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Debt, precarity and gender: male and female temporary labour migrants in Singapore

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ABSTRACT
As one of Asia's key hubs for transient workers, Singapore's migration regime creates particularly gendered streams of labour, especially among lower skilled occupations, as is apparent in two key sectors – domestic work and construction work. Drawing on surveys with Bangladeshi construction workers and Indonesian domestic workers based in Singapore, as well as in-depth interviews with each group, this paper examines gendered issues of temporary labour migration, precarity and risk, as they occur against a backdrop of migrant indebtedness. In this paper, we argue that migrant indebtedness occurs along a spectrum that ranges from less visible, or what we call 'silently' incurred forms of debt, through to more 'resonant' types of debt that are acquired upfront and thus more readily quantifiable. Using this spectrum of migrant indebtedness, we aim to complicate debates about debt-financed migration by underscoring the ways in which notions of debt and unfreedom can be imbricated with both constraints and opportunities for migrants' agency.

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Introduction

Labour historian Sunil Amrith describes the Bay of Bengal as 'a sea of debt, bound by advances loans and obligations' (Amrith 2013, 9). Amrith's focus draws attention to the role debt played in facilitating migrants' movements and subsequently shaping their fortunes as they moved across the South Asian region. Although primarily historical in nature, Amrith's observations resonate in the contemporary era of Asian migration, where debt-financed migration is a common feature underpinning labour mobility (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Lindquist 2010; Lindquist 2012; Sobieszczyk 2002).

Despite the widespread role of debt in financing migration, relatively little work has focused explicitly on its role in the migration process (for some exceptions, see Davidson 2013; Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Mosse et al. 2002; Sobieszczyk 2002; Stoll 2010). Moreover, comparatively few studies have specifically sought to understand the role that gender plays in shaping the risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities that result from migration-related indebtedness (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Killias 2010; Lindquist 2012; Sobieszczyk 2000; Sobieszczyk 2002). This oversight is surprising, especially if we consider the so-called feminisation of migration, which has seen women outnumber men as international labour

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migrants, particularly in the Asian region, resulting in distinctly gendered flows of labour migrants (Piper 2008).

The role of debt in the migration process is made all the more complicated by virtue of the fact that current processes of globalisation and transnational migration have worked to create a new division of labour. Consequently, migrants typically fill low-paid jobs in so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous and degrading) occupations (Wills et al. 2009). Across Asia much of this low-skilled labour is filled by workers from other countries of the Global South and involves short-term contracts built upon precarity and indebtedness (Morgan and Olsen 2009; Strauss and Fudge 2013).

'3D' jobs such as domestic work and construction work – which form the basis of this paper – are also underpinned by high degrees of dependency upon employers, heightened by the fact that these international migrants are far removed from their usual social support networks. Domestic and construction work also tends to be based on short-term contracts and long working hours. These working conditions can be intensified by the fact that temporary labour migrants are often denied the same statutory rights as citizens or longer term residents. In short, temporary labour is often associated with issues of precarity and conditions of unfreedom (Davidson 2013).

This somewhat pessimistic view of debt, dependency and precarity experienced by temporary labour migrants is confounded by claims that migration is necessary for the development of people and communities in the Global South, especially in light of reduced foreign aid (De Haas 2010; Kapur 2004). While 'migration as development' has taken a largely economistic and optimistic perspective on financial remittances as bolstering community development in less-developed nations, this work has rarely considered debt within the context of its analysis (for some exceptions, see Breman 1985; Mosse et al. 2002).

This paper aims to fill these gaps by examining the gender-differentiated issues associated with debt in the context of Singapore's heavily regulated temporary labour migration regime. In doing so, we seek to complicate understandings of debt and move beyond constructing a dichotomous view about debt playing a 'good' or 'bad' role with regard to migrants and their livelihoods (Hoang and Yeoh 2015). In the article, we put forward the argument that migrant indebtedness occurs along a spectrum, from relatively 'silently' incurred forms of debt repaid by salary deductions, to more 'resonant' forms of debt made through upfront payments. In the context of Singapore, we show how this spectrum of migrant indebtedness tends to run along gendered lines. In doing so, we show how these different degrees and forms of indebtedness have implications for migrants' salaries and remitting capacity as they undertake precarious labour in attempts to fulfil their migration goals. Furthermore, we demonstrate how various forms of migrant indebtedness can also have repercussions for migrants' job mobility while in the destination country. In short, we argue that debt can work to both enable and constrain migrants; but the issue of migrant indebtedness needs to be read in conjunction with a multitude of other factors that can shape migrants' experiences, and ultimately their life trajectories.

Migration–development nexus and the role of debt-financed migration

The migration–development nexus, prefaced on the idea that migration is essentially good for development in migrant-sending countries, has experienced somewhat of a resurgence in political and policy-based discourse (Faist 2008). While the initial enthusiasm underpinning migration as a form of development was couched in primarily economic terms – that is, that financial remittances could alleviate poverty and stimulate local investment in migrant-sending areas (de Haas 2005; Stark, Helmenstein, and Prskawetz 1997) – this enthusiasm has widened to incorporate the role of social remittances, including the idea that migration could promote ideas of democracy, human and gender rights (Faist 2008; Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004). The debate about migration and its merits for development has even posited that temporary labour migration is more desirable than permanent migration, due to the expectation that the former type of migrants will remit a higher proportion of their income (see Faist 2008, 22).

As such, focus has been cast upon migrants as 'agents of development', deemed responsible for promoting valuable social and financial remittances for their families and communities (de Haas 2005; Stark, Helmenstein, and Prskawetz 1997). While scholars have sought to critique the notions of progress that are often assumed in the 'migration as development' discourse (see for example, Faist 2008; Dannecker 2009; Raghuram 2009), there has been little focus on the role of debt and how it complicates ideas of migration as promoting economic and social development of migrant-sending communities.

Where it has been considered, debt in the context of shaping migration trajectories has largely been approached in two ways. One stresses the constraints that debt imposes in the context of migration (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Mosse et al. 2002), where migration may 'undermine [income or security] by perpetuating debt and dependency' (Mosse et al. 2002, 60; Stoll 2010). The other tends to focus on the productive aspects of debt as a strategy through which migrants can acquire upwards social and economic mobility (Lindquist 2012; Mosse et al. 2002; Sobieszczyk 2002). Moreover, the risky nature of international migration, including the role of debt in facilitating mobility, has also been described as a form of 'insurance' whereby migrants can assist family members at home in times of financial distress (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Stark 1991; Taylor 2006).

Therefore, while debt has been recognised as playing a necessary, if not productive, role in migration and subsequently development, it remains largely overlooked in debates surrounding the migration–development nexus. We aim to contribute a more nuanced perspective on debt, particularly as it intersects with precarity, by examining its gender-differentiated implications in the context of migration and development.

Debt, precarity and unfree labour

The majority of those who undertake debt-financed migration do so to gain access to employment that can be described as precarious and underpinned by conditions of unfreedom. Precarious work is labour that is poorly compensated, insecure, with little legal protections, but conditions of precarity have been seen as more than just 'a position in the labour market' (Lewis et al. 2015 citing Neilson and Rossiter 2005); rather, it is linked to uncertainty or inability to predict one's fate across a gamut of factors in one's life. Tied to this is the idea of unfree labour, which can also include conditions of debt-bondage, whereby workers, to varying degrees, may find themselves in conditions of slavery or forced labour (Bastia and McGrath 2011). Importantly, Davidson (2013) has warned against locating notions of slavery and freedom as binary opposites, especially in the context of contemporary migration. She goes on to note that while indebtedness can indeed be seriously problematic, restricting migrants' freedom, 'it is also a means by which many people seek to extend and secure their future freedoms' (177).

While precarity is not exclusive to low-skilled labour migrants, their positions are underpinned by uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability in global labour markets. As such, temporary labour migrants are prone to what Lewis et al. (2015, 3) label 'hyper-precarity' brought about by the 'ongoing interplay of neo-liberal labour markets and highly restrictive immigration regimes'. In many cases, temporary labour migrants are forbidden to join labour unions, may be excluded from employment legislations in the destination country and can face strict conditions around their employment, whereby breaches constitute grounds for their repatriation. In short, the intersection between restrictive visa and immigration policies, and precarious labour conditions means that exploitation of temporary labour migrants can be doubly acute.

These conditions of exploitation may be further exacerbated when temporary labour is underpinned by debt, and as such legal migration channels can also lead to 'serious restraints on workers' freedoms and lock them into vastly unequal relations of power and dependence' (Davidson 2013, 182). In such situations, migrants' own sense of responsibility towards repaying their debts can ' … in turn [be] used as disciplining mechanisms by employers' (Lewis et al. 2015, 8; see also Barrientos, Kothari, and Phillips 2013). Yet at the same time, attention has also been drawn to the fact that debt as a mobilising force can help migrants achieve their longer term goals; therefore, there is a need to avoid 'freeze framing' the lives of temporary, low-skilled labour migrants as embedded in experiences that are characterised by unfreedom (Davidson 2013, 185). Hence, the intersection of precarity, unfreedom and debt in the context of low-skilled temporary migrant labour works to complicate our understanding of the productive aspects of migration and its potential to alleviate poverty. As such, we call for a more nuanced view of debt to deepen our understanding of how it operates within migrants' lives and shapes their migration trajectories in both the short and the long term.

Debt, dependency and gender

When it comes to the role of debt in mobilising migrants, gender-differentiated pathways of migration have been observed, particularly in Asia, where gendered demands for labour inform recruitment processes and subsequently shape migrants' trajectories to their destination(s) (Hoang and Yeoh 2015; Lindquist 2012; Sobieszczyk 2000). The existing literature has highlighted that men are often required to pay significant sums in advance to secure a spot in lucrative labour markets such as Singapore, Taiwan and Japan (Dannecker 2009; Lindquist 2010). Thus, from the outset, men must be able to access capital or collateral through their family or broader networks, or otherwise through banks, to finance their migration. Mosse et al. (2002) point to the fact that in the rural Indian context, young single men from relatively well-to-do families often migrate with the intention of managing risks and building the families' assets, whereas for poorer farmers migration is linked to a 'defensive coping strategy' (70) to help them meet their daily needs. In this sense, family-funded migration is expected to pay dividends and further elevate the family socially and economically. Therefore, family-financed migration entails its own distinct advantages and dependencies whereby no- or low-interest loans from kin is deeply intertwined with familial expectations and aspirations (Rahman Md

2009). For men, this debt is also linked to gendered expectations, which in the Bangladeshi context are embedded in patriarchal family structures where men are deemed the natural breadwinners (Dannecker 2009) – a status that can come into question as migrant men 'grapple with dominant narratives of gender and modernity' in the destination country (Ye 2013, 14).

Prevailing gendered norms also work to shape female migrants' visions and experiences of migration, including their experiences of dependency both on the job and with family 'back home' (Dannecker 2009; Paul 2015). For example, women's stereotypical roles as 'dutiful daughters, supportive spouses and caring mothers' where they want to 'help' their families can allow women to construct their mobility as occurring within the traditional gendered boundaries (Paul 2015, 16).

Gendered occupations also work to shape different forms of migrant dependency. Women who undertake domestic work typically encounter a different form of dependency compared to men in the construction industry. Domestic work in the Asian region is characterised by live-in work underscored by asymmetrical power relations (Huang, Yeoh, and Rahman 2005). Live-in domestic work can expand well beyond the hours expected in more formal realms of employment, with no legal guarantee of access to typical employment entitlements such as sick leave or overtime pay. Furthermore, isolated from peers, women are often vulnerable, with little recourse to seek improvements to their employment conditions (Huang and Yeoh 2007; Platt et al. 2013; Yeoh and Huang 1998).

On the other hand, construction companies frequently utilise labour subcontracting as a 'labour-market strategy' (Debrah and Ofori 1997, 690) to maintain flexibility and cope with uncertainties in demand. In such an arrangement, risks and uncertainty in the labour market are systematically passed on to workers who are dependent upon a continuous flow of short-term, contractual work to ensure income stability. Consequently, a subcontracting system relieves 'the main contractor of contractual obligations to the workforce' (697), and works to reduce individual workers' bargaining power (Mosse et al. 2002). Therefore, both systems structuring construction and domestic work contribute to conditions which can work to exacerbate workers' precarity.

In the sections that follow, we discuss the particularities of Singapore's temporary migration regime, followed by the research methods and sampling. We then examine the results of the research, first outlining the gendered pathways of migration and how this works to shape men and women's migration trajectories. Next, the article explores the gendered use of remittances against the backdrop of migrant indebtedness. The third results section uncovers how indebtedness can both immobilise and mobilise men and women during their stay in Singapore, while focusing the lens on the notion of precarious labour and dependencies that arise during the course of their employment. Finally, the article concludes with a reflection on the intersection of gender, indebtedness and precarious labour and its implication for broader debates about migration and development.

Temporary migration in Singapore

Singapore's temporary workers are positioned within a highly regulated, stratified migration regime which differentiates between highly skilled professionals ('Employment Pass'), mid-skilled workers ('S Pass') and low-waged contract workers ('Work Permit' holders or WPHs). Both domestic workers and the majority of construction workers are WPHs, although some higher skilled construction workers may be S Pass holders. In 2015, there were 231,500 foreign domestic workers and 326,000 construction workers who were WPHs, constituting 23% and 33% of all WPHs, respectively (Ministry of Manpower 2015).[1]

Migration regimes play a central role in shaping individuals' everyday life and long-term plans, including migrants' residency entitlements, work and welfare rights in the host country (Lewis et al. 2015, 11). WPHs are not entitled to bring along their spouses/dependents and have little prospects of obtaining residency or citizenship. As such, WPHs constitute a transient (and disposable) workforce which can be repatriated during economic downturns (Yeoh 2006). Debt-financed migration thus constitutes an important strand in the broader fabric of gendered migration regimes, one which needs greater attention as it relates to issues of migrant precarity and dependency.

In the context of debt-financed migration, the temporary nature of employment further heightens the sense of precarity and dependency workers experience in Singapore. Job mobility is also restricted for WPHs as changing jobs rests upon their current employer's written consent. Work permits are granted for one or two years for construction workers, and two years for domestic workers. Once a construction worker's initial contract has expired, it can be renewed, or he may be repatriated, and thus need to embark on multiple migration stints to recoup the debt incurred. In doing so, the worker may incur a new series of debts. A quarter (25%) of the construction workers in this study were Special Pass holders. Special Passes are issued to foreign workers undergoing employment disputes, injury compensation cases or other claims against the employer. While Special Passes allow workers to stay in Singapore legally while their claims are pending, the majority are prohibited from working. This has distinct implications for precarity if we consider that migrants have incurred debt through loans but have very limited, if any, means of paying it back while their cases are pending. While our sample of Special Pass holders may over-represent the experiences of these visa holders, our study opens up insights into the intersection of precarity and debt, as they intersect with specific processes ostensibly designed to protect workers, yet effectively immobilise them physically and financially. Domestic workers may also be issued Special Passes; however, they are considerably smaller in number[2] than construction workers and were not represented among our sample. For domestic workers, it is possible to either renew or change employers at the end of the two-year contract, or seek employers' consent to obtain a 'release' prior to the end of the contract. Unlike construction workers, domestic workers' employers are subject to a S$5000 security bond,[3] which can be forfeited in part or full should their domestic worker abscond, get pregnant or give birth in Singapore, or marry a citizen or permanent resident without prior permission from the government. These conditions often work to encourage employers to limit their domestic workers' spatial and social mobility – although for domestic workers restrictions on their mobility are lifted once they clear their debt deduction period (Platt et al. 2016).

Research methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to undertake research on issues relating to temporary labour migration in Singapore. The study emerged out of a broad aim to clarify which circumstances have the potential to lead migrants and their families out of poverty, and ascertain which may instead result in a downward spiral into indebtedness. As such, issues of debt, remittances and hopes for the future were common to both sets of survey and individual interviews.

The bilingual questionnaires with Indonesian domestic workers ($n = 201$) were conducted in late 2012 and with Bangladeshi construction workers ($n = 205$) in late 2013 through early 2014. To expand upon insights gained from the survey, we also conducted in-depth interviews with 38 domestic workers and 30 construction workers from the initial survey samples. We aimed to ensure that our sampling sites were geographically diverse and respondents were recruited through a mix of stratified and snowball sampling techniques, while taking into account a range of criteria. For women the focus was upon the number of contracts, access to a day off and their marital status, while for men, the criteria included their type of work visa, their marital status and type of employer (i.e. labour supply company, subcontracting firm or main contractor).

Sample

In our overall sample of 205 construction workers, all were male,[4] 149 were Work Permit holders (73%), 52 held Special Passes (25%) and 4 were on S Passes (2%). The majority of workers were employed by subcontracting firms (56%), while 30% worked for a main contractor, and 13% with 'labour-only' subcontractors (also known as labour supply companies). Just over 43% of workers were on their first overseas migration stint (i.e. working with their first employer), while 57% had either worked for at least two employers in Singapore, or had prior overseas work experience in other countries. Among the former, the majority (22%) were students before migrating to Singapore. Others were either unemployed or working in small businesses, farms or the services sector.

Although there was a wide variation in age among construction workers surveyed, the bulk (81%) of workers were aged between 23 and 40 years. Forty-one per cent of the sample were married and 31% of these men had at least one child. The majority of men were also relatively well educated, with 84% possessing at least secondary school qualification, among which 46% had higher secondary school qualification, and 8% were tertiary educated. Compared with national averages in Bangladesh, it is clear that workers are predominantly from the middle-class stratum of society. Just over 60% of workers reported that they were the main financial supporter of households, which averaged 5.5 in size.

Of the 201 foreign domestic workers surveyed, all were female[5] and all were WPHs. Ninety per cent were aged between 23 and 40 years old. Around two-thirds of women (64%) had been married and more than half (56%) had children. In half of the cases (53%) of mothers, they had one child. Women typically came from small households, with 48% from households with three or four other household members. A substantial proportion of women who participated in the survey had above average levels of education, reflecting previous studies, which highlight the positive influence education has upon Indonesian women's decision to migrate (Syafitri 2012; Syafitri and Knerr 2012).

Women's main occupation in Indonesia before leaving for Singapore reflected the gendered nature of livelihoods with the majority identifying as housewives (22%), domestic workers (23%) and factory workers (18%). The remainder worked in a range of occupations such as service work (19%) and farming (6%), or were unemployed (12%).

Results

Gendered pathways – migration and indebtedness

Inasmuch as labour migration was seen as a viable pathway to achieving socio-economic mobility, the ways in which men and women went about securing their migration in Singapore differed greatly, highlighting patently gendered modes of financing migration among our sample. For men the decision to migrate typically required significant investments in terms of finance, time and effort, even before a job is secured in Singapore. Almost all our construction work respondents (97%) had to pay money to an agent or training centre in Bangladesh before they left for work in Singapore. The average sum for pre-departure fees that workers paid in total for their first migration stint to Singapore was Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) 393,275 (S$6394).[6] Of those who had actually repaid their debts in full, the actual mean time taken to do so was 16.5 months, whereas on average respondents had estimated that their repayments would take 12 months. These costs were attributed to formal training – workers must be certified in a trade before departure – and fees for job placement in Singapore (Transient Workers Count Too 2012).

In order to pay these fees, the majority of respondents (81%) had to borrow money from multiple sources. The main sources of lending were relatives (45%), followed by household members (10%) and the bank (10%). While the need to borrow from multiple sources indicates the high cost of migration to Singapore, for some men, borrowing from numerous people meant that the capital was relatively easy to raise, as demonstrated by Ashik who managed to repay his loans within six months of arriving, who had relied solely on relatives to help finance his migration:

> I did not take a loan from the bank … I took BDT 50,000 (S$813) from my relatives and rest, BDT 80 [thousand] (S$1,300) received from my family. My family is … big, we are eight members in the family, so it was manageable.

For those who did not have to borrow, it was still necessary to raise capital through selling or mortgaging land or liquidating other assets such as gold. In a small number of cases, men had their migration costs paid for up front by their fathers or close family members. The fact that men had access to capital or collateral underscores the fact that many originated from middle-class households, with the most marginalised Bangladeshi typically unable to access such migration (Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2012). Ironically, those who are already working in the construction industry in Bangladesh are typically unable to access such work due their marginalised economic status.

Not all men found financing their migration as ‘manageable’ as Ashik did. Financing migration was made all the more difficult in instances where training and placement costs were arbitrarily raised. Kamal, a WPH in his mid-20s, was initially quoted a sum of just over S$4000 to finance his migration. After six months in the training centre, this cost was revised to approximately S$6500, which Kamal paid on the premise that his migration would lead to work with a ‘good company, [where] I can earn these money and get a better life’. From this perspective, Kamal and many other men like him couch their aspirations within a discourse that is underpinned by the logic of 'migration as development'. Yet as Piper (2009, 98) noted, these aspirations are all harder to achieve when they occur against a backdrop of decreasing foreign aid and privatisation of social welfare, which ultimately serves to transfer 'responsibility for development to the individual migrants'. Thus in this context, debt and the precarity it entails become all the more individualised, especially given the revolving-door policy of Singapore's temporary labour migration regime, which, as we demonstrate later in this paper, Kamal came to feel acutely.

In comparison to men, around 90% of domestic workers we surveyed did not pay any fees to a training centre or middlemen prior to their arrival in Singapore. Instead, they repaid their debt via salary deductions. Their debt is calculated based on women's monthly salary and their deduction period. While women are usually given information about their debt deduction period, they found their exact amount of debt difficult to pinpoint. As such, only 2 of the 201 women surveyed could give any indication of how their debt deductions were used to finance various costs related to the migration. In comparison, over 70% of men could itemise their migration costs due to agents' fees (average cost BDT 358,000 or S$5821), while 45% were aware of the specific amount paid for their training (on average BDT 269,000 or S$4374). Thus, from the outset, men's debt resonate more clearly for them as a quantifiable figure that requires servicing.

Based on calculations of an average domestic worker's salary of S$450 and a mean salary deduction period of eight months, the total debt women accrued was approximately S$3600. Akin to construction workers, the parameters around this debt repayment can change as Putri, a 27-year-old single woman who has worked in Singapore during two separate migration periods, noted:

> … I was told that it [the monthly salary] would be S$380, but when I got here suddenly I was told the job would only pay S$360, with no off day. Besides that, the deduction was supposed to be only over 7 months, but ended up over 8 months … .

Thus, women's debt, when compared to that of construction workers, is not as easily quantifiable, nor visible. As such, we argue that this form of debt can by comparison be considered 'silently' incurred. Unlike construction workers who often rely upon family members to help finance their migration, women's families do not necessarily feel the direct consequences of their debt. Instead, many women's families are given a lump sum of one million rupiah (S$105) prior to the women's departure from the household, although this is frequently used to purchase goods necessary for women's migration (Lindquist 2010). However, women's absence can create difficulties for 'left-behind families' as they try to replace women's labour and care-giving roles in the household (Lam et al. 2013).

Despite being 'silently' incurred, debt is not any less problematic for women and can work to heighten women's precarity in the realm of domestic work (Anderson 2000; Jureidini and Moukarbel 2004). This was especially so during the early stages of their migration when women received only a nominal allowance during the debt deduction period. Nearly two-thirds[7] (61%) of the women received only S$10 or less per month as an allowance – barely enough to purchase mobile phone credit to contact their families. These early stages of domestic work also often coincide with women's limited social and spatial mobility, which may be even further limited until their debt is cleared (Platt et al. 2016). Thus, the entry point to migration is often a particularly difficult time for women where precarious labour may deeply intersect with conditions of unfreedom (Bastia and McGrath 2011).

Hence, this section has shown that both men and women's indebtedness – whether incurred 'silently' through debt deductions or more 'resonantly' via upfront payments – intersects heavily with issues of precarious labour, which can work to further complicate migrants' experiences of earning and remitting as we demonstrate in the following section.

Spectrums of indebtedness and migrants' remittances

Predictably, indebtedness is deeply intertwined with migrants' capacity to remit in a meaningful way. Construction workers' basic salaries[8] – which are calculated on a daily rate – averaged S$23 per day (and the median amount at S$20),[9] while women's monthly salaries averaged S$445 per month (which equates to between S$16 and S$19 per day depending on the number of days off they get, if any). Results from our surveys (Tables 1 and 2) show that unsurprisingly, the presence of debt is differently configured for men and women.

Debt figures as a more 'silent' and resonant feature in the ways in which women and men, respectively, *planned* and *actually* used their remittances. For domestic workers (Table 2), the planned and actual use of remittances was fairly congruous, with the exception of their plans for investments in business and savings. Construction workers, however, despite their higher monthly earnings overall compared to domestic workers, reported greater variance between their *planned* and *actual* use of remittances. Akin to domestic workers, spending on basic needs and education remained a priority (84% and 45%), indicating men and women's key roles as providers for family back home. Yet, debt repayment emerged as the third most prominent use for construction workers, increasing from a planned 18% to 38% in reality. It is important to note that for women, while repayment of debt only constituted a small amount of remittance use for women (3% planned and actual use), the majority of women could not remit in a meaningful sense until their debt deduction period was cleared. For women, this period lasted on average between seven and nine months (64%), with 18 months as the longest reported salary deduction period.

The impact of debt upon men's remittances, directing money away from those planned for savings and businesses, can be linked to the shifting parameters around their work conditions. A recurring theme in the interviews revolved around discrepancies in *promised* and *actual* wages. Similarly, men also reported how two-year contracts promised to them did not

Table 1. Planned and actual uses of remittances for construction workers ($n = 205$).

Use of remittances	Planned (%)	Actual (%)
Buy land/house	27	21
Business	29	10
Education	38	45
Basic needs	77	84
Medical	10	22
Household goods	17	21
Buy vehicle	2	0
Repay debts	18	38
Savings	49	25
Other	7	2

Table 2. Planned and actual uses of remittances for domestic workers ($n = 201$).

Use of remittances	Planned (%)	Actual (%)
Buy land/house	44	39
Business	18	9
Education	65	66
Basic needs	68	73
Medical	8	10
Household goods	2	5
Buy vehicle	3	13
Repay debts	3	3
Savings	50	38
Other	9	8

materialise, as well as underpayment of overtime wages. Construction workers such as Mizan who was on a Special Pass described how efforts to challenge employers on their working conditions were often met with threats to send the workers back home: 'that's why cannot talk loud, so is scared [boss will] send home'. Against the backdrop of outstanding debts, such threats can work as a disciplining force for construction workers in the broader context of neo-liberal labour markets (Davidson 2013).

Unfulfilled promises regarding contract terms had significant implications for men such as Kamal. Aged 26 years, Kamal was a WPH who had undertaken three successive one-year contracts despite initially being promised a two-year contract. Upon the end of each contract, he had to return home to Bangladesh and was required to pay an additional lump sum – first S$2000 and later S$4200 – before he could undertake a subsequent migration to Singapore. The fact that he had two brothers working overseas helped finance each of his stints, although he still had to borrow from other family members to finance his migration. It is our argument that the recurrent nature of this debt for men such as Kamal, and the shifting parameters that inform men's experience of precarious labour within Singapore's construction industry, works to make their debt all the more 'resonant' in their lives (and often the lives of others who have helped finance their migration).

The resonance of men's debt also intersected deeply with their role as providers, upon whom financial hopes had been pinned, as they set out to bolster their families' financial and social mobility (Dannecker 2009; Rahman Md 2009). This role was evident for men such as Saiful who had experienced a workplace accident nine months into his migration and was on a Special Pass and unable to work. So great was his shame about his inability to live up to his gendered expectations, he hid the extent of his injuries from his family in order to protect them: 'If I tell them everything, then they will suffer a lot.'

Gendered debt-financed migration and job mobility in Singapore

Women's debt, while incurred 'silently', can also prevent women from remitting in a meaningful sense for protracted periods of time, as Una's case demonstrates. At 32 years, Una had already been working in Singapore for 16 years with 6 different employers. After her father's retrenchment, Una had migrated and assumed the role of breadwinner for the next 10 years, supporting her two brothers' education. However, Una likened the initial years of her migration to Singapore to 'being in prison' where 'somebody control you'. The conditions she experienced were encapsulated by an incident where she was woken in the middle of the night to work by having a bucket of water thrown at her. Such treatment was compounded by her enforced social isolation, where she had no access to a day off or a phone. Therefore, despite choosing Singapore as a destination because her aunt was working there, Una was denied the opportunity of ever seeing her.

Una's early years in Singapore characterised '3D' work, where she lacked employment protections by virtue of the fact that domestic workers are excluded from Singapore's Employment Act (Anderson 2000; Strauss and Fudge 2013; Wills et al. 2009). Yet Barrientos, Kothari, and Phillips (2013, 1039) note that conditions of unfreedom are typically most serious when migrants face 'unfreedom at the point of exit'.

Despite her precarious conditions, Una was able to leave each job before the contract had expired – even though she had not fulfilled her salary deductions or obtained a 'release' to facilitate her transfer to another employer. Instead, Una decided to take a risk by embarking upon the 30-minute ferry ride across to Indonesia. There she was assisted by an employment agent to re-enter Singapore. However, upon each re-entry, Una was considered a 'new' arrival – a status that required her to go through the debt deduction period (around nine months' salary) each time.

The 'silent' means by which Una incurred her migration debt in this case did not equate to 'unfreedom at the point of exit'. Instead, through her decision to depart Singapore[10] and restart her debt deduction period, Una was in effect able to expunge herself from the previous debt, albeit while incurring a new one. However, her disrupted employment and recurrent debt deductions meant that she was unable to remit in a meaningful sense only until after two years in Singapore, despite being her family's main breadwinner.

Davidson (2013, 185) has encouraged us to move beyond defining migrants as based on their experiences of precarity and unfreedom. Instead, she has called for the need to consider migrants' engagement in precarious labour in the context of their longer term migration goals. Indeed, if we fast forward towards the later stages of Kamal and Una's migration, we see a different set of circumstances. Una had recently married a Malaysian who worked in Singapore and had plans to settle soon in Malaysia. In the meantime, she had built a house for her family and her brothers had graduated from university and enjoyed decent jobs in Indonesia. Kamal, despite his disjointed migration, was in the process of building a house, although he anticipated he still needed to work three to four years more abroad in order to have his own business. Yet, we can see how the 'silent' and 'resonant' forms of debt had worked to mobilise two different WPHs in different ways in the context of Singapore's highly regulated migration regime.

In the case of Una, the silent and less quantifiable nature of her debt arguably made it easier to flee her precarious employment conditions, although in the earlier stages of her migration, this led her to assume more debt. This salary deduction model underpinning domestic workers' migration ostensibly works to individualise the risk and place the debt upon migrants, much in the same way that upfront forms of debt operate. While there is ample evidence of debt being imbricated with issues of precarity and unfreedom (Davidson 2013) as Una's case shows, there is room for slippages as the debt is not merely between employers and their employees, but often involves a constellation of other factors and can become 'entangled' with the employer and the employment agent (Goh, Wee, and Yeoh forthcoming, 5). As a result, debt-financed migration does not work to merely 'lock migrant workers into relationships of personal dependency on employers who sponsor them' (Davidson 2013, 183). Rather as debtors, women do have the power to default on their loan, particularly when the debt is purely transactional and not linked to wider familiar networks (Graeber 2011). While the trajectories of women who default on their debt may not proceed as smoothly as Una's, her situation underscores that the silent and entangled nature of women's debt can provide opportunities to exercise job mobility in the context of so-called 3D employment.

Kamal's mobility was more deeply intertwined with a more resonant and recurring form of debt brought about by neo-liberal labour regimes which have the ability to hire, fire and deport surplus labour at its behest (Wills et al. 2009; Lewis et al. 2015). After his promised two-year contract did not materialise he had to twice incur thousands of dollars of upfront debt. After six years in Singapore, he earned around S$800–900 per month, yet he reported having only S$900 in savings. Having paid off his loans, the rest of his money is sent to his father on a regular basis to help build a house and maintain family land. Nonetheless, despite anticipating he would be in Singapore for a maximum of seven years, the intermittent nature of his migration and his recurrent debt delayed his plans for the future. While both Una and Kamal experienced difficulties in the early stages of their migration, these cases work to show how different forms of debt operate within migrants' lives taking on more silent and resonant qualities, as individuals attempt to carve out their longer term plans.

Migrant indebtedness and 'hyper-precarity'

Debt, as the above cases demonstrate, intersects deeply with migrants' pre-existing experiences of precarity (Bastia and McGrath 2011; Davidson 2013), as well as kinship ties and social expectations (Graeber 2011). Neo-liberal labour regimes and the restrictive migration regulations which underpin 'hyper-precarity' (Lewis et al. 2015) can work to further compound experiences of migrant indebtedness, as Shohel's case demonstrates.

Discouraged by his poor employment prospects in Bangladesh, Shohel arrived in Singapore in 2011, aged 26 years. His decision to migrate was based on a relative's recommendation that Singapore was a good place to earn money. He subsequently borrowed from five different sources to raise S$8000 for his migration, relying heavily upon loans from his father, brother and other relatives. The family also sold land to meet the BDT 400,000 (S$6500) shortfall for the training and placement fee.

Within a year Shohel found himself on a Special Pass following a workplace accident which involved a fall from a three-storey roof due to inadequate safety equipment, resulting in a nine-day hospital stay. Although his initial medical costs were met by his employer, he was unable to work legally while he awaited the outcome of his compensation claim. Shohel pieced together small patches of work and relied upon assistance from his brother and friends also working in Singapore while awaiting the outcome of his case. Thus, his constellation of dependencies has changed to no longer revolve around one employer, but instead included a range of bosses supplying casual work, his brother and friends, and the state, which ultimately oversaw the outcome of his injury claim. In the meantime, he also had to manage expectations of relatives who would periodically call to chase him for the S$5000 he still owed for financing his migration.

Despite the precarious situation Shohel found himself in, he still professed a desire to return to Singapore, bolstered by a fairly positive prognosis about his future capacity to use his hand:

> … after ‘I go back [to Bangladesh]. I want Singapore again come. Cause my country job no have … This training I pass already … But I can Singapore, I can job I think … I want Singapore again come.

Shohel’s case, and his desire to return, underscores the complex interplay of precarity and migrant indebtedness in the context of low-status retrogressive job. In such cases ‘migration trajectories, constrained rights and entitlement and precarious labour collide to close down alternatives’ (Lewis et al. 2015, 15), leaving Shohel little other option than to wait for his compensation claim to be heard. As Saiful, another Special Pass holder noted, regarding his compensation claim ‘how much I get is the lottery of my life now’. Saiful and Shohel’s experiences underscore the ways in which striated temporary labour regimes and the hazards of construction work coalesce with debt to effectively immobilise them, leaving their debts to resonate until their cases are resolved.

Conclusions

This paper, by using a spectrum of migrant indebtedness, seeks to widen the lens with within which we consider men and women’s experiences of debt as they intersect with precarious labour. The three cases presented in this article seek to flesh out the contours of the various visa positions (work passes and special passes) available to low-skilled migrants in Singapore’s highly regulated migration regime. These cases underscore the multiple ways in which debt can work to position migrants at various points along the spectrum of indebtedness as it intersects with issues of gender and precarity.

Gendered pathways for financing migration in the context of Singapore where debt is incurred silently, or in more upfront ways, underscore ways in which indebtedness can work to mobilise and immobilise women differently throughout the course of their migration trajectories. Men’s upfront debt is closely tied to neo-liberal work regimes, including subcontracted labour, which has become the default form of labour for many industries requiring a flexible and ultimately ‘disposable’ workforce found in the form of temporary labour migrants (Wills et al. 2009). In this context of ‘use and discard’ labour (Yeoh 2006), construction workers’ debt can become all the more resonant, as they struggle to access long-term contracts and the remuneration they were promised, as made evident by Kamal who entered a series of debt to re-enter Singapore.

In the case of domestic work, gendered dependencies are predicated on highly asymmetrical power relations with employers, debt deductions and the live-in nature of the job. Yet in the context of Singapore’s labour regime, women’s debt may become entangled between the employer and the agent, who establish the terms of the worker’s contract (Goh, Wee, and Yeoh, forthcoming). Thus, women’s debt, as less quantifiable and ‘silently’ incurred, may create possibilities for them to default on the loan and seek alternatives outside their immediate employment conditions, as Una’s case demonstrated.

Considering issues of debt and precarity, within the context of ‘migration as development’, it is apparent that the individualisation of responsibility for development (Piper 2009) occurs alongside the individualisation of risk for migrants within the context of neo-liberal models of labour. Therefore, viewing migration as a form of development needs to also consider that migrants’ ‘transnational social positions and livelihoods pressures' necessitate their engagement in precarious labour (Lewis et al. 2015, 16), including conditions of indebtedness to achieve their goals. Through our conceptualisation of a spectrum of migrant indebtedness, we broaden debates which tend to dichotomise debt as either a productive force or a constraint, highlighting its numerous faces as migrants forge their migration trajectories. In doing so, we illuminate the need to expand the temporal lens to examine how debt and precarity intersect in the context of highly gendered migration, and its implications for migration and development over the longer term.

Notes

1. Percentages are rounded off to the nearest whole number.
2. While the Ministry of Manpower receives about 2000 foreign domestic worker-related complaints a year, only 90 such cases have been the subject of cases in court over a five-year period (*The New Paper* 2015), suggesting that most cases have been resolved or abandoned prior to being escalated to a more serious level of complaint.
3. Money is expressed in Singapore dollars (S$) unless otherwise specified.
4. Only male migrants of particular nationalities may be recruited as foreign construction workers in Singapore.
5. While male foreign domestic workers are present in Singapore, this is a relatively new phenomenon and as of 2013, it was estimated that there were fewer than 40 such domestic workers (*The Straits Times 2013*).
6. The approximate conversion rate between Bangladeshi taka and Singapore dollars used in this paper is S$1 to BDT 61.50
7. This sample included 16 women who reported receiving no allowance at all during this time.
8. Basic salary is calculated on a daily rate, and excludes overtime pay.
9. The comparison between monthly and daily wages between men and women is based on the fact that while women are paid a set monthly salary, men's work is paid on a daily basis and their monthly wages may vary, depending on how many days they work per month.
10. It is important to note that this is not always the case for domestic workers who have travel documents confiscated by employers and who may lack the confidence and financial means to abscond (Anggraeni 2006).

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