Working gendered boundaries: temporary migration experiences of Bangladeshi women in the Malaysian export industry from a multi-sited perspective
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CHAPTER 3: THE SENDING AND THE RECEIVING COUNTRY: BANGLADESH AND MALAYSIA

This chapter focuses on the socio-economic context of Bangladesh and Malaysia and on the structural aspects that have stirred migration flows between the two countries.

Map 3.1: South-South East Asia

![Map of South-South East Asia showing Bangladesh and Malaysia](Source: Esri-data 2006)

3.1 Bangladesh: Economic and demographic context

With a population of 142 million and a population density of 1042 people per square kilometre, Bangladesh has one of the highest population densities in the world. It is the world’s third largest Islamic country (Siddiqui 2003:2; World Bank 2006a). When British rule in South Asia ended in 1947, West Bengal and Pakistan became a single Muslim state, even though they were geographically separated by India and were thousands of miles apart. A short but bloody liberation war brought an end to this arrangement, and in 1971 Bangladesh became an independent state. The new state struggled with the political and economic effects of the war. The Pakistan army had killed hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis (and perhaps millions; the figures...
are unreliable), including many intellectuals and potential leaders. The economy was disrupted and political independence was accompanied by growing authoritarianism. Starting in the 1970s, Bangladesh had been gradually transformed into a more monetized economy based on formal labour relations (Kabeer 2000:59). Prices rose as a result of the international oil crisis; several natural disasters and large-scale crop failures added to the malaise, which culminated in the 1974-75 famine. Poverty and landlessness increased rapidly, inducing migration to urban areas, particularly to Dhaka.

Map 3.2: Bangladesh

Source: Esri-data 2006

1. Just three years after independence, the civilian regime that had led the war of independence turned the country’s multiparty parliamentary democracy into a one-party presidential system. In 1975 the military took control of the state. After a popular uprising, democracy was re-established in 1991. Since then, the political power has changed three times between the two leading parties – the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (Siddiqui 2003:2). Struggles over political power between these parties are not uncommonly disruptive, as they regularly culminate in general strikes (hartals) that completely paralyse public life for a day or longer and form a major obstacle to public order and peace as well as economic progress.
In the late 1970s, two thirds of the population lived below the poverty line, and according to the latest estimates, 50% still live below the poverty line (World Bank 2006a). Bangladesh has high rates of malnutrition and maternal mortality, and is one of the world’s poorest countries. Economic hardship is generally highest among women in terms of good health and nutrition, and education and income (Siddiqui 2003;2; UNDP 2003). The average life expectancy at birth is 63 years, with men living several months longer than women. In 2002, the adult literacy rate was 31% for women and 49% for men (World Bank 2006a). The literacy rate among those aged between 15 and 24 rose from 42% in 1990 to 49% in 2001, and school enrolment for boys and girls is now virtually equal at both the primary and the secondary level. In 2006, GDP per capita was USD 2121 (IMF 2006). GDP rates have risen since the mid 1980s, largely as a result of the expanding industrial sector and a major contribution from the garment industry (see table 3.1). Between 1995 and 2005, GDP increased each year by an average of 5.3% (World Bank 2006a).

Table 3.1: Structure of the Bangladeshi economy (% of GDP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Bank 2006a: ‘Bangladesh at a glance’

The garment industry in Bangladesh occupies a prominent position within the country’s industrial structure. In 1982, World Bank stipulations and incentives led the government to introduce its New Industrial Policy. Within a few years, the garment sector was employing 250,000 people; by 2001 this figure had quadrupled. The majority of garment workers are women. It is the largest manufacturing sector and provides jobs for some 50% of the total industrial workforce. The sector contributes 9.5% to the country’s GDP and accounts for almost 77% of total exports, making it the country’s leading foreign exchange earner (World Bank 2003c; World Bank 2006a). The dependence on this sector, however, makes the country vulnerable to fluctuations in the international economic arena. This dependence became particularly clear in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the USA: more than 300,000 garment workers – approximately a third of the total number employed in the sector – lost their jobs in the few months following the attacks (BBC 7-11-2001).

Although the industrial and service sectors in Bangladesh are expanding, it is estimated that two thirds of the labour force is still directly or indirectly engaged in agriculture. Scarcity of land, unemployment and underemployment are major problems. About one third of the total working age population of Bangladesh is believed to be either unemployed or underemployed; educated people make up a disproportionately large percentage of the unemployed (Mahmood 1996; Siddiqui 2003:2). An estimated 5% of the labour force is employed outside the country. While it has been argued that migration cannot possibly have a significant impact
on the national level of labour statistics – given an 80-million strong labour force compared to several hundred thousand migrating each year (Skeldon 2003) – others argue that migration and the continuous inflow of remittances play a major role in keeping the unemployment rate stable (Afşar et al. 2000; IOM 2002). Many Bangladeshis migrate, but many more are trying to do so in order to escape unemployment (cf. de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005).

Migrants’ remittances are a major source of revenues to the country. While the garment industry is officially the highest foreign exchange earner in Bangladesh, Siddiqui (2003:3) argues that if these figures were adjusted for the import of raw material, the net earnings of migrant workers’ remittances would be higher than that of the garment industry. Remittances make up 30% of all foreign exchange earnings and contribute greatly to balancing the trade bill by covering approximately two thirds of the trade deficit. Since the mid 1990s, the total amount of remittances has been larger than the total amount of foreign aid received (Afşar et al. 2000:31; Murshid et al. 2000:11).

Between 2000 and 2002, about USD 2 billion was remitted annually via official channels; in 2003, this figure rose to USD 3 billion. Apart from these formal remittances, at least an equally large sum is sent via unofficial sources (Siddiqui 2003; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Although unofficial remittances do not contribute to a country’s foreign exchange earnings, they are nevertheless of great economic importance to the receiving families and fuel the country’s economy.

3.2 Migration: scope and direction of flows

As in most countries, the rural to urban migration flow in Bangladesh is larger than the international migration outflow. Internal migration and international migration are often interrelated, as many people who migrate internationally have already moved within the country (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:10). International migration is very topical in many villages or neighbourhoods in Bangladesh. Poverty is widespread, land has increasingly ended up in the hands of fewer people and unemployment figures are high. Together with the success stories of those who have returned from working abroad, many people dream of going to bidesh. As Gardner (1993:1) expressively put it:

Peoples’ desires centre on the distant localities of foreign countries, and foreign power (...) those who have never left the homeland long for the self-imposed exile of the diaspora, for despite the pulls of the homeland, it is only overseas that economic power and the means to material transformation are supposed to exist.

The dream of going to bidesh reflects people’s insecurity of life in Bangladesh and the continual economic struggle that many face. Although not everyone succeeds abroad, many households risk their livelihood by selling land or indebting themselves by attempting to send a household member abroad. In many villages, a large percentage of the male population has migrated.
Over the past decade, documented emigration grew by about 10% annually. Each year in the period 1991-2002, an average of 226,000 Bangladeshis left the country for employment elsewhere. Over the past 30 years, more than 3.8 million Bangladeshis officially left for overseas employment opportunities. Some migrants may have been counted more than once, as some are likely to have obtained subsequent short-term labour contracts. Likewise, large numbers of migrants are believed to have left undocumented and are hence unaccounted for. In general, reliable data on emigration from Bangladesh is hard to find (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:8).

The region’s colonial past has influenced its migration flows. Many Bangladeshis migrated to the UK, and later to the USA; these flows came to an abrupt halt following the 1973 oil crisis (Ahmed 2000; Siddiqui 2003). In combination with increasingly stringent migration regulations worldwide, migration flows from Bangladesh have changed drastically since the early 1970s. Contemporary emigration is characterized by two distinct migration flows: a small flow to industrialized countries and a large flow to the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Although many potential migrants envision migrating to industrialized countries in the West, emigration from Bangladesh to these countries is largely limited to students, professionals and those who immigrate to be reunited with their families. There are no official data on the number of documented or undocumented Bangladeshi migrants living in industrialized countries. According to an educated guess by government officials and migration experts, there are close to 1.2 million Bangladeshis living in industrialized countries (Siddiqui 2003). It is estimated that half a million Bangladeshis live in the UK and another half million in the USA. About 70,000 live in Italy. Other countries mentioned are Canada, Japan, Australia and Greece, each of which hosts more than 10,000 migrants (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:18).

The overwhelming majority of migrants who leave Bangladesh move to either the Middle East or Southeast Asia (see table 3.2). These flows consist almost exclusively of short-term labour migrants. Although some migrants are recruited for skilled jobs (technicians, masons, etc.), the majority of Bangladeshi contract workers work in semi-skilled or unskilled professions in the construction, manufacturing or service sectors (Siddiqui 2003:16).

The demand for work visas for Middle Eastern destinations remains high, even though wages have decreased over the years. The high demand has had a negative effect on the fees demanded by recruiters and on the wages paid overseas (Goss and Lindquist, 2000; INSTRAW/OM 2000:18; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Many of those who had to return after their contracts expired, try to migrate again. Although not all succeed, many engage in long-distance circular migration.

Apart from those who migrated documented, many left the country undocument- ed. Many reports and studies on international migration from Bangladesh leave undocumented migration relatively untouched. Although researching the latter is less straightforward, thorough studies are sorely needed. The major destination of undocumented migration from Bangladesh is neighbouring India. Although there
### Table 3.2: Migration by country of employment (1976-2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia</th>
<th>Kuwait</th>
<th>UAE</th>
<th>Qatar</th>
<th>Iraq</th>
<th>Libya</th>
<th>Bah-rain</th>
<th>Oman</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Korea</th>
<th>Singa-pore</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976-1989</td>
<td>254,215</td>
<td>84,961</td>
<td>105,986</td>
<td>57,765</td>
<td>63,643</td>
<td>311,322</td>
<td>28,062</td>
<td>833,723</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3851</td>
<td>9345</td>
<td>723,886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>557,486</td>
<td>5957</td>
<td>8307</td>
<td>7672</td>
<td>2700</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>4563</td>
<td>13,980</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>103,814</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>75,656</td>
<td>28,547</td>
<td>8583</td>
<td>3772</td>
<td>1124</td>
<td>3480</td>
<td>23,087</td>
<td>1628</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>147,131</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>93,132</td>
<td>34,377</td>
<td>12,975</td>
<td>3251</td>
<td>1617</td>
<td>5804</td>
<td>25,825</td>
<td>10,537</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>188,124</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>106,387</td>
<td>26,407</td>
<td>15,810</td>
<td>2441</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>5396</td>
<td>15,866</td>
<td>67,938</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1739</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>244,508</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>911,385</td>
<td>14,912</td>
<td>15,051</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>4233</td>
<td>6470</td>
<td>47,826</td>
<td>1558</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>186,326</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>84,009</td>
<td>17,492</td>
<td>14,686</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>3004</td>
<td>20,949</td>
<td>35,174</td>
<td>3315</td>
<td>3762</td>
<td>3975</td>
<td>187,543</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>72,734</td>
<td>21,042</td>
<td>23,812</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>3759</td>
<td>8691</td>
<td>66,631</td>
<td>2759</td>
<td>5304</td>
<td>4904</td>
<td>211,714</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>106,534</td>
<td>21,126</td>
<td>54,719</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>5010</td>
<td>5985</td>
<td>27,401</td>
<td>2762</td>
<td>381,077</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>158,715</td>
<td>25,444</td>
<td>38,796</td>
<td>6806</td>
<td>1254</td>
<td>7014</td>
<td>4779</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>21,728</td>
<td>2602</td>
<td>267,667</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>26,286</td>
<td>3324</td>
<td>3912</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>268,182</td>
<td>268,182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>144,618</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>34,034</td>
<td>1433</td>
<td>1010</td>
<td>4637</td>
<td>5258</td>
<td>17,237</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>11,095</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>222,686</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>137,248</td>
<td>5341</td>
<td>16,252</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>4371</td>
<td>4561</td>
<td>4921</td>
<td>1561</td>
<td>9615</td>
<td>4422</td>
<td>188,965</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>163,258</td>
<td>8272</td>
<td>25,459</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1574</td>
<td>5421</td>
<td>3854</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6856</td>
<td>1127</td>
<td>216,025</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,731,116</td>
<td>316,899</td>
<td>406,845</td>
<td>91,745</td>
<td>66,343</td>
<td>49,236</td>
<td>89,393</td>
<td>227,073</td>
<td>257,739</td>
<td>13,179</td>
<td>103,069</td>
<td>3,387,648</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: In Siddiqui 2003:15, prepared from Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training data)

* A disproportionately large number due to a legislation scheme of undocumented Bangladeshis in Malaysia
are no official statistics, it is estimated that about 15 million Bangladeshis currently reside in India (van Schendel & Abraham, 2005). Undocumented migration from Bangladesh to other destinations is also believed to be significant, and has increased over the past decades. Several factors underlie this trend: an ever-increasing demand for overseas jobs due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities in Bangladesh; a decrease in the number of overseas work permits; restrictions on female migration; and the lack of control and regulation of unofficial and deceitful recruiters (Siddiqui 2003).

Many migrants who rely on recruiters – many of whom are dubious characters – are unaware of their actual status. The large majority of migrants are men. Before looking at female migration, it is instructive to first focus on women, gender and work in Bangladesh.

3.3 Women, marriage and work in Bangladesh

Although an increasing number of women in Bangladesh are taking paid jobs outside their homes, it is not yet the norm. Women’s roles and appropriate behaviour are closely linked with prevalent gender norms that a woman should remain within the domestic realm (Amin 1997:33).

The concept of purdah – a set of norms and rules that prescribe the standards for female behaviour – is central to the definition of femininity in Bangladesh. Purdah literally means ‘veil’ or ‘curtain’ and refers to the practice of women’s seclusion. Purdah is often associated with Islam, but it seems to derive from organizing principles that existed in Bangladesh and India before the arrival of Islam (Rozario 1998:259). In the strictest sense, it refers to keeping women confined to the home and allowing them to leave the home compound only if they are completely covered, that is, wearing a burqua. Purdah thus has a clear spatial dimension: the movement of women is spatially controlled, as purdah demarcates women’s domestic and hidden domain or place from men’s public and visible domain. Purdah also entails codes of behaviour that are intended to enforce women’s modesty and purity, as well as restrictions on interactions with men from outside the immediate kin group. Since purdah restricts women’s behaviour and movement, it profoundly affects their access to paid employment outside the home and hampers their economic independence (Rozario 1992:88; Gardner 1994:5; Kabeer 2000:35; Amin 1997).3

As in many other countries in Asia and other parts of the world, Bangladeshi women derive prestige from being married and having children. An unmarried adult

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2. This issue has increasingly been politicized in India and has put a (further) strain on India-Bangladeshi relations; the former demanding that Bangladesh takes back its citizens. Subsequent Bangladeshi governments have consistently denied the presence of any illegal immigrants in India.

3. Certain class differences can however be discerned. For educated middle- or upper-class women it is often socially accepted and not uncommon to hold jobs outside the home – although families often expect women to stop work after marriage.
woman is regarded as sexually dangerous and a potential source of shame to her family. Remaining unmarried is not a desirable option for most women, as it generally implies economic uncertainty, low prestige and vulnerability to various forms of abuse (Kabeer 2000:187).

Among Muslims in Bangladesh and elsewhere, it is traditional for the groom’s family to pay the bride’s family a bride price at the time of marriage. Since the 1970s, however, a radical shift has taken place in the organization of the institution of marriage in Bangladesh: instead of paying a bride price to the bride’s relatives, the practice of demanding dowry (money and goods) from her parents has become increasingly common. This shift has far-reaching consequences for gender relations, as it has led to an ‘economic devaluation’ of women (as wives) and negatively affected their social position (Kabeer 2000:60). There are various explanations as to why this change took place. According to the elderly in many villages, the shift to the dowry system and the increase in dowry payments were due to a rather sudden surplus of eligible girls to be wedded. Although this explanation is rejected by many social scientists, according to Amin and Cain (1997) a marriage ‘squeeze’ was the main reason for the shift. While these authors did not take socio-economic aspects into account, such aspects may well have played a role.

It has been asserted by some that the shift from bride price to dowry was influenced by the confluence of local and global processes. Initially, only wealthy urban Muslims adopted the Hindu tradition of paying dowries to show off their wealth and to ensure that their daughters would have a good life after marriage. In the course of time, this custom was adopted by the lower classes. The dowry was also used as a vehicle for upward social mobility for daughters – marrying a daughter into a ‘better’ family or into a higher class or caste position (Gardner 1994; Rozario 1992; Kabeer 2000). During those years, Bangladesh had been progressively incorporated into the global cash economy, which had a significantly different impact on men than on women. Men increasingly took on waged employment, which resulted in a rise in the value of their labour as they started to earn cash. At the same time, women’s traditional economic roles, which are linked to processing agricultural yields, were increasingly eroded as a result of the growth of landlessness and the increasing importance of the cash economy. The cash economy held few structural job opportunities for women, as their traditional place continued to be within the home compound. While the ‘value’ of men increased, that of women eroded further (Kabeer 2000:60). In combination with the social ‘must’ of marriage for women and

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4. Amin and Cain (1997:304) argue that the initial excesses were large for two reasons; the relatively small size of birth cohorts of the 1940s, most likely owing to the Bengal famine of 1943, combined with a relatively large birth cohort of the following decade. While the overall sex ratios did not show an excess of girls, the sex ratios for age ranges appropriate for marriage show a considerable excess of marriageable girls, which is explained by declining mortality, which created younger cohorts that were larger that older cohorts, combined with the norm that men marry younger women. The time that the marriage squeeze occurred is consistent with the timing of the practice of dowry – about 20 years after mortality first began to decline. In the following decades the ratio became more even and the squeeze is easing.
the marriage squeeze, dowries were increasingly demanded at inflated rates. The trend towards ever larger dowry demands seemed to also reflect the increasing importance of global images of consumer cultures and the desire to accumulate material wealth (i.e. consumer goods), as also witnessed in (Hindu) India. As a result of these factors, dowry became an important cause of marital instability and violence. Women are increasingly abandoned or divorced by their husbands, who because of financial distress demand higher and additional dowry payments. For poor men and their families, dowries have become a source of income (Ahmed & Naher 1987; Kabeer 2000:60). Polygamy is reported to be on the increase, and although there are some restrictions, it is not forbidden by law (Afroz, 2007).

Sociocultural and economic practices are produced by the intersection of local and global processes (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999:4). In this context, global processes – which led to the monetization of the economy and increased consumerism – interlocked with traditional, local notions of femininity and masculinity, and resulted in a detrimental effect on the position of women as wives. Within less than a generation, the position of a woman became closely linked to her potential economic ‘gain’ for a prospective husband and his family; a daughter now had the potential to be a financial burden to her family (Rozario 1992: Kabeer 2000).

A consequence of the 1974-5 famine and the increasing economic hardship was that poor women, whether married or single, had little option but to transgress gender rules. In order to survive they increasingly took up employment. Although opportunities were limited, women started to work as day labourers and maids (Khan 1992; Rozario 1998:161; Kabeer 2000:60). In the 1980s, when the garment industry was established and proceeded to grow rapidly, women started to enter the public sphere of the labour market on a larger scale. The factories were located in and around Dhaka (the capital) and Chittagong, and many women from the surrounding rural areas migrated to these cities (Khundker 2001). By the turn of the century, more than one million women were working in this industry. This development mirrored a dramatic change that permeated public life as a whole. As Kabeer (2000: vii) observed:

[Nowadays] thousands of young women [are] moving briskly around on the streets of Dhaka. In a city, a country, where women had been conspicuous by their absence in the public domain this was not merely a new phenomenon but a remarkable one.

With the growing participation of women in urban public life, urban spatial organization changed, as did the gendered code of conduct. For many women the garment industry offered a way out of extreme poverty, the dowry-marriage deadlock and dependence – even if only temporarily.

Studies on women, work and gender have at times come to rather opposing conclusions concerning the alleged changes in the position of women and gender in Bangladesh (cf. Khan 1992; Feldman 1992; Zaman 1995; Amin 1997). These differences seem to be due to the different localities in which these studies were conducted (i.e. in and around Dhaka versus in the deep countryside). Gender norms fluc-
tuate geographically and are influenced by broader political and economic forces, which impact places differently (cf. Lawson 1998). Although micro-credit schemes and small-scale projects are found to have contributed in rural areas, job opportunities remained far fewer in the countryside, particularly in the areas furthest away from Dhaka.

Working conditions in the garment industry in Bangladesh are among the worst in the world, and the wages are among the lowest. Contracts, medical leave and health facilities are generally not provided. Overtime is often both compulsory and excessive; workdays of 12-14 hours are the rule rather than the exception. Trade unions are often prohibited. While the minimum wage itself is very low and households find it hard to live on, Afzar (2001) found that 40% of the women working in the garment industry were earning less than the minimum wage. Not surprisingly, many garment workers suffer from health problems and sleep deficiency (Paul-Majunder & Zohir 1995; Paul-Majunder, 2000; Kibria 2001). Women nevertheless continue to enter the sector in large numbers, as it provides opportunities that are otherwise absent.

The increasing presence of women in the public space led to widespread criticism. Garment workers in Bangladesh are highly stigmatized both in the media and within the wider public discourse. Their jobs are associated with low status and low levels of morality. Historically, this type of defamatory reaction is rather common worldwide. When women start to move out of their domestic gendered places to become employed outside the home, they are often perceived to be challenging existing power relations and the hegemonic gender discourse (Massey 1994). Women who take factory jobs are frequently perceived as having ‘low morals’. Parents are eager for their daughters to marry, in order to safeguard the family’s prestige. Within the Bangladeshi context, Rozario (1992:150) remarked that ‘Drastic changes in Bangladesh’s economy/structure have not been reflected in its ideology/superstructure’. Young brides should be ‘pure’ and have lived a secluded life, but also be educated and rich. According to Rozario (1992:150): ‘Bengalis want the fruits of modernity (radios, televisions, motorcycles, etc.) but are not willing to pay the price (increasing incorporation of women in the workforce threatening their purity).’

Ironically, it was precisely this dilemma that enhanced the establishment of an alternative gender discourse in which young women increasingly go to work. The need to earn a dowry often entails the legitimizing rationale and offers a way for unmarried women to obtain permission to pursue their working aspirations, whether these are born out of sheer need for household survival or are also aimed at increasing their room to manoeuvre, that is, their personal freedom to make their own decisions. In this context, Cornell’s (1995 in Mc Dowell 1999:18) differentiation between a ‘domineering gender regime’ and a set of oppositional gender regimes is instructive. The latter challenges the assumptions about gender and sexuality of the dominant discourse, which can lead to change. Even though women’s entry into the public domain remains contested, and women regularly experience the consequences of negative public opinion and of actions on the part of those factions of society that want to preserve the status quo, women are nonetheless going to work in increasing numbers. Kabeer’s (2000) study on the garment industry shows how, despite stig-
matization, female garment workers started to alter the image of working women by entering the industry on such a large scale. They hence paved the way for and inspired other women who previously might have hesitated to take these jobs due to status and class issues. Over the years, more women with less immediate economic needs also started to enter the industry, in order to gain more independence or to improve their economic situation. Many women still experience social stigmatization; both verbal and physical abuse are common. Nevertheless, women have renegotiated meanings of appropriate gender norms and continue to find options for employment.

It is in light of these developments – changes in the institution of marriage, the need for jobs, the development of the garment industry and the concomitant renegotiations / formulations concerning women’s ‘appropriate’ behaviour – that women’s increased interest in overseas migration should be understood. During a time in which more and more Bangladeshi men were migrating internationally and were seen or believed to come home with money, consumer goods and prestige, increasing numbers of women wanted to do the same. When recruiters started to look for women for overseas factories, not uncommonly at the request of their overseas business partners, women started to leave.5 For many, working in well-paid modern factories in foreign countries seemed an honourable and lucrative alternative to the poorly paid jobs in the garment industry in the major cities of Bangladesh.

3.4 Female migration

In many countries, data on migration are only minimally disaggregated by gender. Up until 1991, emigration figures were not gender-specific in Bangladesh. De Bruyn and Kuddus (2005:18) used data from the governmental Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training to calculate that between 1991 and 2003 only 17,784 women officially migrated. Accounting for less than 1% of all migrants from Bangladesh, official female migration from Bangladesh is low, especially when compared to other Asian sending countries, such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia where female migrants make up 60-80% of the total number of migrants leaving these countries. Not surprisingly, some scholars who focus on Asian female migration suggest that female migration from Bangladesh is ‘negligible’ or ‘not in their culture’ (Shah 1996, cited in Blanchet 2002). Oishi (2002:12; 2005) goes as far as to argue that since in Bangladesh it is mostly the men who do the daily grocery shopping, they are the ones who are in charge of expenditures. Women know little about the household finances and thus ‘are less motivated to take the financial responsibility by going abroad’. In my view, this postulation is not only somewhat presumptuous but also incorrect. Although not many Bangladeshi women have migrated offi-

5. The recruiters – middlemen who generally were from the villages or areas in which they operated – had usually contacted the guardians of daughters’ they considered eligible to migrate. This strategy had also been used when the garment industry in Bangladesh took off (cf. Kabeer 2000).
cially, significant numbers of women have migrated undocumented. A study by Blanchet, Razzaque & Biswas (2005) concluded that more than 437,000 Bangladeshi women are working abroad. In short, Bangladeshi women have not only migrated on a large scale within the country, but many have migrated internationally (cf. Rahim 1997; IOM 2000; INSTRAW 2000; Afsar et al. 2000; Blanchet 2002; Siddiqui 2003; de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005). Meanwhile, many more are trying to do likewise.

The main reasons for the low percentage of women in documented migration statistics are the intermittent restrictions on female migration imposed by the Bangladeshi government since the beginning of the 1980s. In 1981, following the advice of a religious leader, a complete ban on the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women was imposed in order to ‘protect women’s dignity’. In 1988 the ban was replaced by restrictions: the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women became dependent on receiving ‘special permission’. In the early to mid 1990s, a substantial number of women migrated as factory workers, domestic helpers or nurses. In 1997, a complete ban on individual unskilled and semi-skilled female migration was reimposed to protect women as a response to cases of abuse of domestic workers in the Middle East. It was argued that working as an industrial or a domestic worker, or even as a nurse, would expose women to harm and dishonour (INSTRAW/IOM 2000:30). Although the migration of professional and skilled women is now permitted, the ban is still in place for low-rank professions. Unskilled women are allowed to migrate only if they are accompanied by male guardians (Siddiqui 2003:7). However, it has been reported that the government has recently been exploring ways to relax or even lift these restrictions (de Bruyn & Kuddus 2005:16).

The imposition of these policies is closely related to the general societal taboo on women’s work. As with garment workers, women who migrate are frequently stigmatized as being immoral and loose. However, neither stigmatization nor restrictive policies has eliminated women’s need or desire to migrate; instead, they have made the female migrants ‘invisible’. Large numbers of women are trying to find the means, support and ways to migrate internationally and individually. Being dependent on ‘illegal’ circuits, they frequently end up in situations in which exploitation is prevalent. Sadly, and ironically, the very policies that were supposed to protect women have pushed them into the undocumented sphere, making them even more vulnerable to abuse (cf. IOM 2000; Blanchet 2002; Siddiqui 2003). Although many migrant women from Bangladesh want jobs in factories as opposed to domestic work, which is associated with greater vulnerability, the vast majority are employed as domestic workers.

6. It should be noted that also in those days not all female migrants who held official documents in the country of arrival had left Bangladesh ‘legally’. Obtaining a visa can be a cumbersome and time-consuming process. Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training criteria needed to be met: women migrant workers required permission from a guardian (husband, father, brother) and the employer had to guarantee their safety and social security. At times it was easier to circumvent bureaucracy (Rahim 1997:38; IOM/INSTRAW 2000:9; Siddiqui 2003:7).
3.5 The recruitment process: government policies, recruiters and procedures

Until quite recently, the Bangladeshi government was reluctant to actively acknowledge the tremendous contribution that migrants’ remittances make to the national economy. The country lacked a coherent migration policy. The allocation for the facilitation and regulation of migration was a modest 0.1% of the national revenue budget. Policy statements that encouraged labour migration in order to ease unemployment and earn foreign exchange were largely just that: statements (Malik & Abrar 2000:6; Rahim 1997; Achacoso 2000:52; Afsar et al. 2000; Murshid et al. 2000; Siddiqui 2003).

Between 1976 and 2002, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (which is part of the Ministry of Labour and Employment) was in charge of the facilitation of labour migration. Although the Emigration Ordinance was formulated in 1982, it mainly addressed procedural aspects; specific rules and regulations were not developed for another 20 years (INSTRAW/IOM 2000:29). In the meantime, the government engaged in several informal agreements with receiving countries. These agreements were generally on an ad hoc basis and dealt with the number of workers to be recruited and the handling of crises. Bilateral agreements were conspicuously absent, and the terms and conditions of work or welfare for migrants were not addressed. So far, the legal process has largely been ineffective in protecting the rights of migrant workers who are seeking legal recourse (Rahim 1997:29; Malik & Abrar 2000:75; Achacoso 2000).

In December 2001, a new ministry – the Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment – was formed in response to the widespread concerns. Rules and regulations were formulated in order to promote, monitor and regulate migration as laid down in the 1982 Emigration Ordinance. The efforts of the new ministry seemed promising. It has been argued, however, that the department is severely under-resourced financially, which makes managing the migration sector difficult (Siddiqui 2003). A salient detail, as rumoured in Dhaka, is that within the hierarchy of his political party, the minister was subordinate to the director of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). Hence, some expected that there would be few real measures to curb illegal practices, overcharging and mistreatment by recruitment agencies. When in late 2006 Malaysia resumed recruit-
ment from Bangladesh on the condition that migrants would not be overcharged by recruiters, immigration was halted within weeks. According to Malaysian officials, Bangladeshi recruiters heavily overcharge migrants (personal communications, 2007). It is publicly believed in Bangladesh that high-ranking politicians who are closely connected to BAIRA are largely responsible for the high fees (personal communications with various key persons).

Contract labour migration is highly institutionalized (cf. Goss & Lindquist 1995, 2000; Kofman et al. 2000; Phizacklea 2003). Although visas for certain Middle Eastern countries could be obtained relatively easily via friends or relatives, documented migration to Malaysia and Singapore took place almost exclusively within semi-institutionalized networks. Goss and Lindquist (1995:330) rightly highlight in their study on the Philippines that when networks expand, they may actually become more selective and competitive rather than more egalitarian and accessible to an ever-growing group of people. In circumstances such as the one at hand in Bangladesh, where the demand for overseas work permits and visas is large and the supply is limited, migration becomes more institutionalized.

Many migrants hence rely on semi-institutionalized agents – dalals (middlemen or agencies) – to obtain their papers. Other intermediaries are neighbours, relatives or ‘friends’. These individuals, however, do not necessarily operate as benevolently as is sometimes assumed. Although immediate family members may help altruistically, they generally charge for their services. In a study on migration to Kuwait, one of the three main destinations for Bangladeshi migrants, Shah (1996) found that of the various migrant communities, Bangladeshis had paid the highest fees for their migration. This was due not to larger actual costs, but to the greater involvement of manpower agents and intermediaries, and the extra fees charged. The widespread trading in visas for profit, regardless of the jobs available, has been detrimental in that many pay a lot of money for a visa but do not succeed in migrating. Blanchet (2002:188) estimated that about 40% fail in their attempt to migrate to the Middle East.

As some recruiting entrepreneurs became very wealthy, many others, including ex-migrants, tried their luck as well. Consequently, the recruitment business has mushroomed over the past decades. By 2002, BAIRA had registered 700 agencies; however, according to the agents, stiff competition meant that only about a third of the agencies were thriving. Most agencies are medium or small scale, and they often work with a chain of middlemen who are based in villages where they are known and trusted. The business is clearly an opportunistic one. Agencies are not professionally organized. They have hardly any formal or structured relationships with employers in migrant receiving countries and lack information on the dynamics of overseas employment markets. Most recruiters rely heavily on chance encounters

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8. Malik and Abrar (2000:64) found in a study amongst Bangladeshi migrants who had left for various destinations, that more than half (56%) had obtained their migration papers through institutional networks – recruitment agencies, travel agencies or dalals (middlemen) – while a little more than one third (38%) had obtained their visas directly with the help of relatives or friends abroad.
and on information acquired through the grapevine and via their networks. They also rely on information from workers who have been sent before and on informants in Dhaka’s hotels, who notify them as soon as a foreign employer has been signalled (Malik & Abrar 2000:4).

Although they operate rather arbitrarily, both recruiters and returnees greatly influence the geography of migration, that is, the areas the migrants come from and those to which they migrate. Certain districts or villages tend to have higher concentrations of migration to certain areas (Malik & Abrar 2000:63; Siddiqui 2003:3). The choice of destination is also influenced by the amount of money would-be migrants can pay for the recruitment fee: while many can somehow scrape together the money to buy a work permit for Malaysia, for example, most cannot afford to migrate to Korea or Japan – let alone the USA, Canada or the UK – as recruitment fees are much higher and often entail smuggling and travelling without valid papers.

3.6 Destinations: the Middle East and Malaysia

Over the past decades, the largest migration flow from Bangladesh has been to the Middle East (see table 3.1). In the 1960s, some of the Bangladeshis who had gone to Saudi Arabia to fulfil haj (pilgrimage) settled there and engaged in business. The wealth they brought back during their visits to their native villages stimulated others to try their luck. These early migrations to the Middle East by Bangladeshis coincided with the need for foreign labour in these oil-rich burgeoning economies. This was the beginning of what was to become a massive migration flow (Abrar & Malik 2000:34).

Migration to the Middle East came to an abrupt though temporary halt with the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990. Of the 450,000 Asian migrants who were forced to return home due to the war, at least 72,000 were Bangladeshis (Castles & Miller 2003:159; IN Strauss/IOM 2000:8). Consequently, many aspiring migrants and recruiters started to look for alternative destinations. It was at about this time that migration to Malaysia increased in importance. By the mid 1990s, it had become the single largest country of destination for short-term migration outside the Middle East.9

As was the case in the Middle East, individual pioneers who had settled in Malaysia provided contacts between the receiving and the sending countries. Some of the first Bangladeshi migrant workers and businessmen who had come to Malaysia in the 1980s later became large-scale recruiters. The first group of 500 workers arrived in 1986 to work on plantations. By the early 1990s, Bangladeshi migrants had gained the reputation of being ‘hard working’ and ‘compliant’ and had thus become

9. Bangladeshi workers have also been venturing out to other Asian countries, such as Singapore and Korea (see table 3.1). These countries are very popular because the wages are higher – but so are the recruitment fees: migrating to Singapore used to cost approximately 200,000 takas, about double the fee for going to Malaysia.
increasingly popular with Malaysian employers. In 1992, when Malaysia first allowed Bangladeshi migrants to be recruited for the manufacturing sector, the number of migrants from Bangladesh increased significantly (Rudnick 1996:47). According to statistical data from Bangladesh, by 2002 a total of 260,000 Bangladeshis had worked in Malaysia (see table 1). However, there were also many undocumented Bangladeshis working in Malaysia. According to Malaysian statistics, during legalization operations between 1992 and 1994 and in the first half of 1996, approximately 195,000 undocumented Bangladeshis became legalized, that is, received temporary work permits. After the freeze in 1997, 308,000 Bangladeshis were officially working in Malaysia, according to Malaysian statistics (Kassim 1998a:26). Estimates of the total number of undocumented Bangladeshis in Malaysia at the time of these operations ranged from one hundred thousand to several hundred thousand (Migration News 1997). Due to the restrictions on female migrants, between 1991 and August 1996 fewer than 5000 documented Bangladeshi migrant women officially left for Malaysia, which at the time was the single largest destination country for documented female migrants from Bangladesh. These women were recruited exclusively for export-producing factories.

The cultural proximity of the two countries (both are Islamic) enhanced and strengthened both the ties between them and Malaysia’s resolve to recruit workers from Bangladesh. The agreements made were largely informal and on an ad hoc basis until allegations of human rights abuses of Bangladeshis in Malaysian detention camps led to the signing in August 1995 of a bilateral memorandum of understanding. Although the incentive for this formal agreement was the protection of migrants’ rights, it actually focused on recruitment issues and on the prevention of undocumented migration. The memorandum’s tenure was short-lived: recruitment was to cease by January 1997 (Rahim 1997:30), and it did. The short-lived tenure of the memorandum coincided with two events. First, Bangladeshi men had become associated with causing ‘social unrest’ in Malaysia and this perception influenced their further recruitment. Riots had occurred involving conflicts between local and Bangladeshi men. The rivalry was partially driven by jealousy over the popularity of Bangladeshi men among Malaysian women. Second, the Asian financial crisis hit the Malaysian economy and led the government to put a temporary stop to the recruitment of migrant workers. Recruitment from Bangladesh never entirely picked up again for reasons described in the next part of this chapter. By 2006, 64,156 documented Bangladeshis were working in Malaysia (New Straits Times 12-09-2006).

3.7 Malaysia: Economic and Demographic context

Anyone visiting Malaysia at any time from the 1880s onwards would be struck by the enormous presence of foreign workers in the country. At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th the visitor would encounter Chinese workers in tin mines and Chinese and Indian workers in sugar, coffee and later on rubber plantations. Indian workers could also be seen in the construction of
roads, railways and public utility services. Most Chinese and Indian workers were men. (Garcés-Mascareñas 2006:1)

The region that is now known as Malaysia has been influenced by migration for centuries. At independence in 1957, the large population of foreign descendants had the option to become naturalized Malaysians, and many exercised the option. By 2005, Malaysia’s population reached nearly 25 million, with an annual population growth of 2% (World Bank 2006b). The religion of the ethnic Malays is Islam, as decreed by law. The 2000 national census showed that bumiputras (‘sons of the soil’ – Malays and indigenous people) comprised 65% of the population, Chinese 26% and Indians 8%. Non-Malaysian citizens account for 6% of the population (Bureau of Statistics 2001).

Map 3.3: Malaysia

During colonial times, Malaysia’s economy relied on a few primary products, mainly tin and rubber. After independence the government pushed for further industrial development. Initially, the focus was on import substitution, but in the late 1980s a shift towards an export-oriented approach was made. In recent decades,
Malaysia has made significant economic progress and has been referred to as ‘a second-tier tiger’, referring to the newly industrialized countries (NICs) in the Southeast Asian region.

During the 1990s, Malaysia became the world’s sixth largest exporter of manufactured goods and one of the more prosperous countries in Southeast Asia (Barlow 2001:3). From 1987 until 1997, when the country was hit by the Asian financial crisis, the average annual GDP growth was more than 8%. Between 1991 and 2005, GDP growth was 4.1% on average; in 2006, GDP per capita was USD 11,914 (IMF 2006). Malaysia is categorized as an upper-middle-income economy.11

In the following sections, I take a closer look at Malaysia’s economic development and the concomitant migration policies. I pay particular attention to the mid 1990s – when the Bangladeshi migrants this study focuses on were recruited to work in Malaysian industry – and to the Asian economic crisis in the second half of the 1990s, which had a profound effect on migrant workers and migration policies.

Table 3.3: Structure of the Malaysian economy (% of GDP)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
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<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
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Source: based on figures of the Ministry of Finance: Malaysia GDP by sector 2007.

3.8 The role of the manufacturing sector until the 1997 crisis

Over the past decades, a great effort has been made to integrate Malaysia’s ethnic groups into a unified Malaysian nation. In 1969, the country was shaken by communal conflict. High unemployment among young urban Malays was regarded as the underlying reason for the race riots. The key development strategy of the New Economic Policy (NEP) shifted to promoting growth and social equality. Economic development played a key role in the steps taken towards achieving socio-economic redistribution and the eradication of unemployment and poverty, and hence helped

11. The percentage of the population living below the poverty line dropped from 53% in 1970 to 7.5% in 1999; more recent figures are not available. Life expectancy for women is 74 years and for men 68 years; the infant mortality rate is 10 per 1000 births. The literacy rate for women is 85% and for men 92% (UNDP 2003; World Bank 2003b; Department of Statistics Malaysia 2003; Economic Planning Unit Malaysia 2002:1; UNESCO 2003; World Bank 2006b).
to prevent social unrest.\footnote{Policies have been characterized by affirmative actions towards the bumiputras (native Malays), as they were perceived to have been left behind socio-economically, especially compared to the Chinese. Many people regard as discriminatory certain policies, such as quotas for universities (whereby Chinese students have a clear disadvantage compared to Malays) and policies regarding the ownership of firms (at least 30% of the ownership of wealth must be in the hands of Bumiputera). However, others feel that in view of the country’s impressive economic progress and social stability, these policies have served their purpose. For the past decades, Malaysia has been led by the Barisan Nasional – a coalition party of the three ethnic groups, but dominated by the United Malays National Organization, which from 1981 to 2003 was led by the prime minister, Dr Mahathir. Whilst officially a democracy, Malaysia is often criticized for its autocratic ruling, as exemplified by the arrest and detention without charges of critics under the Internal Security Act (ISA).} The strong expansion of the industrial sector and rapid wage growth were powerful agents in reducing poverty and promoting equity and social harmony. All ethnic groups shared in it, although not equally (Pillai 1999:179; Athukorala 2001a:17; Barlow 2001:3). The Malaysian government had been a major player in the country’s industrial relations and economic development.

Malaysia’s rapid GDP growth is largely attributed to increases in manufactured exports, which the government actively promoted by means of a policy regime of open trade and liberal investment, which attracted foreign investors. The comprehensive free trade zone (FTZ) scheme implemented in the early 1970s included low import tariffs and such provisions as tax exemptions and limitations on labour union activities. The timing was right: companies in Japan and the newly industrialized Asian countries were looking for investment possibilities elsewhere due to the deterioration of their export position. Malaysia attracted a massive wave of foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly from these regions. Foreign investment and foreign firms played a major role in the economic progress of the country: by the mid 1990s, foreign firms accounted for over 75% of total manufactured exports (Menon 2001:39; Rasiah 2001:166; Athukorala 2001a:16-23).

By 1995, manufactured exports comprised 80% of all exports. Electronics and electrical goods provided the highest share of manufactured exports (65% in 1997), followed by wood products (5%), chemicals and chemical products (5%), clothing and textiles (4%), and transport equipment (4%) (MITI 1997). Not surprisingly, between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s, most new employment came from the rapidly expanding manufacturing sector: from 1987 to 1996, its direct contribution to total employment was as high as 63% (Athukorala 2001a:16-23). The share of employment in manufacturing as a percentage of total employment climbed from 14% in the mid 1970s to 27% in 1996.

Initially, Malaysia had a ‘large reservoir’ of male and female labour – a major requisite for attracting foreign investment for labour-intensive manufacturing. Due to economic progress, unemployment in Malaysia dropped from a peak of 8.3% in 1986 to 3% and less in the period 1993-1997, leading to a situation of virtual full employment. From the 1970s onwards, foreign multinational companies started to attract large numbers of young Malaysian women to work in their factories. Many young women commuted or migrated from rural to urban areas. In Malaysia, women
have traditionally engaged in labour outside their homes. Women are responsible for harvesting and many go to the market to sell their produce (Ng 1999:35). Although social resistance to the large-scale employment of women in the manufacturing sector was not as strong as it was in Bangladesh, it initially faced opposition and stigmatization. By the beginning of the 1990s, factory employees’ working and payment conditions had improved, mainly due to the decreasing labour reserve. However, many switched jobs when they were offered better wages elsewhere.

Malaysia’s economic development is largely based on the availability of cheap labour; as cheap labour became increasingly scarce, many companies started recruiting foreign labour. The economic growth of the 1990s was mainly input driven, with more and more capital and labour added to generate output expansion. Despite its economic success, economists often argue that Malaysia’s industrial strategy is not sustainable in the long run. The high import content – especially in electronics, electrical products and garment production – makes for low local value-added and low net foreign exchange earnings (Pillai 1998:259; Rasiah 2001). FDI started to fall after 1996, alongside a worldwide glut in electronics, which depressed growth in manufacturing. The major reason for the decline in FDI, however, was the exhaustion of labour reserves since the mid 1990s.

Meanwhile, in many industrial sectors, competition increased from countries in the region that had cheaper labour. More flexible labour practices were increasingly used to reduce labour costs (Ng 2004b:2). Companies relied more and more on contract workers and home workers. Some manufacturing companies, particularly in the garment sector, relocated their production to rural areas where wages were lower and labour was more readily available (Crinis 2002:159). Meanwhile, more companies utilized foreign contract workers to fill their vacancies (Rudnick 1996). Capital had been ‘foreign’ all along, and now the workforce increasingly became foreign, too.

3.9 Foreign workers

As in colonial times, a salient feature of the contemporary Malaysian economy is its strong reliance on foreign workers. In 1996 there were officially more than 745,000 foreign workers in the country; a year later, following a massive legalization scheme, this figure had almost doubled to more than 1,470,000 (Kassim 2001a:132). Estimates of the remaining number of undocumented workers varied from several hundred thousand to more than one million. Foreign labour was estimated to account for as much as 15-30% of the country’s labour force (Rasiah 2001:169-176; Tan & Ariff 2001:62). The government repeatedly claimed that the recruitment of foreign labour was a temporary measure to fill the labour gaps created by Malaysia’s enormous economic success (Rudnick 1996). However, by 2006 the number of documented foreign workers in the country had risen to 1,820,000 (New Straits Times 12-09-2006); the number of undocumented foreigners was estimated at about half that number. Furthermore, there are no signs that Malaysia’s economic dependence on foreign workers will come to an end any time soon.
Between independence and the late 1980s, Indonesians who crossed the Straits of Malaya on their own accord fulfilled foreign labour needs. Due to long-standing ties and cultural similarities, Indonesians were historically not regarded as 'foreigners' (Wong 2006). By the late 1980s, the increasing presence of foreign workers from additional countries led to more regulation of migration. Although undocumented labour migration could not be stopped, migration became increasingly institutionalized. During the early 1990s, legal recruitment was granted

Table 3.4: Documented foreign workers in Peninsular Malaysia

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<td>Jul.-Dec.</td>
<td>414,336</td>
<td>515,983</td>
<td>576,441</td>
<td>586,796</td>
<td>1,190,437</td>
<td>789,684</td>
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<td>21.9</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plantation</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
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<td>Construction</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<td>100%</td>
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Source: Kassim 2001a:132 (based on published and unpublished data of several government departments); ISIS, 2003; and Kanapthy 2006.
only for domestic services, plantation workers and construction. In 1991, an estimated 70% of all workers in construction were foreign; by 1994, 60% of all plantation workers were migrant workers. In response to manufacturers’ requests for foreign labour, in 1992 the government allowed this sector to recruit foreign workers provided the labour was used for export production only and the share of migrant labour did not exceed 30% of a company’s total labour force (Pillai 1992). Several studies point out that the percentage of foreign workers employed by many individual companies is much higher than 30% (Rudnick 1996:40, Smakman 2004; Kung & Wang 2006).13

Since 1997, the manufacturing sector has been the single largest employer of documented foreign workers in Malaysia, accounting for about 30% of the total (see table 3.4). Likewise, 33% of the workforce in manufacturing is composed of migrants (The Star 17-03-2006). According to estimates of documented and undocumented migrants combined, 80% of the migrants who worked in Malaysia over the last decades were Indonesian; many of those who arrived before the 1990s have since settled there (Pillai 2005; Wong 2006). During the 1990s, Bangladeshis comprised the second largest group of migrants in Malaysia (see table 3.4) and the second largest group of foreign workers (after Indonesians) employed in manufacturing (Wong 2006:217).

A breakdown by gender of migrant workers is not available due to poor gender data collection by the department of statistics. Nevertheless, the 1990s were marked by a significant increase in female migrants recruited for jobs other than domestic work. Kassim (2001a:115) estimated that about a third of all foreign workers in manufacturing and half of all those in service jobs (including domestic work) were female.

3.10 The Asian economic crisis and its impact on migrant workers

The Asian financial crisis started in July 1997 in Thailand and soon spread to other countries in the region. Given Malaysia’s impressive economic performance, many were taken aback by the effects of the crisis on the Malaysian ringgit and the wider economy, as a number of Malaysia’s macroeconomic fundamentals were sound at

13. A study among textile and garment factories in the state of Penang in 1994 found that while on average 29% of the labour force was foreign, in several companies the proportion exceeded 30%, with the figure for some subcontractors reaching 90% (Rudnick 1996). A 2000/2001 survey among apparel producers in Malaysia found that on average 37% of companies’ labour forces consisted of foreign workers. Among subcontractors the figure was as high as 50%. It was also found that domestically oriented companies hired foreign workers, which at the time of the study was not allowed (Smakman 2004:263). Kung & Wang (2006) found that more than 50% of the total labour force in the Taiwanese owned companies he studied consisted of foreign workers. The rather stark divergences from the 30% rule reflect the flexibility with which rules are applied. According to a government employee at the immigration department, apart from the guiding rule, there are case-by-case revisions if a company needs more workers (interviews courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006).
the time. Although there had been signs of concern about economic vulnerability before the crisis, they had been hidden beneath the country’s impressive performance record (Yap 2001:45; Rasiah 2001:167; Athukorala 2001b:22; Jomo 2001).

However, the events in the Malaysian financial markets in 1997-1998 – which took place in the wake of the crisis in neighbouring Thailand and led to the crash of the Malaysian ringgit – cannot be explained by domestic vulnerabilities alone. These events were also triggered by panic among international market players and the massive sell-off of stocks and the dumping of domestic currencies. The Malaysian ringgit subsequently plunged from 2.48 ringgits to the US dollar in March 1997 to 3.77 ringgits to the dollar by the end of the year, and reached an all-time low of 4.88 ringgits to the dollar in January 1998. In September 1998, the ringgit was pegged to the US dollar at 3.8, which helped to insulate the economy from the continued adverse external situation and regain some monetary autonomy (Yap 2001:46-57; Jomo 2001). This strategy combined with other economic measures paid off: GDP growth rates, which had slowed down in 1997 and had contracted by -7.4% in 1998, slowly increased to 5.8% in 1999 (see table 3.5). Additionally, a revival in global demand for electric and electronic products led to a major resurgence in exports in 1999, which helped to further improve the trade balance (Rasiah 2001:186; Athukorala 2001b:21). Although GDP growth has been going up, pre-crisis growth rates have not been re-established. Nevertheless, in recent years the manufacturing sector has again been growing steadily; in 2006, the growth rate was 7% (World Bank 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GDP growth</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Mining</th>
<th>Manufacturing</th>
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Source: Malaysia’s Ministry of Finance and World Bank 2007

As a consequence of the economic crisis, many workers were made redundant while others had to ‘voluntarily’ resign. The sectors most affected were manufacturing and

14. Rapid growth had helped to sustain low inflation and falling unemployment rates over the decade prior to the economic crisis.

15. Malaysia had one significant advantage over the other crisis-affected economies: it did not face a savings-investment deficit and overall imbalances with international payments commitments (debts); this was due to strong surpluses recorded in the capital account. Malaysia thus also had more leverage to decide on what policies to apply to tackle the crisis instead of having to obey IMF stipulations as neighbouring countries had to (Rasiah 2001). For further reading: Rasiah 2001; Athukorala 2001b; Yap 2001; Jomo 2001.
construction. A total of 60,000 workers were said to have lost their jobs in the first year after the crisis. This number is likely to be an underestimate, since voluntary lay-offs and the dismissal of undocumented and casual workers were not registered (Pillai 1998:267). Unemployment rates increased from 2.4% in 1997 to 3.2% in 1999, while labour force participation dropped from 87% to 83% for men and from 47% to 44% for women (Athukorala 2001a:20; Rasiah 2001:189). Industrial workers were affected by pay cuts and a decrease in overtime work. Numerous smaller firms became insolvent and went bankrupt. In 1999, the earnings of individual workers in the manufacturing industry declined by 1%, as compared to an increase of 6.4% during 1998. Increasing numbers of Malaysian families had to rely on public services since their incomes had dropped while prices had gone up. Although the impact of the crisis on Malaysian families is argued to have been moderate in comparison to the situation of local citizens in neighbouring countries, many Malaysians suffered from the effects of the crisis.

In Malaysia, the brunt of the crisis was shouldered by foreign workers, as the main impact of lay-offs fell on them. Many had to leave the country, as their annual contracts were not renewed (Yusof 2001; OECD 2001). Malaysia had toughened its stand on foreign workers in an attempt to save the jobs of local workers. Exact numbers of redundancies among the local workers are not available, since the figures are incomplete. Nevertheless, as Kassim (2001b:263) points out, the 187,000 undocumented workers who opted for voluntary repatriation between September and November 1998 alone, far exceed the total number of local workers made redundant during that whole year. Thus, the momentous decline in the number of documented migrant workers by almost 575,000 (39%) between 1997 and 1999 (Kassim 2001a:132) needs to be understood in the context of the Asian economic crisis.

As early as mid 1998, employers began to complain of labour shortages once more, stating they could not find local workers. In response, 120,000 permits were issued. When the economy began to recover in 1999, mainly due to a revival in manufacturing, a further 70,000 new permits were issued for the recruitment of foreign workers, followed in subsequent years by more ad hoc allocations (Kassim 2001a:115; OECD 2001:12).

3.11 Migration policies

Malaysia’s foreign labour policies have been variously described as ‘fluid’, ‘unpredictable’ and possessing a ‘stop-go’ quality (Rudnick 1996; Pillai 1997; Kassim 1998b, 2001b; Menon 2001; stakeholders interviewed by Garcés-Mascareñas 2006). Ad hoc permission to recruit a quota of migrant labourers often results from short-term deficiencies in certain sectors and successful lobbying by employers’

16. It was argued that due to the trade unions’ lack of power, only few programmes have been launched to help those who lost their jobs, although some effort was made by the government to mitigate the negative effects on the poor.
federations. There has been no comprehensive long-term policy and policies are often not transparent.  

Ambiguities in Malaysia’s migration policies reflect on the one hand the government’s compliance with employers’ requests for foreign labour and the consequent perpetuation of the country’s overall economic dependence on foreign workers, and on the other hand the desire to curb the number of foreign workers and the associated ‘social costs’ of migration. Malaysia wants a cheap and flexible labour force, but would rather not host migrants.

The recruitment of migrant workers is subject to strict rules. Apart from meeting the fluctuating labour demands of the economy through the recruitment of flexible labour, the underlying aim of Malaysia’s migration policy is to prevent migrants from becoming permanent settlers. Garcés-Mascareñas (2006:5) highlights three characteristics of a labour migration system as employed by Malaysia. The first salient characteristic is labour circulation, as it assures the process of labour maintenance and renewal. The costs of renewal are borne by the labour supplying country, flexibility is guaranteed and social costs are minimized. Migrants must come without dependants or spouses, and they may not marry local citizens. If a migrant woman becomes pregnant, she is repatriated. A migrant worker could be recruited on a two-year contract that could be extended to a maximum of six or seven years. Since 2002, contracts are generally given on a three-year basis and can be extended for a maximum of five years – except for domestic workers, who can remain with an employer for as long as their services are required (ISIS 2003:21; Kanapthy 2006). Migrant workers also have to undergo medical examinations before migrating and before contract renewal.

The second characteristic of a labour migration system, as witnessed in Malaysia, is the restriction of mobility imposed on migrants: they are tied to the employers for whom they were recruited. When contracts expire, migrants must return to their home country. Once a migrant leaves his or her employer, he or she is rendered undocumented, labelled ‘illegal’ and may be detained and deported. The third characteristic of a migrant labour system is the powerlessness of the foreign worker due to the temporary nature of migration and the restrictions on mobility. Although labour legislation in principle guarantees certain rights to foreign workers, these rights are easily violated due to slack law enforcement. Migrant workers’ capacity to bargain is undermined by their dependence on their employers, who can cancel their contract and have them deported, which in turn keeps wages down.

The Malaysian government regards the issue of undocumented labour as a huge problem. Undocumented migrants are mostly referred to as ‘illegals’ and are seen as criminals, brought in by criminal syndicates, who have to be rooted out. Since the 1980s, Malaysia has continuously tried to curb undocumented labour migration. Throughout the 1990s, several legalization schemes led to the registration of more than a million migrants. Many more were believed to remain undocumented. Na-

17. For a fascinating exploration of the continuities and discontinuities of contemporary labour regulations compared to those under colonial rule, see Garcés-Mascareñas 2006.
tionwide crackdowns on ‘illegal’ migrants were intensified from 1993 onwards. Programmes to curb undocumented migration, known as Ops Nyah I and II (Ops Nyah literally means ‘get rid of’), are ongoing. By 1999, almost 350,000 migrants had been repatriated under these schemes. An additional 188,000 left voluntarily and about 1,450,000 had come forward under legalization programmes (Kassim 2001a:135). After 2000, these schemes were further increased: in 2000, some 100,000 migrants were deported, and in 2001, a further 158,420 were deported (Wong 2006:222).

As in other Asian countries, irregularities and forgery are quite common. Unlicensed labour recruiters and agents have been found guilty of charging exorbitant fees, falsifying documents, and misleading workers about wages and working conditions (cf. Goss & Lindquist 1995; Wickramasekera 2002; Kanapathy 2006:16). Employers generally obtain their foreign workers with the assistance of recruitment agents. If an employer wants to recruit foreign workers, he or she must apply directly to the Immigration Department. When approval is granted, the employer may hire a recruiting agency and visit the sending countries in person to interview potential workers with the assistance of local recruitment agencies (Kassim 2001a:119). Apart from the high fees charged, the work permits migrants pay for are not always authentic. Many migrants find upon arrival that their documents are false; hence, they are undocumented, in other words, ‘illegal’. Corruption in both Bangladesh and Malaysia involving migration officers and politicians is a major obstacle to a just migration regime. Some migrants are identified at the airport and immediately sent back, while others start to work undocumented for a fraction of the money they had anticipated. A few eventually buy ‘official’ documents. Others end up in detention camps before being deported (Rudnick 1996; Wong & Anwar 2003).

Corruption and the lack of law enforcement regarding recruitment in Bangladesh and Malaysia contribute importantly to high levels of undocumented labour (Wickramasekera 2002; Wong 2006:222; interviews with key persons courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006). Additionally, due to a lack of law enforcement, many migrants who are not paid as promised or as stipulated by law see no option but to look for another employer by absconding or overstaying. They become undocumented in order to earn money and pay off the debts they incurred before their departure. Hence, documented and undocumented migration statuses are intricately linked. Current undocumented migration results to some extent from the rigidities of the migrant labour system itself (Rudnick 1996:75; Garcés-Mascareñas 2006:11).

As seen earlier, the economic crisis impacted migration policies and further curtailed the position of migrant workers. The government, fearing another economic downturn, wanted to retain temporary migrant workers as a buffer; the migrants are submissive, have few rights and are easily laid off (Kassim 2001b:277). The two largest migrant groups in the country – Indonesian and Bangladeshi workers – were

18. Many recruitment agents in Malaysia are ex-government employees (interviews with key persons by Garcés-Mascareñas 2006 courteously made available).
19. Meanwhile, there are also migrants who knowingly arrive undocumented.
to be reduced in size in an attempt to increase ‘national security’. It was to be ensured that ‘no foreign nationals from one single country dominate the local labour market’ (The Star 3 September 2003).

These measures were a response to several incidents in which Indonesian and Bangladeshi migrant workers had been adamant and persistent in defending their rights, which involved some strikes as well (AMC 2003:211). In October 2003, the 7-year-long ban on recruitment from Bangladesh was lifted. Malaysia and Bangladesh signed a new memorandum of understanding, after which the ‘manpower export’ was expected to resume (Daily Star 14 Oct. 2003). However, it never really did. Although many employers want more Bangladeshi workers – as they are regarded as obedient and hard working and they easily pick up the language – their requests are generally not honoured (Smakman 2004: Kung & Wang 2006; interviews courtesy of Garcés-Mascareñas 2006). Although recruitment was resumed in September 2006, it was halted again a few weeks later because the Malaysian authorities had found that recruiters in Bangladesh were charging exorbitant fees. Due to migrants’ urgent financial needs, the Malaysian authorities feared that they would resort to illegal activities once they were in the country.

Meanwhile, Malaysia has reinforced its foreign workers policy by negotiating memoranda of understanding with a large number of sending countries, including Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Philippines, Indonesia and Myanmar. Nevertheless, in January 2008, the leading countries of origin for migrants in Malaysia are Indonesia (1.1 million), Nepal and Bangladesh (300,000) (Migration News, 2008).

To regularize the import of migrant workers, Malaysia announced in 2005 that all intake of migrant workers was to be carried out on a government-to-government basis to ensure that migrants are not exploited by labour agents. The government appointed 58 outsourcing companies to supply and manage labour. However, the initial ban on agents was lifted when the authorities realized that the use of agents was an ‘unstoppable trend’. The list of designated source countries was changed to comprise the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. To ensure that migrant workers are not liable to abuse and are able to better integrate into the Malaysian work environment, the government introduced new measures to expose migrant workers to Malaysian laws and culture. As of 1 November 2005, all countries (except Indonesia) have to conduct induction courses for workers coming to Malaysia; if migrants fail, they will not be issued visas or work permits (Kanapathy 2006:14-17).

As Wong (2006:225) argues, after the turn of the new millennium, the emphasis in migration policies changed from cultural if not ethnic affinity (i.e. Indonesians shared the same ethnicity with Malays, and Bangladeshis have the same religion) to cultural and ethnic distance in order to maintain social distance and transience. This policy change appears to have been aimed at weakening migrants’ potential bargaining power, keeping wages low and further discouraging migrant workers from settling down. However, the presence in the country of an estimated 2.4 million migrants (including undocumented workers) shows that the government has not been
very successful in reducing its reliance on foreign labour (24% of those employed in Malaysia are migrant workers). Government officials have repeatedly promised employers in the plantation and manufacturing sector assistance in hiring foreign workers. These sectors would not be able to meet export orders without them. Migrants are needed for the sake of Malaysia’s economic growth; however, it is still believed to be a ‘temporary measure’ (Kassim 2001a:116; cf. The Star 18-05-2004; Kanaphthy 2006:17). In 2006, migrants comprised 33% of the workforce in the manufacturing industry (The Star 17-03-2006).

3.12 Legal protection of migrant workers

A policy was introduced in 1991 to ensure equal wages and benefits for foreign workers in order to prevent employers from replacing locals with foreign workers. Hence, in theory, migrant workers should receive the same wages and benefits as local workers, and thus should not be ‘cheaper’ (Pillai 1992; Rudnick 1996). Internationally, the ILO conventions that specifically concern the protection of the rights of migrants, C. 97 and C. 143, are not ratified by Malaysia - except for the state of Sabah. The basic human rights of all migrant workers are however, covered by universal human rights instruments and ILO core conventions, even if they are not ratified. 20

Many studies have shown that foreign workers in Malaysia are often paid less than local workers. Labour contracts, if they exist, are commonly breached. A strikingly large percentage of migrants do not receive fair wages or fair treatment. Various studies found that as many as 70% of all migrant workers were not paid what they were entitled to according to the relevant labour laws (Pillai 1995; Rudnick 1996; Lee & Sivananthiran 1996; Zahid 1998; Kassim 1998b, 2001b; Abdul-Aziz 2001). Moreover, several studies found that employers often prefer foreign to local workers, as they, unlike local workers, cannot readily ‘job-hop’ and are ‘diligent and compliant’ (Lee & Sivananthiran 1996:89; Rudnick 1996; Abdul-Aziz 2001; Smakman 2004). Some readily admit that foreign workers are cheaper than local workers.

The dominant underlying reason for this inequality is that in practice, migrants have little judicial protection. While in theory migrants and local workers should be treated equally and migrants can file a complaint with the Labour Office, in practice they rarely do. Since visas are tied to the work permit issued by their employers, migrant workers become ‘illegal’ as soon as they are dismissed, and have to leave the country. Employers thus have disproportionally large control over conditions for

migrant labour. In cases in which migrant workers took their employers to court, employers terminated their contracts. Migrants are usually deported or detained while awaiting the verdict, which can take years (Tenaganita 2005; Syed Shahir 2006). Not surprisingly, many migrants do not complain: they know that if they are sent home, they will be even worse off (Rudnick 1996).

It should be noted that in contemporary Malaysia, workers – whether local or foreign – have minimal bargaining power. Labour laws, in as far as they are intended to protect workers’ welfare, are often poorly administered and generally more supportive of managerial prerogatives. There are no minimum wages. As is the case in many export-oriented countries and in response to demands by foreign investors, the activities of trade unions are curbed in order to stimulate FDI. Consequently, employers in Malaysia exercise a high level of control in the workplace, and are not easily challenged by their employees (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:2). Both the size and the structure of unions are heavily regulated: unions may not operate across industries, and the various ‘industries’ are narrowly defined. In many aspects, industrial relations under British rule formed the basis for the industrial relations and policies after independence.

During colonial rule, the large-scale labour recruitment from India and China initiated by the British interfered in the local labour market. The formation of labour unions was hampered and controlled, and ethnic divisions both in the workplace and in broader society became established. Ethnicity continues to be an organizing principle of politics and a significant factor in the political economy. The government has effectively fractured the working class in Malaysia along ethnic and interest lines. The persistence of ethnic identification among local workers has weakened class unity and diminished the role of labour unions (Caspersz 1998:267; Ng 2004a; Bhopal & Rowley 2005:561). Only a small percentage of all workers in industry are unionized (Todd, Lansbury & Davis 2004:16). A large proportion of the existing unions are in-house unions that are based on the Japanese model; management often controls these unions. Those companies and industries that have free unions and have negotiated collective agreements frequently have better working conditions and higher wages (Rudnick 1996).

3.13 Public discourse

The contribution made by foreign workers to Malaysia’s economic development is significant. As Kassim (1998b:18) argues:

If ‘made in Malaysia’ manufactured goods and products have remained competitive in price and can hold their own in world markets, it is due in no small measure to the inexpensive labour of foreign workers.

Malaysia’s modern urban skyline, its gleaming airport and the newly built cyber corridor were mainly built by foreign labour (Kassim 1998b:18; Menon 2001:41). Like elsewhere in the world, this receiving country rarely mentions the positive con-
tributions made by migrant workers to their economy and society. Instead, migrants are blamed for adversities and social problems, particularly in times of crisis or recession (Wickramasekera 2002:4). Trade unions and citizens have been increasingly concerned about the large number of migrant workers and the adverse effects on local workers’ wages. Cheap labour imports have held down the wages of unskilled workers. It has been widely argued that the growth in real wages in the 1990s would have been sharper had it not been for the influx of migrant workers. Moreover, importing cheap labour as a short-term measure adversely affects the long-term competitiveness of Malaysian manufacturing. Little effort is made to upgrade production to higher value-added production (Pillai 1999; Rasiah 2001:186; Tan & Ariff 2001; Athukorala 2001b). Areas of concern that existed before the economic crisis have not been sufficiently tackled. So far, government policies to improve the institutional support in order to generate the human and technical capabilities needed to upgrade production systems and increase value added have fallen short.

Both politicians and the media have consistently blamed foreign workers for various ‘social costs’. Migrants are claimed to be more criminal and to jeopardize the social security, housing and healthcare systems. This further increased after the economic crisis; migrants were resented for taking local workers’ jobs and keeping wages down. Equal wages and equal treatment of local and foreign workers would in the long run benefit all workers, whatever their nationality. So far, however, few steps have been taken in this direction.

3.14 Conclusion

Both Bangladesh and Malaysia are economically highly dependent on migration: Bangladesh needs the employment and remittances, while Malaysia needs a source of cheap labour. This particular migration system was created by the confluence of several parameters. The migration flows between the two countries started with the rather arbitrary migrations of some pioneers and took off in response to the sudden economic need for migrant labour in Malaysia. Furthermore, the Gulf War in the early 1990s temporarily halted migration to the Middle East and indirectly boosted the flow of Bangladeshi migrants to Malaysia. Affinities based on a shared religion facilitated agreements between governments. However, migration flows are often volatile and are easily disrupted and redirected by economic and political fluctuations in the international arena, as shown by the impact of the Asian economic crisis on migrants and migration flows. Migrants are particularly vulnerable to changes in the global political economy. Moreover, the protection of migrant workers’ rights is lacking at both ends of the migration flow.

The vast majority of Bangladeshi migrants are male, a fact that is closely related to gender notions and relations in Bangladesh and the concomitant customs and migration policies that restrain women from working or migrating. Significant numbers of women want to migrate but lack both the financial and the infrastructural means to do so legitimately, which has resulted in large numbers of women migrating as undocumented workers. Simultaneously, women’s search for jobs and the
challenges they face by venturing out in public space are to a large degree related to definitions of womanhood and marriage. How these structural factors have influenced individual migrant women and men’s lives becomes clearer in the following chapters.