

Women and migration: transition, agency and labour

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Abstract: *This paper explores the mechanism involved in women's internal migration and the subsequent coping strategies in the place of destination. Acknowledging the dearth of literature that focuses exclusively on issues related to women's internal migration, this study investigates women's rural-urban migration from a social science and gender and development perspective. This paper aims to focus on questions: what are the causes of migration? Do women make decision of migration on their own? How do they experience gender relations in both the public and private spheres after migration? How do they cope with the new social setting? Based on fieldwork in Sylhet, Bangladesh, the study demonstrates important shifts in women's overall situation. After migration women are more independent, aware about their rights and abilities, better able to exercise own agency and resist coercive practices, and exposed to a range of life choices.*

Key words: *Women, Migration, Gender, Bangladesh*

1. Introduction

A few decades ago women's independent migration in Bangladesh was not so common. Women generally migrated along with the male family members and as dependants of men. However, the scenario has changed to a

great extent in last three decades as a large number of women started to take up paid employment. Especially women's employment in world market factories has brought a remarkable change in migration scenario in Bangladesh. Nowadays a great majority of women are migrating on their own, without being accompanied by a male. In this article my focus is internal migration of women so I will restrict my discussion primarily to internal migration but it is important to keep in mind that even in international migration women are now participating on their own right. Although both internal and international migration duly drew profound attention of many scholars, issues exclusively related to women's internal migration remain relatively under investigated in academic arena. In order to bridge this missing link in this article I am particularly interested in exploring questions related to the reasons behind migration, how gender matters in the process of migration, how women cope with a new social setting, the power and agency they use to migrate and survive in a less familiar socio-cultural context, the way they escape different forms of social control and whether migration affects the gender relations they experience both in the private and public spheres.

2. Context and background of the study

Bangladesh is predominantly an agricultural country, and the majority of its population lives in rural areas. Over the decades the rate of urbanisation in Bangladesh has, however, been experiencing a remarkable increase due to the extensive trend of rural-urban migration. In fact, since the independence of the country in 1971, 70% of the urban growth experienced in Bangladesh is the outcome of internal migration (Afsar 1999 and 2003). Siddiqui (2003) observes rural-urban migration is often adopted as a 'livelihood strategy' by the poorer people who find it difficult to earn a living in rural areas. As the agricultural sector is the major employer in the rural areas, impoverishment of this particular sector and simultaneous dearth of other forms of employment, sharpens the under and unemployment in these contexts, which leaves little option for many people but to migrate to the urban areas in search

of employment (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Banks et al. 2011; Sivaramakrishnan et al. 2005). One of the consequences of capitalisation and the mechanisation of agriculture has been its detrimental impacts on prior forms of employment; it severely curtailed employment options, this has been particularly so for women in rural areas (White 1992). The employment options of men and women alike have suffered enormously as a result of growing landlessness and ongoing reliance on technology; by extension, individual and household levels of poverty have been compounded (Kabeer 1994; Feldman 2001). As mentioned before, since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, various socioeconomic contexts and natural disasters, for example, the cyclone and famine in the 1970s (Dreze and Sen 2013; Herrmann and Svarin 2009); increasing rural under and unemployment, and subsequent higher levels of poverty place rising demands on large numbers of households that each member of the household must earn a living for him/herself. Although in Bangladeshi society men are entrusted with the responsibility to provide for their dependants, under the aforementioned circumstances men may be less likely to discharge their responsibilities as providers and try to get away from this obligation which eventually gives rise to divorce, desertion, and an increase in female headed households (White 1992).

In comparison to rural settings, women's participation in the labour force tends to be higher in urban areas due to greater acceptability and availability of women's paid employment (Kabeer and Mahmud 2004; Momsen 1993; Jesmin and Salway 2000). In corollary over the past few decades an increasing number of poorer women migrate to urban areas with or without a male guardian in order to earn a living for themselves and their family (Kabeer 1997; Kibria 1995). Community related constraints such as kinship bondage and the accountability associated with it, and the inflexibility of observing purdah in rural areas places enormous strain on women's (and their family's) notion of self-esteem, which can effectively rule out the possibility of their engagement in unconventional jobs if any employment opportunity emerges. Women are thus likely to feel less stigmatised by

joining the labour force in an unfamiliar environment in urban settings. Furthermore, migration to urban areas often leads to the disintegration of the extended family system, and therefore may liberate women from many patriarchal controls and promote individualism (Gordon 1996; Desai 2003; Jesmin and Salway 2000). Shah's study (2006) of brick kiln workers in India also reveals that economic hardship is not always the main cause of migration. Rather, in many cases migration is perceived by the migrants as an opportunity to gain some freedom and escape critical social scrutiny. My own study (Choudhury 2013) also finds resonance with Shah's observation that in addition to economic reasons, people's desire to gain independence from coercive social environments can also lead them to migrate.

In the 1980s with the growth of export oriented garment factories in Bangladesh women's job opportunities extended to the global market economy (Halim 2004). Kabeer (2000) noted, for the first time in the country's history a large number of women became visible in the labour market. As with many other developing countries, in Bangladesh, women's incorporation in factory employment was considered a necessity on the part of the employers as they are perceived as cheaper and more docile as workers (Walby 1986). Consequently, like other developing countries, in congruence with the observation of Elson and Pearson (1984) Bangladesh has been experiencing women's concentration in low paid and bottom layer jobs in large numbers. Thus, in addition to a harsh financial reality, demand for female labour in expanding garment factories in urban centres has also acted as a reason to migrate into cities for many women (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997 and 2000). Statistics reveal that 85% of the total garment factory workers are female (Afsar 2003; Hossain et al. 2013). Studies conducted on female garment factory workers in Bangladesh also demonstrate that the majority of them are migrants from rural areas (Kabeer 1997; Rahman 2010). As I mentioned earlier, until a few years ago the independent migration of women to urban areas was not a familiar or acceptable phenomenon in the context of social and cultural constructions of gender roles in Bangladeshi society (Kabeer 1997). However, this particular trend of female migration facilitated

the beginning of a new form of rural-urban migration, where large numbers of women migrate to urban areas relying on their own potential as an independent entity. The pioneering rural-urban migrant garment factory workers paved the way for many women and to date a large number of women continue to follow in their footsteps.

The growing garment sector does not accommodate all women willing to sell their labour power. Moreover, insufficient education credentials and lack of demonstrable formal skills exclude many poor landless women from this type of work. Be that as it may, poor women are able to access certain types of paid employment in the public sphere, albeit they are disproportionately concentrated in casual, low status, gender-stereotyped jobs within the informal sector of the labour market. Although educated women are making inroads into formal sector employment, those poor women who teeter on the brink of extreme poverty accept whatever paid employment comes their way. Increasing participation of poorer women in manual labour in the construction sector is a glaring example of this fact (Ahsan 1997; Afsar 1999; Feldman 2001; Ward et al. 2004). Salway et al. (2003) argue that the forms of paid employment available to poorer women are 'becoming increasingly informal'. I found this to be the case for *beti jogalis*¹ in the construction sector in Bangladesh.

However, my own study (Choudhury 2010) and Desai (2003) reveal that people with low economic and cultural capital are more likely to take paid employment in sectors where their kinship or friendship network can facilitate their access. People tend to migrate to places where they already have relatives or friends as having relations is considered to be the most favourable factor for migration. This kinship or friendship network not only facilitates the migrants to become acclimatised in an unfamiliar urban environment but also efficiently shapes the process of their entrance into the labour force. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the migrants do not choose

¹ Female construction sector helper

the niche by themselves; rather they end up being engaged in the similar forms of employment of their resource person or fellow slum dwellers. Guerin (2013) and Picherit (2012) in India find that the role of middlemen is very important in the lives of villagers who want to migrate and take up employment in different low return sectors, such as brick kilns, cane-cutting and construction. This was, however, not necessarily the case for my participants. Although the contact persons played important catalytic roles in finding jobs for them, comments made by my participants revealed that there was no pressure imposed on them to choose a particular form of employment.

As mentioned above, people migrate to places where they expect to find some support from their social network or contact person, yet in many cases they face difficulties in the new socioeconomic and cultural context. Desai (2003) and Pattanaik (2009) noted, among the informal sector workers in India the situation of construction workers is precarious. Their status of being migrants in the urban setting, and limited socioeconomic and cultural capital in an unfamiliar social setting makes them more vulnerable and less confident to efficiently negotiate with the clever construction sector middlemen. A similar observation was made by Gardner (2008) in her study conducted in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Through the narrative of a participant of her study Gardner demonstrated how agents/middlemen/sardars often use different tricks to pay less than the committed wages to the labourers. In addition to such vulnerability, in construction work sex stereotyping is paramount and the situation for women is worse where they are basically engaged in low paid carrying activities (Basu and Thomas 2009). In this article I will explore in greater detail the experience of female construction workers who migrated to Sylhet city from different rural areas of Bangladesh.

3. Theoretical underpinnings of the study

As stated in the introduction, the main objective of this study is to explore the causes of migration, migration process and subsequent coping strategies adopted by the female migrants. In order to explain women's role in migration, the way they exercise their agencies to earn a living for themselves and their family in a less familiar context and the support network women create to survive, I draw on the idea of 'embodied infrastructure' developed by Suzanne Clisby and Julia Holdsworth (2014). In this article I use this theoretical perspective to explain women's migration process and entry into the labour market in a less/unfamiliar social context. Clisby and Holdsworth (2014) extended the notion of infrastructure directly to people's bodies. Embodiment generally refers to how one experiences one's own body and its capacity for doing 'this and that' (Longo et al. 2008), and infrastructure concerns fundamental physical structures such as transport, roads, buildings, power supplies and so on. Clisby and Holdsworth (2014) argue:

women and women's services act as forms of embodied infrastructure. By this we refer to the ways that women's bodies and material actions themselves become the vehicles, the catalysts, the embodied infrastructure, facilitating access to services and enabling change and support through women's networks. This infrastructure is created through a range of encounters, from those women who act as mentors to other women within their working lives, to the services and formal and informal networks women have established that serve to provide a framework, an infrastructure of support for women.

Clisby and Holdsworth are not suggesting that these embodied infrastructures are not also forms of social network. Rather, they are emphasising that within these social, economic and spatial networks, women's active physical presence, their bodies, become a critical dimension in the creation and maintenance of these networks. They are also extending the understanding and use of the term 'infrastructure' to move beyond the

purely material. Materiality of infrastructure is very important in migration but for the majority of Bangladeshi women only having this material infrastructure is not sufficient as a facilitating factor of migration. In line with Clisby and Holdsworth I argue that it is the ‘embodied infrastructure’ (Clisby and Holdsworth 2014) that renders possible the option of migration, without this it might not be conceived of as a possibility by most women and men.

As we will see in the subsequent sections, women use other people, especially other women, as a means of movement. These pioneering women set the trend of migration, directly or indirectly encourage others to migrate, and facilitate their migration in every possible way, such as bearing the expenses of migration and extending other necessary help and tips, initially providing them with food and shelter in the place of destination, helping them to find jobs and settle down in a new social setting. In this way the people who facilitate both the process of migration and of finding roots in the urban settings become the infrastructure, i.e., embodied infrastructure. I would say it is not only the material support they provide that is valuable; rather these facilitators’ physical presence and manoeuvring capability act as catalysts for the new migrants to overcome the social, religious and ideological predicaments. Migrating to urban areas without male guardians, establishing new living arrangements and engagement in heavily male dominated construction work become possible for most women predominantly because of this. The very presence of women’s bodies in this whole process paves the way for other women. Cleaver (2007) extends the notion of embodiment as one of the enabling factors in understanding agency in the management of resources. She is of the opinion that one’s physical states have an impact on the agency one exercises. In line with Cleaver I also contest that embodiment is an enabling factor and the embodied infrastructure of people who facilitate migration in the context of Bangladeshi construction sector acts as a catalyst for social transformations in significant ways.

4. Participants of the study

In this study I took an ethnographic approach to study migrant female construction workers in Sylhet, a north-eastern district of Bangladesh. Data for the study were generated from field work conducted during December, 2009 to February 2010 and July, 2011 to May, 2012. For the purpose of present study life history interviews of 38 women, who were migrants from rural areas and were from different parts of Bangladesh, have been included. I also ethnographically observed the day to day life of the participants. The participants were purposively selected from 3 construction workers congregating points of Sylhet city. The participants had migrated alone or along with their husbands and/or children from their rural home to Sylhet to ensure a living for themselves and their family. A great majority of them were unsure about what they would do after migrating to Sylhet, a place unfamiliar to most of them. However, they had the conviction that they would be able to provide better support to their family by migrating. A small number of women on the other hand had received some sort of assurance from their contact persons about their future employment and a better prospect. However, this group also did not have a clear picture about their future in the place of destination.

The participant women belonged to different age groups, between the ages of 21 and 56. An overwhelming majority of the participants, however, were unschooled. In addition, they did not have demonstrable marketable skills to compete with the growing labour force of Sylhet city, nevertheless they were motivated to take this bold step of migration. As stated earlier, independent migration on the part of women has not been widespread in the Bangladeshi context until recently; against this backdrop, the study reveals a total of 17 participants who had migrated without a male guardian. Four of the married participants had also migrated leaving their husbands back in their rural home. Some of the women, who had migrated on their own, did not even have the money to finance their trip to Sylhet. Their extended family members or friends supported them by bearing the expenses. However, a small number of them had to borrow money from credit agencies or

acquaintances, with high interest, to bear the travel costs to Sylhet. My participants predominantly migrated with other women of their home villages.

Most of my participants worked as domestic helpers after they had migrated, and subsequently joined construction work, while 2 of them worked as wage labourers even before migration. The majority of them, however, had not been employed before migrating to Sylhet as in rural areas women's paid work in the public sphere is deemed to have a negative reflection on the family's honour. Migration of my participants were predominantly associated with economic need: husbands' incapacity to earn a decent income for the family due to illness, weakness, aging; husbands' lack of intelligence and large family size; death of husband and unavailability of a reliable male breadwinner; desertion by husband; irresponsible and irregular earning habit of husbands'; conjugal conflict and the pressure from lending agencies to repay the loan were the main reasons given by the participants.

5. Women make decision about migration and paid employment

It has been documented in different studies that cultural values mediate women's autonomy and Bangladeshi women who are always under the guardianship of the male members of their family are more constrained to make decision about migration. Rokeya was one of my married participants. Her husband was not a disciplined person since the beginning of their marriage; he inherited property but could not protect them because of his irresponsible behaviour. Consequently, he became a pauper within a few years of marriage. Although Rokeya felt the pressure to earn a livelihood within a year of her marriage, in her village she was unable to find any suitable job. Her husband was far from being a hard worker and she gave birth to 2 daughters in a few years of marriage; consequently, poverty was a serious issue for her family. Her sister-in-law then persuaded them to migrate to Sylhet so that Rokeya also could join the labour force and secure a living

for the family. Rokeya had migrated to Sylhet along with her husband and children and started working as a domestic helper. After a few years, with the help of the women of her neighbourhood, she joined construction work. Another participant, Afia got married in her mid-teens. Both her husband's father and Afia's father were good friends; the father of her husband died at an early age and in order to keep their friendship alive her father decided to marry her off with the son of his friend. After a few years of marriage, she gave birth to her first child. Afia's husband was not very caring about the household; they were suffering from poverty but he did not take any initiative to lift the family out of poverty. Rather he kept spending money on gambling and alcohol. Afia gave birth to 2 more children but no positive transformations took place in the domestic sphere. At one stage, Afia became weary combating persistent hunger and decided to do something to change the situation. She finally managed to manoeuvre her husband to migrate to Sylhet to ensure their livelihood. In Sylhet both Afia and her husband started working as *jogalis*² in construction work, though her husband did not regularly work.

Unlike Rokeya and Afia, Begum (another participant) migrated to Sylhet without her husband. Once Begum became unwell and she needed money for her medical treatment. Her husband did not pay for the doctor and medicine and she did not have money to bear the cost so she borrowed Tk 500 (£4) with interest. The interest on this amount was increasing as she was unable to repay the loan; she requested that her husband reimburse the money, but he flatly turned her down even though he had money in his pocket. Begum felt very bad; she left the house with her children and subsequently migrated to Sylhet with another woman of her village. The woman who brought her to Sylhet was a construction worker, so she took Begum with her to work. For the first few days she was unable to find work, but gradually she learned the work and got accustomed to the culture of the construction sector. After a few months, her husband came to Sylhet to bring them back home, but she refused to go. Her husband sought her landlord's

² Construction sector helper

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intervention as he was playing the role of her local guardian in absence of her male kin; the landlord convinced Begum to allow her husband to live with them. Although she was not very convinced by her husband's promises of good behaviour, considering the social reality, she agreed and asked her husband to join construction work.

Noorjahan, another participant, got married at the age of 18 with the man chosen by her father. Her husband used to work as a wage labourer at that time in Mymensingh and she used to stay at home. During the first year of her marriage, Noorjahan felt that she was required to comply with her husband's wishes no matter whether he is right or wrong. Furthermore, she realised that her husband was a "tall talker" and not serious about his work. Although their family size was small, consisting of only two people, his income was fairly inadequate for the family expenses. In this situation, Noorjahan gave birth to a girl. Her husband did not have any landed property in his village, they only had a small hut to live in. She started raising poultry for extra income but soon her neighbours began complaining that her chicks were going to their premises and damaging their kitchen garden. To avoid further conflict, Noorjahan stopped raising poultry which meant her only source of income was blocked. During the rainy season her husband's tiny earnings would shrink further and they struggled to manage 2 meals a day. Noorjahan often used to ask her husband to do something to earn a little more to support his family. Under such circumstances, one day her husband got back home with the news that some of the villagers were migrating to Sylhet to try their luck. Noorjahan's husband was not sure whether to move to an urban area but she pleaded in favour of migration and suggested if they did not find a job or could not adjust in the place of destination, they would return to their village home. They did not have the money to cover the expenses of migration so Noorjahan borrowed money from her brothers to buy the tickets and travelled to Sylhet with fellow villagers. Since her husband had worked as a rikshaw puller before, he decided to do the same in Sylhet. In Sylhet, also, his income was not enough for the house rent, food and other expenditures. Inspired by the women of her neighbourhood, after a couple of

months, Noorjahan decided to start working outside. At first her husband categorically dismissed her idea of taking paid employment by saying being a man he found it hard to earn some money so what would she be doing by going out, except tarnishing the image of the family. Nonetheless, Noorjahan did not give in; she kept persuading her husband and making promises that she would work only part-time and in no way would the household suffer for that. Eventually her husband allowed her to work as a domestic helper. Noorjahan gave birth to 4 sons after coming to Sylhet. Gradually her paid employment became a necessity for the household. Her daughter used to take care of the younger siblings in her mother's absence. After working as a domestic helpers for a few years, she started working as a construction sector helper to earn little more. Her husband who was initially dead against her paid employment, by now had forgotten that once he did not want her to work outside. Moreover, he became financially dependent on Noorjahan and this was not the case of Noorjahan's household only. Other married participants also reiterated similar experience of husbands' increasing dependence on their (wives') earnings.

Jaheda along her husband and 4 young children had been suffering from poverty in their village home. Her husband was unable to find work regularly to earn a living for the family. She borrowed money from a credit agency to finance her husband's business but his business collapsed and they were struggling to repay the instalments despite relentless effort. Her children were ill and they were starving. In such circumstances, her husband's cousin who was working as a *beti jogali* in Sylhet city visited them. She told Jaheda about the availability of work opportunities in Sylhet for a woman like her. She also told that by working in the construction sector she was better able to meet her family's demand. After hearing many stories of Sylhet and women's work, Jaheda made up her mind and persuaded her husband to migrate to Sylhet with her husband's cousin. Their contact person bore the expenses of their travel to Sylhet, initially gave them food and shelter, helped them to rent a house and take up paid employment in the new social setting. Another participant, Fuleza, migrated to Sylhet with her children 7 years ago

after experiencing prolonged conjugal conflicts and domestic violence. One day their conjugal conflict escalated to the extent that her husband literally threw her out of the house, consequently, she decided to migrate. One of her male cousins helped her to migrate, gave her shelter after migration and introduced her to other women who worked in the construction sector. With the help of her cousin and other women, she started going to the congregating point every morning to find work.

My participants who migrated without being accompanied by their husbands, in most cases their contact person was a woman. And their contact persons not only help them to migrate but also facilitated their access to paid employment whatever employment they found. In this study I found that their contact persons' presence in the labour market and relative success in meeting family's financial needs, mainly though not exclusively, motivated them to take the bold step of migration to a new social setting.

6. Upholding self-esteem, using agency and getting involved in non-conventional forms of employment

As stated earlier, women often feel constrained to get involved in non-conventional forms of employment. However, migration to a less familiar environment, to a great extent, resolves the tension of facing disapproval from their relatives and acquaintances. A great majority of my participants had to face prolong poverty and starvation before migrating to Sylhet. In their place of origins the opportunity to sell their labour power was extremely limited and also they were hesitant to make decision of taking whatever employment is available given their educational qualifications. Razia, a participant, explained her situation regarding when she had decided to walk out on her husband. Her parents had died by then and she did not have any siblings; though her extended family members were always kind to her, she was not interested in returning to them after leaving her husband. Razia perceived that her freedom and self-esteem would suffer if she became dependent on them. She wanted to earn her own living by working hard, but

again thought that she might face additional restrictions on her mobility and face barriers if she desired to live an independent life in her own social environment. Thus, in order to maintain her self-respect and autonomy she decided to migrate to Sylhet without a male guardian:

I had visited Sylhet a few times with my father and husband as both of them worked in Sylhet before. When I had left my husband, I travelled to Sylhet. I did not want to live in my own village as it was suffocating at that moment to be surrounded by familiar faces. I knew some people here in Sylhet so came here, stayed with them for a few days and then found my own way (Razia, 27, separated from husband).

She started living in Sylhet and managed to become engaged in construction work through the people she already knew there. She told me that she visited her village home occasionally but did not feel like going back there permanently in the near future. Rather she was happy with her relatively liberated life in Sylhet. A similar situation was depicted by Fuleza, who had been married to an abusive man. He neither cared for Fuleza's well-being nor for the children, which was the root cause of conjugal conflicts in their household. One day a familiar conflict situation arose, Fuleza's husband beat her up and ultimately asked her to leave his home. She travelled to Sylhet with the help of a male cousin without thinking about relying on someone else for her survival or begging her husband to take her back home:

My husband had kicked me out from his house. I did not look back. I travelled to Sylhet along with my 3 young children and started living here (Fuleza, 33, mother of 3, married for a 2nd time).

Although travelling to a city and establishing a new living arrangement on her own was a completely new experience for her, she told me that the stories of other women of her village, who had already migrated to cities, inspired her. Her cousin's assurance of standing by her in times of crisis also helped her to take such a bold step. Another participant, Shaheda, had the

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exposure of working outside even before she got married. After getting married she went to live with her husband in his village home, but within a few months she realised that her husband did not have a steady income. Furthermore, he was unable to do physically demanding work due to illness. In their village home Shaheda could not join the labour force fearing social sanctions and loss of status, so poverty worsened for her family. She spent a few more months in poverty before deciding to migrate in order to fight against poverty and secure a better future for her only child. Her sister was also a construction worker in Sylhet and living with her husband and children. Shaheda contacted her sister and migrated to Sylhet with her child, leaving her husband in their village home. Shaheda's husband visited them occasionally but he did not permanently move with them as he was unwilling to leave his village home. Although she was struggling at the beginning, she did not want to be dependent on her sister's family. Shaheda told me that her sister and her family had been very supportive and wanted her to live with them, she, nevertheless, preferred to be on her own even in the absence of her husband, which obviously reflects her sense of self-esteem and the ability to define her own goals and act upon them:

My sister lives in Sylhet with her family. I go to work with my sister and or her son, but I do not live with them. I have rented my own place near my sister's house. I go to my sister's house often and she as well visits me several times a day to make sure that I am safe (Shaheda, 25, married, mother of a daughter, migrated leaving husband back in village home).

Studies conducted on garment factory workers in Bangladesh reveal that women's presence in the labour force brings some important shifts both in individual woman's lives and in wider social structures (Kibria 1995; Kabeer 1997; Salway et al. 2005; Rahman 2010). I also found this to be the case for female construction workers. Many of my participants told me that they dared to take these steps because they saw other women achieve success in this way, which inspired them to opt for this path. Migration to an urban setting not only involves the physical infrastructure. The way my participants

migrated, found shelter and set down roots in Sylhet concerns more than the materiality of infrastructure. Here the physical bodies of people were more important in realising this possibility of migration. There were ideological, social and religious restrictions to overcome. Some of the married participants left their husbands in their village homes, others convinced husbands to migrate who were initially not willing to do so, whilst a group of women had left their abusive marriages and migrated with the intention joining the labour market. This transformation in the thought patterns of women about coming out of their houses, migrating to a new social environment, taking up paid employment and making new living arrangements obviously reflects their agency and personhood.

7. Social networks and life in urban areas

Studies (Oishi 2005, Choudhury 2013, Shah 2006) conducted in different parts of the world reveal that people often migrate to places where they have social networks. In this study I also found the same. All my participants told that they had friends or extended family members in the place of destination and they played important catalytic role in the process of migration. However, in addition to aforesaid network women were also seen to create new contacts after migrating to Sylhet and taking paid employment. Participants of this study were migrants from rural areas and in their villages they had very limited opportunities to mingle with unrelated men as the local cultural discourse of honour and shame discourage women to do so (Karim 2008). After migrating to Sylhet and getting involved in construction work, all of them were able to establish new networks consisting of both men and women. In their new place women were able to redefine purdah in their own terms and their mobility increased to a great extent. Participant women reported that they go to different places (sometimes very far away from house) for work purpose. They also deal with difficult situations and people in both the public and private spheres. Mahmud (2003) in her study conducted on female microcredit borrowers noted that women's mobility in the public sphere provided them with more choices. I found this to be the case in this study. My participants told me that their established social

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networks in Sylhet helped them in the workplace in various ways, for example: providing them with information about work; supporting them in the workplace in conflicting situations; helping them realising their wages from shrewd middleman/contractors/employers; protecting them from sexually abusive co-workers and employers. My participants' testimonies also revealed that apart from strictly work related help they also get other kind of favours from their acquaintances. They share light moments, crack jokes, share foods, share their pain and pleasure, borrow money from each other and so on. One of my participants, Afia, was on her own when she was in labour. Her husband left her at home all alone without any kind of support. It was a woman of her neighbourhood who helped her to find assistance and gave birth to a baby. Afia's account reveals to what extent men can be inconsiderate regarding their wives' genuine needs and how social network can be useful in such crucial situations:

The day I gave birth to my 3rd child with my second husband, I requested him to stay at home with me since I was feeling extremely bad. He turned me down flatly and went to attend a marriage ceremony. A woman of my neighbourhood helped me and saved me and my child. My husband did not even care about my life (Afia, 34, married for a 2nd time, mother of 6).

Child care is another arena where my participants told that they received important assistance from their social networks. For instance, Rina and Afia, mentioned noteworthy help with child care from women of their neighbourhoods in difficult times. Momsen (2010) holds that 'women's survival strategies often depend on building networks of women within the community'. I found that the social networks created and maintained by women are particularly important, though not exclusively, in the resource poor households.

8. Summary and conclusion

In Bangladeshi society women's mobility is generally constrained by the norms of purdah and in congruence with the cultural norms women's independent movement in the public sphere was rather less common in the context of Bangladesh. Even three decades ago migration was predominantly a male phenomenon in the country; women mostly migrated as dependents of their male guardians. The scenario has, however, changed in last few decades as women themselves are migrating to urban areas as independent entities and sometimes even without a male guardian. Women's visibility in the public sphere has increased to a great extent as large numbers of women are taking paid employment outside the home.

In poorer households, women's waged work has been viewed as an issue that has a detrimental impact on the status of the family. However, in this study I found that a good number of women are now able to negotiate with the purdah norms and the patriarchal values of the society to take paid employment outside the home. As I mentioned before, Bangladeshi society is, by and large, accustomed to seeing men, especially young men, moving to different places seeking employment, what is new for them is to witness the same for the women of the society. Nearly 43% of my participants had migrated to Sylhet to earn a living without being accompanied by a male guardian, which is obviously a new trend in the context of Bangladesh. Of those married women who migrated with their husbands, in most cases they were the mastermind behind the migration. A few married participants had migrated leaving their husbands back in the village home to join the labour force; this illustrates their resistance towards patriarchal domination in the home and coercive cultural values of the society. A significant number of women's independent migration, determination to forgo the patriarchal bargain in exchange for independence and self-respect indicate women's agency and suggest an increasing trend of female headed households. A new dimension has also been observed in conventionally structured male headed households where the wives were increasingly discharging the role of principal breadwinners for their families. Declining dependence on men in

turn leads to the emergence of a new group of dependent men and reliable breadwinner women.

Migration to a new social setting, mingling with people from different walks of life, access to the public sphere and access to an independent income have brought some noteworthy changes in individual women's lives. Women were seen to be in greater control of their lives, for instance, they were able to make independent decisions about getting married or terminating a marital contract. There were also instances where women refused to have more children which means women are on the way to establishing some control over their own body; this is particularly significant in the context of Bangladesh. After migrating to the urban area, women struggled both inside and outside the home: they went through the domination and exploitation of husbands and male co-workers, faced new challenges and difficulties in every sphere and survived, which clearly illustrates their power, resistance and agency. However, it is not to say that all women equally benefit from migration and each woman experience similar positive transformations in their life. This study, nevertheless, argues, on the whole, migration brings important shifts both on societal level and individual level.

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