



## Migration Brokerage, Precarity and Agency

### What Can We Learn from Research in Africa and Asia?



Passengers at the Bawku lorry station preparing to board a vehicle to Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.  
Photo: © Centre for Migration Studies, Ghana.

### Key lessons

- Disconnects between how migrants and the state view brokerage and informal migration can help us to understand why brokerage continues, even in the face of official state opposition.
- Criminalisation of brokerage may not only fail to address the root causes and consequences of brokered movement of labour but may also have unintended negative consequences.

**G**lobally, brokerage is widespread in migrant labour markets. Brokers fill the gap between migrants and the countries or places they are travelling to, and help migrants traverse complex immigration systems, border controls and labour markets. They are involved in the placement of migrants into precarious jobs but also mitigate the

precarity of migrants from marginalised classes and ethnicities.

The prominent debates around people trafficking and smuggling, and subsequent changes in law and policy, highlight how brokers have become of concern to policymakers in both migrant

sending and receiving countries. Often, policy responses focus on simultaneously protecting migrants – who are perceived to be extremely vulnerable to abuse – and punishing those actors and institutions that might charge significant fees to facilitate migrants’ travel and work. Many mainstream narratives of brokerage tend to oversimplify the role of brokers in migration journeys and fail to consider the views of migrants and would-be migrants about their role. Many migrants who use brokers are compelled to travel due to poverty as well as aspirations for a different lifestyle and do not have access to legal processes that would facilitate their journeys. This leaves them with few alternative options but to use the informal intermediaries who offer the best prospects for realising their migration plans.

This brief summarises *Migrating out of Poverty* research from Ghana, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Qatar, and South Africa. The location and types of migration covered in these studies vary considerably and offer very context-specific lessons. However, it is possible to draw out broad themes that have relevance to policymakers.

It is hoped that the findings in this brief will help policymakers better understand why migrants might use brokers to make potentially dangerous journeys to work in sectors that are poorly regulated. It places the migrant–broker relationship within wider systems of labour circulation in globalised and neoliberalised systems of services and manufacturing as well as geopolitical tensions. Finally, it suggests some adjustments that may improve policy in this area.

## The diversity of brokerage

Migration brokers support their clients by facilitating some combination of exit from their country of origin, support during the migrant’s journey, and finding employment at their destination. There are many actors involved in the brokerage of migration; understanding the logic of their inner workings and organisation can

assist with unpacking generalisations about the industry.

Formal brokers are usually recruitment agencies who have a licence to operate. They take potential migrants through formal, documented registration and employment processes. Some governments have attempted to strengthen regulatory processes related to brokers. For example, in Ethiopia, the Overseas Employment Proclamation (1998) resulted in the establishment of 400 private employment agencies. However, the licensing was limited to brokers facilitating migration to the Middle East. Labour migration to South Africa, North Africa, and Europe continued to be facilitated by informal brokers. These agencies have since been banned.

Informal brokers, who are often connected to other formal and informal brokers in complex chains, operate with little formal state regulation although they may act within the bounds of what is morally acceptable to the communities that they originate from, as this quote from Bangladesh illustrates:

***I am more at ease dealing with the dalal [informal broker] who lives in the next village and whom I can reach anytime than some recruiting agency in Dhaka. In case the deal goes bad, the chances of recovery of money are much higher from the dalal through social pressure than from a powerful agency. (Migrant, Bangladesh to Qatar)***

In this case the relationship between the migrants and brokers is based on culturally grounded notions of reciprocity. As informal brokers are often part of the communities they work in, they can more easily be called upon for assistance when migration goes wrong or when refunds of investments are required. They maintain their reputation and moral integrity and are prepared to refund monies taken from migrants at significant loss to themselves if the migration fails:



Passengers at the Bawku lorry station getting ready to board a vehicle to Pouytenga in Burkina Faso.

Photo: © Centre for Migration Studies, Ghana.

***Once 133 boys I sent at different times were deported all together. They were collected from several prisons in Tanzania and Malawi and transported back home. It was a tough moment for me. On their arrival, I asked famous elders who represent the Hadiya people and work as advisers to the zonal administration to intervene. It was open. With the elders' mediation, I paid back the money I received from the deportees by selling my house for two million birr... the elders and the migrants themselves calculated [and considered] some of my expenses.***  
**(Broker, Ethiopia)**

Local informal brokers may also be considered better placed to provide reliable and honest workers, as this quote from a broker in Ghana illustrates:

***We don't just go in for anybody. We go in for people who are recommended by someone who is well-known. That is why you contact someone whom you trust to get you someone whom he or she trusts... I know there are agencies that can provide you with a worker but I have not utilised their services before because they actually don't know the background of the domestic workers. These job-seekers just approach them and express their interest in working as domestic workers, so all they do is train them and give them to a household. The probability that the worker they would give you would not be up to your standards is high, so I usually prefer the informal recommendations to the agency recruits.***  
**(Employer, Ghana)**

## Mediating precarity and agency

Brokers can exercise power in shaping migrant agency and precarity at different stages of their journey. They can support or undermine migrant autonomy in deciding where and how they want to travel, their safety as they traverse borders and other countries, and their ability to source and secure appropriate work. But this precarity is also mediated by immigration regimes and labour markets in destination countries. Brokers may succeed or fail based on their ability to navigate both regulation and the structures of migration control and employment – such as humanitarian agencies, border control, immigration officials, and employers.

For example, in Ethiopia, the success of a brokerage is determined by the lead broker's ability to establish a structure of 'supply' at place of origin and strong networks with hard-working, smart and trustworthy individual smugglers based at each important point of transit along the route. In this they are supported by a myriad of organisations and people that facilitate migration, such as churches, bus drivers, hotel owners, civil servants, and ordinary individuals and community members who have a stake in the process succeeding.

While there is no doubt that migrant journeys can be dangerous and that migrants can be subject to abuses and risks such as theft and physical violence, brokers also play a role in protecting migrants, as one broker from Sudan explained:

*The militia has no salary. Some of the militia members are former members of the police or army. Some of them live in rented houses. So, what is their source of income? They are the brokers. For the lead brokers also, it is much better to connect to the militia than to the police. The militia members are local people... They know the route much better than the police. Especially recently, when the migrants are coming in a big group, we are using the*

*militia and it has become common. They fight with the police... The police usually run away. (Broker, Sudan)*

When sourcing employment for migrants, brokers mould migrants into the ideal employee based on the expectations of employers. In Ghana, this took the form of training women to be subservient domestic workers and encouraging them to suppress their ethnic identities and use unfamiliar terms that signified subservience to their employer such as 'please', 'thank you', and 'sorry'. In Bangladesh, these ideal workers were produced for the Qatar construction industry through the falsification of documents and stereotypes about Bangladeshi men being meek and unlikely to challenge exploitative working conditions. Rather than challenging hierarchies and inequalities in the societies that they are inserting migrants into, brokers seek to position migrants in ways that are acceptable to the ruling classes in destination cities or countries. Migrants may accept this moulding and perform to it as part of the process of securing work. They may also attempt to subvert these arrangements over time after establishing trust-based relationships at the workplace or with the help of other brokers.

Migrants from disadvantaged and marginalised communities are positioned in work where they face poor working conditions, including violence, sexual exploitation, long working hours, and heavy workloads. Some migrants' contracts are retained or substituted, and their travel documents confiscated, as one migrant in Ghana explained:

*Sometimes when I do something bad, then the madam will slap me [crying]. If she sends me, and I come back and I don't bring the right thing, she slaps me... There was a day I went to bath, when I finished bathing, there was blood in the bath and I didn't know. She called me and asked why. By the time I explained, she slapped me... If I report to my daddy [employer's husband], he will say that it is my fault... (Migrant, Ghana)*

Migrants accept precarious and degrading work to achieve certain life goals like mobilising resources for improving living conditions at home and building social networks that have the potential to lead to better employment in the future. Leaving the negotiation of work conditions (rest, payment, workload, and nature of work, etc.) to workers and the discretion of employers exacerbates the precarity of their position. However, in some cases, brokers assist migrants with moving up the employment ladder by bargaining with employers on wages and conditions.

*For instance, some start as cleaners or home helps and are able to learn how to cook. Within two or more years they leave to move to other places. After two years, when they have learnt other things, I recommend them to other places – like in the Indian companies – as cooks and they get higher wages.*  
(Broker, Ghana)

For many migrant workers, brokers have a significant role to play in challenging, determining, or entrenching the conditions of precarious work, as employers are disproportionately able to dictate a worker's access to entitlements stipulated in the law. It is an important part of brokers' marketing strategies that they are seen to ameliorate harms and abuses:

*If people lose confidence in me, I lose all my market. The source dries up, and then others will take over. Every broker works to win the competition.*  
(Broker, Ethiopia)

## Conclusion

There is inequality in most migrant–broker relations. However, brokers and migrants should be understood as joint creators of complex pathways of migrant circulation on which they both depend. Migration brokerage crafts and supports structures that produce 'good migrants' who are willing to be placed in precarious work. However, over time, migrants may successfully manoeuvre and challenge these structures with the potential for social and economic change. Brokers are an integral part of the strategies employed by migrants to mitigate precarity and protect themselves against abuse from employers and others.

Usually, state responses to informal brokerage are to eliminate these systems and replace them with formalised processes and agencies, which tend to exclude the poorest and most marginalised people who have little access to formal institutions.

Even where formal agencies might facilitate their travel, they are usually far removed from relationships which foster trust. Furthermore, the willingness of migrants in the studies under consideration to attempt to migrate multiple times across routes that they know to be dangerous or risky is testament to the fact that current policy neither protects migrants nor deters them from using informal brokers to the extent that these intermediaries are eliminated.

Harsh laws and policies to control migration (such as the *Kafala* system in Qatar) and increased surveillance of migrant workers, coupled with detention and removal, increase their precarity and close spaces for negotiation and the use of agency in improving working conditions. New approaches to policy are required to take account of the emerging evidence base on informal brokers.

## Further reading

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