

| SPECIAL FEATURE |

Raziya, who says she's around 40 years old, squats in a small shop in the quaint village of Kolma, only a few minutes' ride from Savar town. Beside her is her husband Hossain, the owner of the shop. Hossain gruffly gives directions as she brews tea, now that it is almost four in the afternoon.

This is a very different life for Raziya, compared to just three years ago when she was still in Europe. Raziya had migrated illegally to Greece in 2007, where she remained an undocumented worker for around eight years. Widowed, with a young daughter to support on her own, she was living as a guest in her

sister's house. She was persuaded by a friend, Nasimeh, who encouraged Raziya to go with her to Athens. There, waiting, was a Bangladeshi man, whom Nasimeh had met online, who would make arrangements for the two of them to work at a garments factory, similar to one he worked at.

Raziya and Nasimeh were accompanied on the journey by four men also making their way to Europe. The women first went to Lebanon, where they both did domestic work for several months but left because the owner was harsh. On foot, they walked through several countries, of which she could



Raziya with the photograph of her daughter that travelled with her to, and back from, Europe. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

THE "EURO TRIP" NO ONE TALKS ABOUT

The number of female workers departing Bangladesh is on an upward trajectory, 1,21,925 in 2017, according to Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) data. The stories of female migrant workers in the Middle East have been well documented as have those of male migrant workers in Europe. But female Bangladeshi migrants in Europe are relatively rare, compared to the tens of thousands working in the Gulf and other parts of the Middle East. Among undocumented workers returning from Europe over the past few years are some female migrants who Star Weekend interviewed to learn about their experiences and how well they are reintegrating back in Bangladesh.



Raziya was an undocumented worker in Greece for around eight years. She returned to Bangladesh in 2015.

only tell me the names Syria and Turkey. They journeyed by land and it took 14 days. "We would stay inside all day and walk by road at night," she remembers. "At one point, we had to walk up a very steep hill scrambling up with our hands." Often, there was no food. "The worst hardship I've endured in my life has been those 14 days." But money exchanged hands at every border by the *dalals* the women didn't even talk to once, says Raziya, and they were able to cross into Greece.

While many stories of migrant workers in Europe tend to focus on the risky and expensive journey, Raziya's life in Athens illustrates the hardship undocumented migrant workers endure in Europe. She earned two euros per hour at a garments factory ("small

houses with a few sewing machines, not like the big factories here" she said), as a helper. Some days, there was five to eight hours of work, but on other days, nothing. Not that Raziya made much in the first place—"Some months I would earn 100 euros, other months as little as 15 euros."

"The only time I needed to know Greek was when I went to buy *souvlaki* [a popular Greek fast food]," Raziya says smiling, "But, I stopped after I realised that they used the same knives to cut the chicken or beef as they did pork." She also remembers the delicious citrus fruits she would eat there but she didn't ever see or venture near the historical ruins and monuments Athens is famous for. "I only went to the seaside two times, [that too] at night."

Undocumented and knowing little of the local language, she only felt safe travelling underground [in the metro]. "It was dangerous to be out in the open on the streets. I would always go to the bazaar in a hurry to avoid being seen by the police or asked for my papers."

Her precautions at least helped her avoid detection during her time in Greece. "I lived with a woman who had been caught by the police three times," she says. "She is still there, but I was afraid of being caught without papers and didn't know who would bail me out." Unable to live like that any longer, Raziya went to the Bangladeshi embassy and said she wanted to return.

"Also, I came back for my daughter," she adds. "My sister would call me to say that I should come back and make arrangements for my daughter's marriage." Without papers, Raziya had not been able to send money home regularly through official channels. Whenever she could, she would send money to her sister and brother-in-law, under whose care she had left her daughter. But on her return to Bangladesh, her brother-in-law proved untrustworthy, unable to account for Tk 1,30,000 of her money. "But I can't say anything because they raised my daughter in my absence."

Her daughter had been eight years old when Raziya left for Europe. Embarking on a long and uncertain journey, Raziya couldn't take many belongings besides a few clothes. All she had of her daughter was a photograph, which she bundled up in her clothes. "I always keep the photograph with me." With the money she had managed to return with, Raziya married off her daughter with a Tk 1,50,000 dowry. "That was all the money I had left."

Going to Europe, at any cost
Districts, including Comilla, Brahmanbaria, and Noakhali, in particular see lots of residents leaving their villages and towns to immigrate to countries in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Europe. The resilience of Bangladeshi migrant workers worldwide

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is well known—learning the language and adapting to life in countries very different from their own and coping with the pressure to save and/or send money home to support their families and relatives.

But as Raziya's account shows, the life they live is hardly idyllic, though it may seem so to those awaiting their turn to go abroad in search of a good life in Europe, preferred over the harsh working conditions often prevalent in the Middle East. A 2017 International Organisation for Migration (IOM) survey also found that while Europe is not the primary destination for potential migrants, 56.5 percent of the Bangladeshi respondents said that they intended to go to Europe within five years.

36-year-old Runa Akter was also in Greece, where she had gone with six other women from various districts. "I couldn't find any work here," she says about her village. Like Raziya, she went first to Lebanon, where she worked in the fields. From there, she went to Greece. Among other jobs, she worked at a farm, a restaurant (washing

(roughly USD 150) a month. Runa herself earned USD 100 a month back when she worked in Lebanon.

"I came back because of my lack of papers. I had applied twice for a red card to stay in Greece," says Runa. A "red card" from the police would identify her as an asylum seeker which would allow her to work and move freely in the meantime. Runa returned in December last year, after five years abroad. Towards the end, she had been sitting unemployed at home for a while. "When I came back, I was unable to bring back any money because for eight to nine months I had no work at all. Then, I decided to come back."

The return home

Undocumented migrants such as Raziya and Runa risked being caught for staying in Europe illegally, and have been returning to Bangladesh over the past few years following stricter enforcement by the immigration authorities and increasing asylum rejections. According to 2015-2016 Eurostat data, an average of 2,653 Bangladeshi migrants were



Runa Akter returned to Bangladesh under IOM's assisted voluntary returns programme (AVR) after five years in Europe. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



Runa has spent Tk 2,00,000 so far to re-migrate to Europe. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

dishes), and a garments factory in Athens. At the restaurant for example, she would make around 25 euros a day.

Both Raziya and Runa, despite having been in Greece for many years, had no legal standing. They worked for less than minimum wage and could not move around freely without police checks.

In many village households, there are one or more family members who live abroad. Runa lives with her sister's family—her brother-in-law is a welder working in Dubai. Their neighbour, an elderly woman squatting on the *uthan* beside me, says her daughter works as a house help in Lebanon for Tk 12,000

returned to their country of origin every year.

Both Raziya and Runa's return trip was funded by IOM and both received 500 euros from the organisation for them to have something to start over with in Bangladesh. But comprehensive measures for reintegration of the returnees from Europe have been taken only recently, with the Bangladesh government signing an agreement with IOM to that effect only in April this year. BRAC, together with the European Union and IOM, has introduced a reintegration programme, including social, psychological and economic

support, for returnees. In the meantime, the returnees are coping on their own.

To go abroad in the first place, Runa had had to borrow up to Tk 2,00,000. After her husband wasted a lot of her hard-earned money over the years, while doing no work himself, Runa sought a separation. "Many people are able to save and bring back quite a lot. But the basket I was pouring my money in was bottomless, whatever I saved was lost."

On her return, Runa received Tk 1,40,000 from IOM through its assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme. Back in Athens, she had given an interview as to what she would

do once back in Bangladesh to be eligible for reintegration assistance. Runa said she would use the money to buy cattle and set up her own dairy farm.

But Runa says that she cannot raise cattle on her small piece of land, which is quite flood-prone, and filling in the land would be quite expensive. "So, I thought that if I use the money to go abroad, I can work and pay for my land to be raised first." She got the money three months after returning and promptly handed it over to a *dalal* only a week later, to go to Europe once more.

Runa added Tk 10,000 to the cash Continued to page 12