Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective

Rudnick, A.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Migration is a courageous expression of an individual’s will to overcome adversity and live a better life
Kofi Annan

Migration is not a new phenomenon; people have been on the move throughout history. However, both the magnitude and, more importantly, the complexity of migration have increased substantially in recent decades. In 2005, there were an estimated 191 million migrants worldwide. In other words, 3% of the world population had left their home countries for a year or more. Although it is often believed that most international migration consists of South to North flows, South to South migration is about as voluminous. In 2005, 62 million migrants from developing countries moved to more developed countries, while almost as many (61 million) moved from one developing country to another (Martin & Zürcher 2008:3). Asia, including the Middle East is the region in which most South to South migration takes place. Of all international migrants, 28% live in Asia, as compared to 34% in Europe and 23% in North America (UN 2007). Worldwide, nearly half of all migrants are women.

Migration and the intensification of global processes (globalization) are closely interlinked (Castles 2000; Skeldon 2000; Stalker 2002; Wickramasekera 2002:9). Globalization can be defined as the process of the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness – a process that is facilitated by modern information and communication technology (Castles 2000). At the heart of these intensified global contacts is a rapid increase in cross-border flows of all sorts: finance, trade, ideas, culture, media products, pollution and people (Castles, 2000:271). Global restructuring and foreign direct investment flows have not provided the employment needs of all economically developing countries within Asia. While some countries – for example, the Asian ‘Tigers’ – benefited economically and, over the past decades, increasingly faced labour shortages, other countries like Bangladesh, the Philippines and Indonesia gained less and witnessed large levels of unemployment. The increased economic disparities between countries, which have been further intensified by demographic factors, are at the core of the continuously large migration streams within Asia (Stalker 2000; Phizacklea 2003).

While the free flow of capital, goods and services is widely promoted by those who hold economic and political power, the flow of labour, and of people in general, is severely restricted. Immigration and cultural differences are seen as potential threats to national sovereignty and identity. However, countries tend to have a so-

2. It should be noted that figures are partly based on estimates, as many migrants are undocumented and hence not registered.
mewhat ambiguous position regarding migration: although they want to reduce the influx of migrants, many also want the cheap labour provided by migrants. Moreover, in an increasingly international economy, in which flows of people are inextricably linked to the movements of information, commodities and capital, it is difficult to open borders to the latter movements and close them to people. Consequently, a large percentage of migrants have entered host countries undocumented.

The trade in people has become a very lucrative business. As some argue, labour has become a commodity (Linard 1998:3; Wickramasekera 2002; Abella 2006). International labour migration has been expanding in Southeast Asia since the early 1980s, and now involves almost all countries in the region. Wealthier Southeast Asian economies, particularly Singapore and Malaysia, rely heavily on the labour of foreigners to sustain their economic growth. In these countries, migrants account for as much as 20-30% of the labour force (Jureidini 2003; Ford 2007). Some 6-7 million Asian contract workers reside outside their own countries. While numbers are up in the air, it is estimated that for every documented migrant worker in Southeast Asia, there is at least one undocumented migrant3 (Castles 2000:297; Skeldon 2000:378; Wickramasekera 2002:21; Abella 2006).

Although the scope of labour migration and the relevant immigration policies may differ from country to country, such migration within Asia is characterized by several salient commonalities: documented labour is virtually always temporary and strictly regulated, most of it is South to South migration and there is a feminization of migration.4 This study focuses on the migration experiences of Bangladeshi women and men who temporarily moved to Malaysia to work in labour-intensive factories. Below, I briefly discuss the relevance of this study in relation to the three aforementioned commonalities.

1.1 Temporary labour migration

Over the past decades, temporary labour migration schemes have been very popular in Asia and the Middle East. Such schemes are considered to allow more flexibility in the labour market than more permanent forms of migration. Migrant receiving countries operate temporary migration schemes in order to prevent permanent settlement. Temporary migrant workers often serve as ‘shock absorbers’: they are concentrated in those sectors that are subject to much greater volatility than the rest of

---

3. In popular language, undocumented migration is often referred to as ‘illegal’ migration. However, this term often wrongly criminalizes the migrant worker, and also implies that the migrant is to take the sole blame for his status. As studies have variously found, migrants are often deceived by traffickers and recruitment agents, without being aware of it (Wickramasekera 2002:2).

4. Another common feature is that the demand for foreign workers is often higher than the official supply. Closely related are the increasing number of undocumented workers and the burgeoning migration industry (Wickramasekera 2002:14).
the economy and can be easily laid off. They are generally employed in low-skill services, agriculture and labour-intensive manufacturing (Abella 2006:2-14).

Temporary migrant schemes, which until recently were out of vogue in Australia and the North, are again becoming popular as a means to manage labour immigration. However, these schemes have also become a source of great concern (Ruhs & Martin 2006:2). Temporary migration programmes restrict the rights of migrant workers. In many receiving countries, conditions are attached to temporary admission that effectively preclude the enjoyment of some basic labour rights and entitlements. The unequal treatment of temporary migrant workers compared to local workers has taken severe forms in countries where the organization of migration is left to job brokers and labour contractors, and where labour institutions such as trade unions are weak or prohibited (Abella 2006:2-18). There is often little incentive to protect the rights of migrant workers. As Ruhs and Martin (2006:4) pointedly put it: ‘more rights for migrants typically mean higher costs.’

1.2 South to South migration

In migration discussions, the focus is generally on South to North migration. This is reflected in the migration literature. Studies generally concentrate on permanent migration and issues related to border control and integration into the host country. There is a fundamental difference between the permanent or settlement migration that is prominent in Europe and North America, and the temporary or circular migration as currently witnessed in Asian and Middle Eastern countries, where migrant workers cannot obtain citizenship (OECD 2001; Abella 2006:5; Piper 2006:152). These differences are generally not acknowledged in theoretical discourses on migration. By taking permanent migration as the prevailing assumption, scientists largely ignore the reality of other types of migration (Piper 2006:150; Hugo 2006:211). This study fills this gap in our understanding by focusing on temporary migration processes, which are equally or sometimes even more important in terms of volume and contributions to countries of origin.

1.3 The feminization of migration

Until the late 1970s, it was widely believed that women’s participation in international migration was negligible.5 Those women who did migrate were generally assumed to be following their husbands. Nowadays it is common knowledge that female migrants often outnumber male migrants and that women frequently migrate in their own right. In North America and Europe, migrant women outnumber migrant men.

5. Estimates on migration classified by sex were first compiled and released by the United Nations Population Division in 1998. The figures reveal that in 1960, female migrants accounted for 48% of all migrants.
As for Asia, over the past few decades the number of Asian female migrants migrating on their own – that is, without husbands or families – has increased dramatically. In East and Southeast Asia, the number of female migrants is estimated to have surpassed the number of male migrants, albeit only marginally (Zlotnik 2003:3; ILO 2006).

Due to migration policies and gendered notions on labour, women are usually recruited for gender-specific jobs (such as domestic work), service-related professions and the entertainment industry (ILO 2006:1; Saptari 2006). The majority of female migrant workers in Asia are employed as domestic workers in the Middle East, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Singapore (Asis 2003). The situation of female domestic workers has been well documented (Lycklama 1995; Constable 1997; Tacoli 1999; Gamburd 2000; Parreñas 2001; Asis 2003; Constable 2003; Resurreccion 2004; Saptari 2006).

Large numbers of Asian women migrate undocumented. While some are aware of their status, others are told that their documents are legal. Many women and children end up in the entertainment sector or the sex industry. Abuse is very common and legal support is scarce (IOM, 2000). Factors that contribute to the situation are the large demand for overseas jobs, a lack of policy enforcement, gender discriminatory policies and the burgeoning recruitment industry.

Over the past decades, a growing number of migrant women (and men) were employed in the industrial export-producing sector in migrant receiving countries. Although this sector initially attracted young local women from rural areas, job opportunities in other sectors led to labour shortages in labour-intensive manufacturing. So far, however, little research has been conducted among international migrants in the industrial sector (Asis 2001:33).

Although women are a numerical majority in many cross-border flows, in general research on international migration has overwhelmingly and disproportionately focused on men (Massey et al. 2006:64). This study addresses this issue by focusing primarily on Bangladeshi women working in other Asian countries, specifically taking Malaysia as a case in point. The issue is not only about men and women as such. In any society, the expectations and roles that are collectively assigned to men and women differ, as is reflected in institutions, policies and opportunities. It is thus not surprising that migration can impact men and women differently, as shown by studies that have integrated gender into their analyses (Mahler & Pessar 2006:29; Curran et al. 2006:202; Massey et al. 2006). However, very few studies have looked systematically into gender and the possible differences in the migration experiences of men and women.

While an increasing number of migration scholars now insist that migration is a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools (Donato et al. 2006:4), the majority of immigration studies are still conducted as though gender relations are largely irrelevant to the way the world is organized (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1999:566; Mahler & Pessar 2006:28). Therefore, this study integrates gender relations into the conceptual and analytical framework.
1.4 Focus of the study

This study focuses on Malaysia because it has one of the largest immigrant populations in Asia. Malaysia’s impressive economic development (it had average growth rates of 8% in the decade prior to the economic crisis) is largely based on export manufacturing. In the 1970s and 1980s, the industrial sector thrived on the massive influx of rural Malay women into the export-processing zones. Working conditions were bad and wages were low (Ong 1987; Daud 1985; Ng 2003). With the rapid economic development in the early 1990s, and more lucrative employment opportunities elsewhere, the industrial sector experienced labour shortages. Employers looked for new sources of cheap labour. Hiring international migrants was one important means to overcome the challenge of labour shortages and increasingly stiff international competition. Since 1990, about a third of all workers employed in the industrial sector have been temporary migrant workers from abroad (Rudnick 1996: The Star 17-03-2006). During the 1990s, Bangladeshi workers were the second largest migrant group in Malaysia.

Bangladesh is one of the largest labour sending countries in Asia: because the country is one of the poorest in the region and has high rates of unemployment, many people seek employment elsewhere. Remittances from Bangladeshi migrants are estimated to account for about 30% of the country’s foreign revenues (Siddiqui 2003). Until recently, Malaysia was the second largest emigration destination after the Middle East.

While a disproportionately small number of Bangladeshi women manage to migrate documented, many do so – or attempt to do so – undocumented (Siddiqui 2003). Typical of these women is the general societal taboo on female migration. In many societies, female migration is considered at odds with prevalent gender norms. Their migration contests the social construction of what is considered to be appropriate gender behaviour for women (Espin 1999; Beesey 2001; Blanchet 2002; Pessar & Mahler 2006; Sinke 2006:91).

This study focuses on why Bangladeshi women migrated and how their experiences impacted their lives during their migration and after their return. The fieldwork was carried out in both Malaysia and Bangladesh, and covered the pre-migration phase, the migration phase and the post-migration phase. In order to better understand the gender dynamics involved, the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant men are incorporated whenever possible.

Many of the issues that feature in the area of gender and migration are closely related to globalization issues. Globalization encompasses not only ‘big systems’, like the world financial order or migration systems; it is not only ‘out there’, but also ‘in here’ (Gardner 1994:12). Individuals are engaged in a complex of activities that are both embedded in and transform practices of globalization. Hence, migration is both a cause and a consequence of that process. To understand either the ‘global’ (international migration systems) or the ‘local’ (the impact of migration on individuals, families and communities), one must view each in the context of the other (Gambugd 2000; Resurreccion 2004:16). In other words, apart from understanding the underlying systems and structures, it is instructive to look into migrants’ personal
experiences. By including their experiences, this study complements more quantitative studies, which generally provide less in-depth information on why people migrate and how migration impacts their lives.

1.5 Outline of the book

In Chapter 2, the main question of the study is formulated and theoretical considerations are discussed, culminating in the conceptual and analytical framework of the study. Chapter 3 focuses on the structural context, namely the economic, political and sociocultural context, with specific reference to migration of the migrant sending country (Bangladesh) and the migrant receiving country (Malaysia). In Chapter 4, methodological issues and decisions are explored and the positions of the respondents, the researcher and the research assistants in relation to one another are discussed. Chapter 5 looks into the reasons why the Bangladeshi migrant women and men migrated. Chapter 6 explores the ways in which consent to migrate was obtained, and how the desire to migrate was materialized. The focus of Chapter 7 is on the working conditions and wages of the Bangladeshi migrant workers. Chapter 8 looks at social relations and Bangladeshi migrant workers’ dual embeddedness in Malaysia. Chapter 9 explores the post-migration stage, namely the consequences of migration and migrant women’s lives after their return. The findings of the study are synthesized in Chapter 10.