

SPOTLIGHT



ILLUSTRATION: SHARARA ZAHEEN

Lured by job abroad, sold for sex-work

ZYMA ISLAM

Little-educated women from remote villages find themselves sold as sex-workers in the Middle East, because neither the government nor recruiting agencies can authenticate foreign employers seeking housemaids.

Her home is two boat rides away from central Narsingdi—first, a boat drops you off on the outermost banks of the char, and then after crossing half a mile across the sandy islet, a smaller dinghy takes you down a canal that feeds into the body of char. On either side of the sediment-heavy canal is pure unadulterated beauty—long sandy banks that get overridden with the tall grassy kashful in autumn, followed by lush green woodlands deeper inland. The only other traffic in the canal are families of waddling ducks and the rare clique of kids splashing about. The dinghy drops you at a place where you get your first glimpse of a paved road—that too, one that is barely wide enough to fit a single battery-run three-wheeler that you have to take all the way to the very end of the road. From there her home is once again a half mile away across fields.

Her landless parents work as sharecroppers on other people's fields where the going-rate is Tk 60 per day, making their family "ultra-poor" in academic terms. As a result, neither Kohinur, nor her younger brothers and sisters have completed even primary school. Scat trails around the house points out that the family practices open defecation.

So, when this teenager was approached a local broker named Badol, offering her a job as a housemaid with a Tk 18,000 monthly salary in Saudi Arabia, her parents found no reason to say no. "We thought she was going to the land of Makkah and Madina, she was going to be close to Allah, so we chose to send her," says her mother, a woman who is barely

in her forties, but looks decades older as a result of a life of hard labour. Kohinur was stuffed into a head-to-toe black burkha to get her passport photo taken. The tiny nervous face peering through the burkha's visor in her official portrait, was passed off as a 26-year-old married woman with two children in her passport, because it is not legal to send any woman under the age of 25 abroad. Then, clutching her fabricated passport, the teenager left her pristine homeland on a town-bound boat loaded with harvest, livestock, farmers and traders—the only vessels large enough to ply the Meghna river.

Her recruiting agency, M/S Biplob



Atiyah was sold to a brothel in Lebanon by brokers of a government accredited recruiting agency

International, secured a work clearance for her from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), and her details were uploaded to a database run by the Saudi government. They then matched her up with an employer who said he was looking for a housemaid. Kohinur flew out on October 30, 2018.

But once she reached Saudi Arabia, she realised that the house was not a family home; it was a brothel.

"They traded her like we trade goats and cattle," says Kohinur's mother, "Every day in the evening, men would come to the home to take her and return her by the morning." Sometimes the customers took her for days, and one even kept her

for a month.

"They beat her twice a day with wound up cables. She begged one of the other girls in the brothel to let her use a phone to call us. We informed the broker Badol that our daughter is in a brothel, and to prove that, she had to manage a video call. The girls helped her," describes her mother. The broker demanded Tk 45,000 from the family to bring back the girl. "We loaned the money from a moneylender at a steep interest," says the mother. Kohinur finally came back on January 13, 2019.

"We got her married last month to a construction worker, before word spread that she was made to do sex work in Saudi Arabia. She is not 18 yet. Such is the luck of my daughter, that her husband was too poor to even buy her a wedding sari. They gave her a normal cotton sari, and a cotton salwar kameez set," laments the mother.

Just a few miles away, on the same char, another ultra-poor family's daughter was also sent to Saudi Arabia to do sex work. 25-year-old Armin* and her two children were abandoned by her husband, leaving her to live with her parents. Her father barely scrapes a living by picking peanuts on others' land. Her home is a broken-down one-roomed shanty shared with their livestock. Cooking fuel made with dried cow dung and grass were stacked up to the ceiling by the foot of the bed, making the entire room smell—but they have nowhere else to keep it. "They threw my daughter off the second

ment-accredited recruiting agency from Saudi Arabia had uploaded the details of their employers to a database system that is accessible to the recruiting agencies in Bangladesh and the BMET—so both of them were aware of whom the women were being sent to. How is it that after Kohinur and Armin were legally sent to Saudi Arabia, they ended up doing sex work?

It seems as if every single person and body involved in Bangladesh send these women abroad like throwing a stone in the dark and hoping it hits the target. In spite of the introduction of digital database systems for employers and microchip-enabled smartcards for workers, nobody in Bangladesh has any way to verify whether the employers are legit.

For example, when the government was asked how these women ended up as sex slaves, they said they are not in charge of verification of the employers.

"We do not choose the employers, it is the local recruiting agencies that coordinate with the recruiting agencies in the target country to find the employers," said Mujibur Rahman, the director of emigration and protocol at BMET.

So, we asked Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury Noman, the secretary-general of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) how it is that women are legally being sent abroad to work in brothels.

"We cannot vet the employers. That is



Villages where these women come from are remote, but still has shops dedicated to sending migrant workers abroad

"The recruiting agencies receive USD 2,000 for every woman sent to Saudi Arabia for example, so there is a monetary incentive to do business with all sorts of employers," alleges Shariful Hasan, head of BRAC's migration programme. According to data provided by BRAC, 1,353 female abuse survivors returned just from Saudi Arabia alone between January to December last year. Among them, five were pregnant. There are no official statistics on how many female workers returning to Bangladesh were forced to work as sex slaves.

The responsibility—as it stands—has been shifted entirely on the young, vulnerable shoulders of the women being taken in as sex slaves.

"There is only one way for us to get employers blacklisted—if an allegation gets proven in the foreign courts," says Noman, "and for that the woman who makes the accusation must stay back in that country, and battle the case out in court. If she wins, the employer is blacklisted."

"But activists and her family members keep pressurising us to bring them back."

In effect, in order for Bangladeshi authorities to acknowledge an employer as a "pimp" or a sexual abuser, female migrant workers have to put their lives on hold, stay back in the country where they had been abused and engage in lengthy court battles that could last years. For this, they have to seek help from the Bangladesh consulate in that respective country.

This is a tall order for women like Kohinur and Armin. Firstly, they go abroad to salvage their families from poverty, making it impossible to stay back to fight legal battles. Secondly neither of the women even knew which city they were taken to! So how would they find the Bangladeshi embassy?

On the other hand, accusations without convictions are not enough for recruiting agencies on either side to blacklist an employer.

"If the employer is not blacklisted, there is no existing system for a recruiting agency to communicate to the other Bangladeshi

recruiting agencies that a certain employer runs a brothel, instead of a family home," continues Noman, "so they may end up sending more women to the same person." Evidently, crowdsourcing information does not hold much stock in this industry.

"Besides the woman could be lying," concludes Noman, stating that recruiting agencies have had to deal with cases of false allegations.

The scenario does not get better. "When the woman chooses to return back home, she has to sign a document saying that she is terminating the employment. We are then legally obligated to either return the USD 2,000 we were paid for recruiting the girl or send another woman," states Noman. He assures that recruiting agencies forgo the money rather than sending another woman to the same house.

Unfortunately, in practice, that money paid by the recruiting agency to employers to release the woman often comes from the families themselves—so not only do the women have to endure the torture, but they also have to pay crippling amounts of money to secure their release. When 20-year-old Atiyah's* husband received a call from Jordan that barely lasted two minutes, but constituted of his wife crying and saying "they have sent me to a bad house" over and over again, he knew he must get her back.

The construction worker from a village in Baghata, Narsingdi loaned Tk 1,36,000 (approximately USD 1,700) from a moneylender and handed it over to the broker who had sent his wife to Lebanon. Atiyah was brought back 18 days after she was sent to Lebanon, but unfortunately the family's expenses weren't over yet.

As a result of the gang-rape and torture Atiyah was subjected to, her health was affected and she suffered gynaecological complications. "I came back in 2017, and got pregnant the same year, but something went wrong with the pregnancy and they had to surgically remove a part of the body where the baby grows," says Atiyah quietly. Her medical records show that her right fallopian tube ruptured, and had to be surgically removed. "The doctor told me I cannot have a baby anymore," she adds. The surgery cost them Tk 70,000, and this, too, her husband had to loan from a moneylender.

"The torture there was horrible. I was not given any food to eat—not a single grain of rice. I was only given alcohol. I survived on the chanachur snacks my husband had packed for me before I left for Lebanon. I ate barely a morsel a day to make the packet last. In that state, I had to dress up in just underwear to serve up to four men at a time every night," describes Atiyah.

"And now my father and brothers are blaming me, saying it was my fault and that I had gone abroad to do sex work, so they cut me off from my inheritance," says the survivor.

But even under sky-high debt, the survivor is not without hope—a sobering reminder of the patience and endurance of migrant workers. When asked what she wants to do with her life now, Atiyah starts to talk about her talents. "I am very good at rearing chickens! Maybe I could try my hand at that? See I have two already!" she grinned. Her beautiful large black eyes, which were glassy and dead while talking about her time in Lebanon, now lit up her entire face.

*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the women



ILLUSTRATION: SHARARA ZAHEEN

floor of the brothel because she refused to give in to their demands," says Armin's mother. Armin survived the fall, but now has a crippled arm and a foot. The doctors had to surgically insert a rod into her leg to mend the fracture. A long scar extends from her upper arm to her shoulder, where the skin had split upon impact. Another scar nestles between her eyebrows on her forehead. The fall also broke two of her front teeth. A disabled, penniless Armin was deported from Saudi Arabia and sent back to Bangladesh on June 8, 2018.

Both Kohinur and Armin had gone through legal channels. The BMET had cleared them for work. A Saudi govern-

the job of the Saudi recruiting agencies," he says.

Meanwhile Kohinur's recruiting agency flat out denied sending anyone by that name, although records at BMET, disclosed to this correspondent by their officials, state otherwise. "We did not send anyone by that name last year," says the managing director, AKM Jashimuddin.

"Everyone involved in this trade is doing business but neither the government nor the recruiting agencies are willing to take responsibility," says Shakirul Islam, chairperson of Ovibashi Karmi Unnoyon Program (OKUP), an organisation providing support to migrant workers.