

Push, pull and the runs of choice

How much volition do Bangladeshi work migrants have in deciding to come to Singapore?

By Stephanie Heng

Foreword

Interns at Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) are usually tasked with doing a bit of research in the time they spend with us. Given that their internships are either only six or eight weeks, the topic is seldom very ambitious. Nonetheless, the exercise helps us to fill in gaps in our knowledge and suggest related angles worth exploring.

All research exercises require interaction with migrant workers. In this paper by Stephanie Heng, investigating the question of volition when low wage Bangladeshi workers come to Singapore, she had to interview 10 - 15 workers each at some length. This paper captures the nuances from the men's replies, giving us a more granular picture of men's decisions to migrate for work.

Introduction

There are around 1,386,000 foreign workers in Singapore, and they comprise 37.7% of Singapore's total workforce (Ministry of Manpower, 2018). Moreover, this number is made up of a sizeable amount of low-wage migrant workers. Commonly employed in areas of construction, shipyards, manufacturing, sanitation services, and domestic work, they are integral towards ensuring the continuous development of the Singapore economy and society.

There however has been a lack of research done as to what compels such migrant workers to come to Singapore to work. The common assumption is that money is the sole motivating reason, and while this is true to a large extent, it does not adequately explain the complex intersection of push and pull factors that ultimately led to their decision to work in Singapore. It also does not examine the extent

to which migration is voluntary on the part of the workers. Instead, most conceptualise migration in terms of binary opposites – voluntary versus involuntary migration. The temporary labour migration of Bangladeshi migrant workers has largely been cast in terms of voluntary migration, but this paper seeks to deconstruct this assumption by examining the push and pull factors behind their decision to work in Singapore, and explore migration voluntariness as a spectrum, rather than a dichotomous binary. By discussing the motivations and forces behind migrant workers' act of migration to Singapore, it is the hope of this study to promote greater consideration and understanding amongst its readers towards an oft-misunderstood community in Singapore.

Method

This paper bases its findings from interviews with 13 Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. Respondents were interviewed at either the TWC2 office or TWC2's Cuff Road Project, which is TWC2's meal programme. All respondents in this paper are male Bangladeshi migrant workers employed in areas of construction, shipyards, and manufacturing. They also face or previously encountered injury or salary problems. Beyond interviews, this paper also consulted secondary research papers and news articles.

Findings: Moving towards migration

3.1 Money

Neoclassical economic theories assume that 'rational, self-interested behaviour [is] affected minimally by social relations' (Granovetter, 1985: 481) and it is based on rational choice theory (Goss & Lindquist, 1995: 320). Labour migration flows are explained as occurring primarily due to a disparity in wage levels between countries and labour markets. This theory argues that the bulk of labour migration moves from labour force rich, but capital poor countries to labour force-poor and capital-rich nations. After undergoing a cost-benefit analysis, potential migrants migrate to where they expect the greatest returns over a specific period of time. This school of thought further suggests that migration decisions are taken by the sole individual and stem wholly from differences in labour markets.

According to this theory, migrants move freely in search of work and money. It must be acknowledged that there is truth to this theory. Money was the most commonly mentioned factor among respondents regarding their decision to temporarily migrate to Singapore for work. Respondent 1 remarks that money is the main reason for his decision to work in Singapore and he heard that 'money grows on trees'. Respondent 3 concurs with this perspective, adding repeatedly that Singapore is 'very good [because he] can earn so much money'. Respondent 13 emphasises that the reason he came to Singapore, is 'especially [because of] money.' Respondent 10 – when probed further why he keeps coming back to Singapore – muses that 'money finish very quickly even if come back [to Bangladesh]'. The need for money drives them to continually work in and return to Singapore over the years.

Nonetheless, neoclassical economic theories assume that the individual is a rational actor conducting a logical cost-benefit analysis. In practice however, migrant workers' handling of money matters does not appear strictly rational. Workers often have to fork out hefty agency fees before working in Singapore. This can range between SGD \$1000 to SGD \$8000. To be able to afford such fees, workers often resort to bank and personal loans or selling personal possessions and property. Many respondents answered that they have, at the time of the interview, not earned back the money as 'it is hard' (Respondent 8) and 'difficult' to (Respondent 10). Respondent 13 reports that he only earned back the money after continuous and repeated work in Singapore over ten years, and is able to return to Bangladesh to set up his own business because of the substantial financial compensation he received from his work injury. Therefore, notwithstanding the agency of such migrants, the decision to migrate is not an objectively rational and free choice, but is also complicated by an intersectionality of other factors.

3.2 Social Value

Another factor involved in their decision to temporarily migrate to Singapore for work includes the social value attached to work in Singapore. Respondent 1 notes that '80 per cent [of] people [working here] hear[d] [it] from someone who is working in Singapore, or a friend working in Singapore'. He also remarks that his friends were very impressed with him when he began to work in Singapore. This would appear to be reinforced by the migration network theory. Massey et al. (1993) proposes the migrant network theory, where 'migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, shared community origin' (Massey et al., 1993: 448). The migrant networks enable individuals to lower costs and uncertainties in the process of international migration, and potentially increase the net returns to migration (ibid.).

Respondent 6 further highlights the social capital attached to migration that can bolster marriageability and status; he found a wife after coming to Singapore and his parents-in-law were initially very impressed by his job. Respondent 10 agrees with this perspective, saying people looked at him like a 'rich man', therefore he was able to 'make a good impression' and marry a 'pretty' wife. Moreover, Respondent 10 talked about the need to maintain appearances despite the fact that the wages he earned while in Singapore was hardly sufficient to maintain his family. He mentioned that whenever he came back to Bangladesh, he needed to 'give people a lot of things', such as cloth or gold. This highlights how working in Singapore as a temporary migrant has social value and is a status symbol.

Nonetheless, Respondent 8 comments on the changing perceptions of working in Singapore. 'Last time good,' he says 'now people understand that working here is not that good'. The illusion of Singapore as being the ideal place to work is therefore increasingly eroded due to perhaps the difficulties of working here and earning sufficient money to even begin to pay back the agency fee while supporting their family. Respondent 13 expresses similar sentiments as Respondent 8, who observes that 'if you work in Singapore now, cannot get married to a good family. They [are] scared you run away when in Singapore, or be absent often, who would want that?' Respondent 7 concurs with this, saying 'in the past going to Singapore used to be a very glamorous thing; [a] sign of privilege, wealth and status within society. Now [it] is different, now people know that going to Singapore is a very difficult task,

very hard work'. Respondent 12 (who was unmarried at the time of the interview) comments: 'all people understand now [how difficult life in Singapore is], and now, I cannot get married'. Respondent 13 also agrees, further adding that he does not wish his son to work in Singapore due to the hard life there. Other sources beyond this research paper report the poor living conditions of workers in Singapore (see Malay, 2014; Silvam, 2019).

While the Ministry of Manpower (Singapore) reports that Singapore as a working destination continues to be rated favourably by foreign workers (Ministry of Manpower, 2019), there is a general consensus among respondents that life in Singapore for them is more difficult than initially thought, and this perception has been passed on to the community back in Bangladesh. This begs the question: why do Bangladeshi migrant workers still desire to come to Singapore despite the deteriorating impression of the 'Singaporean dream'? Why do Bangladeshi migrant workers still return to Singapore despite experiencing the difficulties here? These matters are inextricably entangled with the question of choice, and will be dissected in greater detail in the section '(In)voluntary Migration'.

3.3 Family

Money is often articulated as the reason for migration, but beneath it lies a prevalent concern with family. All respondents were reported as saying they needed money to sustain their families. Respondent 1 for instance supports a family of 8 members, and needed to earn money because his father fell sick. He also needs to continue working in Singapore to support his sister's education, who wants to be a doctor. 'My dream is over, [but] not hers', he remarks. Respondent 6 and 7 similarly support 6 family members each. Due to cultural norms, women are normally not expected to work or are discouraged from doing so. As such, the men of the family have to support all family members, including parents, sisters, wife (if any) and children (if any). This debunks the assumption of neoclassical economic theories, which assumes the migrant acting as an individual actor, and instead steers us towards migration systems theory.

According to the migration systems approach, migration is conceptualized as a sequential process of 'decision making, transition and adaptation' by the individual made within 'the context of general political-economic and specific social relationships at each stage' (Fawcett & Arnold, 1987). It emphasises the household as the unit of analysis acting in pursuit of a collective goal (Goss & Lindquist, 1995: 326). Therefore, migration is the outcome of a 'precise calculation of utility and collective decision making by the household unit' (ibid.). Respondent 13 makes an interesting remark, that with regards to his work and pay, as long as in his 'family, everybody makan, can already'. He has modest expectations that is not based solely on the individual accumulation of wealth (though this may be a secondary goal and is not mutually exclusive with providing for the family), but he emphasised that his priority is on feeding his family. Migration systems theory is therefore especially relevant to this case study, as family is highly significant in local culture (see Chowdhury, 2019) and often influences, and is greatly influenced by, migration decisions (see Rahman, 2011).

3.4 Corruption and Inequality

Assuming that migration is a free and personal choice overlooks the key factors driving displacement, including poverty, corruption, and systemic inequality within the sending country. For instance, respondents reported difficulties in getting a high-paying job in Bangladesh. Respondent 11 shares

that it is difficult to get a government job in Bangladesh, as one requires money to get a job, as compared to only merit. Respondent 13 picks up on the issue of inequality built into the system, as ‘if [your] education is good, job good; education lower, it’s hard to find money’. This implies that education is necessary to advance in society, but it is something that is often denied to those who lack the means to pursue it, such as the less well-off. This perpetuates structural inequality. For those that lack the financial means and educational qualifications to attain a high-paying job in Bangladesh, they turn to lower-paying jobs, such as those in the garment production industry (Respondent 13). Respondent 11 points out that as a farmer in Bangladesh he only earns SGD \$300 per month, which is barely enough to sustain his family.

Inherent corruption within the system similarly pushes vulnerable persons towards migrating to Singapore for work. Agents incentivise vulnerable persons to migrate by offering them false or distorted information of work in Singapore. Respondent 10 shares that his agent told him that ‘life is about compromise’, pressuring him to fork out the agent fee of SGD \$4000. Others make it appear that earning back the agent money is easy work. Other studies have found this to be true, where agents incentivise vulnerable persons to migrate (Rudnyckyj, 2004). Assuming that all migrants freely choose to work in Singapore to earn money therefore clouds the difficult circumstances precipitating these decisions.

Thus far, this section has shown that Bangladeshi migrant workers migrate to Singapore for a variety of reasons; overtly, money appears to be the sole purpose but this obscures the difficult and often unfair circumstances prompting these decisions. Such circumstances include poverty, corruption, and exploitation. There is also a general consensus that the social value of migrating to Singapore is slowly being eroded.

Findings: (In)voluntary migration

Bangladeshi migrant workers are mostly portrayed as voluntary migrants and their decision to temporarily migrate to Singapore for work is often presented as a free and informed choice. Nonetheless, assuming that migration is a free and personal choice overlooks the ‘deep-seated drivers of displacement, such as poverty, persecution and prejudice’ within the region (Kwek, 2019).

This therefore raises the question: do all migrant workers freely choose to work in Singapore? A common refrain among respondents that was observed was the phrase ‘no choice’. This was repeated directly by Respondents 7, 8, and 12 and the same sentiments were echoed by other respondents; Respondent 10 notes for instance, that if he had not worked in Singapore, money would not be enough. There was a lack of viable alternatives involved in his decision. Respondent 13 notes that he had ‘no choice, even if [work in Singapore is] hard, must do’ because he was the sole breadwinner of his family and his pay in Bangladesh (should he have worked there) would not have been enough.

In particular, Respondent 10 notes that his heart, every day, is in ‘Bangladesh’. He further elaborates that ‘every man everywhere is thinking of [his] motherland, wife, baby’. It can thus be inferred that if he had a choice he would not have wanted to work in Singapore. This was also explicitly proclaimed by Respondent 13, who said that his heart is ‘always’ in Bangladesh, and that he would rather stay

there if he had a choice. It should be noted that these sentiments were not unanimous amongst all respondents; but of 13 respondents, only one (Respondent 2) reported that if he had a choice, he would still come to Singapore to work.

As Kwek (2017) remarks, we cannot and should not forget the ‘agency of migrant workers in determining their futures’. Nonetheless, ‘applauding choice must not distract us from tackling coercion’ (Kwek, 2017) or understanding that for the large majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore, many of them lack the luxury of free choice. While there is a certain degree of volition in their decision to come to Singapore, it is unfair to assume that all decisions made by all workers are entirely voluntary, and that they should all be generally labelled as ‘voluntary migrants’.

For some of the workers, they have ‘no choice’ or viable alternatives, and it is this group of workers that often tolerate injustice and abuse; they are desperate to stay in Singapore despite the poor treatment experienced. Others may have a certain degree of choice but were indirectly coerced into this decision by extenuating factors. Finally, for an arguably smaller percentage of workers, they are lucky enough to be able to confidently assert that they migrated to Singapore of their own volition, and when given a chance, would still repeat this decision again. As this case study has shown, it is therefore possible and indeed necessary to conceptualise voluntariness of migration as a spectrum, rather than a binary.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has analysed the factors compelling and/or coercing Bangladeshi migrant workers to migrate temporarily to Singapore for work, with the intention of debating the larger issue of volition and voluntariness in Bangladeshi labour migration. This paper has discovered three pertinent points relevant to our discussion. First, as neoclassical economic theories often propose, money is indeed a prominent factor most commonly recognised by migrant workers as catalysing their decision to migrate to Singapore.

Nonetheless, this should not obscure the second key finding of this paper – that money is more often than not an obfuscation of the deep-rooted issues grounding their decision. These issues may and may not be related to financial reasons, but it must be noted that financial reasons are not the sole reason for their migration. Such issues precipitating their act of migration include culture and kinship, corruption, and inequality. Another interesting finding notes that migration to Singapore originally possessed a high social value, but this has since been eroded by the difficult realities of work in Singapore. This leads us to the next question: why do migrant workers continue to come to Singapore to work, or even return to Singapore to work, despite the difficulties faced?

The third and final finding of this paper partially answers this question – that volition is a complex creature, and it is necessary to conceptualise voluntariness in migration as a spectrum. There are different shades of voluntariness prompting Bangladeshi migrant workers to migrate to Singapore temporarily, and their act of migration is the outcome of a complex intersection of coercion and choice. It is therefore too simplistic to label all workers as voluntary migrants.



This paper raises more questions than it answers, some of which includes: to what extent does a worker's socio-economic background influence the interplay between choice and coercion? How far is this phenomenon specific to the Singapore context, and is it possible to extend the findings of this research to Bangladeshi labour migration to other countries in Asia? Lastly, how might these findings be applicable to female foreign domestic workers, assuming that gender might produce different considerations of familial responsibility? These are questions that would merit greater consideration in another study with a larger sample size.

This study began with the hope of nurturing greater understanding and consideration among its readers towards the migrant worker community in Singapore; and it is with these hopes of promoting more equitable treatment of this often-disenfranchised group that it shall conclude.

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