Our Migration Experiences

Proposed Corporate Stand on Migration

Bangladesh: Migrating to support family members

By Sister Bernadette Shilpi Rebeiro, CSC

Bangladesh has a labor surplus as the result of several factors. Two million people enter the working age group every year and more women are participating in the labor force, while agricultural jobs are declining due to mechanization. The domestic economy is expanding but not enough to keep up with the increasing demand for jobs. Out migration seems inevitable as a portion of the labor force seeks employment opportunities abroad.

This has been the experience of Shahida Akter, Honufa Begum, Sufia Khatun, and Sahara Begum who, along with their parents and husband, became refugees after the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. When they left their home in Noakhali District they lost everything, their properties and all the things they had.

They settled in Matiranga, a city in the Khagrachari Hill District where our Sisters served in Junior School. The region is largely hilly with several valleys along major rivers, one of which forms the international boundary between Bangladesh and India (Tripura State). The tribal people and the Bengalis make up a population of 5,25,664 [equivalent to 525, 664 in the international numbering system] in Khagrachari, with the majority living below the poverty line.

When I talked to the women, they told me that life in Hill Tracts was not easy. Being poor they have always suffered discrimination. "We have no rights," remembers Shahida, because the tribal people did not accept them. Also, they did not have any idea of how to make a living in a hilly area. The women married and had children, continuing to live in great poverty. They did not know how to cultivate the hill top and still haven't been successful in growing crops there. They looked for an opportunity to go to foreign countries to work and earn more money to sustain their families.

Three of the women were in their late 40s to 50 in 2014 when they went to Arab countries as domestic workers. The first two years they were mistreated by the

owner of the house because they did not know the language, culture and people. They worked very hard but got a very low salary. They returned home for a visit after two years and shared with me that they had not earned enough to support their families well, or even repay the loan they took to go abroad.

After celebrating the Muslim Eid holiday in October with their families, they returned to work abroad. Now they were quite familiar with the situation, knew the language and had learned how to handle the situation. They told me they were honest and faithful to their work and the owner loved them and accepted them well. Their salary was increased so they are able to support their families and educate their children. Sufia and Sahara said that now they are the blessings of their families.

Last year the Government of Bangladesh made a new rule that no one can buy land in the Hill Tracts except the tribal people. While the women continue to work abroad and send money home, their families are living on a piece of land from the government that can be taken back any time. So, while their economic situation has improved, they continue to live in fear and uncertainty.

Brazil: Migrating to join her husband

By Sister Maria de Lourdes, CSC

Leons, a 31-year-old Haitian mother, left her two daughters with her parents and went alone to the Dominican Republic and then on to Brazil to find her husband. Leons had to leave her country in search of a better quality of life. However, her husband was unemployed, and they faced many difficulties in Brazil including housing, food and employment.

After her husband arrived in Brazil in 2014, he was welcomed in the Project Peace Mission, a Pastoral Center for Mediation for Migrants. Leons, soon pregnant with her third daughter, lives with her husband in a building in the center of São Paulo that was occupied by the movement, along with several immigrants from different countries. She describes, "The environment is dark, there is no light on the stairs, there are four bathrooms to be used collectively by several families, the place is a focus of disease."

Another problem faced by Leons is that her two daughters and their families remain in Haiti, and she doesn't have the money to visit them. She and her husband don't have steady income. He does odd jobs and she does housework when they can find work, but it isn't sufficient for their expenditures. Neither she nor her husband have a qualified profession for the job market. This ends up being very difficult because of the bureaucracy of the labor market and because they are immigrants, in addition to the language barriers.

Leons participates in the activities carried out by the Caritas of the Archdiocese of São Paulo, such as craft courses, lectures, and income generating workshops. She receives a basic Caritas food basket once a month. She explains, "it is not easy to live outside your territory and your family. I miss them so much. Sometimes I talk to my family by WhatsApp*. I wish I could have a job and a space that I could bring my two daughters here. I do not know if I'll ever be able to see them again." After two years in Brazil, Leons still cannot send any money or a souvenir to her family. Leon's plan is to study, have a profession, decent housing, employment and her daughters join her.

* WhatsApp is a message service for voice and video calls, texting and document sharing.

Ghana: Migrating to the city for a better life

By Sister Comfort Arthur, CSC

This is the real-life story of a middle-aged woman in Ghana who has four children and three grandchildren. We will call her Boahinmaa, a name meaning "the one who has left her community." She has suffered tremendously in her life, physically and emotionally, and migration is the leading factor behind much of her suffering.

Boahinmaa got married to a man in a rural area of Ghana called Gomoa Fete. She had two girls and two boys with her husband. However, shortly after the birth of her fourth child, her husband died in a tragic car accident. Hoping for a better life for her and her family, she moved out of her rural home village to the suburban area of Kasoa, a few kilometers from Accra, the capital city of Ghana. When she arrived in Kasoa, she met another man and got married. She then gave birth to another girl. She now has five children.

Boahinmaa's day to day life in Kasoa is in extreme poverty. The city-life was not as she thought and hoped for, and did not bring positive change to her life. Rather, it made her life struggles even worse. She had no extended family near-by, she was in an unknown area, and she was overwhelmed with the new environment.

In terms of her profession, she is a "jack of all trades." Even though she has no formal education, Boahinmaa does so many things to ensure survival for herself and her family. She sometimes assists people on their farms, she sometimes sells small things, and she does other odd jobs so that she and her family can survive.

Her second husband is also a part of Boahinmaa's struggle. He is a violent alcoholic who does not work and does very little to help the family. Her older children also added to the struggle by having their own children out of wedlock. Recently, due to lack of money for proper health insurance, one of Boahinmaa's

daughters passed away from a treatable sickness. Now she is the mother for her three grandchildren as well.

The one positive aspect to her life was finding work with the Sisters of the Holy Cross. This work (weeding the compound/farming) allowed her two young boys and girl to attend the Sisters' school. Her eldest son is off to one of the top high schools in Ghana. His dream is to turn his life around for his family.

While Ghana is rich in natural resources this has not translated into a better life for a majority of the people. Unfortunately, many women and young people find themselves migrating to seek a better life. While conflict and changes in the weather pattern in the north are influencing internal migration, the International Organization for Migration office in Ghana reports that youth unemployment is the primary cause of external migration. Boahinmaa hopes that after graduation her son will not join the surge of young men migrating to more prosperous African countries, or undertake the even more dangerous journey to Europe in search of employment.

Her family is truly miserable in the city. Whether or not staying in the rural areas would have helped is unclear. However, after migrating to the city Boahinmaa and her family seem to be sinking deeper into poverty and can't get themselves out of it. Going back to the rural village would be an embarrassment after being gone so long, and coming home this distraught would not look good for her and her family. They are just one family among the many who have gone to the cities for greener pastures, but who don't thrive as expected. Rather, they create more challenges for themselves through the effects of this migration.

India: Migrating to heal memories of abuse

By Sister Renuka Pegu, CSC

Liea was a beautiful young woman who was enjoying her studies and had hopes for her future. In her family she grew up with protection, trust and love. She felt that no one would do anything bad to another, that the world was safe and life was beautiful.

Her story began when she was in class ten and a good friend of hers was celebrating a birthday. She received an invitation and her friends requested her to spend the night in their house. She never thought that night would bring tragedy to her life. While everybody was sleeping, her friend's young uncle came into the room where she slept. First he went to her friend Alia, and when Alia would not allow him to hold her he beat her. He tied her hands and mouth and sexually abused her. Then he did the same thing to Liea. When she saw him, she was speechless and tried to run, but he had locked the door of the room behind him. When Liea could not open it, he grabbed her and sexually abused her.

Liea and her friend cried that whole night, and in the morning Liea went home. She could not share this with anybody and she asked herself, "Why do I have to live in this world?" There was a time when she wanted to commit suicide but could not do it. Her friend Alia continued to be sexually abused by her relatives day after day, and did commit suicide.

Liea became lonely and mentally ill. Finally she shared the story of her tragic abuse with her mother, who was a very loving and caring mom. In an attempt to save her, her parents migrated with her to another place where she might find healing. In spite of all their efforts they were not able to help her to come back to a normal life. One day her life ended. She died and her whole family went through agony.

Mexico: Fleeing to Escape Domestic Violence

By Sister Areli Cruz Hernandez, CSC

This is the story of Maria, a mother of a nine-year-child we will call Juan. Maria dreamed of having a family in her own country of El Salvador where she could watch her children grow up. The situation changed when her husband started mistreating her and then began mistreating their little child. Tired of this violence, she reported her husband who finally was put in jail. Even then, she was very afraid of him and didn´t feel secure in her home country. This, plus the lack of jobs where she lived led her to think about other options. Gathering her courage, her few belongings and her little child, she decided to go far from her husband to a new country.

After many difficulties she arrived in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México, with neither money nor a place to stay. She and Juan lived in the streets and begged for money during the day until Maria found a job in a restaurant. When she was able to rent a small room she felt better for her and her son, but Juan spent many hours alone while she was at work and didn´t go to school. The neighbors saw the boy seemingly living alone, and not understanding the situation, they notified the authorities.

Juan was taken from her and put in a government institution called Family Integration Development (DIF) where children who are at risk are taken from their families. DIF takes care of them until they find a home for them either with the parents or close relatives who are able to take care for them. Maria talked with people including a lawyer, a psychologist and social worker from that institution. She explained the situation she was going through with her husband, the violence they fled from and her job.

After several months the advisers from the institution told her she would be able to reunite with her son who was now going to a primary school. Maria was happy with the good news and said she would do anything to help her son recuperate.

She continued to work hard to give Juan everything he needed to grow in a better environment.

Peru: Welcoming Refugees from a Country in Crisis

By Sister Lilma Calsin Collazos, CSC

Peru has become a refuge for thousands of Venezuelans fleeing profound political, economic and social crisis who aren't always welcomed by surrounding countries or the United States. Peru issued a new decree in 2017 that regularises the situation of the Venezuelan immigrants, making various administrative procedures easier (residency permits, migrant documentation) and making them eligible for social security benefits. There are over 100,000 Venezuelans in Peru and about 8,000 more enter the country every month.

Twenty-one-year-old Carlos Zegarra who grew up in Caracas is one of these people. He is of African descent and was first raised by his mother and grandmother in a loving home. Carlos' mother built a relationship with a Caucasian male and had two children with him. When he left to work in the United States he took his two children with him, leaving behind Carlos and his mother who was very ill at that time. Carlos' grandmother was blind due to diabetes and could not find a job.

Carlos left college to provide for his mother and grandmother. He plays the guitar and is also a songwriter, so he would perform in the streets or at parties. As the situation in Venezuela got progressively worse, the family started to sell their personal possessions to survive. Inevitably, Carlos had to face a life-changing decision – to leave his mother and grandmother and look for opportunities elsewhere before they died of malnutrition and lack of medical attention.

After traveling for 6 days and bribing border guards in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador, Carlos arrived in Lima in December 2017. He took a room in a hotel where he was robbed of everything, and all that was left was the street. He sang Venezuelan music in the city parks, sometimes receiving small change.

Under enormous pressure to save a bit and still send money to his family, he became ill. His mother put him in touch with one of her friends, Ingrid, who was visiting her grandmother in Lima. Ingrid is Sister Lilma Calsin's niece and Carlos

came to stay in Lilma's mother's house. Another young Venezuelan, 20-year-old Ricardo Oliveira was also staying there. The two of them became friends and started looking for jobs as waiters in restaurants.

They found jobs, but after two weeks Ricardo, "being just a useless Venezuelan," was beaten by the cook and fired. Carlos was fired almost the same day for "not being a good waiter and not attracting enough clientele." They both were, "of course," not paid for the time they had been working.

They started to sing in the streets and city buses together, and also prepared *'arepas*,' a flat, unleavened patty of maize flour which they cooked and sold in the streets. Carlos has not been able to send money to his family, as any extra is used for paperwork to legalise his status in Peru.

Carlos' current goal is to buy a guitar to earn more money for his music. How is Carlos? He is sad and under a lot of pressure, missing his mum and grandmother plenty. He wants to rent a room and bring them over. Luckily, Ingrid and her grandmother, Ms Dina Collazos, give him support and affection, so Carlos has not given up completely. Like many other generous Peruvians, Sister Lilma Calsin's family is providing 5 people with food, lodging, love and safety while they seek employment in a new country.

Uganda: The plight of the female refugee—fleeing civil war in South Sudan

By Sister Semerita Mbambu, CSC

Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting nation in Africa and one of the poorest countries in the world. Its refugee-friendly policy, which has seen the surge of refugees in the country, has come under severe pressure. Migration makes an important impact on the socio-economic development of Uganda; more than 50 per cent of investments have been done by foreigners, mostly from South Asia. These investments are the key sectors of the Ugandan economy such as manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, hospitality and food and beverage. Foreign investment is also leading to job creation although projects that receive capital from foreigners create less employment than national investment projects. However, national and international resources are being pushed to their limits by an overwhelming number of refugees fleeing violence in South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, and other are neighboring countries.

In October 2017, I visited Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement located in Kamwenge District, Western Uganda. During this visit, I encountered a 28-year-old Musoki (name changed), a refugee from South Sudan. She came to Uganda in early 2015 with her three teenage daughters and two sons. Musoki lost her husband in a brutal ethinicized civil war that has afflicted South Sudan for decades. She saw her husband and other family members being killed and their homes vandalized by militia groups. Musoki, along with other women and a large number of children, traveled several days on foot fleeing war and famine that devastated the world's youngest country.

Earlier, refugees who came to Uganda were well received by the government and located in refugee camps where they were given most of their basic needs like clothes, medical and food every month. While Uganda continues to welcome migrants from different countries and receives some support from international organizations, resources are not enough for the overwhelming number of

refugees. The government is no longer able to provide enough food and other basic needs for her five children.

As a developing country, Uganda's service delivery infrastructure especially schools and hospitals remain far inadequate to serve both refugees and nationals. Musoki narrated how she, as well as other refugees, lack permanent shelters and basic social services. Her children go to school in large tents that have been shredded by high winds and leak when it rains. There is no electricity, even at health centers that treat dozens of patients per day. Women give birth on the floor because beds are not available, and sometimes in darkness since there is no electricity. "There's nothing," said Musoki. "Even when you need something to eat, it is not there. I wish I can sell candy, soap, cigarettes and other small items here at the camp or have a small shop but I do not have capital. I wish I can take good care of my children!" Tears rolling endlessly.

In a low and breaking voice, Musoki narrated how she misses her home country and the social stress she has to bear being in a foreign country. She left behind her crops in the garden and property and remains unsure of when to return. She feels insecure in a crowded refugee camp where she is unable to cultivate and have enough food for her children. While some refugees were given land to farm by the government of Uganda, no land was available for Musoki and other refugees. While other refugees can move freely around the country, Musoki does not have financial resources to enable her move and pursue possible business and other opportunities.

There is a saying in my '*Bakonzo*' culture that, "unless you move, you will never tell how the neighbor slept." My visit made me appreciate the plight of refugees in my country. This appreciation and encounter with Musoki rekindled my desire to contribute to the extent possible, to the cause of justice for the vulnerable. In Musoki, I witnessed God's continued care for his people despite their hardships. I will continue reflecting on Isaiah 43:1-7: God is always with us, His people, and we should not be afraid. Let my people return from distant land, from every part of the world. They are my own and I created them to bring me glory (paraphrased).

United States: Migrating to escape gangs

By Sister Veronica Fajardo, CSC

I was a volunteer interpreter at an Immigrant Rights Conference in Los Angeles in April of 2017. During the conference, I met an attendee who asked me if I could help a family from Central America who needed an interpreter for an immigration appointment. I got in contact with the family and agreed to help them. I accompanied a sixteen-year-old young man named Abel to his Asylum appointment at the US Citizenship Immigration Services (USCIS) office in Southern California.

During the interview, Abel shared his story with the immigration officer. Abel was born in a small town in a Central American country. He lived with his grandmother in a rural area surrounded by rivers. His mother left their home country to work in the United States when Abel was a child and would send money for Abel and his younger brother.

When Abel turned 16, gang members began to approach him about joining their gang. The harassment went on for a few months. The gang members would go to his house and follow Abel around the town when he was visiting friends. They called him derogatory names for not joining them or not desiring to earn money by selling drugs or killing people. Abel told the officer that two of his older cousins had been killed by these gangs when he was a child; therefore, Abel was fearful and resistant of them. He tried avoiding them but the antagonism just kept escalating. The situation got worse when they began to look for Abel at his grandmother's house when Abel was in school. As a result, Abel's mother decided to ask him to take the risk of leaving his home town and traveling to the United States. Abel's mother is a housekeeper in the United States and was unable to get a visa for her son.

Abel left home on a treacherous journey to the United States. He encountered many difficulties, but finally was able to make it to the US border in the state of Texas. He turned himself in to Border Patrol, telling them he was from Central America and feared for his life. Border Patrol allowed him to enter the United

States, and he began his application process for asylum. Immigration found out he had relatives in the United States and allowed him to be with them while he waited for his case to be reviewed. When he arrived in the United States, he learned that his best friend who had also resisted entering the gang had disappeared from his home town. A few weeks later, Abel heard his friend had been decapitated.

Abel began to go to high school. Although it was challenging for him, he did his best to learn English, yet it was not easy. He was homesick for his homeland, but was glad to be alive and reunited with his mother.

Abel's mother hired an immigration attorney to help him with his case. The attorney charged his mother $1,000 to accompany her son to the USCIS office for his declaration. During his declaration, Abel was weepy, shaky, and sad. He told the immigration officer clearly multiple times, "If I return to my home country, I will be killed. The gang members have gone to my grandmother's house looking for me, and if I return and they find me, they will kill me."

A couple of weeks later, Abel returned to the USCIS office. An administrative assistant there told him USCIS did not believe that he was in immediate danger; therefore their office would not approve his asylum case. Abel cried for he believed he had done all that was asked of him, but was not successful. The assistant said he could wait to speak to a judge during his court hearing and perhaps would be able to stay in the United States.

I kept in contact with Abel's mother. A few months later she informed me that he had begun skipping school and hanging out with youth that offered him drugs. He used them to self-medicate to avoid thinking of the future and his fear of deportation. After escaping gang violence in his homeland, Abel had lost hope that his arduous journey would lead to a better future.

Reflection Questions

1. How did these stories help you to "stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children?"
2. What impressed you most as you read these stories?
3. What similarities/ differences did you find in the stories?
4. Have you encountered migrants in your ministry and daily life? What has been your response?

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