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Pawns for Profits:
Analysing the Plight of Bangladeshi Female Migrant Workers to KSA Between 2015 – 2018

Ahmad Ibrahim

2023

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to recount this history of female migration into KSA from Bangladesh during the 2015-2018 period as an example of collusion between profit-oriented recruiters and the state apparatus, where women were used as a pawn for opening up the more lucrative male labour migration market. This paper argues that the state, in collusion with private recruiters, engaged in predatory identification and recruitment activities that ultimately put profits over the lives of female migrant workers. In doing so, the paper seeks to postulate an evental analysis of migration governmentality, whereby encounters between heterogenous forces such as the *kafala* system, a pre-capitalist mode of production, state complicity in private profiteering and the logic of neoliberal labour flow coincided to formulate a coercive, yet consensual, migration market. In analysing the methods and practices of both the state and the recruiters in facilitating the migration of female workers to KSA during this period, this paper looks at this period through the lens of 'hyper-precarity' arguing that its institutionalisation is emblematic of the neoliberal regime of labour flexibility.[1] This paper is based on institutional data, secondary reports and the primary accounts of 28 female migrant workers who migrated to KSA during this period. Statistics on migration outflows for male and female migrants from Bangladesh is based on data provided by the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), the government body authorised by the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) to provide 'manpower clearances' to outgoing migrant workers. The paper also looks at various news sources that mention the policy changes undertaken by Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Indonesia, respectively. In so far as linking the theoretical paradigms to the issues being discussed, the paper employs primarily employs event analysis and discourse analysis methods. Finally, the paper also incorporates the voices of returnee female migrant workers from the Middle East, who shared stories of the events leading up to their recruitment and their experiences at destination. The interviews with female migrant workers were collected by the author during a separate research activity analysing the labour migration market in Bangladesh, funded by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS).[2]

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The Condition in Bangladesh

International labour migration from Bangladesh has long-been an income generating strategy employed by rural and peri-urban communities across the country, to the point where it has become a socially embedded lifestyle choice for many regions. The process began in the mid-1970s with outbound labour migration to Gulf states and has since then grown at a steady pace to include many other countries in the world. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains the biggest destination for migrant workers from Bangladesh, with the country having taken in 35.7% of all registered labour migrants leaving the country for the last 50 years.[3] The informal and, at times, clandestine, nature of international labour migration from Bangladesh means that migrant workers often end up paying some of the highest recruitment fees in the world. Understanding the structure of the international migration market is important in this regard as migration from Bangladesh occurs not through any 'open market' as we might begin to conceptualise one, but rather through more primitive conceptualisations of 'market' which essentially means a flow of information (or misinformation) regarding the possibility of an economic transaction, from one interested party to another, in such a way that leads them to taking market choices. The presence of a large number of 'facilitators' or middlemen throughout the process inflates the final cost that is borne by the migrant worker, as profits are absorbed at different stages of the process by different stakeholders. Indeed, Barkat et al (2014) identified that up to 60% of the final recruitment fee paid by the migrant worker is absorbed by intermediaries not officially involved in the transaction.[4]

The informality of the outbound labour migration process creates space for a large number of facilitators to embed themselves into the market structure in order to absorb profits. Visas and passports are procured through networks dependent on kinship, trust, and the promise of mutual benefits. This market configuration means that more often than not, only aspirants who are able to gather the large amount of money up front are able to access these opportunities. Aspirant migrants from rural and peri-urban areas often leverage social networks and sell off existing assets in order to generate the money required for recruitment fees. Given the ways in which patriarchal customs, social beliefs and practices have historically excluded women from public and private decision making in Bangladesh, women's access to this informal migration market remained limited.[5] Unlike aspirant male migrants, women were not able to generate the large amount of capital required to mobilise this intricate and layered network of facilitators. In short, it was rarely profitable for the burgeoning Bangladeshi migration market structure to facilitate women's migration.

Data from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) shows that figures for female migration did not reach six digits until 2015, prior to which the United Arab Emirates was the primary destination country for women.[6] Between 1991, when women's labour migration began in earnest, to 2013, the largest share of women were migrating Lebanon, with 30% of all migrants, with KSA at 13%. Primarily, women's employment continues to be in feminised trades such as domestic work, garments' sectors and other service sector jobs. However, since 2015, the percentage share of women migrating to KSA has sky-rocketed, to the extent that it now occupies 44.4% of the share of all women workers who have migrated internationally.[7] The following sections will attempt to trace the events that affected this change and the ways in which it led to newly formulated migration governmentality that sought to transform women into transnational labouring subjects.

Analysing the Formative Neoliberal 'Event' – 2015

Prior to 2015, the primary source of domestic workers into Saudi Arabia was from Indonesia. The 2015 ban by the Indonesian government on female migrant workers migrating to 21 Middle Eastern countries put into motion a chain of events that changed the migration landscape in Bangladesh. The moratorium on women migrating to the Gulf states was put in place by Indonesia as a response to the unannounced execution of two Indonesian women, Karni Bt. Medi Tarsim and Siti Zeinab.[8] However, placing bans on women's migration was not a new practice by Indonesia, which had done so in 2011 as well, when the Saudi government executed another domestic worker, Ruyati Binti Sapubi, who had been sentenced to death for killing her employer. Indonesia also had to routinely intervene to pay 'blood money' to Saudi families in exchange for pardoning domestic workers who had been convicted.[9]

The Saudi government had previously explored the Bangladeshi market for domestic workers in 2012, responding to the unpredictability of the bans placed by the Indonesian government. However, the initiative failed to garner concrete response due to the market structure in Bangladesh. But in 2015, the response was swift and transformative, with the Bangladeshi Association for International Recruiting Agents (BAIRA) signing a memorandum with the Saudi government to send two male workers for each female worker sent. The figures highlight this change.

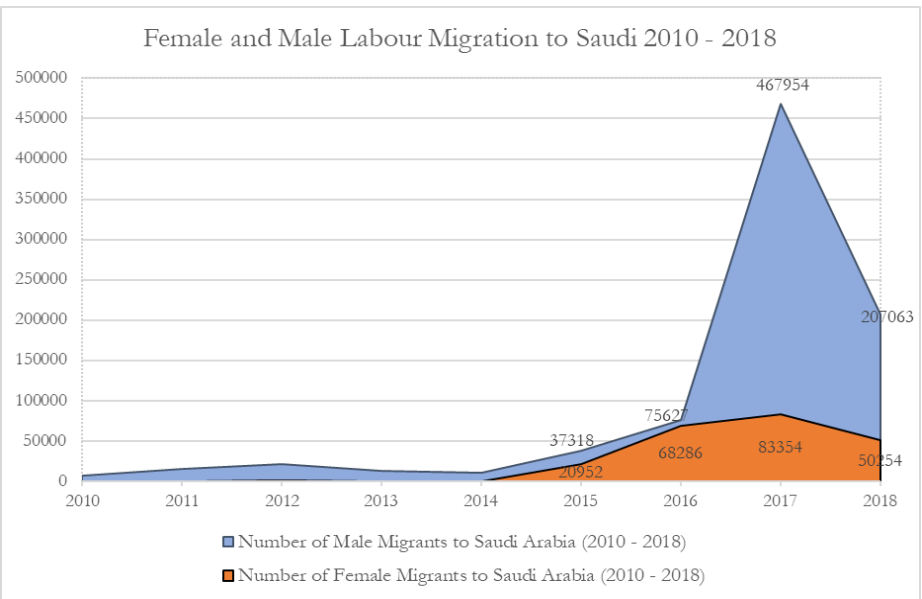

Figure 1. Statistics of female and male labour migration to Saudi Arabia between 2010 - 2018. Source : BMET

The onus was now on the Bangladeshi recruiting agencies to find suitable women workers to send to Saudi Arabia in order to absorb the profits from sending male workers. Prior to this, Saudi Arabia had stopped issuing large scale visas to male migrant workers in Bangladesh, evidenced by the

low number of migrants between 2010 – 2014. Since 2015, however, the numbers going to KSA reached massive proportions as visas were once again being issued for men, contingent upon the provision of female domestic workers. The four years between 2015 – 2018 saw a coordinated campaign by both the state and the formal and informal assemblages of recruitment in Bangladesh to source female migrant workers to send to KSA.

The developments in 2015, while in themselves a localised rupture of existing market relations, coincides well with the logic of transnational neoliberalism, which seeks to transgress the logic of borders in its attempt to identify and recruit labouring subjects. These 'race-to-bottom' ideologies are inherent both in the actions of the destination and origin governments. While Saudi Arabia sought out cheaper and de-regulated flows of women migrants, the Bangladeshi state responded by turning a blind eye towards the reports of abuse that led to the moratorium from Indonesia and opening the doors for women migrants to take their place. The Bangladeshi government has throughout the years engaged in similar race-to-bottom practices and its MoU with Saudi Arabia did not stipulate a minimum wage or a minimum standard of care for women migrant workers.[10]

It is also important here to consider the analytic framework of the 'border' as the method through which labour power is differently situated within the framework of state protection and the affordance of care. The ban for migrants from Indonesia necessitated the search within the borders of Bangladesh, where the state was more eager to facilitate the movement of surplus labouring subjects into vulnerable working conditions. Indeed, the modalities through which certain labouring bodies are able to access their potentialities are structurally marked by their race, gender and geographical origin.[11] In the case of Bangladesh, the events of 2015 marked the rupture at which female subjects were suddenly inscribed with the potentiality to access jobs as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, while also being inscribed with the lack of safety and inherent vulnerability that was associated with such a position.

The change in market dynamics, translated into a new social reality for women in rural and peri-urban areas of Bangladesh, where once migration routes for those without capital were restricted to the urban centres of the country. Sabiha Begum is one such individual for whom the new reality ushered in new avenues of imagination.

> 'At that time, there was a lot of fanfare in our village, with some of the local dalals continually visiting poor women's houses every day. Every day they would come and ask us about our financial situation. They asked us if we wanted to drastically improve our lives by working in Saudi. I didn't think it was an option for women to go abroad like our men. They told me that I would only have to do housework, which I already do.'[12]

The targeting of poor women in vulnerable situations, in particular, was reported by respondents as a common tactic employed by middlemen at the beginning of 2015. Previously it was close to impossible for poor women with little to no capital to envisage going abroad to earn money. The prospect of carrying out 'housework' also attracted the women, who felt it would be similar to the kind of intimate care work they engaged in, in their own homes.

In the end, six women from Sabiha's village decided to make the trip to Saudi Arabia in 2015, including Sabiha herself. Their experiences were traumatic and short-lived, with Sabiha returning home after seven months, almost completely empty-handed.

However, at the macro level, it was not easy for the state or the recruiters to respond to the demands of the Saudi state. While there was a surplus of male workers interested to travel to the Middle East for work, this was not initially the case for women. The Minister for Expatriate Welfare

and Overseas Employment, Nurul Islam, candidly admitted to the fact that the state was still struggling to recruit workers, when he said, 'there is no bar on women from working in Saudi Arabia. We are just not finding enough female workers.'[13] During the first year of the agreement, a sizeable portion of women migrants returned after a few months at the job, citing abusive work conditions, which discouraged other women workers from taking the same decision. The low numbers also put a strain on BAIRA, who had to deliver the agreed number of women migrants to the Saudi government if they were to be allowed to send male migrant workers. At various times, the Saudi embassy suspended the provision of visas to male migrants during 2015, in order to put pressure on BAIRA to fulfil its commitment of sending women workers.[14]

In a report published by Arab News and later picked up by the Bangladeshi media, the Saudi government highlighted the 'failure' of the Bangladeshi government in sending the 500,000 maids that it had promised within one year.[15] The report further stated that until that point, it had managed to only send 20,000 domestic workers to the Gulf state.

The problem of low worker recruitment posed a serious challenge to BAIRA, who were desperate to keep the migration market for male workers open. The organisation highlighted both the poor salary and the concerns for safety as some of the primary reasons as to why women did not show interest. The then BAIRA secretary general Monsur Kalam said:

> 'After conducting a survey in all the 64 districts, we found that our women were unwilling to go to Saudi Arabia. There are some problems in the kingdom that discourage females from going there. Only some very poor women showed interest in Saudi jobs.'[16]

The pressure to recruit women migrants led to large scale mobilisation by recruiting agencies in the rural areas of migration-prone areas of the country.[17] Informal agents of the recruitment agencies would make regular house calls to women they targeted and even provided gifts to them. Feroza Khatun recalls this experience:

> 'Everyday he would come to my house in the morning and bring some groceries. He would ask about my finances and sometimes would give me some money to make ends meet. He then brought up the idea of me going to Saudi Arabia to make more money. I took it positively because I trusted him and he was trying to support me. My husband cannot work so I had to take a decision to go. He had told me that it would only take a small amount of money.'[18]

The informal and highly personalised recruitment tactics employed by the recruitment agencies were in essence sanctioned by the state as it continued to bank on the remittances sent back home by migrants as a source of income and foreign exchange. Indeed, calls from the state continue to focus on identifying ways in which the volume of migration can be increased.[19] Despite the 'negative image of the Kingdom' highlighted by the Minister of Expatriate Welfare, in an interview he assured his Saudi counterparts of their commitment to keep sending women.[20]

The events of 2015 address the initial rupture that opened up the possibility for inscribing gendered subjects with potentialities for transnational labour. The aim of the state, in collusion with private recruitment agencies, was to transform this gendered form of labour subject into the 'ideal migrant subject'. It is at this juncture that the neoliberal fixation on labour flexibility encountered the primitive rent-seeking market systems of Bangladeshi overseas migration to transform the landscape of female migration in Bangladesh and expand its reaches into the rural heartlands. In this analysis, state and market were no longer distinct but 'mutually constitutive entities in a symbiotic relationship'.[21] While the state retained its regulatory authority, it essentially decentralised a

considerable amount of autonomy to market actors to identify and recruit female migrantworkers.

Migration Governmentality – Coercion and Consent in Constructing the 'Ideal Migrant'

The field of study looking at migrant subjectivity has a vast body of literature that informs the ways in which migrants 'become migrants before leaving home'.[22] This is done through the process of developing regulatory frameworks and the development of systematised processes that seek to sculpt the ideal migrant worker. Pre-departure steps such as screening, skill development training and orientation programs play an important role in cultivating migrant subjectivities and giving shape and orientation to labour power, while neutralising its potentialities to transgress. Literature has also looked at the ways in which migration processes 'encounter' governmentality and give rise to practices, discourse and subjectivities that take on self-disciplining agendas.[23]

As we shall see, the neoliberal 'event' of 2015 gave rise to corresponding assemblages of self-disciplining and subjectivity formation for women migrants from Bangladesh. The state, in collaboration with non-state entities, authorised the development of 'technologies of servitude' to provide training to prospective women women migrants in housekeeping.[24] The training programs were launched earlier around 2009, but became popular once the large-scale migration to Saudi Arabia started in 2015. These training programs were primarily centralised in the capital city of Dhaka but have since been decentralised across the country and are now offered in 46 out of 64 districts. The housekeeping training programs offer not only skills on issues such as bedmaking, vacuuming, dusting and personal hygiene but also provide language courses designed to provide aspirant migrants with a working grasp of Arabic.[25] The training programs bore striking resemblance to the training programs offered to potential female migrants in Indonesia with the use of strict disciplinary tactics, routinisation and bare residential arrangements.[26] Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of governmentality, these practices can be contextualised in a broader sense under the ways in which migration governmentalities are inculcated both into migrant workers and into the actions and discourse of society itself.[27]

The training programs highlighted the interplay of migration governmentality and the ethos of neoliberalism, as migrant workers were taught how their wellbeing depended upon their professionalism and behaviour. Khaleda Akhter, one returnee migrant who took part in the training program prior to migrating, shares how the trainers stressed the importance of behaviour:

> 'I was told about the importance of my behaviour. How I had to be pleasant and keep smiling. If someone gets angry with me, I shouldn't show too much emotion. My wellbeing and my fate (Bhaggo) would be tied to how I respond to negative situations.'[28]

The self-disciplining practices are emblematic of governmentality occurring 'at a distance' as it is done through voluntary acts by the individuals themselves.[29] In this instance, Khaleda reported internalising the understanding that her own wellbeing is dependent on her actions as the ideal migrant subject.[30]

Government rhetoric about migrant workers draws on the symbolism of the liberation war of Bangladesh, which gives rise to fervent and unquestioned nationalism. Tagging migrant workers as 'remittance fighters' (in Bangla, *remittance-joddha,* a play on the *mukti-joddha,* meaning freedom fighter), the state develops the purified image of the migrant worker as one who sacrifices themselves for the development of the country. In juxtaposing the notion of the transnational labouring subject with the

body of the freedom fighter, the subjectivities of both bodies are removed, and the necessity of their actions are put beyond question. The freedom fighter fights because they must, therefore, the migrant worker goes abroad for their country because they must.[31]

In this instance, it is useful to locate the actions of the State within the Gramscian concept of coercion and consent, integral to the establishment of hegemony.[32] The rhetoric employed by the state reflects forms of 'consensus' as the corollary of the coercion of self-disciplining that migrant workers must adopt. Evidence shows that there has been a mass adoption of the rhetoric of the *remittance-joddha* by civil society and state organs. Bangladeshi embassies around the world have organised award ceremonies honouring migrants who remit the highest amount of money as 'remittance warriors'.[33] Private firms began to market their services to migrants under the remittance-*joddha* tag and civil society leaders began to write polemics about the sacrifices of remittance warriors.[34]

NGOs and civil society organisations that regularly campaign for the rights of migrant workers have also bought into the trope of the 'remittance warrior', both as a strategic entry point for lobbying with the state and as an unquestioning symbol of reverence towards the war of liberation. Between 2015 to 2018, a number of NGOs extensively documented the plight of female migrant workers traveling to KSA and the regularity with which they would face abuse. BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh (and the world) reported that between 2015 and 2018, over 5,000 female migrants returned from KSA having had horrific experiences, detailing widespread abuse, torture, and exploitation.[35] However, in placing their recommendations to the state, NGOs stop short of calling the state to reconsider its commitment to sending female migrants to KSA. In fact, the abusive nature of the deal between the Saudi government and BAIRA was never called into question by NGOs or human rights activists in terms of the potential pathways of exploitation it might open up. Instead, it was looked at as an opportunity, by most stakeholders, to channel an abundant supply of feminised labouring subjects in search of remittances to fill state coffers and boost the economy. NGOs, unwittingly or otherwise, focused their energy on advocating for greater state intervention into the lives of female migrants workers, boosting their surveillance apparatus both at home and at their embassies abroad, and developing better strategies for the formation of commodifiable migrant workers.[36] The rhetoric adopted by NGOs and civil society organisations is an extension of the migration governmentality of the state, in which the logic of neoliberalism and the localised profiteering that created the female migration market remains unquestioned. These 'technologies of rationalising' serve to harden transnational flows of labour and seek to reify the specific orientation and restraint that neoliberal forces put on labour power and the labouring subject.[37]

Situating the Woman Migrant Amidst Hyper-Precarity

What of the woman who migrates? So far, this paper has traced the genealogy of migration governmentality in the context of the rupture that took place in 2015, particularly altering the landscape of female migration. Through that process, women were subjected to predatory recruitment practices and, later, disciplining and self-disciplining practices, which has managed to successfully establish a robust market for female migrants traveling to the Middle East as domestic workers. There is now considerable demand for traveling to the Middle East as a domestic worker. Women, particularly from rural areas, view this as an attractive income generating opportunity, the likes of which they would likely not find in Bangladesh. However, little has changed in terms of the modality of employment in Saudi Arabia and the environment into which these women are placed.

In Saudi Arabia, the *kafala* system persists as the primary regime of migrant governance, which effectively binds the migrant worker to the sponsor, or employer.[38] The pressures of the kafala system are compounded by the live-in condition of domestic workers. Indeed, the nature of the kafala grants Saudi citizens unregulated power over the bodies and lives of the female migrants with little to no scope for accountability, essentially making the employer a 'proxy for the state'.[39] Reforms to the *kafala* system have often required corporeal sacrifice. A recent change to the *kafala* laws for women migrants has meant that domestic workers no longer require the consent of their employer to switch jobs.[40] This change, in particular, came on the heels of a death penalty verdict handed out by the Saudi courts to a Saudi woman for murdering a Bangladeshi domestic worker, Abiron Begum.[41] Rights groups continue to stress the fact that this change has not been well communicated and that domestic workers continue to live in vulnerability. It is important to note that while the *kafala* system continues to this day as an artefact of pre-capitalist modes of production, it has seamlessly coincided with global neoliberal labour flows and retains its enduring potency in regimenting intimate labour. Within this situation, the woman migrant finds herself at a distance from the state, as it is refuses to intervene in the inviolability of the home, and yet face to face with the state, in the guise of the employer who demands absolute subservience at the threat of cancelling a contract or deportation.

I contend that this particularly gendered sense of precarity can be considered 'hyper-precarity', wherein gendered migration regimes and neoliberalism combine with pre-capitalist modes of production to create multidimensional insecurities and forms of exploitation for migrant workers.[42] The term hyper-precarity is useful to understand the lives of migrants domestic workers in that their precarity does not only stem from work related conditions as is conceptualised for post-Fordist capitalist configurations. Rather, the nature of the interface through which domestic workers are connected to employers and migrate to their destinations inculcates specific kinds of totalitarian unfreedoms that lend to all-encompassing insecurities. Inherent within this conception of hyper-precarity is the threat of deportability, the threat of bodily harm and the internalisation of fear. Sabiha Begum, who lasted seven months at her place of employment illustrates this:

> 'I could not sleep; I could not lie down. I had to be on my feet for up to twenty hours a day. I was constantly abused, beaten with blunt and sharp objects. When I would get cuts, they would not take me to the hospital. I was given food only once a day. I felt I was going to go crazy there. The windows in my room were barred and I dreamed of breaking them and running away. But I kept telling myself that I had to endure it. But I couldn't.'[43]

In the end, Sabiha escaped, like countless others and handed herself over to the authorities. Her ordeal wasn't over yet, as she had to endure several months in prison before being deported back to Bangladesh. Her story bears striking resemblance to countless others who migrated abroad at the beginning of 2015 and, indeed, continue to do so today.

Looking to the Future

In the years since 2018, a few notable changes have impacted the dynamics of the Bangladeshi outbound migration market. For one, the share of women constituting the total number of migrants into Saudi Arabia has decreased from an average of 27.4% between 2015-2018 (going as high as 47% in 2016) to 12.2% between 2019-2023 (excluding the year 2020 where international migration was virtually halted by the COVID-19 pandemic.[44] The statistics suggest that 'winning' a female labour migration contract is no longer as lucrative as it was initially. This is primarily a result of the

economic diversification policies being implemented by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) which has taken on a large number of mega projects that require a substantial workforce. Reports indicated that 57% of Saudi companies were expected to substantially increase their workforce in response to the industrial boom.[45] This was backed up by data shared by Saudi Arabia's Minister for Human Resources at the unveiling of the 2024 budget, where he stated that 1.1 million new jobs had been created in 2023.[46] The high rate of job creation has translated into increased demand for medium and less-skilled migrants into various categories, particularly construction.

However, the falling demand for female migrants from Bangladesh is not only because male visas are now readily available. In fact, the 'race to bottom' logic of neoliberal capitalism has led to Saudi Arabia broadening its market for domestic workers. Under the Saudi Arabian employer-pay model, the recruitment costs of all migrant workers are to be borne by the employer, a fact that does little to deter the lucrative exploitation carried out by recruiting agents in Bangladesh. Over the years, the recruitment cost to be borne by employers for domestic workers from Bangladesh have increased to an average of $2500 (still substantially less than the estimated $4000 required for recruiting South-east Asian, particularly Filipino, domestic workers). The Saudi focus has thus shifted to African countries, where recruitment is still relatively cheap, at an average of between $900 - $1000.[47] In looking at the recruitment patterns now emerging in various African nations, we can see a similar pattern of predatory recruitment that once ravaged the rural heartlands of Bangladesh. For example, in Ethiopia, the government has been criticised for planning and engaging in the predatory recruitment of 500,000 for domestic work in Saudi Arabia. As opposed to Bangladesh, this process is being directly overseen by the Ethiopian government. Public officials and mayors have been reported directly encouraging women to make the journey. However, the practices are eerily similar. There, as in Bangladesh, women report that they are being sold 'an opportunity of a lifetime', and that it was a 'quicker path to success in life than school'.[48] Similar to the events in Bangladesh, this campaign is bereft of awareness of the abuse domestic workers face in Saudi Arabia and Ethiopian recruits have come out with stories of hardship and exploitation in Saudi following their migration. Till date, however, the Ethiopian government's campaign continues unabated, with Facebook being utilised as a popular recruiting medium.[49] The nature of migration governmentality that is engendered in Ethiopia remains to be seen, but it is clear that it is a similar in scope and nature to the neoliberal event that took place in Bangladesh. This development shows that the neoliberal template of developing ever cheaper labouring subjects and ever flexible flows of labour is easily translatable across geographies and polities. Pertinent, here, is a discussion on Marx's poignant characterisation of wage labour and capital in his 1847 lecture, which recounts the inherent logic of capitalism in straining ever more productivity out of labour "for the very reason that it has already strained them – the law that grants it no respite, and constantly shouts in its ear: March! March!" (para 1).[50] This 'march' has been enacted on the global stage not just by cheapening existing labour but by the creation of labouring potentialities in ever cheaper bodies, transcending borders and continents until all avenues are exhausted.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the ways in which the events of 2015 reoriented the labouring potentialities of rural women in Bangladesh, by developing them into transnational domestic workers. This transformational change took place as a means to further the profiteering impulse of the market structure for male migrants in Bangladesh. As part of the urgency for profiteering, women migrants' bodies were considered at once disposable and priceless. They were considered priceless in so far as

they were able to complete their migration and effectively gain recruiting agencies the permit for sending male migrants. They were considered disposable in so far as their safety and their position within the *kafala* system at the destination country was of little concern to either the state or recruiting agencies. Instead, the state responded to the events of 2015 by developing gendered migration governmentalities that aimed to define the subjectivities of women migrants and develop them into commodifiable labouring subjects.

The logic of neoliberalism, particularly situated within the context of migration, is fixated on the flexibility of labour and the inculcation of neoliberal governmentality within the labouring subject. The events starting from 2015 highlight this tendency at a macro level, that of one state in regularising cheap labour flows and that of another in developing the required assemblages to create profitable labouring subjects. At the same time, transnational migration markets complicate simplistic conceptualisations of neoliberalism, where the state takes a back seat to the primitive urge of private capital. In this instance, states played a defining role in regularising cheap labour supply and facilitating private capital accumulation. The Bangladeshi state also developed technologies of coercion and consent in order to legitimise the flow of female migrants into precarious occupations in Saudi Arabia. These heterogenous forces all coincided to shape the female migration market in Bangladesh, forged on the backs of systematic violence against poor, rural women.

Notes

[1] Lewis, H, Dwyer, P, Hodkinson, S, Waite, L, 'Conceptualising hyper-precarious migrant lives: from forced labour to unfreedom', *Precarious Lives: Forced labour, exploitation and asylum* (Bristol, 2014; online edn, Policy Press Scholarship Online, 21 May 2015), https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447306900.003.0006, accessed 5 Aug. 2023.

[2] More information on the findings of the study commissioned by GFEMS can be found here - https://www.gfems.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2186-MigrationExperienceofIndianandBangladeshiWorkersto-GCCCountriesv6TC-DIGITAL.pdf

[3] Data taken from the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), the authorised government agency in charge of outbound labour migration. Data source – BMET website, date accessed – 12 September 2023, link - http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/stattisticalDataAction#

[4] A. Barkat, M.I. Hossain and E. Hoque, "The cost: Causes of and potential redress for high recruitment and migration costs in Bangladesh", report (Geneva, ILO, 2014). Available from www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_303633.pdf

[5] It is not within the scope of this paper to examine the ways in which patriarchal systems exclude and oppress women in Bangladesh and, in particular, exclude them from avenues of decision making and capital accumulation. For an in-depth exploration of this, please see Chowdhury, F. D. (2009). Theorising Patriarchy: The Bangladesh Context. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *37*(4), 599-622. https://doi.org/10.1163/156853109X460200

[6] Data from the BMET website, ibid.

[7] Source – BMET data, ibid.

[8] Quiano, Kathy and Whiteman, Hilary, CNN, 'Saudi Arabia executes second Indonesian maid in one week', 17 April 2015, Link: https://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/17/asia/indonesia-saudi-arabia-executions/index.html

[9] The most egregious example of the 'blood money' system was when the Indonesian government paid $1.8 million for freeing Satinah Binti Jumadi Ahmad, who had been convicted of killing her employer, though she claimed it was in self defence. Source – Elwazer, Schams and Quiano, Kathy, CNN, 'Indonesia pays 'blood money' to save maid from execution in Saudi Arabia', 3 April 2014, Link: https://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/03/world/meast/saudi-arabia-indonesia-maid/

[10] The MoU came after the Saudi state attempted to seek migrant workers from India, which had insisted to put in place a guideline for minimum wages earned for its female migrants. However, Bangladesh elected to not have any such provisions in place. See also Ahmed, Amer, and Bossavie, Lauren. 2022. Toward Safer and More Productive Migration for South Asia. International Development in Focus. Washington, DC: World Bank.

[11] Mezzadra, Sandro and Neilson, Brett. 2013. p.19, *Border As Method or the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[12] Sabiha Begum is a resident of Eliotganj upazila in Cumilla district. Interview conducted by Ahmad Ibrahim, in Eliotganj, Cumilla, Bangladesh. Date – 17th April, 2019.

[13] Biplob, Belal Hossain. *The Daily Star*. 'Manpower export to KSA in limbo'. 28 October 2015. Link – https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/manpower-export-ksa-limbo-163315

[14] Ibid, 19.

[15] BanglaNews24, 'Bangladesh fails to send required housemaids to KSA', 08 October 2015, Link – https://www.banglanews24.com/english/national/news/bd/45685.details

[16] Ibid, 19.

[17] The migration prone districts of the country include Chittagong, Cumilla, Brahmanbaria, Narsingdi and Manikganj. Source- BMET.

[18] Feroza Khatun, returnee migrant worker, interview conducted by author. Date – 24th April, 2019. Location – Raojan, Chattogram.

[19] In a policy paper, the Bangladesh Bank recommended sending more women as domestic workers to Saudi Arabia despite reports of widespread abuse. Source – The Business Standard, 'Bangladesh Bank proposes sending more female workers abroad despite reports of abuse', 22 December 2019, Link – https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-bank-proposes-sending-more-female-workers-abroad-despite-reports-abuse

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[21] Larner W. 2000. Neo-liberalism: policy, ideology, governmentality. Studies in Political Economy 63: 5–25.

[22] Rodriguez, Robyn Magalit and Helen Schwenken. "Becoming a Migrant at Home: Subjectivation Processes in Migrant-Sending Countries Prior to Departure." *Population Space and Place* 19 (2013): 375-388.

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[24] For a broader discussion on the ways in which Indonesia introduced technologies of servitude to develop 'ideal migrant subjects' see also Rudnyckyj, Daromir. "Technologies of Servitude: Governmentality and Indonesian Transnational Labor Migration." *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2004): 407–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3318228.

[25] More information on the thirty-day housekeeping course for potential female migrants going to the Middle East can be found here - https://amaradmission.com/training-post/8613/house---keeping-training-course---1-months

[26] Rudnyckyj writes about the ways in which the 'camp' like surroundings of the training venues and the strict 'civilising' techniques employed in training the migrant workers led to the desire for attaining the inexplicable ideal migrant subject. These practices were designed to inculcate this desire among migrant workers.

[27] Foucault, Michel. 1991. "Governmentality." In The Foucault Effect, Graham Burchell, Colin, Gordona, and Peter Miller (eds.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[28] Khaleda Akhter, interview with the author. Date – 25th April, 2018. Location – Sitakunda, Chattogram.

[29] Rose, N., & Miller, P. (2010). Political power beyond the state: Problematics of government. The British Journal of Sociology, 61(1), 271–303.

[30] For a more in-depth analysis into the role of language in the production of commodifiable migrant workers, see Del Percio, Alfonso. Engineering commodifiable workers: language, migration and the governmentality of the self. *Lang Policy* **17**, 239–259 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-017-9436-4

[31] The production and re-production of the trope of the 'remittance *joddha'* demands its own in-depth analysis that is beyond the ambit of this paper. However, the trope has been used extensively by the government and has been adopted by migrants living abroad to give voice to their sufferings and claiming primacy in the development rhetoric of the state.

[32] Femia, Joseph V., Gramsci 's Political Thought. Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 171-2.

[33] The Daily Sun, 'Bangladesh Embassy in Italy honours top remittance warriors', 10 January 2021; Link – https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/528891/Bangladesh-Embassy-in-Italy-honours-top-remittance-warriors

[34] Islam, Md Ainul. *The Daily Janakantha.* [Translated] 'Change your attitudes towards remittance warriors', 30 August 2021, Link - https://www.dailyjanakantha.com/opinion/news/662944

[35] Faruk, Mohammad Omar. *The Daily Star.* 'Protecting our female migrant workforce' 31 August 2019. Link- https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/protecting-our-female-migrant-workforce-1793371

[36] Recommendations provided by UN Women on female migration from Bangladesh included developing better databases to record movement and cases of migrant workers, establishing a separate unit under the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment for female migrants and improving the curriculum of housekeeping trainings among others. For more information see Shamim, Ishrat, Country Overview : Women and Migration in Bangladesh, UN Women, 2018. Link – https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAsia/Docs/Publications/2018/03/Country-Overview-on-UN-WOMEN-migration.pdf

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[39] Johnson, Mark and Wilcke, Christoph. "Chapter 6. Caged in and Breaking Loose: Intimate Labor, the State, and Migrant Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia and Other Arab Countries" In *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobility Across Asia* edited by Sara Lizbeth Friedman and Pardis Mahdavi, 135-159. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812291841-007

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