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**“Successful” migration, (English) language skills and global inequality:**

**The case of Bangladeshi migrants to the Middle East**

**Elizabeth J. Erling, Qumrul Hasan Chowdhury, Mike Solly and Philip Sargeant**

**Abstract**

Migration has become a vital element of the Bangladeshi economy, which has led to an increasing focus on providing Bangladeshis with the skills needed on the international labour market. English is often cited as one of these skills, and previous research has shown that a primary reason why Bangladeshis wish to learn English is due to its perceived value for pursuing work abroad (Erling et al. 2012). The extent to which English is of value in economic migration, however, has been underexplored in research (Coleman 2010). Drawing on data from a qualitative study which provides new insights into the experiences and perceptions of a cohort of returnee migrants, this article investigates the perceived value of (English) language skills for migration. The study finds that economic migrants see the advantages of having particular skills, especially English, for economic gain. However, applying a capabilities lens to their narratives (Sen, 1999) reveals the difficulties of classifying their experiences in terms of “success” given the deeply embedded structural issues and challenges the participants report facing. This article therefore questions assumptions that language skills can be transformational when social inequality is (re)produced in the context of migration. [192 words/200 limit]

**Keywords:** English, economic value, Bangladesh, migration, inequality

## **1. Introduction**

Migration is a key topic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and central to the global policy agenda. An indication of this was seen in the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants, held in September 2016, which marked the first time that the General Assembly called together the Heads of State and Government to discuss the unprecedented number of international migrants, reaching some 244 million worldwide in 2016 (UNFPA 2016). Of these, 65.6 million are estimated to be forcibly displaced, with the rest consisting primarily of economic migrants. There are several “push factors” contributing to migration, including, most notably at the moment, violent conflict and insecurity in countries like Syria and Afghanistan. A lack of employment opportunities and poverty also contribute to the intensity of the migration flow. Bangladesh, the focus of this paper, is a country which plays a significant role in supplying economic migrants to the world. Official government statistics suggest that from 1976 to 2017, Bangladesh sent more than 11 million workers for employment in other countries (BMET 2018). In all likelihood this figure is much higher, given the number of migrant workers travelling through unofficial channels. By far the greatest number of migrants from Bangladesh are those destined for the Middle East, who have historically made up about 75 per cent of the migrant population (BMET 2018).

Due to the way English is often positioned as the pre-eminent international lingua franca as well as a language of global economic development (Erling and Seargeant 2013), the language is frequently viewed as a necessary or at least highly helpful tool for “success” or for “economic gain”. Previous research undertaken in Bangladesh revealed that one of the most oft-cited reasons for wanting to learn English given by people from rural areas was that the language would provide them with the tools for pursuing economic migration; in this way, English was perceived as a means of helping them to ensure a better life for themselves

and their families (Erling et al 2012). It is within this context that the language skills of Bangladeshi migrant workers have become a matter of increasing concern in discussions of the country's economic development. In a policy dialogue between the Bangladeshi Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, the International Labour Organization and the Center for Policy Dialogue in 2015, it was argued that higher English language skills could help Bangladeshi migrant workers to achieve better jobs and earn higher salaries abroad (Prothom-Alo 2015). With regard to this, the Bangladeshi Minister of Planning stated:

Our workers do not have problems with skills. Their problem is language. Both the people of Sri Lanka and our people do the same work. But the worker from Sri Lanka gets 60 to 70 percent higher salary than our worker. It is because s/he can speak English well (Prothom-Alo 2015, translated by one of the authors).

The perceived value of English for temporary migrant workers from Bangladesh, however, has not been a central focus of academic work up to now. As Coleman (2010:10) laments, "the role of English in international migrant working has received relatively very little attention". The research that exists tends to be quantitative and to focus on the economic value of acquiring the host-country language for permanent migrants. Moreover, most of this research takes an "instrumentalist approach" (Tikly 2016), in which language skills are positioned as "commodities" (cf. Heller 2010) that contribute to economic gain. Few studies investigate the value of English qualitatively, or its perceived value as a lingua franca for migrants to countries with other dominant national languages (but see Guido, 2008; Seargeant et al. 2017).

In contrast, this study uses qualitative methodologies to investigate perceptions of the value of English among temporary Bangladeshi migrants to the Middle East. Applying Sen's (1999) 'capability approach' to the analysis of narratives collected in rural Bangladesh, we explore the role that (English) language skills played in their experience of migration, and the extent to which they relate their language skills to their "success", whether described as "economic gain" or as "capability enhancement". The study finds that economic migrants perceive skills, especially English language skills, as valuable for gaining economic and social capital. However, it is difficult to describe these skills as enabling "success" in terms of "capability enhancement", particularly given the deeply embedded structural issues and challenges the participants report facing. This article therefore questions assumptions, such as that put forward in the policy dialogue above (Prothom-Alo 2015), that language skills can be transformational in terms of individual, community and national development when social inequality is (re)produced in the context of migration (cf. Duchêne et al. 2013).

## **2. Context and analytical framework**

In this section, we first describe the geographic and socioeconomic context in which this study is set. We then go on to describe the analytic framework used for our study, including the position that we take on the idea of "development". As a final step, we describe previous research that investigated the role of language skills in migration, which has shaped the development of our study.

### **2.1 Economic migration from Bangladesh**

This study examines the role of English language skills in the context of economic migration from Bangladesh to the Middle East. Large-scale migration to the Middle East started in the 1970s, when economic prosperity in the Gulf region was growing due to the discovery of

natural resources in the area, along with the rise in global oil prices. These circumstances created a demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in a variety of sectors (Mamun and Nath 2010:29) – a demand which Bangladeshis, among others from countries with developing economies, were eager to fill.

Major destinations for Bangladeshi economic migrants include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Qatar and Kuwait (BMET 2018). Migration to the Middle East has mainly been characterized by temporary employment for specific job contracts, with migrants being expected to return home after completion of the contract period (Mamun and Nath 2010:31). Though, for many migrants, “temporary” employment becomes a permanent solution, as it is not uncommon for people to have several consecutive short-term contracts with the same or different employer over a long-span of their working life. The number of migrants to the Middle East had been rapidly increasing until 2008. Events such as the economic downturn of 2008 and the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions had an impact on migration from Bangladesh at that point, with an estimated 35,000 Bangladeshis repatriated from Libya (IOM 2015). Despite this, economic migration from Bangladesh has continued to flourish, with a total of 1,008,525 workers migrating from Bangladesh in 2017 (BMET 2018).

Economic migration has been seen as a major opportunity to support the development of Bangladesh, which graduated from the status of low income country to a lower middle income country in 2014 (World Bank, 2015). The potential for migration to contribute to development has been met with enthusiasm by many families, migration scholars and government ministers alike, with migration being actively encouraged, not only as a means of tackling poverty and un- and under-employment, but also as a way to address overpopulation

and the environmental issues facing the country (Mamun and Nath 2010:30; Moses 2009; Zaman and Akbar 2013). Remittances – money sent back to the source country – are seen as playing a significant role in the economic growth of Bangladesh, contributing to a decrease in poverty and an increase in recipient family’s income and living standards (Ahmed 2011; Siddiqui 2016). Bangladesh is cited as the seventh largest remittance recipient country in the world, earning nearly 14 billion USD in remittances in 2017 (BMET 2018). Remittances constitute nearly eight per cent of the country’s GDP (World Bank, 2016), a figure that outnumbers overseas aid by six times and foreign direct investment by 12 times (Hassan et al. 2016:107).

## **2.2 Our conception of “development”**

Our account of migration from Bangladesh so far mirrors many contemporary discussions in that there has been a narrow focus on the potential of migration to promote development, with development simplistically and instrumentally conceived of as “economic growth” (cf. Tikly 2016). In the study reported on below, however, we attempted to follow migration scholars such as Bonfanti (2014), de Haas (2014) and Preibisch et al. (2014), who are critical of a narrow focus on economic development in migration studies and of the resulting unproblematic promotion of migration. Such scholars call attention to the regular exploitation and human rights abuses that many migrants face in their efforts to attract economic gain for themselves and their families. Like them, we adopt Sen’s analytical framework (1999), which views development not simply in economic terms, but as an expansion of people’s choices and control. Sen (1999:293) defines development as focusing “on the ability – the substantive freedom – of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have”. Within this approach, Sen uses the concept of “capabilities” to describe the ability of individuals to pursue individual wellbeing and achieve meaningful outcomes for

themselves and their families. Applying this lens, the “success” of migration – and any migration-targeted education initiatives – should be evaluated not solely in terms of how much income is generated or remitted back to a country, but on how well lives are going for each migrant and their families and on the extent to which people’s capabilities are enhanced.

Adopting Sen’s capability approach reveals that a narrow focus on the economic benefits of migration overlooks the social and psychological costs of migration for migrant workers and their families. Research on economic migrants from Bangladesh which has embraced this more holistic focus has provided glimpses into such costs of migration for individuals and the country. For example, Rahman (2012) examined the hardships, discrimination and injustice that migrants regularly face when working abroad. Studies have also explored the impact of father absence on families (Shenk et al. 2013), and the discrimination that women face, both as providers (Rosario 2007) and recipients of remittances (Callan 2007). Other work has looked at the wider impacts of migration, asserting that it has “drained local resources and impeded local development” (Rahman 2000:120). This is because families and communities who have witnessed gains as a result of remittances often become dependent on them and aspirations continue to expand, propelling the need for migration. Dannecker (2009:46) argues that aspirations and hope for a better future are then projected on “a temporary life outside Bangladesh” with change and development becoming processes that do not seem to be possible locally. Others point to the fact that remittances have contributed to the creation of new inequalities (e.g. Callan, 2007), as despite the country’s upward economic status, development challenges continue to persist: Recent figures suggest that 31 per cent of the population still live below the poverty line (Riaz and Rahman 2016). Adopting a more holistic lens to explore migration clearly demonstrates that, despite any economic advances

made by the country, strategies to promote a safe and fair system of migration and development continue to be of key importance to Bangladesh.

### **2.3 The role of language skills in economic migration**

Before moving to the study itself, we provide a brief review of previous research in the area of language skills in economic migration which our study builds on. There has been a range of research exploring the factors contributing to a migrant worker's potential for economic success in various contexts. However, much of this research has been conducted within the economically focused "instrumentalist approach" described above, which therefore also adopts a narrow conception of language skills as commodities – i.e. means to ends or tools which collectively increase people's earning potential (cf. Heller 2010). Some of this work has looked into the financial returns of learning the host country language, unsurprisingly confirming the economic and social value of this for migrant workers (e.g. Chiswick and Miller 1995; 2003; Dustmann and Fabri 2003; Dustmann and van Soest 2001). These studies, however, also found that language skills are not the only significant factor influencing earnings: education, skill level, ethnicity, gender, age at arrival and duration of stay also have a significant impact (cf. Gao and Smyth 2011; Thang et al. 2002).

Given the growing role of English as a lingua franca in a range of professional domains globally, there is an increasing amount of research exploring values of English for migrant workers. For example, Froese et al. (2012) revealed that, for migrant workers in South Korea, the use of Korean at work was useful in terms of cultural adjustments, but that English also had functional and status-related value. Lan (2003) demonstrated how, in Taiwan, English language skills boost the cultural capital of female Filipina domestic service workers, who, despite their low status generally, have a socioeconomic advantage that can be attributed to

their English language skills. There have also been studies that have found limited value of English, particularly for migrants of lower social status. For example, Guido (2008), who explored exchanges in English between European immigration officials and non-European migrants, found that unequal power relations in these encounters contributes to communicative difficulties, meaning that the English skills of the non-European migrants do not always work in their favour. This work suggests that English language skills – while certainly valuable – do not necessarily offer individuals from unprivileged backgrounds opportunities to circumvent inequality.

In the context of the Middle East which, as we have seen, hosts a significant number of temporary economic migrants, research into the values of language and communicative needs of migrants is in its infancy. Recent work has explored the perceived value of English and its role in perpetuating inequalities in, for example, Dubai (Piller 2016). Moreover, it has been established that one of the primary reasons given by rural Bangladeshis for wanting to learn English is that it can assist in pursuing economic migration (Erling et al 2014). There have also been investigations into the economic value of English in the Bangladeshi domestic labour market (Erling and Power 2014) which established a positive correlation between English language learning and economic gain. However, these studies also make clear that the value of English is influenced by local labour market constraints and is rewarded differently depending both on the sector of employment and on an individual socioeconomic background (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity class) (Erling 2017).

The communicative needs of Bangladeshi migrants working in the Middle East have only been briefly touched on in previous work. Afsar (2009), for example, reports on incidents of people being cheated out of their contract entitlements due to their lack of Arabic, and of

being beaten when not carrying out work properly as a result of misunderstanding directives (cf. IOM 2002). Buchenau (2008: 5) finds that “[l]anguage barriers and a lack of understanding of the country’s legal system can make it difficult for migrant workers to seek legal remedies against unfair labor practices”, while Rubdy and McKay (2013) find that Bangladeshis often face various forms of discrimination, in part because they place low on the scale of English proficiency, in particular when compared to migrant workers from the Philippines or Malaysia. The current study was designed to provide deeper insight into the extent to which English is perceived as valuable, and as a means of enhancing capabilities, for economic migrants to the Middle East from Bangladesh.

### **3. The study**

Many of the studies reported on above draw primarily on quantitative methods to focus primarily on the economic values of language skills in migration. As such they provide little insight into what Sen (1999:20) calls the “broader and fuller picture of success and deprivation”. To gain insight into the real freedoms or opportunities that migrants have to achieve what they value, as Sen suggests, we adopted a qualitative methodology, with two Bangladeshi-based researchers carrying out sets of interviews with Bangladeshis who had recently returned from overseas work.

The context of the study was a rural village in the Munshiganj district of the Dhaka division, which has a long history of migration with most homes having family members who are working, or have worked in the Middle East (or, less commonly, the Far East) (Mamun and Nath 2010). Farming is the main profession and industry in this district, with very little large-scale alternative employment. The village is about 30 miles south of the capital city of Dhaka; however, the journey from central Dhaka can easily take three or more hours by car.

Gaining physical access to the community was challenging, but so was finding participants. The Bangladeshi research team was based in Dhaka and, although familiar with issues of migration, they did not have direct personal connections to the migrant community. However, the father-in-law of one of the researchers originated from a village which had experienced a high rate of migration, and he was able to introduce the researchers to a key contact in that village. This contact then served as a guide throughout the fieldwork and provided the team with a link to the community. The process of contacting further participants was done by means of “snowball sampling”, whereby existing participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances, and thus use the local networks as a means of building up a broad group of participants (see further Erling et al 2012).

### **3.1 Data collection**

The data collection was undertaken by two Bangladeshi researchers in the team and took place in three stages: During an initial visit in September 2013, the team met the key contact and tested the instrument and method of collecting data. At this time, one of the UK-based researchers was also able to visit the research site. The main data collection occurred during a 10-day visit in November 2013, when the majority of participants were interviewed. A follow-up visit was undertaken in June 2014 in order to fill in gaps in information about some of the participants, and to recruit two more female participants, taking the total to four.

The data collection consisted of interviews, in which participants were invited to offer their autobiographic narratives of and reflections on their personal migration histories, and in recounting these they were asked about the role of language in their experience (Pavlenko 2007; Piller and Takahashi 2010). This methodology was employed to place the individuals,

their experiences and voices at the centre of the analysis (cf. Verd and Lopez 2011). The interview schedule began with general questions about the participant's education (including languages spoken) and what they had wanted to do and be upon leaving school. This led to a second strand of questions relating to the impetus behind participants' decision to migrate, as well as the main challenges they had in the processes required for migration. The third strand included questions about participants' experiences while working abroad, eliciting information on the jobs held, their opportunities and the skills needed for the jobs they undertook. The final theme explored experiences and reflections since returning to Bangladesh, and whether the experience of migration had been financially or otherwise beneficial in terms of offering freedoms and opportunities. Issues about language were not an explicit focus of the interview, but they often naturally came up as part of the response to questions. If they did not, the researcher probed into aspects of language in the migration process. While participants were invited to reflect on their perceptions of the relationship between language skills and economic benefit, the interview discussions often went far beyond this, with participants also mentioning personal and familial hardships they faced.

The interviews were undertaken either with individuals or groups, depending on the relationship and rapport between the participants, and their availability. All interviews took place in Bangla and were audio-recorded and then transcribed and translated by the researchers. Anonymised, translated excerpts appear in the discussion below.

### **3.2 Ethical issues**

In conducting the study, we followed the structured framework of the Open University Human Participants and Material Ethics Committee as well as the British Association for

Applied Linguistics Recommendations for Good Practice in Applied Linguistics<sup>1</sup>. However, we found that additional ethical considerations were required (see further Hultgren et al. 2016). For example, asking participants to reflect on their experiences of migration meant that some of them relayed stories of hardship, exploitation and abuse. The researchers were faced with an intense sense of helplessness in the face of these narratives, and a feeling that focusing on language skills in migration was diverting the focus away from more serious issues. This has propelled our sense of obligation to ensure that these stories were told, and ultimately motivated us to connect the original focus on language in the study with wider issues of social justice – and to adopt Sen’s capability approach in analysing these narratives.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The data in this study consist of transcribed narratives, which we have treated as “accounts” of the attitudes, beliefs, and mental states of participants, rather than as factual reports (Talmy 2010:132). These accounts present the narratives of Bangladeshi migrants (translated into English), and thus give voice to an underrepresented group. Their relating of the experience of migration led to them recounting stories about their day-to-day language use.

In analysing these narratives, we first constructed a profile of each participant, which included a summary of their biography, as related to us. After an initial reading of the transcripts, we identified common themes that were portrayed as important to the experience of migration, namely economic advancement, social status, education and training, language skills and needs for intercultural communication. The transcripts were coded according to these five themes by three researchers in the team. A fourth researcher then read the entire

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<sup>1</sup> [https://baalweb.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/goodpractice\\_full\\_2016.pdf](https://baalweb.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/goodpractice_full_2016.pdf)

coded dataset to check for consistency and compiled responses in a table so that they could be quantified and patterns could be seen.

The analysis of participants' narratives provided insight into their experiences, their perceived needs and attitudes to the role of language in migration, and broader ideological patterns relating to the positioning of different languages within society. The application of Sen's capability approach brought into focus the presence or absence of meaningful outcomes that the participants experienced as part of migration, and whether, and if so, how, these were related to language skills.

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

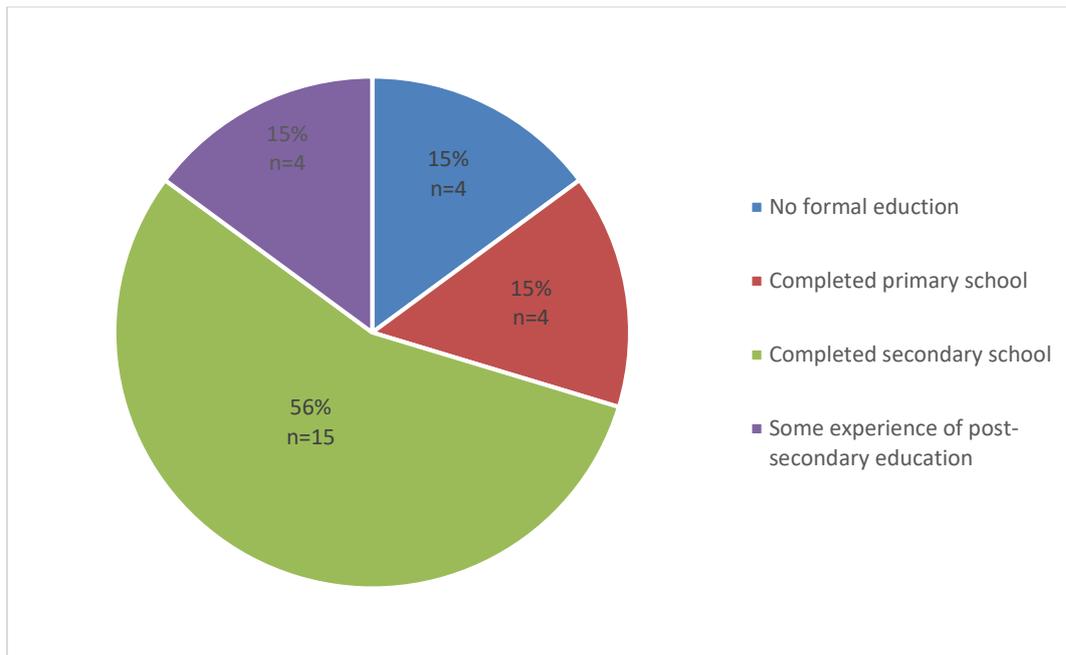
The findings of the study are reported in two stages. The first provides a profile of the participants, which is complemented by findings from other studies of migrants from Bangladesh. The second stage focuses on participants' perceptions of the outcomes of migration and the extent to which they see language skills as enabling a more successful migration experience.

##### **4.1 Profile of participants**

The participants in this study largely match the profile of those reported elsewhere (e.g. Afsar 2009; Rahman 2012): relatively young at the time of departure, mostly male, semi-skilled or unskilled and with low education levels. Many of them had worked abroad for long periods, with 2.5 years being the shortest and 24 years the longest period. As in other studies, male Bangladeshi migrants were in the majority (85%). Despite a concerted effort to recruit female participants, the study involved only four women, all of whom had been domestic workers. As in other studies, most of the male migrant workers were married with their wives and

families living in Bangladesh, which means that they had significant pressure to support the family and send home remittances. All four of the women in our study were married, with two of them reporting that their husbands had left them prior to migration.

As in previous research with migrant workers, the participants in this study were primarily from poor families with low levels of formal education (cf. Afsar 2009; see Figure 1). Four of the participants had no formal education (15%), and four (15%) had completed the primary school level. Over half of the sample (56%) had completed secondary school education, though only one of the four women had achieved this level. Only four respondents had experience of post-secondary education. Women had less experience of education than men: two out of the four women, but only two of the 23 men, had no formal education. Those with little experience of formal education tended to have only basic literacy skills in Bangla, with some mentioning that they were only able to write their names. Low levels of education meant that several of the participants were challenged by the literacy and linguistic demands of migration, which included filling out passport forms and landing cards and reading crucial information about employment and legal rights.



*Figure 1: Education levels of participants*

Just as formal educational levels were quite low in the population, only eight of the 27 participants (ca. 30%) had received any technical training. The majority of those who had technical training were not able to find work in that area in Bangladesh, and also worked in another area once abroad. This meant that most participants learnt whatever skills they had on the job.

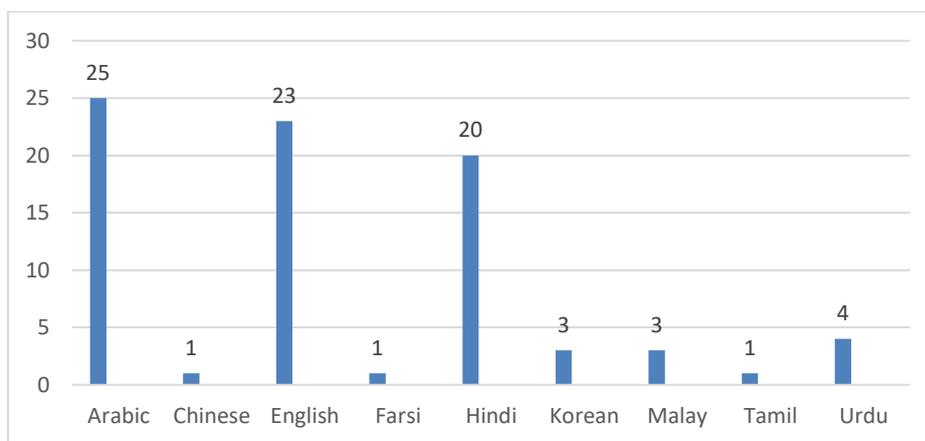
Participants' lack of educational and professional success presented challenges for them to pursue the life that they valued in Bangladesh, and contributed to their decisions to migrate. Low scores on exams blocked some of the participants from carrying on with further education. For others, their low socioeconomic status meant that they could not take up cost-bearing opportunities for education. Many of them reported family tragedies as an impetus for seeking work abroad, e.g. seven participants mentioned the early death of their father. For most of the women, low levels of formal education meant that they could not access jobs in Bangladesh as there are very few (socially acceptable) low-skilled employment opportunities

for women. The two who were divorced were denied any financial support; hence working abroad was one of the only options available to support their children (cf. Asfar 2009). For these participants, migration may be seen as offering an enhancement of financial opportunities; however, this comes at the price of being separated from their children and families.

The fact that migrants tend to be young when they leave means that migration often offers people their first experience outside of the country (and for many, even outside of their villages). Many participants in our study did not have previous experience of travel or of coming into contact with other languages and cultures prior to migration. Despite this, the participants reported a range of language skills pre-departure: 15 of them (56%) said that they had learned some English, most often as part of their formal education since English has been taught in government schools from Grade 1 since the 1990s. Nine of the participants (33%) reported knowing some Arabic prior to departure, as the language is often taught as part of religious education in Bangladesh. A third (9), however, had no knowledge of foreign languages before departure.

All participants reported learning languages through the migration process and multilingualism was common amongst them. Almost everyone had learned at least some Arabic, many reporting that they now speak the language fluently (though writing skills were less common). Twenty-three of the 27 participants (85%) reported having some competence in English (see Figure 2). Other languages that participants mentioned having competence in included Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Malay and Urdu, with eight (30%) citing abilities in four or more languages (in addition to Bangla) (see Appendix 1). Participants reported that they could draw on similarities between Bangla and Hindi and/or Urdu, which made those

languages, which were also used as lingua franca amongst migrant workers in the Middle East, easier to speak and understand. While levels were not assessed, many participants mentioned that their language skills were limited, particularly with regard to writing. Despite this, the participants' descriptions of their language competences suggested that they are highly multilingual with great willingness to learn languages, despite there being almost no formal opportunities to do so.



*Figure 2: Participants' languages (in addition to Bangla) (N=27)*

The participants were involved in a range of occupations during their time abroad, for example automobile mechanic, construction worker, domestic worker, driver or pipeline labourer (see Appendix 1). The range of jobs undertaken provides a sense of the occupational insecurity that many migrants face as well as the limits of working on temporary contracts. It also shows the flexibility required of economic migrants in terms of skills and language use. The participants worked in a variety of countries, with many of them having experience in several within the Middle East, and some in other contexts as well (e.g. Korea, Malaysia and Singapore). Changes in jobs and location often meant, however, that there was likely to be less economic benefit, as costs are always involved in moving and starting a new job.

## 4.2 Migration and economic gain

As established above, the primary driver of migration from Bangladesh is economic gain, which is also an important aspect of capability enhancement. In analysing participants' narratives, we therefore wanted to explore whether they perceived their experience of migration as economically successful. As can be seen in Figure 3, twelve participants (44%) reported that they overwhelmingly perceived their experience of migration as positive; in contrast, eleven participants (41%) had mixed views about their experience of migration and four (15%) perceived it as mostly negative (cf. Afsar, 2009).

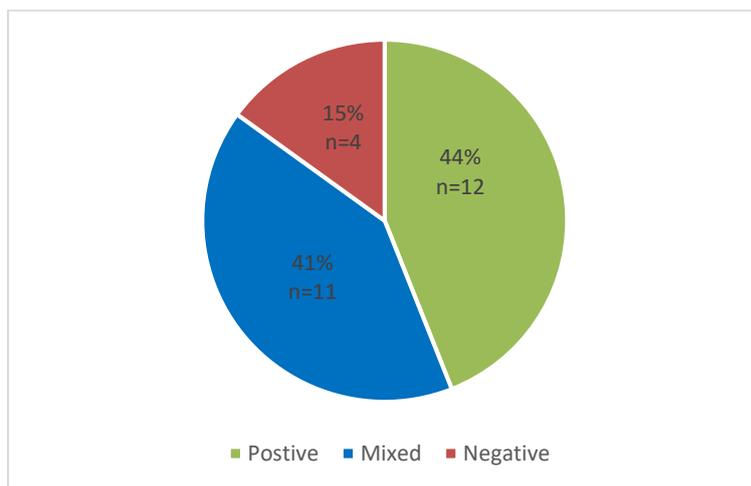


Figure 3: Participants' perception of the migration experience (N=27)

### 4.2.1 Positive experiences of migration and economic gain

The largest group (44%) reported having an overall positive experience of migration and benefitting financially from it. These participants were able to contribute significantly to their own and their family's economic wellbeing. Hafez, for example, was enthusiastic about his experience of working in Saudi Arabia. Unsatisfied with his salary as an Imam in his local village, he decided to pursue work abroad, bolstered by watching others in his community improve their status. Hafez worked as an Imam and shopkeeper for two and half years,

returning to Bangladesh only because his visa expired. According to him, this experience was financially beneficial, as he “earned triple money there than I used to earn here.” Once he returned, he used his savings to open a shop. For Hafez, the benefits of migration extended beyond the financial, as he felt that working abroad improved his social standing in his family and community because of the remittances he was able to send home. Moreover, he was personally enriched by the opportunity to learn about other Islamic ways of life and improve his Arabic. For him, migration had unequivocally enhanced his capabilities: it was an experience that offered him not only financial success, but status and security, along with opportunities to learn in an area in which he felt personally and professionally invested. He attributed his success abroad to having some technical and language skills (most important among these for him were Arabic and Hindi) and a good level of basic education.

Another positive experience was reported by Monjurul, who worked in catering in Saudi Arabia for over nine years. Monjurul’s father died when he was young, which left the family poor and limited his opportunities to go to school. Before migrating, he was engaged in agricultural work, which did not provide enough income to support his family. Through his elder brother who was working in Saudi Arabia, Monjurul was able to get a job there. He reported that he knew some English prior to migration, which was helpful at times, but not always because many Saudis did not speak it. For him, Arabic was essential, which he learned after arrival. He reported satisfaction with his working conditions and salary, recounting with pride that he was able to support his sons through to the secondary school level and managed to arrange for them all to find work abroad. He attributed his success not to any language or technical skills, but to hard work and having fair employers who treated him well. Monjurul is satisfied with his situation, in which he is retired in Bangladesh and

dependent on his sons' income. The family's economic status has increased, but the dependence on remittances continues.

#### **4.2.2 Mixed experiences of migration and economic gain**

The next largest group of eleven participants (41%) perceived the experience of migration as mixed. While these participants reported some economic gains through migration, they also mentioned that these were achieved at significant cost. Participants reported having to endure physical and emotional hardship to achieve whatever gains they had. Pijush, for example, grew up in an acutely poor family. His father fell ill when he was young, and Pijush started working as a day labourer. He therefore had no opportunity to attend formal education or learn languages besides Bangla. After starting a family in Bangladesh, Pijush went to work as a construction worker in Singapore. He learned some English on the job due to the need to communicate with locals as well as fellow migrant workers from India. During this time, Pijush was not able to earn enough to make his family comfortable, and he reported that they were not satisfied with the remittances he was able to send. He regretted that, because of this, none of his four children were able to continue with their education beyond primary school, and thus the family had not escaped the cycle of being relatively low skilled and poor. Still, he reported that working abroad had at least allowed him to provide for his family, including his parents, and make sure that all his children got married. He perceived education as being highly important, and felt that if he had been educated and had skills in other languages, his experience of migration would have been more profitable.

A similarly mixed report of experiences came from Afia, who grew up with financial hardship in her family, her father dying when she was young. This restricted her opportunities for formal education and language learning, and she reported only being able to write her

name. She got married when she was twelve, and her husband, a mason, was only employed for six months a year because of the rainy season. She thus sought employment abroad to help support the family. Afia had been a domestic worker in six Middle-Eastern countries for more than twenty years. She spoke Arabic competently but considered English to be beyond her abilities. She had been able to learn Arabic on the job, feeling to a certain extent forced to as she was sometimes beaten for making mistakes or not understanding directives. As she reported:

At the beginning I had lots of problem with language. If they asked for glass, I used to give plate. If they asked for spoons, I gave plates. In the case of such mistakes, they knocked me ... (Afia)

Even though she had been able to pay for renovations to their house and finance her children's education, Afia was not able to remit as much money as her family expected. Afia attributed her relative lack of economic success to changing jobs, which caused a set back each time. Because she had not been able to find a good employer, Afia was not able to achieve the financial security she was seeking, despite having learned Arabic and spending long periods working abroad.

These two narratives suggest that for people who have missed out on opportunities for formal education, migration can offer mixed prospects in terms of capability enhancement. One hand, they are able to gain employment which might not be available to them in Bangladesh and remit money to their families. On the other, salaries tend to be low and there are significant physical and psychological costs of migration. Thus migration does not always enable a financial transformation and inequalities are perpetuated.

### **4.2.3 Negative experiences of migration and economic gain**

Four of the participants (15%) in the study viewed the experience of migration as overwhelmingly negative, with two saying they would have been better off not going abroad. An example of this position comes from Badol, who had completed secondary school, spoke English and had experience working as an electrician in Bangladesh before working in the UAE for three years. He was recruited by an agency for a job as an electrician, but instead worked as a construction worker and received half of the salary he had been promised. Frustrated, Badol decided to leave that job and work illegally. Due to the stress and insecurity of his situation, he returned to Bangladesh after a year. Badol reported that while abroad he did not even earn back the money that it had cost him to migrate:

Before I went aboard, I too had the ambition that things will significantly change if I could go abroad. But you know this did not happen. After going there, I saw a different reality. People say a lot of things, but it's very difficult to change your circumstances at foreign countries. ... If situation favours you and you show good performance, you will do well. But things do not work accordingly, and then this is a complete loss. Waste of money, waste of time, waste of your energy and you get old. You do hard work and your body becomes weak. (Badol)

Despite being one of the most educated and skilled participants in the sample, speaking Arabic, English and Hindi, Badol's experience of migration was not positive or profitable and he did not perceive it as an enhancement of capabilities.

### **4.3 The role of language and other factors in the experience of migration**

The common perception is that language skills, particularly English, play an important role in ensuring that Bangladeshis have a profitable and positive experience of migration. However the range of narratives explored above make it difficult to establish a relationship between language skills and economic success. Participants like Badol had relatively high levels of education and languages skills before departure, but did not profit financially from migration or view the experience as positive. In contrast, participants like Monjurul came from disadvantaged backgrounds with no or minimal experience of formal education– and limited knowledge of English – but had a positive experience of migration that allowed them to remit significant amounts of money. In the following, we look in further detail at participants’ perceptions of the importance of language skills in their experience of migration, also noting other factors mentioned as enhancing or limiting their capabilities, such as technical skills and structural issues beyond their control.

#### **4.3.1 The role of language skills in economic migration**

The participants in this study overwhelmingly felt that – while they may not be the only or most important criteria for success – skills in languages other than Bangla played an important role in successful economic migration, and hence capability enhancement: 22 of them (81%) linked economic success to language skills. When asked what advice they would give someone planning to work abroad, 14 (52%) of the participants mentioned the importance of learning languages, and 11 (41%) of the participants thought that they would have earned more if they had better language skills, with two of them (7%) specifically mentioning the importance of English. Only five (19%) participants perceived language skills of minimal or no importance in economic success, with one of them noting that languages could be learned on the job after arrival.

Arabic (the official national language in the Middle Eastern countries in the sample) and English (a global lingua franca) were the languages mentioned by participants as being most important, but Hindi, Urdu, and (in the case of Singapore) Chinese, Tamil and Malay were also seen as valuable assets for daily communication and rapport building. In a related study (Sergeant et al., 2017), we found that both Arabic and English had important functional values for the participants, but that these varied depending on interlocutors, domains of work and contexts of situation. For example, the participants who viewed English as being integral to success tended to work in businesses staffed by employees from different language backgrounds who often relied on English as the lingua franca. Arabic, on the other hand, was valued as a means of everyday communication with local colleagues, customers and employers. Participants like Hafez and Monjural reasoned that it is nearly impossible to get or keep a good job in the Middle East without at least some competence in Arabic, and domestic workers like Afia reported that general spoken competence in the language was a necessity, as it was the only way that they could communicate with the women of the households where they worked. Unskilled migrants like Pijush felt that language skills would have made his experience of migration easier and more profitable. While Arabic may be a necessity, skills in the language were not generally perceived as providing an additional financial advantage. English, however, was seen as a useful, additional skill, and many participants attributed their ability to move up the employment ladder to their ability to express themselves in English.

#### **4.3.2 The role of technical skills and education levels in economic migration**

While language skills were perceived by the majority of participants as integral to economic success in migration, participants also recognized the importance of having technical skills.

Ten participants (37%) argued that having a particular skill or trade is absolutely key to being “successful”, having job security and earning well. For example, Hafez noted that specialization in a field is required for success:

They should take vocational training at least in one area. Just having a little knowledge doesn't work there; they need to be specialized in that skill. (Hafez)

Imran, an air-conditioning mechanic, worked in his field of expertise in one job for the duration of his ten-year stay. He felt that the most important element of economic success was developing a skill over time. Imran, however, also reported having competence in Arabic, English, Hindi and Urdu. Thus while technical skills are largely seen as being essential for success, language skills are perceived to adding additional value. This is demonstrated in the excerpt below from Shihab:

Shihab: Salaries increase if one can show good work and if one can work quickly.

Researcher: If one knows [another] language...?

Shihab: If one knows [another] language, then salaries rapidly increase.

The fact that technical skills are widely perceived as being important to ensuring success and enhancing capabilities among participants may be related to the fact that, as mentioned above, only roughly 30% of them had received any technical training. Studies have shown that Bangladeshis are less likely to be educated or specialized in a trade than other migrant workers in the Middle East (e.g. Buchenau 2008; Rubdy and McKay 2013). This lack of skill means that Bangladeshis are more likely to get the least desirable jobs when working abroad.

As one participant suggests in the extract below, Bangladeshi migrants do what are sometimes referred to as “the 3-D jobs”: those which are *dirty*, *difficult* and *dangerous*, and which locals often refuse to do (Jha et al. 2010:78):

If you don't know any work and go as labourer, then you have to work very hard. On the other hand, if you are skilled in any work, then you will have less hardship.

(Rahat)

Given the relatively low level of technical skills amongst the participants, and the fact that technical skills, like language skills, did not always equate with economic success, it is important to consider other factors that had an influence on whether migration was perceived as successful.

#### **4.3.3 Other factors which influence the outcomes of economic migration**

Other factors that participants mentioned as having an impact on the success of the migration experience included the costs of migration, the recruitment process, the type of visa obtained, the type of employer and the length of time spent abroad. As in other studies (e.g. Sharma and Zaman 2009), some participants (e.g. Afia and Pijush) mentioned that they entered into debt to meet the costs of obtaining a passport, visa and air fare, sometimes by mortgaging a small amount of land or taking money from a family member or a village loan shark. These loans are often offered at high interest and can be difficult to repay. As Afia describes:

[my husband] took the property document of my parents' house and pawned it. In this way, I managed to get 45,000 taka and went to Bahrain. That did not go very well. ... my salary was only 4000 taka. The money which I invested for going to Bahrain was

on 10% interest. It was difficult for me to earn back the money which I invested.

(Afia)

Another factor that influenced the outcome of migration was participants' experience of recruiters. Because their education and literacy levels were often low, many participants relied on recruiters to negotiate their terms of work abroad. These recruiters, however, frequently made promises that were not kept. Pijush, for example, reported how his salary did not meet that which was promised and how he felt powerless to do anything about this:

... I had been promised that I would be given 22-24 dollars per day. But in reality, I was given only 16 dollars per day. What could I do? I did not have any options. I came to the foreign country by selling the land of my father. Day after day they did not give me the salary that they promised. ... (Pijush)

Such corruption and deception by recruiters has been reported elsewhere to be common, and this has been found to set workers up for subsequent abuse (Afsar 2009). In fact, some studies suggest that migrant workers who are not very well educated are preferred by both recruiters and employers, as they might be easier to take advantage of and may be more accepting of hard working conditions (Rao and Hossain 2011).

The type of work visa that Bangladeshis usually receive was reported as structurally limiting their opportunities for capability enhancement (cf. de Haas, 2014). Like the majority of Bangladeshis who go to the Middle East, the participants in our study mostly went with fixed "labour" visas, which limited them to particular types of employment, rather than "trade" visas, which provide more flexibility and yield better work opportunities and salaries (cf.

Afsar 2016:158). Liton, for example, who was educated to the undergraduate level, but was not satisfied with his earnings in Saudi Arabia, attributed his lower income to his visa status:

If you look at the Filipinos, they always come to Saudi Arabia with skill visa. Whether they know the work or not, their government manages to give them trade visa. ... Some of them come as “plumber”, some as “mason”. But we, the Bangladeshis, we always come on labour or cleaner visas. That happens with everyone. ... Bangladeshi workers are very hard-working. Why should we get 600 riel while someone else would get 2000 riel doing similar work? (Liton)

Migrant workers are also vulnerable to the whims of employers in the host countries, and there have been several recorded cases of exploitation and racial and ethnic discrimination, with female migrant workers often being particularly vulnerable (Afsar 2009:39). The participants in this study recognised that the success of the migration experience depended heavily on the employer that the worker is placed with. As Bilkis notes:

In the work of domestic worker, if the *Malik* [boss] does not want to increase your salary, your salary will not increase. Things depend on their wishes.

A further factor reported as affecting economic success was length of stay. The longer the migrant works abroad, the more likely it is that they profit financially from the experience. Salaries tend to go up over time as long as a worker demonstrates good work. Being in a stable job also usually results in participants being able to further develop their language and technical skills, which then gives them better options to search for further, more profitable employment. These findings corroborate Rahman (2012), who found that the experience

people gained (including language skills) helped them find better jobs the second time around. While longer periods spent abroad may lead to an enhancement of capabilities in terms of language and technical skills, they also meant being away longer from families and communities in Bangladesh. This extended distance often led to loneliness and isolation, and required other people to look after any family and property in Bangladesh – which in turn, can be seen as limiting freedoms and capabilities.

Another negative aspect of long-term migration can be seen in narratives that show that even when participants managed to improve their economic standing through migration, they experience hardships and sacrifices. For example, at least four participants (Bilkis, Pijush, Rina, Shihab) became ill during their time abroad, with two of them returning home due to illness, which in at least one case prevented them from pursuing further employment. Although it was not the focus of the interviews, some participants referred briefly to experiences of exploitation, hunger and abuse (e.g. Afia, Liton, Rahat), and we can only imagine that several stories of hardship and tribulation went untold. Such examples bring to light that other, larger, structural matters make it difficult to establish a straightforward relationship between language, technical skills and economic benefit through migration.

## **5. Conclusion**

Applying Sen's capability approach to the narratives in this study reveals that while the majority of participants experienced financial benefits from working abroad, this was never without cost. These costs should also be considered when evaluating whether or not migration can be deemed "successful". Policy dialogues, such as that reported in Prothom-Alo (2015) often promote the idea that Bangladeshi migrant workers would profit more from migration if they had better language and technical skills, particularly English. The focus on

English in such dialogues is curious, given that all participants reported that Arabic was an absolute necessity for getting and keeping a job in the Middle East.

What is more, while our study suggests that language and technical skills are important in determining whether the overall experience of migration was positive and prosperous, they are not the only factors influencing the outcomes of migration. Our findings indicate that even migrant workers who speak Arabic and English and have relevant technical skills may have a negative experience of migration, which results in little or no financial reward. Such skills may provide options, in that they enable migrant workers to take more informed control of their migration and help them navigate difficult circumstances. However, the extent to which this informed control can be channelled into economic benefit and enhancement of capabilities is complicated by other factors, such as debts incurred through the initial costs of migration and exploitative practices of recruiters and employers. While language and technical skills can be seen as increasing the likelihood that migrants can respond well to the challenges they face, they do not rule out that they will not experience misfortune.

Even some of the participants in our study who reported being able to remit money and improve their family's standing through migration reported that they did so at the expense of experiencing unfair treatment by employers and intermediaries. Experiences were related about being exploited or cheated out of wages, beaten by employers, or having to endure intensely uncomfortable living conditions. Other sacrifices included living away from family, forsaking opportunities to get married, falling ill as a result of difficult conditions of employment, and experiencing intense loneliness, homesickness and isolation. Some of the participants mentioned the role of *bhaiggo* (fate or luck) in the experience of migration: Despite any forms of education or preparation, some people are successful and some are not.

The participants themselves seemed to struggle to understand what factors determine a positive or negative outcome of migration. As one participant put it:

Foreign land is of laughter and cry. Someone is crying, someone is laughing, and again someone is starving. (Imran)

The participants may interpret their experience as being determined by fate or luck, and surely individual circumstances play a part in the way everyone's life unfolds. However, in addition to this, we suggest that global inequality plays a significant role in the outcomes of these participants' migration. In fact, as noted above, migrants from Bangladesh may be preferred for such jobs precisely because they are easily exploited (cf. Rao and Hossain 2011). Despite their significant sacrifices, hard work and efforts to change their financial situation, many of them seem unable to access the resources they needed to ensure stability and prosperity. While this may, in part, be attributed to a lack of literacy, language and/or technical skills, it also seems to be an outcome of the limitations of the visas that people had access to, or the unjust practices of the intermediaries and employers that they encounter.

It certainly is the case that Bangladeshis should enjoy better quality of education, be offered more possibilities to develop relevant technical skills, and be provided more and better opportunities to learn languages (including English), and these opportunities will enhance people's abilities to prosper economically and experience stability and wellbeing. However, promoting the learning of English as a means of improving people's experience of migration neglects to take into account the role of global inequalities and structural entanglements in economic migration. It will take more than English language skills to ensure social justice, wellbeing and economic prosperity for Bangladeshi migrant workers. Thus, when promoting

English language skills as a means of economic development, wider socioeconomic and contextual issues of power and inequality which limit the development of people's capabilities must also be considered.

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## Appendix 1: Profile of participants

	Name	Gender	Age	Countries worked in	Languages (in addition to Bangla)	Occupations	Duration of stay	Exp mig
1	Afia	Female	42	Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon	Arabic, Hindi	Domestic worker	20 years	Mix
2	Badol	Male	26	UAE	Arabic, English, Hindi	Construction worker, electrician	3 years	Neg
3	Bashar	Male	42	Oman	Arabic, English, Hindi	Family cook and driver	23 years	Mix
4	Bilkis	Female	48	UAE, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Domestic worker	18 years	Posi
5	Bulbul	Male	55	Saudi Arabia, Singapore, UAE	Arabic, English, Hindi, Malay, Urdu	Farmer, pipeline labourer, assistant cook	21 years	Posi
6	Faheem	Male	57	Saudi Arabia, Libya, UK	Arabic, English	Pesticide worker	24 years	Neg
7	Ferdousi	Female	58	Kuwait	Arabic	Domestic worker	10 years	Mix
8	Gofur	Male	58	Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Driver, gardener	18 years	Posi

9	Hafez	Male	38	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Farsi, Hindi	Imam and shopkeeper	2.5 years	Posi
10	Hakim	Male	35	UAE, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Waiter, cleaner, farmer	9.3 years	Posi
11	Hasibul	Male	48	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Cleaner, shopkeeper	6 years	Mix
12	Imran	Male	36	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu	Air conditioning mechanic	10 years	Posi
13	Jahid	Male	42	UAE	Arabic, English, Hindi	Domestic worker, security guard	5 years	Posi
14	Jamil	Male	35	Singapore	Chinese, English, Malay, Tamil	Construction worker, painter	2.5 years	Mix
15	Kaisar	Male	48	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu	Driver, cleaner	7 years	Posi
16	Kalam	Male	50	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Hospital labourer, cook	7 years	Mix
17	Liton	Male	48	South Korea, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi Korean	Catering, pipeline labourer	6 years	Neg

18	Monjurul	Male	55	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu	Catering	9.5 years	Posi
19	Piash	Male	33	South Korea	Arabic, English, Korean	Motor mechanic, textile worker	13 years	Posi
20	Pijush	Male	59	Singapore	English, Hindi	Construction worker, painter	12.5 years	Mix
21	Quader	Male	38	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, Hindi, Korean	Juice maker	3 years	Mix
22	Rahat	Male	33	Singapore, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Security guard, lift operator, automobile mechanic	15 years	Mix
23	Razzak	Male	25	Malaysia, UAE	Arabic, English, Hindi, Malay	Food processing, construction worker	2.5 years	Mix
24	Rina	Female	46	Bahrain	Arabic	Domestic worker	3.5 years	Posi
25	Shawkat	Male	62	Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English	Electric worker, builder	8 years	Neg
26	Shihab	Male	42	Singapore, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English, Hindi	Pipeline labourer, welder	10 years	Mix
27	Sobhan	Male	37	Kuwait, Saudi Arabia	Arabic, English	Shopkeeper	10 years	Neg