

Article

Family Chains: Kinship as a Mechanism of Labour Exploitation Among Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Manufacturing and Labour-Intensive Sectors

Abdelaziz Abdalla Alowais ^{1,2,*}  and Abubakr Suliman ² ¹ Department of Statistics and Community Development, Government of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates² Department of Business Management, The British University in Dubai, Dubai 345015, United Arab Emirates; abubakr.suliman@buid.ac.ae

* Correspondence: abdelaziz.alowais@icloud.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of kinship-based control, which serves as a mechanism of labour exploitation among Bangladeshi migrant workers in manufacturing and labour-intensive sectors in the Northern Emirates. The current study explores different case studies regarding participants dominated by familial control mechanisms that lead to Bangladeshi migrant workers finding themselves in vulnerable situations. This study incorporated an ethnographic research method. Data was gathered through participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The study includes different participant cases, including accounts from Bangladeshi migrant workers and their family members. In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of twelve participants to understand the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers and analyzed using a thematic approach. The findings of this study reveal six major themes: moral blackmail, isolation within the family, moral obligation and silence, familial control structures, abuse framed as duty, and informal hierarchies. This study shows that the existing labour mechanism is challenging for Bangladeshi workers, requiring strict attention from the host country to address challenges related to cultural obligations, the minimum wage, restricted movement, and harsh working conditions. It is implied that Bangladesh must make policy changes to create protective migration policies, establish worker independence, and provide pre-departure welfare programmes. Educational programmes developed by NGOs and public officials must include widespread awareness initiatives to heighten the focus on migrants and their family members and break unsustainable cultural standards. The novel aspect of this study lies in the fact that it explores family-based labour exploitation, which is rarely studied in migration research.

Keywords: return migration; labour migration; Bangladeshi migrant workers; labour market; exploitation

JEL Classification: J61; J46; J47; J15; D13; Z13; O15; F22



Academic Editor: Cristóbal Fernández-Muñoz

Received: 13 May 2025

Revised: 6 June 2025

Accepted: 21 June 2025

Published: 25 June 2025

Citation: Alowais, A.A.; Suliman, A. Family Chains: Kinship as a Mechanism of Labour Exploitation Among Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Manufacturing and Labour-Intensive Sectors. *Societies* **2025**, *15*, 178. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15070178>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Families play an important role in migrant workers' decisions to work in host countries or return to their country of origin. According to previously published research, migrants who stay abroad for work exert pressure on their families to stay [1]. A family may

complicate working arrangements and motivate migrant workers to return to their home or to work on a more long-term basis [2]. The migration of Bangladeshi workers to host countries such as Saudi Arabia is desirable because it positively contributes to family reputation and income [3].

1.1. Background

Migration serves as a strategy for workers to earn money in host countries while simultaneously improving their family status and fulfilling social responsibilities, with the money typically being sent back home [4]. Remittance payments are fundamental in enhancing Bangladesh's rural economy and reducing poverty, as they constitute a substantial portion of the nation's income [5]. Workers who depend on international income must stay abroad while working unconditionally to satisfy the high expectations of their sponsors. Workers, mainly those under the Kafala system, face extensive restrictions regarding their employment choices [6]. Workers suffer abusive labour conditions, with extended shifts, substandard housing, and unpaid salaries, and despite this, they remain silent to spare their families' honour.

Similarly, in a study conducted in another Gulf State by [2,3], it was revealed that Bangladeshi migrant workers in Saudi Arabia face dangerous job conditions and extreme family expectations to keep their jobs. The family members in Bangladesh generally see migration as a solution to their financial difficulties, which puts pressure on workers to send money home regularly. Migrant workers feel tremendous distress because their families have likely sacrificed land or accepted questionable loans to finance migration [1]. Workers avoid making complaints and returning early to their homes because they do not want to paint themselves as inadequate providers for their families. Furthermore, refs. [2,3] stated that male workers demonstrate a high frequency of dangerous injuries, reporting that non-Saudi males in the Eastern Region experienced 8254 injuries, while Al-Mokarramah reported 7801 injuries, and Al-Riyadh had 6590. In addition to Aseer's 1465 injuries, there was a concerning figure of 1723 reported cases in Al-Madinah Al-Monawarah, while Makkah witnessed 7801 injuries. These statistics demonstrate that migrant workers face dangerous working conditions because their jobs involve strenuous, risky activities with inadequate workplace protection and no safety insurance or legal avenues for complaint. Bangladeshi migrant workers remain committed to their workplace even though illness, fatigue, and physical injuries would normally force one to stop working. We can observe that migrant employers sometimes refuse to give rest days or medical help to workers because they understand these migrants fear losing their jobs and deportation. Workers face exploitation while staying quiet because they do not want to disappoint their families by failing to meet their financial needs.

Workers become trapped in cyclical patterns of vulnerability because they continuously face dangerous work environments, alongside abusive recruitment practices, weak legal protection, and pressing family obligations. This situation reinforces the urgent need for policy collaboration across borders, awareness programmes, and supportive networks in host countries to avoid reducing migrants to mere economic tools and provide them with proper dignity and protection.

1.2. Problem Statement

This study exposes how kinship ties are weaponized to exploit Bangladeshi migrant workers in industrial regions across the Northern Emirates, where family members acting as sponsors—such as uncles or cousins—enforce control, suppress rights, and enable abuse. These dual roles blur ethical boundaries, turning kin into exploiters and rendering the abuse both normalized and invisible.

This study defined the significant problem of kinship control via the family chains of Bangladeshi migrant workers in industrial regions across the Northern Emirates. Migrant workers face poor working conditions, characterized by non-payment of wages or insufficient payment, extended working hours, dangerous work, and inadequate rights to freedom, along with familial pressure. Family members who perform their role as sponsors (uncle, cousins, and parents) can create difficulties because of their dual roles in facilitating migration while simultaneously pressuring migrant workers not to return. When we refer to workers facing moral pressures, we refer to the verbal and non-verbal cues they receive that compel them to endure mistreatment to maintain family honour [2].

1.3. Research Gap

The established literature lacks ethnographic research on labour exploitation among Bangladeshi workers in the industrial regions across the Northern Emirates. More specifically, the literature lacks research related to family-controlled migrant work environments [1,7]. Existing studies have primarily focused on employer-driven abuse, but studies examining how kinship or family chains serve as a controlling mechanism for migrant workers are lacking [2,3]. This study has fulfilled this gap by analyzing how migrant labourers continue to suffer oppression due to family pressure.

1.4. Research Question

This study seeks to explore the following research question: how are kinship ties used as mechanisms of control and labour exploitation within Bangladeshi migrant families living and working in the industrial regions of the United Arab Emirates? The focus is on understanding how familial relationships—particularly those involving sponsors such as uncles or cousins—are structured and mobilized to enforce dependency, limit freedoms, and sustain exploitative labour conditions.

1.5. Research Contributions

This study is valuable because it examines how family bonds act as controlling mechanisms for Bangladeshi migrant workers. This research adds new perspectives to the literature by showing that, in addition to abusive employers, the family members of migrants are responsible for sustaining labour exploitation. The ethnographic research presented herein demonstrates how emotional, cultural, and moral values based on family duty and honour prevent workers from returning home and, instead, compel them to stay abroad to work in complex working environments. This study provides an essential understanding of how NGOs and policymakers can help Bangladeshi migrant workers by acting as a support system, supporting in diminishing the fear of family disappointment, establishing independent remittance for workers, and running public awareness campaigns.

2. Literature Review

The movement of Bangladeshi workers to GCC countries has become an important social and economic phenomenon [8]. Migrants from Bangladesh choose Arab Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia as their primary employment location. This is because these nations strongly demand a low-skilled workforce and share cultural and religious links with Bangladesh. Bangladeshi Gulf workers mainly perform tasks in construction, though some work in the domestic service and service industries, through short-term contracts [9]. As another Arab Gulf State, many Bangladeshi migrant workers also choose the UAE as their preferred work location for the reasons listed above. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have been linked together since the beginning of time. However, it is evident that both countries are facing the problem of harbouring informal economies that are formed by migrant labourers and business owners.

2.1. *The Hardships of the Bangladeshi Worker*

The substantial economic value of remittances for Bangladeshi workers are counter-weighted by the difficult working conditions they face, characterized by insufficient legal support and isolation. Research by [2,3] established that workers experience multiple forms of abuse, encompassing abusive behaviour from their employer, passport seizure, excessive work demands, and wage denial. The situation worsens when workers face difficulties due to insufficient language skills and minimal awareness about their rights and limitations regarding employment transition [10]. This raises concern about the reasons behind migrant labourers not reporting instances of abuse, whether suffered by them or their countrymen, and mistreatment is sometimes not reported due to who owns the business and abuse related to informal economic reimbursement that is not detectable.

This research demonstrates that migrant workers from rural regions with low socioeconomic status face difficult conditions because they must meet the demands of their family [11]. Workers endure difficult living situations to boost their social standing and upward economic mobility. However, it is illogical to blame host countries such as the UAE for the formation of the informal economy. It is evident that, due to the isolation of these industrial cities, business owners transfer the dark strategy of exploitation from Bangladesh to the UAE, where they continue to cause harm to their countrymen abroad.

Migrants base their decision to move on socio-cultural pressures from family members and community standards, combined with the need to protect their family reputation [12]. Migrants face adverse mental pressure and health breakdowns, and they endure feelings of discomfort and suffer from exploitation to fulfil the goals their families have set [10]. Leaving home is disheartening, and being stranded in a foreign land is problematic. However, it is important to recognize that the decision to accept low-paying work abroad is often driven by pressure from the migrant's own family, which complicates the narrative of responsibility and shifts part of the burden away from the host country.

Workers who migrate receive monetary benefits but face institutional flaws and intricate social power relations within their migration journey [13,14]. Host country regulations form only part of the situation, while families from migrants' home societies contribute to additional complicating factors, alongside transnational ties [15]. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of Bangladeshi migrant labourers' conditions in Northern Emirates-based industrial zones is necessary to evaluate these factors, including the challenges Bangladeshi migrant workers face in their host country and challenges related to their family-based relationships. Considering the above-presented arguments, the following points are proposed:

P1—Migrant workers experience psychological coercion through familial guilt and emotional manipulation, which limits their ability to resist exploitation.

P2—Workers are socially and emotionally isolated within family-run labour structures, reducing their access to support and increasing dependency on the sponsor.

2.2. *Kinship and Family Dynamics in Migration*

Family ties play a significant role in the migration process for those from South Asian societal structures, such as Bangladeshi people. People from these societies migrate as part of an effort towards family advancement [16]. Families in international migration maintain social control and power structures through familial financial involvement and overseeing activities to guide migrant actions in foreign locations. Kinship-based decisions dominate throughout the migration process [17]. Past research has indicated that families first choose a family member to provide resources for travel expenses. A sponsor then expects continuous remittances in return [1]. Migrants develop moral debt relations because they must fulfil family-based financial and emotional duties while following the cultural norms of sacrifice and obedience. This leads to workers accepting their fate as if it is a

spiritual moral obligation, chaining them to a moral obligation that they can justify but not escape. Under these conditions, migrant workers must endure injustice in silence because any display of disagreement will be enough to disgrace their family [18]. Individuals are intimidated into tightening their tongue to maintain family loyalties, and this strengthens their commitment to family members, even if those family members control or exploit them. Considering the above, the following point is proposed:

P3—Cultural expectations of respect and obedience within the family suppress workers' ability to speak out or report exploitative conditions.

Family members function as sponsors in kin-based kafala arrangements through the kafala system, meaning they have control migrants' documents, allowing them to restrict migrant mobility and exercise authority over decisions. Protective control systems such as the kafala system allow family members to exploit each other because kinship power conceals coercion against members [19]. This duality between care and control makes the family both a source of emotional support and a structure of domination.

The analysis of kinship networks in migration requires consideration due to their complex nature. The family chain provides financial and emotional backing but creates structures that establish inequality, followed by suppression and exploitation. These dynamics affect the health and well-being of workers. As the arguments suggest that the family themselves create a system that shows who is at the top and bottom of the hierarchy, bearing in mind that all the employees are from the same family. Echoing the Orwellian principle that 'all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others,' this notion highlights the paradox of proclaimed equality masking underlying hierarchies and selective privilege. Considering the above, the following point is proposed:

P4—Family members acting as sponsors use kinship authority to regulate the migrant's mobility, wages, and personal freedoms.

2.3. Labour Exploitation

Labour exploitation remains the core issue in migration research, especially in GCC countries, due to their power-concentrated migrant labour system. Bangladeshi labourers working in Gulf State nations face abusive working environments and insufficient legal safeguards [20]. It is perceived labour exploitation includes multiple types of unethical treatment, such as contract substitution, passport confiscation, extended work shifts, and delayed and non-payment of wages. At the same time, migrant workers face restricted mobility and dangerous working environments [21]. The main consequence of exploitation within such situations becomes the acceptance of mistreatment as an appropriate form of sacrifice or responsibility. Migrant workers subject themselves to substandard conditions because of familial, moral, and emotional commitments, along with economic requirements [22]. The feeling of internal duty limits workers from resisting mistreatment or speaking against unjust practices. Families sometimes sanction these difficulties using logic that presents them as essential for obtaining financial solidity and preserving family honour (izzat) in their home country [13,23]. Exploitation becomes more damaging to migrant labourers due to emotional factors that align with traditional family duties and the standards that dominate their communities.

Sponsorship arrangements lead to complex issues regarding the conventional definition of abuse because of familial exploitation practices [24]. Family sponsors who are relatives, like uncles or cousins, make it challenging to distinguish between when one is caring for or coercing a migrant. According to research, migrant workers have a limited ability to challenge exploitation when such mistreatment comes from their family members due to concerns about social consequences and the dissolution of their family relationships. It is perceived that the kafala system, which depends on family connections, conceals

exploitation through false protection mechanisms that sustain traditional family control patterns; however, such claims remain premature and lack sufficient empirical grounding to hold substantive academic value.

Various elements within society continue to drive labour exploitation. Migrants often fall into debt, with extortionate expenses being owed to recruitment brokers who manage their overseas placement before they depart from Bangladesh [25]. Foreign workers depend on their employer since they must obtain sponsor approval to switch jobs, which results in enduring silence. Overall, the labour exploitation suffered by Bangladeshi migrants stems from a combination of job sponsor abuse, familial obligations, debt bondage, and the legal framework [11]. Developing ethical migration frameworks and protective labour policies requires an understanding of the complex interplay of factors between labour migrants. This creates informal systems of hierarchy that policymakers cannot view due to the problematic mindsets of the migrants and the culture that is based on unwritten rules that are alien and strange to the host country. Considering the above, the following point is proposed:

P5—Exploitative labour conditions are justified by sponsors as necessary contributions to family welfare, disguising abuse as a form of sacrifice or responsibility.

2.4. The Role of Moral Obligations and Honour in Family Exploitation

Migrant workers, mainly from Bangladesh, often accept exploitative labour conditions not because they are unaware of the abuse but because they feel morally obligated to endure hardship for the sake of their family's reputation and survival [1]. In many cases, the decision to migrate itself is framed not as an individual opportunity but as a family obligation. Once abroad, workers are expected to send regular remittances, often at the expense of their health, legal status, or well-being. The inability to meet these expectations is viewed not only as a financial failure but a moral shortcoming that brings shame to the family. Although it is argued that *izzat* becomes a powerful motivator that disciplines behaviour and discourages dissent, even in situations of clear exploitation. This dynamic creates a form of moral blackmail, where expressing dissatisfaction or refusing to comply with exploitative arrangements is equated with disloyalty and dishonour.

These expectations are frequently enforced by older or more authoritative family members who leverage their social status to maintain control. Such relationships are rarely questioned, as traditional norms discourage younger or dependent members from challenging elders [26]. This makes it easier for families to justify placing relatives in exploitative roles while framing these sacrifices as noble or spiritually rewarding. The emotional burden is intensified by community narratives that glorify the migrant as a selfless provider, reinforcing silence around abuse. Therefore, assuming workers returning home prematurely or complaining about working conditions can lead to them being perceived as weak by their family and the wider community. Thus, honour and obligation intertwine to create an environment where labour exploitation is accepted, normalized, and even morally endorsed.

In this way, the mechanisms of exploitation extend beyond state policies or employer abuse to cultural values, where familial expectations and notions of moral duty become tools of control. Considering the above, the following is proposed:

P6—Kin-based labour relationships are governed by unwritten power hierarchies that reinforce control and limit autonomy for the migrant worker.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This research used multiple theoretical dimensions to explore how familial relationships and social and cultural expectations lead Bangladeshi migrant workers to endure

labour exploitation [1,3]. Through this framework, the study interprets labour exploitation outcomes by combining insights from the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) and Transnationalism Theory, alongside the cultural aspect of family honour known as izzat. Under the New Economics for Labor Migration (NELM), migration represents a household-based strategic approach that involves multiple family members investing to allow their members abroad to obtain collective economic benefits [1]. Migrant labour is affected by family expectations because migrants must meet the family-defined goals of attaining financial stability and boosting their social standing. Familial trust and economic success are jeopardized when immigrants do not achieve their family-defined objectives, especially in cases where the migrant work returns home prematurely.

Transnationalism Theory provides an additional basis for the research by examining how family members maintain their bonds despite being located in different countries [27]. Physical distance between migrants and their families does not weaken their social and emotional connections because family members maintain these bonds through regular communication, visits, and remittance transfers. Cross-border relationships heap permanent pressure on migrants, which promotes cooperative behaviour while preventing them from offering resistance [28].

Family honour, called izzat, serves as a principal element in this framework because South Asian societies consider it an important social power. Family prestige serves as a motivation for individuals to start migrating as a way to elevate their status symbolically [29]. Men migrating from Bangladesh experience labour exploitation as an ethical duty because cultural norms demand that they display dominance and masculine traits while making sacrifices. Early return and, therefore, the perception of a failed migration can cause migrants to experience mental and emotional breakdowns, resulting in silence and mental discomfort [3].

3. Methodology

This study uses an ethnographic research design, with data collected through field observations and informal conversations. The six points (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6) are explored by identifying themes supported by inductively coded segments from the notes. Each theme consists of a set of related codes that reflect patterns in the data.

3.1. Research Design

This research includes an ethnographic method and utilizes a case study design to investigate the functions of kinship ties, which serve as avenues for labour exploitation among Bangladeshi migrant labourers in the industrial areas of the Northern Emirates. The case study method enabled researchers to investigate cases of control over Bangladeshi migrant workers through their familial chain. The separate case examples explore family obligations within workers' labour settings. The research analyzed eight specific cases to demonstrate different situations where Bangladeshi migrant workers faced exploitation through family control. Researchers studied each family group as a distinct bounded case, enabling an in-depth evaluation of kinship networks as tools for labour exploitation. This research design facilitated the investigation of different social and emotional aspects that determine the relationships between migrant workers and their families.

3.2. Data Collection

Data was gathered through participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation was the key research method for documenting daily interactions between workers and their home environments. Through observation, the researchers acquired real-time insights into behaviours, non-verbal com-

munication, and power dynamics that interview participants might have overlooked or unconsciously expressed. The researchers' observational study helped explain the practices of silence, obedience, and moral duty to better understand kinship relations that drive labour exploitation.

The study includes twelve participants, seven Bangladeshi migrant workers and five members of their families, who were chosen through purposive non-probability sampling procedures. Research data emerged from interviews conducted with different families and migrant workers to understand how they are treated in their work environment treatment, their level of familial authority, and the cultural ethics at play.

3.3. Triangulation

Three data sources ensure the credibility of this study: (1) in-depth interviews, (2) participant observation, and (3) official statistics and research from the academic literature. These sources helped establish trustworthiness throughout the research. Through multiple data sources, researchers obtained evidence that validated identical patterns regarding family-based workplace control methods and employment abuse.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis was performed through a thematic study utilizing Braun and Clarke's analytical approach [30]. The research question led to code development, which was verified by an ongoing review process using observations and interview transcripts as supporting evidence. Moral blackmail represents one theme among the set, with the others being isolation within the family, moral obligation and silence, familial control structures, abuse framed as duty, and informal hierarchies [31].

The following are the steps of thematic analysis:

Data familiarization: The first step involved transcribing interviews with field notes, followed by a reading process. A first reading enabled us to grasp the overall content.

Initial Coding: The researcher selected main phrases from the dataset related to their research topics for initial coding. Coding identified moral pressure, kinship control, and fear of reporting as key concepts within the dataset.

Developing Themes: The coding process led to theme creation, carried out by grouping related codes into more extensive categories, which led to the generation of the following themes: moral blackmail, isolation within the family, moral obligation and silence, familial control structures, abuse framed as duty, and informal hierarchies.

Review and finalizing themes: We examined the relationship between themes and research questions while confirming the smooth transition of codes throughout the entire dataset.

4. Results and Discussion

The transcripts were coded manually using thematic analysis, and various themes and sub-themes emerged after the participant interview analysis (migrant workers and their family members). The findings table (Table 1) shows mapped keywords with themes of qualitative analysis.

Table 1. Qualitative analysis themes. Codes and key elements that reveal our findings.

Themes	Codes	Key Elements
Moral Blackmail	Face abuse, family exploitation	Family pressure (do not shame us) or do not complain about exploitative situations at work.

Table 1. Cont.

Themes	Codes	Key Elements
Isolation within the Family	No shame to Family members	Migrant workers stay quiet because of the fear that their families may become angry.
Moral Obligation and Silence	Family and cultural pressure	Migrant workers face hardships in host countries to fulfil family expectations.
Familial Control Structures	Family members act as sponsors	Family members (uncles, cousins, or parents) hold passports, restrict movements, control the freedom of migrant workers, and stop supporting them financially.
Abuse Framed as Duty	workers in harsh conditions	The family believes that working hard or even under unfair conditions is necessary to support the family.
Informal Hierarchies	Dominate decisions hold authority	Family members (uncles, cousins, or parents) hold authority due to age or are supported by traditional cultural norms.

4.1. Moral Blackmail

Those in Bangladeshi families face pressure from their relatives when they migrate to earn a living for their families. One Bangladeshi migrant worker suggested he experienced moral blackmail, with his desire to not bring shame to the family and, in turn, maintain his family's reputation being weaponized. He stated, *"I have suffered here due to my family, as everyone depends on me."* He added, *"I sacrificed because I must think about my family first, to not bring shame to them. Therefore, I stayed for a long time in this industrial compound. I must accept low wages and long working hours as compared to other workers because I work for my uncle and unfortunately, he is family. More like, the family head."*

These direct quotes point towards the first of our above-listed points, *"P1—Migrant workers experience psychological coercion through familial guilt and emotional manipulation, which limits their ability to resist exploitation."* This point is also supported by a study stating that migrant workers in GCC countries cannot voice their concerns by, for example, partaking in protests, strikes, and demonstrations [2], as workers experiencing inter-family exploitation cannot formally protest against their own family members. The matter is more complicated; thus, blaming public policy is irrational. The emotional manipulation caused by their families and the false kinship given by the family heads can be disastrous.

Many Bangladeshi workers in the manufacturing sector and labour-intensive sectors in the Northern Emirates are paid low wages (sometimes even going unpaid), work in precarious conditions, and are under the strict control of their employers, who are also abusive [3]. Despite all this, they stay to support their family.

One of the participants said that his family put moral pressure on him to survive hardships, even amidst harsh work conditions. Therefore, defined the family network as an essential factor for Bangladeshi workers, finding that workers feel guilty about discussing mistreatment in a host country at work. Therefore, this pressure of moral blackmail forces them to endure exploitative conditions and abuse [32].

4.2. Isolation with Family

Family members such as uncles, parents, or cousins usually provide financial support to migrant workers to cover their social, medical, and educational expenses. As noted by [33], Bangladesh is not as developed as countries like the UK and the US, meaning it is disadvantaged internationally. Therefore, Bangladeshi workers grind to support their

families, thus facing emotional isolation [33]. Parents sometimes encourage a grind-heavy work attitude to ensure that their children do not return from abroad empty-handed.

In our interviews, one of the participants spoke about emotional isolation, stating that his family did not fulfil his desire to return home: *“If I tell them I will return home, my parents will not talk to me.”* He added, *“If I return empty-handed, what will my cousins say? Everyone will judge me.”*

In this participant’s case, his perception of family chains and cultural norms seems deep. The concept of family reputation in South Asian families is known as *izzat*; migrants must adhere to the principles of *izzat* by showing their success abroad. Jalal’s awareness of the weight of family expectation and anxiety about what his cousins would say if he returned home early forced him to spend more time abroad. A desire to uphold family reputation forced Jalal to isolate and distance himself from family members. This touches upon our second point, *“P2—Workers are socially and emotionally isolated within family-run labour structures, reducing their access to support and increasing dependency on the sponsor.”* This reflects that migrant workers not only endure poor working conditions abroad but also suffer detrimental effects such as emotional isolation stemming from familial control. While the existing literature acknowledges these struggles, our first-hand ethnographic research captures the depth of their agony and silence, revealing how familial bonds can become sources of suppression rather than support.

4.3. Moral Obligation and Silence

A moral obligation to stay abroad is commonly felt by Bangladeshi migrant workers. Returning to their home country would lead to them being labelled as failures, so they face hardships in their host countries to fulfil family expectations [2]. Our research indicated that workplace issues related to payment patterns, safety, working time, hygiene, and health issues are common for Bangladeshi migrant workers to deal with.

A female migrant worker said she felt she had a moral obligation to her family. She said, *“As a woman, I suffered a lot due to my family because there was no space for complaint. Instead of sexual harassment, physical and verbal abuse by my countrymen who are supposed to protect me. They know that my father passed away. They know that I can’t report them as I am lost without them too.”* From her point of view, it seems that moral obligation caused her to fall silent instead of reporting abuse and sexual harassment. Women workers in industrial areas face threats of rape, harsh insults, long working hours, and passport confiscation by their family members [2,10]. For women in particular, it is a risk to work in a foreign land, even if there is the potential to earn high wages (usually in dirhams).

Another young worker touched upon the themes of moral obligation and silence, stating that he felt strict moral obligations to support his family and was aware of the cultural narratives surrounding masculinity. As a result, he suffered a breakdown in his health, as well as physical and mental trauma. He stated, *“The responsibility to run the family through foreign income contributed to the breakdown of my health status.”* This reflects P3—*“P3—Cultural expectations of respect and obedience within the family suppress workers’ ability to speak out or report exploitative conditions”*—encompassing how patriarchal and moral expectations enforce silence. Women refrain from reporting harassment to male relatives, while men suffer health-related issues under the toxic pressure to stay obedient, revealing how kinship ties suppress resistance and normalize suffering.

4.4. Family Control Structures

Family chains sponsor migrant workers, sometimes restricting their movements and controlling their freedom, with the most common sponsors in families being uncles, cousins, or parents. One young worker explained that his family told him to work hard for their

betterment. This hinted towards the notion of a familial control structure. Subsequently, we decided to interview and observe business owners, who are sometimes depicted as uncles to the young, exploited workers. One business owner said, *“He is young and does not know the conditions for work. I kept his passport so he could not go anywhere without asking me.”* From the perspective of the business owner, migrant workers’ decision to stay abroad depends more on their family rather than their specific place of work and what they earn. This business owner decided to keep the workers’ passport, implying that he was too young to make his own decisions. Sometimes, a family member is not even aware of the conditions their migrant relative faces in their host country. Family members also sometimes hold the documents of their migrant family member, which can lead to labour exploitation under the guise of care [25,34].

A kin-based kafala system is common among Asian families, meaning family members hold sponsorship and control over individuals. This shows that kinship-based scholarship can create exploitative working conditions and restrictions for migrant workers [35]. In another case, a father of a migrant worker who is living with his son in a labour camp stated, *“As a parent, I manage his expenses and know what is best for my son and our family. Therefore, I hold his passport that was necessary for his stability at work in here to earn a high salary for his family.”* This quote highlights that familial control structures serve as a central framework for analyzing how South Asian migrants work in the Gulf States. They can be the subject of caring and coercive behaviour from their families. As the workers depend on family sponsorship, the family has unlimited control over decision-making. The son mainly lived based on his sponsor’s decisions because his sponsor (his father) was managing his expenses. Family control structures hold authority when it comes to ensuring migrant safety and protecting family standing and financial well-being [26]. Migrants’ lack of decision-making power regarding their work duration and earnings enhances the existing power structure exercised by sponsors. Consequently, migrants experience abusive situations because they remain silent to prevent harming their family status and losing financial support. These findings touch upon P4, *“P4—Family members acting as sponsors use kinship authority to regulate the migrant’s mobility, wages, and personal freedoms.”* These findings confirm that family sponsors, often uncles or parents, illegally hold workers’ passports to control their movement—despite UAE labour laws prohibiting this practice. Kinship is used to justify the act, masking coercion as protection and reinforcing the worker’s dependency and limited autonomy.

4.5. Abuse Framed as Duty

Cultural expectations and norms such as the traditional perceptions of masculinity, the essential duty to work, and family pressure all contribute to the abuse migrant workers face. We also interviewed the mother of a worker, and she said, *“I always tell him as a parent to work hard no matter the conditions, because he is the only one responsible for earning for the family after his father’s death.”* This indicates that migrant workers must endure difficulties for the benefit of their families. South Asian migration spaces accept labour exploitation because migrants perceive their job as sacrifices to help their families financially [36]. The mother believes that her son needs to endure hardship because it fosters family well-being. This situation indicates that Bangladeshi families are used to accepting abusive working environments and that workers need to make sacrifices to achieve social success and improve family finances [37].

According to a female worker, *“You cannot think about comfort by returning home; only your hard work while working abroad can put your family out of financial hardships.”* It is evident that labourers face discomfort in working abroad, as defined by the [2,3]’s study.

In the study, one female migrant worker stated that employers treat them like slaves. They do not provide proper food and fail to seek justice [3]. It may be possible that she faced this type of discomfort but was not allowed to complain to her parents. These findings evoke P5, “P5—Exploitative labour conditions are justified by sponsors as necessary contributions to family welfare, disguising abuse as sacrifice or responsibility.” It is believed that women are treated like servants by uncles, and orphaned boys are pushed into labour by their mothers, all in service of fulfilling family responsibilities. This disguises exploitation as sacrifice, silencing any form of resistance.

4.6. Informal Hierarchies

Paternal male authority and dominance are important factors that exert power over young family members. One young boy who migrated to a booming industrial area in the north from a Bangladeshi family stated he was controlled by his family. The boy’s cousin, who was older than him and has experience of working abroad, stated, “I am older and have more experience than he, working abroad, so I can decide whether he can change jobs or return home.”

From the perspective of the boy’s cousin, elder dominance plays a key role in exploiting migrant workers, affecting their decision to stay or return home. According to research, in South Asian families, age reflects decision-making control, meaning elders command respect from younger family members [38]. Therefore, migrant workers who are under the control of their older family members are culturally forced to respect and accept their decisions [39]. This means Bangladeshi migrant workers are subjected to further exploitative acts. These findings reflect P6: “P6—Kin-based labour relationships are governed by unwritten power hierarchies that reinforce control and limit autonomy for the migrant worker.” This point reinforces that elder family members hold unquestioned authority and that age and status are used to control younger relatives within labour arrangements.

5. Conclusions

This research on kinship as a mechanism of labour exploitation has highlighted how family obligations and controlling mechanisms pose risks to migrant workers. The movement of migrant workers and their choices, beyond employers’ decisions, also depend on familial decisions. This study contributes to understanding how family ties in migration impact return migration. This study on Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Northern Emirates revealed that South Asian workers face negative family pressures, alongside workplace difficulties, which can negatively impact their emotional and mental well-being.

5.1. Recommendations

Preventing and reducing labour exploitation among Bangladeshi migrants in the Northern Emirates requires the implementation of financial independence measures in sponsor accountability systems [21]. Migrants must have access to private digital transfer systems that offer security against their family members’ ability to control their funds. Workers should gain more control over their salary management to minimize dependency on others. Host countries might need to introduce regulations that control employment sponsorship through the Kafala system. Members of the family who act as sponsors must meet the exact same requirements as local employers concerning both wage withholding and passport confiscation legality [38]. A monitoring system should become operational to guarantee fair treatment of international workers in family-based sponsorship situations. It is evident that the laws are very strict when it comes to labour exploitation in the United Arab Emirates. This research aims to alert government authorities to these hidden forms of exploitation, where familial power structures are used to bypass formal labour protections.

By exposing these practices, this study advocates for more inclusive policy frameworks that address not only abuse perpetrated by employers in workplaces but also abuse perpetrated by migrant workers' families.

5.1.1. Education and Public Awareness

Also of importance is the need to improve education and raise public awareness and understanding of migrant workers' experiences. Under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, the Bangladeshi government must improve its pre-departure educational courses by teaching workers about their legal rights, disseminating financial knowledge, and discussing methods to resist familial pressure [16]. The need for pre-migration counselling becomes evident since many migrants lack an understanding of how family members might exploit them. Thus, counsellors must break down societal beliefs that portray suffering through work as an acceptable duty [4]. The population requires educational information, through public awareness efforts, about acceptable standards in kinship assistance [35]. These initiatives gain greater effectiveness when operated by religious leaders who join forces with local media and diaspora organizations to address the harmful cultural practices related to family honour and sacrifice. It is deeply painful to be betrayed by those you trust most—your own family. When kinship becomes a tool of control rather than care, the emotional toll is severe—as if living stranded far away from home is not troubling enough. Yet, awareness and education are essential to breaking the silence. Knowing your rights is the first step toward protecting yourself, even when the threat comes from within one's support network.

5.1.2. The Role of Policymakers

Both reporting systems and policy reforms must be robust to protect vulnerable workers. Efforts must establish confidential hotlines and embassy-based support services and counselling, which protect migrants subjected to coercion or abuse, especially coercion or abuse perpetrated by family members [10]. The support services must provide multilingual resources and demonstrate cultural awareness in their delivery of information to clients. Bangladesh must sign agreements that protect workers from family abuse and set up methods to control sponsors' activities [19]. It is clear that UAE labour laws are sufficiently strict to combat abusive practices; however, the issue does not stem from the UAE itself. Rather, these exploitative systems are imported by the very individuals who undermined their own formal economies, bringing with them underground, unregulated labour practices that now operate beneath the surface of a well-regulated legal framework.

5.1.3. The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs can help reduce family-based labour exploitation through their work, serving as bridges between migrant workers and their families, and the relevant government institutions can provide help too. Non-governmental organizations should offer educational sessions that adequately prepare workers and their relatives, emphasize ethical standards at work and financial responsibility, and override moral blackmail threats [17]. They should provide legal representation, together with counselling services, and work with emergency shelters to support exploited workers, especially because reporting family violence is challenging socially. Non-governmental organizations should launch awareness programmes for Bangladesh's rural areas to reconstruct social customs that currently accept sacrifices and silence during migration. NGOs take part in building protected payment systems for overseas workers and work together with diplomatic institutions to set up anonymous reporting systems for host regions [5]. Non-governmental organizations provide protection by promoting migrant worker rights while directly assisting and monitoring initiatives that help secure their dignity and rights. Through integrating legal systems

and financial structures supplemented by social preventive measures, migrant workers could gain empowerment to protect their rights and dignity abroad. Moreover, NGOs and ethics academics must put their words into action by actively participating in awareness campaigns. Stepping down from their ivory towers, even occasionally, is essential to ensure that ethical discourse translates into real-world impact for the vulnerable communities they write about.

5.2. Strengths and Limitations

The specific geographical scope of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Northern Emirates' industrial areas led to highly relevant findings because it directed the research focus and facilitated deep explanations about kinship-based control on Bangladeshi migrant workers in migrant-dense sectors in the UAE, namely the manufacturing and labour-intensive sectors.

A key strength of this research is that the researchers conducted primary research, interacting with migrant workers and engaging closely with them to observe and document their daily realities. This grounded, empathetic approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the struggles migrants face—beyond what formal interviews or distant analysis could capture (although this technique required years of observations and note-taking before physically approaching the participants). Additionally, ethnographic notetaking did not stop while the interviews were being conducted; rather, they took place simultaneously.

Through this study, readers can gain a better understanding of the cultural values (labour dynamics and family pride values) influencing familial control in South Asian migration to the GCC, as well as the aforementioned associated negative aspects. The use of the non-probability sampling method limits this study's representativeness. However, this method enables researchers to analyze participant information first-hand, ensuring alignment with the research topic and question, thus improving both the authenticity and credibility of the research findings.

5.3. Future Directions

The research approach should reach beyond nationality-specific migrant groups by studying populations from other GCC nations, as this would provide information about the multi-cultural context of migration to industrial regions of the UAE. Future studies should investigate kinship-based control patterns in multi-cultural dimensions. Investigating familial exploitation across genders brings a clear understanding of how moral duties and cultural customs differently affect men and women's experiences.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.A.A.; methodology, A.A.A.; software, A.A.A.; validation, A.A.A.; formal analysis, A.A.A.; investigation, A.A.A.; resources, A.A.A.; data curation, A.A.A.; writing original draft preparation, A.A.A.; writing review and editing, A.A.A.; visualization, A.A.A.; supervision, A.S.; project administration, A.A.A.; funding acquisition, A.A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding. The article processing charge (APC) was personally covered by the first author, Abdelaziz Abdalla Alowais.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required for this study, as it did not involve any form of intervention, vulnerable populations, or the collection of sensitive personal data. The research fully adhered to the ethical principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent, in line with established norms for observational and qualitative social research. Moreover, this study was independently conducted and was not mandated, sponsored, or formally commissioned by any academic or governmental institution. As such, it falls outside the scope of institutional ethical review frameworks while maintaining full compliance with responsible research conduct.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants were briefed on the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures of the research before any data collection took place.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study were obtained through confidential interviews and field observations with migrant participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the content and the potential undocumented status of some respondents, the data will not be publicly shared. To uphold participant confidentiality and ensure their protection, especially given the informal and precarious conditions of some individuals involved, all raw data will be securely destroyed following the publication of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest. The researcher does not share the same nationality or ethnic background as the participants, which minimises the risk of bias and ensures an objective and independent analysis of the findings. The study was conducted with academic neutrality and without any personal or institutional influence.

References

- Klaunig, K.; Karim Khan, S.; Reichelt, M. 'My life is not to be called a failure': How family reputation in the origin affects return considerations among South Asian migrants in the Gulf. *J. Ethn. Migr. Stud.* **2024**, *50*, 5127–5146. [CrossRef]
- Hasin, M.S.D. The Quest for Decent Work: Issues and Challenges of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers towards Saudi Arabia. *Adv. Appl. Sociol.* **2025**, *15*, 106–130. [CrossRef]
- Hasin, M.S.D. Neoliberal Globalization: Understanding the Case of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers towards Saudi Arabia. *Adv. Appl. Sociol.* **2024**, *14*, 740–759. [CrossRef]
- Ness, I. *Migration as Economic Imperialism: How International Labour Mobility Undermines Economic Development in Poor Countries*; John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2023.
- Uddin, M.B. Remittances, Socio-Economic Inequality and Development: Insights from Rural Bangladesh. Ph.D. Thesis, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 2023.
- Ahmed, K. The macroeconomic determinants of remittance in Bangladesh. *Bangladesh Rural Dev. Stud.* **2022**, *25*, 23–37.
- Rahman, M.M. Emigration and the family economy: Bangladeshi labor migration to Saudi Arabia. *Asian Pac. Migr. J.* **2011**, *20*, 389–411. [CrossRef]
- Umar, S.; Rahman, M.M. International student migration to the GCC states: A comparative study. *Migr. Dev.* **2023**, *12*, 111–140. [CrossRef]
- Bossavie, L. *Low-Skilled Temporary Migration Policies: The Case of Bangladesh*; Background Paper to the World Development Report; World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2023.
- Rahaman, M.S.; Rahman, M.M. Life of the Bangladeshi construction workers: An insight observation from the reality of the quality of an isolated community. *J. Enterprising Communities People Places Glob. Econ.* **2022**, *16*, 829–847. [CrossRef]
- Jaehrling, K.; Pereyra, F.; Poblete, L. Introduction: The formalization of paid domestic work—Current trajectories and challenges ahead. *Int. Labour Rev.* **2024**, *163*, 359–375. [CrossRef]
- Bell, A.V. Selection and adaptation in human migration. *Evol. Anthropol. Issues News Rev.* **2023**, *32*, 308–324. [CrossRef]
- Cormos, V.C. The processes of adaptation, assimilation and integration in the country of migration: A psychosocial perspective on place identity changes. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 10296. [CrossRef]
- Czaika, M.; Reinprecht, C. Migration drivers: Why do people migrate? In *Introduction to Migration Studies: An Interactive Guide to the Literatures on Migration and Diversity*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2022; pp. 49–82.
- Ashbourne, L.M.; Tam, D.; Al Jamal, A.; Baobaid, M.; Badahdah, A. Arab families' stories of migration from war zones: Gender roles and family relations in flux. *J. Immigr. Refug. Stud.* **2021**, *19*, 114–127. [CrossRef]
- Mahmud, H. From individual motivations to social determinants: Towards a sociology of migrants' remittances. *Int. Soc. Sci. J.* **2020**, *70*, 175–188. [CrossRef]
- Sultana, R. Remittance Impact on Both Poverty Level and Economic Growth of Bangladesh. 2023. Available online: https://dspace.uui.ac.bd/bitstream/handle/52243/2817/Rajiya%20Sultana_Internship%20Report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed on 1 May 2025).
- Bilecen, T. To stay or to return? A review on return migration literature. *Migr. Lett.* **2022**, *19*, 367–385. [CrossRef]
- Sevinç, Y. Mindsets and family language pressure: Language or anxiety transmission across generations? *J. Multiling. Multicult. Dev.* **2022**, *43*, 874–890. [CrossRef]
- Aarthi, S.; Sahu, M. Migration policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: A critical analysis. *Contemp. Rev. Middle East* **2021**, *8*, 410–434. [CrossRef]

21. Hussain, Z. Immigration policies of the GCC countries: Implications and responses. In *Dynamics of Indian Migration*; Routledge: New Delhi, India, 2020; pp. 93–163.
22. Thiollet, H. Illiberal migration governance in the Arab Gulf. In *Understanding Global Migration*; Stanford University Press: Redwood City, CA, USA, 2022; pp. 50–80.
23. Ewers, M.; Diop, A.; Duma, N.; Le, K. Beyond vulnerability: Contextualizing migrant worker views on rights and wellbeing in the Gulf Arab states. *Comp. Migr. Stud.* **2023**, *11*, 20. [CrossRef]
24. Statista Research Department. Labor Migration Flow from Selected Asian Countries to Saudi Arabia 2022. 2023. Available online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/880773/saudi-arabia-labor-migration-flow-selected-asian-countries/> (accessed on 1 May 2025).
25. Jamil, R.; Kumar, R. Culture, structure, and health: Narratives of low-income Bangladeshi migrant workers from the United Arab Emirates. *Health Commun.* **2021**, *36*, 1297–1308. [CrossRef]
26. Kumar, R.; Jamil, R. Labor, health, and marginalization: A culture-centered analysis of the challenges of male Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East. *Qual. Health Res.* **2020**, *30*, 1723–1736. [CrossRef]
27. Αθανασίου-Διαμαντοπούλου, Σ. Transnational Migration and Family Ties: A Comparative Study. Master's Thesis, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece, 2024.
28. Greschke, H.; Ott, J. Rethinking community in migration studies: Lessons from transnational families for rethinking the relationship of 'community' and 'society'. In *Rethinking Community Through Transdisciplinary Research*; Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2020; pp. 127–143.
29. Christensen, P.S. Revisiting the importance of distance in transnational family lives. *Nord. J. Migr. Res.* **2020**, *10*, 34–50. [CrossRef]
30. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. Thematic analysis. In *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2024; pp. 7187–7193.
31. Squires, V. Thematic analysis. In *Varieties of Qualitative Research Methods: Selected Contextual Perspectives*; Springer: Cham, Switzerland, 2023; pp. 463–468.
32. Sahu, M. Contemporary Labour Migration from South Asia to the GCC States: Emerging Challenges and Prospects. *Manpow. J.* **2022**, *56*, 54–74. Available online: https://www.nilerd.ac.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/paper%203_ContemporaryLabour.pdf (accessed on 1 May 2025).
33. Choudhury, T.; Morad, M.; Dellapuppa, F. Lacerated minds, stolen dreams: Experiences of Bangladeshi women migrants in Saudi Arabia. *Int. Sociol.* **2024**, *39*, 50–70. [CrossRef]
34. Suzuki, Y. A Study on the Background of Bangladeshi Migrant Labourers to the United Arab Emirates. *J. Inst. Community Hum. Serv.* **2020**, *8*, 53–78.
35. Parreñas, R.S.; Silvey, R. The governance of the Kafala system and the punitive control of migrant domestic workers. *Popul. Space Place* **2021**, *27*, e2487. [CrossRef]
36. Ainul, S.; Haque, E.; Santhya, K.; Rob, U. *Assessment of Overseas Labor Migration Systems in Bangladesh*; Population Council: Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2022.
37. Sahu, M. Young migrant women from South Asia in the UAE: Issues and challenges. In *Sustainable Development Goals and Migration*; Routledge: New Delhi, India, 2021; pp. 117–140.
38. Kukreja, R. Migration has stripped us of our manhood: Contradictions of failed masculinity among South Asian male migrants in Greece. *Men Masculinities* **2021**, *24*, 307–325. [CrossRef]
39. Li, X.; Kim, Y.-J.; Hossain, Z. Fathers in Asian Families: (Changing) Contexts of Traditions, Cultures, and Religions. In *Asian Parenting*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2024; pp. 168–189.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.