

“The lottery of my life”: Migration trajectories and the production of precarity among Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore’s construction industry

Grace Baey

Independent Scholar

Brenda S. A. Yeoh

National University of Singapore

Asian and Pacific Migration Journal

2018, Vol. 27(3) 249–272

© Scalabrini Migration Center 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0117196818780087

journals.sagepub.com/home/amj



Abstract

Within the scholarship on precarity, low-waged contract-based migrants are recognized as centrally implicated in precarious employment conditions at the bottom of neoliberal capitalist labor markets. Precarity as a socially corrosive condition stems from both the multiple insecurities of the workplace as disposable labor, and a sense of deportability as migrant subjects with marginal socio-legal status in the host society. Our study of Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore contributes to refining understandings of precarity by approaching labor migration as a cumulative, intensively mediated process, whereby risks and vulnerabilities are compounded across different sites in migrants’ trajectories, even as they enact themselves as mobile, aspiring subjects. As a condition-in-the-making, precarity is experienced and compounded, through a continuum beginning in pre-migration indebtedness, multiplying through entanglements with the migration industry, and manifesting in workplace vulnerabilities at destination. It is most finely balanced when predictability and planning yield to arbitrary hope.

Corresponding author:

Brenda S. A. Yeoh, National University of Singapore, Department of Geography and Asia Research Institute, AS8 #07-01, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260, Singapore.

Email: geoyosa@nus.edu.sg

Keywords

temporary migration regimes, construction workers, precarity, aspiration, Asia

Introduction

Within the burgeoning literature on precarious employment in the context of neoliberal capitalism, there is growing evidence that low-waged migrants concentrated in sectors such as construction, hospitality and care work—in both developed and developing economies—are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (McDowell et al., 2009; Wills et al., 2009; Anderson, 2010; Banki, 2013; Lewis et al., 2015; Swider, 2015; Khurana, 2017). As “a political-economic regime that has at its center the suppression of labor costs and labor’s power,” neoliberalism not only accords weak worker protections, but in the case of migrants, also limits access to social citizenship rights (Torres et al., 2013: 145). Conceptual terms like “hyper-precarity” (Lewis et al., 2015) have been coined to highlight the multiple layering of insecurities that migrants face as a result of their marginal socio-legal status and labor market position, while undertaking jobs that are typically low paid, insecure and irregular. Increasingly, scholars have argued for adopting an expansive approach in our understanding of experiences of precarity, looking not just at employment relations and conditions but “their transnational social status, migration strategies, alongside subsequent constraints on citizenship imposed through immigration regimes” (Lewis et al., 2015: 582). Particularly when migrants’ rights to residence are tied to their jobs, employment precarity meshes with immigration precarity, rendering migrants vulnerable to unexpected repatriation, should they unwittingly fall out of employment (Banki, 2013). By casting an inexorable shadow of “deportability” onto migrants’ sense of self, migrant precarity is continually produced as a state of the mind as migrants attempt to navigate the narrowing spaces hemmed in by the “intractable antagonism between market demands for migrant labor and citizen demands for closure” (Garcés-Mascreñas, 2010: 87). Under these pervasive circumstances of life and labor, migrants themselves become active agents in the construction of precarious subjects, typically undertaking a substantial degree of risk and investment (often through debt and collateral loans) to gain entry into overseas job markets. Precisely because migrant aspirations and livelihoods are folded into these migrant trajectories, the consequences of these compounding precarities are far-reaching in shaping lived experiences and migrant subjectivities (Attanapola, 2013).

In this paper, we draw on a case study of Bangladeshi low-skilled migrant workers in Singapore’s construction industry to understand the way precarity is produced in the everyday realities of migrant lives. In December 2017, approximately 70 percent of Singapore’s 1.37 million-strong foreign workforce

was composed of migrant contract workers on temporary work permits employed in labor intensive sectors such as construction, shipyard, conservancy and landscaping. Of the 965,200 work permit holders, 284,900 (nearly 30 percent) were construction workers.¹ Although a nationality breakdown of migrant construction workers in Singapore is not available, Singapore is ranked third (after Oman and Qatar) in the list of top 10 countries receiving Bangladeshi workers (54,750 deployed in 2014).² The number of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore has risen steadily over the last three decades, often in tandem with periods of construction boom (see Baey and Yeoh, 2015 for compiled figures). Bangladeshi migrant workers are usually recruited as basic-skilled workers and tend to occupy the lowest rungs of the wage ladder in the construction industry (Baey and Yeoh, 2015).

In this study, we examine the different conditions of precarity that underpin men's migration for work in the construction sector by scrutinizing significant junctures in the migration trajectory. Understanding migration as a process intensively mediated by both state institutions and industry (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) prompts us to give attention not just to one specific site within the trajectory, but to consider conditions of pre-departure training and recruitment at source, as well as workers' employment experiences at destination in understanding migrant precarity. In other words, we seek to uncover the place-based nature of migrant-specific vulnerabilities and how these vulnerabilities accumulate, intersect and converge along migrant trajectories in producing precarious migrant subjects. While much of the literature on precarious work has focused on labor market studies and neoliberal immigration regimes in post-industrialist societies (Sassen, 2001; McDowell et al., 2009; Anderson, 2010), we extend the field of analysis to incorporate the migration industry—comprising transnational networks of training centers and brokers that straddle the “middle space” of migration—as a key site where precariousness is reproduced and enacted. Whereas the concept of brokerage can include an “ensemble of entrepreneurs, firms and services which, chiefly motivated by financial gain, facilitate international mobility, settlement and adaptation, and communication and resource transfers across borders” (Hernandez-Leon, 2013: 1), we focus specifically on the role of recruitment brokers (primarily at source) in facilitating access to construction work in Singapore. Through an analysis of the processes of recruitment, training and entry as mediated by these brokers, we show how migration brokerage becomes complicit in compounding experiences of precarity, particularly for migrants who are compelled to undertake substantial debt to access overseas job opportunities. We add to this body of work on the production of precarity in mediated, low-waged, migrant-dominated employment by demonstrating how modes of governance and the materialities of place across

¹<http://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>

²<http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/216104/international-migration-from-bangladesh>

migrant trajectories coalesce to produce precarious subjects. Such an approach to place gives serious attention to the materialities through which precarity is mediated, experienced and folded into everyday lives and senses of self.

Migrant contract labor and compounding precarity

Although understandings of “precarity” tend to vary (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2013), there is general acknowledgment that precarious work refers to “the *uncertainty, instability, and insecurity of work* in which *employees bear the risks of work* (as opposed to businesses or the government) and *receive limited social benefits and statutory entitlements*” (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013: 271, emphasis in the original, quoting Vosko, 2010). In other words, precarious employment is “uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Branch and Hanley, 2011: 569). Scholars agree that precarity is symptomatic of the socially “corrosive” effects of neo-liberal capitalism (Sennett, 1998), as witnessed in the growing casualization of labor and the weakening of social safety nets, even as global competition and technological development intensify. Specific drivers of the growth of precarious work include: the increasing prevalence of subcontracting and temporary staffing, labor market deregulation, global competition resulting in wage squeezes, the lack of a collective voice in the labor market and declining public sector budgets (Bauder, 2006; Standing, 2011; Coe, 2012). In the context of Asia, Wise (2013) points to the down-sourcing of risk in subcontracting arrangements “whereby firms and governments distance themselves from [negative] consequences” to be borne by flexibilized labor. Elcioglu’s (2010: 121) research on temporary staffing agencies (TSAs) in the US interrogates how labor brokers work to exploit and capitalize on existing structural vulnerabilities already produced by the labor market to perpetuate conditions of precariousness for workers. Specifically, TSAs reproduce precariousness through efforts to constrain well-performing temporary workers from obtaining permanent positions with client firms as a way of extending profit margins. Notwithstanding the essential training and job-matching services they provide workers with, TSAs should not be seen as neutral arbiters in the labor market; rather, they often actively exploit and reproduce contingency for profit through various “market-making practices” (Peck and Theodore, 2002 as cited in Elcioglu, 2010: 119).

Precarity also encompasses more than the sphere of work. Rendering the laboring migrant body “flexible” as a normalized state not only redistributes risks in the direction of the worker, but also reproduces notions of flexibility in the workforce as an ideal cultural imaginary emblematic of contemporary life. As Neilson and Rossiter (2006: 10) note,

[P]recarity leads to an interminable lack of certainty, the condition of being unable to predict one’s fate or having some degree of stability on which to

construct a life [that] extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt and the ability to build affective social relations.

In short, the “precariousness of life” reveals itself when people are prevented from anticipating the future to build a social life (Anderson, 2010: 304).

In the context of transnational labor migration, material and symbolic conditions of precarity may lie across borders. Migration undertaken as a household livelihood strategy for income diversification or socio-economic mobility may quickly metamorphosize into a journey of perilous gamble (Deshingkar and Start, 2003). For example, studies of transnational labor in global cities show that migrant workers tend to dominate “bottom-end” positions of the labor market, reflecting the entrenchment of a “new migrant division of labour,” particularly in the construction, hospitality, care and cleaning sectors (Sassen, 2001; May et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2009). Apart from their tolerance for low-paid, “3D” (dirty, dangerous and difficult) jobs given perceived wage differentials between host and home countries, it is argued that migrants’ lack of access to collective organization, social protection and citizenship entitlements are seen as desirable qualities that make them particularly susceptible to insecure and potentially exploitative employment conditions (Berntsen, 2016). For these reasons, migrant workers represent “the perfect workforce in this evolving global capital-labor and class relations: commodified and exploitable; flexible and expendable” (Walia, 2007 as cited in Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013: 281).

Migrant precarity is also produced by the “political and institutional context” of migration (Waite, 2009: 421). Anderson’s (2010) work on immigration policies in the UK reveals how conditions of precariousness are exacerbated for low-waged migrants through the creation of categories of entrant, the molding of employment relations, and the institutionalization of uncertainty. In a similar vein, Garcés-Mascreñas (2010: 87) explains how a sense of insecurity is created among migrants through what she calls the “confine of legality,” which ensures that legal migrants are “immobilised in the job market, made dependent on their employers, and defined as purely and exclusively temporary labor.” Particularly when workers’ rights to residency are tied to their employment contracts, “precarious legal status [may] channel them into precarious employment relations,” and vice versa (Strauss and McGrath, 2017: 203; Banki, 2013). In Yea and Chok’s (2018: 12) words, when “curtailments on the freedom to exit employment relations and enter new ones is institutionalized . . . there are, in fact, causal relations between these different forms of unfreedom.”

As thus far discussed, scholars deploying precarity as a conceptual lens have mainly focused on the interacting roles of the state and the market in producing precarious conditions (Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016: 116). In this

vein, migration researchers have argued that increasingly restrictive immigration governance is complicit in “laying a legal foundation for [precarious] employment relations” (Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016: 118). Beyond the state and the market, there has been less attention on the role of migration brokers and labor market intermediaries in producing conditions of precarity, despite Enright’s (2013: 296) observation that formal and informal labor market intermediaries play an active role in facilitating migration, molding employment relations and “reshaping the spatialities of workers’ mobility, thus having a dramatic effect both in constraining and enhancing worker agency.” Particularly in industries such as construction where the use of brokers for recruitment and subcontracting remains prevalent, it is important to analyze the role of intermediaries in simultaneously facilitating labor market flexibility by down-sourcing risk to migrants, and exploiting these vulnerabilities for profit (Debrah and Ofori, 1997; Enright, 2013). As Reza (2016: 45) explains, mediated or indirect recruitment “through layers of individual recruiters blurs their responsibility toward workers and such employment practices increase the intensity of precariousness by favoring capital against labor.” Given the inherent volatility associated with economic ups and downs in the construction sector, businesses cope with the risks of the “boom-bust character” of the industry by using labor supply intermediaries where the risks can be downloaded through the recruitment process onto the workers, thus intensifying precarity (Reid-Musson et al., 2015: 11).

In order to consider the way the state, the market and the migration industry cohere in shaping the conditions of migrant precarity, we follow Lewis et al. (2015: 587, original emphasis) in emphasizing “the importance of complexities, variations, processes, relations, contexts and, above all, *continuums*, in understanding labor experiences.” Specifically, a “continuum approach” helps illustrate “how migration trajectories, constrained rights and entitlements, and precarious labour collide to close down alternatives to entering or continuing in often severely exploitative unfree labour” (Lewis et al., 2015: 594). Rather than enumerate multiple forms of migrant precarity, we take into account the operations of state, market and labor market intermediaries in following the migrant across space and time in order to understand the cumulative, compounding, but contingent effects of precarious conditions as they impinge on the migrant’s capacity for agency. This perspective is useful in teasing out how different forms of risk and vulnerability assemble at particular sites and junctures of the migration process to compound the ‘hyper-precarious’ lives of low-waged migrants while not obliterating the migrants’ situated agency.

Research methods

This paper focuses on Bangladeshi male migrant workers recruited under a temporary contract labor migration regime for Singapore’s construction

industry. Occupying the lowest rungs of the wage spectrum, these workers are required to leave their families behind and enter the country as individual workers with little or no opportunity for long-term residency and formal citizenship. Based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires ($n = 205$) and life story interviews ($n = 33$) in 2014, the research examines conditions of pre-departure training and recruitment in Bangladesh, as well as workers' employment experiences in Singapore to analyze different areas of risk and vulnerability that workers face over the course of their migration journeys.

While the lack of statistical data on Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore obviated the possibility of obtaining a randomized sample, we tried to ensure that the data collected provided a fair representation of the overall population. Fieldwork was thus conducted at 11 sites (including weekend gathering grounds, migrant worker dormitories and in the vicinity of construction sites) across the island to avoid excessive clustering. Stratified snowball sampling methods were also applied to ensure a good mix across variables such as type of visa (Work Permit or Special Pass Holder³), type of employer (i.e., whether the company is a main contractor, subcontracting firm, or labor supply company), and marital status, in addition to geographic location. Given space constraints, we refer the reader to our working paper (Baey and Yeoh, 2015) for a detailed overview of the 205 survey respondents. Here, as a background sketch to contextualize subsequent discussion, we provide a profile of respondents who participated in the life story interviews (Table 1).

While the survey provided basic information on the issues the respondents confronted in seeking to migrate and secure employment in Singapore, the interviews (lasting 1–2 hours and conducted at a venue of the respondents' choice) provided deeper insights into the motivations for migration and the migration experience itself, as well as work experiences and encounters in the host society. Interviewees were recruited from survey respondents who expressed willingness to share their life story narratives. Understanding how the migrants experienced and reacted to precarious conditions across the migration journey from their own perspectives is central to this analysis. The interview accounts⁴ allow us not only to trace the circumstances under which low-waged labor migration occurs, but also to better understand how the agentic behavior of the migrants interacts with structural conditions in producing different degrees of precarity.

³Work Permit holders are typically basic-/semi-skilled workers (with no minimum wage) employed in the construction, manufacturing, marine, process or service sector. Special Passes are issued to workers who have employment and/or work injury claims filed with the Ministry of Manpower. The visa legalizes their stay in Singapore while their cases are being processed and investigated.

⁴Interview quotes from respondents have not been edited for language.

Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Pseudonym	Visa	Age	Marital status and Number of children	Year of first arrival	Number of employers	Type of employer
Rasel	Work Permit	29	Single	2009	3	Subcontractor
Anwar	Special Pass	39	Married, 2 children	2007	4	Main contractor
Kalam	Special Pass	43	Married, 2 children	2012	1	Main contractor
Moinol	Work Permit	34	Married, 1 child	2008	1	Subcontracting
Sajib	Work Permit	27	Married, 1 child	2010	2	Main contractor
Ripon	Special Pass	32	Married, 1 child	2007	2	Labor supply
Omar	Work Permit	32	Married, no children	2011	2	Subcontractor
Mehedi	Work Permit	18	Single	2013	1	Labor supply
Sumon	Work Permit	38	Married, 2 children	2009	2	Subcontractor
Zabed	Special Pass	28	Single	2008	2	Subcontractor
Mostafa	Special Pass	31	Single	2010	1	Main contractor
Saiful	Special Pass	24	Single	2012	1	Labor supply
Javed	Work Permit	34	Single	2000	3	Labor supply
Mamun	Work Permit	23	Single	2013	1	Subcontractor
Mizan	Special Pass	23	Single	2011	1	Subcontractor
Shohel	Special Pass	26	Single	2011	1	Labor supply
Salim	Special Pass	32	Married, no children	2007	4	Subcontractor
Hasan	Special Pass	34	Married, 1 child	2008	2	Subcontractor
Saju	Work Permit	22	Single	2010	1	Subcontractor
Kabir	Work Permit	37	Married, 2 children	2001	4	Subcontractor
Uzzal	Work Permit	46	Married, 2 children	2004	5	Subcontractor
Habib	Work Permit	35	Married, 2 children	1997	4	Subcontractor
Mokter	Work Permit	27	Married, 1 child	2013	1	Main contractor
Rubel	Work Permit	28	Single	2007	1	Subcontractor
Alam	Work Permit	39	Married, 2 children	2007	3	Subcontractor
Arif	Work Permit	38	Married, 1 child	1998	4	Main contractor
Mishkat	Work Permit	30	Married, 1 child	2000	3	Main contractor
Rohan	Work Permit	26	Single	2011	2	Main contractor
Rifat	Work Permit	45	Married, 1 child	1997	1	Subcontractor
Syed	Work Permit	24	Single	2013	1	Subcontractor
Kamal	Work Permit	26	Single	2008	3	Labor supply
Golam	Work Permit	45	Married, 2 children	1998	5	Main contractor
Hussein	Work Permit	23	Single	2013	1	Main contractor

Institutionalizing precarity: Singapore's labor migration regime

Stratified rights and enforced temporariness

Singapore's managerial migration regime consists of a complex and stratified system of eligibility and benefits that differentiates between highly skilled professionals (under the "Employment Pass" category), mid-skilled workers (under "S Pass") and low-waged contract workers ("Work Permit" holders). Although workers under the Employment and S Pass categories (above particular salary thresholds) are able to bring along their spouses and children, Work Permit holders can only enter the country as individual workers with little or no claims on residency rights or pathways to formal citizenship. Instead, their right to stay is contingent upon one- or two-year contracts that are tied to a specific employer and occupational sector, and these have to be renewed on a regular basis. As low-waged, low-skilled migrants, Bangladeshi construction workers are thus treated as a transient and disposable workforce through a 'use-and-discard' approach, designed to cushion the economy during periods of downturn while allowing businesses the flexibility to respond to fluctuations in demand. Like the internal migrants contracted under mediated employment configurations in China's construction industry discussed by Swider (2015: 49), they are best characterized as "permanently temporary" migrants.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) currently imposes maximum periods of employment of 10 and 22 years, respectively, for basic-skilled (R2) and higher-skilled (R1) work permit holders from 'Non-Traditional Source' countries—namely, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka—and China. According to MOM (2012), this policy is "designed as an administrative control to ensure that [work permit holders] remain transient and do not sink roots in Singapore." Workers employed under the R2 category must possess either a Skills Evaluation Certificate (SEC) or SEC (Knowledge) (SEC(K)) issued by Singapore's Building and Construction Authority (BCA), typically at a designated testing center located in a source country. To be qualified under the R1 category, workers must be registered with the Construction Registration of Tradesmen (CoreTrade) or Multi-Skilling scheme, and issued with BCA-recognized trade certifications in addition to having four years of construction experience in Singapore. At the same time, the state regulates the inflow of foreign labor by allocating specific "Man-Year Entitlements (MYEs)"—calculated based on the value of a particular contract awarded—for the number of workers companies are eligible to hire on a project-by-project basis. When companies exceed this quota, they have to pay an extra SGD 400 (USD 312) over and above the standard

monthly levy rate of SGD 550 (USD 429) for each R2 worker, and SGD 300 (USD 234) for each R1 worker.

At the same time, job mobility is largely restricted for Work Permit Holders as they are not permitted to seek a change of employer apart from those in the construction sector, where written consent from one's current employer is required. Since workers' visas are tied to their employment contracts, they have to be repatriated if their employer chooses to cancel or fails to renew their work permit. In this regard, precarity becomes institutionalized by virtue of state migration policies that enforce the transient status of low-waged migrant workers in Singapore. These policies that enforce transience and disposability are part of what McCormack and Salmenniemi (2016) call a "biopolitics of precarity and the self," where culturally embedding understandings of the low-waged migrant worker as a transgressive figure that unsettles the nation-state are normalized through the regulation and management of labor.

Outsourcing risk in the construction industry

The construction industry in Singapore has traditionally been reliant on subcontractors that provide labor and/or specialized services such as scaffolding, electrical wiring installation and metal casting. It has been argued that construction companies utilize labor subcontracting as a "labor market strategy" to maintain flexibility and cope with uncertainties in demand (Debrah and Ofori, 1997). In particular, its strategic importance

[lies in the availability of] a 'floating' pool of skilled and unskilled site labor from which required numbers of tradespersons and laborers are engaged from project to project... sometimes from week to week [... while relieving] the main contractor of contractual obligations to the workforce (Debrah and Ofori, 1997: 697).

As a result, risks and uncertainty in the labor market are systematically passed down to workers who are made to be reliant upon a continuous flow of short-term work to ensure income stability.

Since 2005, the state has made it mandatory for foreign construction workers to be trained and tested at source before being eligible for a work permit in Singapore. Through the SEC (K) scheme, prospective migrants must now undertake training in a specialized trade skill, such as metal casting, waterproofing or electrical wiring installation, and pass a standardized skills test administered by the BCA through designated overseas testing centers in order to be formally certified. These policy changes signal a deliberate shift toward hiring skilled laborers in the construction workforce in a concerted effort to increase productivity in the sector. The entrant category of "unskilled" workers was phased out after July 2011, and replaced with tiered categories of "basic skilled" (R2) and "higher skilled" (R1) workers. Stemming from

this, employers are incentivized to hire skilled workers through differential levy rates tagged to R1 and R2 categories, where concessions are provided for the former.

Although the move to implement mandatory skills testing at source was intended to ensure the quality of migrants brought in to work in the construction sector, the policy has also had the effect of outsourcing the costs of training beyond Singapore's borders. As a consequence, workers tend to bear the brunt of these extra costs, where it is typical for migrants to have to pay for their own training, job placement fees and travel costs. In the survey, 97.1 percent of respondents ($n = 205$) paid money to an agent or training center in Bangladesh before they left for work in Singapore, where the average total amount paid was BDT 393,275 (USD 4,987). This figure typically includes training and accommodation costs, as well as intermediary fees for job placement services. When we segregated the amount by year of arrival, we found that workers arriving after 2011 paid on average 39 percent more than those who arrived before 2000. To finance these fees, the majority (80.5 percent) had to borrow money from a variety of sources including relatives, household members and the bank. Even among those who did not have to borrow, many migrants either sold material assets, such as land or gold, to obtain the necessary capital.⁵ By normalizing short-term, contractual work and making workers bear the brunt of their migration costs, the industry effectively outsources risk to individual migrants, where precarity is embedded and reproduced in current recruitment and employment practices. Migrant subjects are, in this sense, made to embody precarity as subjects upon which precarity is overlaid in multiple forms, ranging from the burden of financial risks to the potential threat of repatriation and uncertainties of familial connections.

Compounding precarities: Indebtedness and constraining mobilities

As earlier discussed, the literature thus far has focused on the production of precarity on an institutional level (Anderson, 2010) and by giving attention to workplace dynamics and employment relations (Yea, 2017). Building on this body of work, we take an expansive approach by analyzing how precarities are cumulative and compounding from the migrants' perspective as they undertake their journeys from source to destination. In so doing, we pay attention to specific sites and junctures of the migration process where precarity is produced and compounded by multiple constraints of indebtedness, workers'

⁵Given the large cost of migration, it is evident that the construction industry in Singapore tends to attract Bangladeshi migrants predominantly from the middle-class stratum of society. The majority (88.4 percent) of the respondents in the study had at least secondary school qualifications.

marginal socio-legal status and restricted employment rights along what Lewis et al. (2015) have termed as a “continuum of unfreedom.” As they argue, notions of unfreedom often imply “the preclusion of exit . . . through indebtedness and/or withholding wages, but also because of workers’ own perceptions of their responsibilities, obligations or debts which are in turn used as disciplining mechanisms by employers.” Even as Bangladeshi migrants undertake conscious decisions to embark on migration as a livelihood strategy, the sheer barriers to entry and investments required to gain access to Singapore’s labor market tend to severely limit their options for mobility and bargaining power at the workplace. As a result, workers sometimes chose to endure unsafe and/or exploitative employment conditions, rather than risk having their work permits (and visas) revoked. In this vein, an understanding of the multiple processes producing precarity would benefit from a perspective that follows the migrant as the primary subject through different sites, not as a freewheeling individual, but as a mobile, aspiring subject straining to move toward life goals even as precarious conditions accumulate.

In the following sections, we explore how different forms of insecurity intersect and assemble at particular sites and junctures of men’s migration trajectories, beginning from raising money to finance the migration at home, waiting to be “trained” at the training center in Bangladesh to employment at the workplace in Singapore. We will also examine instances where some migrants find themselves out of employment as a result of employment breaches or workplace injury. In so doing, we analyze how multiple forms of precarity are produced and compounded at different junctures, even as migrants negotiate everyday life along their migration journeys.

Debt-financing migration at source

Inasmuch as labor migration entails its own set of risks and costs, it also represents a form of risk diversification for migrants and their families (Rosenzweig and Stark, 1989; Attanapola, 2013). For the large majority of Bangladeshi migrants in our survey (80.5 percent), debt was utilized as a strategy and enabling factor to secure one’s livelihood options for the future. Stemming from the interviews, the main push factor that led many migrants to explore overseas job opportunities was a perceived lack of viable employment for improving standards of living in Bangladesh. In particular, men’s aspirations often took the form of securing higher earnings to build a new house or start a business venture back home (see also Rahman, 2009). For example, 38-year-old Sumon chose to leave his job at his father’s business because he saw migration as a step that would be able to “change my fate.” Although he was able to make ends meet with his current job, he felt that the business did not offer “a perfect earning source to change my lifestyle [and]

my fate." His wife had initially mooted the idea, saying, "Go there [to Singapore]. Many people have been there. Your friend has changed his life, and now it is your turn to change our fate. You will come back, and you will have some money." With this in mind, he borrowed BDT 90,000 (USD 1,097) from several individuals to raise the BDT 270,000 (USD 3,292) needed to finance his migration journey to Singapore.

In the survey, the average amount of money that workers had to borrow was BDT 258,423 (USD 3,278), which accounted for 65.7 percent of their average total placement fee. When asked why so many Bangladeshi men were willing to undertake such substantial loans to finance their migration journeys, 43-year-old Kalam explained that the decision is often made by weighing these initial costs against the longer-term benefits of securing higher earnings from overseas work. In his words:

Bangla person will think, 'If I go to Singapore, I can earn a lot of money, because I can take a loan, then I return.' . . . He will calculate maybe 4 months, 5 months, 3 months, after which I can return all the money I borrowed. . . . Because the agent fee is typically 4 or 5 lakhs (USD 5,070 or USD 6,341) . . . and he has some money. . . . then he will borrow 2 lakhs (USD 2,437), 3 lakhs (USD 3,814). Then he may also arrange . . . to sell or mortgage his land, and sell many things.

Inasmuch as migrant aspirations are commonly projected over the medium- or long-term—as captured by the migrants' own phrases such as the desire to "earn a lot of money," "change my fate," or "develop myself"—the work permit system in Singapore stipulates that workers are only allowed to be issued one- or two-year contracts with no guarantee of renewal. Stemming from the sheer sum of money that workers were compelled to borrow to finance their pre-departure fees, those who managed to fully repay their loans reported taking an average 16.5 months to do so. Furthermore, since employers can arbitrarily cancel workers' permits at any time (following which workers have to be repatriated after outstanding employment claims are settled), the costs and risks involved are indeed far-reaching.

The training center as gateway

Since workers are required to be trained and tested at source under BCA regulations, the training center in Bangladesh often represents the first gateway to securing a work permit in Singapore. Training centers work closely with BCA-appointed overseas testing centers and recruitment agents in Singapore to serve as a one-stop portal by providing an integrated range of services, including skills training and testing, dormitory facilities and job placement, as well as travel logistical arrangements for prospective migrants.

Upon enrollment, students are typically required to place an initial deposit (usually 10 percent of their total placement fee) before commencing theory and practical lessons in a specialized trade skill. These courses typically last three to four months, after which students are scheduled to undergo the SEC (K) skills test to be formally certified. Although test slots are obtainable on a monthly basis, they are often limited and highly competitive as availability is contingent upon the MYEs' quota that employers in Singapore are issued with. After successful completion of the test, migrants then await receipt of an In-Principle Approval (IPA) letter issued by MOM, which serves as a temporary visa for them to gain entry into Singapore. Once the IPA is issued, migrants then pay the bulk of remaining fees to recruitment agents or the training center,⁶ which, for migrants who arrived in Singapore after 2011, typically ranges from BDT 400,000 to 500,000 (USD 5,070 to 6,341).

Although training centers were set up to facilitate the training and recruitment process for Singapore-bound construction workers, the generally unregulated and commercial nature of the industry has brought about several pitfalls and issues. Through the interviews, we found that men's experiences at the training center were often fraught with mismatched expectations with regard to the ease and speed of securing employment, and, on some occasions, extra financial costs that were largely unanticipated. In the first instance, practices such as the collection of deposits and retention of workers' passports mean that workers are bound to the system upon enrollment. A common issue encountered was the protracted length of time at which workers stayed at the training center to wait for a test slot, resulting in unforeseen delays and extra costs. On a few occasions, workers reported having to stay up to 12 months in view of a large oversupply of students vying for limited test slots. Twenty-three-year-old Mizan found his experience at the training center mentally pressuring, seeing that only 10 percent of students were successful in bidding for a test slot for every month. He shared that some of his peers eventually chose to drop out due to the lengthy wait, and had to forfeit their enrollment deposits. As he notes, "some people stay nine months or one year [. . . and sometimes] he stop, [and] he surrender."

At times, workers' placement fees were arbitrarily raised after they had completed both training and testing, with the alleged reason that "the [Singapore] dollar value has increased." For 26-year-old Kamal, the increase was over 37 percent above what he was initially told by his agent. In his words:

When I first went to the training center, I had a contract for BDT 250,000 (USD 3,170) but there were a lot of people in the training center, and so it took me six months to finish the training. Then after six months, they said BDT 250,000 (USD

⁶In most cases, the persons behind the training center and the recruitment agents are the same individuals, although some act as sub-agents as well, mediating between the training center and the prospective migrant.

3,170) is not enough, we need BDT 400,000 (USD 5,073) . . . because the price of the Singapore dollar went up. This price went up, and so you have to pay BDT 400,000 (USD 5,073). I thought okay, I did the training for six months and I passed [the examination]. Whatever money it takes, I eventually have to go to Singapore. I went through the hard work, I paid some money, so what's the point of sitting down? As I have done it, it is better that I go. If I go to Singapore, then I can earn money.

Kamal's experience highlights the vulnerabilities that migrants face by virtue of having to go through the standardized route of the training center to obtain a work permit in Singapore. Having invested a substantial amount of time, money and energy to complete his training, he remained determined to cross this initial hurdle regardless of the extra costs. When asked whether or not he tried to negotiate the increase, he shared that he was just "focused on paying the money and going to Singapore." As he explained,

Even if I don't go now, I will go after two months . . . because the guy from whom I heard about Singapore, this guy was working in a good company. So if I can get into a good company, I can earn the money [back] and get a better life.

The importance of securing a good company was frequently emphasized by workers, because the work permit system in Singapore operates on a sponsorship basis where workers' visas are tied to a sole employer. Despite paying exorbitant amounts of money to access job placement services at the training center, the process remains largely obscure to workers as argued by 28-year-old Zabeed: "They only say that they will give good company. Only this. What is good or bad, we were not able to understand it. [The agent would collect the] same amount from all. What is allocated depends on fate." For many Bangladeshi migrants, good employers were generally perceived as those that offered a decent salary, adhered to proper safety procedures and provided adequate rest for their employees. Companies that were main contractors for construction projects (as opposed to subcontractors and labor supply companies) were seen as those most likely to offer these terms. In some instances, workers tried to circumvent the risk by tapping into social networks to approach separate agents to match them with a better company. However, this move often entailed paying a penalty in exchange for retrieving their passports from the training center, as well as additional fees to engage an external agent.

The attrition of bargaining power at the workplace

Stemming from having to invest large sums of money to access mandatory skills training and testing in Bangladesh, workers typically arrive in Singapore with a substantial debt burden. As such, remaining in employment to ensure a

regular flow of income is often of chief concern, especially for newly arrived migrants. When asked whether or not they felt able to negotiate employment terms with their employers, many workers cited the fear of early repatriation as the source of their main hesitation. Because Singapore's work permit system prescribes that workers' visas are tied to a single employer, losing one's job effectively means that one would also lose the ability to remain in the country. At this juncture, therefore, concerns of job insecurity become intensified by migrant indebtedness and workers' vulnerability to repatriation. As Kalam explains:

If a worker says anything, then the employer will be angry. He will say, 'I send you back to Bangladesh if you talking many, many.' Then the worker will also be scared. He paid a lot of money to invest in his migration stint. If he says anything, and he gets sent back to Bangladesh, then how?

Indeed, it is not uncommon for employers to exploit workers' vulnerability and use the threat of repatriation as a disciplining mechanism to ensure compliance. In Zabed's view, "the fate of the worker depends on the supervisor. If he reports negatively to the company . . . then his renewal will be halted. They will send him back to the country." These practices often translate into feelings of disempowerment among workers who sometimes feel compelled to endure unsafe and/or exploitative workplace conditions, for fear of having their work permits revoked by their employers. In the case of 38-year-old Sumon, he shared that although his employer has consistently failed to pay him proper overtime wages, he felt that he had little bargaining power to negotiate this because he did not wish to be sent home before his contract expired. In a resigned tone, he shared that "we must understand that this is not our country. We can't do a lot of things even if we want to. Like I said, my overtime-hourly pay is SGD 3 (USD 2.30), but according to Singapore government law, [my employer] should pay 1.5 times [the basic rate], which they don't. But if I bargain, they will send me back."

Similarly, Kalam's employer failed to pay him the full amount of overtime wages that were due, seeing that he frequently clocked 24-hour shifts beyond the maximum number of hours allowed. His company supposedly paid his basic wage via electronic transfer, but chose instead to pay his overtime salary in cash so as to evade the law. In Kalam's view, this practice was a deliberate ploy to short-change workers of their wages while masking illegal and exploitative workplace practices. When he decided to confront his employer to demand proper payment, however, the company promptly threatened him with repatriation. In his words: "I shouting, and I say to my employer, 'every month, my overtime salary is SGD 560 (USD 437), and you pay only SGD 160, 145 (USD 125, 113). Why like this? Why?' . . . Then he say he will send me back."

The erosion of migrant workers' bargaining power at the workplace is hence reinforced by their insecure foothold in the host nation-state. As contract workers brought into the nation-state under a regime of enforced temporariness, they are permanently "out-of-place" (Cresswell, 1996). In Sumon's words, "we must understand that this is not our country," and those who wish to remain have to take it upon themselves to self-discipline and self-censure in order to become compliant subjects.

Risking life and limb at the workplace

Migrants' weak bargaining power has important implications on issues of workplace safety, especially when workers feel compelled to undertake work they deem as risky or unsafe. In Singapore, the construction sector remains the top contributor to workplace fatalities, accounting for 57 percent of all fatalities in 2013 (Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Institute, 2014). Construction companies preferred to pay fines for safety breaches than "invest substantially more in a safety system that could cost up to 15 percent of their contract's value (*Straits Times*, 2016). Feedback from industry professionals also pointed out that "companies rushing to meet project deadlines amid rising demand for construction activities [and] the tighter labor market contributing to 'overstretching their workers'" (*TODAY*, 2014) are common underlying factors behind the surge in workplace accidents in the construction industry. Similarly, our interviews with injured workers revealed fatigue stemming from excessive overtime work and tight project deadlines as key contributing factors. At the same time, scholars have argued that the prevalence of subcontracting in the industry tends to result in a "diffusion of responsibility [that] could lead to a decline in house-keeping" (Debrah and Ofori, 1997: 699).

Living and working precariously are recurrent themes in everyday life for the migrant construction worker. Mizan broke both his wrists when he fell from a scaffolding structure while working on a flyover. He was working a daily average of 14 hours including Sundays, and reckoned that the accident happened because he was physically drained from excessive overtime work. He was also not wearing a safety harness when the accident occurred. Although he felt unsafe and frequently overworked, he felt that he had little power to raise these issues with his employer because he was a new worker in the company. In his words:

My boss will say to me if Sunday you want to take time off, ok, then Saturday you also no need to come. You go back better... My company 'subcon' [sub-contractor], so main company always push, push workers to go faster, go faster. Then supervisor also push ah, saying 'Go fast, this one go fast... If the safety supervisor sometimes tell me must working properly, my Korean supervisor will talk loudly to the safety supervisor, saying 'Why you talk to my worker? Why you

disturb my worker?' . . . My supervisor will say: 'Koreans all hardworking, money also a lot. If Singapore 20 years working, Korean 5 years working enough. He say 'I give money, I give salary, so you follow me.' So since I first time coming Singapore, that's why cannot talk loud. I am scared to be sent home. You know if he says, no working, you go back better, then he send me back to Bangladesh, so it is a problem right? Yah, so two years, three years, then we can talk loud.

Employed as a general worker in his company, Mizan also felt that he did not receive proper training to do his work, which involved extending a flyover structure. Having trained in waterproofing, he was told to shadow a Burmese colleague to learn whatever he could. In his view, "99.9 percent [of men work] like this"—that is, they do not utilize the skill they were trained for in Bangladesh. Rather, the experience at the training center was more of a formality and a way of weeding out weak workers, because the process of getting certified was highly competitive and not everyone makes it through. Zabed echoed similar sentiments, saying:

If you can work after enduring that challenge, then they think you'll also be able to work in Singapore. They want a person who can work hard. A person who can't work hard—what will be the use of them in Singapore?

As Ajslev et al. (2017: 895) observe in the case of Danish construction workers, reconfiguring their bodies and "trading health for money" is a "necessary deal" for those who wish to retain their jobs. Unfortunately, there is a limit on how far workers can push themselves to work relentlessly. In Hasan's case, he injured his back and shoulder from an accident in July 2013, which he said was a result of fatigue and unsafe work practices. Like 23-year-old Mizan, he was pushed to undertake work that he felt uncomfortable to do, which resulted in his injury:

Boss put pressure on us to do overnight duty during the fasting month. If not, he said he would send me back to Bangladesh the next day. I told him because it's fasting month, it's not possible for me to work beyond 10:00pm . . . but he pressured me, saying must do. At last, I had no choice . . . I was tired. I was fasting . . . and the scaffolding joint was weak. There was also not enough lighting. They gave us safety harness belts, but we complained about the lighting and they said to carry on with the work. The lighting will be provided later, but they didn't [do so].

Stuck in limbo on a special pass

When a workplace accident is reported, MOM issues a Special Pass to injured workers to legalize their stay in Singapore while they undergo medical

treatment and wait for their work injury compensation to be processed. Workers who have filed a formal complaint against their employers for employment breaches, such as the non-payment of salaries, are also placed on the same pass to assist the Ministry with investigations. Apart from those eligible for the Temporary Job Scheme, the majority of workers on a Special Pass are prohibited from working on a legal basis. The precarity of their conditions stems not only from the fact that day-to-day survival in Singapore is uncertain and difficult, but the emotional toll exacted during the protracted waiting period, and the sense of shame that their migration bids have run aground, often conspire to isolate them from family and friends back home. As Ye (2014: 1015) observes, the “intersections of precarious work and working-class masculinity” often render migrant men “unable to speak of their suffering” to left-behind family members and kin. Precarity is hence not only an exterior condition that is constitutive of the contemporary life but often experienced as an accumulation of circumstances that chisels away—continually and even relentlessly—at the worker’s sense of self and well-being. In other words, as a sense of precarity increasingly takes root in individual lives, it soon becomes a ‘structure of feeling’ operating across this category of workers and their families.

For example, Kalam who has been awaiting his insurance payout for two-and-a-half years lamented that “*makan* (meaning: eating) also difficult, sleeping also difficult. Everything is difficult, too difficult.” When he had no money to pay for his rent, he had to make do with sleeping by the roadside or at a 24-hour café at Mustafa Center. He also shared that it was painful to communicate with his family while being in such dire straits, saying: “Sometimes I talk to my son, and my heart is crying. My eyes water [tears] cannot come, but heart is crying. . . . Family only give me sympathy, but I say okay, no problem, no need this one.” Likewise, 24-year-old Saiful feels that he is unable to tell his parents the full extent of his situation:

If I tell them everything, then they will suffer a lot. I love them most, and for this reason I have not told them. . . . I will return home and then tell my mother. If she cries, then I will try to manage her. On the mobile, I cannot manage her.

Depending on the nature of a workers’ injury and the complexity of the case, the average duration of the claims process⁷ can range from three or four months to over two years. Mizan has been left in a state of limbo since the accident took place two years ago and his parents are anxious for his return to Bangladesh. Nonetheless, he insists on awaiting his insurance payout to settle outstanding loans from his initial placement fee, and use the remaining

⁷Under the MOM, the Work Injury Compensation Act allows workers to make claims for work-related injuries or diseases without having to file a civil suit under common law. See also Yea (2017).

amount to set up a small business in Bangladesh. Precarious subjects continue to narrate a sense of hope as they contemplate uncertain futures.

This sense of hope—as a means of resisting precarity—is evident even among those in dire circumstances. Faced with limited employment options stemming from permanent injury, workers on the Special Pass often place enormous value on the compensation they hope to receive. In the case of 31-year-old Mostafa, he feels that his livelihood options have been severely diminished and the future remains uncertain. Yet, he pinned his hopes that there would be a change of fortunes if the insurance compensation is substantial—in his words:

I will build my whole life on that money. I do not know the amount but I realized that a huge damage has been done to my physical body. If the sum is large, then I can do something after returning to my country. I will not be able to do heavy work. I cannot work with the cattle or start the machine. Now, I am fully depending on the insurance money. How much I will get is the lottery of my life.

Conclusion

The growing vein of scholarship on migrant workers undertaking low paid, insecure and irregular jobs have shown how experiences of precariousness are inextricably linked to broader patterns of intensifying neoliberalism, labor market deregulation and the flexibilization of labor in post-industrialist societies. Drawing on a case study of Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore, we have built on this work to show how precarity as a conceptual lens can advance our knowledge of what is generally known as the disadvantaged position of migrant contract workers. We argue that in order to understand migrant precarity more fully, we need to approach migration as a cumulative, intensively mediated process. This approach gives emphasis to the place-based trajectory of migrant-specific vulnerabilities, and how different forms of risk and vulnerabilities accumulate, intersect and converge to render migrants more susceptible to workplace exploitation and, at the same time, even more persevering under precarious conditions. In other words, we argue that precariousness does not just emanate from state policy or the market at the reception end of the migration process, but is a *condition-in-the-making* that has its roots in pre-migration impoverished circumstances, multiplies as migrant subjects become entangled with the migration industry, and is further deepened and made manifest in the workplace at destination. We contribute to the understanding of precarity through incorporating place-specificities and a sense of temporality by treating it as a contingent yet compounding condition, where aspiring migrant subjects are

channelled into a tunnel of entrapment where there is little choice but to go forward, even as options get narrower and narrower, and the gap between actual circumstances and original aspirations becomes wider and wider. As a human condition that interweaves life and labor, “precarity, thus, conjures life worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability” (Waite, 2009: 416).

In a regime of “mediated employment” (Swider, 2015: 46) where rural men from underdeveloped regions are recruited by labor brokers to work in wealthy global cities, migrant subjects are caught in a liminal state of permanent temporariness, neither strongly embedded in the moral economy of their home villages nor integrated enough into the social worlds at destination to be able to benefit from formal and informal safety nets. Instead, where the state, the migration industry and employers are aligned in outsourcing the bulk of the risk to the individual migrant, the coping mechanism for the migrant subject often turns on approaching migration as a risk-ridden gamble, sustained by the hope that the next throw of the dice would be in their favor. In the words of our interviewees, at each site along the migration journey, even when life and livelihood conditions are at their bleakest, such as when the migrant body has been “destroyed” as a result of severe injury (in Hasan’s words), migrants fasten their hopes on what Mostafa calls “the lottery of my life.” Precisely because “precarity suggests the potential for exploitation and abuse, but not its certain presence” (Banki, 2013: 450), it is always conjoined to hope, that is, the belief in the prospect that this time, fate will deal one a fair hand. In other words, precarity is at its most finely balanced when “the right to plan one’s future with a minimum of security and job certainty” (Ahmad, 2008: 303) has to be replaced by an arbitrary belief that the tide will turn in one’s favor. Our paper has tried to “return [migrant] subjects of development to the center of theorizations about them” (Ye, 2014: 1014, quoting Silvey and Lawson, 1999), not as freewheeling human agents but as aspiring subjects acting under conditions not of their own making. By combining attention to the “disappearance of predictability” (Ahmad, 2008: 302) fostered by a neo-liberal migration-labor regime, with a bio-cultural perspective that centers the migrant as an agentic subject, we glimpse how site-produced precarities are experienced and compounded, even as migrants enact themselves as aspiring, mobile subjects.

Acknowledgments

Although this work has been funded by UK Aid from the UK government through the Migrating Out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper.

Funding

This research was funded by the UK Aid from the UK government through the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium.

References

- Ahmad AN (2008) Dead men working: Time and space in London's ('illegal') migrant economy. *Work, Employment Society* 22(2): 301–318.
- Ajslev JZN, Møller JL, Persson R, et al. (2017) Trading health for money: Agential struggles in the (re)configuration of subjectivity, the body and pain among construction workers. *Work, Employment Society* 31(6): 887–903. DOI:10.1177/0950017016668141.
- Anderson B (2010) Migration, immigration controls, and the fashioning of precarious workers. *Work, Employment Society* 24(2): 300–317.
- Arnold D and Bongiovi JR (2013) Precarious, infirmalizing, and flexible work: Transforming concepts and understandings. *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(3): 289–308.
- Attanapola CT (2013) Back and forth with hopes and fears: Sri Lankan men's narratives on gender and mobility in transnational livelihoods. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift* 67(4): 219–228.
- Baey G and Yeoh BSA (2015) Migration and precarious work: Negotiating debt, employment, and livelihood strategies amongst Bangladeshi migrant men working in Singapore's construction industry. In: *Migrating out of Poverty Working Paper 26*. Brighton: University of Sussex. Available at: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/documents/wp26-baey-yeoh-2015-migration-and-precarious-work.pdf>
- Banki S (2013) Precarity of place: A complement to the growing precariat literature. *Global Discourse* 3(3–4): 450–463.
- Bauder H (2006) *Labour Movement: How Migration Regulates Labour Markets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berntsen L (2016) Reworking labour practices: On the agency of unorganized mobile migrant construction workers. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(3): 472–488.
- Branch EH and Hanley C (2011) Regional convergence in low-wage work and earnings, 1970–2000. *Sociological Perspectives* 54(4): 569–592.
- Coe NM (2012) Geographies of production III: Making space for labour. *Progress in Human Geography* 37(2): 271–284.
- Cresswell T (1996) *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Debrah YA and Ofori G (1997) Flexibility, labour subcontracting and HRM in the construction industry in Singapore: Can the system be refined? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 8(5): 690–709.
- Deshingkar P and Start D (2003) *Seasonal Migration for Livelihoods in India: Coping, Accumulation and Exclusion*. Working Paper 220. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Elcioglu EF (2010) Producing precarity: The temporary staffing agency in the labour market. *Qualitative Sociology* 33: 117–136. DOI 10.1007/s11133-010-9149-x.
- Enright B (2013) (Re)considering new agents: A review of labour market intermediaries within labour geography. *Geography Compass* 7(4): 287–299.

- Garcés-Mascareñas B (2010) Legal production of illegality in a comparative perspective: The cases of Malaysia and Spain. *Asia Europe Journal* 8(1): 77–89.
- Hernandez-Leon R (2013) *The Migration Industry: Brokering Mobility in the Mexico-US Migratory System*. Los Angeles: UCLA International Institute.
- Kalleberg AL and Hewison K (2013) Precarious work and the challenge for Asia. *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(3): 271–288.
- Khurana S (2017) Resisting labour control and optimizing social ties: Experiences of women construction workers in Delhi. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(6): 921–936.
- Lewis HM, Dwyer PJ, Hodgkinson S and Waite L (2015) Hyper-precarious lives: Migrants, work and forced labour in the Global North. *Progress in Human Geography* 39(5): 580–600.
- May J, Wills J, Datta K, et al. (2007) Keeping London working: Global cities, the British state and London's new migrant division of labour. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32(2): 151–167.
- McCormack D and Salmenniemi S (2016) The biopolitics of precarity and the self. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19(1): 3–15.
- McDowell L, Batnitzky A and Dyer S (2009) Precarious work and economic migration: Emerging immigrant divisions of labour in Greater London's Service Sector. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(1): 3–25.
- Ministry of Manpower (MOM) (2012) Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (Chapter 91A): Employment of Foreign Manpower (Work Passes) Regulations 2012. Available at: <http://www.mom.gov.sg/Documents/services-forms/passes/WPSPassConditions.pdf>
- Neilson B and Rossiter N (2006) From precarity to precariousness and back again: Labour, life and unstable networks. *Variant* 25(2): 10–13.
- Peck JA and Theodore N (2002) The temporary staffing industry: Growth imperatives and limits of contingency. *Economic Geography* 78(4): 463–493.
- Rahman MM (2009) Temporary migration and changing family dynamics: Implications for social development. *Population, Space and Place* 15(2): 161–174.
- Reid-Musson E, Buckley M and Anderson B (2015) Building Migrant Precarity: Employment, Citizenship & Skill in Toronto and London's Construction Sectors. Working paper, Urbanization From Below: Precarious Migrant Construction Work in Toronto, Canada and London, UK Project. Available at: <http://www.migrant-workersrights.net/en/resources/building-migrant-precarity-employment-citizenship-s>
- Reza S (2016) Hyper-individualized recruitment: Rural-urban labour migration and precarious construction work in Bangladesh. *Migration, Mobility & Displacement* 2(2): 40–61.
- Rosenzweig MR and Stark O (1989) Consumption smoothing, migration and marriage: Evidence from rural India. *Journal of Political Economy* 97(4): 905–926.
- Sassen S (2001) *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sennett R (1998) *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. London/New York: W. W. Norton.
- Siegmann KA and Schiphorst F (2016) Understanding the globalizing precariat: From informal sector to precarious work. *Progress in Development Studies* 16(2): 111–123.

- Silvey R and Lawson V (1999) Placing the migrant. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89(1): 121–132.
- Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Straits Times* (2016) Workplace fatality rate set to rise this year. 25 August. Available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/workplace-fatality-rate-set-to-rise-this-year>
- Strauss K and McGrath S (2017) Temporary migration, precarious employment and unfree labour relations: Exploring the ‘continuum of exploitation’ in Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program. *Geoforum* 78(1): 199–208.
- Swider S (2015) Building China: Precarious employment among migrant construction workers. *Work, Employment Society* 29(1): 41–59.
- TODAY (2014) New rules on construction industry likely after rise in workplace deaths. 18 February. Available at: <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/new-rules-construction-industry-likely-after-rise-workplace-deaths>
- Torres R, Heyman R, Munoz S, et al. (2013) Building Austin, building justice: Immigrant construction workers, precarious labor regimes and social citizenship. *Geoforum* 45(3): 145–155.
- Vosko LF (2010) *Managing the Margins: Gender, Citizenship and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Waite L (2009) A place and space for a critical geography of precarity? *Geography Compass* 3(1): 412–433.
- Walia H (2007) Increasing precarity: The politics of migrant labor. *Left Turn*. Available at: <http://www.leftturn.org/increasing-precarity-politics-migrant-labor>
- Wills J, May J, Datta K, et al. (2009) London’s migrant division of labour. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 16(3): 257–271.
- Wise A (2013) Pyramid subcontracting and moral detachment: Down-sourcing risk and responsibility in the management of transnational labour in Asia. *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 24(3): 433–455.
- Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Institute (2014) Workplace Safety and Health Report: National Statistics, January to June 2014. Available at: [https://www.wsh-institute.sg/files/wshi/upload/cms/file/Workplace%20Safety%20and%20Health%20Report%202014%20\(January%20to%20June\).pdf](https://www.wsh-institute.sg/files/wshi/upload/cms/file/Workplace%20Safety%20and%20Health%20Report%202014%20(January%20to%20June).pdf)
- Xiang B and Lindquist J (2014) Migration infrastructure. *International Migration Review* 48(s1): S122–S148.
- Ye J (2014) Migrant masculinities: Bangladeshi men in Singapore’s labour force. *Gender, Place & Culture* 21(8): 1012–1028.
- Yea S (2017) The art of not being caught: Temporal strategies for disciplining unfree labour in Singapore’s contract migration. *Geoforum* 78(1): 179–188.
- Yea S and Chok S (2018) Unfreedom unbound: Developing a cumulative approach to understanding unfree labour in Singapore. *Work, Employment and Society*. Epub ahead of print 5 January 2018. DOI:10.1177/0950017017738956.