Despite reports of abuse in countries of destination, women’s labour migration has increased in Bangladesh over the last several years. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET), a total of 1,008,525 people went abroad for work in 2017. Of them, 121,925 (12.1%) were women workers. With a Government recorded figure of 83,354, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) received the highest number of Bangladeshi domestic workers in 2017. Media reports have given vivid details of a large number of severely abused women workers in the KSA returning home. In response, the government of Bangladesh has set up several ‘safe houses’ in KSA for women who leave their employers’ houses. The government also repatriates women workers regularly. NGO colleagues, including our members, provide short and medium term assistance to returnee women workers. However, cases are rarely, if ever, filed against the abusive employers. KSA is not the only country where women migrant workers experience abuse. Similar cases have been reported from all other countries of destination. But the return of a large number of women after very short periods of work in KSA and the severity of exploitation they describe, leads one to conclude that there is no deterrent to such abuse there. These testimonies and reports show that women’s labour migration to some sectors and to certain countries is, to a great extent, still unsafe and unfair.

It is against this backdrop that we held two focus group discussions with our colleagues from Bangladesh with a total of 20 women. While the primary purpose was to provide some on-location research skills support to the partners, the two FGDs also allowed us glimpses into the lives, dreams and frustrations of Bangladeshi women workers.

The first group of 12 women were returnees from various countries in West Asia. All of them were participants of a reintegration programme implemented by our member OKUP in Araihazar upazilla of Narayanganj district. The second group, a mix of returnees and aspiring migrant workers, were part of our project partner KarmojibiNari’s research participants. Both groups had women from the garment and domestic work sectors. The women had been to Jordan, KSA, Oman, Qatar and Lebanon. The length of their overseas stay ranged from one month to ten years. Some of them had migrated more than once to two or three different countries. While a few women clearly saw their migration experience as ‘successful’, others felt that they were ‘unlucky’ because things had not worked out well. Many wanted to migrate for work again.

Lack of safety and fairness seemed to be constants in the lives of women both in their home countries and abroad. They talked about cruel, insensitive husbands and uncaring grown up children who did not raise their voices against the abusive fathers. ‘I ran away from here, from my awful husband. Too bad that I could not continue to stay in KSA. I will go again, to any country that I can. I need to go away from here. I
have heard that garment sector work is good. But I am told that they look for taller and stronger built women. If no other country works out, I will go to India’, said Pinky. With deep sadness and hurt many women talked about the stigma they faced as ‘unsuccessful’ migrants. What hurt them most was the suspicion of husbands and rejection by their children who had grown up in their absence. Often family members and neighbours insinuated that they must have been sexually abused even when that was not the case.

Taslima who had come back after barely a month’s stay in KSA, usually kept her overseas labour migration a secret from people. ‘Marriage proposals were being turned down when the prospective bridegroom’s family heard about it. Finally, I married someone who didn’t know about my migration. But the marriage has not worked out and now I am back with my parents’, she said. ‘These days money is everything. Not kindness or love, only money. In this country men can find wives even if they are not earning anything. But women have to work hard and earn’, she added. The sewing work that she does at the OKUP centre clearly isn’t fetching her much money. She has to spend 30 Taka each day for transportation alone. But the place is safe and she has the company of other women. She also has the hope that if she works hard and saves enough she might be able to buy a sewing machine for herself and work from home in future.

‘My employer in Qatar wanted me to work all the time. If I took rest for some time, she didn’t like it. If I dressed in nice clothes, she got angry with me’, said Rabia. Several women talked about physical violence such as severe beating by their employers abroad. ‘If the mother or father or grandmother was beating us, the grown up children just looked on. No one tried to stop the angry person. If I face abuse here, I can run away but it is my country. Police will not be after me. There, if someone runs away from the employer’s home she is a bastuhara. She is out on the streets and will need to hide from police’, said Fatima.

The ‘success’ stories at home and abroad were results of putting up with excessively hard work for low wages and tolerating a wide range of discriminations without protest. In countries of destination, absence of physical beating and inhuman torture was seen as a ‘good’ situation. Stipulated hours of domestic work, days off and freedom to leave the house were something the women thought would never happen to them. Regularly paid salaries, even when it was less than what was mentioned in the contract, were seen as ‘fair’ because non-payment was a common problem. Overall, it appeared that the lived experiences of women had made them lower the bars for safety and fairness.

We wanted to know if they received or gave solidarity and support from or to fellow workers and whether that helped them in countering unsafe and unfair situations. Reliable information about countries of destination was available to prospective migrants from returnee women but those in domestic work rarely got to meet other domestic workers while working overseas. In households where there were many domestic workers, it was possible to have some support but the employers often tried to keep them separate. One person’s fault or shortcoming was generalised and everyone from that country was seen as ‘incompetent’ or ‘lazy’. ‘If one Bangladeshi woman did something wrong, the whole country was blamed!’ said Jhorna. Asma who had worked in the garment sector in Jordan said that some experienced Bangladeshi women workers are now working as supervisors but they didn’t support the workers of their own country. ‘They are so desperate to climb up the ladder that they pick flaws and file complaints about other Bangladeshi workers. Just so that they can be in the good books of the employers’, she explained.

When compared with domestic work, the situation in the garment sector seemed better because it was not in the private sphere and women could stay in the working women’s hostels. Even though the hostels were far from the city they had company of other workers. The Workers Centre in Jordan was seen as a space where they could come together and avail of several facilities. For most women, the higher wages in countries of destination was the main reason for migrating abroad. ‘If only wages were a little more here, we wouldn’t be so desperate to go. We can just about manage to survive with the wages that we get here. But saving is impossible’, said Asma.

The women’s vision for change included better education system in Bangladesh so it can reach more women and those who migrate in the future would go with education. They expected better trainings before leaving for work. They hoped that the employers abroad would treat them as human beings and not demand excessively long working hours. They wanted to see abusive employers punished by law. They hoped that wages in Bangladesh would increase.

Until those changes happen, they are determined to take risks, keep hoping for the best and be prepared for the worst. ‘I am stronger now. Not as afraid as I was when I went first time’, many women told us.