

Bangladeshi Women Domestic Workers' Experiences of Intimate Labour in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Drawing on the theoretical lens of intimate labour, this paper analyses how economic security is entangled with Bangladeshi women's paid domestic work in Saudi Arabia, where women's bodies become contested sites of labour and gendered violence. We examine the negotiation of gendered expectations, relational dynamics, and power imbalances within Saudi Arabian home workplaces based on in-depth interviews with 18 returnee Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers. Their stories reveal that employer-sponsored domestic work inherently produces systemic risks, severely constraining women's capacity for actively challenging harmful work practices. We argue that economic violence constitutes the most significant form of violation experienced by these women, sustaining other forms of violence. In response to this spectrum of violence, women employ everyday acts of resistance manifested through conscious endurance, affective distance, and non-confrontational tactics to ensure their economic goals of migration. An intimate labour lens highlights that these strategies are far more than coping mechanisms—they represent a critical terrain of resistance where women strategically manage their home workplace and its relational dynamics to deal with violence in the absence of formal institutional protection.

Keywords: intimate labour, paid domestic work, gendered violence, feminist migration policy

Suggested citation: L. Jebin and J. Maher, 'Bangladeshi Women Domestic Workers' Experiences of Intimate Labour in Saudi Arabia', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 27, 2026, pp. 16-37, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201226272>

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Introduction

In the context of globalisation and neoliberalism, many countries from the Global North have experienced an increasing demand for paid care and domestic work, with labour predominantly sourced from women from the Global South.¹ However, the global trend of gendering paid care and domestic work is simultaneously connected to assumptions about women's unpaid domestic work being low-skilled and unproductive. Unpaid care and domestic work is generally defined as 'women's work', and due to women's traditional gender roles as mothers, wives, and daughters, their labour is seen as undeserving of any monetary compensation. Thus, in their unpaid care and domestic work, women experience devaluation and diminishment.² Because of the low social and economic value attached to unpaid care and domestic work, paid domestic workers are often recruited from economically and socially disadvantaged communities. This pattern is also prevalent in the global labour migration regime where the physical labours of women from less wealthy countries are transferred to the private homes in more developed countries. This migratory flow is simultaneously influenced by gendered structural factors in the Global South, such as women's economic insecurity, lack of employment and well-paid work, and the gender wage gap in local economies.³ Reports by the International Labour Organization (ILO) confirm that across regions, domestic workers are migrating under temporary migration schemes to work in private homes. In most cases, they are not entitled to full access to legal employment protections and basic human rights in the receiving countries.⁴ Furthermore, while sending countries offer some official support to protect their migrant workers abroad, these measures are mostly ineffective in practice.⁵ As a consequence, women migrant domestic workers'

¹ R Cox, 'Gendered Work and Migration Regimes', in R A Sollund (ed.), *Transnational Migration, Gender and Rights*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, 2012.

² H Lutz, 'Care Migration: The Connectivity between Care Chains, Care Circulation and Transnational Social Inequality', *Current Sociology*, vol. 66, issue 4, 2018, pp. 577–589, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118765213>.

³ M Lansky *et al.* (eds.), *Women, Gender and Work, Volume 2: Social Choices and Inequalities*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2017.

⁴ M Galotti, *Migrant Domestic Workers Across the World: Global and Regional Estimates*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2016; L Addati *et al.*, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2018; A King-Dejardin, *The Social Construction of Migrant Care Work: At the Intersection of Care, Migration and Gender*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2019, p. 35.

⁵ J Wu and P Kilby, 'The Precarity of Gender, Migration, and Locations: Case Studies from Bangladesh and Nepal', *Development in Practice*, vol. 33, issue 2, 2023, pp. 145–155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2057441>.

employment in private homes can lead to violence and insecurities.⁶ This situation is even more complex for live-in domestic workers (i.e. workers who live in the employers' houses where they perform the work) due to their invisibility in private homes and legal dependency on their employers.⁷ Since paid domestic work is and will remain an important source of women's employment, it is necessary to investigate and understand the experiences of women migrant domestic workers in home workplaces.⁸

In line with these global trends, Bangladeshi women are migrating overseas for paid domestic work and experiencing the same forms of violence in navigating their employment journey. The primary destination for Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers has been Saudi Arabia. There is no official database on women domestic workers' experiences in the Saudi Arabian paid domestic labour sector, but according to one Bangladesh-based organisation, approximately 8,500 female domestic workers have returned home in the last five years due to physical and sexual abuse or irregularities in, or non-payment of, wages.⁹ Furthermore, according to numerous national and international media reports, Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia experience physical and sexual abuse, rape, starvation, beating, as well as suicide and suicide attempts, and many have died.¹⁰

While a significant body of migration scholarship has examined the violence experienced by paid domestic workers, conventional frameworks often overlook the intimacy and intimate dynamics and the resulting violence within the home workplaces. This paper addresses this gap by employing an intimate labour lens that defines paid domestic work as a complex social and emotional exchange requiring the intersection of personal and bodily boundaries.¹¹ This lens reveals how 'intimacy' and the 'intimate' nature of the domestic sphere facilitate unique

⁶ ILO, 'Migrant Domestic Workers', International Labour Organization, n.d., retrieved 20 July 2026, <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/domestic-workers/migrant-domestic-workers>.

⁷ B Hobson, Z Hellgren, and I Serrano, 'Migrants, Markets and Domestic Work: Do Institutional Contexts Matter in the Personal Household Service Sector?', *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 28, issue 4, 2018, pp. 386–401, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928717753578>; R S Parreñas and E Boris, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010.

⁸ King-Dejardin.

⁹ F Nawaz and T A Tonny, 'Reintegration Challenges of Migrants in Bangladesh: A Study on Forced Returnee Women Migrants from Saudi Arabia', *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2019, pp. 49–58, <https://doi.org/10.37534/bpjhssr.2019.v1.n1.id1000.p49>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Parreñas and Boris.

forms of structural and affective violence. Thus, this approach uncovers the mechanisms of bodily violation that traditional labour and migration frameworks frequently obscure.

The paper examines how economic security is at the centre of Bangladeshi women's paid domestic labour and how their search for such security means their bodies are located as key site of gendered conflict/struggle. Applying the intimate labour lens to the narratives of 18 returnee workers, the paper interrogates the diverse practices used by employers to surveil and control women's bodies.¹² We explore how the private setting of Saudi Arabian paid domestic work shapes Bangladeshi women's experiences of violence and dictates the specific, often subtle, ways in which they negotiate power and respond to disempowerment. As their stories highlight, women's experiences of physical security are routinely compromised in the home dynamics of domestic work, as they endure violence and control in pursuit of economic security.

A central contribution of this paper is the exploration of Bangladeshi women's negotiation practices within a highly constrained home workplace. While their accounts reveal occasional micro-strategies of resistance, such as the use of silence or pleading to avoid violence, women's dominant approach was the endurance of inflicted harm, which this paper conceptualises as 'absorption': a deliberate, albeit constrained, form of negotiation. By tracing these everyday practices, this analysis advances feminist migration scholarship, demonstrating how women exercise agency through both strategic resistance and the absorption of harm to secure their economic goals.¹³ In the next section, we examine the intersection of paid domestic work, intimate labour, and gendered violence, drawing on feminist analyses to show how everyday forms of violence are obscured within the expectations of paid domestic work and how women negotiate. Next, we outline the methodological approach, followed by the study's findings. In the final section, we offer concluding reflections.

Paid Domestic Work, Intimate Labour, and Gendered Violence

Mainstream migration scholarship and traditional labour frameworks have historically operated within a bifurcated logic that separates the 'home' from the 'workplace' and 'productive' from 'reproductive' labour.¹⁴ This separation is

¹² E Boris and R S Parreñas, 'Intimate Labors, Introduction', in C R McCann, E Ergun, and S-k Kim, *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives (5th Edition)*, Routledge, New York, 2020.

¹³ R S Parreñas, *Unfree: Migrant Domestic Work in Arab States*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2021.

¹⁴ Parreñas and Boris.

not merely a conceptual oversight, it is a structural omission that fails to capture the gendered realities of risk, harm, and negotiation inherent to live-in domestic work. By considering the home as a private sphere exempt from public labour standards, traditional labour frameworks render many aspects of the home workplace invisible to the law and fail to categorise forms of harm that transcend direct physical assault or standard contractual violations. Feminist migration scholarship addresses this invisibility by integrating the concepts of ‘intimacy’ and ‘labour’—a conceptual shift that dismantles the artificial separation of home and work.¹⁵ This paper builds upon this feminist migration paradigm by analysing how these blurred boundaries between home and workplace operate within highly restrictive labour migration regimes. Applying the intimate labour framework specifically to the experiences of Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia allows us to extend these existing debates. Through this lens, we demonstrate how intimate, bodily, and domestic activities are redefined as spaces of economic production and structural exploitation.

Feminist scholarship conceptualises ‘intimate labour’ as work that relies on bodily labour, emotional engagement, and personal interactions within private homes.¹⁶ Domestic work, caregiving, nursing, and similar occupations fall within this category because they require forms of labour that societies often associate with ‘femininity’.¹⁷ When women perform this labour, it is frequently treated as ‘natural’ rather than being recognised as skilled work. This naturalisation serves to obscure the skills and emotional labour involved, while simultaneously justifying its lower social and economic value. Accordingly, domestic work is positioned outside mainstream labour analysis, which prioritises formal, public employment.¹⁸ Feminist theorists argue that this marginalisation is part of a wider process in which gendered domestic work becomes invisible, undervalued, and excluded from state support and labour protections.¹⁹ Building on this, understanding domestic work as intimate labour provides a framework for analysing how these very dynamics of gendered power shape women’s experiences of violence and negotiation. The relational nature of paid domestic work, such as proximity, care,

¹⁵ P Hetherington and J Laite, ‘Editorial Note: Special Issue: Migration, Sex, and Intimate Labor’, *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 33, issue 4, 2021, pp. 7–39, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2021.0043>.

¹⁶ Parreñas and Boris.

¹⁷ R Cox, ‘Gender, Work, Non-Work and the Invisible Migrant: Au Pairs in Contemporary Britain’, *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 121–124, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0174-9>.

¹⁸ B Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2000.

¹⁹ M Jokela, ‘The Role of Domestic Employment Policies in Shaping Precarious Work’, *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 51, 2017, pp. 286–307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12288>.

and responsiveness, often produces expectations of ‘obedience’, continuous bodily presence, and uninterrupted provision of care from women domestic workers. These affective expectations blur the boundary between employment and kinship, frequently purporting to consider women workers as ‘like family’ while still subordinating them within the household’s hierarchy.²⁰ The discourse of familial closeness appears benign, yet it often serves as a strategy through which employers secure women workers’ bodily compliance and expanded responsibilities, all without monetary compensation.²¹ It is within these blurred boundaries that feminist scholars locate the intersection of intimate labour and gendered violence. Rather than focusing on isolated events, feminist analysis conceptualises women domestic workers’ experiences of violence as embedded in structural, affective, and relational dynamics within the home workplace’s hierarchy.²²

In the case of Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers, the structural vulnerability is initiated long before their arrival through a domestic recruitment channel dominated by local brokers and unregulated agencies. These intermediaries often serve as women’s sole contact point and source of information.²³ Coupled with a lack of pre-departure training, this absolute reliance ensures that many women enter the host country facing significant language barriers and limited access to support services. Upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, these pre-existing vulnerabilities are institutionalised by the broader legal structures of migration in the country, most notably the sponsorship (*kafala*) system. This legal framework transforms the domestic workplace into a site of absolute dependency by binding a worker’s legal residency and right to work to a single employer.²⁴ Under the *kafala* system, the employer holds significant power over the worker’s mobility, often manifesting in the confiscation of passports and the denial of exit permits. This system operates as a form of structural violence: it effectively confines the worker within the private sphere of home, rendering them invisible to formal

²⁰ M T N Nguyen, ‘Fictitious Kinship: Intimacy, Relatedness and Boundaries in the Life of Hanoi’s Migrant Domestic Workers’, *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 32, issue 2, 2014, pp. 81–96, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ca.2014.320208>.

²¹ S J Tan, ‘When the Home Is Also the Workplace: Women Migrant Domestic Workers’ Experiences with the “Live-in” Policy in Singapore and Hong Kong’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 20, 2023, pp. 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223205>.

²² Parreñas and Boris.

²³ A Azad, ‘Recruitment of Migrant Workers in Bangladesh: Elements of Human Trafficking for Labor Exploitation’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 5, issue 2, 2019, pp. 130–150, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2017.1422091>.

²⁴ M T Chowdhury and M S Kaiser, ‘Forced Return of Female Migrant Workers from the Gulf Countries to Their Countries of Origin: Contemporary Trends, Causes, and Consequences’, in R Baikady *et al.* (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Problems*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023, pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2_323-1.

labour protections. By institutionalising legal dependency, the *kafala* system ensures that the employer's intimate work expectations are facilitated by the threat of deportation or criminalisation, effectively weaponising the structural isolation inherent in live-in domestic work. This structural confinement falls most heavily on women from economically marginalised countries like Bangladesh, who migrate for live-in domestic labour to fulfil urgent financial obligations to their families. These women operate within an intersection of class and gendered expectations that heightens their dependence on the employer's home. Furthermore, the privatised nature of Saudi homes renders the women virtually inaccessible to consular services and host-country labour supports.²⁵

This spatial confinement is further reinforced by gendered restrictions on movement, where women workers are often prohibited from leaving the house unaccompanied. To ensure women's compliance and minimise the possibility of external support, employers frequently confiscate mobile phones, cutting off the worker's last remaining link to her social network or family. Thus, Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers' pursuit of economic security is shaped by an extreme degree of vulnerability in Saudi homes. The women enter these homes with non-existent social networks, intensifying their dependence on the employer for basic necessities such as food, housing, and information. This intersection of class, nationality, and gender produces a specific embodied vulnerability, where the women's survival is predicated on their ability to navigate the intimate and physical demands of the home workplace while subjected to total dependency on their employers.

Rather than focusing on isolated events, feminist analysis of intimate labour conceptualises violence as an experience rooted in structural, economic, and relational dynamics of home workplaces. Accordingly, this paper aligns with the ILO's comprehensive framework on violence in the world of work, utilising its clear classification of physical, sexual, and economic harms.²⁶ Grounding our typology in this institutional definition allows us to demonstrate how the spatial isolation of the home workplace reconfigures these categories, turning structural failure into a mechanism for reinforcing everyday violation of women's bodies. It is important to mention that this specific typology emerged organically from women's stories, reflecting how their lived experiences naturally map onto, yet expose the limits of, institutional definitions of work-related violence. In this light, the intimate labour lens allows us to understand how threats to food security,

²⁵ R Silvey, 'Transnational Domestication: State Power and Indonesian Migrant Women in Saudi Arabia', *Political Geography*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2004, pp. 245–264, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2003.12.015>.

²⁶ R Zimmer, 'The Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work: ILO Convention No. 190', in M Moore, C Scherrer, and M van der Linden, *The Elgar Companion to Decent Work and the Sustainable Development Goals*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2025, pp. 336–345.

restricted living conditions, and economic exploitation operate as everyday tools of discipline that manifest as distinct economic and physical harms.

Yet, within this system of coercion, women are not merely passive victims. In the total absence of effective institutional support, women migrant domestic workers navigate their workplaces through what Parreñas identifies as everyday forms of resistance.²⁷ These micro-negotiations and subtle acts of defiance allow workers to reclaim a degree of agency within a system designed to ensure their total dependency on the employers. In this context, resistance rarely takes the form of formal legal complaints, which are often inaccessible to the women. Instead, it manifests through micro-strategies, such as the refusal of food or the temporary withdrawal of labour, which serve as critical, embodied forms of negotiation within the unregulated space of the home workplace. Building on these insights, this paper extends the feminist analysis of paid domestic work as intimate labour by investigating how these everyday relational and embodied expectations shape the specific experiences of Bangladeshi women in Saudi Arabian home workplaces. By centring their narratives, it moves beyond identifying broad structural vulnerabilities to analyse how mutually reinforcing forms of insecurity—across physical, sexual, and economic domains—are produced through employers' intimate expectations and contested through women's persistent, albeit constrained, agency.

Method

Research Design

This research was conducted between September 2021 and August 2022 and primarily focused on the experiences of returnee female migrant domestic workers in Bangladesh. Grounded in feminist migration theory, the study adopted a qualitative design specifically intended to amplify the voices of marginalised women and listen to the narratives they were willing to share.²⁸ This framework was purposefully chosen to centre the 'situated knowledge' of the survivors of violence. Rather than considering violence as incidental, this study investigated how structural and economic conditions within Saudi Arabian households facilitate systematic violation of women's bodies. By focusing on returnees, the research aimed to uncover the power dynamics that define the migration experience for women from the Global South, shifting the analytical lens from individual victimisation to institutional failure.

²⁷ R S Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work (2nd Edition)*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015.

²⁸ S Reinharz and L Davidman, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992.

Population and Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited through purposive, criterion-based sampling in collaboration with BRAC, a Bangladesh-based international development organisation. The selection criteria required participants to be returned female domestic workers who had worked in Saudi Arabia within the last five years and had experienced workplace exploitation or violence. A total of 18 participants were interviewed; their demographic information is presented below.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Formal education	Marital status	Marital age	Number of children	Departure	Return
Sheuly	24	Grade-8	Married	19	1	2019	2020
Korobi	23	Grade-10	Divorced	11	1	2018	2019
Shapla	23	No Schooling	Married	12	2	2018	2018
Rojoni	45	No Schooling	Widowed	15	6	2018	2018
Jasmine	32	Grade-8	Divorced	13	2	2019	2020
Maloti	44	No schooling	Widowed	11	1	2019	2020
Monjori	21	Grade-8	Separated	14	1	2017	2019
Shurjomukhi	18	Grade-8	Unmarried	N/A	None	2019	2021
Golap	20	Grade-2	Married	20	None	2021	2021
Chapa	40	Grade-4	Married	14	2	2019	2019
Jui	23	Grade-7	Divorced	14/15	None	2020	2020
Aparajita	25	No schooling	Separated	12	3	2019	2021
Zinia	40	No schooling	Married	13	2	2019	2020
Joba	35	Grade-1	Widowed	11	4	2017	2020
Parul	40	No school	Married	22	2	2019	2019
Shaluk	30	Grade-2	Married	17	3	2019	2020
Hena	40	No schooling	Married	14/15	4	2019	2019
Shimul	19	Grade-5	Married	19	None	2019	2020

This sample size was determined sufficient by the narrative depth and conceptual richness of the women's stories. As qualitative researchers, our focus was on capturing the profound complexities of these lived experiences. This sample size allowed for an intimate, rigorous engagement with each narrative, ensuring that the structural nuances of violence and resistance were thoroughly explored. While this recruitment strategy introduces a potential selection bias—as BRAC primarily serves those experiencing significant hardship—this was a deliberate choice. Our objective was to provide a critical in-depth analysis of the systemic failures and institutional gaps experienced by the most 'vulnerable' returnees. By prioritising the intensity and richness of these narratives, our study investigated the specific power dynamics of the domestic workplace, moving beyond surface-level trends to understand the 'embodied' violence and negotiation forced upon women within the private sphere of the Saudi home.

Data Collection and Researcher's Positionality

Fieldwork was carried out via semi-structured phone interviews, which the participants identified as the most secure and convenient medium given the sensitivity of the topic and the geographical locations of the women. As the first author shares the participants' gender and nationality, an 'insider' status was initially assumed. However, we recognised that trust is cultivated through active listening rather than shared identity alone.²⁹ To minimise power imbalances, the researcher used colloquial Bangla and conducted three to four informal conversations before the formal interviews began. These sessions, which averaged two to three hours across multiple calls, allowed rapport to develop through shared discussions on motherhood and everyday life, creating a safe space for the women to navigate their trauma narratives.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded over the phone in Bangla, and then transcribed and translated into English by following a mix of both verbatim and creative translation. While verbatim ensures linguistic accuracy, creative translation captures the localised expression and contextual nuances.³⁰ For privacy and confidentiality of the participants, we chose pseudonyms which were shared with the women. To understand the women's narratives, we adopted reflexive thematic analysis, a process that considered coding as an active, interpretive

²⁹ J Carling, M B Erdal, and R Ezzati, 'Beyond the Insider–Outsider Divide in Migration Research', *Migration Studies*, vol. 2, issue 1, 2014, pp. 36–54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnt022>.

³⁰ O Castro and E Ergun, 'Translation and Feminism', in J Evans and F Fernandez, *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics*, Routledge, London, 2018, pp. 125–144.

process shaped by our specific positioning as feminist researchers.³¹ This method involved a constant, iterative practice between the participants' narratives and our theoretical framework of intimate labour and thus developed a typology of violence: lack of access to safe and sufficient food; physical violence; safe living arrangement and sexual violence; and economic violation. This approach allowed us to move beyond a broad definition of harm to examine how these specific forms of violence mutually reinforce one another within the home workplace. As the interviews were conducted over the phone, we adopted reflexive listening practice, and analysed vocal cues, silences, and hesitations as forms of 'embodied data'.³² This rigorous analytical process ensured that the resulting themes centre women's voices and perspectives while highlighting the patterns of violence and negotiation that described the intimate nature of their employment

Ethical Considerations and Trauma-Informed Care

University ethics approval was secured and the study adhered strictly to trauma-informed ethical protocols.³³ The researcher informed participants that they could pause, skip questions, or end the interview at any time. Furthermore, since participants were recruited through BRAC's Migration Programme, they were already part of an existing support system. The researcher also provided each woman with direct contact information for psychosocial counselling and legal aid, thereby establishing a clear referral mechanism for any emotional distress triggered by the interviews. The first author (who interviewed the women) developed some targeted mental and physical boundaries before and after each interview. This involved giving herself content warnings prior to emotionally demanding sessions and utilising grounding rituals, such as structured pauses and dedicated spatial transitions to process the mental stress of the fieldwork.

Limitations

While this study provides in-depth accounts of the lived experiences of returnee women, it is limited by the duration of the participants' stay in Saudi Arabia. The women had remained in the country for relatively short periods, typically three

³¹ G Terry *et al.*, 'Thematic Analysis', in C Willig and W S Rogers, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology (2nd Edition)*, SAGE Publications, London, 2017, pp. 17–37.

³² H Abrahams, 'Listen to Me: A Reflection on Practice in Qualitative Interviewing', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol. 1, issue 2, 2017, pp. 253–259, <https://doi.org/10.1332/239868017X15090095938377>.

³³ K Ratajczak and S Clevenger, 'Applying Trauma-Informed Care Principles to Assist Gender-Based Violence Researchers and Students', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol. 10, issue 2, 2026, pp. 319–327, <https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2025D000000111>.

months to two years. This timeframe likely shaped their experiences of isolation and vulnerability which is a limitation of our study.

Findings and Discussion

The women's stories revealed that physical security is deeply entangled with employers' expectations surrounding food practices, the threat or enactment of physical violence, and the regulation of women's living arrangements, including exposure to sexual violence. At the same time, women's economic security is undermined through practices such as wage retention, non-payment, and under-payment, illustrating how economic insecurity and embodied harms are mutually reinforcing in these contexts. Within these highly regulated environments, women often faced limited avenues to openly challenge their employers. As a result, the most prevalent response was a form of 'absorption', where workers endured these demands and harms. This was not an internalisation of their conditions, but a survival technique necessitated by the total absence of alternative supports.

Simultaneously, women deployed subtle micro-strategies to contest their total dependency and resist harmful practices. These acts, including the refusal of food, the temporary withdrawal of labour, and persistent demands for earned wages, functioned as expression of defiance in a context where formal avenues for redress were entirely absent. Such resistance represented a precarious yet critical negotiation for women's dignity and economic rights within the unregulated spaces of the Saudi home workplace.

Physical Violence

Food Practices as Tools of Bodily Control

Echoing findings in earlier scholarship, food practices constitute a primary strategy through which employers regulate workers' bodies within home workplace.³⁴ In our study, nine participants revealed how food intake and the imposition of the employer's food culture functioned as everyday tools of discipline and bodily control. One participant, Jasmine, described a state of extreme nutritional precariousness where she was forced to source waste food from the dustbin to sustain herself. Despite the physical intensity of her labour, which included washing clothes for a household of nine, the employer systematically denied her sufficient nourishment. Jasmine's decision to continue working 'at any cost' was not an acceptance of these conditions, but a survival technique necessitated by her

³⁴ E M de Casanova, 'Embodied Inequality: The Experience of Domestic Work in Urban Ecuador', *Gender & Society*, vol. 27, issue 4, 2013, pp. 561–585, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213483895>.

role as the sole economic provider for her family in Bangladesh. For Jasmine, the ‘absorption’ of waste food was the only available means to secure the economic stability that drove her migration. Similarly, Maloti’s narrative illustrates how the deprivation of basic needs functions as a mechanism of employers’ control to enforce dependency. Maloti resorted to consuming raw dough—a desperate strategy of survival born from the systematic denial of food:

My employer did not give me enough food... I had to steal flour and eat it mixed with water. I did not even get the chance to make bread, because they might catch me red-handed. I asked for three meals, but they told me that I was not entitled to that, because I was their slave... I went there for income; what choice did I have other than stealing the flour?

By framing her as a ‘slave’, Maloti’s employer exploited the legal and structural isolation of the home workplace to justify absolute nutritional control. Maloti’s ‘stealing’ was, in fact, a necessary negotiation for her bodily survival in a space where no institutional support services were accessible. Similarly, Joba’s experience underscores how putting up with food deprivation, specifically the routine consumption of leftovers, worked as a tool of negotiated endurance. Her tolerance of these conditions was a forced adaptation to the absence of economic security in Bangladesh. For Joba, the physical absorption of hardship operated as a precarious bargaining tool. By enduring food insecurity, she was able to stay long enough to secure a year’s worth of wages that her employer had previously refused to pay:

The food problem was unbearable, but I continued working... eating leftovers every day. I did that just because I wanted to earn and save money for myself and for my sons. Though my employer was not paying my wages regularly, somehow, I managed to get an equivalent payment for one year because I sustained myself there.

While Jasmine, Maloti, and Joba discussed the subtle imposition of food practices, Korobi shared how her employer asserted a more explicit, racialised authority. She recalls: ‘They behaved as if I did not have the right to choose my own food... they considered me a poor woman from a poor country who should not have her own choice.’ Korobi’s experience illustrates how the employers use ‘food practice’ to assert a classed hierarchy, framing the worker’s employment as a ‘favour’ that demanded the subordination of her bodily autonomy. Korobi did not remain in these conditions because they were acceptable; rather, she was forced to absorb food insecurity as a structural necessity to secure her wages in a system designed for her absolute dependency on the employer. This imposition manifests not only in the denial of food choice but also in the enforcement of a different food culture that leaves women physically tired and hungry. Shimul shared how difficult it was to adapt to her employer’s food culture, a process that took her three months: ‘They used to eat bread, which was difficult for me to eat as we,

the Bangladeshi people, are used to have rice. To be honest, I did not get used to their food, I just swallowed to survive.’

From these narratives, it is clear that women were structurally compelled to absorb food insecurity as an ongoing practice of their employment. Because the employer-sponsored domestic work system binds women within the invisible and unregulated boundary of the private homes, everyday bodily needs like food and nutrition are stripped of legal protections. As a result, these basic rights are left entirely to the discretion of individual employers, forcing women into a highly constrained, embodied negotiation.

Physical Assault and Punishment

In home workplaces, domestic workers are expected to demonstrate unquestioned ‘obedience’ to their employers. Any act of perceived disobedience or active resistance is often met with punishment, where physical violence becomes a normalised and routine tool of discipline.³⁵ Employers deploy physical punishment not only to enforce ‘compliance’ but also to reinforce their authority and control over women’s bodies. However, rather than being passive recipients of this harm, the women in our study employed a range of covert tactics—from strategic compliance to the deliberate absorption of violence—to navigate the condition of dependency on the employers. Among the 18 participants, eight detailed the systematic use of physical assault and the survival techniques they employed in response. Korobi’s narrative exemplifies the use of strategic compliance, where she performed the role of the ‘obedient servant’ to prevent further escalation of bodily harm while simultaneously planning her escape. Her deliberate choice to perform ‘silence’ was a calculated survival manoeuvre:

I did not try to talk to my madam regarding the beating... If I raised the issue, I knew she would beat me even harder. They expected women to be obedient and compliant. So, I did my job silently while planning to find a new employer.

By adopting strategic compliance, Korobi instrumentalised her perceived obedience as a protective safeguard while covertly seeking alternative employment. This strategy was necessitated by the *kafala* system, which rendered leaving an employer’s home or employment legally and physically impossible. This power dynamic is further complicated by the legal requirement for a release certificate from the current employer. Because future employment depends

³⁵ R S Parreñas and R Silvey, ‘The Precarity of Migrant Domestic Work’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 117, issue 2, 2018, pp. 430–438, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-4374944>.

on this document, our participants explained that women strategically absorb the hardships of leaving a job to prevent their employer from withholding the necessary paperwork. When immediate departure was impossible, women were forced to absorb physical harm as a survival mechanism to secure the economic goals of their migration. Joba's narrative underscores this forced adaptation, where endurance of physical violence worked as a precarious bargaining tool to secure the income: 'It was difficult to tolerate physical punishment every day. But, I had no other choice to secure the wages.'

Legal and spatial restrictions in the Saudi domestic labour regime facilitate physical violence, leaving women with no choice but to endure abuse. Because Saudi Arabian homes are legally secluded from oversight, the domestic workplace functions as an unregulated space where violence is systematically deployed to suppress labour rights. Within this system, employers deliberately use physical harm as a disciplinary tool to silence women who insist on their contractual wages. Jui and Monjori's experiences reveal that absorption was sustained only until the violence escalated to a life-threatening level. When women demanded their wages, employers used physical punishment, such as throwing boiling water on them to silence their voices. This violence was compounded by a lack of state or institutional support within the host country, leaving the women with no choice but to escape even by risking their lives. Jasmine's experience exemplifies this; trapped by language barriers and physical locks, she finally jumped from a first-floor window as her only means of survival:

I did not even understand their language very well, where should I go for support, who could help me there? Then I called one of my friends who lived in Riyadh. She suggested I escape from that house and go to her place via taxi. I was so scared about this plan, what was more concerning that I did not have my passport either; I only had some money. One night, I escaped that house, I jumped from the first floor as all other exits were heavily locked.

Beyond the immediate threat of physical harm, the narratives of Champa and Maloti reveal that women developed specific navigational tactics to manage constant psychological pressure. Maloti observed that violence occurred even when she 'followed all the rules', highlighting a deliberate structural attempt to instil fear as a mechanism of control. In response, women adopted a tactic of affective distance, separating their internal emotional state from the physical abuse to maintain their capacity to continue working. This everyday form of negotiation is further illustrated by Korobi. In her experience, violence was utilised to secure compliance at the very onset of an instruction: 'Whenever they ordered me to do something, they either slapped or pushed me first and then they ordered. Probably they thought that I would do the work properly if they slapped me every time... I felt so much humiliation and shame... that I could not work properly.' This statement demonstrates that domestic work is not simply

structured through routine violence but is fundamentally constituted by it. This absolute power is rooted in the sponsorship system, which grants employers legal authority over the worker's physical presence and mobility. Within the intimate space of the home, this legal authority allows for a repetitive assertion of power, where the act of giving 'orders' is transformed into a routine of domination. Violence is not incidental here; rather, it is woven into the everyday practice of labour, normalising physical coercion as an inherent component of the work itself. Thus, physical violence and economic insecurity become mutually reinforcing: the constant threat of wage withholding or deportation compels women to treat bodily harm as a manageable condition of survival, effectively binding their economic security to the absorption of violence.

Unsafe Living Arrangement and Sexual Violence

Feminist analysis reveals that sexual violence is often inseparable from paid domestic work, largely due to the extreme proximity and blurred boundaries between labour and intimacy that define this sector.³⁶ Within the private sphere of the home, this proximity exposes women to heightened vulnerability, as employers frequently perceive sexual access as a structural entitlement of the labour contract. In this context, the intimate dynamics of domestic work serve to normalise sexual violence, reframing abuse as an inherent feature of the labour relationship. In our study, ten participants shared experiences of sexual violence, directly linking their vulnerability to the spatial manipulation of their living arrangements. These narratives highlight how sexual violence is facilitated by the living arrangement in the home workplace. Jasmine described how she was forced to cohabitate with the employer's pet birds. This provided an excuse for the male employer to enter her room late at night under the guise of 'feeding the birds'. Jasmine's response was to 'pretend' she did not understand his true intentions, putting on a performance of 'ignorance'. By acting as if the employer's presence were innocent, Jasmine avoided a direct confrontation that would have likely escalated the situation or risked her employment:

His body language and eye contacts clearly signalled his intentions... He thought that as my 'master', he had the right to have sex with me. I understood his intention clearly, but I was pretending that I did not understand anything. Because I wanted to continue the work without any unnecessary hassles.

Jasmine's narrative highlights how women are forced to strategically navigate employers' expectation of sexual access, transforming bodily protection into an everyday struggle for survival. Within this dynamic, the employer's power sanctions

³⁶ Hetherington and Laite.

them to treat the worker's body as a space under their intimate authority. By relying on the constant threat of deportation, the employers transform the domestic workplace into an active site of sexual violence. Women workers are aware that their legal right to remain in Saudi Arabia is tied to their employment, forcing them to negotiate this dependency while ensuring their physical safety. Jasmine's experience highlights the tactical nature of this endurance. She maintained her safety by constantly monitoring her employer's intentions and utilising the physical space of the home—locking her door and feigning sleep—to create a necessary, though fragile, barrier against sexual violence. Maloti's narrative further underscores how employers use spatial isolation as an 'opportunity' for sexual violence. By routinely entering her unlocked, secluded room, Maloti's employer's son exploited a living space that she noted was intentionally situated far from others to prevent her from seeking help. This isolation was compounded by her mobility and communication restrictions. Maloti's phone was seized immediately upon her arrival in Saudi Arabia, and she remained trapped within a house that was kept locked and under constant CCTV surveillance. Without any social network or outside contact in the country, she was left with no means of support:

All I could do was request a less painful style of rape to which they did not agree... They believed that since I went there as a domestic worker, I was always available for free sex... they thought that they could do it whatever style they liked.

Maloti's statement clearly highlights her unsafe condition where she had no other choice than requesting a 'less painful style' of sexual violence. In the absence of any formal safety mechanism, she was attempting to negotiate the terms of her survival within a site of absolute bodily violation. Similarly, Parul shared that her accommodation was outside of and far from the 'main house', which meant she was facing constant threats of sexual violence. She was in a situation where she was unable to withstand 'men's force' due to her isolated living arrangements:

It was so far from the main house that even if I screamed no one could hear... I used to work in the main house during the day and stay at that room alone at night. If any man went there and forced me, do you think I had the courage to stop them?

For Parul, the absorption of sexual violence was a coerced exchange where she had to prioritise economic security over her bodily safety due to the structural confinement of the *kafala* system. Parul discussed her deliberate consumption of sedative-laced meals, fully aware that her male employer would rape her once she became unconscious. As she noted, the primary reason for persisting in that violent setting was the necessity of maintaining a source of income, where sexual availability was implicitly considered as an inherent part of the paid labour arrangement.

In this section, women's stories highlight how the living arrangements within private homes were structured to expose them to the risk of sexual violence. While women acknowledged their experiences of sexual violence, they identified economic insecurity as the primary form of violence in domestic work and the fundamental reason they absorbed and sustained sexual violence.

Economic Violence

This section details employers' strategies of forcing women to work, applying various techniques of economic extraction. Employers' systemic practice of economic violence includes non-payment, underpayment, delayed payment, and partial payment of wages. Another common practice is retaining a portion of women's wages until the end of their employment, thus preventing them from discontinuing their work even in the face of unbearable physical and sexual violence discussed above. Among the 18 participants, 13 experienced wage retention, with more than half reporting under-payment. Women further revealed that wage retention was frequently enforced through a spectrum of overtly coercive tactics, such as verbal intimidation and mobility restriction. They were acutely aware that any overt resistance would likely trigger an escalation of violence. In response, they negotiated their survival through affective techniques, such as deliberate silence, leveraging emotional appeals or 'familial' proximity to invoke the employer's moral obligation. In some cases, women attempted to disrupt the isolation of the domestic sphere by involving local brokers to intervene, strategically seeking external pressure to address economic violence without triggering a direct confrontation with their employers.

One participant, Sheuly, shared that, in accordance with her contract, the employer was obligated to pay SAR 1,000 (USD 260), but they only paid SAR 800 (USD 213). She complained to her recruitment agency about the underpayment, but they took no action and refused to negotiate with the employer for fair wages. Sheuly's story reveals how employers escalate their level of control by using the broader migratory infrastructure, specifically through involving the recruitment agency. This strategy relies on the violent synergy between the private homes and the Saudi recruiters, which function as the local counterpart to the Bangladeshi agency. Instead of serving as a support system for women, the Saudi agency functioned as an external enforcer for the employers, prioritising institutional discipline and control over worker rights. In the absence of formal institutional support, Sheuly used 'affective negotiation' as a survivalist alternative for labour rights, where crying and emotional pleas function as conscious micro-strategies. By 'crying a lot' to the employer's wife, Sheuly strategically leveraged gendered proximity to shift the conflict from a contractual dispute to emotional negotiation. Thus, she attempted to invoke a sense of shared feminine empathy. Sheuly described this as a deliberate effort to transform the employer's wife from a position of authority to that of a potential negotiator:

I was crying that they did not give me a fair amount and I did not have anything I could do against them... I also asked for it from my employer's wife and cried a lot with her. She agreed that she would give me one thousand Riyals from next month.

Similarly, Monjori detailed how her employer coordinated with recruitment agencies to enforce her labour despite ongoing economic extraction. However, when discussing her eventual escape, Monjori identified wage retention, rather than other forms of violence, as the primary factor. She underscored her initial commitment to completing the two-year tenure, noting that she even compromised her nutritional needs to achieve that goal:

Their food culture was awful, but I was adamant that I would stick it out until the end of my contract. The payment was irregular. They used offensive language toward me if I asked for my pay. I stayed there for two years, but I only received three months' salary. I finally decided to run away. I could not stand the food, and I was not receiving the money. I therefore no longer found a reason to work there.

Monjori's narrative highlights how the devaluation of women's work at home is operationalised through irregular payment, transforming a labour agreement into a site of economic and bodily violence. This strategic wage retention serves to deny women's legal and social rights as workers. Such economic extraction acts as a mechanism of ownership, underpinned by physical and verbal violence to sustain control. Within this system, the necessity to secure withheld wages becomes a structural demand, leaving women with little choice but to endure the constant violation of their bodies. As a result, Monjori's strategies shifted from persistence to strategic withdrawal. Her initial micro-strategy was absorption where she attempted to complete the two-year contract to secure her child's future, indicating that she viewed her labour as a formal economic exchange even when her employers did not. However, after receiving only three months' salary for two years of work, she reclaimed her agency through the act of running away. By physically removing herself from the employer's home, Monjori actively challenged the employer's sense of ownership, signalling that once the promise of economic security is violated, the 'reason to work' and the justification for enduring bodily and nutritional insecurity effectively disappear. Korobi's experience further highlights how employers strategically use wage retention as a deliberate tactic to ensure the continuity of women's labour under abusive conditions:

They withheld my salary regularly, often keeping one or two months' pay to ensure I stayed and worked hard. Their plan succeeded, as I endured restrictions on contacting my family, preparing my own meals, and even physical abuse, while continuing to work in the hope of eventually receiving my wages.

By 'regularly' keeping one or two months' pay, the employer creates a state of ongoing economic dependency, where the worker's physical labour is effectively compelled by her own overdue earnings. Korobi's comment that 'their plan succeeded' reveals the efficacy of this strategy. The expectation of payment became the primary mechanism through which she was forced to endure severe restrictions on her mobility, communication, and nutritional autonomy. In this process, the withholding of wages does more than just extract physical labour. It acts as an instrument to silence the worker's resistance to physical violence. For Korobi, the home workplace became a site where her hope for economic security was effectively used against her, forcing to trade her bodily safety for the mere possibility of financial recovery.

As evidenced by these narratives, economic violence emerged as the most significant form of harm, as it functioned to mutually reinforce other dimensions of violence which were enacted and sustained through women's economic dependence. Within the precarious setting of paid domestic work, women endured systematic bodily violence under the fragile expectation of securing economic stability—a promise that, in most cases, was never achieved. This illustrates a profound structural confinement, where the pursuit of economic security becomes the very mechanism that binds the women to a site of ongoing physical insecurity.

Conclusion

Drawing on the intimate labour lens, this paper has shown how Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers negotiate with violence in the private work setting of their employers' homes. By foregrounding the relational and embodied nature of paid domestic work, the women's stories demonstrate that their safety was severely constrained not only by the absence of state protection and labour rights but also by the intimate expectations and bodily demands embedded in home workplaces. Women's thoughts and actions were shaped through this intimate labour regime, where employers exercised control through food, accommodation, bodily surveillance, and physical discipline, and where women's negotiation was tied to their livelihoods and physical safety. Within these conditions, women's bodies often absorbed various forms of violence as a strategy for survival and economic security.

The women's narratives also reveal a form of constrained agency. In the absence of institutional support, their strategy shifted from overt resistance to strategic endurance. Specifically, women employed affective tactics, such as silence, emotional pleas, and compliance, to handle the affective work setting of the home. By leveraging gendered and familial proximity to appeal to an employer's sense of moral obligation, the women engaged in a non-confrontational form of bargaining. These manoeuvres allowed them to contest the devaluation of their labour and negotiate for their withheld wages without causing the immediate physical escalation that overt resistance might exacerbate.

By analysing these survival strategies through the intimate labour lens, this paper contributes to this special issue by addressing how a focus on intimate labour exposes the unique risks and harms cutting across the traditional public/private divide, while mapping the complex intersections of violence experienced by Bangladeshi women migrant domestic workers. It offers a feminist account that connects paid domestic labour, embodiment, and women's safety, highlighting how violence is produced and sustained through employers' intimate expectations and women's constrained choices. This lens captures the subtle, embodied, and relational dimensions of violence that conventional policy frameworks and labour protections often overlook, showing how harmful food practices, unsafe living arrangements, physical punishment, and economic exploitation operate together to deliberately place women's bodies at risk. Thus, our paper makes a significant contribution to feminist migration scholarship by highlighting the nuanced ways gendered violence is embedded in paid domestic work and demonstrating the importance of using the intimate labour lens to understand women's specific vulnerabilities and negotiations. Therefore, targeted policies must recognise that the home is an intimate work space likely to produce and sustain specific forms of violation. Effective protections must move beyond standard labour law to address the negotiation strategies women employ to navigate the physical and economic risks inherent in these isolated work settings. Future research should consider how longer durations of stay in the destination country might alter these dynamics. Workers who remain for extended periods may gain language skills, broader social networks, and a greater familiarity with the host country, potentially shifting their strategies for negotiation and resistance. Understanding the evolution of these 'intimate labour' experiences over time remains a vital area for further scholarly inquiry.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the interview participants for giving their time and expertise. Their insights, knowledge, and experiences have been incredibly valuable for this paper. Thanks to the service providers of BRAC Migration Programme too.

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