MY MIGRATION JOURNEY

Photo by Jeanne Crump
Between January and March 2021 the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) carried out interviews with trafficking survivors in Bangladesh and Cambodia to understand their reintegration experience. The findings can be found here. From those interviews are select short stories of the survivors’ migration and return journeys. The stories have been edited from interview form for clarity.

We hope that sharing these experiences will contribute to our understanding of how trafficking occurs, the evolving types of risks that people face taking work abroad, and what these survivors found to be the most helpful in reintegrating with their communities.

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My name is AI and I'm a trafficking survivor from Bangladesh. One day, one of my uncles on my mother's side offered to help me get a better job abroad. A few days later, he brought it up again and told me I could sign a contract with him to go abroad. At first, I told him I needed time to think it over. He said I would need 400,000 Takas ($4,700 USD) to cover the costs of going abroad and that I would earn between 30,000 and 40,000 Takas ($350-$450 USD) per month. He said it would be with a good company and that I would be able to choose what kind of work to do.

He sent me to Brunei. Someone picked me up from the airport, and a few hours later, one of my cousins came to me. I stayed at my cousin’s home for 12 days, but no one came to me from the company or broker. I finally called my uncle, and he assured me I would get a job. After another 12 days, someone came on behalf of the broker to pick me up from my cousin’s home. I started working with the broker as a day labourer. After a few days, when I asked the broker for an update on my real job, he told me that there wouldn’t be any other job. I would have to work with him as a day labourer. I worked there for 6 months as a day labourer, but then it became impossible for me to work. I never got any of my salary. I reached out to my uncle back in Bangladesh, and he tried to reassure me that I would get a proper job within 15 days. But I didn’t get another job.

Finally, I decided to come back to Bangladesh. I asked the bosses for my passport, but they wouldn’t give it to me. After a few weeks, I devised a plan and was able to get my passport back from them. Then I bought a ticket and returned to Bangladesh. I landed in Dhaka from Brunei and came home to my local district.

After a month, some people from the Anirban organization came to visit me. They were interested in my story, so I told them all about my experiences. Then they asked me what my plans were for the future, particularly wondering whether or not I was planning to go abroad again. I said that I would never go abroad again. At that time, my mental condition was not good. It was a horrible time. A few days later, the members of Anirban took me to a training. The name of the training program was "life saving training", and it involved support for reintegration and training for running a small business. They gave me financial support to establish my own business, and now I'm running a polity firm.
My reintegration process started in 2017. The organization Anirban and other local people helped me in my reintegration. I learned many things from Anirban’s training program, such as the 10 step systems for going abroad legally and safely. If anyone can follow the steps, then they won’t face any problems. Reintegration means that everything starts new, and one needs to implement the lessons from the training process.

My idea of a good life is earning money and living with family members. As a trafficking survivor, I don’t think I am fully successful in my reintegration. Compared to earlier in my life, I am feeling better. Based on my experience, if survivors receive proper training and support, then 70% could successfully reintegrate.

My barrier was financial support. Anirban members counselled me on how to take on the challenge of survival and reintegration. Now I think mental strength is the main thing for successful reintegration. I didn’t want to file a legal case, even with help. I don’t have an address or any real information about my traffickers.
My name is HS. I am 24 years old. I have 5 siblings, and I am the third child. My father’s name is Han. My mother is San. My parents are farmers living in Preah Vihear Province [Cambodia]. I am a Khmer woman who decided to register to go to Malaysia through a company called TSE. I knew that my family’s livelihood was poor, so I wanted to go to Malaysia. It was only when I got to the other country that I realised how nice it had been in my hometown. I used to live with my parents and siblings, and we had fun. When I got to the other country, I was all alone.

Regardless of how tired I was, I had to endure. No matter how difficult it was, I had to have the money to help my family to have a better life. When I got to Malaysia, I didn’t know their language. When I was ordered east, I went west; west, I went east. I didn’t understand the boss’s orders. I couldn’t understand the language when I first arrived. After a while, I began to understand the language, but it took too long. I was beaten. I was there for three months [before I could understand what was being said around me]. I had to endure it to have money to send to Cambodia and help my family.

I went to Malaysia to work as a housewife’s housemaid. The salary was $250 per month. I worked in a house selling noodle soup, washing dishes and pots, with no time for resting. I worked from 5 am to midnight. I couldn’t rest because I was overloaded with work and I was working alone. At the end of the day, I had to knead the dough [for the next day's noodles], sweep and mop up afterwards. Then I would take a shower, and it would be 11 pm. At 12 am I went to sleep. In the morning, I got to work at 5 am, but 5 am in Malaysia is 4 am in Cambodia. It’s not the same. I didn’t get enough sleep. I wasn’t eating enough. I was eating twice a day, only in the afternoon and in the evening. I didn’t eat anything in the morning. Regardless of how difficult it was, I kept my thoughts to myself. I didn’t let anyone know because this was my real life, having left Cambodia to work in Malaysia, in a house. I didn’t know that the salary wasn’t very high; I just went.

My boss said that there would only be a salary if I worked. No work, then no payment. If I rested for even one day, the pay would be deducted. If she went outside for one day and I stayed at home alone, the pay would be deducted. She said that only if the shop was open I would get paid. [When the authorities disrupted the noodle shop in the house, my boss eventually decided I wasn’t useful.] When she let me go, it was instant.
She organized everything for my return to Cambodia, including purchasing a flight ticket.

I didn’t know that she had decided to let me go. In the morning, I was sweeping and mopping the house as usual. In the afternoon around 12, she told me to take a shower and dress nicely. I asked where I was going. She didn’t say. After showering and getting dressed, I asked, “Boss, am I going out?” Her child told me, “You are going to Cambodia today.” When I came down, she calculated the money I was owed. I was scared and excited. When I got to the airport, I was so scared because I was alone and frantic. When I was going inside, my boss kept on peering at me to see whether I was safe or not.

When I got home, I was happy to see my relatives. But they hadn’t received any of the support [money]. The villagers were all happy to see me coming back to Cambodia. It was like being dead and coming back to life. Because I had disappeared for so many years. My parents were happy. I felt so sad when I saw my parents because they were so skinny. They had been worrying a lot. They had gone to a number of Khmer fortune tellers, who had informed them that I was out there alive, but that the boss hadn’t allowed me to go back to Cambodia.

When I came back to Cambodia, ADHOC [organization] supported me. They provided 50 kg of rice, noodles, canned sardines, soy sauce, fish sauce, laundry detergent, soybean oil, salt, and sugar. I felt excited and happy after coming back to Cambodia. When I got some money, I fixed up the house. I feel happy to be in our beautiful house with my family members. I had been in Malaysia all alone, so I was happy to be back in Cambodia and to see the villagers and relatives coming and asking how I was doing. No more worries.
I haven’t found a job. I went to Phnom Penh for 2 or 3 months, but I came back because I didn’t know what job to do to sustain the family. If Adhoc or anyone could support me to open a grocery stall, that would be great. That is the only support I want.

I would like to tell all Khmer women and the younger generation to not think like me – to migrate to Malaysia for so many years. The salary here can be sufficient for living in Cambodia. Don’t go and be miserable like me because I was wrong. At the time, I wanted to follow others, so I went. Now that I’m back in Cambodia, I do not want to go overseas anymore.
I am BM and I live in Dinajpur District [Bangladesh]. I am 50 years old, and I have two daughters and one son. I’m currently the owner of a small general store in my village. I might view myself as a successfully reintegrated survivor. My financial condition has changed through my hardship. My relatives and neighbours also respect me for being able to get to this position despite a lot of suffering. I know some of my brothers in my community who are successfully reintegrated. They now have their ways of earning a steady income; they are economically sound, and they are able to help others.

After I had counselling in Rangpur, I recognized what I am lacking in my thoughts. I started thinking over how to avoid [negative thoughts]. This helped me a lot to move past the sorrow. The main challenge for reintegration is the discouraging attitude from relatives and society. Second is the misconception that you can be successful in a day.

The details of the trafficking experience are very important because they have brought me to where I am now and to a realisation of the needs that I have. I was around 50 when I returned, but the experience has given me some lessons, including not to be afraid of hard work, the importance of working in a planned way, and that no work is small [nothing you do is without meaning; everything you do matters]. Family support is the only thing that can really help a person get on the right track to reintegration.

The biggest problems is making oneself mentally stable after such suffering. Besides that, the problem of finances is another issue that leads to crisis. A person needs to have faith in Allah who will reward him for his honesty in time.

When I went to The Maldives, I was very helpless. But now I know how to do work and what I need to check before starting a job.
What I feel is that the middleman should be brought to trial and a system should be formed to bring them to trial for everything they've done. My communication skills have become better over time, and it’s helped me gain more customers.

But, back in my home village, I did not receive any help from anyone. The support I received from RDRS [organization] has changed my life. The training, especially the counselling, was quite effective for me. The financial support helped me to start my trading again. The support was so impactful that I have become a volunteer for RDRS, helping share information with the village men about how to safely go abroad. I am a member of the anti-trafficking committee of the union, and I’ve been able to help many people who were at risk of being trafficked.

I did not get any support from family or friends after the trafficking experience. The government has to play a leading role here. They should provide immediate first-hand support to survivors. They can give one time assistance to the person and arrange a loan for people with lower interest. Recognition is another crucial factor. Government should treat survivors with respect, which will encourage other people to respect survivors as well. This would give them recognition. The Union Parishad Chairman could also play a leading role here. The support could be provided through him.

The NGOs need to do more follow up with people after providing information. Society has a big role here as well. People in society need to understand that if they are friendly to survivors, it will go a long way to inspire and encourage these people, who have suffered a lot, to properly establish themselves.
My name is VR and I’m 21 years old. I live in Kratie Province [Cambodia]. I am the second of 8 children. My mother is a rice farmer. I was tricked by a broker into going to China. They tricked me because I didn’t know anything. They said that I could get work in China – that I would get 400 to 500 dollars a month working in a shoe factory. My salary in Cambodia was so low, so I jumped at the chance to earn much more in China. They told me I would be going to China for only one year, and then I would come back home.

I thought about having such a good salary. I thought about helping my relatives at home. I also thought about how our house was incomplete, how we didn’t have enough resources yet to make it fully enclosed. In China, I would get a great salary. Would only go for one year, and I could come back home for visits. So, I wanted to go. I didn’t know that I was going to get scammed. My mother was also tricked. The broker took my birth certificate and filled out fake documents. To get to China, I would need a passport, proper documents, and to be at least 22 years old. I wasn’t old enough, so fake documents were made. They increased my age.

I travelled with the broker from the village to Phnom Penh and on through Vietnam to China. I was scared, but there was a Khmer broker who had been living in China for a long time who came to translate. He told me that I was being taken to get a husband. If I didn’t take a husband, they would hurt me. Like, they would mistreat and beat me up. It didn’t matter if the person was old or whatever, they would sell me to a husband as long as the price was right. They handed me over to my Chinese husband and gave him my fake passport.

In that house, it wasn’t too hard. He loved me, but I didn’t love him. I was trying to stay, but he restricted my rights. He wouldn’t let me go out; wouldn’t let me befriend Khmer people. The Chinese neighbors would say things to my husband, and he would restrict my freedoms. I was sad when I realized that I was to be sold. I wanted to cry, and a part of me wanted to laugh [at how I had ended up in this situation].
Early on, the broker told me that if I could give my husband a child, I would be allowed to return to Cambodia 3 or 4 months after the baby was born. But it wasn't true. I gave birth to a child, and afterwards they didn't let me leave. When I called the embassy, they said that if I wanted to come back to Cambodia, I couldn't bring the child. So, I had to take the illegal way to come back to Cambodia. I didn’t stay in a shelter once I returned because I had come back illegally.

For a Chinese person, it would be very expensive to find a Khmer wife living in Cambodia. Taking someone like me illegally might only cost 85,000 or 90,000 CNY ($13,000 or $14,000 USD). To arrange a proper visa and passport for someone would cost around 200,000 CNY ($30,000 USD).

I didn’t meet ADHOC \[organization\] for a while after getting back home. ADHOC gave me rice two times, as well as fish sauce, soy sauce, noodles, and books and a backpack for my daughter. I am not sure if my life is better now or successful. I still don’t have a proper occupation. I don’t have my own house or a motorbike. I don’t know what to request from the local authorities. They have never helped me solve my problems. I appreciate all the help I have gotten from ADHOC, but I’m afraid they have reached their limit and they may cut off support from here on. I am in debt because of hospital fees after coming back. I don’t earn a lot, so when I’m sick, I end up in debt.
My parents and my little son helped me during reintegration, and little brother and sister. When I had problems, I thought about quitting or taking a break. So, my family gave me courage. And I also think of the organisations that helped me. I never forgot them. Before I went to Thailand, I looked at my family, and they were really struggling with eating, living, and spending – not enough. I can't remember, but when I was leaving, I looked at everything in my house. I took a risk going. The biggest thing I was worried about was not having been able to reunite with my family because I went in through the wrong road illegally. So, I didn’t know if I would die or live.

I was working at the ice factory. To say it, there wasn’t any forcing involved, it was not that difficult, but when they forced us, it was really difficult. Very exhausting and couldn’t sleep well, working overtime a lot. I got to send remittance, but not so much. I decided to come back because I could no longer persist, and the salary wasn’t enough. If there was any spending and freedom, I would not have been upset. But I was living there like a pig, and the money was not decent enough for my family living back home.

After I got back for 4 to 5 months, then the NGOs gave me tools for fixing motorbikes and such. Maybe it was a while, maybe a month or two when I moved my shop to the front main road.
I was afraid of people being envious of me, trying to defeat me. I can’t really trust people anymore because of their words. It is the organisations who helped me fully for my successful reintegration. They helped me, giving me strength from abroad from our country Cambodia.

I still remember my boss’s words. He/she said that even if I made it back to Cambodia, they wouldn’t let me be happy. I am still worried about those words. The boss threatened me. So, when I face some problems, I often think about those words whether it’s true or not. In short, I only started to feel comfortable as of this month. Eight months until now I feel happy, clear of worrying. I only think about my job. With my family, there isn’t any problem regarding the reintegration. The only problem is my job. To be concise, it’s with the villagers that I have to face, like, when a person comes and says this and that. I solve it accordingly. If they say things that are untrue about me, I will confront them. I want to advise the other survivors to try and make an effort. Don’t always wait for help. You have to help yourself.

To help with reintegration, I ask the authority, service providers and such to look after those who are struggling and unfortunate. Up until now, that they helped me with equipment, it’s more than enough for me. I know that if I were to do it on my own, it would really be a struggle. For those who have been helped by the NGOs, don’t rely completely on them. Help yourself first.

I think it is really important to share my details because in my life I have not met anything that severe. This was my first time. It was difficult until I was free. It was that hard that I didn’t think that I could be sitting at home as I am right now. Because another country is not like our country. I am okay with sharing my story because I want others to know about my misfortune.
A Domestic Prisoner in Saudi Arabia

I am HS from Dhaka [Bangladesh]. I work with Anirban [organization]. I work on the issues of human trafficking and child marriage. I even received the Joyeeta Award from Upazila for this. When I find out about a victim from here, I discuss it with the victim at my shop. I do backyard meetings. Through backyard meetings and discussions, I provide support services. When I find a victim of human trafficking, I refer them to Socheton [organization]. When I find a victim of child-marriage, I inform UNO.

I think I am successfully reintegrated. Let me tell you, I went to Saudi Arabia. I returned in a different state. I was broken physically, and I was broken mentally. They [the traffickers] tortured me a lot; they didn't give me any food. Then they kept me under house arrest for five days. They didn't even let me eat. They also arranged for me to return to Bangladesh. They noticed that I had breathing problems and I could even die. They were really afraid of the police. The reason I went to Saudi Arabia was to raise my children. My dream is to get my children educated.

If a girl like me wants to go abroad, there are 10 steps to follow in order to migrate legally. But we didn't receive the training beforehand. We believed what the broker said and didn't follow the government's rules for migration.

I think I'm successfully reintegrated. I'm better than before. Polash and Ruksana madam from Socheton helped me. I did a lot of training. My family also really supported me, and now I'm running a shop next to my house. My shop is doing well. I didn't have problems from my family when I got back. They supported me. Neither my husband nor my mother-in-law had any problems with me. But I faced some problems from the rest of society. When my husband would go out in public, he would get comments from people.
Another thing is I couldn't go out. People used to laugh at me when I went out. I couldn't escape the shame. I stayed at home for two months. Then slowly I started to think, “It cannot go on like this anymore”. Then, by God's grace, I got help from Socheton. I think I am more successful than before. People do not treat me like they used to. They have changed now. I got the Joyeeta Award, out of 600 to 700 others who were eligible. The UNO/TNO, Chairman, teachers, the Mayor... such eminent people came and gave me the Joyeeta Award. People don't use bad words for me anymore.

As far as I know the way Anirban works, no one gets cheated here. Everyone gets successfully reintegrated. People can be successfully reintegrated. They want to change themselves. We help them; they help us. There are challenges in counselling people. When I was informed that Socheton provides these counselling services and training for reintegration, my husband didn't believe it. He was worried about where I was going and what might happen. Now, when we go to a victim's house, it is common that they don't believe [that we're really there to help]. They say it's all a lie. They don't believe us. Why would they let their girls go? Then we have to make them understand. Families can be a big challenge [to reaching survivors with support]. There are also social barriers. When victims come back from abroad, people hate them.

We also arrange backyard meetings. I called the people in my whole village. I've had backyard meetings about child marriage and human trafficking to make people aware.

Those who have papers, photocopies of passports, photocopies of visas, if they make a case with these, many people get their money back. Not everyone has paper, many make paper. Then the broker is jailed. Victims get their money back. I think the government plays a role in successful reintegration. I think those who came from abroad like me, I wish that they could get services like me from Socheton. I will pray for Socheton my whole life.
My name is MD. My hometown is in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar [Bangladesh]. I came [back to Bangladesh] through the Red Crescent Society from Sri Lanka. One of my friends from the neighboring locality proposed to me to go to Malaysia. I was a student in grade 8 then. I had to get on a [fishing] trawler involuntarily. They forced me to get on it. After 8-9 days, we mistakenly entered the Malaysian border. They beat me a lot. They tortured me in such a way that I can't even say properly. They sent me to the border of Thailand. We somehow escaped. We couldn't eat anything for 24 days. Then the Sri Lankan Navy rescued us and took us to Sri Lanka. They provided the needed treatment for us. After three months and 19 days, we came back to Bangladesh with the help of Red Crescent Society.

I didn't stay in any shelter home. I was included in the life skill training program of Iccha [organization]. After coming back to Bangladesh, I returned to my home. I cannot remember much, but my rehabilitation started maybe at the end of 2012. I took training from Winrock's project. I learned to drive. Now I am a driver.

When a victim comes back to Bangladesh, it's usual to have a lot of loans over his head. Depression is a common word in such moments. According to my perspective, giving a victim his old life back is a successful rehabilitation. Alhamdulillah, at this moment I think I am successful. I have also got married. I have children as well. I bought a car by taking loans. The loan is almost paid. I have also built a house. I am leading a happy life now. I am the president of Anirban [organization]. I have been working since 2013 with Anirban. I know, it's tough to give everyone a life that I am leading, but at least I can help. Even if a survivor comes to the union sector, the chairman calls us. From 2013, we have provided support to almost 400-500 victims.

There are so many examples of other victims who have overcome like me. The percentage varies from locality to locality. It varies among 40-70%. When I was a victim, I couldn't even speak properly. They took me to a union council after joining Anirban. The main purpose was to let others know about the pain I got. When I was sharing my experience, I started crying. I wasn't even able to speak. At that time, I had so much problem talking. In 2012, when a new law regarding human trafficking was in the making, we were present there.
Even now I see bad dreams about those days. How hard those days were and how happy I am now. It took me over a year’s time to be rehabilitated. When I share these experiences, I feel both happy and sad. The main obstacle to this reintegration process is that the male victims face the financial problem and female victims face social problems. Society doesn't accept female victims of trafficking. In Cox’s Bazar, most of the people think that the female victims are harmful to the other girls of the society. To make them acceptable we have to do counselling with members and many leaders of the society.

After taking the life skill training, I could understand what the right decision for me is and what’s wrong. When I went back home, my family helped me a lot. When I came back here, both my mental and physical health was not okay. My elder brother who was studying at Chittagong University used to motivate me to forget all these [problems]. He took me to Chittagong. I stayed there for a month. I have been working since 2012. I have worked on so many projects. But to be honest, 80% of work is done by NGOs. But, the government has no concern about us. There is no committee in the union council. The meetings are only held when we go there physically. But it’s their responsibility and they don’t do anything.
I am TM and I'm from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. I'm a trafficking survivor. I am very well and successfully reintegrated now. I realised that I had stepped into a wrong path. Now I realise that the brokers deceived me. I will not trust any outsiders anymore. If I have to do something, I have to do it by myself. After returning from abroad, I got admitted into YPSA and Anirban [organization]. I am much better than before. Anirban's members were also trafficked. They came back and formed an organization of their own. Those who have been trafficked are brought in and given counselling. These members work to ensure that the victims are not trafficked again.

There is no one in my family except my younger sister. I had told everyone that I am going to my grandmother's house. No one knew that I was trafficked, everyone thought I was at my grandmother's house. The brokers took all the money from me. I came back empty-handed. I found out about Anirban and joined the Anirban member meeting. Then I found out they work with human trafficking [victims]. I talked to them, and they brought me to the YPSA Shelter Home. I was there for 5 to 6 months. They gave me training and counselling. Through this, I have freed myself from anxiety. My reintegration started after about 10 to 15 days and after 3 to 4 months I got back to my previous life.
I haven't seen anyone that I consider to be successfully reintegrated around me. A lot of people like that [victims of trafficking] came when I was at the YPSA Shelter Home. They could not eat or sleep at night. They have also recovered through counselling and training. If they became more mentally ill, they would see a doctor. This is how support was given. I have seen a lot of people who have been helped financially or otherwise. I've seen 10 to 15 cases like that. Everyone has been successfully rehabilitated through counselling.

When I returned from abroad, my mental state was much worse. I didn't eat properly, I didn't talk to anyone, I cried. Through counselling, I have regained my beautiful life. The biggest problem is the financial problem. If the victim is poor, they are trafficked for money. Another problem is the lack of education. I was not educated, they would not let me go out of the house, I didn't even know the roads of the village. So, it was easy to deceive me. Poverty and lack of education are the two reasons why people are trafficked. No one in the family or society knew that I was trafficked. I attended the training secretly. If they knew, they would say a lot of bad things behind my back, because we are girls, it doesn't happen with boys. Everyone sees girls as lesser than boys. It happens more in our rural areas.

If I filed a case, there would be a lot of talk in the society about what I did, why I did it, questions would arise. That's why I did not file any case to keep my dignity. In my opinion, justice would not have been done, only my values would have been disrespected. Through training, I learned how to help the people around me. I have learned how to stand by them when needed.

I didn't tell my friends about this because just like the people of the society they would talk about me. It would have been better if the government, YPSA, Anirban had worked better on human trafficking. Then maybe human trafficking will stop in Bangladesh. If the government and these agencies like Nongor and Anirban keep working in this way, then those who returned after human trafficking will no longer be in trouble. The law mentions the punishment of those brokers. They should get death row. The law is in place but not enforced.
A seven-year (2016-2023) program, USAID Asia CTIP is a regional activity that focuses on transnational and regional challenges to combat human trafficking. The program aims to reduce the trafficking of persons in Asia through a coordinated and consolidated action by governments, civil society and business that will foster cross-border cooperation, develop opportunities for private-sector leadership and improve the quality of data associated with human trafficking. Learn more about the project here.

**Resource Links:**
- Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
- Young Power in Social Action (YSPA) Bangladesh
- Socheton Society Bangladesh
- RDRS Bangladesh
- USAID Bangladesh Counter Trafficking in Persons Project (BCTIP)
- USAID Cambodia Counter Trafficking in Persons Project

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