

## **RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF YOUNG BANGLADESHI MIGRANT MEN IN MALAYSIA AND SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **Abstract**

*Bangladeshi youths' decision of risk-taking in migration is shaped by their perceptions of better life opportunities. They resort to different strategies to manage the risks involved in the migration process, starting from the journey to finding a job and to sustaining them in the destination countries. These include networks of relationships, access to information, migrants' perceived control and agency in their migration journey and importantly, faith on the mercy of Allah. This paper is based on interviews with six young Bangladeshi migrant men in Malaysia and South Africa and is situated within the wider literature on risk-taking. Deploying a constructionist approach, it argues that young Bangladeshi migrants' risk management strategies are influenced by their perceptions of risk and risk-taking in migration which are subjective, culturally informed and often embedded in context-specific practices and interests.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bangladesh is primarily a country of origin for labour migration. The youth comprising 30% of the total population in the country consists a significant proportion of the migrant population.<sup>1</sup> Bangladeshi youth's decision of risk taking in migration primarily through illegal channels is constructed by their perceptions of better life opportunities along with specific individual experience and risk information received from different networks. They are neither irrational nor fatalist. Instead, they resort to different strategies to manage the risks involved in the migration process, starting from the journey to finding a job and to sustaining them in a new context of the destination countries. There is a diverse collection of scholarly works carried out on Bangladeshi migrants and diaspora abroad.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the literature on young Bangladeshi migrants'

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<sup>1</sup> S. R. Rashid and J. U. Sikder, *Choosing a Life: Remittances and Youth Aspirations in Bangladeshi Villages*, Migrating Out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium, Working Paper 40, Brighton: University of Sussex, 2016, available at: <<http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/files/file.php?name=wp40-rashid-and-sikder-2016-choosing-a-life-remittances-and-youth-aspirations.pdf&site=354>> (accessed on 21 April 2018).

<sup>2</sup> K. Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; C. R. Abrar (ed.), *On the Margin: Refugees*,

perception of risk taking in unauthorised migration and their risk management strategies remain quite uneven, particularly in the context of new and often less discussed destinations like South Africa. While data on labour migration from Bangladesh is so far focused on countries in the Gulf, Southeast Asia, North America, Europe, and Australia,<sup>3</sup> there is a dearth of hard data on the total number of Bangladeshi migrants currently residing and working in South Africa. The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)<sup>4</sup> in its recent statistics on country-wise overseas employment of Bangladeshi identified 20 destination countries, and South Africa is not included in that list. BMET's reluctance to acknowledge South Africa as a destination country has been attributed to the fact that Bangladeshis working there did not take immigration clearance from it.<sup>5</sup> However, empirical data collected in conversation with young

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*Migrants and Minorities*, Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit, 2000; T. Siddiqui, *Transcending Boundaries: Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press, 2001; K. Gardner, "Lives in Motion: The Life-course, Movement and Migration in Bangladesh," *Journal of South Asian Development*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2009, pp. 229–251; K. Gardner and K. Mand, "My Away is Here": Place, Emplacement and Mobility amongst British Bengali Children," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 6, 2012, pp. 969-986; N. Rao, "Migration, Mobility and Changing Power Relations: Aspirations and Praxis of Bangladeshi Migrants," *Gender, Peace and Culture*, Vol. 21, No. 7, 2014, pp. 872-887; G. Baey and B. S. A. Yeoh, *Migration and Precarious Work: Negotiating Debt, Employment, and Livelihood Strategies Amongst Bangladeshi Migrant Men Working in Singapore's Construction Industry*, Migrating Out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium, Working Paper 26, Brighton: University of Sussex, 2015, available at: <<http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/files/file.php?name=wp26-baey-yeoh-2015-migration-and-precarious-work.pdf&site=354>> (accessed on 21 April 2018); S. R. Rashid, *Uncertain Tomorrows: Livelihoods, Capital and Risk in Labour Migration from Bangladesh*, Dhaka: UPL, 2016; S. R. Rashid and J. U. Sikder, *Choosing a Life: Remittances and Youth Aspirations in Bangladeshi Villages*, Migrating Out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium, Working Paper 40, Brighton: University of Sussex, 2016, available at: <<http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/files/file.php?name=wp40-rashid-and-sikder-2016-choosing-a-life-remittances-and-youth-aspirations.pdf&site=354>> (accessed on 21 April 2018).

<sup>3</sup> T. Siddiqui, *Transcending Boundaries: Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press, 2001; S. R. Rashid, *Uncertain Tomorrows: Livelihoods, Capital and Risk in Labour Migration from Bangladesh*, Dhaka: UPL, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> BMET is an executive body responsible for facilitating labour migration from Bangladesh. It operates under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment of the Government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are listed as the top five countries for overseas employment for Bangladeshis in 2017. available at: <[http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/view Stat Report. action? report number=16](http://www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/view%20Stat%20Report.action?report%20number=16)> (accessed on 21 April 2018).

<sup>5</sup> There is hardly any reliable data or academic writing in this matter. This information has been retrieved from a newspaper report, M. O. U. Bhuyan, "Bangladeshis in South Africa: Scores killed by miscreants," *New Age*, Dhaka, 24 November 2015, available at:

Bangladeshi migrants in South Africa for writing this paper rather suggests somewhat contradictory findings. As they informed, South Africa has been a destination for Bangladeshis for some time, but it is not a common destination for all age group of migrants. Given the long and often dangerous migration route to South Africa that needs four (4) to sixteen (16) days *en route*, it is mainly young Bangladeshi men who migrate to South Africa.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of young Bangladeshi male migrants' risk management strategies in two seemingly different destinations, Malaysia and South Africa. It also examines young Bangladeshi migrants' perception of risk-taking related to migration and to what extent the risk-perception influences their risk management strategies.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper deploys a constructionist framework that considers risks to be subjective, embedded in social context<sup>6</sup> and 'culturally informed'.<sup>7</sup> Building on my prior work on risk management strategies of young Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia and South Africa, it argues that individual migrants' responses to risk need to be analysed 'against the background of their embeddedness in a socio-cultural background and identity as a member of a social group'.<sup>8</sup> Researchers explain how context-specific socio-cultural determinants like religion or the established culture of migration govern individuals' decision to migrate, the way they view risks associated to it and importantly, how they engage in managing these risks.<sup>9</sup> In this line, a recent study on brokering international migration shows how despite the demonisation of brokers in the existing moral discourse, migrants tend to view the risk and exploitation by brokers against

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<<http://archive.newagebd.net/178295/bangladeshis-in-south-africa-scores-killed-by-miscreants/>> (accessed on 22 August 2017).

<sup>6</sup> M. Douglas and A. Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982; J. R. Masuda and T. Garvin, "Place, Culture, and the Social Amplification of Risk," *Risk Analysis*, Vol. 26, 2006, pp. 437-454.

<sup>7</sup> M.A. Williams and V. Balaz, *Migration, Risk and Uncertainty*, Routledge Studies in Human Geography: Taylor and Francis Ltd., 2014, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> P. Taylor-Gooby and J. O. Zinn, *Changing Directions in Risk Research: Reinvigorating the Social*, SCARR Working Paper 2005/8, Canterbury: University of Kent, 2005, p. 37; L. Momen, *Risk Management Strategies of Young Bangladeshi Male Migrants in Malaysia and South Africa* (Unpublished Master's Dissertation), Brighton, UK: University of Sussex, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Cohen, *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004; M. Barrette, *Paths to Adulthood: Freedom, Belonging, and Temporalities in Mbunda Biographies from Western Zambia*, Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 2004; H. M. Carretero and J. Carling, "Beyond 'Kamikaze Migrants': Risk Taking in West African Boat Migration to Europe," *Human Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 4, 2012, pp. 407-416.