

Draft

Mother's land and others' land
'Stolen' youth of returned female migrants

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Abstract

This paper, a part of a major research project dealing with return migrants, delves into the perceptions among female return migrants who migrated in their youth and returned home as older women. Both qualitative and quantitatively analyzed data confirm that most of the respondents regret their migration decision mostly because they think they have lost their marriage and job prospects.

Introduction

“... .. departed with tight skin and black hair, and returned with wrinkled skin and white hair...” One returnee from Hong Kong to Nepal.

Of the around one million domestic helpers in Hong Kong and the Middle-East an overwhelming majority (92%) have moved over in their reproductive age² and majority of them were within the age group of 18- 25 years at the time of their departure (Ullah, 2010). They generally move with a two year contract; however some of them manage to renew their contracts and thus extend their stay. One study (see Ullah, 2010) shows that around 35% of them have been in Hong Kong for the last twelve years on renewal of contracts or changes of jobs. In order to recoup the money they spent on their migration and to meet the demands of the family members they left behind, they continued extending their contracts. However, at some point during their overseas life they

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² There were no clinical guidelines to characterize reproductive life span until 2001. However, representatives from organizations like the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM), the National Institutes of Health, and the North American Menopause Society, pooled their knowledge and developed the STRAW system which stands for the Stages of Reproductive Aging Workshop in which it was developed. According to STRAW reproductive stages are as follows: Early Reproductive Stage: Approximate age: Puberty to age 20; Middle Reproductive Stage: Approximate age: 20 to 38, and Late Reproductive Stage: Approximate age: 38 to 42.

experience a “wake up call” and begin to feel that the most important part of their life is finished. They start pondering over freshly over their lives’ plan.

In recent years increasing global unemployment has hit young people hard. The number of unemployed youth increased steadily between 1993 and 2003, to reach a current height of eighty-eight million unemployed youth. This places the youth share of the total unemployed at 47%, a ‘particularly troublesome figure given that youth make up only 25% of the working-age population’ (ILO, 2004). Current estimates predict that in 2015, 660 million young people will either be working or looking for work which is an increase of 7.5% over the number of youth in the labour force in 2003 (ILO, 2004). Young people are more inclined to move than any other groups. Unemployment pressure at home, their inherent propensity to move and ambition for upward economic and social mobility work as strong motivating factors for seeking overseas opportunities (Asian Demographic, 2004). “For most young people,³ finding decent work is a coming-of-age symbol that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood (ILO, 2004). These populations leave young and return old. In between, a long period of time is spent in a sort of illusion. However, at one point disillusionment sets in and many youth have what could be described as a ‘wake up’ call. After this period of disillusionment, these migrants feelings about the past merit more understanding.

Childhood and youth are in themselves valuable stages of life, more than just necessary stops on the way to adulthood (World Bank, 2010). Different scholars have provided different ways of defining youth. It as a phase when a person moves from a time of dependence (childhood) to independence (adulthood) and identifies four distinct aspects of this move.⁴ These transitions are interconnected, i.e. leaving home and setting up one’s own personal economy require an independent source of income, and to reach this stage a young person generally has to acquire qualifications and to have succeeded in demonstrating his or her skill in the labor market (Caldwell, 2002). Young people, when faced with uncertain employment prospects and financial insecurity, are likely to avoid establishing stable personal relationships, postpone marriage, and/or put off having or accepting the responsibility for children.

Almost all of these young female migrants moved over unaccompanied, meaning that their life abroad is mostly spent without a partner, except for a few exceptional cases. At one point, some of them decide to return; some fail to renew contracts; some of them get tired of staying away from homeland. Regardless of the reasons for return, subconsciously they calculate the costs and benefits of their migration. This cost-benefit analysis is not only in relation to monetary factors but also social cost-benefit analysis. Youth is the prime time of an individual. This is the time to contribute to the nation, build up one’s future, and gain personal satisfactions and attainments. It is crucial to

³ One of the most common definitions of youth in quantitative terms comprises persons between the age of 15 and 24. It is used by both the United Nations and the World Bank and is applied in many statistics and indicators.

⁴ Leaving the parental home and establishing new living arrangements; Completing full-time education; Forming close, stable personal relationships outside of the family, often resulting in marriage and children; and Testing the labor market, finding work and possibly settling into a career, and achieving a more or less sustainable livelihood.

understand the implications of the “wake-up call” about their life plans even after a decade or more of living abroad.

The transition from youth to adulthood for migrants represents a challenge to the youth/adult dichotomy of migration and presents a new set of challenges on account of their migration. Early migration often speeds up the transition to adulthood, as females tend to marry younger and take on the responsibilities of adulthood sooner. A research study that was conducted in garment factories in Bangladesh focused specifically on adolescence as a time frame to judge the effects of migration.⁵ The researchers posit that for young female garment workers, having a degree of autonomy during their adolescence as a result of their ability to work gives them greater decision-making ability once they transition into the role of a traditional wife later in life. In this context, migration benefits the migrant youth by redefining their traditional roles and increasing their economic value in the family. Employment in labor-intensive, low-skilled factory work offers women a chance to work outside the home and experience a modicum of independence.⁶ Women who migrate for employment are likely to marry later in life (Amin et al, 1998). However, when their stay becomes more prolonged than they expected, marriage often gets postponed forever, and existing relationships are likely to end.

Significant amounts of research thus far have been conducted on many aspects of migration and labour issues. Surprisingly, a severe scarcity persists in the body of knowledge that deals with this issue. The researcher encountered the same while searching for existing research that deals with the consequences (financial or psychological) on life plans after their youth is spent abroad unaccompanied. However, largely unknown is the consequence of such long truancy from the homeland. It is difficult to find research that deals with the issue of losing one’s youth while serving others abroad (Whitehead et al, 2007; du, 2003). The idea of the youth who has agency is quite common in studies of youth in developing countries. It has been widely used to counteract the idea of the youth as simply passive (Whitehead et al, 2007).

Objectives and methodology

The main objective of this paper is to better understand about what the returnees think about the prime time of their life that they spent abroad unaccompanied and what are the impacts on their life plan. This paper deals with two major issues: what are their perceptions about their time spent abroad and what do returnees think is the best way to compensate for their perceived loss. The specific objectives are:

⁵ Adolescence is usually defined as a time between the ages of 10 and 19 years when young people are making the transition from childhood to adulthood. The three main aspects of this stage of life are demographic and biological, psychological and emotional, and economic (Amin et al, 1998).

⁶ In a setting such as Bangladesh where girls are considered eligible for marriage soon after puberty and work provides an alternative to early marriage, child labor legislation could have important consequences for reproductive health.”⁶ Importantly, the transition from childhood to adulthood brings young migrants to terms with their own sexuality, which in Bangladesh, is managed through early marriage and *purdah*

- 1) to examine the differences in how they would have planned their life if they did not migrate as unaccompanied workers;
- 2) If they consider their migration a beneficial or correct decision; and
- 3) What would be their recommendations for the young people moving abroad unaccompanied.

Sample selection

While this is a qualitative research some descriptive statistics were applied. This research selected the study sample (n) based on snow-ball technique. It is important to note that the decision was made to select respondents who lived abroad at least 10 years; who migrated between the ages of 18 and 30 years and those who migrated unaccompanied. Accompanied ones were deliberately excluded because their life is entirely different and this is also beyond the scope of the research. All the respondents were single, female return migrants. A well-designed checklist was used for data collection. Countries were selected purposively based on the logistical convenience.

Table 1. Sample distributions

Countries	Respondents	%
Philippines	19	31
Bangladesh	23	33
Nepal	11	17
India	12	19
Total	63	100

Major questions asked:

What do they think about their long stint abroad; what are their major regrets and attainments; what were the major motivations for keeping extending their stay abroad.

Findings

The mean stint of the migrants abroad was 11.14 years. The average age when they moved was twenty-one-years-old which means they moved in their prime period of life.⁷ Of the total respondents, 35% (22) were married and the rest were singles, and nine of the married ones and three of the singles had children before they departed. Many returned when they reached fifty years of age. As high as 67% stayed back on extension of their contracts i.e. stayed legally and twenty-two stayed legally around eight years after their first entry and five percent became illegal after their first contract expired, and the rest declined to answer. Of the returnees, 71% lived in Hong Kong and 25% in the Middle East and the rest in different countries in East Asia.

Table 2. Age at departure

Age when departed	<i>f</i>	%
18-22	31	59

⁷ While it is subjective and often argued that some people consider retired life is their prime time. However, generally young period of life is considered prime time of life.

22-26	19	30
26-30	13	21
Mean year of stay	11.14	
Mean age	20.6	
Total	63	100.00

Source: Survey

Perceptions on life plan on return

“... .. time flies fast, I never thought I would spend so many years of my life out of my country. When I returned-- I found everything got changed. Though in between I visited twice my country but it seems I failed to comprehend the real change that took place during my absence... ..” A returnee to Bangladesh.

Some home communities were excited when migrants return homes, others are disappointed. Many family members grow accustomed to receiving the remittances, which end when a migrant returns home. Moreover, they appear as an extra ‘element’ in the family and face space limitations as the set up of space within the house has been entirely changed since they left.

Respondents evaluated their migration experiences and post-migration plans in the above way. Most of them seemed to be mentioning only regrets, which are arranged in order of significance they attached: lost marriage prospect; lost chances to be a mother; family ties weakened; lost skill and job opportunities; psychological burden; difficulty in re-integrating in the society. This would of course vary for male return migrants because marriage prospect is not an important issue for them. This evaluation does not essentially include the issues of financial gains.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents irrespective of origin claimed that they have lost their marriage prospect. This is something they regret more than anything. Except the respondents of the Philippines, almost all of them said ‘no marriage no baby’ (Table 3). They pointed to the fact that in order to be a real woman one has to be a mother and they have lost that prospect as well. In charting the transition from youth to adulthood for migrants, a spatial and relational disruption is evident in the family structure that is relevant to the patterns and effects of migration (Arulamplan et al, 2001). This dislocation can be both a cause and an effect of migration. Local norms about parent-child relationships have context-specific affects on how the dislocation is managed, while governmental discourse on the subject of youth migration has been negative to the point of labeling it “trafficking” even when the full definition of human trafficking has not been met.

Table 3. Perception on marriage prospects

Countries	Lost marriage prospect (%)	Lost chances to be a mother (%)
Philippines	95	53

Bangladesh	98	99
Nepal	91	95
India	90	94

Source: Survey

Inevitably, gender plays a large role in the expectations of young people and their ability or desire to migrate. Girls, in the African and Asian contexts, are not seen as permanent members of the household since they eventually leave home when married. Researchers have found that families are more likely to release a girl to work elsewhere, since her economic value is less and her future ties to the family in question are uncertain (CPRC, 2004). Compounded with that, girls have a slimmer chance of pursuing an education, and thus they are more likely to move in search of economic opportunities. This is problematic and troubling, since young migrant girls are at risk of sexual abuse or exploitation by employers (Socorro and Peter, 2004). Nearly 28% of the population of the Philippines is in the ‘youth’ age category, and of those 21 million, nearly 12% are migrants. Women and girls dominate the urban migration flow, particularly in the 15-19 year age grouping. Young people are a repository of the future: a public good, in some ways, and most certainly a private good in the African and Asian contexts. Though the age of majority varies greatly from place to place, the understanding of children as dependent, passive, and obedient is long-held (Whitehead et al, 2007). In contrast, large families may take advantage of local approval towards child migration when socioeconomic factors prevent them from adequately caring for all children. This is especially evident in rural Africa, where researchers have noticed a trend of youth migration that links closely to poverty and urbanization (CPRC, 2004). The family is one of the most important socio economic institutions in our society, but the nature of the links between family members varies dramatically across nationalities. In some cultures/nationalities family ties are weak and members only feel obligated up to a point to be linked to others members of the family. In other cultures family ties are strong (Alesina and Guiliano, 2007; Elder and Schimdt, 2004). The highest percentage of respondents who thought that their absence weakened the family ties are Nepalese (67%) followed by Indians; Filipinas and Bangladeshis. The variation across the countries may be explained by the traditional family bond i.e. traditional belief in joint family with strong ties. Most of those who felt their place of origin seemed like ‘new’ on their return are Indians (72%) followed by Nepalese, Bangladeshis and Filipinas.

Table 4. Perception on ties with families

Countries	Family ties weakened (%)	Feel like losing roots (%)
Philippines	65	54
Bangladesh	45	55
Nepal	67	70
India	66	72

Source: Survey

Professional compromise is a very common sacrifice found in the lower and unskilled labour migration trend. The researcher’s first encounter with an ex-college teacher in Indonesia who accepted job as domestic helper in Hong Kong answered his long-held

questions about professional compromise. Later, he encountered countless cases like trained and experienced nurses from the Philippines who were working in Hong Kong and Singapore as domestic helpers. Where adult migration is common there are well-established ways of making moves and more or less imperfect local knowledge about conditions of work and life at destinations, which young people also may make use of (Whitehead et al, 2007). A unique cause of migration for young migrants is the early loss of one or both parents, which heavily influences their decision to migrate. In Africa, impoverishment at home was a leading cause of migration, and in the Philippines better income prospects are major motivations (Whitehead et al, 2007). Any study in the migration of youth will undoubtedly stray towards multiple other disciplines to offer a complete explanation of the process. However, there are perceptible variations in the preferences of work attributes by gender and age group. Young women value the match between work and skills more, while men attach importance to work management (Ryan, 1999).

Table 4. Lost skill and job opportunities

Countries	Lost skill and job opportunities (%)
Philippines	78
Bangladesh	70
Nepal	84
India	75

Source: Survey

In most cases, when someone remains out of sight they eventually go out of mind. In some cases, they are not easily accepted again in the family. Therefore, reintegration within the family and society appear as a challenge for them, let alone arranging a new job in such a ‘new’ environment. Most of them reported losing contact with their friends and possible employers. They said now they have to start everything fresh as if they arrived in a ‘foreign country’.

The level of difficulty was not assessed in this paper. If they faced difficulty and what sort of difficulties those were, were the questions asked to know the difficulty dynamics in re-integration process. The highest percentage of returnees that faced difficulties were from Bangladesh followed by the Philippines, India and Nepal. Major difficulties mentioned were: family members and neighbors do not want to cooperate with anything; they do not know where to look for jobs; friendlessness (previous friends either left the place or got married) and people look at them as if they are aliens and relatives do not make contact anymore.

However, many respondents reported an eventual feeling of empowerment that accompanied their migration and employment. In the international realm, however, migration of young girls is often frowned upon and seen as a purely exploitative situation, yet the evidence shows that for these women, it helps them adjust to adulthood while bringing them in contact with ideas they may not have experienced otherwise (Amin, et al 1998). In contrast to the economic incentives for girls to work, factory workers often must deal with the stigma their work entails. In a conservative country like

Bangladesh, girls who work are feared to be corrupted and marriage prospects are also hampered. In response, workers often save and pay for their own dowries.

In the transition to adulthood for women, societal pressures always battle against migration and employment opportunities. However, on a broader scale, the opportunities these women gain through their migration experience could benefit women in conservative societies. Elsewhere in the region, researchers have recently been looking at the ways in which minority (migrant) youths integrate into dominant cultures. In a slightly different category than young people who migrate independently for employment, children of migrant workers experience a more difficult time adapting to their new lives and transitioning into adulthood because of it. “Some scholars have suggested that minority youths may deliberately resist adaptation of majority behavior and therefore also reject the goal of upward social mobility,” as they contain themselves within like communities by language or culture (Aslund et al, 2009).

There is a correlation between social integration and economic opportunities, confirming the suspicion that young people who migrate and then remain segregated in like communities may be at a disadvantage later in life (Jekielek and Brett, 2005).

Migration undoubtedly has important effects on the transition from childhood to adulthood. In some cases, these effects are positive, while in others, the effects show a need for greater regulation of young migration. The transition to adulthood is a complex process in which youth who have been dependent on parents throughout start taking definitive steps to achieve measures of financial, residential, and emotional independence. Without education, they are unlikely to integrate and will suffer from disconnection later in life. Many of them openly admitted they were sort of living an isolated life. Many relatives visited them after their return with a hope they would get money or they would borrow money from them. Obviously, as they returned with broken hope they stopped making contact. Of the married ones, 24% had divorced in different periods; 9% of them have been separated.

Table 5. Difficulty in re-integrating in the society

Countries	Respondents	%
Philippines	19	31
Bangladesh	23	33
Nepal	11	17
India	12	19
Total	63	100

Source: Survey

Conclusions

Globally, the number of female migrants has been large and increasing, both in terms of the sheer number of women involved and in terms of their share of the world's migrant stock. Migrants decide whether to stay in host country or to return to their home country, simultaneously with different choices. The decisions are made by comparing the

discounted flow of utility between staying for an additional year and returning to the home country permanently. The majority of these returnees often turn into unproductive members of their societies. This may largely depend on how well governments and civil societies invest in social, economic, and political institutions that meet the current needs of them. The even more obvious gain in making the most of the productive potential of youth and ensuring the availability of decent employment opportunities for youth is the personal gain to the young people themselves.

Existing research generally looks into the success cases of return migrants and their enterprising initiatives. However, little research attention has focused on the perception of those returnees who regret spending a major part of their life abroad. More research in this area could be conducted to see more deeply into the dynamics of their perceived 'losses'. To conclude, the statement from the World Youth report which said "negative perceptions of youth, the failure to help them develop to their full potential, the inability to recognize that investing in youth benefits national development, and the consequent unwillingness and incapacity of society to fully involve young people in a meaningful way have effectively deprived the world of a resource of inestimable value."

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