalition data relevant to each code	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme	Checking if the themes work with the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme	Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Source: Adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

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As depicted in Figure 3.2, the initial phase of data analysis involved immersing myself in the data to gain a thorough understanding, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This foundational step required transcribing, repeated readings, and making sense of the data for coding. Since the interviews were conducted in Bangla, the participants' native language, I took care to translate the relevant portions of the raw data, including transcripts, memos, and field notes, into English. This comprehensive process consumed a significant portion of the early months, ensuring that I had a solid grasp of the data collected during the fieldwork.

Subsequently, I organised the transcripts and notes in preparation for coding by categorising and labelling them with representative words, following the approach outlined by Rossman and Rallis (2017). This systematic approach involved a progressive process of sorting and defining various sources, such as transcripts, field notes, memos, documents, and relevant literature. Tesch's (1990) eight-step coding process served as a guiding framework throughout this process.

The coding steps encompassed: (I) generating ideas after thoroughly reading the transcripts, (II) selecting pertinent transcripts and delving into their underlying meanings while documenting thoughts, (III) creating a comprehensive list of topics and clustering them accordingly, (IV) revisiting the data and assigning abbreviated codes to the identified topics, (V) formulating descriptive wording for the topics and transforming them into categories, (VI) reevaluating the abbreviation for each category, (VII) assembling data materials pertaining to each category, and (VIII) recoding, as needed.

At this stage of the data analysis process, I engaged in synthesising my thoughts by reviewing the complete coding list and collating similar meanings to generate broader themes and sub-themes. The preceding steps provided a solid foundation for theme development. The initial thematic map, represented in the form of a mind map (see Appendix 11), proved to be an invaluable tool in comprehending and reviewing the emerging themes and sub-themes.

The subsequent phase involved returning to the raw data, including transcripts, notes, and memos. In a meticulous manner, I reviewed the codes, sub-themes, and themes, ensuring that they were well-supported by relevant data. This iterative process allowed me to refine

code names, reorganising certain codes within previous themes, and creating new codes and themes where necessary. The goal was to ensure that these iterations accurately represented the dataset and met my satisfaction, in alignment with the approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006) for capturing the overall meaning of the data. It allowed for a deeper understanding of the data, ensuring that the emergent themes were robust and closely aligned with the research questions. By diligently reviewing and refining the themes in light of the raw data, I aimed to produce a comprehensive and coherent analysis that would contribute meaningfully to the research findings.

Following the generation of themes, I engaged in a thorough process of defining and naming each theme. During this phase, I meticulously scrutinised the generated themes for internal consistency, coherence, and complexity. This critical evaluation allowed me to refine and fine-tune the contours of the themes and sub-themes in the analysis. I took great care in composing concise descriptions that accurately captured the scope and content of each theme. Any challenges encountered during this task prompted me to re-evaluate the themes, leading to necessary reworking and reshaping to ensure their accuracy and clarity.

Subsequently, each theme underwent a detailed analysis during the dissertation writing process. I approached this analysis with a focus on crafting a compelling narrative that effectively conveyed the complexity of the data. To achieve this, I presented the analyses succinctly and logically, supported by substantial evidence from the data. To bring the research findings to life, I strategically incorporated relevant extracts from the participants' accounts, which vividly illustrated the focal points of the study. These extracts were seamlessly integrated into the data analysis to enhance the reader's understanding. Moreover, the data analysis went beyond mere descriptions, as I made persuasive arguments that were directly aligned with the research questions. By providing a coherent and well-supported analysis, I aimed to present a robust and comprehensive exploration of the research themes, contributing to the overall strength and validity of the dissertation.

The use of NVivo 12.1, a digital analysis software package, significantly enhanced the manual coding process and facilitated the generation of themes for this study (see Appendix 12 for a representation of the software interface). NVivo's user-friendly interface proved invaluable

in efficiently organising, importing, and synthesising the extensive data collected during the research. As a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, NVivo offered various features that greatly aided in data management, evidence retrieval, coding, theme generation, analysis, and visualisation, aligning with the research objectives as highlighted by Creswell and Baez (2021). Within NVivo, I created nodes for individual cases, treating each interview as a distinct unit of analysis. To generate nodes, I employed two broad approaches. First, I began by formulating initial ideas derived from the theoretical framework and literature review, using these as a starting point to explore the relevant data and create nodes accordingly. Simultaneously, I adopted an open-minded approach and allowed themes to emerge organically from the data without imposing any assumptions or preconceived notions.

3.7 Rigour of the Study: Validity and Reliability

Addressing validity, which encompasses trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), was of paramount importance throughout the research process. To ensure the robustness of the study, four key strategies were implemented: (i) triangulation, (ii) reflexivity, (iii) consideration of disconfirming evidence, and (iv) inclusion of thick descriptions (Creswell and Baez, 2021:200). First of all, data collection involved gathering information from three distinct sources: conducting in-depth interviews, obtaining relevant documents and reports from public offices, NGOs, training centres, and recruitment agencies as secondary data, and engaging in participant observations to gain insights into workers' preparedness before undertaking overseas jobs. This comprehensive approach of triangulation of data from multiple sources served to minimise potential biases that could arise from relying solely on one data collection method. By carefully examining, comparing, and cross-checking data from diverse sources, the research findings were strengthened in terms of validity and reliability.

Reflexivity was another essential aspect of ensuring the research's credibility. The researcher's self-awareness and recognition of their own played a critical role in shaping the study's approach and interpretations. Throughout the study, I maintained a conscious awareness of my own background, biases, and potential influences on the research process and outcomes. I focused on understanding my positionality and the influence of gender

relations on the research process. By critically reflecting on my positionality and continuously considering how my background might impact the research, I sought to mitigate my own bias and maintain objectivity in data interpretation.

Furthermore, the inclusion of disconfirming evidence played a crucial role in ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings. By critically analysing contradictory evidence and juxtaposing it against the general findings, I was able to achieve a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the research subject. This approach allowed for a realistic portrayal of the identified themes and facilitated more nuanced and accurate conclusions. Ultimately, this contributed to the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. By incorporating these strategies, the study aimed to uphold rigorous standards of research validity and produce robust and reliable outcomes.

The final step taken to enhance the validity and reliability of this study involved employing the "thick description" strategy. This approach aimed to provide a detailed and rich account of the research context, including information about the research environment, participants, and cultural factors that could have influenced the research outcomes. By offering readers relevant contextual information, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the research findings was conveyed, thereby ensuring transparency and data validity in the research process. Overall, by implementing the above mentioned four strategies, the study aimed to enhance the trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the research, ultimately contributing to the validity of the research findings.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter offers a comprehensive examination of the research approach, research design, data collection methods, and data analysis strategies utilised in this study. To ensure a thorough understanding of the subject matter, in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary means of gathering field data for this project. These interviews were conducted with key participants, providing valuable firsthand insights into their experiences and perspectives. In addition to in-depth interviews, relevant grey literature, including reports, regulations, and documents, was extensively gathered, interpreted, and synthesised. This step ensured a

comprehensive contextual understanding of the research topic and enriched the overall analysis. To gain further insights into the challenges faced by workers in their overseas workplaces, participant observation was incorporated into the research methodology. This approach allowed the researcher to witness how workers were prepared for the future challenges at their workplaces.

The combination of in-depth interviews, extensive analysis of relevant grey literature, and participant observation offered a robust and multifaceted approach to exploring the research topic. This methodological diversity enabled the research to delve deeply into the intricacies of the subject matter, providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of workers' agency in negotiating workplace difficulties in overseas settings. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the data, the research process placed significant emphasis on grounding the collected information and its interpretations in the lived experiences and perspectives of the returnees. By actively engaging with the participants and understanding their unique contexts, key issues pertaining to power relations, influence, positionality, and gender relations were identified and consistently addressed throughout the research journey. This approach helped to avoid potential biases and offered a more accurate representation of the participants' realities.

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout all stages of the research, starting from data collection and organisation to processing and dissemination. The well-being and privacy of the participants were of utmost importance. An informed consent was obtained before any data collection activities. To capture the participants' thoughts, ideas, feelings, and reactions accurately, reflexive notes were diligently maintained. These notes served as a valuable tool to validate the data and provided insights into the participants' perspectives beyond what was conveyed in the interviews.

Between conducting interviews, deliberate breaks were set aside to allow the researcher time to reflect on preceding interviews. These dedicated breaks served a crucial purpose in integrating and making sense of the insights obtained from the participants' perspectives. By taking time for reflection, the researcher could better process the information gathered, identify emerging themes, and explore new topics that may not have been initially apparent.

During fieldwork, the researcher engaged in the process of sense-making, which involved preliminary analysis of data collected in the interviews. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, shedding light on both commonalities and variations in the issues recounted by different participants. By carefully noting and analysing these patterns, the researcher could draw a meaningful and comprehensive picture of the research topic. In addition to verbal responses, the researcher also paid close attention to non-verbal cues exhibited by the participants during the interviews. These non-verbal cues, including facial expressions, gestures, appearance, corrections, pauses, and hesitations. By considering these non-verbal aspects, the researcher gained additional insights into the participants' emotions, attitudes, and unspoken perspectives. It thus provided valuable supplementary information to enhance the understanding of the data.

During fieldwork, the researcher conducted a thorough examination of collected data in relation to the research questions. This process involved assessing the alignment between the responses and the study's objectives, ensuring that the data collected were relevant and valuable to the research goals. Continuing from the meticulous examination of collected data and their alignment with the research objectives, the subsequent chapter delves into a critical examination of the migratory dynamics between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, and thus illuminates the intricate interplay spotlighting dependence from Bangladesh's reliance on overseas employment and remittances.

CHAPTER FOUR

BANGLADESHI MDWs IN SAUDI ARABIA

4.1 Introduction

Labour migration has played a significant role in contributing to overseas employment and remittances, thus driving Bangladesh's economic success over the past few decades. This phenomenon has effectively alleviated unemployment pressure and provided a substantial boost to the economy. Annually, a considerable number of Bangladeshi labourers seek opportunities for overseas employment, making it a viable option for millions of workers. According to statistical data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET), approximately 3.4 million Bangladeshi workers pursued overseas jobs in the past five years (2018-2022), with over 1.1 million being employed abroad in 2022 alone. Besides that, within the same period, more than 408,000 women were employed overseas, and an impressive 268,000 (65%) of them employed in Saudi Arabia (BMET, 2023).

It is evident that Bangladesh heavily relies on overseas employment and remittances. Bangladesh has strategically integrated overseas employment and remittances into its economic development framework[11]. A deliberate labour export policy has transformed the country into one of the leading labour brokerage states in the world, that is, a state that has developed a transnational migration apparatus (both bureaucracy and diplomacy) to manage the outflow of its workforce to the global labour market (Rodriguez, 2010). Both policy and legal frameworks in Bangladesh reflect the significance of labour migration. The 'Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013' stands as a testament to this acknowledgment. The Act outlines three prominent aspirations, namely: (I) promoting opportunities for overseas employment, (II) establishing a safe and equitable migration system, and (III) ensuring the rights and welfare of workers abroad.

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[11] Economic development is the most sought aspiration for Bangladesh. Through ''Vision-2041'', the country has set a clear roadmap to eradicate extreme poverty by 2031 and envisioned a high-economic nation by 2041. To materialise these visions and aims, Bangladesh seeks uninterrupted overseas employment opportunities and foreign remittances inflows (GoB, 2020a).

However, not all aspirations outlined in the Act have received equal attention and focus. While promoting overseas employment has been given priority, ensuring safe migration and safeguarding workers' rights have not received the same level of emphasis; and this is reflected in state's policies and endeavours. In the following sections, we will delve into how active promotion has taken precedence over worker protection.

4.2 Regime of Active Promotion by Bangladeshi State

Migration from Bengal has a rich historical background, primarily driven by trade and religious factors. During the colonial period from 1757 to 1947, there was a significant influx of professionals and skilled workers from the Bengal region into the United Kingdom (UK) and other European countries. However, this flow of migration faced obstacles due to the restrictive immigration policies of the UK from the 1940s to the 1960s, coupled with the Pakistani government's imposition of travel restrictions on Bangladeshis (then East Pakistan) through passport denials (Kibria, 2008:521).

Subsequently, migration stagnated until the mid-1970s when a new trend emerged, fuelled by the rising demand for cheap and low-skilled labour in the international market. The oil crisis of 1973 led to a surge in demand for Bangladeshi workers in Middle Eastern countries. These countries capitalised on the soaring oil prices and increased revenues to invest in large-scale infrastructure projects, thereby creating an unprecedented demand for cheap and low-skilled labour from countries with a surplus labour force, including Bangladesh.

The increased demand for Bangladeshi labour in the Middle East coincided with significant events during the same period. Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 but was confronted with devastation and economic hardship, including a severe famine in 1974 and political turmoil following the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation. Despite these formidable challenges, and in order to promote economic recovery, Bangladesh capitalised on its surplus labour force to meet the demand for cheap labourers in Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia. This trend continued for nearly two decades, albeit with occasional disruptions caused by global economic shocks.

In the early 1990s, a new wave of heightened demand for cheap Bangladeshi workers emerged, particularly from newly industrialising Southeast Asian countries. During that period, the demand for Bangladeshi labour force remained robust in the Middle East as well. In response to these demands, the government strategically channelled its surplus workforce, effectively addressing intersecting issues such as demographic pressure, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of economic opportunities. Deliberate labour export policies implemented by successive governments have created ample job opportunities for millions of Bangladeshi workers. The number of Bangladeshi migrant workers has shown a steady increase, rising from just a few thousand in 1976 to a staggering 14.7 million by 2022 (BMET, 2023), thereby positioning Bangladesh as one of the major countries of origin and ranking sixth globally (IOM, 2022).

The Bangladeshi state's commitment to promoting labour migration is evident in the various programs and policies it has put in place. The government sets annual targets for overseas employment and remittances, continuously striving to surpass the figures of the previous year. To bolster labour migration, effective marketing strategies are employed, including requests made to receiving states to recruit more Bangladeshi workers. This aspect remains a top priority in bilateral talks with high-level delegates from these receiving states. Additionally, the government conducts regular delegation visits and labour market research to explore and expand potential labour markets. To support and manage this growing phenomenon, specialised institutions, such as the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), were established in 2001.

The country has issued licences to thousands of recruitment agencies engaged in international recruitment and placement processes. In addition to the private agencies, there is a public recruitment agency called the Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL), although its success in placing workers abroad is overshadowed by the private counterparts. To support the process further, Bangladesh has also established labour wings in embassies of countries where a significant number of Bangladeshi workers are employed.

Bangladesh has successfully sent workers to approximately 170 countries and has entered into bilateral agreements (BLA) or Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with some of the receiving states. Recognizing labour migration as a crucial sector, it now constitutes 12% of

the country's labour force. To ensure a continuous supply of labour to meet both internal and external demands, the National Skills Development Authority has been tasked with overseeing this aspect (GoB, 2020). Moreover, prominent policy documents highlight the importance of deploying workers for foreign jobs. For example, the 'Eighth Five Year Plan (2020-2025)' sets a target to employ 3.25 million workers in overseas jobs within five years. Similarly, the preceding 'Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020)' also emphasised labour migration as an integral component of the country's macroeconomic stability (GoB, 2016a). These numerous policies and facilitatory actions exemplify the active promotion of labour migration by the state.

4.3 Status of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers

Parallel to the rising number of outbound migrants, there has been a concerning increase in the number of deaths among Bangladeshi workers abroad. Shockingly, approximately 10-13 dead bodies are repatriated daily, resulting in around 4,000 deaths annually (Bhuyan, 05 January 2020). While official reports often attribute these deaths to "cardiac arrest" (accounting for approximately 44% of cases), the prevalence of such reports with 'similar notes' for each and every case raises questions, particularly considering that workers pass medical fitness assessments before being sent overseas (Ullah and Hossain, 2014).

This raises a crucial and disturbing question: How do seemingly healthy workers succumb to such a disproportionately high death rate while working abroad? In many cases, the families of the deceased remain unconvinced by the death reports issued by the receiving states, as the autopsy process lacks transparency. Indeed, it is rational to suspect that inhumane work conditions and abusive practices significantly contribute to the alarming number of deaths among Bangladeshi workers abroad. Even if the death reports issued by receiving states are accurate, the absence of autopsies conducted upon repatriation, despite numerous requests from families for a second autopsy, raises concerns. Consequently, the death reports produced by the receiving states become the final word (Ullah and Hossain, 2014), revealing a power asymmetry between home and host states. This also underscores the limited influence and power wielded by migrants and their families to assert their legitimate demands.

In the Bangladeshi context, migrant workers, their families, and non-resident Bangladeshis often lack political connections, which further compounds their challenges. A notable example of this is the longstanding issue of voting rights for non-resident Bangladeshis[12], including migrant workers. Despite years of demanding this right, little progress has been made. Granting voting rights could have provided them with a form of political power to voice their demands. However, this demand remains unfulfilled, attributed to a lack of willingness, slow actions, and logistical challenges cited by the state (Khasru, 2017).

The disparity in status and political power between MDWs and their counterparts, recruitment agencies, and middlemen, is striking and has significant implications for the well-being of workers. Recruitment agencies and middlemen hold greater social and political influence, largely due to their strong political connections. This power dynamic allows them to take advantage of lax regulations and ties with the government. They thus engage in unethical practices with impunity. These practices include spreading misinformation, charging exorbitant fees, deceiving workers, manipulating contracts, and even engaging in visa trading. The consequences of these unscrupulous practices can be severe and put the lives of workers at risk. Regrettably, the Bangladeshi state seems to tolerate such practices.

Despite the fact that their calls for voting rights and second autopsy have gone unanswered for years, migrant workers are often lauded as essential contributors to Bangladesh's economy. They are frequently referred to as "*remittance joddha*" (remittance fighters) to acknowledge their sacrifices. This comparison with the "freedom fighters" who fought for Bangladesh's independence in 1971 is intended to honour the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers and their invaluable contributions. It also serves as an encouragement for workers to seek employment overseas and send remittances, which have become a lifeline for the country's economy.

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[12] Government data does not provide the exact number of Bangladeshis abroad. However, there was an estimated stock of more than ten million non-resident Bangladeshis globally- two-third of whom were migrant workers.

4.4 Profile of Migrant and Non-migrant Domestic Workers

In this section, I shift the focus to delineating the profile and status of both migrant and non-migrant domestic workers in Bangladesh. Understanding the specifics of non-migrant domestic workers is crucial in comprehending the unique challenges faced by this workforce abroad. Estimates indicate that around three million domestic workers in Bangladesh lack adequate legal and social protections. To address the issues faced by this neglected group, the government enacted the 'Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2015.' However, this policy falls short in guaranteeing minimum wages or limiting maximum working hours for domestic workers. It even allows for the employment of children as young as 12 years old, albeit with the condition that they are not engaged in heavy or dangerous work. This condition creates a grey area that lacks proper monitoring, raising concerns about labour exploitation.

Furthermore, the Labor Act of 2013 excludes domestic workers from its purview, preventing them from becoming trade union members. Consequently, domestic work in Bangladesh is considered part of the informal sector, leaving these workers vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Tragically, domestic workers endure stories of violence, including beatings, starvation, and physical torture, which are frequently featured in the media. Despite playing a vital role in many households, domestic workers are often treated as an underclass in society (The Daily Star, 2020).

Similarly, Bangladeshi women seeking overseas domestic jobs often occupy a lower socioeconomic status (Nusrat, 2019; Oishi, 2005). They typically have limited or no political connections and rarely participate in organised efforts to amplify their voices. Many of these women face financial crises or social disapproval, with approximately one-quarter of MDWs reported to be divorced or abandoned by their husbands (Islam, 2019).

According to a recent national survey (GoB, 2020b), around 40% of MDWs have no formal education. Besides that, the survey reveals that only 34.5% of MDWs had contracts when going abroad, while 51.1% had no contract, and 12.1% were unaware of its existence (GoB, 2020b). Furthermore, 53.1% of women did not receive any training before migration, and approximately 75.3% had limited language proficiency beyond their native language (GoB, 2020b). These findings are consistent with academic studies, such as Nana Oishi's research,

which compares Bangladeshi women migrant workers with counterparts from other countries in the following manner:

> Bangladeshi migrant women have the lowest educational and professional backgrounds (Oishi, 2005:106). [...] They were the least educated [...] Only one of the eleven migrants and one of the nine quasi-migrants whom I surveyed had any formal education [...] The rest had no education and were completely illiterate [...] It was entirely impossible for these women to understand the contract documents [...] During the interviews, I was often stunned that some women did not understand the difference between recruitment agencies and the government (Oishi, 2005:109).

Therefore, the lack of education and work experience can indeed hinder domestic workers from effectively asserting their workplace rights, making them susceptible to exploitation. Furthermore, their limited awareness of labour rights, immigration regulations, and legal avenues for recourse provides unscrupulous employers, recruitment agencies, and intermediaries with opportunities to take advantage. Paradoxically, despite facing increased exploitation and a deficit in protection, the Bangladeshi state has shifted its focus towards facilitating overseas domestic jobs for these women. This highlights the government's prioritisation of promoting overseas employment opportunities for Bangladeshi women, potentially leading to more complex challenges in ensuring their safety, rights, and welfare while working abroad.

4.5 Policy Evolution Concerning MDWs

The evolution of policies concerning domestic workers in Bangladesh has shown a gendered approach. Initially, the country adopted restrictive measures on women's mobility, which later transitioned to active promotion in recent years. The journey of women's overseas employment began in the mid-1970s with a program that deployed 50 women workers to Iraq. However, this program was short-lived, as it was suspended after just seven months due to widespread allegations of abuse and exploitation, raising serious concerns about the safety and well-being of women migrant workers. As a protective measure, the country imposed a

ban on the overseas employment of semi-skilled and unskilled[13] women in 1981 (Siddiqui, 2008). This ban remained in effect for a decade, reflecting the government's concern about the potential risks and vulnerabilities faced by women in overseas employment.

Following the Gulf War in 1991, Bangladesh lifted the ban on semi-skilled women's overseas employment. This decision was partly motivated by the desire to counter irregular migration, but more significantly, it was aimed at channelling remittances back to the country (Oishi, 2005). This shift in policy reflects the government's emphasis on economic considerations and the significant role of remittances in contributing to the country's economy. The ban on unskilled women persisted even after the ban was lifted for semi-skilled women, but with certain restrictions such as age limits.

Moreover, women seeking semi-skilled occupations were required to submit documentary evidence of consent signed by a male guardian before being allowed to take overseas jobs. These regulations created significant barriers and limitations for aspiring women workers, hindering their mobility and opportunities for overseas employment. In 1998, the government eased mobility for qualified women professionals such as doctors, engineers, and teachers, but restrictions remained in place for other aspiring women (Siddiqui, 2008). These restrictive policies contributed to low rates of women's overseas employment for several decades, with their participation accounting for less than 1% of the total overseas employment until 2000 (Siddiqui, 2016).

However, positive changes occurred in 2003 when the ban on domestic workers was lifted with specific conditions, including a minimum age requirement of 35 years and a preference for married workers accompanied by their husbands (Oishi, 2005). This marked a turning point that contributed to an increase in the number of domestic workers seeking overseas employment. Subsequently, in 2006, the age limit was further lowered to 25, further enhancing opportunities for women seeking overseas domestic jobs. Despite that, the mobility of domestic workers remained relatively insignificant until 2014, with only gradual growth observed. It was not until 2015 that there was a substantial increase in the flow of

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[13] Bangladesh categorises migrant workers at four levels: (I) professionals; (II) skilled; (III) semi-skilled; (IV) unskilled. The women MDWs, who are central to this study, fall into the category of unskilled workers (GoB, Yearly Report 2020-21, 47).

domestic workers, mainly driven by significant intake by Saudi Arabia and government decision to facilitate sending MDWs in exploitative working conditions. This shift in trends can be attributed to Bangladesh gradually transitioning from a "value-driven emigration policy" to a "demand-driven" policy for women's overseas employment (Oishi, 2005).

To understand the reasons behind this transition by the Bangladeshi state, we can refer to Gardner's (2012) insights. For labour-surplus countries like Bangladesh, the challenges of workplace exploitation in destination countries coexist with substantial overseas employment and remittance inflows. Women migrants, in particular, remit a significant portion of their income to their families, which contributes to the improvement of household conditions and the country's economic strength as a whole (Islam, 2019).

The substantial demand for domestic workers from Saudi Arabia, combined with the positive impact of remittances on household well-being, likely played a crucial role in prompting the Bangladeshi state to adopt a "demand-driven" approach for women's overseas employment. The allure of economic benefits and opportunities for workers, along with the potential to address labour surplus challenges in Bangladesh, might have influenced this shift in policy. Indeed, remittances sent by MDWs have become increasingly vital for Bangladesh's economy. In a country with limited opportunities for formal employment, labour migration has absorbed a significant portion of the new labour force, acting as a crucial "safety valve" to alleviate acute unemployment problems and generate remittances for Bangladesh (Martin, 2017).

The positive impact of overseas employment and remittances on Bangladesh's national income and consumption is evident (Hossain, 2017). For instance, the steady flow of remittances played a pivotal role in reversing the negative balance of the current account in the early 1990s, and by the late 1990s, it even surpassed official development assistance (ODA) in terms of volume (Lewis, 2011). Moreover, remittances have significantly contributed to increasing the country's national reserves to a satisfactory level, recognising it as one of the pillars of the nation's economic strength. Furthermore, remittances account for 6-8% of Bangladesh's GDP and approximately 40% of foreign exchange earnings. Scholars have demonstrated that without overseas employment and remittances, Bangladesh's economic position would be significantly less promising (Hossain, 2017). However, the reliance on

remittances and overseas jobs have made Bangladesh dependent on receiving states, particularly Saudi Arabia. The next section will explore the dynamics of dependency within the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor.

4.6 The Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia Migration Corridor

While Bangladesh plays a significant role in the global migration landscape, the mobility of Bangladeshi labour migrants is primarily concentrated in certain Middle Eastern and a few East Asian countries. Approximately 75% of Bangladeshi labourers find employment in Middle Eastern countries (Kibria, 2008:522). However, these statistics may not fully represent the overall mobility patterns of low-skilled Bangladeshi migrant workers. Several major labour markets, such as the UAE, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Libya, and Malaysia, have either been closed for years due to unfavourable political or economic conditions or have chosen not to recruit workers from Bangladesh. Consequently, Bangladesh has become heavily reliant on a few receiving states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Table 4.1: Bangladeshi Labour Employment in Saudi Arabia (2018-2022)

Year	Overseas Employment		Women Employment	
	Total (162 countries)	Saudi Arabia	Total (162 countries)	Saudi Arabia
2022	1135,873	612,418 (54%)	99,644	66,033 (66%)
2021	617,209	457227 (74%)	80,113	53,082 (66%)
2020	217,669	161,726 (74%)	21,934	12735 (58%)
2019	700,159	399,000 (57%)	104,786	62,578 (60%)
2018	734,181	257,317 (35%)	101,695	73,713 (72%)
	3405,091	1887,688 (55%)	408,172	268,141 (65%)

Source: Author's Compilation from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) Data, 2023

Both Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia play prominent roles on the global stage, with Saudi Arabia serving as a major receiving state and Bangladesh as a significant supplier of cheap labour. Saudi Arabia ranks second, following the USA, as the largest transnational employer nation (Magliveras, 2019). Bangladesh, on the other hand, has played a crucial role in filling the low-skilled labour gaps in Saudi Arabia. Despite the challenges of labour exploitation, the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia corridor stands as a major migration corridor for migrant workers, including domestic workers (as shown in Table 4.1).

Over the past few decades, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a popular destination for Bangladeshi workers, mainly due to the abundance of overseas job opportunities (Rahman, 2011). It is essential to recognize that, in addition to economic factors, there is also a spiritual attraction that draws Bangladeshi workers to Saudi Arabia (Kibria, 2008). As depicted in Table 4.3, Saudi Arabia has generated approximately two million overseas jobs, accounting for 55% of total employment for Bangladeshi workers in the past five years (2018-2022).

The share of women's employment in Saudi Arabia is even higher, constituting approximately 65% of the total women's employment from Bangladesh during the same period. Over the previous five years (2018-2022), nearly three hundred thousand women have taken up domestic jobs in Saudi Arabia, signifying the substantial employment opportunities generated for Bangladeshi women in the Saudi Arabian labour market. This surge in employment has led to Bangladesh's overwhelming dependence on the Saudi Arabian labour market. To fully comprehend the extent of this dependency, it is essential to consider the flow of remittances from Saudi Arabia. Approximately one-fifth of the total remittances received by Bangladesh each year come from Saudi Arabia, highlighting the significant contribution of Saudi Arabia as a source of remittance for Bangladesh (BMET, 2023).

The recent demand for Bangladeshi domestic workers in Saudi Arabia is noteworthy. After a period of closure, Saudi Arabia resumed admitting Bangladeshi workers (both men and women) in 2015. This offer came at a time when Saudi Arabia was involved in worker safety disputes with other leading sending states, such as the Philippines and Indonesia. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's calculated move to intake Bangladeshi domestic workers came with compromises on responsibility for protecting these workers. Saudi Arabia did not adhere to the labour standards set by Indonesia and the Philippines. Instead, the country opted to ensure a consistent supply of domestic workers by offering to take two men labourers for every single woman domestic worker from Bangladesh (Kamal and Bhuiyan, 2019 December 02).

By accepting this offer, Bangladesh exposes itself to potential challenges experienced by other sending states, such as the Philippines and Indonesia. These countries faced disputes with Saudi Arabia over the rights and protection of their workers, with widespread allegations leading to the imposition of bans or restrictions. They criticised Saudi Arabia for its inaction

and lack of cooperation in addressing these issues. However, these actions did not significantly impact Saudi Arabia, as other sending states, including Bangladesh, were ready and willing to supply workers.

Bangladesh's desire to send domestic workers to Saudi Arabia stems from several factors, including the availability of abundant labour that cannot be absorbed domestically and the limited marketability of the country's human capital elsewhere. This has led Bangladesh to view the employability of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia as a lucrative opportunity, even though it has been less assertive in addressing worker protection issues. Despite the challenges and risks, Bangladesh has maintained its status as a competitive labour source for Saudi Arabia.

4.7 Labour Provisions and Practices in Saudi Arabia

Migration has played a central role in Saudi Arabia's developmental strategies, with the country hosting millions of migrant workers to sustain its economy, supported by its oil wealth. The country follows a pattern common among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, experiencing three waves of migration: migration of professionals and experts from Western countries from 1930 to 1950, migration from Arab countries from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and migration from South Asian countries from the mid-1980s onward (Oommen, 2017).

Like other GCC states, Saudi Arabia operates under a sponsorship system, known as Kafala, which delegates responsibilities to employers. This system serves as the fundamental institutional framework that empowers employers by granting them near-total control over workers' visas and legal status (Rajan and Joseph, 2020). The entry, residence, and exit of migrant workers are contingent upon the satisfaction and desires of their employers. This arrangement severely restricts workers' autonomy and leaves them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Workers cannot change their employment status, workplace, or employers without the permission of their employers. Due to this, workers are also unable to return to their home countries before or at the end of their contractual period.

While Saudi Arabia employs millions of migrant workers, it has fallen short in upholding international labour norms and protecting the rights of these workers. Despite ratifying certain conventions related to the protection of workers, such as the Abolition of Forced Labor Convention 1957, the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention 1958, the Equal Remuneration Convention 1951, and the Labour Inspection Convention 1947 (Jureidini, 2019), the implementation of these instruments has not been effectively carried out.

Moreover, a significant concern is that Saudi Arabia has not ratified some key legal instruments that specifically address the rights and protections of migrant workers. For instance, the country has not ratified the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), 1990, or the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011, which are crucial for safeguarding the rights of MDWs. Besides that, the country has not ratified the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention in 1948 (Jureidini, 2019) which further limits the ability of workers to form and join unions and advocate for their rights collectively.

Furthermore, NGO operations are prohibited in Saudi Arabia (Vlieger, 2012), depriving migrant workers of the ability to organise or voice their concerns. The legislation in Saudi Arabia prohibits demonstrations, collective organisation, and labour unionism, severely limiting the fundamental principles of labour rights. The lack of worker-friendly court and justice system, as well as complex and time-consuming mechanisms for complaint and dispute resolution, further exacerbates the challenges faced by MDWs.

Amid such constraints, in 2015, the Saudi Ministry of Labour and Social Development introduced the digital platform *Musaned* (musaned.gov.sa) to streamline the recruitment process for domestic workers. This platform aimed to enhance recruitment efficiency through automation, consisting of three components: e-visa, e-contracting, and e-Tawtheeq (attestation). The platform sought to address some of the issues associated with labour migration and recruitment processes. By reducing the dependency of employers on recruitment agencies and middlemen, employers can now recruit workers without the need to visit public offices or rely on recruitment agencies. This platform efficiently manages the recruitment process and stores workers' detailed information, including passport copies and

contracts. While the primary goal of *Musaned* is to reduce recruitment time and ease of the recruitment process, it raises concerns about its emphasis on safeguarding employer interests over upholding workers' rights.

In the context of Saudi Arabia's labour law, MDWs are not covered. Instead, there is a 'standard employment contract' introduced to outline workers' rights and employers' responsibilities. However, this contract falls short of being equivalent to labour law, and there are a number of significant shortcomings in its provisions that need to be addressed. One of those is that certain provisions in the standard employment contract may only seem satisfactory on paper, aiming to establish standard employment conditions as those are flouted by employers. For example, clauses such as one day of weekly rest (Clause 6), employer-provided medical treatment (Clause 9), uninterrupted 9-hour rest (Clause 5), and adequate food (Clause 8) are intended to protect workers' rights. However, in reality, employers frequently violate these provisions with impunity, rendering them ineffective in providing actual relief from hardships.

Moreover, the standard employment contract unreasonably grants employers excessive power, exacerbating power imbalances in the employer-employee relationship. It incorporates unfair and discriminatory clauses that favour employers. For instance, Clauses 14(i) and 14(ii) introduce discriminatory provisions regarding contract termination, including different notice periods (30 days for employers, 60 days for workers) and varying compensation amounts. Furthermore, the standard employment contract lacks provisions on several crucial issues, such as legal recourse against perpetrators or compensation for workplace injuries. This absence of provisions further contributes to power imbalances within the employer-worker relationship, leaving workers vulnerable and without adequate protection.

Moreover, some provisions in the standard employment contract place workers in vulnerable positions. For instance, workers are required to provide written notice if they wish to terminate their employment. This requirement becomes unattainable for workers who cannot communicate in languages other than their native language[14], which is the case for

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[14] The literacy level is extremely low among Bangladeshi MDWs. During one session in a training session, the instructor also asked the attendees to refer to the Housekeeping Training Manual they had used during their

75.3% of Bangladeshi MDWs. Another impracticality arises from the requirement for workers to remain in their employers' residences and continue work during the notice period. This raises a significant concern: how can a worker continue living with their employer after serving notice for early termination? Such discriminatory and impractical provisions make the standard employment contract inaccessible, unfair, and a source of empowerment for employers while disempowering MDWs.

The employment of housemaids has become a status symbol for Saudi nationals, with approximately 80% of Saudi Arabian households employing them (Nurchayati, 2011; Fernandez, 2020:138). Saudi Arabia hosts an estimated two million MDWs, making up over 47% of total women employment in the country. The demand for domestic workers in Saudi Arabia heavily favours non-nationals, as 99.87% of domestic worker positions are occupied by migrants (Rajan and Joseph, 2020). No Saudi citizens take domestic jobs. This lack of competition between local citizens and migrants for domestic jobs has allowed for the large-scale influx and presence of MDWs to persist for many years with minimal state intervention, fostering an environment of workplace domination.

MDWs endure numerous hardships, including sleep deprivation, inadequate food, lack of medical care, physical and gendered violence, and widespread wage theft. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest average weekly working hours in the world, with MDWs working an average of 63.7 hours per week (ITUC, 2017). These workers are further confined by restrictions on their mobility and communication with family and friends. Workers face constant threats of reporting to the police, being transferred to abusive employers or abandonment in the desert. Employers often resort to false accusations of theft or damage to exert control over MDWs. The lack of a viable redressal mechanism prevents workers from filing formal complaints. Informal channels for seeking justice on the other hand often led to severe retaliation. These exploitative labour practices perpetuate an unequal dependency and power asymmetry in the relationships between MDWs and their employers.

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training. She wanted to assess who among them could read Bangla. Nine out of the 26 attendees raised their hands.

4.8 The Abuse and Exploitation of Bangladeshi MDWs in Saudi Arabia

This study has shed light on various instances of resistance and agency among MDWs in the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor. However, it is to acknowledge that they generally face domination and power asymmetries in their working conditions. Tragic incidents of severe repression, like the case of Kulsum, a 14-year-old MDW who returned from Saudi Arabia in 2020 as a lifeless body, occasionally garner public attention. Kulsum's employer subjected her to merciless torture, leaving her on the street with broken legs and damaged eyes (Tasneem, 2020 September 25). Despite being rescued by the law enforcement agency and admitted to a hospital, she passed away after a few weeks. Prior to this barbarous incident, Kulsum had reached out to her family, pleading for rescue from the brutal torture inflicted by her employers. Her family sought help from the recruitment agency and middlemen, but their efforts were in vain.

Kulsum's case is unfortunately not an isolated incident. Allegations of abuse and exploitation within the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor have become alarmingly recurrent, even though many workers continue to persevere against all odds in their workplaces. Over a span of four years (2016-2019), approximately 13,000 Bangladeshi MDWs prematurely returned, citing torture and oppression by their employers and recruitment agencies (Billah, 2019). Tragically, there have also been reports of 67 suicides and 153 unnatural deaths during the same period (Tasneem, 2020 September 25; Hasan, 2020 September 19). In an effort to seek help and rescue from abusive employers and recruitment agencies, MDWs have turned to social media for support (Nusrat, 2019). Some MDWs have sought refuge in temporary shelters[15] operated by embassies, while others continue to endure exploitative working conditions out of fear of victimisation or due to uncertainty and unfamiliarity (Bruijnzeel, 2019).

A survey conducted by a local NGO on premature returnee MDWs revealed distressing statistics. Approximately 61% of the surveyed returnees reported experiencing physical torture, while 14% disclosed instances of sexual abuse. Moreover, 86% of returnees did not receive the promised salary, and 64% did not have an employment contract. The survey also

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[15] To protect MDWs in Saudi Arabia, the embassies and consulates of sending states, including those of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Uganda operate shelters for their respective nationals.

highlighted that 34% of returnees came back within three months, while 61% returned within one year (Islam, 2019). Many returnees suffer from psychological disorders and physical disabilities, further exacerbating their plight (Hasnat, 2018, August 30).

Despite the alarming allegations of exploitation, punitive actions against employers are infrequent. This culture of impunity allows employers to wield arbitrary power over MDWs. There are no provisions for workplace inspection, meaning receiving states prioritise the privacy of employers over the rights of workers. Because of unfriendly court and justice systems, and complex and time-consuming dispute resolution processes, the well-being of MDWs remains entirely contingent on the whims of their employers.

4.9 Bangladeshi MDWs in the Tapestry of Exploitation Literature

The harsh work environment experienced by Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, has been extensively documented in academic literature over the years (Frantz, 2013; Malit and Naufal, 2019; Parrenas, 2001; Silvy and Parrenas, 2019; Vlieger, 2012; Mantouvalou, 2015; Chuang, 2010). In a similar vein, studies within and beyond the Middle East depict the exploitation endured by MDWs as various forms of modern-day slavery (Bales, 2012; Anderson, 2015), confinement (Vlieger, 2012), contract servitude (Bales, 2012), enslavement (Mantouvalou, 2015), protracted precarity (Piper, Rosewarne, and Wither, 2017), indentured labour (Parrenas, 2017), and lack of freedom (Parrenas, 2022).

In Saudi Arabia, female MDWs suffer exploitation by recruiters, intermediaries, and employers. They often report unpaid wages, passport confiscation, physical or sexual abuse, and poor working conditions, many of which are indicators of human trafficking (US Department of State, 2023a). Additionally, charges of absconding filed against MDWs are used as a means to retaliate against them, restrict their mobility, and hinder them from reporting abuses or obtaining exit visas. Despite some form of reform, Saudi Arabia retains a Tier 2 classification in the US 'Trafficking in Persons Report'.

Approximately four million domestic workers in Saudi Arabia lack adequate legal protections. Female MDWs in this country are typically unable to change employers without permission until after two years of employment, effectively subjecting them to conditions resembling slavery. While slavery was officially abolished in Saudi Arabia in 1962, cultural remnants persist, with some employers still viewing MDWs as commodities that could be traded at will (Nurchayati, 2011; Fernandez, 2020). Despite regulations, reports have emerged of Ugandan domestic workers being 'sold' and 'transferred' between employers online without workers' consent (US Department of State, 2023a). International and national laws define trafficking victims based on the elements of action, means, and purpose of exploitation. Due to deceptive recruitment practices aimed at exploiting them for labour, many Bangladeshi MDWs in Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, could be considered victims of trafficking (Azad, 2019).

4.10 Response by Bangladeshi State

The Bangladeshi state's responses can be categorised into three main approaches. Firstly, there are some schematic protective measures in place. Bangladesh has established a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia in 2005, to govern the recruitment, deployment, and employment of MDWs. A joint working committee (JWC) oversees the implementation of the MoU and addresses relevant issues. The committee was assigned to oversee and safeguard the interests of MDWs.

In the immediate past meeting in 2019, the decisions made by the committee, such as maintaining a database of MDWs and simplifying the complaint system (The New Age, 2019 December 02), highlight the existing gaps in safety measures, including the practice of returning runaway workers to exploitative employers. While the protection gap is a persistent problem, the decisions taken in those meetings lack implementation. Irregularity is another problem. Convening follow up meetings delay years mostly because of the dearth of engagement and commitment on the part of Saudi Arabia. The inconsistency in convening committee meetings due to lack of enthusiasm by Saudi Arabia constitutes an impediment to actualise the envisaged safeguards for MDWs.

Besides that, Bangladesh has established labour wings in the embassy and consulate office in Saudi Arabia, with appointed labour attaches responsible for safeguarding the interests of migrant workers and facilitating dispute resolution. The embassy has set up dedicated 24-hour hotlines and safe houses to provide support and assistance to workers who leave their employers. The existence of safe houses indicates that a significant number of workers are in urgent need of state intervention.

The second critical response by the state aims to foster a positive narrative. In response to allegations of states actively participating in the export of workers to vulnerable occupations, there are claims that the majority of Bangladeshi MDWs are in satisfactory conditions, with only a small percentage facing difficulties. However, such claims often lack empirical evidence and may not reflect the reality experienced by many MDWs. As part of these narratives, workers are sometimes accused of encountering problems due to their own shortcomings and inability to adapt to foreign cultures and work environments (Hasnat, 2018; Islam, 2018 May 20). Most of these claims seek to downplay the severity of the challenges and hardships faced by MDWs, indicating a misinterpretation, and misunderstanding of their workplace experiences.

Besides that, rather than taking effective action to address protection deficits, the current discourse often emphasises dignity. This approach serves the purpose to divert public attention from the failure to implement appropriate measures against mistreatment in the receiving states and sidesteps the issue of safeguarding workers abroad. While promoting a discourse on emphasising dignity might aid in diverting attention from the urgent need to address the appalling working and living conditions, it also targets gaining acceptance for women's endeavour to take overseas jobs, as women's overseas employment lacks approval and support from the wider community[16].

Apart from dignity, discussions on improving working conditions often revolve around training and skill enhancement. The emphasis on skill development is driven by the belief that enhancing workers' skills will make them more resilient to workplace challenges. However, it

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[16] Bangladeshi women brave conservative societal views to pursue overseas domestic jobs, challenging traditional norms.

also tends to distract the state's focus and public attention from the real issue of protection deficits and rights deprivation experienced by migrant workers. Highlighting the importance of training could be utilised as an attempt to shift blame onto the workers themselves, suggesting that their lack of training is the cause of workplace abuse. This narrative can conveniently perpetuate the notion that those without training face greater difficulties, unfairly placing the burden on the workers.

Regrettably, there have been allegations of corrupt practices. A national survey revealed that over half of the women who took overseas jobs did so without receiving any training (BBS, 2020). Moreover, while training can be seen as a means to empower prospective workers, it can also have the unintended effect of instilling a passive and non-assertive attitude. Indeed, the response from authorities appears to focus on cultivating obedient workers. This tendency towards fostering compliance can be observed in the training sessions documented by the researcher. As part of data collection techniques, the researcher visited two training centres and attended two lecture sessions and a practical class.

The instructor proceeded to provide advice on various matters. Some of the advice aimed to cultivate a professional attitude, while others appeared to promote compliance among the attendees. The instructor advised participants to greet their employers every morning and cautioned them about the potential consequences of damaging or rendering any machine non-functional due to their actions. The instructor emphasised that such actions could lead to punishment and salary deductions.

The instructor emphasised the preservation of duplicate copies of passports, as employers may take custody of them. This directive stems from a discerning recognition that passport confiscation by employers remains a palpable concern. Passport confiscation limits workers' mobility. Simultaneously, this coercive practice precipitates a complex interplay of emotional distress and disempowerment, unveiling a power asymmetry within the relationship between MDWs and their employers. It also unveils a tolerance on the part of the Bangladeshi state underscoring a larger scenario of power asymmetry between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia.

Subsequently, understanding Saudi Arabian culture was stressed. An emphasis was placed on meticulous attention on keeping clothes well-ironed, as wrinkled clothes are one of their

dislikes. Workers were cautioned to exercise utmost care to avoid burning any garments, as it could result in severe consequences. This suggests a dual purpose within the instructor's teachings. While this aligns with the goal of enabling workers to navigate their new environment with awareness, the cautionary advice regarding the careful handling of clothing and the potential consequences of mishandling, including severe outcomes, does imply a broader message. This message indirectly points to the stark reality that exists in some cases, where employers may resort to harsh measures for minor infractions.

The instructor also advised attendees to work towards gaining the trust of their employers. Workers were cautioned saying, "Employers may have valuable items in the house and may monitor your actions. Remember, it is their home, and they have the right to keep their belongings anywhere. Greediness should be avoided. CCTV cameras may be used for surveillance. Remember, you are going abroad for the sake of your family, so it is important not to make any mistakes." The instructor further added, "Trust can be built by engaging hard work, complying instructions, not showing any resentment. Do not show your dissatisfaction if you are asked to do the same tasks repeatedly or simultaneously by two family members."

This lecture primarily focused on highlighting the "Dos and Don'ts." Some of the advice seemed aimed at promoting passivity and docility among the workers. For example, workers were informed that their employers might not allow them to communicate with their families on a daily basis. The instructor asked, "Will your employer permit you to communicate every day?" The unanimous response was 'No'. Attendees were advised not to feel saddened by the inability to communicate frequently. The advice continued:

> You may experience homesickness; in which case you can cry before sleeping. However, avoid crying during the day. [...] Do not feel resentful when guests come. Similarly, do not become upset if you are asked to work in another household. You may receive tips as a result. [...] You must adapt to their food habits. Do not expect to finish your work early or receive frequent breaks. [...] Although there may be things that make you unhappy, you must remain patient. Avoid engaging in arguments. Sometimes, staying silent can lead to victory. Strive to maintain a positive relationship with your employers and return home after earning money.

The lecture underscored the importance of hard work, following instructions diligently, and not expressing resentment. Workers were also encouraged not to show dissatisfaction if asked to perform the same tasks repeatedly or simultaneously by different family members. After attending two lectures and one practical class, the researcher left the training centre with the impression that the training aimed to both empower and disempower workers. Instances of disciplining and disempowering workers are also evident in the Housekeeping Training Manual, 2016. For instance, it states:

> You may be required to work more than 8 hours, and there may be instances of physical violence. Mental preparedness is necessary (page-15). [...] Generally, a separate room will be provided, but you may have to sleep in the kitchen (page-16). [...] Verbal, physical, or sexual harassment may occur within the household. In such cases, fleeing is not recommended, as a runaway MDW will struggle to find employment elsewhere. Additionally, legal actions may be taken, possibly leading to imprisonment (page-67, Housekeeping Training Manual 2016).

Furthermore, the Manual advises workers to keep a copy of their passports if they must surrender them to their employer (page 19). This is worth noticing that the instructor also advised the same, as we have seen above. While this recommendation serves as a proactive countermeasure against employers' deliberate actions to disempower workers, it tacitly acknowledges the perennial mistreatments and ingrained challenges at MDWs' workplaces. The Manual also suggests that 80% of problems can be resolved within 2-3 months (page 02). This assertion ostensibly provides a glimmer of optimism. But concurrently it underscores the recurrent obstacles that workers face at their workplaces. In aggregate, the above-mentioned suggestions imply that workers are forewarned of potential risks but are simultaneously encouraged to tolerate them.

4.11 Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia Migratory Relations

Taking into consideration the preceding discussion so far, the migratory relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia can be examined from a number of perspectives, including the demand-supply standpoint. A growing body of scholarly literature supports the argument that the decision of MDWs to seek overseas employment does not occur in isolation. The demand for these workers arises from the extensive welfare provisions that facilitate the large-scale importation of MDWs, serving to substitute or supplement government services amidst the decline of formal care provisions (Rajan and Joseph, 2020: 236). Simultaneously, structural constraints such as economic stagnation and limited employment opportunities encourage Bangladesh to pursue a deliberate policy of labour export. Given that economic globalisation has generated a high demand for low-skilled jobs, and workers' remittances serve as a significant source of revenue, Bangladesh actively promotes overseas jobs for a workforce that cannot be employed otherwise.

The migratory relationships between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh could be discussed drawing on the study by LeBaron and Phillips (2019). Saudi Arabia's role in sustaining exploitative working conditions becomes evident through its actions and policies. Critical examples include the delegation of excessive control to employers, inadequate enforcement of labour legislation, failure to uphold labour standards, transferring enforcement responsibilities to employers, weak regulation of labour recruitment leading to abuse, absence of labour inspection, and limitations on workers' mobility.

At the same time, within the purview of this study, an essential recognition emerges that underscores the transnational character of recruitment and protection of workers, where Bangladesh as a sending state plays a complicit role. Frantz's work serves as a seminal point of reference, elucidating on the genesis of labour exploitation. His work demonstrates that their origins can be traced back to the state policies and practices at the sending end from which workers embark on their journeys (Frantz, 2013).

Another influential study reveals that origin states are more involved in facilitating migration than in protecting rights and improving working conditions in destination countries (Ireland, 2018). While Saudi Arabia facilitates exploitative working conditions through its actions and policies, Bangladesh's position and its complementary roles as a sending country must also

be assessed in terms of its direct and indirect roles in this process. The Bangladeshi state's facilitatory roles include subjecting workers to exploitative labour, prioritising migration over protecting workers' rights and safety, accepting differential labour protection, failing to regulate recruitment agencies and intermediaries, lack of monitoring of contractual agreements, and a failure to demand robust protection against mistreatment. The complicit roles of Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh in perpetuating exploitative working conditions are not coincidental but rather part of a structural process.

> The [migrant workers] have emerged as subjects of living labour as a
> constitutive and antagonistic element in capital labour relation. Exploitation
> of labour was and more today is a social process; and exploitation of migrants
> is grounded in the entire migratory process and experience, and yet as in the
> case of other experiences of living labour this exploitation is always confronted
> with migrants' agency (Samaddar, 2020:72-73).

The scholarly contributions of Samaddar offer valuable insights that inform the present study. Of notable significance in empirical chapters (Chapter 5, 6 and 7), where an extensive discourse unfolds, examining the ways in which MDWs negotiate the array of challenges they encounter, underpinned by agency they exercise. His contribution underscores that the phenomenon of exploitation traverses beyond isolated incidents. It sheds light on the fact that the undercurrents of exploitation are grounded throughout the entire spectrum of the migratory process. One significant example of this is the nexus between recruitment agencies in sending and receiving countries, which has given rise to a transnational recruitment industry rife with widespread bribery and exorbitant fees charged for placement. This has resulted in systematic corruption in the recruitment process, including visa trading[17], creating a billion-dollar business where visas are traded multiple times among registered and unregistered intermediaries (Rahman, 2012; Jureidini, 2016). This complex web of corruption

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[17] Numerous studies have revealed 'visa trading' practices in the transnational recruitment process, especially in the Asia-GCC migration corridor (Rahman, 2012; Siddiqui, 2016). It has become a profitable business for some, who have made it a part-time earnings source (Migrant-Rights.Org, 2015). Since the demand for migrant workers was structural and the visa brokers, clan members, and business elites were politically connected, 'visa trading' was seemingly tolerated in the receiving states.

and exploitation further exacerbates the predicaments of MDWs and perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

The indifference and tolerance of states have indeed contributed to the proliferation of the illegal 'visa trading' business. This tolerance has also given rise to the culture of 'free visas,' where workers go abroad without specific job assignments in the destination countries. While these practices may not have direct detrimental implications for MDWs, they have significant deleterious effects on the working and living conditions of them. For instance, the tolerance towards abusive employers is a case in point. Instead of taking exemplary action against such employers, Saudi Arabia often criminalises workers who leave their employers and actively pursue them to bring them back to the same exploitative working conditions. This labelling of runaway workers as absconders perpetuates a cycle of exploitation and abuse.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, advises their workers not to leave their employers, even in highly exploitative conditions. This advice, coupled with the lack of protection measures and enforcement of labour rights, further disempowers MDWs and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. The existence of power asymmetry is indeed a crucial aspect of the migratory relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. This imbalance in influence and authority is shaped by various factors, including economic and geopolitical relationships, which significantly impact how these two nations interact with each other. The power imbalance is further exacerbated by Bangladesh's dependency on Saudi Arabia for employment opportunities and remittances. This dependency puts Bangladesh in a position where it must compete with other sending countries, leading to what is often referred to as a "race to the bottom" (Rosewarne, 2012). Bangladesh shows its willingness to facilitate overseas job placements in Saudi Arabia that offer low labour standards and lax regulations.

The findings of Ireland's study highlight a significant revelation: sending states, including Bangladesh, often exhibit reluctance to challenge receiving states. They are hesitant to upset the receiving states, prioritising maintaining amicable relations even in cases of labour abuse (Ireland, 2018:334). This dynamic potentially leads to a lack of intervention on behalf of their workers by sending states, creating, and reinforcing a power asymmetry. In the context of the relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, this dynamic appears to be applicable.

Despite concerns about labour abuse, Bangladesh shows a lack of assertiveness and refrain from risking strained relations.

Another contributing factor to the power asymmetry is the surplus of labour on the supply side, which empowers Saudi Arabia to manipulate the terms and conditions of employment to its advantage, leading to differential distribution of labour standards and discriminatory provisions. Despite this, Bangladesh tends to side with abusers to maintain good relationships rather than demand fair treatment or appropriate interventions.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh tends to undersell its workers (Piper Rosewarne and Wither, 2017) instead of prioritising the attainment of rights and protection. The deliberate decision by the Bangladeshi state to promote women's overseas employment aligns with the surge in demand[18] in Saudi Arabia. The significant contribution of overseas jobs and remittance is why successive governments have adopted similar principles on the issue of protection deficits, rights denial, and labour migration as a whole. This approach stems from the fear that Saudi Arabia will cease to receive workers if Bangladesh strongly advocates for protection issues.

4.12 Conclusion

Bangladesh, despite being a country abundant in labour, witnessed a slower uptake of Bangladeshi women pursuing overseas employment until the twenty-first century. It is attributed to government policies and societal perceptions shaping the mobility patterns of women labour. From a complete ban in 1981 to subsequent restrictive measures, it was only in 2003 that active facilitation policies began to flourish. This gradual shift from prohibition to restriction to facilitation highlights the complexity of the migratory relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia.

The Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia corridor plays a significant role in shaping the landscape of labour migration from Bangladesh and serves as a crucial source of employment opportunities for Bangladeshi workers. The demand for Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia, particularly domestic workers, underscores the importance of the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia

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[18] The restriction in supplying MDWs in Saudi Arabia by major sending countries, including the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia, have contributed to the increased demand for Bangladeshi MDWs.

migration corridor and the economic implications it holds for both countries. Simultaneously, it exposes the severe protection deficits.

This chapter focuses on the migratory relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, with an emphasis on live-in domestic workers. It explores the contextual factors that enable employers to exert power over these workers. It also investigates the power asymmetry at the state level that brings profound impacts between MDWs and employers. The presence of tied visas, discriminatory employment contracts, and collusive practices among various actors empowers employers while diminishing the choices, resources, and capacities of the workers. The next chapter discusses constraints from the perspective of asymmetrical power relationships faced by MDWs with their counterparts.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONSTRAINTS: MULTI-LEVEL POWER ASYMMETRIES

5.1 Introduction

Pinky (pseudonym) embarked on a journey to Saudi Arabia in June 2018, where she worked for two years before returning in January 2021. During this period, she worked in three different households. Her first employer replaced her due to their expectations of hiring an experienced worker. Consequently, Pinky was returned to the recruitment agency office, from where she was sent to the residence of her second employer. Despite encountering numerous challenges, Pinky managed to complete her tenure in the second household. In this particular household, Pinky's official employer, the daughter of an elderly woman, mistreated her badly. Pinky's responsibilities included caring for the elderly lady and assisting two family members with intellectual disabilities. The household frequently hosted guests and relatives, which added to Pinky's already heavy workload. Even the slightest mistake in her work led to both mental and physical abuse. Furthermore, the children of the household had a habit of stealing and falsely accusing Pinky.

Pinky was coerced into working for other households. After nine months, her salary payments ceased abruptly. According to Pinky, her salary was handed over to her employer's daughter by the elderly lady she served, but the daughter stopped remunerating Pinky. After a few months, Pinky reached out to the agency to report her situation. When the agency contacted her employer, the violence against Pinky escalated. Her phone was stolen, and all her belongings, including gifts she received from relatives for good performance, were locked away. Pinky was falsely accused of stealing 500 Riyals, which were deducted from her unpaid salary. Pinky vehemently denied the allegations of theft. But that did not work. Feeling powerless, she could only resort to invoking a curse, hoping that divine justice would prevail.

With her salary unpaid for several months and her physical and mental well-being deteriorating significantly, Pinky faced immense hardship. She was unable to contact her family for almost six months then. Every so often she wondered if she would survive until the next day. The elderly lady (the mother of Pinky's employer) noticed a significant decline in

Pinky's health and behaviour and inquired about her condition. Pinky confided in her, revealing the truth about her salary being withheld, and requested that this information not be shared with her daughter (Pinky's employer) out of fear of retaliation. Flouting Pinky's request, the elderly lady asked her daughter. This resulted in Pinky's employer becoming furious and subjecting her to further mistreatment. Under duress, Pinky was coerced into signing a document on a white paper, leaving her devastated.

As the sole breadwinner for her family, Pinky continued her job hoping that she would eventually receive her unpaid salary. Unfortunately, her employers had different intentions. Upon completing her two-year tenure, Pinky was transferred to another employer (third employer), with more than a year's worth of salary still pending. Losing all hope, Pinky desperately sought an opportunity to escape from the household and report her grievances to the police. One day, she managed to run away and promptly reported her situation to the authorities. During the police intervention, Pinky's employer presented the document she had signed, stating that Pinky had received her salary in cash. Pinky found herself unable to prove that she had been deprived of her rightful wages.

During this interview conducted one year after her return home, Pinky expressed her ongoing efforts to secure her unpaid salary. She persisted in contacting her employer, who initially assured her that the outstanding amount would be settled. However, a few days prior to the interview, her employer blocked her communication. Nevertheless, Pinky remained resolute and continued her attempts to reach her employer through her sister's phone number.

Pinky's account signifies her firsthand experience of enduring employer dominance and abuse. She was subjected to mistreatment by her employers, who not only mistreated Pinky but also withheld her salary. Faced with these injustices, Pinky resorted to limited means to protest. Initially, she expressed her resentment, insisted to exit employment relations, and asked to bring her to the agency office (*maktab*) with the purpose of returning back to her home. She also reported the non-payment of her salary to the employer's mother and the recruitment agency.

Regrettably, her resistance resulted in grave consequences. Pinky was subjected to physical assault, her phone was confiscated, and her personal belongings were locked away. She was accused of stealing 500 riyals from her employer, causing immense distress. Moreover, under coercion, Pinky's employer compelled her to sign a blank document and made a false statement. Against her will, she was then transferred to another employer. When Pinky reported it to the police, the employer presented the fabricated declaration as proof that Pinky had received her salary in cash. Despite her best efforts, Pinky failed to substantiate her claim that she had signed a blank paper under duress. She also could not prove that she did not pilfer any money.

Pinky's attempt to seek redress by confiding in her employer's mother and complaining to the recruitment agency only worsened her situation. Report to the police also did not bring expected results as she could not prove her allegation and also because the police sided with employers. Her story serves as a stark illustration of domination, power asymmetry, complicity, and culture of impunity that combinedly make workers' efforts fail. In addition to Pinky's vignette presented above, narratives from other returnees' experiences are at the core of this chapter. Drawing on their experiences, this chapter renders an in-depth discussion on the impact of domination, power asymmetries, impunity, and complicity of various actors against negotiations undertaken by MDWs.

5.2 Uncovering Power Asymmetries

MDWs endure profound power asymmetries in their relationships with their employers. They grapple with the harsh realities of mental, physical, and psychological violence, all of which give rise to enduring implications. In their effort to negotiate adversities, MDWs often face retaliatory actions from employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and even states. Furthermore, the "Standard Employment Contract" inadequately addresses disputes between workers and employers, failing to vest sending states or respective embassies with a formal mediating role.

With little to no access to formalised courts or relevant authorities, MDWs find themselves without access to justice. Their exclusion from labour laws leaves them in legal limbo (Rajan

and Joseph, 2020); existing regulations remain either inadequately enforced or completely neglect workers' rights and wellbeing. This environment of lax oversight permits exploitative employers to capitalise on structural and institutional factors, perpetuating and intensifying the workers' state of dependence. As a result, MDWs find themselves bereft of control over their labour, thus perpetually subjected to conditions of domination.

The complicity of these actors serves to further compound the insurmountable obstacles. Unfairly, MDWs are subjected to the risk of being banned from re-entering the host country. This imposes considerable impediments when seeking redress through legal channels. The findings of this study offer an illustration of the ways in which dominant actors collude to circumscribe workers' efforts, perpetuating a hyper-asymmetrical power relationship.

MDWs find themselves in a state of forced immobility (Mansour-Ille and Mendow, 2018), wherein abusive employers hinder their ability to return home. Employers wield excessive control, forbidding workers from departing even after contractual obligations have been concluded. Workers' options are limited, leaving them with only the possibility of communicating with non-abusive family members, recruitment agencies, and middlemen. In response to these predicaments, when workers exit employment relationships through running away, it jeopardises their future prospects, as they face retaliation and endure bans on re-entry to Saudi Arabia as punishment.

MDWs face immobility, control, evidence manipulation, complicity, culture of impunity, as well as retaliation and deliberate isolation, all of which collectively create and reinforce power asymmetries and domination. This chapter identifies the production and sustenance of power asymmetries, which is manifested at multiple levels. It identifies power asymmetries at four distinct levels: between MDWs and employers, between sending and receiving states, between MDWs and recruitment agencies, and between recruitment agencies in sending and receiving states- all of which significantly impact the plight of MDWs. These multifaceted power asymmetries serve to exacerbate the already existing power disparity between MDWs and their employers. Subsequent sections provide a comprehensive elucidation of these challenges.

5.3 Multi-levels Power Asymmetries

5.3.1 Asymmetry Between MDWs And Employers

Domination and power asymmetry severely restrict workers' efforts to change their situations. The arbitrary power of employers creates repressive working conditions. It deprives workers of their basic entitlement. MDWs are deprived of a day off, adequate rest and sleep. Other entitlements, such as adequate food, clothing, and personal hygiene products, are also disregarded. Despite inclusion of these entitlements in the standard employment contracts, workers are left without entitlement and care. The power asymmetry is evident in a practice of forced returns. MDWs are often repatriated before their contractual period ends, particularly when workers bring allegations of sexual harassment. In many instances, workers are sent back even though they are innocent. Health-related issues also contribute to forced returns, as some workers become unable to fulfil employers' expectations due to deteriorating health caused by overwork, malnutrition, and sleep deprivation. Besides that, workers who suffer workplace injuries and require medical treatment are often repatriated to avoid the costs of healthcare and compensation. Forced returns are succinct examples of employers' domination that limit workers' choices to return or remain in their workplaces.

Another manifestation of power asymmetry is the inordinate control employers possess and exercise over MDWs. Systematically producing dependency, it plays a crucial role in exerting control. This control extends beyond merely governing the workers' labour. It extends up to workers' minds and bodies. Employers manipulate the behaviour and personhood of workers. One mature returnee, Doly (pseudonym), shared her distressing experience, mentioning that her employer even controlled her thoughts. She stated, "My employer used to inquire about my thoughts incessantly. I couldn't escape these interrogations as she continuously poked and pressured me, so I ended up lying to her about what I was thinking."

Doly's appalling experience led her to express that being a prisoner could have been better than working as an MDW abroad. She drew a comparison between MDWs and prisoners, highlighting that prisoners receive basic food and treatment, can communicate with each other, and share their feelings—something that MDWs are denied. Another mature returnee, Romana, shared similar sentiments, stating, "There was no scope for independent choices in

an employer's home. My desires and thoughts were confined. Working as a live-in housemaid is akin to living in a prison." These statements corroborate the findings that MDWs' lives, including their labour power, bodies, behaviour, thought processes, and personhood are controlled by employers (Fernandez, 2020:58).

MDWs are subjected to barbaric treatment, and some employers' mindsets are profoundly malicious. A section of employers even harbours a "misguided sense of possessing the worker" (Pande, 2012: 387). They coerce workers by claiming they have purchased workers, having spent a significant amount of money. Consequently, they believe workers should obey their will and expectations without question. In some instances, employers refuse to provide remuneration, asserting that they have already paid for the workers' services. One returnee, Rupa[19] expressed, "They did not want to give me my salary. When I asked for my wages, they used to say that they had bought me by spending Taka 200,000 (USD 2,000)". Furthermore, employers use the threat of transferring workers to abusive employers as a means of control. They treat workers as commodities and transfer them from one employer to another by transforming sponsorships. This commodification of workers is evident not only in employers' attitudes but also in their language:

> My first employer used to say, "We have bought you [*amra tumake kine ansi*]".
> When my physical condition deteriorated and I became ill, they brought me to
> the recruitment agency office. One representative talked with my employer,
> after which he beat me. A few days later, they sent me to a new place, where
> I found a Bangladeshi worker. She said, *Kafeel amader kinte asbe* (employers
> would come to buy us). The following day, a family came. *Dalal Amake bikri
> kore dey (*I was sold by the middleman)[20].

The above example illustrates how employers treated workers as mere commodities. They took advantage of two ministerial decisions, "Ministerial Decision 605[21]" and "Ministerial

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[19] A pseudonym.

[20] Khoteja (pseudonym), interview by author, Rupganj, Narayanganj, 10 December 2022.

[21] The Ministry of Labour and Social Development, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issued a decision in 2017 that allows transfer of domestic workers between employers under certain conditionalities. (source: GoSA, Ministry of Labour & Social Development, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. www.misd.gov.sa)

Decision 310" that allowed employers to change and terminate workers respectively on perceived dissatisfaction with workers' performance. Article 5(1) of the 'Ministerial Decision' No 310 on the Domestic Worker Regulations said, ''the employer has the right to terminate the contract by his or her own will during the probation period without any liability, if it is proved that the domestic worker is professionally insufficient'' (GoSA, 2013). This decision gave employers the authority to cancel sponsorship, transfer workers to other employers, or return them to recruitment agencies. On most occasions, workers' salaries are kept unpaid. One worker, Sabina, shared her experience of being transferred from her first employer to a second one while her salary remained pending. Her first employer held her passport and resident permit (*iqama*). She regained possession of these documents only after the second employer purchased her from the first employer.

In the eyes of workers, employers are perceived as wielders of immense power, making them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and mistreatment. Mina, a premature returnee, regarded her overseas employment as one of the worst decisions of her life. She suffered regular physical abuse from her female employer, endured deprivation of basic necessities such as clothing, food, and personal hygiene items. Her statement reflects the profound power asymmetry with her employers:

> My employer kept me locked when they went outdoors. They confiscated my mobile phone and contact numbers. Initially, they scolded me. Subsequently, they began beating me and did not give me a salary. I asked the middleman and recruitment agency several times to change my workplace, so I could continue my job. However, they did not pay heed to my appeal. Employers were like kings and queens[22].

A striking observation among workers is the tendency to view their employers as kings and queens. Mina found it difficult to adjust or leverage harsh working conditions to her advantage. Her realisation of her employers' perceived status as kings or queens exemplified the supreme authority employers held and exercised. Another returnee, Lily (pseudonym),

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[22] Mina (pseudonym), interview by author, Manikganj Sadar, 26 December 2022.

too, shared a similar perspective, likening their situation to broiler chickens confined in cages. "We were like broiler chickens confined in a cage. Once in a cage, none could do anything," she recounted. These statements vividly illustrate the power disparity between employers and workers.

MDWs faced severe communication restrictions, denying them contact or voice complaints about their situations. Poly (pseudonym), a returnee, shared that she was allowed to call her family after three days of arrival. Her employers later denied her right to communicate with her family. Although they occasionally received calls from her family, they kept the calls on hold without engaging in conversation. Throughout her six-month stay, Poly was only able to talk with her family three to four times. Despite a promise to provide her with a mobile phone, the employers failed to fulfil this commitment.

Barring MDWs from communicating with friends and family and fellow workers was a 'conscious ploy' by employers to keep workers in the dark (Constable, 2007). As a part of employers' deliberate attempt to ensure isolation, mobile confiscation was a regular affair faced by MDWs. A mature returnee, Suraiya (pseudonym) carried a phone with a few essential numbers. But she could not contact anyone seeking help, as her employer replaced her phone with an older one. She had a helpline number saved on her mobile, but she could not use it when she needed it. In addition to mobile phones, MDWs were denied possessing contact numbers. A premature returnee, Rupa (pseudonym), remarked:

> I looked after an elderly woman who regularly visited her sister and I had to
> accompany her. One day, when I went with the elderly woman to her sister's
> house, they searched my bag and found a mobile number (I had no mobile) on
> a piece of paper. They tore up the paper and threw it into a dustbin[23].

Similar to Rupa, another premature returnee, Sadia, experienced communication problems. Sadia revealed that she remained untraceable for approximately three months before being granted permission to call her family. During this call, her employers recorded the

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[23] Rupa (pseudonym), interview by author, Rampal, Munshiganj, 29 January 2022.

conversations, had them translated with the help of others, and subsequently mistreated Sadia for conveying her difficulties with her family.

Employers deliberately curtail the ability of workers to meet or form social spaces. They restrict the mobility and communication of domestic workers. Once inside the employers' households, MDWs lose their connections to the outside world and become physically and virtually confined. They are isolated from each other by being prohibited from meeting and conversing with fellow workers. The imposition of restrictions on physical mobility and the deprivation of a day off eliminates any opportunities for collaborative platforms for these groups of workers. Employers employ various tactics to ensure solidarity among workers. Employers denied workers' access to tools and means that would facilitate communication. One premature returnee, Reta (pseudonym), shared her experience, highlighting the impact of these restrictions:

> I went to Qatar with a housemaid visa. Five months later, I was trafficked to Saudi Arabia. I lost my connection. My employers in Saudi Arabia denied communication and did not allow me to talk to my family. I cried a lot. I asked permission to talk to my family, stating that I had small children and an old mother in Bangladesh. That did not work. They used to lock me in the room before going outdoors. I could not call even when they were not in the house. There were no telephones (everyone had a mobile phone)[24].

One of the primary reasons for banning MDWs from communicating with their fellow workers is the employers' fear that such interactions could lead to an enhancement of workers' knowledge and subsequently result in raised expectations and demands for rights and entitlements (Parreñas, 2022:43). Simultaneously, employers prohibit workers from contacting their families back home, as they are apprehensive that workers might share accounts of mistreatment by the employers and seek assistance from family and friends.

Another deliberate ploy by employers was to withhold their contact information and house addresses from the workers, making it impossible for the workers to disclose their employers'

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[24] Reta (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Rupganj, Narayanganj, 10 December 2022.

identities. This intentional action serves as a deterrent, preventing workers from reaching out to authorities when they dearly need it. It also hampers workers' ability to disclose their employers' identities and locations, especially during critical situations, such as when filing reports with the police. Even after working for several months, some workers remain unaware of their workplace's contact number or location. This calculated effort to render workers powerless has significant implications. As Nuri a premature returnee, revealed:

> Instead of sending me through the proper channel (buying tickets and issuing an exit visa), they left me on the street, snatched my nose pin, and did not give me my passport. They left me far from their house. I did not prepare to face this cruelty. I did not even imagine that they would discard me in this manner. I cried when they left me alone on the street. After some time, the police rescued me. The police asked me about my employer and their location. I could not provide them with my employer's address or contact number[25].

Nuri's case exemplifies the power asymmetry between employers and workers. It also exposes how deliberate concealment of information by employers could have a profound impact on workers' safety and wellbeing. Nuri faced mistreatment and abuse at her employer's house, but she had no means to report the incident or seek help. Her employer deliberately withheld crucial information, such as the employer's address, making it challenging for Nuri to reach out to authorities. Upon rescuing Nuri, the police sent her to a *Safar jail[26],* where she spent a few weeks and was repatriated to Bangladesh. Apparently, her employer evaded any legal consequences due to the lack of evidence as Nuri could not provide the name and address of her employer. Nuri's employer remained unscathed because of collusion among actors and owing to the biased larger structure.

Employers deliberately withhold vital information such as addresses and contact details from MDWs, as evidenced by another returnee, Romana (pseudonym). Despite her persistent inquiries, Romana's employers refused to disclose the address where she worked. She tried

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[25]Nuri (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Singair, Manikganj, 03 January 2022.

[26] Prisons in Saudi Arabia where detained immigrants are kept temporarily before being sent to their home country.

to know that during the initial days but failed. Subsequently, she feared seeking that information with an apprehension of retaliation. Eventually, she discreetly obtained the address from a neighbour MDW during a trip to the market. Romana asked the fellow worker to write down the address on tissue paper, so the employer did not understand what she was asking for. ''They would become suspicious if they knew that I was trying to learn about the address of my workplace", she recounted. These examples highlight the power asymmetry between employers and MDWs, with employers exerting significant control over information.

The power imbalance becomes even more pronounced when serious offences are committed by employers. The burden of proof often falls on MDWs. In contrast, employers actively attempt to conceal or destroy evidence, while allegations made by workers are frequently ignored. In cases of sexual harassment, women employers show indifference or disbelief towards MDWs' allegations against men employers, making it challenging for the workers to seek justice. The private nature of domestic work further isolates MDWs from the public eyes, making it difficult for them to lodge complaints or pursue legal action against their employers. MDWs are denied producing witnesses. Returnees mentioned taking photographs of wounds, sharing them online, and seeking justice. Others remarked that they used notebooks to write about the incidents.

MDWs reside within the intimate confines of their employers' private domains, thereby bestowing upon employers' inordinate controlling power. The "insular environment of the home" (Ueno, 2009) puts them at a greater risk of being abused and ill-treated. Geographically dispersed location bars them from social interactions and makes them invisible. The invisibility of MDWs results in layers of difficulty, producing a high prevalence of exploitation. It reinforces workplace challenges turning these even more profound, complex, and fatal. Their jobs in their employer's private domain hindered lodging formal complaints. Filing a case against employers while staying in an employers' house is impractical and impossible, as they could be subjected to retaliation. These constraints expose workers to tremendous employer domination.

The above discussion on some of the aspects such as deprivation of entitlements, repatriating workers against their will, exerting inordinate control, perceiving, and treating workers as commodity, crippling workers by barring them communication and workplace information,

destroying evidence of serious mistreatments are either expressions or causes of power asymmetry and employers' domination. Workers' perceptions of their employers as "kings and queens" and simultaneously assuming self as "broiler in a cage" also manifests the power asymmetry between them.

The root of this power asymmetry lies in the sponsorship visa system, which renders workers entirely dependent on their employers for immigration, residence and exit visas. The discriminatory standard employment contract also complements the power gap. Both the sponsorship visa system and discriminatory employment contracts create a relationship of dependency which tends to limit the space for negotiations. The complicity among powerful actors and the absence of effective complaints and protective mechanisms further shields employers from accountability for mistreatment, thus setting the stage for impunity. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge that MDWs' negotiations are constrained by power asymmetries, complicity, and impunity, fostering a relationship of dependency and reinforce power asymmetries. A cognisance of this allows to develop a more realistic account of negotiations in unequal power relationships.

5.3.2 Asymmetry at the State Level

The power asymmetry between employers and workers is not the sole asymmetry that affects the working and living conditions of MDWs. Asymmetry at the state level also has profound implications. The sending states, due to a power gap with receiving states, are often unable to take adequate actions to protect their workers. The embassies, representing the sending states, are expected to proactively advocate for the workers' welfare. However, their involvement in addressing issues is questionable, as evident in workers' accounts.

During times of crisis, only a few MDWs anticipate support from their embassies. Many returnees revealed that they had little or no contact with the embassy during their ordeal. Middlemen and recruitment agencies hinder the embassies' support by downplaying their role. One middleman, Sanjida (pseudonym), claimed that the workers she sent did not encounter any difficulties abroad. Simultaneously, she admitted that her business would be jeopardised if workers faced difficulties and shared those, which is why she refrained from

advising workers to seek assistance from the government offices (embassies). "If workers were aware of the embassy's presence, they might report even minor issues, tarnishing my reputation and affecting my business," she explained. Simultaneous to recruitment agencies and middlemen's deliberate action to impede workers seeking assistance from the embassies, embassies lack proactive measures to reach out to workers. Their limited visibility reflects the constrained role they play.

While MDWs may have had little awareness about the embassy before going abroad, they soon realise its importance, particularly when facing difficulties. Frustration among MDWs is evident due to the perceived lack of government support. Nadira (pseudonym), a mature returnee, expressed her disappointment, noting that other states cared for their nationals to a greater extent, causing employers and agencies to think twice before mistreating them. She emphasised that employers and agency personnel subject Bangladeshi workers to mistreatment because they believe the Bangladeshi state does not care for them. A lack of proactive support reflects that excessive dependency on overseas jobs and remittances has weakened the bargaining power of the Bangladeshis state. The relationship between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia was extensively examined in Chapter Four, unveiling the significant power gap between sending and receiving states that affect immensely on the plights of MDWs.

5.3.3 Asymmetry Between MDWs And Recruitment Agencies

The power asymmetry between MDWs and recruitment agencies in both sending and receiving states is another reality that impacts workers' safety and wellbeing. Recruitment agencies wield disproportionate power due to their socio-economic status and political connections. MDWs, on the other hand, possess far low social status and lack political influence. Given the official responsibility of holding the matchmaking position between MDWs and employers, recruitment agencies possess significant control over job placements and dispute resolution between workers and employers.

One critical factor contributing to the power gap is the lack of interaction between MDWs and recruitment agencies in the sending state during the recruitment process and throughout

the migration journey. Limited communication with agencies leaves them unable to seek help during difficulties, further isolating them and exacerbating their vulnerability. Recruitment agencies do not actively support workers and instead they entirely focus on financial considerations. A recruitment agency official[27] revealed that if a worker leaves their employer within three months, the agency must refund the fees received from the employer. As a result, agencies are reluctant to assist workers facing abuse and exploitation, as it leads them to financial losses. He stated, "We invest money in recruiting and placing workers. If they return within three months, we must refund the entire amount to the employers. Alternatively, we must replace the returnee with another worker. Therefore, we exert pressure on workers to compensate if any worker wants to return early".

The recruitment agencies in Bangladesh tend to evade responsibility once workers arrive abroad. Simultaneously, they engage in a blame game. One agency owner[28] pointed fingers at middlemen and workers, claiming that workers have unrealistic expectations about working conditions on one hand. On the other hand, middlemen agree to all demands[29] of MDWs during the recruitment process. They shift blame to middlemen, arguing that if workers encounter difficulties, they should communicate with recruitment agencies. However, middlemen discourage workers from contacting recruitment agencies, especially when workers were sent abroad with false promises by middlemen. The agency owner stressed that middlemen feared their deceptive practices would be exposed if workers approached recruitment agencies.

Another recruitment agency official[30] stated that they often do not become aware of workers' difficulties early on. This lack of awareness was attributed to workers for not having the contact information of the recruitment agencies. Furthermore, middlemen generally prevent workers from meeting with recruitment agencies. When asked about the reasons for this, the

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[27] M Overseas (Pseudonym).

[28] L Overseas (Pseudonym).

[29] According to the owner of a recruitment agency, workers want to work at Mecca and Medina, the two holy places in Saudi Arabia. Some wish to work as cleaners at a hospital or madrasah (school). Others want to work for small families. Sometimes, two relatives or acquaintances want to work jointly in a family. Middlemen promise to arrange everything according to their choice, although they have no access to any information about the working conditions, nor do they know about any employers.

[30] H Overseas (Pseudonym).

recruitment personnel mentioned that middlemen feared losing their influence and business if workers become less dependent on them. Moreover, middlemen were apprehensive that allowing workers to communicate directly with recruitment agencies would unveil corrupt practices involving false promises, misinformation, and excessive fees. When the researcher further inquired why recruitment agencies did not ensure authentic information for workers, the response was that middlemen could abandon them and choose to work with another recruitment agency if they tried to ensure that.

The statement sheds light on the intricate relationship between recruitment agencies and middlemen, exposing their collusion in sustaining deceptive practices. Although the recruitment agency owner appears to criticise middlemen, they eventually collaborate with them due to the fear of losing clients and the pursuit of profit maximisation. This collaboration prioritises financial interests over ensuring the protection and well-being of workers.

Both recruitment agencies and middlemen wield significant power compared to the workers. Consequently, once the workers are sent abroad, both parties can evade responsibility. Middlemen bear no legal obligations and can do little or nothing to assist workers facing difficulties abroad. On the other hand, recruitment agencies tend to avoid maintaining connections with workers in order to avoid responsibilities and potential loss of profits. The weak enforcement from the part of the state helps in this regard. Many workers are more familiar with middlemen, even though recruitment agencies are officially responsible for facilitating their overseas employment. This systematic disconnection is one of the causes to perpetuate the power asymmetry between recruitment agencies and workers.

The power disparity is evident in the practice of requiring MDWs to sign an informal and illegal 'pledge' (*Angikarnama*) with recruitment agencies before taking overseas jobs. This additional pledge, in addition to the formal employment contracts, is designed to bind workers, preventing them from returning without completing the full employment tenure, even in cases of severe labour exploitation. The pledge comes with conditions. It favours employers' interests when workers express a desire to return early. It stipulates that the workers are going abroad with their own responsibilities and that there are no recruitment agencies' liabilities if the workers ran away.

The use of this illegitimate pledge exemplifies the power gap between workers and recruitment agencies. A copy, collected from a recruitment agency read- "I will work for my employers by maintaining utmost discipline. I will not leave my employer's house. I will work at my employer's house until the end of my contractual period. I am bound to pay $2000 to the recruiter if I wish to return home within three months." MDWs are required to sign this pledge during the recruitment process. The provided excerpt highlights the exploitative practices of recruitment agencies and the power gap between them and MDWs in the receiving state. Even though the "pledge" signed by workers with recruitment agencies holds no legal value, agencies use it to coerce workers into staying in exploitative working conditions and impose compensation charges if workers express a desire to return home. Unfortunately, despite allegations, recruitment agencies face no consequences for their misdeeds including obliging workers to sign this pledge, leading to a perpetuation of unequal power relationships.

The power disparity between MDWs and recruitment agencies is even more pronounced in the receiving states. MDWs find themselves unable to hold recruitment agencies in the receiving states accountable, as they become entirely dependent on the agencies' will. Instead of fulfilling their role as mediators and safeguarding the workers' interests and wellbeing, recruitment agencies prioritise profit maximisation and cater to the employers' demands. In the name of disciplining workers, they act more like "torture cells" than overseeing the implementation of employment contracts. Returnees' accounts reveal that recruitment agency offices in Saudi Arabia serve as venues for physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Such abuse often occurs when workers refuse to work under abusive employers or express a desire to return home. The agency offices, like employers' houses, become spaces where workers face beatings, slapping, punching, molestation, rape, vilification, and threats.

Recruitment agencies, along with middlemen, exert control and perpetrate abuse against workers, leaving workers vulnerable and unprotected. Like employers, agencies and middlemen in the receiving states coerced and abused workers. Workers in recruitment offices and middlemen's houses were unsafe and unprotected, like employers' houses. Returnees reported distressing experiences of being brutally beaten while in recruitment

agency offices. Returnees[31] even expressed that being in their employer's house was preferable to the abuse endured in the recruitment agency office. A premature returnee[32] shared a harrowing account of being mercilessly beaten by her female employer, resulting in a fracture of her waist bone. Although her employer reluctantly admitted her to a hospital, where she stayed for approximately ten days, the ordeal did not end there. Upon her return to the agency office, the women in charge in the recruitment agency office subjected her to further beatings, claiming that it was the best treatment for her. Unfortunately, her experience was not an isolated incident, as other returnees also recounted similar abuse within recruitment agency offices.

In addition to physical abuse, the recruitment agency offices employ bullying tactics to coerce workers into tolerating subpar working conditions and deter them from seeking to change employers. MDWs face beratement and intimidation when expressing a desire for an employer change. Moreover, when employers return workers to the recruitment office because of their dissatisfaction, workers are physically harmed, creating an environment of fear and exploitation (Parreñas, 2022: 120). In such situations, recruitment agencies in workers' home countries cannot help them as recruitment agencies in receiving states ignore their calls- another area of power asymmetry that is explained next.

5.3.4 Asymmetry Between Recruitment Agencies

The fourth form of power asymmetry exists in the relationship between recruitment agencies in sending and receiving states. The unequal footing between these transnational agencies jeopardises workers' plights. Despite the immense implications, there is a scant focus on power relations between agencies in sending and receiving states, resulting in a significant power gap between them. Consequently, recruitment agencies in sending states find it difficult to negotiate for workers' protection and safety. In the context of Saudi Arabia, recruitment agencies hold the upper hand, while Bangladeshi recruitment agencies have limited influence in addressing workers' difficulties. One personnel from a recruitment agency ventilated his frustration:

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[31] One such returnee is Robia (pseudonym).

[32] Mitu (pseudonym).

There is no scope for action against abusive employers. We receive no support when we complain. The Saudi embassy in Dhaka does not provide proper support if allegations are brought against employers or recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia. By contrast, if recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia bring allegations against us, they take stiff action. The Saudi embassy in Dhaka even bans recruitment agencies in Bangladesh. If a MDW (*khaddama*) faces difficulties, and if we inform recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia, they do not act or take any appropriate measures. We cannot hold them responsible. They care little about worker miseries and hardly listen to our requests. In these situations, we feel helpless[33].

This statement highlights the power asymmetry between a recruitment agency in Bangladesh and its Saudi Arabian counterpart, significantly impacting workers' safety and well-being. Recruitment agencies between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia sign a "partnership contract". This contract is signed to formalise their involvement in the recruitment process. It lasts for two years. Once this contract period ends, recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia often stop communicating with their counterparts in Bangladesh, especially in situations when workers are not allowed to return home by their employers. Consequently, when employers exploit workers or delay their return after the contractual period ends, recruitment agencies in Bangladesh cannot provide meaningful assistance to workers.

The partnership contract is discriminatory and therefore, it is a source of power asymmetry. Recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia flout the contract provisions as well. In disputes between these agencies, Saudi authorities tend to favour Saudi recruitment agencies. This lack of accountability from recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia leaves recruitment agencies in Bangladesh unable to hold them responsible. The prevailing dominance of one party over the other at the recruitment agency level has profound implications on workers' struggles against power and domination by employers.

As per the partnership contract, the responsibility for monitoring the treatment of MDWs by their employers lies with recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia. However, non-cooperation

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[33] One employee from M Overseas (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Palton, Dhaka, 30 January 2022.

with Bangladeshi recruitment agencies meant they took sides by employers rather than to protect workers. This reluctance to hold employers accountable for mistreatment further reinforces the power gap between MDWs and their employers. Pertinently, recruitment agencies in Bangladesh are heavily reliant on their counterparts in Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, they face intense competition with fellow recruitment agencies within their national boundaries. This fear of losing business is another reason why Bangladeshi recruitment agencies struggle to assert and stand firm against Saudi recruitment agencies, when it comes to safeguarding the rights and interests of workers.

Thus far, the intertwined and compounded power asymmetries at different levels have a profound impact on the relationships between employers and MDWs, consequently affecting the overall plight of MDWs in various ways. In light of the above discussion, the multi-level power asymmetries, its contributing factors, and their implications are summarised and presented in the following table (Table 6.1):

Table 5.1: Power Asymmetries: Contributing Factors to Hyper-asymmetrical Power Relationship

Level	Contributing Factors to Power Asymmetries	Implications on MDWs
MDWs-Employers	(1) delegation of controlling authority to employers, (II) exclusion from labour laws, no provisions of workplace inspection and ineffective regulation (III) discriminatory employment contract (IV) impunity, no exemplary punishment (V) unfriendly court and justice system/absence of viable complaint mechanism (VI) prohibition on demonstration, collective bargaining, trade union or NGO activities (VII) differential distribution of labour standards and protection, racialised hierarchy (VIII) lack of knowledge of the local language, culture, and legal understanding	Dependency, created through states' provisions, helps employers use and exercise arbitrary power. Workers' voices, mobility, and freedom are circumscribed. The combined effect of these attributing factors creates insurmountable power asymmetry between workers and employers, what this study calls hyper-asymmetry in power relationships.
Receiving-Sending States	(I) dependency (II) fear of losing market (III) race to the bottom, underselling workers by sending states (IV) geopolitical and economic strengths	Sending states cannot hold the receiving states accountable for mistreatment at workplaces Dependency and power asymmetry circumscribe sending states' assertions and receiving states' inaction.
MDWs-Recruitment Agencies and Middlemen	(I) impunity, absence of exemplary punishment (II) dependency (III) social and political status	Recruitment agencies deceive workers with impunity. In addition, they flout provisions set by the states. MDWs cannot hold recruitment agencies and middlemen accountable because of the power asymmetry.
Recruitment Agencies (sending-receiving states)	(I) dependency (II) impunity (III) fear of losing business	The power asymmetry is the reason that recruitment agencies in sending states cannot hold their counterparts in Saudi Arabia responsible when workers are in difficulties.

Source: Author's rendering.

In addition to the power gap at multiple levels, discussed so far and summarised in Table 6.4, there exists collusion among powerful actors at different levels that reinforces the power gap between MDWs and employers. As discussed below, the complicity of power holders is the reason many workers' efforts tend to fail or prove ineffective.

5.4 Complicity and Retaliation

MDWs encounter a context of shared involvement among actors involved in the employment and management, such as employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen and even host states. These actors are driven by mutual interests and their collaboration often perpetuates and brings adverse consequences when workers attempt to assert their rights, seek justice, or improve their working conditions. It highlights the interconnectedness of complicit actors, retaliatory actions, and the repercussions faced by MDWs.

Nabila went to Saudi Arabia in 2019 and stayed in her employer's house for approximately three months. Her female employer was ill-behaved and abusive. Nabila had no privacy- she used to find her belongings displaced each time she woke up in the morning. The workload was enormously high. She had to work, even when she was ill. They repeatedly forced her to perform the same tasks. When she tried to defend herself, they beat her. Nabila felt that they needed at least two housemaids. Overwork, food, and sleep deprivation led her to poor health. She lost hope. Her motivation came to nought when her employers cheated, saying they had remitted her salary, but the money was not deposited in her bank account. ''They lied'', Nabila recounted. Working so hard without getting due salary frustrated her profoundly.

When Nabila had a fever, her employer did not arrange her treatment. After repeated requests, she was allowed to talk to family members but did not let her take the mobile phone in her hand. The employers kept belittling her all the time, emphasising that they bought her spending much money. They abused her verbally. She tolerated and kept patience. Then she became determined not to stay in their house. Nabila insisted on arranging for her return to Bangladesh. Initially, they did not pay heed. Finally, they agreed to leave her. But, instead of

arranging her return to Bangladesh, they brought her to the agency office. Nabila realised that she was deceived. Soon after reaching the recruitment office, they coerced her to send her to another employer's home. She refused, fearing that she would end up with more exploitation. The officials in the recruitment office threatened to kill or discard her in the desert. They beat her mercilessly on several occasions.

After a couple of days, they arranged a video conversation with a staff from the recruitment agency in Bangladesh. The man undressed during the video call to terrify Nabila. The recruitment agency owner in Bangladesh threatened Nabila that they would confine her husband and son if she did not go to the employer's house. Being perplexed, Nabila then contacted the middleman (*dalal*) in Bangladesh, who expressed his incapacity. The middleman told Nabila that the recruitment agency detained him as Nabila refused to go to her employer's house, which Nabila guessed was a bluff. The recruitment office asked for 250,000 taka [USD 2500] as compensation- equivalent to more than one year of salary. The middleman also asked Nabila the same.

Nabila's case exemplifies the nexus between employers and recruitment actors- recruitment agencies and middlemen. In a context of difficulties, workers' primary recourse is to contact recruitment agencies and middlemen. However, contacting them is not always easy owing to many reasons including the fact that workers are denied contact numbers. If workers are received by the recruitment office or middlemen and stay in their office or under their arrangement for a few days before going to the employer's house, there is a likelihood that they obtain the contact number of the recruitment agency and middleman beforehand.

Nevertheless, this is not guaranteed as these actors often refuse to provide workers with their contact numbers. Workers are advised that their employers already know the recruitment agency's contact number. This exemplifies that the recruitment agencies do not want to be directly contacted by workers. Instead, they prefer to stay connected through employers. When workers in difficulties cannot directly contact recruitment agencies, it favours employers. This reveals one of the elements of the nexus between employers and recruitment agencies.

Complicity between employers and state agencies is also evident in another experienced returnee, Sabina, who used to help her fellow junior MDWs she encountered. She narrated her endeavour to help one inexperienced and young MDW in difficulties, who worked for a family residing upstairs in the same building where Sabina worked. The girl did not want to continue working there due to physical violence inflicted by a man family member.

Sabina sympathised, offered mental support, and assured her of assistance. Sabina informed her female employer about the girl's plight. Subsequently, the female employer reported to the abusive family, leading to the girl being beaten as she disclosed her misery. The police were called to investigate, and the employer falsely claimed that the housemaid had beaten their children, justifying their actions. The police believed the employer's false allegations, showing indifference to the worker's claims. The worker did not get remedy because the law enforcement agency took the side of employers.

MDWs facing difficulties receive little state support, if any. The study revealed that reporting to the police was only feasible when workers managed to run away or report in person. Access to the police while staying in employers' houses was deemed impossible and impractical. Notably, the study found no instances of MDWs calling the police from their employer's house, primarily due to the lack of means to contact the authorities. Furthermore, it was evident that law enforcement agencies often sided with employers, refusing to share their contact numbers with the workers. For instance, Rubi (pseudonym), a mature returnee, reported her plight to the police, but unfortunately, she was sent back to her abusive employers against her will. While departing the law enforcement office, Rubi requested the contact number, hoping to reach out for help if needed. But she was denied. Instead, the law enforcement office gave the contact number to her employer.

The complicity among various actors creates a precarious situation for workers. While individual actors may wield power and exert dominance at different levels, the underlying purposes and methods of coercion and exploitation remain strikingly similar. Employers, recruitment agencies, and law enforcement agencies work in unison, prioritising their interests over workers' welfare and escaping accountability. Therefore, reporting to law enforcement agencies rarely yields the expected results, often leading to MDWs being returned to their abusive employers.

One of the glaring manifestations of power asymmetry between workers and employers is the denial of communication with their families. MDWs find their mobile phones confiscated, effectively preventing them from raising complaints or contacting recruitment agencies and middlemen. Moreover, reporting such issues through these channels seldom brings about substantial results, as these actors often work in tandem to maximise their interests. In many cases, filing complaints exacerbates workers' precarious conditions, as employers retaliate against them. On the other hand, law enforcement agencies tend to handle only those cases that garner media attention or arise from campaigns led by human rights activists (Nurchayati, 2011).

One noticeable aspect of these collusion is that state agencies also partake in them. The collusion between employers and receiving states contributes to the isolation of workers. Domestic work is one of the few sectors where workers remain hidden from the public. The invisibility and isolation of MDWs create significant obstacles in exercising their agency. The workplaces of MDWs are concealed in nature (Frantz, 2013), and their working conditions remain largely invisible (England, 2017). This study reveals that state policies, legal codes, and deliberate actions by employers solidify multiple constraints, thereby exposing the power gap. Furthermore, lax regulations and poor enforcement contribute to a culture of impunity, ultimately benefiting employers. The absence of workplace inspections allows employers to exploit workers without repercussions.

In Saudi Arabia, pro-migrant NGO activities are scarce, and civil society organisations are virtually non-existent. The "Basic Law" of the country does not address freedom of expression or the right to information. Moreover, the legislation in the country prohibits worker demonstrations, collective bargaining, and labour trade unions, and it also bans collective organisation and strikes (Almutairi, 2018). All these factors impose significant costs on workers' ability to form meaningful platforms or alliances to resist the status quo.

The collusion between state and non-state actors, such as employers, recruitment agencies, and middlemen, poses significant challenges for workers enduring abusive working conditions. One illustrative example of this collusion is the case of Kobita (pseudonym). A daughter of a returnee MDWs, Kobita worked in Saudi Arabia for approximately three months in 2016. Within these short periods, she worked in three houses. Her first employer threw

away the dry food she had carried out. She was denied food she liked. Owing to food deprivation and extreme workload, Kobita became sick and fell off the stairs. She fainted twice. On one occasion, her employers checked by kicking her whether she died. Pretending to bring her to the airport for repatriation, they handed her over to the middleman without remuneration for the time she worked for them. In the middleman's house, Kobita met with other MDWs.

One day, the middleman punched and ordered her to get ready to go to an employer's house. Instead of bringing her to an employer's house, he took her to a hotel and attempted to rape her (*amar sathe kharap kaj korar chesta korse*). Kobita reacted by screaming and threatening suicide. The middleman offered money. Kobita still refused. He then brought her to his house and warned her not to disclose what had occurred. When the middleman went outside, Kobita confided her nightmare with other MDWs. To her surprise, they also shared similar experiences. They grew solidarity quickly but were still scared of the middleman's inhumane treatment. They apprehended that the middleman would sell (*bikri kore dibe*) them to abusive employers. Therefore, they secretly planned to leave the middleman's house but behaved so that the middleman could not predict their plan.

One early morning, they ran off jointly from the house and stayed beside a busy street. After a while, they saw a police van. They approached the van by raising their hand. None of them knew Arabic but could explain what happened to them. The police brought them to the police station. They felt respited and believed that they had escaped. But, within hours, they saw the middleman at the police station. Kobita and her compatriots were scared. After some time, the police asked them to go with him. Kobita and her fellow workers were unable to resist. Kobita recounted, "We requested not to hand us over to the middleman. They did not listen to us. On the way home from the police station, the middleman threatened us with severe consequences".

The next few days were no less than calamities. The middleman vilified and threatened them in several ways. Workers desperately wanted to go to an employer's house rather than stay in the middleman's house, but that was not in their hands. After a few days, Kobita was sent to her second employer's house, where she looked after three children in addition to

household chores. She had no rest time. Despite this, her employer forced her to work at another house. When she refused, they attempted to beat her. The employer used racial slurs, saying that the Bangladeshi people were *harami* (bad person). Kobita felt annoyed and mimicked that Saudi people were *harami*. The employer complained to the middleman, and she was sent back to the middleman's house.

The middleman was furious and accused her of not staying in the employer's house. One midnight, he took Kobita to the roof of the building and threatened to kill her. Kobita survived that night by seeking mercy and promising to work for another employer. Fortunately, she had a third employer within a few days. She recalled that her third employer was kind and compassionate. She stayed in the house for one month and happily celebrated Eid (a religious festival) with them. Within a few weeks, she was diagnosed with jaundice which compelled her to return home. Kobita recalled her mother's advice (who had worked in Saudi Arabia for over six years) to protest the odds at the workplace.

The above episode vividly illustrates the interconnection between middlemen and state agencies in destination countries. In their desperate attempt to break free from the control of the middleman, workers face coercion and resistance. When they decide to escape and seek help from law enforcement agencies, the latter sides with the middlemen, subsequently returning workers to middlemen's custody. The aforementioned cases highlight the alarming collusion between middlemen and state agencies, which perpetuates the exploitation and vulnerability of migrant domestic workers. The law enforcement agency's bias towards the middleman further compounds the power asymmetry and leaves workers without proper protection and recourse to remedies, as found in this study.

5.5 Culture of Impunity

In the context of exploitative labour settings, the agency and efforts of workers are circumscribed by a multitude of factors, resulting in their enduring suffering within an environment characterised by a troubling norm of impunity. This culture of impunity lays the foundation for the substantial power differential that exists between workers and employers, as the latter are aware that their actions need not be subjected to accountability. Within this

power dynamic, employers, recruitment agencies and middlemen often employ intimidation tactics, consistently conveying the message that their abusive actions will carry no consequences, thus solidifying their dominance. Numerous instances underscore that, in most cases, these key actors evade accountability and remain unscathed despite the abusive nature of their actions.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that there are sporadic exceptions in which workers manage to emancipate themselves from the perpetual cycle of abuse, although the perpetrators, primarily the employers, remain untouched by the repercussions of their actions. One poignant illustration within the purview Mina, who confronted a myriad of obstacles. Her employers confiscated her phone and contact numbers, making it impossible for her to seek help. It, thereby, rendered her utterly isolated and powerless. After enduring 2.5 months of mistreatment, Mina decided to exit the employment relationship and report the abuse to the police. Despite her employers' attempts to retrieve her, Mina stood her ground and presented visible scars on her body as evidence of the physical torture inflicted upon her.

While the police were convinced by the evidence and did not return Mina to her abusive employers, their response remained conspicuously inadequate in holding the employer accountable for their reprehensible actions. This particular incident, as a case study, serves as a compelling testament to the deeply entrenched culture of immunity, where employers often evade prosecution for their actions against domestic workers. Despite the visible scars serving as evidence for the abuse, no formal charge was brought against the employer. No tangible action was taken to ensure justice and accountability for the perpetrators. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, at the very least, Mina found solace in escaping the clutches of her abusive employers, allowing her to emancipate herself from the exploitative working relationship that had imprisoned her in a cycle of suffering and domination.

The above narrative underscores the daunting obstacles and the grim reality faced by many MDWs in exploitative labour settings, where a pervasive culture of impunity shields employers from accountability for their abusive actions. Workers endure formidable challenges often with minimal prospects for justice. Despite their courageous efforts, the legal and administrative response fell short of delivering the accountability.

5.6 Conclusion

The arbitrary domination over MDWs is why workers undergo a cycle of abuse and exploitation. The controlling authority of employers conferred through the sponsorship visa system and discriminatory employment contracts limit workers' options. Since, the living and working conditions of MDWs is controlled by powerful actors, workers' efforts were rife with obstacles, resulting in terrible costs. On most occasions, workers could not produce any evidence. The absence of a viable redressal mechanism meant that they could not lodge complaints against the perpetrators. Only a few could produce evidence and avoid further exploitation, although justice was not met.

Along with the power asymmetry between MDWs and employers, this study uncovers a complex form of power asymmetry at the state level that profoundly affects workers' living and working conditions. For instance, state-level power asymmetry is translated into discriminatory policies and laws to maintain the interests of employers and receiving states. Because of dependency, sending states cannot stand firm, which ultimately help breed numerous exploitative tools for disciplining workers.

Similarly, the power disparity between MDWs and recruitment agencies bears paramount significance. Recruitment agencies wield substantial influence in the recruitment process, placement, dispute resolution, job termination and return home. Bolstered by their political connections, agencies deftly manoeuvre in their own favour. In contrast, the socio-economic constraints, coupled with their lack of political leverage, render MDWs far less authority and strengths. Recruitment agencies are driven by profit maximisation. When MDWs attempt to exit the employment relationships from abusive working conditions, recruitment agencies both in receiving and sending countries coerce them into submission, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation. This study unearths the distressing reality in the agency offices in Saudi Arabia that was often referred to as "torture cells." by a considerable number of returnees.

Another striking power imbalance lies in the interaction between recruitment agencies in sending and receiving states. The lopsided power dynamics at the agency level result in detrimental consequences for MDWs. Recruitment agencies in receiving states frequently disregard calls from their counterparts in sending states when workers are engulfed in distress and hardship. Therefore, even a genuine attempt by the recruitment agency in

sending a state could not bring any positive outcome for workers. This negligent attitude exacerbates the plights of MDWs.

Beyond the multi-level power asymmetries, the complicity among various actors and the prevalence of a culture of impunity play pivotal roles in widening the power asymmetry between MDWs and employers. This study reveals that reporting incidents to law enforcement agencies often fails to yield tangible results, with many workers being sent back to their abusive employers. Instead of safeguarding the rights of MDWs, the state agencies favoured employers, perpetuating the oppressive system. This complicity among actors amplifies the power gap between MDWs and employers, resulting in what can be termed "hyper-asymmetry" in power relations.

Scrutinising the power asymmetries at various levels and examining the complicity of actors in reinforcing this asymmetry, this chapter has demonstrated how the unequal power dynamics between MDWs and employers culminate in hyper-asymmetry because of power asymmetries at other levels and owing to collusion among powerful actors. This study demonstrates that focusing solely on power asymmetry between employers and workers falls short of understanding the complex dynamics in which MDWs are enmeshed. Therefore, in order to secure a deeper understanding of agency it is necessary to investigate the power asymmetries at multiple levels that affects the working conditions of MDWs and widens the power relationship between employers and MDWs.

The present chapter has discussed the complexity and difficulties MDWs face in their endeavours. However, it is crucial to note that the workers are not entirely devoid of agency or power. Despite facing arbitrary domination and power asymmetries in their workplace, domestic workers have demonstrated resilience. While their options may be limited, they have found ways to contest and negotiate their circumstances. It is, therefore, a matter of appreciation to the insights that migrant workers, including migrant domestic workers, are resilient and therefore are ''adaptive agents'' (Samaddar, 2020:76). This understanding informs the forthcoming chapter (Chapter Six) that will delve into the empirical findings, illustrating the various acts, actions, tactics, and strategies employed by MDWs to challenge and negotiate their situations. Chapter SIX will shed light on the agency and resilience of

MDWs and their efforts to navigate the power asymmetries in the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor.

CHAPTER SIX

NEGOTIATION-MDWs' STRATEGIES

6.1 Introduction

Having had work experience as a migrant domestic worker (MDW) in Lebanon for a couple of years, Sadia (pseudonym) went to Saudi Arabia in 2016. Shortly after commencing her employment, her employer attempted to take her photograph without her consent. Perplexed, Sadia inquired about the reason for this intrusion. To her dismay, she was informed that a complaint had been lodged against her previous employer with the law enforcement agency and her current employer found this out through social media. Throughout her tenure, Sadia endured incessant nagging and mistreatment from her female employer, who habitually imposed repetitive tasks, restricted her access to sufficient food, sleep, and rest, and subjected her to exhaustion.

As her physical and mental fatigue escalated over time, Sadia gradually asserted herself, refusing to perform tasks twice unless adequately compensated. However, her employer reacted unfavourably to this assertion, responding with anger and physically assaulting Sadia by pushing her on the head. In response to the assault, Sadia lodged a complaint with her sponsor (*Kafeel*[34]). Pushing *Kafeel's* head, she described how his wife had mistreated her. Unprepared for such a confrontation, *Kafeel* expressed his disapproval saying "*haram*" (it is prohibited). Sadia replied, ''Am I a *Shoytan* (Satan)[35]? Why did your wife behave in this way?"

Mistreatment and open confrontation continued. A few days later, Sadia found herself in a distressing incident where her female employer attempted to inflict harm upon her by pouring hot cooking oil on her body. Refusing to accept such mistreatment, Sadia reported the incident to the recruitment office, seeking redress. However, her complaint yielded no results. Reflecting on the situation, Sadia recalled a time when the host family went for a

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[34] The official employer (or sponsor) of a worker in the Arab states is understood as a *Kafeel*. For MDWs, most *Kafeels* are men rather than women.

[35] Bangla shoytan is satan in English. In Bangla, Shoytan means a person with a bad moral character, and it is commonly used as a derogatory word. In the religion of Islam, Satan is understood as an evil spirit who rebelled and therefore was cast out of heaven.

holiday at their village residence. One morning, the female employer instructed her to clean a bottle cap. Sadia, preferring to delay the task, emphasised the use of hot water to facilitate the removal of the dirt. She argued that it would take some time. The employer was adamant and insisted on doing that immediately. Despite there being aggression in her employer's approach, Sadia showed defiance. In a sarcastic tone, she remarked, "Shall I also cleanse the impurities in your heart?" Enraged by her remark, the female employer complained to her husband, who shouted and assaulted Sadia.

The subsequent day, feeling unwell, Sadia requested that one of the children leave her alone. However, the child complained, prompting the male employer to confront her angrily. He accused Sadia of pushing their son. Denying the allegation, Sadia was met with multiple slaps and a violent outburst from the man's employer, who even threatened her with a chair. In an attempt to defend herself, Sadia retaliated by spitting at him. It was a sign of disregard and hate towards employers and it invited fierce retaliation. The couple subjected her to a relentless assault, repeatedly kicking and punching her. Blood flowed from her nose, drenching her clothes and the floor. Sadia sought refuge at *Kafeel's* sister's house, who resided in the same neighbourhood and worked as a journalist. Sadia asked her to document her injuries, but her request was declined. Determined to preserve evidence, Sadia changed her attire, preserving the blood-soaked garments in a bag.

The host family returned to Riyadh the following day. During the car journey, the employers demanded that Sadia hand over her blood-soaked clothes. Refusing to comply, she contemplated her options. Seizing an opportunity when they stopped at a highway restaurant for breakfast, Sadia pretended to need to use the restroom and entered the restaurant. She displayed her blood-stained clothes in front of a security camera and ensured the incident was recorded. Subsequently, during the remainder of the journey, the car underwent several inspections at highway checkpoints. Therefore, instead of taking her home, the employers took Sadia to the recruitment office, where agency employees forcibly confiscated her blood-stained dresses. Despite her efforts, Sadia was unable to retain possession of them. Sadia met fellow MDWs who cautioned her that agency employees often resorted to physical violence against workers who refused to go to their abusive employers. While workers harboured

anger, fear also gripped them. As a fellow worker, Sadia understood their frustration and helplessness.

Recalling her time at the agency office, Sadia described it as a "torture cell." Employees provided no sustenance or rest for the workers. Disturbingly, the recruitment agency in Bangladesh had advised its Saudi Arabian counterpart to employ violence against those who resisted placement with abusive employers. After a few days, the recruitment agency attempted to assign Sadia to a different employer. In reply, she declared her refusal to enter any household as a bond servant *[chakor hisabe ami karo basay jabo na]*. A telephone conversation was arranged with the recruitment agency and the middleman in Bangladesh, both of whom coerced Sadia to accept the employment. However, she remained resolute in her refusal. The recruitment agency in Bangladesh, in response, suggested the recruitment agency in Saudi Arabia teach her with "proper lessons."

Towards the end of the telephone conversation, a woman employee in the recruitment office resorted to derogatory language and physically assaulted Sadia by slapping her. In self-defence, Sadia warned her assailant to cease her actions. However, the woman employee persisted in her violence, indiscriminately striking Sadia. Unable to restrain herself, Sadia reciprocated with a slap, prompting other MDWs to join in immediately. They seized the woman employee by her hair and engaged in physical confrontation. Sadia reassured her fellow workers, urging them to stand united.

The above story reveals various forms of exploitation and violence perpetrated by employers. Workers' attempts to resist were met with aggression and further violence. Nonetheless, episodes display an example of resilience and courage, as workers stand firm against mistreatment they endure. It delineates how they negotiated and reconstructed their employment relationships by using agency. Workers' efforts to preserve evidence of violence reflects their determination to seek justice against mistreatments they experienced. Their sarcastic remarks, delaying in listening to their employer's instructions or requesting employers' children stay away serve as a form of resistance against their employers' abuse. In broad terms, their accounts depict their efforts in engaging with open confrontation, defiance against domination and collective resistance. In addition to the above vignette, the

experience and negotiation narratives from many other returnee MDWs are at the core of this chapter.

6.2 Negotiation Strategies by MDWs

The discourse surrounding MDWs has often been characterised by an emphasis on their victimhood, inadvertently obfuscating the strategies and tactics employed by these workers in their workplace. Against this reductionist portrayal, an array of negotiation strategies by MDWs illustrate that workers are not always powerless (Constable, 2015). Consequently, it is imperative to diagnose this portrayal of passive recipients of domination. Investigation under the present study rejects the depiction of MDWs as merely passive victims as they are involved in at least four categories of negotiations: coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive resistance, and overt confrontation. This chapter thus brings the multifaceted endeavours undertaken by MDWs to the fore. As is being discussed in the present chapter, the depiction solely through the lens of victimisation obscures their repertoire of strategies and agency, which MDWs express in numerous ways.

The data collected through this study suggests that most of the actions that MDWs undertake are done so alone, primarily in their workplaces. However, their tactics and strategies are diverse. Unfavourable circumstances sometimes compel them to be obliging and to show a compliant attitude, perpetuating and reinforcing power and domination. Depending on context, they engage in pursuing their employers through the language of rights and entitlements, trust making, putting extra effort or through supplication, which this study distinguishes as persuasive strategies.

Occasionally, they even go for small-scale collective actions. If they apply everyday resistance in the form of foot-dragging, pretending, lying, exacerbating, and alike in one context, they show an open form of resistance in the modes of argument, back talk, flouting or counter-intimidation. They temporarily stopped work for a brief period to open up avenues for negotiations. Simultaneously, they knew they cannot stop working for unlimited time. They were cognizant of their limitations and constraints and therefore they sought to maintain a good relationship with their employers. This eagerness to restore positive relationships underscores the complex entanglement MDWs face within their employment context.

This chapter depicts and analyses different forms of negotiations employed by workers and sheds light on the agency of MDWs. It illustrates how MDWs' agency is constructed and how they contest and exert their agency in an unfavourable working and living environment. Through an examination of negotiations, this study uncovers that MDWs engage in dynamic and multifarious negotiations, recognizing the complexities inherent in their relationships with employers. This chapter attempts to unravel the complexity of negotiations between MDWs and their employers and finds some common forms of negotiation strategies.

This study found a number of prominent trends in the face of power. Along with two well established scenarios, coping strategies, and everyday resistance in disguise, it has found two other prominent courses of actions employed by MDWs: persuasive strategies and small-scale open confrontation (Table 5.1), which are emerging in the migration literature. All forms of these acts, tactics and strategies engaged by MDWs are seen from a broader perspective of negotiation.

Figure 6.1: Negotiation Strategies and Expression of Agency
Source: Author's rendering based on empirical findings.

6.2.1 Coping Strategies

Before delving into the discussion on coping strategies, it is pertinent to recollect that this study does not consider coping strategies as resistance, because these are not aimed at transformation but at managing adversities. When resistance cannot be executed in a power asymmetrical relationship, driven by the desire for survival, MDWs test for numerous actions. They use various coping strategies. Several prominent coping strategies identified and delineated in this chapter are self-discipline, tolerance, accommodation, sharing and learning tricks from fellow workers and establishing a positive relationship with kind members of the family. First and foremost, amid employers' immense disciplinary control, it is imperative to acknowledge the remarkable commitment to discipline displayed by MDWs. Sticking to self-discipline enables them to negotiate challenges and strive towards their goals. MDWs resort to many forms of self-discipline to uphold their commitment to their work.

One notable example is their self-imposed discipline and the practice of refraining from receiving phone calls during working hours. By consciously avoiding such distractions, they demonstrate a strong sense of discipline and professionalism. This deliberate act of self-restraint underscores their adaptability in negotiating complexities of their work environment. It is of paramount significance to recognise that this manifestation of self-discipline does not exist in isolation. Rather, it encompasses a multifaceted spectrum of dimensions that serves as demonstration of their negotiation ability in dealing with adversities they have endured within their working environments. Broadly speaking, a common phenomenon observed entails the restriction of workers' communication and interaction, imposed by employers. To overcome that MDWs recalibrated their talking time, deferring that until night, as an illustrative example.

Alike overcoming difficulties in communication through self-discipline and negotiation, self-discipline turned to be an effective means in checking sexual harassment, including molestation, unwelcome touching, or attempting to rape. Unsurprisingly, workers feared the intrusion of their men employers while sleeping. Some feared working alone in the kitchen. To counter this, workers locked the door while sleeping or working alone. But this was impossible when they had to sleep in a lockless room. Also, locking doors were not always adequate. MDWs were worried that the abusers possessed another set of keys.

One returnee, Munia (pseudonym), had a terrible time in her employer's house. Munia understood the bad intentions of the male members of the family and checked these by engaging in her own version of self-restriction. Some of the strategies she undertook were avoiding receiving tips from men members, not exchanging smiles with them, closing the door, and opening the window when there were no female family members, and blocking the door with a table or heavy furniture before sleeping. Munia's efforts to check for sexual harassment through self-discipline resonated with other participants' accounts, although the individual courses of action differed. For instance, Roji (pseudonym) employed religious practices to protect herself from sexual harassment. She kept wearing a veil to signal her modesty and thus cope with the potential danger.

The second most common coping strategy among MDWs is adjusting to and tolerating difficulties. Aria (pseudonym), a mature returnee, had one of the highest levels of resentment regarding ill-treatment. Her female employer used to call her names, including '*Haywan*' [meaning wild animal, *janowar* in Bangla]. Aria felt angry. But she remained calm. She tolerated mistreatments including these derogatory words so that she could continue earning a salary. However, Aria's employers delayed their payments and increased ill-treatment when it was salary time. Aria, on the contrary, behaved her best and showed the highest tolerance. She spoke:

> At the end of the month, when the payment time was closer, I tried to rebuild
> my relationship and say good words. I tried to behave my best during my salary
> [payment time]. I did not reply, even when they beat me[36].

As shown, workers deliberately showed the highest tolerance in order to keep continuation of their salaries. Tolerance paid them in a multitude way although slowly might those came. For example, another returnee Sakhina (pseudonym) stated that her cruel employers gradually became kind and considerate to her. Because of her "patience" in response to ill-treatment, they became pleasing and caring. ''I tried to adjust to their lifestyles. I showed the

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[36]Aria (pseudonym), interview by author, Madhabdi, Narsingdi, 27 January 2022.

highest level of patience for months as I did not want to interrupt my earnings. Therefore, I did not react when my employer misbehaved or ill-treated me. At times, they sought a pardon when they understood their fault''.

MDWs managed to cope with their adversities through their mental preparedness to face harsh and unfavourable working conditions. Most workers anticipated that their food in the host country would not be the same and therefore were ready to adjust. They knew the work volume would be higher, and no excuse would work. Workers also anticipated that their employer would not allow them to use mobile phones during work hours. Therefore, they were ready to adjust to the situation to survive and thrive. This mental framework was constructed on the premise that there were both good and bad people in every country[37] and that working conditions abroad depend on *taqdeer* (fortune/luck). Yet, that does not mean that they completely submit themselves to their luck. They strive to help each other, wherever possible.

One returnee, Sabina (pseudonym) extended informal support to fellow workers. She met other Bangladeshi MDWs at family gatherings. She listened to their problems and conveyed those to their women employers wherever she could. She provided advice and tricks to adjust and continue. She recalled that her employer had ten brothers and five sisters. Almost all had housemaids. On family occasions, she met fellow MDWs. One MDW underwent difficulties and shared her sorrow. Sabina assured the girl by extending mental and psychological support. She conveyed this message to her employer. Although the housemaid encountered enhanced abuse when Sabina complained on behalf of the girl, it did not deter her from standing beside fellow workers and sharing advice and tricks.

Learning tricks from senior MDWs is one of the ways to survive and accommodate workplace difficulties for newer MDWs. At the initial stage of her overseas job, Akhi (pseudonym), a mature returnee, received advice from a senior MDW and it helped her immensely. Her employer did not care about her well-being. She starved for months. She shared my sorrows

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[37] For example, an interview with Runa (pseudonym), a premature returnee, revealed returnees' mental framework. Runa stated, '*valo kharap sob deshei ase'* (There are both good and bad people in every country).

and difficulties with a senior Bangladeshi worker who advised her to eat from the employer's share of food and cook, eat, and clean everything when everyone stays outside the house. This advice helped her continue her job.

From the above, it is evident that experienced MDWs offered mental support and exchanged tricks and advice with their fellow workers. They provided support to newer workers. Some of their advice proved effective, whereas others backfired. When one advised the other, they followed up with what had happened. Workers felt happy when their suggestions were helpful. Similarly, they felt pity when the advice was unsuccessful. Ventilating sorrows and seeking help from senior and experienced MDWs was an avenue to which MDWs frequently resorted.

Allying with kind-hearted family members is one such effort that they resorted where possible. Building positive relationships with kind and non-abusive family members is one of the frequently used coping strategies under exploitative working conditions. To ward off the pain of harsh working conditions, MDWs consciously form positive relationships with non-abusive members. When men employers are abusive, ill-tempered, or rude, they strive to ally with their women employers. The opposite is true when the female employer is abusive. A mature returnee, Rani (pseudonym), is an illustrative example. She remarked about her employers saying, *'purush-ta valo, mahila-ta paji''* (that her male employer cared for her, whereas the female employer was ill-behaved). The woman used to beat and reprimand Rani for silly reasons. She always used derogatory words. Rani did not let those uncontested. She showed resentments through avoiding interactions. When Rani had no faults, she received support from her male employer. Rani understood that as she observed an exchange of words about Rani between the couple.

But that support did not come automatically. Rani deliberately made a positive relationship with the male employer. Along the way, she took advantage[38] of her knowledge about the

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[38] Although making a position relationship with kind-hearted family members is one of the survival strategies for most MDWs, some attempt to extract benefits by utilising knowledge of family relationships between their men and women employers. Workers took advantage of the knowledge that their men employers were exhausted from seeking new workers. Simultaneously, their alliance with men employers could have coincided when their men employers did not have good relationships with their women employers. Yet, the likelihood of

relationship between the couple. Rani noticed the couple slept in different rooms, signalling a worsening relationship between the couple. Rani sought to capitalise her knowledge of family relationships, while the female employer's ill-treatment stimulated Rani to take this recourse. Rani's accounts of allying with her male employer resonated with Farzana's accounts. Although the male employer came and stayed at the house during the weekend, his interest in cooking helped Farzana get the opportunity to convey her misery. When Farzana spoke about her miseries including food deprivation, the male employer became sympathetic.

One of the problems of allying with the men employers is that the female employer apprehended an illicit relationship between workers and men employers. It brought severe consequences. Workers were not unaware of the risks of allying with their men employers. Therefore, to reduce misunderstandings and circumvent retaliation, workers interacted as little as possible with their men employers and avoided talking with them. But this was not always sufficient to assure their women employers. One returnee, Adrita, even swore by putting her hand on the head of the female employer:

> *Beti-ta khub kharap silo* (the female employer was terrible). She did not like that I stayed clean. She was suspicious (*sondehay kore*) of an illicit relationship (*obaidha somparka*) between her husband and me. She kept an eye on my movements and used to stay behind the door and observe me. She accused me of looking into the eyes of the male employer and talking to him. I felt exhausted. To reduce her anger and disbelief, I put my hand on her head and said, "Baba (male employer) is older than my father (in Bangladesh), and you are older than my mother. Why do you have such an absurd doubt?[39]

As indicated above, alliance with men members was risky for MDWs. Although workers sought advantage of this relationship, their misery increased on many occasions when they

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turning that relationship into a consensual physical one was not impractical. Some tend to draw pleasure and go for extra earnings through these illicit relationships (Nurchayati 2011), while others in a similar situation mostly sought to alleviate their marginalised situation by deepening relationships with men employers.

[39] Adrita (pseudonym), interview by author, Singair, Manikganj, 30 January 2022.

were allied with men members. Being suspicious, women employers arrange for early and forced returns, often without rendering any prior notice to workers. "The female employer doubted an illicit relationship between her husband and me. One day, she brought me to the agency office without any prior indication. She told me to get ready. I did not know she was bringing me to the agency office", stated Adrita.

As Adrita's case was illustrative, building a good relationship with non-abusive men members was challenging to materialise when women employers contemplate an illegal relationship and view workers as sexual rivals (Fernandez 2020:62). Although, the ill-treatment and negligence of the women employers gradually prompted workers to ally with their men employers, this was not the norm. Workers knew that their women employers were the key members with whom they had to interact most of the time. Therefore, they prefer to establish good relationships with their women employers. "I did not want to be suspected by my madam (female employer). I knew the male employer would not stay in the house much of the time, and I would work with the female employer. Therefore, I purposefully established a good relationship with her" Tamija (pseudonym), a mature returnee, expressed her insights. One of the motivations to make a good relationship with women employers was to save them from sexual harassment as well.

From the above, it is evident that MDWs negotiate ill-behaved and abusive employers by allying with kind family members. They allied with their men employers when women employers are ill-behaved, and vice versa when men employers are abusive. However, workers' efforts to create positive relationships were not limited to their men or women employers. When both man and female employers were abusive or building a positive relationship with a male member seemed risky, workers allied with other family members, such as elderly person of the family. Adrita remembered that the good relationship with the elderly woman helped her continue her job amid mistreatment by the female employer. When Adrita's employers mistreated her, the elderly woman showed sympathy stating that Adrita's parents could also scold her sometimes. As a gesture of love, the elderly woman hugged her at times. ''How would I stay for months in that house if the elderly woman would

not adore me?", recounted Adrita. Adrita's case exemplifies that under repressive working conditions, workers sometimes encounter good-hearted[40] family members.

Establishing positive relationships was not limited to good-hearted family members of the households. To stay safe from violence and to avoid abusive employers, they adopted similar strategies while staying in the recruitment office. One such example is Nabila (pseudonym), who applied wisdom to protect herself from the recruitment agency's violence. To avoid physical violence in the recruitment office and to avoid being sent to an abusive employer, Nabila established good relationships with a woman employee in the recruitment office and it resulted in avoiding going to another abusive employer and returning home. To convince her, Nabila rendered her highest service to the female employee. She served her with water, washed her socks and combed the female employee's hair. Nabila deposited her savings on her, which she received as tips from her employer's relatives during the religious festivals.

Nabila confided to the female employee that if she were to beat Nabila for the sake of her job, it would be okay. She requested to send her back home. The female employee extended her kindness and advised Nabila to tell her office boss that Nabila was beaten and not given food. Nabila acted accordingly. One day, the office boss asked Nabila whether she would go to the employer's house. Nabila replied in affirmative. But when a family came into the agency office to choose and recruit a MDW, she hid in the bathroom until they left. This way Nabila avoided going to another employer's house and could return back home.

The endeavour to cultivate positive relationships with family members, employers or employees in the recruitment offices who exhibit a reasonable disposition constitutes a tangible manifestation of workers' agency in the face of workplace adversities, thereby rendering their daily existence more tolerable. Within the context of this section, the objective is to draw focus towards the distinct strategies employed by workers in negotiating the multifaceted challenges they encounter. These strategies are characterised by a sense of self-restraint, enduring tolerance, and the strategic formation of alliances with kind

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[40] Encountering a kind-hearted person also spells out that a sense of rationalism and moral justice has guided some employers and family members to treat workers as humans (Parreñas, 2022).

individuals. The next section will provide an elucidation of workers' negotiation strategies in response to hardships through subtle forms of everyday resistance, which are often executed in disguised forms.

6.2.2 Everyday Resistance: Resistance In Disguise

Everyday resistance in disguise is one of the most studied areas in relation to subalterns, including impoverished peasants and other subaltern groups. Similar to other subalterns, MDWs' actions were contingent on individual circumstances. Everyday resistance occupies one of the significant bodies of their actions. These happen in the form of disguise and therefore not easily perceived. In case of MDWs, these include but are not limited to pretending, stealing, foot-dragging, lying, and exacerbating. These acts of resistance in disguise were common when workers felt miserable about their employers' treatment. Some of these acts did not entirely happen in disguise. Some were a combination of both disguise and open forms of resistance. One returnee, Sabina's episode is a case in point:

> After repeated mistreatment, I stopped giving my female employer *salaam* (religious greeting). I remained silent for a few days and avoided eye contact. She also did not talk to me at this time. She did not give me food or ask me to eat it. A few days later, I wanted to reconcile and aspire to make my relationship normal. I then greeted her religiously, and she replied[41].

This particular act was a combination of overt and covert action. keeping silence and stopping religious greetings were the manifestation of everyday resistance. Sabina did not stop working. Nor did she show any visible acts of defiance. Instead, she expressed resentment by being silent for a few days and avoiding rendering greetings. Sabina's female employer noticed that Sabina did not offer religious greetings but did not take any actions against Sabina. Although keeping silent and avoiding greetings seemed innocuous, and there were no visible expressions of that act, it could invite brutal retaliation in the form of misbehaviour

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[41] Sabina (pseudonym), interview by author, Demra, Dhaka, 04 February 2022.

and cruelty. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that the silence of subjugated groups can also be an expression of agency and resistance (Parpart, 2010).

While MDWs may employ tactics such as temporarily stopping work or refrain from talking, they are cognizant of the need to maintain a good relationship with their employers. They were aware of practical limitations of completely halting work indefinitely. This awareness leads them to show eagerness to restore a positive rapport, understanding that negotiations must occur within certain boundaries. Apart from the above, workers also did something unusual to pacify their anger. For instance, a premature returnee, Shayla (pseudonym) mentioned that she demanded more kitchen and cleaning ingredients than required and encouraged employers' children to waste those. The act did not redress or ameliorate Shayla's situation, nor did she intend to avail it. By the same token, this act was neither directed at negating power nor intended to negotiate forthrightly. Nonetheless, this reduced her anger, as she felt she had done revenge. This corroborates Ortner's idea that resistance can be creative and more than opposing the status quo (Ortner, 2015). In Scott's language and meaning, these everyday forms of resistance are weapons of the weak in the face of power (Scott, 1985).

Another display of everyday resistance and negotiating difficulties is the secret help and solidarity extended among workers. Workers strived to create social spaces by extending their hands to fellow workers. Their efforts were organic. They shared difficulties, rendered support, and taught tricks to each other, what Fernandez (2020:99) termed as "informal social insurance". This study found sharing advice among fellow workers as one of their strategies to overcome constraints. Despite deliberate attempts to segregate workers and denial of communication, workers secretly exchanged advice and learned techniques from each other to deal with their employers. They did so in a context where they had limited scope to meet and talk with fellow workers.

Although they feared being caught, they did not deter them from seeing each other. They met secretly on the roof, balcony, or the nearest rubbish points. They sometimes took the opportunity to meet other MDWs in shopping malls, family gatherings, recruitment agency

offices, and middlemen's houses. On these rare but precious occasions of meetings, relatively inexperienced and young MDWs learned tricks from experienced and senior workers.

Apart from examples of these forms of secret meeting, sharing, and applying tricks, everyday resistance by MDWs was conducted individually, as most involved solitary efforts. Workers' aims resorting to everyday resistance was predominantly to create a tolerable working environment or pacify anger rather than overhauling the prevailing exploitative conditions. Everyday resistance was in disguise, but workers' agency was not limited to only engaging in everyday resistance. MDWs were much more strategic and assertive to offset difficulties and attain tolerable working conditions. In the next section we are going to discuss these at length.

6.2.3 Persuasive Strategies

Apart from the above-described coping strategies, that are employed through self-restriction, accommodation or by establishing positive relationships with kind members of the family, workers engage in persuasive strategies. Here persuasive strategies mean those acts, tactics and strategies that are engaged in order to circumvent workplace difficulties and at the same time improve the working conditions. Consciousness of entitlements played a vital role in their effort to pursue employers in this regard. Subsequent discussion shows their engagement in persuasion through strategies of asking for entitlements, offering commitment, supplication, trust-building, flattering, and extra effort to make employers happy.

One of the difficulties workers encountered in their employers' house was the disruption in communication. They negotiate this difficulty through assuring their employers of their commitment to work hard. As an example, Runa (pseudonym) was not allowed to talk to her family for a while. After a few weeks, in an opportune moment she approached her employers that she needed to talk to her family. ''I said that I would work to meet your satisfaction, but I must be allowed to talk to my family. I asked my employer's wife to fix a time. She was reluctant initially, but then she acceded". Nadira (pseudonym), another mature returnee, also faced difficulties communicating with her family. As soon as she joined with her host family,

they removed her mobile SIM device. Nadira became disconnected from her family. She made the following deal:

> I left three children in Bangladesh and desperately needed to connect. They did not pay heed to my repeated requests. I then made a deal with *Kafeel*'s son. I worked in their flats (upstairs in the same building) for one hour daily. In return, they allowed me to use the Wi-Fi connection[42].

As we have seen above, Nadira earned access to Wi-Fi through a successful negotiation with her employers. In addition to that she also succeeded in increasing her salary. Her employer forced her to work in their shop along with household chores. Nadira declined. She stated that it was not her job to work in their family businesses. Her employers kept forcing her to work in the shop. Nadira took this as a bargaining point to increase her salary. After a few days, Nadira stated that she would work in the shop if she was given an additional 500 riyals. Her employers conceded. ''My monthly salary was 1000 riyals. They agreed to give me 1500 riyals in total. Therefore, I worked at the shop in the afternoon. The female employer sat at the cash counter, and I helped display clothes to the customers", she remarked. Another notable aspect of workers' negotiation when dealing with salary was to project self-deprecation and thus appeal to a sense of empathy from their employers. They made known to their employers that they were a parent, much like their employers, with the responsibility of raising children. During the salary negotiation, they expressed the necessity of salary in a convincing way. A premature returnee, Ripa, stated as follows:

> "I told them I had children like you and needed my salary to raise them. I wanted to draw out sympathy, saying, I loved my children the way you loved your child. During my salary time, I presented myself low by saying, *ana miskin* [I am poor]''[43].

Another returnee, Nuri (pseudonym, applied a similar strategy. Nuri had to work in two houses (the employer's and her sister's houses), but she received a salary only from one

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[42]Nadira (pseudonym), interview by author, Capasia, Gazipur, 21 January 2022.

[43] Ripa (pseudonym), interview by author, Manikganj Sadar, Manikganj, 26 December 2021.

house. It lasted for around 5-6 months. After that, they stopped paying Nuri. Whenever she asked for a salary, they tended to beat her. Nuri convinced them by presenting herself as a *miskin*. Presenting oneself as *miskin* was particularly prevalent in the case of unpaid salaries. As found in this study, withholding workers' salaries was a recurring abusive tool. While making their request for a salary, workers consciously positioned themselves in a vulnerable light by conveying a sense of financial hardship. It is thus noticeable that workers strategically employed the emotional tactic of eliciting sympathy by emphasising the deep affection they possess for their children and by showing their economic marginalisation. They sometimes overemphasised while doing so.

Although presenting oneself low had the potential to reinforce the power asymmetry in the relationship between workers and employers, workers elicited sympathy through supplication. They did so consciously. Some returnees even solicited sympathy and won employers' hearts through crying. Workers have applied this strategy to obtain remedies against severe difficulties or deprivation. Kamala (pseudonym) was such a returnee, who developed acute health complications while staying in my employer's house. Even after repeated requests, her employers did not bring her to the doctor. She cried and asked either to be brought to the hospital or to be sent to Bangladesh. ''When I cried, they sometimes became softer'', recounted Kamala.

Kamala's account exemplifies that crying evoked employers' sympathy occasionally and workers took the advantage of gratitude (Ueno, 2009). Even though some of these acts widened power asymmetry, workers pursued immediate attainment rather than a more significant achievement or large-scale change. Along the way to capitalising on employers' emotions and invoked help, workers utilised a sense of moral claims-making in overcoming difficulties. For example, Akhi, a mature returnee, had difficulty communicating with family members as she was denied Wi-Fi access. After a few months, she finally earned Wi-Fi access by convincing employers in the following manner:

> One day at an opportune moment, I spoke to the newly married daughter of
> my *Kafeel*. I promised to talk for only ten minutes per day. I said I missed my

children and family badly. I said I worked a lot for you; did you not feel an iota

of sympathy for me?[44]

The employer's daughter agreed on the appealing logic and rendered Akhi with Wi-Fi access. Akhi's logic exemplifies workers' persuasion skills and convincing abilities. Logic in the negotiation was complemented by their circumspection and wisdom in their actions. One such act was to build a relationship of trust with their employers. Tamija, a mature returnee, succeeded in building trust with employers and achieved several advantages. The first few months were difficult because her employers hardly treated her as a human being.

Employers did not allow Tamija a minimum of food, sleep, and rest. They treated her as a subhuman, forced her to work even when she was extremely sick. Tamija called her employers cruel. She surmounted these cruelties by building a relationship of trust. She narrated her trust-making process stating that her employers tested her by keeping money and pricey things there and here. She understood that those were plotted to test her. She did not touch anything. Her honesty and devotion to work helped her earn their trust. During initial days in her employers' house, Tamija reckoned that her employers would change their behaviour if she worked hard and stayed honest. She acted accordingly and it worked.

Like Tamija, another mature returnee, Akhi, recounted her effort to build a trustworthy relationship. She recollected that her employer went to Jeddah[45] for three days and left her alone. On the second day of their absence, Akhi found a bundle of money on the shelf while cleaning the house. She could flee from that house if she wished. But Akhi did not. Instead, she reported as soon as her employers returned from the tour. It helped her win their trust. The employers were happy and presented Akhi with a gold ring. From then on, employers used to inform Akhi when her family made a telephone call, which they had never done before. ''They became cordial with me and cared for my well-being from them on'', she recounted. Akhi's working conditions improved to a greater extent after passing that "character test" (Nurchayati, 2011).

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[44]Akhi (pseudonym), interview by author, Demra, Dhaka, 04 February 2022.

[45] A holy city in Saudi Arabia.

Along with good deeds, appealing logic and honesty, words from workers also had a profound impact. Returnees avoided exploitation and mistreatment through flattering their employers. They spoke pleasing words to make their employers happy. Romana (pseudonym), a mature returnee, apprehended that protest would only increase her difficulties. She intentionally uttered good words and it helped her a lot. Her employers became happy when she praised them. She capitalised that knowledge and mitigated difficulties through uttering pleasant words. The migration goal of Romana was to continue her income and support her family. A rupture in livelihood options due to the demise of her husband was a compelling motivation to take an overseas job. But she faced employer domination and exploitation. She had no way but to continue. She found a tactic of praising her employers, which assured her of continuation. Romana's strategy echoed Tamija's statements. "I used to say good words to my employer and their naughty children, so they gradually reduce mistreatment'', recounted Tamija.

Apart from the above, one of the few persuasive strategies undertaken by workers was to render an extra effort to impress employers. Cooking employers' favourite cuisine was one of such efforts that MDWs took to convince employers and thus earn tolerable working conditions. Many used this skill they had learned in their previous stint abroad. Others acquired and utilised that skill by learning from social media or YouTube channels. Returnees mentioned that their target was to keep employers in sound mind and thus ward off exploitation. A mature returnee, Chamily (pseudonym), recounted:

> I faced many difficulties in the initial stages. There were approximately 25 family members. They always complained and did not allow me to talk to my family. Therefore, I sought an avenue to convince the women employer. My experience in Dubai, UAE helped me cook Arabian cuisine for my female employer, who happened to be a gourmand. My efforts worked, and she gradually became pleasant. She was so pleasant in the end that she

contributed to buying me a mobile phone. Moreover, while returning, she arranged a farewell party for me[46].

Like Chamily, Roji, another mature returnee, pursued employers by employing extra effort while doing her everyday tasks. She showed no resentment when the work volume increased due to increased family members or the frequent presence of guests. Instead, she tried hard and engaged in the highest efforts. Five members comprised her employer's family when she joined. However, it increased within a few months, as *Kafeel's* daughter was divorced and returned with children to her parent's home. The total number of family members doubled in Roji's host family, and thus the work volume. Despite this, she strived her best to manage everything. ''My strategy was to complete my job with extra effort even though the work volume increased day by day. I avoided complaining. They reduced mistreatment gradually". The above recounts exemplify that cooking skills and extra effort helped to transform exploitative working conditions into tolerable ones for Chamily and Roji respectively. This chapter presented that the engagement through supplication, appealing logic, trust building effort, deliberate use of pleasing words, cooking skills and extra efforts all helped convert a harsh environment into a tolerable level.

6.2.4 Individual Open Confrontation

Along with everyday resistance in disguise, MDWs negotiate difficulties by employing many direct forms of resistance in a regular manner. Although these were conducted in a regular manner, the everyday nature of the open form of acts, tactics and strategies workers apply to navigate employers' domination at their workplaces are different from the understanding of everyday resistance. Like everyday resistance in disguise, these were also common and quotidian. Therefore, this study departs from the common understanding that MDWs merely accommodate or resist in disguise. Instead, it shows that they engage in small-scale open resistance and remain confrontational in response to the ill-treatment of abusive employers.

As found in this study, domination in the form of harsh working conditions, deprivation, violence (physical, sexual, and mental), threats, negligence, and rude behaviour prompts

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[46] Chamily (pseudonym), interview by author, Manikganj Sadar, Manikganj, 24 January 2022.

workers to argue, raise their voices, firmly reply, and show resentment. Workers subtly talk back (Ueno 2009) and exchange derogatory words, wherever possible. The resistance in the form of open confrontation manifested as counter-intimidation (Nurchayati, 2011), action-based confrontation, reporting complaints, and resisting forced return and forced immobility.

MDWs' strategies in the face of power vary as the scale of difficulties also varies for individuals. Although mostly rhetorical, workers apply counter-intimidation. During the recruitment process, Lily[47] was deceived by the middleman as she found no match between actual scenarios with what she was promised. She faced brutal torture and had no access to phone. The female employer used to scold her for silly reasons. She confiscated Lily's passport and luggage. Lily was beaten often. When it became intolerable, Lily insisted that she would not stay in their house and would return to home (*ami bolsi ami deshe chole jabo*). She chided the lady in Bangla (the worker's mother tongue) when her female employer scolded her using sarcastic words in Arabic. Lily threatened her employer by saying that her government knew about her workplace address. ''I warned her that I would lodge a case if she mistreated me further and that my government would not forgive her.''

What Lily said to her employer was rhetoric. She knew she would not be able to file a complaint, nor would her government rescue her. She wanted to create a space to reduce the level of abuse. Lily's accounts resonate with many other returnees' efforts. For instance, another returnee, Nadira recollected that one day she was on a call with her son. The female employer snatched her mobile phone in the middle. Nadira felt offended. When Nadira showed resentment, the female employer became frenzied and complained to her sons and daughters. All of them misbehaved with Nadira.

Nadira defended herself, saying, ''I know your language and perform tasks flawlessly; why then do you do this with me?''. Nadira was resentful of their disparaging words. She declared that she would not continue in their home. The next day, when the female employer uttered abusive words again, Nadira felt annoyed and said, "If you go further, I will use a knife". The female employer called her sons and daughters again. Nadira refused the allegation, saying

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[47] A pseudonym of a premature returnee.

she did not show their mother a knife. Instead, she cut vegetables while replying to muttering. But they were not convinced. Nadira recalled:

> They sent me to the recruitment office. The agency employees snatched my mobile no sooner had they brought me to the recruitment office. They checked my body and the luggage. Other MDWs informed me that women employees in the recruitment office beat workers. The agency people coerced me so I should go to my employer's house again. Otherwise, they threaten to send me to another house. When I refused, they wanted to assault me. I suggested that I had my close relatives in this town, and it would bring severe consequences if they did any harm to me. I also threatened to share their cruelty on Facebook[48].

Workers' threats were often more rhetorical than sincere. Nadira had no close relatives in Saudi Arabia who could help her. But she suggested having close relatives in order to demonstrate her strengths. She plotted that both to avoid physical violence and go to her abusive employer. As was the case for Nadira, the confrontation depicted above was primarily verbal. These contained counter-intimidation, backtalk, and exchange of derogatory words. But their negotiation against difficulties was not limited to only counter-intimidation or exchange of words. They went further. Unfavourable circumstances forced them to resort to action-based overt resistance. Among others, workers' strategies were to stop work, shut doors, stay alone, go for a hunger strike and grab hands during physical violence.

One such example is Hashi's (pseudonym) narration. Her employer's mistreatment compelled Hashi to stop work for two consecutive days. She could not sleep because she was obliged to serve her employers at night. One night, she was tired and slept. Her employer called her at approximately 11-12 pm. Hashi did not respond intentionally. The employer became angry and shouted. He then came to beat her and tried to burn her face with cigarettes. Hashi saved her face from this menace. The following morning, she called the Saudi recruitment agency and asked them to change her employer. She stayed in a room without work for a couple of

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[48] Nadira (pseudonym), interview by author, Capasia, Gazipur, 21 January 2022.

days. When the female employer requested opening the door, she declined stating that she would not work in their house anymore.

Stopping work for a brief period of time, calling the recruiting agency to change employers, or declaring not to stay in employers' houses were the expression of their willingness to confront in an open manner. Assertions against odds were even deeper. In cases of physical violence by employers, such as when employers grabbed workers' hair to assault, workers revolted in reply, grabbed employers' hands, and warned them that if they stepped further workers would do the same. A mature returnee, Rani, stated that raising voice and standing firm was something she used to improve her working conditions. She snatched the iron from her female employer's hand when the latter tried to burn her body. Rani warned her employer not to repeat it again. The other day, she grabbed her employer's hair in reply to employer's similar action inflicted upon her. She asserted that if anybody stands firm, abusive employers do not have sufficient room to commit abuse.

Rani's experience was echoed by Nadira, who grabbed her employer's hand when the latter wanted to hit Nadira with a mug. The employer was not ready to witness this response from Nadira. She was shocked and exclaimed- "How dare!". Nadira replied that she came abroad to work because she was brave. She questioned what her fault was and why her employer resorted to physical violence. Apart from replying, workers also questioned the validity of ordering them by family members other than their *Kafeels* (sponsors). They raised this question when family members exerted violence on them. Workers stopped serving exploitative members and went on a hunger strike.

Chamily, a mature returnee, recounted one episode stating that her employer's daughter called her upstairs in one morning. Chamily was working downstairs. The employer's daughter shouted and slapped Chamily several times as Chamily could not respond to her immediately. She threatened to send Chamily back home. Chamily in a sarcastic language replied that she was ready to return home. Chamily's employer's son heard about the incident and asked his sister (the employer's daughter). The employer's daughter became furious and accused Chamily of plotting a dispute between them (brother and sister), which was utterly wrong. The employer's daughter behaved rudely and wanted to assault Chamily again. In reply,

Chamily stopped eating for a few days. She declared that she would not go upstairs to serve the employer's daughter. ''I declared that I would not listen to anybody other than my *Kafeel*.''

Similar to declaring not to serve someone and asserting to return back to their home country, the act of lodging complaints against perpetrators is another form of overt resistance. In absence of viable formal complaint mechanism, workers had to resort to informal channels[49]. From workers' accounts, they informed or reported their grievances to several actors: kind and non-abusive members of the family, and recruitment agencies and middlemen, both in Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia.

Complaints to kind and non-abusive members were common among the abused returnees. It was workers' primary recourse in cases of miseries like sexual abuse. Still, this approach was not always straightforward. Instead, this was problematic, as other family members did not believe in the workers' claims. In most cases, workers could not prove their claims because of lack of evidence as perpetrators denied. A mature returnee, Maksuda remarked that one day a male member of her host family tried to force himself on her. Maksuda forcibly untied and ran to downstairs. She informed the perpetrator's sisters. But they did not believe her. She then informed the madam (female employer), who also did not take any steps. Maksuda was devastated. She insisted that she would not stay in their house. When the elderly lady (the mother of the female employer) of the house heard from Maksuda, she called her eldest son to mediate. When interrogated, the abuser said he wanted to check whether Maksuda was good or bad. No action was taken against him.

There are two possible scenarios in case of a sexual harassment. The first scenario is that other members of the family do not show seriousness against these allegations, show apathy as if nothing serious happened. The family hierarchy plays a vital role in these situations. Part of the explanation is that the women employers have limited control over their husbands or adult sons because of a patriarchal society and hierarchy in the family. One NGO personal and

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[49] Along with informal complaint channels, they also reported to the police or embassy but that was possible only after running away from their employers' house, which is discussed elaborately in Chapter Seven.

migrant activist, Monira, who had experience in dealing with sexually abused workers, recounted the following:

> If the controlling power is in the hands of women, it may cause pain in the form of deprivation, overwork, and mental torture. However, men members of the family cannot commit any sexual abuse. On the contrary, if the controlling authority lies with the male employer, the female employer cannot protect workers from sexual harassment[50] .

In the second scenario, workers are blamed, and no action is taken against perpetrators. In some cases, immediately after complaints are made, workers are deported abruptly so that workers cannot complain or communicate the incident seeking help. This study has found reporting to non-abusive family members, recruitment agencies, middlemen, police, and embassies as an act of resistance for several reasons. First, it is among the limited actions that workers can resort to in the face of exploitative working conditions or abusive employers. Bringing allegations against any family member is an open form of everyday resistance as the perpetrators get informed that allegations were lodged against them. Second, when workers inform or seek help, employers protest or retaliate. This study, therefore, conceives that any act by MDWs that invites retaliation is an act of resistance. These acts of small-scale resistance depicted so far were mostly solitary in nature.

Another direct form of overt resistance is the example of becoming runaway by MDWs. The act of asserting and attempting to untie employment relationships serves as a significant example of direct and open resistance by MDWs. In repressive contexts, such as those prevailing in the migration corridor between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, exiting or attempting to exit employment relationships has become an act of resistance and agency. Whether it is through running away, reaching amicable settlements, seeking mediation, or paying compensation, MDWs demonstrate their determination to terminate the exploitative employment relationships and assert their agency. A comprehensive discussion on this form of open resistance is provided in Chapter Six.

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[50]Monira (pseudonym), interview by author, Munshiganj Sadar, Munshiganj, 24 January 2022.

Occasionally, in conjunction with fellow workers and family members, MDWs exerted collective resistance, albeit rarely. State policies often prohibit or restrict demonstrations, collective bargaining, and NGO activism. Furthermore, some intersecting factors, such as their status as migrants and women in a patriarchal society, also inhibit any possibilities of collective resistance. Trade unionism is either prohibited or restricted; and women's forum and NGO activities are extremely limited in Saudi Arabia. The glimpse of collective resistance that this study presents is neither planned nor public, as was seen in the vignette by Sadia, depicted at the beginning of this chapter.

Sadia's story exemplified a form of collective resistance. A few years of experience abroad gave Sadia the courage to confront her employer and recruitment agency. Her cases resonate with the work of Bayat (2010), who found that unorganised and atomised individuals could mobilise around each other when state or powerful elites suppressed them. Individualistic resistance in these situations can lead to collective resistance. Nevertheless, Sadia's story illustrates that their collective resistance was reactive. It was also fragmentary and grew in response to immediate circumstances. No further advancement happened from this momentary collective resistance.

Therefore, although this study has found some examples of collective resistance, these had little prospect to develop further. MDWs had little scope to meet and mingle with fellow workers, which was fundamental to developing, cultivating, and executing collective resistance. Meetings with fellow MDWs were minimal, as employers deliberately kept workers distant from their compatriots. Recurring mobile confiscations also deterred them from communicating with one another. The sudden meetings on the house's roof, balcony, rubbish points or shopping malls did not provide sufficient time and space to help form a common platform or to develop solidarity.

While these limiting factors were created and sustained at the employer level, the state's policies set the context in many ways. No unions were permitted. There was no scope for freedom of association, demonstration, or collective bargaining in Saudi Arabia, which was pivotal for any collective effort. Second, NGO and civil society activities are limited, also

because of restrictive state provisions. Third, confinement, isolation, and debarring communication by employers and recruitment agencies obstruct them reaching support groups or cheating any platform. Furthermore, MDWs had other significant limitations, including being women and working in a patriarchal society. They were migrants, which limited them to many rights and entitlements. Furthermore, they were dispersed. Their multilayer invisibility also limited the likelihood of collective resistance.

6.2.5 Combined Manifestation

To negotiate workplace abuse and domination, MDWs exercise agency, trying to improve their work conditions in unfavourable scenarios. As depicted, along with coping strategies and everyday resistance, they engage in persuasive strategies and open confrontation. These efforts overlap, with MDWs attempting different approaches in different contexts. Their actions are situationally determined, fluid and sometimes inconsistent, as evident in the following examples.

Having working experience of around four years in Jordan, Shayla went to Saudi Arabia. Her employer uttered abusive words and shouted at her all the time, rarely allowing her to communicate with her family. One day, the female employer stopped her abruptly while talking to her family. Shayla was openly resentful, saying that she would no longer stay in their house and would want to return to Bangladesh. She asked for the key to the locker to get her luggage. She stopped work and stayed in a room for quite some time. She talked for an hour with her family before she engaged in work again.

 Shayla 's efforts were multifarious. Apart from stopping work or declaring not to stay in their house, she also used religious references. She mentioned that her *Kafeel* gave her reduced pay (100 riyals less) compared to the agreed amount. She asserted that she was a *miskin* (poor). She also referred to religion, saying –''*Allah bichar korbe*'' (the Almighty would not tolerate this kind of injustice). The reference to religion had a positive impact on employers' behaviour and attitudes. Shayla brought up Jordan's example when she argued with her employer. She opined that workers should not be afraid or shy; they must stay firm,

work efficiently, and learn Arabic. "I cried at times, but simultaneously I fought against the odds", she emphasised.

During her initial few months, Shayla was denied a mobile SIM. But she persistently insisted. Then when she received a mobile SIM, she felt she became empowered. ''I felt at least I would be able to let others know my situation'', Shayla recounted. Shayla needed rest because she worked long days and could not sleep sufficiently at night. She asked her employers to allow her to rest. But this did not work. She then complained to the recruitment agency in Saudi Arabia and sought their help. They were on her side and spoke to the employer. After that, her employers fixed a rest time during the day. Shayla was relieved. She managed another difficulty. The employers hosted a constant flow of guests, making Shayla overwhelmed with excessive workload. She insisted she could not manage if guests were in the house. She expressed her resentment and sought help. Although the female employer was not convinced initially, she then helped her. Shayla claimed she tried many ways to improve her successors' working conditions.

A combined manifestation of different acts was also visible in Falany's (pseudonym) case, who dealt with difficulties adopting a number of strategies. Falany went to Saudi Arabia in 2017 and returned after 11 months. She faced difficulties dealing with *Kafeel's* younger daughter, 35 years old widowed woman. The widowed woman was ill-behaved with Falany from the beginning. She used to detect mistakes and blamed Falany almost all the time. She snatched Falany's mobile phone and accused her of not working properly. She physically assaulted Falany several times, alleging that she stole money.

Falany was mentally affected by the ill-treatment. She complained to her female *Kafeel* with no results. Falany then found her own way to cope with it. She did not face her alone. Falany snatched the brush one day when the widowed woman tried to hit her. She completed tasks promptly and flawlessly, so the widowed woman could not accuse Falany of anything. The other day when the widow woman abused her physically, Falany stopped working and locked the door. When *Kafeel* asked Falany to open the door, Falany said she would not listen to anybody other than *Kafeel*. She demanded remedy. She asked *Kafeel* to bring her to the recruitment agency office.

In contrast to the problematic relationship with *Kafeel's* daughter, Falany established good relationships with other family members, including *Kafeel* and *Kafeel's* son. Falany recalled one episode regarding a holiday visit by her host family. On the way, *Kafeel's* son asked Falany for 100 riyals to buy fuel. She gave him money. It was the money Falany received from the elder daughter of her *Kafeel*, as she worked in their house for approximately one month. After coming to the hotel, *Kafeel's* younger daughter slapped her, grabbed her hair, and accused her of stealing her money. This violence disheartened Falany. She stayed alone in the hotel room for the entire holiday tour and did not accompany them.

After returning from the holiday, Falany declined to bring luggage from the car. The widowed daughter beat her again. Falany ran to their cousin's house in the same neighbourhood and refused to return to *Kafeel's* house. Falany felt dejected and showed resoluteness to return to Bangladesh. Her employers did not want her to return. But Falany was firm in her decision and insisted that she report it to the police. To Falany's understanding, the host family feared that it would damage their reputation if Falany reported to the police. Therefore, they agreed to arrange her return. Falany's counter-intimidation worked.

As was the case for Falany, workers resort to a constellation of strategies in the face of workplace violence and domination. In other words, workers relied on numerous negotiation strategies. As described above, Falany resisted employing diverse strategies. She confronted the abusive family member, allied with kind members, locked the door to show her antagonism, defied orders, showed resentment by staying alone in the hotel room, insisted that they brought her to the recruitment agency office, stayed in the hotel room alone, ran away from the employer's house, threatened to report to the police, and finally returned home. Her actions included all elements of coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open form of resistance.

Falany's multifarious challenges and responses resonated with Pia's (pseudonym) difficulties and negotiation strategies. Pia had to serve a joint family of approximately 30 members. She had to work in their garden, stay awake until late at night and hardly had any respite. Overwork caused her poor health. Her employers accused her of pretending to be sick,

although Pia felt like dying. They abused her verbally all the time. Pia was annoyed. Nevertheless, she tolerated showing the highest level of patience.

Then one day Pia exploded in a surprising way. She created a scene. She brought a knife from the kitchen, placed it on her belly, and insisted that she would commit suicide. Her employers were not prepared to see this happen. They became frightened. Pia asked why she was given a salary of 800 riyals despite 1000 riyals being written on her visa (should be read as contract). She questioned why she was deprived. She insisted that her host family was big. She urged to employ someone who wanted to work with only 800 riyals. She also said she was a *miskin* (poor) and left her children at home. She then questioned why they did not allow her to talk to her family? Thereafter, she declared that she would not stay in their house. She insisted on bringing her to the recruitment agency office. She locked her door and sat there for several hours. After a while, when her employers called her to open the door, she replied that she would not open the door until they had solved these issues.

Pia threatened her employer with a suicide attempt, made them panic and thus created an ambience to vent her resentment about ill-treatment. She applied logic to convince them. While doing so, she also used supplication techniques and presented herself as a poor person to invigorate sympathy. Pia's accounts exemplify that MDWs use different strategies, including open and direct confrontation, persuasion in addition to coping strategies and everyday resistance.

This study unpacks a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted strategies employed by workers, which encompass not only coping strategies and everyday resistance but also extend to persuasive strategies and open confrontation. It is of paramount importance to emphasise that, contrary to preconceived notions, the primary aspiration of these workers does not inherently revolve around resistance. Instead, their overarching goal centres on the pursuit of safe workplaces characterised by decent working conditions. Their earnest endeavour is to foster amicable relationships with their employers while maintaining a peaceful work environment. From workers accounts, it is found that MDWs do not initiate their employment relationship with acts of defiance or challenges against ill-treatment or domination by their employers or recruitment agencies. Instead, their initial approach is rooted in the utilisation

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of coping strategies and the discreet application of everyday resistance. Over time, as a cumulative constellation of lived experiences, language acquisition, and increased consciousness, they gradually transition towards employing persuasive strategies and open confrontations, as part of their evolving agency. This progression serves as a testament to the transformative nature of the agency of MDWs.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to unravel the intricacies of MDWs' negotiation strategies that manifest through a wide-ranging of acts, tactics, and strategies. These are dynamic, context-specific, and situational. MDWs do not adhere to a single strategy. Instead, they adopt different approaches. Instead of overturning oppressive structures, their primary objective was to resolve immediate difficulties, pursue fair working conditions, and ameliorate their working and personal lives. Based on workers' accounts, this chapter delineated their activities under a broad theme of negotiation that subsumes four distinctive strategies: coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation.

Among the above four, coping strategies and everyday resistance were often treated as the only two options for MDWs. But this study rejects the binary of coping strategies and everyday resistance. Despite numerous constraints, MDWs negotiate workplace mistreatment by adopting another two other noticeable strategies. One such is the open confrontation. This study identified powerful stories of open confrontation that fell outside the boundaries of everyday resistance. It has found open confrontation in the form of counter-intimidation, complaints, back talk, stopping work for a brief period of time, defiance, shutting doors, assertion not to work in the employer's house, and showing resentment.

Although direct confrontation in the form of backtalk, lodging complaints, showing evidence and counter-intimidation were regular affairs, those were open and therefore were different from the common understanding of everyday resistance that happened in disguise. Therefore, these go beyond Scott's (1985, 1989, 1990) conceptualisation of everyday resistance and the difference between everyday resistance and open confrontation is clear.

This study advances the idea that these open individual acts of resistance exercised by MDWs are essential for understanding workers' agency and addressing MDWs' challenges.

Apart from the above three, the acts of persuasion were another dominant trend that prevailed in workers' efforts against domination. The workplace of MDWs was not only a "site of resistance" or a "site of conformity". It went beyond this simple dichotomy as workers were also involved with persuasive strategies. Workers engaged in persuasive strategies through making efforts in capitalising entitlements, adhering to commitment, building trust, exerting extra effort to attain a recognition or occasionally understating own ability during conversations. These strategies exemplify their effort to convince their employers and make the workplace favourable.

It is imperative to discuss how persuasive strategies were distinctive to coping strategies. One of the distinctive features between the coping and persuasive approach is that while coping strategies are to recede from one's demand, persuasive strategies aim to attain workers' own agenda. Moreover, while coping strategies may oblige to the existing power structure, persuasive strategies keep workers' willpower alive. The final distinction grounded from the workers' experiences is that persuasive strategies are more active and assertive than coping strategies. This chapter argues that understanding the nuances between coping and persuasive strategies is one of the vital areas in order to comprehend workers' agency.

This chapter outlines various manifestations of coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation. The negotiations of MDWs exemplify their engagement in multifaceted practices. This chapter highlights the significance of understanding the dynamics of negotiations. It provides insights into the intricate nature of these negotiations. It emphasises the need for a more nuanced understanding of MDWs' agency within the constraints of their employment conditions. By shedding light on the multifarious activities and strategies employed by MDWs during negotiations, this chapter contributes to a deeper comprehension of the negotiation processes within unequal power dynamics.

The repertoires of acts, tactics, and strategies in the form of coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation, explicated in this chapter, revealed many nuances of negotiation that express MDWs' agency. One of the extraordinary steps by MDWs was their efforts to extricate themselves from exploitative employment relationships. Once they could run away and report to the law enforcement agency, they were sent back to their workplaces. Reporting to the recruitment agency offices also brought the same results. Upon gaining the agency to negotiate such unfavourable circumstances, they exhibited a resolute refusal to re-engage with exploitative working conditions, which we will explore in the next chapter (Chapter SEVEN).

CHAPTER SEVEN

EXITING DOMINATION AND POWER ASYMMETRY

7.1 Introduction

Rubi (pseudonym), an experienced migrant domestic worker (MDW), who worked in Lebanon and UAE, went to Saudi Arabia in 2019, stayed for two years and three months, and returned in January 2021. Her job was to take care of an elderly lady including household chores. The elderly lady was demanding and authoritative. When Rubi needed to go to bed at night after completing all my jobs, the lady ordered her to take her to bathe. The elderly lady used to call her sons, who beat Rubi if she defied the elderly lady's command. Employers confiscated Rubi's documents, including her passport. They also seized her mobile phones and contact numbers in the very first month of her employment. After repeated requests, she was allowed to contact her family once a month for a few minutes. Apart from that, she could not communicate with anyone. Two Bangladeshi workers used to clean her employer's house once a fortnight. Rubi thought she would share her sorrow with them. But employers did not allow her to talk to any Bangladeshis.

Rubi's employers did not bother about her well-being. Rubi alleged she did not face physical torture in Dubai, whereas there were no days in Saudi Arabia when she was not beaten. Due to torture, the muscles of her legs were wounded. She was beaten so severely that she could not lie on one side of her body. She received a salary for only six months against the service she provided for two years. They promised to pay her unpaid salaries before she left, but it never happened. To her account, Rubi tried to avoid running away because the house was far from the main road. She thought she would not be able to run much from that house. However, she decided to run away due to their excessive torture (*ottachar*). She became familiar with the surroundings while accompanying the old lady. She asked her about any landmark building or so while commuting. Thus, she was known to the nearest police station.

One day, she ran away from her employer's house and went to the police seeking help. When her employer came to the police station, she refused to return to her workplace. But it did not work. She had to return to her employer's house. While leaving the police station, she

thought that their (police) contact number would help her in the future. She requested their phone number. But the police refused to give her any contact number. Instead, they gave a number to her employer. After coming to the house, employers beat her severely. Rubi's case is no exception. The outcomes of the runaways were almost identical to those of other runaway workers. But that did not deter them from their attempt to exit exploitative employment relationships.

Uncertainty, insecurity, lack of means, and fear of further victimisation are some of the competing reasons that workers often refrain from leaving their employers. From workers' accounts, it becomes evident that they only consider terminating their employment relationships after exhausting other alternatives. Only when nothing else works do they plan to exit. For a runaway worker, the challenges are enormous. For instance, workers are frequently run after by their employers and recruitment agencies. If they report to the police or are discovered by the police, they are coerced and obliged to return to their abusive employers.

Becoming a run-away incurred inherent costs. The legal provisions in Saudi Arabia have criminalised the act of running away. Runaway workers are often subject to false accusations (Frantz, 2013). Once deported, they are barred from re-entry for five years. Despite the deleterious consequences of running away, workers still choose to escape and defy the state's oppressive and discriminatory provisions that disempowers them. Running away from an abusive employer's house challenges and undermines the state provisions. This is one of the reasons why this study considers running away as a display of agency, often undertaken as a measure of last resort. Another rich manifestation of workers' agency is the story-making strategies to defy immobility in a domination and exploitative setting, which will be unfolding in subsequent sections.

7.2 Exiting Employment Relationships

MDWs resort to a repertoire of open resistance. One of them is their efforts to untie themselves from abusive employment relationships. Despite the risk of retaliation, they strive to leave their employers when faced with exploitative conditions. To exit, they employ various

strategies such as running away, paying compensation, or reaching an amicable settlement through mediation by recruitment agencies or by crafting stories. These decisions are voluntary, although they arise from a complex interplay of factors. MDWs often only reach this point when they have exhausted all possible efforts to continue their jobs .

In oppressive working conditions, the intentions of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) typically revolve around two main options: either planning to exit or seeking to improve their working conditions. Although centred on consumer dissatisfaction, Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice framework proves insightful while assessing MDWs' decisions regarding their employment. According to Hirschman, power stems from the ability to express dissatisfaction (voice) or to leave (exit), with voice holding particular significance when exit is not feasible (Hirschman, 1980: 445). Thus, applying this framework can aid in understanding the agency of MDWs.

Drawing from the Hirschman's study, Dowding et al. suggested that the relative costs and benefits associated with exit and voice differ depending on the context (Dowding, John, Mergoupis, and VanVugt, 2000: 472). This finding supports the idea that exit and voice are not mutually exclusive. Thus, it is logical to think ones' behaviour beyond the dichotomy of exit and voice. In line with that thought, the Hirschman's framework introduces a third component: loyalty, which is often viewed as passive. While Hirschman's exit, voice, and loyalty (EVL) framework has been expanded upon conceptually and empirically in various fields, loyalty is not explored within the scope of the current study.

Instead, a proposed theorem by Hirschman that considers the presence of repression alongside exit and voice, proves worthy of consideration for this study. Hirschman's analogy, suggesting that only two out of these three variables can be controlled, is helpful in understanding MDWs' decisions when facing repression in their workplace. The inference could be drawn in the way that when employers stifle voice and enforce repression, MDWs opt to exit the employment relationship. In other words, exit becomes the last resort only after voice proves ineffective under repression.

Before resorting to exiting employment relationships, returnees attempted multiple strategies with little success, striving to meet their employers' expectations. However, as the above accounts show, the more workers complied with their employers' instructions, the more they mistreated them. Consequently, listening to and complying with employers did not yield positive results. In a similar vein, defiance also did not bring positive results. Those even invited retaliation. Workers therefore planned to find opportunities to untie employment relationships.

Though not physically restrained, workers often find themselves unable to escape their predicament. Even after the contractual period ends, they are not allowed to return home. It dispels any notion of fair working conditions for mature returnees. Many mature returnees attempted to return home multiple times but faced numerous obstacles that either delayed or thwarted their efforts. Employers engaged in various excuses and tactics, such as not issuing exit visas, withholding salaries, or confiscating belongings, to prevent their return. In addition to that, employers displayed a change in behaviour, pretending kinder towards the end of the contract period, to counter workers' intentions to leave. In response, workers employed false promises and requested leave instead of asking for a final return, knowing that they were never going to return. Thus, story-making emerged as an effective tactic to obtain employers' consent and amicably sever the employment relationship.

As with other forms of resistance, untying employment relationships came at a significant cost. This study highlights that running away, reporting to the law enforcement agency, refusing to return to the employers' house, or prematurely returning home is a unique way for workers to negotiate mistreatment and constraints. Through these actions, workers seek to escape the pervasive power and domination. Similarly, exiting employment relationships through compensation, amicable settlement, and story-making showcases their agency, representing both the rejection and negotiation of power dynamics.

7.3 Barriers and Risks to Exit

Exiting employers causes enormous risks. Nila's (pseudonym) case was illustrative. Her employers were oppressive. She felt insecure as there were no neighbours nearby. Due to these compelling reasons, Nila decided not to continue staying in that house and was

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desperate to find an alternative. On the contrary, her employer was determined to prevent her from leaving. To intimidate her, men members of the family took her to a sheep farm and threatened her, claiming that some miscreants were planning something terrible. They presented her with two options: either staying in their house or working at the sheep farm. She apprehended a potential sexual abuse if she stayed in the farm. Therefore, to escape the terrifying situation, she agreed to continue working in their house.

Nila did not want to stay in the employer's house. Declaring to not stay in the employer's house was an act of resistance in an open form. However, she could not escape retaliation. Her employer threatened to obtain her consent to stay. While she resisted by attempting to untie employment relations, she was threatened by her employers. Nila used her wisdom and altered her decisions. She chose to work at the employers' house rather than work in the farmhouse. But that was the beginning of a difficult journey. Within the next few months, Nila developed pain in her waist due to overwork. The elderly woman she served beat Nila, whatever she had in her hands. She used derogatory words, including *haywan* (animal) almost constantly. Nila could not but tolerate these derogatory and dehumanising words. Her employers deducted money from Nila's salary by bringing false allegations of damage. One day, after Nila was beaten for no reason, Nila's employers offered her 50 riyals. Nila was concerned about her dignity. She rejected that money and said, "Am I a small child that I will forget everything seeing money?" She said that she was poor, but that did not mean that she would tolerate everything. Nila asked them to send her to Bangladesh in two days. She recollected the next episode in the following manner:

> When I did not want to stay in their house, the employer said I would be allowed
> to return if I paid the compensation. I said, "You gave money to the recruitment
> agency, not me; go and recover money from them. [...] As I had no husband in
> Bangladesh, I tried to continue, even though it was excruciating. At times, I
> thought of untying my employment relationship. I feared societal vilification in my
> home country. However, my employer's house was in a mountainous area in the
> desert. One would not know whether someone had been killed or discarded.
> There was no scope to run away. I apprehended that the predators would have

abused me if I ran off. Sometimes, I wondered if I could leave that house by being a bird[51].

Nila's account suggests that workers juggled many factors before making their decisions. Nila faced numerous challenges, yet she continued her work. She contemplated running away, but she carefully considered the pros and cons of her intended action. Firstly, because of her husband's death, she had to be self-reliant and support her family. Secondly, she feared societal perceptions and the potential negative comments from neighbours and relatives. Thirdly, she considered her safety, as running away had inherent risks. Finally, she envisaged the uncertainty of the journey in untangling employment relationships. The convergence of these factors deterred her from attempting to leave her employer's house.

Nila's account illustrated that workers exercised prudence and wisdom while resorting to negotiation strategies. They carefully chose and applied these strategies, staying mindful of their positions, potential risks, likelihood of retaliation, viability, context, and consequences. While deciding on and showing resistance, they had to break impediments enacted by employers. Employers, in general, disallowed workers from interacting or communicating with fellow workers, creating a restrictive environment. Workers who were in those situations, followed a series of thoughtful exit plans. They planned their personal safety, suitable time for escape, and exit strategies. They familiarise themselves with the neighbourhood, inquiring during outings or shopping trips to identify reporting locations or nearby police stations. After leaving their employers' houses, they sought help from neighbours, acquaintances, or the police.

Returning home is workers' last resort when faced with exploitative working conditions. However, returning home before completing the contract was immensely difficult, as employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and state provisions did not allow it. When workers' efforts were exhausted and everything went beyond their tolerance, they attempted to terminate employment relationships through alternative means. However, constant monitoring limited their efforts. Employers and recruitment agencies demanded monetary compensation, making it impossible for many workers to escape abusive conditions.

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[51] Nila (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Araihazar, Narayanganj, 01 February 2022.

Arju (pseudonym), a premature returnee, shared her account of the situation where her *Kafeel* did not take any responsibility for her. On the other hand, *Kafeel*'s wife (female employer) also refused to let her return to Bangladesh. Furthermore, the female employer prevented *Kafeel* from purchasing a return ticket for Arju. Adding to her distress, the female employer demanded compensation from Arju. Arju was bewildered by the demand, questioning how she could possibly compensate them. However, it is not just employers who demand compensation; recruitment agencies also impose such demands to cover their recruitment costs. The coercive nature of this practice by recruitment agencies is evident. The recruitment agency owners asserted that they were generous as they arranged return tickets for the returnees. However, concomitantly, they confessed that they put pressure on workers for compensation. One recruitment agency owner stated:

> One worker, I sent, stopped working and wanted to return without any reason. When I requested that she stay and continue working, she said she badly missed her daughter and could not work. I said you had to pay 3,00,000 takas (3000 USD) as compensation. However, this did not work. I had to buy a return ticket for her[52].

For mature returnees, the challenge was not smaller. Rather, it proved to be an enormous struggle to terminate their employment relationships and return home. These workers wanted to go back home immediately after completing their contracts. According to the contract, the employers were obligated to issue exit visas and purchase return tickets for them. However, instead of fulfilling this obligation, the employers employed many cunning ploys. Some even sent workers to *Safar jail* in order to avoid the cost of proper channels for sending workers back home. As a result, workers spent months in *Safar jails*. Saudi authorities record their information and fingerprints, which could lead to barring re-entry if the employers make false accusations.

Some workers resorted to strikes by stopping work, as their employers did not issue exit visas or buy tickets, yet still expected them to continue working. An example is Sabila (pseudonym), a mature returnee, who became sick due to overwork. She suffered from regular fever and

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[52]Owner of L Overseas (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Dhaka, 30 January 2022.

tonsillitis due to excessive use of water for cleaning and washing. When Sabila requested treatment, she faced insult and cruelty. Upon arguing, her employers even threatened physical assault. Sabila was forced to work for an additional nine months beyond her two-year contractual period without any remuneration.

Employers extracted Sabila's labour for those extra nine months, deliberately delaying her return home. When Sabila insisted on leaving, the female employer used food as leverage, threatening not to provide her with meals if she did not work. Sabila bravely responded that she would rather not eat. Despite refusing to work for an entire week, she faced further intimidation as her employers threatened to report her to the police and confine her for an additional five years. Having no other alternative, Sabila asked the driver for help. But Sabila's desperate attempts to exit her employment relationship were thwarted when the driver informed the employer about her intention.

Returning home was a challenging ordeal for both premature and mature workers. Premature workers were not allowed to return home. They were not physically confined but felt bound to stay. Their efforts to return home were circumscribed by many factors. Employers' consents were mandatory as there were requirements for exit visas. In most cases, workers were asked to compensate for the recruitment costs, which was almost impossible for many. For mature returnees, the context was different. But workers' felt the problem of not being able to leave employers. Most mature returnees had to stay for an extended period after completing their two-year contracts, as employers held controlling power. Delays in issuing exit visas and purchasing air tickets were common tactics used by employers. In addition to that, many employers withheld workers' salaries, while some acted amicably towards the end of the two-year contract period. However, their true intention was to maximise the labour force. Employers forced workers to stay beyond their contract duration to avoid the costs associated with placing a new worker (Parreñas, 2022:113). This led to the adoption of various schemes to delay workers' return.

7.4 Exit Provisions

MDWs' endeavours are constrained by power gaps that operate at multiple levels, ultimately leading them to seek an exit from their employment relationships. However, workers are unable to do so unilaterally. The standard employment contract includes provisions that grant workers the option to leave their employers before the contract's end. Nevertheless, these provisions are inherently discriminatory. For instance, Article 14 states the following:

> The employer may terminate the contract by serving a written notice upon DSW (Domestic Service Worker). Such termination shall be affected only on the expiry of a period of 30 days from the date of service of the notice on DSW. The DSW shall be paid the wages for this period of 30 days. However, if the termination is intended with immediate effect, the notice shall state the same and shall be accompanied by wages of one month. The employee may also terminate the contract by giving a written notice of 60 days to the employer and shall pay the employer an amount equivalent to 2 (two) months' wage before departure. However, if the employee terminates the contract with immediate effect, he/she shall pay an amount equivalent to 3 (three) months' wage before departure. The employer on payment of the amount mentioned hereinabove shall immediately provide the necessary papers to effect exit of DSW from Saudi Arabia (Article 14, The Standard Employment Contract).

These provisions significantly restrict the mobility of workers, thereby limiting their efforts to terminate their employment relationships. While employers possess the right to terminate workers with 30 days' notice, workers are required to provide a 60-day notice. In the event of an employer's notice of termination, workers must continue to work for one month. The employers must pay for that duration. It means that employers receive one month of service for one month's salary during the notice period, resulting in no penalties for employers and no additional benefits for workers.

On the other hand, if workers intend to terminate their contract, they must serve a two-month notice. During these two months, they are obligated to continue working for their employers and, additionally, are required to pay the employer an amount equivalent to two

months' salary. As a result, a total of four months' salary or service equivalent needs to be paid or rendered as compensation if workers want to terminate their contract. These discriminatory conditions severely limit workers' ability to exit from abusive employers, ultimately reinforcing the power asymmetry between workers and employers. Furthermore, the standard employment contract mandates that workers must serve a written notice to terminate the contract, raising concerns about how a worker with limited education and linguistic skills[53] can fulfil this requirement. Moreover, some provisions of the contract prove impractical from the workers' perspective. For example, Article 12 states the following:

> The parties to this contract shall endeavour to resolve [any] dispute, if any, arising from this contract amicably through the Ministry of Labor. However, if the same cannot be resolved as above, the contracting parties may refer the dispute to the appropriate Saudi authorities for [re]conciliation and/or resolution (Article 12, The Standard Employment Contract).

Evidently, in the standard employment contract, the designated entities responsible for arbitrating disputes were exclusively drawn from the host countries. This raises notable apprehensions concerning the avenues available to MDWs for seeking redressal within the purview of the Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia, especially when they reside within the households of their employers. May look good in papers, these are not less than impractical. Therefore, the procedural feasibility in accessing the relevant authorities for lodging appeals warrants careful examination. These critical issues needed to be incorporated into the standard employment contract, should it aim to safeguard the rights and well-being of MDWs.

7.5 Social Stigma and Family support in Exiting Employment Relationships

Exiting employment relationships and returning home before the completion of the contractual period was highly humiliating for MDWs. On the one hand, it ruined their livelihood options, while on the other, workers' neighbours, acquaintances and relatives including loved ones humiliated them with castigating derogatory comments. On most

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[53] Above two-third of Bangladeshi MDWs could not communicate in a foreign language (GoB, 2020b).

occasions, neighbours assume that sexual exploitation prompted workers exiting employment relationships and returning home. These people delivered defamatory words, suggesting that something terrible happened to the premature returnees. This negative discourse circulated in the community about their sexual reputation (Fernandez, 2020:64: 108).

As found in this study, society became an invisible force in deciding to exit employment relationships. The likelihood of neighbours' derogatory comments became one of the compelling reasons for workers to avoid returning home early. In other words, negative societal perceptions invited significant implications on workers' decisions to terminate employment relationships. They perceived returning home early as a disgraceful decision because neighbours and relatives would make fun of them. Negative societal perceptions and bullying permeated the lives of the returnees' families, including their children. Therefore, societal denigration became one of the compelling reasons why workers tended to avoid disengaging employment relationships or returning early.

Returnees were aware of negative societal perceptions before taking overseas jobs, but they embraced the challenge. One mature returnee, Runa (pseudonym), prepared for her second stint in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker. She anticipated vilification from neighbours and relatives in case any bad things happened. Therefore, she sought prayers so that she would get a good employer [*valo Kafeel*]. She stated that if something bad happened and she had to return home early, she would not be able to face society [*samaj-a mukh dekhate parbo na*], family, and friends. She lamented that society could be unscrupulous and unkind towards MDWs. What is prevalent is that society indirectly played a role when workers struggled abroad. Therefore, deciding whether to exit the employment relationship or return home early was a complex decision. By returning early, they ended their livelihood options and faced the risk of societal vilification. Therefore, along with the motivation to retain their livelihood, societal denigration was one of the reasons they engaged in the highest efforts to continue enduring domination in asymmetric power relationships.

Unlike societal vilification, workers' families played an entirely opposite role in exiting employment relationships. As found in this study, family support was indispensable in workers' efforts to terminate employment relationships, including through story-making.

Families were intensely involved in making up the story. Their support was crucial in the absence of an institutionalised firewall. In other words, the outcome of workers' efforts depended on the agency of workers' families as well. From workers' accounts, it was evident that MDWs' families back at home were deeply involved in protecting, rescuing, and bringing back their loved ones, especially when workers faced difficulties.

In the absence of a formal support mechanism, family involvement was vital on many occasions. One premature returnee, Sabiha's (pseudonym) family efforts to exit abusive employers, is a case in point. Sabiha decided to go abroad when her husband left her and broke off the relationship. The middleman promised her a medical visa[54], but she was cheated and sent on a housemaid visa. Sabiha recalled struggling for months before she could untie the employment relationship. Sabiha's family could not talk to her daughter even once a month. The returnee's father recalled that amid repeated appeals to send his daughter back, the wife of Sabiha's *Kafeel* warned Sabiha's father, suggesting whether Sabiha's family wanted their daughter back or her corpse. The threat scared Sabiha's parents, leaving them speechless and helpless.

Sabiha's father recounted, "I immediately went to the house of the vice chairman in our locality and sought help to bring back my daughter. I also communicated with BRAC (one of the leading NGOs in Bangladesh) to help bring back my daughter." It took enormous effort on the part of Sabiha's parents. They lodged a complaint with the relevant public office through a local NGO, mentioned above. For the next few weeks, Sabiha's parents pursued both the NGO and the public office tirelessly before Sabiha could escape the exploitative relationship and return home. Sabiha's parents' efforts were instrumental in bringing her back.

Another premature returnee, Amiron (pseudonym), faced a similar problem, as her host family did not allow her to return. Amiron thought about running away from that house, but the host house was located in the desert, requiring at least a two-hour walk to the main road. When Amiron understood she could do little by herself, she requested that the agency help her and arrange her return to Bangladesh. But they did not pay heed to her repeated requests.

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[54] Workers were aware of the difference between working in a house and hospital or madrasah. Therefore, many workers preferred to work in a hospital or any religious school or markets as a cleaner. But they were deceived by the recruitment agency and middlemen on many occasions. Workers were promised to arrange a medical visa but were sent to a household (*basabari*).

Meanwhile, the situation exceeded tolerable levels. Amiron shared her sufferings with her family, who then contacted the recruitment agency and the middleman. Their initial requests were also turned down. Amiron's parents then intensified pressure and threatened to file a case. This initiative worked, and the recruitment agency was obliged to communicate with their counterpart in Saudi Arabia. They then arrange her return.

Family support yielded positive results in untying employment relationships for Robia as well. Robia was in extreme difficulties and could not manage any more. Repeated requests to the recruitment agency and middleman did not produce any result. She then informed her brother of her difficulties, who pressured the middleman, giving them an ultimatum to bring Robia back. Being frightened, the middleman left the locality. Robia's brother then requested the recruitment agency to take necessary actions. When they did not pay heed, he and some of his politically connected friends invaded the recruitment office and vandalised the office furniture. Within a few days, the recruitment agency arranged for her return.

Another example is Mitu's case. Mitu's husband's job as a police informer helped in her return. The recruitment agency office was preparing to send Mitu to another employer's house. While staying in the recruitment office, Mitu was allowed to talk to her husband through a video call. Although she could not convey her appalling condition on the call because agency personnel were around her. Mitu's husband understood the situation. He complained to a police station, and the police took it seriously. Mitu's husband's previous job as a 'police source' helped in her return without further menace.

During a crisis, recruitment agencies and middlemen often ignored workers' calls. Workers' appeals to rescue them from exploitative working conditions were ignored. Due to power asymmetries, workers and their families struggled to hold these actors responsible. Because of their higher socio-economic and political status, recruitment agencies and middlemen could exercise power at their volition. Nevertheless, it was revealed that workers' families' efforts played a crucial role in influencing the responses of recruitment agencies and middlemen. Therefore, although not frequently seen, workers, with the support of their family, friends, and relatives, could overpower the might of recruitment agencies and middlemen by exerting pressure at times, and successfully help in exiting exploitative employment relationships.

7.6 Exit Strategies

To exit exploitative employment relationships, MDWs employed various techniques. Some of the frequently used strategies included counter-intimidation, amicable settlement through paying compensation, running away, and story-making. It is essential to emphasise that workers' efforts through the above methods were not isolated; they often utilised a combination of approaches. When one tactic did not yield results, they resorted to another approach. Moreover, at times, they employed multiple tactics simultaneously. This section primarily focuses on the strategies of running away and story-making that workers used to exit from exploitative employment relationships.

7.6.1 Running Away

Workers employ a diverse repertoire of acts, tactics, and strategies to navigate challenging workplace conditions and improve their working conditions. As we have seen in Chapter 5, workers negotiate workplace difficulties in multifarious ways, including coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation. Therefore, running away is often seen as their last recourse. After exhausting all other options and efforts, they may decide to terminate their employment relationships. However, returning home before completing their contract proves exceptionally challenging due to some compelling reasons. Although workers are not confined physically, they feel obligated to stay. It is impossible to leave workplaces without jeopardising their status. Workers need exit visas issued from their employers. Their appeals to issue exit visas and arrange them return home are responded by asking for compensation. While recruitment agencies get involved in the process, they also take the side of employers and coerce workers to either stay or repay the recruitment costs. But, affording such compensation is not feasible for workers, leading them to consider running away as an alternative.

Running has never been that easy. Rather, it invites many other challenges. Leaving employers without the consent of employers is considered a criminal offence. Those who are caught, face punishment through incarceration, deportation, and false accusations (Parreñas, 2022:5; Frantz 2013). Therefore, becoming runaways entails significant costs and risks. Runaway workers jeopardise their chances of re-entry, facing the possibility of being banned

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from returning to the host country. Leaving employers' houses causes uncertainty, insecurity, and risk as well. Workers may end up with perpetrators, exacerbating predicaments. Since employers, recruitment agencies and middlemen run after runaway workers, they run the risk of being forced back into abusive working conditions and face retaliation. Even reporting to the law enforcement agencies also result in returning to their abusive employers, as state entities favour employers.

Notwithstanding the likelihood of these risks and uncertainties, workers continue to opt for the course of departing their employers, manifesting a compelling impetus to exit from the oppressive power and domination they experience. This effort represents the exertion of their agency. This is an enormous effort on the part of workers. Nevertheless, it is intriguing to observe that the discourse encapsulating the endeavours of workers to sever ties with their employers often finds itself entwined within a fabric of disparagement. The findings of the present study challenge this prevailing narrative, thereby casting an illuminative spotlight upon workers' pursuits as nothing short of remarkable and extraordinary.

7.6.2 Story-making

Leaving a school-going daughter with her elderly mother, Doly went to Saudi Arabia in 2016 and returned in 2021. She worked with her first employer for 20 months. They did not give her the last ten months' salary. When she argued, they stopped giving her food for several days. She survived by drinking water. She was transferred to a second employer, where she worked for seven months. To her understanding, the second employer bought her (*kine nise*) with the promise that they would pay the pending salary. However, Doly never received this salary. She worked seven months in her second employer's house and received salaries at the end. However, the employer deceived her with a cunning ploy. Immediately after paying her seven-month salary, they borrowed this money from Doly, which they had never refunded. Keeping her salary pending, she was transferred to a third employer, where she worked for more than two years. The three families with whom she worked were relatives of each other. Every time she was transferred, Doly was promised that her pending salaries would be paid, but this did not happen.

Doly experiences manifested employers' inordinate control and domination. From the core of her heart, she felt it was better to become a prisoner than to go abroad as an MDW. To her, prisoners can talk to each other in prison and share their feelings. In employers' houses, MDWs do not get that liberty. Employers even control workers' thoughts. She recollected mentioning, "My employers used to ask me what I was thinking. I could not avoid giving her an answer, as she repeatedly asked me what I thought. She used to hurt me by poking her fingers into my body and forcing me to know my inner thinking. I had to lie in those situations." After tolerating these difficulties while staying in her third employer's house for two years, she prepared to return to Bangladesh. But her employers had a different idea. She shared:

> "They did not allow me to return even after the contract ended. I requested them the umpteenth time with no results. They deliberately delayed my return process by not issuing exit visas or buying tickets. I was mentally devastated as my salary was also kept pending. I thought of committing suicide and attempted to leave them by any means. But I remembered my mother's advice, who said that she would at least get the information. if I died in that house. By contrast, I might fall into uncertainty if I went outside and ended up in the hands of the worst people (*kharap lok*)[55]".

Doly secretly used social media. She became a member of an IMO Group- a platform for MDWs. She learned a technique from the IMO group and told her employer that her husband had divorced her because she did not return home for quite a long time. Therefore, she needed to return to defend herself. Doly's employers did not believe that initially and asked her to show the divorce letter. Doly discussed it with her brother, who produced a false divorce letter and shared it with Doly. Although her employers were suspicious initially, they agreed in the end. But that was not unconditional. They promised that they would give Doly all the unpaid salaries (16 months) if she returned after availing the leave. Doly had no alternative but to agree, as she desperately wanted to return. Her employer issued an exit visa and bought her return tickets. After coming to Bangladesh, Doly did not return to her

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[55] Doly (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Munshiganj Sadar, 24 January 2022.

workplace, contemplating that they would not give her the pending salary. "What was the guarantee that they would give me an unpaid salary"? she questioned.

Story-making[56], particularly by highlighting family problems, emerged as a prevalent and effective strategy employed by MDWs to facilitate their return home. Doly's case serves as a powerful example of the successful application of this tactic. Facing significant challenges in her workplace, including the non-payment of her salary for months and employers' refusal of her request to return, Doly resorted to an innovative strategy of story-making. She exacerbated her family problem highlighting that her husband at home divorced her unilaterally. She made it compelling by mentioning the reason for that divorce that her husband divorced her because she did not return home even after completing the contract. Doly's made-up story was too powerful to ignore by her employer, although they were suspicious at the initial stage. Doly utilised the support of her family to craft a compelling narrative. By emphasising family problems and the need to be with her loved ones, Doly managed to secure her return home.

Sara (pseudonym), another mature returnee, had a similar experience. Despite repeated requests, her employers continued to delay her return. In response, Sara resorted to story-making and asked for a leave of absence. She categorically asked for a leave instead of a final departure. She cited her mother's illness along with other family problems and requested for a temporary leave. She promised to return once the issues were resolved. Before taking this strategy, Sara applied many other strategies, but those did not work. She asserted her resentment, vowing that she did not want to stay anymore in her employer's house and asked

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[56] Pertinent to mention, cases where workers encountered challenges such as withheld salaries, story-making proved to be a compelling strategy to negotiate and overcome such difficulties. Aria (pseudonym), for instance, managed to secure her pending salary by crafting a narrative that highlighted the dire situation of her fictitious children who were without food and in need of urgent medical treatment. She categorically mentioned that her children needed food to survive although she had no children. Similarly, Reta (pseudonym) employed a similar tactic, stating that her family (*paribar*) in Bangladesh was starving to persuade her employers to release her salary.

Story-making, therefore, emerged as a versatile and effective tool that workers employed not only to terminate exploitative employment relationships but also to negotiate various other difficulties they encountered. The use of compelling narratives enabled them to navigate through challenging situations when support from other avenues was scarce or unattainable. It provided MDWs with a means to exert agency and gain some degree of control over their circumstances when they faced domination and thus exploitation in their workplace environments.

to bring her to the recruitment agency office, asking to arrange her return tickets. None worked. But then story-making saved her. Her employers agreed to let her go for a leave, but she did not return to her work.

Both Doly and Sara's strategies of story-making exemplifies their resilience in navigating difficulties of domination. It reminds the concept of hidden transcripts that individuals and groups display in the face of power. Strategically, MDWs expressed compliance and deference. They tended to conform to the expectations and demands of employers who tended to exercise power. In those situations, concealing their true thoughts or feelings they adapted with the situations and applied strategies in creative ways.

7.7 Exiting Relationships- Defeat or an Achievement?

In contrast to viewing workers' efforts in exiting employment relationships as defeats, this study presents these actions as manifestations of triumphs. As depicted in the figure below (Figure 7.1), a wide range of actions and counter-actions took place in their endeavours to exit from exploitative working conditions.

Workers' Actions to Pursue Return
Complaining to recruitment agency and middlemen, exerting pressure through family and friends, strike/stop working;

story making/exacerbating family problem;

promise to return; paying compensation

Employer's Actions To Halt Return
Confinement, not letting communication, threat, salary withholding;

not buying return tickets;

not issuing exit visa;

good behaviour; luggage confiscation;
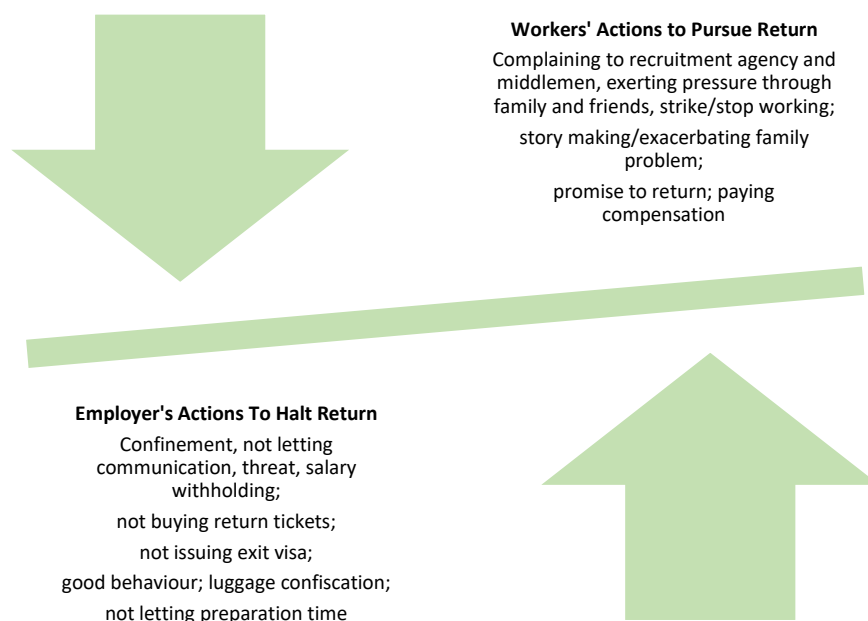
not letting preparation time

Figure 7.1: Exiting Relationships: Actions and Counter-actions by Employers and Workers

One of the primary elements for an effective story-making was to ask for a leave of absence instead of asking for a final departure. Returnees' attempts to request a leave instead of terminating their employment relationships were met with doubt, leading employers to adopt various strategies to bind workers in unusual ways. They intentionally withheld salaries and confiscated luggage. They also employed a tactic of not providing prior information or time for preparation before sending workers back to their home countries. This deliberate ploy was based on the expectation that workers would return if some matters and belongings were left pending.

One mature returnee, Nila, shared her first-hand experience. Her employers took her to the market one day, bought gifts for her children, and then accompanied her directly to the airport to board the flight. Nila felt deeply offended as her employers had not informed her that she would be leaving for Bangladesh that day. When she expressed her resentment, the employers responded dismissively, stating, "You are coming again, so what is the problem?" Employers expected that leaving belongings would compel Nila to return. Nila, on the other hand, knew she would not return. Nila was not convinced by her employer's statement, as she was unprepared for such an arrangement. "I left my luggage with money and belongings. There were watches, perfumes, and other things that I had accumulated over the past 2.5 years. I could not bring them. I had to return poor,'' she recounted.

The confiscation of belongings, non-payment of salary, buying tickets without informing the workers, and keeping the departure date secret until the last moment exemplified the employers' domination. These tactics were intended as a form of "insurance" to ensure that workers would return after availing their leave. Nila's employers assumed that Nila would return due to the pending salaries and belongings left behind.

In contrast to the employers' efforts to bind workers through various means, MDWs employed story-making strategies. They exited exploitative employment relationships through story-making with exacerbating family crises. They realised their returns by creating counterfeit but convincing stories, displaying their resilience and agency. Layla's (pseudonym) story is illustrative, who went to Saudi Arabia in 2017 and returned in 2020. She faced enormous difficulties at her employer's house. Layla described her working conditions as appalling. She had to work at *Kafeel*'s house and two of their relatives' houses. She cleaned

15 rooms and 15 toilets, and even picked dates from three gardens. She went to sleep at around 02:00 to 03:00 am almost daily during her entire stay in the employer's house. She tolerated these inhumane working conditions and counted the days left to complete her tenure. She was sexually abused by a family member.

When she informed the female employer about sexual harassment, they did not believe this, despite evidence of her claim. Layla requested that the CC Camera be checked for evidence. Still, they did not care. According to Layla, they are all merciless. Layla felt helpless. She was not allowed to talk to her family after complaining of sexual abuse. They confiscated her mobile device, and she became traceless. She became seriously ill- both mentally and physically. She was admitted to the hospital at the eleventh hour. When the doctor asked her why she came late to the hospital, she could not answer.

Layla was desperate to return home. When she insisted, she did not want to stay, the elderly woman asked for compensation. She said she would buy a return ticket if Layla compensated. ''How and why shall I compensate''? Layla expressed her resentment. She said that she would complain about it to the police or would jump from the roof of the house. She prepared at least three times to leave her employer's house. At some point, she wanted to jump from the roof to leave her employers. However, the house was in the middle of the desert. In addition, she feared that the people she would end up with would sexually abuse her.

Layla needed support, but she had none to help her. She decided to approach the farm workers, employed by her employers. She wrote a note and sent it with cattle food, expecting that there might be a kind-hearted person who could assist her. The next day, she received a reply. It mentioned that it would be a significant risk to try to leave this house and that she could have ended up with any predators (bad people). The reply notes advised her to establish a good relationship with her employer to obtain a leave of absence to escape. Their advice helped Layla plan the next course of action. She asked for a four-week leave. She requested to grant her leave so she could visit her children and family and return. "I promised to return to my workplace. They agreed and granted me leave. But I am not going to join them", she recounted.

Layla's experience was a compelling case study. Her experience highlights the significant challenges workers faced in their workplace. Despite difficulties, they did not receive any support or remedies for the issues they encountered. Although they desired to terminate their employment relationship, they found themselves unable to do so. Therefore, returnees resorted to a deliberate strategy of building a positive relationship and crafted a story of family crisis to convince their employers. Instead of seeking a final departure, workers requested a leave of absence, promising to return to their work. When all other efforts proved futile, story-making endeavour became their saving grace. Thus, story-making was a common trend, especially among those whose mobility was restricted by employers even after the end of their contracts.

As seen above, the phenomenon of story-making was a strategic tool employed by workers. While facing challenging circumstances, workers cultivated a positive rapport with their employers and wove a narrative of family crisis. Rather than pursuing a definitive exit, they sought a temporary leave of absence harbouring the knowledge that their return was an impossibility. While not entirely truthful, the story-making served as one of the effective tools. This deliberate and strategic approach highlights the agency of MDWs in constructing the narrative in their pursuit of exiting exploitative relationships.

7.8 Conclusion

As we delved into the previous chapter (Chapter 6), MDWs confront power imbalances, dominance, retaliation, and a culture of impunity, while striving to improve their work conditions. When their efforts fail, workers use their final tactic: exit. The analysis and findings in the present chapter (Chapter 7) showed that when workers decide to exit exploitative employment relationships, they face enormous challenges. Employers often demand reparation if a worker wishes to return home before completing the contractual period. Employers knew that workers would be unable to fulfil this condition. Asking for compensation, therefore, is an exploitative tool that was engaged to bind workers with exploitative working conditions. Workers try to reach an amicable settlement in those situations. But their failure led them to consider running away.

In existing literature, running away, and returning home early are often equated as failures rather than expressions of agency. The findings of the present study do not commensurate with this perception. This study demonstrates that the decision to run away is far more complicated and deeper than its literal meaning. Workers choose to run away despite the criminalization of such actions in Saudi laws, putting themselves at risk of detention and deportation. Workers are run after by employers, recruitment agencies and middlemen. They are brought back to the abusive working conditions. Workers face retaliation in the form of physical and mental punishment for their endeavour to leave employers. Besides that, running away may result in being banned from re-entry, limiting their future job prospects. Moreover, there is a risk of falling victim to predators during the process.

The decision to leave exploitative working conditions is costly both financially and socially and requires immense effort- especially for women in a patriarchal society. In many cases, the remote location of employers' houses further complicates the process. However, workers exhibit resilience in their decisions and actions. Through this way, they manage to defeat the exploitative working environment. Therefore, their choice to leave exploitative conditions should be seen as an achievement rather than a failure.

For mature returnees, employers create impediments to prevent workers from returning home after completion of the employment contract. Employers refuse to issue exit visas or purchase return tickets. They withhold workers' salaries and confiscate their luggage to prevent them from leaving. In response, MDWs employ various tactics, with one unique technique being story-making to exit exploitative working conditions and abusive employers. Workers create fictitious stories, often centred around family crises, hospitalizations, or divorce, to make their reasons for leaving convincing and believable. These efforts exemplify their bargaining and negotiation skills throughout the process.

To make their fictitious stories convincing and believable, they take leave of absence instead of asking for a termination of their employment contract. Therefore, a promise to return to work comes with counterfeit stories. On most occasions, workers' families get involved with the process of story making through providing evidence. Drawing on the diverse experiences of MDWs, this study sheds light on their resilience and determination in overcoming

oppressive power dynamics and domination. It underscores the agency they display in navigating and challenging exploitative working conditions.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

8.1 Introduction

Live-in women migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Saudi Arabia are at a high risk of abuse and exploitation in their workplaces. As this study shows, MDWs are kept indoors and denied mobility or communication. Employers deprive them of sleep, food, medical care, and wages. They perpetrate acts of physical and gender-based violence. MDWs constantly face threats of being reported to the police or transferred to abusive employers or large families. Employers intimidate them by threatening to the point of killing and discarding them in desolate areas. False allegations of theft and damage are used as a means of abuse and unsettling workers. Workers cannot lodge formal complaints predominantly because of the absence of a viable redressal mechanism. Informal complaints, on the other hand, often lead to severe consequences. As workers' workplaces are their employers' residences, and their mobility is restricted, taking legal action is nearly impossible. The sponsorship visa system and discriminatory employment provisions exacerbate workers' plights.

To defy workplace difficulties and improve working conditions, MDWs engage in diverse acts, tactics, and strategies- a mixture of coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation. MDWs do not adhere to a single strategy. Instead, they make situational judgements by adopting various approaches at different times. Rather than attempting to overturn the oppressive structure entirely, their key negotiation strategy is to address immediate difficulties and foster a tolerable working environment.

A crucial argument presented in this thesis is that these negotiations comprise a crucial repertoire in MDWs' politics, incorporating both defiance and conformity. While negotiating workplace difficulties, they confront power asymmetries and other associated contributing factors, including retaliation, collusion among actors, and a culture of impunity. As evidenced in this study, the power asymmetry between MDWs and their employers is not the only issue. Power asymmetry at the state level imperils the working and living conditions of MDWs. Bangladesh is unable to stand firm against mistreatment in Saudi Arabia as the dependency on overseas employment and remittances has weakened the bargaining power of

Bangladesh. Bangladesh, like other sending states, is involved in a 'race to the bottom' by underselling its vast pool of workforce. Excessive dependence on Saudi Arabia widens the power gap between Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, resulting in the toleration of mistreatment and the deprivation of MDWs.

Power asymmetry also exists between the workers and recruitment agencies. Recruitment agencies are involved in coercion and exploitation. A shift in the onus of care from the state to the individual resulted in the emergence of these dominant actors. Operating as matchmakers in the transnational recruitment system, they exploit workers to maximise profits. It is evident that recruitment agency offices serve as 'torture cells' where power asymmetry comes into play. Similarly, power asymmetry at the recruitment agency level significantly affects the plight of workers. Recruitment agencies in Bangladesh cannot hold abusive employers responsible as the agencies in Saudi Arabia do not cooperate. The lack of cooperation renders recruitment agencies in Bangladesh powerless when workers face difficulties. Instead of ensuring workers' rights and safety, recruitment agencies in Saudi Arabia prioritise employers' interests over workers' fundamental rights and entitlements.

Power asymmetries at all aforementioned levels compound the power relationships between MDWs and employers. Moreover, the powerful actors are deeply entwined in these dynamics. Power asymmetries at multiple levels and the complicity of powerful actors result in hyper-asymmetry in power relationships with their employers. The study of power asymmetries at all levels is crucial, as the complicity of powerful actors tends to undermine workers' efforts. MDWs are entangled in a hyper-asymmetrical power relationship, which hinders their efforts against dominant forces and structures. This study argues that the current discussion on power asymmetry is inadequate and calls for a more comprehensive examination across different levels.

It is found that MDWs remain proactive while navigating complex power structures and confronting constraints. An illustrative example of their determination is the efforts to terminate employment relationships. Employers' attempts to prevent workers from leaving exploitative employment conditions, requiring workers to exercise agency in complex ways. MDWs employ numerous strategies to this end. These include counter-intimidation, seeking

amicable settlements through mediation by recruitment agencies, paying compensation, running away, and story-making, among others.

While running away attempts and premature returns may carry negative connotations in the existing literature and political discourse, this study demonstrates that MDWs' efforts to terminate employment relationships should not equate them with individuals avoiding engagement. Instead, they remain highly active in actualising decisions. Resilience and engagement in story-making represent innovative strategies employed to terminate abusive and exploitative employment relationships.

8.2 Response to the Research Questions

8.2.1 How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

MDWs are not passive recipients of domination in asymmetrical power relationships. Instead, they actively negotiate difficulties to improve their situations through various means. Despite facing constraints imposed and facilitated by powerful actors, such as employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and states, MDWs display innovation in asserting their agency. To negotiate and challenge domination, MDWs employ a constellation of small-scale acts, tactics, and strategies.

MDWs employ coping strategies through self-discipline, accommodation, and tolerance. They refrain from making phone calls during work hours. They complete their tasks promptly to avoid faults found by their employers. Furthermore, they adapt to their employers' food and sleep habits and tolerate excessive work volume. To circumvent gender violence, they avoid exchanging smiles, decline tips or gifts from men members, cover their faces with veils, lock doors while sleeping, and avoid working alone in the kitchen. Under adverse working conditions, they employ everyday resistance techniques, such as foot dragging, pretending, lying, and false compliance. For instance, if deprived of sufficient food, they might eat from their employers' shares. Occasionally, they adopt silence and avoid arguing or interacting with their employers.

A significant trend observed in this study is the use of persuasive strategies, in a range of ways, including the language of rights and entitlement, supplication, trust building, flattering,

employing extra effort. They also do so through capitalisation of employers' emotions, and logical reasoning. This study highlights the significance of persuasive strategies as one of the compelling approaches to transform exploitative environments into advantageous ones. Persuasive strategies differ from coping strategies. For instance, coping strategies involve curtailing desires or entitlements through self-discipline, self-restriction, or tolerance, whereas persuasive strategies aim to assert workers' expectations and entitlements. The distinction between coping and persuasive strategies lies in their approaches to work and living conditions. Coping strategies may involve retreating from the demands of standard conditions, whereas persuasive strategies seek gradual improvements. From this perspective, persuasive effort involves constructive engagement. Moreover, while coping strategies may reinforce the existing power structure, persuasive strategies may not necessarily support it. Unlike coping strategies, persuasive strategies are active and aim to meet workers' expectations subtly without provoking retaliation. The outcomes of persuasive strategies become apparent after a comparatively extended period. Therefore, they are aspirational in nature. Building upon these insights, persuasive strategies could be conceptualised as aspirational adaptive capabilities that seek to negotiate adversities without necessarily reinforcing the status quo.

Apart from coping and persuasive strategies, this study found a significant course of action by MDWs through active and open resistance, such as verbal confrontation, counter-intimidation, hunger strikes, intermittently stopping work, lodging complaints against perpetrators, presenting evidence, and seeking compensation. Another form of resistance is the phenomenon of exiting employment relationships by running away, or story-making. Moreover, as this study found, MDWs engage in small-scale collective resistance. These resistances were organic and lacked proper organisation and prospects. The absence of fundamental rights such as the right to demonstration, collective bargaining, trade unionism, and NGO activism hinders the possibility of meaningful collective resistance. Moreover, isolation, disciplinary measures, and surveillance limit this potential.

During interviews, MDWs shared significant moments in their migration trajectories, showcasing grassroots and organic strategies employed with limited resources. The study reveals the workers' growing recognition of their own worth, as they gradually increase their responses, indicating the evolution of their agency. MDWs' efforts are multifaceted and often

combined, encompassing both contesting and reshaping exploitative relationships and power imbalances, as well as adapting to adverse circumstances. Their responses and strategies evolve in response to the changing constraints. Initially, they engage in coping strategies and everyday resistance. Then, gradually, they utilise persuasive strategies and open confrontations and express dissent in the face of power.

It is evident that MDWs address workplace constraints by applying a combination of strategies. The strategies they adopt vary and are neither constant nor monolithic. Coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation are fluid and situational. Coping and everyday resistance can escalate to acts of persuasive strategies and open resistance, whereas open confrontation and persuasive strategies may diminish to coping strategies and everyday resistance. Moreover, these strategies can coexist and complement one another. The constellations of activities employed by MDWs refute the notion that depicts them as passive victims. This thesis argues that, in addition to coping strategies and everyday resistance, it is imperative to consider persuasive strategies and open confrontation as part of their diverse expressions of agency.

8.2.2 What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

One of the significant obstacles faced by MDWs is power asymmetry, which operates at multiple levels and affects the relationships between MDWs and their employers. Power asymmetry is evident not only at the MDW-employer level but also at the other three levels: between sending and receiving states, between MDWs and recruitment agencies, and between recruitment agencies at sending and receiving states. Power asymmetries at these aforementioned levels bring negative impact on MDW-employer relationships and thus on working and living conditions of workers.

As found in this study, assertive workers are threatened by being transferred to other abusive employers, and such intimidation is more than mere rhetoric. Therefore, workers' determination to refuse to accept exploitative working conditions is difficult. On most occasions, assertive workers are either sent to recruitment agency offices or face early return. Sometimes they are transferred to other employers in exchange for money. It is evident that assertions by MDWs in their efforts to exit exploitative working relationships often invite

retaliation. Employers employ various techniques, such as delaying the processing of workers' returns, withholding the issuance of exit visas, or purchasing return tickets. They also withhold salaries and confiscate the workers' belongings.

In addition to the complexities of this asymmetrical power relationship, collusion among powerful actors often leads to failure in workers' efforts. Attempts to escape exploitative conditions by running away cannot be realised because of the complicity of various parties. Law enforcement agencies chase and return runaway workers to abusive employers. They are aided by recruitment agencies and middlemen in the receiving state. Even recruitment agencies in the sending states collude, pressuring workers over the phone to stay and return to their exploitative employers. This study uncovers a culture of collusion among actors, including employers, recruitment agencies, and middlemen, who coerce workers into remaining in exploitative working conditions. Law enforcement agencies, recruitment offices, and middlemen typically take the employers' side, which compel workers to return back into exploitative situations. False charges of theft and damage subject workers to detention, deportation, and future entry bans.

Power asymmetries, complicity, retaliation, and culture of impunity are the difficulties faced by workers when attempting to change their situation. These power imbalances are deeply rooted in a broader structure of power asymmetry, where various actors, including employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and state institutions, contribute and perpetuate these imbalances. Consequently, MDWs navigate within a web of hyper-asymmetry in power dynamics, which significantly circumscribes and shapes their negotiating capability. Based on the insights gathered from the discussion, the term 'hyper-asymmetry' could be conceptualised as power asymmetries at multiple levels that reinforce each other, predominantly because of collusion among actors.

8.2.3 How do they overcome these obstacles?

A key element that emerges among MDWs during adversity in the workplace is the desire for fair and standard working conditions, which motivates them to employ diverse acts, tactics, and strategies. In most cases they do not receive adequate support. Thus, it is not surprising that MDWs resort to terminating their employment relationships as a last resort when all

other efforts fail to garner meaningful assistance. To exit abusive employers or exploitative working conditions, they employ strategies such as counter-intimidation, seeking an amicable settlement through mediation by recruitment agencies, paying compensation, running away and story-making.

However, efforts to exit employment relationships are not straightforward. In the absence of a meaningful support mechanism, workers' families play a crucial role. They pressure recruitment agencies or middlemen, occasionally reaching abusive employers directly. However, this requires immense effort, with uncertain outcomes, as appeals from workers' families are often met with denial. Determined to seek justice and redress, workers' families sometimes resort to threatening legal actions against recruitment agencies.

When nothing works and the working situation becomes untenable, MDWs contemplate leaving employers altogether. This determination comes after exhausting various strategies: coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation. MDWs' assertion to return home are coerced by asking for a large amount of compensation, prompting them to contemplate running away. However, MDWs' restricted mobility within their host families' residences makes running away uncertain and difficult. The remote and unfamiliar location of the host house poses additional difficulties. Nevertheless, workers strive to terminate the employment relationship although it invites enormous risks, and uncertainties. Workers run the risk of being detained, deported, and banned on re-entry, as running away is criminalised in Saudi Arabia's legislation. Therefore, along with employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and law enforcement agencies run after workers. Employers lodge allegations of theft and damage. If caught, workers are brought back to abusive working conditions. Once returned, workers face retaliation by employers.

In the current literature, running away has negative connotations. This is considered a failure. However, this study finds that workers' efforts to run away require extraordinary efforts. Employers do not let workers leave, wanting to extract labour even after the end of the contractual period. They do not issue exit visas or buy return tickets. Employers keep salaries pending, confiscate belongings or even transfer workers to other employers. Repeated appeals by workers to let them return home are turned down, creating immense anxiety and stress. Consequently, in a state of mounting distress and intolerable conditions, workers

fabricate stories that exaggerate family crises[57] and present an urgency to return home. To evoke sympathy, they ask employers for leave of absence instead of a final departure. The story-making strategy worked for many returnees. It shows workers' resilience and agency in adverse situations.

8.3 Research Contribution

8.3.1 Knowledge Supported by this Research

Powerful actors tended to circumscribe workers' efforts and inflicted retaliation as was evident for runaway workers. In most cases, workers were sent back to abusive employers only to endure more adversity and reprisals. However, although resistance might prove counterproductive in some instances, it can also lead to resolving difficulties and improving working conditions. Illustrative examples were the episode of obtaining help from female employers in managing excessive workloads, acquiring rest time during the day, and earning employers' consent for an increased salary. The efforts of some workers brought fruitful results as they succeeded in changing their workplaces. These efforts were transformative as they reoriented their employment relationships and workplace.

The inference is that workers' resistive acts against the face of power brought about positive outcomes and helped improve their working and living conditions. Occasionally, they escaped exploitative working conditions and obtained a sense of freedom from immobility. These accounts demonstrate the significance of agency and negotiation in causing positive changes in employment conditions. It showcases the workers' proactive approach, even in adversities and assertiveness in advocating for their rights. Moreover, it highlights the potential transformative impact of negotiations to address the challenges faced by workers. However, this does not mean to romanticise the outcomes of their efforts and resistance. Although this study did not specifically assess the positive and negative effects of resistance, it is crucial to acknowledge that resistance may provoke retaliation and reinforce power dynamics and domination.

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[57] Family members often assist in crafting and presenting false stories and fake documents (such as divorce letters) to support workers' claims.

This research revealed a noticeable increase in the agency of MDWs. Agency improved as workers progressed through their migration journeys abroad. Those who had prior experience as domestic workers in foreign countries exhibited higher manoeuvring capacities, although this did not guarantee decent working conditions. Experienced workers were relatively more confident as their previous stint helped them deal with unfavourable situations. However, mere experience did not guarantee managing oppressive working conditions. Many experienced workers faced enormous difficulties, because of harsh working conditions and employers' domination. Experienced workers became runaways, exited employment relationships, and returned home without completing their contractual periods. However, in general, experience helped workers in abusive and unfavourable working environments. By contrast, first-time workers faced more difficulties and had less leverage in their negotiations.

Along with work experience, language acquisition played a vital role in workers' ability to confront employers effectively. Those who acquired proficiency in Arabic were better equipped to handle difficulties and asserted their agency than those who lacked language skills. Language acquisition brought a transformative impact on the experiences, particularly in countering intimidation and asserting workers' rights. In the initial period of employment, language barriers hinder effective communication, leaving workers vulnerable and unable to respond adequately to abusive behaviour from their employers. However, as workers gradually become proficient in Arabic, they gain the means to respond and resist mistreatment. The ability to reply in Arabic marks a significant turning point in interactions with employers. It makes workers less susceptible to further mistreatment and manipulation.

In the early phase, individuals experienced emotional distress. During this phase, individuals' responses were limited because of their limited language ability. However, gradual mastery of Arabic language skills enabled progressive communication. This progression mitigated the extent of the mistreatment that endured during the initial months. When employers exercised arbitrary power, brought false acquisitions, issued threats of transferring to more abusive employers, workers challenged.[58] They demanded that they be taken to the

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[58] Sara (pseudonym) was one of such workers, among others.

recruitment office. Individuals expressed readiness to embrace whatever circumstances their fate might dictate, articulating this sentiment in Arabic. Many returnees highlighted their fear during the initial months as they were unable to respond. However, they overcame this adversity by acquiring Arabic. This narrative underscores the pivotal role of Arabic proficiency in enabling effective negotiations within challenging and exploitative contexts.

Language acquisition empowered MDWs by facilitating communication and challenging oppressive situations. It became their newfound tool to assert their rights and confront unjust treatment. While positive impacts of language skills were evident from returnees' accounts of language skills, the importance of language acquisition was recognised even by those who did not develop their language skills, as they understood its role in strengthening their position. Despite lacking formal education, some MDWs managed to acquire the Arabic language quickly. During the interviews, returnees recalled engaging in eventful and argumentative conversations with their employers in Arabic language. While their efforts might have appeared minor compared to the scale of suppression they faced, language skills enabled some to create tolerable spaces on numerous occasions, showcasing workers' ability to negotiate their grievances effectively.

In addition to the positive impact of experience and language skills, increased consciousness was also visible. Returnees demonstrated increased awareness of their self-position, working conditions, and deprivation. They expressed regret that workers from other countries were often regarded as more favourable. These observations were made when they interacted and shared experiences during family programmes with workers from other sending states including Indonesia and the Philippines. Moreover, MDWs' statements[59] shed light on the issue of compensation deprivation following workplace injuries. Their understanding of deprivation and entitlement was evident in their accounts. The migration trajectory of MDWs served as a learning experience for labour and visa conditions, leading them to an enhanced consciousness. This awareness prompted them to constantly compare their challenging conditions with other examples, such as how they were treated or discriminated against in comparison with other nationals.

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[59] Ratna (pseudonym), among others.

Returnees spontaneously recollected and compared their status even when not explicitly asked. These reflections demonstrate their consciousness and agency. Returnees[60] statements highlight disparities in treatment and working conditions in comparison to MDWs from other countries. The discriminatory practices are evident. Returnees[61] lamented that Bangladeshi workers' salaries were lower than those of workers from other countries and that they were subjected to mistreatment. For instance, they observed that Filipino MDWs were not required to repeat the completed tasks. Moreover, Filipino workers were allowed to rest during the day, while Bangladeshi workers were not granted such opportunities.

The migration journey led workers to become increasingly conscious of their working conditions, self-positions, dignity, rights, and entitlements. This heightened awareness helped them recognise instances of discrimination and deprivation, which, in turn, contributed to an increase in their agency. The learning experience during migration fostered self-confidence among most women, as noted by Fernandez (2020:64: 107). This also increases self-assertion. Consequently, by expressing discontent, inquiring about wages, and refusing to tolerate mistreatment, workers demanded better employment conditions.

As found in this study, workers' agency was influenced by various confounding variables including their experience, prior training in their home country, duration of migration, language acquisition ability, and growing consciousness. Many initially passive MDWs transformed into active and fearless individuals after a few months. Workers displayed compliant attitudes early in their employment, but gradually raised their voices, adopting resistive measures appropriate for each specific context. It is evident that workers initially relied on coping strategies and everyday resistance in disguise forms. However, over time, they have shifted towards more assertive and courageous attitudes. Their accounts revealed a pattern of transformation from compliance to confrontation, as they transitioned from being sober and obedient to becoming more defiant.

This transformation validates De Hass's (2021) aspiration-capabilities framework that emphasises human agency. MDWs have demonstrated resistant agency through both everyday resistance and open confrontation. They have also shown capable agency through

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[60] Returnees Akhi and Parul (pseudonyms), among others.
[61] Such as Marufa (pseudonym).

coping and persuasive strategies. In a similar vein, both successful and failed endeavours to exit exploitative employment relationships through running away and story-making are a combination of resistant agency and capable agency. The migration journey instilled workers with an evolved agency that challenged discriminatory practices and demanded improved working conditions. Factors, such as experience, language acquisition and consciousness play pivotal roles in shaping workers' agency and ability to negotiate workplace challenges. The shift from initial compliance to confrontation demonstrates the evolution of workers' attitudes from passive coping to assertive resistance.

8.3.2 Knowledge Extended by this Research

This study extends the knowledge in three distinctive areas. First, it demonstrates that MDWs are not passive victims. They exhibit agency and actively negotiate difficulties in the workplace. Despite facing immense constraints, they have employed various acts, tactics, and strategies to negotiate abuse and exploitation. In the migration literature, workers have been shown to be engaged in coping strategies and everyday resistance. This study argues that, in addition to employing coping strategies and everyday resistance, MDWs engage in persuasive strategies and open confrontations.

The prominent persuasive strategies identified in this study include supplication, trust-building, capitalising on employers' emotions, employing an extra effort to please employers, and uttering good words. Persuasive strategies are distinct from coping strategies. Coping strategies can be viewed as survival approaches, which often involve aligning with the habits and preferences of employers, such as adjusting sleeping time to match the employer's schedule or consuming the same food. Persuasive strategies, on the other hand, are intended to bring about improvements in working conditions, moving beyond mere survival and accommodation.

Moreover, while coping strategies may be adapted to the existing status quo, MDWs employ persuasive strategies to improve their living and working conditions. Persuasive strategies may evoke sympathy and enable MDWs to obtain what they are deprived of. Nonetheless, in contrast to coping strategies, persuasive strategies challenge power structure. An illustrative example is the frequent comparisons of positive memories of their previous workplace with

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present circumstances and reminds employers of employment standards. By highlighting their rights and previous experiences, MDWs remind employers of their entitlements and convey their expectations while undermining their present power structures. In contrast, coping strategies may not necessarily aim to challenge the power structure. Furthermore, coping or survival strategies are often executed "at the cost of themselves or their fellow humans" (Bayat, 2010), which is not the case for persuasive strategies.

Another remarkable trend observed in the present study was open confrontation. These were complementary to everyday resistance but distinctive. Open confrontations encompass counter-intimidation, lodging complaints, intermittent work stoppages, hunger strikes, defying orders, voicing dissent, and producing evidence. These negotiation strategies underscore their resolute stance in adverse circumstances. The shift from covert resistance to more direct forms of expression is evident in the aforementioned tangible approaches. Moreover, the deliberate exit from exploitative employment relationships in the form of running away or story-making epitomises a succinct assertion of selfhood. These assertions reflect their refusal to be viewed as passive victims of exploitation.

Based on the above findings, this study argues that MDWs engage in a multifaceted repertoire of acts, actions and strategies that transcends the realm of coping strategies and everyday resistance. As a remarkable display of agency and adaptability, they extend their involvement beyond these forms and embrace a wider spectrum of proactive measures through persuasive strategies and open confrontation. These diverse approaches collectively constitute the practice of negotiation, which showcases resilience and determination.

Second, in the realm of migration literature, scholarly attention has been directed towards the power asymmetry between MDWs and employers. Attention also employed to an extent to the power imbalance at the state level. However, little attention has been paid to the power asymmetry between MDWs and recruitment agencies. In addition, scholarly inquiry remains notably deficient on power asymmetries at the recruitment agency level. The present study found that power imbalances at these various levels significantly impact the power relationship between workers and employers, and therefore on the working conditions and the workers' efforts to combat workplace difficulties.

This study argues that the understanding of power asymmetry between MDWs and employers is inadequate in the migration literature. The limited consideration of power asymmetries signifies a gap in understanding the depth and breadth of their implications for the employment relationship between MDWs and their employers. The existence of power asymmetries at multiple levels widens the power asymmetry between MDWs and their employers. One of the significant contributions of this study lies in its findings of multi-level power asymmetries, which is crucial in comprehending workers' struggles, negotiation tactics, and agency.

Moreover, in addition to the presence of multi-tiered power asymmetries, a salient phenomenon emerges in which powerful actors engage in calculated collusion, undermining the endeavours of MDWs. The present investigation illuminates the complex interplay of multi-layered power asymmetries that is reinforced because of collusion among actors. Driven by the pursuit of profit maximisation or extraction of labour, these actors engage in collaborative endeavours. This study reveals that the convergence of multilevel power asymmetries and the collusion of powerful actors contribute to the creation of hyper-asymmetrical power relationships between workers and their employers.

The third contribution of this study highlights the triumph from the perspective of workers in exiting exploitative relationships. In the current literature, terminating the employment relationship is seen as a failure, which this study disapproves. Although MDWs are not physically confined but rather bound by legal ties to their employers. These legal restrictions prevent them from exiting employment relationships as they are officially tied to their employers. Employers often do not issue exit visas or purchase return tickets, making it extremely challenging for workers to leave exploitative employment relationships. Nevertheless, despite the considerable risks involved, MDWs make efforts to exit abusive employers by running away or story-making.

The study underscores the complexity of becoming runaways, revealing a heightened risk and uncertainty that surpasses the conventional understanding of leaving employers. Running away embroils them in risk as they are run after by employers, recruitment agencies, middlemen, and government entities. Moreover, workers find themselves caught in retaliation in the form of false accusations, thereby amplifying their vulnerability. False

allegations of theft and damage cause them to be detained, deported, or barred from future entry into the country. If caught, the law enforcement agency sends them back to exploitative working conditions, paving the way for exacerbating plight.

Despite the potential for dreadful outcomes, running away proves productive, as it allows workers to break free from oppressive power dynamics and domination by severing exploitative employment relationships. Against the negative connotations associated with runaway efforts in migration literature and political discourse, the findings of workers' extraordinary effort in this study challenge the notion of considering the termination of employment relationships a failure.

Moreover, apart from becoming runaways, this study found an innovative approach, story-making, as a negotiation strategy to exit exploitative relationships. This was particularly prevalent among returnees who had completed their tenure but were unable to return home. Employers impede their efforts to return home by employing several strategies, including by not issuing exit permits. Workers were legally entitled to obtain a return ticket at the end of the contractual period, which the employers did not buy. Workers' belongings were confiscated, their salaries were kept pending and they were even transferred to other employers. In response to these adversities, workers applied an innovative approach. They resorted to story-making by exaggerating their family problems back and sought leave of absence instead of asking for a final departure. This strategy worked for them. It signified their resilience and agency in negotiating adversities.

8.3.3 Opportunities for Future Study

The present study identified several areas that warrant further research. One such area is the examination of outcomes resulting from the repertoires of negotiation activities used by MDWs. The study reveals that the objective of negotiations by MDWs is to achieve fair working conditions. From the workers' perspective, negotiation is anticipated to yield positive results. For example, workers could extract pending salaries, earn rest time, or even change their employers through the mediation of recruitment agencies. However, while resistance occasionally led to positive outcomes, it predominantly resulted in negative consequences, reinforcing power and domination. Existing studies have yet to investigate how such

negotiations can genuinely improve working conditions and enhance the lives of workers. Therefore, a comprehensive study on this area is required.

Second, the inadequacy of existing support mechanisms for MDWs is a critical area that the present study has identified. This reveals that the current support systems are ineffective, leaving workers feeling helpless in negotiating with abusive employers and exploitative working conditions. Comprehensive research could be conducted to identify loopholes in existing support mechanisms that could offer meaningful suggestions and thus genuinely help MDWs obtain the remedies they deserve. Therefore, a study could delve into questions such as why existing support mechanisms fall short in assisting MDWs and how states can respond more effectively to address exploitation through laws, policies, and practices.

Third, this study highlights the indispensable role of family support in the efforts of MDWs, aimed at improving working conditions, restraining exploitative working conditions, and exiting employment relationships. Despite their lack of direct access to employers, family members were sometimes able to reach employers. They significantly contribute by engaging with recruitment agencies and middlemen and seeking assistance to rescue their loved ones from abusive employers. They approached NGOs and public offices, submitted applications, and lodged complaints on behalf of workers in the sending states. However, while this study delves into understanding the imperative roles of their families, it leaves room for an investigation deeper into the subject. Potential research questions in this area could include: To what extent do family supports complement MDWs' efforts to negotiate exploitative working conditions?

Fourth, one of the quotidian forms of negotiation strategy undertaken by MDWs was the open confrontation at the individual level. Those were manifested by challenging the authority of employers through back-talking, hunger strikes, intermittent stopping of work, filing complaints, presenting evidence, counter-intimidations and exiting employment relationships. The everyday form of resistance is viewed as a primary recourse by MDWs, where either the actors or their acts remain disguised. Therefore, the focus on visible and noticeable forms of resistance- where both actors and their acts are open- is scant in migration literature. This study delved into this issue deeper. Nonetheless, further research

is needed to understand the depth and breadth of this form of negotiation strategy as considering MDWs' individual open confrontations is crucial in understanding their agency.

Fifth, one of the significant findings of this study is the influence of societal perceptions in the home country on workers' decisions and response to exploitative working conditions abroad. Societal perception not only discourages women from taking overseas jobs as domestic workers but also acts as an impediment to returning home or even seeking justice upon returning home. It is found that workers accept exploitative conditions to avoid the societal vilification of premature returns. Although this thesis delves into this aspect, it signals the need for a more comprehensive study on this topic. Potential research questions include: How does societal perception at home jeopardise workers' efforts in exiting employment relationships? What are the implications of societal perceptions in seeking justice for workers upon their return?

8.4 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Since labour exploitation and the denial of rights occur beyond the jurisdiction of the sending states, the task of protecting MDWs abroad is inherently problematic. For sending states like Bangladesh, three primary options can be considered: first, attempting to intervene in the pre-migration stage; second, addressing issues through bilateral cooperation; and third, contemplating a unilateral decision to restrict workers' mobility.

The Bangladesh government has taken several measures that primarily focus on the pre-migration stage to address challenges. However, there exist shortcomings. Once MDWs are employed in foreign households, their access to communication becomes limited, hindering direct contact with embassies or recruitment agencies. Consequently, they often find themselves reliant on middlemen, although these actors frequently fail to provide the necessary assistance. Middlemen do not direct workers to seek aid from recruitment agencies or embassies. Workers communicate with recruitment agencies only after considerable delays, thereby exacerbating the severity of their predicaments. The absence of effective communication channels and meaningful redressal mechanisms significantly contributes to the plight of workers.

This study reveals that despite the mandatory requirement of one month of residential training, many Bangladeshi MDWs venture abroad without undergoing proper training. Consequently, their lack of preparation makes them vulnerable to uncertainty and invites significant challenges. It has been observed that some workers receive training certificates without attending or completing the training. There appears to be a tendency among authorities to downplay such irregularities. Blaming workers for their predicaments is another phenomenon, suggesting that they were inadequately qualified, lacked awareness of working conditions, or were ignorant of operating equipment.

An important practical insight drawn from this study is that many workers seek to avoid attending residential training because they require to stay away from their families during the training period. The commitment to time, effort, and financial resources involved in training makes it an option that workers generally prefer to evade. Moreover, returnees fear that attending training might draw attention to their plan to take overseas jobs- a plan that they want to keep secret until they depart from their home country. Middlemen play a significant role in influencing workers' decisions regarding training attendance. They often dissuade workers from undergoing training, fearing that well-informed women may be less willing to go abroad, thus affecting their business interests. In fact, it has been noted that a significant[62] number of trainees abandon training after attending only a few days, proving middlemen's apprehension.

It is evident that individuals who avoided undergoing formal training prior to embarking on overseas employment encountered a markedly more arduous set of challenges compared to their trained counterparts. Untrained workers are often at a disadvantage, as they lack foundational knowledge and insights into the host country's culture, including food and sleeping habits of the receiving state. Additionally, these individuals are ill-prepared to face challenges posed by harsh working conditions. Conversely, those who attend proper residential training possessed an added advantage of acquiring preliminary knowledge of culture and Arabic language, which equipped them to address challenges inherent to overseas domestic jobs.

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[62] Roughly around 15-20 per cent, as was mentioned by one participant from a training centre.

The lack of training and passivity during the preparatory stage significantly affects the lives of MDWs abroad. This research found that a section of workers does not undertake preparatory tasks independently; instead, they rely on middlemen to handle all necessary arrangements. The only time they visit any office is for biometric fingerprinting, with many of them not even visiting recruitment agency offices. Middlemen play a crucial role throughout the recruitment process and assist workers in obtaining necessary documents, including birth certificates, passports, medical tests, biometric fingerprints, and other requirements. As part of a package, workers even stayed in middlemen's houses to complete the necessary tasks during the pre-migration stage. Because middlemen arrange on workers' behalf, MDWs perform minimal preparatory work independently. While this may be helpful, it does not benefit workers preparing for new challenges in a foreign country. In other words, because middlemen perform all their work at the preparatory stage, would-be migrant workers miss the opportunity to build capacity for future challenges.

Another aspect of migration management is the channelling of underaged women, despite official regulations prohibiting women under the age of 25 from taking overseas jobs. Some underaged girls are fraudulently portrayed as adults on paper to obtain clearance for taking overseas employment. This study uncovered instances in which girls as young as 14 years old went abroad as domestic workers. It is essential to understand the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon. First, middlemen and recruitment agencies often advise underaged girls to lie about their age, if they wish to work abroad. They are coerced into believing that revealing their real age would result in them being denied the opportunity to take overseas jobs. In addition to that, economic hardship pushes young girls to resort to desperate measures, leading them to conceal their true age. Consequently, placing sole blame on recruitment agencies or middlemen might be unjustified, as desperation compels workers to become complicit in this collusion.

The concealment of age in the migration process has deep-rooted causes. To qualify for overseas jobs, individuals often obtain false birth certificates with fictitious addresses. These fraudulent documents are then used in order to acquire passports. The question arises as to how underaged individuals manage to pass through multiple stages of the migration process, including obtaining a passport, training certificate, clearance from public offices, passing

medical tests, and navigating immigration channels at airports. The responsibility to address these issues lies in the government, which warrants comprehensive action.

Another concern regarding migration management pertains to employment contracts. In the past, recruitment agencies engaged in "contract substitution" (Jureidini, 2016). However, with the introduction of the *Musaned* platform, contract substitution has become less prevalent. Nonetheless, some challenges persist. In recent years, many workers have been denied the opportunity to read and comprehend their contracts before signing them. Moreover, a significant number of workers have been deprived of signing contracts altogether.

This study revealed instances where returnees had not signed any contract. In some cases, recruitment agencies and middlemen hastily obtain workers' signatures during medical tests and fingerprinting, providing them with no chance to review or understand the contractual conditions. Returnees reported that the recruitment agencies signed employment contracts on their behalf, without their knowledge or consent. It was acknowledged by the recruitment agency during interviews. Noteworthy to mention that some returnees were aware of the manipulative tactic orchestrated by middlemen and recruitment agencies, yet they did not resist it. The desperation to secure overseas jobs, coupled with a lack of awareness contributed to their compliance with these unethical practices. Moreover, many workers rely solely on verbal commitments, neglecting the importance of formal contracts.

This study highlights the lack of responsiveness of recruitment agencies and underscores the pressing need for enhanced accountability within the recruitment industry. It also emphasises the importance of establishing a robust support system for MDWs. To effectively address cases of exploitation and abuse, it is crucial to raise awareness among workers and their families about the available avenues for redress, including legal measures. The initial focus should be engaged on improving migration processes, regulating intermediaries, combating corruption, and enhancing workers' skills, which can help minimise existing loopholes in migration management.

The second crucial area for intervention is to work with the receiving states. It requires signing and implementing bilateral agreements with the receiving states. However, this task poses

significant challenges, as receiving states often avoid signing such agreements and lack commitment to implementation even when they are signed. In this regard, leveraging regional and multilateral platforms while negotiating with receiving states can be established, although again the effectiveness of such efforts depends on the willingness of receiving states to cooperate. Therefore, it is vital to address the potential risks associated with over-reliance on a single destination country or even on sending workers for precarious jobs.

A valuable lesson can be learned from other labour-surplus countries, such as the Philippines, which has taken substantive measures to protect its workers. For instance, the Philippines restricts women workers from going to Saudi Arabia despite facing acute unemployment and being heavily reliant on remittances. The country demonstrates a strong commitment to defend its workers by implementing bans or restrictions, blacklisting abusive employers, unscrupulous recruitment agencies, and imposing bans on the confiscation of workers' mobile phones.

The bargaining strength of the Philippines is significantly higher than that of Bangladesh, as it is not overwhelmingly dependent on a single labour market. In addition, the Philippines does not view labour migration as an integral part of its development, even though increasing the number of overseas jobs and remittance income was crucial for this country. Consequently, migration management in the Philippines is more disciplined, structured, and robust than that in Bangladesh.

Since labour migration has been feminised in the Philippines since the 1990s, the country experienced difficulties much earlier than Bangladesh. They also developed a level of competency in attaining transnational safety and protection measures. A key lesson for other sending countries including Bangladesh is that the Philippines facilitates labour migration to the states with which they have signed an agreement (Ireland, 2018). Setting a responsive framework against mistreatment, introducing a return and reintegration strategy, a strong market position, gender equality, and pro-migrant civil society are notable factors that helped the Philippines make and implement policy decisions to protect Filipino workers abroad (Ireland, 2018). These are areas that Bangladesh should head towards in the foreseeable future.

The difference in skills between Bangladeshi and Filipino MDWs is noticeable at the micro level. Skills and higher literacy provide the Philippines with much-needed bargaining strengths, enabling Filipino authorities to respond robustly (Ireland, 2018). By contrast, Bangladeshi MDWs are primarily uneducated or lack formal schooling (Kibria, 2008). Approximately half of Bangladeshi MDWs have no formal education, and only 9% have studied in secondary schools (Islam, 2019). Skill is one of the bargaining tools that Bangladesh lacks. Therefore, although skills should not be the sole focus when workers' basic rights are at stake, improving human capital could be one of the focused areas to work on by the Bangladeshi state.

Finally, in relation to imposing a ban on women overseas employment in Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh fears irregular migration and trafficking as an aftermath. This fear is not baseless. It has been found that a hard-line stance, such as bans or restrictions, can invite irregular migration, including trafficking, primarily when acute unemployment problems exist in the sending state (Hennebry, 2017). Bangladesh should work towards mitigating the risks associated with irregular migration and should proactively address this issue through implementing more robust policies. Simultaneously, it is imperative that Bangladesh directs it efforts towards creation of employment opportunity within its national boundaries. This endeavour should be targeted towards specific categories of women who may otherwise consider overseas employment as primary option. Bangladesh should craft a framework that should meticulously address the complex interplay of economic imperatives and the well-being of female workers abroad.

8.5 Limitations of this Study

While sharing workplace experiences, MDWs inevitably talked about their employers. One limitation of this study is the absence of primary data derived from employers' perspectives. The present study did not involve direct interviews with employers. However, employers' perspectives were partially captured through returnees' statements. In these statements, employers emphasised that other employers were known to engage in more exploitative practices. Therefore, returnees were fortunate. The varying intensity of abuse perpetrated by employers was confirmed through insights obtained from returnees' accounts and supported by secondary literature that provided insights into employers' perspectives. Moreover, while

these statements offer a general understanding of how employers treat workers, it is essential to acknowledge that the study primarily focused on the experiences of returnee MDWs, not their employers.

Second, this study aimed to extract the lived experiences of live-in women returnee MDWs in the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor. The recruitment of participants was facilitated through snowball sampling, where initial contacts were obtained from NGOs specialising in dealing with MDWs. Subsequently, the returnee MDWs provided contact details of fellow returnees. To avoid potential overrepresentation from any specific locality, interviews were conducted with returnees from five different administrative districts, namely Dhaka, Munshiganj, Narsingdi, Gazipur, and Narayangonj.

These districts were chosen from among major source areas from which a significant number of women migrated to Saudi Arabia to take up overseas jobs as domestic workers. However, it is important to acknowledge that these districts are not among the top source districts. Owing to constraints of time, accessibility, and resources, it was not possible to encompass returnees from other administrative districts. It is also worth noting that while agency and negotiation skills were the focus areas of the study, these attributes might not vary significantly among workers based on their locality. Instead, differences were more likely to be influenced by workers' experiences, pre-departure training, improved consciousness, and language acquisition.

8.6 Summary and Conclusion

This thesis undertook a critical examination and exploration of the agency of MDWs operating within an intricate and multifaceted framework of power dynamics. By delving into the rich and nuanced lived experiences of 50 MDWs who returned from Saudi Arabia to Bangladesh, this study rigorously investigated, analysed, and elucidated the multifaceted nature of their agency. In doing so, it sought to challenge and question the prevailing assumptions and perceptions that often associate these workers as passive recipients of abuse and exploitation.

Through a comprehensive investigation of the negotiations employed by MDWs within the complex web of power relations, this study sheds light on the dynamic interplay between agency and power within the specific context of MDWs-employers' relationships. By giving voice to these workers' experiences, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of their agency and the challenges they face in navigating workplace domination and power asymmetries. The insights gained from this research contribute to the broader discourse on MDWs and their agency, opening avenues for further exploration and potential policy interventions to support and empower this group of workers.

The central argument advanced in this study is that negotiations undertaken by MDWs constitute a vital and indispensable repertoire in their engagement with exploitative living and working conditions. It encompasses a wide range of actions, strategies, and tactics that go beyond the simplistic notions of passivity and subordination. This study argues that apart from coping strategies and everyday resistance, they engage in persuasive strategies and open confrontation. By employing a negotiation lens to conceptualise and analyse the agency of MDWs, this research challenges the narrative that portrays them as passive victims. Instead, it argues that, within the context of exploitative employment relationships, they apply their agency in multifarious ways.

The ability to negotiate domination and power asymmetries that seek to circumscribe their efforts is the agency of MDWs. On the other hand, the term negotiation encompasses a diverse array of acts, strategies, and tactics undertaken by MDWs in response to dominant power structures, thereby challenging and reshaping these power dynamics. By conceptualising and analysing agency and negotiation within the specific context of MDWs, this study has illustrated their ability to exercise choice and voice their concerns. Four broad approaches- coping strategies, everyday resistance, persuasive strategies, and open confrontation manifest their capabilities under exploitative working conditions. The empirical findings of this study align closely with the principles articulated in De Hass's conceptualisation of migration as a function of capabilities and aspirations.

MDWs do not adhere to a singular strategy; instead, they employ diverse and context-specific approaches in their negotiation processes. The primary objective of these negotiations is not

necessarily to overturn oppressive structures in their entirety, but rather to address immediate difficulties and create a tolerable and conducive working environment. This study identifies and explores several ways in which MDWs negotiate workplace difficulties and power imbalances. But these multiple forms of negotiation efforts are not fixed or isolated. Workers exhibit flexibility and adaptability in response to specific contextual factors and varying degrees of power intensity they encounter.

A critical contribution of this study lies in highlighting the persistent and pervasive power disparities at multiple levels that affect the experience of MDWs. This study argues that power asymmetry remains insufficiently understood within the field of migration studies, particularly within the context of employer-MDW relationships. To comprehensively comprehend the power dynamics and dominance in this relationship, it is imperative to consider larger power structures operating at multiple levels that significantly influence the employment conditions of MDWs.

Furthermore, this thesis brings to the forefront the fluid, dynamic, and ever-evolving nature of the negotiation processes employed by MDWs. A crucial facet of these negotiations lies in their inherent heterogeneity, exemplifying the diverse array of strategies, tactics, and approaches that MDWs employ in highly asymmetrical power relationships. It is crucial to recognise that MDWs do not passively accept their circumstances; rather, they exercise agency within the constraints of their social and economic context. Even when facing forced immobility, MDWs meticulously assess their situation, and strategically weigh their options before deciding whether to terminate their employment relationships.

The notion of forced immobility or confinement is not solely physical, but rather stems from the complex web of difficulties in which these individuals are enmeshed. The denial of exit permits by employers, a prerequisite for leaving employers, accentuates a sense of constraint. In addition, the demand for compensation for an early termination adds another layer of complexity. Amid this backdrop, workers' decision to terminate employment relationships is a manifestation of the calculated evaluation. Before arriving at the decision to exit, MDWs uphold their agency to negotiate the challenges inherent to their employment context. The determination to remain and engage in negotiations with adversities underscores the

exercise of their agency. In tandem with this, the act of departing from employers serves as an assertion of their agency.

In instances where amicable resolution proves elusive and the work and living environment continues to be untenable, individuals contemplate severing ties through becoming runaways. Although run away was a common phenomenon observed among premature, a significant number of mature returnees were among those who ran away from exploitative working conditions. It is imperative to acknowledge that this course of action entails a significant cost. The classification of running away as a criminal offence according to Saudi legislation renders runaway workers liable to detention, deportation, and a re-entry ban. Employers, in strategic manoeuvres, exploit this by bringing false allegations of theft and damage against runaway workers. By collaborating closely with recruitment agencies and middlemen, employers run after workers. In the event of capture, individuals are subjected to a cycle of retribution. Law enforcement agencies perpetuate this cycle, facilitating the return of runaway workers to the custody of their abusive employers.

The existing literature often underestimates this remarkable effort by MDWs, unfairly characterising their actions of running away or prematurely returning home as failures. This study argues that MDWs engage in extraordinary efforts to exit exploitative employment relationships, challenge abusive employers, and navigate exploitative working environments, thus demonstrating their resilience in the face of adversity.

Another display of workers' resourcefulness and resilience is their ability to terminate employment relationships through story-making. Workers face difficulties in exiting employers even after the completion of contracts. As found, employers, driven by their inclination to extend the duration of their workers' tenure, adopt a multifaceted approach. This encompasses a range of cunning tricks, such as withholding of exit permits, deliberate delaying of buying return tickets, confiscation of luggage, withholding salaries and even orchestration of an outwardly amicable behaviour so workers are convinced to prolong their stay in employers' house. To counter, workers employ innovative ways to exit employment relationships in these situations. They conceal their true feelings and desires to navigate difficulties in severing employment relationships. Workers employ story-making by exaggerating family problems, creating an urgency to return home, and invoking sympathy.

They solicit a leave of absence instead of asking for a final departure. These approaches highlight the complexity of power dynamics, and attest to the remarkable resilience and agency exhibited by these individuals within adverse circumstances while maintaining a façade of compliance.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Committee Notification

Tony Royle <tony.royle@york.ac.uk>   2 Aug 2021, 17:22
to Debbie, Alice, Indrajit, me ▾

Dear Alice

I was on leave for a couple of days last week so I'm still catching up on email

Thanks for your comprehensive response I can now conform that Mohammed's ethics application is now approved

Best wishes

Tony

•••

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Background

I am Mohammed Hossain Sarker, a PhD student at the University of York, UK. I am working on the research project titled '**Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in the Face of Power Asymmetry and Domination: Lesson from Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia corridor'** The primary objective of this research project is to **comprehensively** explore acts, tactics and strategies employed by migrant domestic workers (MDWs) who find themselves in situations characterised by exploitation and domination. Focusing on the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia migration corridor, which has witnessed a notable rise in cases of suicides, unnatural deaths, runaway and premature return in recent years, this project aims to offer a more nuanced analysis of construction agency among MDWs. By delving into the exercise of agency by MDWs, this study seeks to shed light on the dynamics of their actions in exploitative working conditions.

Before consenting to participate in this research project, kindly read this information sheet attentively. Should you have any queries or require further information, please do not hesitate to seek clarification.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to understand the agency of MDWs in the face of power asymmetry and domination; and the constraints that workers face along the way.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because this study assumes you as one of the valued participants for generating knowledge in relation to the focus area of this study.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete a participant Consent Form. If you change your mind at any point during the study, you will be able to withdraw your participation (within 3 months) without having to provide a reason.

On what basis will you process my data?

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data. In line with the charter which states about the advance of learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR: *Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.* Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j): *Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes.*

Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data. In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with common law duty of confidentiality, I will seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be the legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

How will you use my data?
Data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this notice.

Will you share my data with 3rd parties?
No. Data will only be accessible to the project team at York only.

How will you keep my data secure?
The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data and/or special category data. For the purposes of this project, data will be coded, and password protected. Information will be treated confidential and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In addition, we will anonymise or pseudonymised data wherever possible.

Will you transfer my data internationally?
No. Data will be held within the European Economic Area in full compliance with data protection legislation.

Will I be identified in any research outputs?
No, you will not be identified in any research outputs as anonymity would be ensured.

How long will you keep my data?
Data will be retained in line with legal requirements or where there is a business need. Retention timeframes will be determined as per University's Records Retention Schedule.

What rights do I have in relation to my data?
Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection, or portability. You also have a right to withdrawal. Please note, not all rights apply where data is processed purely for research purposes. For further information, please visit https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/generaldataprotectionregulation/individualsrights/.

Questions or concerns
If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact Professor Nina Caspersen (nina.caspersen@york.ac.uk), Head of Department, in the first instance. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Acting Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk.

Right to complain

If you are unhappy with the way in which the University has handled your personal data, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

Contact details.

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Supervisors:

Dr. Indrajit Roy (indrajit.roy@york.ac.uk)

Dr. Alice M Nah (alice.nah@york.ac.uk)

Department of Politics, Derwent College

University of York,

Heslington, YO10 5DD, United Kingdom.

Appendix 3: Pre-interview Consent Form

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study?	Yes ❐ No ❐
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes ❐ No ❐
Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the research team?	Yes ❐ No ❐
Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study for any reason, without affecting any services you receive?	Yes ❐ No ❐
Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?	Yes ❐ No ❐
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes ❐ No ❐
If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded?	Yes ❐ No ❐

(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).

Your name (in BLOCK letters):
Your signature:
Date:

_____

Interviewer' name:
Signature:
Date:

_____

Contact details
Researcher:
Mohammed Hossain Sarker (mhs549@york.ac.uk)
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Heslington, YO10 5DD, United Kingdom.

Appendix 4: Premature Returnee MDWs Interview Guide

Opening Conversations

When did you embark on your journey to Saudi Arabia, and how long was your stay?

How did you arrange to go abroad, and what preparations did you make for your overseas employment?

What were your initial perceptions or ideas about the working conditions abroad? How did you find it?

What positive aspects did you find about your overseas job?

R.Q. 1. How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

What were the negative aspects you encountered in your overseas job?

Could you share some of the difficulties you faced in your workplace?

Did you attempt any actions to improve the situation? If so, how?

During your time in your employer's house, did you engage in any form of resistance or assert your concerns when you were dissatisfied with your employer or working conditions?

Would you continue your work for a different employer if given the opportunity?

R.Q. 2. What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

What obstacles did you encounter while attempting to change your situation or address the challenges you faced?

Can you recall any significant conversations you had with your employer during your employment?

Whom did you reach out to for help during times of difficulties, and how did you make contact?

What were your expectations from relevant actors, such as state, recruitment agency, middleman, civil society when you encountered difficulties?

What support did you receive? Was it sufficient?

What obstacles did you face in getting justice after returning?

R.Q. 3. How do they overcome these obstacles?

Before deciding to terminate your employment, what steps did you take, and what factors influenced your decision?

Why and When did you exactly think of exiting employment relationship?

What prompted you to consider terminating your employment relationship, and was there anything that could have helped you continue your job?

Ending conversations

What are you currently doing?

Do you have any plans to take another overseas job in the future?

What advice would you offer to individuals aspiring to become MDWs? Is there anything else you would like to emphasise or highlight?

Appendix 5: Mature Returnee MDWs Interview Guide

Opening Conversations

When did you embark on your journey to Saudi Arabia, and how long was your stay?

How did you arrange to go abroad, and what preparations did you make for your overseas employment?

What were your initial perceptions or ideas about the working conditions abroad? How did you find it?

What positive aspects did you find about your overseas job?

R.Q. 1. How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

What were the negative aspects you encountered in your overseas job?

Could you share some of the difficulties you faced in your workplace?

Did you attempt any actions to improve the situation? If so, how?

During your time in your employer's house, did you engage in any form of resistance or assert your concerns when you were dissatisfied with your employer or working conditions?

R.Q. 2. What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

What obstacles did you encounter while attempting to change your situation or address the challenges you faced?

Can you recall any significant conversations you had with your employer during your employment?

Whom did you reach out to for help during times of difficulties, and how did you make contact?

What were your expectations from relevant actors, such as state, recruitment agency, middleman, civil society when you encountered difficulties?

What support did you receive? Was it sufficient?

What obstacles did you face in getting justice after returning?

R.Q. 3. How do they overcome these obstacles?

What factors contributed to the completion of your job? How did you return after your completion of contract?

Can you compare and contrast your perception of your employer and working conditions at the initial stage of your employment to the end of your employment?

What factors contributed to your stay and completion of the contract period?

Ending Conversations

What are you currently doing?

Do you have any plans to take another overseas job in the future?

What advice would you offer to individuals aspiring to become MDWs? Is there anything else you would like to emphasise or highlight?

Appendix 6: Government Officials Interview Guide

Opening questions

How would you characterise the working conditions of MDWs in Saudi Arabia?
What are the common issues that MDWs usually face in their workplace and how do these challenges impact their wellbeing and rights?

R.Q. 1. How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

How do MDWs confront violence, domination, and exploitation in the workplace?
What support mechanisms are available for MDWs if their employers do not comply with the employment contract or if workers face exploitation and difficulties?
How does the government, including the embassy, assist MDWs who find themselves in exploitative situations?

R.Q. 2. What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

What are the primary difficulties that MDWs face while striving to overcome domination and exploitative conditions in their workplace?

R.Q. 3. How do they overcome these obstacles?

What are the top few reasons, you think, that prompt workers to exit employment relationships, and what circumstances typically lead to their situation?
When exactly do MDWs exit employment relationships? How challenging is it for an MDW to return home? What difficulties do they face after returning?

Ending questions

The 'Cost of Migration Survey 2020' revealed that 53% MDWs took overseas jobs without training while 65% went without a contract. Can you provide your thoughts and comments on this concerning trend?
Is there anything else you would like to highlight regarding the working conditions and challenges faced by MDWs in Saudi Arabia?

Appendix 7: Recruitment Agencies and Middlemen Interview Guide

Opening questions

How do you assist MDWs in securing overseas jobs abroad?

How would you characterise the working conditions of MDWs in Saudi Arabia?

R.Q. 1. How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

What are the common issues that MDWs usually face in their workplace?

What role do you play when MDWs find themselves in exploitative working conditions and what measures do you take to support them?

Could you elaborate your responsibility while workers are working abroad?

R.Q. 2. What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

How do MDWs confront violence, domination, and exploitation in the workplace?

What barriers do you encounter when trying to improve their situation?

There have been allegations that workers in danger or their families do not receive necessary help, and complaints regarding extra charges as compensation for seeking to return home from exploitative situations. What is your response to these concerns?

R.Q. 3. How do they overcome these obstacles?

How do you assist MDWs who reach out for rescue or desperately want to leave their workplace?

What are the primary reasons that prompt MDWs to exit employment relationships?

When exactly do MDWs strive to exit employment relationships?

Ending questions

The 'Cost of Migration Survey 2020' reported that 53% MDWs took overseas jobs without training, while 65% went without a contract. What is the responsibility of the recruitment agencies in these areas? What factors contribute to such situations?

Is there anything else you would like to highlight regarding your organisation's efforts, or the challenges faced by MDWs in the migration process and their working conditions?

Appendix 8: NGO and Civil Society Interview Guide

Opening questions

     How would you characterise the working conditions of MDWs in Saudi Arabia?

R.Q. 1. How do MDWs exercise agency when faced with abuse and exploitation?

     What are the common issues that MDWs typically encounter in their workplace?
     How do they negotiate these challenges?
     How do MDWs confront violence, domination, and exploitation in the workplace and what strategies do they employ against these difficulties?

R.Q. 2. What obstacles do they encounter in their efforts to change situations?

     What difficulties do MDWs face when attempting to improve their working conditions or change their situation?
     How do you assist and support MDWs who find them in exploitative working conditions?

R.Q. 3. How do they overcome these obstacles?

     What are the primary reasons that prompt MDWs to seek to exit employment relationships? Could you elaborate on the circumstances that lead to their decision?
     When exactly did MDWs strive to exit employment relationships?

Ending questions

     Is there anything else you would like to emphasise or highlight in relation to the working conditions and challenges faced by MDWs in Saudi Arabia?

Appendix 9: Confidentiality and Data ownership Agreement

Confidentiality and Data Ownership Agreement with the Research Assistant

Project Title: The Premature Return of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs): Lessons from the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia Migration Corridor

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This "Confidentiality and Data Ownership Agreement" is made between the Research Assistant and the Researcher (Principal Investigator), and it entered into effect as of 20 November 2021 under the following terms and conditions:

Declaration	Agreement
(i) I hereby agree that all data (personal data and research data) collected/accumulated in the form of consent forms, interview tapes, notes, transcripts, and the like, will be recorded, handled, and treated strictly as confidential information.	☑
(ii) I hereby agree that all documents/materials (including this) shared with me by the Researcher (Principal Investigator) of this project will be treated strictly as confidential information.	☑
(iii) I hereby agree that data collected under this investigation must be stored in a safe location.	☑
(iv) I hereby agree that no data, data set or information, under this investigation, will be used for any purposes other than this project.	☑
(v) I hereby agree that I will not discuss the project and the data collected under this project with anybody else other than the Researcher/Project Investigator.	☑
(vi) I will not duplicate, share, publish or otherwise disclose any data related to this project to any third parties other than in response to the appropriate court order if any.	☑
(vii) Upon the completion of this project, I will delete/destroy all form of data related to this project and will provide a written declaration to the Researcher (Principal Investigator) on the same.	☑
(viii) I will notify the Researcher (Principal Investigator) immediately should I become aware of any breach/potential breach of data collected under this project.	☑
(ix) I shall hereby adhere to the terms of this agreement and understand that non-observance of any of the above-mentioned agreed conditions will be treated as breaching of the agreement and would be subject to legal actions by the Researcher (Principal Investigator) and his affiliated organisation.	☑

Signature of the Research Assistant: *Oishi Roy*
Name of the Research Assistant (CAPITAL LETTER): OISHI ROY
Date of Signature: 20.11.21

Signature of the Researcher (Principal Investigator): ....
Name of the Researcher (Principal Investigator): MOHAMMED HOSSAIN SARKER
Date of Signature: 20.11.2021

Appendix 10: Ethics compliance Agreement

Ethics Compliance Agreement
Project Title: The Premature Return of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs): Lessons from the Bangladesh-Saudi Arabia Migration Corridor
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This "Ethics Compliance Agreement" is made between the Research Assistant and the Researcher (Principal Investigator) of the above-mentioned project, and it entered into effect as of 20 November 2021 under the following declarations:

Declaration	Agreement
(i) I have understood the role of the Research Assistant in the data collection process along with the aim and objective of this research project.	☑
(ii) Under close supervision of the Researcher, I will comply with research ethics, including but not limited to anonymity, confidentiality, rights of the research participants, the sensitivity of the research data and the anticipated risks.	
(iii) I, along with the Researcher, will apprise the participant of the purpose, likely outcomes, and the benefits of the study before conducting interviews to provide a clear understanding of the project and gain informed consent.	☑
(iv) I understand that the 'participants information sheet' and the 'consent form' would be distributed among participants in advance, and those would be read out before any interview to earn informed consent. If any returnee MDW cannot sign the 'consent form', a thumb impression would be sought as an alternative. However, if anyone feels discomfort in providing a thumb impression, oral consent would be recorded in the presence of a witness. I will ensure the witness leaves the place before I start the interview.	☑
(v) I will be careful in complying with the ethical standard so as to avoid any harm to the participants. I will also be mindful of respecting the needs and desires of the participants.	☑
(vi) I will apprise the research participants on the use of data collection devices, e.g., audio recorder, and it would be used only after having consent;	☑
(vii) Before each interview, I will state that the participation is entirely voluntary. Participants would be informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study any time between the interview date to the next three months.	☑
(viii) I will assure and ensure the highest level of anonymity and confidentiality. An explanation would be given on how anonymity and confidentiality would be ensured	☑
(ix) I will not ask any embarrassing or threatening questions to the participants. However, I understand that some of the returnee MDWs may express upsetting incidents, including any physical, mental, or emotional abuse that they might have suffered at their workplaces. If such a situation arises and if any participant appears to be experiencing any distress during the interview, I will pause the session. I will ask them if they wish to continue or stop the interview. If needed, the interview would be postponed or discarded altogether. In case of any emotional distress during interviews, returnee MDWs would be offered contacts for further help.	☑
(x) I will comply with health and safety regulations in relation to Covid. Steps will be taken as per the local guidelines in relation to Covid. While in the field, I will follow government advice, including adhering to all cautionary safety measures to protect both myself and the participants. I will not go for any fieldwork if I have any doubt of having Covid symptoms so as not to be a possible vector for spreading the virus. Cautionary measures will include but are not limited to wearing face cover, hand sanitising, social distancing, repeated cleaning of stuff, avoiding intimate space and keeping interaction limited while travelling.	☑
(xi) before I move, I will familiarise myself with the locality by taking help from personal	☑

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(xii) The highest efforts would be placed to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of both research and personal data in line with the 'General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018' and 'Data Protection Act 2018'. I will take the following steps: (a) personal data would be separated from the research data. Identifying information (name, contact and address) would be removed from the transcripts. (b) the transcripts, field notes and recordings would be anonymised with 'participant code'. (c) transcripts, fieldnotes, recorders, laptop and external hard drives would be stored in a locked closet in a room with a locked door. (d) the audio recorders will be under passcode. Audio records would be returned to the Researcher soon after transcribing interviews. Once returned, the records would be deleted from the recorder. (e) all electronic data will be kept under a password-protected and encrypted personal laptop. A password-protected external hard drive would be used for backup, if feasible. However, no personal data would be stored in the external hard drive. (g) data from the hard drive would be securely erased once data are returned to the Researcher. (h) The transcripts, personal data, field notes, audio records would be destroyed once those are returned to the Researcher and the fieldwork is completed.	☑
(xiii) I will be both careful and respectful to the local customs and practices while interacting with my participants and will uphold their dignity.	☑
(xiv) I will emphasise building a 'relationship of trust' by being amicable and showing respect.	☑
(xv) project is going to collect only minimum personal information, and those would be used only to communicate with participants during fieldwork.	☑
(xvi) I will be extremely careful so that no adverse publicity or financial loss for the university takes place.	☑
(xvii) Along with the above, I will follow any other Code of Practice on Research Integrity, as and when guided and instructed by the Researcher.	☑
(xviii) I shall hereby adhere to these declarations and understand that non-observance of any of the above-mentioned agreed conditions will be treated as breaching of the agreement and would be subject to legal actions.	☑

Signature of the Research Assistant: *Oishi Roy*

Name of the Research Assistant (CAPITAL LETTER): OISHI ROY

Date of Signature: 20.11.2021

Signature of the Researcher (Principal Investigator): ....

Name of the Researcher (Principal Investigator): MOHAMMED HOSSAIN SARKER
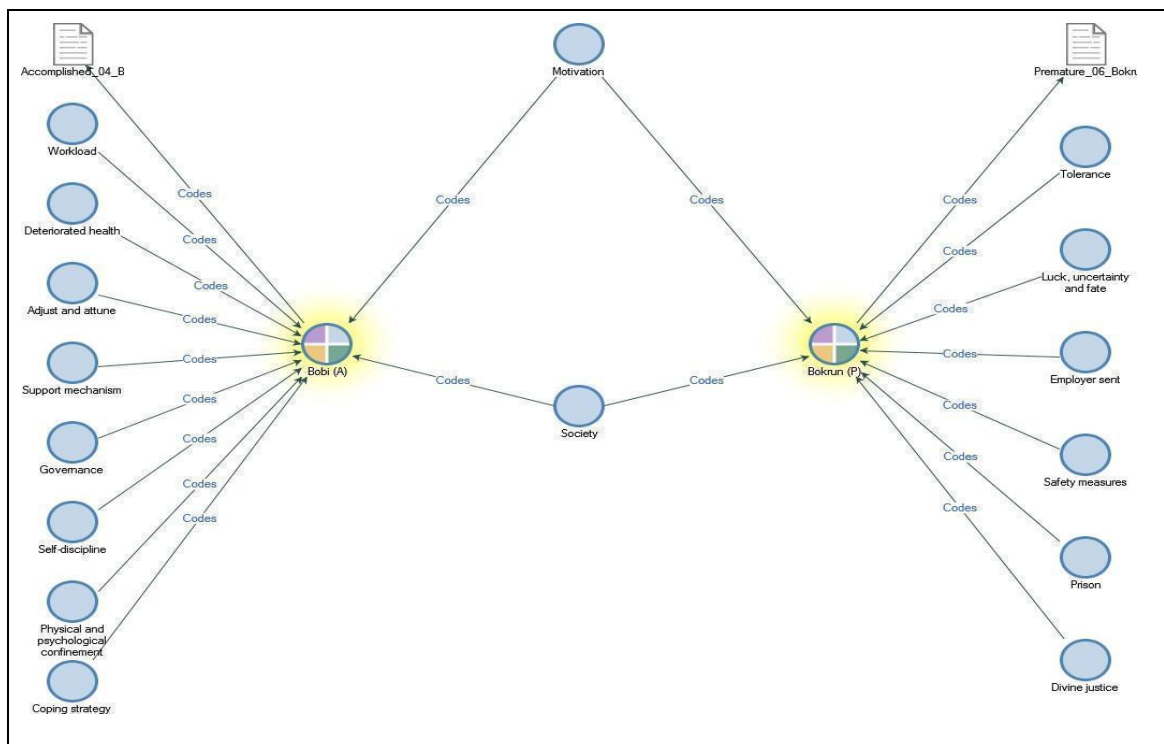
Date of Signature: 20.11.2021

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Appendix 11: Examples of Mind Map
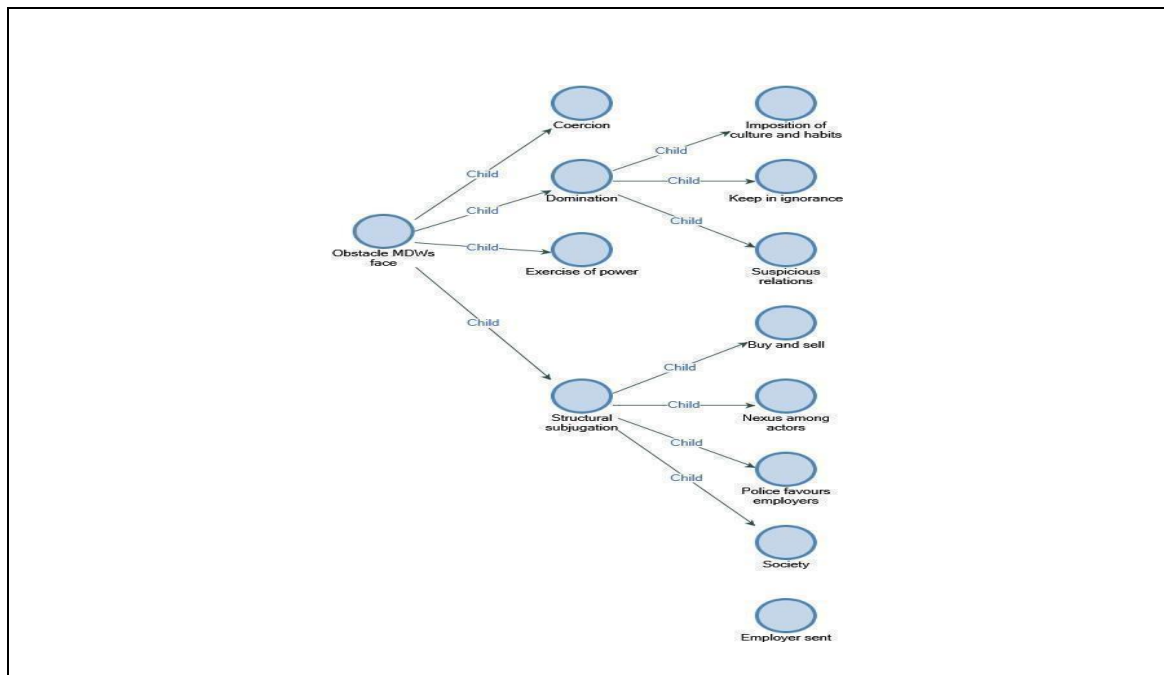
Source: Author

Appendix 12: Examples of Visualisation of Codes

Source: Author

Acronyms

AP	-	Asia Pacific
BBS	-	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BLA	-	Bilateral Agreement
BMET	-	Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training
BNSK	-	Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra
BOESL	-	Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited
BRAC	-	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
GCC	-	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
GoB	-	Government of Bangladesh
GoSA	-	Government of Saudi Arabia
ICRMW	-	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
ILO	-	International Labour Organisation
IOM	-	International Organisation for Migration
ITUC	-	International Trade Union Confederation
JWC	-	Joint Working Committee
MDW	-	Migrant Domestic Worker
MoEWOE	-	Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment
MoU	-	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	-	Official Development Assistance
OKUP	-	Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Programme
UAE	-	United Arab Emirates
UK	-	United Kingdom
UN	-	United Nations
USA	-	United States of America

Glossary

Allah bichar korbe	-	Bangla: the Almighty will judge
Amar sathe kharap kaj korar chesta korse	-	Bangla: tried to rape. The word ''kharap kaj'' is metaphorically used for sex activities.
Ami bolsi ami deshe chole jabo	-	Bangla: I said I would go back to my home
Ana miskin	-	Arabic: I am poor
Angikarnama	-	Bangla: pledge
Basabari	-	Bangla: house
Beti		Bangla: woman (meant the female employer)
Beti-ta khub kharap silo		Bangla: the female employer was terrible
Bikri kore dibe		Bangla: I would be sold (meant transferred to another employer)
Chakor hisabe ami karo basabari-te jabo na	-	Bangla: I would not go to any household as a bonded labour (meant as if a slave)
Dalal	-	Bangla: middleman. In Bangladesh, middlemen are commonly known as dalal, which connotes as broker.
Dalal amake bikri kore dey.	-	Bangla: I was sold by the middleman
Desh	-	Bangla: home country
Haram	-	Arabic: non-permissible. This is opposite to halal (permissible)
Harami	-	Arabic: a sinner
Haywan	-	Arabic: animal
Iqama	-	Arabic: residence permit
Janowar	-	Bangla: animal
Joddha	-	Bangla: fighter

Kafala	-	Arabic: An institutional framework of sponsorship system introduced by Saudi Arabia and other GCC states that delegate authority and responsibility to employers for migrant workers.
Kafeel	-	Arabic: the official employer (or sponsor) of a worker in the Arab states
Kafeel amader kinte asbe		Bangla: employers will come to buy us.
Khaddama	-	Arabic: servant, domestic worker. MDWs are known as khaddama.
Kharap	-	Bangla: bad/immoral/exploitative
Kharap lok	-	Bangla: bad/worst people
Kharap malik	-	Bangla: bad employer
Kopal	-	Bangla: luck
Kopal kharap	-	Bangla: bad luck
Madrasah	-	Arabic: school
Mahila	-	Bangla: women. Workers used it for their female employers
Maktab	-	Arabic: generally, it means (elementary) school. It also means office. It was used by MDWs to mean the recruitment agency office.
Malik	-	Bangla: employer
Miskin	-	Arabic: similar to impecunious in English. In religious terms, *miskin* refers to someone with no property, and poor refers to someone with less property, equivalent to 80 grams of gold. With this understanding, a *miskin* is someone whose financial level is lower than a poor one. Therefore, it means a *miskin* is poorer than a poor one (https://www.herkul.org).
Musaned	-	Arabic: integrated electronic system, introduced by Saudi government
Obaidha somparka		Bangla: illegal relationship
Ottachar	-	Bangla: torture
Ovishap	-	Bangla: curse
Paji	-	Bangla: terrible. It was meant to female employer
Paribar	-	Bangla: family

Purush	-	Bangla: man. Workers used this to mention their male employer.
Purush-ta valo, beti-ta paji	-	Bangla: the male employer was good while the female employer was terrible.
Safar jail	-	Arabic English: also known as *safar prison*. It is the prison where detained immigrants are kept temporarily before being sent to their home country.
Salaam	-	Arabic and Bangla: religious greetings
Samaj	-	Bangla: society, community
Samaj-a mukh dekhate parbo na	-	Bangla: I would not be able to face society
Sondehoy kore	-	Bangla: suspicious (of an illegal relationship)
Soytan	-	Bangla: devil
Taka	-	Bangla: Bangladeshi currency (1 USD=108 Taka as of August 2023)
Taqdeer	-	Arabic and Bangla: luck
Tawtheeq	-	Arabic: attestation
Vaggoy	-	Bangla: luck
Valo	-	Bangla: good
Valo Kafeel	-	Bangla: good employer
Valo kharap sob deshei ase	-	Bangla: There are both good and bad people in every country

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