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Hyper-individualized recruitment: Rural-urban labour migration and precarious construction work in Bangladesh

Selim Reza

Abstract. *Indirect recruitment through individual recruiters triggers specific areas of precarious employment in the construction sector of Bangladesh. This paper critically examines the navigating role of individual recruiters in determining precarious work conditions for the rural-urban migrant labourers. It unpacks the inter-connections between recruitment practices, rural-urban labour migration and precarious employment in the construction sector of Bangladesh. Taking the case study of migrant construction labourers in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, it draws on surveys and in-depth interviews to examine specific conditions of individualized recruitment practices and employment relations that contribute to various pressures and insecurities amongst migrant construction labourers. Examining labour recruitment through the lens of precarious work, this paper argues that neoliberal practices have led to indirect recruitment practices where the pronounced existence of individual recruiters as the key actors underpins the precariousness of construction labour in Bangladesh.*

Construction work is a common but precarious source of employment for migrant labourers. In Bangladesh, more than 2.6 million labourers work in the construction sector and many of them are rural-urban migrant labourers in cities (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2010). Their indirect recruitment is regarded as problematic and contributing to precarious work conditions (Abrar and Reza 2014, Ahsan 1997, Chowdhury et al. 2012, Farhana, Rahman, and Rahman 2012). Motivations for profit maximization encourage indirect recruitment of migrant construction labourers through individual recruiters. The predominant role of these individual recruiters is not limited to the process of recruitment alone, rather they extend to labour management at the destination. Their day-to-day operations within such recruitment processes mediate various forms of pressures rendering exploitative employment relations for the rural-urban migrant construction labourers. This paper is based on a mixed-methods study that draws on surveys and in-depth interviews of migrant construction labourers in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. By taking the notion of precarious work as an analytical point, it critically examines why urban construction work is precarious for rural-urban migrant labourers and the role of recruitment practices in it. Exploring the

inter-connections between recruitment practices, rural-urban labour migration and the exploitation of migrant labourers in the construction sector, I argue that neoliberal practices have introduced indirect recruitment and labour management practices through individual recruiters that produce precarious work conditions for internal migrant labourers.

Research Methods

In order to collect primary data, I visited Bangladesh during late November 2015 to early March 2016 and gathered empirical evidence supporting this paper through a three-month long field trip in Dhaka. Before commencing data collection, I sought Human Ethics Approval from Flinders University of South Australia to ensure respectful treatment of the research participants and minimize potential risks and burdens in relation to participation. I followed the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research guidelines to access, recruit and treat the participants.

A mixed-methods approach was followed to combine quantitative and qualitative data gathering through a questionnaire-based survey and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The survey followed the purposive random sampling technique through which a conscious selection of 100 migrant construction labourers was undertaken on the basis of certain characteristics such as at least six months work experience in urban construction projects. The basis for recruitment was mainly the participants' experience of migration and work in Dhaka. The ratio of male and female participants was not even and thus 86 male and 14 female labourers were surveyed. This is because construction in Bangladesh is predominantly considered as labour-intensive masculine work where male workers outnumber female workers due to their physical strength and fitness for menial work for long hours (Ahsan 1997, Rahman and Islam 2013). More than two-thirds of the participants were the sole member of their family migrating and working in Dhaka and all of their family members were living in villages. More than half of the labourers had relied on farming as their only livelihood option in their villages before migrating. The majority of the labourers did not go to school and thus none had technical education or training in construction work.

I recruited the survey participants directly, with the help of gatekeepers. For this study, the project supervisors in construction sites were the gatekeepers whose permission and assistance were sought to recruit participants. By virtue of their personal or work relationships to migrant construction labourers, they were the key persons to control access to workers on construction sites. I personally visited the sites and approached them before contacting potential participants. Their permission allowed me initial access to research sites and the potential participants (Homan 2001, Kawulich 2011, Liempt and Bilger 2009). Through the assistance and approval of gatekeepers, I was able to craft an acceptable approach to the potential participants. Their support enabled me to build trust and credibility with participants and facilitate identification and recruitment of the participants (Eide and Allen 2008). I asked

the gatekeepers to invite participation through informing the workers where I would be (i.e. one of the tea stalls situated off worksites) during the designated breaks and they could speak to me then. However, the participants who did not feel comfortable to talk there, I allowed to independently choose a time and place convenient for them. An adequately private and secure place off the worksite was mutually selected for conducting interviews during breaks. Participation was voluntary and the participants provided informed verbal consent as per the information provided to them. Participants were anonymous and all information they provided was managed in the strictest confidence.

The qualitative interview participants were drawn from the overall survey sample. A sub-sample of 15 participants was selected for in-depth interviewing. I used a purposeful sampling strategy to select them. The basis for recruitment was the individuals' self-identification of willingness to participate in the in-depth interview process, as indicated by completion of the relevant question on the survey questionnaire (Hodgkin 2008, Teddlie and Yu 2007). This strategy allowed following up with these participants to obtain their specific language, voice, reasons and detailed explanation about the research topic. The main aim was to select the information-rich cases, even very low in number, which can provide in-depth insights into people's lives (Patton 2002). With regard to selecting the total number of participants for in-depth interviews (n=15), I used the principle of saturation that allows discontinuing data collection at the moment when new data do not add further strength to investigation of the research issues (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Mason 2010). In addition, five individual recruiters were interviewed to obtain employers' perspectives on individualized recruitment. While survey data laid the groundwork by testing the concept of rural-urban labour migration and its association with construction work in Bangladesh, in-depth interviews uncovered the critical mechanisms structuring indirect recruitment practices by providing migrant construction labourers' narratives (Bloemraad 2007). Synthesized data extracted from the survey and in-depth interviews provided first-hand knowledge to produce empirical evidence that this paper is based on.

The Changing Nature of Work

The construction industry represents a significant proportion of precarious workers. The changes in work in this industry are representative of many of the broader trends that we witness in employment under neoliberalism. Therefore, this paper is situated in scholarly literature on precarious work and neoliberalism. Claiming the rise of precarious work as a new development under neoliberalism, I argue that indirect employment through individual recruiters intensifies the precariousness of construction work, specifically for rural-urban migrant workers in cities. In order to unpack the nature and extent of individualized recruitment practices, I produce new empirical evidence and coin a unique term 'hyper-individualized recruitment' to show the overwhelming dominance of individual agents in each stage of a multi-tiered labour management process and its repercussions on migrant workers' lives.

The features of globalized employment relations have been rapidly changing. Precarious work is the central feature of the current world of employment (Anderson 2010, Kalleberg 2011, Ross 2009, Standing 2011). Globalization is considered a significant force that has brought changes in employment relations between migrant labourers and employers. Facilitated by globalization, increasing migrations of capital and labour have shaped changes in structural and institutional features of work resulting in new forms of formal and informal employment. In many ways, internal and international labour migration has impacted on the supply and demand of labour and thus changed the features of work and employment. The dynamics of exchange of capital and work associated with labour migration have significantly influenced the structure, articulation and experience of employment relations in local and global workplaces (Lansbury, Kitay, and Wailes 2003, Rodriguez and Mearns 2012). In this context, globalization is the key force that has facilitated many structural and operational changes and permeated various new forms of employment. The multidimensional impacts of globalization on employment relations are attributed to flexible labour market policies since the 1970s that have produced considerable uncertainty, instability, insecurity and inequality in industrial societies by creating a demand for greater flexibility and maximized profit (Kalleberg 2009, 2011, Standing 2011).

Neoliberal work regimes are best known for introducing informal employment practices by creating demand and supply of migrant labourers who are subject to multi-dimensional insecurities and exploitation. These regimes have implicated migrant labourers in highly precarious work experiences (Lewis et al. 2015). At the same time, these regimes have created flexibility within the labour market through which migrant labourers are forced to take up non-standard forms of employment including contractual, casual, temporary and part-time work (McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2009, Ross 2008). Neoliberal developments characterized by expansion of global competition, technological development, privatization, deregulation of markets, and a continued decline in the power of unions urged nation-states and businesses to establish flexible employment systems in which workers, more particularly the migrant labourers, bear more risks and receive limited protections. Such employment systems are epitomized by widespread flexibilities and the greater use of precarious work. Moreover, neoliberal restructuring has shifted economic risks onto labourers making them a flexible workforce subject to overwhelmingly unstable and insecure employment (Kalleberg 2011, Standing 2011). Lack of channels for upward occupational mobility and prospect of career identity force them to remain at the bottom end of the labour markets.

There are many debates on the nature and extent of precarious work and it has been argued that the concept of precarious work involves overstatement of temporariness and contingency in new employment patterns under neoliberalism (Doogan 2009). Moreover, by arguing 'we all are precariat' scholars have refuted that precariat is a new class (Seymour 2012). In spite of these critiques, there is consensus among scholars that new forms of flexibilities

have been introduced under neoliberalism and the absence of labour protection is the key insecurity that workers have been experiencing. Contemporary scholarly evidence from Arnold and Bongiovi (2013), Cross (2010), Kalleberg (2009, 2011, 2012), Kalleberg and Hewison (2013), Lee (2015), Neve (2014), Ofreneo (2010), Ross (2008, 2009) and Wilson and Ebert (2013) confirms that labour flexibility has become the central feature of the current world of work shaped by neoliberal developments. While labour protection encompasses a wide range of securities, such as upward occupational mobility, safe work environments, income guarantees and the right to a collective voice, much of the labour insecurities emanate from lack of commitment from principal employers. Indirect recruitment through layers of individual recruiters blurs their responsibility towards workers and such employment practices increase the intensity of precariousness by favoring capital against labour.

Employers' increasing demand for low-cost and flexible migrant labour has endorsed indirect recruitment practices such as outsourcing. Outsourcing of migrant labour, the most rational option to the employers for reducing cost, has now become widely legitimized. At the same time, this practice has initiated various forms of precarious work conditions. Globally this trend has created the basic problem of balancing flexibility for employers and security for migrant labourers. For employers, indirect recruitment strategies reduce costs, cut the permanent workforce, and maximize flexibility (Hewison and Kalleberg 2012). On the other hand, labourers receive less benefits and protections. While outsourced and temporary work is not the only form of precarious employment routinely offered to the migrant labourers, the typical features of precarious work include a wide range of employment arrangements such as work provided by individual labour recruiters that offer low wages, few or no benefits, limited or no collective representation, and job insecurity (Anderson 2010, Beck 2000, Hewison and Kalleberg 2012, Ross 2009, Standing 2011, Vosko 2009). The construction sector in Asian countries, Bangladesh in particular, represents many of these features.

In Asia, there is a trend to label the workers in the informal sector as precarious. Because of differences in their level of development, historical trajectories and cultural traditions, Asian countries differ in the degree of precarious work. However, increased flexibilization and insecurity in employment have been recent features of migrant labour in the region (Kalleberg and Hewison 2013). Bangladesh's construction sector is officially declared as a formal sector. In spite of that, informalization, more specifically individualization of recruitment is the key aspect of precarious work that the internal migrant labourers are experiencing in the sector. As in many other Asian countries, Bangladesh's internal migrant labourers are predominantly familiar with such recruitment practices. What is new in the country is extended layers of individual recruiters that dominate contemporary recruitment practices, particularly for the migrant construction labourers. Additional layers of individual recruiters in multi-tiered recruitment practices in recent times has triggered specific areas of precariousness in construction that was at least less precarious in the past.

Internal migration of labour in Bangladesh is intrinsically linked to urbanization, a recent phenomenon. After the liberation of Bangladesh from the Pakistani government in 1971, a sharp increase in the rate of urbanization contributed to growing economic and commercial activities in urban areas (Afsar 2003, Nabi 1992). Therefore, rural-urban migration and the recruitment of internal migrant labourers is a relatively new reality in the country, when compared to other countries in the region. Being born in the neoliberal era, Bangladesh embraced indirect recruitment practices from the very beginning. The rules of business and labour management strategies already prevalent in the world influenced the country since its birth. In particular, deregulation of business and private investment since the early 1990s has led to a rapid increase in urban construction activities and competition in the internal labour market (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2011). These developments have introduced a new world of work for Bangladesh's migrant construction labourers who have traditionally been accepting indirect recruitment practices as an embedded phenomenon in their work life. Although subcontracting and outsourcing have always been common labour hire practices in Bangladesh, the contemporary nature of these practices confirms a new and distinct labour recruitment strategy that has emerged as the most viable option to the urban builders. Interconnections among the layers of individual recruiters and their labour management functions implicate significant impacts on work conditions of migrant construction labourers in urban projects.

Rural-urban Labour Migration and Construction Work in Bangladesh

Construction in Bangladesh is a dominant sector in terms of its enormous economic contribution and employment. In 2010, the sector contributed 8.4 percent to Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and gained a 6 percent annual growth rate, higher than that of the largest sector in Bangladesh, agriculture (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2011). Recent demographic changes, infrastructure and housing development activities and the massive expansion of private real estate businesses in the country have further boosted the growth of the sector. The sector involves more than 200 large construction firms and 5,000 small and medium-sized private contractors and real estate companies (Chowdhury 2010). Construction has been a significant source of employment for rural labourers. A survey of farm and non-farm employment shows that in the three-year period through 2006-2009 more than 600, 000 workers switched from agriculture to non-farm sectors in addition to another 3.6 million workers who joined various non-farm activities. While the share of the farm sector in the labour force dropped by 4.5 percent during this period, nearly half a million people switched to the construction sector making the total number of construction workers 2.6 million in 2010 that was forecasted to be 2.9 million in 2015 (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2010, 2011). The growth rate of employed persons in construction was 13.52 percent in 2010. Employing 4.84 percent of the total labour force and 5.49 percent of the total youth labourers, the sector

offered employment to 6.6 percent of urban and 4.3 percent of rural labourers (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2010). Bangladesh's latest development policy documents, including the Vision 2021, pointed to project construction as one of the main engines of high growth in upcoming years in terms of employment.

Construction workers in divisional cities constitute an overwhelming bulk of rural-urban migrant labourers coming from different parts of Bangladesh. They migrate to cities seasonally when they have little options to survive on farming during the lean season for harvest. Many marginalized peasants and agricultural labourers migrate from rural areas to major cities such as Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Sylhet and avail employment in urban construction projects (Abrar and Reza 2014, Chowdhury et al. 2012, Farhana, Rahman, and Rahman 2012, Uddin and Firoj 2013). Internal migrant labourers perceive construction work as the most favorable income option in cities due to its built-in incentive such as free onsite accommodation. While compared to another vibrant sector, garment manufacturing, construction offers better wages and it requires less skills and education (Uddin and Firoj 2013). Due to the nature of the recruitment process, construction work has emerged as an easily accessible work option in major cities of Bangladesh. Unlike other sectors such as garment manufacturing, this is the only sector in the cities where rural labourers can readily join without passing through any formalities of identity verification and skill testing. Indirect recruitment practices enable them to find work and onsite accommodation without going through any official procedures.

Although recruitment practices in other sectors, such as garment manufacturing, have mostly been standardized due to their linkages with foreign buyers who maintain and pressurize to maintain international labour standards, Bangladesh's construction sector is purely a domestic sector that does not share any international linkages. As a result, it has emerged as a sector where informal recruitment practices are widely established and massive unfair and exploitative labour issues are regularly reported. In spite of being a burgeoning sector with the ever-increasing need for skilled workers, as yet there is no specialized training school in Bangladesh to impart training on construction work. Construction labourers have little options to enhance their skills except learning on the job. Taking the pressure of completing contracted, budgeted work on time, the individual recruiters are reluctant to provide any kind of skill training to their workers while lack of institutional training is salient. Entering the sector as unskilled labourers coming from villages, migrant construction labourers work in an environment marked by poor occupational safety and high rates of accidents. Daily newspapers in Bangladesh regularly report accidental deaths of construction labourers in cities although many incidences remain unpublished.

Individualized Recruitment and Precariousness of Construction Work

Individual recruiters in Bangladesh's construction sector generally recruit individuals on a demand basis although recruitment of a group or team of

labourers from villages is not uncommon. While they may have preference to specific villages or districts, often they recruit individuals from various regions to fill labour shortages quickly. However, recruiting individuals is easier than recruiting a group or team of workers. In order to ease preparatory tasks ranging from organizing travel to placing labourers in project accommodation, individual recruiters prefer individuals over a group or team. While most of the individuals come to Dhaka by trusting individual recruiters, one-to-one communication and associated promises before migration favor the latter by simplifying their tasks of managing and overseeing labourers upon their arrival. Another important benefit the recruiters get by preferring individuals over a group is the lowest chance of 'group dynamics' and peer influence resulting from potential interactions of group members that can negatively impact on migration decision. Furthermore, the practice of offering cash advances implies that offering large amounts of cash advances to a group or team of workers is riskier than offering petty amounts to individuals. Thus the recruiters can easily adapt to uncertainties of investment in case a labourer does not turn up in Dhaka.

Indirect recruitment of rural-urban migrant construction labourers through individual labour contractors and intermediaries is long established in Bangladesh. Urban builders do not recruit labourers directly. As an individual recruiter attached to a renowned building company in Dhaka validates this point:

My company is not interested to recruit or manage these poor labourers.....they don't have time to think about the labour. The company wants timely delivery of work only, they are not concerned about how I recruit and manage them. It is completely my responsibility to bring labourers from villages and look after them in worksites.

While contractors or subcontractors have a long history as recruiters in construction across many national contexts, the latest development of outsourcing practices is 'secondary subcontracting' that engages additional layer(s) to subcontracting for sub-letting of work (Sözen and Küçük 1999). Bangladesh's individual recruiters heavily dominate recruitment and management of migrant construction labourers in cities by mobilizing labour and determining the terms of employment. Because of their central role in recruitment and supply of labourers, they are often referred to as 'subcontractors' as they take contracts from owners, builders and contractors. They operate in a multi-tiered contracting system and their overwhelming dominance in recruitment implies one of several layers of intermediaries.

Interviews with individual recruiters reveal that several layers of individual recruiters are involved in labour procurement, and their number is more than what we see in case of outsourcing, subcontracting or secondary subcontracting. As one individual recruiter reports:

It is not possible for my workers to reach original owner of the proj-

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ect. I can't do that myself either..... at first he has contracted to a contractor.....The contractor has got an engineer..... The engineer has contracted to a subcontractor.... The subcontractor has contracted labour procurement to a labour contractor..... It is the labour contractor who asked me to join this project in Dhaka by bringing workers from villages..... Being a foreman now, I work myself and oversee my workers.

While traditional outsourcing or subcontracting practices in construction projects generally involve three to four firms or entities preferably between a general contractor and special trade subcontractors (Costantino, Pietroforte, and Hamill 2001, Fellini, Ferro, and Fullin 2007), recruitment of migrant construction workers in Bangladesh involves six or more individual entities including a builder, contractor(s), engineer(s), subcontractor(s), labour contractor(s), foremen and/or labourer(s). Although every project does not have all of them, they exist hierarchically and their hierarchical power impacts labour management in construction projects. In the absence of a written contract, often they intervene in overseeing the progress of work and pressurize the labourers to perform tasks that they discretionarily assign.

Empirical evidence from field research suggests that there are three types of individualized recruitment practices through which Dhaka's migrant construction labourers are recruited. These recruitment practices implicate three distinct types of physical location of the recruiters: recruiters within the project, recruiters in villages and recruiters on the streets.

In Dhaka's construction projects, every worker is a potential recruiter. The original owner of a construction project never deals with labour issues. Contractors and engineers take the contracts from owners and they subcontract the work to a labour contractor on a certain rate. Having extensive networks in all parts of the country, the labour contractor then utilizes his networks to recruit labourers from villages and initially contacts with previously acquainted skilled workers such as masons, carpenters, tilers, and plumbers. He asks them to find out about suitable unskilled labourers who can join the project immediately. Thus the skilled labourers bring in unskilled labourers from villages. Exploiting the relative poverty of farmers and the rural-urban division that forms barriers to migration, they collect poor labourers from rural areas to supply urban construction projects. Recruiting labourers from similar backgrounds has been common in other parts of the region including India and China (Suresh 2010, Swider 2015). An individual recruiter argues:

.....now the rural people have nothing to do as this is the lean season for harvest..... if you visit villages today, you will see how desperate people are.....I pick those who seem to be hardworking and physically capable.

Bringing in unskilled labourers, a skilled labourer gradually becomes a team leader or foreman nominated by the labour contractor and thus a group of unskilled labourers work under his supervision. He controls them, oversees their

performance and pays them after being paid by the labour contractor.

In some cases, individual subcontractors visit their own villages and mingle with villagers to discuss work opportunities in cities. By mingling with villagers, they try to get an idea about poverty levels and unemployment among the villagers. Thus they find out about potentially hard working young labourers and offer construction work in cities as job. As an individual recruiter reported:

We do not recruit everyone.....we recruit only the poor labourers..... the poorest in a village. Poor workers are generally hardworking, modest and disciplined. They are also very easy to manage.

Discretionary recruitment practices and choosing vulnerable people as migrant labourers allow the subcontractors to exert control over the labourers and utilize them for maximum output. At the same time, in absence of any state-sponsored formal recruitment opportunities, rural labourers are forced to depend on individual recruiters and hence it is literally impossible for a rural labourer to find construction work in the city without being part of the process that these individual recruiters control.

Being unable to bear the cost of migration, aspirant migrant labourers receive cash advances from individual recruiters to cover travel costs and pay off family debts. They pay the money later in long-term installments by working in Dhaka. For the recruiters, offering cash advances ensures guaranteed booking of labourers by indicating to them a confirmed job opportunity in the city. While some migrant labourers report cash advances as generous support from the individual recruiters, wage cuts and imposed deductions of wages often lead to increased indebtedness and distress of the labourers. It has been found that many migrant labourers in Dhaka had to repay the money from the first payment of wages and thus the full amount of the initial payment was utilized for that purpose. Arriving in a city for the first time and working hard, the workers found the practice distressful. The practice of adjusting cash advances by cutting and underpaying the labourers' daily wage is considered attractive and many labourers aspire to be subcontractors who are considered to be making more money than the labourers. Seeing subcontractors' day to day operations directly, some labourers validate that becoming a subcontractor guarantees the earning of more money. An apprentice labourer in Dhaka states:

It will not take long time to become a subcontractor. I will just need to perform well and abide by the seniors' instructions carefully.....anytime the opportunity might arise.....to earn more than what I am earning now.

Furthermore, unlike recruitment of labourers from villages it is common in Bangladesh that the rural-urban migrant labourers individually migrate to Dhaka and sit in street labour markets where they are hired by the subcontractors who maintain regular contacts with builders and contractors. These are often spot markets where employers meet workers in person and negoti-

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ate wages and terms of employment before hiring (Anand 2001, Chowdhury et al. 2012, Jha 2002, Mosse, Gupta, and Shah 2005, Swider 2015, Yoon and Kang 2000). These open labour markets are generally located at certain points in Dhaka, preferably near busy bus stops where migrant labourers congregate every morning and wait to be hired to different construction sites. For individual recruiters, street labour markets are the most favorable place to hire cheap labourers. Because of the nature of commitment and terms of employment, the relationship between recruiters and day labourers is very loose in this context and favors the recruiters to offer marginal wages on the spot. On the contrary, street markets are the most vulnerable place to find work. A brief lifetime of offered work and the abundant supply of poor labourers in the city creates pressures for the migrant labourers to compete in an informal labour market and embrace precarious work conditions for their survival. Since most of the individual recruiters in Dhaka are predominantly male, they do not wish to recruit female workers for various reasons. As a result, everyday a large number of labourers congregating on the street return home without work. As a female labourer cites, “earlier we used to get work at least ten to fifteen days in a month, but now the time is so bad that even if I wait the whole day here, no one will come to hire me.” Living without work is very common not only for the labourers congregating on the streets, in all three types of recruitment discussed above, the individual recruiters do not guarantee continuous employment and therefore many labourers remain without work for up to a month. Thus job insecurities amongst the migrant construction labourers in Dhaka are prevalent.

Lack of labour protection is salient in Bangladesh’s construction sector where labourers are recruited on verbal agreements. Recruitment without written contracts and identity documents creates barriers to seek legal protection and engage in collective bargaining. Bargaining capacity and options for upward occupational mobility are severely curtailed. As a young worker reports:

I can’t bargain on my wages or leaves.....never ever.....if I do, the contractor will ask me to leave the work immediately. Many other people are waiting to be employed. Who wants to lose work? Staying quiet is the best thing to do.

In Dhaka’s construction projects, migrant labourers are not allowed to raise any issue with regard to their wages, payment, leave or work conditions. Due to the nature of a verbal commitment, individual recruiters regularly instruct them to stay disciplined and loyal. Raising any concern to the recruiters poses risks of losing one’s job without payment of due wages. Having verbal restrictions from the recruiters, the labourers are often reluctant to think of employment benefits. They just work hard to please their recruiters while keeping themselves away from any kind of negotiation and union. These actions have characterized them as a flexible and a hardworking labour force commonly opted by builders in Dhaka.

Perhaps the most significant problem associated with individualized re-

cruitment is non-payment or irregular payment of wages. Labourers do not receive their daily wage in a systematic way. Interviews with the labourers reveal that the practice of offering *khoraki* (survival money) is very common in Dhaka. *Khoraki* is a part of the daily wage, preferably one-third, paid every evening as survival money. The balance amount is paid monthly or at the end of the project cycle. Almost all labourers interviewed for this paper report that they receive *khoraki* from their recruiters to survive and spend all that money for buying daily meals only. Recruiters do not pay the labourers' daily wage in full amount arguing that they may leave the job if the full amount is paid. Paying in fractions eases the task of retaining labourers for longer periods and thus the labourers remain disciplined believing that a big amount of their due wages is held by their recruiters. In this context, *khoraki* is an exploitative labour retention practice of the individual recruiters that puts the migrant labourers' life under constant pressures.

About two-thirds of the labourers report that they do not receive their wages on any designated day of the month. The individual recruiters do not follow any regular schedule to pay their labourers and they pay them when they wish. A labourer reports:

We do not have any designated date for payment of wage. He (the foreman) pays us when he gets money.....If I need urgent money for my family at this moment, I have to request him again and again and convince him to get some money from my due wages. It completely depends on his discretion.

The discretionary authority of the recruiters allows them to control wage payment options and retain the workers forcefully in a bonded manner. While individual recruiters do not pay regularly, non-payment and irregular payment of wages often creates wage burden for them. In a few cases, the labourers had to switch to another project or recruiter since their previous recruiter fled after failing to pay huge amounts of due wages. Creating various forms of pressures and tension with regard to payment of overdue wages, these incidences impact the workers' work and personal life.

Migrant construction labourers in Dhaka also report that occupational safety has always been a concern that makes them worried about their future. Many express their frustrations asserting that working as a construction labourer essentially means ending up with onsite death. A few labourers report that they have seen their co-workers dying in front of them. Falling from a height is very common in Dhaka's construction projects and working on high scaffolds without safety belts is a common cause of such deaths. Construction labourers do not receive any safety gadgets such as a helmet, gumboots, belts or masks from their recruiters. As a labourer mentions, "investing in safety instruments will reduce their profit.....I have never seen any employer offering safety gadgets for workers." Individual recruiters do not invest in safety equipment. It has been found that profit maximization by supplying low-cost

labour is their policy and hence they do not want to spend on safety.

Hyper-individualized Recruitment: A New Aspect of Precarious Work

Migrant labourers are vulnerable to changes in the demand of construction related employment that is overwhelmingly marked by a multi-tiered contracting system. As the International Labour Organization (2015) reports in one of its latest reports on construction workforce, “the poor image of the construction jobs.....has been compounded by the flexible labour market policies, particularly ‘outsourcing’, in which the construction workforce is recruited through subcontractors and other intermediaries.” The contingent nature of work in construction is attributed to how these individuals recruit and manage their workers. As yet there is very little attempt to examine their role as employers. Much of the existing literature of labour migration discusses why migrants leave home and what happens to them upon arrival, thereby less is known about the forms of infrastructure that facilitate their mobility. Individual intermediaries are the starting point in the infrastructure of migration and thus recruitment process (Fernandez 2013, Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). Therefore, conventional perspectives used to discuss the relationship between globalization and labour migration do not necessarily problematize the role of these employers as crucial labour market actors (Bremner 2003, MacKenzie and Forde 2009, Zeitlyn, Deshingkar, and Holtom 2014).

Empirical evidence supporting this paper unpacks a new recruitment practice in Bangladesh, uniquely termed as ‘hyper-individualized recruitment,’ suggesting the central role of individual recruiters in recruitment and management of migrant construction labourers in Dhaka. New evidence presented in the above discussions suggests that the number of layers of individual recruiters in Bangladesh is more than that found in traditional outsourcing and subcontracting. While individual recruiters in Bangladesh have a distinct role in labour recruitment and management, their influence and power in mobilizing labour and determining the terms of employment permeate precarious work conditions. Builders and owners of construction projects in Dhaka are highly dependent on the recruiters for supplying migrant labourers following a hyper-individualized approach. At every stage of recruitment and management process, migrant labourers are required to overwhelmingly depend on them. For both builders and labourers, they are the main point of contact. Due to lack of any state-based recruitment option, indirect recruitment through them is the only option available to both builders and labourers in Dhaka. They are locally known by a variety of names: *Sardar*, Foreman, *Mistri*, *Malik* and Contractor. Although they go by different titles, their backgrounds and functions are essentially the same. Most of them were once themselves unskilled migrant labourers coming from villages. Generally they constitute a continuous link between rural labourers seeking work and urban builders who can offer work. Their role extends from supplying cheap labour to guaranteeing timely completion of construction projects by maintaining a disciplined and loyal workforce. They assure urban builders’ money and the migrant la-

bourers' employment in the city, and for this service they get a commission from the builders and also benefits from underpaying the wages of migrant construction labourers (ILO 2001).

In the absence of any official regulations, individual recruiters have the ultimate discretion in determining terms and conditions of employment and labour protection for the migrant construction labourers in Bangladesh. Their discretionary authority over the workforce creates varying sources of control and exploitation and results in various forms of precariousness including irregular, underpayment and non-payment of wages, insecure and unstable jobs, poor occupational health and lack of labour protection. Practices of offering cash advances and imposed wage cuts often lead to increased indebtedness and distress of the migrant construction labourers in Dhaka. Moreover, irregular payment of wage and the practice of giving *khoraki* as survival money contribute to depressed wages and underpayment. Scholarly evidence confirms that similar practices intensify the controlling relationship and bonded labour (Bremen 1996, 2003, Jha 2002, Mitullah and Wachira 2003, Pattenden 2012, Picherit 2012, Smita 2008, Swider 2015, Thorat and Jones 2011). Therefore, the structure of indirect recruitment in Bangladesh's construction sector confirms a new aspect of precarious employment for migrant labourers.

It is regularly claimed that precariousness in the construction sector of Asian countries is backed by the absence of regulation (Agarwala 2014, Raftery et al. 1998, Wells 2007). While the essence of precariousness is the essence of informality in the region, the linkages between formal and informal are quite complex and interlinked. Often they reinforce each other. This is because individual recruiters operate through interconnected networks of actors and across multiple regulation regimes (Fernandez 2013). As part of liberalizing the economy by deregulating labour markets, reluctance to enforce labour regulations is evident in Bangladesh. Deregulation of the local labour market has created the space for individual recruiters and eased their function of supplying low-cost labour. Local builders have found individualized recruitment an easier option to evade laws. In this context the kind of regulatory structure in place for international migration does not exist. This is because finding employment within the country does not involve crossing international borders or involving actors in international recruitment. Thus there is little relationship between individual recruiters and the state with respect to internal migrant construction labourers. As they do not have written contracts or other job related documents they are easily kept out of the provisions of laws. While the existence of individual recruiters in terms of labour recruitment is not acknowledged through national laws, their predominant role does not allow the state to engage in labour management. This enables the recruiters to avoid visibility and operate outside the purview and protection of legal regulations. Their day-to-day operations and associated practices put labour management issues beyond the state's capacity (Agarwala 2014, Fernandez 2013, Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). The lack of state-based labour enrolment opportunities coupled with absence of regulation in Bangladesh has legitimized their role and

thus the growth of their layers in recruitment processes.

The nature and extent of individual recruiters' daily activities reveals that they perform two critical roles that conform to core assumptions of labour management practices under neoliberalism. Firstly, by keeping a flexible labour force, they reduce urban builders' direct and indirect expenses related to labour. Secondly, they make the relationship between capital and labour indirect to the advantage of capital (Ball and Connolly 1987, Firman 1991, Haan and Rogaly 2002, Vaid 1999). In their day-to-day operations, individual recruiters navigate different interfaces of state to negotiate regulations making urban access a complex process, market to identify employment opportunities with burgeoning demand for cheap labour in cities, and individual clients to secure waged work in the urban construction sector. Therefore, the commonly used perspectives on the dyadic worker-employer relationship are not complete enough to comprehend the sources of control and exploitation of the migrant construction labourers as they are deeply rooted in the more complex triad of the state, the market and the individual (Swider 2015). Whilst individualized recruitment of migrant construction labourers in Bangladesh serves the interests of capital by ensuring a flexible labour supply at low costs, it is very central to the precarious forms of employment under neoliberalism. The overarching role of individual recruiters and their control over migrant labourers simplify the task of minimizing labour costs and shrinking the scope for labour protection while passing on production risks to the migrant labourers.

Conclusion

The empirical evidence presented in this paper suggests that neoliberal developments have intensified individualized recruitment practices that render paths of exploitation of rural-urban migrant labourers in Bangladesh's construction sector. Due to the overwhelming engagement of individual agents and their discretion in every stage of the recruitment process, labour recruitment practices in Bangladesh's construction sector is hyper-individualized, not merely individualized. The predominant role of individual recruiters in recruiting as well as managing rural-urban migrant construction labourers is largely attributed to control relations through which migrant labourers are seen as a viable source of low-cost flexible labour. Hyper-individualized recruitment practices in this sector pervade a cheap and flexible labour supply to the builders and insecurities to the rural-urban migrant construction labourers. Considering individual recruiters as the most important labour market actors in shaping employment relations as well as migration outcomes, hyper-individualized recruitment practices demand further investigation. By examining the navigating role of individual recruiters and associated control relations, migration and labour scholars must respond to this challenge through critical analyses of structural changes of employment relations in local and global workplaces.

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