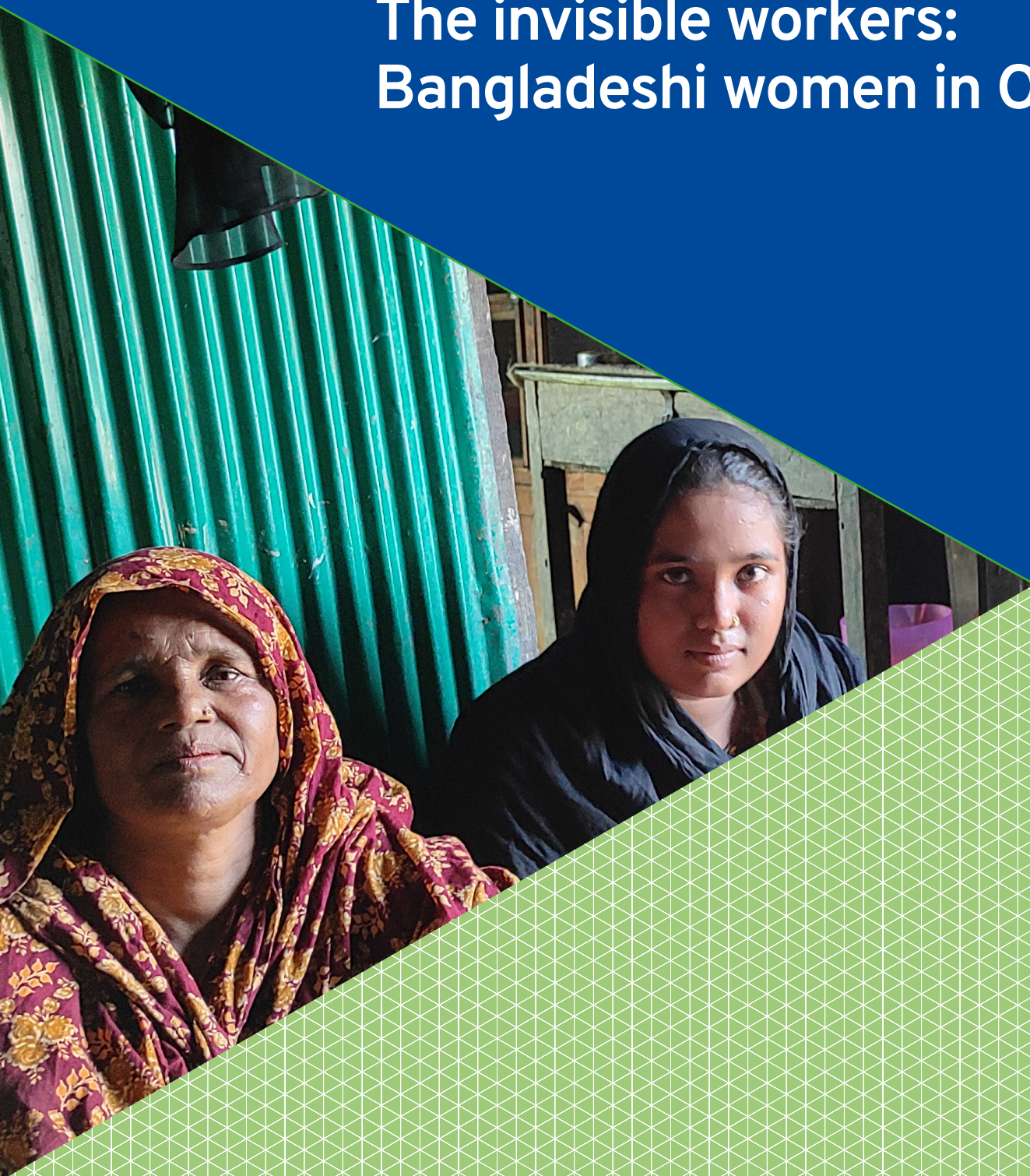




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The invisible workers: Bangladeshi women in Oman



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► **The invisible workers: Bangladeshi women in Oman**

Thérèse Blanchet

We are cheap to employ, we can work hard, and we don't mind staying inside the house. This is why Omanis appreciate us.

– Amina, worked eight years for the same employer in Salalah

We don't have problems as in a neighboring country. The law applies here. To my knowledge, few women run away from their employer. The complaints we get are mostly about non-payment or underpayment of salary, bodily harm like slapping or hitting, and inadequate food.

–Official from the Bangladesh embassy, Muscat



Foreword

Over the past few decades, a succession of public narratives on women's low-income migration have generated stereotypes of migrant women from Bangladesh. These stereotypes invariably reflect different shades of patriarchal perspectives about women's mobility and work; however, seldom are the voices of those women who migrate heard. Their vast and diverging experiences and reflections on dealing with officials, employers, family members and other men and women who shape these migration experiences in different countries is rarely documented – except as misleading stories of systemic abuse.

The purpose of this ethnography is to follow the lives of these working women and document and analyse the diversity of their individual and collective experiences. The findings reveal a very different reality that contrasts the usual characterizations of migrant women. Such research is important to ground policymaking on a more accurate understanding of women's work, mobility and motivations. This study is part of a series of assessments meant to document the perspectives of migrant women along different labour migration pathways.

Igor Bosc
Chief Technical Advisor
Work in Freedom Programme

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Note on terminology

According to Article 1(b) of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), the term “domestic work” means “work performed in or for a household or households”, and “domestic worker” means “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship”. Convention No. 189 applies to all domestic workers and not necessarily to all domestic work. This legal definition is important as it contrasts with colloquial terms such as “maids” that exclude acknowledgement of work and tend to conflate the tasks that are performed with those of persons involved in unpaid household work, especially women.

That said, in the context of ethnographic research, it is important to take note of the colloquial terms that are used. They portray the positionality of those who use them. Such positionality illustrates subjectivities, prejudices and socio-linguistic characteristics that inform the nature of the social, economic and labour relationships. Referring to the official legal

term “domestic worker” when describing these relationships pushes their real nature outside its framework, hence leading to an abstraction of the object of study.

In Oman, as in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, “maids” along with male cooks, drivers and gardeners administratively belong to the category of “domestic worker”. Anthropological research is not served by erasing or neutralizing the gender dimensions of these occupations in societies practising a particularly strong separation of the sexes. “Maid” is the closest English approximation to the term *“kajer meye”* in Bangla. This study fully acknowledges the need to refer to domestic workers in official public discourse. That said, for the purpose of anthropological analysis the terms that best translate meanings for the subjects of study may be used. This should not be misconstrued as tacit acceptance of the colloquial expressions in place of “domestic work”.

Executive summary

This report is the outcome of a one-month field study conducted in Oman to document the working and living conditions of Bangladeshi women, the majority of which are employed as maids. Oman has been an important destination for men ever since 1976, when Bangladesh started keeping records on its migrants.

Women as workers came much later, mostly from 2013. They originate from districts different from those of the men, who are mostly from Chattogram and the south-eastern part of the country. Women presently make up less than 10 per cent of the overall Bangladeshi migrant population in Oman.

Bangladeshi women who came as wives readily adhered to the conservative attitudes prevalent in Omani society and conformed to its mobility restrictions. Those who came as maids did not initiate new patterns either. Recruiters frequently advertise Bangladeshi women's ability to live in confinement, praising them for supposedly possessing a quality that maids of other nationalities do not possess to the same degree. The Bangla saying "Women are made for the home" (*Meyera ghorer jinnish*), found in Oman's traditional society a receptive echo.

Reaching out to Bangladeshi women in Oman has been a challenge. In Muscat and Salalah, where field work was conducted, Bangladeshi women are hardly ever found on the street or in shops. Those who go out generally wear the black burka with the niqab, making their identification as Bangladeshi impossible. Moreover, Bangladeshi men, in the great majority, have no access to Bangladeshi women and no first-hand knowledge of their working and living conditions, even though many hold strong opinions regarding the abuse their countrywomen allegedly suffer in Omani homes. During the course of this research, it has been important to access women and hear their voice and not merely others' opinion of them.

Thirty-five Bangladeshi women migrant workers were interviewed. They were found in 11 types of occupations, including 13 working as live-in maids, 11 as live-out maids, 2 as cleaners and 1 as a medical doctor. Among Bangladeshis living

in Oman, a strong gender divide is crisscrossed by an equally strong social hierarchy glimpsed at through institutions such as select social clubs.

Bangladeshi women are often employed in large Omani households where they are the only maid. While many have refused to accept these conditions, others not only stayed but extended their contract several times. Starting salaries are among the lowest in the Middle East but regular increases are common, with maids doubling their initial salaries in six to seven years. Bangladeshi maids neither claim nor are they given outings and weekly days off. A limited social life deploys around garbage bins, where women chat, exchange phone numbers, share messages, hand over cash and sometimes initiate love relationships. Extensions of kitchens, these liminal places are neither totally in nor totally out.

Live-out maids most often hold a "free visa", while a few are undocumented. In Muscat, they rent rooms with Indian families and pay for the room with their work as well as take customers outside. In Salalah, a woman declared that one cannot work as a live-out maid without having a temporary "husband". Bangladeshi men commonly assert that such arrangements are a mere cover up for sex work, and if not, living maritally with a man who is not their "true" husband is just as morally reprehensible. Live-out maids, however, depict their lives otherwise. They find a companion and share expenses but retain control on their income, work with less pressure and enjoy a freedom that live-in maids do not have. Their challenge is finding a sufficient number of customers.

The Bangladesh and the Omani governments concluded an agreement two years ago, fixing the minimum monthly salary at 90 Omani rials for women and men. The rule is not rigorously enforced, and several maids are paid less. Even licensed recruiting agencies suggest to their clients that women without experience be paid 80 rials. The higher salaries paid to maids in Saudi Arabia have diminished the attraction of Oman and forced salaries to be reviewed.

NGOs do not flourish in Oman. The Omani government intends to regulate its own affairs and has been extremely cautious

with external influences. While tourists are welcome and religious communities enjoy a degree of freedom, strict control is exerted on organizations within the country.

This situation leaves a void. Few researches have been conducted on domestic workers, and none on Bangladeshi women, leaving unchecked the

common belief that “90 per cent of our women working in Omani homes are abused”. The objective of this study, which is to access working women and provide a more nuanced view of their living and working conditions, has been fulfilled within the limits of difficult access and a relatively short time.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the study

This report is the outcome of a one-month field study conducted in Oman to document the working and living conditions of Bangladeshi women, the majority of which were employed as maids. Begun in February 2020, fieldwork was completed in early March, just before the Coronavirus pandemic caused much of the world to lock down.

The research was undertaken as part of the “Work in Freedom”, an ILO–DFID project aiming to promote empowerment, fair recruitment, safe migration and decent work for women and girls from South Asia. The Oman study follows two more field studies conducted in Jordan and Lebanon in 2018 and 2019.

The research is exploratory, and the outlook deliberately kept broad and open. A few case histories of women who had migrated to Oman were recorded in Bangladesh prior to departure. Available literature, mostly from human rights organizations, was also reviewed. This preparatory work raised questions regarding the specificities of the sponsorship system in Oman, the characteristics of sponsors employing Bangladeshi women in particular, the manner in which they were recruited and the communities and districts they came from in Bangladesh. Oman has been an important destination for men ever since Bangladesh started keeping records on its migrants in 1976. Women workers came later, with a significant increase from 2013. Source districts, massively represented among male migrants in Oman, notably Chattagram, Feni, Noakhali and Cumilla, are known not to send their women abroad and most women migrant workers do not come from these districts. Nonetheless, the presence of male migrants prepared the ground for women, shaping the place they occupy and the image constructed of them in the Bangladeshi community as well as in the eyes of Omani employers. Bangladeshi women migrant workers

have to justify their migration and demonstrate they are “good Muslims”. The field study aimed to meet women in direct encounters and not merely solicit others’ opinion of them. Access could be difficult, but if one succeeded in getting a close look at their working and living conditions and in hearing the women’s views, a more nuanced and reliable picture of them could be drawn, rather than the excessively negative image painted in the Bangladeshi media and elsewhere.

1.2 Oman: An overview

Oman has been known as a relatively peaceful and stable country in a region torn by conflicts. Sultan Qaboos, who died on 10 January 2020, is largely credited with this legacy of neutrality. Coming to power in 1970 after a palace revolution, Sultan Qaboos played a major role in building Oman as a nation and in setting up the modern state as it functions today. First, he pacified a communist-inspired rebellion in the Dhofar region and re-named the country as Oman (instead of Muscat and Oman), and second, he gave priority to building a strong army and a loyal police force. Slavery, which had been a trademark of Oman throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was abolished in the year he came to power.

Sultan Qaboos practised a policy of inclusion, granting Omani citizenship to non-Arabs living in the territory, including Baluchis (whose former territory straddled Iran and Afghanistan) and Swahili-speaking populations originating from Zanzibar and the east coast of Africa. Officially, people of all origins and races are equal in Oman. While the country is an Islamic state, applying a mild form of the sharia, religious groups other than Muslims are allowed to follow their faith. Islamic movements such as Al Qaeda or Daesh, which destabilized countries of the region, were not allowed to take root in Oman.

Oman adopted modernity while remaining a relatively conservative society.¹ Presently, there

¹ *Celestial Bodies* (2010, 2018), a novel by Jokha Alharthy, translated from Arabic by Marilyn Booth, presents a powerful image of these transformations. It shows three generations of women and the rapid changes and consequent shifts in outlook. Featuring an illiterate grandmother, a mother who learns to read and write as an adult and a granddaughter who studies to become a doctor, the novel recalls memories of the master–slave relationship and ancient traditions, crossing a precarious edge between contrasting worlds.

are no independent NGOs operating in Oman, a situation which contrasts with Lebanon and Jordan. The Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) is a government body supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One NGO based in the United Kingdom, the Omani Centre for Human Rights (OCHR), claims that “rights activists face legal harassment, threats and arrest by security authorities” and this is why they chose to work from the UK.² This claim could not be verified.

Oman’s oil resources are limited and awareness of the need to diversify the economy came early. Under Sultan Qaboos, the building of infrastructure, ports and roads boosted the economy and gave access to historical and natural sites of great beauty serving a tourism industry that, together with traditions of hospitality and a remarkable degree of security, attracts a wide range of visitors. This was before the COVID-19 pandemic kept many tourists away. But they will come back.

In October 2017, Oman’s total population numbered 4,641,466, out of which 45 per cent were expatriates. Migrant workers, and more particularly south Indians, have played a major role in Oman’s development. Today, a policy of “Omanization”, aiming to reduce unemployment among Omani youth, is progressively replacing foreigners with Omani citizens. Indian nationals occupying top and mid-level management positions are leaving Oman or their jobs are being downgraded. Omanization is applied at many levels. Jobs, such as taxi driving, are now reserved for Omanis. A rule requiring that shops and offices employ Omani citizens led to the closure of smaller establishments run by Bangladeshis, who could not afford to pay higher Omani salaries. Omanization is a challenge and is not implemented at the same pace in all spheres of activity. Bangladeshi doctors employed at the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah said there were not enough Omani doctors to replace them at present and their jobs were not in jeopardy.

As I left Oman at the beginning of March 2020, the country was mourning the death of Sultan Qaboos. His successor was quickly installed and there was no power void. But there was worrying news. A serious drop in the price of oil had begun to deplete government resources,

putting pressure on the national budget, while the Coronavirus pandemic that followed caused the sudden departure of tourists, the closure of hotels, the end of tour operator activities and the lockdown of an entire industry. The consequences of these measures are yet to be assessed.

1.3 Bangladeshi workers in Oman: A long history

Oman has been an important destination for Bangladeshi workers, as mentioned above. From 1976 to 2019, the country occupied the third place among destinations, coming after Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The migration flow has been uneven. From 1996 to 2008, visas for men were granted only for agricultural work, even though workers with such visas often did not stay on farms but sought work in cities. In 2008, restrictions were lifted, as ambitious construction plans required workers. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, recruitment extended to new districts beyond the traditional sources of male migrants. Bangladesh embassy officials in Muscat estimate the number of Bangladeshis presently living in Oman at 750,000, including undocumented workers. Employed mostly in low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs, their occupations are not being “Omanized” at the same pace as jobs held by Indians. This explains why the number of Bangladeshi nationals in Oman has now surpassed the number of Indians.

Bangladeshi labour migration in Oman has been an essentially male affair, with few men bringing their wives and children as family dependents. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) statistics, from 1991 to 2019, women made up only 6.3 per cent of the overall migrant workers to Oman, with a marked increase from 2013 onwards (see Appendix 1). For the year 2019, records show that 17,654 women workers entered Oman, constituting 16.8 per cent of the overall migrant workers. Bangladesh embassy officials estimate that women presently make up less than 10 per cent of the overall Bangladeshi migrant population.

The late arrival of Bangladeshi women as “workers” in their own right, and not as family dependents, constitutes a major difference from

² See Omani Centre for Human Rights (OCHR), “[Home Page](#)”. They write that the year 2011 saw a tightening of security measures and greater control of dissenting voices.

countries like Jordan and Lebanon. In the latter, women surpassed the number of men and were acknowledged as workers from the start. Many women there exert a degree of autonomy and freedom in the organization of their work, in their movement and in their lifestyle not found in Oman otherwise. Some of them had worked in garment factories before (especially in Jordan) switching to domestic work later. These women praised and defended this freedom – something they did not enjoy in their home country where men were far more critical.

In Oman, Bangladeshi women coming as wives readily adhered to the conservative attitudes prevalent in Omani society and submitted to mobility restrictions. Those who came as maids did not initiate new patterns either. We shall see that recruiters highlight Bangladeshi women's ability to live in confinement in the home of their employer, praising this "quality" that maids of

other nationalities do not possess to the same degree. The Bangla saying "Women are made for the home" (*Meyera ghorer jinnish*) found in Oman's traditional society a receptive echo. Not only accepting but praising confinement as the mark of "good Muslim women" is an injunction that in the course of my fieldwork has seldom been defied.

Bangladeshi women are hardly found on the streets or in shops. Those who go out generally wear the black burka, often with the face-concealing niqab. The all-covering garment makes the identification of Bangladeshi women outdoors almost impossible, rendering the field methods successfully applied in Lebanon and Jordan non-applicable. Reaching out to Bangladeshi women in Oman has therefore been a time-consuming and challenging exercise. This will be discussed later.

2. Organization of the research

2.1 Calendar

Fieldwork in Oman began on 31 January and ended on 2 March 2020. The first 10 days were spent in Muscat, the following 12 days in and around Salalah and the last 9 days in and around Muscat. A 12-hour bus journey from Muscat to Salalah permitted one to appreciate the vast and empty land separating Oman's two main cities and to meet Omanis – mostly Bedouin women and their children – using such transport. In addition, a one-day road trip from Muscat to Sur, al Kamil and Itra allowed meeting Bangladeshi men involved in fishing, building and agricultural work. Not a single Bangladeshi woman was spotted on this journey. Research conducted in Bangladesh provided a glimpse of the working and living conditions of women employed in isolated farms. However, I was unable to meet any of them in Oman.

2.2 Research sites, methods and processes

Several interviews were conducted with migrant men, embassy officials, personnel of recruiting agencies, taxi drivers, Omani employers, shopkeepers and others. However, the target pursued with stubborn determination has been to meet Bangladeshi women migrant workers. Interviews were conducted with 35 of them. These interviews vary in duration, depth and reliability. In the best circumstances, conversation could proceed at leisure and carry on over several meetings. In other cases, time was short and there was no second chance to fill in gaps or address inconsistencies. Nonetheless, given the difficulties of the task, these results feel like a hard-won victory.

Most women migrant workers were acutely aware of the negative perceptions of them at home. They told their story as though they needed to fend off criticism, insisting that they had “legitimate” reasons to migrate, whether it was poverty, divorce, widowhood, paying for the medical treatment of a sick child, paying the dowry of daughters of marriageable age or reimbursing a family loan. The circumstances leading them to take this path were not of their making. Their narratives mostly reiterated

traditional gender roles in a conservative society. The women interviewed did not subscribe to any revolutionary discourses, but there were a few exceptions.

Cultivating a neutral stance and taking care not to show greater interest in narratives of hardship, exploitation and suffering than in exemplary stories of good treatment by kind employers was critically important. Given the media slant, the subject is immensely sensitive. But cultivating neutrality did not necessarily create trust or erase suspicion. Was I a journalist, a human rights activist, an NGO worker or a potential recruiter? Why did I show such interest in migrant women's lives? Would the women speaking to me reap benefits or get into trouble? Two women closed the interview and stopped talking when I began writing down their words; some others did not come back for a second interview. Given the strong separation of the sexes prevalent in Omani society, a man would have faced even greater limitations than I did. Knowing Bangladeshi society, culture and geography was also helpful in orienting the interviews and showing that I was familiar with “home”. Conversing in Bangla itself created the home.

Few employers could be interviewed. I do not speak Arabic and most of those I met did not speak English. Words exchanged with the translation of the Bangladeshi maid were perforce limited. Long interviews were conducted within Omani homes. It must be said that the employers who opened their doors to me were confident about their good score as employers, while the women interviewed in their employer's home were not inclined to complain about the latter. Fieldwork conducted on the street or among returnees in Bangladesh exposed a greater range of employers, including some “bad” ones. In the next section, I shall describe the research methods and processes applied while exploiting the possibilities each site offered.

2.2.1 Muscat

Muscat is a widely spread-out city built for cars. To move around, a driver is essential and I needed one with whom I shared a common

language, which was not always the case with Omani taxi drivers. The hotel I had booked in Darseit was managed by some south Indians. They employed Bangladeshi staff, who quickly found a Bangladeshi driver to assist me. I mostly worked with Anwar,³ a 28-year-old man from Banshkhali (Chattogram) who had lived in Oman for eight years. Anwar had formed a carpool with other drivers from his area and when he could not come, a replacement was sent. These drivers had regular Indian clients, bringing their children to school. They also occasionally piloted tourists that the hotel referred to them.

Anwar first introduced me to areas with major concentrations of Bangladeshi migrants in and around Muscat. He tried his best to assist in identifying Bangladeshi women workers, but it was not easy. Women on the street were mostly from India. Trying to speak to a woman who could be Bangladeshi before she turned a corner or entered a house felt uncomfortably like hunting for a prey. The method did not yield much and was soon discarded. Meetings were arranged with a few Bangladeshi women who were Anwar's occasional clients, but these were disappointing as well. The women were suspicious or had more urgent problems to solve. Agreeing to a first meeting, they gave little time and refused a second encounter. Beginnings were frustratingly slow. I would have to find my own ways to reach out to these women, which got somewhat easier once I got a grip on the geography.

Hamriyah

Thousands of Bangladeshi men gather on the streets of Hamriyah every night, clustered in groups of those originating from the same district. The oldest migrants were from Chattogram. One man claimed that 80 per cent of the men in Hamriyah were from that district. They were also from Feni, Cumilla and Sylhet, while more recent arrivals were from all over Bangladesh. On Fridays, the crowds were even larger. Known as mini-Bangladesh, Hamriyah is a strange "country", populated exclusively by men. Restaurants, grocery shops, tailor and barber shops are run by Bangladeshis. There is a large mosque for Muslims and a small puja house for Hindus. Vegetables locally grown

with "seeds from Bangladesh" are sold in many shops. I was told that some Bangladeshi families reside in Hamriyah, but I never saw the women. Interviewing men of all ages was relatively easy. A large number worked in construction, registering with a Bangladeshi *sardar* (labour recruiter) who supplied labour to contractors, taking a cut for himself. Many men were undocumented.

Now, they need us for building [things]. So they do not arrest those who have no valid papers. They prefer to look the other way.

—A man from Chattogram, who spent 30 years in Oman

Documented and undocumented workers were paid the same daily rate, between eight and ten rials. When building sites were some distance away, workers did not return to Hamriyah every night but stayed in camps erected on the spot. These men continued renting a place in Hamriyah where they kept their belongings, maintained networks, got news from home and so on. Accommodations were rudimentary, consisting of a bed in an air-conditioned room shared with several workers, and access to a common toilet, shower and kitchen.

Talking with Bangladeshi men in Hamriyah, it soon became clear that the great majority of them had no access to Bangladeshi women employed in Omani homes. They had no first-hand knowledge of their working and living conditions; still many did not hesitate to offer their "knowledge" when I explained the purpose of my research, asserting that the great majority of maids are exploited and abused in Omani homes. We shall come back to the imaginings of these men deprived of their women.

Ruwi

This is a busy commercial area, migrant workers come to for shopping, to consult a doctor or simply to socialize. On Fridays, I estimated that about 20 per cent of those around were women – many being Indians or Filipino. A few Bangladeshi women could be spotted, generally wearing a burka and accompanied by a "husband". However, the crowded street (or the "husband") did not permit lengthy conversations.

³ Anwar is a fictive name. All personal names in this report have been changed to protect respondents, but their place of origin is as reported.

Two tea shops under Bangladeshi managements offered some opportunity. On a Friday, I could converse with (1) a *hozur* (Ismamic leader) cum politician from Feni who came to Oman to raise funds for his madrasah (Islamic school), (2) a trio composed of two women and one man, each originating from different districts in Bangladesh; one of the women, heavily made up and provocatively dressed (in this context), was seeking to attract customers and (3) four young men from Chattogram, each with his story, who explained how important it was for them to meet in Ruwi once a week to get relief from their social isolation. The tea shop manager finally asked me to leave, as I had stayed too long and was harming his business. Ruwi has bars and night clubs, which I discovered at the end of my stay.

Matrah

Matrah is an old and densely populated neighbourhood famous for its large covered souk that attracts large numbers of tourists disembarking from cruise ships. It is home to many Omanis of Baluchi origin, recognized for their linguistic and cultural proximity with Bangladeshis. There are also Bangladeshi men who have worked in Oman since the early 1980s, some bringing their wives and raising their children in Oman. These men were a mine of information on the arrival of successive waves of Bangladeshi migrants and the transformation of Omani society over the last four decades. They explained how Bangladeshi tailors had kept up with the standardization of Omani national costumes, making men's dishdashas and women's burkas. They had carved an occupational niche as tailors, and some had amassed considerable wealth. The embroidered caps worn by Omani men were also made by Bangladeshis. Omani families that moved out of Matrah, seeking greater space and comfort, often returned to their old neighbourhood to order dishdashas and burkas from their old Bangladeshi tailors. They did the same when needing a maid, calling upon a trusted Bangladeshi to recruit a "good" woman from his homeland. Jamal, a man from Nabigonj, who has lived in Matrah for 32 years, claimed to have provided several Bangladeshi maids to Omani families, a task that was getting increasingly difficult as the salaries offered were too low. He arranged my first interview with a Bangladeshi woman working in an Omani home. The employer granted twenty minutes that could be

stretched only a little. Yet, it was a breakthrough. Interestingly, the sponsors (here called *arbab*) of the men I met in Hamriyah were often from *matrah*, suggesting an enduring relationship between Bangladeshi migrants and the inhabitants of this neighbourhood. A Hindu tailor from Chattogram, who made dresses for Omani clients in Hamriyah, had occupied the same shop since 1981, working under the same *arbab*, who lived in Matrah. I asked if their relationship was friendly after so many years and he replied: "So long as I pay." Every month, the tailor paid 15 rials to his *arbab*, who owned several shops providing him a comfortable monthly rent.

Wadi Adai

Most maid-recruiting agencies for Muscat and surrounding areas are located in Wadi Adai. Potential employers "shopping" for a maid come to consult the catalogues on display, while agents advertise the merits of maids from different nationalities. Most agencies specialize in one or two countries. Competition is fierce and some agents do not hesitate to smear the reputation of other nationalities to highlight the ones they sponsor. In the catalogues advertising Bangladeshi women, photographs show them wearing burka – which is not the case for Indians, Nepali or African women. One agency that proposed Bangladeshi maids praised their good qualities as "Muslim women" who – unlike Filipina or Indians – were portrayed as being happy to stay inside the home and did not claim holidays. I would later discover that most Bangladeshi maids did not come through agencies, but were recruited through personal networks.

Sidab

Located on the outskirts of Muscat, Sidab is inhabited by Omani families of modest means, and it was recommended as a location where Bangladeshi maids are likely to find employment for this reason. An enclave in the midst of stony mountains, the village-like settlement was alive with barefoot children playing on the street among free-running chickens. Doors were open and people friendly. Four Bangladeshi maids were identified in Sidab, and two of them could be interviewed at leisure. Omani women joined the conversation (in Arabic and Bangla) and shared a generous snack. In this all-women gathering, the seating arrangement and body language did not express social distance but rather conviviality.

The Bangladesh embassy

Situated in the diplomatic enclave along the seashore, the Bangladesh embassy was an important location to meet workers living in different parts of Oman. The only official Bangladesh representation in the country, the embassy is visited by all those needing to renew their passport, get a birth or a marriage certificate, or having other requests. Applications are generally made in the morning and documents delivered in the afternoon; the documents specify the time allotted for the interviews.

Several visits were made to embassy officials. Inside the embassy, interesting observations could be made. One day, a woman entered the office of the Labour Attaché, holding a two-month-old baby and flanked by two Omani policemen. I learned that she had just been pardoned after spending nine months in jail – a pardon accorded on the occasion of Sultan Qaboos's death – and was about to be taken to the airport by a police escort. The woman had received a one-year sentence for having an illicit relationship with the father of the child, a Bangladeshi man still in jail. Her employer had spied on her and they were caught. They had paid dearly for a love affair. Circumstances did not permit me to conduct an interview. However, this was an opportunity to learn more about the "mild" form of sharia law applied in Oman, a country where abortion is also illegal.

2.2.2 Salalah

Located in the Dhofar region, over 1,000 kilometres south of Muscat, Salalah enjoys a microclimate with sufficient rainfall, making it suitable for the cultivation of a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. It is mostly inhabited by the Dhofari people whose ancestral territory spreads on both sides of the border with Yemen. These features give Salalah a distinctive character.

"In Salalah, we are a minority. The Bangladeshis outnumber us," commented an Omani taxi driver. Some 170,000 Bangladeshi reportedly live in Salalah. The high concentration is immediately apparent when visiting the "Bangladesh Market", a large, informal and transient market put up in the afternoon where fruits and vegetables, poultry and meat are sold for a good price. Hundreds of Bangladeshi men display their wares below signboards (written in English) explicitly forbidding holding such a market. Police raids are carried out regularly, but sellers and buyers keep returning. The place was too crowded to hold interviews. Besides, no Bangladeshi woman was spotted at the Bangladesh market.

Research in Salalah yielded results more quickly than in Muscat for two reasons. First, the smaller size of the city and a village-like environment facilitated informal encounters. The neighbourhood where I stayed could be explored on foot without a driver, if need be. Second, and most importantly, stories of Bangladeshi migrant women working in Salalah had been documented and contact established with one of them prior to arrival. While conducting fieldwork in Patuakhali, a colleague had met several women working in Salalah. Phone conversations were held over several weeks with the most senior of them, Amena (fictive name), who had worked in Salalah for nine years. A relationship of trust developed, and she promised to assist me. Her employer permitted that I visit their home. I did so several times and Amena introduced me to Bangladeshi maids working in neighbouring houses. This was a real breakthrough in the research. Also, I was fortunate to meet a Bangladeshi doctor and his family at the Bangladesh embassy in Muscat. The husband and wife were employed at the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah – he as a surgeon and she as a gynaecologist-obstetrician. They introduced me to their Bangladeshi colleagues and other hospital workers, and generously shared their experience and knowledge of Omani society.

3. Migrant women interviewed

3.1 Age, education, marital status

The three tables below give the age, educational level and marital status of the women interviewed. Of the seven women below the age of 25, six were live-in domestic workers and one was a bar dancer. The two women above the age of 45 were both “wives” with family visas.

The number of divorced, separated and widowed women added up to 19 and were more numerous than married women. Among the 14 married women, 3 were living in Oman with their husbands. The reasons why the remaining 11 married women migrated vary widely and will be looked into later. Only two women never married, one was the bar dancer and the other a young maid.

► Table 1: Ages of women interviewed

Age	Number of women
21–25	7
26–30	5
31–35	9
36–40	9
41–45	3
Above 45	2
Total	35

Source: Oman Study 2020.

► Table 2: Educational levels of women interviewed

Educational level	Number of women
No schooling	14
Up to Class V	9
Class VI to X	5
SSC	1
MBBS + specialty	1
Info missing	5
Total	35

Source: Oman Study 2020.

► Table 3: Marital statuses of women interviewed

Marital status	Number of women
Married	14
Unmarried	2
Divorced	11
Widowed	5
Separated	3
Total	35

Source: Oman Study 2020.

3.2 Occupations

Migrant women’s occupations is a topic more complex than it first appears, as income-generating work does not always correspond with women’s status in the community or the type of visa held. Eleven occupations have been identified among the 35 women interviewed. Some defined themselves as “wife” and would resent being referred to as “worker”. In one case, a woman provided assistance to her tailor husband, keeping him posted on dress styles popular among Omani women she socialized with and bringing him clients. She ran her own cloth business and sewed clothes at home, but never appeared in “his” shop. The husband had accepted his wife’s assistance after he got seriously ill. In another case, a woman dressed in a burka with the nikab lifted sat behind the till in the morning, directing operations in the grocery shop that her husband managed later on in the day. Other “wives” were seen embroidering caps worn by Omani men as an income-generating activity. Despite the work they did, these women did not present themselves as and were not considered “workers” in the Bangladeshi community. Workers are believed to be “essentially” men, and the old ideological construct once so prevalent in Bengali society is still strongly held by this long-settled Bangladeshi community. Bangladeshi “wives” claim a dignity and a rank that maids do not have and some of the harshest and most denigrating comments heard about maids came from them.

I only met one “wife” in Salalah who did not hide her status as “worker”. Rabia was returning from a cleaning job in a hotel with three other

Bangladeshi women when I met her. She had been in Oman for 6 years and her husband for 13 years. The latter's *arbab* had arranged a family visa for her. "My husband did not earn enough. We have four children and we needed two incomes," she explained. The husband worked on a farm and reportedly earned 100 rials a month, which is much less than the minimum salary required to obtain a family visa. In Muscat, it is commonly said that unless a migrant worker earns at least 350 rials a month, they cannot apply for a family visa. But in Salalah several informants described *arbabs* as capable of bypassing such regulations and obtaining a family visa for their employee, if they so wished. "It depends how much your *arbab* cares for you and wants to keep you," commented a young man. Family visas also carry a dubious reputation as it may cover women engaging in "bad" work. This will be considered further below.

At the other end of the occupational range stands a professional woman, the obstetrician-gynaecologist employed at the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah. She received full recognition as a professional in her own right, socially, legally and economically. Unlike Bangladeshi "wives", she did not wear a burka and did not cover her head in public, and no one pressured her to do so. The prestige of her profession sufficed, permitting this freedom while her identity as "wife" and "Muslim" belonged to her private life. Among Bangladeshis residing in Oman, gender is crisscrossed by a strong social hierarchy, which can be glimpsed at through institutions such as the Bangladesh school in Muscat, or the select social clubs of Muscat and Salalah where successful businessmen display their rank. Locked up in the homes of their Omani employers, maids are marginal to this world, and in this research, priority was given to them.

Needless to say, the 11 occupations listed here should not be taken as indicative of their numerical importance. The research method did not aim to "achieve" numbers anyway, which would have been difficult in the short period of time available. On the other hand, the open approach adopted has the merit of questioning conventional categories, identifying complex situations and uncovering mixed arrangements in the pursuit of income. These strategies that intersect with class and gender are at the core of our research.

Live-in domestic workers (locally called "engaged") undoubtedly constitute a numerical majority, but access to them was limited: 13 "engaged" women could be interviewed in Oman and a few more in Bangladesh. Among those operating freelance as live-out maids ("mini-mini" workers), 11 were interviewed: 8 had free visas, 2 had no valid documents and 1 (Rabia, mentioned above) had a family visa. The complexity of these women's situations is best understood through case histories, some of which will be presented below. It should be mentioned that, unlike in Jordan or Lebanon, part-time domestic work is often done by men in Oman. Men are more visible than women as they move on bicycles and can be seen throughout the day, going from one employer to the other. Their greater and cheaper physical mobility allows them to work for clients residing in more distant locations. In Muscat, Indian households, which are smaller, often employ them. In Salalah, part-time male domestic workers mostly serve in Omani homes. The men I interviewed described themselves as "cooks", an occupation carrying higher status and often better pay than "maids", who are typically female.

One woman qualifies as entrepreneur. Naheema, a 37-year-old, was interviewed at the seashore park close to the Bangladesh embassy as she was waiting to pick up some documents. She said that she ran her own beauty parlour in Rustaq, and had just purchased a car and learned to drive, testifying to the success of her enterprise. Such achievements are exceptional. A widow, she arrived in Oman nine years ago after her husband died suddenly in Dubai. Her Omani sponsor trained her and after five years offered to sell one of her beauty parlours to Naheema. She took up the challenge and paid the sum of 5,000 rials in three instalments. Naheema describes her sponsor as a woman with feminist ideas, who became a friend and mentor. The two women are tied by an economic relationship in which the Omani has the upper hand, yet Naheema says that she has been highly benefited and is grateful that her mentor gave her the confidence to take up a huge challenge. Naheema explained the importance of beauty parlours in the life of Omani women, a permitted outing that they eagerly and assiduously go on every fortnight. These regular clients ensured the success of her enterprise. Naheema brought to Oman her sister who works with her, her sister's husband and her son. When we met at

the end of February, she was planning to travel to Bangladesh and soon return for the busiest period of the year before the Eid festival. This was before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. I lost track of Naheema but often thought of her.

Conversations with the two women listed as sex workers did not include any mention of their alleged profession, as such topics cannot be openly addressed in a public place. (In one case, Bangladeshi men who had been clients of the woman gave me information about her timings and rates of pay for services.) In her mid-thirties, the first woman lived with her husband and an eight-year-old daughter under a family visa. The popular address was certainly no secret to the police, but arrangements were evidently made. The other woman, whom I met in Muscat (Ruwi), was strongly suspected of practising this profession by other Bangladeshi men, and I similarly interpreted her provocative dress and her behaviour. With the young woman employed as a dancer in a bar, phone conversations were held after observing her performance on the dance floor. But she was always under supervision. Investigating such professions is never easy.

► **Table 4: Occupations identified**

Occupations	Number of women
Maid (live-in)	13
Maid (live-out)	11
Cleaner in hospital	2
Cleaner in school	1
Grocery shop co-manager	1
Tailor, stylist, saleswoman	1
Obstetrician/gynecologist	1
Beautician	1
Bar dancer	1
Sex worker	2
<i>Dalali</i> (informal agent)	1
Total	35

Source: Oman Study 2020.

3.3 Districts of origin

The 35 women come from 18 different districts. Origins in Bangladesh are not only widespread, they do not correspond with the districts of male migrants. Most notably, none of the women came from Chattogram, reportedly the most important source district for men. A few came from Feni, Noakhali or Cumilla, old districts of male migration where the disapproval of

women's migration is common. These findings are consistent with men's attitudes expressed in statements such as:

- We don't allow our women to work in Chattogram. How could we allow them to work abroad?
- I would rather beg than send my wife abroad.
- A man who sends his wife to work abroad has no honour.

► **Table 5: Districts of origin**

District of origin	Number of women
Dhaka	6
Sariatpur	4
Patuakhali	4
Hobiganj	3
Gazipur	2
Pabna	2
Brahmanbaria	2
Noakhali	2
Feni	1
Cumilla	1
Joshore	1
Khulna	1
Kushtia	1
Narshingdi	1
Manikganj	1
Brisal	1
Faridpur	1
Dinajpur	1

Source: Oman Study 2020.

3.4 Modes of recruitment

Women migrate to Oman under four types of visas: professional, company, domestic worker and family visas. Tourist visas could be added to the list, but none of the women interviewed came on one. Modes of recruitment vary for each type of visa. They also differ depending on the occupation intended under a particular type of visa. This is the case for free visas, which are domestic visas sold at a higher price as high returns are expected (at least this is the idea presented) and the legal sponsors take a certain risk given that they do not employ the woman, who is free to work for several clients. Family visas may also cover several kinds of arrangements and income-earning activities, as suggested above.

3.4.1 Professional visas

Professional visas in Oman concern only a very small number of Bangladeshi women. MBBS doctors with various specialties were first recruited in 2012 after the Omani Government placed a special request to the Bangladesh Government, committing to cover all costs. Interestingly, the doctors interviewed admitted that even they were not exempted from paying a surcharge to the Bangladesh recruiting agency that processed their papers.

3.4.2 Company visas

Two women with company visas were interviewed, who worked as cleaners in a hospital. While thousands of Bangladeshi men are employed as cleaners, women are needed to work in the female wards of hospitals. In Salalah, they were mostly Nepali, Filipino or other nationalities and very few were Bangladeshi. The women interviewed had paid 180,000 and 200,000 Bangladeshi takas to a recruiting agency, while men working in the men's ward of the same hospital had paid 230,000 and 300,000 takas. Women migrating with company visas generally pay more than for domestic visas, but here they paid less than the men. Yet, women and men received the same basic salary: 90 rials (equivalent to 19,800 takas). In addition, cleaners in hospitals receive tips from patients' families and may take up part-time jobs outside to increase their income. Migrating with a company visa is reputedly safer for women, an argument regularly put forward by recruiting agencies in Bangladesh, although benefits in terms of income are not necessarily greater. A woman who was paid 200,000 takas said it took her a full year to reimburse the cost of her migration.

3.4.3 Domestic workers' visas

The great majority of Bangladeshi women in Oman migrate with domestic visas and, as mentioned above, are recruited by relatives and personal acquaintances through unofficial networks. The statement reported earlier on women not being recruited via agencies has been fully confirmed in the course of fieldwork.

My cousin used to work in this tailor shop across the street. He brought me here to Sidab six years ago because our family was very poor. My father worked as a rickshaw-puller and could not feed his seven children. After my elder sister died, I became the eldest, and I had to do something for them. I

was not married. My passport said I was 20 but I was younger.

– Monouara, 23 years old, Cumilla

My home is in Patuakhali, but I was recruited from Dhaka. I used to work in a garment factory. A woman at the factory whose husband worked in Oman said he could help me get a visa. This is how I came to Oman almost nine years ago.

– Amena, 38 years old, Patuakhali

Amena subsequently recruited her sister and her niece for relatives of her employer. Her niece, who arrived three months earlier, explained.

I paid 75,000 takas and an agent handled everything. I did not follow the government training as I was joining my aunt and she could train me.

– Rozy, 26 years old, Patuakhali

Amena, the aunt, commented:

Training could only have increased the costs and would have been a waste of time. I did not go through our local dalal as I did not trust him. I went directly to a dalal in Fakirapool (Dhaka) and he got the papers processed.

Amena did not reveal how much she had received from the employer for this recruitment and she denied having made any profit, but it is generally assumed otherwise. Many long-time migrants, women and men, have acted as recruiters at some stage. Kulsum, who came to Oman in 2013, was recruited by her "cousin brother" (male cousin), who worked in Salalah at the time, and she paid him 120,000 takas to do so. She later recruited about ten maids and, like Amena, she denied having made any profit. Aisha, one of Kulsum's recruits, works for Kulsum's employer's sister, who lives next door. Such recruitment patterns may have resulted in several Bangladeshi maids living in close proximity.

Naheema, the manager of the beauty parlour introduced above, said she often had requests for maids from her Omani customers and she did her best to fulfil the demand. Her family lives in Gazipur in Bangladesh, an industrial area that has several garment factories. They rent rooms to factory workers and thus have access to a pool of potential candidates. Unlike Amina or Kulsum, Naheema acknowledged that she earned 20,000 takas per maid she recruited. A privilege of seniority and of trust from Omanis,

recruiting maids has been an important source of additional income for several migrant women and men.

The supplier of a maid, in theory, should offer a guarantee to the employer that the recruit will work satisfactorily. The basis of this guarantee could be that she is a relative, they are from the same village, the recruiter knows her family or some other reassuring connection. But we have no evidence that recruiters pressed for decent salaries and other working conditions. Bangladeshi women are among the least-paid maids in Oman, as was repeatedly confirmed. Some recruiters admit that the low salaries bear a link with runaway maids, for which Bangladeshi maids are often blamed, and this is one of the reasons why Omani employers increasingly call upon the services of recruiting agencies. "Before, recruitment was direct. There were no recruiting agencies. Things changed two years ago," said Jamal from Matrah. Angry at the low salary Bangladeshi maids are paid in Oman, one man from Cumilla said he refused to recruit a woman for less than 100 rials, and he approved of women running away when paid less. But such determination to claim a good salary for the maid recruited is exceptional.

Fahima was brought to Oman by her brother-in-law in 2014. Few women migrate from her district but Fahima badly needed to escape from a violent husband and her situation was desperate. Her first employer was a family of Baluchi origin that had moved out of Matrah to settle in Al Amrate. Fahima broke her contract. I asked why.

I had to serve 15 people and my salary was only 50 rials the first year and 60 rials the second year. There was a lot of work. I accepted this. The reason I left was a divorced daughter who was crazy and made my life hell. No, no, there was no other kind of abuse. My family lives here in Oman. They knew my employer, and it would have been impossible for them to abuse me.

– Fahima, 38 years old

Placed by her brother-in-law, Fahima could not disavow him and refuse the conditions of employment he had agreed to on her behalf. In spite of the problems she faced, Fahima said she felt safe (for example, from sexual abuse), as her family personally knew the employer. She claims to have accepted the heavy work but not

the irrational behaviour of a mentally unstable woman. Similarly, Rozy, who had arrived three months ago, was unhappy about her salary of 85 rials, but she could not protest too loudly as she owed respect to the aunt who brought her. Could long-standing relationships of trust between an employer and a recruiter protect women from (sexual) abuse, while at the same time tying them to low pay and other poor conditions not to their advantage?

3.5 Live-in maids

3.5.1 Working and living conditions

We have seen that Omani households are often very large, and maids are burdened with heavy work. To throw some light on living and working conditions, I shall present five women. Three of them are among the six Bangladeshi maids working in nearby houses in Salalah, whom I visited several times, getting a chance to observe their environment from within. The fourth is a woman I met as she was emptying the garbage in another part of Salalah. We conversed on the porch of her employer's home for two hours. The fifth is a woman I interviewed in Bangladesh one month after her return from Oman. She relates her experience working on a farm in an isolated area.

1. Rabia

Rabia guides me into her employer's house, where the doors are always kept unlocked. She shows me the vast room (*majli*) she has to clean every day. She takes me to the kitchen and points out the large cooking pots she uses every day to cook rice, a meat dish and other food. Rabia prepares food for 22 people daily, not counting guests who often drop in on Fridays and add to the number. She uses the same cooking methods and the same spices as in Bangladesh, minus the chillies. The head of the household is a widow, mother to 14 children – 7 sons and 7 daughters. She lives with her sons. Two are married and have one child each but they have no jobs. The remaining sons remit their income to their mother, and Rabia's salary comes from that common pot.

Rabia returned from home leave two months ago. She was away for three months, and her employer covered the return airfare. Upon her return, her monthly salary was increased from 90 rials to 100 rials. Still, Rabia feels cheated because the days, totalling about one month, before and

after she went on leave have not been paid for and, when sick, she has to pay for medicines from her own savings. She calls her employer a miser and has nicknamed her "Tiger". When asked why she had returned to the same employer if she felt poorly treated, Rabia explained that her husband had opposed her return to Oman and fighting his objections had fully occupied her time at home. Unless her husband approved, no one in the community supported her right to migrate. Desperate, she finally went to a medicine man who gave her an amulet to change her husband's heart, and it succeeded in doing so. Rabia is from Noakhali, where women's labour migration is uncommon. Her husband earns little, and she wants to do something for her children. She completed her primary education before marrying at the age of 14. Her husband is illiterate. Rabia sends her income to her mother who has a bank account and looks after her two children. The mother gives some money to the husband. Rabia has a room of her own on the rooftop of the employer's house.

2. Rozy

Rozy lives on the same street, opposite Rabia's house. Her employer has six sons. The two eldest boys have completed school and are looking for jobs; the next two, aged 15 and 17, are severely disabled, move in wheelchairs and require care, which is provided by the mother and the older brothers. The two youngest sons attend school. The father has a job, but the family is not well off. They receive a government allowance for the disabled sons and possibly for domestic help (which could not be confirmed). Rozy is paid 85 rials a month and is eagerly waiting for a salary increase when she completes two years. Her aunt, Amena, who recruited her, is asking her to be patient, knowing that the financial condition of her employer is not very good. She and Amena work for families whose male heads are brothers.

Although the brothers live in the same house, they have separate kitchens. On weekdays, Rozy and Amena get up at five in the morning, make flat bread and tea for breakfast and prepare tiffin for the children, who leave for school at 7 a.m. Between 9 and 11 a.m., they have some time for themselves, except on Fridays when numerous visitors are entertained.

The women share a bedroom in a building under construction. The children's school uniforms are hanging in the room, and it is

Amina's responsibility to iron them, while men's dishdashas are sent to a specialized laundry. In such large families, maids cannot do everything. I have seen women of the family with a broom cleaning their own rooms. Amena is Rozy's model. Amena started with a salary of 70 rials and, with regular increases, she now earns 130 rials. Her employer is the owner of several businesses and is the richest among his brothers. She has been with the same family for nine years. Amena has brought her son to Oman. Rozy is hoping to bring her husband. She is in her mid-twenties and says that she misses him very much.

3. Shilpi

Shilpi is 30 years old and has been working in Oman for two years and two months. Her employer has five children and a sixth one is expected. She was entitled to home leave, but the husband asked her to delay departure until the birth of the baby. She reluctantly agreed but demanded that her salary be increased. Paid 80 rials a month, Shilpi feels exploited. She says unless her salary is increased, she will not stay. The employer's children are all close in age – she indicates their heights through gestures. She says "Madame" has little energy, sleeps most of the time, so she is left to cope with domestic chores and the children. The family often spends time in the mountains on a farm where camels and goats are raised and is home to Madame's family. With her employer, Shilpi shares her time between the village and Salalah. She has many worries on her mind. Her husband has taken a second wife, and this is the reason she migrated, leaving behind her two children aged 9 and 12 years old. She left out of anger, not because of poverty. Should she get a divorce? Shilpi intends to take a decision on her next visit home.

4. Rasheda

Omanis have a reputation for remaining awake at night and for sleeping during the day, and not only during the month of Ramadan. Many interviews were conducted in the morning while the employer's household was asleep. Wearing a salwar kameez with a colourful dupatta wrapped around her head, Rasheda is spotted dumping a plastic bag in the garbage bin. She is probably Bangladeshi, I guess, so I walk fast to catch up with her. I greet her in Bangla. She is astonished and pleased. Her employers are asleep – it is about eight in the morning – and Rasheda has

some time to herself. We begin the conversation on the street and continue sitting outside on the stairs of her employer's home.

Rasheda is from Ashulia. She migrated because her husband had a huge debt to clear. He wanted to sell their homestead land but Rasheda refused, suggesting that she migrate instead. The husband reluctantly agreed. Rasheda tells me that she has not returned home in six years and has just decided to prolong her stay for another two years, as the employer offered a substantial salary increase. Rasheda first earned 70 rials a month; two years later her salary increased to 80 rials, and two years after that, to 100 rials. Because she was planning to finally go home, the employer offered 130 rials, and so she agreed to stay for two more years. The payment of her salary is four months late, but Rasheda is confident that the agreement will be respected.

She works for an extended family composed of an elderly couple and their five sons, their wives and their children, totalling about 40 people. She does not do the cleaning. Her responsibility is solely the cooking. Rasheda prepares Bangladeshi dishes, which the employer obviously appreciates. The elderly father buys what she needs at her request and Rasheda seldom goes out.

Rasheda has a room of her own. She has brought to Oman her only son, her son-in-law and one of her daughters, and has reimbursed the debt that prompted her migration. Rasheda is in her mid-forties. She had never held a formal job prior to her migration and had only cooked for her family. She now plans, organizes and cooks for 40 people on a daily basis, revealing remarkable skills, intelligence and energy. Her reputation as a cook has circulated in the neighbourhood and she is sometimes hired to cook a dish, stealing time off from her employer's house while they are asleep. When we part, she is about to go in to prepare garlic-ginger paste for future use.

Rabia, Rozy, Amina and Rasheda work for large families that employ one domestic worker each. Some employers struggle to pay their salary, others are more comfortable. In Salalah, many families are close to their rural roots and have recently become urban dwellers. Many go back and forth between village and town, and these rural links were reinforced when the pandemic broke out.

5. Parveen

Parveen is from Patuakhali. She is about 40 years old and Oman was her first migration abroad.

She narrates her experience with the series of employers she had until she finally settled with one family for the rest of her stay.

Maya picked me up at the airport in Oman [Salalah] and took me to her place. The following day, she called the kafeel (employer, sponsor) who came to get me. I asked where I was being taken. Maya said not far. The kafeel drove in his jeep for several hours. The place was far away, and I was terrified [she was taken to Mirbat]. There were 13 people in the kafeel's household. They employed one man from Noakhali who had been in Oman for so many years he hardly remembered how to speak Bangla. He looked after their goats – many goats; about 800. They collected milk and made butter. They showed me the work I would have to do: washing these big pots. There was a problem with water, which I had to collect from a hand pump. In addition, cleaning the house, washing and ironing clothes. There was work [enough] for two maids. Too much work. I had a contract for two years but after one month I could not carry on. My hands were swollen and full of sores. That environment in the desert made me sick. I told my kafeel that I could not stay. He called Maya, who tried to convince me to stay but I refused. The kafeel drove me back to her. He gave her my one month's salary [70 rials + 10 rials as a tip in appreciation for the hard work I did]. He had liked my work. His wife was a schoolteacher and she left her two small children with me when she went to work. I had grown attached to them and they were sad when I left. They wanted me back and were willing to increase my salary, but I refused.

Maya pressed me hard to return. I kept refusing and she hit me with her fists. That went on for 10–15 days. Then, she sent me to different homes. You know, people who hire a woman for two to three days often abuse her sexually. In the end, I was sent to a home for seven days. They liked my work and they kept me. This time, I agreed. I finally spent two and a half years with them.

The dalal should inform women about the location where they are likely to be sent to work. If I had been told that I would be sent to the desert I may have been prepared mentally. When a woman cannot cope with the work and is returned to the dalal, that is when she is maltreated in all kinds of ways. She is given the choice: either you accept

the job, or you pay 150,000 takas and I send you home. The dalals are responsible for these problems. I did not understand the language, but my employers appreciated my work. In all the homes where I worked, the malik (boss, employer) never behaved badly with me. Those who did were the dalals. These people know how to bewitch you with their words. They are fakirtantrer lok (people who practise black magic).

How many Bangladeshi women work in such locations? Isolated farms may have difficulty keeping maids at their service. With limited time, I searched for more cases but found none. We shall come back to Maya and her methods.

3.5.2 Cooking, cleaning, childcare

Bangladeshi maids are often in charge of cooking and their style of cuisine is generally appreciated. In Oman, the elderly often live in the midst of extended families and maids seldom have to take care of them alone. Two maids, Tania and Sabina, whom I met in Salalah said that they receive an extra payment on top of their salary for providing services to the elderly mother of the household. Rozy does not look after the disabled adolescent sons of her employer, as it would be inappropriate for a young woman who is not of the family to do so, but Tania takes care of a disabled eight-year-old boy and has been doing so since he was a baby. His mother, a schoolteacher, receives a special allowance for childcare (whether the allowance relates to the disability of the son or the mother's profession as a teacher could not be clarified).

These maids are not specifically hired to look after children, but they do so along with other duties. In Salalah, children were observed playing on the street, boys and girls together, until late in the evening. Maids kept a casual eye on them while chatting or reading messages on their cell phones. When Aisha got up to prepare the evening meal, leaving the children on their own, I asked where the parents were:

The women are inside, sleeping or zapping on their cell phone. The men are outside, may be with a son or two.

Maids have the authority to correct young children; they may ask a boy to run an errand and, on the whole, they seem to be respected. But the unsupervised children complicate their work. Aisha commented:

Children increase my work. They can be controlled when they are young but by the age of 12–13, they don't pay attention to what I say. The boys hit me. If it goes too far, I complain to the parents and the father administers a correction.

On the opposite side of the street, two women were going out, leaving many young children behind. Several little heads could be seen through the window. The family has seven children, said Aisha, but they cannot afford to have a maid.

The Oman government has encouraged population growth to occupy a vast and largely empty territory. Generous family allocations have been provided. But large families do not suffice to build a nation. Lately, there has been a concern with child education and the quality of schooling. We have seen that many youths are unemployed, and perhaps unemployable, if they failed to complete school. The Omanization policy aiming to replace expatriates with Omanis adds pressure to develop at the earliest relevant skills and competence. In a population whose life has been softened by government allowances, while experiencing a rapid social transformation from one generation to the next, the challenges are tremendous. During the time I was conducting fieldwork in Salalah, a father stabbed to death his son's teacher after the boy complained about being reprimanded. The father had used as a weapon his *khanjar*, the traditional dagger worn by Omani men – commonly described as a “symbol of manhood, power and authority”. The teacher was Egyptian, as are many teachers in Salalah.⁴ The implications of such an act are troubling. Interestingly, the media did not report the event and no discussion took place on the tensions that such drama could reveal.

3.5.3 Socializing around garbage bins

Several maids interviewed in Salalah live next to Sadika Park, also known as Nepali Park. The place is visited by migrant workers on Fridays.

4 Doctors at the Sultan Qaboos Hospital confirmed the death of the Egyptian teacher and the weapon used. Given their position, the doctors are witness to situations and events (such as suicide, homicide, complications following abortion) that are hushed up and never come in the open. Oman is a strongly policed society.

At the entrance, a signpost indicates that it is reserved for “families”. Men on their own are not welcome but women in groups, families and heterogender couples can visit the park. A patch of green grass and the shade of trees are inviting in this dry land. Yet, Bangladeshi maids living 100 metres away declared never having visited the park, repeating that they found everything they needed inside the home and going out was unnecessary. That Bangladeshi maids do not visit Sadika Park is not completely true. One Friday, two women and a man from Chattogram were sitting on the lawn and chatting. The women worked as maids and were given time off and could visit the park. One was wearing a salwar kameez and the other, who had recently arrived, a *khami* (traditional wrapper) and a short blouse that Buddhist women wear at home. Both women were Buddhist. This encounter raised questions. Is religion rather than nationality the main factor determining maids’ rights to claim time off and outings? Should one make a link with the well-known tolerance the Omani state practises towards non-Muslims, exemplified in a number of ways? Thus, a Hindu man met in Hamriyah, who has lived in Oman for more than 30 years, explained that he had a special card permitting him to regularly buy whiskey at a cheap price, a privilege he liberally used (he was slightly drunk).

With questions on how Muslim maids got to know the neighbourhood if they never went out, and how they kept in touch with Bangladeshi maids working in other households including those working under the mini-mini formula, Tania explained:

We meet other maids at the garbage bins. We go late in the afternoon, and we take our time. We chat, we share stories, we hear gossip and find out what is going on.

Maids socializing around garbage bins has been reported elsewhere. One man I met in Hamriyah asserted that 90 per cent of the maids working in Omani homes were abused. When I asked if he had any proof of what he said, he narrated the story of his “cousin sister” (female cousin), who worked in Barkat. One day, she called him in great distress, requesting his help. Her employer had not paid her in five months; she had completed her contract and desperately wanted to go home but not without her dues. Could he help her? She gave her address. They were to meet, not at the employer’s house, but at the garbage bin nearby.

Just think of it, my cousin was distressed, and she asked for my help. I had not seen her in two years, and the only place where we could meet was at the garbage dump.

A terrible humiliation to this man. He took two days off work to meet his cousin-sister at the garbage bin.

She looked worn out and much older than I remembered. She explained her situation. She cried. We met several times. She brought me fruit and other food from her employer’s kitchen.

The cousin mobilized other Bangladeshi men in the same town, and they elaborated a plan. They advised the woman to go to the street, wait until an army (or possibly the Royal police) patrolling car appeared and request help. If need be, Bangladeshi men could be called and interpret for her. The scheme worked. An army car stopped, the woman explained her problem, the official went to the employer and admonished him, ensuring that the maid was paid her dues and sent home without delay. Women being held back in this way has been reported as a recurrent problem in Oman. The good part of the story here is that an Omani authority effectively intervened to repair the harm done. If this is a case of abuse, it is important to add that the abuse was mended, at least economically.

Garbage bins are well-known meeting spots where maids chat, exchange phone numbers, share messages, hand over cash and initiate relationships. I saw Rabia offering food to a man at the garbage bin near her house. She said he was a “brother” and they met once in a while. The garbage bin is also where Kolpona started a love relationship with her *habibi*. (companion, temporary “husband”). Her case history is given a little later.

In Oman, hospitality is a tradition, and all houses are equipped to receive guests. The large *majli* for men and a smaller one for women are common features of Omani homes. When directed to an empty *majli* to interview a maid in Matrah, I was invited to sit on a floor cushion while she squatted on the floor. Both of us felt ill at ease. The clock was ticking and hospitality (for someone conducting research on maids) was polite but restrained. In Salalah, where the ground was prepared beforehand and the employer agreed to our meetings, the women’s own room was a far more convivial place. In Muscat, some meetings were held at my hotel,

but the place made the women nervous. Hotels have CCTV (closed-circuit TV) cameras; the women were certain we were being filmed and their presence in such locations could be suspect. In the corridor and in the lift, they entirely covered their face with a black veil that blocked the view: not seeing and not being seen. I did not check whether garbage bins had CCTV cameras, but they are certainly permitted meeting places for maids. Extensions of kitchens and, in a sense, liminal places neither totally in nor totally out, garbage bins define a space where maids have some rights and effectively exert agency and a degree of freedom. At the garbage bins, women did not wear burkas.

3.6 Live-in versus live-out maids

Two women I met in Muscat debated the advantages of working as “engaged” and living with the *arbab* family against the merits of living-out and serving several clients as a “mini-mini” worker. Shahana had worked as engaged under the same *arbab* for six years but when the latter moved to another town, she refused to follow and decided to stay in Muscat and work independently. She said: “My *arbab* was a good man. He wanted to help me, and he did not take any profit when he arranged for my *aqama*. I only paid 200 rials.” Shahana continued under the same sponsor while operating as a mini-mini worker for two years. Her work permit was about to expire, and she was desperate to find another *arbab* who would take her as engaged. Comparing the two situations, she said that the latter offered more security and less hassle. She discussed these options with Reshmi, a woman from Kushtia, who had been in Oman for two years with a free visa. The two women reviewed their contacts to see if any of them could help Shahana find an *arbab* at short notice. What made the situation of a mini-mini worker such as Shahana so insecure in Muscat? I did not get a satisfactory answer.

In Muscat, the women I met who were working as a mini-mini had difficulties making ends meet. In February 2020, many Indian families known to hire part-time domestic workers were leaving. It was the end of the school year and many did not plan to return. The Omanization policy and a general slowing down of the economy were two main reasons. The coronavirus pandemic could only have hastened this exodus.

3.7 Live-out maids

Eleven women were interviewed who worked as maids under the mini-mini formula. As mentioned, eight had free visas, two were without valid documents and one had a family visa. Conversations with live-out maids were never easy, but they were more fruitful in Salalah than in Muscat. The next section describes the situation of four women: Parveen and Rupali who had free visas, and Kolpona and Shahida who had no valid documents.

3.7.1 With “free visas”

Marufa

Marufa came to Oman (Salalah) in 2015 as “engaged” and, after two years, she got the *arbab* to sign a release letter without cost. She had negotiated with a second *arbab* willing to provide her a free visa (and had probably begun a relationship with her *habibi*). When I met Marufa, she had just renewed her *aqama* for a second time, paying 610 rials: 550 rials to the *arbab*, with additional costs for the medical exam and other fees. Marufa is a widow and has a 12-year-old daughter who is her responsibility. Therefore, it is important for her to be able to visit home, which she can do with a free visa. She has a job as a school caretaker, for which she earns 80 rials a month. It keeps her busy for eight hours, five days a week, and she was looking for additional jobs to increase her income. As we were talking with other maids sitting on a street corner, Marufa did not hesitate to declare that she shares her life with a man. She is from Gazipur and her *habibi* is from Noakhali, such couples originating from different districts being a common occurrence in *habibi* relationships. Like her, he has a free visa. Marufa is very clear on why women part-time domestic workers live with a *habibi*.

It is simply not possible to be a part-time worker and live outside without a habibi. Marriage contract or not, the Omani rarely check. We present ourselves as husband and wife.

Marufa declares that her *habibi* pays for the rent and takes none of her money. She provides for her daughter and keeps her own savings. Her present *arbab* knows she has a “husband”. I cannot help but reflect how Marufa’s discourse contrasts with that of the men in Hamriyah, who imagined that women in such situations were necessarily tricked and abused and/or

morally depraved. As we converse in this all-women gathering, other maids jokingly say they wish they had a *habibi* as well, and they ask me whether I can find one for them.

Marufa's statement about the impossibility for live-out maids to manage without a "husband" ought to be qualified. In Muscat, several part-time workers rented rooms from Indian families, paying cash or more often providing work in exchange for the room and taking clients outside as well. In such cases, the Indian family provided the security that might have required a "husband" elsewhere.

Rupali

Rupali is from Noakhali. A compatriot from the same district, who has a laundry shop, had never met in Salalah a woman from his part of the country, which is known not to send its women abroad. Astonished to find her, he wanted to hear her story and invited me to join in.

Rupali is the eldest of six daughters and one brother, the brother being the youngest. At age 16, she was married to a man who already had a wife and children. The family agreed to the marriage nonetheless because they were poor and could not afford to pay for dowry. Rupali lived with the husband a little over a year, long enough to give birth to a son. When the child was three months old, she returned to her parents, unable to cope. Leaving the baby with her mother, she took a job in a Chattogram factory. After a few months, someone at the factory suggested that she migrate to Oman with a free visa. The cost was 200,000 takas and took one year to reimburse. After two years, Rupali returned to Noakhali, and again joined a factory. Seven months later, she decided to migrate once more to Oman with a free visa. Rupali explained that she lives with a "husband". Both of them earn and send money to their respective families. On good months, she earns about 150 rials. Her son, now eight years old, studies in a madrasah.

That Rupali migrated to Oman the first time with a free visa raises some questions. Having no knowledge of Arabic, being ignorant of Omani ways, how could she find clients and work without having a network and some kind of assistance? Who facilitated her entry and for what kind of work? Her compatriot is convinced that her present income comes from sex work. He seems well informed on the matter, his laundry shop being a cover for all kinds of

activities. But in the end neither of us had the elements to reach a conclusion.

Women like Marufa, Rupali, Kolpona and others are easily accused of immorality by the Bangladeshi community in Oman. Whether they engage in prostitution or not, living maritally with a man who is not their "true" husband suffices to destroy their reputation. The expression "*habibi*", commonly used in Jordan or Lebanon, is less usual in Oman, no doubt reflecting a more restrictive society.

3.7.2 Without valid visas

Kolpona

Kolpona is from Barisal and has been working in Oman (Salalah) for six years without returning home. About 30 years old, she migrated after her husband died, leaving her alone to raise three small children. In 2014, she paid 100,000 takas to migrate to Oman, entrusting her sons to her mother. Kolpona worked two years under one *arbab*, and two and a half years under a second one. The latter failed to renew her *aqama* after it expired. When Kolpona found out, she left him.

When I meet Kolpona, she is working in four Omani homes, each paying between 20 and 30 rials per month, totalling about 90 rials. She is satisfied with this income and her workload is lighter than when she was engaged. She has control over her work schedule and more time to rest. With a big smile, she tells the all-women street gathering that she is sharing her life with a "husband". He is a Muslim from Chattogram and she is a Hindu from Barisal, an unlikely match in the context of Bangladesh but not so unusual in *habibi* relationships. Kolpona is emotionally attached to her "husband" and hopes the relationship will continue. However, the future seems uncertain. She is planning to report to the police as an illegal worker at the end of the month and is prepared to spend some time in a detention centre until repatriated. Her last *arbab* kept her passport but she has a copy on her cell phone. She has put money aside to cover the cost of the airline ticket.

If Kolpona did as she said, the lockdown closed the airport before she could be repatriated. What happened to Kolpona could not be known.

Shahida

She does not reveal at first that she has no valid papers but does not refute the information

when another woman mentions it. Shahida is 33 years old and has been in Oman for seven years without returning home once. She came to Oman as engaged but after three years, her *arbab* said he could no longer afford to pay her. His elderly father had died and there was less need for her services. Shahida had a valid *aqama* for one more year, and so she began working as mini-mini. Her departure from the *arbab* was amicable. She still keeps in touch with the family, who calls her when special events require additional hands. When her *aqama* expired, Shahida did not seek a new *arbab* to get a free visa, which matters to women intending to visit home, but is not the case for Shahida. She was her husband's third wife. When her marriage was arranged, two wives had already left him.

My husband has no wife now. Who would want to stay with such a man? I divorced him.

Shahida bore her husband four children. She cannot tell their ages but says they were born one after the other. The youngest is a girl who was three years old when Shahida left. When asked how many children her husband has, Shahida must think twice and finally declares he has seven children. She never sent money to him, as he is not a poor man and has grown-up sons. She believes he can look after the children. Her thoughts go to her ten-year-old daughter who is without a mother. Her present living arrangements – with or without a *habibi* – are unclear. Unlike Kolpona, Shahida does not intend to report to the police to get repatriated. In truth, she has no home to go back to. She is not doing well, but her life in Oman is better than what she has known in Bangladesh. Shahida is extremely bitter towards the ex-husband and seems quite detached from her sons as well. The kind of marriage she contracted suggests she comes from a poor family who has to get their daughters married anyhow, no matter the outcome. Shahida never went to school.

3.7.3 With family visas

Only Rabia, whose situation was evoked earlier, works as a part-time maid with a family visa. Family visas are cheap, and they used to be granted quite liberally by the Omani government. One man reported that in the early 2000s, such visas were used, or rather abused, to facilitate the entry of male children who were put to work. A 20-year-old wife would be shown to be the mother of boys almost as old as herself. The

Bangladesh embassy intervened to check this form of child labour, and the Omani government later restricted this door of entry.

In this study, the status of “worker” is recognized for five women under family visas, but they have very little in common. Two live with their husband and observe strict *purdah* while engaging in their work, two were found or are suspected of engaging in sex work, and one works as part-time maid. As pointed out above, the visa held does not determine the occupation.

3.8 Mixed occupations: *Dalali* and agents

Finally, a word must be said about veteran migrant women who are difficult to place in any category, as they engage in a number of activities. These women speak Arabic, cultivate a good network, and have a flair for profit-making activities. Although such women's multiple engagements are difficult to follow, two characters may be presented to give a hint of the ways they operate. Najma was interviewed in person in Salalah, while Maya was described through the women she recruited and is not counted among the 35 interviewees.

Najma

I met Najma with three other women returning from a one-day cleaning job at a hotel. She describes herself as someone with good connections who can help other women find work. Without hesitation, she invites me to her home to continue the conversation started at a street eatery. Najma has a son and a daughter. When her son was four years old, she first left her village in Shariatpur and took a job as a maid in Dhaka. From there, she migrated to Saudi Arabia, where she spent four years. Najma first came to Oman in 2010. In all, she has been abroad for 14 years, a long time, which she highlights to augment her aura. In Oman, she first worked as engaged for a family she calls *kalo jat* (black race). Najma still lives in a neighbourhood of Salalah where most inhabitants are of African origin. As engaged, she was paid a monthly salary of 40 rials the first year and 50 rials the second year. After two years, Najma returned to Bangladesh and came back with a free visa costing 250,000 takas. Every two years, she renews her *aqama* at her own cost and continues under the free visa regime. An amazingly free woman, Najma declares:

I did not divorce my husband even though he took three more wives after me. He is no good, all the wives left him. [laughing] My husband is now the caretaker of my house.

Najma has her own house. She does not say much about the daughter who lives in Bangladesh, but is proud to introduce her son. At age 16, she brought him to Oman and found him his first job. At age 19, she arranged his marriage with a girl from Shariatpur. The young wife visited Oman with a three-month visitor's visa and returned to Bangladesh pregnant, so Najma is a mother-in-law and a grandmother – a status marker in Bengali society. She also brought nephews and several non-related men to Oman. Men at the street eatery where I first meet her later tell me that she is not a trustworthy woman; she is always on the move and does not do any real work. In the Bangladeshi community, she is regarded as a *dalali* and her source of income is no longer domestic work. I am told that the young man who keeps silent during the interview at her place is her *habibi*.

Maya

Maya is the Nepali woman who sent Parveen to work in an isolated farm in Mirbat. She has links with recruiting agencies in Bangladesh and works closely with Shumit, a sub-agent in Patuakhali. Several women recruited by this tandem were encountered and interviewed by me in Bangladesh and in Oman. Maya's power and audacity are said to derive from the fact that her sister married an Omani policeman. The women Maya recruited provided interesting details on the way she operates. Parveen is the most outspoken.

I know Maya. I know her strategy. She supplies maids to households where previous maids did not stay because the work pressure was too much. I have experience of this. In the second household she sent me to [after Mirbat], there were 27 members; in the next one, there were 23 people. I could not cope. I think Fahima [a woman from her village] felt [overwhelmed] in this kind of situation and she could not adjust. I have many health problems now and I blame Maya for these. When I went to Oman, Shumit (the local dalal) wanted 60,000 takas with the arrangement that it will be deducted from my salary when I started working. But Maya took 90,000 takas from my income.

Maya lives a little outside Salalah, but she is well known in the area. She mostly brings women from

Bangladesh ... In her place, she has three rooms where she organizes some kind of prostitution business. She offers the women the opportunity to earn a little extra. They tell their employer that they have a sister or a relative to meet and they request to be absent for a few hours. Maya sustains that lie. Meanwhile, she fixes up the client and provides the room. I saw how this business is conducted when I stayed at her house. She made the offer to me also, but I refused. Maya keeps the accounts. The girl gets something, and she gets something.

Maya is described as a shrewd businesswoman who brings women on credit if need be and makes sure she will recoup her investment and make a profit; she is not kind to those unable to cope. She has been known to terrorize and blackmail families to get them to pay for the repatriation of a woman who does not want to stay. According to Parveen, she also uses her home as a prostitution den. Maya deals with an agency in Fakirapool (Dhaka) and at least two of the women she sent to Oman did not register with the Bangladesh government and were not issued a "smart card". Other informal recruiters described in this report, such as Amena or Kulsum, do not send their recruits illegally. But Maya does. In Salalah, she avoids me, and we can only talk on the phone once I return to Bangladesh. Maya has been engaged in the recruitment of Bangladeshi women for some 15 years. She is the person who recruited Amena in 2012.

3.9 Migrant mothers bringing their sons to Oman

Migration has permitted mothers to bring their young sons to Oman. Either divorced, widowed or with unreliable husbands, these mothers who were empowered by migration, finance their sons' migration and find their first jobs with the help of their *arbabs*. Najma, Amena, Rasheda, Ferdouzara and Naheema followed the same path. Normally, such responsibilities towards sons are taken up by fathers or other male relatives but empowered migrant mothers have the ability to organize their sons' migration and shepherd their entry into adulthood. Why should mothers bring a son and not a daughter, knowing that women can also earn well abroad? This question can be explored through Rasheda who brought to Oman her son-in-law, her son and one of her two daughters, in that order. Depending on the relationship she has with

each of them and the circumstances of their migration, the gesture does not have the same significance.

With my earnings, I paid for my son-in-law and for my son's migration. My cost was 1.5 lakh (150,000 takas) for the first and three lakh (300,000 takas) for the second. The son-in-law paid half his cost, and I paid the other half. It was not a success. He was sick and could not work. He left after two years and never reimbursed the money I spent for him. Then, I brought my son to Oman instead of letting him get spoiled in Bangladesh. He was 19 years old and studying for his intermediate degree (junior college diploma). My arbab's brother helped him find a job. He is doing well. He works in a restaurant, earns 120 rials and has no costs as food, lodging and uniforms are provided. He needs to spend on himself – after all, he is a man – so he takes 20 rials for his pocket money and hands over to me 100 rials. I am happy with this.

The reasoning here is that work migration will complete the son's education and protect him from dangers such as getting addicted or meeting bad friends. Under the benevolent eye of his migrant mother, he will learn the value of work and how to become responsible. The educational factor here and keeping the son away from bad influences are just as important as the earnings. Actually, these objectives merge together, as to learn to be a man one must become a good provider. At first, Rasheda does not mention that she has also brought her daughter to Oman – a migration that she does not relate with the same pride and is in fact the outcome of a failure.

After my son-in-law returned having “failed” migration, he started behaving very badly with my daughter. She then asked me to help her come to Oman to get away from this. She wanted to do something for her two daughters. I helped her.

Rasheda specifies that she will not benefit from her married daughter's earnings because her *shongshar* (family) is separate, which is not the case for her son. With the latter, what is hers is his, and vice versa. She even deposits her savings in a bank account which is in her son's name.

My husband did not think it was necessary for me to have a separate bank account before I left. At first, I sent my money to his account. But he is a spendthrift. He only eats rice with fish. So I asked my son to open a bank account in his name and this is where I send my money. My son listens to me. There will be no problem.

Rasheda relies on the moral ascendancy she has over her son to exert control, contrasting with her inability to check her husband's propensity to spend money. Rasheda now has the responsibility of getting her second daughter, who is 19 years old, married. Sufficient money has been set aside to pay for a good dowry and to cover marriage costs. A party came with a marriage proposal but when they found out the girl's mother was a migrant abroad, they withdrew their offer. Rasheda's migration has enriched her family but, as she found out, it has depleted their honour capital (*man shonman*). The suspicion entertained about migrant women's reputation casts a shadow over her achievements.

Whether conservative or rebellious in their own lives, migrant mothers do not escape the class-specific patriarchal norms and values prevailing at home. In some respects, mothers of sons build their own power upon these very norms. Rasheda believes that to be the mother of a son is a strength. For daughters, it is definitely more complicated. She first helped her son-in-law to migrate, as men should provide for the family and only after he failed, both as a migrant and as a caring husband, she helped her daughter migrate. As for the younger daughter, the priority is to arrange her marriage, hoping for a more fortunate outcome this time.

Rasheda, who holds traditional middle-class values, is struggling to maintain her family's social position, considering the ambiguous benefits of her migration. She projects her ambition on to the son, not the married daughter who belongs to a separate family, nor the unmarried daughter about to be given away in marriage. But research has shown that such valuation of sons and daughters is not universal in Bangladesh. Poor families having only daughters, or families where the sons are too young to migrate or evade family responsibilities, have allowed and even encouraged unmarried daughters to migrate. This is the case with Monouara, quoted earlier. Her father is a rickshaw-puller who could not feed his seven children, and Monouara migrated when she was only 17 years old after her elder sister died. She is proud of her contribution to the family and, now 24 years old, she is in no hurry to marry. The value of such women may not be recognized in Bangladesh's patriarchal society, but they are also the ones most likely to forge new paths.

4. The Bangladesh embassy

Two labour attachés have been appointed to the Bangladesh embassy in Muscat, reflecting the importance of the Bangladeshi migrant population in Oman, then estimated at 750,000. According to official Omani government data, this number fell to 546,681 in October 2020.⁵ The proportion of women among them is not clearly known but one labour attaché estimates that they make up less than 10 per cent. The labour wing of the embassy employs 13 staff, which is considered insufficient, given the size of the migrant population and the work it entails.

4.1 Regulation of minimum salary

Oman, as with most countries in the Middle East, has the particularity of fixing salaries according to the nationality of its foreign workers and not according to individual qualifications. Nationalities are thus typified and workers' earnings bracketed. Some governments, such as that of the Philippines, have been more efficient than others in promoting their nationals and demanding corresponding salaries. The Philippines is an example of the former kind, but Bangladesh is known to have often lagged behind in this respect.

Two years ago, the Bangladesh and the Omani governments concluded an agreement fixing the minimum monthly salary for Bangladeshi workers at 90 rials, the same level adopted for women and men. According to the Bangladesh ambassador, the Omani government had pressed for a lower rate, but Bangladesh fought for this level. Perhaps the ambassador expected criticism, as most Bangladeshis in Oman blame their government for not demanding at least 100 rials, and forever accepting low pay for them. The minimum salary has enormous consequences for a large number of workers. Companies are bound to adhere to the norm. Numerous men employed by cleaning companies stated that receiving the minimum salary and, in order to earn a decent income and make their migration worthwhile, they resorted to overtime to such

a degree that their health was endangered. The lowest-paid man I met in Oman worked for a private printing press and received a monthly salary of 70 rials, with food at his own cost. So, though at the lower end of the salary scale, it cannot be said that women are paid less than the men. At the upper end, though, men have access to a wider range of occupations and earn much more than women.

Several maids do not get the stipulated minimum salary. Two women reported being paid 70 rials and quite a few received 80 and 85 rials. Following the bilateral agreement concluded in 2015 between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh, which fixed domestic workers' monthly salary at 1,000 Saudi riyals, income generally increased for women throughout the Middle East.⁶ A wide application of the new regulations, noticeable from 2017, attracted women workers and exerted pressure on Omani employers to augment salaries. Table 4 and figure 1 in the Appendix show a lesser number of women from Bangladesh opting for Oman as the number of recruits for Saudi Arabia increases.

4.2 Safe homes

According to the labour attaché, Bangladeshi women in Oman do not face problems as much as in Saudi Arabia. Certainly, the embassy is less solicited. The attaché believes that Omani are less likely to physically and sexually abuse maids, and fewer women "run away" from the employer for such reasons, while admitting that absconding is common and often well planned, with the woman joining someone.

Women who run away always have a contact, someone to help them. They cannot do it alone. We know this, but we don't mention it when a case is fought in court. The Bangladeshi who helped a woman escape is not incriminated. The reason why the woman ran away is the main issue.

To deal with problems of non-payment or underpayment of salaries, inadequate food,

⁵ Times News Service. "Falling number of expats brings Oman's population down by close to 5%" Times of Oman. 22 November 2020.

⁶ This increase was well documented in a recent study conducted for Work in Freedom (ILO). See Blanchet and Biswas (2020).

physical and sexual abuse, the embassy maintains two safe homes in Muscat. An Omani law firm has been contracted to fight cases on behalf of the wronged women, while the latter stay at a safe home waiting for the outcome at the cost of the embassy. These arrangements are made in collaboration with the Indian government, with the law firm serving both Indian and Bangladeshi women. Although the two houses have places for 60 women, the labour attaché admitted that, at the time of the interview, the occupants numbered about 20 women. These houses could not be visited.

The diplomat praised the efficiency of the Omani police and the way the law is applied. An example is given of a Bangladeshi woman who filed a case against her Omani employer for sexually abusing her. She won the court case, and the employer was sent to jail. But upon his release, taking his revenge, the former employer accused the woman of theft, a serious offence in Oman, and she is now unable to leave the country. Labour attachés, who visit jails and are aware of those having been caught, may not realize the offences that the net never catches. One issue discussed was the free visa that Omani citizens so liberally grant as a source of easy money. We have seen how widespread the practice is. An Omani caught engaging in this practice is fined 1,000 rials pointed out a labour attaché. Whatever the legal provision, and whether Omani *arbabs* providing free visas are fined or not, it evidently does not deter the practice.

Regarding safe homes, it should be mentioned that, unlike Jordan or Lebanon, there are no NGOs in Oman offering shelter or other assistance to migrant women. While churches and temples openly conduct religious services for their respective communities, the provision of other kinds of assistance has not been found. Bangladeshi women, Muslims in their great majority, are unaware of services from NGOs. In case of need, they mostly rely on their compatriots.

4.3 “In Oman, the law applies”

The minimum monthly salary of 90 rials is legally binding and serves as a basis in court cases fought for non-payment and underpayment of salaries. The law may be binding in theory but considering the considerable number of Bangladeshi women paid below-minimum salary and the insignificant number of court cases fought, the practice clearly lags. At recruiting agencies, agents were heard advising potential employers to pay the woman they might hire 80 rials if she was a first-time migrant, and 90 rials if she had experience. Even in official agencies, the norm is abused.

Embassy officials seem unaware of much that goes on outside. This is the case in Muscat and even more so in Salalah, 1,000 kilometres away. The staff, who are overworked, have little time to investigate workers' rights outside; for example, to find out how recruiting agencies instruct employers to pay a Bangladeshi below minimum wage. Even with the best intentions, it is difficult for them to follow up the problems that migrant workers face.

Through the Bangladesh school, social clubs and other facilities, the embassy staff leads a life that unfolds miles away from domestic workers. On my last visit to the embassy, a young woman who “ran away” from her Omani employer came to seek help, her face covered with the niqab. She was introduced into a room filled with men. I asked if the embassy employed a woman to receive the complaints of such a visitor and was told that the woman who normally plays this role had been requested to prepare a reception for the ambassador, a very female task. The young woman was clearly intimidated. In such a context, how could she explain the reason why she had “run away” from her employer. The embassy may not have adjusted to the mounting number of women working in Oman and their special needs. Services offered, including legal assistance and the safe homes, are minimal and look more like window dressing.

5. Recruiting agencies

According to official Omani statistics, there were about 154,000 migrant female domestic workers in Oman in 2017, all nationalities included.⁷ Interviews conducted with Bangladeshi women in Oman show that nearly all were recruited through personal connections and unofficial networks, a situation also confirmed by numerous observers.

5.1 In Muscat

Visiting recruiting agencies gives us an idea of the nationalities offered on the market and permits a comparison of conditions, such as agency costs, salaries and other terms of employment. In Muscat, the agencies visited were located in Adi Wadai, with the exception of one office close to the diplomatic enclave, which supplied Filipina maids to wealthier households. The nationalities offered were Filipino, Sri Lankan, Indian, Bangladeshi, Nepali, Ugandan and Ghanaian. Assumed to be a potential employer and playing the role, I inquired about procedures and costs to employ a maid and what were the mutual obligations. There was little difference between these agencies' fees and all of them more or less announced the same salary range for a particular nationality.

5.1.1 Salary scales and conditions of employment: Comparing nationalities

Filipinas call the highest rate of pay, as they do elsewhere in the Gulf region. The minimum monthly salary is fixed at 160 rials for them, compared with 120 rials for Indians and Sri Lankans, and 90 rials for Bangladeshi maids. The agency fee for a Filipina maid ranges from 1,335 to 1,550 rials, compared with 1,200 rials for an Indian or a Sri Lankan maid, and 800 rials for a Bangladeshi. These fees are exclusive of the *aqama*, costing the employer 200 rials. Differences in costs between Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi maids are explained by the fact that, for the former, the employer pays a health insurance made compulsory by the Sri

Lankan government whereas for employers of Bangladeshi maids, health insurance is left to the discretion of the employer, meaning they are not insured. We have seen Bangladeshi maids paying for health care from their own pockets, unless fortunate enough to have kind and generous employers; this was confirmed by the Bangladeshi doctors working in Salalah.

If Filipina maids appear to enjoy higher salaries than other nationalities, standards in Oman are generally low compared to other countries in the Gulf. The agency specializing in this source country and serving a wealthier clientele explained that the only limitation on the duration of a working day is that eight hours of rest at a stretch must be given in 24 hours. This leaves 16 hours for potential calls of duty, and when (during the day or night) rest should be granted is not specified either. Maids are expected to adjust to the tempo of their employer's life, no matter the nationality. According to the recruiting agencies visited, a Filipino maid is entitled to one day off per month. Such terms do not follow the Oman standard contract for the employment of domestic workers, which mandates one day off per week. Human rights agencies have denounced such conditions, in particular "being forced to work overtime without extra pay or sufficient time off" or being "denied a single day or even a few hours off each week". The very notion of paying overtime charges appears foreign and incomprehensible to most Omani employers, and recruiting agencies in no way attempt to introduce the notion. I asked if the Filipina maids the agency supplied could speak English and the reply was: No, but they understand – suggesting that the domestic workers these agencies proposed in Oman are not the college-educated women who served to fabricate the image of women over-qualified for the job.

In Wadi Adai, the catalogue for Bangladeshi maids in most agencies, except one, was thinner than for Indians. The same women were being

⁷ The Oman Monthly Statistical Bulletin in December 2017 mentions 154,434 female expatriate workers employed in the Private and Family Sector. The great majority of these women are domestic workers.

advertised in several agencies. Most files mentioned that the woman had worked in Saudi Arabia, and therefore was experienced and should be paid accordingly. Women came from a wide range of districts.

► **Table 6: Salary scale and agency fees according to maid's nationality**

Maid's nationality	Salary scale in rials	Agency fee in rials
Filipina	160–170	1 335–1 500
Sri Lankan	110–120	1500
Indian	90–120	N.A.
Bangladeshi	80–90	800

Source: Oman Study 2020.

In one agency run by a Sri Lankan man, the arguments used to “sell” women from his country to potential employers were particularly outrageous towards other nationalities. When I asked about a Bangladeshi maid, the man told me it would be a bad choice. He said, “Fifty per cent run away from their employer. They are hot and cannot live without a man.” For Indians, the proportion went down to 25 per cent and for Sri Lankan women, it was only 1 per cent. The agency offers a six-month trial period. If the employer is not satisfied, the employee can be returned and another maid offered. In the end, if none works to the employer's satisfaction, the fees paid are returned.

Another agency explained that a woman may decide not to stay with the employer and the agency would propose to her another home. She may have three trials. If she accepts none, she is sent back. The agency did not explain to me as a potential employer what would happen when a woman could not adjust to my home and was required to be sent home. But we know that extreme pressure is applied on them to pay the agency and compensate for its costs and ensure its profit margin. All agencies keep rooms where women stay until they find an employer or get repatriated.

5.1.2 Scenes of drama at agencies

Agencies are the theatre of drama, screams and tears. Some scenes were furtively observed. A Ghanaian woman about to be driven to the airport threw her suitcase in the face of the agent who yelled insults at her. In one agency, six Indian women were sitting on a bench waiting to be “chosen”. The agent asked if I was interested

in taking any one of them as a maid. I could not speak with them as we did not speak a common language. The power over a domestic worker, lent to me by my supposed ability to pay, was terrifying. Were slave markets any different?

Communicating with Bangladeshi women was easier. One woman had worked for one month and had been returned to the agency. She was ready to leave with a second employer but complained that the first employer had not paid her. She pleaded and she cried. The Bangladeshi agent told her she need not fear, and they would see that she got paid as they held the first employer's deposit of 800 rials as guarantee. This is when I heard the Bangladeshi agent advising the second employer to pay the woman a monthly salary of 80 rials, ignoring the Bangladesh government minimum salary of 90 rials. I could converse in English with the woman's second employer as she was waiting for her car. She said:

Filipina maids? No good. Hopeless. I had a Sri Lankan maid who wanted to leave after two years. She was okay. I am now trying a Bangladeshi.

She left in her expensive abaya with the clicking sound of her golden bangles, followed by the new Bangladeshi maid who had not dried her tears, her heart full of anger and resentment for not having been paid the first month. A village woman's first migration; a woman lost in a country whose language she does not comprehend. Master and maid. The hierarchical order exemplified, enacted in these scenes. I had seen how the agent tried to make the woman insecure by pointing out the smallest faults she could have made with the first employer. Some women are able to stand up to these destabilizing procedures, but some others do not find the words and swallow the humiliation.

At the Bangladeshi agency, a woman in her early twenties had come for her medical exam. She had completed her secondary education and looked confident. She explained how she was cheated by the agency in Bangladesh who told her the salary in Oman would be the same as in Saudi Arabia. She had worked for a salary of 1,000 Saudi riyals (22,500 takas) in Saudi Arabia and was offered only 90 Omani rials (19,500 takas) in Oman, not understanding that the minimum salaries in the two countries did not mean the same.

The Bangladeshi agent finally understood that I was not a potential employer, that I had other interests and could follow conversations in Bangla. A man in his fifties who had spent 27 years in Oman, he was relatively new to the job. He explained that he dealt with two agencies in Bangladesh, one located in Banani, the other in Fakirapool. He never visited their premises, and all business was conducted by phone. In February, business was low. He expected it would pick up in the month of April. No one knew then that the pandemic would cause the situation to get worst.

5.1.3 Definition of intolerable abuse.

The Bangladeshi agent emphatically declared that there are four types of abuse he would not tolerate: (1) sexual harassment, (2) salaries withheld, (3) beatings and physical torture, and (4) food withdrawal. Interestingly, he said nothing about excessive workload and working hours, or restrictions on movement. He fully endorsed the injunction that good Muslim women do not ask to go out.

Our women do not ask to go out. Why should they? What is the need? There are too many risks for them. They are fine inside the employers' homes.

Again, I heard the rule repeated word for word like a mantra by many of the women interviewed. If good Muslim women are meant to stay inside, is a maid requesting a day off not a "good" Muslim? How to justify such an injunction? After all, women of other nationalities in Oman move freely on the street and it does not make them "bad" women. In countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, Bangladeshi Muslim women move around freely and feel safe. How does one explain these differences between nationalities

and between countries? Is it mainly due to Omani or Bangladeshi gender politics, the size of the Bangladeshi male population in Oman and the "danger" it represents for women, or the particularly conservative districts migrants come from? Refusing the "essentialization" of the "good Muslim woman", I struggle to find an explanation but feel quite alone in this quest.

5.2 In Salalah

In Salalah, there are few recruiting agencies, and many with signboards had their doors closed perhaps because business was low. I visited two of them. The first offered Filipino, Sri Lankan, Nepali and Bangladeshi maids.

We recommend Sri Lankans. There have been complaints about Bangladeshi maids not showing respect.

I did not get any clarification on what the agent meant by "not showing respect" and the reasons why a particular nationality was being promoted. Another agency managed by a Jordanian man had stopped offering Bangladeshi maids but proposed Sierra Leone and Ghanaian maids at a cheaper price than Bangladeshi.

Sierra Leone and Ghanaian maids are cheaper than Bangladeshi maids. These are the only two African countries from which we are allowed to recruit. Christian or Muslim makes no difference to the employer.

So, in this competitive business, African maids may now replace Bangladeshi women at the bottom of the salary scale. One notes a sales strategy where the maid's religion is considered irrelevant, an interesting contrast with the Bangladeshi recruiting agency.

6. Discussion

6.1 Return to research methods

Before summing up the findings of this exploratory exercise, I wish to come back to the research methods deployed in conditions that were far from easy, with the greatest limitations being the limited access to the women I wished to study and the relatively short time that was available to me. Tracing steps is important to explain how “facts” emerge and the solidity of the findings. The research methods called for me to plunge into an unfamiliar world, ready to be astonished, while suspending a priori notions or personal judgments. This is a task demanding training, experience and hard work, knowing that the exercise is never perfect.

The object was broadly to study Bangladeshi women migrant workers in Oman. Women working in any income-generating activity were considered “workers”, including some with the status of “wife” who reside in Oman under family visas. Although the main focus of the study has been domestic workers, throwing the net wide allowed capturing grey zones and questioning the social construction of “work” in relation to women. Strongly gendered and class-specific, we have seen that the definitions of “work” and conditions of its practice are also religion-specific. This is the case when “good Muslim women” employed as maids are deemed as not requiring any days off or outings, as the employer’s home suffices to meet their needs.

Research methods combined interviews, one-to-one conversations, participation in gatherings of Bangladeshi women, and of men (rarely both together), talking among themselves without anyone imposing a topic. For women, material was collected using the format of individual case histories, with the recording of some basic information rapidly gathered. Having collected the material, came the interpretation. How credible are the stories heard? Why were they told this way? How was I perceived, and how did it affect the storytelling? What information was revealed, and what was withheld? The interpretation takes into account the multiple contexts of migrants’ lives, in Oman and in Bangladesh, and draws upon concomitant and past research.

Narratives recorded in Oman often tread a similar trajectory. A majority of women experienced poverty; they often had numerous siblings, an absent or incapacitated father, went through early marriage, early motherhood, marriage breakdown, or a return to the natal family with or without children – all resulting in a pressing need to work and to earn. Sometimes, a *dalal* spots the needy woman as a good candidate for migration and makes a proposal. Alternatively, she may sometimes herself decide to migrate and approach the *dalal*. As mentioned in the introduction, these stories seldom express great personal ambition but rather the need to cope with a difficult situation not of the women’s making. Several stories unfold according to a template that recreates stereotypes about migrant women, many of which are also found in journalistic accounts. This is the *oshohoi meye* (poor, vulnerable, resourceless, sometimes cheated and abused woman). Is this vulnerability emphasized to stimulate sympathy? The question arises because research conducted on migrant women in different contexts has produced more diverse and complex narratives where women’s agency comes to the fore more forcefully.

Case histories show pride in achievements in relation to the initial *oshohoi* condition. Migration can be a deeply transforming experience, but most women in Oman exert caution in this respect. Few women present themselves as rebels questioning social mores, claiming personal choice and asserting autonomy. The injunction to be a “good Muslim woman” and the conservative character of Omani society combined with the severely critical gaze of their male compatriots to exert restraint. There are a few outstanding exceptions, but notably less than encountered in previous research sites, especially in Jordan and Lebanon.

My findings certainly do not support the common view held by a majority of Bangladeshi men in Oman that 80 to 90 per cent of maids in Omani home are abused (*nirjaton hoi*). By the way, how does one render in English such a strong word as *nirjaton*? When asked to be more precise and explain what they meant or implied, most informants specify sexual abuse. *Nirjaton*

has been translated as “torture”, and lately “harassment”. The word is vaguely descriptive of bad treatment with a strong connotation of (probable) sexual abuse for women “out of place”. The word *nirjaton* lends support to a gender ideology that defines women as “naturally” *oshohoi* and consequently in need of guardians (of their sexuality).

Is this report presenting a “true” picture of the living and working conditions of Bangladeshi women working in Oman? Did it miss anything? Certainly. All studies have their limitations. But just as rows of bricks construct a wall, each piece of research contributes to elaborate a body of knowledge. It is not the final word. It can never be.

6.2 Main findings

6.2.1 Low salaries and false promises

Omani employers pay low salaries to Bangladeshi maids who occupy the lower rungs in this occupational ladder. The gap in salaries offered in Saudi Arabia for similar jobs, from 2015 onward, exacerbated the differences to Oman which became a less attractive destination, at least in economic terms. Salaries are important. After all, the main reason women migrate is to earn enough to improve their own and their families’ well-being. In Muscat, Indians, who preferably employ part-time domestic workers, say that Omanis employ full-time Bangladeshi maids because they have large families, do not like to do the work themselves and need a maid around the clock. Certainly, in the households visited, maids are not employed to dust china. They perform heavy and essential tasks for the household, such as cooking, with one maid alone serving a large number of people.

The minimum salaries of 90 rials adopted by the Bangladesh and the Omani governments two years ago is clearly not enforced and has not been much publicized either. There are no independent NGOs to carry the message, and official recruiting agencies themselves do not strictly follow the rule. A few cases are taken to court when women seek embassy assistance. Court cases may be won, but the outcome does little to change employers’ behaviour overall.

To attract candidates, Bangladeshi recruiters resort to promises of higher salaries that will not be delivered, a practice that poisons the relationship with the employer from the start

and can lead to drama (see Karima’s case history in Appendix 2). Such lies and false promises are more likely to be committed by agencies in Bangladesh. They have not been documented, and would certainly be more difficult to manage when recruitment is done through personal networks. Amena, who recruited her niece, or Kulsum, who recruited her neighbour, would have to answer for cheating, since both the recruiter and recruited work in close proximity.

While the starting salaries are low, increases are commonly granted every year or every two years when the *aqama* is renewed. Unpaid leave of two to three months is granted every two years and the return ticket is covered by the employer. Here, more time may be granted when it is deemed necessary by the employer, as the worker has no days off; but her holidays at home are at her own cost, which is in violation of the 2011 Oman standard contract for domestic workers, which states that the 30 days of leave granted every two years should be paid leave. Women who work to the satisfaction of their employers have had their salaries doubled (Amena, Rasheda, Tania) in six to seven years. Long-time employees may be paid with some delays, but once a relationship of trust is established and both parties know their particular circumstances, these delays are acceptable to the workers.

My employer, who is a businessman, pays me every three to four months. He knows I do not have small children waiting for remittances at home. He has never cheated me, and I trust him. Rozy’s situation is different. Her family depends on the money she sends every month, and her employer pays her on the twenty-fourth of each month.

–Amena, eight years in Oman

Increases are capped when the employer cannot afford to pay more. Starting with a salary of 60 rials, Aisha’s salary has been increased every two years up to 100 rials. She sees her compatriots’ salary being increased but not hers. While displeased, Aisha knows the employer is presently unemployed and cannot afford to pay more. She could leave but she is staying. An employer’s ability to pay is seen as a matter of luck and some maids are more fortunate than others. Families that pay regularly often have members who are government employees (men are often in the police and women schoolteachers).

Along with low salaries, delayed and unpaid salaries have been reported as recurrent problems in Oman. In the current study, we have met the man who intervened to help his cousin recover her unpaid salary. The problem was resolved through the intervention of the Royal Oman police. Unpaid and delayed salaries can cause situations that rapidly deteriorate. Some women “run away”. Others stay with anger and resentment. Slavery was officially abolished in Oman in 1970. Yet, work without pay amounts to forced labour.⁸ The Omani government does not condone such practices, but, clearly, insufficient pressure is applied while recourse to sanctions is rare. A few court cases fought and won do not change behaviour overall.

6.2.2 Workload and job satisfaction

We have seen that Bangladeshi women commonly work in large Omani households where they are the only domestic worker employed. One maid serving 40 members in one household has been reported. Large households have frightened more than one woman, at least one of whom refused to stay. Others not only stayed but extended their contract several times. For such renewals to occur, the contract must work to the satisfaction of both parties. Women performing essential tasks may feel rewarded by the regularly increased salary, the appreciation they receive and the importance of the work they perform.

After nine years, Amena is more than a maid to her employers’ family. She was in their employ when her 11-year-old daughter drowned in the village pond back home, three months after her arrival and, on several occasions, they have been at her side showing sympathy. Patron–employee relationships may not be devoid of humanity and kindness. Amena appreciates that the employer buys fish and other treats that she likes. When sick, he pays for her health care. There is more than money in the contract binding employer and employee. Amena’s reliability and moral strength have been pillars to the employer’s household. In return, she found a shelter more secure than she ever had at home.

Since most of descriptions of domestic workers come from inquiries conducted by NGOs seeking to identify human rights abuses, the positive

aspects of the relationship women domestic workers may have with the employer are seldom highlighted.

6.2.3 Who employs Bangladeshi maids?

We are cheap to employ, we can work hard and we don’t mind staying inside the house. This is why Omanis appreciate us.

This quote from Amena provides the beginning of an answer. When searching for Bangladeshi maids in Muscat, I was directed to a neighbourhood where Omani families of modest means live. I found them in lower- to middle-income households, often in extended families where men engage in business, are employed in the police, the bank and so on, with quite a few being unemployed. Women hold jobs as schoolteachers and in the police, and one was a retired civil servant; but the majority have no jobs outside the home. Bangladeshi maids have not been found employed in families where the husband and wife work outside, leaving their children to the care of the maid, nor families that include migrants sending remittances to those left behind, as in Lebanon. Large extended families live under the same roof. A remarkable feature is the grouping of resources among brothers, the employed sharing with the unemployed.

Bangladeshi maids know little about their employer’s position in wider Omani society. They know about married daughters spending much time at their mother’s house, families remaining awake at night and sleeping during the day, and about children attending school at seven in the morning, as the maids prepare the children’s breakfast. They know about the links many employers keep with their rural home where camels and goats are raised. Little research could be conducted to extend this information.

Some Bangladeshi maids work for Indian families in Muscat, mostly part-time. The cultural proximity in terms of language and food preferences is appreciated. One Delhi man said he would choose a Bangladeshi maid rather than a Sri Lankan or a Nepali because he appreciates Bengali food.

8 Oman ratified the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) in 1998.

6.2.4 About sexual abuse

The Bangladesh embassy reported cases of sexual abuse being less common in Oman than in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, perpetrators of such crime have been prosecuted. Sexual abuse could occur anywhere. However, living conditions in crowded Omani homes, where women and children stay at home, would make such attempts more difficult. Women sent to an employer for short trial periods are reportedly more exposed.

6.2.5 About sex work

In Muscat, at Ruwi, women were observed waiting for clients at the entrances of bars early in the evening. A few were Bangladeshis wearing salwar kameez, some were burka-clad Iranians and others Egyptians with Western-style dress. The young bar dancer observed at work denied being engaged in prostitution. She was encouraged to hold phone conversations with enamoured customers, enticing them to attend the bar where she worked and express their appreciation by presenting her with a *malla* (a flower necklace, here replaced by a card sold at the bar and worth a specific amount). She shared benefits with the Bangladeshi bar manager. The cost of drinks at the bar would be above the means of most migrant workers.

In Salalah, two women reportedly use their homes as prostitution dens, one living with her husband and child under a family visa, the other, an unlicensed recruiter who organizes this income-generating activity when women spend time at her house in between employers. Considering the tens of thousands of young men leading a solo life in Oman, markets for commercial sex services undoubtedly exist, but not much could be discovered during my short fieldwork.

6.2.6 Live-out domestic workers

In Oman, a good portion of part-time live-out domestic workers are men earning more than women in similar jobs, partly because they are more mobile and partly because they command higher payment. Men call themselves “cooks”, although they may do some cleaning, whereas the women are referred to as “maids” even if their main task is cooking.

In Muscat, live-out maids rent rooms with Indian families and pay for the room with their work, as well as by finding work with customers outside.

In Salalah, a woman declared that one cannot work as a live-out maid without having a *habibi*, or temporary “husband”. Such arrangements are more covered up and appear less common than in Lebanon or Jordan. Live-out maids may remain undocumented, but most arrange for a free visa. A woman with a free visa declared that her sponsor knows she has a “husband”, but never bothered to check the marriage certificate. Bangladeshi men commonly assert that women living with a temporary “husband” are mere cover-ups for sex work, and if not, living maritally with a man not their “true” husband is just as morally reprehensible. They describe such women as on a slippery slope: abused in the Omani employer’s home, they “run away” and survive by engaging in a sinful occupation. The description live-out maids give of their situation could not be more in contrast with this. They talk of having found a companion and controlling their income even as expenses are shared. As live-out maids, their work pressure is less, and they have more freedom, allowing them to take Fridays off. Their main challenge is securing enough customers.

6.2.7 Absence or silence of NGOs

The Omani government intends to regulate its own affairs and has been extremely cautious with external influences. Local NGOs do not flourish in Oman. While tourists are welcome and religious communities enjoy a degree of freedom, strict control is exerted on organizations within the country and police permission must be obtained for any meetings above a certain number. Human rights activists entering the country with tourist visas have not been welcome.

6.2.8 EPZ and manufacturing

Two women interviewed in Bangladesh after they returned from Oman in 2019 described having been employed in a small garment factory located in Sohar, which produced clothes for the local market. It was a family enterprise that employed 15 Bangladeshi women and 3 Indian men. There was no overtime and little pressure to meet targets. The women had imagined conditions as in Jordan, but it was not what they found. In their view, the management was amateurish and not professional. Wages were only slightly higher than in Bangladesh and were always paid late. They were provided lodging, but had to pay for their food out of their meagre

salaries and they did not feed themselves well as a result. After three years, the employer did not want to let them go and the two women paid their own airfare, forfeiting two months' salaries. Other employees had left before them and had not been replaced. "Our employers were poor Omanis. They also had a farm where they employed Bangladeshi men." Both women had been garment factory workers in Bangladesh before going to Oman and were recruited through a colleague's husband. They followed the 21-day compulsory pre-departure training and, in all likelihood, left with domestic worker visas.

According to this description, this factory venture was a success neither for the Omani owner nor for the Bangladesh women they employed. The women were not allowed to go out and their honour was safe, according to both the Omani owner and the conservative Bangladeshi community. But does this suffice? The experience

was disempowering and economically unrewarding. Upon return, both women resumed work at a garment factory and felt that, given the salaries presently paid in Bangladesh, migration is not worthwhile. Omani employers could have difficulties attracting women workers to their factories unless better conditions are offered.

In February 2020, word circulated at the Bangladesh embassy in Muscat that a large garment factory was to be opened in Salalah, but I later heard the plan had been dropped – the reason being that the interested investor withdrew after disagreement with the Omani government regarding the number of Omani nationals the factory would have to employ. Omanis are unlikely to accept the same conditions as migrant workers, and profits would not be the same. Omanization is a challenge. Oman still plans to develop its manufacturing sector.

7. Conclusion

This exploratory study will, hopefully, contribute to better knowledge and understanding of Bangladeshi women migrant workers in Oman. I recognize its limitations. My fieldwork was short (31 days) and reaching out to largely invisible women workers has been a challenge. Nonetheless, as it is, it fills a void as few ethnographic studies have been conducted on the working and living conditions of migrant women in Oman, and none on Bangladeshis. Bangladeshi maids have been ignored and/or wrongly portrayed by compatriots who do not approve of their countrywomen's migration, and are perturbed by what they suspect, or imagine, but do not know first-hand. The rationality, or rather irrationality, of their fears deserves attention, but perhaps in another research.

The Bangladeshi community in Oman mirrors the home country, but in a twisted and partial way: first, by the massive presence of men and the absence or invisibility of women and, second, by the specific origin of the migrants who come from the south-eastern districts of the country (Chattogram, Feni, Noakhali and others). These veteran migrant workers have set the norms and appropriated the right to represent the country. Secluded or moving out "invisibly", their wives, by definition, are not "workers". Bangladeshi women who came to work as maids represent an anomaly, a disturbing Other, from which the first migrants keep their distance. Two patriarchal and highly conservative societies, the Omani and the Chattagonian, have reinforced one another in Oman.

It would be presumptuous on my part to pretend to know Omani society after such a short encounter. Not speaking Arabic was certainly a barrier. But the society does not easily reveal itself to Arabic speakers either. One Sudanese doctor, a colleague of the Bangladeshi doctors at the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah, remarked, "In Oman, there is no colour bar, no racism. The population is very mixed but there are social classes. Everybody is not the same. The regime is opaque, and it is difficult for us to understand the inside even if we speak Arabic. I learn something new every day."

Migrant workers may not read through this opacity, but many understand the importance of having a powerful *arbab* capable of offering protection and, if need be, bend the rules. Mannan, a holder of a free visa, was one of my drivers. Three years ago, he was arrested by the police and sent to jail for not being where he should be according to his work permit. He called his *arbab*, who negotiated and got him freed within three weeks. "Omanis work it out among themselves. If they want you out of jail, you will be freed." My drivers had an interesting relationship with their *arbabs*. When called on some special duty, they dropped everything else and answered: "Ready". *Arbabs* evidently belong to different social classes, wield different degrees of power and have different interests. While for some, the monthly rent that sponsoring procures matters most; for others, to have someone ready for service at short notice may be more important.

For women also, much depends on the *arbab*. Some are described as benevolent and helpful, others as harsh. We have seen a live-in maid caught by her *arbab* in an illegitimate relationship with a Bangladeshi man. The *arbab* filed a case, and both culprits were sent to jail, where the woman gave birth to a child before being pardoned. Other *arbabs* close their eyes and do not bother to demand a marriage certificate from the live-out maid who has a temporary husband. Whatever the work, the *arbab's* permission is required. Migrant workers are at their mercy, whether benevolent or strict. Relationship with the police is another matter. Which offense gets excused, and which offense is not? What are the risks incurred by the young Bangladeshi dancer working in the Indian dance bar of an international hotel? The Omani owner disclaimed any responsibility. He said he only rents the room to the Bangladeshi DJ.

This exploratory study addresses a number of issues, leaving many questions unanswered. Before closing, I wish to return to migrant women's empowerment, an objective that the WIF project promotes. In this connection, a study conducted by Sandhya Rao Mehta, an English professor at Sultan Qaboos University, ought to

be signalled.⁹ Mehta followed 15 Indian women working as maids in Oman for ten years. She contests the victim narratives held and propagated by NGOs and human rights activists, showing instead the multiple ways in which women negotiate the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, cope and deal with patriarchal systems, and wrest autonomy, both at home and in Oman. Hers is a refreshing study that stands out. The life that migrants lead prior to migration, the “normal” violence suffered at home, provides

an essential perspective to understand the threshold of the acceptable and the intolerable abroad. “If life is difficult abroad, bear with it. Just remember where you come from,” reminded a veteran woman migrant worker to her junior colleague. Empowerment and freedom are complex matters measurable in small degrees, while the sentiments they inspire have an incommensurable quality. That is why patiently taking the time to listen to migrant women is so important.

9 Sandhya Rao Mehta, “Contesting Victim Narratives: Indian Domestic Workers in Oman”, *Migration and Development* 6, No. 3 (2017).

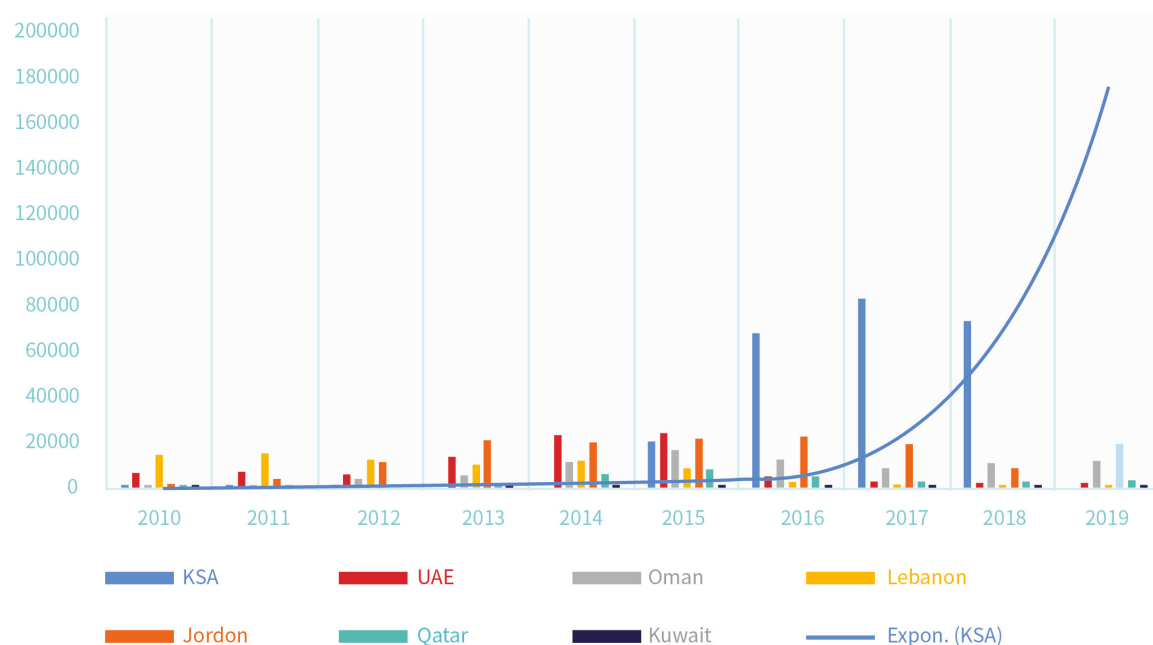
Appendix 1: Oman among other destinations of women migrant workers: 2010–2019

► Table 7. Major destinations of women migrant workers: 2010–19

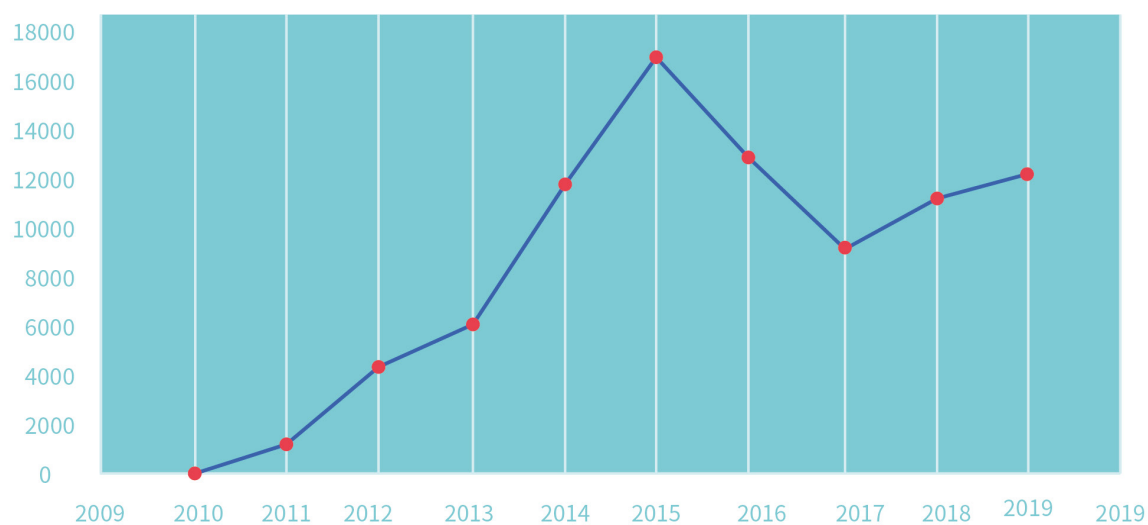
Year	KSA	UAE	Oman	Lebanon	Jordan	Qatar	Kuwait
2010	44	7111	18	15116	2136	3	1
2011	166	7394	1061	15610	4338	4	0
2012	484	6212	4102	12496	11582	6	0
2013	167	13710	6068	10750	21243	2100	0
2014	13	23214	11584	11990	20134	6452	1
2015	20952	24307	16980	8782	21776	8642	6
2016	68286	5151	12897	2450	22689	5381	128
2017	83354	3272	9199	1642	19872	3272	393
2018	73713	2427	11034	1207	9100	3196	111
2019	62578	2483	12226	1611	19706	3741	758

Source: Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET). Data published in 2020.

► Figure 1. Major destinations of Bangladeshi women migrant workers: 2010–19



►Figure 2. Bangladeshi women migrant workers to Oman: 2010–2019



Appendix 2: Case history: Karima: a “free visa” dearly paid for

I met Karima on the street of Darsait in Muscat on a Friday evening. It was her day off and she was returning home after visiting a friend. A lively woman in her twenties, she was neatly dressed, wearing a black burka with a red scarf over her head. She was pleased to meet someone from Bangladesh and the conversation was friendly. She did not get worried when I pulled out my notebook to write down some information. We exchanged phone numbers and met one more time. However, after hearing that I had spoken to a man linked to the agency held responsible for cheating her, Karima became suspicious and she stopped responding to my calls. Before this happened, she shared the following with me.

I am from Khulna. I was married very young, at the age of 11, and gave birth to a daughter the following year. My husband is paralyzed and cannot work. My cousin sister (kalato bon) brought me to Oman.

Karima had recently returned from Bangladesh to attend her daughter's wedding. The girl is only 13 years old. “In my family, girls are married young,” she commented. Karima tells me she studied up to Class VII. She does not say much about her husband except that he is sick and cannot work. She came to Oman three years ago (2017).

I purchased a free visa for which the dalal wanted 160,000 takas. I could not pay such a large amount. I had savings for 10,000 takas from my tailoring work and I obtained a loan from an NGO for 80,000 takas. I gave the dalal half of what he had demanded. He told me that I could work two months without salary [it would go to him instead] and he would accept this. I was sent to a family living about a four-hour drive from Muscat. My employers were good people, but the salary was only 70 rials. After six months, I told them I could not accept such a low salary and I asked to be taken to Muscat and [that] they should write a release letter. That letter cost me 120,000 takas [about 540 rials]. I had already paid to the dalal 140 rials (two months' salary) plus 80,000 takas. Then, I needed a new aqama under a new kafeel for which I paid 600 rials plus 750 rials to the

dalal. I have been under this kafeel for the last one and half years.

Selling a so-called “free visa” at a high price was the first trick deployed to cheat Karima. In fact, there was no free visa at all. She was sent to an employer as an engaged maid and her salary at 70 rials was low but, in 2017, this was not such an unusual rate. The recruiter pocketed two months of her salary, supposedly to pay for her remaining dues. So Karima went two months without pay. After six months, she again paid an unusually large sum of money for a release letter from the first *arbab* and then paid a second *arbab* for a free visa as well as a large fee to the *dalal*. All the charges for Karima appear to be inflated. Who assisted her, or rather who cheated her, at every step of the negotiations?

As Karima tells her story standing on a street corner, she goes from one currency to the other and I have some difficulties following her but continue to take notes. Adding it all up, her cost comes to about 530,000 takas. No migrant woman declared having paid such a high amount of money in Oman. No man paid so much.

Her misfortune is linked to an agency called Noorani Overseas that the Omani government closed down in 2016 (here the dates do not quite tally as she arrived in Oman in 2017). Bangladeshi informants told me that this agency was linked to a scandal and that they brought many women from Bangladesh. The agency owner had switched to a snack food business. I tried to pursue the inquiry at the snack bar, was offered free coffee and free conversation but obtained little else.

Interestingly, the staff of the new snack bar were all from Chattogram district, as was the owner of the Noorani Overseas agency. The staff was well aware that their boss brought to Oman girls from Khulna, Tangail, Barisal or Rangpur. They would never send their women abroad. Once more, the scenario draws a specific geographical map. That migrants from new areas are easily cheated by migrants originating from old areas of migration is nothing new, but here the exploitation takes a gender configuration as well.

When I met Karima, she was sharing a room with another Bangladeshi woman who was cheated by the same individuals. They had helped each other in their misfortune. Karima worked for three

Indian families and was trying to get a fourth one to make ends meet. She was worried as many Indians were leaving Oman.



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Work in Freedom

Work in Freedom is an integrated development cooperation programme aiming to reduce vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour of women migrating to garment and domestic work. The programme works along migration pathways in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon and some of Gulf countries. Interventions focus on promoting mobility by choice, fair recruitment to decent jobs, and safety and dignity for migrant workers.

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